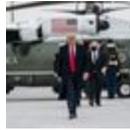




House votes to impeach Trump for the second time, one week after Capitol rio...



Lizzie Borden house, site of 1892 ax murders, listed for sale at \$2 million



'Go there ready for war': FBI's Norfolk office sent warning ahead of Capitol...



Man whc  
Au:  
rio

ADVERTISEMENT

EDUCATION NEWS

# Norfolk schools canceled key meetings with families of special-needs students during the pandemic. Other cities carried on.

FEEDBACK

By SARA GREGORY  
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | JUL 04, 2020



Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP



FEEDBACK

Norfolk's School Administration Building at 800 E. City Hall Ave.

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

NORFOLK — When Norfolk schools first closed in March, the federally mandated annual meetings between educators and parents to discuss academic plans for students with disabilities moved to Zoom.

Then, halfway through the shutdown, the district told parents it wouldn't hold any meetings, virtual or not, until schools reopened.

Advertisement



FEEDBACK

Norfolk's decision was unique among Hampton Roads school districts, and possibly across the state. Other local districts say they've continued to hold meetings virtually except when parents have agreed to postpone them.

Norfolk parents don't appear to have a voice in what's meant to be a collaborative process between families and educators. They say the lack of communication has left them in limbo, their children slipping off track.

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

A Norfolk mom with three children who have IEPs said she's tried to be patient in recognition of the unprecedented nature of the closures, but worries her children are missing out.

"You're setting my kids up to fail, and I'm not the only one," said the mother, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of concern her children could face retaliation if she publicly criticized school officials.

FEEDBACK

An April 10 letter to Norfolk parents says that in addition to pressing pause on the annual individualized education program meetings for students already receiving special education services, the district wouldn't hold meetings to determine whether new students are eligible.

Kathy O'Hara, a spokeswoman for the district, said Norfolk stopped holding meetings because of legal advice from the city attorney's office. She wouldn't say whether the lawyers advised that the district could or should stop the meetings, but said some exceptions were made.

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

O'Hara referred questions to Assistant City Attorney Derek Mungo, who didn't respond to a request to elaborate on the decision. A request for copies of any plans detailing how Norfolk would handle special education services during the closure was still pending Thursday as the holiday weekend began.

Across the country, the shutdown has exacerbated the already large challenges districts face when trying to provide equitable services to students with disabilities, who have some of the worst scores of any group of students on Virginia's reading and math tests. In Norfolk, one in every seven students has a disability.

While Virginia and the U.S. Department of Education waived many general education requirements to give districts flexibility during the coronavirus pandemic, most special education requirements were left intact.

To the frustration of some administrators, the very specific timelines for meeting and making decisions on services haven't been relaxed, though districts can postpone them if parents agree to it or an in-person evaluation is required to determine students' needs. Annual meetings to set each child's placement, goals and services are typically held in the spring,

**FEEDBACK**

Charles Pyle, a spokesman for the state education department, pointed to that flexibility when he was provided a copy of Norfolk's letter to parents but wouldn't say whether Norfolk had erred in its interpretation by canceling meetings en masse. He said the department planned to reach out to the district after seeing the letter "to see if they have any questions about the guidance."

Pyle said he wasn't aware of any other districts in the state doing what Norfolk has done.

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

## Other cities' approaches

Special education services during the extended closures have looked very different from usual, and as they did for all students, districts had to pivot virtually overnight to new ways of teaching.

Many of the services that students with disabilities receive, such as occupational or speech therapy, are hard or impossible to provide virtually. Other accommodations, like one-on-one aides or hands-on direction, don't translate remotely, either.

At the same time, federal and state education departments have said districts still have an obligation to educate students with disabilities — closure or not. That's a tall order, Virginia Beach Superintendent Aaron Spence has said. It's been "very difficult" to remotely provide students with disabilities the same level of support they were getting before the closures.

FEEDBACK

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

FEEDBACK

Virginia Beach schools Superintendent Aaron Spence in 2013. (ill Tiernan)

That challenge is one reason why students with disabilities are expected to be brought back for in-person instruction in the first wave of most districts' reopening plans.

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

question as to how much benefit some students have gotten from it.”

