



COVID-19 EDUCATION

# Early data shows extent of learning loss among Virginia students

BY: KATE MASTERS - JANUARY 29, 2021 12:03 AM



📷 Students at Watkins Elementary in Chesterfield County attend class wearing masks in 2020. (Chesterfield Public Schools)

Early data from Virginia schools suggest that more students are struggling academically as the majority of divisions continue to operate totally or partially remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It's a concern that educators have raised as they continue to navigate virtual instruction. According to a survey of 132 local districts conducted by the Virginia Department of Education, 40 ranked failing students as the biggest issue with remote learning – above even access to reliable internet, which was the highest concern for about 35 divisions.

Nearly two dozen districts reported that the percentage of high schoolers and middle schoolers failing two or more classes had grown by more than 30 percent compared to last school year. And more than 50 divisions reported higher rates of absenteeism than the previous year.

The pandemic's academic effect on students has been a continuing concern as the COVID-19 pandemic stretches into 2021. In late March, Virginia became one of the first states in the country to close both public and private schools for the remainder of the year. Gov. Ralph Northam described it as a “[period of sacrifice](#)” amid early uncertainty over how the virus could affect students, teachers and families.

As of Jan. 26, [42 of the state's 132 divisions](#) are still operating fully remotely. But Northam and state education officials are now emphasizing [a return to the classroom](#) as more research suggests that schools can safely minimize the risk of COVID-19 exposures.

“While we must remain vigilant regarding the prevention and spread of SARS-CoV-2, we need to balance this important objective with the shared goal of providing in-person educational instruction to the children of Virginia,” Health Commissioner Dr. Norman Oliver and James Lane, the state's superintendent of public instruction, wrote in a joint letter earlier this month.

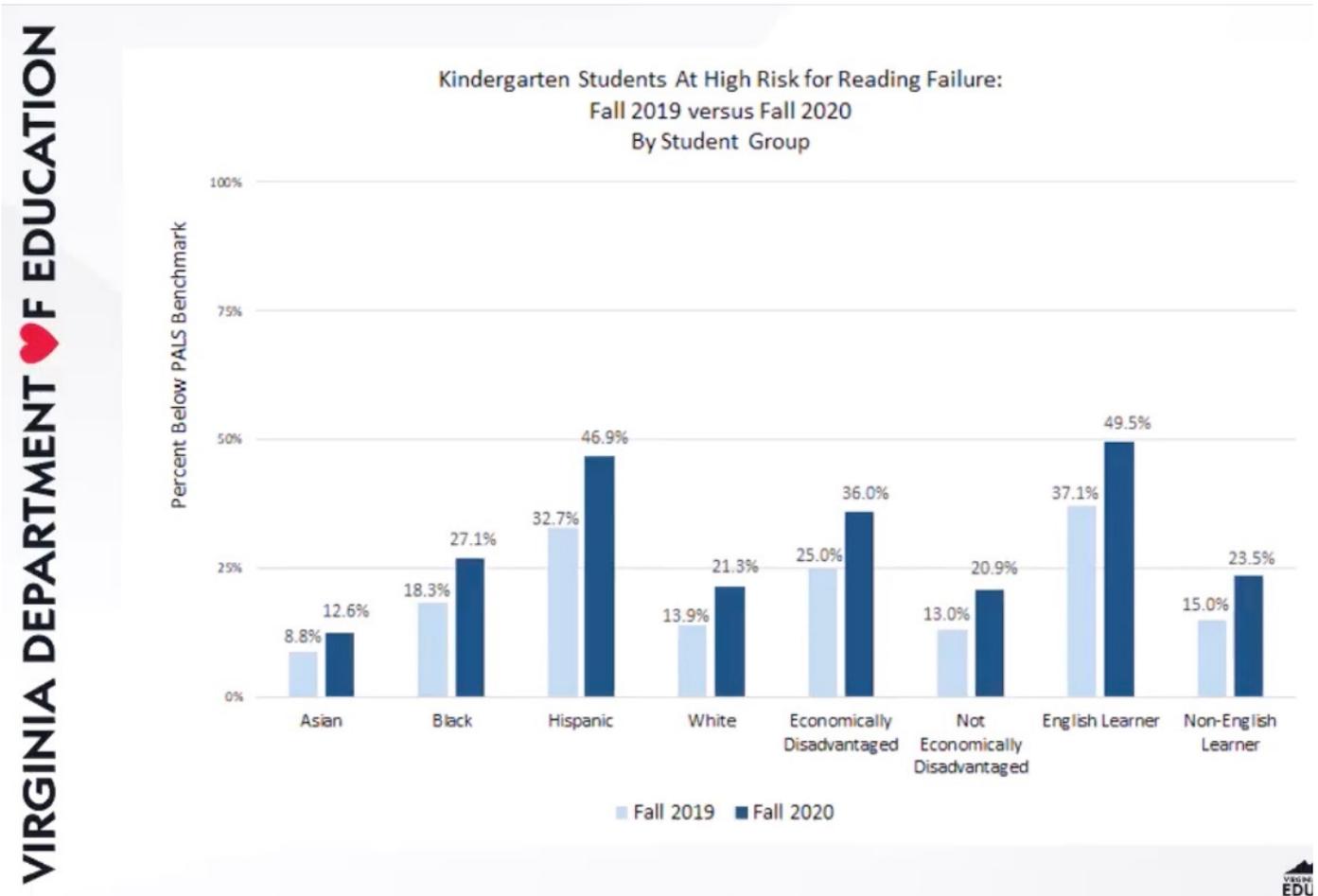
Some of the most concerning statistics on learning loss in Virginia come from scores on the [PALS assessment](#) – a literacy screening tool used by almost all school divisions across the state. Michael Bolling, the state's assistant superintendent for learning and innovation, told the Virginia Board of Education at a Thursday meeting that PALS data showed significantly more kindergarten and first grade students starting the current school year at high risk for reading failure compared to the previous year.

