

Education president preps for another virus school year

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Georgia Association of Educators President Lisa Morgan said one loss of life with a child is unacceptable. With 12 children in Georgia dying to COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, she said the focus of Georgia educators this school year is keeping children safe.

Submitted photo



VALDOSTA – March 12, 2020 is a date forever ingrained in the minds of educators going into the 2021-22 school year, Lisa Morgan, Georgia Association of Educators president, said.

During the course of a weekend, school systems switched from in-class learning to virtual learning, and eventually, came the introduction of hybrid learning to the masses due to the then growing COVID-19 pandemic.

Morgan said there were two terms to remember from then: synchronous and asynchronous.

The former saw students and teachers online at the same time while the latter had lessons posted for students to finish at any time.

There needs to be an assessment educators make in regards to understanding where students' learning levels are at because not everyone adapted best to virtual/hybrid learning.

However, while academics are on the minds of educators, students have to deal with the social and emotional impacts the pandemic has had on them.

“Typically, we don’t see them experience those social, emotional (and behavioral impacts) and exhibit (them) until they feel comfortable and safe again,” Morgan said.

With the number of deaths that have occurred in Georgia because of COVID-19 — which is about 19,000 as of this week — it’s likely students have lost family members, loved ones or even neighbors.

They might know someone that’s severely ill, Morgan said, so that’s something they’ll be dealing with in the coming year.

“One of our priorities for the American Rescue Plan funding is we’re asking that our school systems look at (if they) have a nurse in every classroom, and if we can add some more counselors and social workers,” she said.

It’s all in the hope that incoming students can get help if they need or want it.

The new school year has already started for some across the state, but Lowndes County Schools and Valdosta City Schools will open Aug. 6 and Aug. 10 respectively, both only offering in-class learning.

Between the increase of COVID-19 cases and the imminent opening of the local school systems, student and staff safety measure policies are at the forefront of educators’ minds.

LCS’s reopening plan involves consistent sanitizing and cleaning of its schools, alongside the option for students and staff to wear masks.

VCS’s reopening plan also calls for consistent sanitizing of school property but masks are required.

Both schools have shown a wish to return to normal but we are still surviving a pandemic, Morgan said.

Students younger than 12 are not eligible for the vaccine yet, “so we know we still need to be following the CDC guidelines,” she said. “But we are hopeful that this year will be a more normal school year.”

Morgan remembers a conversation with a mother last year who said her child was quarantined three times within 30 days. It’s one of the situations, including the sudden case increases in Florida because of the delta variant, that led her to start viewing COVID-19 cases in children.

Georgia children account for more than 100,000 COVID-19 cases in the state.

It is essentially a small percentage in comparison to the 942,887 COVID-19 cases in the state — about 10.60% — but it’s still alarming. Morgan said they thought progress was being made.

COVID-19 case counts hit their peaks in January/February, but every subsequent month it had gone down.

“In June, we were down to about 27-28 cases per day in children here in Georgia,” Morgan said. “That number has doubled for July and we’re back up to about 57-58 cases per day (statewide).”

It’s the exact same thing the state experienced in June 2020 — cases were low then and by July they were back up. It’s concerning to see this and what it means for face-to-face instruction, she said.

Vaccines, because they are approved under an emergency operation, probably won’t be mandated for educators or teachers. But masks should be worn, Morgan said.

Just as school officials listen to expert educators on what should be done in the classroom, they have to listen to the experts on COVID-19, at least as they learn more about it, she said.

They recommend wearing masks, continuing social distancing, washing hands frequently, staying home if feeling sick and getting vaccinated if eligible.

GAE recognizes that schools are doing everything they can to keep everyone safe, Morgan said, but there's no magic bubble to keep it all out.

"We lost 12 children in Georgia to COVID-19 and I said last year, one loss of life of a child is unacceptable," she said. "We don't know what the delta variant is going to do but we must continue to wash our hands and follow those guidelines."

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Story Time (Ages 4 & up)
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