

THE ROANOKE TIMES
NOVEMBER 25, 2021

Roanoke Valley schools increase emphasis on career skills

By Luke Weir

Students these days want welding torches, keyboards, curling irons and training with other tools of the trades, so Roanoke Valley school divisions are investing in new learning spaces while discussions begin to explore regionalized aspects of career and technical education.

Roanoke city and county schools are pivoting resources toward career readiness, responding to increased student demand for educations in trades and other certified, well-paid professions.

Career and technical education goes by CTE for short, said Morgan Romeo, executive director of Virginia Career Works, which is steering efforts to form a regional CTE collaborative.

“The school systems have really taken an interest in CTE, which is fantastic,” Romeo said. “They’re trying internally to get their capacity up to where it needs to be, to then really focus on regional efforts.”

More readily than in generations past, high schoolers are seeking hard skills, work-based learning and other resume experience in varied and valued fields of employment. Witnessing firsthand that change in student interests is Jason Suhr, director of technical education for Roanoke County Public Schools.

“There does seem to be a noteworthy and worthwhile shift toward appreciating the value of trades as part of our society,” Suhr said. “Despite the myth that these are second- or third-tier opportunities for students, these career opportunities can be very fulfilling, and lifelong.”

Roanoke County committee is laying groundwork

In Roanoke County, a citizen-led committee is working to determine the site, size requirements and solar power potential of a new trade center, which will replace the outdated Burton Center for Arts and Technology, an 89,000-square foot vocational facility located in Salem.

Early estimates put a new BCAT structure at 176,000 square feet, with a price of \$84 million. Teachers such as Mike French, computer science instructor at BCAT, said they are excited for the extra space.

“More space would mean more students,” French said earlier in October, during a BCAT open house event. “This lab gets completely full, it maxes out at 22 students.”

In the culinary kitchen, students are crammed like sardines. It was never intended as a classroom, said Chef Teresa Baxter, while students carved apples into the shape of swans during an open house demonstration.

“In actuality, this space was created for a cafeteria kitchen, so it's not really a working teaching space. I made it that,” Baxter said. “The new BCAT would give us more access, and a bigger classroom space for us to work in.”

A result of the confined classrooms is more students turned away, denied an opportunity to pursue their field of interest. About 350 BCAT applicants were denied from the center’s various programs in one recent school year, officials said previously, while indicating the number is trending upward.

Roanoke is drafting designs

Currently, Roanoke students at William Fleming High School must bus over to the city’s other high school for many trade classes, but the district is working to change that.

Roanoke City Public Schools have hired engineers who will draw up plans to convert the former William Ruffner Middle School, located beside William Fleming, into a trade school for those high schoolers.

Presently, the number of Patrick Henry students enrolled in CTE is almost twice that of enrolled William Fleming students. Officials said that discrepancy is likely due to the time required for Fleming students to travel to Patrick Henry.

The planned new trade school would eliminate that problem and fit with the division’s equity plan, officials said. Estimates in May put renovation costs at \$5.5 million, with staffing expected to cost \$2.8 million annually, beginning in fall 2023.

Offerings planned for the renovated Ruffner facility include: automotive technology, arts and communication, carpentry, cosmetology, criminal justice and landscaping, among others.

Regional approaches possible

A regional collaborative is forming and hopes to meet sometime this fall to discuss how schools in the Roanoke Valley and Alleghany Highlands might benefit from sharing certain aspects of career and technical education, said Romeo, of Virginia Career Works.

Districts identified in a 2020 study of K-12 career and technical education include Alleghany, Botetourt, Craig, Franklin and Roanoke counties, plus the cities of Covington, Roanoke and Salem. Along with school officials, business leaders and other stakeholders will contribute to the CTE collaborative, Romeo said.

“We’ll be trying to figure out how we can do it, but make it make sense,” she said. “There's a lot of data surrounding what businesses need.”

