

Some schools to offer remote options

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While K-12 schools across Vermont will return to in-person instruction this fall, some still plan to offer a virtual option.

Coming out of last school year, the Agency of Education (AOE) instructed schools to return to in-person learning five days a week in the fall, largely discouraging remote learning.

However, in a memo issued this week, the AOE clarified its position regarding virtual learning for the 2021-22 academic year, noting that “online/blended learning was utilized prior to the pandemic under the normal regulatory framework” of Vermont’s Flexible Pathways Initiative.

Created in 2013 as part of Act 77, Flexible Pathways encourages school districts to develop and expand “high-quality educational experiences” in a variety of areas, including virtual learning, work-based learning, personalized learning and career and technical education.

“During the emergency response districts moved to remote and hybrid teaching as an operational stance. While remote and hybrid operational dispositions are no longer all-school operational modes available to districts, remote and hybrid learning should be understood to be distinct from the pre-existing flexible pathway of online/blended learning (also referred to as virtual learning),” the memo reads.

With positive COVID-19 cases on the rise in Vermont because of the delta variant, as well as masking mandates and other mitigation strategies being implemented in schools at the local level, families appear to be once again interested in going remote.

Around the state, school districts are starting to respond to those concerns.

Earlier this summer, Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union (FNESU) launched “Flexible Pathways Academy,” a 1-year pilot program offering a “more personalized, mostly virtual, school option” for K-12 students, according to its website.

FNESU officials were not immediately available for comment Friday.

Meanwhile, in Rutland County, Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union (RNESU) recently announced it would offer a similar virtual option.

Superintendent Jeanne Collins reported between 40 and 50 families in the six-school, eight-town supervisory union have expressed an interest in virtual learning.

Their reasons for not wanting to return to the classroom vary.

“There are some families that still don’t feel they could return their child due to immunosuppressant issues in the home. ... And there are some families who won’t send their child if they’re wearing a mask,” she said.

When RNESU reopens on Sept. 1, it will require universal masking for all students and staff when indoors.

Collins said that while she was willing to provide some type of virtual accommodation, she did not want to ask classroom teachers to once again juggle in-person and remote instruction, as they did last year.

Instead, RNESU contracted with EdOptions Academy, a virtual learning service offered by the online education platform Edmentum.

EdOptions will provide synchronous and asynchronous virtual instruction to students in grades K-12, delivered by licensed teachers and overseen by a local educator.

“We hope to do two things: We hope to keep kids connected to our schools, even if they cannot attend, and we also hope to keep transmission of the virus or impact on others to a minimum, which will allow less interruption in the learning environment,” she said.

The service will be funded by federal Early and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds, according to Collins.

Students who sign up for EdOptions must commit to the whole semester. It will not be available to students who might need to temporarily quarantine if they test positive for COVID. Quarantined students will be treated like any other student who is absent because of illness, and will need to work with teachers to make up assignments.

Collins added, however, that if an entire classroom needs to quarantine, remote learning could be an option.

Although the AOE memo only came out this week, RNESU was ahead of the curve.

“We were kind of thinking forward, assuming that that guidance was going to happen,” said Kristin Hubert, director of curriculum.

While the Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative provided online learning options to Vermont schools last year and will continue to do so this year, Hubert said EdOptions was a better fit for RNESU since it's a platform students are already familiar with.

(RNESU currently works with VTVLC in grades 9-12 to provide students access to classes not available to them locally.)

Hubert said, that while many students struggled learning remotely last year, some thrived.

"There's this really distinct part of the student body that did really, really well with online learning," she said.

She noted that virtual instruction will look different from last year, however.

"These kids are engaged in a fully virtual academy with a fully virtual teacher. They have a daily schedule, they have to be in attendance, they have to progress," she said, explaining that if the program is not a good fit for a student, they can be transferred back into the classroom.

Given its benefits for certain students, Hubert expects RNESU may continue some type of virtual option beyond this school year.

"It fits in, even in non-COVID time, with Vermont Flexible Pathways. So it's just another way to support students in Vermont," she said.

RNESU hosted two informational town halls for families interested in remote learning earlier this week. At 5 p.m. Monday, it will host a virtual Q&A on Zoom. Visit www.rnesu.org/article/512790 to view videos of the town halls and find a link to the Q&A.