

Spotsy teachers say fewer students coming to class

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

High school teachers in Spotsylvania County Public Schools say attendance at their in-person classes is lower than it should be, and has declined since the hybrid school option began in October.

Spotsylvania students who select the hybrid option are divided into two groups. Each group attends school in person two days a week and participates in virtual online learning for another two days.

Students who are not in the hybrid program learn

from home four days a week.

The Free Lance—Star spoke to three county high school teachers who said there has never been perfect attendance at their in-person classes, and that there have been occasions when no students show up.

In schools that have enrollments of over 1,000 students, only about 150 to 200 kids are coming to the building each day, the teachers said.

The teachers asked to speak off the record for fear of backlash from the community.

According to informa-

tion provided by division spokeswoman Rene Daniels, participation in the hybrid model has dropped since it began Oct. 12.

About 64 percent of all families indicated on a survey conducted over the summer that they would choose the hybrid model, but as of Dec. 10, the por-

tion of the student body participating in the hybrid model division-wide had dropped to 54 percent, Daniels said.

At the high school level, just 46 percent of students are in the hybrid model, according to information

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shared by the division.

At the middle school level, 51 percent of students are hybrid and at the elementary level, 61 percent are hybrid.

Stafford County brought back elementary students for a hybrid in-person program in late October. Participation just before Thanksgiving was about 40 percent, the same as when it started, division spokeswoman Sandra Osborne-Peters said.

The three Spotsylvania high school teachers said they have students who are signed up for the hybrid program but choose to stay at home and work virtually.

One county English teacher said her students attended in-person classes regularly at the beginning of hybrid instruction but have “dropped like flies.”

“There are classes when I’m at school and there are no kids in the room and I’m just teaching virtually,” the teacher said. “It’s like a dystopia.”

A county social studies teacher said the biggest in-person class he teaches is supposed to have five students. Only two ever attended regularly. One of those students went back to the virtual model, but the others “just didn’t show up,” the teacher said.

He said he teaches two classes where there is only one student in the room with him.

“In my opinion, it’s defeating that I’m still teaching 90 to 99 percent of my class virtually, and then I have maybe one or two kids in the classroom,” the teacher said. “I just wonder what exactly we’re doing this for.”

A county science teacher also said she has students enrolled in the hybrid program who have never come to in-person

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classes.

“They might show up in the Google Meet, but never in person,” the teacher said. “Some days are better than others. Some days I have pretty good attendance, and then sometimes I have classes where I don’t have any students in person where I’m supposed to have quite a few.”

The high school teachers said that since most of their students are virtual, they feel they are not able to focus on those who are in the classroom.

“I feel like they aren’t getting the best individualized attention that they thought hybrid would be,” the science teacher said. “Simply because there’s 20 kids online versus two in person.”

According to the English instructor, teachers feel they are stuck behind their desks and are not able to do what they would normally do to help in-person students feel involved in the class.

“I’m teaching in a very different way than I usually do, because I have to sit at my computer and pay attention to the virtual kids, so I’m already not able to do the classroom arrangement that I have been able to do in the past,” the English teacher said. “So I just sit at my desk and say, ‘Please be quiet and pay attention’ and there’s no way to enforce it.”

“It feels like babysit-

ting,” the teacher continued. “In my opinion, it’s not a better education for these kids.”

The teachers said they spend a lot of class time reminding students to keep their masks on and maintain social distance from their friends.

“I think a lot of the students don’t enjoy wearing the mask, so that’s a concern,” the science teacher said. “We’re having to constantly remind them to stay 6 feet apart and not take down their masks.”

The teachers said they felt they had just gotten settled in a routine of teaching virtually when the School Board approved the hybrid in-person program. They said they wished the division had decided to phase in the hybrid model by bringing elementary students back first, instead of K–12 all at the same time.

“We had to scramble to modify lessons and get everyone the resources they needed,” the social studies teacher said. “I think we should have stayed virtual through the semester and tried hybrid in January. I think [the school board] rushed into it.”

The teachers said most colleagues they speak to share the same concerns about the hybrid program. They said they have brought these concerns to the administration.

“I think administration agrees with us that it is not cost effective to open a school for 150 students a day,” the science teacher said. “I think they do agree, but are trying to make the best of it. Which is tough.”

The English teacher said she feels instructors are expected to “make it work,” and they will.

“But at what cost?” she said.

