



“

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Neil English is superintendent of the Riverview School District, which serves the boroughs of Oakmont and Verona, northeast of Pittsburgh. Dr. English stands in the hallway of Riverview Junior-Senior High School during the changing of classes as some of the six-year school's more than 400 students pass by.

CLASSROOMS & COVID

School officials across the country, including in the Pittsburgh region, are trying to rebuild functioning educational systems after students have experienced both personal and learning losses during the pandemic. But they are finding that many challenges remain. By Julia Fraser

High school basketball players let loose their final shot before the buzzer in front of empty bleachers. Actors in the school musical reached for the high notes behind surgical masks. Graduating seniors accepted their diplomas sitting six feet apart on a football field.

The COVID-19 virus profoundly changed school activities in the United States after it reached the nation's shores in early 2020. More than two years later, school administrators, educators and parents still struggle to balance mitigating a lingering public health crisis with reinstating "normal" operations while providing a robust education.

Much has changed in that time. The virus, steps to prevent and treat it, public policies, and attitudes have evolved.

"When the pandemic started, there was so much urgency and a lot of stress and anxiety," said Neil English, superintendent of Riverview School District, northeast of Pittsburgh. "The decisions we were making felt really serious,

really urgent. There wasn't protection, there wasn't vaccination, there wasn't treatment. We didn't want school policy to negatively impact families, causing someone to die."

In the fall of 2021, for example, 3 out of 4 school districts in the United States required masks for students and staff attending school in person. But policies relaxing such restrictions were gaining momentum by the end of the school year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

This fall, the masks came off. Riverview and most other school districts in the Pittsburgh region and across the U.S. instituted mask-optional policies.

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With or without a mask, the public health impact of the pandemic persists.

COVID-19 has claimed the lives of more than a million people across the country,

including more than 3,500 in Allegheny County. More than 200,000 children in the U.S. have lost one or both parents to COVID-19, according to estimates from COVID Collaborative, a nonpartisan public health project to address the pandemic. Omicron, the dominant strain this year, is more readily transmitted, yet the rate of death and severe illness has slowed due to vaccines, the nature of the strain and other factors.

Meanwhile, the pandemic has taken a toll on education. School closures, virtual instruction and other policies designed to stave off the spread of the virus kept children away from the classroom, diminishing academic outcomes and increasing absenteeism. Widespread learning loss has deepened inequity across race, ethnicity and family income levels, forcing educators to weigh health risks with educational outcomes, facing criticism and controversy at every turn.

New guidance issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in August is a shift in policy away from trying to control transmission rates. The agency, for example, scaled back its quarantine advice, recommending people test for the virus if symptomatic and isolate for five days if infected.

“This is a new phase of the pandemic, and the CDC is really focused on preventing severe outcomes and no longer focused on preventing the spread of the infection,” said Dr. Debra Bogen, director of the Allegheny County Health Department. “It is really about hospitalizations, deaths and long-term outcomes now.”

The Health Department has advised school districts in the county since the pandemic began. But Dr. Bogen said that while the Health Department helps school districts interpret CDC guidance, it does not issue additional recommendations.

Districts throughout Allegheny County recently adjusted their COVID-19 policies from what they had in place last school year. Most districts have gone mask-optional with district administrators paying close attention to the CDC’s reported levels of COVID-19 community spread in Allegheny County.

Pittsburgh Public Schools, for example, requires masking for students and staff when levels of community spread reach “high.” Masks are recommended during “medium” and they are optional at “low” levels of community spread. Athletes and performers are not required to wear a mask when competing or performing, regardless of the level of COVID-19 cases in the community.

Keeping students in schools for as long as possible drove decision-making in the district. Last year, if a school building had a COVID-19 positivity rate of 5 percent within a 14-day period, the school was closed. This year, a COVID-19 response team, which includes the district physician, monitors cases and provides recommendations on a case-by-case basis, hoping to avoid school closure.

Students who are exposed to a positive case will no longer be sent home, and positive students will isolate for five days, then wear masks in school through day 10.

“These are the things that will enable us to increase the number of students who can stay in school and continue learning,” said Michael McNamara, chief operating officer at Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Although districts are easing masking mandates, public health practice remains engrained.

