

# The Deeper Dig: Starting school amid a Covid-19 surge

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Students arrive at U-32

for the first day of school on September 8. Photo by Mike Dougherty/VTDigger

Students in some districts are returning to school buildings as soon as this week. Meanwhile, Covid-19 cases across the state are [still surging](#) due to the highly contagious Delta variant.

School leaders across the state say their No. 1 job is to keep kids safe this fall. But what exactly that means could look different from school to school.

That's in part because the state [has released](#) only a two-page memo to guide the reopening process.

The [local-control approach](#) has led to a range of outcomes. For example, while schools in Canaan won't require masks, schools in the Montpelier-Roxbury district will require universal indoor masking in accordance with recommendations by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Some superintendents agree with the state's approach. Others feel it could put children and school staff at risk.

"I wish there would be more alignment," said Brian Ricca, the superintendent in the St. Johnsbury School District. "I don't understand what's preventing our administration from being more emphatic and giving us more to support a safe return to schools."

On this week's podcast, Ricca and three other school leaders — Libby Bonesteel (Montpelier-Roxbury School District), Jeanne Collins (Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union) and John Castle (North Country Supervisory Union) — discuss the gaps in guidance. Below is a partial transcript, edited for length and clarity.

*Lola Duffort contributed reporting.*

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Brian Ricca: I feel a very visceral, professional responsibility to maintain an environment that is incredibly safe for children who are coming back and don't even have the opportunity to get vaccinated.

*Brian Ricca is the superintendent in the St. Johnsbury school district. He said he's excited for in-person education — and frustrated about how it's been rolled out.*

Brian Ricca: I'll be honest, I want our kids back in school. As a dad, I want my own children back in school, and I want my student population in St. Johnsbury that I serve back in school.

We had a lot of hope. In June, there was a lot of reason to be really optimistic that we were going to be able to start the school year differently. And while I absolutely understand that we are leading the way in this country in vaccine percentages, that doesn't help me as a preK-8 building, where, as I said to you before, the majority of my children are not even eligible for it yet.

*Part of Brian's frustration has to do with the state's guidance — or lack of it. Earlier this month, the Agency of Education and the Department of Health put out a [two-page memo](#) with some recommendations on masking and staying home when you're sick. It said nothing about ventilation or physical distancing, and very little about vaccination.*

*For some educators, that's not enough.*

Brian Ricca: I mean, the state gave us this humongous document last time. Two pages does not seem like enough to me right now, when the medical community that is tasked with the medical well being of young people is saying we need to be doing more. I wish there would be more alignment. I don't understand what's preventing our administration from being more emphatic and giving us more to support a safe return to schools.

*Some of the conflict comes from masking rules. The CDC and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend universal indoor masking in schools. The state recommends masking for the first two weeks of the school year. At that point, if 80% of the vaccine-eligible population in a school have received full doses of the vaccine, then mask rules can drop for those people.*

*Again, this is guidance. One school district, in Canaan, has already said "nope": masks will be optional. Other districts have swung the other way.*

Libby Bonesteel: We will all be masked. And my message to my community about masks was that we'll be masked until further notice.

*Libby Bonesteel is the superintendent for the Montpelier-Roxbury district.*

Libby Bonesteel: I didn't put anything about a 10-day or an 80% thing or anything like that. It was "until further notice" to give myself some flexibility there.

*Libby said superintendents have been left on their own to figure out how to enforce masking rules in certain environments, like when students are eating.*

Libby Bonesteel: It depends by school. We're shipping in tons of picnic tables and different types of tables for our middle school and our high school so that we can spread kids out in the cafeteria.

In our elementary schools, at Union, our kids will be eating in the classrooms again to start the school year. At Roxbury, they'll be splitting the school up half and half to keep less kids there while they're unmasked and eating. We're using different doorways for kids to enter. That kind of thing.

*But beyond just having to adapt, the state has put superintendents in a tricky spot. Now, they're the ones taking heat from parents who don't agree with a school's approach.*

Libby Bonesteel: I think that Montpelier and Roxbury communities understand masking and believe in the science, and we don't get that pushback. But I was on a call with superintendents today, and there's a lot happening in those districts and at board meetings right now with just absolute vitriol coming at the superintendent. Comments like, "Why are you killing my kid with a mask?" That kind of thing.

