

Back to school!

Schools close after opening Wednesday

BY JEFF POOLE
Editor

The 2021-22 school year got off to a stunted start last week with schools closed Thursday and Friday following Wednesday's opening.

Approximately 5,000 masked students arrived at the county's nine schools Wednesday morning as Orange County Schools returned to five-day-a-week, in-person instruction.

But extreme heat, coupled with federal masking requirements on school buses kept students home Thursday and Friday.

"This year, we have the unprecedented mandate for students to wear masks on buses due to the delta variant of the COVID virus," Orange County Schools Superintendent Dr. Cecil Snead said. "We have received feedback in the past and currently about heat on the buses. Given the combination of the heat index projected on Thursday and Friday to be between 103 and 110 in the afternoon hours and that students are federally mandated to wear masks on buses, we elected to close."

He said in the meantime, school officials are investigating



PHOTOS BY JEFF POOLE

Pictured at top, Orange Elementary School students disembark in the bus circle as the 2021-22 school year began last Wednesday. Bottom photo, school counselor Carly Blaine welcomes back Dorian Chub Chun on the first day of school. For more photos, see page A7 and www.orangenews.com.

> See **SCHOOLS**, page A7

> Schools continued from page A1

retrofitting the school's bus fleet with air conditioning. The schools' 15 special needs buses are fitted with air conditioning.

More than 2,730 children travel to school by bus across all programs.

Dr. Snead said there were instances in the past when schools were closed early due to extreme heat, but he could not recall closing for an entire day.

"In the past, however, there were no mandates of wearing masks on buses, nor were people concerned about the combination of masks and heat in the past," he said.

Given that variable, and "due to the dynamic nature of circumstances that can impact transportation and operation," he said it's difficult to set a threshold for what level of heat would prompt schools to close.

According to weather data recorded at the Northern Piedmont Center on Route 15 in Orange, temperatures Thursday and Friday reached highs of 95 both days, though station manager Greg Lillard noted actual temperatures are different than "feel like" temperatures, which include humidity and other factors. Heat advisories were in effect last Thursday and Friday.

Extreme heat and humidity weren't the only challenges for school transportation last week as buses were delayed and some students placed on the wrong buses, notably at Locust Grove Primary School. Dr. Snead refuted social media reports that sug-

gested students were "lost" but noted some were placed on the wrong bus by school staff.

"Procedures have been thoroughly reviewed and revised and an emphasis has been placed on safeguarding students by multiple checks and balances throughout the school day in regard to bus transport and personal transport," he said. "The other emphasis has been placed on communication at several levels. Radio communications between buses, schools, and the transportation office is difficult in some areas where there are dead zones. For example, if Child A was on a bus in a dead zone while Child B was trying to be located by radio, then the perception may become that the child was "lost" due to the inability for the bus driver to hear the communication and respond."

He said until the dead zones are corrected, school administrators have developed a process for the school bus roster to be electronically scanned for the school office to have.

"This means if a bus is in a dead zone, we can rely on the copy of the roster in the school office to provide assurances," he said. "It's also important to understand that the roster can only be developed if the child is physically placed on the bus. We are also purchasing a transportation package that will interface with our current bus routing software. This will allow a parent to track their student in real time through an

app they download onto their personal device. We will start putting this in place this semester."

Busing issues were further compounded by an extended delay loading students onto buses at Locust Grove Primary.

"In the beginning days of the school year, historical data suggests that it usually takes 25-30 minutes to load our students onto the LGPS buses," Dr. Snead said. "However, as habits develop throughout the year we have loaded buses at LGPS in as little as 10-15 minutes. What is unfortunate is that a series of circumstances kept adding to the students' total experience on the bus that day was about two hours total including waiting in the lot to arriving at their home."

He said in the meantime, if a school believes a busing delay will be 20 minutes or more, it will place a notice on its Facebook page and issue a School Messenger response.

"We're owning our mistakes," Orange County School Board chair Sherrie Page said Friday. "Things weren't as tight as they should have been but the administration is working to fix that."

She also acknowledged a number of students were placed on the wrong bus and other delays in loading created a "snowball" effect.

Aside from the transportation challenges, Page said students returning to school were "remarkable."

"You could tell they wanted to be back at school," she said of the first day last Wednesday.