Students are largely measured on whether they meet the assessment's benchmark. In the fall of 2019, only 17.9 percent of kindergarten students and 18.3 percent of first-graders tested below the benchmark, Bolling said. But in the fall of 2020, 27.2 percent of kindergarteners and 28.5 percent of first-graders tested below it – a collective jump of roughly 10 percent.

A little more than 55 percent of those assessments were conducted digitally, but Bolling said state trends were similar across in-person and remote tests.

“There were significant increases [in testing below benchmark], especially in students that were Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged and English learners,” he told board members.

Among White kindergarten students, for example, 13.9 percent were classified as high risk in the fall of 2019 compared to 21.3 percent in 2020 – a jump of 7.4 percentage points. But the number of Black students testing below the benchmark rose by 8.8 percentage points, compared to 14.2 percentage points for Hispanic students.



📷 Data from the Virginia Department of Education shows disparities in reading readiness among kindergarten students during the pandemic.

Educators have warned that remote learning could exacerbate existing achievement gaps between White students and many students of color, along with differences along economic lines. But the data also indicate that many parents remain concerned about sending their children back to school. More than 20 local divisions reported that at least 20 percent of their parents opted for remote learning when in-person or hybrid models were also an option.

Two divisions said more than 75 percent of families opted for stay-at-home learning.

“Our largest divisions, to date, have been predominantly remote,” Lane pointed out. “But I’ll say we’re hearing that in most school divisions, somewhere between 10 and 30 percent of parents choosing remote even when in-person is offered.”

It speaks to the larger complexities when it comes to assessing learning loss – and weighing those concerns against fears of COVID-19 transmission in schools. Lane said that other academic assessments, such as the educational nonprofit NWEA’s [MAP tool](#), largely showed small gains in reading from third to eighth grade and only minor losses in math.

“Essentially, if our SOLs back these results at the end of the year, it gives us some reason for optimism,” he said. “And I think it’s a huge credit to our teachers.”

VDOE also plans to launch a remediation and recovery workgroup to collaborate with local divisions on addressing learning loss among their students.

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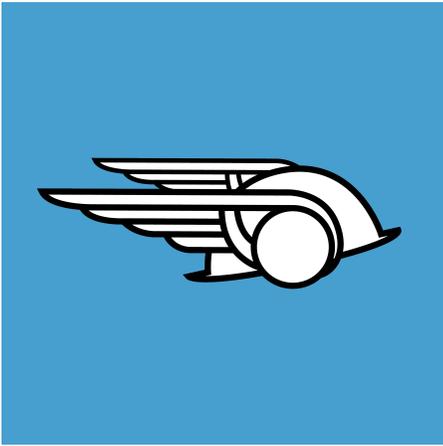
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# Virginia teachers are going to be assessed on ‘cultural competency.’ What does that mean?