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School's out, but some students hard at work

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
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At the Colonial Forge High School yearbook staff's daily virtual meeting, senior Kaitlyn Fulmore displayed her computer screen.

On it was draft copy for the "Canceled by Covid" spread.

"You could never imagine walking out of school on a Thursday afternoon, not knowing that was the last time you'd see your friends during third lunch," it read.

"The copy is a little sad," Kaitlyn said. "I kind of don't want you guys to read it."

"You need pictures of students walking out of school," said Tiffany Kopcak, yearbook adviser. "Pictures that convey that absence."

Since March 12, when Gov. Ralph Northam ordered Virginia schools to close for two weeks—and soon afterward for the rest of the academic year—the close-knit yearbook staff of 12 has been working from home, some-

times for 12 hours a day, to put together a yearbook for a school year that ended abruptly midway through the third quarter.

"I work until I go to bed," said senior Joe Kubicki.

The yearbook staff—five of whom are seniors—had to "alter coverage plans to cover what life is like for teens in the pandemic, conduct interviews via email, surveys and social media, have staff meetings and copy coaching

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via Google Hangouts, sit in the school parking lot so they can access the network and hunt for pictures and manage the stress of moving to online work while on a deadline and grieving the end of their high school careers," Kopcak said.

The new theme for the 2019–20 Colonial Forge High School yearbook is: "It is what it is."

The students are putting together a timeline of the coronavirus outbreak as it happens. They've interviewed 467 fellow students about the emotional impact of the virus-related cancellations.

They've had to redo six spreads and added some "corona flavor" to most of the others, Kopcak said.

One of the new spreads is called "At home with COVID." Another is dedicated to teachers continuing to teach from home.

They have pictures of student athletes cleaning out their lockers for the year, months before they thought they would have to.

The members of the yearbook staff are so close that they kept finding reasons to extend their first video call after school closed.

"The extent to which they missed each other was palpable," Kopcak said.

They described feeling "devastated" and "betrayed" by the way the virus has affected them.

But the act of accurately capturing and describing this time for their fellow students and posterity is, they say, comforting.

"We're still in contact," Kaitlyn said. "We're still part of the student body."

"The yearbook is not going to be what we thought it was going to be," she continued. "But it is what it is. You can't just give up on it."

Joe said the experience is teaching them "personal responsibility."

"I could have not done the

work, but then I would have been a big jerk," he said. "I don't want to do that. I want to see this finished."

Brian Guan said he's seeing the positive in their situation.

"It's more like we've had the setback, but we get to learn how to communicate through the circumstances," he said. "It seems like we're not giving up. There's nothing stopping us."

Across Interstate 95, students at another Stafford County high school are also staying engaged with their extracurricular activities despite school being closed.

Brooke Point High School's Inspire Virginia voter registration club has won the Governor's Challenge Award three years in a row for successfully registering at least 65 percent of the senior class to vote.

Under normal circumstances, the club puts together a voter registration assembly for seniors, said faculty adviser and history teacher Shylo Seaman.

"What our kids have decided to do instead is do this digitally," Seaman said. "We have a list of seniors, and they've signed up to contact all of them and give them a website where they can pledge to vote or register to vote."

"We're really trying to win this Governor's award for the fourth consecutive year," she continued. "The kids have really taken it on."

Faculty co-adviser and government teacher Patrick Holsouser said the students have embraced making something good out of a bad situation.

"When we told them the assembly would have to be canceled, these kids, instead of complaining and whining, they did just the opposite," he said. "It was, 'What can we do?'"

Through emails and phone calls, the club members registered 85 seniors to vote in only five days, Holsouser said, and are well on the way to their goal of registering at least 65 percent of the 433 eligible seniors by May 18.

"I'm just so proud of these kids," Holsouser said.

Brooke Point Principal Tim Roberts said the Inspire Virginia club is helping to create "a sense of normalcy" for their fellow students.

"They're creating a sense of community because these students are reaching out to their peers," he said. "And the other side of it is that they're creating an environment where kids can feel like they're doing something that's bigger than them. That's what I'm really proud of. Yes, we want to keep kids engaged in learning, and this is how we keep kids engaged, period."

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School enrollment drops due to pandemic

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Nora Mason's daughter started kindergarten last year at Ferry Farm Elementary School in Stafford County.

"We really liked her experience in public school," Mason said. "She seemed happy, she adjusted pretty well and she was doing well academically. I feel like [Ferry Farm staff and teachers] did a good job of making school fun. She wanted to go every day."

