



**Bellefonte Area
School District**

Bellefonte Area School District

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

Dec. 11, 2020

Dear Bellefonte Area School District families, staff and community:

Happy Friday! I'd like to provide an update for our status and let you know about some changes that will pertain to the Middle School and then to the whole district. I apologize for the length of this letter but I do have a lot of information and some very important updates to share.

What is a case that counts in the PDE orders?

You may recall that last week I shared that the Pa Department of Health and the PA Department of Education issued new mandates and orders regarding how schools can operate. In the new orders and according to the required Attestation form, all school districts are required to follow the PDE chart, Recommendations for Schools Following Identification of Positive Case(s) of COVID-19. More information about this can be found on PDE's website. The PDE chart includes recommendations for schools based on the size of the school (number of students) and number of positive cases in a school during a 14 rolling, calendar time period. I did my best to try to explain what counts as a case and how all of this new information would actually work in our school settings. I know it's all so confusing. Earlier this week, PDE provided further clarification about what counts as an active case in the 14 day rolling calendar through a new FAQ document that can be found here:

<https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/SchoolReopeningGuidance/ReopeningPreKto12/PublicHealthGuidance/Pages/SchoolClosureRecommendations.aspx#faqs>

Specifically, on the PDE website, PDE defines a case that counts as:

“The case count for a school building includes only individuals (students or staff) with a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19 *who were physically present* in the school setting while infectious, including, but not limited to, instruction, work, sports, or extracurricular activities.” So, I will be reporting cases based on whether they “count” according to this definition, but I’ll also include the total number of new cases in the district. The 14 day rolling calendar adds another layer to whether a school should close for a period of time. Just as a concrete example, if a student or staff member has symptoms and tests positive on December 8th and is in school that day, the case would “count” and the 14 day rolling calendar for that case would be Dec. 8-21. Keep in mind that the PDE, 14 day rolling calendar is an entirely different rule than the DoH rules for isolation and quarantine which were recently reduced by the DoH. In order to give parents, families, and staff the most up to date counts, I will be sending more frequent notifications, probably on Friday each week, and then on Monday in my regular letter. So, since I last reported in Monday’s letter, here is a list of the known cases since my letter on Monday.

Building	Total number of known, new cases since 12/7	*Number of cases that now “count” - students/staff that have been physically present in the building while infectious
High School	5 (4 students, 1 staff)	0
Middle School	4 (all students)	3
Bellefonte Elem.	0	0
Benner Elem.	1 (student)	1
Marion-Walker	0	0
Pleasant Gap	0	0
BeLA	1	0

Active cases move in and out of the 14 day window based on the date of symptom onset or a positive case. This chart shows the new cases since Monday, and the number of cases since Monday that “count.” If you look closely at this chart, you will see that we have had 11 new cases since Monday, but only 4 of those cases were in school. This means that students who are

staying home while ill, voluntarily quarantining or doing remote learning have helped us greatly! Thank you so much!!

Also, I'd like to note, of course, parents have been and will be notified if their children have been identified as a close contact as soon as possible after a new case is identified, just as we have been doing. And, it bears repeating that all areas of our buildings and transportation (buses and vans), are thoroughly cleaned and disinfected daily. We do extra deep cleaning, as well. Most importantly, to date, we still have no known cases that have been transmitted within our schools, no known transmission between students or staff while in school.

Change in status for the Bellefonte Area Middle School (BAMS) only

This brings us to our issue and case count at the middle school, as of today. Currently, we have 3 active cases in the 14 day rolling calendar for the middle school. We want to give parents as much notice as possible, so Mrs. Garman sent information out to the parents of Middle School students this afternoon. Due to rising and anticipated cases that may be identified as early as tomorrow, we have made the decision in collaboration with the Department of Health to move the middle school to remote learning on Monday, Dec. 14 and Dec. 15. The Middle School will be able to reopen for in-person learning on Wednesday, Dec. 16. We know this is not ideal for our students, but it's being done out of an abundance of caution and with a desire to have students in school as much as possible. As a side note, case counts reset to 0 after a closure.

Entire District going to fully remote learning on Dec. 21 and 22

More importantly, after much thought, deliberation, consideration and discussion, we are going to go to remote learning in all of our BASD buildings on Dec. 21 and 22. I know that I have said that we would stay the course and do the best we can to keep students in our schools. But, this plan actually will help us get them back in school more quickly while continuing to provide a safe and healthy learning environment in our schools. While we do not know what the next week will bring in terms of new cases, there are a lot of really good reasons for going remote just on those 2 days, Dec 21 and 22. One of the biggest advantages is that if our last in-person school day is Dec. 18th, then we will have a full 14 day window over the break. Barring any complications or other declarations, we should be able to come back confidently on Jan. 4th with a clean slate and very clean buildings. As I've said many times and in my letter on Nov. 2, we don't want to spread the disease, and we really don't want anyone to become sick with this virus. On the other hand, we do want to keep our students in our schools because we know that's what is best for them academically, physically, socially and emotionally. We know

that there are grave concerns for our students who have shown or will show signs of depression and anxiety, students and families who may have food or shelter concerns, or students who may not have adult support for virtual education at home, etc., if we close schools. We know parents need to work to support their families; we know some of our parents and families worry constantly about what school closure may mean for them. But, this is what has led to this decision for Dec. 21 and 22. If we close on those 2 days, barring any complications from the Governor, PDE or the PA DoH or unforeseen circumstances, we can confidently return to school, full time on Jan. 4th. I know this may create hardship for parents on those 2 days, and I'm truly sorry. But, in the long run, we have great hopes that we will be able to get our students back in our schools more quickly in January and resume the very successful and safe practices that we have accomplished together thus far, so that we can provide the best educational environment while keeping our students and staff healthy.

All BASD students will be learning virtually on Dec. 21 and 22. While the teachers and students have been preparing and practicing for remote instruction since August, teachers will work with students next week, so they are even more prepared to engage in remote learning on Dec. 21 and 22. Principals and teachers may send more information about plans for those 2 days next week. I'll also include some more information in my Monday letter.

And in January

On November 25, I sent information about the Thanksgiving holiday. I'd like to share the same information, as it also pertains to the Winter/Christmas break:

The number of rising cases across the US, PA and our county can be alarming. There is a real fear that this holiday, too, will increase the rapid spreading of covid19 through travel, large gatherings, etc. This fear is what is driving some school districts to close through a 14 day period, or even longer, after the break. And, this is where we need the most help from parents. To be clear, I would never discourage our families from getting together. I would never try to tell people what to do in their own private lives. I understand the importance of being with family maybe more than most this holiday season. My mother passed away 7 days before Christmas in 2016, and my father passed away in February this year, so this will be our first Christmas without both our parents. The love and support of one's family is one of the most precious gifts we have and to not celebrate that time with family is very difficult even in the pandemic. I can't imagine how some families are making these hard choices right now. And, now the big favor....again, I'm asking parents to voluntarily quarantine their students if they have any concerns that they could have been exposed to the disease in any way over this holiday period. In addition, parents who have concerns about their students returning to school with the rising number of cases or are feeling uncomfortable with the return may also voluntarily

quarantine their children or just continue the voluntary quarantine from the past few weeks.. Students will be able to login to their own classes, follow their own schedules and connect with their teachers virtually. If parents choose to quarantine or continue to quarantine their children instead of returning to school on Jan. 4th, they simply need to send a note to their child's school indicating that they will be quarantining or continuing quarantining and learning virtually.

I fully believe that our working together like this after Thanksgiving has helped us tremendously in keeping our students in school, but also provided an option for students to participate virtually. We have been able to provide at least a little more social distancing in some areas, and we have had fewer quarantines of close contacts for the few cases we have had. This partnership and parent cooperation has been simply fantastic. We are where we are today due to the consideration and support of our parents and families. I have nothing but the deepest gratitude and appreciation for all that parents have done over the past few weeks and all school year!

Looking ahead, we will be asking parents to re-select the learning option for their students for the second semester which begins on January 19th. We will be sending a lot more information about this re-selection next week and during the first week of January. In short, there will be four options as we start the second semester. We will have the same three we had the first semester - full time in person 5 days, hybrid (2 days in, 3 days remote), and BeLA. But, we will be adding a full time virtual option where students will be learning virtually through our own teachers and classes, much like some have been doing during the recent quarantines and past few weeks. As I said, there's a lot more information that will be sent about this. I just wanted to mention what is on the horizon.

I warned that this letter would be very long. Thanks for hanging in to the end. As a recap, the Middle School will be in remote learning on Dec. 14 and 15 and reopen on Dec. 16. Barring any surge in cases in the schools, the high school and all 4 elementary schools will stay the course next week, Dec. 14 - 18. The entire district will move to remote learning on Dec. 21 and 22. But, our plan is to return to teaching and learning, as we have been doing, on Jan. 4, in person or remotely for those students who are quarantining. 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. I also will send my Monday letter, as usual, with more information and updates.

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, 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.

Sincerely,
Tammie Burnaford
Interim Superintendent
Bellefonte Area School District