BY: KATE MASTERS - APRIL 1, 2021 12:03 AM



(Getty Images)

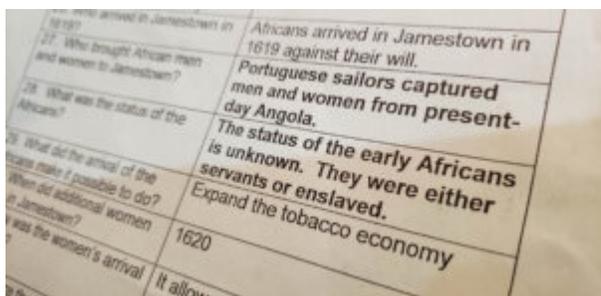
Makya Little was helping her fourth-grade daughter review for the [Virginia Studies SOL](#), a standardized test on state history, when she found herself taken aback by one of the questions on the study guide.

“She gets to this one question that says ‘What’s the status of the early African?’” said Little, who lives in Prince William County. The correct answer, according to the class materials, was

“unknown. They were either servants or enslaved.”

“I got really, really upset,” Little said. While historians widely agree that the first Africans to arrive at the Jamestown settlement were enslaved, there’s been [contentious discussion](#) on the topic – some of the [state’s own study materials](#) also state that it’s “unknown” whether they arrived as slaves or indentured servants. The school division didn’t provide any of that context, and Little said multiple thoughts flashed through her head. The information was “misleading,” she added, and seemed designed to “soften how early Americans treated Black and Indigenous people” (another prompt on the study guide stated that native people and English settlers had a “trade relationship”).

Little had never thought of herself as an education advocate – before that day, she had never regularly attended PTA or school board meetings. But seeing her ancestors “relegated to slaves or servants,” as she put it, made her realize that something had to change.



📷 A study guide from Prince William County Public Schools states that it’s “unknown” whether early Africans in Virginia were enslaved or servants (courtesy of Makya Little).

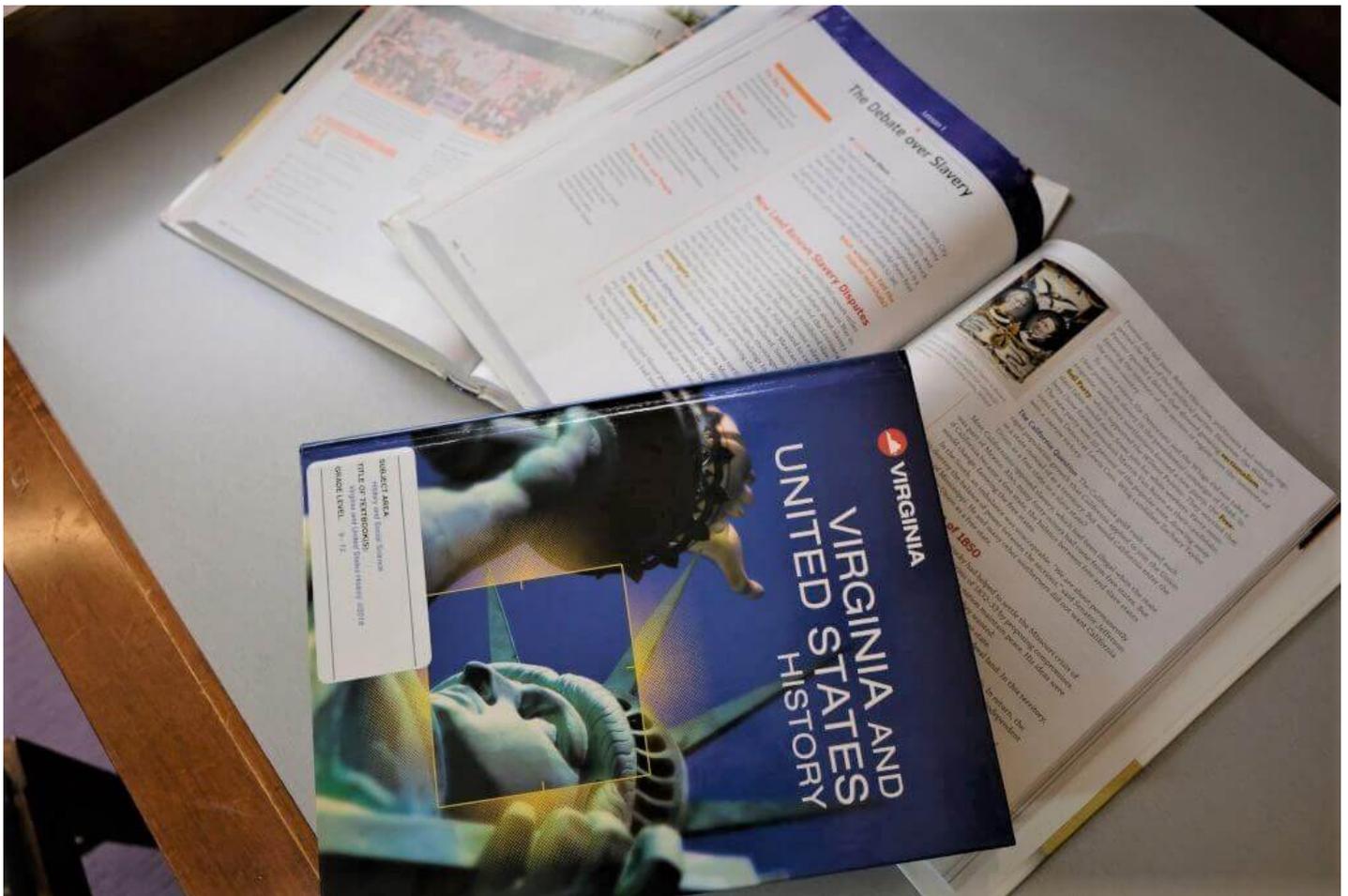
Her efforts to change the way Black history is taught in Virginia schools ultimately got her appointed to the state’s Commission on African American History Education, where Little served as an advocate for parents and historically black colleges and universities (she graduated from Florida A&M University, a highly ranked HBCU).

