



**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

March 1, 2021

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

Happy Monday! It seems hard to believe that it's already March, and we have only 3 months of school left this year. March 1st also brings a little controversy in my house. My husband, Bill, was born on Feb. 29th, so he only has a birthday every four years. I think he should only celebrate and get gifts every four years. He seems to think I should be showering him with gifts today, March 1st (the day after Feb. 28th). Anyway, I digress, but it's just so nice to think about something abnormal other than the coronavirus all of the time. Today's letter includes case count information and new information from PDE about standardized tests.

BASD Case Count Update

Since my letter and report on Friday, Feb. 26th, we did not receive notification of any new cases in our schools or district. If you recall, our current active case count for all buildings is 0. We have no known cases for students or staff in our district. The number of cases has been dropping in Centre County and in our two main zip codes, 16823 and 16841. But, we are certainly not out of the woods yet. We must maintain our safe practices and not drop our guards.

I mentioned in a prior letter that I still track the numbers for Centre County and our main zip codes. To compare, our most recent counts are similar to the numbers of new cases that we had in late October and early November. For example, during the reporting week of Oct. 30th, we had 39 new cases in the 16823 zip code. During the reporting week of Feb. 19th, there were 41 new cases. To compare the number of Centre County cases during those same periods, there were 237 new cases during the Oct. 30th reporting period and 317 new cases during the Feb. 19th time period. The numbers aren't exactly close, but it's important to note that in terms of county designations, Centre County remains in the "substantial" rate of transmission designation

now, as we were in the fall. Hopefully, with continued safe practices and the increased availability of the vaccine, we will see our numbers continue to decline.

I'd also like to add one final note about numbers and transmission. To date, we still have no known transmission of the virus within our schools or district. This is a true testament to the outstanding work we have done together to keep our students and staff safe while in school. We can't thank you enough for all of your help and support! And we couldn't be prouder of our students who have worn masks and done all that we asked to be safe!

The Latest from PDE and Standardized Tests for the 20-21 School Year

First some background...the US Dept of Education (USDE) and the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to give standardized tests in certain grade levels and subject areas. In accordance, the PA Dept of Education (PDE) requires that all public schools administer PSSA Reading/Writing and Math tests to all students in grades 3 through 8 every spring. Additionally, schools must give the PSSA science tests to every 4th and 8th grade student each spring. The Keystone Exams must be given to students as they complete the required courses of Algebra 1, Biology and Literature.

When schools were closed last spring, our PDE applied for and was granted a waiver from the USDE to forego the PSSA tests and Keystone exams. We could not and did not give the exams. Since then, our schools were closed for the final 3 months of the 19-20 school year, and the pandemic has impacted every facet of our lives. The impact to the education and well being of our students has been immeasurable. To us, there seems to be no legitimate reason for administering the PSSA and Keystone exams for this school year, as well. Many of our students still have learning gaps. Some of our students are learning virtually for many reasons including health concerns of in person learning. The social and emotional stress on our students during this pandemic continues.

With the change in administration at the federal level, there was some hope that the USDE would again issue waivers to states for standardized testing this year. That has not happened. So, late last week, our PDE issued guidance on administering the PSSA and Keystone exams. Yesterday, I received the following email from Matt Stem, the Deputy Secretary of Education at PDE:

Dear Colleague,

Earlier this week, [I shared PDE's draft communication to the United States Department of Education \(USDE\)](#) with you, which outlined our proposed approach to Federally-required assessment administration for the 2020-21 school year.

Last night, [PDE submitted an official letter to the USDE, informing the agency that Pennsylvania's local education agencies will have the option to postpone academic achievement and English learner proficiency tests until fall 2021.](#) This decision, which does not require waiver

approval from USDE, allows Pennsylvania to comply with federal law, ensures that assessment administration does not systematically disadvantage historically underserved student groups, and maintains a focus on meeting students' emotional and social needs as education recovery continues.

We know you have questions about this plan; we will continue to provide you with answers and share new and developing information with you as we move forward together.

Thank you for everything that you do for your school community.

Matthew S Stem | Deputy Secretary

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So, PDE's current stance is that we must administer the PSSA and Keystone Exams, but we can do them this spring or in the fall. There are so many complications and issues with this allowance. There are layers of obstacles and literally hundreds of questions that have not been answered by PDE. But, no matter when we administer the tests, the best interest of our students does not seem to be at the center of PDE's guidance. Please understand that I, too, do not support administering standardized tests this year, and I will continue to fight for what is best for our students. At the end of the day, we may be bound by law and PDE, and administering the PSSA and Keystone Exams may be mandatory. We will be forced to select a time to give them, and right now, there is no good time. Our administrative team will be meeting soon to make some preliminary plans in the event that we are forced to administer the tests. In true PDE fashion, I expect that we won't get answers to the questions we have in a timely manner and things can change rapidly. We will keep you posted, and I will certainly share your parental rights with you, too, in coming informational letters.

Other Reminders

We will have school next week on March 11th and 12th. These 2 days are our 2 snow make up days.

Parents should continue to notify building principals if their child(ren) tests positive for the coronavirus. 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.

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. If any of this latest information changes or our status must change, we will let you know as soon as possible. Unless we have any major news, outbreaks or changes that need to be shared immediately, I will send a weekly update letter with case counts and other information next Monday.

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.

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

Sincerely,
Tammie Burnaford
Interim Superintendent
Bellefonte Area School District