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## **PARENT NOTIFICATION**

### **October 16, 2020**

Dear Parents,

I want to take this opportunity to bring everyone up to speed on the current status of school operations and the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been an odd start to the school year to say the least. Typically, this time of year focuses on how to improve educational outcomes for our students, improving curriculum and instructional delivery, and preparing for upcoming school and community events. This year, the focus has been on how to keep students and staff healthy; maintaining a quality educational process – both in person and hybrid learning; and multi-planning: developing a plan to bring all students safely back into the building for in-person learning while at the same time developing a plan to deal with situations such as a class quarantine or closure of the school building altogether. Because there is no way to foresee how the rest of the year will play out, we are working diligently on contingency planning for multiple scenarios.

We believe strongly that our students can reap the biggest benefit of “The Bear Creek Experience” if they are on campus, learning in person. That being said, we believe virtual learning can play a critical role in delivering a quality education; however, it is not a replacement for in-person instruction.

Our strategy coming into the 2020-2021 school year was to get as many of our students into the classroom for as long as possible, realizing that based on past epidemiological trends, the COVID-19 pandemic may take a turn for the worse before it gets better. We realized that quarantining a class or closing the school was a distinct possibility at some point, but we did not want to begin the year in that situation. The collective efforts of our staff, students and parents paid off – and we successfully opened the school and have operated now for over a month with minimal disruption from COVID-19. Unfortunately, our concern is that the tide may be turning.

It is clearly apparent that the COVID-19 is a divisive topic, particularly in the hyper-partisan and politically-charged world in which we live. Everyone has an opinion, and we have to respect that; however, decisions relating to the operation of our school have been, and will continue to be based on data. And the data is trending in a not-so-good direction, at least for the short term. The positive COVID-19 infection rate is not only increasing nationally, but is increasing dramatically here in Pennsylvania, and specifically in Luzerne County. Historically, the greater Hazleton Area reported the highest infection rates in our county, but the trend has shifted away from Hazleton and more and more positive cases are being reported in the Wyoming Valley. If this trend continues, you will see more schools and businesses negatively impacted.

The response to COVID-19 among schools has varied, including many schools and school districts making decisions to close their doors to in-person instruction because of one or two positive cases among their staff or student populations. These decisions vary significantly, and the decisions to close are the direct result of how well each school planned over the summer and how it structured its operation.

Bear Creek Community structured its operation in a way to prevent COVID transmission to the greatest extent possible. It hasn't been easy. It has been an inconvenience for students, staff and parents. It is not the ideal learning environment; however, we feel it is the safest environment we can provide for in-person learning. Our students, parents and staff have all sacrificed so that our students can interact with one another, and most importantly learn with one another. We are grateful for everyone's sacrifice during this challenging time and want you all to know – our collective efforts are making a difference!

Reducing class size, restricting student movement, maintaining social distancing in classrooms, enforcing mandatory face coverings, eliminating large group gatherings, and a multitude of sanitation measures have all made a difference – and will continue to make a difference. But we all must continue to sacrifice; we all must continue to be vigilant and not become complacent. The pandemic is not over, but together, we have proven we can get through this and do so safely.

### **How does the school handle situations involving students or staff that are exposed to COVID-19 or are infected with COVID-19?**

There are many factors that impact how we handle these situations. Exposure is treated differently from infection based on guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (the "CDC"). In each situation that arises, the School's Leadership Team immediately convenes often by phone or video conference after school hours, and reaches a consensus as to how to respond, based on CDC guidelines. We then contact the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Rapid Response Team and present the specifics of our situation, and our proposed response. The Rapid Response Team either agrees with our action plan, or provides other direction. The third step in our process is to then contact the Pennsylvania Department of Health for concurrence on our proposed action plan. Following these three steps, we then move forward with implementing a response plan.

This process typically involves students or staff being restricted from the school campus with a recommended quarantine or isolation for a prescribed period of time; determining an individual learning plan for students who are unable to attend school in-person along with providing the necessary materials; engaging substitute teachers or reassigning staff to cover vacancies if staff members are in quarantine or isolation; communicating with parents and staff ; and implementing additional steps to sanitize the school facility.

Depending upon the specific circumstances, the Pennsylvania Department of Health will implement formal contact tracing, and will directly notify parents or staff members regarding exposure to COVID-19.

### **What is the difference between quarantine and isolation, and how do you determine when a 10-day and 14-day restriction applies?**

- Isolation separates sick people with a contagious disease from people who are not sick. Infected individuals can return to interacting with others after (a) at least 10 days since symptoms first appeared; (b) at least 24 hours with no fever without fever-reducing medication; (c) other symptoms are improving.
- Quarantine separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick. Quarantine is used for potential exposure (close contact with an infected individual = within six feet for more than 15 minutes). Quarantine is 14 days from potential exposure.

For individuals who are infected with COVID, symptoms typically present at day 3 or day 4. The contagious period of the infection is typically 7-10 days. So when determining who needs to quarantine based on potential exposure, you typically need to identify when a person who is positive (either as a result of a positive test or presumed positive because of multiple symptoms) first exhibited symptoms, and count back three days.

