

## NY school districts quiet on remote learning plans

**Sarah Taddeo and Katelyn Cordero**

New York State Team USA TODAY NETWORK

New York school districts have remained mostly quiet about remote learning plans for the year, highlighting instead the benefits of in-person learning as the academic year began amid high COVID-19 caseloads.

Virtual learning got off to a bumpy start in most communities last fall, with some barriers remaining difficult to address throughout the school year.

Parents struggled to supervise their children's learning while working from home. Broadband access issues make it difficult for some kids, especially those in rural or underserved communities, to keep up with schoolwork. Teachers were burnt out and exasperated trying to conduct class through a screen.

Now, after a year of trial and error, most schools have an expert grasp on what's required to educate online. But many districts haven't discussed remote



**Parents and their children enter School 45 's main entrance in Rochester on Thursday.**

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



**Yonkers schools Superintendent Edwin M. Quezada directs students as they get off at the Kahlil Gibran School on Rosedale Avenue on the first day of school Thursday. MARK VERGARI/THE JOURNAL NEWS**

learning in detail, saying that in-person learning this fall is the only, and best, option for students who don't have a valid medical reason not to be there.

### **Should schools offer widespread remote learning?**

involvement in a child's educational experience," the district said.

Parental involvement remains a critical part of the education system's success, said Hyde Park Superintendent Aviva Kafka, noting that one of the

The debate over remote learning among parents and lawmakers is a heated one.

Some have pushed back on districts' strict in-person requirements, saying remote learning should be a choice for every family, given the spread of the highly contagious delta variant.

On the other side, a group of Manhattan parents filed a preliminary injunction against the Department of Education in May in a push to reopen the schools permanently, saying their kids were depressed and isolated due to remote instruction.

The state's Department of Education struck a delicate balance on this issue in its reopening guide for the 2021-2022 school year: Students should be in school, the guide read, but schools must be prepared to offer remote learning at any time.

"It's still vastly preferable for most children to be in schools ... but it's a given that (districts will) need contingency plans for remote learning," said Bob Lowry, deputy director of the New York State Council of School Superintendents.

Indeed, educational groups and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have said that in-person learning is better for children's mental health and social interaction, and that it should be a priority.

Schools insist that this year's COVID-19 measures, including mandatory indoor masking, will vastly decrease the possibility of closure and a return to widespread remote learning options.

Still, parents can opt for their children to learn virtually for medical reasons, and the possibility of a COVID-19 outbreak in an individual school or specific geographical area could necessitate a temporary closure at some point during the school year.

Meanwhile, kids under 12 are still not cleared to be vaccinated in the U.S., and vaccination rates among 12to-15-year-olds are lagging in some areas of the state; many counties showed rates at or under 30% in early September.

### **What do we know about remote learning plans?**

Schools in the Greece Central School District, a large district near Rochester where more than 10,000 students are enrolled, could revert back to a fully remote learning model in the case of a schoolwide or

greatest takeaways from last year's unfamiliar remote learning landscape was the relationship forged between parents and school staff. "Families had to support their children's learning more than ever before by necessity, and those school/parent partnerships will continue to support students and be strengthened when we return all in-person," Kafka said. "We were also reminded that good teaching and learning are simply good teaching and learning, whether in remote or in person."

### **Lawmakers: Make remote learning a universal option**

As the school year approached and districts solidified their plans for the year amid shifting state and federal guidance, some lawmakers, mainly in the New York City area, advocated for schools to allow remote learning, pointing to the risk of COVID-19 spreading indoors, especially among kids under the legal vaccination age.

"I believe families should have a remote option," New York City Councilmember Justin Brannan, who represents parts of Brooklyn, said on Twitter last month. "We are still in the middle of a global pandemic and extreme caution must always be the #1 priority when it comes to our kids and those we entrust with their care. This is – or at least should be – non-negotiable."

Several lawmakers and parents argued for a remote learning option at a New York City Council hearing in early September, but Mayor Bill de Blasio has been adamant that in-person learning is the way forward except for those with medical exemptions.

Most parents would agree that getting back to in-person learning is the long term goal, said New York Sen. Alessandra Biaggi, D-Bronx.

"Yes, it's ideal to be in person to learn. I don't believe that any parent would make the good faith argument otherwise," she said in a statement on Twitter. "But, no, not everyone feels safe doing so and we need to take that seriously."

Arlington parent Michael Wisseman refused to send his son to school to first three days of school for fear that his son would bring home the virus. The father of a 16-year-old said he is immunocompromised and has his elderly father living with him.

At a school board meeting over the summer Arlington, a district in Dutchess County, announced it would eliminate its remote learning program, and pointed to

districtwide shutdown, said district community relations manager Laurel Heiden.

“But our goal is to keep school safe and open year round,” she added.

Each student in grades K-12 has a Chromebook, just as last year, where they can access homework and online class elements, she said.

Those students who received a medical exemption will participate in virtual school at BOCES or receive individual tutoring. The district will observe snow days as it did in the case of bad weather in the winter months before COVID-19.

Universal masking will decrease extensive quarantine requirements, and those students who are quarantined will connect with their teachers to obtain work they can complete at home, as was the case for sick students in the pre-COVID-19 era. Teachers will not be expected to correspond with students over Google Meet, a video conferencing platform, as they were last year, Heiden said.

The quarantine protocol will be similar in the Hyde Park School District, near Poughkeepsie, and in other districts in Dutchess County. Districts will provide tutoring services to longer-term quarantined students and will give them an opportunity to make up missed work.

Medically exempt students in Dutchess County can access an inhouse remote program, while others are utilizing a remote academy through Dutchess BOCES.

In the Syracuse City Schools, those students with medical exemptions will participate in synchronous learning — meaning live instruction in real time over a video platform — and will be monitored closely for participation throughout the week, according to the district’s virtual school application.

The district will continue to support students facing internet access or affordability barriers at home with school-issued tablets and WiFi hot spots.

Families are encouraged to engage in their child’s virtual academic development and plan; “Research indicates a clear need for parent

homeschooling as an option for parents who don’t feel comfortable sending their students to school.

Wissemann said his son did well in remote learning throughout the pandemic and doesn’t believe homeschool is a good option. He’s still unsure of what he’s going to do.

“I should be able to keep everybody in my own home safe without having to worry about anything, like I’ve been doing for the past 18 months,” he said. “I don’t know what else to do. Like, why does he lose out on the chance for an education just because I’m sick?”

“I’m just trying to do the right thing, it doesn’t make any sense to me,” he added.

*Sarah Taddeo is an enterprise reporter for USA Today Network’s New York State Team. Got a story tip or comment? Contact Sarah at STADDEO@Gannett.com or (585) 258-2774. Follow her on Twitter @Sjtaddeo. This coverage is only possible with support from our readers. Please consider becoming a digital subscriber.*



**The hallway was a hub of activity as students seek out their classrooms on the first day of school at the Kahlil Gibran School on Rosedale Road in Yonkers on Thursday.**



**Students have their temperature taken as they enter the Kahlil Gibran School on Rosedale Avenue on the first day of school on Thursday. PHOTOS BY MARK VERGARI/THE JOURNAL NEWS**

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