



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

September 13, 2021

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

We are back!! It's been so exciting to have our students in our schools! This is our first full week of school, and I'm sure it will be a fantastic five days!

Since the Secretary of Health issued the Order, I've spent hours on the phone with attorneys and reading and trying to interpret all of the information coming from the PA Department of Education (PDE) and the PA Department of Health (PA DoH). In this update letter, I just want to try to unite our district in the best interest of **all** students, to keep **all** students and staff as safe as possible, and to keep our students in school. I don't want to incite any more anger or negativity. I continue to struggle with finding the right words that can unite us rather than divide us more in an emotionally and politically charged environment. I apologize for not getting a letter out sooner, but this is what has kept me from continuing my usual letters and has kept me from sleeping.

A Reflection

First some personal reflections - In my nearly 35 year career in education, this past week has been one of the most difficult and challenging. But, I spent Saturday morning watching the 9/11 tributes and memorials. The speeches at each memorial were compelling. Thinking about the heroes of Flight 93 and the words of a passenger named Todd Beamer made me think (his story was shared on social media this weekend). I was struck by the memories and messages that are still prevalent today. I realize there is no real comparison or connection to what happened on that horrific day 20 years ago to our world today. But, it does make one think and reflect. Most adults remember where they were on September 11, 2011. Where were you? I was a first year principal at Wingate Elementary School trying to provide comfort and assurance for our students and staff in the times of uncertainty and fear. In the days that followed the attacks, we became united as a nation and as a community. We embraced with empathy and care

for all. Flash forward 20 years. I'm in my first full year of being a superintendent, only a few days into the new school year, and I again find myself trying to find the right words to comfort, assure and unite our school community family. I haven't sent my usual letter to parents and staff this week because of that struggle, and I have found that in the volatile world we are living in, I must check every word and consult an attorney at every move while mustering the courage to lead. We are trying to navigate extremely difficult times, to keep **all** staff and students safe, and to meet the diverse and sometimes competing needs of **all** of our students.. On behalf of the district, I apologize if your child had a negative experience at school with regards to that mission over this week. Please know our teachers, administrators and staff are working their hearts out to try to keep **all** students safe in school and to provide the best education possible in these challenging times. They are heroes in today's terms.

The Role of the PA Department of Education (PDE)

PDE is the governing body of all public schools in PA. PDE often issues clarifying information, guidance and creates all regulations and requirements for schools. As it has been during this entire pandemic, PDE does change course and often shares information with schools late on a Friday afternoon. As an example, on Friday, September 3, 2021 at 4:07 PM, superintendents were sent updated information through a FAQ page on the PDE website. This information explained what schools should do to protect the safety of other students and staff in a classroom when there are students with approved mask exceptions in the classroom, and a list of additional mitigation/prevention strategies was provided. This was sent to us over the long weekend before the first day that the Order became effective. As another example, on Friday, Sept 10, 2021, PDE sent superintendents information about what actions PDE will take if a School Board chooses to blatantly disregard the entire Secretary of Health's Order of August 31, 2021. The proposed sanctions are very severe for school personnel, board members and the school district, if the board chooses to completely ignore the Order. (a Board member from Bald Eagle shared information from his perspective on their district website, if you are interested). We will continue to monitor, to adapt, and to share information that we get from PDE. As a side note, there is a wealth of information on the PA DoH, PDE and CDC websites if you'd like to read more.

The PA DoH Order

As explained in my letter on September 2, 2021, as a district, we will comply, implement and enforce the Secretary of Health's Order, as written - "Each teacher, child/student, staff, or visitor working, attending, or visiting a School Entity shall wear a face covering indoors, regardless of vaccination status, except as set forth in Section 3 of the Order." Section 3 of the Order allows for medical or mental health exceptions for those students who meet the requirement. PDE requires us to follow our usual process for determining reasonable

accommodations as outlined in something called our 504 process. Section 504 and IDEA are federal laws. Information on the PDE website indicates that:

“any exception be in accordance with eligibility under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act or IDEA for such medical or mental health condition or disability. School entities should follow their established processes for determining student eligibility under those laws, including any medical documentation that they would normally require.”

This week we will begin working through each request for an exception as we would do in the 504 process. Please note that additional medical documentation may be necessary within the 504 process, as our usual practice has been. Also please note that this is the legal advice that was given to us by our attorney as we try to understand and comply with all aspects of the Order and federal law.

Case Numbers

I haven't reported case numbers in our district for the first 2 weeks of school, but I'll try to identify and explain our cases since school started and cases as of today. In those first two weeks, we were informed of a total of 12 cases since our first day of school on August 31st. At first, that may sound like a lot, but we were notified of most of the cases just prior to or over the long Labor Day weekend. This complicated reporting and contact tracing. Of the 12 cases, 8 are students and 4 are staff members. By building, 2 were at Marion-Walker (1 student, 1 staff), 4 were at the Middle School (3 students, 1 staff), and 6 were at the High School (4 students, 2 staff). Also, like last year, note that some of the cases are related and in the same family. These 12 cases stretch over the past 13 days, so some of the persons have recovered, and some of the isolations/quarantines have concluded.

