



As the nation anxiously braces for the new school year, Charlottesville City Schools took initiative to prepare parents and children for what's to come. Some 3,900 Charlottesville students return to school on Wednesday after a year of virtual and partial in-class attendance. Although some students returned to in-person learning in March of this year, many students have not walked school halls since 2020.

CCS plans to host the first conversation regarding schools' COVID safety practices at 4 p.m. Sunday. The discussion will be broadcast via Zoom and will include School Board Chair Lisa Larson-Torres, Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Operations Kim Powell, and acting Director of Human Resources and Student Services Beth Baptist. Charlene Green, deputy director of the piedmont housing alliance, will be the moderator.

"Of course, there's a lot of stress, this is not a normal back-to-school year," Amanda Korman, community relations liaison for city schools, said. "The reason we're hosting this event is to provide information to help families and staff feel grounded for this transition."

Currently, the school system requires vaccinations or weekly testing for staff members, with some exemptions. Approximately 95% of staff is fully vaccinated, and the division has made vaccination accessible to those who remain unvaccinated.

Bus Shortage

Sunday's Zoom event will cover safety practices such as incorporating COVID safety into a typical school day; how the division and families will respond to positive COVID cases in a school; and additional safety ideas. However, one question still remains: how will students get to school?

The bus driver shortage has been a national issue prior to the start of the pandemic. The reasons for the shortage vary from pay and benefits to health concerns. School bus drivers are required to maintain a commercial driver's license while earning part-time wages. Additionally, many drivers are retirees who make up a vulnerable demographic of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When Charlottesville students returned to in-person learning last spring, students were placed on a waiting list with special needs children being prioritized for bus service. With school set to begin next week, many parents will be left to find alternative transportation methods for their students. With COVID cases on the rise, it's possible that multiple school bus routes will be required to reduce vehicle capacity.

"We can't even discuss the safety net of a plan if you can't assure parents that their child(ren) can get to school. You're already counting them out before they get through those doors," said Tanesha Hudson, a community advocate for city school students.

Hudson is an activist and education advocate who works closely with area schools. Although transportation is an optional provision for schools, she believes that finalizing transportation prior to reopening is a vital step in preparation.

"The plan also has to include how the children will get to school. The school is responsible for the

children being successful,” Hudson said. “They have a benchmark to meet that they have to then in turn answer to the state. How can we want our children to be successful if we’re not making it a necessity to make sure that they’re getting to school?”

Hudson has been working with school officials to come up with solutions for the transportation issue. However, with COVID cases back on the rise due to the Delta variant, recent positive cases in school-aged children, and the bus shortage, she believes allowing virtual classes to be more ideal.

“The first semester should have been virtual, limiting in-building access to the most vulnerable children. Children on an [individualized education program], special education students and children with disabilities,” she suggested.

CCS had hoped for a fix to this problem when the City Council during a July meeting approved a plan to provide \$2,400 bonuses for bus drivers. The plan also included health insurance benefits.

Sunday’s Zoom will address COVID safety practices in the school system. Parents can submit their questions for the Zoom chat as part of registration or they can submit them during the event.

Register to attend the Zoom chat here:

Current information about the division’s COVID safety plans is available on the CCS website: