

## SCHOOLS FACE THEIR BIGGEST TEST

'A whole lot of moving parts'

BY RANDY RIELAND  
For Foothills Forum

When Rappahannock's public school students return next Monday, they'll kick off their school year with a temperature check.

They'll be wearing masks, too, at least on the buses and in the hallways. They can remove them once they get to their desks, where they will be shielded with plastic barriers from their classmates.

But beyond the obvious pandemic precautions, the school district is about to become part of something far more abstract and challenging. It is a kind of experiment to see not just how well students learn and teachers teach when a school's top priority is to keep everyone safe, but also how kids, used to the messy swirl of personal connections and social interactions, adapt to

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BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

**'I MAY NEVER PLAY FOOTBALL AGAIN'** | The reality of COVID-19 is just now hitting Taven Murrah, a Rappahannock County High School athlete who is entering his senior year. Taven's story and others from RCPS are found beginning on Page 13.

**A TYPICAL SCHOOL DAY IN ATYPICAL TIMES** | How Rappahannock County's public school students will get back to class next week

1

Parents do a morning check of students for COVID symptoms — fever, chills, cough, shortness of breath, recent loss of smell or taste. If kids show symptoms, they should be kept home.

2

Students riding buses must wear masks and sit by themselves, with the exception of siblings. Bus drivers also will be masked.

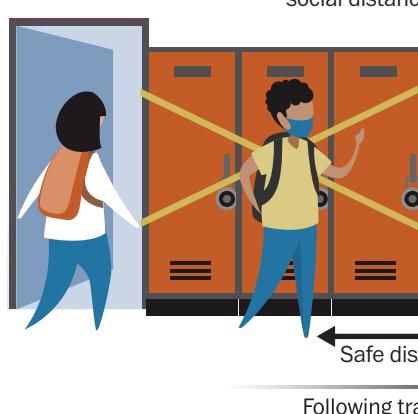
3

Staff at screening stations at the schools will do temperature checks of all students — bus riders and those who arrive in cars — before they're permitted to enter buildings.



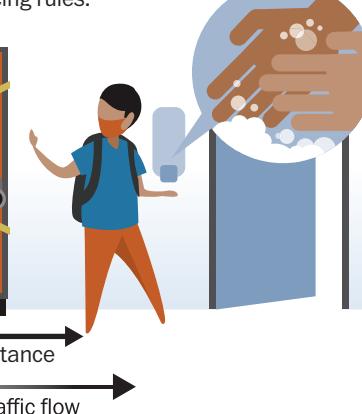
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Students will go directly to their first classrooms. No loitering in the halls. Lockers are off-limits.



5

When in the hallways, students will be required to wear masks and expected to follow directional arrows and social distancing rules.



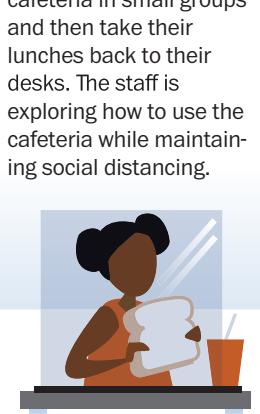
6

Students will have access to a hands-free sanitizing stations when they enter classrooms.



7

All in-person days will start with "morning meetings" where students work on a social and emotional learning curriculum. This is also a time when classes can have group discussions and students can share concerns they may have.



8

Students will eat lunch at their desks, each of which will have a plastic shield. Those in the high school will go to the cafeteria in small groups and then take their lunches back to their desks. The staff is exploring how to use the cafeteria while maintaining social distancing.



9

Schedules for high school students will be staggered to reduce traffic in the hallways.



10

When classes go outside, their rooms will be sprayed with sanitizer by custodians. This is repeated at the end of the school day. Major cleaning, such as wiping down walls and windowsills, will happen every Wednesday when all students are at home.

