TRUTH. ACCURACY. FAIRNESS.

Winning bid
Burwil secures contract for courthouse renovations
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Junior Florida State softball pitcher has plenty of ties to region
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BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

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Biden urges G-7 leaders to call out, compete with China

BY JONATHAN LEMIRE, AAMER MADHANI and JILL LAWLESS
Associated Press

CARBIS BAY, England — Leaders of the world's largest economies unveiled an infrastructure plan Saturday for the developing world to compete with China's global initiatives, but they were searching for a consensus on how to forcefully call out Beijing over human rights abuses.

Citing China for its forced labor practices is part of President Joe Biden's campaign to persuade fellow democratic leaders to present a more unified front to compete economically with Beijing. But while they agreed to work toward competing against China, there was less unity on how adversarial a public position the group should take.

Canada, the United Kingdom and France largely endorsed Biden's position, while Germany, Italy and the European Union showed more hesitancy during Saturday's first session of the Group of Seven summit, according to two senior Biden administration officials. The officials who briefed reporters were not authorized to publicly discuss the private meeting and spoke on condition of anonymity.

See **G-7**, Page A6

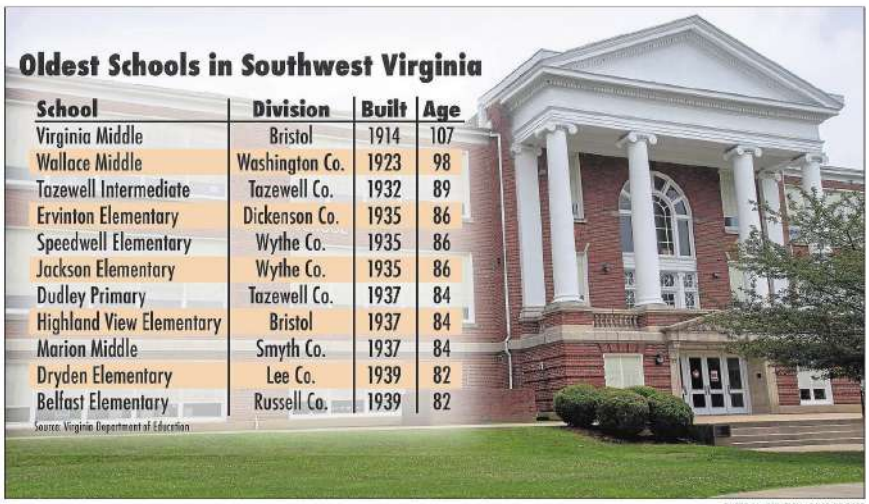
LOCATION	#CASES	#DEATHS
Worldwide	175,421,800+	3,787,800+
United States	33,457,200+	599,600+
Virginia	677,671	10,150
Tennessee	865,885	12,498

% FULLY VACCINATED IN VA.: 47.3%
% FULLY VACCINATED IN TENN.: 35%

SOURCES: Johns Hopkins, Virginia and Tennessee Departments of Health, AP

86/66
Weather » A10

AGING SCHOOLS CRISIS



Oldest Schools in Southwest Virginia

School	Division	Built	Age
Virginia Middle	Bristol	1914	107
Wallace Middle	Washington Co.	1923	98
Tazewell Intermediate	Tazewell Co.	1932	89
Ervinton Elementary	Dickenson Co.	1935	86
Speedwell Elementary	Wythe Co.	1935	86
Jackson Elementary	Wythe Co.	1935	86
Dudley Primary	Tazewell Co.	1937	84
Highland View Elementary	Bristol	1937	84
Marion Middle	Smyth Co.	1937	84
Dryden Elementary	Lee Co.	1939	82
Belfast Elementary	Russell Co.	1939	82

Source: Virginia Department of Education

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION / DAVID CRIGGER

Virginia Middle School in Bristol, Virginia is 107 years old and was built in 1914. It is the state's seventh oldest public school building.

'Moonshot moment'

Virginia school divisions addressing aging schools fleet

BY DAVID MCGEE
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

BRISTOL, Va. — Deep inside the bowels of Highland View Elementary lies the 84-year-old school's original boiler, a wall filled with electrical panels served by an aging nest of wires that carry power throughout the building and a sign on a vent warning "Danger: asbestos."

When former Gov. Terry McAuliffe recently toured the space, he was admonished "not to touch anything."

The Virginia Department of Education recommended that the city close Highland View in 1999 because it reached the end of its functional life. Some 22 years later, the school — which serves many of the city's most economically challenged families — continues operating with no end in sight.

It has undergone a series of upgrades to address air quality, water quality, a leaking roof, handicapped accessibility and other issues. The Bristol Virginia School Board has worked for more than a decade to establish a replacement, but the money has never been available.

Virginia is full of Highland Views.

A new report by the Virginia Department of Education reveals 1,040 of the state's 2,005 school buildings are 50 or more years old. That includes 55% of all Virginia elementary schools, 45% of middle schools and 46% of all high schools.

"An old building is not necessarily a bad building," state Superintendent of Public Instruction James Lane said last week during his presentation to the Virginia Coalition of Small and Rural Schools virtual summit on school infrastructure. "Have those schools been upgraded or renovated to modern standards? How well maintained are those buildings? Frankly, with the budget cuts we've faced since the recession that's been more challenging."

See **SCHOOLS**, Page A3

DAVID CRIGGER/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

A warning sign in a sealed area in the basemant boiler room at Highland View Elementary School in Bristol, Virginia. Highland View was built in 1937.

