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Area private schools plan for full in-person reopening, see increased interest

Jamey Cross
Jul 24, 2020



Chris Button, associate head of school, rearranges furniture to create a classroom space at Virginia Episcopal School in Lynchburg on Thursday, July 23, 2020.

Kendall Warner/The News & Advance

Braxton Carter, a teacher at Sandusky Middle School, had planned to enroll his 5-year-old foster son in kindergarten at Lynchburg City Schools' Sandusky Elementary this fall.

But, when the division announced kindergarteners would only be in school buildings two days per week at the start of the school year, Carter said he was worried his son might fall behind.

“Going into kindergarten, he needs full day [instruction], five days a week,” Carter said.

So, Carter said he looked into an option that would have his son in school every day: private school.

Across the country, public schools are going online-only or having students in school just a few days per week for the start of the school year. Private schools, on the other hand, are opening their doors wide and offering five days of in-person learning to students.

That’s the case in the Lynchburg area where no public school division plans to have any student in school five full days per week. Area school divisions currently plan to have students in school a few days each week and learning virtually other days.

Bedford County Public Schools comes the closest to a “normal” schedule for its younger students, with their current plan allowing Pre-K through sixth graders to attend in-person school five days per week, but the school day will be slightly shorter.

Private schools, such as Virginia Episcopal School, Desmond T. Doss Christian Academy and James River Day School, said they’re seeing parents, like Carter, show an interest in their schools as they announce plans to reopen for all students for five days per week of in-person learning.

Chris Button, associate head of school at VES, said the school will use a hybrid model of learning because it serves ninth through 12th-grade students. Using complementary online and in-person aspects will allow students to stay on track with their courses if they have to miss in-person classes due to quarantine or other conflicts.

VES is making a lot of changes to in-person instruction, Button said. Not all of the school's classrooms allow for effective teaching with social distancing, so they'll be adapting some outdoor spaces to serve as classrooms. Button said some classes at the school enroll about 18 students, but many average around 12. To allow for social distancing, Button said no class will have more than 15 students.

"We want the most risk-averse situation we can possibly create for both students and ... our faculty," Button said.

A unique challenge VES faces for reopening, Button said, is it serves both day students and boarding students. While day school students come to school for the school day and live off campus, boarders live on campus. Because day students move on and off campus, Button said they pose the largest risk to the boarders' "bubble."

In order to mitigate the risk and decrease the chance for contact, day school students will not eat with boarders and won't be in close-contact with boarders during "down time" on campus.

"We pride ourselves on not having a big division between day [students] and boarders," Button said. "It's going to feel different in that regard."

Button said the school has seen an increase in interest from local families but, because of the decrease in class size and other restrictions, they've nearly hit their capacity of around 80, day students and 172 boarders.

Stephen Doss, principal at Desmond T. Doss Christian Academy, said the school plans to open for face-to-face instruction for the 2020-21 school year.

"We've had a number of families that have come to us this summer because of what some of the other schools are doing for instruction," he said. "They want their kids to be in school every day."

Doss said the school might get five or 10 new students during the summer. This year they've already received more than 20, and he expects more in the coming weeks.

“We’ve seen an increase in interest from the public school sector that normally we don’t see,” Doss said.

Peter York, head of schools at James River Day School, said he’s seen an “overwhelming” interest and number of new applications for the 2020-21 school year. James River Day School, which serves kindergarten through eighth grade, plans to begin the school year with all students on campus.

In a typical spring to summer season, he said, he might see six to 10 new students. This year, he’s already received more than 30 new students, not counting kindergarten.

“We are partners with our public schools,” York said. “We all teach kids, and the public schools are just in a tough spot.”

York said classrooms are being adapted to comply with social distance requirements and masks will be required, but teachers and parents are excited for students to be back in school.

“The benefits of being back, far exceed the risks,” he said.

Andrew Glover said he is considering moving his two Lynchburg City Schools students to a private school as well, but he’s conflicted.

Glover’s two sons will be in first and second grades in the fall, and, like Carter, he said he’s concerned about the division’s current plan to have Pre-K through fifth-grade students receiving instruction remotely three days per week.

“You can’t learn to read and write in a virtual environment,” Glover said.

Because students in the division will be learning virtually three days per week, based on the current plan, Glover said he fears parents will be forced to become their child’s teacher.

