

Coronavirus

Schools trying to mitigate risk

Students face virus test as classrooms 're-open'

WASHINGTON, Aug 9, (AP): Reopening schools is easy. Keeping them open will be the hard part. As educators prepare to welcome students back to class for the first time in months, schools' ability to quickly identify and contain coronavirus outbreaks before they get out of hand will be put to the test in thousands of districts around the country.

Newly reopened schools in Mississippi, Indiana and Georgia have already reported infections just days into the academic year, triggering virus protocols that include swiftly isolating infected students, tracing their contacts and quarantining people they exposed.

"It doesn't matter if you open schools in July, like we did, or if you open in August, September or October. All schools are going to have to deal with the issue of positive COVID-19 test results," said Lee Childress, superintendent of Corinth School District in Mississippi, where more than 100 students are quarantined at home after being exposed to a handful of infected classmates.

Schools are trying to mitigate the risk of transmission by spreading desks apart, serving meals in the classroom and keeping groups of students together throughout the day. Many schools – but not all – will require students and staff to wear masks, which health experts say is critical to cutting down on spread.

Administrators say it might be difficult to control the mixing and mingling that happens at every school. Asymptomatic carriers could silently spread the virus to many others. A student might not remember every contact, or be reluctant to tell the truth because that would mean forcing friends into quarantine.

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Infections

Schools are reopening as new infections run at about 54,000 a day in the US. While that's down from a peak of well over 70,000 in the second half of July, cases are rising in nearly 20 states, and deaths are climbing in most of them.

In Indiana, where case numbers and the positivity rate have been rising, a student showed up to class outside Indianapolis before getting the results of a virus test. Greenfield-Central Junior High soon learned he was positive.

It was the first day of school.

"We felt like we were at a good place to start school and then, through no fault of our own, a kid comes to school who shouldn't have been there," Superintendent Harold Olin said, acknowledging "uncomfortable" conversations with parents whose children then had to be quarantined.

Because it was the school system's first case, Olin himself grabbed a tape measure and headed to the infected student's classroom to figure out who was seated nearby so they could be notified of their potential exposure.

Jason Martin's son, Houston, who attends seventh grade at Greenfield-Central, was among those forced to learn remotely for 14 days.

"Clearly, he's disappointed," Martin said. But the school "responded pretty well from a bonehead parent making a decision to send their kid to school knowing they have a pending COVID test result."

The question of whether an infected student or staffer should trigger an automatic shutdown has divided school officials.

New York City's public school system, the largest in the US, says it will automatically shutter classrooms or buildings for 14 days at a time, depending on the severity and circumstances of an outbreak. In hard-hit Texas, school systems in Houston and Dallas say they will close a building for up to five days if a student or staffer tests positive, to allow for cleaning and to give contact tracers time to do their work. It's too risky to try to keep a school open while officials figure out who might have been exposed, Hinojosa said.

Prepared

"Until there's a vaccine, just be prepared to have these rolling shutdowns," he said.

Others administrators say they will try to keep schools open during an outbreak, counting on quick action to keep a lid on it.

In Pennsylvania, the Bethlehem Area School District intends to keep classrooms open if there's a confirmed case. "One closure decision can lead to a potentially crippling and precedent-setting domino effect of closures throughout the school district," the district says on its website.

Dr. Ibukun Akinboyo, a pediatric infectious diseases specialist at Duke University, said even the best plans for reopening and responding to sick students and staff are going to run into trouble if there's a high level of community spread.

"Whatever is happening in the community will likely play out in the schools as well," she said.

In Mississippi, where more than 20% of virus tests have been coming back positive, at least eight students and one staff member in Corinth have tested positive since school resumed last week. District officials used classroom seating charts to determine who needed to be quarantined.

The tally through Friday: 122 people.

Nurses, administrators and teachers have worked together to identify the infected students' close contacts – anyone who was within 6 feet for at least 15 minutes. But at some point, contact tracing ceases to be practical, and a school might have to close, Childress said.

"I think if you have a large number, the process could quickly become unmanageable, and that would be something that we would know when we see it," he said.

