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Nelson parents have mixed feelings after repeated delays to in-person learning

Nick Cropper

Feb 25, 2021



The entrance to Nelson Middle School is pictured.

Nick Cropper

As the Nelson County School Board transitioned into the public comments section of its Feb. 16 meeting, Mary Kathryn Allen took her usual place at the podium.

It has become a common occurrence in the past few months for the Gladstone mother of three Nelson County Public Schools students to address board members and advocate for the division to once again open its doors.

“I am tired of being told we that cannot open these doors. It can be done. Counties around us that are twice our size are doing it,” Allen said to board members.

She and many other Nelson County parents will eventually have their wish, as the board voted unanimously to begin a phased return to the classroom starting March 1. But repeated delays to get to that point have left some with mounting frustrations as officials contemplated the right time to bring students back for in-person learning.

Some parents pointed to what they felt was a double standard regarding officials’ decision to allow sports to resume while not allowing in-person classes to restart as well.

The Nelson County School Board during recent meetings has voted to repeatedly delay the rural division’s transition to a hybrid learning format — the next phase of its return to school plan — citing COVID-19 concerns and ongoing vaccination efforts.

“It keeps being postponed, postponed, postponed, and that’s getting the kids’ hopes up and then it’s being crushed,” said Lovingston resident Kimberly Martin.

Not bringing students to the classroom has been a polarizing decision for the rural county where some families lack reliable internet access.

Monthly, Allen has told board members how her children are struggling in the 100% virtual learning format, but in her most recent update she said one child has shut down and it is a daily battle to have her child participate in school, despite the efforts of the teacher.

Martin described the multiple delays as frustrating for her and her two middle schoolers. While her students do receive some in-person remediation, their grades have ultimately suffered.

“Virtual learning is failing them, period,” Martin said. “It’s failing a lot of the kids. If they don’t go back to school, I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

She said when her sixth grader graduated last year he was “excited to go into ‘big boy school,’” but that feeling was fleeting as he has not been able to interact with friends or teachers and his work has gone downhill as a result.

Nelson County Public Schools has been an outlier when compared to neighboring localities, including Amherst, Albemarle and Bedford counties and the city of Lynchburg, all of which offer at least a hybrid option.

“I think that there are reasonable ways to take precautions in the school to where they can make it safe,” Martin said. “Other schools are doing it, so why can’t Nelson? Amherst is doing it. Albemarle is doing it. All the other schools are doing it. Why can’t Nelson?”

Nelson County resident Emily Lucas is noticing a similar trend with her first grader, although she said she has a high school senior who is doing fine in the online format and would most likely stay virtual.

Lucas said she also works with roughly 30 middle and high school-aged students through her church who mostly share in a longing to be back in the classroom.

Lucas and Martin said they were sympathetic of the board wanting to protect the health of students and staff, but they felt their students’ failing grades and mental health weren’t being weighed as equally when officials voted to delay.

“I understand the fear and the concern and putting safety as a priority. I get all of that, but at the same time I still think there’s genuinely no reason to not give the option,” Lucas said of hybrid learning. “...I have real concerns about the mental

health of students. They are really struggling. It is not beneficial for them to be in isolation for so long.”

However, some NCPS parents, such as Arrington resident Sarah Turner, commended the school board for their action.

“I have nothing but great things to say about the school board. I think they’ve done a tremendous job given what they’ve been handed,” Turner said.

Turner noted that while her two children, one each in elementary and middle school, are doing fine academically in spite of lacking reliable internet service at home, her children are struggling socially. She also is concerned for teacher and staff safety and said she feels she has not yet seen an acceptable plan for when staff get sick.

Given the chance to go back to the classroom, Turner said she leaned toward keeping her children at home for the time being. She wasn’t opposed to giving families a choice, however, as long as adequate safety measures are in place.

“I have nothing but great things to say about the teachers this year. I love, love, love, love everything they have done, but their safety is just as important as the safety of my kids, so that needs to be taken into consideration,” Turner said.

https://newsadvance.com/community/nelson_county_times/news/ncps-brings-last-group-of-students-back-to-classroom/article_4954f98a-9196-11eb-ab8a-a3da7eb4f959.html

NCPS brings last group of students back to classroom

Nick Cropper

Apr 7, 2021



The mascot mural inside Nelson County High School now dons a mask as seen in this September 2020 photo.
Kendall Warner, The News & Advance

Nelson County Public Schools has accomplished what it set out to do at the beginning of March: bring all grade levels back into a hybrid format by the end of the month.

