The Roanoke Times

AUG. 9, 2020

**Bridging digital gap left to state educators**

By Claire Mitzel

Three-tenths of a mile.

That’s how far the Harless family is from reliable broadband in northern Roanoke County.

“Comcast runs, I think, the first 10 or 15 houses down the road,” Bobby Harless said. “And then after that, it’s nothing.”

Harless lives near Hanging Rock, one of the pockets in Roanoke County where portions of residents report poor broadband access. Harless counts himself lucky to have access through provider All Points Broadband, but it’s expensive and slow, he said.

“We’re really on the very edge of getting service,” he said.

His family has made due since March, when the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly meant both Harless, a software engineer, and his wife, Courtney, a Roanoke County teacher, had to work from home. Their daughter was a kindergartner at Masons Cove Elementary, and they had to rely on paper packets because their internet was too slow to handle the school’s online learning platform.

But now with school starting later this month — and Courtney Harless needing to provide virtual instruction to students — the family is concerned their internet will not be up to the tasks at hand.

Reliable high-speed broadband is a problem that persists across Virginia, from the southwestern mountains to the Middle Peninsula. Nearly 1 in 3 residents of rural Virginia do not have access to high-speed internet, defined by the Federal Communications Commission as at least 25 megabits per second download and 3 megabits per second upload, according to a 2019 Commonwealth Connect report on Gov. Ralph Northam’s universal broadband initiative. Tens of thousands of urban residents don’t have high-speed broadband, either, largely due to affordability.

The issue has been exacerbated and forced into the spotlight during the pandemic, and it has caused special concern among educators. Schools transitioned to a haphazard combination of online learning and paper packets when classrooms closed in March. Many localities and regions have broadband authorities to expand access, and Northam has made it a priority. But those are long-term solutions, expensive and time-consuming. Students need access now. School officials have spent the summer puzzling out not only how to reopen schools for the 2020–21 school year, but how to reach students who will engage in virtual instruction, a key part of most divisions’ back-to-school plans.

“There’s often an expectation that the schools should provide the internet access, but we’re not capable of providing broadband access to a population,” said Halifax County Public Schools Superintendent Mark Lineburg, who estimates 45% of the division’s nearly 5,000 students don’t have reliable access.

Innovation on the go

Bristol Virginia Public Schools Superintendent Keith Perrigan leads the Coalition of Small and Rural Schools of Virginia, a group of nearly 80 of the state’s 132 divisions that first banded together in 2017 to advocate for issues of mutual concern, such as teacher retention and enrollment loss.

Broadband is now at the top of that list.

“I don’t know that there’s an immediate solution,” Perrigan said. “I do think that this will start a conversation that will cause long-range things to happen, but I’ve yet to hear a good short-term solution for how communities are going to do this.”

Bristol Virginia Public Schools acquired hot spots for students and worked with local internet providers to provide high-speed access to the 100 students in need, Perrigan said, which is about 5% of Bristol’s student body.

“Just because you have internet in a community [doesn’t] mean that it’s sufficient for remote learning,” he said.

In lieu of permanent solutions, coalition member Louisa County Public Schools got creative. When students there go back to school Thursday, building trades and technology students will begin work on 10 solar hot spot units designed to provide community access points.

The school division already has deployed 22 Wireless on Wheels units throughout the county since April, and another 10 will boost the division’s ability to provide high-speed access as classes start. The rural school division, located in the center of the state, has approximately 5,000 students, about half of whom don’t have reliable access, Superintendent Doug Straley estimated.

“It’s not the cure-all. But it certainly is a great solution for a community that doesn’t have a lot of options,” Straley said. “It won’t be a situation where [students] can’t do [virtual] because they don’t have internet.”

The innovation is a product of division Director of Technology David Childress and Director of CTE-STEAM and Innovation Kenneth Bouwens.

They’ve built two versions: cellular and satellite, the latter of which provides connectivity to the parts of the county without cell service, Childress said. The mobile units are positioned throughout the community in places like shopping center parking lots. Students can download their work and take it home to do offline. When the fall semester starts, the school division plans to provide transportation to the units, Straley said.

The idea has become so popular that Childress has fielded requests from other school divisions that want to build their own. A website, wow.lcps.k12.va.us, provides a how-to guide and list of parts, which total less than $3,000.