As a result of that commission, and years of concern over the state’s standards of learning, Virginia legislators passed a bill this year that mandates African American history training for many

teachers and sets new inclusivity standards for educators.

The state has long grappled with [outdated and omissive curricula](#) that – in many cases – mischaracterize important moments in African American history, experts say. But [a nearly year-long review by the commission](#) found that many teachers also struggle to incorporate Black history in the classroom.

“In Virginia, teachers have been criticized for questionable activities meant to teach African American history and engage around difficult topics,” the commission’s [final report](#) reads. In some cases, those have included a [mock slave auction](#) or asking Black students to [pretend to pick cotton](#). Experts say many educators lack the training and cultural knowledge to sensitively approach difficult topics or [tie diverse perspectives and learning materials](#) into their classroom curriculum.



📷 A report from the state's African American History Education Commission recommends overhauling how African American history is taught in Virginia schools. (Mechelle Hankerson/ Virginia Mercury)

Earlier this year, the General Assembly passed [legislation](#) from Sen. Mamie Locke, D-Hampton, and Del. Clinton Jenkins, D-Suffolk, that requires teachers, principals and superintendents in Virginia to be evaluated on “cultural competency.” The measure was supported by the Virginia Education Association, one of the state’s largest teachers’ unions. Last week, the state’s Board of Education also added “culturally responsive teaching” to its list of performance standards for teachers.

“Cultural competency and equitable practices are essential for teachers to achieve success in the commonwealth’s increasingly diverse schools,” BOE president Dan Gecker said in a statement. The board framed the addition as a “new expectation” that will change how the state evaluates teachers – and how students across Virginia are taught.

## First of all, what is cultural competency?

The state’s new performance standards call on teachers to demonstrate “a commitment to equity” and classroom strategies that result in “culturally inclusive” learning environments. In a March 18 meeting, Virginia school board members said culturally responsive teaching should also focus on academic performance – with a goal of eliminating achievement gaps between students. In 2019, the latest year for which statewide data is available, the [Washington Post reported](#) that 89 percent of Asian students and 85 percent of White students

passed state reading exams versus 66 percent of Latino students and 65 percent of Black students. Gaps among elementary students had widened over the last several years.

“It’s an area that can get lost when we think about creating a positive environment where people feel welcome,” said Francisco Durán, a board member and superintendent of Arlington County Public Schools. “Including that language really solidifies and strengthens what we’re expecting in regards to culturally responsive teaching and equitable outcomes for students.”

In the real world, it means educators should be aware of how their own cultural upbringing affects their perspective and learn to develop lesson plans that resonate with their students. Maria Burgos, the equity and inclusion officer for Prince William County, gave the example of a science class learning about the life cycle.

“Let’s say I’m including a living animal like a deer,” she said. “I’m letting my students know in advance what’s coming up. And I’m asking, ‘What are your experiences around this?’”

The hope is that a better understanding of other cultures, and their own potential blind spots, will help educators expand what they’re teaching and how they’re teaching it. That, in turn, will help students relate to and absorb the material.

The legislation from Locke and Jenkins already requires history and social science teachers to complete some instruction in African American history before they can obtain or renew their license (though the Board of Education still has to develop specific requirements). In October, the board also approved recommendations from the AAHEC, including substantial edits to the state’s social studies curriculum.