While he doesn’t approve of the division’s plan for fall reopening, he said, his family loves the community at T.C. Miller Elementary School for Innovation and they don’t want his sons to potentially lose their spots at the school if they were to leave for a

semester or year.

“Had they not gotten into T.C. Miller, we would have already been in a private school,” he said.

Glover said he’s considering Liberty Christian Academy and Timberlake Christian School as possible private school options for his sons.

According to a post on the Liberty Christian Academy’s website from Head of Schools Mark Hine, Liberty Christian Academy plans to begin the 2020-21 school year with full day, in-class instruction for all students on Aug. 29. The post said the school may delay that start date for one week to allow more time for preparation.

The school will use facilities at Thomas Road Baptist Church for additional classroom space that will help allow the school to meet social distancing requirements. Liberty Christian Academy will “strongly encourage” face masks when possible and require them when social distancing is not possible, the post said.

Carter said he enrolled his son in Timberlake Christian School, which has released its draft reopening plan to its families — that includes in-person instruction five days per week for students — but the school has not made that plan public. Requests for an interview or a copy of the plan were denied by Timberlake Christian School.

Carter said he thinks the Lynchburg City Schools’ current plan is the safest and best option it has under the circumstances. While they want students in buildings more days a week, Lynchburg City School administrators have said their transportation challenges and classroom space don’t allow them to offer that safely with social distancing requirements.

“I wish he could go to Lynchburg City Schools, I want him there so bad,” Carter said. “They have a lot to offer and he would have been with a great teacher.”

Lynchburg City Schools spokesperson Cindy Babb said the division still is enrolling students for the upcoming school year, and it is too soon to tell how their reopening plans and the pandemic may affect enrollment.

Carter said he worries his son not receiving in-person instruction five days a week as he starts kindergarten might cause him to fall further behind. As a middle school teacher, Carter said he thinks middle and high school students are better able to complete online assignments, so the division's plan for those students to begin the school year online and transition to two days in school buildings won't be as bad.

"I don't think it's ideal, none of this is ideal," Carter said.

Jamey Cross covers education. Reach her at (434) 385-5532.

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'Fingers crossed': Lynchburg-area high school bands wait to perform together again

Jamey Cross
Oct 1, 2020



Band director Scott Belcher conducts a one-on-one clarinet lesson with one of his students over video call at Nelson County High School on Wednesday, Sept. 30, 2020.

Kendall Warner/NELSON COUNTY TIMES

When Nelson County High School's marching band held its annual summer band camp in July, it was a welcome change for senior Anna Cheape, the band's drum major.

School had been closed since March amid the coronavirus pandemic, and, Cheape said, “It was nice to get back to some kind of normal.”

That normal was short-lived. The Nelson County School Board voted later that month to begin the school year in a completely remote model — meaning no extracurriculars, including band.

Now, Nelson County’s high school band and others in the Lynchburg area are adapting to the pandemic. Band directors are learning to teach differently in person and remotely. Students are sometimes practicing alone, recording videos, rather than together in person with their bandmates.

Scott Belcher, band director at Nelson County’s middle and high schools, said he’s had to adapt his classes to work in an online format. While they once would have been in a classroom together, Belcher’s students now meet in small groups or one-on-one with Belcher.

Video conferencing sites, such as Zoom or Google Meet, don’t allow sound from multiple parties to blend well together. Sound delays and volume often prevent students from creating one harmonious piece of music together on a video call. Instead, Belcher said, he’s having his students send in recordings of their performances and he’s cutting the parts together to make one complete performance.

“We’re making the best out of a bad situation and just trying to be here for the kids,” Belcher said.

NCHS senior Oliver Hale has been a musician since he was 5 years old. He said he misses the experience of playing with his classmates and director.

“Usually you’re building off of one another and playing with the groove and with the feel,” Hale said. “Playing with a video on your computer is really just not the same.”

Lynchburg City Schools’ classes have been conducted online since the school year began in August, including band.

Doug Brown, band director at Heritage High School, said he's been doing asynchronous instruction, meaning not live, so students can choose what time they view the material and complete assignments.

Currently, the division plans to bring high school students back for some in-person learning beginning Oct. 27.

"We're really looking forward to hybrid learning and getting students back into the classroom and doing what we love," Brown said.