Regionalized CTE in the Roanoke Valley would look at opportunities to combine classes and utilize mobile classrooms, among other things, Romeo said. But getting more students seated in career training programs is essential for the shorter-term, because it addresses the immediate increase in student demand.

“It's a great thing that they're increasing their capacity,” Romeo said. “There's pieces to the puzzle that are being put in.”

Perhaps one or more CTE academies might be viable for the region, but a unified, combined trade school for all the area high schoolers is unlikely, Romeo said.

“I am not sure that one big, shared building is the end-all solution, which is why I haven't been too concerned about the county and city trying to get their buildings stood up,” Romeo said. “That just increases their capacity to do more.”

Suhr, of Roanoke County Public Schools, agreed that the division is focusing first on its own CTE concerns, and that a totally shared facility is probably not the solution for regionwide needs.

“It'd be one thing if we all had programs that were unpopular with students... but the opposite is true,” Suhr said. “We would need to build a regional center that would be incomprehensible, both cost-wise and size-wise, to accommodate the needs of all the Roanoke Valley school districts.”

Smaller districts set to benefit

School divisions with smaller enrollment hope to benefit from regionalized CTE programs. Salem City Schools is one of those divisions expecting to expand offerings by regionalizing, said Jamie Soltis, its director of instruction and career readiness.

“We're excited because we've got great programs for our school. We offer a wealth of opportunity,” Soltis said. But, “we are always looking to think outside the box on how we can partner with other businesses, industries, school divisions, whoever, on how we can continue to expand our offerings to our kids.”

Already, Salem City Schools have partnered for years with Roanoke County Public Schools to fill slots in its apprenticeship program. Similar coordination between area school divisions can be expected as the regional collaborative begins its discussions

“We all have the same vision and mission,” Soltis said. “Hopefully we can all work together in the best interest of all the kids, and all the employers in the valley.”

A market response to college costs?

As college costs have soared during decades past, so too has youthful interest in careers that do not require university degrees.

“Limiting college debt, that's one of the things I'm pretty passionate about,” Suhr said. “If we can minimize college debt, I think we limit the ball and chain around a lot of peoples' ankles for 30 years, paying off college debt that might not have anything to do with what they end up going into.”

College undoubtedly provides people with solid opportunities, but so too can understanding mechatronics, or knowing a coding language, or being a licensed cosmetologist. For those professions, college is not always required.

“For so long we've been going along with ‘the only way to be successful is to go to college,’” Soltis said. “Well, you can go and make six figures as a welder somewhere, with no college and no debt.”

And with shortages nationwide in so many industries, employers are already looking for capable youth to fill vacancies, providing solid potential for budding careers.

“There's a lot of ways to have a happy, healthy, well-compensated life,” Soltis said. “That's a paradigm change for a lot of parents and families.”

THE ROANOKE TIMES

NOVEMBER 13, 2021

Botetourt School Board members decry lack of meaningful citizen input

By Luke Weir

Botetourt County School Board members were all ears to receive meaningful input from the public during a meeting this week, but were instead frustrated by people who only shared their complaints and conspiracy theories.

The board traveled to the auditorium of James River High School for its meeting Thursday night, and first congratulated the school's marching band on recently earned awards and a third-place finish during interstate competitions. The band, in turn, paraded into the room, trumpets blaring and drumline rumbling, playing patriotic tunes in honor of Veterans Day.

The James River math department was recognized for its high student achievement scores. Amy Wolford was named the Kiwanis Educator of the Year for Botetourt County.

After those acknowledgements and applause, up came a line of parents and concerned citizens, each allotted three minutes to address the school board about any topic they wanted.

Some of those people said they were against schools openly supporting gay or transgender people. Other people speaking to the board shared home-cooked conspiracy theories that seemed rooted in anti-vaccine sentiments:

Speakers encouraged Botetourt schools to return millions of dollars' worth of federal coronavirus relief funds, for fear students will be forced to receive COVID-19 vaccines. None of those voices mentioned how the Virginia Department of Health already lists more than two dozen vaccinations on its school and day care immunization requirements.