BY LAURA STANTON FOR RAPP NEWS AND FOOTHILLS FORUM

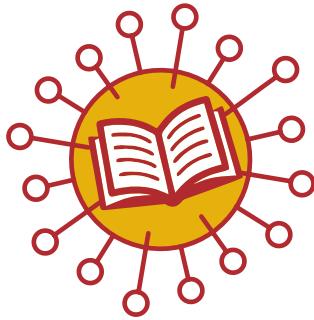
### Running Republican, juggling a pandemic

At a Rappahannock fundraiser last weekend, Congressional candidate Bob Good conceded risks of COVID-19 — sans mask: "I believe that we need to take reasonable precautions." Page 16



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## BACK TO SCHOOL

*A Rapp News-Foothills Forum Special Report*

### KIDS AND COVID-19

Here is some of the latest research on how the coronavirus affects children.

While children comprise **22 percent** of the U.S. population, about **7 percent** of the coronavirus cases in the U.S. have been children up to the age of 17. (CDC)

Analysis of COVID-19 data from 14 states found that the hospitalization rate among children with the virus (**8 per 100,000**) remains low compared to the rate for adults (**164.5 per 100,000**). But one in three hospitalized children was admitted to an intensive care unit, about the same rate as for adults. (CDC)

There was a **90 percent increase** in children's coronavirus cases during a four-week period between July 9 and August 6. (American Academy of Pediatrics)

Children have been **.4 percent** of COVID-19 deaths. Nineteen states have had no child deaths. (American Academy of Pediatrics)

In a recent study, **children under the age of 5 with COVID-19** were found to have more of the virus in their upper respiratory tract than adults or older children. (JAMA Pediatrics)

A recent study in South Korea concluded that **children younger than 10** were less likely to transmit COVID-19 than adults, but **kids age 10 or older** may transmit the infection at levels similar to adults. (Kaiser Family Foundation)

PHOTOS BY  
LUKE CHRISTOPHER  
FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

## SCHOOLS

From Page 1

an environment gone strangely anti-septic.

Earlier in the summer, Superintendent Shannon Grimsley had hoped that all students would be able to return on a close to normal schedule. But it soon became clear that if Rappahannock County Public Schools (RCPS) was going to meet Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines on social distancing, it would need to cut the capacity of its two school buildings in half.

A total of 117 students will attend classes in person four days a week, although because of the space constraints, the district wasn't able to accommodate many of the requests for that arrangement. Most of the parents who requested the maximum in-school option cited lack of child care, financial hardship or unreliable or no broadband access, according to Grimsley.

Most students (523) will be split into two groups and follow a hybrid schedule of two days of in-school classes and three days of virtual learning. A third set (133) has opted to stay at home and study only online five days a week.

"I am very worried about the lack of socialization," said Kathy Sickler, the school district's social worker. "I know safety has to come first. But seeing other kids only two days a week is not enough."

"I feel for the kids," added Jimmy Swindler, the high school's principal. "Kids are wired to be social. What we need to do goes against that grain."

Ideally, if the coronavirus data from state and regional health officials stabilizes, and the COVID-19 transmission rate in Rappahannock remains low, the RCPS will be able to switch to four days of in-person learning. But if the numbers worsen and Gov. Ralph Northam orders a move back to Phase 2, only students with special needs and young children will be permitted in the schools.

### Change is a constant

Any day things could change. That's the reality. No matter how much planning and preparation has gone into making classroom learning possible, one outbreak could shut everything down again. If a student or staff member tests positive for the coronavirus, in-person learning could be cancelled for two to five days. That decision will be up to the school board.

As school nurse, Courtney Atkins is RCPS's chief COVID-19 watchdog. If a student arrives with a temperature higher than 100 degrees, or other symptoms — such as a new cough, shortness of breath or loss of taste and smell — he or she will be sent to an iso-



**Welcome back to class:** Rappahannock's public schools have incurred nearly \$450,000 in expenses to retool for COVID.

lation room where Atkins will do a more comprehensive assessment, including determining if the student has had any exposure to someone with the virus.

The student will be sent home, but

if they haven't been exposed, they can return to school 24 hours after their fever is gone.

