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TYRONE
AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT
Soaring Forward to Explore, Challenge and Succeed
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Tyrone Area Middle School
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December 1, 2020

Dear TASD Parents, Families, and Staff:

I hope that you had a chance to relax and enjoy the Thanksgiving break! It is hard to believe that December is upon us!

TASD Positive COVID-19 Cases

First, a brief report of the cases in our schools. Over the break, we were notified of 1 new positive case (a student) at the middle school, 1 new positive case (a student) at the elementary school, and 2 new positive cases in the district offices (adults). All individuals attended school last Monday, November 23, and so the cases will require contact tracing. Individuals who will need to quarantine as a result of these cases are being notified. As of this morning, that brings our total active, known positive case count to 6 (3 students and 3 adults). We do still have several students and staff members who are quarantined due to outside of school exposures and/or pending COVID-19 test results.

Latest Information from the Commonwealth of PA

Last week, the PA Department of Education (PDE) and the PA Department of Health (DOH) issued new orders regarding how our schools may operate. In short, the Superintendent and School Board President of any school district in the Commonwealth located within a county designated at the “substantial” level of community transmission for at least two weeks were required to sign and submit an Attestation Form. There are two options for school districts in this designation: (1) allowance to provide in-person instruction for all or some of the students with adherence to the guidelines or (2) transition to a fully remote learning model for all students and continue to do so until the county is not in the substantial transmission category for at least two consecutive weeks. After some discussion with the administration and school board, we have determined to choose Option #1.

The requirements of Option 1 include our compliance in two main areas. The first area is the Secretary of Health’s updated mask and face covering orders. This part is not much different from what we have been doing since the beginning of the year; however, there are a few updates to implement. Our students and staff have been complying with the mask requirement and we have been following the order provided by the DOH since the beginning of the school year. That being said, it is always a good idea for staff, students, and parents to review these requirements, as it is important to wear masks properly in and out of school. We continue to be required to provide regular reminders of this and enforce this to the extent possible. 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>

The second part of Option 1 is more stringent and will have more of an impact on our schools and instructional models. While there are suggestions of what schools must do for contact tracing, we are already doing this on a regular basis. When we are notified of a positive case, contact tracing begins while awaiting guidance from the DOH. The success of this is also due to parents contacting school staff when they are notified of a positive case in their families or of a known exposure. Thank you so much to those who let us know as soon as possible!

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Additionally, part of Option 1 binds us legally to close schools based on the table provided by PDE. There is no local decision over this, as indicated on the attestation form. Each of the buildings in our school district fall under the “medium schools” category on the chart. The chart of mandated closures can be found here:

<https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID19/SchoolReopeningGuidance/ReopeningPreKto12/PublicHealthGuidance/Pages/SchoolClosureRecommendations.aspx>

As explained, in choosing this first option, we will be legally required to close schools based on the chart if we reach the thresholds. This option does, however, allow us to close only the schools that are impacted by an increase in cases, not necessarily the entire district at once.

Generally speaking, there are three reasons why we would need to close schools: (1) a significant increase in cases - now covered in the new orders from the Governor, PA DOH, and PDE; (2) by order of the Governor, PA DOH and/or PDE - guidance issued this week; or (3) a shortage of staff/substitutes or an abundance of quarantines wherein we cannot provide an effective education or provide for everyone's safety.

Community Cases

The number of rising cases across the country, Commonwealth, and our county(ies) is alarming. We will do whatever we can to provide students and staff the best educational environment possible amid these circumstances. Over the holiday season, we continue to ask parents to quarantine their students if they have any concerns that they could have been exposed to the virus in any way.

Current Instructional Models

The current instructional models will be continually reevaluated. It is extremely important to note that, based on the new guidelines, changes in the models and potential building closures could occur without much, if any, advanced notice. Please continue to keep contingency plans in place for your children as fully remote learning may continue or be instituted beyond the current benchmark of December 11th. For today, things will remain as planned.

Moving Forward

Once again, we encourage everyone in the community to follow the guidelines and practices put in place to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19. This includes washing hands frequently, wearing masks properly, and taking personal responsibility for one's interactions. It is critical for families and employees to notify school personnel when exposures or positive cases occur as schools are often the first line in the contact tracing process.

We will continue to provide you with periodic updates as they are available. Thank you for your continued support, patience, and flexibility.

Sincerely,

Leslie A. Estep