Cumberland County Public Schools is taking a similar approach: Superintendent Chip Jones said they plan to equip buses with hot spots from the public library and take them throughout the county, located between Richmond and Lynchburg. Already, hot spots have been placed in churches and community locations.

Other school divisions are still working to come up with solutions, like Southside Virginia’s Halifax County, which begins school Sept. 8.

“Halifax Virtual Academy is gonna be dynamic, and it’s gonna be really, really good,” Lineburg said of the division’s virtual component. “But it’s just not as clean as saying, ‘We’re getting hot spots to folks across the county,’ because even with hot spots, we still wouldn’t have internet access for some.”

Hot spots have been installed in every school building, and the division will equip every student with a Chromebook so they can download materials at school without needing to connect at home. The division also may use other ideas as it finalizes its plans, and Lineburg pledged to “find whatever method it takes” to educate students.

“The one thing I know that we have is we have great teachers, and our teachers will pull this off,” Lineburg said. “And that’s really the key to it.”

Broadband’s ripple effects

Middlesex County Public Schools Superintendent Pete Gretz worries “the **divide** between the haves and the have nots is becoming more delineated” without a broadband expansion solution, which the Middlesex Broadband Authority is working on.

“As broadband becomes more of not just an expectation but just a common avenue of delivering essential services to people ... it’s becoming more of a problem,” he said.

A long, thin, rural county on the Middle Peninsula bounded by the Rappahannock and Piankatank rivers and Chesapeake Bay, Middlesex County has a small population of approximately 10,500 residents. The waterfront location draws a wealthy demographic of retirees and vacationers, Gretz said. But the interior of the county tells a different story; over half of the 1,200 students qualify for free/reduced lunch, according to Virginia Department of Education data.

Over 30% of families in the school system don’t have access to the internet, a combination of location and affordability, Gretz said. U.S. Route 17 and Virginia State Route 33 run the length of Middlesex County, splitting it in half. There’s not much incentive for internet providers to run service down the side roads that form offshoots from the highway unless families are willing to pay thousands for service to be installed, Gretz said.

He also worries about the indirect effects from a lack of broadband when it comes to “making this a desirable place for people to move so that we can continue to grow and continue to sustain ourselves.”

The county largely relies on property taxes for revenue. Its infrastructure can’t support large-scale economic development; there are Middlesex residents at the eastern tip of the county who don’t have clean water, Gretz said.

As younger families contemplate a move to Middlesex, Gretz thinks a lack of broadband might be a deal-breaker. That could lower property values, which would affect the county’s main source of revenue — and potentially, the division’s budget.

“Broadband is becoming more and more an essential part of ensuring that revenue is stable,” he said.

For the upcoming school year, Gretz plans to create Wireless on Wheels units with funding from Charlottesville-based Sun Tribe Solar, which runs renewable energy for Middlesex County Public Schools. The division also is awaiting delivery of LTE-enabled Chromebooks for the upcoming school year, which will essentially act as built-in hot spots using cellular networks.

In the spring, students relied on standalone hot spots, although Gretz noted parts of the county don’t have cell service.

“So there’s really no alternative other than bringing the service physically under the ground to them, or erecting a new tower or something,” Gretz said.

Looking toward the future

That problem is one Harless and his neighbors face in Roanoke County. Though Harless has access — albeit only 15 megabits for $80 per month — others rely on their phone as a hot spot, if they can.

Harless previously inquired with Comcast about getting the company to bridge the .3-mile gap to his house. They could do it — for $30,000, he said. He could split the bill with nearby neighbors, but that would still shake out to thousands per household.

“It’s just too much. People don’t want to pay that,” Harless said.

“The county or somebody has to fund [broadband expansion], or the state has to fund this in order to get it done, and it just hasn’t happened,” he added.

Jones, from Cumberland County, said the ultimate goal is to ensure all students receive a quality education no matter their location.

“When you don’t have the internet and everything that you need to enhance it and make it the best it can be, it almost sometimes can make people lose trust in you,” he said.

The exact number of Virginians without reliable broadband access is unknown. There are estimates, like the figures provided in Northam’s 2019 report, but service maps are widely seen as misleading because the FCC until this year allowed internet service providers to list a census block as fully covered if at least one address used service.