"They need to be in school and safe. They need to be there to learn, but for the social aspect of it as well."

Dr. Snead described the energy in the schools last Wednesday as "fantastic."

"I visited all of the schools on the first day. I started at the high school and worked my way around the county. The students were friendly and appeared ready for their day. I helped a few freshmen find their class. The teachers were ready and expressed appreciation to see their students. This sentiment was the norm at all the schools in Orange County," he said.

"We are blessed to be able to restart our in-person learning for our students to provide them some semblance of community and normalcy this year. There are so many supportive families and community members who contribute to the greater good that enable us to move past the challenges we face. Our staff works hard with love in their heart for our children. I live it intimately with them every single day. If something doesn't go as planned, they and I hurt deeply but we all come back stronger for our children. We have much for which to be thankful; and we will continue to give our best for our students."



PHOTOS BY JEFF POOLE

Pictured, top to bottom: Danielle Tinder gives daughter Mackenzie a hug before she enters Orange Elementary for her first day of Kindergarten. Older brother, Silas, is a fourth-grader. Audrey (first grade) and Roman Shepherd (fifth grade) pose as their mother, Dorothy, takes a photo. Orange Elementary School Principal Sherri McGhee greets Tyeshia Shelton and new kindergarten student Jayven Nibblins last Wednesday morning. For more photos from the first day of school at OES, see www.orangenews.com.

Schools clarify contact tracing procedure

BY JEFF POOLE

Editor

Of the more than 460 new COVID-19 cases in Orange County in the last four weeks, approximately 75 of those were reported in Orange County Public Schools.

School officials confirmed that individuals (students or staff) had tested positive in each of the county's nine schools.

Meanwhile, the inability to identify specifically who has tested positive, who hasn't, and therefore who is considered a close contact and must quarantine and who doesn't seems to have caused confusion and frustration among parents.

While superintendent Dr. Cecil Snead and school administrators updated the Orange County School Board last week on COVID-19 mitigation and protocols, they continued to get a steady stream of questions from parents and families seeking transparency and clarity.

In an interview shortly before the state-mandated four-day holiday weekend, Dr. Snead, school human resources director Yvonne Dawson and special edu-

> See **SCHOOLS**, page **A6**

> Schools continued from page A1

cation director Susan Aylor explained school policies and attempted to ameliorate the frustration.

"It's not black and white," Dr. Snead began. "We're just trying to manage information as we become aware and keep our operations moving forward."

"No two cases are the same," Aylor added. "People look and assume certain situations go together and you can't make that assumption."

Among the 17 bullet points in the 2021-22 return to school safety protocol is one of the sticking points for many parents: "OCPS will continue to work with the Virginia Department of Health to contact trace when cases of COVID-19 are identified."

What that looks like, in reality, varies on a case-by-case basis, Dawson said.

Most of the schools' positive virus cases have been self-reported, she said. In some circumstances, a staff member may see symptoms in a student and send them to the school nurse to be evaluated.

"If the child is sent home, the nurse recommends the family seek guidance from their health care provider," Dawson said.

"We don't mandate anyone get a COVID test," Aylor added.

Nor do the schools administer COVID tests.

"We don't give medical advice," Dawson continued. "We're giving guidance based on the information we have and directing them back to their health care provider."

Once a parent or staff members reports a positive COVID-19 test result, school officials begin the contact tracing process—which can be complex and confusing based on a myriad of factors.

"I think the public may be getting confused about when contact tracing begins," Dr. Snead said.

Additionally, Dawson said when the pandemic began, contact tracing largely was handled by health department staff. As it's expanded, the health department doesn't have the personnel to keep up, and rely heavily on the school divisions for help.

According to the Virginia Department of Health, a person with COVID-19 is

considered to be contagious starting from two days before they became sick (or two days before test specimen collection if they never had symptoms) until they meet the criteria to discontinue isolation.

Dawson said that 48-hour window is critical contact tracing—a process that, at the school level, involves the principal, assistant principal and school nurse, who alert Dawson and Aylor at the central office.

"When did the symptoms start? That drives the quarantine period," Dawson said. "If they don't have symptoms, we use their [positive] test date."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention note an infected person can spread COVID-19 starting 48 hours before the person has any symptoms or tests positive.

