

Some Vermont schools close, go remote due to COVID-19

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Spike in cases creates staffing challenges and forces schools to adapt

WINOOSKI, Vt. —

Some schools in Vermont were either closed on Friday or moved to remote learning Friday, but not because of the fresh blanket of snow. A spike in COVID-19 cases has raised a lot of concerns for schools, especially when it comes to staffing.

"With a small school when you have a third of your staff who are already out due to COVID, whether it's a COVID case or a close contact or having to quarantine, that's a huge number," said Penny Chamberlin, superintendent of Orleans Central Supervisory Union.

After learning of even more staff who weren't feeling well early this week, Irasburg Village School closed on Wednesday for three days.

"When I see this level of illness within our adult population I prefer to close two or three days, get reset at the end of that third day. That may provide the parents a chance to have a little bit of consistency," Chamberlin said.

Chamberlin will submit these three days to the Agency of Education through a waiver process, hoping they won't have to be made up at the end of the year. She expects regular, in-person learning to resume on Monday and is encouraging families to enroll their children in the Test-to-Stay program.

"It will be hard to stay open next week if we have, for instance, only 20% of students in a class, in a grade, who are approved to do Test-to-Stay, that means all the rest have to stay home anyway," Chamberlin said.

Meanwhile, the Winooski School District canceled school on Thursday and Friday due to COVID-19, citing 35 positive cases within the school community since Monday. That challenge is being felt all across Vermont.

"Since we returned on Monday, we've had really an exponential number of cases than what we've had prior to the holiday break," said Jeanne Collins, superintendent of Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union.

Otter Valley Union High School saw 30 positive cases since Thursday, which also means a lot of close contacts.

"With a third of the student body out and several staff out it just did not feel like it was safe from a staffing capacity basis to be open on Friday," Collins said.

Collins said the best decision was to switch to remote learning.

"We did do a distanced learning day and while that's technically not allowable by the state it does allow for the learning to continue," Collins said.

Gov. Phil Scott's office told NBC5 school closures were to be expected given the current spread of the virus.