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Go back ... or not?

Parents face a gut-wrenching choice on school reopening



JONATHON GRUENKE/STAFF

From left, Joy Naik, Ashraya, Mihir, Olivia, and Sahar stand outside their Chesapeake home. Her children will not attend school in person this year.

BY MATT JONES

Staff writer

CHESAPEAKE — It doesn't matter if other students go back to school in September. All the children on Joy Naik's cul-de-sac are staying home.

Parents were given two options as part of Chesapeake Public Schools' reopening plan. Option 1 is the "continuum," which could range from normal classes to online classes, depending on health conditions.

Naik and her neighbors chose Option 2 — all online, all semester.

"It was too much, 'We might do this, we might do that' with Option 1, and I understand why. But, I didn't want to have to stress about it," Naik said.

With about seven weeks to go before classes are scheduled to start, most Hampton Roads districts haven't decided whether students will come back to classrooms. Some Hampton Roads families have already made up their minds. The rest have a decision to make — and none of the options look good.

Gov. Ralph Northam's school reopening guidelines require districts to have a virtual option for

Humid with clouds and sun



High: 96

Low: 77

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families who don't feel safe sending their children to school. For families with health concerns or a vulnerable family member at home, if they can keep their children at home, they want to.

Amy Pearson's daughter is going into eighth grade at Spratley Gifted Center in Hampton. Her daughter is "twice exceptional" — she excels academically and has ADHD and Tourette syndrome.

In the spring, Pearson saw her struggle to stay focused during virtual classes and watched as her social skills declined.

"She gets sucked into the electronics so strongly that she hyper-focuses on it, regardless of all else," Pearson said. "It can really be difficult to keep her doing appropriate schoolwork on her electronics when she is on them."

About 20% of that district's families responded to a survey earlier this month about its phased reopening plans. Of those, 47% said they weren't yet comfortable sending their student to school every day.

About a third of those who answered preferred an all-virtual option over part-time or full-time in-person instruction for all grades.

Pearson, who was PTA president at Spratley for three years, says she values the program and knows it'll be a struggle if her daughter stays home. But she doesn't see how she can send her daughter, either: She fidgets with her mask when she has to wear it for long stretches and has asthma. And because of physical distancing requirements, the social interactions her daughter's missed out on won't be possible in-person anyway.

"If I really felt like putting her in school would really pull those social skills back into where we want and need them to be, I would do that," Pearson said. "That's what I would have to do."

The lack of social inter-

their own thermometers for their classrooms.

"I don't trust the division — any division, not just Newport News Public Schools, any public school division — to have the funds to magically provide all of the things that are going to need to be provided and to think through all of the scenarios that need to be thought through in order to make this successful," Connell said.

Her own seventh and ninth grader will attend school virtually in the fall. An adjunct instructor in Christopher Newport University's teacher preparation program, Connell hopes she can supplement what they'll miss out on in school with her background as a teacher.

Connell said she realizes that it's a privilege to be able to consider virtual schooling.

"I know it upsets teachers to view education as babysitting, but a lot of families require public education so that they can go off and do their jobs and earn income to put food on the table," she said.

JONATHON GRUENKE/STAFF



Joy Naik, center, watches as her children from left, Olivia, 3, Sahar, 14, Mihir, 13, and Ashraya, 8, play in their backyard Thursday evening. Naik has made the decision to have her children work online to start the upcoming school year.

actions also worries Staci Runkel Martin. Her son is a rising sixth grader at Larkspur Middle in Virginia Beach and only one of a handful from his elementary school zoned to attend Larkspur. Since schools closed, he's stayed in contact with his friends on Minecraft, building a model of their school in the video game. But as much as he misses school, she doesn't plan to send him back.

"It's going to be tough for him. It's a transition grade," Martin said. "But we're not going to send him back in person at all."

Beside her and her husband's own health concerns, her 75-year-old mother lives with them. She survived post-World War II refugee camps, Scarlett fever and diphtheria. Although children are believed to be less likely to transmit COVID-19, what if her son brought it home?

"My son would feel terrible if he was the one that brought it home and Oma passed away," Martin said.

"No matter how much we could say it's not his fault, it's just going to be in the kid's mind."

There are still many other families who aren't interested in virtual options, though, especially after their experiences in spring.

Joseph Todd, who recently returned to work in-person again at Norfolk Naval Shipyard, was disappointed Norfolk's not considering a five-day in-person option. At a meeting Wednesday, board members said they were leaning toward all-virtual.

Virtual instruction in spring for his two school-aged children brought a deluge of notifications, assignments and messages from teachers that he and his wife struggled to keep track of. Between his job and his kid's schooling, he doesn't think he could keep up in fall.

"It's a 20-hour day and it's not going to happen," Todd said. "I've got to keep a roof over our head. I'm

going to have to work."

He wants a five-day option and schools to provide enough personal protective equipment for everyone, and said he would accept higher taxes or contribute to teacher fundraisers if it meant everyone had masks and PPE.

"We are not trained education professionals, not in the slightest," Todd said. "A plan needs to be delegated properly throughout the school systems, down to the teachers, as to what the teachers are allowed to do. How can they maintain control and structure for their students and make sure the resources are allotted?"

The Association of School Business Officials International and the School Superintendents Association estimate it will cost an average district about \$1.8 million to reopen. Many districts have set aside large chunks of money they expect to receive through the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief,

and Economic Security Act for PPE, cleaning supplies and other necessities.

Norfolk administrators said this week they've ordered plexiglass shields, masks, gloves and other supplies but the challenge will be making sure it arrives in time and can be distributed to schools before September if any degree of in-person learning is going to start then.

Teachers anticipate at least some of that responsibility will fall to them, just as buying tissues, paper towels and Clorox wipes has for years.

Cindy Connell, who works at Gildersleeve Elementary School in Newport News, has been a public school teacher for 15 years, following in the footsteps of her mom. She worries about having to buy her own PPE and hand sanitizer, and what happens if a teacher gets sick — worried enough to look for another job. She has teacher friends elsewhere in the state who've been told to buy

Naik also says that she's lucky that she can work from home, teaching dance classes virtually so she can spend time with her four children.

Because her neighbors chose Option 2 as well, they've talked about creating a co-op to cover some of the things that their children wouldn't get in school. Naik can help with art and physical education; one of her neighbors is an expert on personal finance.

But she also knows that some of her friends in dual military families — in which both parents serve — don't have the choice that they have. And that's why Naik wants her three children in public schools home, at least for fall.

"They need first dibs on Option 1, because they have no choice but to send their kids to school. Why not, those of us who can, pull out our kids so that the school can do the proper safety precautions?"

Matt Jones, 757-247-4729,
mjones@dailypress.com