



## **Bellefonte Area School District**

318 North Allegheny Street  
Bellefonte, PA 16823  
Telephone: (814) 355-4814

**Mrs. Tammie L. Burnaford, Superintendent**  
**Dr. Kristopher M. Vancas, Director of Curriculum and Instruction**  
**Mr. Kenneth G. Bean, Jr., CMA, Director of Fiscal Affairs**

*Inspiring and Preparing Today's Learners to Embrace Tomorrow's Challenges*

---

**August 20, 2021**

### **Dear Bellefonte Area School District Parents, Families, Staff and Community:**

We are bacckkk! This summer has just flown by. It's hard to believe that our staff returned to our schools this week, and our students will return in less than two weeks. I really hope you and your family have had an awesome summer and will be able to enjoy these last few days of summer vacation. As I mentioned in my letter on July 23rd and at each School Board meeting, my intent is to keep you informed about our plans now and throughout the school year. I have had this letter ready to send, but we are getting new information and suggested guidance nearly every day. Just when I think I can provide the most updated information, we get more news.

But, by waiting, I need to apologize now for a few things. First, I've gotten hundreds of calls and emails from parents who shared their concerns or asked some very good questions over the past month. I have not been able to keep up. My goal has always been to respond to all parent/guardian emails and calls. I want to offer my sincere apologies if you have sent me an email, and I haven't responded. I just can't keep up, especially with the start of the school year and all of the regular things we need to do to open schools. Please know that I read every email I've gotten and have taken your thoughts and concerns to heart. Secondly, this is going to be a very long letter. My sister who only reads the end of a good book would not be able to get through this one. I have so much to share with you and so much to say.

### **On a personal note first**

No decision is taken lightly, and we continually strive to do what's best for all of our students. Someone told me that this is a no-win situation right now as we face covid challenges in a very divided country and community. It does seem like that, but ultimately, the "win" must be focused on our students. In some ways, entering this school year is even more difficult than last year. I continue to lose sleep. This letter and information is not intended to cause more

debate, uneasiness or worry, but to explain and answer questions and concerns while trying to begin to build some bridges over the divide in our community.

### **A quick look back to last year to create a frame of reference for this year**

Overall, our students were able to be in-person more than any other district in the county and most of the public schools in the state. As a district, we closed only 2 days - the 2 days prior to the Christmas/Holiday break. If you recall, we only did that so we were guaranteed to come back to school on Jan. 4th with a “clean slate” according to the PDE rules at the time.

Throughout the year, we planned, changed plans, and then changed plans again. We took every day as it came. We worked together to do what was best for all of *our* Bellefonte Area School District students. We asked parents to work with us, and parents stepped up in all of the best and biggest ways. We had an amazing journey together and formed the partnerships that got us through the school year. I know we can do it again this year!

### **The Proposed Health and Safety Plan**

New Health and Safety Plans (H/S Plans) are required by the PA Department of Education (PDE). Our H/S Plan includes all required components, was approved by the School Board of Directors on July 27, 2021 and was submitted to PDE by July 30, 2021. We were also required to post the H/S plan to our website, and ours is posted on the home page ([www.basd.net](http://www.basd.net)) If you would like to hear more about the H/S Plan or how strategies have been discussed, here is a link to the meeting on July 27, 2021:

<https://videoplayer.telvue.com/player/GNduNoua2rBThhw6N4PRP9OCSPf6B2ru/playlists/4805/media/655363?autostart=false&showtabssearch=true&fullscreen=false&jwsourc=c>

Here is a link to the Board of Directors meeting on August 10, 2021 when the H/S Plan was again discussed:

<https://videoplayer.telvue.com/player/GNduNoua2rBThhw6N4PRP9OCSPf6B2ru/playlists/4805/media/660591?autostart=false&showtabssearch=true&fullscreen=false&jwsourc=c>

Important aspects of the PDE-required Health and Safety Plans:

- The PDE guidance allows “local control for each school district” rather than mandating the same rules for all districts. This is important to us because we are not like other districts in our area or even in our state in that we offered in-person learning for the entire year last year. This also allows us to monitor our own data and cases in our own district and zip codes. We focused all of our attention on *our* students, parents/guardians and families.
- The number one push for the CDC guidance, from the PA Department of Health (PA DoH) and the PA Department of Education (PDE) is to get and keep students in school, but this is more general because many school districts were not in school last year like we were. Nevertheless, this is also our goal. We know that the best learning experience for

most students is to be in-person. But, we also will offer a virtual experience through our BeLA program with onsite assistance available to students.