Joel Barnes and his wife are rethinking their decision to send their four kids back to Corinth schools after their son was exposed at the high school. They are awaiting the results of his virus test.

"We expected there to be some cases of COVID, but we're honestly surprised that it happened so quickly and has spread to so many so rapidly," said Barnes, who has lung and nerve damage from a car accident and worries about contracting the virus. "Now it's taken off."

The couple have pulled two of their children from school in favor of remote lessons.

"In hindsight, we wish we'd gone virtual from the start," he said.

Joseph Allen, who directs a program at the Harvard University School of Public Health focused on healthy buildings, said masking, contact tracing and quarantining are all important – but so is proper ventilation and air filtration, which Allen said too many districts are ignoring.

Small, inexpensive steps like opening windows, equipping classrooms with box fans and portable air purifiers, and holding classes outside can make a big difference in keeping the virus at bay, even if an infected student or teacher shows up, Allen said.

"We need to get a bit more creative with schools," he said. "If we don't do those upfront things, we're going to have cases."



An empty street leads to the US Capitol before dawn on Aug 8, 2020 in Washington. Congress failed to reach an agreement on a COVID-19 financial relief package Friday evening. (AP)

Politics

Payroll tax deferred

Trump order allows unemployment pay

BEDMINSTER, N.J., Aug 9, (AP): President Donald Trump has bypassed the nation's lawmakers as he claimed the authority to defer payroll taxes and replace an expired unemployment benefit with a lower amount after negotiations with Congress on a new coronavirus rescue package collapsed.

Trump's orders on Saturday encroached on Congress' control of federal spending and seemed likely to be met with legal challenges. The president cast his actions as necessary given that lawmakers have been unable to reach an agreement to plunge more money into the stumbling economy, which has imperiled his November reelection.

Trump moved to continue paying a supplemental federal unemployment benefit for millions of Americans out of work during the outbreak. However, his order called for up to \$400 payments each week, one-third less than the \$600 people had been receiving. How many people would receive the benefit and how long it might take to arrive were open questions.

The previous unemployment benefit, which expired on Aug. 1, was fully funded by Washington, but Trump is asking states to now cover 25%. He is seeking to set aside \$44 billion in previously approved disaster aid to help states, but said it would be up to states to determine how much, if any of it, to fund, so the benefits could be smaller still.

Many states already faced budget shortfalls due to the coronavirus pandemic and would have difficulty assuming the new obligation.

Trump hopes the four executive orders he signed will signal to Americans that he is acting where Congress will not to address economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has upended nearly all aspects of American life. It's unclear what the economic impact of his actions will be, and his orders do not address several areas that have been part of the congressional negotiations, including funding for schools and state and local governments.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer dismissed

Trump's actions as "meager" in the face of economic and health crises facing Americans. Democrats initially sought a \$3.4 trillion package, but said they lowered their ask in talks to \$2 trillion. Republicans had proposed a \$1 trillion plan.

Trump's Democratic opponent in the presidential race, Joe Biden, called the orders "a series of half-baked measures" and accused him of putting at risk Social Security, which is funded by the payroll tax.

Trump's embrace of executive actions to sidestep Congress ran in sharp contrast to his criticism of former President Barack Obama's use of executive orders on a more limited basis. Though Trump cast it as a necessary step given the deterioration of congressional negotiations, the president himself was not an active participant in those talks. The orders "will take care of pretty much this entire situation, as we know it," Trump said, despite the fact that they are far smaller in scope than congressional legislation, and even aides acknowledged they didn't meet all needs.

Extension

In addition to the extension of some unemployment benefits, Trump's orders call for a deferral of payroll tax and federal student loan payments and efforts to halt evictions. The evictions executive order directs the Treasury and Housing and Urban Development departments to identify funds to provide financial assistance to those struggling to pay their monthly rent.

Trump said the employee portion of the payroll tax would be deferred from Aug. 1 through the end of the year. The move would not directly aid unemployed workers, who do not pay the tax when they are jobless, and employees would need to repay the federal government eventually without an act of Congress.