So if I think about it in the context of a larger state, then yeah, I wish that there would — it's almost political cover for the people who need to do this job. And I don't know if the state either worries about that piece, or thought it through, because Vermont has been so successful. So I'm worried about my colleagues and what they're experiencing right now.

Jeanne Collins: What I'm hearing is a mixed bag on masks. Staff are much more universal on wanting to have masks. Parents are either strongly for or strongly against. There's very little middle ground.

*Jeanne Collins, the superintendent in Rutland, sent out a survey earlier this month. She said she got strong responses on masking from both sides.*

Jeanne Collins: There are more parents who responded to that who said yes on masks, "I'm not sending my child without it." There's still a great deal of anxiety with the Delta variant of even sending kids to school, and there are still families with immunocompromised people in the household — whether it's the students or another household member — who are very concerned about exposing their child to the Delta variant and bringing it back home.

One of my favorite comments that came from a parent was, "I just want staff there with open arms ready to love my child." So we'll do that. And then a lot of concern about, you know, "We get that there needs to be masks, but could we get outside more and take off the masks and have fun?" Which we also are planning to do.

*Parents who really are strongly anti-mask — how are you addressing those concerns when people come at you?*

Jeanne Collins: I'm sorry. We can agree to disagree. But I have an obligation, a duty of care obligation, to provide the safest, healthiest environment that I can provide for all students. That does not necessarily mean that everyone's going to agree with me. But I am the person who is tasked with the responsibility and obligation. And I need to know that I have created as safe and healthy [an] environment as I possibly can in a pandemic, which is not perfect. So I'm sorry that you don't agree.

*Jeanne said the state's guidance around masking was just flat-out confusing. She's planning to honor the 80% threshold in schools with mostly older kids, but stick to universal masking in schools with mostly younger kids.*

Jeanne Collins: I am wondering why it's a district-by-district decision to start the school year universally masked. And I would like to see it not be a district-by-district decision.

I think that it's difficult enough to try to meet your community's needs. But when your community is so split over such an issue as that. If this really is a health issue, and it is impacting our hospitals in a way that health care workers are walking off the job, and we have fewer of them; that teachers are walking off the job, and we have fewer of them — then let's just get a grip on it and say we're starting the year with masks.

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*Part of the frustration among school officials right now is that the current surge in cases took everyone by surprise.*

John Castle: If we looked at things through a lens in June, there was great optimism that we had gotten through the worst of Covid-19. ... And then as we've seen the uptick with the Delta variant throughout the summer, I think the picture certainly has changed.

*John Castle heads the North Country Supervisory Union, with schools from Lowell to Essex County. He said some things will look more normal than they did last year — for example, students will do some physical distancing, but without any rigid guidelines.*

John Castle: It's not as if we've broken out the tape measure. You know, last year was really difficult for a number of our schools to meet the either three-foot or six-foot physical distancing. In schools, that was particularly hard. The high school had to be in a hybrid [model] because of that, and the junior high was really maxed out around their use of space. So if we had to return to something like that, it would really be, certainly, a setback.

*John is handling mask rules similar to Rutland — universal masking in schools with mostly younger kids, and honoring the 80% threshold in schools with mostly older kids. But John said he's not sure how to track progress towards that threshold — and the state hasn't given any hints.*

John Castle: I think we're a little concerned about how this determination will be made. Will it be made by the Department of Health in a cross reference of their vaccine database along with our student database? Or will there be some process we're expected to conduct in terms of a voluntary attestation of meeting the vaccine requirement, or providing proof of a vaccine? Again, not a requirement to do that, but some voluntary, and even then some folks may have some reluctance to do that or participate in that.

*John said that with vaccination rates for younger Vermonters dragging, he's also concerned about the threshold even being realistic.*

John Castle: There's this arbitrary number of 80% out there. And let's just say North Country Union High School hovers at 72%. Maybe after a couple more weeks, we get up to 73% or 74%. And then people are just saying, "Why can't we not wear masks? We're almost there, right?" But it's like, nope, you're not there.