- The CDC guidance indicates that school districts should take a “layered prevention/mitigation” approach in their H/S Plans. In our H/S plan we kept nearly all of the prevention/mitigation strategies from last year and actually added or enhanced a few strategies to start the school year. Depending on what the day, week or month brings, we may need to readjust strategies or slowly remove particular mitigation/prevention strategies.

### **Let’s talk more about some of the strategies that will be in place to start the school year...**

- Although we are not required to have one, we still have a Pandemic Coordinator. Mrs. Karen Krisch will be in that role again this year. She was amazing and helped lead us through all aspects of the pandemic last year. Importantly, she has personal contacts with PA DoH personnel, the inside track, so to speak and can connect us with the experts in a moment’s notice.
- Like last year, classrooms and schools will maintain at least 3 feet of physical distancing to the extent possible. The required Contact Tracing still includes persons that were within 6 feet of an infected person for more than 15 minutes. (Please see the Contact Tracing, Isolation, Quarantine section for more information regarding other changes to the rules for this.)
- Last year, we purchased hundreds of plexi-glass desk shields for students and staff. These will be available again this year, and we are planning to order more as requested. The desk shields provide an added layer of protection for individual students and small groups of students and were used mainly by elementary students last year. In fact, last year the PA DoH decided that desk shields were an added, effective barrier and did not require some students or staff to quarantine if they were utilizing desk shields. This year, we have the desk shields available to all students and classrooms. Please talk with your child’s teacher or principal to get more information about how desk shields can be an option for individual students, as well.
- Comprehensive daily cleaning and sanitizing will continue this year.
- Hand sanitizer is readily available in all areas and classrooms for students and staff, and frequent hand washing will be encouraged again this year.
- Ventilation systems at the high school and middle school were replaced over the past year. We had a particular focus on improving ventilation in our classrooms throughout the district last year, and this will continue into this year. Improving ventilation is a mitigation/prevention strategy supported by the CDC, the PA DoH and PDE.
- Organizations from outside our district will not be permitted to hold large group events inside our facilities at least to start the school year.

- To start the school year, we are also going to limit visitors and volunteers in the buildings. Student teachers and interns are volunteers in our classrooms and buildings, as well. However, we are allowing student teachers/interns to either participate virtually or provide proof of vaccination if they do come in.
- As mentioned in my letter of July 23rd, vaccination of students and staff will not be required. However, we did host several vaccination clinics in the evenings in our high school last year, and we may partner with local pharmacies to host future vaccination clinics, if our community would like us to do so. While we are on the subject of vaccinations, in a survey done in July with all of our staff, 89% of our staff, including all teachers, professional staff, administrators and support staff indicated that they are or will be fully vaccinated by the start of school. More than 80% of our staff responded to the survey, so the vaccination rate in our staff is believed to be rather high.
- We have the same ability to rapidly adjust to the circumstances in a particular classroom or school or as a district as needed this year. We can pivot on a dime as the saying goes. For example, if we would get a surge in cases in a particular classroom or in any of our schools, we may need to include more layered, prevention/mitigation strategies, but our goal remains to keep our schools open, to keep students and staff safe, and to continue to do what's best for all of our students. As a side note, just this week, PDE issued guidance regarding "outbreak containment" and told school districts to work closely with our local representatives from the PA DoH. We will continue to work with our identified PA DoH epidemiologist from last year, and Mrs. Krisch still has direct contact with the PA DoH. In yesterday's guidance, the suggested thresholds for adding more layers of prevention/mitigation or potentially moving to remote learning are much higher than last year.
- Numbers and cases will be tracked for our district in the same manner as last year. I continue to follow the daily numbers for Centre County and our 2 main zip codes - 16823 and 16841. These two zip codes cover most of our district, but they also extend into other school districts. Like last year, I will report the case numbers for the zip codes at least weekly to parents. Please see the section marked Numbers for current data. In the future, if cases occur, I'll report any cases that we have in our schools. When we met directly with one of the lead epidemiologists from the PA DoH in early July, we expressed our frustration with not having more precise data, but I don't think that will change. By the way, she commended our efforts and all that we did in this district last year.
- One of our greatest successes from last year was the partnerships that we formed with parents/guardians. We asked parents to keep their children home from school if they were experiencing symptoms. We asked parents/guardians to contact us immediately if their children tested positive for covid. On both counts, they did, and to a remarkable level! With little to no support from the PA DoH, this allowed us to keep covid out of our

schools. We could not have done what we did and got through the year as we did without this partnership. We are asking again for parents to keep their child(ren) home if they have symptoms and to contact us immediately if their child(ren) tests positive for the coronavirus. Our principals and nurses stand ready again to help.

