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OV Principal will leave post in June of 2022

'It's time to let other's lead,' Avery said

BY ANGELO LYNN

BRANDON — At a school board meeting Tuesday night chock full of budget preparations, concerns of COVID cases at school and impending testing program to keep students in school and healthy as much as possible, plus a shortage of available teachers, substitutes and school bus drivers, the bombshell news of the meeting was something entirely unexpected: the board learned that long-time Otter Valley Principal James Avery had submitted his letter of resignation effective this June 2022.

At 63, Avery said the decision was very emotional for him and it didn't come easy, but he simply told RNESU Superintendent Jeanne Collins that "the time had come" to let someone else take charge as principal and take the school forward.

"I've always wanted the best for this place — this school, this community, these students,"



PRINCIPAL JAMES AVERY

Avery said in a brief interview Tuesday morning, "You always want to leave a place better than you found it... I hope I've done that. Now it's time to give it to

someone new and let them make it better."

Avery first came to the school in 1991 as a special educator hired by Supt. Bill Mathis during the first inklings of the "school-to-work" movement that later

"Whomever they get, you have to be all in. A principal has to be all in, every day. And the community knows it, and they give back when you are."

—James Avery

morphed into the school's Cam (See Principal Avery, Page 6)

State pushes school testing as recent data shows Covid falling

BY ERIN PETENKO, VtDigger

Vermont is hoping to implement a new model that would test Covid-19-exposed students to keep them in school — but staffing that testing strategy may prove to be a challenge, said Dan French, state education secretary, at a press conference Tuesday.

The state's Covid-19 mitigation measures in K-12 education

have shifted as the Delta variant has caused a surge in cases and classroom closures. At first, Vermont recommended lifting masking orders in high-vaccination schools, only to reverse that measure temporarily within weeks after schools began the fall semester.

The Agency of Education then recommended weekly surveillance testing of students to limit cases while dialing back contact tracing. It's unclear how many schools implemented that testing, but school officials and

(See School testing, Page 7)



On the run

OV QUARTERBACK CALEB Whitney, above, came in for the second half of play against top-ranked Windsor Jacks this past Saturday and was constantly on the run from the Jacks' defensive front. See story and more photos on page 8.

Reporter photo/Angelo Lynn

SolarFest looking into Brandon for a permanent home in 2022

BY ANGELO LYNN

BRANDON — The town of Brandon is one of a dozen communities throughout central and southern Vermont that is in the running as the permanent home of SolarFest, the renewable energy festival that has drawn thousands of people annually for the past 25 years. The festival is known for its high-energy musical acts on the main stage, arts, education and hands-on workshops for a sustainable lifestyle.

"We're looking ahead to establish a home and are fortunate to have an experienced and dedicated group of volunteers working to find the right place to put down roots," said SolarFest President Bill Laberge. "We're hoping to return to our in-person festival in July of 2022, hopefully in our new home, wherever that may be."

The leaders in Brandon answered the call with Selectboard member Tim Guiles, Economic Development Manager Bill Moore and Jim Emerson of the Energy Committee arranging visits, property tours and ongoing discussions about poten-

(See SolarFest, Page 19)



ATTENDEES ENJOY A concert at an earlier SolarFest.



School testing

(Continued from Page 1)

nurses said they struggled to get started with staff stretched thin already.

Now, the agency is pushing a model that would allow students to stay in school when exposed to Covid-19 rather than having to quarantine. This "test-to-stay" model is already in place in Massachusetts, and French said it would "reduce the impact on student learning and ... reduce the time students spend out of the classroom as a result of Covid-19."

Under this model, unvaccinated students with no symptoms who were exposed to a case would get an antigen test at the beginning of each school day until seven days have passed since their exposure. Symptomatic students must stay out of school.

French said the test-to-stay arrangement would work in tandem with other testing strategies, including surveillance testing, take-home PCR tests for families to use and PCR response testing for schools to use if they want to, for example, immediately test a student with symptoms.

But he admitted that districts may find it difficult to staff these testing needs.

"The major bottleneck for implementing testing will be staffing," French said. "I expect many schools will consider hiring additional staff or redeploying staff they already have on hand to implement the testing,

so this will take some time to ramp up across the state."

French added that school districts have "considerable" funding from the federal government for Covid-19 mitigation measures. He expects it will take a few weeks for school districts to get started on the new testing measures because of those logistical issues.

"But I can't help but think this is going to be the solution that

really strikes the appropriate balance between keeping kids safe but also keeping kids in school. ... We have to work hard to figure these things out, and it's going to be a state and local partnership to do that," he said.

The Department of Health reported 107 new Covid-19 cases in K-12 schools in the past week, among students or staff who were infectious while physically in school. In total, the department has reported 651 cases since the start of the school year.

In all, 51% of Vermont schools have not had a single Covid-19 case this year, which means 49% of schools have had at least one case. The RNESU school board was to hear a report on Covid cases in the district at Tuesday night's board meeting, and plans for the impending testing programs. The Reporter will cover that discussion in its next issue.

BETTER OUTLOOK AHEAD

Vermont reported 1,166 Covid-19 cases in the past week,

compared with 1,462 cases the week before. That's the second straight week of falling Covid-19 cases, according to a presentation from Michael Pieciak, commissioner of the Department of Financial Regulation.

Pieciak said it was still too early to give a forecast for the coming weeks, and hospitalizations have remained relatively level even as cases have dropped.

But cases and hospitalizations at a national level have dropped as well, an encouraging sign for Vermont's coronavirus outlook, he said.

Cases remain far higher among unvaccinated Vermonters. The rate of Covid-19 cases among unvaccinated Vermonters is 4.3 higher than the rate among fully vaccinated Vermonters, according to DFR data.

The hospitalization rate for unvaccinated Vermonters is 2.7 times higher, although it's fallen 30% in the past seven days while hospital stays for vaccinated Vermonters have declined 14%, the data shows. Pieciak said the hospitalization rate for Vermonters 70 and older has dropped as well.

About 2,700 Vermonters got their first shot of the vaccine in the past week, an increase from the past few weeks. In total, 88.3% of Vermonters 12 and older have received at least one dose of the vaccine.

On Tuesday, Vermont reported 92 new Covid cases. Thirty-seven people are in the hospital with the virus, including 13 in intensive care units. In total, 323 people have died in the pandemic, including 42 people in September and one so far in October.

Higher ed, health care union opposes AFL-CIO gun stance

BY TIFFANY TAN, Vt.Digger

MONTPELIER — Leaders of a group representing Vermont health care and higher education workers called on an umbrella labor group Thursday to withdraw its support for gun rights, saying that policy could promote violence.

The executive board of the state's American Federation of Teachers described as "irresponsible" a Vermont AFL-CIO resolution that declares support for gun rights to counter the rise of extremist groups in the coun-

try.

AFT Vermont President Deb Snell said that, while she doesn't have a problem with responsible gun ownership, she is concerned that the state AFL-CIO's officially backing gun ownership would translate into violence.

"It's like people are looking for trouble," she said. "I'm reminded of the laws in the South, the 'stand your ground' laws, and how many unnecessary deaths have happened because of that."

Snell said workers who AFT

represents — teachers and nurses — have seen school shootings firsthand and have had to deal with their aftermath. The AFL-CIO resolution, passed during the labor group's convention on Sunday, "don't align with our beliefs," she said.

Snell said about 3,000 AFT Vermont members stopped paying dues to the state AFL-CIO two years ago because of what they consider "reckless actions" by its leaders. "It seems to be turning into this more extrem-

(See Gun stance, Page 14)



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