### **Why don't you check every student's temperature in the morning when they come to school?**

The answer is simple – cost/benefit. The value in doing so is not worth the time and effort. Why? The public health data is becoming more and more clear as it relates to exposure and the development of symptoms. This varies greatly depending upon multiple circumstances – including age, underlying health condition, and even blood type. The data available is clear. Children can and do become infected with COVID-19, but they do not present symptoms in the same fashion as adults. Students may have the virus and show little or no symptoms – including not running a high body temperature. So delaying the start of school by 30 – 45 minutes to scan every student is not a valid indicator as to whether a student may or may not be infected with COVID-19.

### **Will I be personally contacted if my child has been exposed to COVID-19 in the school setting?**

Yes. Exposure is defined as being within six feet for fifteen (15) minutes or more, of a person who has tested positive for COVID-19. This is the guidance set by the CDC and the Pennsylvania Department of Health. In these situations, we are required to report to the Rapid Response Team and the Pennsylvania Department of Health. The Pennsylvania Department of Health will conduct contact tracing, will notify those individuals (or parents of students) who have been exposed, and will provide further direction. Depending upon the size of the population impacted, the school may also reach out and make contact with individuals and parents/guardians as well.

### **When will you close school?**

How we respond to a COVID-19 situation depends on the details of that specific situation. We will employ a tiered approach, and our response will be measured, ensuring that students and staff are not placed in a situation that puts their health at unnecessary risk. We will follow CDC and Department of Health Guidelines throughout this decision-making process. We will initially seek to isolate and quarantine the necessary individuals. We will next consider a quarantine for a smaller group of students/staff. Next will be consideration to a quarantine for a class, grade or classroom wing. The final consideration will be a school-wide closure. In addition to individuals who may be infected or exposed, we also must consider adequate staffing when making these decisions. Our goal is to limit the disruption to the educational process while working to ensure the health and welfare of our students and staff.

### **What will put school operations at risk going forward?**

School operations are at risk as infection rates in our local community increase, plain and simple. The more we – and you as parents and family – do to prevent the potential transmission of this disease, will determine whether or not we can make it through the school year without more widespread school closures.

What is important?

- (1) Wear a mask whenever you interact with individuals who do not reside in your household. Many people do not like wearing a mask – including me. But in the end, wearing a mask has a big impact on reducing the potential for transmission. If you don't want to wear a mask for your own protection – think of others, including your children, their classmates and our staff.
- (2) Avoid group gatherings. This is not easy, especially with Thanksgiving and Christmas approaching. The more people you interact with – including friends and family outside your immediate household – the more you are putting yourself, your children, and others at risk. **There is an increase likelihood that school may close after Thanksgiving or Christmas because of the behaviors of students, parents and staff. Please consider this when making plans for the holidays. The impact may be much bigger than you think.**

- (3) Stay home if you are sick. Keep your children home if they are sick or if they are exhibiting symptoms of illness – and not just a fever. Chills, headache, muscle ache, upset stomach, diarrhea. Keep kids home. We know it is a disruption and an inconvenience – but the risks to your children, other children and our school is much greater. The more we work together to prevent potential transmission of COVID-19 or other illnesses, the greater the likelihood we can make it through the end of the school year without a school closure.
- (4) Practice and encourage good person hygiene. Step away from others when coughing or sneezing. Cough or sneeze into your arm. Wash your hands frequently. If you can't wash your hands, use hand sanitizer.

### **Where do we go from here?**

I can't stress enough that keeping our students, families and staff safe - as well as keeping school open - is a collective effort among all stakeholders, including parents. The decisions each of us make may have a far-reaching impact, including whether or not we are able to bring all students back into the building for in-person instruction, or if we have to close school.

We continue to analyze public health data on a daily basis, and regularly consult with our Pandemic Planning & Coordination Team, as well as our public health partners. We have contingency plans that may allow more students to return to school five days a week, but we also have contingency plans to quarantine classes of students as well as close the school if necessary. Where we go from here will be driven by infection rates, and will be determined by the action or inaction of students, parents and staff.

On a side note, we are experience multiple supply chain issues relating to materials that support school operations, and are dealing with them as best as possible. We learned that our bulk order of student Chromebooks has been delayed yet again due to overwhelming demand at the national level. We are working directly with Dell to on an alternative order, in an effort to receive them quicker. At this point, we may not have all the new Chromebooks distributed until after the winter break.

We understand that the ongoing pandemic has altered our lives in many ways, and we all wish we can act and live our lives in the same way we did a year ago, but that simply is not the case. I believe there are reasons to be hopeful and optimistic, and that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Although the next six months or so may pose even more challenges, there are efforts at the national, and even global level, to deal with COVID-19. Collectively we must "bite the bullet" and get through this.

Please stay safe and stay healthy. We will continue to disseminate information through our e-mail bulletins and on social media, so parents stay informed.

Jim Smith  
Chief Executive Officer