

COVID cases surge at some Vermont schools, barely register at others

01-06-2022, WCAX, by Olivia Lyons

RUTLAND, Vt. (WCAX) - Vermont students returned to school this week from holiday break, just as daily case counts began surging to new record highs.

So far, just what impact schools are seeing has been hard to assess statewide. Schools are having vastly different experiences. Some are closing to deal with the increase in cases among students and staff while others only have a few positive cases.

Superintendent Mark Tucker says his Caledonia Central Supervisory Union has just seven cases total this week. A few were reported before students returned from break. Surveillance testing on Tuesday revealed more cases among students and staff.

Neighboring St. Johnsbury School District has had only one student and one staff member test positive. And all 233 surveillance tests came back negative.

But this is not the case for all schools.

In the past two days, Vergennes Union High School has confirmed seven new cases. In a statement, Superintendent Sheila Soule said: "We also have several faculty and staff members out or working from home this week. I am concerned we will reach a breaking point soon."

Superintendent Brooke Olsen-Farrell says as of Thursday morning, there are 50 cases throughout the Slate Valley Unified Union School District. Twenty-four students have tested positive at Fair Haven Union High School, breaking their case count record of 21 from before Thanksgiving.

According to Superintendent Jeanne Collins, the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union has had an explosion of cases, with nearly one-third of the high school's students absent on Wednesday and 20 more confirmed cases on Thursday. Neshobe School has five entire classes out because of so many positive cases. And three out of five of Otter Creek Academy's classes are also out.

"This is a tremendous difference from before the break. Before the break, I could tell you we have 10 here, three here, I can't even do that for you right now. The numbers are just coming in so fast," Collins said.

Another high case count comes to us from Superintendent Bill Olsen. He says the Rutland City School District has confirmed 100 cases among students and 25 cases among staff.

All superintendents had their weekly meeting with Vt. Education Secretary Dan French. Collins says French supports closing schools if it is not safe because of COVID cases.

On Friday, Otter Valley High School will be remote learning while school leaders assess the COVID situation.

"We just simply feel that we need to take a step back right now with the number of students out positive, staff out on quarantine," Collins said.

Maintenance crews were also dealing with a burning smell at the school in Brandon.

According to a Facebook post, school leaders say it was because of motor burnout, and it was shut down before a fire started.

The Vermont Department of Health has not released updated case totals for this week by age. But during the holiday break, cases in kids 0-9 nearly doubled from the week before. In the 10-19 category, there were more than double the number of cases from the week before.