THE TENNESSEAN

'We're drowning': Inside the chaotic start of Tennessee's school year as COVID tightened its grip



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Editor's note: This story has been updated to correct that Gov. Bill Lee was responding to a question about school districts during an Aug. 25 news conference where he said the state had no plans to allow districts to return to virtual school.

Just two weeks into the new academic year last month, eight members of the Smith County school board met for an emergency meeting to discuss the district's COVID-19 mitigation and quarantine efforts.

The district started the school year with strong quarantine protocols, based loosely on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance.

Like most Tennessee school districts outside the state's urban centers, masks were optional for the 3,000 students enrolled in the Smith County School System, a rural area nestled about 50 miles east of Nashville.

But as the number of COVID-19 cases among schoolchildren surged across the state, so did the numbers of students required to quarantine at home.

Without the option to offer widespread remote learning, district leaders struggled to balance safety measures with pushback from parents, some of whom aren't convinced COVID-19 is a concern.

Ahead of the specially called Aug. 24 meeting, board members decided to poll parents themselves.

Would they prefer the district continue following CDC guidelines, the poll sent to families asked. Should the district require masks? Require close contacts quarantine at all?

During the meeting, board members listened intently to school nurses and other local health care providers. They asked thoughtful questions about asymptomatic spread, worried about the learning loss students might experience when stuck at home and compared policies in surrounding school districts.

And then they agreed to make quarantining optional.

The next day any Smith County student without symptoms could return to school.

Parent Shoshanna Ford was devastated.

"It feels so disorganized and chaotic," the mother of 8-year-old twins said by email. "We have this policy — but you don't have to follow it if you don't want to."

The chaos in Smith County is indicative of a statewide crisis.

Though this academic year is the third impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, schools have started classes besieged by the delta variant. Schools are closing with too few staff to teach and thousands of students are either at home in quarantine or sick with the virus. But districts are denied the chance to go virtual despite being ready and willing thanks to a new state rule. State leaders have sent mixed messages and contact tracing is failing.

TIMELINE: State guidance on masks, virtual learning to schools is confusing. This timeline will help.

As school leaders frantically try to mitigate the impact of the delta variant, without clear guidance or direction, most are armed with unenforceable policies or just fumbling in the

dark.

Can schools require masks? Enforce quarantines? Switch to remote learning? Can they enforce any policy they try to adopt anyway?

And Gov. Bill Lee and his administration haven't always provided clear answers.

Messaging from the Tennessee Department of Education and the Governor's Office has continued to sow confusion through the first month of the school year, with state officials sometimes backtracking or flip-flopping in the same day and even contradicting each other entirely.

Smith County isn't the only district having trouble enforcing quarantines. Some are trying to figure out if they can offer remote instruction to students while they are at home and others have shuttered schools to try and quell the spread of the virus.

At least a handful of districts are closed until mid-September — many of them in rural, conservative parts of the state with low vaccination rates and no mask mandates.

But it didn't have to be this way.

'We're overwhelmed, we're drowning'

This week, all 79 schools in Hamilton County, which encompasses Chattanooga, closed for two days.

Home to the fourth-largest school district in the state, Hamilton County has seen exponential increases in COVID-19 cases. In just a week, the 423 active COVID-19 cases among students reported by the district nearly doubled to 722.

Area hospitals are flooded with locals and patients coming in from rural Southeast Tennessee and even North Georgia and North Alabama. National Guard troops were deployed to area hospitals.

Last week, a custodian for the school district died due to COVID-19.

Tucker McClendon, a member of the Hamilton County Board of Education, said the district's medical team and task force advised district leaders to close after the Labor Day weekend.

But despite being recognized nationally for its efforts to ensure tens of thousands of students have access to the internet, hotspots and quality devices, Hamilton County students won't receive instruction while schools are closed.

"If there is ever a county that could pivot to virtual, it would be Hamilton County," McClendon said.

Just last week, students were encouraged to learn remotely during an in-service day for teachers but the new rule approved by the Tennessee State Board of Education in April doesn't allow school districts to pivot entirely to remote learning.

A spokesperson for the Tennessee Department of Education even applauded the district's "exceptional leadership" and creative use of a professional development day in an email to The Tennessean.

Hamilton County Schools was the first of the state's four largest school districts to reopen in-person last fall.

Now McClendon said he feels the district is being negatively affected by state leaders' attempts to prevent districts like Metro Nashville Public Schools and Shelby County Schools from going remote like they did for the majority of the last school year.

"We shouldn't be punished for bad actors in the state when we have faithfully shown that we want kids in school," McClendon said. "We're overwhelmed, and we're drowning and the state hasn't given us a life vest."

Other school leaders feel similarly.

During a recent meeting of the Rutherford County school board, chairman Coy Young said he felt like the district's hands were tied as the board grappled with whether to implement a mask mandate as COVID-19 cases and quarantines skyrocketed among students.

