



Bellefonte Area School District

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

June 4, 2021

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

WE DID IT!!!! Thank you, thank you, thank you for all of your support and help throughout this very challenging school year! We could not have done it without you!

A Look Back

I was going to do a whole analysis of all that we did to get through this year, but that would make this letter way too long. Overall, our students were able to be in-person more than any other 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. Just a few other highlights:

- We planned, changed plans, and then changed plans again all last summer trying to prepare for the opening of the school year. We asked parents to work with us and to choose a learning option for their own child’s circumstances. This was the first step in our amazing journey together and the partnerships we would need to get us through this school year.
- Centre County was designated as a county with a “substantial rate of transmission” in the early part of September. At that time, I was required to have a zoom meeting with the PA Department of Education (PDE) and the PA Department of Health (PA DoH). During every one of those meetings, PDE “strongly encouraged” us to move to a full remote option regardless of the number of positive cases identified in our local area by zip code. Some districts chose to do so. We stayed the course and kept our students in school, but

more importantly, we did a great job together keeping our students and staff safe. Our custodians, teachers, and all BASD staff embraced the challenges we were faced with and did everything they could to provide a safe learning environment for students and staff.

- Our first 2 positive cases were identified on Oct. 8, 2020. The words “contact tracing” were foreign to us, but quickly became one of our tools to stay in school when the PA DoH could not keep up with contacting families. Parents and staff were diligent in notifying our principals and administrators so that we could isolate an outbreak. And, our principals and administrators worked tirelessly to help students and families stay safe through early identification of cases.
- With a growing number of cases and districts like ours that did not shut down at PDEs urging, in late November, PDE developed plans that changed “recommendations” into “requirements.” As part of these plans, school district superintendents and Board presidents were required to sign and submit an “Attestation” form that mandated schools be shut down if a certain number of cases were identified in our schools. We no longer had the liberty to make our own decisions about in-person learning. As a result, 3 of our 6 schools (the High School, the Middle School and Marion-Walker Elementary School) were forced to close for periods of time due to the number of cases that counted according to the PDE mandates. At that time, we had no evidence of student-student, student-staff, staff-staff transmission. But, that did change this spring when we believe there may have been a few incidences of spread between staff or students in our schools or activities.
- PDE intended for the school closures to be for “deep cleaning” and “contact tracing,” but our custodians and staff were working very hard to keep every inch of our schools sanitized and safe all year. They were “deep cleaning” before deep cleaning was cool. In terms of the contact tracing, as soon as parents or staff let us know, we went to work on the contact tracing. We didn’t wait for the PA DoH (thank goodness, some families would still be waiting -lol). These 2 things provided even more safety for our students and staff.
- In the winter and beyond, we asked parents to partner with us to maintain safe school environments, and they certainly rose to the occasion. We are so very grateful. Thank you!
- Following a resurgence of positive cases in early spring, Centre County remained in the “substantial rate of community transmission” category until 3 weeks ago, and we continued to follow PDE guidelines.
- The Governor and the PA DoH announced that most restrictions would be lifted on May 31, 2021. However the PDE and the CDC required school districts to follow masking and social distancing guidelines for the remainder of the school year.
- And here we are, we’ve had 208 known cases of the coronavirus from Oct. 8, 2020 until today. This is roughly about 7% of our students and staff. While we don’t want anyone

in our district to become ill, only a few persons ended up in the hospital or were critically ill from the coronavirus. And, we are aware that many of our staff members, students, parents and families lost loved ones to the coronavirus outside of the district. That, alone, is very sad. We would like to express our sympathies to those who did lose loved ones over the past year or more.

- All of this information and the statistics indicate just how well we have done in working together this year.

Did we make some mistakes and take some missteps along the way this year? Sure. We are sorry that those things happened. But, please know that we did the best we could for our students. We truly tried to put students first. On a personal and side note, I can say that I lost a lot of sleep and NO decision was ever taken lightly. Thank you so much for your understanding, patience and support.

A Look Ahead to the 2021 - 2022 School Year

At this time, we do not know how the school year will begin or what exactly it will look like on the first day of school, August 31, 2021. We now know the new covid cases have plummeted in Centre County and in our 2 main zip codes, particularly over the past two weeks. It's impossible to know what our covid world will be like in August. The virus could be completely gone or negligible, or there could be new variants, or maybe somewhere in between or something no one can predict. If I had to guess, I'd guess that covid may become like many other transmissible diseases in our schools (ex: the "stomach bug," or strep throat, etc.), and we would exercise additional precautions (ex. cleaning) to lessen the spread, just as we did pre-pandemic. But, as a disclaimer, I'm not a great guesser or I'd be in Las Vegas (lol).

However, here's what we do know today:

- The Governor and the PA DoH announced that all mask mandates and social distancing requirements will be lifted for all PA residents by June 28th.
- As of right now, we will drop our restrictions in our schools by June 28th, as well. We do not know what those restrictions, if any, may look like in August. We know there could be families who are still unsure about sending their children to school, and some that feel fully confident about it. As we have done this entire year, we will work with parents to provide options and opportunities to meet the needs of all students and families. And, we will be completely transparent about our plans.
- The PA Department of Education will issue guidance, recommendations, and requirements for all PA school districts this summer. We want "normal" as much as anyone and will work to that end, as much as possible. We already know that we must complete some forms (ex: the Instructional Time Template and something like a revised/abbreviated Health and Safety Plan - PDE is supposed to send these to us soon)

regarding our planned reopening of schools and submit them to PDE for approval by the end of July. We will begin working on those in a few weeks, but we learned last year that PDE often changes the guidelines that we must follow.

- I'm not sure where the rumor came from, but there are no plans in our school district to require covid vaccines for any students. In fact, PDE even indicates that on the PDE website for all school districts.
- 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
- We are slated to receive substantial amounts of money from the federal government to help students with learning gaps (the state calls it "accelerated learning"). We are already working on some plans to help students when we return to school. For now, kids need to be kids. They, too, have worked hard and have had many challenges to face this year.

This Summer

All district and school offices will be closed to the public on Fridays this summer from June 11 - August 13, 2021. We are hoping that our staff can get a much-deserved vacation this summer, so we won't always have coverage on Fridays. The offices will be open Monday - Thursday mainly from 8:00 AM - 2:30 PM unless otherwise posted. You can call the school office or email the building principal this summer if you have any questions or need more information, too.

Please look for emails from me or postings on our website this summer for updates. There also may be updates on our website or the PDE website throughout the summer. We are going to take a few weeks to catch our breath and relax a bit, but we will do our best to keep you well informed as we get closer to the start of school.

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 this past year. Bellefonte is truly an amazing and awesome school district and community because of you! 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 this summer! ENJOY!

Sincerely,
Tammie Burnaford
Superintendent
Bellefonte Area School District

