

Can schools stay open as COVID-19 is still surging?

Most of the Rochester area is in a ‘yellow zone’ classification

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Public schools in the Rochester area are in great danger of a forced closure next week as COVID-19 transmission rates continue to hit new highs, according to local data and guidelines from the state Department of Health.

Most of the Rochester area is in the newly designated “yellow zone,” the least restrictive of three possible classifications. It has forced schools to develop a testing regimen for students and staff but allows them to remain open.

An area moves into the next zone, orange, if it has a rolling 4% positivity rate over 10 days and at least 12 new cases daily per 100,000 residents. Monroe County exceeds the latter metric and was perilously close to a 4% rate over 10 days

An orange zone designation would force all schools to close until they test all students and staff, among other consequences.

“I’m very concerned about that,” Kathleen Graupman, president of the Monroe County Council of School Superintendents, said

as of Thursday, with no sign of a reversal.

Those standards are not applied automatically, but rather at the state’s discretion.

Monroe County Executive Adam Bello and Commissioner of Public Health Michael Mendoza are urging residents to avoid the private gatherings that have driven infection thus far.

“We’re yellow; the lights are flashing now,” Bello said Thursday. “These are the warning lights. ... We don’t want to get any worse.”

As for the testing requirement in schools, Graupman said local districts are scrambling to meet changing directives from the state, with a primary emphasis on making children and families comfortable with the tests.



Sara Walrath greets her children Sammie, 9, left, and Charlotte, 6, as they get off the school bus. School days are short because of COVID-19 precautions.

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said Thursday, explaining that he started out with many questions but now is comfortable with the testing regimen. “... my hope is parents will want to have their children tested.”

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Friday. “If we go to an orange or red, I struggle with taking on more of the burden with the community to get kids back to school when the community necessarily hasn’t brought that rate down.”

The local coronavirus statistics are the worst since March, and worsening. The seven-day positive test rate is 4.34%; 300 new cases and two deaths were reported Thursday and 298 new cases Friday.

Bishop Kearney, a private school, announced last week it would close until after Thanksgiving. New York City may temporarily close its schools starting Monday if its positivity rate exceeds 3%, Mayor Bill de Blasio said.

Other consequences of a move to the orange zone would include an end to indoor dining and the closure of gyms and salons, among other things.

They are not the deep nasal cavity tests but rather a less-invasive one that older students can do themselves. Families can also get a test done somewhere else and bring in the proof. But no child will be forced to submit to a test.

“We want to make sure parents are comfortable and they’re not feeling forced,” Graupman said. “Once kids do it (they’ll) see it’s not a big deal.”

She warned, though, that some districts likely will not meet the yellow zone requirement of 20% testing each week. Mendoza said that’s fine with him as long as schools are striving for “the spirit of the law,” while also affirming that keeping children in the classroom was the health department’s objective.

“I, too, am a father, and I want what is best for my children,” Mendoza



Monroe County Public Health Commissioner Dr. Michael Mendoza demonstrates a rapid testing kit that will be used in schools. PROVIDED PHOTO