“It’s obvious we’ve been handed a situation here that we can’t win and a lot of these decisions have been passed on to this board by our state, our federal government and we’re trying to come up with a solution here and they’ve got our hands tied," Young said.

After the state education department finally released a waiver process for districts to pivot individual schools to remote learning temporarily, several districts rushed to apply.

Rutherford County Schools was one of them.

Donnie Holman, director of Overton County Schools, also hoped three of his district's seven schools could go remote while school staff recovered from illness or quarantines.

One day last week he went to speak with one of his principals and Holman found him mopping the floors. Another school was without cooks and cafeteria workers.

"Our teachers and staff are being very flexible," Holman said. "They are willing to bend, they are doing things to keep the school functioning."

But Overton's waiver request was denied. The district closed for two days anyway.

State leaders sow continued confusion

On Aug. 24, while board members met in Smith County, Williamson County Schools and Franklin Special School District leaders sent a letter to local lawmakers pleading with them to urge Lee to allow districts to pivot to remote learning.

Shelby County Schools also hoped to switch at least some students or schools to remote learning when needed.

Though the education department didn't weigh in on the request, Director of Legislative Affairs Jay Klein told Hamilton County lawmakers and school leaders that individual schools could use inclement weather days if they needed to close, hoping to clear up confusion around remote learning, according to emails obtained by The Tennessean.

But just a day later, Education Commissioner Penny Schwinn offered more confusion.

During a regular weekly call with superintendents, she said they can offer remote instruction to students who are stuck at home in quarantine or isolation — and even to entire grade levels if all students are out.

But she reiterated that schools couldn't pivot entirely to remote learning and definitely not entire districts.

During the same call, Morgan McDonald, deputy commissioner for the Tennessee Department of Health, outlined the quarantine and contact tracing protocols that schools are "expected" to follow guidance some school leaders said they could have used weeks prior.

Later that afternoon, Schwinn appeared alongside the governor during a news conference. Lee reiterated that he had "no plans" at the time to allow school districts to pivot to remote learning.

TENNESSEE GOVERNOR: Gov. Bill Lee is criticized by all sides. He's still well positioned for 2022.

But just minutes after the news conference, Schwinn told two reporters there was nothing stopping individual schools from switching to remote learning, as long as it isn't a district-wide shift.

The commissioner's comments sent school leaders and education advocates scrambling for answers.

By Aug. 27, Schwinn provided guidance for remote learning and launched the new waiver application process for districts, but the damage was done.

'We thought it was going to be different'

Lee acknowledges the effectiveness of vaccines and masks.

But he continues to stand by his administration's response to the pandemic, particularly his mask order that is now the subject of multiple lawsuits and a civil rights probe by the U.S. Department of Education. The Republican governor has maintained that parents — not government officials — know what's best for their children.

Schwinn has said schools, like the rest of society, were caught off guard because of steadily decreasing cases this summer.

The commissioner worries many districts aren't implementing the same mitigation measures as they did last year, especially since many face increasing pushback from constituents rebelling against tighter policies.

Schwinn said the state's waiver process is working. The department has received 15 total requests as of Sept. 2 and approved 10.

The process is just a temporary, stop-gap measure to get districts through what the commissioner hopes will just be a momentary surge in cases this fall.

She has told the General Assembly, state leadership, and her own boss that if cases continue to surge this winter, districts will need a more permanent solution, Schwinn told reporters last week.

Schwinn also acknowledges the start of the school year has not gone ideally.

“This has been a very, very hard start to the school year," she said during the Aug. 25 superintendent call. "The best analogy I have is that we all come to a new school year with empty backpacks and I think we came this year with backpacks full of bricks."

The department could have done more to support districts during the first days of school this year, she said.

COVID-19: Thousands of texts, then silence. How GOP pressure halted COVID-19 outreach to teens.

'Our state can and must do more'

Now educators, community leaders and advocacy organizations are calling for more flexibility for school districts, additional guidance and most of all, stronger support for the best public health practices inside schools.

The Tennessee Alliance for Equity in Education, a statewide network of more than 60 education advocacy groups, is drafting an open letter to Schwinn urging her to work with districts and offer "clear guidance so that students can learn safely and in person."

"We believe that our state can and must do more to protect them and provide consistent instruction during this challenging time," the group said.

J.C. Bowman, executive director of Professional Educators of Tennessee, a non-partisan teacher association headquartered in Nashville, called the ongoing confusion a "hot mess."

"Our local districts need a coherent policy and clarification by the state immediately on this issue. More importantly, the state needs to listen to LEA’s and stakeholders, or we will need a special session to address these growing challenges," Bowman said.

Reporters Laura Testino, Brett Kelman and Natalie Allison contributed to this story.

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