

Staffing struggles force some Vt. school closures

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RUTLAND, Vt. (WCAX) - The COVID surge is taking a hit on many schools around our region. In some cases it's not sick students that's the problem but a lack of staff to keep the building open.

U-32 Middle and High School parents received an early morning phone call Friday, but not for a snow day or broken water main. "It was a staff shortage that led to the closure," said Washington Central Unified Union School District Interim Superintendent Jennifer Miller-Arsenault.

There are about 46 confirmed positive COVID cases among students and staff and some staff are out caring for their own children. With so few substitutes available, the school of 700 students was forced to close. "There's still just a lot of stress in the system. We're really grateful for their service and today we just couldn't do it," Miller-Arsenault said.

Irasburg village school has been closed since Wednesday due to a similar staff shortage. Superintendent Penny Chamberlin acknowledges closing schools daily makes it challenging for families to find care, but says closing for multiple days at a time gives people more time to recover and wait for test results. "You don't want the families to have undue hardship because we had to close school because we don't have enough staff to provide a safe environment for students within the building," she said.

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Chamberlin says students can access lesson plans on Google Classroom and some teachers sent home packets, but they're more focused on wellness check-ins with students. "We're concerned about where the kids are. Are they being taken care of? are they safe? Are they in a space that is supporting them?" she said

Otter Valley Union High School closed Thursday morning because of a burning odor in the school. But after looking at the high positive case counts and staff shortage, they stayed closed on Friday too. "We're not going to get ahead of COVID, we know that. Our hope is that we will have enough people able to return, that we will be able to run the school again next week," said Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union Superintendent Jeanne Collins.

The state is not allowing schools that offer remote learning this year to count those days, but Collins says her administration decided to offer distance learning anyway to prevent more educational gaps. "It's not the same as last year, it's not full remote, but it is keeping the learning moving while the school is closed," she said.

The impact on schools varies around the state. We've heard from other districts that have had very few cases and no interruptions in learning. But superintendents we spoke with say they are expecting increasing impacts and are anxiously awaiting new guidance on contact tracing and quarantines, and rolling out boosters to younger students.