The division welcomed back its third and final phase of students to hybrid learning — consisting of a blend of two in-person and three at-home days — with grades nine through 12 returning to the classroom March 29.

Nelson County High School Principal Chris Sumner said having students back in the classroom has been a “welcome change,” with student and staff excited for the change and “lots of smiles and learning happening all around.”

For many high school students, it’s been more than a year since they set foot inside the building. Schools were shuttered in March 2020 as a response to the worsening COVID-19 pandemic, although at the time, the disease had yet to really make its presence known in the county.

During an April 1 Nelson County School Board meeting, Superintendent Martha Eagle noted 59% of students had returned for in-person learning, with the remaining 41% remaining in fully virtual learning — a slight deviation from what has been observed at the other grade levels.

“Our entire staff misses those who aren’t coming into the building, but we also understand and respect the various reasons that our virtual students and their families choose to continue with remote instruction,” Sumner said in an email April 1.

Eagle previously noted roughly 75% of students and families had opted to make the transition to hybrid learning with the remaining quarter choosing to stay 100% virtual from the previous phases — the first being grades pre-K through three and the second being grades 4 through 8 with a two-week buffer between.

In the first week of being back at school, Sumner said, students and staff made the transition “seamlessly.” He noted staff and faculty held meetings with both the A and B cohorts Monday and Wednesday to set expectations for the new school environment. Virtual students also were given expectations for the remainder of the year.

“Students and staff have followed all expectations and protocols without exception since,” Sumner said.

Attendance rates across all four county schools have remained at a 90% average, Eagle said, but she expected that should improve as students and families settle into their new routines.

The Nelson County School Board approved the phased rollout of hybrid learning in February.

Board members during the April 1 meeting praised school staff for their work in getting students back to the classroom.

“I have witnessed firsthand the process at the middle school and high school and it is running like clockwork so I really do appreciate all the hard work,” North District board representative Janet Turner-Giles said.

With the majority of the school year having been spent in an entirely virtual format in which students could participate in either synchronous or asynchronous instruction depending primarily on their accessibility to internet, Sumner said the school is working on addressing education gaps.

He said teachers currently are auditing their pacing guides to determine what skills they covered and what skills still need to be covered going forward and teachers in subsequent classes will adjust their pacing for next year to cover any necessary prerequisite skills.

The division also is considering summer learning options for its students.

“Ultimately, it will take some time and effort but I’m confident that our division, staff, and students will get our students back on track despite the pandemic-related setback,” Sumner said.

https://newsadvance.com/community/nelson_county_times/news/watch-now-local-high-school-seniors-reflect-on-final-year-dominated-by-virtual-learning/article_ee9b0ccc-af7d-11eb-90c2-6f410a029bf6.html

Watch Now: Local high school seniors reflect on final year dominated by virtual learning

Nick Cropper

May 19, 2021



Anna Cheape (right) is pictured during a match against Altavista.

Lee Luther Jr., For the Nelson County Times

For the seniors of Nelson County High School, the 2020-2021 school year has been one to remember, but not for the typical milestones people often associate with the final entry in students' secondary education.

Many seniors and other Nelson County Public Schools students have been away from the brick-and-mortar buildings for roughly a year following a mandatory closure from Gov. Ralph Northam in March 2020 to help mitigate the spread of the pandemic at the time.

Although students returned to the classroom in March, some seniors say it hasn't felt like their final year.

"It just doesn't feel like I'm a senior this year," senior Anna Cheape said. "My graduation is in three weeks and I don't feel like I'm graduating. It just feels like the end of the school year."

Cheape, the daughter of Nelson County School Board Chair George Cheape, said she never anticipated being away from school for so long.

When the initial school closure first occurred in March 2020, senior Tucker Shannon said he was excited to have the initial two weeks off. The drama program, which Shannon also is a part of, had just finished its spring musical.

But Shannon said the reality of the situation started to set in when Northam ordered schools remain closed for the rest of the school year.

"You don't know how much you miss school until you're not in it," Shannon said.

Despite the time it took to get to this point, the seniors said they were appreciative to be back in the classroom, if only for a couple months, to see friends or teachers and to be able to participate in some extra curriculars mostly in the second semester.

