

New York schools make plans for fall

Districts stock up on protective gear as they await Cuomo decision

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Faculty and staff at Binghamton High School have spent the summer busily measuring rooms to determine how social distancing will be enforced amid the coronavirus pandemic.

They’re stocking up on personal protective equipment, including a three- to four-month supply of masks (80,000 in total) for students and faculty. Electrostatic sprayers — first ordered in March as a tool to kill the virus — have arrived.

With Gov. Andrew Cuomo expected to make his decision during next week on whether schools should open or remain virtual in the fall, school districts across New York are in the thick of gathering the right equipment and drafting plans — and backup plans — for the coming school year At Binghamton, it includes a hybrid schedule for high schools that would result in smaller class sizes and give students a mix of virtual and in-person learning.

“We have a phenomenal staff that have wonderful imaginations to help us re-imagine what education could be like in the fall,” said the district’s superintendent, Tonia Thompson.

Using guidelines issued by the state Department of Health, administrators are consulting students, families and staff to create individual plans that work best for their school communities.

Districts are required to submit the plans to the state Education Department by Friday for approval.

But it won’t be until Cuomo’s decision — heavily based on the state’s COVID-19 infection rate — that schools will know for sure whether they are permitted to re-open their doors in the fall.

“Our best thinking at one moment can be very, very different at another,” said Ithaca City School District Superintendent Luvelle Brown. “So, this is where we are,



Binghamton High School seniors toss their caps in celebration after graduation on June 28 at NYSEG Stadium.

JEFF MILLER/CORRESPONDENT

“We’re looking to bring back as many young people as possible, as long as it continues to be safe according to the formula that the governor has rolled out in the guidelines that we were given.”

Luvelle Brown

Ithaca City School District Superintendent

Districts have begun to release preliminary plans, though they’re subject to change according to infection rates and state guidelines.

and I’m looking forward to working to continue to be engaged with our community to be flexible and meet the needs of our learners.”

Some districts that are favoring a hybrid model for September are hoping to bring all of their elementary students to school each day, but few, if any, are seriously considering five days a week of in-person classes for high schools.

“Remote is a part of our world no matter what,” said Joel Adelberg, the interim superintendent in Bedford, Westchester County. “Even if we come back with everybody in, we could end up back in remote in a New York minute, literally and figuratively.”

Re-envisioning the school year

A 23-page document issued by the state Department of Health earlier this month provides mandatory guidelines for in-person instruction in schools.

The guidance ranges from signage and face coverings, to how social distancing should be handled when a student is playing a wind instrument or exercising.

Based on the guidance, schools must draft plans that address the following topics:

- i Reopening of school facilities for in-person instruction.
- i Monitoring of health conditions.
- i Containment of potential transmission of the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19).
- i Closure of school facilities and in-person instruction, if necessitated by widespread virus transmission.

It also has been holding forums for families and faculty members to gauge questions and concerns.

The goal is that faculty members who wish to stay home will be matched up with students who pick a full virtual learning experience. This will also naturally reduce the number of students physically returning to buildings, and in turn effect the details of the hybrid schedule.

The district is in the process of receiving this data, which will ultimately determine enrollment numbers for in-person instruction and allow the district to nail down certain specifics that have not yet been determined.

“We have to see what our parents are wanting and are committing to before we can say which grade levels are hybrid and are not,” Thompson said.

‘The great experiment’

As of Monday, the Elimira City School District had not yet released specific details of its preliminary plans.

But the district issued an online survey for parents, students and staff to help shape the district’s reopening plans, Superintendent Hillary Austin said on the district’s website.

The plan will outline three possible formats: remote instruction, in-person instruction and a hybrid schedule that would be a blend of remote and in-person instruction.

“At this point in time, and based on criteria set forth by governing bodies, it is currently likely we will begin our year using a hybrid model of on-line and in-person instruction,” Austin wrote.

The Ithaca City School District is giving students and faculty two choices: in-person learning and teaching five days a week, or virtual

“To ensure equity in education, Responsible Parties should prioritize efforts to return all students to in-person instruction at this time,” the guidance states. “However, based on the dynamic nature of local community transmission of the COVID-19 virus, a phased-in approach or hybrid model combining in-person instruction and remote/distance learning may be necessary at various times through the 2020-2021 school year.”

Preliminary plans drafted by the Binghamton City School District include a hybrid schedule, most likely for secondary level students, with Cohort A attending school in-person on Monday and Tuesday, Cohort B attending Thursday and Friday.

On Wednesday — and the days that the cohorts are not physically in school — learning will be virtual.

Students who need more intense in-person intervention also may attend on Wednesdays. And if they cannot utilize virtual learning in any capacity, they will attend school in-person as many as five days a week.

“Equity is important. Equity doesn’t mean equal all the time,” Thompson said. “So some students being provided more in-person instruction than others is going to be part of the plan because we recognize, depending on their individual needs, that’s going to be required of us to support them.”

Students and faculty members who prefer a completely remote experience will be free to do so.

Educators now have months of experience and feedback under their belts to help determine more effective methods for online schooling, such as using utilizing Google Classroom as the platform most used by students.

The district has assembled a safety committee and several task forces that meet frequently to prepare for the coming school year, in the event that in-person learning is permitted.

One task force centers on the teaching of behaviors, focusing on how students will be taught proper hygiene, social distancing, the right way to wear masks and other preventative measures. They’re creating

learning five days a week.

“Key to our approach to this is choice. Voice and choice,” Brown said.

Students and faculty are free to choose either option, based on their needs. Teachers who pick remote work may be paired with students who have also chosen a virtual experience.

When receiving in-person instruction, students may be put in cohorts.

“We’re looking to bring back as many young people as possible, as long as it continues to be safe according to the formula that the governor has rolled out in the guidelines that we were given,” Brown said.

There is over 1 million total square feet of space across the district’s buildings, and social distancing will be enforced during in-person learning, “We’re confident that we can provide spacing that is according to the guidelines,” Brown said.

The district is enhancing its HVAC systems, with new filters and enhanced filters, and is also looking into enhanced ventilation to bring fresh air into the building. The district also plans to enhance its approaches to cleaning and sanitation, Brown said.

Once Cuomo gives his final decision whether schools will be permitted to hold in-person education, districts will finalize their plans and post them on their websites.

“Folks are in different places, and this is the great experiment,” Brown said.

“This is the beauty of public education. This is the beauty of a diverse community like mine. It’s my job, and I’m challenged to meet the needs of all of our learners and the needs and wishes of a community.”

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Elmira High School seniors participate in their socially distanced graduation ceremony June 28 at the Chemung County Fairgrounds in Horseheads. PROVIDED

videos, signage and other tools to help teach students best practices to stay safe.

A safety committee has been examining the square footage of each of the school’s buildings, and how that effects the occupancy and social distancing guidelines that have been issued by the Department of Health.

And there’s other details, like student mask breaks, that need to be factored into plans.

In mid-July, the district issued surveys to families and faculty members to determine their preferences.