



**Bellefonte Area
School District**

Bellefonte Area School District

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**Mrs. Tammie L. Burnaford, Superintendent
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Inspiring and Preparing Today's Learners to Embrace Tomorrow's Challenges

April 6, 2021

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

Happy Tuesday! I sincerely hope that you were able to enjoy some of your time over the long weekend with family, loved ones and friends. The weather has been beautiful! When I think of where we were last year at this time, I appreciate the beauty of this spring even more.

As I mentioned in last week's letter, we are continuing to see an uptick in cases in the district, as well as in the county and in the state. With the Easter holiday and the easing of restrictions, the number of cases in our district could rise even farther. We are urging parents to keep students home if they are exhibiting covid-like symptoms or if they may have been exposed to a positive case of the coronavirus. We need to be vigilant in our safe practices in order to curb the spread of the virus. Late last week, the PA Department of Education (PDE) and the PA Department of Health (PA DoH) released new guidelines for schools. A summary of those changes is also included in this week's letter.

BASD Case Count Update

Since my letter and report on Monday, March 29, we received notification of 8 new cases, and possibly one more new case, in our district, as follows:

- Two students at Benner Elementary School tested positive for the coronavirus early last week. The students were in school while infectious, so the cases do count by PDE guidelines. Mr. Vancas worked on the contact tracing and the parents of all students who may have been close contacts were notified last week.
- A staff member who works at Benner Elementary also tested positive for the coronavirus last week. The staff member was in school while infectious, so the case does count by PDE guidelines. Mr. Vancas worked on the contact tracing, but there were very few to

no close contacts identified. Please note that there is no known connection between any of the recent cases at Benner Elementary.

- The rest of the new, known district cases involve 4 high school students and 1 staff member. Keeping track of the new cases has been somewhat challenging due to late notifications and the long break. To the best of our knowledge, here's what we know, as of today:
 - ❑ 2 unrelated, high school students tested positive for the coronavirus early last week. Both students were in school while infectious, and both cases count by PDE guidelines. Parents of all students who may have been close contacts to these students were notified by Mrs. Michaels and Mr. Fedisson last week.
 - ❑ 2 unrelated, high school students tested positive for the coronavirus, but were not in school while infectious. The cases do not count by PDE guidelines, and no contact tracing was necessary..
 - ❑ A high school staff member tested positive for the coronavirus early last week and was in school while infectious. However, there were no close contacts identified for the staff member, so no contact tracing occurred.
 - ❑ Late yesterday, Mr. Fedisson received notification of another possible, positive case for a high school student, but the information was not yet confirmed as of this letter. However, if the test is positive, the case will not count and no contact tracing will be necessary. The student has not been in school for at least a week.

Just to refresh your memory, per the PA Department of Education (PDE) mandates, we must keep track of the number of active cases in each district school based on a 14 day rolling calendar. Cases count in the rolling 14 day calendar only if the student/staff member was physically present in the building while infectious. Active cases move in and out of the 14 day window based on the date of symptom onset or a positive case. The case counts and surrounding circumstances are discussed with the PA Department of Health (DoH) after each new case is identified, and we are given recommendations about possible closures, if needed. The PDE guidelines for closures changed last week and are summarized in the next section of this letter. In terms of the most recent cases, we have been in touch with the DoH over the past week and have been following the DoH guidance.

Building	Total number of known, new cases since 3/29	*Since 3/29, the number of new cases that do “count” - students/staff that have been physically present in the building while infectious
High School	5 (4 students, 1 staff member) (possibly one more student case)	3
Middle School	0	0
Bellefonte Elem.	0	0
Benner Elem.	3 (2 students, 1 staff member)	3
Marion-Walker Elem.	0	0
Pleasant Gap Elem.	0	0
BeLA	0	0

Revisions to PDE Guidelines for Recommendations on Handling Covid Cases in Schools

On March 30, 2021, PDE issued new Recommendations for Pre-K to 12 Schools Following Identification of a Case(s) of COVID-19. These changes took effect yesterday and significantly alter how closures are handled when an outbreak occurs in our schools. Specifically, PDE shortened the length of potential closures based on the number of new cases in a school’s 14-day calendar, taking into account the size of school and the county designation for community transmission.