"Children and staff should not be in school with a fever," Atkins ➔



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**VOICES**



**High school Principal Jimmy Swindler:** “I feel for the kids. Kids are wired to be social. What we need to do goes against that grain.”

→ said. “But a fever can mean a lot of things, not just the coronavirus.”

If a student seems “highly suspicious” because they present COVID symptoms, they will be sent home, with a suggestion that they see a physician. If the doctor recommends a coronavirus test and it comes back negative, they will be able to return to school.

In the event a student or staff member tests positive, they’ll have to quarantine at home for 10 days after the diagnosis. If they report being exposed to someone with the virus, they’ll need to stay home and isolated from the sick person for two weeks.

If someone who has been in the school buildings tests positive, Atkins said she will work closely with the Virginia Department of Health on contact tracing and in determining what next steps should be taken, including temporary closure.

Another reality is that a positive case could spark calls to shut things down.

“Closing down over one positive case is not what our guidance would tell us to do,” Grimsley said. “But that might be what politics tells us to do, based on perception and the optics.”

## Time for a reboot

When Gov. Northam ordered Virginia’s schools closed last March, the RCPS teachers and staff were thrown into the white water.

They had to scramble to convert curriculums designed for face-to-face teaching into disembodied lessons coming through a computer screen. In the process, they learned that they couldn’t rely on using videos or other streaming content because only about a third of Rappahannock students had suitable broadband connections in their homes.

They also saw that many kids struggled without the structure of a daily schedule and the familiarity of a classroom setting. Parents tried to pick up the slack, but often it was a thin patch.

Fifth grade teacher Layne Vickers pointed out that most elementary school children had little experience

with online learning. Some took to it. “But,” she added, “a lot of parents said that getting their kids to sit down in front of the computer to do schoolwork was like pulling teeth.”

Still, teachers, parents and students managed to improvise a close to the school year. It was clear, though, that a reboot would be needed to reopen in August.

But a reboot to what?

Even Superintendent Grimsley wasn’t quite sure. But she got a good sense of how complex and wide-ranging an undertaking it would be when the Virginia Department of Education released a 130-page planning guide, titled “Recover, Redesign, Restart” in June.

With a clearer picture of the state’s expectations, Grimsley and her team began developing a plan. But they didn’t have much time, and the guide covered a lot of ground.

They quickly created nine different task forces, inviting members of the community to join staff and teachers in tackling a broad set of issues — from health and safety to meals and transportation to reconfiguring spaces and schedules to addressing the social and emotional needs of students and staff.

“There were a whole lot of moving parts,” she said.

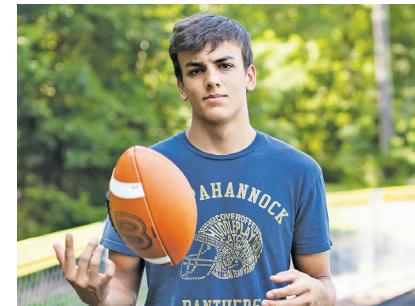
## Clearing the air

Grimsley thinks that one benefit of having a separate committee focus on each of the tasks is that RCPS was able to get a jump on ordering the unusual batch of supplies needed to keep everyone in the schools safe. Some districts, she said, have had their requests placed on back order and may have to wait months.

Much of the job of tracking down supplies fell to Robin Bolt, RCPS’s executive director of Administrative Services. She concedes that she faced a huge learning curve.

“There have been a massive amount of things that have never been on our radar before. The face shields, the N95 masks,” she said. “This is the hardest I’ve ever

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**TAVEN MURRAH**

**Senior football and soccer player and track athlete – he’s on the hybrid schedule**

**On having fall football season cancelled:**

“I was training three weeks ago, and midway through my workout it hit me. I thought, ‘I may never play football again.’ I didn’t even know how to cope with it, really.”