Localities with broadband authorities have completed their own surveys to provide a more accurate picture; Roanoke County, for example, estimates 20% of residents are unserved and 13% are underserved, meaning they have internet access but not download speeds equivalent to broadband. The county recently solicited requests for proposals to expand broadband in rural areas, and contributed $133,000 of its Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act funds toward the purchase of 685 hot spots for students, which cost approximately $575,300 with a two-year service agreement.

Though schools are shouldering the burden to provide short-term solutions to students, educators are looking for providers and government to expand access long term.

National Rural Education Association Executive Director Allen Pratt said broadband should be a utility.

“I don’t think districts should be in the business of being broadband or internet providers,” Pratt said.

The government is “gonna have to really open the door to allow this fix to happen and not really be a Band-Aid fix,” Pratt said.

“I just think it’s a matter of setting the politics aside and doing what’s best for rural communities,” said Perrigan, Bristol’s superintendent.

Though the question of internet accessibility is prevalent in rural America, where both location and cost pose a problem, families in urban areas are also without reliable internet.

Roanoke City Public Schools works with Cox’s Connect2Compete program, which allows families who aren’t current Cox customers, who participate in a government subsidy program and who have at least one child in school to pay a reduced price of $9.95 per month. Comcast also has a similar program, called Internet Essentials.

Cox Public Affairs Manager Sarah Buck said the company has expanded the program’s criteria to help as many families as possible. Since March, Cox has seen a more than 300% increase in Connect2Compete connections in some parts of the state, according to Margaret-Hunter Wade, Cox’s public relations director for Virginia. Through Sept. 30, households will receive their first two months free.

“We have been working day in and day out, it seems, for the past several weeks just to think of creative solutions to help these families get connected and not have to worry about one more thing, especially how they’re going to pay for their bills,” Buck said.

Roanoke City Public Schools spokesman Justin McLeod said the school system plans to offer financial assistance for families, and hot spots will also be available. The city plans to allocate $1.18 million of its CARES Act funds to youth and education, which include internet access.

Hot spotting solutions

On a recent Friday afternoon in the fluorescent-lit gym of Fort Lewis Elementary School in Roanoke County, staff handed out laptops and a handful of hot spots as students trickled through the line.

The unique thing about these hot spots is that the cell phone carrier can be swapped out, Director of Information Technology Jeff Terry explained. U.S. Cellular, for example, provides better service than other carriers in the Masons Cove area in northwest Roanoke County. For “extreme cases,” the division has acquired a handful of cell extenders to provide a signal boost, Terry said.

Hot spot service for families who qualify for free and reduced lunch, which make up 70% of the 685 who need internet access, will be paid for by the school division.

“Even the hot spots that we’re doing doesn’t answer the question for everybody because some people are still so remote,” Superintendent Ken Nicely acknowledged.

The division also partnered with the county to place cable modems in the Bent Mountain and Catawba community centers to serve two areas notorious for poor service. Schools also have flash drives to load content offline.

The digital divide also extends to device access, and Roanoke County’s hallmark program is its one-to-one laptop program, which is in its 18th year, according to Terry. It started with high school students, later expanded to middle school, and this school year will serve elementary-aged students because of the division’s partially-virtual reopening plan.

“I think our ultimate goal, this year especially, is to have that laptop work exactly as it would here [at school],” Terry said, to make virtual learning work smoothly.

Brunswick County Public Schools, in Southside Virginia, is about to experience a one-to-one device program for the first time. When Superintendent Kristy Somerville-Midgette arrived to Brunswick County in 2018, there were about 22 students for every laptop. She set in motion a goal of one laptop for every student, a vision she’ll see out this fall.

Little did she know then how perfect her timing would be.

“My technology director and I — literally, it was a week before [schools closed] — we were sitting talking, and I said, ‘OK, we’re going to be at a one-to-one, we’ll have the technology, now what?’ ”

Brunswick County Public Schools serves 1,500 students, and a majority of students qualify for free/reduced lunch. Internet access was a crucial piece of the reopening puzzle, but because the county is so small and remote, with few places of business, there aren’t many places to put devices like the solar-powered wireless on wheels.

Hot spots are Brunswick County’s answer, which the county is funding through a portion of its CARES Act funds. A semester of service shakes out to be about $235,000, and the county provided $300,000, Somerville-Midgette said. Families who have picked up devices have expressed thanks to the school system, she said.

But CARES funding won’t last forever. She worries about small, rural communities like Brunswick getting left behind if access stays limited.

