

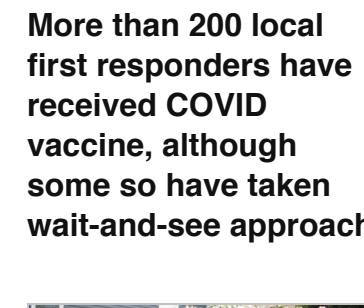
MARCH 24, 2020

## Coronavirus shuts down schools for the rest of spring and creates ‘grounds for concern’ about Hburg district’s budget

By Randi B. Hagi, Assistant Editor

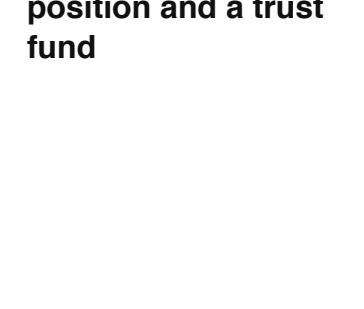
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JANUARY 13, 2021

Suggestions for housing crunch include new coordinator position and a trust fund

By Randi B. Hagi, assistant editor

As COVID-19's disruption to schools escalated Monday with statewide closures for the rest of spring, Harrisonburg school officials dealt with the fallout while also making final preparations to present the district's 2021 budget to the city council tonight.

But COVID-19's economic effects of businesses closing or cutting back services could also affect the school district's request for a 4% increase in funding from the city council, School Board Chair Andy Kohen told *The Citizen* in an email Monday.

"There are grounds for concern about Council approving the budget," Kohen said, in light of the "inevitable decline" in sales tax and restaurant meals tax revenue to the city, as college students leave Harrisonburg and restaurants close their doors.

It's one of myriad ways the response to COVID-19 has sharply changed the present and future of Harrisonburg in only a few weeks.

The ripple effects continued Monday. Gov. Ralph Northam announced that public and private schools in Virginia will close for the remainder of the academic year.

Superintendent Michael Richards wrote to Harrisonburg families, saying school leaders "have been preparing to make potential adjustments to our at-home learning in the event of a prolonged closure," and that more information would come out in the following days.

The bagged meal and Mobile Cafe programs will continue to provide food for Harrisonburg children under age 18. A meal schedule and pickup information are available on the district's website.

Richards also said Virginia is applying for a waiver to cancel the SOLs, or Standards of Learning tests, which measure the Commonwealth's expectations for each student's annual progress. Other states also have applied for similar waivers to skip the annual statewide exams.

"On Friday the U.S. Department of Education indicated that all waivers will be approved," he wrote.

Many students are also concerned about graduation — and what comes after. Richards wrote that the Virginia Department of Education is still sorting out the details for graduation requirements, but "the State is determined to help seniors graduate despite the interruption."

### School budget: employees raises and how to pay for them

According to a presentation Richards gave to the school board in Thursday's meeting, the district is requesting \$37.2 million from the city. That amounts to 42% of the district's total \$88.5 million proposed budget with the rest coming from the state and federal governments. The request to the city would represent a 4% increase from last year's \$35.8 million.

"We are in uncharted waters related to our fiscal outlook," City Manager Eric Campbell wrote *The Citizen* in an email. "Clearly, the coronavirus pandemic is affecting our revenue forecast for the current fiscal year, as well as, next fiscal year. It is too early to determine the impact at this point."

The district's proposed budget includes salary increases for all Harrisonburg City Public School employees. If accepted by the city, school nutrition assistants will see a raise of 7.5%. All other employees would get a 3% raise.

School nutrition employees "are our lowest paid classification by far," said Tracy Shaver, executive director of finance, during Thursday's school board meeting in which the board approved the budget proposal.

Kohen wrote that he was happy to see the school nutrition raise, which he said wouldn't solve the pay imbalance but will help "rectify some of the inequity in the existing pay scale structure."

"It is crucial to recognize that more than three quarters of all HCPS expenditures are on people and that equity is at the top of the list of core beliefs of HCPS," he said.

Richards, the superintendent, told *The Citizen* in an email that the raise for school nutrition employees is part of his plan to improve "pay parity" for employees.