 Gov. Ralph Northam speaks at the first meeting of the Virginia Commission on African American History Education in the Commonwealth at the University of Virginia. (Mechelle Hankerson/The Virginia Mercury)

Those standards of learning were already scheduled for review, and the revisions are expected to be completed and presented to the state board by November 2022. But there are many other areas that have historically failed to acknowledge non-White contributions, said Cassandra Newby-Alexander, a history professor and dean at Norfolk State University who also served on the state's commission. She pointed to history and language arts curriculum, which often fails to include Native Americans outside the context of early American settlers or westward expansion.

By recognizing their own lack of knowledge on certain topics, Newby-Alexander said teachers could actively work to improve it – and incorporate source materials from figures and perspectives that haven't historically been included.

“To have cultural competency means you're aware there's a lot that you don't know,” Newby-Alexander said. “And that you need to seek other sources to find out that the information you've been given is incomplete.”



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# What does the new standard mean for teachers?

Teachers in Virginia are formally evaluated once a year during their first three years on the job. That switches to at least once every three years after they're contracted with a local school division. Informal reviews can occur more frequently – particularly if an educator is struggling in certain areas, said James Stronge, a William & Mary education professor who helped the state develop its uniform performance standards for teachers as an [independent consultant](#).

Under the updated standards adopted by the board last week, “culturally responsive teaching” will become a new metric for teacher success. The revised document includes seven different sample indicators that a teacher is meeting the standard, from “inclusive” communication strategies that reflect the needs of all students – from English language learners to those with disabilities – to learning materials that “represent and validate diversity from all rings of culture.”

Another example is paying special attention to students in [gap groups](#) – the state’s term for learners who fall behind in test scores and other performance metrics.

There are several ways teachers are assessed, from student surveys and self-evaluations to documentation from the classroom. Samples of diverse learning materials are one way educators can demonstrate culturally responsive teaching, according to the revised guidelines.

The board is also planning another round of revisions before the standard goes into effect – including the development of a model evaluation system. Stronge said there will be an additional round of workgroups with teachers to determine if other sample indicators or documentation should be added to the list.

Ken Blackstone, a spokesman for the Virginia Department of Education, said the proposed implementation date for the guidelines is May 13. Once they go into effect, culturally responsive teaching will become a weighted part of teacher evaluations – along with eight other performance measures like professionalism and student academic progress.

According to Stronge, the goal of formal evaluations is to support teachers and provide professional development if they need help in certain areas. Teachers who don't meet expectations – which factor in all eight standards – can be put on a performance improvement plan, which “is designed to support a teacher in addressing areas of concern through targeted supervision and additional resources,” Blackstone said.

But if teachers can't or won't make improvements, there are repercussions for consistently low evaluation scores.

“If there is a teacher who is ineffective and cannot or will not improve, that teacher is not helping children,” Stronge said. “So if that doesn't occur, there could be consequences related to holding the position.”

## What comes next?

Blackstone said VDOE would provide four regional trainings this summer on the new performance standards and evaluation criteria for teachers. The state's two-year budget, which will be finalized in early April, also includes \$365,000 for a new cultural proficiency coordinator at VDOE and statewide professional development on cultural competency.

The legislation from Locke and Jenkins requires competency training at least once every two years for teachers and administrators. And while the state Board of Education is responsible for establishing standards for that training by the end of 2021, Blackstone said local school boards are required to adopt their own policies for ensuring that staff meet the the new requirement by the start of the 2022-23 school year.

Burgos said many advocacy groups are also calling on school divisions to create their own training programs. That's likely to produce some geographic differences depending on how widely local school boards embrace the concept of cultural competency beyond what's mandated by the state.

“Yes, this makes people feel uncomfortable because they're not sure what it means for them,” Burgos said. Several Republican lawmakers raised objections to the bill in committee, worried it would create an unfunded mandate for school districts – or require teachers to espouse viewpoints they don't agree with.

“I get concerned that I have a Department of Education that’s gonna try to push down – I’ll call it indoctrination,” said Del. Glenn Davis, R-Virginia Beach, during a January committee meeting. “The biggest problem I have in our nation right now with education is the conversations we should be having are not being had. Our children need to be taught everything and what all cultures have provided.”

Del. Schuyler VanValkenburg, D-Henrico, responded that the state had already created another commission focused on broader cultural representation in Virginia’s standards of learning – from [anti-Semitism and the underpinnings of the Holocaust](#) to indigenous history. Supporters of the bill have also pushed back on the idea that requiring more inclusion in classrooms would threaten the rights of educators. Burgos said the legislation simply called for more diversity in instruction. If that “goes against your espoused beliefs,” she added, it’s likely that students are also being negatively impacted.