Then the pandemic hit and schools closed. Mason wasn't happy with the virtual learning offered by the school.

"I didn't think it was extensive

enough. She needed more structure," Mason said.

As summer progressed, Mason felt she was watching her happy, well-adjusted daughter regress in age and behavior.

"She's usually a super great kid, very well-behaved. We never had issues [with her behavior]. But she was starting to throw tantrums and acting like her 3-year-old sister," Mason said.

She and her husband suspected their daughter was suffering from being separated from other kids. So when the Stafford County School Board approved a 100 percent virtual start to the 2020-21 school year, they decided

to pull her out of the system and enroll her at Holy Cross Academy.

"Naturally, yes, you're a little bit worried they're going to get [COVID-19]," Mason said. "But it's worth it to us to try to get her back on track to where she was. And it does seem to have helped. She's not having tantrums anymore and she is definitely happy to be leaving the house and seeing other people."

"We didn't have a negative experience [with the public school system]," Mason continued. "It was just the pandemic."

Area public schools are seeing lower

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enrollment numbers this year than last year, as the COVID-19 pandemic is causing some parents to choose private schools or home schooling for their children.

Most local public school divisions started the school year virtually for at least the first nine weeks. Spotsylvania County will begin a hybrid schedule Monday and others will do so later this month, but students will still only be in school buildings for a few days a week.

Most local private schools, however, reopened in August with in-person instruction five days a week, and with COVID-19 mitigation procedures such as face coverings and social distancing.

For working parents without child care, those who feel strongly about in-person instruction or their child's need for socialization, those who don't like the public schools' virtual learning offerings or those who don't want to take the risk of in-person school, private school or home schooling has been the solution.

FINANCIAL LOSSES

Students leaving the public school system will result in a lower average daily membership, which is the count the state uses to determine public school funding.

In Stafford, as of early September, 471 students had withdrawn from the public school division for home school this year, compared with 162 last year. Spokesperson Sandra Osborne-Peters said the division doesn't have information about how many families pulled their students for private school.

"The numbers we have rely upon parents self-reporting it to us, so it may not be 100 percent accurate," she said.

Chris Fulmer, Stafford's assistant superintendent of finance and administration, estimated in a Sept. 8 presentation to the School Board that this year's average daily membership will be 760 students short of the budgeted number.

That translates to a loss of \$4.5 million from the state. Combined with shortfalls such as a decline in federal revenue and state sales tax revenue, Stafford County Public Schools is facing a total revenue shortfall of \$6.44 million, Fulmer estimated.

Three million dollars in contingency funds included in the School Board's adopted budget reduces the total projected shortfall next year to \$3.44 million.

In Spotsylvania County as of Sept. 14, 1,519 students had withdrawn from the public school division for home school this year, as compared to 1,089 last year and 1,021 the year before. In addition, 142 students withdrew from Spotsylvania public schools for private schools this summer, compared with 33 last year.

Carol Flenard, deputy superintendent and chief academic officer for Spotsylvania County Public Schools, told the School Board Sept. 14 that parents have also shared that they are keeping kindergarten students home this year.

Under Virginia law, parents can keep children who are not yet 6 and who they feel are not mentally, physically or emotionally ready for kindergarten home until the following school year.

Spotsylvania School Board member Lorita Daniels said the division is estimating a loss of about \$1 million from the state based on a lower-than-projected average daily membership, in addition to an estimated loss of \$1.4 million in sales tax revenue.

Fredericksburg City Public Schools Interim Deputy Superintendent Matthew Eberhardt reported to the School Board Sept. 14 that the division is experiencing a total decrease of 145 students this year over last year. Of those, 116 are kindergarten students.

Hugh Mercer Elementary School in Fredericksburg, which saw its enrollment grow 14 percent between 2017 and 2019, and other area elementary schools could face an overcrowding issue next year if all kindergarten-aged students who are staying home this year come back to the public school divisions.

The city school division had 172 requests to home-school—100 more than last year, Eberhardt said—and 52 families indicated they were withdrawing for private schools.

"We need to recognize that we have an increase in home schooling as well as an increase [in students] going to private schools," he said.

The city school division is now estimating an average daily membership of 3,429—about 130 students short of what had been projected. This will result in a decrease of about \$497,000, according to Jennifer Brody, director of finance.

As of early September, Caroline County had 347 requests to home-school, compared

with 237 last year.