“There seems to be a lot of misinformation and confusion going around,” said board Chairwoman Anna Weddle, in response after the 15-minute public comment session. “Virginia schools are already required by law to follow CDC guidelines ... All we are doing is continuing to follow the law.”

People in the audience began speaking out, causing Weddle to call out two attendees by name and ask them to stop speaking out of turn. At least one person yelled at the elected school board representatives to “stop vaccinating our children,” and another shouted, “you're complicit.”

“The current CDC guidelines do not include vaccine mandates. We will not be vaccinating your children,” Weddle said. “We cannot give a child a Tylenol without parental permission, as it should be. We are not going to secretly vaccinate your child.”

Botetourt County used federal coronavirus relief funds for its summer academy this year, helping hundreds of kids get the extra education they needed to catch up in school. That program will be repeated in summer 2022, Weddle said.

“This money is a good thing,” she said, over shouting voices. “Extra money to address learning loss is a good thing.”

As the board moved into the bulk of its meeting agenda, including setting school calendars for the next two years, deciding on expenses and hearing updates from staff members and Superintendent Jonathan Russ, the crowd began shuffling toward the exits.

Weddle spoke up again.

“This is the action item point of the agenda, where we do discuss and make votes on very important items,” Weddle said. “It’s really sad to see all of you that came all the way out to James River just disappear now.”

By the time the board opened the floor for public comment less than an hour later, nobody remaining in the audience spoke up to provide input on the schools’ continued reopening plans. This lack of comment prompted a response from outgoing school board member Michelle Austin.

“We had a lot of people in the crowd tonight worried about the American Rescue Plan and these funds,” Austin said. “The sad part about it is, when they had an opportunity to give meaningful input, they’ve all left.”

THE ROANOKE TIMES
AUGUST 23, 2021

The COVID conundrum: Regional school boards getting an earful as the pandemic continues

By Luke Weir

Driven by their own research, concerned citizens addressed school boards across the region in recent weeks, imploring their local leaders to stand against state and national orders that require students to wear masks.

An Aug. 12 order from the governor makes masking compulsory in K-12 schools. Prior to that emergency order, some school boards in the region were reluctant to tell students to mask up — and now some are complying, but begrudgingly.

Constituents have been to school board meetings in higher than usual numbers, with plenty of parents opposing orders for student face masks. Several elected leaders share those parents' sentiments.

More than a dozen people — including one student — addressed the Roanoke County School Board during its recent meeting, the day Northam issued that mask mandate. The crowd assembled was overwhelmingly against the order.

Glenvar High School alumni Christin Wilson spoke out of concern for her son, who now attends.

“While I don't have a personal medical degree, I do have extensive research in all that,” Wilson said. “In the past year and a half, I have read and researched a variety of articles and studies.”

Wilson said the coronavirus is too small for cloth masks to effectively stop transmission. She recommended the board let parents decide whether children wear masks to school.

“I'm a advocate of not masking,” she said. “It does not provide the needed ability to gain oxygen for not only my child, but the others who are within the classroom as well.”

Several others similarly said that mask holes are too big to stop the coronavirus. One man described wearing a mask to stop COVID-19 as like throwing sand at a chain-link fence, and some said a study found the virus is only a tiny nanometer wide.

A report researched at the Argonne National Laboratory in Illinois confirms the miniscule size of the coronavirus, but points out it is transmitted through spit particles that tend to be much larger.

“The use of physical barriers such as respiratory masks can be highly effective,” the report said, ranking various household fabrics' effectiveness as masks. “Fabrics that are porous should be avoided.”

Still other people, or sometimes the same people, said masks are restrictive enough to stop sufficient flow of oxygen to kids' brains. It's an urban legend at this point, debunked by organizations like the American Academy of Pediatrics.

