



**Bellefonte Area
School District**

Bellefonte Area School District

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

Jan. 11, 2021

Dear Bellefonte Area School District families, staff and community:

Happy Monday! The weather this weekend was truly beautiful for January, well of course, unless you are a fan of snow. The extended forecast this week looks OK, and as of now, we shouldn't have any weather related complications for school this week. In an upcoming parent letter, I will explain how decisions are made about delays and closures due to weather conditions. I'm also going to share information about the difference between a "remote learning day" and a "flexible instructional day" in an upcoming letter. But, for now, it seems we should be OK with avoiding inclement weather this week. So, I'll focus on the coronavirus for this update letter.

BASD Case Count Update

Since my letter and report on Friday, Jan. 8, we were notified of 4 new, positive cases in the district. Yesterday we received notification that another high school student tested positive for Covid19. The student was present in school last week, and Mr. Fedisson and Mrs. Michaels immediately began our contact tracing process. As of late last night, most of the close contacts were identified and parents were notified by the high school principals. The high school student was physically present in the school while infectious, so the case does count according to PDE mandates. Yesterday, we also received notification of the three new positive cases (all students) from Pleasant Gap Elementary. Two of the students are related to each other, and both were physically present in school last week while infectious. Dr. Besch, the PGE principal, worked on the contact tracing and most parents with students who may have been close contacts to these two cases were notified by late last night. He will follow up with any others first thing this morning. The third, new positive case at Pleasant Gap involved a student who was not in school

last week while infectious, so there was no contact tracing to be done. That case does not count for Pleasant Gap.

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. This is our current summary for each school in the district:

Building	Total number of known, new cases since 1/4	*Number of cases that now “count” - students/staff that have been physically present in the building while infectious
High School	2 (both students)	2
Middle School	0	0
Bellefonte Elem.	0	0
Benner Elem.	0	0
Marion-Walker Elem.	0	0
Pleasant Gap Elem.	3 (all students)	2
BeLA	0	0

More information about the PDE mandates and the 14 day rolling calendar for instructional models can be found on the PDE website.

I'd also like to reiterate what Dr. Levine from the PA DoH said in the Press Conference held on Jan. 7th (I summarized this press conference in my letter on Friday, more information is

available on the DoH website). Research and recent evidence indicates that the spread of the coronavirus is less likely to occur in schools than it is outside the school setting. To date, we still have no known, direct transmission of the virus within our schools. In many cases, the virus is spread within families, relatives or other gatherings. The safety plans, the mask wearing and all of the safety precautions we take in our schools may contribute to our ability to help mitigate the spread in schools. In addition, parents keeping their children home when they or someone they have been near are ill or test positive and parents choosing to self-quarantine their children has been incredibly helpful in the mitigation of the spread. I know the words “it takes a village to raise a child” may sound cliché, but it truly has been our working together, all of us, that has helped keep our students and staff safe and healthy. Thank you so very much for all you have done in this effort. Together, we are one amazing “village!”

Local Case Counts

A few people have inquired about my not sharing the Centre County and local case counts as much. Honestly, the local case counts do not matter as much as they once did in terms of what we do in our schools. The new PDE mandates and the Attestation form issued on Nov. 23, 2020 reflect the new requirements based on school districts located in counties that have been designated as having a “substantial rate of community transmission.” Centre County has been designated as such for over 4 months, and now all 67 PA counties are designated as “substantial.” But, even with the “substantial” designation, Dr. Levine, the DoH and PDE recognized that students, particularly young students, should be in school and issued new guidance in the press conference last week.

However, I love numbers, and I continue to keep close track of the new cases in Centre County and in our 2 largest zip code areas within the district. Like the rest of the Centre County, the new cases in the 16823 and 16841 zip codes have increased very significantly over the past 2 months. As an example, on Nov. 10, 2020, exactly 2 months ago, there were a total of 254 cases in the 16823 zip code and a total of 37 cases in the 16841 zip code. If you recall, these 2 zip codes make up a majority of our district, but they also span 2 other school districts. As of yesterday, there are now 1671 total cases attributed to 16823 and 246 total cases attributed to 16841 since the first cases were identified in Centre County in March.

In previous letters I mentioned that it’s difficult to know who has been infected or the specific locations of positive case count data issued by the DoH because the DoH only will give data based on residency within a zip code. If you recall, I’ve mentioned in previous letters that we have 3 nursing homes, a rehabilitative hospital, 3 prisons and a juvenile detention center all located within the 16823 zip code. Since November, I also mentioned that we were aware of outbreaks in at least 2 of the nursing homes, and we were informed that there may have been

outbreaks at SCI Benner and SCI Rockview and at the Centre County prison. In an article written by Brett Pallotto and published by the Centre Daily Times on Jan. 8, 2021, the prison outbreaks were confirmed. There have been a significant number of inmates and employees at the Centre County prison test positive, but the reported number of cases at SCI Benner and SCI Rockview was incredible, in my opinion. According to the article, almost 1200 inmates and employees at Benner and Rockview state prisons have tested positive for the coronavirus. The article includes current data and statistics for the prisons, too. Of course, the employees may or may not reside in the 16823 zip code, so those cases may not be in the 16823 counts. The DoH doesn't break down the data in zip codes, so there is no way of knowing which prison cases may or may not have been attributed to the 16823 zip code, but maybe it could explain some of the rapid growth in new case counts in 16823 over the past 2 months or maybe not. I was just very surprised at the alarming numbers at the prisons.

The Vaccine

The DoH has indicated that the vaccine will become available to people in PA based on phases. Essential workers, mainly those in the healthcare field, were in phase 1 and were the first to receive the vaccine. The rollout has been slow. Over the break, we received notice from Mount Nittany Hospital that our school nurses are eligible to receive the vaccine, and on Friday, we received a similar notice that our Speech Therapists are also now eligible to receive the vaccine. Late last week, I was part of a meeting where it was suggested that school employees who are now in the phase 1b group for distribution may have the opportunity to receive the vaccine over the next few weeks or a month. The logistics of vaccinating a larger group like school employees in Centre County may be challenging, but we will work it out. We currently have 419 employees within our district alone. As we hear about potential opportunities for vaccines for our staff and plans, I will share that information.

Other Reminders

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 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.

As we start school today, we are planning to maintain our current instructional models in all schools for this week. We have in-person learning, hybrid and our BeLA plans in place, as we have been doing. In addition, this week parents may choose to self quarantine their students and allow them to learn virtually through Google Classroom as we offered after the break.

Over this past week, we asked parents to complete a survey to choose a learning plan for their child(ren) for the second semester. We already have received responses from more than 93% of our parents! Thank you so very much! We have a Professional Learning Day for teachers next Monday, so students will not have school on Jan. 18th. The second semester will begin on Tuesday, Jan. 19th. Administrators, staff and teachers will be planning and getting ready for the second semester this week. They will be in touch with parents with more information, as needed.

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 an update letter with case counts and other information on Friday, again this week.

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.

And, and once again, thank you so very much for all you do, your support, and your willingness to partner with us to do what is best for students while keeping them and our staff as safe and healthy as possible! I hope you have a fabulous week!

Sincerely,
Tammie Burnaford
Interim Superintendent
Bellefonte Area School District