

Welcome back



PHOTOS BY SAVANNAH BLAKE | THE JOURNAL

Walhalla Elementary School students wearing masks head inside after getting dropped off for the first day of school on Monday morning.

Students return to school for first time since March

BY GREG OLIVER
THE JOURNAL

WALHALLA — For the first time in more than five months, schools in Oconee and Pickens counties welcomed three-quarters of their students back for in-person classroom instruction Monday, while the remaining quarter started their school year with virtual learning.

"We're really excited," Walhalla Elementary School principal Christi Hartsock said. "There's a lot of positive energy, and we just

can't wait for a great year."

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March, South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster ordered all schools in the state to close their doors and transition to distance learning. The decision was eventually made to continue in the new format for the remainder of the school year.

During the summer, school districts were required to submit individual plans to the State Department of Education allowing

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Walhalla Elementary principal Christi Hartsock waves at parents as they drive by after dropping their children off for the first day of school.

SCHOOL: 'Whatever it takes'

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families to select options of in-person instruction or virtual learning for their children. A survey conducted by the School District of Oconee County showed that approximately 75 percent preferred the in-person option.

Teachers were given the choice of teaching in person or virtual. However, this year, virtual teachers are providing instruction from their respective classrooms while also taking attendance.

Hartsock said she feels teachers have "absolutely" done everything they can to prepare for all the health and safety protocols necessitated by COVID-19.

"We're more than prepared, and our teachers are excited and willing to follow whatever it takes to get these kids back in the building," she said.

Walhalla Middle School principal Scott Dixon said other than typical first-day traffic, the return to school "has been amazing."

"It's been 164 days since we had students in the building," Dixon said. "They rocked it this morning wearing their masks and following all of our COVID guidelines. Students enrolled in SDOC @ Home are logging on and learning the expectations."

James M. Brown Elementary principal Ashley Robertson said that as of 8 a.m. Monday she had "all my steps in" from a busy first day of school.

"Kids, teachers, everyone coming in — there was definitely a sense of excitement in the building," Robertson said. "We had teachers at every door to make sure they were walking kids to the actual classroom."

Robertson said she feels good about the COVID-19 safety protocols put into place.



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James M. Brown Elementary principal Ashley Robertson said there was "a sense of excitement in the building" Monday as students returned to school for the first time since March.

"I'm very confident and very optimistic it's going to be great," she said.

High school principals also reported a smooth opening day following a longer-than-usual in-person break.

"This has been the smoothest opening we've had," Seneca High principal Felicia LeRoy said. "I told the teachers and students this morning that right now, at this very moment, the world seems right again."

District superintendent Michael Thorsland said administrators visited all of the school sites Monday.

"While there were certainly new routines and obvious COVID-19 precautions, it felt close to a normal school opening," Thorsland said.

Associate superintendent of administration Steve Hanvey called re-opening school buildings to students "the best day in regards to work that I've had in five months."

"It did my heart good to see our students back," Hanvey said. "While the masks hid the smiles, it was obvious they were happy to be in school. ... Our staff is second to

none and did an outstanding job today."

Pickens County schools also opened Monday, and Clemson Elementary principal Michelle Craddock said her administrative team visited classrooms to welcome new and returning students. She added that teachers and students alike "are all happy to be back in the building together."

"The new normal is definitely different, but as I reminded my staff yesterday morning, what has stayed the same is what makes our school so special — the people," Craddock said. "Our face-to-face teachers and staff and our Pickens County Virtual Academy teachers are all eager to take on this new challenge together."

"We will do all we can to provide the very best for our students and staff. Safety will be the top priority, but along with that will be love, laughter and learning."

School District of Pickens County spokesman John Eby said he was pleased with the first day.

"Everything went as well as we could have imagined," Eby said.