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As teachers opted out, Hampton adjusted plan for return

Wednesday was the first day of in-person instruction for some

By Matt Jones
Staff Writer

HAMPTON — After lunch Wednesday, a student in Amber Collins' kindergarten class at Hunter B. Andrews School made an announcement: She needed to throw up.

Collins quickly sent her to the bathroom, but another girl immediately turned around and told Collins, "She has COVID!" Collins tried to explain that didn't necessarily mean COVID-19.

"The child was still scared," Collins said. "She didn't deserve to be in a situation that would make her that scared."

Wednesday was the first day of in-person instruction for some students in Hampton. Pre-K and kindergarten students, along with certain students with disabilities and English language learners, returned to the classroom as part of a two-day-a-week hybrid model.

"Based on the information I've received, our first day of modified in-person learning went well," said Superintendent Jeffery Smith at a School Board meeting Wednesday evening. Collins and several other teachers showed up to protest and encourage the district to approach reopening with caution.

The return came after the district announced late Friday that it wouldn't include first, second, third and sixth grades in hybrid learning. The district approved a wave of medical accommodations for staff at risk of serious illness from the coronavirus, leaving too few teachers to accommodate all of the grades.

When the decision was announced, 65 classrooms would have been missing teachers.

The last-minute announcement citing the medical accommodations led to criticism directed at

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Historic clash in South Bend

For the first time in conference history, a No. 1-ranked ACC team (Clemson) will play an ACC foe ranked better than No. 7 (Notre Dame is No. 4). That is among 10 things you should know about this week's ACC football games, writes Norm Wood.

SPORTS

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High: 70
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Details on the back page of sports



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teachers.

“Virtual instruction is not a viable option for all children and definitely not an option for mine. I understand there was a plan that would’ve brought my child back to school,” said Brenda Marks during public comment at Wednesday’s meeting. “But that plan was sabotaged, and my question to you is how do we get back on track?”

There’s no evidence of a coordinated campaign by teachers. Staff have steadily requested medical accommodations for months, and all of the approved requests were based on medical documentation.

As of Oct. 27, there were 49 positions covered by job accommodations in classrooms that would’ve had students returning. That number steadily increased over the next few days, to 56 on Oct. 28 and 68 on Oct. 29. By Oct. 30, 82 positions in the returning grades had medical exemptions. In the 24 hours leading up to the decision, 26 medical accommodations were approved.

At the same time, more families are choosing to stay virtual. As of Oct. 1, about 51% of families who responded to a district survey said they wanted to join in-person instruction. About 80% of the district’s families had responded before the district announced its

reopening plans.

But as of Tuesday, that number had dropped to 45%. Some of the biggest drops were among students returning this week. The share of Pre-K families choosing in-person dropped from 78% to 54%. For kindergarten families, it dropped from 63% to 45%.

Smith sent a message to staff Monday afternoon clarifying Friday’s announcement. He said that the message “was in no way intended to devalue the hard work of our committed instructional staff.”

“Together, we have navigated many turbulent waters in support of our students and families prior to this pandemic. However, the pandemic has created challenges, professionally and personally, unlike anything we might have imagined,” Smith wrote. “Also, I have witnessed that recently, in some cases, we have allowed forces outside of our school division to become the voice of who we are and how we problem solve as a community.”

Ann Cherry broke with the board norm of staying silent during the public comment session to address the idea that teachers were somehow responsible for the delay. Later in the meeting, Cherry announced she would request a board self-evaluation “in light of everything that’s going on.”

“Our teachers never, in any way, were trying to do anything that would sabotage this plan that the superinten-

dent had,” Cherry said.

The teachers from Hampton and Newport News who showed up to Wednesday’s board meeting said that they would continue to push their districts to listen to their input. Collins and others said their building administrators had done a good job, and some of their fellow teachers said they had a good first day back.

“Last Friday, when we got the news that the change had been made and that only Pre-K and kindergarten were coming back, it did feel like a little bit of a victory based on what we had been fighting for,” said Jason Trueblood, a sixth-grade teacher. “But I also knew that people also were going to have to come back and it was a little bittersweet, frankly.”

They still have questions. Collins was concerned about one of her students who wouldn’t keep a mask on.

Although the district has said students who don’t wear a mask will be switched to virtual instruction, she worried that if that student already had COVID-19, it might be too late.

“I had one student at the beginning of the day who said he was scared because he’s in a new environment with no friends,” Collins said. “I couldn’t even give him a hug to comfort him.”

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