“Masks will not affect your child's ability to focus or learn in school,” reads an article on [healthychildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org), powered by the pediatrics academy. “The vast majority of children age 2 or older can safely wear face masks for extended periods of time, such as the school day or at child care. This includes children with many medical conditions.”

Issues galore

Those weren't the only problems people had with masks. During an eight-minute dissertation at the Roanoke County meeting, Jessica Longshore listed quite a few side effects that mask-wearing might cause, citing several scientific journals.

“It also adversely affects the innate immunity host defense, lung edema clearance and cell proliferation,” she said, turning to face the crowd behind her. “I don't know if everybody understands that. My family is in medicine.”

Longshore also listed as evidence for her research the website childrenshealthdefense.org, a source criticized for vaccine misinformation. She went on to say the government does not have constitutionally vested power to mandate mask-wearing.

“I’m not a lawyer,” Longshore said. “I’m not even a constitutional scholar. But in the last six to eight months, I’ve done extensive research on the Constitution and what my rights as a citizen are.”

Although rules at meetings allow speakers three minutes each to address the Roanoke County School Board, some carried on impassioned for nine or 10 minutes, with nobody stopping them.

First Amendment expressions against masking went on in a similar fashion for the better part of two hours. Anti-mask sentiments echoed off the chamber walls.

Some speakers came with written remarks to recite. Others spoke off the cuff.

One woman wept while reading comments from a petition she started on change.org.

Some people seemed angry, shaking fists as they spoke with increasing volume. Others presented by reading directly from website printouts, distributing to the board copies of their online research.

People said the state and national government are bullies. Some speakers, like Scott Swineburn, didn’t have kids enrolled in the school system, because they were going to start homeschooling.

“I don’t quite know exactly 100% how we’re going to do it, but we’re going to do it. And we hope he gets the best education possible,” Swineburn said, imploring the school board to defy orders. “You guys can break the law. There are consequences. Parents are willing to support that and be there for you to help challenge that.”

But all elected officials, including school board members, take an oath to uphold the law when they are sworn into office.

Plenty of people, like Swineburn, have opted for homeschooling since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, said Anne Miller, president and executive director for the Home Educators Association of Virginia, during a phone call Friday.

Miller pointed at Virginia Department of Education data that shows the number of homeschoolers statewide jumped from about 38,000 prior to the pandemic, to more than 59,000 for the 2020-21 academic year. The association’s Facebook page has exploded in membership, she said.

“In the last week, we’ve welcomed hundreds of families into the group, people who have decided that with a mask mandate they don’t think they can send their children to school,” Miller said. “We have trained and unofficial moderators making sure that parents get accurate information. There’s a lot. Oh my word. There’s so much wrong information out there.”

Conduct not becoming

At the end of a 45-minute public hearing the same night as Roanoke County’s sound off, attendees at a Botetourt County School Board meeting complained that not everyone was allowed to speak.

Members of the public yelled at their school board. After at least one person cursed, Chairwoman Anna Weddle asked county deputies to remove everyone except for school employees from the room.

“This is a statewide requirement issued by the state health commissioner,” Weddle said. “Local school boards have no input. We appreciate you advocating for your children.”

The Botetourt board continued its meeting, which was also livestreamed to the public from the division’s website.

Thirteen people spoke during those 45 minutes of public comment. Most discussed their opposition to the new K-12 mask mandate, while some others focused on prior causes of public outrage, like critical race theory and gender rights to use a bathroom.

A Central Academy Middle School eighth grader, Silas Whitson, was first to speak.

“Kids my age do not seem to be spreading COVID,” said Whitson, who told the board that masks give him a headache and he doesn’t want to wear one.

Other speakers, including Mike Merritt, also said that children were not spreading the virus.

Upon further research, data from the Centers for Disease Control says children can be infected and can transmit the coronavirus to others. Earlier studies suggesting that kids do not transmit COVID-19 might have been due to schools, day care centers and other activities being shut down, and fewer tests conducted on younger demographics, a CDC brief reads.

“Rates of infection can be comparable, and in some settings higher, than in adults,” the report said, citing eight of its 98 sources.

