

COVID showing up in some local schools

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With the school year now under way, Rutland County K-12 schools have been largely successful at keeping COVID-19 at bay. Some haven't seen a single case.

As of Monday, Mill River Unified Union School District hasn't yet had a case at any of its five schools, according to Superintendent David Younce.

At Slate Valley Unified Union School District, Superintendent Brooke Olsen-Farrell said one classroom was quarantined last week, impacting 26 students and staff.

She added that one classroom at Fair Haven Grade School and another at Castleton Village School would be in quarantine this week.

To the north of the county, Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union saw two positive cases at Otter Valley Union High School over the weekend.

"We are keeping the school open and contacted all 62 identified close contacts. If unvaccinated or if they have symptoms, they are asked to quarantine and be tested," Superintendent Jeanne Collins wrote in an email.

"It is coming. I expect more cases affecting schools soon — seems to be climbing up Route 7," she added.

Just south on Route 7, Rutland Town School is one such affected school. Last week, the K-8 school reported five cases, sending five classrooms into quarantine.

Christopher Sell, superintendent of the Greater Rutland County Supervisory Union, which oversees RTS, said there were no new cases reported over the weekend. He added that the rest of GRCSU's schools, which reside in five other Rutland County towns, have been quiet.

Sell said the quarantined classes are currently learning remotely. Any students who are quarantined outside of a full class are learning asynchronously; however, unlike last year, there is no hybrid model available. All days spent learning while quarantined will count as student attendance days, he noted.

While Sell credited GRCSU's nursing staff and administrators for their work in following contact tracing protocols, he expressed frustration that the health department has not been as supportive as it was last year.

"I think part of our frustration — the same frustrated being felt across the state — is that we are doing contract tracing, really, it's fallen upon the school," he said. "The school's being forced to go through this on our own."

"We're operating without a lot of the resources and support we had last year," Sell said. "We're dealing with a pandemic still ... and we're not getting a lot of support in dealing with these health-related issues. And we're doing the best we can."

Rutland City Public Schools have had a total of five cases since the start of the academic year, which has resulted in three classrooms being quarantined, said Superintendent Bill Olsen.

Olsen explained that one of those classrooms was in the upper grade levels, where some students were vaccinated, so not everyone needed to quarantine.

Students will be learning remotely while quarantined.

Unlike Sell, Olsen said he hasn't had any issues with the state regarding contact tracing. Olsen said RCPS nurses and administrators are following the same protocols as last year.

He said contact tracing is a full-time job for school officials, noting that two district employees spent nearly 12 hours working through the process on Sunday.

"So it's a lot of work. They're putting out a lot of effort," he said.

Rutland County's situation is mild compared to other parts of the state, where several full schools have already been forced to quarantine due to positive cases.

The state reported, as of Sept. 6, that a total of 81 school-related cases have been documented since Aug. 23. Half those cases occurred in the week prior to Sept. 6.

The state data, however, is not comprehensive, making it difficult to get a full picture of how effectively the virus is spreading, or not spreading, within schools. Not included in it are people in learning communities with COVID-19 who were not at school during their infectious period. In other words, someone may have been exposed to the virus either in or outside of school, but did not have an opportunity to spread it to other people in the learning community, and therefore was not counted.

(An infectious period — when a person with COVID-19 is contagious — starts two days before symptoms begin and continues until they are recovered. For those without symptoms, the infectious period starts two days before they had a positive test.)

In recent weeks, school officials have been pressing the state to do more to prevent the spread of COVID within schools as the highly transmissible delta variant continues to drive positive case counts upward.

According to a Vermont Department of Health report from Sept. 10, rates of COVID were highest among 0- to 9-year-olds and 20- to 29-year-olds. Children ages 0-9, accounted for 27.8 cases of COVID per 10,000.

And despite Vermont being third in the nation for administering the COVID vaccine, children under 12 are not currently eligible to receive it.

American Academy of Pediatrics data from the last two weeks of August showed a 10% increase nationally in the cumulated number of COVID-19 cases among children.

The AAP also showed that Vermont had the highest cumulative percentage of cases in children at around 23% — well above the national average of 15%.

However, a state-by-state analysis of AAP data put Vermont fifth from the bottom nationally for childhood COVID cases, with a rate of just under 5,000 cases per 100,000 children.

Last week, several school officials and public health advocates called on Gov. Phil Scott to adopt universal masking for all schools, citing Vermont Department of Health data.

Heading into the new school year, the Agency of Education released a two-page memo advising school districts to require universal masking for the first 10 instructional days of the school year while student vaccination rates were determined.

The governor revised that plan last week, recommending schools keep universal masking in place through Oct. 4.

“We hope by then the delta wave that has impacted the entire country, though fortunately not anywhere near as severe in Vermont, will have begun to subside,” Scott said at the time.

On Monday, the state reported 108 new cases of COVID-19, including 38 hospitalizations and nine people in intensive care. The most recent death was reported on Sunday. Rutland County had 12 new cases for a total of 246 in the past two weeks.