

## NC Rural Coalition Fighting COVID-19

### NC Rural Coalition Fighting COVID-19 June 23, 2021 Zoom Meeting Minutes

Facilitator: Kelly Calabria, President & CEO, Foundation for Health Leadership & Innovation

Speakers: Karen Wade, Policy Advisor, NC Department of Health & Human Services

Dr. Eric Cunningham, Superintendent, Halifax County Schools, Rocky Mount, NC

Topic: Back to School plans regarding COVID-19 prevention, protection and vaccinations.

Kelly Calabria welcomed the participants and added that the Coalition is a partnership between FHLI, The Rural Center, The Governor's Hometown Strong initiative, AHEC and The Office of Rural Health, a unit of the NC Department of Health and Human Services. Initial efforts were directed at COVID-19 safety and vaccine information and creating a feedback loop to hear what's happening in communities so that NC DHHS can provide resources to areas that need them. Today's focus is on prevention and vaccine information for school-age children in preparation for back-to-school.

Karen Wade presented a chart of COVID-19 outbreaks among children 0-17, reflecting a lower rate of transmission in primary and secondary schools. Prevention measures have been effective in slowing the spread. There was no large spike in outbreaks among children. About 1,580 cases were recorded from childcare facilities and 2,466 were reported from K-12 age children. The Strong Schools Public Health Toolkit, a public health guidance for schools on requirements and recommendations for schools to slow the spread, has been posted to the NC DHHS website. The plan is divided into 3 categories: Remote learning, hybrid learning, and in person learning and the key requirements for the schools are observing the 3 Ws, wearing a face covering, observing social distancing, monitoring for symptoms and confirming cases. <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/media/164/download>

NC DHHS received federal funding to support screening testing for public and private K-12 schools during the 2021-22 school year. This includes priority vendor support, independent testing program, including free tests for schools, and fund for public schools (local education agencies (LEAs and charters)) to hire temporary school support and health staff.

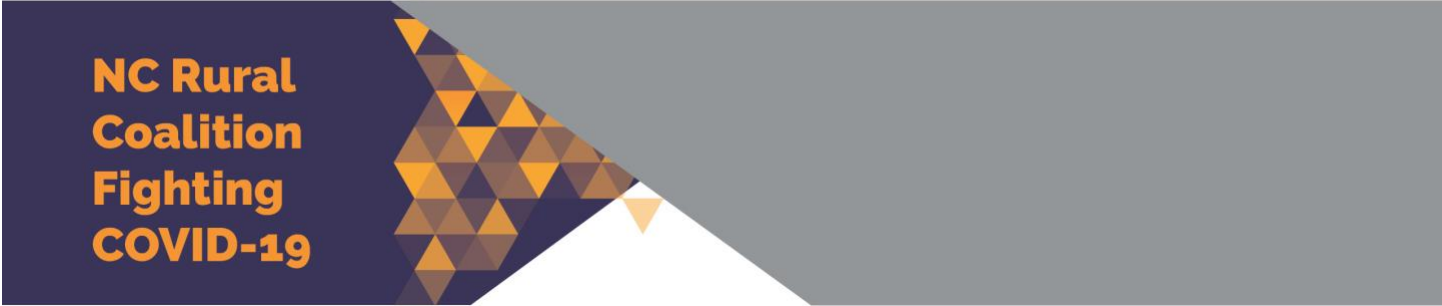
Ms. Wade reviewed her call to action: Four things to do now to prepare for the 2021-22 school year:

1. Be familiar with test types to make informed decisions. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/operation-strategy.html>
2. Be ready to reach out to school and district leadership with resources
3. Learn about team nursing and the role of the RN School Nurse Team Leader. Training is available at <https://sites.google.com/view/nchealthyschools-training/home>
4. Stay informed by attending available office hours and reading email briefings during summer breaks.

NC DHHS can provide matchmaking with Local Education Agencies (LEAs)/schools and local health departments to be a vaccine provider and host school based vaccine events across the state in public and private schools. Among the total population, about 40% have been fully vaccinated. The vaccine rate for those over 12 years is 49%.

NCDHHS has created materials directed at the 12-17 year old population, including social media chat boxes to comment on why you received the vaccine, Facebook frames, flyers and public service announcements.

<https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/vaccines/covid-19-vaccine-communications-toolkit>

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Other new initiatives include four \$1 million drawings for vaccinated individuals, and four \$125,000 drawings for students 12-17 years old that can be used for secondary education including tuition, room board, and books, and can be used in any institution. <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/summervaxcash>

A Back-to-School Toolkit for school administrators has been created to promote vaccinations, using school events and sports physicals as opportunities for vaccinations. <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/slow-spread/materials-resources/covid-19-communications-toolkit#3-ws-flyers>

Continued prevention efforts and testing for those younger than 12 are still being promoted, including outreach through trusted messengers, public service announcements, and coaches.

Dr. Cunningham introduced himself and mentioned he has completed five years as superintendent of Halifax County, and shared a story that impacted him greatly. He realized that children are resilient, and that he had an opportunity to change their lives.

