

# Schools continue to feel COVID strain

11-16-2021, Rutland Herald, by Jim Sabataseo

Following a week that saw record numbers of positive COVID-19 cases reported statewide — and with case rates not anticipated to decrease anytime soon, according to state projections — K-12 schools are feeling the strain.

On Monday, the state reported 222 new cases of COVID, with 52 hospitalizations, including 11 in intensive care.

The latest state data showed that cases increased 42% over the previous seven days and increased 55% over the previous 14 days.

School-related data from Nov. 8, showed 217 new cases of COVID in K-12 schools in the previous seven days, for a total of 1,502 cases in schools since the beginning of the school year.

As of Nov. 3, case rates were highest among 0-11 year olds, with 45.6 cases per 10,000.

In Rutland County, which saw 39 new cases of COVID Monday for a 14-day total of 692 — the second-highest in the state behind Chittenden County — a number of students, faculty and staff are out of the classroom and in quarantine.

All five schools in the Mill River Unified Union School District were closed Monday to allow for contact tracing, which Superintendent David Younce characterized as “expansive” in a message to the community.

Younce said in an interview that the district has six active cases spread across three schools, with 73 students and nearly 30 staff identified as close contacts. As a result, 62 people are in quarantine, including two full classrooms.

Younce reported that the district is in the process of launching the state’s Test to Stay program — an initiative in which local school districts provide daily response tests onsite to minimize the need to quarantine — however, it must first get beyond the current spike in cases.

“If we can get new cases to settle down, then we’ll be able to operate the Test to Stay and hopefully get some of those kids back in the buildings,” he said.

While Younce still was waiting on the latest student vaccination numbers, he estimated about 50% to 60% of eligible students were vaccinated.

In addition, students ages 5-11 are beginning to get their doses of the vaccine.

“We had two elementary-based clinics last week. We saw about 25% of our 5- through 11-(year-old) population access those clinics,” said Younce.

With Thanksgiving on the horizon, Younce said he is concerned how case counts will look on the other side of the holiday.

He noted that schools no longer have the regulatory authority to easily pivot to remote learning like they did in the previous academic year.

In May, the Agency of Education declared that schools return to the “normal regulatory framework for determining student attendance and student days,” meaning that at least 51% of the school must be physically in attendance to constitute a school day.

“I guess my concern is, what happens when schools need to be closed down for periods of time and how does that translate in terms of student attendance or not? So I think there’s some things we’re going to need to see some more information on from the state” he said.

Younce underscored the gravity of the current situation, pointing to the announcement over the weekend by the state Department of Health that it would no longer be conducting contact tracing for every positive case reported.

“Due to the currently large number of COVID-19 cases, we are asking Vermonters who test positive for COVID-19 to isolate at home away from other people and begin reaching out to close contacts immediately,” read a message on the health department’s website dated Nov. 13. “The Health Department will prioritize contact tracing to people at higher risk. You may not receive a phone call from a contact tracer, but you still need to stay home and away from others, and follow these steps to stop further spread.”

“If VDH is overwhelmed — that they’re starting to decide who to call and who not to call — how does that translate to schools and the work that we’re trying to do?” Younce asked.

Jeanne Collins, superintendent of Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, reported a dramatic increase in COVID cases in the past 10 days, particularly in elementary schools.

She estimated RNESU has had more than two dozen positive cases since schools reopened this fall — exceeding the total number of cases recorded in RNESU in the previous school year.

Those cases have resulted in a number of full classrooms being sent into quarantine across the six-school supervisory union.

Collins noted each positive case takes four to six hours of staff time to conduct contact tracing and notify parents and the community.

She added that shifting to remote learning with no lead time impacts teacher instruction, as well as students and families at home.

Collins noted RNESU received state approval on Friday to begin Test to Stay, which she hopes will significantly help keep students in the classroom.

“We hope to have it up and running by the time we return from Thanksgiving and perhaps before. However, I caution that if numbers are too high, we may not be able to run the program as we do not have staffing capacity to administer it and supervise students as they wait for results,” she stated.

On the vaccination front, Collins reported a vaccination rate of just over 50% at Otter Valley Union High School as of the beginning of the month.

“We ask that everyone remember this virus has not gone away and is alive and well and running through our communities,” she stated.

To the west in the Slate Valley Unified Union School District, Superintendent Brooke Olsen-Farrell stated in an email that her district is seeing the highest numbers of cases since the pandemic began — averaging two to three cases per day that require contact tracing.

However, she noted that many more students are testing positive and vaccinated staff are experiencing breakthrough infections.

Olsen-Farrell wrote that Test to Stay has been helping limit the number of students needing to quarantine.

“Prior to Test to Stay we might have had 100-plus students in quarantine depending on the given day. Some of these students have been quarantined three times since the start of school,” she stated.

That said, Olsen-Farrell expressed concern that testing supplies may not last.

“Our current tests expire on December 18th so they don’t quite take us until December break,” she wrote. “There also is some confusion between the AOE and (Vermont Department of Health) on who Test to Stay should be administered to. Overall, we are doing okay and staff is making it work to keep students and staff safe.”

Olsen-Farrell reported the district-wide vaccination rate for eligible students ages 12 and older was sitting just below 50%, which she described as “fairly low.”

She added that staffing continues to be a “huge concern,” noting that the district currently has around 18 unfilled positions.

According to Olsen-Farrell, staff absentee rates are also high. Due to a combination of normal illness, COVID protocols and breakthrough cases, only about 50% of absences are being filled by substitutes daily.

On Friday, for example, there were 44 staff absences in the district and only 22 available subs.

“Administrators, office personnel, etc., are all subbing. Teachers are taking on extra duties and we are pulling our interventionists to cover classrooms,” stated Olsen-Farrell.

In Rutland City, Superintendent Bill Olsen, reported that cases of COVID are currently as high as they were in the first few weeks of school.

On Monday, the district had 20 active cases, according to Olsen.

He said quarantine statuses vary by school.

Rutland High School had one student in quarantine while Stafford Technical Center had 12 students out.

At Northeast Primary School, a total of 22 students were quarantining, including one full classroom.

Hardest hit was Rutland Intermediate School, with nine classrooms in quarantine. Four of those classes are scheduled to return on Wednesday, Olsen noted.

Olsen said Test to Stay is not yet fully implemented in the district, stating, “We are in the midst of doing the set-up work to get that to happen.”

He added that the district doesn’t have solid data on vaccination rates but estimated about 50% of eligible students have received the vaccine.

Olsen attributed both the slow rollout of Test to Stay and lack of vaccine data due to capacity, noting that district nurses and staff are stretched thin.

“They simply have not had the time to do so fully,” he said. “We think vaccination rate could be higher, for as we contact trace, we find students showing us vaccination cards that they had not reported before.”

Olsen stressed the importance of getting vaccinated, stating, “Vaccination offers two large benefits: the health benefit of protection from the illness and the benefit of removing the student from the need to quarantine, providing the student has no symptoms. On both levels, it’s wise to get vaccinated.”

Attempts to reach Greater Rutland County Supervisory Union Superintendent Christopher Sell on Monday were unsuccessful.