



Nov. 25, 2020

Dear Bellefonte Area School District families, staff and community:

Happy Thanksgiving! I'd like to provide an update for our status and review the most recent requirements for schools. I apologize for the length of this letter but I do have a lot of information to share. If you are like my sister who usually just reads the last chapter of a book to get to the ending first (lol), I'll summarize here. For now, we are going to continue to stay the course for now and continue to offer in-person teaching/learning. We will do what we need to do within our schools, as required by the Governor, the PA Secretary of Health (PA DoH) and the PA Department of Education (PDE). But, we need some help from parents which I'll explain in this letter.

First, a brief report of the cases in our schools. As of today, we have only 1 known, active case of covid19 in our schools. We were notified a few hours ago that a student at the high school tested positive for covid19. The student has not been in school since last Friday. It's only been a few hours, and our student information system is down due to the holiday, so we have not completed contact tracing quite yet. We are working on it and will notify any parents who may need to have their students quarantine. With the student not in school since last week, the contact tracing could be minimal. I'm so sorry that I can't give you more information at this moment. But, I really wanted to get this letter out. As mentioned, this is the only known active case in students or staff for the entire district. The other prior cases have all "recovered" and quarantines have ended. We still have no known transmissions that have occurred within our schools between our students and/or staff. All positive cases have been a result of contact outside our schools.

As you may know, the PA Department of Health Secretary and Governor Wolf issued new mandates and requirements for schools in orders issued on Monday, Nov. 23, 2020. Since the initial release, we have received clarifications and guidance from our school district attorneys. In short, the Governor, the Secretary of Health and PDE are requiring Superintendents to sign a legal document that is entitled "Attestation Ensuring Implementation of Mitigation Efforts." The President of our Board of Directors and I are legally bound to sign this form and submit to PDE by November 30th. More information about this document can be found on PDE's website. Basically, PDE is making us choose between two options for districts that are in counties with a substantial level of community transmission (Centre County has been designated as such for several weeks, almost all PA counties are now in this designation). The first option would allow us to provide in-person instruction for all or some of the students, but this option comes with strings attached. The second option indicates we must transition to a fully remote learning model for all students and we would continue to do so until the county is not in the substantial

transmission category for at least two consecutive weeks. The second option means we could have no in-person instruction for any students. After talking with our Board of Directors and our team of administrators, we are choosing the first option at this time.

The requirements of Option 1 include our compliance in two main areas: the Secretary of Health's updated mask and face covering orders and contact tracing and the identification of cases within our schools. For the first, we must agree to and prove we are complying with all mask orders and guidance. This part is not very different from what we have been doing. We do have a few updates to implement, but we can easily do so. Our students and staff have been complying with the mask requirement, and we have been following all of the guidance provided by the DoH for months. I mentioned this in some of my previous letters. I do believe that our vigilance with wearing masks has helped minimize the spread. But, here is my first favor to ask of parents. Will you please review with your child how important it is to wear their masks properly in school? Our students have been awesome with this, but we are now required to provide regular reminders of this and enforce this to the extent possible. We will remind students to wear their masks properly at school. Any help you can give at home is greatly appreciated. More information about the new mask orders can be found here: <https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Guidance/Universal-Masking-FAQ.aspx> and here: <https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/SchoolReopeningGuidance/ReopeningPreKto12/PublicHealthGuidance/Pages/default.aspx>

The second part of Option 1 is more stringent and will have more impact on our schools. While there is some suggestion of what schools must do for contact tracing, we were already on top of this. As soon as we are notified of a positive case, our principals begin contact tracing to get a jump on mitigating spread. The success of this is also due to parents contacting principals as soon as they get word which has helped tremendously. Thank you so much to those who let us know as soon as possible! Additionally, part of option 1 binds us legally to close schools based on the table provided to PDE. There is no local decision or control for this. The chart of mandated closures can be found here: <https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/SchoolReopeningGuidance/ReopeningPreKto12/PublicHealthGuidance/Pages/SchoolClosureRecommendations.aspx>

All of our elementary schools fall under the "small schools" category in the chart. The middle school and the high school are "medium size schools," although the high school is nearly a "large school" with almost exactly 900 students. As explained, we chose this first option, and we will be legally required to close schools based on the charts if we reach the thresholds. But, this option does allow us to close only the schools that are impacted by an increase in cases, not necessarily the entire district at once.