Even when in-person instruction resumes, Brown said, it will look much different. Brown said he already has chairs in his classroom set up 10 feet apart to abide by social distancing, and he's looking into getting musician masks and horn covers to better protect students.

Musician masks, he said, look like regular face masks, but they have an overlapping flap in the center that allows an instrument's mouth piece to fit through. Brown said he's asking volunteers in the community to help sew musician masks for students before they come back for in-person instruction.

"Our goal is to get the students back into the classroom as safely as possible," Webb said. "We would appreciate any community support we can get."

Unlike Belcher and Brown, David Webb, band director at Jefferson Forest High School, has students in person, as Bedford County Public Schools' reopening plan gave all students the option to receive some in-person instruction.

Webb said they have been using "instrument masks," or horn covers, which are made from a spandex-like material that wrap around a horn or the end of an instrument to limit the amount of air blown into the room.

"We tested out a lot of different fabrics to find out what was going to let the sound out while also blocking some of the air students are blowing into the room," Webb said.

While BCPS and LCS have been allowing some extracurricular activities, such as small groups of athletes conditioning, Brown, Webb and E. C. Glass High School band director Russell Pawlas said they opted not to have their marching bands meet yet this fall.

“The two reasons the marching band exists is for its own competition circuit and for football games — neither of which are happening,” Webb said.

Pawlas added: “We didn’t know what we’d be practicing for.”

Brown said ensuring high-touch surfaces, such as instruments and equipment, stayed clean and maintaining social distancing would have been difficult.

Pawlas said he and Brown are hoping to find opportunities for their bands to compete in the winter. Pawlas said he feels for his senior students who have already missed so much.

“We’re looking for anything we can do to help replace what they’ve lost and at least give them something,” Pawlas said.

For now, Belcher said, he’s just waiting for hybrid learning to start — which could be as soon as later this month — and hopes in-person practices for marching band could follow.

“Supposedly the football season is going to happen in February, and if that happens we’re going to be right there marching, even if we have to march in the snow,” Belcher said.

Cheape said she hopes her fellow marching band members have spent this time at home practicing and that they’ll be “stronger than ever” when they can finally come back together again.

“We haven’t given up on marching band,” Belcher said. “I’ve got my fingers crossed that we’ll be back together soon.”

But, this season won't be the only one affected, Pawlas said. He's worried that the COVID-19 pandemic and the changes schools have seen over the past two semesters could have lasting effects.

Students in third, fourth and fifth grades, he said, would already be thinking about joining middle school band. It's rare, he said, for a high schooler to start band in ninth grade. Most start in middle school and come to high school with experience.

"We're losing a generation of kids," Pawlas said. "This is not something that just goes away with a vaccine for us."

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/education/during-pandemic-lynchburg-area-families-look-for-learning-in-a-variety-of-places/article_cda4f75a-e025-588c-a1bf-da64c5870c70.html

During pandemic, Lynchburg-area families look for learning in a variety of places

Jamey Cross
Oct 13, 2020



Jay Pratley calls on Tinley Clauss, 8, to answer an alpaca-related question at the Smith Mountain Lake Alpaca Farm on Oct. 8. Tinley was there for an educational tour with her mother, Ashley Clauss, and three brothers, Decker, Deagan and Tavin. Lynchburg-area families looked for lessons in a variety of places this year.

Kendall Warner/The News & Advance

Eight-year-old Tinley Clauss' hand was raised before Jay Pratley finished asking the question.

Tinley hasn't been in a traditional classroom since March, so on Thursday she was eager to show how much she had learned about alpacas at Smith Mountain Lake Farm.

Since schools were ordered to close at the start of the coronavirus pandemic in March, student learning has looked much different for many families. Area school divisions have adopted hybrid, remote and virtual learning options, as COVID-19 restrictions limit the amount of students that can be in a classroom or on a bus at one time.

Farms, historical sites and other alternative educational environments in the Lynchburg area are seeing an increase in kids and families looking to get out of the house for hands-on learning opportunities to replace the in-person, teacher-led instruction their students are missing.

Tinley's mom, Ashley Clauss, said she chose to homeschool Tinley and her 7-year-old brother, Decker, this year. Clauss said her family — Greensboro, North Carolina natives — has been living in their Bedford County home at Smith Mountain Lake for the past several weeks.

