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**Capitol View
*Commentary by J.L. Schmidt***

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**Gearing Up for the Next Wave, Proceed with Caution**

Just when you thought it was over, here we go again with a new Covid variant that means the pandemic continues.

Dr. James Lawler, co-executive director of the University of Nebraska Medical Center’s Global Center for Health Security in Omaha, said he is concerned this is going to be the worst phase of the pandemic for much of the United States, “particularly states like ours that have low vaccination rates.”

At the same time, he said he’s encouraged by data showing that more people are getting vaccinated. “If we can build on that momentum and get enough of the community vaccinated, we really would have a very mild experience with this delta wave,” he said.

A legitimate vaccination target for the United States is at least 70 percent of the population, he said. Getting to 75 percent to 80 percent would produce dramatic reductions in transmission. But in states such as Florida, Arkansas, Louisiana, Missouri and Mississippi, hospital and intensive care unit admissions are going up at the same rate or higher than they were last fall. Already busy hospitals could become overwhelmed.

Lawler also cautions that opening schools without masks and other measures that reduce transmission, such as spacing kids out and providing good ventilation, would be “throwing gasoline on the fire.”

Omaha’s Westside Community Schools, Ralston Public Schools and Lincoln Public Schools have announced plans to require masks for elementary school students, staff, and visitors.

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Both the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics have recommended that all students, teachers, and staff wear masks in schools, regardless of their vaccination status. Hear, hear!

Nebraska Governor Pete Ricketts opposes both mask and vaccine mandates and last year blocked local health departments from imposing mask mandates, a rule that the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department was not required to follow. As a result, the county risk dial dropped significantly over time because of a mask mandate.

The Governor has vowed to fight any attempt by President Joe Biden to direct the state’s management of the coronavirus pandemic. Ricketts’ spokesman Taylor Gage said, “One reason for this is there is not a one-size-fits-all strategy that works for every state. The president needs to support the states and respect our rights.”

Nebraska has seen six straight weeks of increases in virus cases. Hospitalizations, primarily involving unvaccinated people, are also up. The state has recorded more than 231,000 cases with 2,553 deaths. More than half of the cases and half of the deaths have come from five counties: Douglas, Lancaster, Sarpy, Hall and Scotts Bluff.

Debate about mask use and vaccine mandates has increased, along with the number of COVID-19 cases across the nation. Cases in Nebraska have escalated faster than they have nationally.

A statewide group of mothers who are also doctors has called on the Governor to change his mind and enforce masking for schools. Dr. Christine Mitchell, an Omaha-area internal medicine specialist, said critics have expressed frustration over the shifting guidance, but it is important for policies to adapt to the situation based on the information available.

“This virus changes. The pandemic changes. And we have to change our policies with it,” she said. “Now it’s time that we make the restrictions again, put the masks on and see if we can keep school going all year, just like we did last year.”

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Lawler said serious infections and hospitalizations are still occurring primarily among those not vaccinated. Vaccines remain effective in preventing serious illness, hospitalization, and death, even against the variants because they produce much higher levels of neutralizing antibodies than natural infections with the virus.

The Governor had said he expected schools would open for in-person classes without mask or vaccine requirements. But he has not attempted to stop school districts from requiring masks and his office did not directly criticize Tyson Foods for its announcement that it will require vaccination for all workers, vendors, and visitors at its plants. The company has meatpacking plants in Dakota City, Lexington, Madison, and Omaha.

Let us slowdown in our rush to return to normal. Let’s separate science and politics as we buck up to take another shot at defeating the virus. I believe that scientific education and research trumps the popular votes of partisan politics.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years.*