

# ‘A pretty serious crisis’: Students and staff return to school closures, surging cases and expired tests

01-07-2022, VT Digger, by Peter D’Auria



U-32 Middle & High

School in East Montpelier was closed on Friday, Jan. 7, due to Covid-related staff shortages, according to administrators.

Photo by Mike Dougherty/VTDigger

In Winooski, as students returned from the holiday break, schools lasted just three days this week before closing under the weight of Covid-19 cases.

There were so many cases in the building — which houses JFK Elementary, as well as Winooski Middle and High School — that the district advised all community members to simply assume that they had been exposed. School staff did not have the bandwidth to get in touch with every close contact, [officials wrote](#).

“Things are terrible,” Emily Hecker, a spokesperson for the Winooski school district, told VTDigger in an email.

Last week, as the Omicron variant surged across the country, Vermonters saw the state’s highest caseload of the entire pandemic. Amid a series of record-shattering days, school officials braced for students to return, fearing an explosion of coronavirus cases.

This week, those fears were realized. As schools reopened after the holiday break, students and staff returned to a surge of cases that closed buildings and strained already-dire staffing shortages.

“It’s a pretty serious crisis at this point,” Penny Chamberlin, the superintendent of Orleans Central Supervisory Union, said in an interview.

At least half a dozen schools across the state closed one or more days this week, including Winooski Middle & High School, JFK Elementary, Irasburg Village School, U-32 Middle & High School, Waits River Valley School and Otter Valley Elementary.

Otter Valley Elementary had nearly a third of its students out with Covid-19, Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union Superintendent Jeanne Collins said in a text.

“Too many cases,” Collins said in a text. “Need to move to remote and hope people test over the weekend.”

In Winooski, school staff logged 35 positive cases of Covid-19, including 20 who were contagious while at school.

The school is conducting test-to-stay, a testing regimen that allows students at risk of infection to stay in class, as well as surveillance testing, a broader testing program for athletes and other students who volunteer. But, she said, it’s unclear how long the district can maintain that.

“To pull off this level of testing, we are taking all three of our principals, our only school nurse (the other nurse is out this week), two guidance counselors, myself (the Director of Communications), the Superintendent’s Executive Assistant, and all of our Multilingual Liaisons off their regular duties,” Hecker said via email. “This is obviously not sustainable.”

In the Orange East Supervisory Union, where Waits River Valley School was forced to close on Friday due to staffing shortages, Superintendent Emilie Knisley said the explosion of Covid cases was unprecedented.

“Our (supervisory union) has had a lot of cases over the course of the year,” Knisley said. “But this is coming in at a rate like I have not seen before.”

In an email to community members in the Barre Unified Union School District, Superintendent Chris Hennessy said that some parents have been knowingly sending Covid-positive children to school.

“The vast majority of our students and families are doing the right thing by following the guidance and doing their best to look out for the safety of others,” Hennessy said, “but the actions of a few are going to make keeping school open and fully staffed increasingly challenging to continue.”

It’s not just soaring case counts and staffing shortages that have plagued the return to school.

Before the end of the holiday break, the Vermont Department of Health announced [new guidance](#) for Covid-19 isolation, based on changes made by the federal Centers for Disease Control.

Usually, local school officials said, the Agency of Education released its own guidance to schools. But this time, the agency issued no new guidelines.

The state’s messaging “on how to manage this latest surge is incredibly inconsistent and unclear,” Barre’s Hennessy said in his email.

The Agency of Education did not immediately respond to questions about the guidance emailed Friday morning. At a [press conference](#) before the holiday break, Secretary of Education Dan French urged students to get vaccinated and boosted and called on schools to “conduct additional testing sessions after the holidays.”

That has left school districts trying to answer some questions on their own. For example, under the state’s [new guidelines](#), anyone infected with the coronavirus can leave isolation after five days — a decrease from the original 10-day duration — if they test negative twice with a rapid test. People must “wear a mask around others” for another five days after coming out of isolation, according to the state guidance.

But if a student comes out of isolation after five days, it’s not clear when they have to wear a mask.

“What happens with lunch?” asked Brooke Olsen-Farrell, the superintendent of Slate Valley Unified School District. “They can’t really eat lunch in the cafeteria then, can they? Or can’t they?”

And now that [booster shots](#) are available for many students, it’s unclear exactly how those will affect students’ vaccination status — which determines whether students must quarantine after close contacts.

To make matters worse, some districts are also grappling with outdated Covid-19 tests.

Many rapid tests given to schools by the state Agency of Education this fall expired in late December, local school officials said.

In the Mill River Unified Union School District, school staff were forced to cancel their test-to-stay program several days this week because their tests had expired in late December, Superintendent David Younce said.

“We had parents frustrated because, before the break, they were hearing, ‘Hey, we’ve got all kinds of tests that we can use,’ ” Younce said. “And then after the break, it was, ‘Well, we don’t really have these tests that we can use anymore.’ ”

Chamberlin, of Orleans Central Supervisory Union, said school officials in her district had received shipments of tests just days before their expiration date in late December.

“We had less than two weeks, I think, of actually being able to utilize the tests in the schools before they expired,” she said. Had they not expired, “it would have allowed us to be somewhat predictable with what we were coming back to from break.”

Ted Fisher, a spokesperson for the Vermont Agency of Education, said the problem of expiring kits had been a concern for weeks.

“Some schools had not used up existing stocks of kits that were expiring, and we gave them guidance earlier in December on how to use the kits before they expired, and on ordering replacement kits so they would not be short,” Fisher said in an email. “Most SU/SDs did so. If an SU/SD did not order replacement kits, they should contact us ASAP about ordering.”

Orleans Central received a new shipment of antigen tests on Thursday, Chamberlin said, and staff are working to sort them and determine the best way to get them to staff and students.

“We’re part of the supply chain now, is what we’ve become,” she said. “We’re pediatric clinics, and we’re now warehouses.”

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