However, Superintendent Sarah Calveric reported during an Oct. 6 joint meeting of the School Board and Board of Supervisors that current average daily membership is estimated to be only 60 students fewer than projected. That translates to a loss of about \$325,000, Calveric said.

In Spotsylvania County as of Sept. 14, 1,519 students had withdrawn from the public school division for home school this year, as compared to 1,089 last year and 1,021 the year before. In addition, 142 students withdrew from Spotsylvania public schools for private schools this summer, compared with 33 last year.

"We are pleased to say that we're at 60—however, we wish we were at zero," she said. "We're hoping that when we get back to a model that is more face-to-face, that some of those students will re-enroll. We will be reaching out to them to entice them to come back."

As public school enrollment dipped, applications to area private schools were up this year over last year.

Karen Moschetto, Fredericksburg Academy's head of school, said the school received "many more" applications this year but couldn't accept more than about five new students.

"We could have been up more but we simply didn't have space given the COVID restrictions," she said. "We are sticking with the six feet of distance in our classrooms."

STATE AND FEDERAL AID

A bill introduced for the ongoing special session of the Virginia General Assem-

bly would have changed how school funding is allocated under a state of emergency.

Funding for a school year is usually based on the average daily membership—the average number of students present in a school district each day over a specific time period—calculated on March 31 of the previous school year.

Senate Bill 5069, introduced by Sen. Frank Ruff, R-Mecklenburg, would have allowed for funding calculated during a state of emergency to be based on the average of the current and previous school year's average daily memberships.

The bill was tabled in early September by the Senate Finance Committee, with committee members mentioning that it could be addressed during the 2021 regular session, which begins in January.

The House of Delegates included an amendment to the biannual budget which would appropriate \$95 million for local governments to dedicate to public education as a replacement for lost sales tax revenue.

The House also included language delaying reductions in semi-monthly state payments due to mid-year adjustments to average daily membership projections. Normally, state payments to school divisions are adjusted in January to reflect revised average daily memberships. The amendment delays reductions until March.

Public education advocates are now hoping to see the same language added to the state Senate's budget.

On top of their regular budget needs, schools are facing additional financial pressure due to the pandemic. Some of these new costs include cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment for faculty and staff, technology equipment to support virtual learning, additional mental health services for families, expanded meal distribution, maintenance and updating of HVAC systems and human resource costs.

The federal CARES Act allocated money to public school divisions to assist with

pandemic-related needs. Allocations are based on each school division's relative share of 2019 federal Title I funds.

Local school allocations earlier this year ranged from close to \$2.4 million for Spotsylvania schools, which has over 24,000 students, and \$331,690 for the much smaller King George County school division.

Caroline schools received \$740,347 in CARES funds, Fredericksburg schools received \$869,035 and Stafford schools received about \$1.6 million.

Local governments also received federal CARES funds for pandemic expenses and some have transferred a portion of those funds to the local school divisions.

Stafford has allocated more than half of its \$13.3 million in CARES funds to the school division, and Caroline appropriated about \$1 million, or 37 percent, of its CARES funding for the schools.

Spotsylvania has allocated \$100,000—less than half a percent—from its \$11.8 million in CARES funding for the school division. The county continues to hold \$2.2 million from the school division until figures on carryover money from the last fiscal year are known. The county will have that information next month.

On Thursday, Gov. Ralph Northam announced that Virginia school divisions would receive \$220 million—\$175 per pupil—in money provided to the state under the CARES Act.

In the Fredericksburg region, Stafford is set to get a total of \$5.25 million, Spotsylvania \$4.09 million and Fredericksburg \$631,663. Caroline will get \$722,225, King George \$777,455 and Orange County \$847,578.

According to the Richmond Times-Dispatch, most of the money already is reflected in budget proposals adopted by the House of Delegates and Senate in special session.

'ONLY WHEN IT'S SAFE'

Nancy Marquina of Stafford pulled her 11- and 15-year-olds from public schools this year mainly because her father lives with her and has Stage 4 lung cancer. The children are enrolled in K12, Virginia's online public school option.

She felt the Stafford School Board took too long to come to a decision about how to start the school year. She grew frustrated with the "back and forth" and started to lack confidence in the board's decision-making abilities.

"I was afraid [the school division] would not give us the option to stay virtual," Marquina said. "That was my thing. I didn't know if they were going to continue offering the virtual or if they would make everyone go back to school in January."

"I think right now, I would love them to go back," she added, "but only when it's safe."

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