

Schools roll out COVID guidance

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Local school districts are falling in line with Agency of Education COVID-19 recommendations for the fall.

With schools across Rutland County set to reopen in the coming days, administrators are beginning to release plans for what virus mitigation strategies will look like inside buildings.

Earlier this month, the AOE released a 2-page memo, advising schools to require universal masking for the first 10 instructional days of the school year in order to determine the percentage of eligible students who are fully vaccinated. After the 10 days, masks will no longer be required for all those who are eligible for vaccination once the vaccination rate among eligible students surpasses 80%.

Masks will be required for students younger than 12, who are currently ineligible to receive the vaccine.

All passengers on buses will be required to wear masks regardless of vaccination status, per federal regulation.

Masks will not be required outdoors.

According to the latest state data, 69.6% of 12- to 15-year-olds and 75% of 16- to 17-year-olds have received at least one dose of the vaccine.

The state guidance is less stringent than recommendations from Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), which have called for universal mask mandates in schools.

The state, however, is taking a local-control approach to addressing COVID in schools this year, leaving districts to chart their own course.

In Rutland County, Rutland City Public Schools, the Greater Rutland County Supervisory Union and the Slate Valley Unified Union School District are hewing closely to AOE guidance.

On Monday evening, the Slate Valley School Board approved Superintendent Brook Olsen-Farrell's recommendations after an extended discussion.

Olsen-Farrell informed the board vaccination rates among SVUUSD students are low.

In a Wednesday interview, she estimated that only 52, or 20%, of Fair Haven Union High School students had been vaccinated as of Aug. 12, according to the state vaccine registry and anecdotal reports from parents.

While some board members struggled with not allowing families to decide for themselves whether or not to wear masks, others argued it was the board's responsibility to keep all students safe.

"I just am having a very hard time trying to ... make that decision of what's best for somebody's child. I'm not their parents," said board member Tara Buxton.

"We make that decision almost every day in school," Olsen-Farrell replied.

Board member Peter Stone stated his belief that masks should be mandatory for everyone inside school buildings because it's the best way to ensure the virus won't spread.

"We have laws in the United States. It's still America. You have a speed limit, you follow it. You have to wear a seat belt. There's lots of things you have to do," he said.

Rutland City School Commissioners approved Superintendent Bill Olsen's recommendations to follow AOE guidance Tuesday night.

Olsen provided commissioners with a memo that cited state statute 16 V.S.A. section 834(a), which states, "Each school district and its employees owe its students a duty of ordinary care to prevent the students from being exposed to unreasonable risk, from which it is foreseeable that injury is likely to occur."

GRCSU Superintendent Christopher Sell stated in an email that he would be asking his board to confirm his recommendations at its regular meeting Wednesday evening.

Elsewhere in the county, Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union and Mill River Unified Union School District are being slightly more conservative, requiring universal masking indoors for all students and staff in grades pre-K-12 until the 80% threshold is crossed.

"It is anticipated that masking will not continue all year; however, the agency of education, CDC and American Academy of Pediatrics VT all state clearly that masks are the minimum we can do to protect our unvaccinated children and our own duty of care obligation finds that masking is necessary," RNESU Superintendent Jeanne Collins wrote in an Aug. 16 letter to families. "We will monitor the impact of the delta variant and any future variants, our vaccination rates, and community outbreak and transmission rates and will step back from masking as soon as it is feasible."

But while local districts are all adopting some flavor of AOE guidance, others around the state are taking different approaches.

Last week, the Canaan School Board in Essex County voted 5-0 to open schools without masks, according to a report by VT Digger.

A message to parents from Superintendent Karen Conroy, stated, “Mask wearing will be optional for all students and staff, but highly recommended when indoors for individual protection.”

The Harwood Unified Union School District went in the opposite direction, meanwhile, adopting some of the strictest requirements in the state. In addition to universal masking, all staff will be required to get vaccinated and many of the social distancing protocols from last school year will remain in effect, according to a letter released by Superintendent Brigid Nease last week.

As a patchwork of plans begins to emerge around the state, school administrators have expressed frustration at the lack of detail and direction from the AOE, such as exactly how student vaccination rates will be calculated.

“There are still a lot of questions, and there still are not good answers from the state,” Mill River Superintendent David Younce informed his School Board last week in reference to vaccine verification.

“Folks in my role as superintendents are bugging the Agency of Education about that every single day.”

Some state legislators have seized upon this frustration, criticizing Gov. Phil Scott for not doing more.

On Tuesday morning, Sen. President Pro Tem Becca Balint and House Speaker Jill Krowinski issued a pair of statements calling on Scott to take more proactive steps to mitigate the spread of the virus, especially in schools.

“Since the start of the pandemic, Vermont has been leading the nation in our response to COVID, and Vermonters have stepped up heroically, steadfastly, and let evidence-based science guide our policy response. That’s why I am concerned that the Governor’s change in strategy is failing to keep Vermonters, all of us, safe,” said Krowinski, D-Chittenden.

Balint, D-Windham, echoed Krowinski, adding that she has heard from school administrators and teachers who are asking for clearer guidance.

“As a parent of a child under 12, I know parents across Vermont are, like me, excited about schools reopening, but many are also anxious about sending their unvaccinated children into bustling schools and classrooms,” she stated. “It is unclear and confusing to thousands of parents across Vermont why students, faculty, and staff are not being required to wear masks in schools at a time when we have community spread of the virus and our youngest children don’t have the protection that adults have available to them.”

At his regular Tuesday news conference, the Republican Scott waved off the criticism, accusing the Democrat lawmakers of “playing politics.”

He said he had confidence in the state’s ability to mitigate the virus.

“We’re No. 1 in the nation in so many different categories, we’re doing something right,” he said.

He added that modeling indicated cases are expected to drop in a couple weeks and said he didn’t believe another state of emergency order was appropriate right now, warning of potential overuse.

“It should only be used in times of real emergency. There’s no emergency that we’re seeing at this point in time that would force us to go into (such an order),” he said.

On Wednesday, the state reported 120 new positive cases of COVID-19, including 35 hospitalizations.