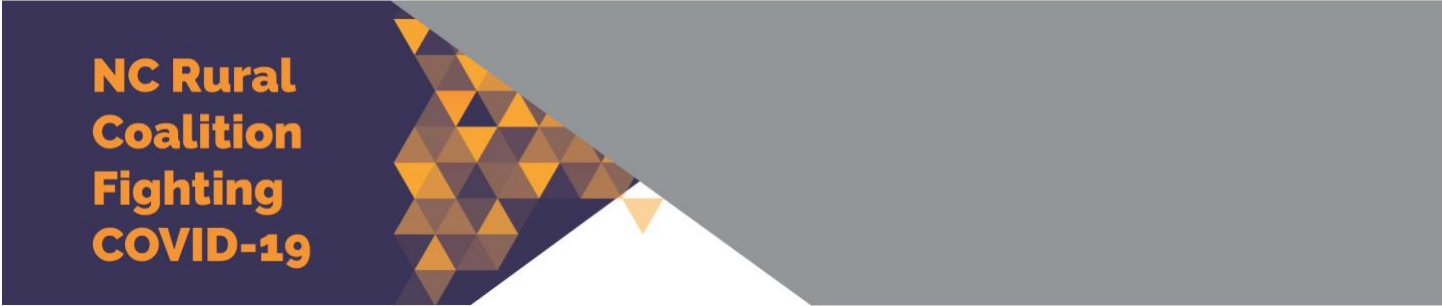
On March 16, 2020, the state shut down due to the pandemic. He worked with the school board to create a vision/mission to empower the students to be successful and address the needs of the whole student in partnership with everyone. He started with three questions: 1. Where are we now? 2. Where are we going? 3. How do we get there?

He added that there were three phases to the pandemic voyage: 1. March 16-June 10, 2020, which he labeled "Uncharted Waters" 2. June 11-August 2, which he named "Riding the Waves" and 3. August 3, 2020-now, which he called "Anchor Down." The first focus was safety and to keep everyone working. One of the "waves" was a massive food shortage and most parents were essential workers. Most homes had intergenerational housing, up to 10 people per household where COVID could ravage the household. Accomplishments included the delivery of 13,000 instructional packets, 2,000 online lessons, 250K meals and no employees were furloughed. The day after schools closed, buses delivered food.

During "Riding the Waves," from June 11-August 2, the school district continued to teach. Stakeholders were educated on COVID-19 conditions and the district stayed current on government reports, followed by a discussion on how to stay aligned. They attended all state professional development webinars to help improve the infrastructure. They launched a 1:1 Program and had a virtual graduation. Shortly after July 3, the district lost Mr. Patterson, an administrator, to COVID, which was devastating. They were the first school system to lose an administrator to COVID.

Two strike teams created process maps for webpages, people, environmental methods and materials for a successful year for students.

Phase 3, "Anchor Down," focused on safety, sanitation, nutritional services, instructional services and setting expectations. During that time, an additional 225K meals were served. the 1:1 program was implemented and 800 hotspots were handed out. Desks were delivered to students for a home classroom. Most parents were frontline workers, so most children were latchkey children, which had to be addressed.

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Processes were rolled out to safely reopen the schools. There is a reopening of school tab on the website: <https://www.halifax.k12.nc.us> that outlines a list of processes, including the Chrome Book distribution. Using the pandemic as an opportunity for the students, they created their own help desk. Students were offered Dell certification courses on Chrome book repair to make them more marketable during the pandemic. They gained work force skills and soft skills in the worst possible environment. It's a great example of taking lemons and making lemonade.

The Governor mentioned learning pods in one of his speeches, so satellite learning centers were created in churches around the county, where kids could be tutored and instructed, which was highly successful. This confirmed that students learn best face to face. All children deserve a sound, basic education; not handouts, but hand-ups, which focus on equality.

To reopen schools, Halifax County needs to be a vaccine clinic, where the school is a hub and people get the correct information. Schools are trusted. Vaccine promotion has been successful in increasing vaccine rates among employees and the new focus must be on the younger age groups, so they can receive their shots as well. The month of July will focus on educating the community on reopening schools, keeping everyone safe and creating vaccination sites at the school. A summer school session is running from June 1-30 and almost 40% of students voluntarily signed up. The kids are hungry to return, but it needs to be done safely.

When asked how he has been coping through the pandemic, Dr. Cunningham responded that COVID has taught us to be vulnerable, to focus on self-care and clean up toxic thinking. He shared how COVID directly affected his family. He has been influenced by Brenè Brown and practices yoga and embraces mindful thinking. He has received a grant to install chill-out rooms in schools, where kids can go and collect themselves with a school nurse or counsellor, then rejoin the group. He has created a program called Sweet Tea with Dr. C <https://youtu.be/UTA7YZRCO90>, which is offered monthly, inviting parents, guests and partners to share their stories with the community. Sharing creates linking together.

The next meeting will be July 21<sup>st</sup> at 9:00am.