



Opinion

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Schools face difficult decisions as COVID-19 continues to mutate

Editorial Board

After nearly two years of combating the ever-mutating SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, two facts have become clear. COVID-19 can be deadly and the polarization of the American public in the face of a pandemic remains high.

The death count from the virus is projected to surpass 800,000 in the United States by the end of the year. Minnesota's death count is fast approaching 10,000. In the reality of the human toll on those dying from the disease and herculean efforts by health care providers caring for the sick, strong opposition remains for coronavirus vaccinations. For many the pandemic is not as serious as described by the scientific and medical community.

The ever-changing landscape of the pandemic battle does not make the task easy for schools across the state. Minnesota's current surge in coronavirus cases is fueled by the delta variant. Cases and hospitalizations for the virus are at highs for 2021. News late last month of a new variant – omicron – may be more unwelcome news, although it is still too early to determine if omicron will be more infectious or less lethal than previous variants and evade vaccine protection.

What should school districts be doing? We believe requirements for vaccinations, testing and mask wearing are effective, but difficult to enforce. Students, parents and school staff are caught in a bind over what should be done. It is highly possible mandates will lead to more division and discourse from those in the public opposed to vaccinations and protocols recommended by public health officials. Courts across the nation are now hearing challenges to many of the mandates handed down by governmental units and businesses.

Finding common ground between those who oppose vaccines and question the legitimacy of the pandemic and those who follow public health recommendations to fight the virus may be unattainable. As schools opened in the fall, locally determined protocols were implemented to include masking, hygiene and social distancing. Online learning remains an option for districts where outbreaks warrant keeping kids at home. It is nearly impossible to balance protocols correctly. There needs to be consideration of not only health recommendations, but economic, educational and societal concerns.

We believe it is imperative that parents and the community understand the scope and potential severity that the virus can cause. Early variants of COVID-19 did not infect young people as readily as adults, but that trend has

changed this fall. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in November recommended Pfizer's vaccine for the 28 million children in the 5 to 11 age group.

According to the CDC, the childhood case load for infections has increased from 3% in early 2020 to more than 25% this fall. The CDC says more than 6 million children in the U.S. have been infected, including 2 million in the 5 to 11 age group. Nearly 700 children have died from COVID-19. Three students and 18 staff members in Minnesota schools have died during the pandemic. In the face of such facts, it is hard to understand how public opinion polls continue to show 42-66% of parents reluctant or opposed to vaccinations for their children.

Many have compared the current pandemic to the polio epidemics that struck the U.S. through the first half of the 20th Century. In the early 1950s vaccines were developed that led to the disease being eradicated in the U.S. After years of working to find a cure for polio, the public was solidly behind the effort, and it worked. The lightning-like speed for the development of vaccines for coronavirus last year speaks to the scientific medical advances that weren't present in the 20th Century.

There is a strong segment of the U.S. population today that rallies behind science much like that of the previous century. Keep in mind that in the 1950s there was no social media to spread false or misleading information regarding the pandemic and vaccines. Perhaps we were a more trusting society in the 1950s.

Positive steps have been taken to broaden the effort to get kids vaccinated. Last month Gov. Tim Walz mobilized more than 1,100 providers to offer a variety of locations for vaccinations. Pharmacies, health care systems, medical clinics, local public health and tribal health agencies, state-run clinics and some school clinics are taking part. Leaders of the Minnesota Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics and Education Minnesota have endorsed the effort.

As the state continues to deal with delta and keeping a watchful eye on omicron, local school officials need to keep parents and students current on best practices that can include vaccinations. It is imperative that local school boards adopt policies and protocols that emphasize safety for students and staff. There can be no greater priority in this public health crisis.

An editorial from the Adams ECM Publishers Editorial Board. The Forest Lake Times is a newspaper of APG-ECM. Reactions welcome: editorial.board@apgecm.com.

Businesses shouldn't shoulder unemployment insurance debt

From the Capitol

Anne Neu Brindley



Last week we learned that Minnesota has a \$7.7 billion budget surplus, the largest in state history. This is welcome news when our businesses are facing an impending crisis.

The Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund currently owes the federal government nearly \$1.1 billion. In the summer of 2020, Minnesota, like many states, began borrowing money from the federal government to pay for a surge in unemployment claims caused by Gov. Walz's business shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Minnesota businesses, through no fault of their own, will be left to pay for the state's Unemployment Insurance debt through increases from both the state and federal governments if we do not act quickly to repay and restore our UI reserve.

How much of a tax increase are businesses facing? Conservative estimates project a combined federal/state UI tax increase of 15% or more. Unlike FICA taxes, employers bear sole responsibility for UI

payroll taxes so they must shoulder this burden if the state does not repay the UI reserve.

It is unconscionable that government would force businesses to pick up the tab for this debt after forcing them to close. With a \$7.7 billion budget surplus and over \$1 billion in additional COVID relief funds, it is clear the state has the resources to solve this crisis. Shockingly, Democrats in the Senate recently announced that they oppose using federal COVID relief funds to repay the UI debt. Instead they think businesses, who are still recovering from government shutdowns amidst inflation and a supply chain crisis, should "pay their fair share" and pay the UI tax increase.