“I don’t think everything can be left to the locality,” she said. “We don’t have the funding or the resources to make it happen.”

The Roanoke Times

Dec. 20, 2020

**'These are my children': Franklin County's Anthony Swann carries message of love and compassion as state's top teacher**

By Claire Mitzel

At first glance, Anthony Swann’s fifth grade classroom is no different from any other.

Students sit at their laptops on a recent December morning, completing reading assignments as the Rocky Mount Elementary teacher walks around the room answering questions. A white Christmas tree gives the room a festive feel, and books line the nearby shelf. Student-made art hangs along the back wall.

But take a closer look — and listen — and you’ll start to notice more.

The art?

Those are cards congratulating Swann for being named the 2021 Virginia Teacher of the Year. He’s the first Franklin County teacher since 1990 to win the statewide award.

Framed stories about his county and regional wins hang elsewhere in the room.

The tree?

Presents sit underneath, waiting to be opened by students later that day. Every year, Swann asks his students to create a wish list. He buys them each a present “because I want them to know that even if you go home and you don’t have anything, Mr. Swann loves you enough and lets you know that you matter.”

And as he walks around the room, Swann addresses his students as “sir” and “ma’am.” He calls his students “my children.”

Swann, 36, weaves love, respect and compassion into every facet of teaching. Shaped by his childhood, the majority of which was spent in foster care, he wants his students — his children — to feel loved and supported. He wants them to know that they can trust him. He wants them to know that they matter.

So he doesn’t raise his voice. He rarely sends students to the office. He runs a program called “Guys with Ties,” which provides mentoring and life-coaching to fifth grade boys. He also helped develop the school’s Cooperative Culture initiative, which rewards students for positive behavior.

The number of discipline referrals has dropped “dramatically,” said Principal Lisa Newell.

“I have seen children actually completely turned around,” she said.

Swann plans to use his Teacher of the Year platform to let teachers know that they, too, have the power to change their students’ lives.

After all, it was his fourth grade teacher, Jerretta Wilson, who changed his.

“Had she not found me and searched for me, I just know I wouldn’t be where I am today,” Swann said.

‘Everything is going to be all right’

Swann was in Wilson’s fourth grade class at Schoolfield Elementary in Danville the day social services abruptly arrived to take him into foster care.

“Before she let them, she grabbed me and she was just like, ‘Anthony, everything is going to be all right,’” Swann recalled. “And so from that day, you know, I just held on to those words.”

Swann spent the rest of his childhood in foster care, from ages 9 to 21. He became a ward of the state because “my parents did not want me.” His father was absent and his mother experienced drug addiction and alcoholism, he said.

He struggled with the trauma of being rejected by his parents and living in foster care. He began acting out, receiving bad grades and getting suspended. There were times, he said, when he would “sit around and wish I was dead because I just hated my life.”

He also began to play school, his “safe haven.”

He moved to a different elementary school upon entering foster care. Later that year, he received an envelope full of cards from his classmates and Wilson, but he otherwise lost touch with her.

She found him about five years later.

It was only recently that Swann found out how.

“She would drive around the city to different churches, to different — she went to the school board office, she went to social services, just asking where had I been taken,” Swann recounted.

When they reunited, she told him that he didn’t have to grow up to be like his parents; that she wanted him to make something of himself.

Swann told her that he wanted to become a teacher, explaining the impact she had on him.

“It wasn’t until she found me that I was able to get a hold of my anger, get a hold of the trauma that I was dealing with, and to veer it in a different direction,” he said.

From that day forward, she was there for him. When he didn’t have a car in college to get to his student teaching, for example, Wilson picked him up and dropped him off every morning before she had to go to school, he said.

Swann graduated with his bachelor’s degree in 2007 from Averett University and later received his master’s degree in 2014 from Regent University.

When he began his teaching in 2007, he chose to return to Schoolfield Elementary because it was “such a milestone in my life.”

It also meant that he taught at the same school as Wilson.

“That really was surreal, teaching with the one teacher that made the major difference in my life,” he said.

To know that someone searched for and found him — and still to this day calls — left an indelible mark on Swann.

“Just knowing that I could be somebody’s hope, especially a student’s hope, to let them know no matter where you come from, no matter the trauma or the emotional trauma, or things you’ve gone through, you can make it,” he said. “Whatever you want to be, you can become. Just knowing that makes a difference.”