> "With an influx of federal dollars like nothing I have ever experienced and bipartisan support for this issue in our General Assembly, we have a moonshot moment to make decisions and affect budget and policy that will have a multi-generational impact."
> — **Keith Perrigan,** Bristol Virginia superintendent

Bristol Virginia school buildings

School	Open	Age
Virginia Middle School	1914	107
Highland View Elementary	1937	84
Stonewall Jackson Elementary	1948	73
Virginia High School	1954	67
Washington-Lee Elementary	1968	53
Van Pelt Elementary	1975	46

Source: Virginia Department of Education

GRAPHIC BY DAVID CRIGGER/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Schools

From Page A1

Bristol and Southwest Virginia

Ninety-five of 131 schools across the 10 counties and two cities of far Southwest Virginia, or 72%, are 50 or more years old and 17 — including Highland View — are 80 or more years old.

Bristol's six-school fleet has this region's highest median age — 70 years. Virginia Middle School has been in constant operation for 107 years and is the state's seventh oldest public school building. It is one of 19 Virginia schools that are a century or more old and the structure was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1997.

Five of the city's six schools are over 50 and its newest school, Van Pelt Elementary, opened in 1975, making it 46.

For perspective, Bristol's 70-year median school age ranks fifth oldest among the entire state's 133 school divisions. Bristol is tied with the city of Martinsville and King and Queen County. Bland County schools rank as the oldest with a median age of 82.5 years. Patrick County is second at 82, while Floyd and Grayson counties are tied for third at 75.5 years each.

Lee, Russell and Wythe counties all rank among the state's 10 oldest school fleets, each with a median building age of 68 years old.

Ten of Lee County's 11 schools are 50 or older, with the oldest being 84 and the newest 32. Eight of Russell County's 11 school buildings are 50 or older and the oldest is 82. In Wythe County, 11 of 13 schools are over 50 and the oldest is 86.

Wise and Dickenson counties have some of the region's lowest median school ages at 44 and 47.5, respectively. Both systems replaced a number of older schools over the past decade.

Funding school construction

In simplest terms, schools are so old because they're expensive to replace.

The challenge of securing funding for school construction is as old or older than many of the buildings. State and federal sources have been in and out of the game over the past century. Many of the current schools were built in the 1930s and early 1940s through the federal Works Progress Administration.

Often, it is left up to localities to raise taxes high enough to support school construction.

Dating back to the 1980s, Virginia allocated tens of millions of dollars in state aid for school construction grants, but that pool dried up during the recession of 2008-09.

Present state financial support for school capital projects is limited to loan programs and a portion of the state lottery funding. During fiscal year 2019-20, school divisions reported $1.1 billion in capital spending costs, $476 million in debt service costs and $7.1 billion in outstanding debt — all on school facilities.

That may be changing.

In the wake of a blizzard of federal dollars aimed at righting the wrongs created by the novel coronavirus pandemic, school officials and lawmakers are discussing how some of the most recent round of funds could be channeled toward school construction and — if the state could again dedicate funding for schools — how that might look.

The new state report provides a couple of jumping off points.

It would cost an estimated $24.7 billion to replace all of the state's 1,040 schools that are 50 years or older — if that much money were available, Lane said.

Secondly, there are currently 81 new schools on capital improvement budgets in localities around the state with a combined cost of $3.8 billion. An additional 566 renovation projects on the drawing board are expected to cost $3.3 billion. Of those 81 planned new schools, the overwhelming majority are in densely populated, affluent areas with a substantial tax base. Thirty-one are in northern Virginia, 17 in central Virginia and 16 in the Tidewater area, while just two are planned in Southwest Virginia.

Today, eight new public schools are being built in Virginia, at a combined cost of $410 million, according to the Department of Education. Three are in the city of Richmond, two are in adjoining Henrico County, one is in nearby New Kent County and the other in the city of Chesapeake.

More than 50 major renovation projects totaling an additional $410 million are also underway in larger areas, including Fairfax, Lynchburg and Roanoke. The lone project underway in far Southwest Virginia is a $12 million renovation at George Wythe High School, according to the state Department of Education.

"Moonshot moment"

The Virginia General Assembly is scheduled to convene an August special session to discuss spending $3.8 billion from the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund. Last week, rural schools coalition President Keith Perrigan, superintendent of Bristol Virginia Public Schools, termed this a "moonshot moment" in urging lawmakers to designate those funds for school construction needs.

"We have known for a long time that school infrastructure in Virginia is in bad shape," Perrigan said during the summit. "It is actually worse than many of us thought, especially in rural Virginia. With an influx of federal dollars like nothing I have ever experienced and bipartisan support for this issue in our General Assembly, we have a moonshot moment to make decisions and affect budget and policy that will have a multi-generational impact."

The $3.8 billion offers a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" to modernize schools, use one-time money that could pay long-term dividends, improve the health and safety for generations and jump-start local economies with good-paying construction jobs across the state, according to a coalition document.

It urges that the funding be allocated using the state's existing "at-risk, add-on" formula, which accounts for student poverty, rather than just relying on the composite index of each locality.

Perrigan said it would be wrong for the federal government to force school systems to invest heavily in fixing up older buildings in poor condition as opposed to building new, more efficient facilities.

During the summit, several speakers touched on a requirement that some federal funding be spent by 2024, while other funds could be spent up until 2026.

State Superintendent Lane said it isn't advisable to consider the COVID relief monies because of the short time frame to spend the money, but Perrigan suggested the federal requirements could be modified.

State Sen. Siobhan Dunnavant, R-Henrico, also participated in the summit and voiced her support for both using the federal dollars and state funds to assist school divisions.

"I know there is optimism the federal government may give us more permissibility to use this for new builds, but I think the real snag is we have to have the construction done by 2024," Dunnavant said. "We need to be looking at the outcome metrics, and there is great evidence to show that new school buildings, for children, improve attendance, test scores and they improve overall grades."

