

'Something's working:' CT diocese avoids school shutdowns as COVID-19 cases climb



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Students leave All Saints Catholic School Wednesday, December 16, 2020, in Norwalk, Conn

Photo: Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media

NORWALK — Going back to school in the time of coronavirus isn't without its complications. Families have dealt with schools closing for contact tracing and subsequent two-week closures with remote learning due to the number of people who need to quarantine.

But at local Catholic schools, this hasn't been the case. Both Noelle Both Debes, who works at Greenwich Catholic School as director of advancement, and her daughter, who is in seventh grade at All Saints Catholic School in Norwalk, have been back in school five days a week with limited time for quarantines.

This is a stark contrast to public schools in their hometown of Norwalk, where buildings have been closed for up to two weeks at a time due to quarantines and staffing shortages.

"There have been a few situations where one cohort may be quarantined, but by and large the students have been in school since September," Debes said. "They're really good about keeping the cohorts together. They wear masks constantly. They wear them outside even. They're really good about mitigating the risk in school."

This has generally been the case across the 24 Catholics schools in the Diocese of Bridgeport. Steve Cheeseman, superintendent for the Diocese of Bridgeport, said there have only been a handful of incidents where some of the diocese's five high schools have had to go remote longer term due to staff and student quarantines, but other than that, the area's Catholic schools have had a lot of success reopening.

Cheeseman did not know the exact number of cases, but said there were some schools with no cases at all.

"We haven't had significant numbers," Cheeseman said. "We haven't had any spread within the school. Any cases have been contracted outside the school building. There has been no spread. The teachers are doing a great job following protocols."

While the diocese is smaller than most districts — there's about 7,000 students in the system — Cheeseman said most are attending classes in-person. Only about 180 elementary schoolers are part of the diocese's online learning academy, with most middle and high schoolers attending in person.

Students in preschool through eighth grade are in school five days a week. Some high schools have returned in a hybrid model, but others, like Notre Dame Catholic High School in Fairfield, are back five days a week.

"Right now the (case) numbers are a little higher as we approach the holidays, but for the most part most students have opted for in person it's the better option," Cheeseman said. "If they can be in person, the learning experience is so much better. A lot

of it has to do with socialization. People had enough of being in their house last spring and learning from home. It's the better of the options and it keeps kids connected a little more."

The diocese has also not been struck with long-term switches to remote learning, as staff pitch in to help if a teacher is quarantined. Cheeseman said some teachers will teach remotely from quarantine while another staff member supervises. In other cases, even the principal will step in to help teach.

"It has to be pointed out at the end of the day the teachers are the heroes of the pandemic in our schools," Cheeseman said. "They've gone above and beyond to make sure their students are educated whether it be remote or in person and they are juggling a tremendous amount of stress and anxiety as they juggle personal health and home with concerns of their students."



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Photo: Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media

Debes said her daughter went remote for one week when a student in her class thought they were exposed to the virus.

"The parents are acting out of an abundance of caution," she said. "If they even think their child was exposed by someone outside of school, they don't send them to school. They inform the school. That's why it's a little less chaotic. I think the parents are very thankful to have their students in school. Whatever they can do to keep that happening, that's what they're doing. ... It could be smaller classrooms. It could be the community. I don't know but something's working."

When working at Greenwich Catholic, Debes said she has also seen staff going out of their way to wear masks and keep distance when working together to reduce the chance of exposure.

Greenwich Catholic has only see a few switches to remote at the middle school level, according to Principal Patrice Kopas, many of which were the result of erring on the side of caution when it came to quarantines. There have only been about four or five cases confirmed out of 350 students, all of which were contracted outside the school.

"We opened on Sept. 1 and we haven't closed," she said. "We've had some outbreaks and pockets in the beginning when everything was really new and no one knew what was going on. We were overly cautious but we thought we needed to do the right thing."

The diocese put out a reopening plan back in July that adapted state and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines to the schools. The plan relies heavily on the use of cohorts, which poses more of a challenge at the high school level, Cheeseman said, but is easier for younger students.

The diocese has worked closely with the local health departments to determine when students and staff should quarantine. Like other schools, the diocese is handling exposure and quarantines based on each individual situation.

"Every situation is handled on a case-by-case basis. The nurse always follows the guidelines. We try not to overreact but we have to be safe," said Linda Dunn, principal at All Saints.

Dunn contributes the success to parents and staff as well. Parents in particular, she said, have been good about keeping students home when ill and communicating potential exposures.

"Things have been going very well," she said. "I have a cooperative group of parents. I have a dedicated group of teachers and a fantastic school nurse. That's how we're keeping this place open."

All Saints has experienced a few quarantine situations, though: The middle school has gone remote a few times due to exposure at a gathering outside school, and a fifth-grade class did the same. Preschool classes are currently closed as well.

Dunn said the school has closed for a day or two due to contact tracing, but never for an extended period. The looming holidays make her worried, but she said she doesn't see shutdowns happening anytime soon.

“If things go like they’re going now, I’m confident we can stay open,” she said. “Anything can happen ... but right now I have one adult and one student coming off quarantine Monday. Other than that, nobody is sick here. There’s no reason for me to close this school at this moment. We had a plan in place and stuck through it and we’re able to move forward. ... In the end, the parents want their kids in school.”

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