

NEWS

COVID in Bucks schools: Central Bucks parents fuming after 29 case reported in Gayman Elementary



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Bucks County Courier Times

Published 4:18 p.m. ET Oct. 29, 2021 | Updated 4:21 p.m. ET Oct. 29, 2021

An outbreak of 29 coronavirus cases clustered in seven Gayman Elementary School classes had dozens of Central Bucks School District parents livid Friday.

A deluge of phone calls, emails and online messages were made to this news organization Friday morning from parents of children who were both close contacts to infected students and some who recently tested positive this week.

The parents, most of whom wished to have their names withheld from this story, said they were getting little to no information from the school district, blaming a lackluster health and safety plan for causing an outbreak many learned about after talking to other parents.

Central Bucks sent an email to area parents late Friday afternoon confirming 29 cases were reported this week in the district.

"Over the past week, Gayman Elementary has been made aware of 29 positive COVID cases among our school population The families in these classes have already been notified of the positive cases within their classrooms, and all of those who came into close personal contact with a positive case have been notified," the email states.

The letter adds the district will implement mandatory masking for all students, regardless of exemption status and take other mitigation steps when students return Monday.

Those measures include deep cleaning the the school each night, requiring students remain at least six feet apart when eating, and having students divided during lunch or snack breaks by having some eat in the cafeteria and others eat in classrooms or hallways.

The letter also says students will be required to wear masks on buses, but that has been a requirement issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention through a public transportation mandate for months.

The Central Bucks School District's coronavirus dashboard online hasn't been updated to reflect cases at any of the district's schools this week, but this news organization was inundated with calls from parents saying all but seven students in one sixth grade class were home Thursday.

Several parents say they have seen an "explosion of cases" in the school, either through notifications from the district or messages from other parents self-reporting that their children tested positive.

One parent said her fourth-grade daughter said she felt "yucky" when she returned home from school Monday.

"Out of an abundance of caution, I took her to get tested, thinking that I was being ridiculous because she was feeling a little bit off .. and it turned out that my fourth-grader was COVID positive," the mother of two Gayman students said Friday.

That parent's other daughter, who is in the sixth grade, was supposed to get vaccinated on Friday after recently turning 12 — the minimum age vaccines are currently approved for.

While her older daughter has tested negative so far, the sixth-grader's vaccine appointment was delayed due to the close contact.

Another mother of three children in the second, fourth and sixth grades had a similar experience this week.

Her fourth-grader came home sick Wednesday and got a positive test result on Thursday morning, which prompted her to keep her other two children home for the time being.

"I know that there was a positive case in (fourth-grader's) class early in the week. That mom had said that she notified the school, though I don't know that for sure. We never got an email regarding that," she said.

Most of the parents of children with positive tests say their children have been asymptomatic, but are frustrated that most of them learned of cases in other classes and grades from other parents and not the district itself.

Central Bucks' health and safety plan alerts parents when another student in their child's class has been confirmed positive, and another notification if the student is considered a "close contact" and may need to stay home.

If a fourth-grade student has a sibling in another grade, however, those parents say they aren't getting notified if they don't have a child in that fourth-grade class.

Most of the parents that spoke to this news organization said they only became aware of the scope of the apparent outbreak after other parents reached out to them.

None of the parents she contacted who do not have children in Gayman reported any positive cases, and the parent said she is certain her daughter contracted the virus at school.

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Stacy Mancuso, a Council Rock teacher who lives in the district, said she got multiple emails from the district after both her sons, a sixth-grade student and a fourth-grade student, were in class with another child who tested positive Monday.

Mancuso tested positive for the coronavirus herself about five weeks ago from a student in her class.

"I came home, I isolated, and thankfully none of my children got COVID-19," Mancuso said.

She took her children out of school for several days, returning after they had negative test results.

On Wednesday, Mancuso said her one of sons told her that that student who test positive Monday was back in school. When she asked her son if he was sure, her son replied, "I sit and eat lunch with him."

"At 3:30, I tested them both ... my sixth-grade son was positive and my fourth grade son was not," Mancuso said.

Mancuso said the district told her that her older son could return to school because he was

asymptomatic, but her son's pediatrician recommended he not return because he could still spread the virus to other students.

"A day and a half, whether you're symptomatic or not, is extremely quick to return to a building," Mancuso said.

The district's health and safety plan allows students and staff who are symptomatic to stay home for three days, returning only if their symptoms "resolve" and they are fever-free for 24 hours.

Mancuso kept both of her sons home, which meant they would have to use the school's virtual learning option — described by multiple parents as a live stream of the classroom.

Mancuso was at first told her fourth-grader couldn't access the live stream because he never tested positive for the coronavirus.

A note from her son's pediatrician recommending he not attend school until later next week remedied that problem, but Mancuso said she was left more frustrated with the district's cavalier attitude over the pandemic.

The parents don't want the school closed to in-person learning, but said they wanted to see some kind of action from the district other than the health and safety plan to require masks where at least three students have tested positive in a five-day period.

The district is currently following a state Department of Health order requiring masks in K-12 schools, but that order allows exemptions for medical reasons.

Central Bucks' health and safety plan nullifies mask exemptions once a class sees three cases in a week, but parents say only a few students in the entire school have exemptions in place.

The district's response, according to the parents, is effectively implementing the same policy that didn't prevent the initial outbreak.

Email alerts sent Friday morning show Gayman administrators have canceled a book fair that was scheduled for Monday and Tuesday "due to unforeseen circumstances."

The outdoor Trunk-or-Treat event in the Gayman parking lot scheduled between 3:30 and 5:30 Saturday afternoon is still on, but the school recommends social distancing and masks.

“Given the current situation at Gayman, please accompany your children to this event and maintain 6 foot distance while attending. If a 6 foot distance is not possible, please wear a mask. If you or your children are not feeling well, please stay home,” the email to parents sent at around 2 p.m. Friday says.

Most cases among students have been mild or asymptomatic this week, but one parent said her daughter was in significant pain after testing positive earlier this week.

That student, a fifth-grader, came home with a headache and fever on Tuesday.

A confirmed positive test the next day led to the family’s pediatrician recommending her other children, a second-grade student at Gayman and another sibling attending pre-school elsewhere, remain home for 10 days.

While her fifth-grader is doing better now, the mother of three said her oldest daughter had intense joint pain during the first days of her infection.

“It has knocked my daughter down. The other day she was screaming ... it hurts ... COVID is not nothing,” she said, sobbing during a phone interview Friday.