**On following a hybrid schedule:**

“I’m not sure if I’m going to struggle, but I know I’m not a virtual learner. But with two days in school at the beginning of the week, I’ll have some kind of structure to my schedule. I’ll know what I have to do for the week. I won’t just have a computer telling me what I have to do.”

**On this senior year:**

“In one way, it’s cool, we’re only going to school two days a week. But then it’s like, it’s my senior year and we’re only going to school two days a week. There’s some good and a lotta bad to it.”

## COURTNEY ATKINS

**School nurse/athletic director**



**On the reaction of teachers:**

“It’s been a mix of emotions. Teachers are concerned, obviously for their own health, but also for a lot, it’s ‘I want to make sure I’m doing what’s right for the kids.’ They want to make sure they’re following the guidelines properly. That is a great way to start.”

**On the cancellation of sports until December:**

“I’ve encouraged the coaches to really stay engaged with their athletes, even if it’s over Zoom or through a quick email. We want them to know that we are in this with them.”

**On the coming months:**

“I do feel positive about what we’re doing, and that we’re on the right track to a new normal way of doing school. I don’t have this ominous feeling. I really don’t. People are saying it won’t be if, but when. But maybe it won’t be when.”

**More Voices, next page**

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**JIMMY SWINDLER**  
Principal, Rappahannock County  
High School

**On dealing with the pandemic:**  
“If my experience of the past six months has taught me anything, it has been to be prepared for any eventuality at any moment. For a while, we were drinking from the fire hose. There was just so much uncertainty. There still is.”

**On adjusting to a new normal:**

“One big challenge is learning new social habits that go against the grain of everything we’ve learned in our lives — handshakes, hugs, standing close to someone when you’re talking. We’re going to be teaching new social habits.”

**On the class of 2021:**

“They’re the ones I’m really concerned about. Can we come up with things we can do for our seniors that can at least give them something to remember?”



**KATHY SICKLER**  
RCPS social worker

**On following a hybrid schedule:**

“There’s a lot of research that shows that kids thrive when there’s stability and consistency. We can make this hybrid schedule as stable as possible, but it’s not what school used to be. And it’s not what these last five months have been. So, it’s another adjustment for the children and their parents.”

**On financial anxiety in the community:**

“I’m getting feedback from high schoolers who are mad that their parents are not letting them do school virtually, because they wanted to work to help out with the family income. We still have some stressors out there about family finances.”

**On student attitudes about coming back:**

“I know some students going into their senior years, and they’re a little anxious about the unknown. Also, a little angry about their senior year not being a traditional senior year. Not necessarily angry at school, but the situation.”

“I also know some students who are totally ready to come back to school. To see their friends. And, they recognize that they need structure, a reason to get out of bed in the morning.”



**LAYNE VICKERS**  
RCPS fifth grade teacher

**On the hybrid class schedule:**

“We did all in-person last year, then went to all-virtual, and now we’re doing a mix. I’ll see a group of kids for two days, then I’ll see a different group another two days. It’s hard to wrap my head around what it will be like.”

**On having young students follow the new rules:**

“We’re going to have to take it slow and steady. Just how they learned how to tie their shoes, they’ll learn how to do this as well.”

**On connecting with students:**

“You want to make the most of your time. It needs to be active and engaged. We’re going to have to find new and different ways to make those connections. You can do Zoom meetings and Google Meet with them. I just hope we can get back to in-person learning full time.”



PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

**JENNA ROBEY**

Senior volleyball, basketball  
and softball player — who is on the  
hybrid schedule

**On virtual learning from home:**

“Last spring was hard because I am a visual learner. It was really hard for me to focus. I was at home and I’d think there really were a lot of other things I could be doing. Or if I had something that was due, and it stormed and my wi-fi went out.”

**On overlapping sports seasons next year:**

Because we’re such a small school, one of the hardest things is that a lot of the kids who play basketball also play volleyball. And a lot of kids who play volleyball also play softball.”

