

October 22, 2020

## **RE: Rise in COVID-19 Cases in the Community and Implications for Schools**

Dear Families and Staff:

As Berrien County school districts prepared our Return to Learn plans for the 2020-2021 school year, our most important consideration was delivering quality education while supporting the health, safety, and well-being of our students, staff, and their families. As part of our plans, we offered multiple instructional options to best meet everyone's needs. Options included in-person and remote instruction, and in some instances, a combination of both. While we understand the need for flexibility, our ultimate goal is for all students to return to in-person instruction so that schools can continue to provide all the services that Berrien County children need to be successful.

Right from the beginning, our districts implemented protocols based on the best information we could gather. Relying on expert guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, and the Berrien County Health Department, along with specific direction from the Michigan Department of Education, we developed plans that included protocols to keep our students and staff safe. This included protocols that (1) worked to keep COVID-19 from entering our buildings; and (2) mitigated the possible spread of COVID-19. These strategies included:

1. Keeping COVID-19 Out of Our Schools
  - a. Required daily screening for staff
  - b. Recommended daily screening for students
  - c. Limited access to volunteers and contractors
  - d. Suspension of field trips and other activities
  
2. Mitigating the Spread
  - a. Wearing of face coverings
  - b. Social distancing
  - c. Cohorting
  - d. Limits to crowd sizes at events
  - e. Expanded disinfecting and cleaning work spaces and commons areas

Now nearly two full months into the school year, we are appreciative of the collective effort that has allowed us to continue to offer education options to our families. We also want to thank our families for their vigilance in monitoring the symptoms of their children, communicating exposure and test results, and prompt responses to quarantine requests. This attentiveness from families has aided greatly in our ability to work collaboratively with the Berrien County Health Department to act quickly to isolate and quarantine those who are positive for COVID-19 or have been exposed to the virus. Through our experience this fall, it has become abundantly clear that the better we do with our mitigation strategies, the longer we will be able to keep schools open and have children attend school in person.

Our efforts have worked to create a safer environment for students and staff members in the school setting, but the same protocols have not been uniformly practiced within our community at large. The Berrien County Health Department and other state public health officials have reported a significant increase in positive cases across our state and region in recent weeks (see [Berrien County Health Department COVID-19 Dashboard link](#)). However, we know that despite increased community transmission levels, there has still been very limited transmission within schools. In fact, the majority of individuals associated with our schools that are currently in isolation or quarantine did not have an exposure to COVID-19 at school. Rather, these exposures happened outside of the school setting.

Schools play a vital role in our communities, and we've seen that having the in-person option this school year has provided a significant benefit for the academic, social, emotional, and physical wellbeing of our students and families. Having schools open and operational also allows for parents and caregivers to keep attending work, thus, sustaining our local economy. We stand united with our local health department sharing a common goal to sustain the optimal learning environment of in-person instruction

as long as possible. At the same time, community-based spread of COVID-19 has the potential to jeopardize our continued ability to offer in-person learning and extracurricular activities.

The ability to keep our schools open for in-person instruction is dependent not only on our ability to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 within the walls of our building, but it is equally dependent upon how our entire community is faring as a whole. If the rate of cases continues to trend upward, the Berrien County Health Department warns that schools may be forced to implement additional protocols and restrictions to prevent the current rate of spread. These safety measures could mean the cancellation of extracurricular activities, including band and athletics, further limiting access to events and, in a worst-case scenario, forcing a shift to fully remote learning across our districts.

It is critical that we all work together to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in our communities with the same resolve that has allowed us to successfully open our schools this fall. We all must follow the necessary protocols when out in public or around others outside of your household that have worked to provide a safe environment in our schools: wear a mask, watch your distance, and wash your hands. Continue to screen your students for the onset of symptoms before the start of each day, and keep them home if they are sick.

Our ongoing partnership with you, our school families and community members, is of the utmost importance to us as we uphold health and safety precautions both within and outside of school. Thank you for your continuous support, flexibility, and demonstrated resilience during this unprecedented school year.

Signed,

Respectfully,

Your Partners in Education



Nicki Britten, Health Officer  
Berrien County Health Department



Eric Hoppstock, Superintendent  
Berrien RESA



Dr. Dan Applegate, Superintendent  
Niles Community Schools

Dr. Andrae Townsel  
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Benton Harbor Area Schools



David Eichberg, Superintendent  
Berrien Springs Public Schools



Karen Weimer, Superintendent  
Brandywine Community Schools



Shane M. Peters, Superintendent  
Bridgman Public Schools



Patricia Robinson, Superintendent  
Buchanan Community Schools



David Ehlers, Superintendent  
Coloma Community Schools



Sarah Brookshire, Administrator  
Countryside Academy



Ann Shell, Superintendent  
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Philip S. Freeman, Superintendent  
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**Latrisha Corona**

Latrisha Corona, School Leader  
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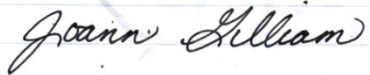
Dr. Jeffrey Leslie, Superintendent  
New Buffalo Area Schools



Laura Lausch, Principal  
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**Scott Bojanich**

Scott Bojanich, Superintendent  
River Valley School District



Joann Gilliam, Principal  
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Dr. Thomas S. Bruce, Superintendent  
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Ric Seager, Superintendent  
Watervliet Public School