Dunnavant said an investment, such as Bristol, Virginia is proposing to close three older schools and replace them with one new building, makes good fiscal sense.

She also called the one-time federal dollars a "gift" that should be invested in new buildings

"I think there's a lot we can do. The key is making the point that school construction is not a luxury. That it is an absolute necessity and — if we want the outcomes we're asking our K-12 education to provide us — we have to be a part of that solution with buildings," Dunnavant said.

State Del. Israel O'Quinn, R-Bristol, also voiced support for deploying the federal money, but urged schools to use previously released funds to pay for items like heating and air system upgrades, window or roof replacement — since all are approved uses.

"I think it's important not to duplicate what is available through existing federal funding and that way we can stretch the playing field," O'Quinn said.

He added that many localities can't assume the debt needed to replace buildings.

"If you come from a small or rural school division, and sometimes if you don't, you know your local governments just don't have the ability," O'Quinn said. "They cannot raise property taxes high enough to cover this shortfall. This is a huge opportunity making sure we're not being redundant or replicating things we can already pay for through other funding mechanisms is key to stretching this out."

New state commission

The General Assembly's recently formed Commission on School Construction and Modernization is working to get its arms around the issue, according to its chairwoman, Sen. Jennifer McClellan, D-Richmond, who participated in the summit along with Vice Chairman Del. Chris Hurst, D-Blacksburg.

"We are going to have to find a long-term, dedicated funding stream from the state level, which we used to provide," McLellan said, noting the $24.7 billion, $3.8 billion and $3.3 billion figures cited in the new state report.

"This is a huge amount of money. We can't leave this to local governments, but we're not getting enough from the federal government. We, at the state level, are going to have to figure out what is the right mix for us to get as much in now up front for new schools and renovation. Frankly, we are going to need your help prioritizing because we are not going to be able to meet that full list," she said.

Hurst called the application of the $3.8 billion in federal funds a "drop in the bucket."

"I want to make sure we get that process right and make sure we have buy-in from everybody in the state that we can appropriate government funds for school construction in a meaningful way and have that be more of a down payment on the longer conversation," Hurst said. "What are some things we used to do in Virginia we might bring back again, and what are some new things that we can do to try and help school divisions with affordability and debt service? All of those are part of a meaningful conversation that wasn't really with us a few years ago."

The 17-member commission includes five House delegates, three senators, three citizen members and six non-voting members. Perrigan is one of three citizen members and Lane is one of the six non-voting members.

Transformational Ridgeview

Not every school in Southwest Virginia is on its last legs. Haydee Robinson was named superintendent of Dickenson County schools in 2009, and her first assignment was to secure funding for new schools.

In her comments during Thursday's summit, Robinson recalled being met with laughter that fall after approaching officials of the poor, rural county, who told her there was no money for new school construction and likely would never be.

Less than six years later — in August 2015 — some of those same officials participated in a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the consolidated Ridgeview High School complex in Clintwood. The system consolidated three smaller, run down high schools, a career center and a middle school onto a single campus.

The change has been transformational, Robinson said during the summit.

"The school very quickly became the community, and that's what we've always wanted there," she said.

Because several county schools were located in flood zones, Robinson was able to secure $110 million from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The county only had to provide a 5% match or $5.5 million.

Robinson said the Board of Supervisors, School Board and Industrial Development Authority were united in the lengthy process, but some members of the community were resistant because they didn't want schools closed.

"We were in a meeting, and a parent said, 'Our children don't need those fancy schools.' We were working with such extremes," Robinson said, adding that county taxes never went up due to the school construction and the division's utility bills decreased.

Students went from having no hot water in school bathrooms, no track to run on, mediocre facilities, limited course offerings and different course options at different high schools, to a state-of-the-art complex that consolidated all the sports facilities onto a single campus and includes the county's only stretch of four-lane highway.

"Test scores aren't everything. But before Ridgeview, Dickenson County was probably [ranked] 120 or 125 out of 133 in SOL [Standards of Learning] scores. In the years before [COVID], we were in the top 25," she said.

"During the design process, I told the architect I want children — when they first see Ridgeview — to think, if I work I can do anything because of this school. I hope children still get that feeling."

Bristol's elementary conundrum

In 2011, the Bristol Virginia School Board voted its intent to close the city's three oldest, most outdated elementary schools — Highland View, Stonewall Jackson and Washington-Lee — and replace them with a single consolidated school.

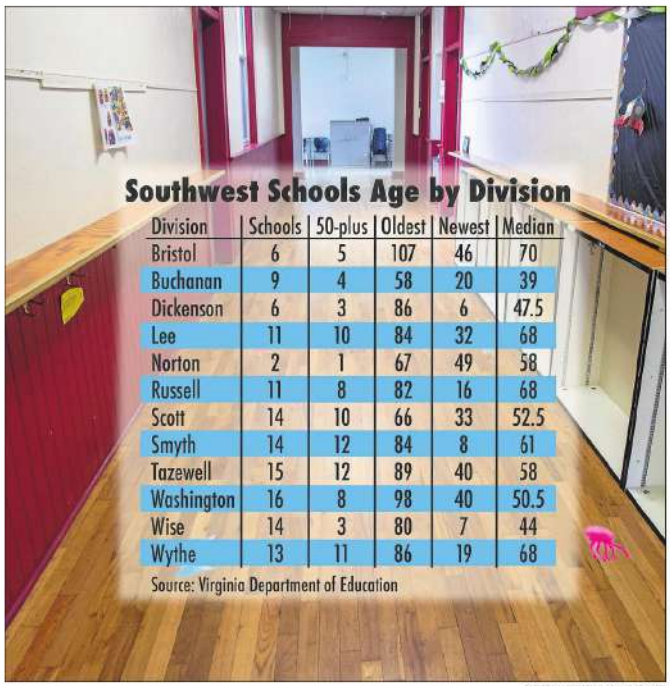
Multiple iterations of school boards and three superintendents have failed to generate sufficient support to execute the plan while, at that same time, former city officials were immersed in borrowing more than $50 million to try and develop a shopping center.