My Republican colleagues and I will not allow businesses to pay for a government induced problem. We are working quickly to help Minnesota employers avoid a higher tax bill. I recently sent a letter, along with my colleagues on the Workforce Development

Committee, urging Gov. Walz to address this impending crisis by:

- Prioritizing eliminating the UITF debt and restoring the required reserves in any special session between now and the beginning of the 2022 session.
- Working with Minnesota's federal delegation to reinstate the interest waiver on UI loans and seek UI debt forgiveness
- Enhancing UI fraud prevention measures within the Department of Employment and Economic Development.
- Examining existing state and federal UI laws for authority to suspend tax increases until the debt is eliminated and reserve rebuilt with surplus funds.

Our historic \$7.7 billion surplus and over \$1 billion in COVID relief funds leaves no excuse. We cannot force Minnesota's employers to pay the price for our state's UI debt. It is clear Minnesota has no issue collecting revenue. Instead of creating another unnecessary tax hike, let's send a message to our small businesses that we recognize all their hardships during the pandemic and we are here to help.

Anne Neu Brindley is the state representative for District 32B. She can be reached at rep.anne.neu@house.mn.

Fossils, glaciers, and the water we drink

Poke along the trail at the Lilydale brickyards in St. Paul, and you're likely to find fossilized remains of prehistoric sea creatures that lived 450 million years ago during the Ordovician period - bryozoans, crinoids, brachiopods, and trilobites. How did they end up here, more than 1000 miles from the nearest ocean?

If you climb the trail, you'll find yourself at the top of a steep bluff, gazing out onto a broad river valley below. The Mississippi River, mighty though it may be, is but a thin brown line through the center of the valley, like a rivulet streaming down the side of a bucket that has just been emptied. Where did the rest of the water go?

I used to think that rocks were boring, but now I am fascinated by the geologic stories in the rocks, cliffs, rivers, and lakes around our state.

Take the St. Croix River as an example. According to Justin Tweet, a paleontologist with the American Geosciences Institute, the river valley was formed by a failed continental rift that almost split the land apart 1.1 billion years ago. In other words, if things had gone differently, there would be more dividing Minnesota and Wisconsin than just a Vikings-Packers rivalry.

During the Cambrian and Ordovician periods, 540 to 443 million years ago, the continents were

On the Water

Angie Hong



arranged differently and an ocean covered most of what is now Minnesota. Over time, the sand at the bottom of this prehistoric ocean compacted to form layers of sedimentary rock called sandstone. The shells, coral, algae, fecal matter, and other organic debris on top of the sand eventually solidified into limestone. This limestone layer is where we find marine fossils today.

Much, much more recently in geologic time, a series of glaciations swept through Minnesota in several waves from 2 million to 10,000 years ago. As the glaciers melted and receded, they created most of the lakes, rivers and groundwater aquifers that we see in our present landscape. Over time, the rivers carved through layers of soft sandstone to create steep bluffs like what we see along the St. Croix River and Mississippi River Gorge in Minneapolis. Downstream of Fort Snelling and along the Minnesota River, however, the bluffs are far from the water's edge. That is because a much larger river called the Great River Warren once flowed through this valley as it drained glacial Lake Agassiz. In com-

parison, the modern-day Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers are but trickles.

Glaciers also carved small dimples in the landscape that later filled with water to form lakes and wetlands. We call these prairie potholes. The prairie pothole region of the upper Midwest is known as the "duck factory" and supports more than 50 percent of our nation's migratory waterfowl.

When the glaciers melted, some of the water soaked down into the ground and filled empty pore space in the sandstone layers deep below; these are the aquifers that we use for drinking water today. Groundwater provides 100 percent of the drinking water for people in Washington County and 70 percent of the drinking water in Minnesota.

The deepest aquifer in Washington County is the Mt. Simon aquifer, which exists in a layer of sandstone 160-255 feet thick that was laid down at the beginning of the Cambrian period. Forest Lake, Lake Elmo Park Reserve, and private wells along the St. Croix River draw water from the Mt. Simon aquifer. Above this, the Eau

Claire, Wonewoc, Tunnel City, St. Lawrence, and Jordan aquifers also exist in sandstone from the Cambrian period. Numerous communities, including Cottage Grove, Lake Elmo, Oakdale, Oak Park Heights, Newport, St. Paul Park, and Woodbury, draw water from the Jordan aquifer.

The next layer, formed by sandstone from the Ordovician period, is the Prairie-Du Chien aquifer. This layer is fragile and there are portions of Washington County, especially in the southeast, where karst features such as sinkholes, fractures, and caves are quick to form. Hugo, Stillwater, and Mahtomedi draw their community water supplies from the Prairie-Du Chien and Jordan aquifers.

Along the Mississippi River, sandstone, shale, and limestone can be found above the Prairie-Du Chien aquifer. Closer to the St. Croix, however, these topmost layers have been worn away over time. That's why you won't often find fossils along the St. Croix River the way you do at the Lilydale brickyards.

So, thank a glacier for the water we drink and enjoy a day at the ancient beach!

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