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- Trica Fogal
- Cory Tom Madigan
- Edward H. Schaus
- Kandy Lee Sonnek
- Donna Mae Wick

MORE ONLINE



The week in images

The Associated Press offers a selection of its best photographs of the past week.
View the collection at mankatofreepress.com.

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Bonding bill

The House Republicans, by rejecting the public works bill last week, hurt outstate communities that needed the projects. — A5

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Chance of storms

Humid. High in the 80s, low in the low 60s.



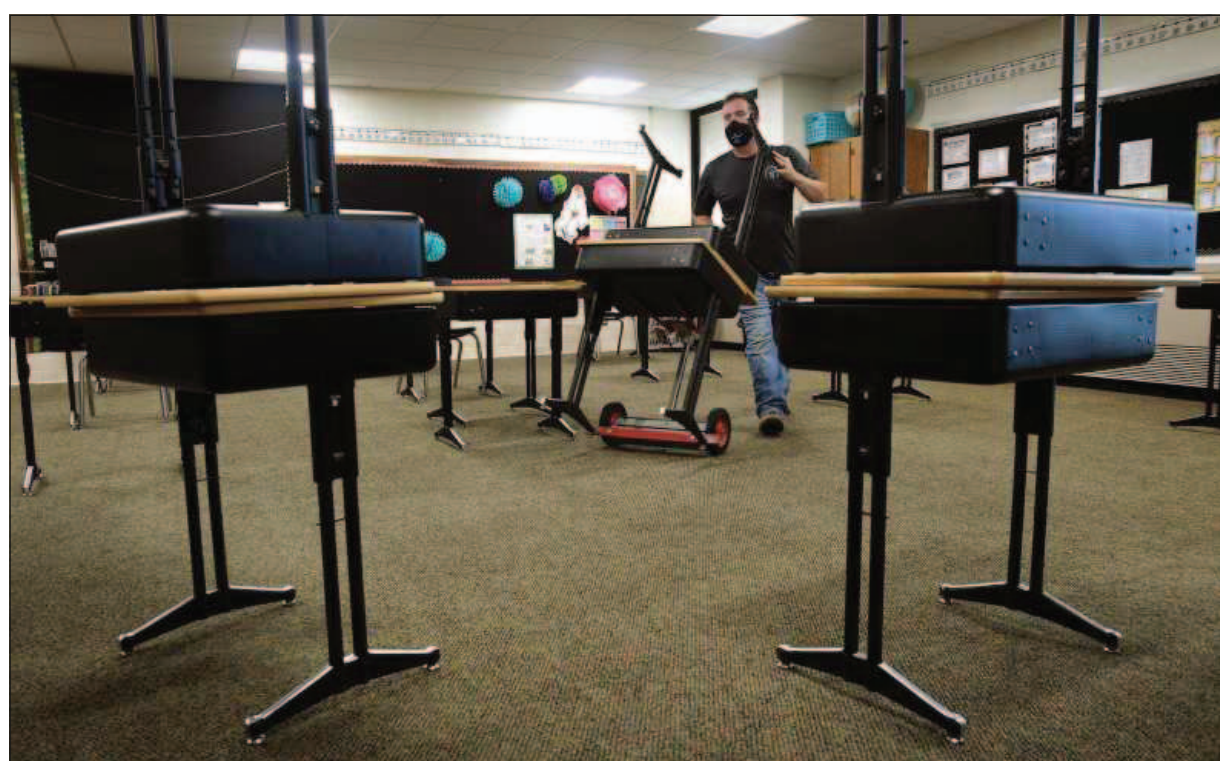
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Mankato, Minnesota

EXTRA PREP

Schools prepare for three fall scenarios



Photos by John Cross for The Free Press

Kevin Schirmers, head custodian at Kennedy Elementary School in Mankato, removes desks from a classroom. A state decision on whether in-person classes will resume this fall is expected this week.