Much like Robinson, one of Perrigan's initial directives was to move the school project forward.

In 2017, Perrigan first proposed an alternative funding plan under which a developer would pay to build the school and then lease the building back to the city and board, who would repay that amount over time, primarily through savings generated by closing older, inefficient buildings and lower staffing costs. A split council ultimately approved the plan in 2019, but it was put on indefinite hold to research potentially better funding. It remained on the back burner due to the pandemic, but school officials resumed discussions earlier this year.

Besides concerns about the cost and the city's precarious long-term debt, the public and City Council voiced concerns over the proposed location adjacent to Van Pelt Elementary, parental access and losing the "feel" and proximity of neighborhood schools.

dmcgee@bristolnews.com
276-645-2532
Twitter: @DMcGeeBHC



Division	Schools	50-plus	Oldest	Newest	Median
Bristol	6	5	107	46	70
Buchanan	9	4	58	20	39
Dickenson	6	3	86	6	47.5
Lee	11	10	84	32	68
Norton	2	1	67	49	58
Russell	11	8	82	16	68
Scott	14	10	66	33	52.5
Smyth	14	12	84	8	61
Tazewell	15	12	89	40	58
Washington	16	8	98	40	50.5
Wise	14	3	80	7	44
Wythe	13	11	86	19	68

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION / DAVID CRIGGER

A hallway in the older section of Highland View Elementary School in Bristol, Virginia. Highland View was built in 1937.

Oldest Median School Age in Virginia

1.	Bland County	82.5
2.	Patrick County	82.0
3.	Floyd County	75.5
4	Grayson County	75.5
5.	Bristol	70.0
6	King & Queen Co.	70.0
7.	Martinsville	70.0
8.	Lee County	68.0
9.	Russell County	68.0
10.	Wythe County	68.0

Source: Virginia Department of Education

GRAPHIC BY DAVID CRIGGER/BHC

TRUTH. ACCURACY. FAIRNESS.

LARRY KING

Broadcasting giant for half-century dies at 87 — A4

MIX & MASK

See if you can mix local community leaders with their masks — COMMUNITY, D1

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In first days, Biden flashes action as deep problems loom

BY JONATHAN LEMIRE
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Inside the White House, President Joe Biden presided over a focused launch of his administration, using his first days in office to break sharply with his predecessor while signing executive orders meant as a showy display of action to address the historic challenges he inherited.

But outside the gates at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., there are signs everywhere that those crises are as deep and intractable as ever. The coronavirus pandemic surges, the economy teeters and Republicans in Congress have signaled objections to many of Biden's plans.

Biden is looking to jump-start his first 100 days in office with action and symbolism to reassure a divided and weary public that help is in the offing. He also knows that what a president can do on his own is limited so he is calling for Congress to act while he is being candid with Americans that dark days are ahead.

"The crisis is not getting better. It's deepening," Biden said Friday about the impact of pandemic. "A lot of America is

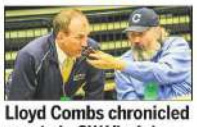
See **BIDEN**, Page A6

LOCATION	#CASES	#DEATHS
Worldwide	98,693,000+	2,118,600+
United States	24,985,600+	417,300+
Virginia	468,655	6,979
Tennessee	795,876	8,819

#VACCINATED IN VIRGINIA: 393,613
#VACCINATED IN TENNESSEE: 438,577

SOURCES: Johns Hopkins, Virginia and Tennessee Departments of Health, AP

INSIDE



Lloyd Combs chronicled sports in SW Virginia — History with Hayes » C1

Thank you, **Pat Moore,** for subscribing to the Bristol Herald Courier.

45/40 Weather » A10

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BRISTOL VIRGINIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

DAVID CRIGGER/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Cooper Wyatt, with Dynamark Security Inc., installs video cameras in the hallways at Virginia High School to assist with contact tracing.

DAVID CRIGGER/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

While water fountains have been covered, filling fountains for water bottles have been installed.

'Anxious to get back'

System ready to reopen schools Monday

BY DAVID MCGEE
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

BRISTOL, Va. — Bristol, Virginia students and teachers return to classrooms Monday for the first time in nearly a month, as the division continues to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.

City students were last in classrooms Dec. 9 and online classes resumed Jan. 12. School officials added bookend weeks of virtual classes around the traditional Christmas break to allow as many teachers and staff as possible to receive the first round of COVID vaccinations, following months with few actual cases in classrooms.

ONLINE

» To view a video message from Bristol Virginia Public Schools go here: https://youtu.be/05QYUNMi02c

See **SCHOOLS**, Page A7

Michigan Mega Millions ticket wins $1.05B jackpot

BY ED WHITE
Associated Press

DETROIT — Someone in Michigan bought the winning ticket for the $1.05 billion Mega Millions jackpot, which is the third-largest lottery prize in U.S. history.

The winning numbers for Friday night's drawing were 4, 26, 42, 50 and 60, with a Mega Ball of 24. The winning ticket was purchased at a Kroger store in the Detroit suburb of Novi, the Michigan Lottery said.

"Someone in Michigan woke up to life-changing news this morning, and Kroger Michigan congratulates the newest Michigan multimillionaire," said Rachel Hurst, a regional spokeswoman for the grocery chain. She declined to comment further.