‘These are my children’

Swann has made a point to be open with students about his childhood experiences.

“Once I started teaching, I just put it in my mind to tell my children where I come from because a lot of times, children feel like, ‘Oh you’re a teacher, you don’t understand,’” Swann said.

“But opening up to them and telling them where I’ve come from ...”

Swann trails off and starts telling stories.

There was the young man in foster care who started to change once he realized Swann related to his experiences. The student cried on the last day of school, worried that he would never see Swann again.

Then there’s the little boy who calls out, “Hey, Daddy” whenever he sees Swann in the hallway.

And there are the students who grew up and now have families of their own. They still stay in touch, too. One, who lives in another state, wished his son could be in Swann’s class.

“Just knowing that I can reach children makes the difference,” Swann said.

His mother passed away his senior year of college. He has been in touch with his father, but their relationship is strained.

So when Swann got engaged recently, he turned to his students.

“Emotionally, it’s been a challenge because I’m thinking, I don’t have not one parent whom I can share these moments with. But just knowing I can share them with my children helps a lot.”

He’s purposeful in calling them “my children.”

“I look at my children as my children,” he said. “I don’t look at them as just students ... these are my children, these are my babies. So just giving back to them, it really helps me to cope even times where I’m having a hard time.”

‘He doesn’t shy away’

Swann is perhaps best known in the Franklin County education community for running Guys with Ties.

The fifth grade boys dress up every month and learn about both practical matters and values like respect, honesty and integrity. It’s so popular that the younger boys also like to dress up to feel included.

Last Valentine’s Day, the young men learned how to treat women by dressing up and giving every girl in school a carnation and bag of chocolate.

“The looks on the girls’ faces were priceless,” Swann recalled.

On another occasion, the group helped the custodians clean the school. The lesson was that “it’s OK to be a boy or a male or a man and to be clean and tidy and organized,” Swann said.

“I’m teaching them about honesty; even if you feel like you’re gonna get in trouble, tell the truth,” Swann said, ticking off some of the lessons. “Teaching them how your character speaks for you before you enter the room. Just teaching them things like that and teaching them not only does ties mean the tie we wear, but it means the ties in life that you will have. The things you do today makes a difference to your future.”

The percentage of Rocky Mount Elementary students receiving discipline referrals has decreased from 22% to 9% since Guys with Ties began, Newell said.

In addition, Black students make up about 35% of the school’s population but comprised 67% of discipline referrals, according to Newell. That figure has since dropped to 24%.“The relationship we have with every child is paramount,” she said.

Swann works every day to build those relationships and is deserving of Teacher of the Year, Newell said.

“He doesn’t shy away from the real issues,” she said.

‘Virginia is for the influential’

Swann didn’t think he would be named Virginia’s top teacher. But then again, he didn’t think he’d receive the honor at the county or regional level, either.

He taught in Danville and North Carolina before coming to Franklin County in 2017, so he reasoned that was too little time to be worthy of the county title.

He had been taking care of his sister who had fallen ill when he somewhat hastily submitted his regional application materials, so he put the Region 6 award out of his mind.

“And then honestly, I didn’t think that I was going to win Virginia state Teacher of the Year because I was the only male and the only minority,” he said. “And so I just kind of just prepared myself.”

State officials announced Swann as Virginia Teacher of the Year during a virtual ceremony in October.

“It’s just very surreal, honestly,” he said, adding that it’s an honor to have the platform to serve Virginia, educators and students.

He wants teachers to know they have the power to change a student’s life.

“We often say that Virginia is for lovers, but Virginia is for the influential as well,” he said. “We have that influence to change a child’s life for the better. They could have been on the edge, but one thing you did or said would cause them to take a deep breath and keep going.”

The lessons educators impart cause ripple effects that last generations, Swann said.

“We as educators have the ability to reach generations that we will never meet because we will teach this generation, but as they grow older, they’ll meet other people, and then those people will meet other people,” he said. “We’ve never met those people. But just to know ... that they’re passing it on, and they’re saying, ‘Let me tell you what my fifth grade teacher taught me,’ or ‘You don’t have to do this because my teacher taught me this.’ “That is the type of influence we have. That’s my message.”

The Roanoke Times

may 20, 2020

**Roanoke County seniors graduate curbside, online in altered pandemic-era ceremonies**

By Claire Mitzel

Under a heavy gray sky that poured constant rain on Tuesday morning, Northside High School Principal Jason Breeding fielded questions via walkie-talkie as cars rolled into the school’s student parking lot.

