



Messalonskee High School student cleaners (from left to right) Abigail Carpenter, Rebekah Letourneau, and Noelle Languet prepare to clean a room at the high school

They are on the frontlines of the coronavirus conflict. Armed with spray bottle and microfibre cloths, they are the cleaning crew, four masked Messalonskee High School students determined to keep their classmates safe in what seems like an endless battle of germ warfare. On a recent Friday afternoon, senior Abigail Carpenter and juniors Noelle Languet and Rebekah Letourneau stood together in the English department wing, poised to disinfect classrooms, while

their fourth fellow cleaner, Emelia Frost, worked in the laundry room to tackle the soiled materials used for disinfecting.

Hired by RSU 18 at an hourly wage of \$13.25, the girls have been working since late August, and they hope they'll stay employed through the end of the school year.

Keeping their jobs means more money they can earn, but perhaps even more importantly, it means that school - in-person school - will still be in session, a situation that stands in stark contrast to many school systems in Maine and around the country.

Carpenter said the fact that she and her fellow cleaners play a critical role in enabling in-school learning to continue makes their work meaningful - and even somewhat enjoyable.

"After a while it does get a little fun," she said, "because you are helping a lot of people and making sure your school stays open."

RSU 18 assistant superintendent Keith Morin said the school system employs about two dozen student cleaners district-wide, most of them Messalonskee students.

Money for the workforce comes via COVID-19 relief funding, but that funding ends at the end of the current calendar year, according to Morin.

Morin said the district will have to re-assess the program at that time and determine how to proceed for the remainder of the school year.

But what's clear at this point, he said, is the students provide an important extra layer of protection for district schools, taking at least some pressure off the shoulders of the regular custodial staff.

In addition, he said, the program empowers the students involved, giving them an opportunity to serve their schools in an altogether different way.

"There is a sense of pride," he said, "when you are working in your school."

The Messalonskee cleaning crew starts soon after the dismissal bell each school day and works for about four hours. The students start on the third floor, cleaning every classroom, emptying trash cans, even wiping down stair railings.

Letourneau said she gets into a zone of sorts when she cleans. “It kind of gives me time to relax and just let my mind wander,” she said.

Languet said she didn’t hesitate to apply for the job when the opportunity arose. Despite all the news circulating about the dangers of the virus, Languet said she figured her risk would be no greater than any other Messalonskee student.

“We were going to school anyway,” she said. “It’s not so bad. It’s only the four of us (after school).”

Morin gives them and their fellow student cleaners in the district high marks for their efforts.

“They are doing an exceptional job,” he said.