The Mega Millions top prize had been growing since Sept. 15, when a winning ticket was sold in Wisconsin. The lottery's next estimated jackpot is $20 million.

Friday night's drawing came just two days after a ticket sold

See **JACKPOT**, Page A6

AP PHOTO/KEITH SRAKOCIC

A Mega Millions playslip for those players preferring to choose the numbers they want to play is among the stacks of other lottery game playslips on display at a Smoker Friendly store Friday in Cranberry Township, Pennsylvania.

Schools

From Page A1

"Our parents and our students are anxious to get back. Our staff was very dedicated to providing in-person instruction before, but it's even more so now they've gotten that first vaccine. It's like a sense of relief that I sense from folks working directly with children," Superintendent Keith Perrigan said.

"We are so excited to get our kids back in the building on Jan. 25. That is the start toward normalcy, whatever normalcy looks like in the future. What we're doing right now is not natural for our families, and we're ready to get back to learning the way it's meant to be," he said.

Schools have been cleaned extensively, and new air cleaning technology has been installed in all buildings but, otherwise, the routine of substantial mitigation efforts will be much the same as last semester, Perrigan said.

"There will be no changes. Right before Christmas break, we added 23 new mitigations that we only had about four days to implement. Those 23 and a good portion of our staff have been vaccinated, so we'll continue to follow the plan that's worked up to this point," Perrigan said last week while inspecting Virginia High School.

From August through Jan. 21, the division reported 31 total student cases with none active and 32 positive staff cases with two currently listed as active.

City schools were among the first in the state to return to class last August with all schools open. Students attended classes four days per week with Friday reserved for online learning. The division's plan included extensive steps to try and mitigate exposure to the virus, including daily temperature checks for everyone, modified breakfast and lunch procedures, mandatory mask-wearing for all students and staff, altered schedules, socially distanced classrooms, school buses and common spaces among dozens of changes.

The division has also filled a number of vacancies in its custodial department to provide additional help with cleaning.

Zero transmission

The system reported just 29 COVID-19 cases among students during the first semester, compared to 14 cases of the virus during the recently completed Christmas break, Perrigan said.

"Our team put such a good plan together we were really over prepared. I think the lesson we've learned is when we follow our plan we protect students and staff from transmission and even from quarantine. We've been blessed — and this could all change tomorrow — but we've had zero examples of transmission in our schools since the beginning of the pandemic," Perrigan said.

"Our philosophy has been about balancing risk. We knew some of the risk we were taking was there would be some transmission in our schools. We tried to develop a plan that would alleviate as much of that as possible. We had to quarantine around 50 people and, out of the people we quarantined because they had close contact, none of those folks contracted the virus," he said.

School officials initially said anecdotally that children would be better off in schools with mitigations, and that has proven true, Perrigan said.

"We've been out of school for about a month now, and we have seen a large number of school-age children who've tested positive during that time. When we left school, about 28 of our kids had tested positive and, in the first couple weeks we were out of school, we had 11 school-age children test positive," he said.

The Virginia Department of Health reported 73 new cases of the novel coronavirus in the city during the past 10 days — the amount of time the Centers for Disease Control says a person with a positive test is considered contagious. There have been 204 new cases citywide so far this month.

"Of the 30-some percent of our kids attending virtually, we saw a much larger percentages of them testing positive than in-person," Perrigan said. "As of Jan. 4, there had been an increase of 14 school age children who tested positive since we moved to a fully virtual environment; a 3-week period. We only had 29 in-person learners test positive the entire first semester. Our mitigations provide a safer environment than many of our students have access to outside of school."

About two-thirds of the division's students attended classes in person last fall, with the balance participating online. Come Monday, Perrigan expects that will again be the case.

Social distancing

If more parents want to send their students to schools, it could create issues with the extensive social-distancing mitigations in classrooms, common areas and on school buses — which are running extra routes to maintain distance among passengers.

"In some areas, we have room and in some areas we don't," the superintendent said. As folks request to come back, we're looking at the classrooms they'll be in and — as long as it doesn't cause us to go below 6 feet of social distancing — we'll let them in. If it does cause us to go below that 6 feet, we'll try to work out a very creative schedule where that person may only come back two days a week."

That could change next month.

"By mid-February, after the vaccine has had time to fully develop in our staff, I would anticipate we'll start looking at reducing the number of mitigations that we have. Not throwing them out the window, but reducing them so we can get more of our students in the buildings," Perrigan said. "After Feb. 8, everyone that took it should be almost fully immune from COVID, and we look to expand our offerings after that."

More technology

During the break, contractors for Energy Systems Group installed more than 330 Global Plasma Solutions needle-point bipolar ionization devices in the heating and cooling systems of the city's four elementary schools, the middle and high schools. Paid for with about $450,000 in federal CARES Act funding, the devices are expected to be 99% effective in killing the novel coronavirus and many other airborne pathogens.

It included 115 units at Virginia High School, more than 80 at Virginia Middle and between 26 and 41 units at each of the city's four elementary schools. Ten portable Aerus air scrubbers — made at that company's Bristol, Virginia manufacturing plant — will be used in places where the ionization units couldn't be installed.

And more technology is on the way, including additional video cameras.

"Since the Department of Health is not doing contact tracing anymore that responsibility falls on us. Having good digital cameras, in as many places as we can in our buildings, enables us to follow a student or a staff member — if they've had a positive case — just to verify we are able to identify all their contacts," Perrigan said. "We have already used the cameras extensively — even when we were working with the health department — to track their travels throughout the building. It helps to make sure we notify those who had a close or even a low-risk contact."

The division is also getting quotes and plans to acquire several air quality monitors, but those will be installed in the future.