“It’s already showing up through your actions,” she said. “It’s already showing up in the number of deficits we see throughout education.”

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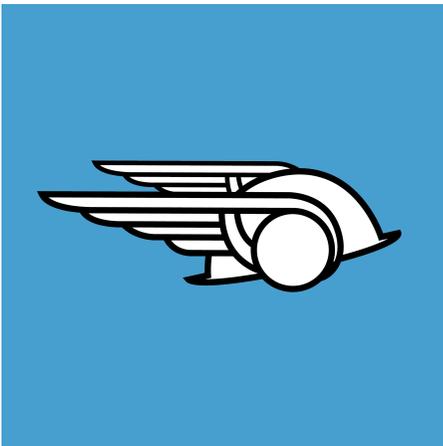
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COVID-19 EDUCATION

# What Virginia's school outbreak dashboard can – and can't – say about the risks of reopening

BY: KATE MASTERS - MARCH 29, 2021 12:04 AM



William Fox Elementary School in Richmond. (Ned Oliver/ Virginia Mercury 2019)

In late September, when Virginia health officials [launched a dashboard](#) that detailed outbreaks in K-12 schools across the state, it was applauded as a long-needed step toward more transparency – and a relief for parents hesitant over the prospect of sending their children back to the classroom.

Six months later, the data on reopening has gained even more importance amid a state and nationwide push [to return students to the classroom](#). But there are limits on what it can and can't tell officials, parents and others looking for answers on the relative risks of in-person school.

In early February, Gov. Ralph Northam [directed local divisions](#) to begin offering in-person instruction by March 15. Three weeks later, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation – with bipartisan support – that mandates a return to the classroom by July 1.

As a result, only three of the state's 132 local school divisions were operating fully remotely as of March 22, [according to data](#) from the Virginia Department of Education. Thirty-eight are fully in-person – defined by the agency as providing at least four days of in-person instruction for all students.

According to VDOE, the majority of divisions – 91 in all – define their schedules anywhere from partially in-person to partially hybrid, meaning that some students (“usually the younger grades”) are in person for part of the week while others are still remote. Thirty-four divisions are “all hybrid,” meaning some students are remote and others go in for fewer than four days a week. And some of the state's largest school divisions, including [many in Northern Virginia](#) and in Richmond city, have no plans to bring all students back for five-days-a-week instruction until the fall.

