

February 18, 2021

Majority Chairman Sonney, Minority Chairman Longietti, and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony for this public hearing convened by the House Education Committee. My name is LeeAnn Singley and I am a School Board Director for Susquenita School District in Perry County. While the concerns of my testimony may be shared by fellow school board directors, I am not speaking on behalf of my school board or school district. I am writing today to express some of the challenges facing public schools while navigating through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Face-to-Face Instruction –This is what public schools do. This is why we exist. In Pennsylvania, many districts have successfully steered through the pandemic and safely offered an in-person learning option to their students in spite of the level of community transmission. However, as COVID cases began to rise in the late fall, the PA Department of Education (PDE) and the Department of Health (DOH) required school districts that were offering in-person instruction (in any form) to sign an Attestation Form agreeing to comply with two documents – 1) The Universal Masking Order, and 2) “Recommendations for Pre-K to 12 Schools Following the Identification of a Case(s) of COVID-19”. It is this latter document which I would like to bring to your attention.

The “Recommendations for Pre-K to 12 Schools...” document provides a matrix schools follow when addressing COVID cases in their school buildings and determining subsequent school closures. The closure matrix has been established based on the size of the school, the number of cases in a 14 day rolling period, and the level of community spread (although there is little difference in the closure requirements regardless of community spread).

By way of an example, a small school building (student population <500) with two (2) cases in a 14 rolling period would have a recommended closure of 3-5 days.

While this document originated as a “recommendation”, under the current attestation order it has become a mandate for districts offering face to face instruction. Because of this, the closure matrix and elements of it have put an undue burden on school districts.

**This closure matrix is hurting our schools. Please eliminate the closure matrix and entrust the decision to responsible local control.**

- The time has come for individual school districts/buildings to manage COVID cases, isolate and quarantine those case, and determine (with any necessary assistance from the DOH) if school building closures are warranted. School districts are prepared for this. Building administrators and school nurses know and understand the uniqueness of their situation better than anyone.
- School population – As stated above, the matrix is based, in part, on school population (e.g., Small school < 500 students, Medium School 500-900 students, Large School > 900

students). The higher the building population, the higher the threshold of cases a building can endure prior to directing a closure. While the number of cases needed to meet that threshold include both student AND staff cases, only students are included in the total building population used to determine school size.

- Number of Cases – The matrix includes threshold case counts that warrant a school closure. For small size schools this number is two (2) cases in a 14 day rolling period. This number has not changed since August. Early in the pandemic, when it was unknown how COVID might spread through schools, this low threshold might have made sense. Today, increasing data supports that schools are not a source of spread. Closing schools actually places children into the community and many times into “grandma’s” house for child care.
- 14 day rolling period – Case numbers are totaled over a 14 day rolling period. While it is recognized that symptoms can occur within 2-14 days of exposure, in most cases symptoms occur within 3-5 days which has prompted the CDC to shorten quarantine period to just 10 days. The vast majority of students quarantined due to school exposure do not go on to develop symptoms. In fact, due to this, the State of Ohio does not quarantine close contacts of student cases at all.
- In doing a search of the COVID documents of surrounding states, I could not find any with an arbitrary closure matrix, such as the one utilized in PA. Most states give guidance to schools on isolation of COVID cases and the identification of close contacts and quarantine. This is all very appropriate. However, they are leaving school closure decisions at the local level where they belong.

It is widely publicized and established that school closures negatively impact students and families. While the push has been to return our younger students to the classroom, it is within our teen student population where much of this collateral damage has been realized.

- **Mental Health** – For years, mental health has taken a “backseat” to other physical health issues, and it appears no different during this COVID pandemic. While it has been publicly acknowledged that mental health is an issue with students, there is still the “Yeah, but”. Policies seem to favor COVID restrictions and keep mental health out of the conversation. We are gravely underestimating the need for peer-to-peer, face-to-face interactions among our youth.

Data has shown increases in mental health issues in school age children including suicide/suicide attempts, bulimia, and anorexia. Words like “skyrocketing” are used to describe these circumstances (as opposed to “rare” when describing serious complications due to COVID in children).

This is true in our own district. Our Board recently approved the immediate hire of an additional high school guidance counselor just to manage the increase in mental health needs of our students. This support does not happen if students are not in school. It is real. It is part of the collateral damage of the pandemic.

- **Vocational-Technical School** – Vocational Technical Training requires students to attend an offsite school. When the sending school closes due to COVID cases, the students are unable to attend in-person learning at a Vo-Tech school. Given the hands-on nature of Vo-Tech training, these students are disadvantaged. Rural school districts, like Susquenita, have a higher percentage of students embarking on a Vocational Technical career path and thus are more greatly impacted.
- **Athletics and extracurriculars** – School closures due to COVID often forces the postponement or cancellation of athletics and extracurriculars offered through the school. Student athletes, including those who have NOT been identified as close contacts, are often not able to participate in athletic contests. This is especially demoralizing when the identified cases are among the staff, and not students at all. The optics are “well if it is serious enough to close your school, then it is just too risky”. In these situations, students that are not close contacts are no more infectious than anyone else. The risk is being misplaced. These closures may impact something as major as recruitment possibilities, or maybe it just impacts meeting a life-long goal. Either way, once-in-a-lifetime opportunities are being taken away from these young adults and thus contributing to the mental health issues stated above. Most would acknowledge the value athletics and extracurriculars bring to a student’s academic success. In a pandemic, they also serve as a “sedative”, a place for respite in an otherwise anxiety ridden situation.

**By eliminating the closure matrix, local school districts will be empowered to make informed decisions about their school closures, and avoid the collateral damage being caused by unnecessary shut downs.**

Moving forward, it is my hope that we can begin to manage COVID in our schools in a manner that is pragmatic, by relieving some of the restrictions in the attestation documents, and allowing schools to operate as close to normal as possible. The time has come.

Thank you once again for providing me with the opportunity to share the experiences and concerns of a local school board member who, like many, has been dedicated to providing the best possible educational experience for students in a safe and responsible manner. I welcome further discussion on this topic of mutual concern. Please feel free to reach out to me should you have any questions.

Sincerely,



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