## **Masks**

Masks have become the hot button issue with parents clearly divided in their stances. We have heard from hundreds of parents on both sides of the argument for schools requiring masks of students, staff and everyone who enters our buildings. One side argues that masks should be required for everyone. They point to information and studies that indicate that masks can prevent spread of the disease and they share worries that the Delta variant is causing the current surge in cases, particularly in those who are unvaccinated. They indicate that masks provided additional prevention last year and should continue into this year. The other side points to information that indicates that masks hinder social/emotional and mental health growth. They point to information in the media or studies that suggest that masks may not provide enough protection or can be harmful. They state that parents should be able to make health-related decisions about their children and that school districts should not have the authority to mandate masks. I continue to read every piece of information I can. We have talked to doctors, and even some of them are divided about the effectiveness of masks. All of this considered, I can understand both sides of the argument, and I see legitimacy in both arguments. There is nothing we can say or do to find consensus on the topic of masks. There is a common thread on both sides, though. In all of the emails and calls that we've gotten from parents on both sides, I sense the worries, concerns and even fears of our parents. For example, parents who want us to mandate masks worry about the spread of the disease and their children getting ill. Parents who want to make their own decisions worry about the social/emotional growth and mental health that has taken a toll on their children. Neither side is wrong to worry or be fearful. I know that parents are strong in their opinions and convictions on the topic of masks, but this theme of worry and fear regardless of their stance, unites us. I'd like to share a few thoughts, key points and information about masks, at this point in time:

- As I reported at the School Board meeting, we have had many student activities in our schools over the past 2 months, including Summer Tutoring, Extended School Year for student groups, Open Gyms, and Academic Camps. These groups included students of all ages. We utilized the strategies from the past year and allowed parents to decide if their children wore masks. Some did and some did not. We had 0 known cases in our schools this summer. In talking with other districts and organizations, they, too, had an optional mask policy in their summer programs for students of all ages and had no known cases or spread in their schools.
- Last year at this time, we heard from many parents of students at Bellefonte Elementary School and Benner Elementary School in particular where there is no air conditioning.

They were concerned about their children wearing masks all day in sometimes stifling heat. We provided frequent mask breaks for the students and fans for more ventilation, but it was a challenge. And, we still have no air conditioning in these buildings as we start this school year.

- Our current Health and Safety Plan indicates that we will abide by any mandates that are issued from the PA DoH and PDE. It's interesting to note that these 2 state organizations that provide all oversight to schools and placed so many restrictions on schools last year will not mandate masks. They simply say the "CDC recommends.." This has added to the politicized opinions of all.
- In a recent survey conducted by the PA Superintendents Association, 89.6% of the 250 school districts that responded indicated that students and staff may voluntarily wear masks in school. With the exception of State College, no other districts in our Intermediate Unit are requiring masks, as of this writing.
- Last year, students were absolutely awesome about wearing masks. We had very few issues with the actual wearing of masks. Most students seemed to just see masks as a way of life. We did have some students who had a medical exemption from wearing masks and that was OK, too. If masks are mandated, I'm sure there will be medical exemptions again. It's interesting that there doesn't seem to be as much emphasis placed on the worries that some students cannot wear masks right now. Additionally, the current CDC guidance, in small print, indicates that if a student who is identified as a close contact was wearing a mask when exposed to a student who tests positive who was also wearing a mask when the exposure occurred, there are some actions a student may need to take, but there is no clear cut required quarantine. All of this being said, many students may want to wear masks.
- The district has purchased nearly 1000 N95, KN95, M95, and 3-5 ply masks, and we have more ordered. According to many media and medical reports, these types of masks fit more closely to the face and filter more particulates providing added protection for the persons wearing them. Parents who want the added protection for their child(ren) can request these masks for their children by contacting their building principal or nurse.
- At this time, we can follow CDC guidance and recommend that students and staff wear masks in our schools, but the decision rests with the parents/guardians. This is subject to change. We learned last year that plans can change rapidly and often.

### **Masks on buses**

Our Health and Safety Plan indicates that we will abide by any federal mandates as well. There is a federal mandate from the Department of Homeland Security/TSA that requires masks on all public transportation. There was a discussion about whether school buses really are public transportation, but there's been no definitive answer about that. After much deliberation and

advice from our attorneys, we will abide by the federal mandate and require masks on buses and school vans. Students who access our transportation must wear masks on buses and school vans.