"I want to establish an empirical, data-driven salary and wage system. The system I inherited is too random," Richards wrote. "I intend to engage in a systematic review of all employee groups in an effort to determine whether we have internal and external parity."

External parity, Richards said, takes into account regional studies about how similar positions are compensated in other organizations and the private sector.

Richards also included 10 additional high school positions in the budget, to "front load" staffing needs for the new high school. But those additional employees, including an assistant principal, two English Second Language teachers, and a STEM teacher, will begin working at Harrisonburg High School until the new one is complete.

"The positions are needed now to keep up with student enrollment growth in order to keep class sizes reasonable and will transfer over to the new school when it opens," Richards wrote.

Kohen said in Thursday's meeting that previous studies conducted in the district indicate high school staffing needs will increase by 10-15% when the new school opens.

The total \$88.5 million proposed budget is a 6% increase from the previous budget of \$83.5 million. Roughly \$3.6 million of the additional \$5 million would go toward instructional costs — much of it to pay for the additional high school positions.

Another factor racking up instructional expenses is Richards' initiative called The World Is My Classroom, which "connects teachers and students to relevant, authentic teaching and learning resources such as professional authors, NASA, student-led academic conferences, fine arts events, and more," he wrote.

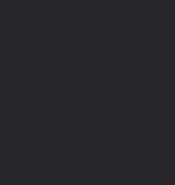
The initiative, which launched in the fall, has brought award-winning authors like Kwame Alexander to visit Harrisonburg schools.

### City council's meeting proceeds but public urged to view remotely

The city council will allow public attendees at their meeting tonight, but are strongly encouraging interested residents to participate from home. The meeting can be watched on WHSV-TV channel three and the city's Facebook page and website.

Residents can still speak during the public comment portion of the agenda by calling in to the meeting live at 540-437-2687.

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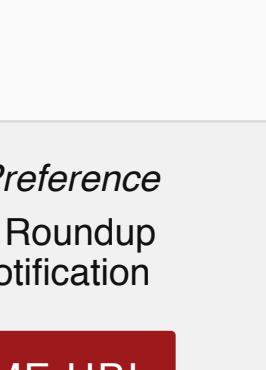
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## Pandemic prompts different schools of thought about new building