I understand some of the encouragement that that might provide for people to become vaccinated. I'm not sure [if], in some cases, people will still feel reluctant to have their children vaccinated. ... Are we going to get to that magical number of 80%? I certainly am not anticipating that that's going to happen, say, in the first two weeks of school, which is really what was suggested as a possibility.

*John said overall, he agreed with the state's approach to give local districts the power to make their own decisions. But it has placed him in the middle of a heated debate among parents.*

John Castle: It is a little bit of a no win situation. And, you know, we faced that last year. As I say to my leadership team, there's no end to the opportunities for me to disappoint people. At some point, somebody is going to be disappointed. I understand that.

What I think I feel confident in articulating is that if we're going to come down on the side of anything, it's going to be on the side of health and safety. And that if there's a doubt about something, and we can be more safe by a certain practice or protocol, that's the direction we're going to go.

If we can mitigate the spread of this virus by wearing masks, it makes total sense to me that we would do that for the good of our students and their health, the good of our staff and their health, and also to keep schools open. Because if we have cases, and we have quarantining, we're going to have disruption, and students are going to have a loss of learning.

*Other superintendents said they're looking for more specific guidance from the state on what happens if cases crop up. Here's Libby Bonesteel.*

Libby Bonesteel: We've been told to treat this like the flu, and it's not the flu. The experience over the last year and a half has told us this is not like the flu. So we can't do that. I'm concerned about contact tracing for our elementary students in particular, who are not vaccinated, and — how do we continue the learning?

*Last year, schools were tasked with completing their own contact tracing. The health department hasn't told school leaders if that's happening again.*

Libby Bonesteel: If we have to contact trace between vaccinated and unvaccinated, that matters. And we need to have the system set up to do that, so we don't have to do that legwork in an emergency where we're stressed, trying to get people in contact with the people who need to be in contact. So I'm very much looking forward to getting the guidance around contact tracing and how we will be doing that.

Brian Ricca: As we look ahead, it would be really helpful, from my perspective, if we had an advanced look on what contingencies should look like, from the perspective of the administration.

Given that we've had positive cases in summer school, I think it behooves me as a superintendent, whose basic goal is to operate a school district safely, to expect that there will be more positive cases. And I would love to hear more guidance from the administration — whether that's the governor, whether it's Dr. [Mark] Levine, the Department of Health, whether it's the Secretary of Education [Dan French], on what we should be preparing for. Candidly, I wish there was a more uniform approach to what the Vermont American Academy of Pediatrics is recommending. I feel as though we need more.

*Last year, there was specific guidance around activities that were considered riskier for spreading the virus, like athletics and music. Jeanne Collins pointed out that this year, the health guidance didn't mention either.*

Jeanne Collins: The music guidance, for example. My teachers are starting their planning on Monday. They come back for their in-service days Monday, and I still don't know what to tell them to plan for music classes. And I shouldn't be sitting in this position, you know, mere days away from paying people to plan for classroom instruction without knowing what to tell them to plan.

*All these gaps have some school officials frustrated with the Agency of Education.*

Brian Ricca: I'm looking for more detail. I'm looking for more guidance. For me, this is not a time for a light touch. This is a time for leadership and putting vulnerable children's lives first.

I want more leadership. I, as a parent, expect more leadership. As a superintendent, I expect more leadership. My parents, my families, expect more leadership. And it's hard to feel like we are filling a vacuum, where honestly, there's a pretty clear path forward.

*I asked Jeanne Collins what the end of this period looks like. What does getting back to normal really mean at this point?*

Jeanne Collins: Well, I don't know when we're going to get there. But you know, I see me walking into a school and walking into a classroom, not wearing a mask. Seeing a group of kids sitting around the table doing a group activity, not wearing a mask. And singing happening. And just, not that level of anxiety that we've had for the last 16, 18 months. That's what I hope to get back to.

*You're saying when you're in the school building now, you can kind of just sense that anxiety is there?*

You can. And you know, I'll walk in with the mask on, the teachers will have masks on, the kids will have masks on. The door is not wide open. People are discouraged from coming into the schools. We don't have assemblies, and parents sitting through assemblies. But we would go back to that. We would bring community in more often, as we did before. I think we're all hopeful for that time.