### **The numbers**

Just a quick note about the case numbers. It is true they have risen in Centre County and in our two, district zip codes. But, compared to other parts of the nation or even to our own numbers from last spring, our new case numbers remain lower. For example, during the current reporting period (August 13-19), and according to the PA DoH dashboard, there were 16 new cases in 16823 and 10 in 16841. In previous reporting periods, the positivity rate has been below or near 5% which fits in a “low” transmission category. These statistics are far less than the outbreaks that we experienced in the winter and even in the spring. I do continue to keep track of the numbers and to analyze local data. As a side note, the PA DoH uses a different reporting system than the CDC which uses a rolling calendar count. And, the CDC designates counties as having low, moderate, substantial or high rates of community transmission now. A few months ago, “substantial” was defined as having more than 100 cases per 100,000 people. Now, “substantial” is defined as having 50-99 cases per 100,000. A new category of “high” is used to describe a county with more than 100 cases per 100,000. Centre County has been designated as having “substantial” community transmission for the past few weeks due to case numbers. The cases have climbed, but the wording isn’t the same as in the past.

Some parents have raised concerns that our case numbers may rise when the Penn State students return. To be honest, I expect they will. They did last year, too. But, we kept our focus on our own students and families and that worked so well.

### **Contact Tracing, Isolation, Quarantine**

We must do contact tracing and suggest quarantines to start this school year in the same manner that we did last year. “Close contacts” are still defined as persons who are within 6 feet of an infected person for more than 15 consecutive minutes. Last year, the PA DoH was overwhelmed and their information often lagged or was non-existent to aid in contact tracing and notifications. Our principals and nurses stand ready to assume some of those responsibilities again this year.

The difference is that there are new quarantine rules this year - how long, testing, etc. The PA DoH and the CDC guidelines are different from last year. Vaccination status, wearing a mask vs. not wearing a mask, early testing after exposure are some of the new variables. We are still working through this information, and I’ll share the new rules in a separate “chapter” and letter next week or our principals and nurses will send more concise information. Please note, though, that students who are vaccinated may not have to quarantine. Again, as I mentioned earlier, vaccinations are not required and do not need to be reported to us, but if a student is vaccinated, parents may want to report this status to their school nurse, just like other health related information. This could cut down on contact tracing time, if we are aware. But, again,

this is a parent's choice. As another side note, in the CDC guidelines, in small print, if a student is wearing a mask and is identified as a close contact to an infected person who is also wearing a mask, obviously the infected student needs to isolate, but the close contact does not need to quarantine. This is only for students, not staff. Yes, this is in direct opposition to what we did the entire year last year. As I said, the quarantine rules are very different from last year, and they are very confusing. We will send more information to parents.

### **Instructional Choices**

Looking at the student learning and growth data from last year, as well as considering students' social/emotional/mental health, we are planning to start this school year with two options for parents. At this point, we are offering full time, in person learning for students **or** enrollment in our district cyber school, the Bellefonte E-Learning Academy, aka BeLA. We asked parents to let us know if they would like to choose the BeLA option to start the year in a survey that was sent a few weeks ago. However, we know circumstances may change and parents may want to opt-in or opt-out of BeLA. Please email Dr. Garman (middle school and high school students) or Dr. Besch (elementary school students) if you would like to change your option.

### **Covid Testing Program**

Yesterday, the state released more information about a voluntary covid testing program that is available to school districts. A third-party vendor was hired by PDE to the tune of 87 million dollars to aid schools with testing and lessen the burden on our nurses. However, the information that superintendents received is unclear and raises many questions and concerns, in my opinion. Our district will not be opting into the program at this time. More information may be sent at a later date.

### **The Rest of this Summer and a Look Ahead to the 2021 - 2022 School Year**

School Begins for the 2021 - 2022 School Year on August 31, 2021. Here is a link to the Board approved school calendar for the 21-22 school year:

[https://www.basd.net/cms/lib/PA01001269/Centricity/Domain/12/2021\\_22%20School%20Calendar.pdf](https://www.basd.net/cms/lib/PA01001269/Centricity/Domain/12/2021_22%20School%20Calendar.pdf)

As we start the school year, we will be requesting assistance and input from parents/guardians/families/staff in four areas: the ARP ESSER Funds and Federal Programs expenditures, the district's Comprehensive Plan development, the district's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion team and the Rebranding initiative. More information about each committee and a survey will be sent to parents/guardians in the next week or so.

Please look for emails from me, the building principals or nurses for updates. I am planning to send my regular updates and letters in the coming school year. My goals continue to



be to keep parents/families informed, to be as transparent as possible at all times, and to do the best we can for *all* of our students. We will be taking one day at a time and face all of our challenges together again.

Again, I just want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your support, your patience and understanding and all you have done for our students over the past year and what you will continue to do into this new school year. The phrase “we are all in this together” can seem hollow, but it truly is what makes Bellefonte an amazing and awesome school district and community! I feel so very blessed to be part of this school district and community. I hope you and your family stay safe, healthy and well for the rest of this summer! ENJOY!

Sincerely,  
Tammie Burnaford  
Superintendent  
Bellefonte Area School District