

Education

Across America, students are back in school. It's working — but it's weird.



Fifth-grader Utibe Edet holds a book at Bielefield Elementary School in Middletown, Conn., where masks are required. (Stan Godlewski for The Washington Post)

By Hannah Natanson
Kim Mueller
and
Steven Burkholder

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On a recent morning in October, social studies teacher Randy Martin swept back his long hair, adjusted his mask and posed a question to the roomful of masked eighth-graders facing him in a classroom tucked among the foothills of New Mexico's Sandia Mountains.

“Who,” he said, “thinks it’s worth being back at in-person school?”

Sixteen hands shot up: the majority of Martin’s 25-person class at Desert Ridge Middle School in Albuquerque. The class then launched into a lengthy argument over the merits

of bricks-and-mortar vs. virtual schooling — par for the course on a “Modern Monday,” a day that Martin always sets aside for debating current events.

In that moment, Martin and his middle-schoolers seemed confident that the world of virtual learning was a world they had left behind. And for the vast majority of American schoolchildren in this unusual academic year, that’s true — at least for now.

More than a month into the 2020-2021 school year — despite a surge in [coronavirus](#) cases and bitter political fights over vaccine and mask mandates — most American schoolchildren are back in the classroom. And while the political battles may continue, it looks like the students are there to stay.

Last month, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona testified before Congress that 96 percent of public schools have reopened for in-person instruction. And the first week in October saw the smallest number of school closures due to coronavirus outbreaks — 38 — since the school year began, according to Burbio, a data-tracking firm.

Many school districts — including, for example, Virginia’s largest system, Fairfax County Public Schools — are requiring that all students attend classes face-to-face unless they can prove a medical need for at-home schooling. And in places where schools are offering virtual programs, most families are nonetheless opting for face-to-face learning.

In all, [more than 50 million children](#) are seated in classrooms, many of them for the first time in 18 months.

“Safety was the way back in, and safety is the way to stay in,” said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. Weingarten said she has visited more than 40 schools in 20 states since the academic year began to check on how things are going.

“In school after school that I’ve been in, I’ve seen kids wearing masks religiously, people attempting to make sure the distancing rules are working, ventilation systems being improved,” Weingarten said. “Overwhelmingly, people want to be in school.”

With all the safety precautions, it is not quite the triumphant back-to-school that educators dreamed of last year and planned for over the summer. The rise of the delta variant of the coronavirus, coupled with the continuing unavailability of the vaccine for children under 12, ended hopes for a return to the pre-pandemic version of a normal school day.

Intense ideological fights over what and how educators should teach about race, racism and American history have further complicated the return to school. Republican-led legislatures in at least five states passed laws over the summer restricting what teachers can say about race in the classroom, and the legislatures of 17 more states are considering similar bills, according to an NBC News tally.

The battles over school mask-wearing, vaccine mandates, and what and how educators should teach about race, racism and American history have further complicated the return to school. And the conflict over safety measures is unlikely to end soon, now that school systems in many places are considering extending their vaccine requirements from staff to students over 12 — a measure California [adopted this month](#), making it the first state to do so.

Also disruptive to learning, parents and educators say, is quarantining. Since school started, hundreds of thousands of students and school employees nationwide have been forced to enter one- or two-week periods of quarantine after coming into contact with children or staffers who tested positive for the virus. The most recent [federal guidance](#) recommends that unvaccinated people quarantine at home for 14 days after exposure, but allows vaccinated individuals to return to school as soon as they receive a negative coronavirus test.

[*Delta variant stress tests back-to-school plans*](#)

In the Washington region, tens of thousands of children and teachers quarantined during the first month of school, [including the entire sixth grade at one D.C. school](#). Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland's largest school district, sent more than 5,000 students into quarantine in just five weeks of classes.

At first, many parents complained their schools had done little to prepare to educate quarantining students. In response, officials rolled out programs in which isolating children can watch live streams of their classes on Zoom. Still, some families remain displeased with this online setup, which in many cases does not allow quarantining students to participate in class.