The federal guidance to districts has acknowledged the difficulties, Spence said, but said that educators are still responsible for adhering to the regulations.

“The sort of absurdity of that guidance sticks with me, I’ll just say that,” Spence said.

Many school districts, Jones said, have told parents they won’t be able to provide all the usual services to students with disabilities during the closure. In some cases, districts have worked with parents to come to an agreement on what can be provided. Others haven’t, she said.

The schools her clients attend, mostly on the Peninsula, all have been using Zoom to hold IEP and other meetings, though. For the most part, it’s been so successful Jones said she can see it becoming a common practice even after coronavirus. There are sometimes internet issues, and signing documents electronically has been harder, but it works well for most meetings.

**FEEDBACK**

More guidance from the state and federal education departments could have helped address some of the piecemeal approaches that have emerged during the closures, she said. And as schools make plans to reopen, it would be helpful to have clearer guidance on how to do that well, she added. Given the time lost this spring, Jones said, districts should consider what kind of additional services students will need this fall to catch up and keep progressing.

---

‘Different messages’

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

The mom of three said the process was different for each of her children. Two attend public schools and the third attends a private day school because of the severity of his needs.

Before the closure, her oldest had an IEP meeting scheduled for the end of March. Then school officials said they couldn't hold the meeting but asked her to "bear with them." She didn't hear from them again until May, when her son's teacher asked if she wanted to hold the meeting over Zoom or let district staff on the IEP team make decisions without her.

The mom said she wanted to participate but then was told by another staff member that the teacher had been mistaken — Zoom meetings weren't an option. Her son was due in April for a separate evaluation that happens every three years, and that hasn't happened yet, either.

She's had more communication with her second child's teacher, who said early on that everything was being postponed and the school couldn't provide the accommodations her daughter normally receives due to the shutdown. She asked if the girl qualified for summer school or any other extended year services and was told no.

**FEEDBACK**

Eligibility for additional services in the summer is based in part on whether parents or teachers can make the case that a child has regressed. That determination would typically be made in the types of meetings and evaluations that have been on hold in Norfolk.

Meanwhile, the woman's youngest child's private school held an IEP meeting and decided he qualified for summer school services.

"He's been excelling," she said.

Her two oldest? "They miss school," she said.

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

Norfolk said it made exceptions and held some IEP meetings but didn't elaborate on which ones or why. Matthew Moynihan, the father of a preschooler with special needs and the chair of the district's Special Education Advisory Committee, said he wasn't aware Norfolk had stopped IEP meetings or evaluations until a reporter shared a copy of the letter with him.

He didn't get the letter as a parent, and the committee wasn't informed of the plan either, he said. His own son's IEP meeting was delayed but held in early June. The committee hasn't met since the pandemic began, also under the advice of the city attorney's office.

"This seems to be a rather drastic step to have been taking," Moynihan said. "It's really disappointing to learn about all of this second hand."

Moynihan's son's meeting was "exactly like meetings in the past," just over Zoom, he said.

The special education advisory committee and Moynihan, who ran unsuccessfully for the School Board in May, have been critical of the lack of communication and administrative support from both the district and the board.

FEEDBACK

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

FEEDBACK

Matthew Moynihan, right, has been critical of how Norfolk schools treat children with disabilities. He ran unsuccessfully this year against School Board Chairwoman Noelle Gabriel, left.

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

In a February letter to School Board Chairwoman Noelle Gabriel, whom he later ran against, Moynihan wrote that the committee’s “consistently heard from parents that they have been told different messages depending on who they speak with, which leads to unnecessary confusion and inefficiencies.”

Ellen Fitzenrider, another member of the committee and one of the most vocal critics of the district’s special education services, put much of the blame on the city attorney’s office. That complaint has been echoed by some board members, who have advocated limiting the office’s involvement or seeking outside counsel, as many districts do.

#### LATEST EDUCATION

Virginia Beach students to return for in-person classes in February if positive rate declines

10:57 AM

Students with dyslexia face challenges in virtual learning. One former teacher is making it her business.