Clarice Gibbs vowed to get involved with the Liberty Counsel, a Florida-based Christian rights group that has litigated against same-sex marriage laws, to fight the mask mandate.

Thomas Colleluori said bullying students by forcing them to wear masks has caused his children emotional trauma.

One speaker encouraged people to check websites like Gateway Pundit, known for frequent false claims about COVID-19, and the War Room podcast of Steve Bannon, a former advisor to President Donald Trump. Bannon last year suggested beheading chief medical adviser to the president, Anthony Fauci, and FBI Director Christopher Wray, according to multiple reports.

Many claims made at school board meetings regionwide referred to outdated news articles, academic journals or other stories that — upon a second-check — are now revised and corrected. Primary sources, if used at all, seem to be misrepresented, misunderstood, cherry-picked or otherwise taken out of context.

For example, Vickie Henderson warned the Roanoke County School Board that children could have permanently protruding ears as a side effect of prolonged mask-wearing.

Indeed, a 2020 study authored by Italian plastic surgeons suggests prolonged pressure specifically from surgical masks’ elastic loops can influence the correct growth and angulation of kids’ outer ears. In spite

of itself, the study goes on to acknowledge that many scientific societies have raised doubts about physical and psychological risks of child mask-wearing.

The study, published in a journal called *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery*, provides examples of face masks that don't use elastic loops, notes that protruding ears can be corrected for children without surgery, and said highlighting the matter will alert people to search for alternative solutions, "while maintaining ... legitimate prevention of the potential spread of the virus."

Several people who spoke at the Botetourt school board meeting participate in a Facebook group called "Patriot parents for kids in VA."

Late last week, the group uploaded a form for religious exemption from mask-wearing, in part because "mask-wearing restricts the life-giving breath of God."

School board officials said in emails that the division approves each religious exemption request on a case-by-case basis, and will seek legal counsel when necessary.

The request for religious exemption on that Facebook page makes the same debunked statements about mask-wearing causing unsafe oxygen levels. It also cites "apparent psychological factors" caused by covering parts of the face.

But again, career scientists and psychologists disagree, like AJ Prussin, who has a Ph.D. and is a research scientist at Virginia Tech, specializing in bioaerosols. He said oxygen depletion and increased carbon dioxide are not true effects of mask-wearing.

"We've shown that masks are very, very effective at filtering out these virus particles," Prussin said. "Kids don't have problems wearing masks. They don't."

But getting the right mask with a good fit is definitely important for children, he said. He and another expert in the field at Virginia Tech, Linsey Marr, have developed a spreadsheet that stresses comfort, fit and filtration. See their information online at bit.ly/VTmaskInfo.

According to that document, a genuine KN95 or KF94 mask, made to fit kids, is the best way to go. There are counterfeits circulating, but the document provides a link to mask test results, as well as a link to share information about masks that meet the best current standards.

"We just try to focus on the science aspect of it and give people the information," said Prussin, who has young children of his own, one of whom is 4 and has been wearing a mask about half of her life by now. "That's the best we can do from our end."

Kim Burgess, a pediatric psychologist based in Rockville, Maryland, said she is "in the trenches" treating children during the pandemic. Burgess said she understands why some parents are concerned about children wearing masks in school.

"Wearing masks fosters parents' and kids' big fears that we'll return to where we were in March 2020, when the lockdown happened," Burgess said. "Families and businesses are anxious that the delta and the lambda [variants] will set us back."

Setting an example

No studies show that wearing masks has negative psychological effects on children and teenagers, Burgess said.

“As a psychologist, I observe that it’s not masks per se that are distressing children and teenagers,” Burgess said. “It’s the whole COVID-effect, which causes stress, frustrations, insecurities, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, which can lead to depression and other things.”

In fact, children might feel stressed about masks because of what the grown-ups around them are saying.

