

Some schools bring more students back to the classroom

04-27-2021, Rutland Herald, by Jim Sabatano

As Vermont's K-12 schools enter the homestretch of this academic year, a loosening of pandemic-related restrictions has allowed some school districts to bring more students back into the classroom.

Earlier this month, state officials revised health and safety guidance for schools, clearing the way for more in-person learning. Per new recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, physical distancing for students was reduced to 3 feet. (Students are still required to be 6 feet apart during meals, and adults must be 6 feet apart at all times.)

In addition, the 14-day quarantine requirement for out-of-state travel was lifted. Vaccinated families can now travel freely, and unvaccinated families need only get tested within three days of returning.

The move is part of Gov. Phil Scott's aspirational goal of getting as many students as possible physically back to school before the end of the year.

That push was complicated, however, as COVID-19 cases tied to learning communities began to spike in March.

As of April 21, the Vermont Department of Health has reported 1,240 total cases of COVID-19 in K-12 schools, with most occurring since late January.

An analysis by VT Digger found that 133 people were infected at a school or school-related event in March alone — as many as had been infected in the first six months of the school year combined.

That development put a wrinkle in Scott's plan as educators began to question the wisdom of disrupting current schedules and risking more infections for the last several weeks of the school year.

Coming out of April break, some school districts announced they would be revising their plans while others opted to maintain the status quo.

While most schools have almost fully returned to in-person instruction in grades K-8, many high schools remain on hybrid schedules alternating between remote and in-person learning.

At Rutland City Public Schools, Superintendent Bill Olsen said not much has changed.

Grades K-6 have been learning in person five days since last fall and grades 7-8 remain separated into to three distinct learning pods. The high school, meanwhile, continues to operate on a hybrid schedule.

“We likely will be maintaining our current breakfast and lunch system of eating in classrooms rather than the cafeteria, as the distancing guidelines do not make the full use of the cafeteria feasible,” he said, adding that the new guidance does allow for more mixing of student cohort groups for educational purposes.

In the Slate Valley Unified School District, Superintendent Brooke Olsen-Farrell reported that they are also staying the course, with full-time in-person instruction for grades K-8 and hybrid learning for grades 9-12.

The Greater Rutland County Supervisory Union will join Rutland City and Slate Valley in nearly full-time instruction, reports Superintendent Chris Sell. Starting May 5, all GRCSU schools will shift to full-day in-person every weekday except Wednesday, which will be in person for a half-day.

To the north of Rutland County, students at Otter Valley Union High School will return from a hybrid schedule to four-day in-person instruction beginning May 3, according to Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union Superintendent Jeanne Collins.

Collins said currently almost a quarter of OVUHS students are currently fully remote. She added that about 27 elementary classrooms throughout RNESU have remote students daily.

That fact informed her decision to keep Wednesdays remote across the board.

“Whether teaching one or ten remote students, a teacher must prepare lessons to go online, check in and follow up on all remote lessons, which adds quite a bit to their workload,” she wrote in a recent message to families.

Collins explained that figuring out how to feed more students while keeping them physically distanced has been a challenge. She said the school has ordered desks, tents for outdoor use and is working on a staggered schedule.

Mill River Union Middle and High School will also return to in-person learning four days a week starting May 3.

The Mill River School District has had one of the more conservative learning plans during the pandemic. Schools remained fully remote until November. Since then, grades K-6 have been in person four days a week with one remote day while grades 7-12 have been hybrid.

A survey sent out earlier this and month completed by more than 400 MRU families, faculty and staff, found that 67% favored the four-day-a-week plan.

Superintendent David Younce wrote in an email that the purchase of additional desks has allowed for room configurations to meet 3-foot requirements; however, figuring out the logistics for students meals has proven more difficult at Mill River as well.

“The 6-foot requirement for meals ... precludes us from having all students eat in the classrooms as they have been able to do previously,” he stated, explaining that the school will use a combination of classrooms and larger spaces such as the cafeteria and gymnasium.

“Managing that setup while protecting the instructional purposes that those spaces may serve — especially gymnasium space — is the biggest challenge at the moment,” Younce wrote. “But we’ve got good people putting their heads together to make it happen and I am confident that it will go well.”