These current case numbers can be compared with what we experienced over a similar 14 day period in the early outbreaks last fall and what we had in the late spring. However, the difference this year is that the PA DoH and PDE are not using any of the same metrics as last year to determine how schools should handle the case numbers. The PA DoH and the CDC have some guidelines that have a much higher threshold than last year (see the next section). But, we will continue to carefully monitor outbreaks and consult with the DoH to determine the best path forward. I'd also like to add that overall, the number of quarantines has been fairly minimal, particularly this week due to vaccination status and mask wearing.

Late addition notification: Yesterday, we were notified of 3 new cases, all are students, and all are at the Marion-Walker Elementary School (MWE). There appears to be no connection between these 3 cases at school. Additional prevention/mitigation strategies will be put in place at MWE. Mrs. Krisch, the principal at Marion-Walker, sent more information to all of the parents of students at MWE last evening.

We can never know for 100% certainty where a person contracted the virus, but like last year, it does not appear that the virus has been spread in our schools at this time. In several cases, a family member tested positive and/or exposure may have occurred in an activity outside our schools.

From this point forward, I'll send case number updates on Fridays and/or Mondays, even if it's just a notice and not a full letter.

Do we have to close schools if there is an outbreak?

As mentioned, and at this time, there are no clear cut numbers and thresholds for closing classrooms or buildings this year. Last year, we were required to close for a certain period of time based on the number of cases in a school building over a 14 day rolling calendar period. Those requirements were established by PDE. This year, the only guidance we have been given from the PA DoH is in terms of "outbreak containment." The thresholds for a full 14 day closure seem very high compared to last year. This is what was shared by the DoH in an August 11, 2021 webinar and by a Client Alert from our attorneys on August 17, 2021:

If schools are experiencing an outbreak, they are encouraged to reach out to their local health department for guidance, and, if needed, the DOH will work with schools to preserve safe inperson learning. However, school closures may still occur if deemed necessary. The guidance presents the following closure matrix where the DOH may recommend a maximum 14-day suspension of in-person leaning if the following criteria are met:

- *5% of students/staff confirmed cases in 14-day window:
 - Small school (<500 staff & students): 25 case threshold*
 - Medium school (500-900 staff & students): 25-45 case threshold*
 - Large school (900+ staff & students): 45+ case threshold OR**
- *3 simultaneous classroom and/or core group outbreaks: Transmission between 2 or more students or students/staff/teachers without other identified epidemiological links in 3 or more classrooms and/or core groups (i.e. teams, band).*

The guidance provides no further explanation so schools are cautioned to consult the DOH, county or municipal health departments when it remains unclear from whom, when, or where the transmission occurred. The guidance also indicates that schools are permitted to consider short-term closures for staffing shortages, student quarantines that become disruptive, or monitoring close cases. The short term closures could impact classrooms, sections of a school or an entire school. We have been working closely with the PA DoH for the past year and will continue to consult with our contacts at the PA DoH as indicated.

Special Meeting/Work Session of the Board of Directors

One of the district-wide subjects that was moved to the back burner during this pandemic is the consideration of new or renovated elementary school buildings. Before the pandemic, the Board and Dr. Saylor created a building project committee and began the process of looking at how we may be able to improve the physical plant of the elementary buildings. “Listening meetings” were held in each of the elementary schools back in the spring of 2019, and the Board followed up with many discussions into the 19-20 school year. More information about the steps that had been taken and the information that had been presented is on the district website at the following link: <https://www.basd.net/newelem>

The Board of Directors recently agreed to move forward with the consideration of new or renovated elementary schools. A special meeting of the Board will be held this Tuesday, September 14, 2021 in the Bellefonte Area Middle School Cafeteria at 7:00 PM. The purpose of this work session is to review the previous information and process and to hear a presentation from Hunt Engineers regarding possible steps forward. This is a special work session of the Board. As such, the Elementary project is the only topic of discussion and no votes will be taken. The Board will be determining next steps which will include seeking community input. Tuesday night’s Board work session will be recorded by CNET and will be available on the district webpage next week.

Some final thoughts in this letter....

My goals continue to be to keep parents/families informed, to be as transparent as possible, and to do the best we can for *all* of our students. I believe that we have and can continue to work together as one united, outstanding school community. Like last year, there are a few ways we can combat the virus together. We ask parents to keep their students home if they are sick or experiencing covid-like symptoms, and we ask parents to notify their child’s building principals, as soon as possible, if their child tests positive.

I just want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your support, your patience and understanding as we try to navigate these unprecedented times and for all you've done for our students in the past, during these first 2 weeks of school, and for what you will continue to do into this new school 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 and have a great week!

Sincerely,
Tammie Burnaford
Superintendent
Bellefonte Area School District