State issues revised guidance

Last summer saw considerable debate across Virginia as educators, lawmakers and health officials wrangled with how best to safely educate students amid the pandemic. The state ultimately left that decision up to local school boards with large numbers opting for online classes or a combination of online and in-person learning.

On Jan. 14, the Virginia departments of education and health released revised guidance saying a division's "capacity to successfully implement mitigation strategies and local community disease data should be factored into school operations plans."

"As local school and health leaders evaluate and adjust instructional offerings in 2021, they must carefully balance the risks associated with operating during a pandemic and the long-term effects of students not attending school in person," according to the statement. "Even when a school carefully plans and prepares, during a pandemic, cases of COVID-19 still may occur. It is not possible to eliminate all risk of disease in community settings, such as schools. Students and staff most at risk of serious complications from COVID-19 should continue to have remote learning and working options."

Perrigan said that mirrors what Bristol experienced in its first semester.

"When we first opened, the state took a more cautious approach about bringing students in person. We've tried to balance risk for what made sense for Bristol," he said. "Now there is enough data out there nationwide, and the data is pretty clear that schools are not areas of high transmission. I think the reason for that is because of the numerous mitigations school divisions have put into place to protect staff and students from the virus."

Learning loss

The state's newly revised guidance also addresses learning lost due to students being out of traditional classroom settings — both last spring and last fall as educators say virtual options create a disparity in learning and retention for many students.

"The risks of not opening schools need to be carefully considered and given proper weight. Long-term school closures as a mitigation strategy for COVID-19 transmission may cause inadvertent harm to children; for example, children who do not have in-person instruction may suffer learning loss with long-term effects, mental health issues, or a potential regression in social skills," according to the statement.

About 35% of city students earned one or more failing grades on their most recent report cards, which were issued last Tuesday, Perrigan said. More than half of those students were in the remote learning environment, yet those students make up only 30% of the overall population.

"We're extremely concerned. With this new round of CARES Act funding we'll be receiving, part of that will be designated to purchasing tests we can use to determine if students are at, above or below grade level so we can identify students who are struggling," Perrigan said. "Secondly, we are looking at completely revamping our summer school program. We're looking at four different models.

"For those students who are doing virtual but not being successful, [we're looking at] making that a requirement to make sure we engage them over the summer so, when we start next fall, we get them as close to grade-level as possible."

The federal government waived standardized testing last spring, as most schools nationwide were closed from March through June. Perrigan said that is likely to occur again.

"We have a partial waiver on standardized testing," he said. "I think we will see additional waivers extended with the change in administration at the federal level. Prior to the inauguration, we had not gotten a federal waiver, but I think the chances for that occurring now with a new administration in Washington are probably better."

dmcgee@bristolnews.com
276-645-2532 | Twitter: @DMcGeeBHC

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Amid pandemic, Sullivan County's ACT scores drop

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Biden pushes tax offer in infrastructure talks with GOP

BY JOSH BOAK
Associated Press

President Joe Biden is trying to break a logjam with Republicans on how to pay for infrastructure improvements, proposing a 15% minimum tax on corporations and the possibility of revenues from increased IRS enforcement as a possible compromise.

The offer was made Wednesday to Republican Sen. Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia as part of the bipartisan negotiations and did not reflect a change in Biden's overall vision for funding infrastructure.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden examined possible tax code changes from his plans that Republicans might support. The president concluded that a minimum corporate tax could provide some common ground.

"He looked to see what could be a path forward with his Republican colleagues on this specific negotiation," Psaki told reporters at a Thursday briefing. "This is a component of what he's proposed for a pay-for that he's lifting up as a question as to whether they could agree to that."

Biden has proposed increasing the corporate tax rate to 28% from 21% to help fund his plans for roads, bridges, electric vehicles and broadband internet, and that remains one of his preferred approaches. But the rate hike is a nonstarter with Republicans because it would undo the 2017 tax cuts signed into law by President Donald Trump.

By floating an alternative — there is no minimum corporate tax now on profits — Biden was trying to give Republicans a way to back infrastructure without violating their own red line of keeping corporate tax rates at their current level. The Washington Post first reported the offer.

On Thursday, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said he spoke with Capito after the session and is "still hoping" to reach a deal with the administration. But he prefers the GOP approach that is eyeing a scaled-down package, paid for by tapping unspent COVID-19 relief funds, rather than taxes.

"Let's reach an agreement on infrastructure that's smaller but still significant, and fully paid for," he said in Paducah, Kentucky.

The president is essentially staking out the principle that profitable corporations should pay income taxes. Many companies can avoid taxes or minimize their bills through a series of credits, deductions and other ways of structuring their income and expenses.

The president has insisted that the middle class should not bear the cost of greater infrastructure spending. Yet a chasm exists in negotiations because Republicans say that corporate tax increases will hinder economic growth.

The idea of imposing a minimum corporate tax is not new for Biden, who proposed the policy during the presidential campaign last year, and that could turn off some Republicans. The center-right Tax Foundation estimated that a minimum tax would subtract 0.21% from long-run U.S. gross domestic product.

BRISTOL VIRGINIA SCHOOLS

DAVID CRIGGER/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER FILE PHOTO

In this file photo, Bristol Virginia Schools Superintendent Keith Perrigan talks about schools opening in August last year. The school division bucked national trends and offered a full year of in-person classes amid the pandemic.

LANDMARK YEAR

School administrators reflect on unparalleled challenges

BY DAVID MCGEE
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

BRISTOL, Va. — When 116 Virginia High School seniors accept their diplomas tonight it will conclude an unparalleled year for the Bristol Virginia school division, which bucked national trends and offered a full year of in-person classes amid the throes of a global pandemic.

