

COVID cases on the rise as schools open further

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Vermont COVID-19 Cases by Age

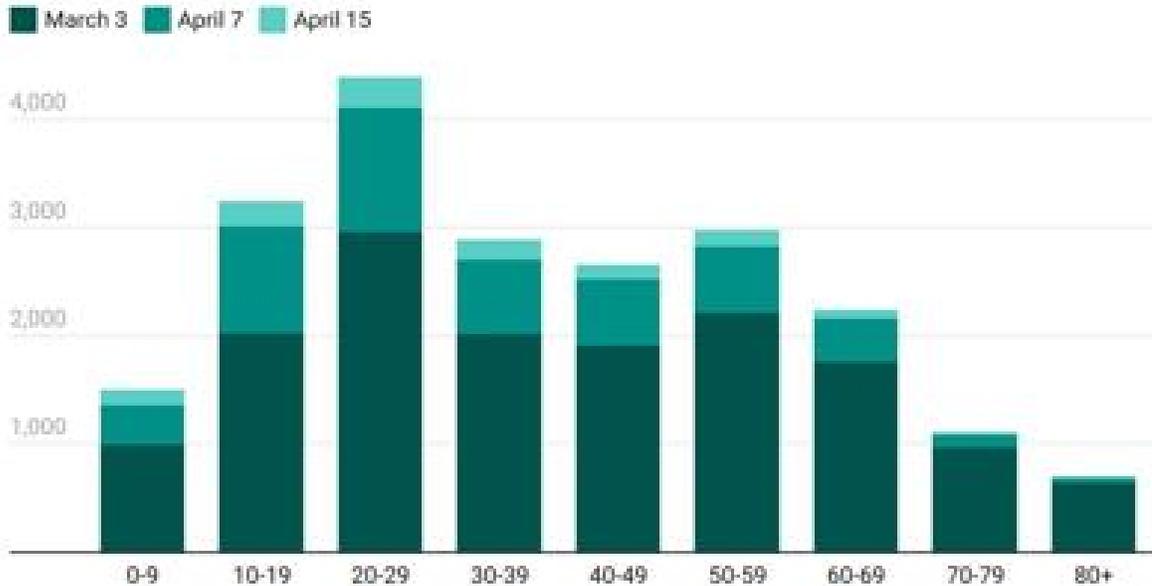


Chart shows the change in COVID-19 cases between March 3, 2021 and April 15, 2021.

Chart: Julia Bailey-Wells - Source: Vermont Department of Health Data - Created with Datawrapper

Schools across Vermont are looking to adapt to new state COVID-19 guidance with an eye toward getting more students back into classrooms following the April school break.

The new rules, however, spell out significant shifts in practice regarding returning to school after travel and distancing in the classroom for students in grades 7-12. Plans to change course come as new cases among the youngest Vermonters — those age 0-9 and 10-19 — are growing at the fastest rate of any of the age groups reported daily by the Vermont Health Department.

As of Thursday, there were 1,503 cases among the youngest age group to age 9. That is an increase of 10.4% since April 7 and a jump of 51.8% since March 3 when there were only 990 cases recorded for the youngest children.

Likewise, in the 10-19 age band, cases Thursday numbered 3,247, an increase of 7.9% since April 7. Compared to the total March 3 of 2,024, that group has seen a jump of 60%.

Both groups are showing faster case growth than the 20-29 age band where cases totaled 4,394 Thursday compared with 2,959 on March 3, an increase of just over 48%.

Cases among older age groups are growing at lower rates as the state's COVID-19 vaccine rollout has prioritized immunizing older Vermonters in the past several months.

Vermont Education Secretary Daniel French Thursday said education and health officials are aware of the circumstances, but stand by their guidance that's designed to return students to as much time in school as possible before the school year ends. "The higher case counts among parents and school-aged children is concerning," French said in an email. "Our modeling predicted this plateauing of case counts to a certain extent, but we also know the ability of the virus to spread and impact school operations will be reduced as vaccination starts to make a bigger impact among younger Vermonters."