Students have option of learning at home

By Kristine Goodrich
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If public schools are allowed to reopen in September, students will still have the option to continue learning from home. The state will announce a decision Thursday regarding what school will look like in the fall. Schools have been directed to prepare for three potential scenarios: a continuation of remote learning, a return to in-person learning, or a hybrid of both.

If either the in-person or hybrid scenario is recommended, the state is requiring schools to also offer distance learning as an option for families who have health concerns. If the hybrid model is the choice, local school leaders say that would not necessarily mean half of their students would be in the buildings each day.

Local school leaders say they are busy preparing preliminary plans for each possible scenario.

"Each of the scenarios have inherent challenges," said new St. Peter Public Schools Supt. Bill Gronseth. "There are many details to consider. The safety and well-being of our students and staff is and will remain our top priority. Plans and protocols for school buses, cafeterias, hallways and classrooms are important to maintaining that safety."

Area district leaders say they understand families are anxious, and they also are ready for a state decision so they may begin final-



Kevin Schirmers, head custodian at Kennedy Elementary School, adds more desks removed from a classroom to meet social distancing guidelines to a hallway already lined with desks and other classroom furniture.

izing plans.

"Like everyone else, Mankato Area Public Schools is eagerly awaiting word from the Minnesota Department of Education," said Supt. Paul Peterson.

The model the state announces this week could change as the school year progresses if the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic worsens or wanes.

Multiple school superintendents said having to be prepared to transition with just a few days notice is their greatest challenge.

Unique hybrids

If the hybrid model is recommended to start the school year, schedules could look different for

each school and even between grade levels.

Guidance already issued by the Minnesota Department of Education says schools would need to limit in-person attendance to 50% of the building's capacity. Schools would also be required to maintain 6 feet of separation between each person. If that cannot be achieved at half capacity, they must further reduce attendance.

New Waseca Public Schools Supt. Eric Hudspeth noted the 50% capacity restriction does not mean that 50% of students will have to stay home. That's because enrollment does not always match capacity.

Please see SCHOOLS, Page A6

Parents more likely than teachers to favor reopening

By Kristine Goodrich
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Surveys indicate the majority of parents support at least partially reopening school buildings this fall. Teachers meanwhile are divided. And many are still undecided.

A statewide Minnesota Department of Education survey found

64% of parents "would feel comfortable" sending their children back into a classroom. Another 24% were uncertain and 11% said "no."

Of the two-thirds of parents who were comfortable, 94% wanted their children to go back full time.

Many area school districts also surveyed parents about their preference but still are collecting or

analyzing results.

In the Maple River School District, Supt. Dan Anderson said the responses are still trickling in but the trend is clear: "Most have had enough of distance learning. We want kids back in school."

In Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton,

Please see PREFERENCES, Page A6

Shelters for day, night

Salvation Army, Connections to collaborate

By Brian Arola
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MANKATO — The Salvation Army and Connections Shelter will collaborate to provide around-the-clock homeless shelters this fall.

The plan calls for The Salvation Army to switch from its overnight men's shelter to a day shelter available to people who don't have housing. Connections Shelter will then provide overnight space at its new location in the First Presbyterian Church.

Working together will fill gaps for individuals and families who'd otherwise have no place to go until the overnight shelter opens, said Leslie Johnson, Salvation Army's business administrator.

"It's going to be such an amazing change for the community and for this population," she said. "Hopefully we can figure out how to

Please see SHELTERS, Page A6

New cases confirmed in eight counties

The Free Press and MPR News

MANKATO — Blue Earth County was one of eight south-central Minnesota counties with new COVID-19 cases confirmed Saturday.

All but Faribault County had new cases in the nine-county region, according to the Minnesota Department of Health.

The 11 new cases in Blue Earth County were among 38 total in the region.

Waseca County had eight new cases for the second straight day, the two biggest increases in the county's cases during the pandemic.