By Randi B. Hagi, Assistant Editor  
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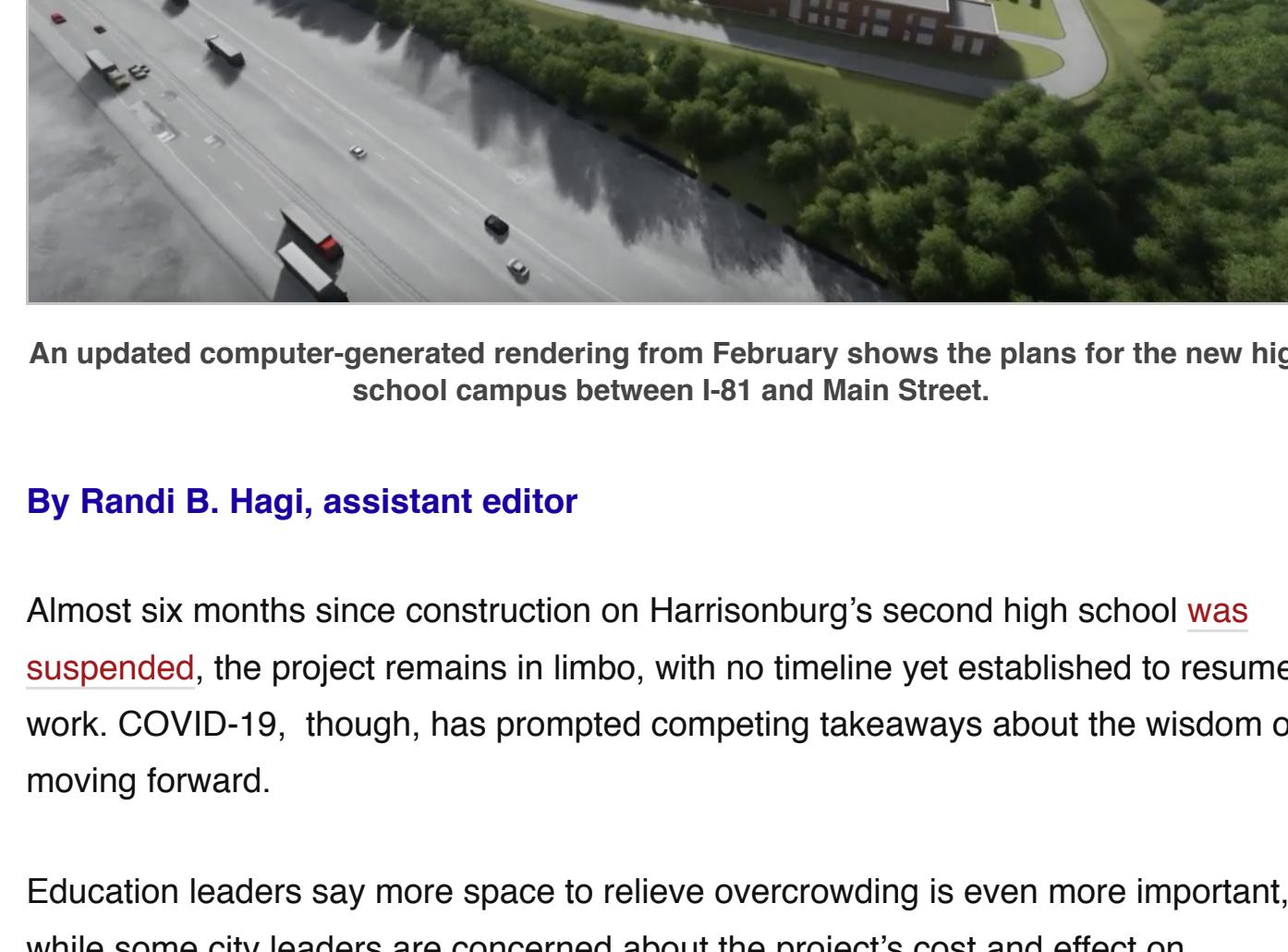
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An updated computer-generated rendering from February shows the plans for the new high school campus between I-81 and Main Street.

By Randi B. Hagi, assistant editor

Almost six months since construction on Harrisonburg's second high school was suspended, the project remains in limbo, with no timeline yet established to resume work. COVID-19, though, has prompted competing takeaways about the wisdom of moving forward.

Education leaders say more space to relieve overcrowding is even more important, while some city leaders are concerned about the project's cost and effect on taxpayers in light of the pandemic's economic hit.

The Harrisonburg City Public School board voted in April to put the project on hold for a year, after which the school board or contractor could decide to terminate the contract.

Superintendent Michael Richards said Wednesday the city council-school board liaison committee resumed discussions about it at the group's last meeting but have made no concrete plans.

"It looks like we won't have a good sense of the bond market or city revenues until the end of the calendar year," Richards said.

The project, which will cost the city approximately \$100 million in new debt for construction, site preparation, roadwork, technology and furniture, would require the city council to raise the property tax rate to cover the debt payments. In the spring, the council discussed raising the rate from 86 cents per \$100 of assessed value to 99 cents per \$100, but after the pandemic hit, City Manager Eric Campbell said he was "extremely uncomfortable" with implementing that increase.

That doesn't appear to have changed.

"COVID-19's impact on our city and our residents has no expiration date that we are aware of, and mitigating the hardships our residents and businesses are experiencing right now because of it is our highest priority," Michael Parks, the city's director of communications, told *The Citizen* in an email.

The project's contractor, Nielsen Builders, Inc., has the right to withdraw from the project if the city isn't ready to move forward this coming spring. But CEO and President Tony Biller told *The Citizen* that the company doesn't have any set plans for that scenario.

"I guess we'll deal with that at the time, but right now the hope is that it starts up again," Biller said. "We periodically contact them, but I think they have their hands full right now."