On Monday, the state opens up vaccine appointment registration to all Vermonters age 16 and older.

Meanwhile, school officials are working to modify their procedures for the final stretch of the 2020-21 school year to follow new approaches regarding quarantine and travel, testing, and physical distancing in school for students in grades 7-12.

At a meeting of the Harwood Unified Union School Board Wednesday night, Superintendent Brigid Nease called the new guidance released last week by the state "pretty sweepingly different."

School Board members had questions about how the new rules would be applied in school after April vacation when all schools will have students in-person four days a week. Students in grades 7-12 currently are in school just two days a week.

"It is true that folks can literally come back from a trip on Sunday and go to school on Monday," Nease told the School Board. "It really is a paradigm shift from the nonspread of the virus ... versus living with the virus and managing the virus."

State travel guidance now says that unvaccinated Vermonters who travel out-of-state no longer need to quarantine, but must get a COVID-19 test three days after they return. In the case of schools, students can go to school while they wait to get tested and receive the results, providing they are well.

"It's really quite a lot of change for us," Nease said, adding that the district has already sent out messaging to families and school nurses are answering many questions from parents.

"Superintendents across the state really had concerns about (removing quarantine), asked some hard questions about that, and I would go as far as to say pushed back and what we were told is that this is the

decision of the agency based on the best medical science based on where we are with the current state of the virus,” Nease said.

Sorting out the details around the new guidance is a top priority at schools across the state, said Jeffrey Francis, executive director of the Vermont Superintendents Association.

Jeanne Collins, superintendent in the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, is part of an advisory group to the state Agency of Education. “This is a very complex thing to do with only about six weeks of school left after vacation,” she said.

Collins acknowledges that there is concern because children are getting COVID-19, although they become less seriously ill than adults, and transmission in schools has been low.

State Health Department data backs that up, according to spokeswoman Katie Warchut. “The majority of cases among school-age children in March appear to have been associated with small inside gatherings and some winter sports,” she said, referring to a recent report based on data through April 3.

The instances of children being hospitalized are also very rare. “Children in these age groups typically can recover at home,” Warchut said.

The recent change in travel guidance, which requires a test but not a mandatory quarantine period, is meant to make compliance easier, and to catch cases sooner, Warchut explained. Families that travel should still take prevention steps including wearing masks, distancing and avoiding crowds, she said.

Collins pointed out that the remaining weeks will require balancing the risk of virus spread against the need for students to return to their normal school routines after a chaotic year. French and state mental health officials have called attention to setbacks among many students due to lack of the normal connection and socialization school provides as a result of remote school during the pandemic.

“I think our guidance for schools can ensure both their safe operations and our interest in better addressing the needs of students through providing more in-person instruction,” French said.

Collins pointed out that the state directives give schools the final say on how much in-person time they provide and the ability to change course if circumstances of the virus change.

One factor that may work in favor of limiting virus spread is the fact that the majority of educators have been vaccinated already and more parents are getting the vaccine every day. But as schools welcome more students back in person, their daily routines will vary. A practical challenge: the new state guidance

says distancing for older students has been relaxed to three feet, except during meals when it remains six feet.

Nease said those logistics will be up to middle and high school principals to sort out as she expects students will likely be eating lunches in classrooms and cafeterias, outside under tents, and even in the high school auditorium if necessary. “I think it will be a patchwork quilt,” she said.

French said that leeway is intentional — to a point. “I believe districts still need to have some flexibility in implementing our guidance based on their specific logistical considerations, but the variation in our school operations statewide — in-person, hybrid, or remote — should not be based on a local assessment of what is safe or not,” he said. “We can rely on the Vermont Health Department for this assessment, and their public health expertise is what is behind our guidance since it is joint guidance issued by the Department of Health and the Agency of Education.”

Harwood schools are implementing the guidance and will be ready when school resumes on April 26, Nease said. But Collins added that school leaders are also watching their communities. “We’re telling parents, this could be temporary,” she said.