



**Bellefonte Area
School District**

Bellefonte Area School District

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

Nov. 9, 2020

Dear Bellefonte Area School District families, staff and community:

Happy Monday! What beautiful weather we are having! Before I share our usual reports, I'd like to address one of the rumors that was swirling around on Friday. The rumor suggested that Gov. Wolf would be closing all PA schools indefinitely due to the rise in positive COVID cases in Pennsylvania. Of course, this caused a great deal of concern, and many people were inquiring about the rumor. I happened to be in a zoom meeting with the PA Superintendents' Association on Friday, so I asked if there was any truth to the rumors during the zoom. I also reached out to the director of our Central Intermediate Unit who has weekly meetings at the state level, and Senator Corman. From all responses and fronts, the stories of impending school closures were simply false rumors. While we have no way of knowing what each day will bring, I will do my best to quell rumors and bring timely and accurate information to you.

As usual, first I'd like to share some information about some positive COVID-19 cases that were identified in our school district in the past week. By the end of last week, we received notification that there were three, new positive cases at Benner Elementary School. These three cases are all from the same family, and there was very little close contact with students or staff at Benner. In addition, as explained in last week's letter, there was one positive case at Pleasant Gap, but no students or staff were quarantined in that case. In both elementary schools, the parents kept the students home when they weren't feeling well, and all safety protocols were strictly followed at the schools. I believe it's this type of teamwork in all facets of our school community that has kept the virus from spreading within the schools, between students and/or staff. As of this writing, the four elementary cases (one from last week at PGE and the newest, three family members at Benner) are the only active cases in the entire district. All other previous cases have passed the 14 day recovery or quarantine periods.

At the local level, there was a decrease in the number of positive cases in the 16823 zip code last week, as compared to the previous reporting period. In the past seven day, the PA Department of Health (DOH) reporting period (Friday, Oct. 30 - Thursday, Nov. 5), the number of new positive cases in the 16823 zip code dropped to 25, down from the all-time high of 39 in the prior reporting period. There were four new cases in the 16841 zip code. Perhaps, more importantly, it seems unlikely that the downward trend will be sustained in this next reporting period. Since Friday, there have been 28 new cases in the 16823 zip code alone. As a reminder, these two zip codes also span two other school districts, and it's very hard to tell where these cases are in our community. We know there are outbreaks in several establishments within the 16823 zip code. The number of positive cases and the number of tests hit record numbers in the state over the past week, as well.

In terms of the county-level data, the number of positive cases in Centre County rose during this reporting period. While Centre County is no longer leading the state in positive cases per 100,000 or positivity rate, there are now at least 37 other counties in Pennsylvania that will be determined to have a "substantial rate of community transmission." As mentioned, on a state and national level, there seems to be more testing and a surge in positive cases in recent days and weeks, as well.

In terms of information, I'd like to explain what our process looks like for combating the coronavirus as it arises in our district now. From the minute a parent or staff member notifies a building principal or district administrator that someone in our district has tested positive for the virus, we spring into action. This early notice from parents or staff allows us to get ahead of the potential spread because the PA DOH information often lags by at least a few days, especially with the increase in cases in PA during recent weeks. Karen Krisch, the principal at Marion-Walker and our district pandemic coordinator, has built relationships and worked closely with our local DOH representative and leaders within the state DOH. After a new case has been identified, Mrs. Krisch works with the building principals and other district administrators to begin contact tracing and to predict tentative quarantining dates. Using the guidelines set forth by the DOH, our principals contact at least some of the students or staff members who may have been *potentially* a close contact of an infected person. We notify those persons and ask them to begin their quarantine. We know that the DOH is very overwhelmed, especially in recent weeks, and sometimes does not reach out to the potential close contacts for several days. Ultimately, only the DOH can interview the potential close contacts and issue quarantines, but we are trying to be proactive to stop any spread that could occur in the schools. Of course, we also continue to deep clean, sanitize and disinfect every area of our schools, buses and vans on a daily basis, so that the virus is eliminated on any surfaces. In short, our main goals are to try to protect the privacy of our students and staff, to mitigate the spread of the virus, and to maintain the safest schools possible.

As the local, state and national positive cases are rising, we will continue to closely monitor the data and our schools. We will keep our schools open as long as we can safely do so. We asked that parents/guardians consider contingency plans for their children in the event we may need to close one or more schools for a period of time. However, as of this writing, we are not planning to move to full remote learning in any of our schools yet or at this time. Of course, changes can come rapidly, and we may need to change our plans at a moment's notice. If any of this latest information changes or our status must change, we will let you know as soon as possible.

Again, we encourage 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 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, even if the number of new cases rises in our zip code, county and state.

And, once again, thank you so much for all you do!

Sincerely,
Tammie Burnaford
Interim Superintendent
Bellefonte Area School District