School Board Chair Andy Kohen said he understands the need for this suspension as both a board member and an economist.

"There's way too much uncertainty for anybody to be able to commit now," Kohen said. With that in mind, the project is "not off the burner, but to a back burner for the time being ... it's not on the immediate radar of either the board or the [division's] central administration, but it will be soon."

City Council Member George Hirschmann, who's running for re-election this fall, told *The Citizen* he'd like to take this opportunity to reconsider constructing an annex instead of a separate second high school.

"There's a possibility you're going to see a lot more virtual education, which would ... relieve, I believe, some of the crowding in the high school. So then you scratch your head and you wonder, do we need a high school?" Hirschmann said.

But, as School Board Member Nick Swayne said, "eventually, we're going to go back."

Kohen echoed that sentiment.

"We're doing the very best we can, I think, and we're learning along the way ... to provide the educational setting and opportunity for the children of Harrisonburg," he said. "But we're under no illusions that it's a perfect substitute for in-person learning."

Swayne is familiar with the annex concept. He's been on the board since 2008 and participated in the many conversations that exhausted the options for relieving the high school's overcrowding problem. Swayne said "a lot of folks latched onto a price tag" of \$55 million to build an annex, but that wouldn't include additional costs such as purchasing land or updating nearby roads.

"We never drove down that path long enough to get to the total cost of the project," Swayne explained – and that's in part because an annex would only accommodate 600 additional students. Harrisonburg High School had 1,881 enrolled last fall – which was already [more than 500 students past capacity](#).

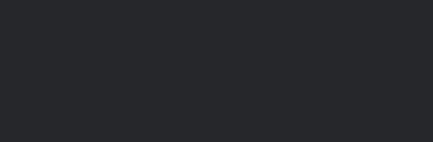
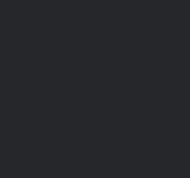
So by the time an annex would be built, "you're at capacity," Swayne said. Data presented by the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service last year projected Harrisonburg would have more than 2,100 high school students in the city by 2025.

The extent of that overcrowding will also affect how the existing high school begins to reopen whenever the pandemic begins to subside in the area.

Richards also presented CDC data in the school board's Tuesday meeting that provides public health metrics for when the division could safely implement a hybrid education model, with up to half the student body in school buildings at a time on alternating days. But Richards told *The Citizen* afterward that Harrisonburg High School is not large enough to accommodate even half of its students while they're social distancing.

"I think the pandemic has really shone even more light on the need for more space at the high school," he said.

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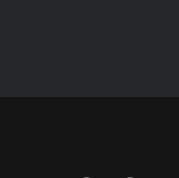
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NOVEMBER 23, 2020