“Kids take their cues from adults they trust. Children don’t want to be in the middle of arguing,” Burgess said. “If we could not expose them to a lot of that controversy or arguing amongst people, or high conflict about it, then that would be really helpful to our children.”

She offered some coping strategies. In particular, parents should give their children as many breaks as possible from wearing masks, particularly in their own homes, when no immunocompromised people are around. Also important is to remember that the pandemic will eventually come to an end.

“First of all, everyone needs to remember that this is temporary. This is going to end, just like all pandemics do,” she said. “I never thought I would say this about COVID, but here we all have a window of opportunity to teach our kids how to handle one of the biggest stressors they’ve ever had in their lives. Wearing masks is part of it.”

Katie Jones, of Buchanan, was the only speaker wearing a mask at the recent Botetourt meeting. She spoke in favor of school policies that respect gender identity and race, and she is not alone in her feelings about those topics, she said after the meeting.

“I think that we would have had more people come to the meeting had it not been a pandemic,” Jones said. “It was close quarters, I knew that people weren’t going to be wearing a mask. ... I didn’t ask anybody else to come, simply because we’re in a pandemic.”

She and her husband have three kids, two of whom are in county schools. Jones said her 10th grader and sixth grader are doing OK with wearing masks.

“We did virtual all last year, so this was a big step for them,” she said. “They do say that some of the kids aren’t wearing their masks properly. I ask if they’re going to say something [to school authorities], and of course they’re not going to say something.”

Jones, a member of the Army Reserve, said that she disagreed about issues of diversity and masking with most of those who were at the meetings, but they did have at least one common viewpoint: The board should hold the meetings in a larger space, given the recent interest in public speaking.

Weddle, the Botetourt school board chairwoman, said that the board is checking on other venues for its Sept. 9 meeting, while still allowing video livestreaming.

“That decision will be made and pushed out shortly,” Weddle wrote in an email exchange.

Those future meetings, like the one on Aug. 12, might include people touting websites that are not widely trusted sources of information. Some might actively push disinformation, or else repeat misinformation as fact.

Mike Horning, an associate professor of communication at Virginia Tech, studies disinformation in social media.

He said social media has gained audiences due to increasing polarization among people who are paying attention to news and information. As beliefs become more partisan, people reach out for sources that confirm their biases.

“People gravitate toward those sources online that they feel support their worldview,” Horning said. “And that’s why you have the misinformation that you do, because a lot of those sources might not always be entirely inaccurate — although sometimes they are — but it’s also about how they choose to select and frame the content and present it to people. It doesn’t give people [all of the] information.”

The larger political climate, in which compromise has fallen by the wayside, has not helped the country move through the crisis at hand, he said.

“We’re in the middle of a pandemic in the middle of one of the more partisan times in American history,” Horning said. “That makes it a sort of unique moment. ... We have this approach now to beat the other side, win at all costs, and we’re seeing it on both sides of the aisle in some ways.

“And it’s not surprising in some sense that when citizens are watching that kind of behavior that they’re going to adopt the same kinds of tactics, even on local policy.”

Speakers at a recent Craig County School Board meeting espoused QAnon conspiracy theory claims, relating mask mandates to elitist plots that aim to instill a New World Order hellbent on enslaving free people.

In Salem on Aug. 10, about a dozen people sat in the school board’s audience, and six spoke up regarding mask mandates. Daniel Sapp, a physician still wearing maroon-colored scrubs, said fewer than 300 children died from the coronavirus since January 2020.

“The medical risk, I can tell you, is not even a fraction of a percent,” Sapp said, focusing instead on declining mental health in children. “I’m a physician, I see this every day. You just have to trust me on some things.”

Kelly Bryant, speaking with wife and son in the audience, provided a counterpoint to Sapp, saying any one of those child deaths might have been prevented, and every precaution should be taken to protect the youth moving forward, regardless of odds or percentages.

“What aren’t our kids worth to be kept safe?” Bryant said. “I’m not above the inconvenience of wearing a mask to keep other people safe.”