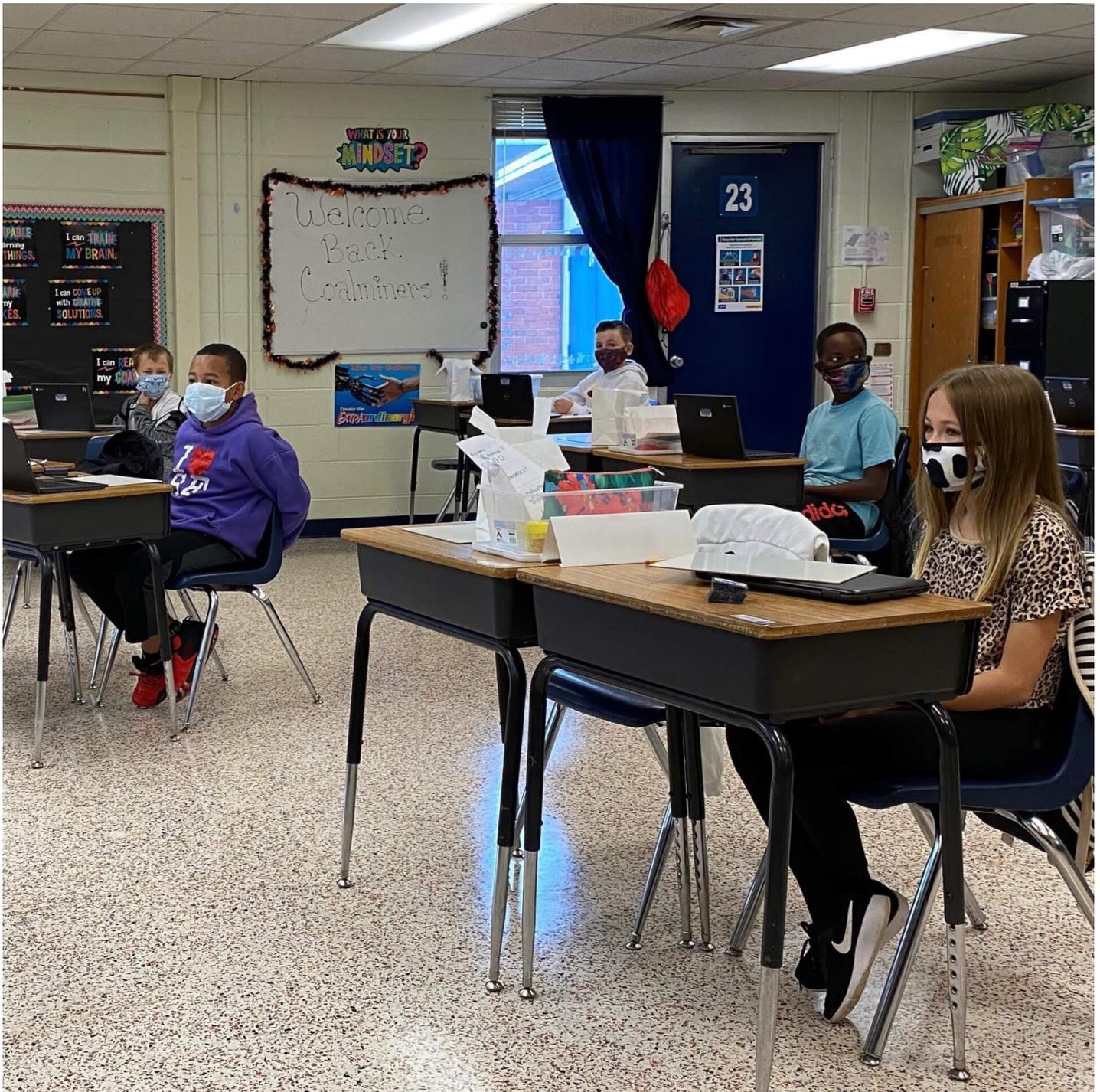
Reopening decisions are still mired in debate. Schools across the Hampton Roads region [hesitated to return students to class](#) as cases surged over the holidays. Administrators in Richmond and Fairfax County have argued [it's impossible](#) to phase thousands of students back to the classroom and maintain social distancing requirements in overcrowded school buildings. Since the start of the school year, many administrators have also complained that they've been forced to take on the role of public health experts, [interpreting a complicated slew of metrics](#) from state and national sources.

Dr. Taison Bell, an infectious disease specialist at the University of Virginia, said the debate will likely extend until children can receive a vaccine – which isn't expected to happen until at least the early fall. “I don't really think the conversation will end until that's achieved,” he said.

In the meantime, the state's [outbreak dashboard](#) is another metric that's frequently consulted by parents and others looking to glean information about virus transmission risks in schools. And unlike other indicators – such as an “operational strategy” from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that includes [five different levels](#) of transmission risk based on case rates and test positivity – it's simple to understand.

The data includes the name of each school, the locality and the number of cases associated with the outbreak (the exact numbers for small case counts aren't disclosed to preserve anonymity, according to the Virginia Department of Health). The department also lists the “investigation status” for each outbreak – whether it's in progress, “pending closure” or closed completely.

Based on the data, it's easy to draw some simple conclusions. As of Friday, six of the 12 schools currently listed with an “outbreak in progress” were private. Five of those six were private, Christian schools. Private schools also appeared to have larger outbreaks than K-12 public schools, whose case numbers – with the exception of Independence High School in Loudoun County – were all small enough that VDH did not include them on the dashboard.



📷 Students at Watkins Elementary in Chesterfield County attend class wearing masks. Chesterfield returned to all virtual learning after Thanksgiving. (Chesterfield County Public Schools)

An analysis of every listed outbreak in schools since the start of the pandemic reflects a similar trend. The six largest in the state, in terms of overall numbers, all occurred at private schools.

Five were Christian, and two – Fork Union Military Academy and Fishburne Military School – were all-male boarding schools that also admit day students.

Does that mean private schools are more likely to have outbreaks than public ones – or are they struggling more to mitigate the spread? Experts say case numbers leave out vital context. Most private schools, for example, have had markedly different operational strategies from public schools for much of the pandemic. Not only have more been in-person, but they’ve been more completely in-person, while many public schools have staggered schedules to reduce the number of students in the building at any one time. That means trends could shift as more public school students return for in-person instruction.

The state’s dashboard also leaves out information about the overall number of students and faculty relative to the number of cases. That makes a big difference when it comes to assessing the overall burden of disease.

StoneBridge School in Chesapeake, for example, currently tops the dashboard with 59 outbreak-associated cases among students and faculty. But [according to its website](#), the school has a total of 393 students and more than 70 staff – meaning that roughly 12 percent of its overall population was infected.

