



COUNTY OF BUCKS

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June 15, 2020

GUIDANCE FOR BUCKS COUNTY SCHOOL REOPENINGS

Dear Chief School Administrators,

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a tremendous challenge for our community in many different ways. Our schools were put in the unenviable position of having to close suddenly and deal with a situation no one had ever encountered. Both your partnership with the Health Department and your enduring dedication to prioritize the health and safety of all school stakeholders during these trying times have been greatly appreciated.

The County, from the start, has put into place strong measures to contain and track the virus over time, allowing us to understand how and where infections were likely originating. Bucks County has achieved a consistent pattern of low levels of baseline pure community spread, defined as those cases whose source of infection cannot be determined. If we continue on the same course, the Governor is expected to move the County to the “green” status no later than June 26.

We now face the task of planning for a safe, and reasonably normal, return to school in just a few short months. With the support of everyone involved, including students, their families, and district staff, this can be accomplished effectively.

Earlier this month, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) released preliminary guidance requiring each school district’s board of school directors to create and approve its own “Health and Safety Plan” prior to reopening for in-person instruction. To accomplish the goal of having individualized plans to meet the specific needs of Bucks County, PDE has indicated that the guidance be created in consultation with the local health department.

While each school entity has unique characteristics of size, geographic location, school design, graduation requirements, and local board policy, consistency in procedure and practice among Bucks County’s school districts is desirable to the fullest extent possible. Regardless of how they might vary, all plans will be centered on the health and safety of students and staff.

I, along with Scott Forster, the director of the Bucks County Emergency Management Agency, have met regularly with you – the Intermediate Unit executive director, 13 local superintendents, and three career and technical school directors – for many months, beginning prior to the closures. This collaboration has allowed for the development of guidance based on medical and public health expertise in consultation with the needs and realities of school operations.

While health and safety considerations are paramount, guidance also is rooted in our understanding and belief that social interaction and in-person instruction is essential to our children’s emotional well-being, as well as their educational growth and advancement.

The Bucks County Health Department's guidance consists of a spectrum of interventions and strategies that, when applied consistently, work in combination to reduce the overall risk of infection and spread. No single precaution, or set of precautions, will completely eradicate COVID-19 or prevent its transmission. Though there is built-in flexibility to address the possibility of varying conditions over time, at this time there is a low prevalence of disease in the community, and the Bucks County Health Department will be adopting an overall long-term approach that begins to treat COVID-19 similarly to other contagious diseases that are found in our schools.

Highlights of the guidance include the following:

- Symptom screening will be done by all parents/guardians at home each morning before the school day. No children with symptoms will be sent on a bus or brought to school.
- All district staff will perform a symptom screen on themselves prior to leaving for work, and will stay home if ill.
- Temperature screening will not be required upon entrance to school for students or staff.
- Students and staff will consistently be made aware of the signs and symptoms of COVID-19.
- Students and staff will go to the nurse immediately if feeling symptomatic.
- Wearing masks will not be required of students while in school, but will be optional. Extended usage of masks often leads to discomfort, distraction, or mishandling/misuse, triggering a child to touch their face more frequently and causing contamination and/or rendering the mask ineffective. Masks also make it difficult to speak or ask questions in a classroom setting. Removing symptomatic children from the schools, coupled with Bucks County maintaining a low level community prevalence of COVID-19, will decrease the overall risk of infection in a given classroom. However, students and staff will have masks with them at all times in the event that their use is required, including in a school vehicle, if the individual becomes symptomatic, or if the minimum social distancing cannot be maintained.
- Staff, when not able to socially distance from students in the classroom, will utilize either a face shield or mask.
- Six foot distancing is not required for classroom seating – a lesser distance is acceptable if six feet is not achievable to meet the needs of students. There will be a minimum spacing of three feet, the social distancing recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO), as a three-foot distance is associated with large reductions in infection via droplet spread of coughs and sneezes. Classroom configurations will be altered for maximal social distancing as feasible. For example, staggered rows of desks all facing the same direction, with limitations on face-to-face seating.
- All high-touch surfaces will be disinfected regularly, including water fountains, door handles, light switches, playground equipment, and student desks. Students and staff will be encouraged to use individual water bottles from home or disposable plastic bottles.
- All individuals in school will sanitize or wash their hands on a frequent basis. Hand sanitizer will be made available in all common areas, hallways, and/or in classrooms where sinks for handwashing are not available.
- Classrooms and common areas will be ventilated with additional circulation of outdoor air when possible, using windows, doors, and/or fans.
- Buses can operate with a maximum of two students per seat, with the understanding that masks will be required of students while on the bus. Disinfect all high-touch surfaces on buses at least daily. Bus drivers will also be required to wear face shields and/or masks when students enter/exit the bus. Drivers may choose to

wear a mask at all times when students are present, unless specifically prohibited by the bus company/school entity policy.

-The Bucks County Health Department will assist with the development of strategies similar to those successfully used with measles, pertussis, and other infectious diseases that allow classrooms, schools, and districts to remain open in the event of a confirmed case of COVID-19. For example, for the 14-day period after such a diagnosis, there would be increased education on signs and symptoms, increased monitoring of hygiene, increased use of masks, and increased enforcement of social distancing.

-The health department will also take the lead on contact tracing, isolation/quarantine of ill students and staff, and any further actions needed to contain the spread of COVID-19.

-High-traffic hallway use will be limited when feasible, by either staggering the end of classroom periods to reduce the number of students in the hallways simultaneously, and/or by requiring masking.

-In cafeterias, when feasible, individuals will be seated in staggered arrangements to avoid “across-the-table” seating. Individuals will be required to sanitize or wash their hands prior to, and after, eating. Consider using assigned seating for students in cafeterias and other congregate settings to help assist with contact tracing. The Bucks County Health Department will support the school district food service departments with training in best practices for food service and safety.

Throughout both the reopening in the fall, and any interscholastic athletic programs starting prior to that time, the Bucks County Health Department will remain your full and committed partner to navigate any changes to this situation, and to make adjustments to the plans if needed. As we strive to minimize the overall effects of COVID-19, the health and safety of the entire school community remains our priority.

David C. Damsker, MD, MPH
Director
Bucks County Health Department