In essence, the deferral is an interest-free loan that would have to be repaid. Trump said he'll try to get lawmakers to extend it, and the timing would line up with a post-election lame-duck session in which Con-

gress will try to pass government funding bills.

"If I win, I may extend and terminate," Trump said, repeating a longtime goal but remaining silent on how he'd fund the Medicare and Social Security benefits that the 7% tax on employee income covers. Employers also pay 7.65% of their payrolls into the funds.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., issued a statement saying he supported Trump "exploring his options to get unemployment benefits and other relief to the people who need them the most." Like Trump, McConnell accused Democrats of using the coronavirus package negotiations to pursue other goals. The Democratic chairman of the tax-writing House Ways and Means Committee, Rep. Richard E. Neal of Massachusetts, accused Trump of "brazenly circumventing Congress to institute tax policy that destabilizes Social Security." He also cited a threat to Medicare funding.

The use of executive actions drew criticism from Republican Sen. Ben Sasse of Nebraska. "The pen-and-phone theory of executive lawmaking is unconstitutional slop," said Sasse, a member of the Senate's Judiciary and Finance panels. He added that Trump "does not have the power to unilaterally rewrite the payroll tax law. Under the Constitution, that power belongs to the American people acting through their members of Congress."

With no deal on virus relief in sight, lawmakers went home on Friday with instructions to be ready to return for a vote on an agreement. A stalemate that could stretch well into August and even September was possible, casting doubt on the ability of the Trump administration and Democrats to come together on a fifth COVID-19 response bill.

Often an impasse in Washington is of little consequence for the public – but this would mean more hardship for millions of people who are losing enhanced jobless benefits and cause further damage to the economy.



Bob Garick stands by the entrance to his home, Aug 5, in Oviedo, Fla. Garick was looking forward to being a field supervisor during the door-knocking phase of the 2020 census, but as the number of new coronavirus cases in Florida shot up last month, he changed his mind and decided not to take the job. The loss of these so-called door-knockers – formally known as enumerators – is happening just when the agency faces newly tightened deadlines to reach the hardest to count communities, including minorities and immigrants. (AP)



Arpaio

DeWine

America

Ohio Gov tests negative: The fourth COVID-19 test result for Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine came back negative Saturday after he received conflicting positive and negative results two days before, ahead of a scheduled meeting with President Trump.

The governor and First Lady, Fran DeWine, were tested at Ohio State University "out of an abundance of caution" following a rollercoaster day Thursday that began with DeWine receiving a positive test result followed by two negatives. The governor announced the negative results on Twitter on Saturday afternoon, thanking "everyone who sent along good wishes."

The Republican governor had to take a COVID-19 test Thursday morning in Cleveland as part of White House protocol for anyone scheduled to come in contact with the president. DeWine was administered a rapid point-of-care antigen test at a mobile testing site facilitated by the Republican National Committee, according to DeWine spokesperson Dan Tierney.

DeWine then headed to meet Trump at the airport to greet him. "I was fully expecting to see the president that morning," DeWine said in a press conference Friday. "But as we were driving to the airport to meet him, I was called and told about my positive result." (AP)

Joe Arpaio defeated: This political campaign was likely the last for Joe Arpaio, the former six-term sheriff of metro Phoenix known for leading immigration crackdowns and building a political career around the harsh treatment of jail inmates. The 88-year-old lawmaker narrowly lost a race to win back his old job, his second failed comeback bid four years after getting voted out of office.

Arpaio got edged out Friday in the Republican primary for Maricopa County sheriff by his former second-in-command, Jerry Sheridan, in a race that was lower profile and more modestly funded for Arpaio than the blowout campaigns of his heyday. While he still faced criticism over his 2017 criminal

conviction – which President Donald Trump pardoned – many didn't know he was running until they saw his name on the ballot.

"I think some people were tired of me, and they wanted somebody else," Arpaio said. "And that's the way it went."

A retired federal drug enforcement agent, Arpaio was elected sheriff in 1992 after his predecessor was criticized for mishandling an investigation into the killings of nine people at a Buddhist temple. (AP)

4 tribes sue over Oklahoma: Four Oklahoma tribes are asking a federal court to void gambling compacts between the state of Oklahoma and two other tribes – agreements that the Oklahoma State Supreme Court recently invalidated.

The Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw and Citizen Potawatomi Nations filed a lawsuit Friday in US District Court in Washington, DC, asking for a declaration that the US Department of Interior vio-

lated federal law by allowing the agreements Gov. Kevin Stitt signed with the Comanche Nation and the Otoe-Missouria Tribe to take effect.

"While the Oklahoma Supreme Court has declared those agreements invalid under Oklahoma law, their validity under Federal law must also be addressed to avoid damage to the integrity of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act," attorneys for the tribes said in a statement. "The tribes filed this suit to protect IGRA's established framework and the Tribal operations conducted under it."

Officials with the Department of Interior, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the governor's office did not immediately respond to request for comment Saturday. The lawsuit was first reported by The Oklahoman.

The chairman of the Oklahoma Indian Gaming Association, Matthew Morgan, said the group supports the tribes' efforts.

"As we have stated from the beginning, Governor Stitt never had the legal authority to enter into

these gaming agreements," Morgan said in a statement. "It is sad that Governor Stitt has placed the tribal governments in this position."

Oklahoma's high court ruled July 21 that Stitt overstepped his authority. The deals would have allowed the Comanche Nation and the Otoe-Missouria Tribe to offer wagering on sporting events and house-banked card and table games.

Republican state Senate President Pro Tem Greg Treat and Republican House Speaker Charles McCall filed that lawsuit and are also seeking to invalidate compacts that the Republican governor signed with the Kialagee Tribal Town and Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians. Attorneys for the governor filed a brief in state court this past week arguing that their compacts are valid because they do not include sports betting or house-banked games.

The lawsuit "is the latest in a series of efforts by legislators to wrest away the executive authority of the governor to negotiate and enter into compacts with Indian Tribes and improperly vest such powers solely to the legislative in the legislative branch," according to the brief filed Tuesday. (AP)

Bikers descend on Sturgis: The coronavirus may be changing the world, but there aren't many signs of the pandemic at the massive annual motorcycle rally being held this week at a small city along Interstate 90 in western South Dakota. The scene Saturday at the 80th Sturgis Motorcycle Rally was familiar to veterans of the event, with throngs of maskless bikers packing the streets.

Motorcyclist Kevin Lunsman, 63, rode more than 600 miles (965 kilometers) to the rally from Big Lake, Minnesota, with several

friends. Lunsman said he has attended the Sturgis event every year since 2003 and didn't want to miss the 80th, despite being "somewhat" concerned about the coronavirus.

Still, the crowds of people and rows of bikes surprised him. He said there was no difference from previous years "other than a few people wearing masks."

Lunsman said he was avoiding the bars and nightclubs that line the city's main drag this year, but many others were not. They were filled with revelers as the sun set Friday.

"Everybody's still partying hardy," Lunsman said. Organizers expected the overall crowd to be smaller, perhaps half the size of a normal year, when some half-million people from across country roar into a town whose population is around 7,000. (AP)

Father, son charged in slaying: The father and son jailed on murder charges in the slaying of Ahmaud Arbery are asking a Georgia judge to grant them bond and to throw out two charges in their indictment.

Gregory McMichael and his adult son, Travis McMichael, were jailed and arrested in May, more than two months after Arbery was slain. The 25-year-old Black man was chased and fatally shot after the McMichaels, who are white, spotted him running in their neighborhood just outside the port city of Brunswick.

Attorneys for both men filed legal motions Thursday asking Superior Court Judge Timothy Walmley to set a bond that would allow the McMichaels to be freed pending trial. The judge denied bond last month for William "Roddie" Bryan Jr., a third man charged in Arbery's killing.

Attorneys for 34-year-old Travis McMichael argued he has no prior criminal history and poses no risk of fleeing. (AP)



In this photo provided by Jason Koski and Cornell University, Bryan Maley, (right), a grad student in the Master of Public Health program, interviews a student on campus about mask-wearing experiences as part of a public health survey on July 30, 2020, in Ithaca, N.Y. (AP)