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SHELTERS: Daytime for Salvation Army

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serve them better, and this is a step in the right direction.”

Leaders from the two nonprofits have been discussing working closer together since before the COVID-19 pandemic began. The conversations continued once The Salvation Army's new leaders, Lt. Andy Wheeler and wife, Lt. Corey Wheeler, recently stepped in.

Both nonprofits have been offering overnight shelters over the past few years. Now they won't be duplicating efforts as much.

With Connections' move to First Presbyterian Church opening up more overnight space this fall, the shelter's leaders feel they'll have enough capacity to take in people who stayed at Salvation Army's men's shelter. Connections now has enough beds for 35 guests, and usually had about 22 at a time last season.

Connections will open in October, while The Salvation Army's day shelter will begin in November — both run roughly from fall to spring. The Salvation Army plans to “mirror” its open hours to cover the times when Connections is closed for the day, Johnson said.

So once both are up and running, people experiencing homelessness would have a place to seek shelter throughout the day.

“It fills a huge gap that we had,” said Erica Koser, Connections co-director. “People should be able to leave the shelter in the morning, get breakfast at Holy Grounds, head over to the Salvation Army and return to the shelter and be cared for the whole time, which is really beautiful.”

Having safe places to go could be especially important for the homeless community in the fall if the COVID pandemic doesn't slow down. Time will tell whether the places where some sought shelter in the past — downtown Mankato's grocery store, library and coffee shops — will be open for them.

Many of those places already weren't available at times in past years. On top of the window from when the library closed in the early evening and the shelters opened hours later, Johnson said Sundays, holidays and blizzards decreased the options even more.

“It just eliminates that major gap in service,” she said of the partnership. “They will always have a safe, warm place.”

People experiencing homelessness are at high risk for COVID complications. Having places for them to go, Koser said, should make it more likely symptoms are caught sooner.

Both nonprofits will also still provide casework to help find more permanent housing for guests. The Salvation Army's day services will be based out of what was previously the men's shelter, with more space available if social distancing becomes an issue.

Connections, meanwhile, for the first time has its own office to base operations at First Presbyterian. The shelter started out with a weekly rotating model housed at area churches, then had a single location at Covenant Family Church, and now will operate out of the church's upper floor.

Donations will be needed to operate the day and overnight shelters. The two nonprofits will raise money separately, although the traditional avenues for fundraising could be tricky during the pandemic.

The Salvation Army's fall 5K for its shelter and the annual bell ringing campaign before Christmas, for instance, could be impacted by the pandemic.

“There are so many what-ifs,” Johnson said. “So certainly if people want to contribute that'd be great.”

She and Koser called the collaboration an important and exciting development for the Mankato area's homeless population.

“Anytime a nonprofit that works with people experiencing homelessness can partner, it's good because it streamlines what we do,” Koser said. “And most importantly, it's great for our guests.”

Follow Brian Arola @Brian-Arola

SCHOOLS: Plans may vary by grade

Continued from Page A1

“We may be able to have our students in school more than half of the time,” Hudspeth said in a video message to the Waseca community.

Many school districts, including Mankato, have not yet announced any specific plans under the hybrid model. Peterson said his district is still examining options but will be prepared to share a hybrid plan soon after the education department's announcement if it is the state's recommendation.

Mankato Area Public Schools Director of Teaching and Learning Travis Olson said the approach might vary by grade.

“We're looking at different ways at doing (hybrid learning) knowing that the needs of our students are different based on their ages,” he said.

Other districts have tentative or firm plans.

The Maple River School District plans to welcome back elementary students full time and secondary students every other day. If they repurpose some rooms, such as the media center, into classrooms, they will be able to achieve social distancing, Supt. Dan Anderson said.

“We're getting very creative with space,” Anderson said.

Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton Supt. Kurt Stumpf said his district will prioritize their youngest learners for every day in-person instruction. Older students likely will attend every other day. How many grades will need to be every other day has not yet been determined.

