

# Are COVID rules for schools keeping your kids out of class?

## 10-08-2021, WCAX, by Olivia Lyons

RUTLAND, Vt. (WCAX) - Vermont schools are open for full in-person learning this year but the surge of COVID cases in September caused a significant disruption in many schools across the state. Between individual students testing positive to entire classrooms forced to quarantine, the absentee rate appears to be up sharply over pre-pandemic levels.

We don't have statewide numbers to show how many days of school have been missed, but school officials we talked with say COVID is still taking a toll on learning.

"There have been moments where it's been hard to kind of stay on top of it," said Kerry Coarse, the principal of the Rutland Intermediate School.

Coarse says her staff has become efficient at alerting parents of COVID close contacts. And since their students remain in close groups all day, Coarse says when somebody tests positive in a classroom, their practice is to quarantine the whole class.

So far this year, that has happened nine times at RIS.

According to the Vermont Department of Health, as of Oct. 3, this school year RIS has reported only six positive cases of COVID. But the school has had approximately 150 students miss school while in quarantine.

As for the number of students quarantining on Friday, Oct. 8, Coarse said they are down to probably only two dozen.

Tracking absences due to the pandemic so far this year is not easy. The Health Department reports 651 positive cases in schools statewide through last week. But that doesn't tell us how many students have had to miss school because they were considered close contacts.

Vermont's Agency of Education could not give us statewide absentee numbers. So we reached out to all districts in the state and heard back from five.

One example is the Slate Valley Unified School District. It reported a rate of 3.9% of their students absent on any given day in September 2019. But this September, it has nearly tripled to 11.6%.

In the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, the entire Neshobe School is currently out quarantining.

"Whenever everybody is kind of in the same boat, it is almost easier in some ways," said Abby Brodowski, a Neshobe School parent.

Brodowski has a son in kindergarten and a daughter in third grade, who was a close contact. They are still awaiting test results.

"Her whole class was automatically quarantined and then my son, we didn't find out about until a day or so later, but we had kept him out anyway," Brodowski said.

She says communication between the school and parents has been informative.

All classes have since switched to remote learning, but before that, her son was given school work online.

“His teacher puts stuff up on Google classroom and they navigate it and he really likes to share it with me, which I think is great,” Brodowski said.

Back at RIS, if a single student needs to quarantine and be tested, but not an entire classroom, the teacher will send home paper and pencil lessons until they can return, just like it was pre-pandemic if a student needed to miss school.

“It is unfortunate that sometimes kids have to stay home when they’re not sick, and fortunately, kids are testing negative and we’re not having the spread within our building,” Coarse said.

The state is trying to get the “test to stay” program up and running. Their hope is this would eliminate some kids from quarantining.

Coarse tells me her school is looking into it and it could cut down on a lot of students being absent.