“We don’t want to assume it’s over,” said Nancy Hines, superintendent at Penn Hills School District, located in one of Pittsburgh’s eastern suburbs. “We’re waiting and watching. This is good common sense that we’ve always tried to share during flu season. What we’ve done to prevent COVID is good practice, good hygiene.

“I don’t think we’re going to be totally relaxed — hand-washing, distancing, those are good practices. Some people in our organization will still exercise their right to wear a mask if they so choose.”

The endorsement of COVID-19 vaccines for all children older than 6 months by the CDC in June offered another layer of protection for students. The Health Department, local pharmacies, hospitals and health care providers have partnered with districts throughout the county to host clinics to encourage vaccination.

“Vaccination is a way to prevent serious [COVID-19-related] outcomes for children and adults, so that’s where I think schools should continue to focus,” Dr. Bogen said.

The vaccine has been a tough sell in Allegheny County, despite efforts of districts. By the end of August, when the school year in many places was beginning, about 66 percent of children aged 15 to 19, 55 percent of children aged 10 to 14 and 43 percent of children aged 5 to 9 had at least one dose of a vaccine to prevent COVID-19.

“I really hit it hard on vaccinations from the standpoint of education,” Riverview Superintendent Neil English said. “If you’re vaccinated, you’re out of school less. Even with that — pushing the educational line — people get so mad that I bring up vaccination at all.

“There’s a population of people who say: ‘Don’t tell me what to do.’ It is highly politicized and people get very upset. I’ve gotten a ton of pushback in terms of anything related to COVID.”

The pandemic hindered learning throughout the country. Closed schools and virtual instruction led to weeks of learning loss that touched most districts across the U.S. But districts with high poverty rates were hit the hardest. Students in such districts lost the equivalent of 22 weeks of instruction in the 2020–21 school year, according to a study by the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University.

DO THE MATH



Despite virtual instruction and other distance-learning efforts during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, learning loss touched most school districts across the country. Here are some of the numbers:

22 WEEKS

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2 DECADES

When results from the March 2020 National Assessment for Educational Progress were compared to those for the March 2022 exams, national reading and math scores for elementary school students were found to have plunged to levels last seen two decades ago.

10 PERCENT

Part of the learning loss students experienced during the pandemic can be attributed to the rise of chronic absenteeism, which involves missing at least 10 percent of the school year.

National test scores in reading and math for elementary school students plummeted to levels last seen two decades ago, based on results of the National Assessment for Educational Progress comparing March 2020 to March 2022. Math scores declined for the first time ever, and reading scores produced the largest falloff in 30 years.

Part of that learning loss can be attributed to the rise of chronic absenteeism — missing at least 10 percent of the school year. Chronic absenteeism increases a student’s risk of dropping out of high school, experiencing adverse health outcomes and becoming involved in the criminal justice system. The percentage of chronically absent students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools jumped from 22.7 percent during the 2020–21 school year to 33.7 percent for the 2021–22 school year.

“Keeping the kids in school is our number one priority,” Mr. McNamara said. “It’s a delicate balance between making sure we’re not spreading the virus but also making sure we’re keeping the kids in front of teachers on a daily basis. We need to limit the disruption to learning.”

Help arrived from the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) funding as part of the American Rescue Plan. School districts in Allegheny County received \$420 million, and many have made significant investments in physical infrastructure to improve air quality and ventilation and other building improvements. Pittsburgh Public Schools spent millions updating HVAC systems and adding air purifiers in buildings throughout the district.

Many districts spent some of the ESSER funds on bolstering the mental health supports offered to students, such as hiring additional school counselors. The Northgate School District, northwest of Pittsburgh, invested \$800,000 over four years in The Chill Project, a comprehensive behavioral support program run by Allegheny Health Network that aims to address trauma experienced by children.

But ESSER backing isn’t a sustainable financing stream to support ongoing mental health programs and maintain infrastructure. The pandemic may have exposed the fragile link between public health and educational outcomes, but strengthening that bond will require more than greater awareness.

“We’ve started thinking of health more holistically,” said James Fogarty, executive director of A+ Schools, an education nonprofit focused on Pittsburgh Public Schools. “How can schools help support health? Whether it’s through better food or better ventilation, it can lead to better learning outcomes.

“It’s an important thing that I think people are more conscious of now. But part of the issue is that we closed schools and went remote when we were opening bars. We didn’t prioritize getting kids back in school. There’s some consciousness, but we’re not there.” **h**