10:05 AM

As pandemic worsens, the public is still welcome — in person — at Chesapeake School Board meetings

JAN 12, 2021

Chesapeake schools still bringing students back next week. They’re also rolling out vaccines for

The city attorney’s office has advised the district to take unconventional approaches before. Norfolk’s way of getting outside help for children whose needs can’t be met by the school system is unique in Virginia. While other districts find the best provider for each child, Norfolk has master agreements with a few outside agencies. Parent advocates including Fitzenrider and Carter Melin have said that pigeonholes students, meaning they get services from the lowest bidder instead of the best option.

Fitzenrider’s 16-year-old daughter was scheduled to have an IEP meeting the first week of the closure. Fitzenrider said she understood why that meeting was postponed but she hasn’t heard anything more

FEEDBACK

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

## Hampton schools to stick with all-virtual instruction until Feb. 8

JAN 11, 2021

districts serve special-needs students.

“You have a district that is not held accountable at the state level,” she said. “And no one is being held accountable at the district level.”

*Sara Gregory, 757-469-7484, [sara.gregory@pilotonline.com](mailto:sara.gregory@pilotonline.com)*

Topics: [Norfolk Public Schools](#), [Norfolk](#), [special education](#), [coronavirus](#), [school shutdowns](#), [Virginia Department of Education](#), [watchdog](#)

Sara Gregory



FEEDBACK

Sara Gregory covers Norfolk and Portsmouth public schools and has worked at The Virginian-Pilot since March 2018. Sara moved to Norfolk from Roanoke, where she covered education in the Star City.

## Top Surgeon: This Simple Trick Empties Your Bowels Every Morning (Almost Immediately)

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

# We Tested Nutrisystem: Here's What Happened

TOPDUST FOR NUTRISYSTEM | SPONSORED

## Getting this Treasure is impossible! Prove us wrong

HERO WARS | SPONSORED

Get Nutrisystem Meals Delivered: Now 50% Off!

Seniors Under 86 Years Of Age Get Up To \$50000 In Life Ins for \$15/Mth

NORFOLK PILOT ONLINE | SPONSORED

 PILOTONLINE.COM

Tanya Roberts dies at 65 after premature death announcement

 PILOTONLINE.COM

Joe Scarborough drops f-bomb Thursday on MSNBC during impassioned segment

By **DIAMOND REMBERG AND RAEY**

 CHICAGO TRIBUNE

**FEEDBACK** One of the stranger houses you'll find is now on Airbnb. Take a look.

## Foods in Your Diet That Cause Psoriasis

HEALTHCENTRAL | SPONSORED

## Federal Program Will Pay Off Your Home If You Live In Virginia

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP



'Trump' scraped onto back of manatee in Florida: report



A Black student's mother complained about 'Fences.' He was expelled.

By **MARIEEEDZHOLTON**

## You May Like

Sponsored Links by Taboola

### New Senior Apartments in Hampton Are Turning Heads

Senior Living | Search Ads

### This Is Where the Majority of Singles Over 50 Are Finding Love in Hampton

SilverSingles

### Bring your desktop to life with Bing Wallpaper

Microsoft

FEEDBACK

### The Most Relaxing Farm Game of 2020. No Install

inga: The Island Farm

MOST READ • NEWS



COURTS & CRIME

Norfolk man charged with shooting a 1-month-old — and 4 others — in attack that sparked outrage

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

VIRGINIA GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

General Assembly kicks off 2021 session amid pandemic with some legislators in Richmond — and most remote

3h

HEALTH & MEDICINE

Virginia website no longer discourages Spanish readers from getting the coronavirus vaccine

3h

ADVERTISEMENT

CONNECT



FEEDBACK

TRIBUNE PUBLISHING

Chicago Tribune

New York Daily News

Sun Sentinel of Fla.

Hartford Courant

The Daily Meal

The Baltimore Sun

Orlando Sentinel

The Morning Call of Pa.

Daily Press of Va.

BestReviews

COMPANY INFO

Get the latest news in the palm of your hand

DOWNLOAD THE APP

**Place an ad**

**Classifieds**

**Privacy policy**

**Manage Web Notifications**

**Local print ads**

**Member center**

**FAQ**

**Terms of service**

**ePilot**

**About The Virginian-Pilot**

Copyright © 2021, The Virginian-Pilot

**FEEDBACK**

**Get the latest news in the palm of your hand**

**DOWNLOAD THE APP**