"We want to make sure we're providing the safest environment for our students and staff," Dawson said. "We go through contact tracing and pull out those who were closest to the individual and send them home."

"In getting people out, we want to err on the side of caution," she added.

During the contact tracing investigation, school staff looks at when the individual was last in the building and who they would have contact with.

"We look at their class schedules and ask for seating charts," Dawson said. "What is the distance between desks and learning spaces? Were they masked? We even go out and measure the space between desks. Is the student a bus rider? Are they an athlete?"

Any student deemed a close contact to someone who tested positive is notified individually by school administrators.

Once that happens, a notification goes out to all parents and the information is posted on the school's website or posted to the school's social media feed.

Dawson acknowledged school administrators were trying to get better about each school being more consistent in how and where that information is posted.

As the contact tracing investigation continues, some of those individuals initially sent home may be able to return to

school if the evidence determines they were not a close contact or adversely exposed.

According to the Virginia Department of Health, in K-12 education settings, a student who is within three to six feet of an infected student is not considered a close contact as long as both the infected student and the exposed student correctly and consistently wore well-fitting masks the entire time.

"If we can get a student back in the building, that's where we want them," Dawson said.

"It's not a subjective decision, it's an objective one," Dr. Snead added. "If the facts of contact tracing support quarantine, the student has to quarantine."

For close contacts in a K-12 setting, VDH suggests no quarantine is necessary if both children are masked and greater than three feet apart. Additionally, fully vaccinated close contacts do not need to quarantine following an exposure as long as they have no symptoms, though they should continue to wear masks in indoor settings.

Students should quarantine if they were within three feet of an infected person for more than 15 minutes—regardless of masks; within six feet of one another for more than 15 minutes if one child is masked and the other is not; or if both children are unmasked and within six feet of one another for more than 15 minutes.

Snead, Aylor and Dawson agreed that the situation becomes more challenging and complex because privacy laws protect the identity of those who test positive, leading to speculation and assumptions.

"We can't compromise one person's rights for another's," Dr. Snead said.

Dawson encouraged parents who had questions or concerns to contact school administrators for more information.

"It's better to have that conversation," she said. "We may not agree, but they'll be getting that information from us and not social media."

For more information on COVID-19, vaccinations, guidelines and mitigation procedures, visit <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/coronavirus/>.

OCHS Class of 2021



PHOTO BY JEFF POOLE

Confetti floats among Orange County High School graduates following the second of two ceremonies Saturday morning at Porterfield Park in Orange. For more photos, see this week's B-section and www.orangenews.com.

A year of perseverance

307 graduates in split commencement

BY JEFF POOLE

Editor

It was only fitting that a hybrid school year concluded with a hybrid graduation.

Orange County High School conferred more than 300 degrees Saturday during a commencement ceremony that was split alphabetically and

streamed online.

Even with the lifting of a number of COVID-19 public health restrictions in recent weeks, OCHS held dual graduation ceremonies at Porterfield Park Saturday morning—with graduates divided based on the letters of their last names. Students A-La enjoyed the better draw,

beginning at 8 a.m. under overcast skies and cooler temperatures. Students Le-Z sweated as the sun and temperatures rose during the 11 a.m. service.

Still, absent the fervor of thousands of supportive family and friends, the day's split events melded excitement, relief, celebration and wonder after a most unusual senior

> See **GRADUATION**, page **A7**

year.

With that in mind, the day's speakers capitalized on shared themes of resilience, drive, perseverance and achieving the unthinkable.

Senior Andrea Payette, who will attend the University of Virginia next year, served as the master of ceremonies for Saturday's commencement exercises for the 307-student class of 2021.

In her remarks to both groups, she told her classmates that the shared experience of attending OCHS gave each of them a level of understanding of one another.

"Our differences make us stronger—as individuals and as a group," she said. "As we enter this new chapter, I hope we all can remember that what we're doing right now can affect us the rest of our lives.

Inefficient habits can be replaced by new and better ones. We are each responsible for our growth as human beings and each called to be leaders in a group effort to make the world a better place.

Improvement in the world begins with making improvements to ourselves."

She said the beauty of life is it is never too late to improve.