## The good, the bad and the ‘trending in the right direction’ of Hburg High School’s online learning

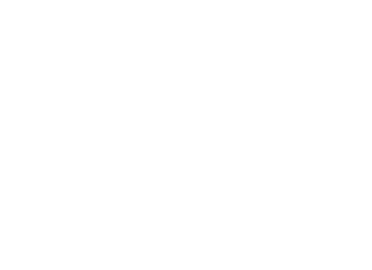
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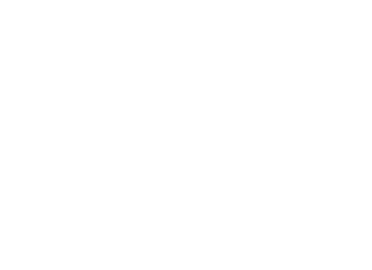
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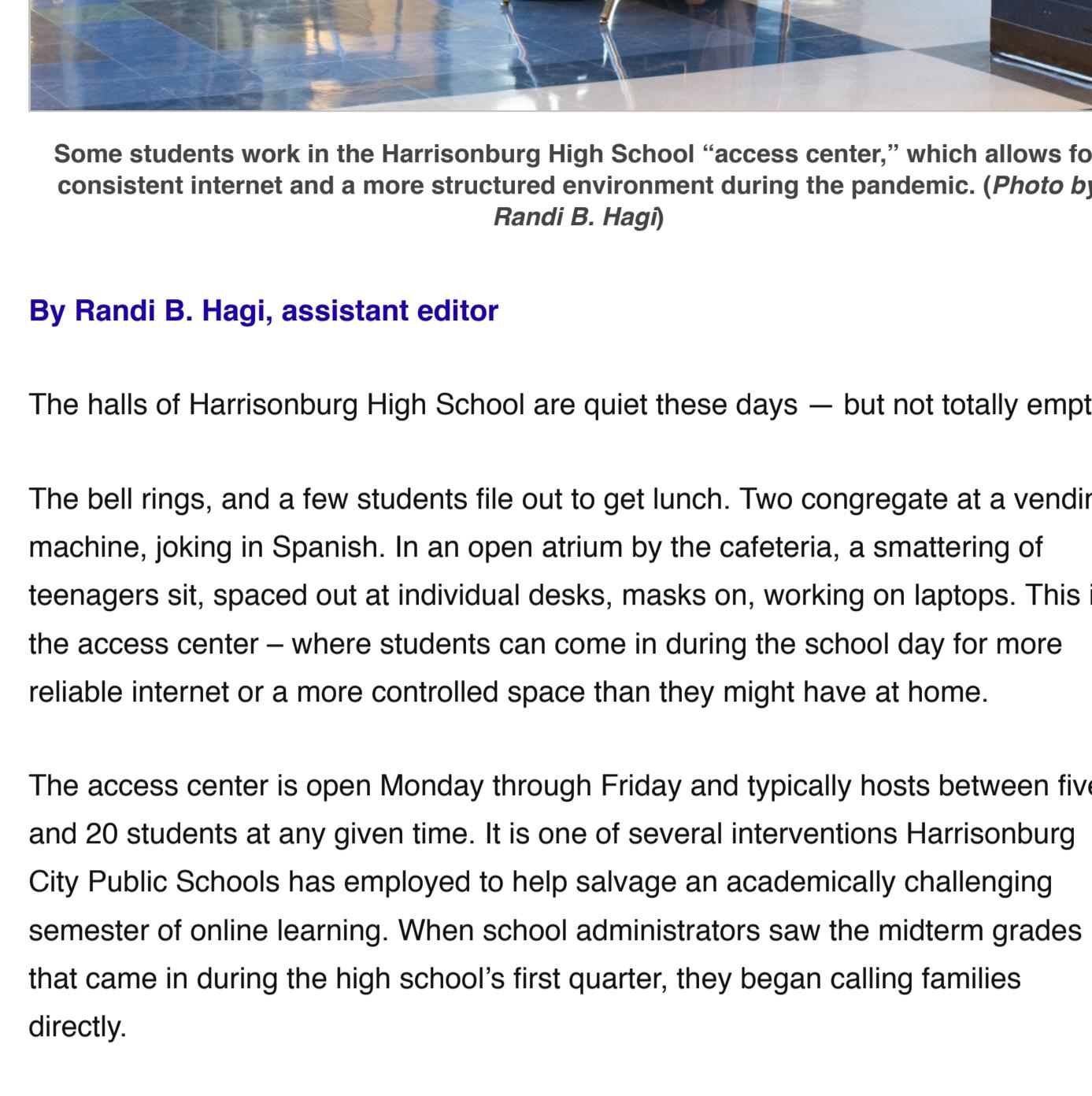
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Some students work in the Harrisonburg High School “access center,” which allows for consistent internet and a more structured environment during the pandemic. (Photo by Randi B. Hagi)

By Randi B. Hagi, assistant editor

The halls of Harrisonburg High School are quiet these days — but not totally empty.

The bell rings, and a few students file out to get lunch. Two congregate at a vending machine, joking in Spanish. In an open atrium by the cafeteria, a smattering of teenagers sit, spaced out at individual desks, masks on, working on laptops. This is the access center — where students can come in during the school day for more reliable internet or a more controlled space than they might have at home.

