

Freeport school's reopening offers glimpse into what classrooms could look like this fall

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By Rachel OhmStaff Writer

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Emily Walsh, office manager at L'Ecole Francais du Maine in South Freeport, takes preschooler Hatcher Mardel's temperature before the child enters the building Thursday. The French immersion school reopened May 20 and is following CDC guidelines. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

SOUTH FREEPORT — At the start of the school day Emily Walsh stands in the entryway to L'Ecole Francaise du Maine holding an electronic thermometer and a clipboard of papers on student attendance and how to do at-home health checks.

Plastic cones on the ground mark the appropriate distance parents should keep from one another as they walk their masked children to the door of the school. Walsh, who also wears a mask, greets the children by taking their temperature and giving them a squirt of hand sanitizer.

“You're good,” she says, giving the OK to students one by one so they can enter the building and find their way to a classroom where they'll stick with one teacher and a small group for the day.

State says it, not school districts, will decide when students can return

This is what school looks like in the coronavirus era.

The day starts with a special drop-off regimen and is followed by social distancing and cleaning. There are fewer people in the building and no field trips. And there are programmatic changes such as the option for students to continue school remotely if they so choose.

The independent French immersion school, which serves about 60 students in preschool through fifth grade, has a clear advantage in its small size and the fact it doesn't have to provide some of the services required in public schools, like transportation and a school meal program.

Still, the school could serve as a model for what classrooms will look like this fall, as many of the things it has implemented reflect what the state is asking schools more broadly to consider.

A draft framework for reopening released by the Maine Department of Education last week calls for students and teachers to wear masks, conduct daily "self-checks" to monitor health and rearrange physical spaces – all things the French school has already done.

"I've never looked at the school the same way," said Willy LeBihan, founder and head of school, who said the decision to reopen was based on concerns about the long-term impact staying at home would have on students and parents' needs for child care as they returned to work. "Being in a rural setting and being a small school is a huge commodity. It's a huge advantage."



Emily Walsh, office manager at L'Ecole Francais du Maine, takes pre-kindergartener Ruby Mardel's temperature before entering the building. The French immersion school re-opened May 20 and is following CDC guidelines. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

Gov. Janet Mills closed both public and private schools in mid-March as part of a “Stay at Home” order, the requirements of which have only partially been lifted as part of the state’s reopening plan.

However, because the South Freeport school is also a licensed child care facility, it was allowed to reopen May 20 and has been following the guidance for child care facilities deemed essential during the pandemic.

LeBihan said the school’s small size, rural setting and the setup of the building – a single hallway with four large classrooms – have ensured a safe reopening. In addition, the school gave families the option to continue remote learning rather than return in person, and about 25 students chose to do so.

“We were hesitant to send our kids back to school with the pandemic going on, but the French school did a very nice job sending out what the new protocols were,” said Caroline Foust-Wright, a physician whose children Ayla and Quinn are in kindergarten and preschool.

Child care was a problem for Foust-Wright and her husband, who is also a doctor, during the closure. She said they are grateful to be able to send their children to a small school that is taking the reopening precautions seriously.

“Having our children at home without other children to play with we definitely noticed behavior changes,” she said. “This has been fantastic having them back here socializing and doing the things they’re supposed to do.”



pre-kindergartner Leo Riemann hugs her father, Helge Riemann, before she enters L’Ecole Francaise du Maine, which has just 60 pupils. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

Currently only students and teachers are allowed in the building at L’Ecole Francaise while administrators are still working from home and visitors are prohibited. LeBihan helps oversee the morning drop-off and greets families outside wearing a mask and gloves, but he does not enter the building.

Parents complete an at-home questionnaire about their child’s health and submit it by email daily. Any child with a fever or viral symptoms of any kind is not allowed to come to school.

Walsh, the school’s office manager, oversees the pickup and drop-off for students, then returns home. She also teaches a yoga class to students over Zoom.

Inside the school, most furniture and miscellaneous items such as books, toys and

educational tools have been removed so as to facilitate cleaning, which takes place nightly and throughout the day. Windows are open as much as possible and water fountains are off-limits.

The students are separated into four groups assigned to different classrooms and the groups do not mix throughout the day. The school does not have a cafeteria, though prior to the pandemic children ate together in a common indoor area.

Taking advantage of the nice weather has been key to the reopening, as the different groups now take turns using the playground and eating lunch (which students bring from home) outside. If it's raining the students eat at their own desks in their classrooms.