"Motivation is a fleeting phenomenon, but discipline can be controlled and will always move mountains," Payette said. "In difficult moments, I like to return to the law of attraction. Thoughts are powerful and what we focus on expands. What will you choose to focus on and what will you expand in our world?"

"Will you choose to focus on kindness, compassion, opportunity, community service, dedication to family or contributing to a company—maybe even starting your own?" she asked her classmates. "No matter what path you choose, it is important to make a conscious effort dedicated to improving the lives of others as well as your own.

Your mind is your greatest tool and strongest asset. Make it a lovely magical oasis of blossoming ideas, engaging thoughts and the rest will come."

Salutatorian Kylie Trask, who will study abroad as part of Duke Kunshan University, built her remarks off of the oft-repeated pandemic phrases of "in these unprecedented times..." and "in these times of uncertainty..."

Yet amid that uncertainty, she declared the Class of 2021 had found its "why."

"We have dug deep within ourselves to find more than just fleeting motivation, but drive—the drive to wake up early each morning and attend Zoom classes. The drive to pass classes to graduate and the drive to live our lives through a pandemic," she said. "Why you have that drive is different, but it was enough force to get you through the last year.

Quoting the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, she said, "He who has a 'why' to live can bear almost any 'how.' Go on with the same persever-

ance as you did this year."

Valedictorian Katelyn Woolfrey's speech was succinct and direct.

"According to all known laws of aviation, there's no way a bee should be able to fly," she told her classmates. "Its wings are too small to get its fat little body off the ground. The bee, of course, flies anyway, because bees don't care what humans think is impossible."

Like the bee, she said, the class of 2021 did something unthinkable. It navigated a senior year during a global pandemic, culminating in Saturday's graduation.

"Congratulations everyone. We're done. And if we all get vaccinated, the pandemic will be over too. So please, if you are able, get vaccinated, so thank you and good luck with everything you do," she concluded.

School officials and administrators spoke of the graduates' purpose and resilience.

School board chair Sherrie Page said she saw before her young adults who developed character and learned to work hard in challenging times. She said the graduates had also learned to be kinder, more patient, more grateful and more gracious. She encouraged them to "meet people where they are, because you never know what people are going through or what their struggle is or what they've overcome."

School superintendent Dr. Cecil Snead said each graduating class has a unique set of talents based on the culmination of its experiences.

"Each gives us a gift of promise and hope," he said citing the students' resiliency as COVID wreaked havoc on their junior and senior years.

"You have demonstrated a commodity so uneasily attained—resiliency," he said, citing author Elena Aguilar, who defined resilience as "a way of being that allows us to bounce back quickly from adversity—bounce back stronger and better than before so we can fulfill our purpose in life."

Continuing Aguilar's definition, Dr. Snead said, "Resilience cannot be obtained without courage. You must also possess perseverance, empathy, optimism, acceptance, positive self-perception, knowing yourself. Because you are here, you have defaulted to some inner courage you may not realize you possessed until this senior year.

Your resilience and the qualities you possess to achieve that resilience gives me reason to accept your gift of promise to us. We accept your gift of hope to us. Thank you for what you have accomplished and thank you for that promise and hope."

OCHS Principal Wendell Green was the final speaker and his message was one of gratitude and achievement with advice for the future.

Amid those "unprecedented times," he acknowledged the "love and support of family, encouragement of your friends, dedication, commitment flexibility of your teachers, school counselors, administrators, and sup-

port staff and the extra push needed from mentors, coaches and other special people in your lives," that helped the graduates reach this point in their lives.

He said the actor Christopher Reeve once said a hero is "an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.

"Class of 2021, you are our heroes. Your resilience, compassion and caring spirit toward one another has been remarkable. We are thankful for each and every one of you," the principal said, before highlighting a range of achievements and accomplishments OCHS students had made despite the challenging circumstances of the past year.

"Whether you are going to college, the armed forces, trade school or work force, here is some advice I'd like to share," he offered the graduates. "Always be yourself. Treat others like you'd want to be treated. Give 100%. Write down your goals and be willing to work hard to achieve them. Surround yourself with people who are a positive influence. Understand there may be setbacks. Always maintain a positive attitude and never give up."

With their diplomas in hand and their classes concluded, Principal Green still had one question left for the graduates to answer and it was a pretty easy one.

"We are?"

"OC!"