“We want to bring back as many students as safely as possible, and there are many moving parts to consider in this planning phase,” Stumpf said.

He worries some students could struggle with a variable schedule. “Some students thrive on routines, and with a possible rotation of students, routines are hard to establish,” he said.

Gronseth said the St. Peter district is using a hybrid model for summer school that they are



John Cross for The Free Press

A room set up to meet social distancing guidelines means only 18 of the usual 24 desks will fit in a classroom at Kennedy Elementary School.

looking at continuing into the fall. Summer school students are in school for two consecutive days a week and learn from home the other days.

“As the (summer) program moves forward, we will gather information and feedback regarding what works and what can be adjusted,” Gronseth said.

Transportation would be a challenge for school districts under the hybrid model. Buses are included in the requirement to maintain 6 feet of separation between people.

In person

Students' experiences will be different than last fall even if the state recommends a full return to in-person learning.

While 6 feet of separation would not be required, the planning guidance released last month by the Minnesota Department of Education asks schools to “create as much space between students and teachers as is feasible.”

Other state recommendations for the in-person or the hybrid model include no nonessential visitors, field trips or assemblies;

staggered arrival and dismissal times; prepackaged meals in classrooms; plexiglass barriers; hallway markings; and other visual aids to encourage social distancing in common areas.

Students over 5 years old also will be required to wear masks at most times under the governor's executive order issued last week.

Distance learning

If the state says distance learning must continue into the fall, area school officials say families can expect some improvements from the spring.

Many districts surveyed parents about what they thought worked well and not so well in the spring and district leaders say they are using that feedback as they plan for the fall.

“We've listened,” Hudspeth said of Waseca staff. “We're working on making some adjustments. And should we have to incorporate that model this fall, I am confident it will be the best case we can possibly do for our students.”

“A challenge with distance learning for all students is the additional stress placed upon

families,” Stumpf said. “We have received more feedback from families on distance learning and plan to revise our plans to ensure we are meeting the needs of students.”

If distance learning is continued, districts will be required to resume providing free bagged meals for pickup and free child care for parents who work in jobs that have been classified as essential.

Families can choose to keep children at home full time even if schools open or reopen.

“We understand that no matter which model is decided upon to start the school year, there will be families who may require or choose full-time distance learning at times or for a longer duration,” Gronseth said. “We are preparing for that as well. We want to make sure that we are meeting the needs of students and families.”

Anderson said Maple River would start by working with families to see if there is any way to accommodate their concerns that would make parents comfortable with sending their children to school.

PREFERENCES: Union says half of teachers want distance learning

Continued from Page A1

75% of responding parents said they could send their children back to school, only 5% had already decided to keep their children home and 20% were undecided.

The Education Minnesota state teachers union recently surveyed its members and found 49% wanted distance learning to continue, 17% wanted a full return to in-person classes and 29% preferred a hybrid.

“Educators are anxious about their own health and the health of the people they love,” Education Minnesota President Denise Specht said in a statement.

More than 130 people responded to The Free Press Facebook query of their preference and the results were mixed.

Many believe distance learning should continue.

“While I would prefer my kids to be in the classroom, I don't think my preferences should outweigh the concerns of all of the staff that need to be there to accommodate in person learning,” wrote Angela Korte, a parent of children at Franklin Elementary School and Prairie Winds Middle School.

Dawn Watts said her Prairie Winds Middle School eighth grader and Kennedy Elementary School fourth grader both have asked to continue learning from home.

“Both of these kids love school,” she wrote. “They miss their friends. They miss being around people. They just don't want to get sick and they don't want to bring it home.”

Others said it is time to return to class.

“My kids thrive in school,” Tony

Dickmeyer wrote. “They love it and I love that they love to go to school. Please for my wife and I's sanity. Please open schools.”

East High School student Kaitlyn Sohm said she struggled with remote learning.