After two dissatisfying months of trying to offer virtual classes during spring 2020, even as most divisions just shut their doors, city school division leaders made it clear last summer their intent was to at least begin the school year in the classroom.

Reflecting on that time, Superintendent Keith Perrigan credits their success to planning, diligence, cooperation and a bit of luck.

School division COVID-19 cases 2020-21

	Student	Staff	Total
Highland View	5	1	6
Stonewall Jackson	3	1	4
Washington-Lee	2	4	6
Van Pelt	13	12	25
Virginia Middle	28	7	35
Virginia High	29	8	37
Other	0	7	7
District	80	40	120

Source: Bristol Virginia Public Schools

"Nobody knew what to expect. If you asked me a year ago if we would have the level of success we had, I'd have said absolutely not," Perrigan said. "I anticipated we would start school, we would have outbreaks and — at some point — we would have to revert to virtual [online]. Every success built on another success, and it helped build confidence and trust. I think most folks are glad we made the decision we did."

Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam closed schools in March 2020 to reduce the spreading virus and, last summer, state education leaders trumpeted online learning as the safest way to provide instruction amid the pandemic.

The Bristol Virginia school system was one in only four in Virginia to fully open schools in August.

"What we found was the fear was much greater than the reality, and we could pull it off — as long as we had a good plan with strong mitigation and that we implemented that plan with fidelity. It taught me,

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Thank you, **Raymond Joines,** for subscribing to the Bristol Herald Courier.

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LOCATION	#CASES	#DEATHS
Worldwide	171,969,680+	3,697,300+
United States	33,125,500+	596,300+
Virginia	676,841	11,215
Tennessee	863,629	12,472

% FULLY VACCINATED IN VA.: 44.9%
% FULLY VACCINATED IN TENN.: 33.7%

SOURCES: Johns Hopkins, Virginia and Tennessee Departments of Health, AP

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US to boost global vaccine sharing

BY ZEKE MILLER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden announced Thursday the U.S. will swiftly donate an initial allotment of 25 million doses of surplus vaccine overseas through the United Nations-backed COVAX program, promising infusions for South and Central America, Asia, Africa and others at a time of glaring shortages abroad and more than ample supplies at home.

The doses mark a substantial — and immediate — boost to the lagging COVAX effort, which to date has shared just 76 million doses with needy countries.

The announcement came just hours after World Health Organization officials in Africa made a new plea for vaccine sharing because of an alarming situation on the continent, where shipments have ground to "a near halt" while virus cases have spiked over the past two weeks.

Overall, the White House has announced plans to share 80 million doses globally by the end of June, most through COVAX.

Study: Radiation drugs track and kill cancer cells

BY CARLA K. JOHNSON
AP Medical Writer

Doctors are reporting improved survival in men with advanced prostate cancer from an experimental drug that delivers radiation directly to tumor cells.

Few such drugs are approved now, but the approach may become a new way to treat patients with other hard-to-reach or inoperable cancers.

The study tested an emerging class of medicine called radiopharmaceuticals, drugs that deliver radiation directly to cancer cells. The drug in this case is a molecule that contains two parts: a tracker and a cancer-killing payload.

Trillions of these molecules hunt down cancer cells, latching onto protein receptors on the cell membrane. The payload emits radiation, which hits the tumor cells within its range.

"You can treat tumors that you cannot see. Anywhere the drug can go, the drug can reach tumor cells," said Dr. Frank Lin, who had no role in the study but heads a division at the National Cancer Institute that helps develop such medicine.

Results were released Thursday by the American Society of Clinical Oncology ahead of its annual meeting this weekend. The study was funded by Novartis, the drug's maker, which plans to seek approvals in the United States and Europe later this year.

When cancer is confined to the prostate, radiation can be beamed onto the body or implanted in pellets.

But those methods don't work well in more advanced prostate cancer. About 43,000 men in the United States each year are diagnosed with prostate cancer that has spread and is no longer responding to hormone-blocking treatment.

The study tested a new way to get radiation treatment to such patients.

It involved 831 men with advanced prostate cancer. Two-thirds were given the radiation drug and the rest served as a comparison group. Patients got the drug through an IV every six weeks, up to six times.

After about two years, those who received the drug did better, on average. The cancer was kept at bay for nearly nine months compared to about three months for the others. Survival was better too — about 15 months versus 11 months.

Pill shows benefit in certain hard-to-treat breast cancers

BY CARLA K. JOHNSON
AP Medical Writer

A pill has been shown to help keep certain early-stage, hard-to-treat breast cancers at bay after initial treatment in findings being reported early because they are so promising.

Study results were released Thursday by the American Society of Clinical Oncology ahead of its annual meeting and published in the New England Journal of Medicine.

The pill, called Lynparza, was found to help breast cancer patients with harmful mutations live longer without disease after their cancers had been treated with standard surgery and chemotherapy.

It was studied in patients with mutations in genes known as BRCA1 and BRCA2 that can predispose people to breast cancer if they don't work properly, but who did not have a gene flaw that can be targeted by the drug Herceptin.

Most patients in the study also had tumors that were not fueled by the hormones estrogen or progesterone. Cancers not fueled by these two hormones or by the gene Herceptin targets are called "triple negative." They are especially hard to treat.

The new study tested Lynparza in 1,836 women and men with early-stage disease who were given the drug or placebo pills for one year after surgery and chemotherapy. About 82% of patients in the study had triple-negative breast cancer.

Independent monitors advised releasing the results after seeing clear benefit from Lynparza. After three years, 86% of patients on it were alive without their cancer recurring compared to 77% in the placebo group.