Martin, the social studies teacher, said it has been a challenge to ensure isolating students do not fall behind in Albuquerque, too. His district, Albuquerque Public Schools, is requiring that anyone exposed to the virus stay at home for 10 days. A spokeswoman for the district, which enrolls about 74,500, said roughly 1,000 students and staffers have tested positive for the virus since July.

At Desert Ridge Middle, about 30 students have had to quarantine since school began, officials said. Five of those were in Martin's class — forcing the teacher to lean heavily on Google Classroom, an online learning platform.

It wasn't easy. "But I'm confident," Martin said, "that getting through the year is absolutely doable."

Dan Domenech, executive director of AASA, the school superintendents association, said he hears a similar determination to keep classrooms open when he speaks to teachers, principals and superintendents across the country. But he warned that educators cannot lose sight of other looming problems — such as addressing the

yawning racial and socioeconomic achievement gap that widened drastically during online learning.

“Compared to last year? Absolutely a success,” Domenech said of the school year so far. “Compared to what we would qualify as ‘normal’? Still a problem, and it’s going to be a problem for the better part of this year.”

Early stumbles

The hiccups this fall have come in every area of school life, from the daily bus route, to the classroom, to how students and teachers consume meals.

At the start of the year, many districts struggled to find enough bus drivers, cafeteria workers and substitute teachers. These positions, typically filled by part-time workers, frequently entail lower pay as well as unusual, unpredictable hours. Many employees in this category resigned or failed to show up for work this fall, some put off by fear of the virus or, in other places, by fear of a vaccine mandate.

School districts scrambled for alternatives. Officials in Philadelphia offered parents \$300 a month to drive their children to school, while New York began fast-tracking bus driver’s license applications. In Massachusetts, Gov. Charlie Baker (R) [called out the National Guard to drive children to school](#).

In Kansas City, Mo., a shortage of bus drivers meant that students at Crossroads Preparatory Academy — one of the city’s 20 public charter schools — were left stranded in the early fall. Although school lets out at 2:45 p.m., some Crossroads Preparatory students often waited until 5:30 p.m. for buses to arrive and take them home, said Principal Kirsten Brown-Persley.

“Parents were getting so frustrated,” Brown-Persley said. “They would call me and complain about their kiddos getting home so late.”

The neighboring Kansas City School District faced similar busing problems at its 33 schools, a spokeswoman said, as did the Raytown School District, where administrators at one point sent an email to families warning that the school bus might not show up.

The staffing gaps shrank, then closed, after Kansas City-area school officials upped bus driver’s pay, in some places to \$18 an hour. As of October, bus routes are running on time for most charter and public systems in the area, officials said.

But once students arrive at school, new problems arise.

School cafeterias are running short on all kinds of food, including fruit, [diced chicken and packaged chips](#), as the pandemic continues to disrupt global supply chains. Plus, students and teachers must contend with extra safety restrictions, given they must remove their masks to eat.

This has led to a bizarre dining experience. Students are munching behind plexiglass or in assigned seats, sometimes while subject to a no-talking rule meant to minimize germ dispersal through the air. At one school in the nation's capital, parents volunteered to watch children during meals, [just so the kids could eat outside](#).

At Crossroads Preparatory in downtown Kansas City, staffers sometimes help vendors distribute bagged or boxed lunches at 10 different sites throughout the five-story building. Teachers then give up their lunch periods to monitor students while they eat.

Victoria Bagalwa, a 15-year-old sophomore at the school, said she likes having teachers around during lunch, available for casual conversations. It's a refreshing change from the past year-and-a-half, she said, when classes were online and teachers were reduced to pixelated rectangles on a screen.

Still, Bagalwa feels bad.

"The teacher is supposed to be taking a break," Bagalwa said. "You feel like a burden to them."

Kristin Pfeiffer, who teaches geometry and algebra at Crossroads Preparatory, said the year has been mentally and physically taxing. Often, she has had to step in and lead other teachers' classes because they are out sick, she said. That has meant working through her planning period, time she is supposed to use to grade assignments and prepare lessons.

Normally, a substitute would take on that responsibility, but the school has been struggling to hire substitutes as well as bus drivers.