The access center is open Monday through Friday and typically hosts between five and 20 students at any given time. It is one of several interventions Harrisonburg City Public Schools has employed to help salvage an academically challenging semester of online learning. When school administrators saw the midterm grades that came in during the high school’s first quarter, they began calling families directly.

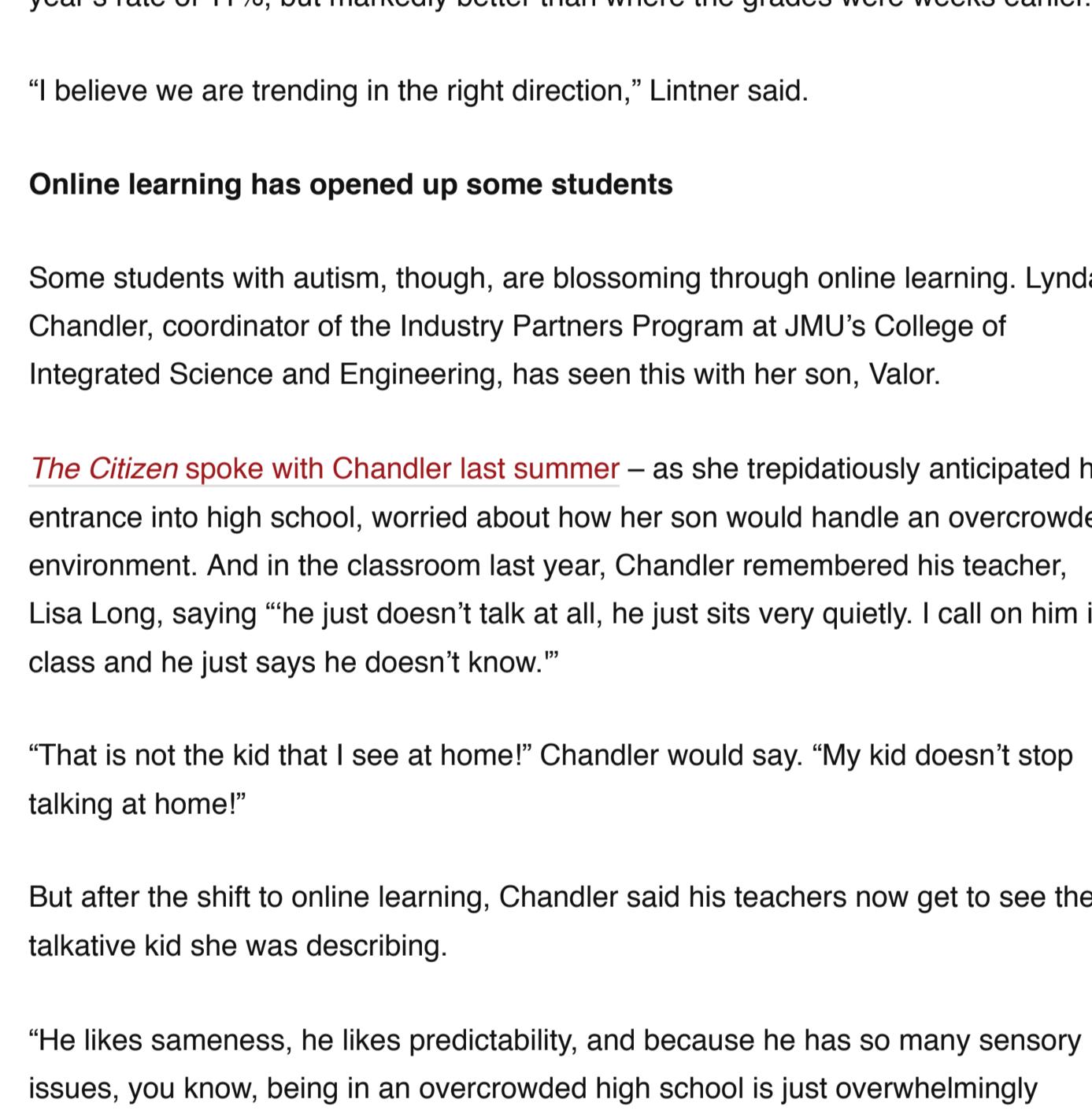
“We do have a higher failure rate than last year,” said Pat Lintner, chief academic officer. This has been mostly concentrated at the high school, where Lintner and other division staff have been “trying to unearth exactly what caused some of these failures.”