Masks, distancing and hand sanitizer have become ubiquitous at Freeport's L'Ecole Francaise du Maine, where Leo Riemann, above, is a pre-kindergartner. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

Teachers primarily spend their time working with students in person after creating a weekly set of materials for the students still at home. The school has a teaching assistant dedicated to providing support for students learning remotely, and their regular teacher checks in with them daily.

“For me personally it's part of who I am, so it was difficult to share the work with a colleague,” said Elodie Chancelier, a first- and second-grade teacher. “And not seeing my other students every day (has been hard). I still see them a couple times per week on Zoom,

but I'm the type of person who likes to be there, so for me the challenge was to let go of some things and accept all the changes."

Being able to offer a full curriculum both remotely and in the classroom has been impossible, even with the help of the teaching assistant, so Chancelier said she has had to offer less arts and science online and focus instead on math, French and English.

Her students have all responded differently to remote learning depending in part on how much help they are able to get at home. Because the school is a French immersion program, having an adult at home who speaks French has also made a huge difference for students.

"We have some students who surprised us and are really thriving with remote school," Chancelier said. "There are others who are continuing as usual and adapting and others who need a little extra help. I'm confident we'll be able to catch up on that at the beginning of the next year."

And while being back in the classroom has its advantages, it's still not quite the same. "Being a French immersion school, we love to sing," LeBihan said. "However, singing happens to be an activity not recommended by the CDC because it projects particles, so we don't do singing."



The French immersion school's office manager checks the temperature of preschooler Quinn Foust-Wright before he's allowed to enter the building. "Kids are so adaptable," says Willy LeBihan, founder and head of school, who says the pupils are diligent about wearing masks. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

There are also no field trips, but the school has made an attempt to bring the field trips to school. Instead of taking a field trip to a rock quarry, for example, the school brought in a pile of gravel and dumped it in the playground for students to sift through for a geology lesson.

The willingness of parents and families to adhere to social distancing outside of school has also been important.

"The parents are saying, 'We're taking all the measures we can. We are taking all the measures at night. We don't gather. We don't take our kids out in large groups.' So they're not exposing the children," LeBihan said.

At school the children stick to their groups of about 10 students and one teacher, which increases the risk of exposure to the virus but limits it compared to what a normal school day would look like.

All children and staff also wear masks, which the school provides if a student does not have one or forgets it at home. Surprisingly, most children, except for the very youngest ones, are diligent about wearing their masks, according to LeBihan.

“Kids are so adaptable,” he said. “It’s amazing. They do wear them and we supply masks if they forget them.”



The L’Ecole Francais du Maine, a French immersion school, re-opened May 20 following CDC guidelines. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

Financially, he said the reopening has had some impact on the school’s budget due mostly to the cost for increased professional cleaning, but the costs are manageable. The school is planning to stay open in the fall and move up the start date to early August rather than the traditional start around Labor Day.

Since most families aren’t planning on traveling this summer, the early start would allow for time to be built into the calendar in case there’s a second wave of the virus and they need to close in the winter. It will also allow them to continue taking advantage of the good weather and opportunities to eat outside and keep windows open.

And due to demand from parents faced with a shortage of summer activities for children this year, there will also be a summer camp open to both students and non-students.

LeBihan said he’s cognizant that what has worked for his school might not work for others, especially larger or more urban schools. Over the last few months he’s heard from colleagues at French schools in Los Angeles, Chicago, Calgary and other places around the

world all with the same question: How can we reopen safely?

His advice is for schools to not be afraid, to study the protocols from government and health officials and to study the layout and shape of their buildings to figure out how it can work.

“The most important thing is students need to go back to school,” he said. “We serve students who are just learning to read and to write. They’re learning music. They’re making friends and learning to share. These are social skills they can’t learn (at home). They learn those things with their peers on the playground and in the sandbox.”



Emily Walsh, office manager at L'Ecole Francais du Maine, takes pre-kindergartener Sebastian Roveillo's temperature before entering the building. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

Ben Grasso, whose daughter Cordelia is in kindergarten at the school, said while he did have concerns about sending her back, he feels the school is making the best decisions it can to keep students safe.

“A kid’s job is to socialize, to play and to learn, especially at this age,” Grasso said. “Although they did a fantastic job digitally I think there’s an in-person part that if you can do it safely, it’s worth pursuing.”

Chancelier, the teacher, said she was given the option to return to school in person and it was a difficult decision due to health concerns. Ultimately, though, she said she’s happy to

be back in the classroom.

“I was really nervous,” she said. “I was asking myself, ‘Was I making the right decision? Was I putting myself at risk?’ In the end you have to decide do you want to and it’s what you feel OK with. For me, being with my students again, it relieves me of my concerns. I’m really glad to see them again every day.”

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