**On her senior year:**

“On one hand, I’m not so upset because at least as of right now, we’ll still get to be in the school setting. But I am a little upset because I know things are going to be way different. We’ll have to deal with social distancing, and high schoolers aren’t very good at that. Plus, everyone will be wearing a mask, and it will be so hard to tell facial expressions.”

## SCHOOLS

From Page 13

worked over the summer.”

In addition to purchasing 750 KN95 masks and 1,350 cloth masks to be made available to every student, teacher and staff member, Bolt ordered plastic shields to screen three sides of every student’s desk. She bought more than 100 touch-free hand sanitizer dispensers, which are now in every classroom, and spread around the schools and the RCPS administrative offices. And, she acquired five electrostatic backpack misters. They’ll be used to disinfect classrooms and hallways after school, and when students in a class are outside.

Playground equipment will also be sprayed daily. A “deep cleaning” where everything is wiped down, including walls and window sills, will be done every Wednesday, the day when all classes are virtual. The ventilation system will run two hours earlier in the morning and two hours later after school.

Grimsley estimated that since March, RCPS has incurred almost \$450,000 in COVID-related expenses, including \$62,000 to purchase devices for each student. She emphasized, though, that since it has been able to use funds from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act and also repurpose other money in its budget, no additional county tax dollars have been spent.

Aside from when they’re seated at their desks, students will be required to keep their mouths and noses covered. Or as Grimsley put it: “If they’re on their feet, the mask is on.”

Principal Swindler said that students who choose not to wear a mask will be asked to switch to the all-virtual schedule. “We’re not going to turn this into a dis-

### WHAT IS FOOTHILLS FORUM?

Foothills Forum is an independent, community-supported nonprofit tackling the need for in-depth research and reporting on Rappahannock County issues. The group has an agreement with Rappahannock Media, owner of the Rappahannock News, to present this and other reporting projects.

→ [More at footillsforum.org](http://footillsforum.org)



cipline issue,” he said. “Safety is not discipline. If you can’t do it, then you’re going to have to stay home and do all your learning remotely.”

## Raising spirits

Swindler does feel that RCPS’s teachers have a better handle on online teaching than they did during the hectic days last spring. Many learned through trial and error, and the difficulties so many students had in streaming video only complicated matters. Now, students will be given flash drives which they can use to download content to home computers instead of depending on a good broadband connection.

Also, every student will be provided their own device — iPads for kids in Pre-K through first grade, Chromebooks for everyone else.

Probably the most notable upgrade involves the use of an online platform called Virtual Virginia. First launched by the state’s Department of Education in 2006, it was ramped up dramatically last spring to enable teachers to use its virtual curriculum while being able to personalize the lessons.

In some ways, Swindler thinks a bigger challenge

this year will be finding ways to provide the kind of shared experiences that shape friendships and memories. The cancellation of sports by the Virginia High School League until at least mid-December will make it that much harder.

“School sports in this country, more than anywhere else in the world, is such an integral piece of the fabric of our high school experience,” he said. “That’s the part I hope we can figure out.”

Swindler believes the high school should be able to sustain its peer mentor program, in which seniors and juniors are linked up with eighth graders to help them adapt to life in their new school. He likewise is hopeful that P.R.I.D.E. (Positive Relationships Inspire a Drive for Excellence), the extracurricular clubs started by teachers, can keep meeting in some form.

“We need to have ways kids can have fun, but still be safe,” he said.

For her part, Grimsley acknowledged that when students return next week, they could be feeling anxiety along with the usual start-of-school excitement. That’s to be expected, she said. The key is to keep a close track where they are emotionally and socially.

“You can’t really have any learning if their brains are occupied with anxiety and fear,” she said. “We want to get a pulse on that every day.”

The teachers came back to the schools earlier this month and have spent the past few weeks learning the new protocols and training to sharpen their virtual teaching skills.

They, too, likely worry about the uncertainty of the coming months.

“Yes, there are some anxieties, but I haven’t seen the angst and protesting other school districts are facing,” Grimsley said. “For the most part, our staff is ready to come back and be here for the children. There’s a sense that we need to be here.”