That’s significant, but lower than other schools on the dashboard with smaller case numbers. Grace Christian School in Hanover had 52 cases, [but lists a total of 235 students and employees](#). At 22 percent, it’s a significantly larger infection rate. Neither school responded to requests for comment.

“What we care about isn’t cases, but case rates,” said Emily Oster, a Brown University economist who’s spent months studying available data on transmission in schools. “One case in a school of 10 people is different than one case in a school of 1,000 people.” She began collecting data on K-12 transmission in late August to address what she saw as a shortage of information on the risks posed by school reopening. One significant question at the time was whether schools could lead to “super-spreader” events – contributing to a rise in cases throughout the community.

“But if you look at all the data – like, for example, [a big study](#) that came out of North Carolina – they did really detailed contact tracing and had something like 800 cases in the school population,” Oster said. “Of which 32 were associated with in-school transmission. That kind of ratio suggests that a very large share of the cases we’re seeing are, in fact, not school-transmitted cases.”

Brown’s [dashboard](#) tries to incorporate similar context, contrasting case rates in schools with rates in the surrounding communities. The data suggests that case rates over time are generally higher in the community than they are within school buildings (squaring with some administrators in Virginia who say they’ve seen greater numbers of COVID-19 cases among their remote-learning students).

It also indicates that mitigation measures play a strong role in transmission. [Consistent mask wearing](#), for example, tends to significantly reduce case rates among students and particularly staff, who Bell said are at higher risk of contracting and spreading the disease than students.

Experts say that context is important when it comes to decision-making. While the state publicly discloses outbreaks, which it defines as two or more “epidemiologically linked” coronavirus cases among students or staff, local health departments generally won’t discuss them. Multiple districts with large school outbreaks declined to answer even general questions, such as how they started or if there were any similarities in how cases tended to spread.

“I really can’t glean much from the numbers because I don’t have much context for them,” Bell said. But when schools do provide more information on an outbreak, it makes a difference.

Fishburne, for example, was the only school with one of the six largest outbreaks in the state to respond to an interview request from the Mercury. Communications director Chris Richmond said the school’s first outbreak of the school year was confirmed on Jan. 26 – when students returned from winter break just as cases were surging across the state.

“I think it had to do more with the time of year than anything else,” he said. While VDH reports there were a total of 26 infections, the school says that only 15 cadets and one faculty member tested positive when the Central Shenandoah Health District organized a mass screening event on campus.

When the results came back, Richmond said the school transitioned to online classes for two weeks. Students who tested positive were isolated in their own dorm rooms, and Fishburne canceled outside visitation for all but essential deliveries. Since then, the school hasn’t had another positive case, he said.

Experts say those experiences can inform other schools. As more and more teachers are vaccinated, along with the surrounding community, Bell said he’s seen a growing acceptance of returning to the classroom. But there are still some activities that are riskier than others. High community case rates generally translate to more in-school infections. Mask wearing, social distancing and ventilation – either through opening windows or HVAC filters – are other clear ways to reduce the risk of transmission.

Other activities are less obvious. Grace Creasey, executive director of the Virginia Council for Private Education, said many schools believed their outbreaks were linked to recreational sports leagues – where students and parents from different campuses and different neighborhoods gather and play together. Epidemiologist Chtaura Jackson, who leads the Richmond-Henrico Health District’s K-12 response, said some private schools in the area had started [pooled testing](#) for children who play on sports teams.

Other high-risk activities include band and choir practice – settings where aerosols have the opportunity to spread within closed spaces. Mitigating those specific risks is a way to refocus the school reopening debate, Bell said.

“It’s always been the case that any indoor activity will increase the risk of cases,” he said. “It’s not really a ‘Should we do it or should we not?’ It’s really a ‘What’s our risk tolerance and what are we going to prioritize?’”

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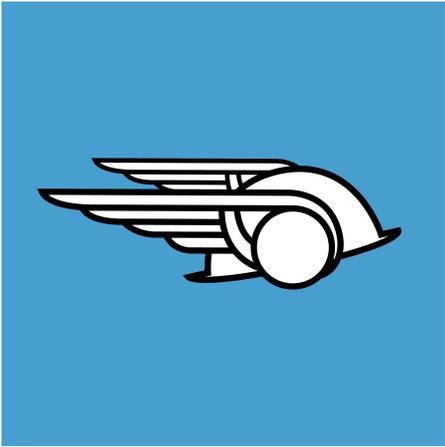
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