As a way to get her children out of the house, Clauss said, she's been taking Tinley, Decker, 4-year-old Deagan and 13-month-old Tavin on field trips to various learning spaces around them. They've been to a fire station, apple orchard and, now, an alpaca farm.

"I'm trying to find educational opportunities for them that are fun and informative and can get us outside," Clauss said. "And they're learning about things they typically wouldn't be."

Robbin Martinelli, co-owner of the farm, said the farm is always busy with visitors, but they have seen an increase in kids and families coming by the farm since the school year began.

"This particular year, we're seeing a lot of parents and grandparents who, with remote learning, have had to become teachers overnight," she said.

The farm is more than a petting zoo, Martinelli said. It's a hands-on educational facility. Visitors can sign up for a guided, interactive, 90-minute tour where they learn about the science and history of alpacas. Then, visitors are able to feed, hug and hold some of the alpacas on the farm.

Pratley, co-owner of the farm, leads the tours, teaching visitors everything alpaca — what they eat, where they come from, what animals they're related to and what can be made with their fur.

"No offense," Clauss told Pratley, "but it was a lot more interesting than I thought it was going to be."

Pratley laughed: "We hear that a lot."

Tinley said she was excited her science and history lessons for the day consisted of petting cute alpacas instead of working out of a book all day.

On the farm, Pratley said, visitors are not required to wear masks, as they are outside and have the space to spread out in the groups they came with. Inside the gift shop, however, masks are required.

SeaQuest Lynchburg has also seen an increase in families and students visiting its location in River Ridge Mall.

Cindy Capps, program and educational coordinator at SeaQuest Lynchburg, said the interactive facility closed in March until early June. Slowly, the facility has been reopening and, she said, SeaQuest is seeing families seeking an interactive educational environment for their students.

"A lot of parents are using us as an opportunity to get kids out of the house and to get into a more interactive environment," Capps said.

Since reopening in June, Capps said, SeaQuest has slowly been resuming interactions with animals and educational programs.

Area school divisions are not allowing field trips right now, so Capps said SeaQuest developed virtual field trips and other educational videos that students can watch on its Facebook page and YouTube channel.

“We just want to make every option available that we possibly can for families during this time,” Capps said.

Danny Johnson, owner of Johnson’s Orchards in Bedford County, said the orchard typically sees 3,000 to 5,000 people visit the orchards with school field trips every year. Though field trips aren’t happening this year, Johnson said they are still seeing families bring their children out to pick apples, play and pet animals.

Johnson said the orchard has adopted many COVID-19 restrictions, such as requiring masks while visitors are inside or near other people and asking groups to stay socially distanced from other groups when possible. Still, he said, families are using the orchards as a way to get outside.

“We’ve got a little bit of everything,” Johnson said. “There’s plenty for kids to do out here.”

In addition to harvesting and learning about apples, visitors at Johnson’s farm can sit down for a picnic lunch, and visit and feed the peacocks, chickens, ducks, pigs, llamas, goats and other animals on the farm.

Caitlin Curtis, director of education and donor systems at Red Hill, the final home and burial place of Patrick Henry in Campbell County, said Red Hill has been holding “home school days” for home-schooling families to come visit the historical buildings, museum and trail on the 1,000-acre property.

With so many events canceled amid the coronavirus pandemic, Curtis said they heard homeschool families in the community are having a hard time finding places that are open for visitors and implementing health restrictions.

“We wanted to do something to show that we’re here for them right now,” Curtis said. “And it was very successful.”

Much of the grounds are self-guided, she said, so parents and children are able to take as much or as little time on the trails and in the buildings as they wish, without worrying about being in large crowds.

Curtis said Red Hill, like SeaQuest and Johnson's Orchards, usually sees a lot of school field trips around this time of the year. But, Curtis said they're still seeing kids on the grounds daily.

"Even with some changes we've made during the pandemic, we're still offering a fun, interactive educational experience for kids and adults," Curtis said.

Ashley Clauss said she's enjoying her family's little field trips just as much as her kids are. During their tour at Smith Mountain Lake Farm Thursday, Clauss said she had to stop herself from texting her husband all the fun facts she was learning about alpacas.

"Stuff like this is so much more fun than doing work out of a book all day," she said. "It's better for them and it's better for me."