In my Monday letter this week, I also explained Dr. Levine's new mandates to curb the spread of the virus, including expanded mask requirements and travel requirements. I reviewed what the travel requirements are. In that letter, I also explained that there are three reasons why we would need to close schools. They were:

- \*A significant increase in cases - now covered in the new orders from the Governor, PA DoH, and PDE

- \*By order of the Governor, PA DoH and/or PDE - guidance issued this week

- \*A shortage of staff and substitutes if we can't provide an effective education or provide for safety of all students and staff

These three reasons are still apparent. We only have 1 known, active case currently. And as of right now, we are planning to return to school on Dec. 1st.

However, the number of rising cases across the US, PA and our county can be potentially

alarming. There is a fear that this Thanksgiving holiday 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 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 and giving thanks or engaging in long standing traditions of shopping and going to deer camp. 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. This is why I mentioned my sister in the opening paragraph. My father passed away in February, so this will be our first Thanksgiving 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....I'm asking, nearly begging, 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. Students will be able to login to their own classes, follow their own schedules and connect with their teachers virtually. Up to this point, we have not allowed "self" or "voluntary" quarantine for students who were not a close contact, but this phase of the rapid spread of the disease and the holiday are different than the past few months. If parents choose to quarantine their children instead of returning to school on Dec. 1st, they simply need to send a note to their child's school indicating that they will be quarantining and learning virtually. The typical 14 day quarantine period after the break which ends on Nov. 30th would mean that students could return on Dec. 14th. As another bonus, if some students are voluntarily quarantined, this will lessen the numbers in the classrooms and schools, making physical distancing even better and perhaps lessening other quarantines if a new case arises. I know this is an inconvenience for parents, but we have worked together so well to get us to this time. As I've said before, the support of parents and our working together for the health and safety of our students and staff has been absolutely incredible. We cannot thank you enough.

And now my final favor request...our staff, teachers, principals and administrators are completely overwhelmed and nearly exhausted. They have been working harder than they ever have to provide a safe and effective education for all of our students. They have risen to the occasion and worked tirelessly for 64 straight school days. They need a break, and they need to spend time with their families. In fact, I guess we all need to spend time with our families and with our loved ones. I may even have a distant turkey dinner with my sister. I'm asking staff, teachers, administrators and principals to "log off" for at least a few days over this holiday period. I just want to let you know that if you email or try to get in touch with them, their responses may not be as prompt this week. But, if you need immediate assistance or have an emergency, please don't hesitate to send me an email ([tburnafo@basd.net](mailto:tburnafo@basd.net)) any time. I will be checking email very regularly. I will do my best to help you.

I warned that this letter would be very long. Thanks for hanging in to the end. As a recap, we are planning to stay the course in our in-person model, but follow all new guidance, mandates and orders. Our plan is to return to teaching/learning on Dec. 1, 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.

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.

Please note, we do not have school next Monday, Nov. 30th. I will send my usual letter on Tuesday, Dec. 1st, so that I can provide the most up-to-date information. Of course, if any other pertinent information arises over this weekend, I will send that, as well.

On a personal note, again I'd like to say I am so grateful that I am part of this awesome school community and I can serve the students, parents, families and community. I am so truly blessed. Thank you.

I would like to wish you and your family a safe and very wonderful Thanksgiving!

Sincerely,  
Tammie Burnaford  
Interim Superintendent  
Bellefonte Area School District