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School officials reflect on a year of COVID-19

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Throughout the country, educational institutions have been implementing strategies to bring students back to school safely. The Randolph County School System and Asheboro City schools went through a year of closures and plans, leading to an ultimate decision for in-person learning.

On March 24, Stephen Gainey, super-

intendent of Randolph County, announced multiple updates that would take place as the system embarks on a journey back to normalcy.

'This is another effort to get back where we knew schools'

According to Gainey, daily assessment check-ins will no longer be required as of March 26. The assessments were implemented at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year on Aug. 17.

Gainey is confident in their decision to halt the assessments. "When students and staff members came to school every day, we asked them a set of questions to see if they had COVID symptoms, and we took their temperature before they were allowed in. This is another effort to open schools and get back to where we knew schools before we closed."

On March 23, Gov. Roy Cooper announced that he would relax restrictions due to trends showing improve-

ment. As a result, the school system will increase the number of seats they use for their stadiums, gyms, and auditoriums to 50% capacity effective March 26.

The school system will also stop temperature checks at after-school activities such as sporting events in their indoor and outdoor facilities.

Following the legislation of Senate Bill 220, signed by Gov. Cooper several weeks ago on reopening schools; the

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Randolph County board of education members concluded to change the schedule for six through 12 students back to in-person learning Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, with Wednesday for remote learning on April 6.

Now all grades will have the same school schedule getting back on campus.

'We have been working daily towards this goal'

In a special-called board of education meeting on March 19, members approved the shift for secondary students to attend in-school learning.

Asheboro City Schools are officially transitioning middle school and high school students to Plan A, in-person learning four days a week on April 6, after weeks of inviting secondary schools to return physically.

In a press release, Superintendent Aaron Woody said the board is extremely excited to have six through 12 students back in classrooms under the plan.

According to Woody, school administrators are confident in placing students under this significant milestone.

"Since the beginning of the 20-21 school year, we have been working daily towards this goal. It's important to remember. We have been offering in-person learning under Plan B," Woody said.

The initial response to COVID closures: 'We focused on students and staff'

Before the governor's announcement to close schools last spring, Asheboro City Schools had already begun communicating with families and making plans for remote learning in case it was needed.

According to Woody, when the governor officially

closed schools, district leaders met the following Sunday morning and planned to get paper packets to students.

"We were able to get these packets in the hands of our students the very next day. As the information about COVID-19 has continued to evolve, so have our plans," Woody said. "By summer 2020, we'd moved away from paper packets and had purchased technology such as iPads and Chromebooks for each student and teacher for better virtual instruction."

The county system was also quick to examine and determine the safety parameters needed in place a day before schools closed at a special-called principals meeting, developing signs for doors and informing parents.

"I went home on March 13 and didn't feel good because I just sent a message out to our parents saying we love you, but you can't come in," Gainey said. "We focused on students and staff, and I was no happy about telling the parents, but they were supportive in all of this."

Although the circumstances immediately following the pandemic weren't ideal, Gainey believes the staff and teachers have been putting in the necessary effort to educate students remotely and in-person during the school year.

From beginning to now: 'We are excited to have students back'

At the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, Asheboro City Schools started in Plan C, all remote learning, as the community's COVID number has improved, and they have invited back more students to classrooms.

Later on, they transitioned to Plan B across the district last October and now believe they are in a great place for Plan A, in-person instruction four days a week.

The city schools are confident in keeping students safe following StrongSchools NC Public Health Toolkit guidelines since they have been facilitating face-to-

face learning since October.

"We feel our approach has been measured and rooted in three things such as safety, data, and values," Woody said. "We are excited to have students back in our schools four days a week. This is what we have been working towards since last March."

From a county standpoint, Gainey believes they have finally found a plan that will work due to the administration's contact tracing efforts whenever there was a case.

"We are going to stick to the plan until our numbers look better and until we get to zero. So until this goes away, there will be no lack of attention," Gainey said.

Petrucce Jean-Charles is a Government Watchdog Reporter. They are interested in what's going on in the community and are open to tips on people, businesses and issues. Contact Petruce at pjeancharles@gannett.com and follow @PetrucceKetsia on Twitter.