“We’ve got a stretch Hummer limo coming in, so I’m not sure which space they’re going to go in,” Breeding radioed to his faculty and staff in the parking lot.

No problem, the parking lot crew radioed back. The limo, chauffeuring senior Iliyah Houston, was able to back into its assigned space.

Elsewhere in the parking lot, one family was helping another jump their car after its battery died.

All this before 10:10 a.m., when families were given the high sign to slowly roll past waving and clapping teachers before coming to a brief stop in front of a white tent. Breeding, his face partially hidden behind a mask, handed each graduate a diploma, diploma cover and a drawstring bag full of Northside-emblazoned gifts, including a lanyard, cup and koozie.

Then the students continued on, driving out of Northside High School Road and into the post-high school world.

Roanoke County’s high schools ditched the usual graduation playbook this week in order to pull off pandemic-era commencements. Students received their diploma curbside and watched their names flash across the screen from the comfort of their own home during a virtual graduation ceremony.

Schools hammered out details as fast as they could in recent weeks when it became apparent that in-person graduation was off the table for May. The drive-thru diploma ceremonies, happening throughout the week, involve honking, cheering and cars decked out in some combination of balloons, banners and magnets that named the senior sitting in the passenger seat. William Byrd also held a senior parade before the drive-thru began Tuesday morning, encouraging Vinton residents to line the streets in support.

The virtual ceremonies featured music and speeches that would be typically found at the ceremony — with pandemic-related themes — and students’ names flashed across the screen. But at the end of Tuesday’s ceremonies, a few familiar faces were part of a special surprise: University of Virginia men’s basketball coach Tony Bennett, former Virginia Tech football coach Frank Beamer and former NFL player and Cave Spring alumnus Tiki Barber all recorded messages of support.

“It’s not easy missing all of your spring activities or doing your homework from your bedroom or your kitchen table,” Barber said. “But let me add my voice to the many that are going to tell you how proud they are of you. You guys succeeded through something very, very difficult.”

Seniors in Botetourt and Roanoke counties are the first local students to experience these pandemic-era ceremonies, with other school divisions in the Roanoke and New River valleys following in the coming weeks with virtual or modified in-person ceremonies.

Lord Botetourt High School seniors graduated Monday night; James River, Northside and William Byrd seniors graduated Tuesday; and Hidden Valley, Cave Spring and Glenvar seniors graduate Wednesday. The two counties also promised to hold a traditional ceremony once it’s safe.

Ahead of the week’s festivities, Roanoke County seniors took stock.

Some people say it’s selfish for seniors to be upset about missing a traditional graduation, said Northside senior and valedictorian Danielle Brock, 18. But for 17- and 18-year-olds, school is all they’ve ever known.

“For 13 of those years, we’ve been looking forward to this moment, and it was kind of just ripped from under us,” she said. Brock noted, too, that graduation may be the most important moment in some students’ lives.

Hidden Valley senior Katie Parks, 18, said the school created many opportunities to still celebrate, such as flashing seniors’ names on big billboards around the county.

Fellow Hidden Valley senior Chloe Rogers, 18, had an additional reason to look forward to graduation: seeing her dad. He’s been in North Carolina for over a month with the North Carolina Air National Guard for COVID-19 preparations, Rogers said on Monday. He planned to return home Monday night in time for her diploma ceremony, she said.

Other seniors are ready to close the chapter on high school.

Hidden Valley senior Dillan Edgar, 17, has his eye on another graduation. He’s joining the Marine Corps and leaves in August for 13 weeks of boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina.

“Yeah, I’m upset that I didn’t have all this senior stuff that everyone talks about, but I really don’t care to be honest,” Edgar said with a slight laugh. “My main goal is now to get through my boot camp graduation and earn my title that I’m working for.”

The class of 2020 is the most resilient class in Roanoke County history, Superintendent Ken Nicely said Tuesday during Northside’s online ceremony.

Northside senior and Student Council Association President Ashleigh Esparagoza, 17, would agree.

“Even though it’s kind of hard for us to deal with it, I think that we were the right class to go through it,” she said on Monday. “Because I honestly think that everyone in our class has been pretty optimistic about it, and we’re a pretty strong class altogether.”