"It's not the helping out that is difficult," Pfeiffer said. "It's 'being on' 100 percent of the time for the kids. It's that you don't have 10 minutes for yourself."

Crossroads Preparatory recently bumped its pay for substitutes from \$100 to \$120 a day. And the change appears to be helping.

"We're getting them filled as of last week," Brown-Persley said of the substitute positions. "We are holding our breath and hoping it stays."

'Kids — they get it'

Maurice Barker, 10, said time flows differently this year at his elementary school in Middletown, Conn.

For most of third and fourth grade Maurice, like the vast majority of Middletown's roughly 4,500 public school students, learned online. The day crawled by, he said, as he dealt with Internet outages.

Now, learning in-person at Bielefield Elementary School, "it feels much faster," he said. "Time goes by faster."

Maurice loves his newfound ability to walk into the library of his fifth-grade classroom, pick up a book and sit down to read it — right there. That wasn't possible on Zoom, said Barker, whose current favorite book is James Rallison's "The Odd 1s Out."

Barker, like all Middletown students, has to keep his mask on except during recess and physical education, while eating, or when playing a wind instrument in music class. He doesn't like it, he said, but he is willing to wear the mask because it will keep him safe.

Bielefield Principal Kristie Bourdoulous said the year has posed challenges — including getting everyone used to daily temperatures checks and ensuring students are placed far enough apart in classrooms. But her school's safety precautions are working, she said.

The Middletown school system has seen just 26 students and six staff members test positive for the virus since school began, while 69 students and seven staffers have entered quarantine.

"Students, I would say, have adapted. Staff has adapted," Bourdoulous said. "All of our kids came back. They're here and happy."

Middletown is one of many places where precautions such as school mask requirements drew little ire and caused no wrinkles during reopening. But the same is not true for several states in the South, where Republican-dominated legislatures attempted to bar schools from enforcing mask mandates by [threatening fines or a drop in state funding](#).

"You can see a tale of two countries in school reopenings," said Weingarten of the teachers' federation. "You see the commitment to safety in the North and in the West. In the South, what you've seen is an ideological battle."

South Carolina is one of the states where the battle is raging fiercest. Ahead of the school year, the legislature passed a budget proviso asserting no state funds could be used to enforce mask mandates, while Gov. Henry McMaster (R) denounced face coverings in schools.

But within a few weeks of schools reopening, many had to close again because of high infection rates and quarantine numbers — illustrating a [recent finding by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that pediatric virus cases rose faster in counties](#) without school mask requirements. In late September, a federal judge overturned South Carolina's ban on mask mandates.

Shortly after, the second-largest school system in South Carolina, the Charleston County School District, began requiring masks for students and staffers. Since the start of the year, the district — which enrolls about 48,000, 99 percent of whom are learning in-person — had seen more than 8,000 students and employees enter quarantine. As of the first week in October, that number was down to about 500.

Millibeth Currie, a seventh-grade science teacher at Charleston County's Moultrie Middle School, said she's seen "a lot of hostility among our parents with the mask

thing,” which has been hard to take. Superintendent Gerrita Postlewait said emotions have run high in her district, causing teachers and school employees to “become targets for the frustrations people are feeling.”

Currie said her interactions with students have sustained her through a difficult couple of weeks. Many children have asked her why they have to wear masks in school again.

But when she explains that masks are necessary to keep them learning in-person, their “eyes light up,” she said.

“They say, ‘Oh yeah, I did horrible when I stayed at home,’ ” Currie said. “Kids — they get it.”

Among the students who have accepted masks is Sophie Compton, 11, who attends elementary school in Charleston.

Sophie said she loves being at school this year, and feels safe there. Wearing a mask does not bother her.

Still, the sixth-grader sometimes daydreams about what school was like before the pandemic, back when she was in fourth grade.

“Sometimes I just ask myself, ‘When is it going to end?’ ” Sophie said. “I know it’s going to end sometime. But just not right now.”

Natanson reported from D.C., Mueller from Kansas City, Mo., and Burkholder from Middletown, Conn.

Ben Ikenson in Albuquerque and Stephanie Hunt in Charleston, S.C., contributed to this report.