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NEWS

Central Bucks OKs modified quarantine, allowing students with 'low -level' COVID exposure to stay in school

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The Central Bucks School District will implement a modified quarantine plan for potential exposure to the coronavirus starting April 19.

School board members voted 5-4 Tuesday night on the change allowing some students potentially exposed to the coronavirus to remain in school under stricter mask and social distancing requirements.

School board member President Tracy Suits, Vice President Karen Smith, Jodi Schwartz and Lorraine Sciuto-Ballasy opposed the change to the district's health and safety plan.

The opposing board members said the changes put too high a risk of increased exposure for the overall student body and faculty with just weeks before the end of the current school year.

Smith said that, while the Bucks County Health Department approves of modified quarantine, the new quarantine option is not officially recommended by state or federal health agencies.

"Experts don't always agree, and I just want to err on the side of caution with the greater number of experts," Smith said.

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"I think it's also important that we told our parents we were going to use traditional quarantine when they signed up for the current method of instruction and I'm not

comfortable with just unilaterally making that change," Smith added.

The Bucks County Health Department has offered a modified quarantine for adults throughout the pandemic to allow them to continue working while not symptomatic.

Only health agencies like the county's health department can issue isolation or quarantine orders, but school districts do set their own rules on who can attend in-person lessons.

The change to the district policy this week basically adds a county approved option to its list of in-person conditions.

A student can be placed on modified quarantine if they have had "low-level exposure" to a person who has tested positive for COVID-19.

Students who are showing symptoms of the coronavirus, who can't wear a mask or are at high risk for at-home exposure to the virus will not be placed on modified quarantine.

A student on modified quarantine must wear a mask at all times. The only exception is for eating or drinking, but they must be at least six feet from another person when they remove their mask.

The student must also stay home if symptoms develop.

If a student doesn't follow the rules, they will have to attend school virtually and remain out of school up to 10 days after the date of the first known exposure.

Dr. David Damsker, who heads the county's health department, has long been a proponent of bringing the county's modified quarantine option to school districts.

"Modified Quarantine allows school districts to stop sending healthy children home after in-school exposures. These types of non-ongoing exposures have been consistently shown to be very low-risk, with only a handful of potential cases of spread amongst the many thousands of students placed on quarantine after an in-school exposure," Damsker wrote in an email Wednesday.

At least two school districts in the county, Pennridge and Council Rock, have adopted a modified quarantine plan, and Damsker added that other states like Ohio and Missouri have also "successfully" implemented similar plans.

Damsker provided estimates to Central Bucks about a month ago showing about 1,100 students have had in-school exposure to the coronavirus this school year, but only six had tested positive.

Damsker added Wednesday that COVID-19 is less likely to present with severe or life-threatening symptoms in children.

About 5,400 students across the county have tested positive for COVID-19 during the school year, but none have required hospitalization, Damsker said.

Tuesday's vote also includes several other changes to things like playground equipment use and no longer removing library books from circulation in between borrowings.

The school board members who voted against the changes said their main objection was the modified quarantine.

Guidance to faculty and parents regarding the modified quarantine is expected to be sent from the school district later this week.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health reported 920,147 coronavirus cases since last March statewide.

Bucks County has had 54,881 cases since the pandemic began.

An estimated 25,522 Pennsylvanians have died so far, with 1,201 of those fatalities were in Bucks County, according to state data updated Wednesday afternoon.