

# Schools facing daily challenges, COVID

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ASHEBORO — School administrators, teachers and students have a couple of weeks behind them in the 2020-21 school year and so far so good. To say it has been eventful thus far is an

understatement.

Never mind the new normal with classes split up and the new cleaning and in-school procedures for the Randolph County School System (RCSS), which joined Uwharrie Charter Academy as the only systems in the region to resume on-campus education. Asheboro City Schools

(ACS) have remained remote only, but will be addressing a possible return to school once the board of education meets next week.

“The first three weeks of school in the Randolph County School System have been very positive,” Superintendent Dr. Stephen Gainey said. “Our students and staff members

have done a great job on our school campuses as well as with remote instruction.

“Also, the parents of our students, the members of the Board of Education and the members of the surrounding community should be commended for their efforts

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# SCHOOLS

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to support our school system during the opening of the 2020-2021 school year.”

ACS superintendent Dr. Aaron Woody was very upbeat related to the school year thus far. Like Gainey, he stated the response has been well received as to how the school is progressing and teaching with the students is being conducted.

“It’s going really well. We’ve had a couple of tech issues that we’re working through,” he said. “Our teachers are meeting with their kids the times they are supposed to have class. We’ve had a lot of positive responses from parents. We’re really trying to establish relationships through teachers and students.

“We realize that this is going to be a long year. We’re going to have our ups and downs. We owe it to our kids to give our very best.”

Still, as the year began, both sides have had their headaches as things progressed.

For the county schools, there have not been a lot of issues that have come up throughout the process as the students returned to school. That is, aside from the obvious, which is COVID-19 and its threat when gathering students and teachers at school. Thus far, only four incidents of exposure have occurred where the county has had to step in and send some home for exposure and for safety.

The biggest is the closure of Trinity High School to students, a decision made by staff with input from Randolph County Public Health which has been in on all the situations related to COVID-19 in schools. The high school will be closed through Sept. 13 with hopes of getting students back in on Sept. 14 and 17.

Through it all, Gainey has maintained that the staff will continue to



**Students in the Randolph County School System, like these at Grays Chapel Elementary, have been rolling along so far with just a few issues related to COVID-19 early in the 2020-21 school year. [TIM MOODY/PIO, RCSS]**

work with public health and the state guidances pertaining to COVID in providing the complete care and safety of the students and their families as well as the teachers, staff and their families as well.

“I am extremely proud of the high level of effort exhibited by our students and staff members to start the 2020-2021 school year on a positive note,” he said.

Bringing students back requires vigilance on cleaning and protocols. That includes masks and checks before students enter the schools. It also means much more intensive daily and weekly cleaning, exercising all these precautions to limit COVID-19 exposure or contamination which might greatly impact their ability to learn. And even with that, it is going relatively smoothly.

“Our students, staff members and parents have been very receptive to the new safety standards implemented throughout our school system as a result of the coronavirus pandemic,” he said.

Those issues are still to come for Woody as the board of education is set to meet on Sept. 10. That might be when they could reach a decision to bring students back to campus. As for now, it has been so far, so good. Asheboro’s primary problems thus far into the year all have to do with technology and the internet.

“We’ve had network drops and such. We’ve learned some things regarding (internet)

hotspots, network firewalls,” Woody said, adding they have had to wrestle with some hackers attempting to disrupt the network. They are pursuing the problem, adding the source is from far away, not a local situation attempting to muddle the school system.

Even though students are not in school, it is all a big undertaking and will be just as much of a new twist whenever students return. But Woody says that everyone is working together for the most part to get through it and learn it all together.

“Our advantage is we did some big planning in the spring and put some investment behind it,” he said. “We’ve not been overly complicated or rigorous yet. We’re learning the ins and outs, getting attendance, turning in work, etc. People realize it isn’t perfect, but they realize that we’re working.”

“The school system is working hard every day to improve our effectiveness with regard to the provision of remote instruction for students,” Gainey said. “This work also is aimed at providing additional support for our staff members in their work to provide remote instruction for students.”

While no students have been on campus yet, there have been COVID issues as well for Woody and the ACS administration with a teacher and a couple of staff members dealing with a positive test and exposures. In all, the protocols have been

implemented with went off without issue as they continue to work toward the day when students will return.

“We’ve purchased quite a bit of new equipment and cleaning supplies. That’s a work in progress, too. (The key) I think is communication with the staff and with the public, to help folks understand it is safe.

“Over next two weeks, we’re going to every school and every day, going through every school, all the supplies ... We want to be able to say to all the families that we’ve dotted every ‘i’ and crossed every ‘t.’”

On Sept. 10, the ACS board will meet and Woody will give them the numbers and a decision to return to on-campus learning could come then.

“We will look at the (COVID) metrics: the 7- and 14-day average/transfer rates, the percentages of it in Randolph County and hot spot data as well as data in school visits,” Woody said.

Meanwhile, the school year rolls on. A lot of people echo the end of Dr. Gainey’s summation.

“Overall, I am very proud of everyone’s efforts at the school level as well as the central service level,” he said. “I am confident that our school system will continue to get better with our movement through the 2020-2021 school year. Nonetheless, I look forward to the day when all of our students return to our 31 school campuses at the same time.”