“As a student I need to go back,” she wrote. “This is taking a toll on people's mental health and obviously grades in general. Online was the most difficult thing to keep up with and I never want to have to go through it again.”

Multiple people suggested a hybrid with priority for in-person instruction going to students with special needs.

“While hybrid may not be the best choice for all students, I would like to see it considered for students with IEPs (individualized education programs),” Leah Zilka Cameron wrote. “Both of

my kids have IEPs and struggled so hard with the distance learning, even with me trying to help them.”

Several people opposed the hybrid idea, doubting it would be any safer than a full-time return to class.

“If schools are hybrid, won't kids be using child care the other days and mixing with other groups? How is this better?” Kallie Rochelle wrote. “If kids can go to school some days, why not every day?”

Several more respondents thought parents should be allowed to decide whether or not to send their children to school.

“If people aren't comfortable, they can school at home,” wrote Alexis Rae Woods. “But my kids absolutely need the interaction of friends and the education of teachers.”

VIRUS: Lake of the Woods County has its first case

Continued from Page A1

Brown and Sibley counties had the next most new cases in the region with four each.

The full list of new cases in the region includes:

- Blue Earth County — 11
- Waseca County — Eight
- Brown County — Four
- Sibley County — Four
- Nicollet County — Three
- Le Sueur County — Three
- Watonwan County — Three
- Martin County — Two

Minnesota had 805 total new cases in the health department's latest update, pushing the overall total past 50,000 cases. The new case total was the biggest in a single day statewide since May, although the rate of positive tests was similar to previous days at 4.5%

Five more Minnesotans died of the coronavirus, bringing the state's death toll to 1,571 since the start of the pandemic. The state's daily death tolls haven't reached double digits since July 2.

Hospitalizations also rose statewide. Seven more Minnesotans with COVID were hospitalized in

intensive care units as of Friday compared to the day before, and two more Minnesotans were hospitalized outside ICUs.

The 287 total COVID hospitalizations are the most so far in July, while still being less than half of the state's peak in May. ICU hospitalizations totaled 115 as of Friday.

The hospitalization totals are a lagging indicator compared to new cases, meaning it can take weeks after an uptick in cases for hospitalization totals to rise. Minnesota's continued rise in new cases has state health officials warning about more hospitalizations to come.

Blue Earth County also had a rise in COVID hospitalizations in recent days. After only having one COVID hospitalization as of Wednesday, the county had three — including two in ICUs — in the county's most recent update Thursday.

Saturday's health department report also showed, for the first time, a case in northern Minnesota's Lake of the Woods County — meaning COVID-19 cases have been confirmed in all 87 Minne-



Minnesota Public Radio News

Lake of the Woods County is the last of Minnesota's 87 counties to report a coronavirus case.

sota counties.

The latest numbers come as Gov. Tim Walz's statewide mask-wearing order for restaurants, stores and other public indoor gathering spaces took effect Saturday. Walz announced the mandate Wednesday as a way to stem the spread of COVID-19 and put the state on a path back to normalcy.

If 90 to 95% of Minnesotans complied, businesses could stay open, kids could return safely to school buildings, and we “get back that life that we all miss so

much,” he said.

Kris Ehresmann, the state's infectious disease director, on Friday said it would be several weeks before officials could assess the impact of Minnesota's new mask mandate.

“We kind of look at a 21-day window,” she said during Friday's briefing. “We really are hoping, based on what's been seen in other locations, that we're going to see the positive impact of this mandate — but it won't be instantaneous.”

Under the order, businesses have to post notice of the new regulations and ensure patrons comply. Children age 5 and younger are exempt. Cities with tougher ordinances can go beyond the state indoor-only rules.

Walz compared the inconvenience of wearing a mask to wearing seat belts in cars and preventing smoking in indoor spaces, changes in behavior required by government that ultimately saved lives.

“This is a small sacrifice for a potential big gain,” he said.