

# Schools set to open; majority of students returning

**By Tony Bolick**

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ASHEBORO — The 2020-21 school year is upon us and with the novel coronavirus nothing is normal. The new calendar comes with new challenges. There are temperatures to take, masks to wear, cleaning like never before and still, the spectre of COVID-19 looms around every corner and every class.

Public health, governments, administrators, teachers, staff and parents alike have all wrestled with just what to do. While most may never have more than a bad cold, others may be asymptomatic, and can unknowingly spread it. The disease is still communicable and has a host of complications and high-risk factors that can be dangerous for others, both healthy and with compromised body systems.

All that has led us here as the school year kicked off for Randolph Early College High School on Tuesday and



**Teachers and staff guide student arrivals at the Uwharrie Charter Academy Elementary campus for the first day of Plan B in the 2020-21 school year. Most students are expected to return to in-person school once the county schools open later this month.** [TONY BOLICK]

Uwharrie Charter Academy (UCA) on Thursday. Randolph County (RCSS) and Asheboro City (ACS) school systems were set to open up under their respective Plan Bs before ACS pulled back to a Plan C opening announced Wednesday. UCA and RCSS

are on Plan B with half the students attending two days, the other half on the other two days and one day of full virtual. Each has also developed a fully online/virtual curriculum for those families not yet comfortable with the possible exposure at

this point.

To date, the school systems have gotten mostly positive news with regards to the public's trust and student's coming back to school. On average, schools

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are entertaining a return of about 70 percent of the student capacity.

Here is a breakdown of those numbers:

## Uwharrie Charter Academy

Uwharrie Charter Academy is a little different than the other school systems. UCA opens earlier and has students coming in from all around the region, thus amplifying their need to be diligent in planning and safety. Officials have to pay heed to trends, not only in Randolph, but surrounding and nearby counties as well.

UCA will open the year with an A-B student designation in the K-6 grades and grades 7-12 will be full virtual for the year. As with anything dealing with COVID-19, this is the standard, but is always fluid. Should statistics and trends with the virus determine otherwise — good or bad — changes could come quickly.

In this plan, A students will attend classes in-person on Monday and Tuesday while B students will attend on Wednesday-Thursday. Friday, usually a half-day in a normal school calendar will now be a full virtual day with extra cleaning on campuses.

"The one thing that keeps playing over and over, we're all in the same boat. We're all starting from a common place," said UCA interim superintendent Casey Harris, who, in 13 years of work in education has never seen anything like this.

"At the end of the day, everybody is trying to put forth their best guest, their best attempt to provide their best education. I know Dr. (Aaron) Woody, Dr. (Stephen) Gainey are banging their head against the same walls. If anything, it gives us all a common ground for us to work from."

UCA has 1,813 students in its system. While a little under 1,000 of those are the full-remote 7-12 grades, the K-6 population will operate on the A-B system and, of those students, roughly one-third has opted for full virtual learning. All Harris asks is for parents to try to stay their chosen course for



**Asheboro High School and the rest of the eight-school Asheboro City School system will be vacant of students when the new year begins. On Wednesday, ACS opted to pull back to Plan C, but before that, nearly 85 percent of its 4,500 students were set to come back to school on Aug. 17.** [TONY BOLICK]



**The Randolph County School System's 31 campuses, including Southwestern Randolph High School (above), will be opening on Aug. 17 to almost 75 percent capacity in regards to in-person enrollment for the 2020-21 year. The remainder have opted for the full remote learning option, but Superintendent Dr. Stephen Gainey says parents can change if they feel safer in moving their child back to school at any time.** [TONY BOLICK]

the first six-week period.

"What we've done is we've used the week of Sept. 10, that is the end of our first grading period. Then we can reassess from there. We wanted to offer consistency either way," Harris said. "I certainly hope we're able to — as trends change, etc. — we'll be able to pull in more kids and offer more learning. But if things worsen it will be to pull back to a plan C."

## Randolph County School System

Dr. Stephen Gainey has been in education for 27 years and this is his seventh year as Randolph County superintendent. There is no mold or playbook for an event of this nature. Gainey's staff and the entire administration throughout the system

has committed to covering the bases of this challenge. They have been contacting and surveying every student and family to see what they think, what they feel and what they need. There surveys have covered both in-person school as well as remote learning and any subsequent issues within that.

"I don't think we've ever had a challenge of this nature, not in my 27 years," Gainey said. "Really proud of the work done. My staff members and principals have had teams of staff members involved."

"We're just trying to do everything we can to provide support for students and welcome them back to the 2020-21 school year."

Randolph County has 15,600 students in the system across 31 schools, including Randolph Early

in-person. Students will be separated per school/class into A and B groups. A will attend school on Monday-Tuesday and B on Thursday-Friday with Wednesday a full remote day for all students and campus cleaning of the schools. This will cover all grades K-12.

Randolph County currently is anticipating just over 73 percent attendance in-person with the remaining 26 percent in virtual education.

"I can tell you ... I've never experienced anything like the challenge we're getting ready to face," Gainey said. "Our students are dependent upon us and I'm confident in our staff to be successful in approaching this challenge."

Gainey added that with the virus and the ever-changing dynamic around it, the school system is being very loose in its attendance programs. He said at any time, parents can shift their child out of in-person education if they are uncomfortable, or should they feel better about the situation, their child can pick up in-person learning from full remote. He said all the students are all set up for either way and can move between if they feel the need to change.

"We're trying to be as flexible as we can with our students and parents," he said. "The last thing we want to do is put too many barriers up that we lost our students. They are special to us."

## Asheboro City Schools

Asheboro City Schools were on board and moving ahead with Plan B for the coming school year, but as administrators continued to watch over the numbers across the state, they opted to scale back. Wednesday, superintendent Dr. Aaron Woody made the announcement

that ACS would fall back to Plan C with regards to the 2020-21 school

"The response to our decision to move into Plan C has been well received by the majority of families and staff. Of course, we want students back in school," Dr. Woody said Friday. "We believe students learn best when they are face to face with our high quality teachers. One of Asheboro City Schools core values is to keep students and staff safe and we will continue to make decisions guided by this value."

Prior to the decision, ACS had placed a little over 700 students into their full virtual education program called Access Ed. According to Carla Freemyer, executive director of human resources, those were spread fairly evenly across the grades in the system covering seven elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school. That number represents about 16 percent of the entire student body, estimated to be around 15,000.

ACS will remain in the plan for the first month of the school calendar and then reassess. Families will likely be able to stay or shift their choices in regards to school attendance once school system decides to return to a Plan B. But that decision will remain in the hands of the administration and whether the numbers then reflect a better level or one more conducive to safe in-person learning for all involved.

"Asheboro City Schools will remain in Plan C until September 21, 2020. We will continue to monitor state and local data related to COVID-19 and work with our public health partners as we consider next steps," Dr. Woody said. "All required safety measures are in place, so we are ready to transition into Plan B once there is enough data to indicate we can do so safely."