As an example for our district, Centre County is still in the substantial rate of community transmission category, and our high school and middle school are considered as “medium sized” by PDE standards. In the past, if we had 4-6 new cases in a 14 day rolling calendar at the high

school or middle school, we may have had to close schools for 3-7 days upon recommendation from the PA DoH. In the new guidelines, but under the same conditions, the high school or middle school will only need to close for 2-3 days upon PA DoH recommendation. Additionally, in the past, if our high school or middle school had 7 or more cases that counted in the 14 day rolling calendar, the buildings may have had a mandatory 14 day closure from the PA DoH. In the new guidelines, under the same conditions, the high school or middle school may need to close for only 5 days based on the recommendation from the PA DoH. More details and a lot more information about these PDE changes can be found on the PDE website at: <https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/SchoolReopeningGuidance/ReopeningPreKto12/PublicHealthGuidance/Pages/SchoolClosureRecommendations.aspx>

PA DoH Adopts CDC Guidelines and Revises Social Distancing Requirements in Schools

Last week, the PA DoH also issued new guidance for schools, particularly for Social and Physical Distancing requirements. The new parameters for classrooms and other instructional spaces include:

- Classrooms - In elementary schools, students should be at least 3 feet apart, regardless of the community transmission level. In middle and high schools, students should be at least 3 feet apart in areas of low and moderate community transmission. In areas of substantial community transmission, middle and high school students should be 6 feet apart to the maximum extent feasible. (Centre County is currently in the substantial designation)
- Outside the Classrooms - Maintain 6 feet of distance to the maximum extent feasible in all settings outside of the classroom and other instructional spaces including: when masks can't be worn, such as when eating.

Importantly, these new Distancing Guidelines do not apply in Contact Tracing. According to the PA DoH:

“Regardless of the distance between students in classrooms and instructional spaces, the definition of close contacts does not change. Close contacts are individuals who have been exposed (within 6 feet distance for at least 15 consecutive minutes) to someone who is a case during the infectious period. For example, students sitting less than 6 feet from a person diagnosed with COVID-19 for a total of 15 minutes or more should quarantine at home and be referred for testing See DOH Health Alert Network (HAN) 533 for more information on determining a close contact.”

More information can be found on the various web pages for the PA DoH.

Other Reminders

Parents should continue to notify building principals if their child(ren) tests positive for the coronavirus as soon as possible, so that we can provide information for parents and we can stay on top of any contact tracing that may need to occur.. The best way to get in touch with the building principal in the evenings, on the weekends or off times is via email, as our principals check email regularly even during the evening hours and on weekends. The quick notifications really have helped our administrators to act quickly to begin contact tracing and to lessen the spread of the disease over the past 6 months.

Of course, the PDE mandates, the DoH directives, increases in new cases or unforeseen issues can happen rapidly, and we may need to change our plans at a moment's notice. The uptick in cases is concerning. If closures must occur, all other school-related activities and athletic events will be postponed, as well, during any closure. If any of this latest information changes or our status must change, we will let you know as soon as possible.

Again, we are urging everyone in our school community to continue to follow the guidelines and practices that can help lessen the spread of the virus. This includes washing hands frequently, wearing masks, social distancing and practicing personal responsibility. Now, as much as ever, we need to keep up the great work in order to keep our students, staff and community safe and healthy. Please use good judgement and practice safety at all times, so that we can return to normal.

I hope you and your family stays safe, healthy and well! Best wishes for a fabulous week ahead!

Sincerely,
Tammie Burnaford
Superintendent
Bellefonte Area School District