For students, the access center has offered structure and consistent internet access.

High school junior Johnathan Correa said he started coming in at the beginning of the school year but stopped for a while “because I thought it was the same as being home,” he said.

“But my internet at home isn’t the best, and I get distracted really easily,” Correa said. “So me and my dad thought it would be better to come here every day. It helps me stay focused more, because I feel like I’m at school instead of being in the comfort of my home.”

While Correa said his cybersecurity fundamentals class is still a bit challenging, and all the subjects are harder online than in person, “my grades are doing way better than they were in the first quarter.”



High school junior Johnathan Correa says coming to the high school’s access center has helped him focus and offers better internet. (Photo by Randi B. Hagi)

Saura Saville, a high school athletic trainer-turned-online-learning-troubleshooter, monitors the access center every day.

“I think the kids are making the best of the situation they have at hand, and they’re really trying as best as they can,” Saville said.

After seeing a higher rate of failing grades halfway through the fall quarter, school officials began reaching out to families of students who seemed to be struggling.

“You always go straight to the family” with an academic intervention, Superintendent Michael Richards said.

They heard a variety of issues from parents and guardians: some had been more hands-off with their high schoolers’ academics, while focusing more on helping younger children in the family. Some had poor internet access. And others just had too much going on in the house, with students and adults still working jobs — including many working from home — during the pandemic.

Communicating with families, deploying mega-wifi routers and mobile hotspots throughout the city, and opening the access center seems to be paying off. At the fall quarter’s midterm, 28% of all grades issued in high school classes were Fs.

By the quarter’s end on Nov. 2, that rate had dropped to 18% — not as good as last year’s rate of 11%, but markedly better than where the grades were weeks earlier.

“I believe we are trending in the right direction,” Lintner said.

### Online learning has opened up some students

Some students with autism, though, are blossoming through online learning. Lynda Chandler, coordinator of the Industry Partners Program at JMU’s College of Integrated Science and Engineering, has seen this with her son, Valor.

*The Citizen* spoke with Chandler last summer — as she trepidatiously anticipated his entrance into high school, worried about how her son would handle an overcrowded environment. And in the classroom last year, Chandler remembered his teacher, Lisa Long, saying “he just doesn’t talk at all, he just sits very quietly. I call on him in class and he just says he doesn’t know.”

“That is not the kid that I see at home!” Chandler would say. “My kid doesn’t stop talking at home!”

But after the shift to online learning, Chandler said his teachers now get to see the talkative kid she was describing.

“He likes sameness, he likes predictability, and because he has so many sensory issues, you know, being in an overcrowded high school is just overwhelmingly challenging for him,” she said. “For me, this is a silver lining. Because yeah, we’ve been kind of cooped up at home, but I’ve seen my son flourish.”

Valor became so invested in school that he set up part of his bedroom as an office, where he often sits with his friendly “bowling ball of a cat,” Barclay, during class sessions.

Chandler, like many working parents, has had to perform some schedule acrobatics during the pandemic. She can work from home in the morning and has arranged for someone to stay with Valor and his sister, Honor, when she goes to her office in the afternoon.

This Thanksgiving, she said, “I am very thankful that my son is in a great school and his teachers are fantastic.”

One of those special education teachers, Lisa Long, said Valor isn’t the only student who’s come out of his shell during this time.

“A lot of my students have a lot of social anxiety, and I thought … maybe they are just quiet also. Well now that we’ve been online, I have a few students with autism who are just talking up a storm,” Long said. “It’s amazing to me. I feel like I’m getting to know them on a more personal level. I’m getting to see the real person that they are.”

Long has taught her students to use email and tell time to help them navigate online schooling.

“The life skills we have learned are unbelievable,” she said. Her students have been so academically engaged this semester that she actually plans on integrating some online learning into the classroom after the pandemic.

“Their true abilities,” she said, “have really shone, being on the computer.”

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