Schools

From Page A1

and I think many others, is if we can open school in the middle of a pandemic, there is nothing we can't do," Perrigan said. "Our planning team and our staff pulled off the impossible. Nobody — and I mean nobody — outside our inner circle thought we could be successful."

Faith Mabe, principal of Washington-Lee Elementary, recalls the mood of the community and nation was fixated on the virus.

"My biggest concern was losing someone to the virus. I just couldn't imagine losing a teacher or a student. I knew that I would feel responsible for the loss," Mabe said. "I knew teachers were scared. I knew that they were counting on me to make and keep their workplace safe."

She said hearing about daily death counts was difficult, and concerns extended from their own families to students' families — many with older adults as caregivers.

"The biggest thing I remember is the fear permeating everything," she said.

Perrigan assembled a team of more than 50 administrators, teachers, parents, students and others in the community who met last summer to plan. Aided by a COVID case rate much lower than other parts of the state, they adapted Centers for Disease Control mitigation guidelines while teachers prepared lessons for a range of teaching options.

"The goal was to prepare for all scenarios, but our number one focus was to get back to school in person. We had multiple plans of how we would address wherever we ended up being on Aug. 20," he said noting the final decision to open schools was made a week before classes started.

"Our board was resolute that our kids needed us to be open, our parents needed us to be open and our community needed us to be open. What tipped the scale, as we balanced risk, was let's at least get the year started so we could build those relationships with students and teachers so if we had to go to a hybrid or virtual schedule we had built those relationships," Perrigan said.

Mabe said the precautions and planning were remarkable.

"We had the safest environment possible," Mabe said. "Most of our students had more safety precautions at school than anywhere else they were spending their time. We got comfort from being here together. We got comfort from seeing our kids and giving the best care we could. We didn't have transmission from school."

While the city's and region's cases increased in late summer, it didn't reach a critical point.

"It was easier for us to be courageous on the front end because we didn't have the same numbers of cases as some places, but we caught up and actually surpassed most divisions. Bristol's metrics at the end of the year were bad, but it never infiltrated into our schools," Perrigan said.

Throughout the 180-day duration of the school year, 80 students and 40 staff members contracted the virus. The number of student cases among virtual learners was double that of those who attended in person.

"We probably had the safest environment for any of our students to be in. Ninety-nine percent of our classrooms required 6 feet of distance, we required masks, we encouraged safe practices and we supported families if their child was sick," the superintendent said.

And they checked the temperatures of every student, teacher and staff member before they could enter school buildings for all 180 days of classes — including Thursday's early dismissal day.

"We had zero examples of outbreaks and two examples of in-school transmission as defined by the Virginia Department of Health. Our school nursing staff and principals followed up on every lead with contact tracing," Perrigan said.

The division's three smallest elementary schools reported few cases the entire year.

"I had as many, if not more, remote learners who ended up with COVID in their homes than in-person learners," Mabe said.

All of the mitigations designed to improve health and safety altered the daily routine.

"COVID impacted everything, from the way we traveled to school [limited bus runs] to teaching practices — whole group lessons being 6 feet apart wearing masks," Mabe said. "We lost best teaching practices to safe teaching practices. It impacted relationships. One of my students saw a picture of me in my office and didn't know it was me because she had only seen me in a mask this year.

"It changed how they played, how we held classes — library and music in classrooms instead of sharing to one central location. It impacted attendance greatly. Young children often have a runny nose or an upset stomach. Now they had to leave school for slight symptoms or not come in the first place. Our focus shifted from academics and best practices to safety, procedures and logistics," Mabe said.

Educators are, by nature, planners, Mabe said. But this year was governed by an evolving series of plans because "nothing" was like it had been in past years, which created a steep learning curve.

"We had to be OK with not knowing the answers to all the 'what ifs.' We shut down to the outside world — no visitors or family events, but we did end up feeling like we got to go into their worlds [into homes via computer]," she said. "We also became even better communicators with families. We connected in a different way, but it was valuable. We had parent conferences much more often than the usual twice a year. We worked twice as hard and are seeing half the results in many cases."

Systemwide, an average of about 70% of all students were in the classrooms four days per week with the balance logged on from home, Perrigan said. The number of in-person students ranged from about 65% when classes began, to 63% in December, when area cases surged dramatically, to about 80% in the final weeks of the spring semester.

While some students thrived in the virtual learning environment, many did not.

"The remote learners were not being successful at home," Mabe said. "We realized that we are not as effective when they aren't here. We can't supervise remotely. We can't make them turn on the computer. We can't help them in the moment or take advantage of those teachable moments that make us so effective."

That is causing concern about a quantifiable learning gap that could impact students later in life.

"We're still determining what the gap is. We know that it's there. Had we continued to be virtual, like we finished the year last year, that gap might be insurmountable," Perrigan said. "Almost half our elementary students are going to attend summer camp. It's going to last longer this year than last, and we're going to have a focus on reading and math — those core skills students have to have to be successful."

They are also implementing new programs when classes resume in August and hope to have most students caught up by next summer, he said.

Their biggest mistake, Perrigan said, was over-planning.

"So many things we planned to do, we never had to implement. More importantly, so many things we were fearful about didn't come to fruition. That fear was debilitating at the beginning," he said. "Our team and our staff didn't let fear get in the way of serving our students because, at the end of the day, we made the right decision."

Mabe said she is proud of everything the system accomplished but acknowledged she and her staff are "exhausted both physically and emotionally," but still preparing to begin a four-week summer program next week.

Looking back, Perrigan said the pandemic forced "unimaginable" changes in people's jobs "but in every single situation our staff has stepped up, and that's probably what I'm most proud of."

dmcgee@bristolnews.com
276-645-2532
Twitter: @DMcGeeBHC