While their grades did not necessarily suffer, both Shannon and Cheape said they appreciated the hybrid format and some in-person class time over the alternative of 100% virtual learning.

Cheape is the drum major with the school's marching band, she plays on the tennis team and is part of the drama program. She added her favorite parts of coming back to school were performing in the virtual one-act play competition.

“It was really hard hoping to have something to do and then it just gets taken away like everything else was,” Cheape said. “As much as I complain, school was really my life because I spent so much time there. In a way, it was like losing a big part of my life all of a sudden.”

In July, the Nelson County School Board voted after three hours deliberating to implement a three-phased return to the classroom beginning with an entirely virtual format followed by a hybrid model and eventually a transition to a more traditional classroom environment.

The board repeatedly delayed attempts to transition to hybrid learning, noting concern over health metrics in the county at the time. That transition was furthered delayed by a post-Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday surge in cases.

In February, the board voted in favor of bringing students into the hybrid format throughout the month of March, beginning with grades pre-K through three, followed by grades four through eight and nine through 12 with a two-week buffer between each cluster.

Shannon said it was frustrating to have that goal pushed back, but added it was the right decision given rising COVID-19 cases.

“My hopes were up every time. I had it in my head that we would be back in hybrid by October and it just kept moving down,” Shannon said. “Ever since early last summer we thought we might go back and it kept getting pushed back and pushed back and you start to realize it might not happen at all.”

During the fall, Cheape was among a group of students and teachers that had voiced their support for returning to the classroom amid more students struggling academically with an increase in failing grades across primary and secondary schools.

“I don’t know, [our voice] didn’t really get heard until March,” Cheape said. “It didn’t really seem like we were heard as much as we wanted to be.”

Cheape also said she was frustrated wondering why other larger school divisions had made transitions to the classroom while Nelson County couldn't.

"I couldn't understand why we couldn't do hybrid from the beginning," Cheape said. "I sometimes felt like the school system wasn't doing as much as they could to get our senior year back."

There is a silver lining to the extended period of virtual learning, however. According to the two Nelson County High School seniors, at-home learning allowed them to better prepare for the next step in their lives.

"It was a new environment," Shannon said. "When you're online at home you're really set free and you really have to learn how to manage your time."

He added virtual learning also gave him flexibility to manage his schedule was more flexible and he could take more time with assignments to make sure the work was done properly.

Amherst County Public Schools resumed in-person learning in September after a six-month period of mostly empty school buildings. The Amherst Remote Academy was set up to accommodate the hybrid system of the traditional class setting with social distancing and at-home learning, which drew just more than a third of the student body, according to school officials.

Senior Reagan Bui said she liked Amherst County school administrators constantly communicating with students and staff about COVID-19 trends and updates.

"I loved how they followed the guidelines and tried to keep us safe as possible," Bui said. "It was a really nice experience."

Amherst County High School seniors missed out on much social interaction and some senior traditions this year, Bui said, but students were able to make the most of it.

"Our student council did a really good job to find alternatives to help the seniors and

make their year a little better,” said Bui, who will attend Virginia Commonwealth University and major in biochemistry.

ACHS senior Colson Davis said going into the unprecedented school year he was unsure what the experience would be like.

“Once I got there, I’m a very optimistic person. I like to look at the positives in life,” Davis said. “The fact that we were even able to be there despite all the challenges it was to adjust to the online learning, I was just happy to see my friends again, my teachers, my administration.”

The hybrid system called for two days of in-person instruction and two days of at-home learning with Fridays off. Davis, who will attend James Madison University to major in political science, is involved in theater and tennis. He said despite the limitations ACHS managed to make those programs work.

Working from home taught him time management responsibility and how to treat the tasks like a real-world job, he said.

“It made the days I was there a lot more beneficial,” Davis said. “I made sure each day I walked into that building I had a smile on my face and I made sure I was making my last year in high school count, which I really think I did this year.”

Cheape, who is going to Emory and Henry College to study education, said she felt this past year served as a stepping stone for the next chapter in her life.

With plans to go to Appalachian State University and enroll in the the school’s nursing program, Shannon said he also felt he was ready to move on.

“I think it has made me more ready to move on just because it has been so hard,” Shannon said. “I was worried about being sad to leave Nelson County, which I still am, but I’m more ready to move on and start something new.”

Reporter Justin Faulconer contributed.