



Bellefonte Area School District

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

August 30, 2021

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

We are just one day away from the start of the 2021 - 2022 school year. The excitement of the first day is growing and palpable in both students and staff. Tomorrow will be my 47th first day of school (13 as a student, 12 as an elementary teacher, 16 as a principal, 4 as an assistant superintendent, 1 as an interim superintendent). The excitement never wanes. I don't think I've ever slept well the night before the first day of school, and this year will be no exception, especially since this will be my first, first day of school as the superintendent of this most awesome school district.

This letter does not contain a lot of new information since my last letter on August 20, 2021. Many specific details can be found in that 9 page letter. We will get that letter posted to the district website for your reference, as well. I'd like to review and remind parents/guardians of a few items.

But to start...a heartfelt plea...

As I mentioned in my last letter, the divisiveness about masks continues to grip our nation, state and community. I am thankful that we are able to have civil discussions, and I appreciate the openness we can have without falling into the extreme negativity found elsewhere. Per CDC guidance, students and staff are strongly encouraged to wear masks indoors, but the parents may make the choice for their own children, as of right now.

I struggled into the night last night trying to find the right words that could unite our district. I'm not sure I can do so, but I just need to try to make some pleas. One of our greatest successes from last year was the partnerships that we formed with parents/guardians, staff and students. We asked parents to keep their children home from school if they were experiencing symptoms or were ill. They did unfalteringly, and we need that again this year. We asked parents/guardians to contact us immediately if their children tested positive for covid. They did in record time, and we need that again this year. Last year, students and staff were absolutely

awesome about wearing masks in school if they could, and about following all of the safety protocols we had in place.. All of our parents, students and staff took personal responsibility, as well as accepting responsibility for the greater good. We need that kind of understanding and support again this year. This is how we did, and can, keep our students and staff safe and in school.

Last year, we worked together to do what was best for all of **our** Bellefonte Area School District students. We focused all of our attention on **our** students, parents/guardians and families. 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 have so much faith in our parents, staff and students for this year, too.

Our BASD Proposed Health and Safety Plan and Updated Safety Protocols

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. The H/S Plan is posted on the district website. The administrative team has been working diligently on more safety protocols over the past several weeks, too. A review of some of the key points:

- 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 some mitigation/prevention strategies.
- Masks in Schools- Per CDC guidance and at this time, masks are strongly encouraged in all of our schools and district buildings. According to the Board-approved H/S Plan, at this time, masks will be at the parents’ discretion in schools. This may change if there is a significant surge or outbreak in our own local communities or schools or if there is a mandate issued by PDE, the PA Department of Health (PA DoH), CDC or by a governmental agency. We learned last year that plans can change rapidly and often. Parents will be notified if this status changes.
- The District purchased hundreds of N95, KN95, and M95c masks for students. Parents who would like any of these masks for their child should contact their school principal or nurse or their child’s teacher.
- Plexi-glass Desk Shields - Desk shields provide an added layer of protection. Parents who would like for their child to have a portable desk shield should contact their child’s principal or teacher.
- Vaccinations for students or staff will not be required. However, according to the new PA DoH quarantine rules, persons who are vaccinated may not be required to quarantine if identified as a “close contact.” Parents of students who are vaccinated may want to share this information with school nurses as a health information update.

- 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. However, the “rules” regarding quarantines have been revised this year by the PA DoH. For example, if a student who tests positive for covid is wearing a mask and the student who is identified as a close contact is wearing a mask, the student who is the close contact does not have to quarantine.

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. 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.

Contact Tracing, Isolation, Quarantine

Last week, we were notified by the PA DoH that schools must do their own contact tracing and self-reporting again this year. Quite frankly, we found we could not depend on the PA DoH last year, and we excelled at doing this on our own with our principals and nurses working tirelessly with parents. We are prepared to do so again this year, but we may need some patience as we try to navigate the new rules. More information was sent to the parents by the nurses and building principals last week and also will be available on the district website.

Students who are quarantined or isolated for an extended period of time will have the opportunity to connect to their teachers and classes remotely through Google Classroom like last year. More information will be sent by principals and teachers.

The numbers and other districts

Like last year, we will use our own case counts and community COVID-19 statistics to help inform our decisions. Centre County was moved to the “high” rate of transmission over the past week according to the CDC website. However, over the same time period a significant percentage of the new cases have been in the State College and University Park areas. As an example, in the last 3 days of this reporting period, there have been 4 new cases in both 16823 and 16841, but the case numbers in the State College zip codes have been well into the double digits. This is exactly how the data evolved last year at this time and into the school year. In fact, State College closed its schools for several weeks to start the school year last year due to the number of cases in those district areas. Additionally, over the past week, the Penns Valley Area School District had a significant outbreak within their high school athletic teams. In talking with the Superintendent from Penns Valley, the outbreak is what prompted the temporary masking in that district and was in line with their Health and Safety Plan. All last year, we kept our focus

on our own students and families and that worked so well for us. We will continue to use our own local zip code case counts, community statistics, and school-level data to inform our decisions.

I have been asked where I get the “numbers.” I have, and will continue to, get our case count numbers directly from the PA DoH Dashboard which is located on the PA DoH website. On September 1, 2020, I created a spreadsheet that includes daily case counts. I still maintain this spreadsheet. This summer, we again asked the PA DoH to give us more accurate case count data by giving us information based on municipality rather than zip code and details regarding age spans of positive cases. The PA DoH again refused to provide this data. Our 2 main zip codes (16823 and 16841) in the BASD also span other school districts (Bald Eagle Area and Keystone Central School District). We don’t know exactly where cases are in those 2 zip codes which makes our data more complicated, but it’s the only way to get at least close to our local numbers.

After school begins tomorrow, I will provide case count updates to parents at least weekly in weekly update letters, like last year.

A quick reminder

Free breakfast and free lunch will be available for all students again this school year!

I will be sending regular weekly letters and any necessary updates again this 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. And I cannot wait to see our students again in less than 24 hours!

Sincerely,
Tammie Burnaford
Superintendent
Bellefonte Area School District