

# The Intelligencer

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## LOCAL

# What will school look like this fall? Teachers, top educators grapple with safety, financial concerns

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Meg Griffin is trying to imagine her fourth-grade class at Cold Spring Elementary School without small group readings on the carpet, hands-on math and science lessons, and knowing just what she will be up against once doors open to students in the fall.

“We think we are sending them back to normal, but I know it will be anything but normal,” said Griffin, an educator of more than 20 years and a nurse who is planning for multiple scenarios as she prepares for the fall reopening.

Students, educators and staff heading back to schools this fall will see some big changes as they navigate an academic landscape designed for safety and stripped of close-contact exchanges.

As area districts get closer to finalizing required health and safety plans for reopening schools, many questions linger. The flexible use of sick days, the enforcement of masks and social distancing requirements, and how to shoulder both online and in-person instruction are just a few topics area educators hope to get clarified before they head back.

## Learning to adjust

Required mask-wearing is just one new adjustment.

Across the county, students will see smaller class sizes, crowd-control measures in hallways and cafeterias, hand-washing and sanitizing stations in common areas, Plexiglas barriers in some spots and more rigorous online learning programs, area district leaders said this week.

Griffin is mapping out contingency plans in her mind, jotting down reminders to have students bring an additional mask in a Ziploc bag, in the event they lose theirs.

Realizing masks are a concern, Bucks County Commissioner Chairwoman Diane Ellis-Marseglia announced Thursday that the county, using CARES Act funding, will purchase face shields for each public and private school student in Bucks County.

"We think this is a great way for them to all start off together with that same protection," she said. "We know there has been a lot of worry about wearing masks, and people who can't wear masks, but virtually everyone can wear a shield."

But masks are just one of many concerns on the minds of teachers.

Warwick Elementary School teacher Michelle Jacobs said, with all the possible scenarios for change, "my brain has not stopped running."

She won't be able to help kids tie their shoes, open snacks and be a part of other personal exchanges that have become so natural for teachers working with young children.

"When a student gets physically sick in the classroom and they have a mask on, what do I do?" she asked. "I never thought of that, and no one else needs to think of that. But it's the classroom teacher that needs to know."

Inevitably, Jacobs said, teachers in classrooms will make the bulk of decisions.

"We are the the ones who need to keep our kids safe, who will make all these small decisions at a moment's notice in the classroom with 20 to 30 students in front of us," she said. "We want to do whatever is necessary to make them safe, but we don't have even science telling us what that means for certain."

### **Cost of change**

Along with the logistical challenges, schools are facing a financial crisis too, said Chris Lilienthal, assistant director of communication for the Pennsylvania State Education Association. Pennsylvania school districts are looking at a \$1 billion revenue deficit heading into the new school year.

"We're looking for emergency federal funding so school districts can balance budgets and make sure they are not forced to lay off staff during a time when we need all hands-on deck to implement all safety protocols," he said.

As of this week, more than 100 districts have filed re-opening plans, with many of them offering staggered school schedules, considering outdoor spaces for classes and implementing hybrid approaches. "Half the students come in Monday and Wednesday and

the other half come in Tuesday and Thursday to reduce the number of students in school at once,” Lilienthal said.

On Friday, Central Bucks School District Superintendent John Kopicki announced that families in the district will be asked, starting July 22, to choose one of two program options, hybrid or online only.

As new state guidelines were released this week, he said, “it became clear to our leadership that given the space limitations within our 23 schools, it would be impossible to offer a traditional five-day option and meet the social distancing requirements included in the orders.”

Though a growing number of parents are opting for virtual learning only, the vast majority of families in Bucks County want their children to return to an in-person setting, as long as safeguards are in place and guidelines for social distancing and mask-wearing are enforced, area surveys show.

Over the next two weeks, districts are expected to finalize required health and safety plans, which will detail the guidelines for all school reopening activities and reflect both the needs of the school community and the advice of local health agencies.

“We want our kids back in school, but we want to be safe about it and apply the best practices advised by experts from the CDC for social distancing,” said Quakertown Community School District Superintendent Bill Harner, who presented a plan that allows for both in-person, hybrid and virtual options, depending on the grade level. “Every superintendent is putting safety first; that means having to make some decisions that will make some people unhappy.”

Teacher comments and survey responses shared on Quakertown’s district website point to concerns educators have about the enforcement of new mandates, including the shared use of materials in classrooms and whether some teachers will have to instruct both live and virtual classes. Harner said that Quakertown’s fall reopening plans will reflect both emerging health guidelines and feedback from a task force that also included districts’ families and school employees.

Like many districts, Quakertown’s plan is contingent upon parent feedback and capacity. “The exact schedule of live instruction at the secondary level will be determined once parents select the option they want for their child,” according to the plan. “If the percentage of students selecting live instruction in a building can fit into that building while maintaining

social distancing, then all students in that building will be able to attend live instruction for five shortened days per week or four full days per week.“

But if the percentage of students selecting live instruction in a building exceeds capacity (space and staff), then the district will offer a staggered schedule.

Teachers must also plan for many contingencies.

To give teachers a “safe place” to exchange ideas and concerns, teacher Jessica Jones created a Facebook group for educators seeking out best teaching practices while prioritizing safety.

“I think teachers are some of the best problem-solvers we have,” said Jones, who teaches at Upper Dublin High School. “We were told to plan for every scenario and to be able to enact them at a moment's notice; We are planning. We’ve been thinking about it since school ended. For us — as teachers — not to know what we are planning for is very difficult.”

### **‘Weight of responsibility’**

Jacobs is keeping her own teen children home to minimize the risk of COVID-19 exposure, but she will be returning to school to be there for her third-grade students. Still, she feels the “weight of responsibility” for their health and education on her shoulders, and her mind is racing with the changes that she and her colleagues will be up against.

"No matter how we begin school, I know my students, they know me; I know their families," said Jacobs, who will be teaching the same class of students moving into third grade.

Suzi Drake, a teacher at Neshaminy High School, has doubts about the wisdom of a full-on in-person reopening.

"I would not want to be an administrator with the task of planning to reopen," she said.

About 12% of parents in Central Bucks, 14% of parents in Quakertown and 13% of parents in Pennsbury have reported in recent surveys that they do not plan on allowing their children to return to in-person instruction in the fall and would prefer full-time virtual learning.

Districts, now, are planning for both.

Kopicki said leaders are working hard to meet the individual needs of the community while prioritizing the need to protect the health and safety of students, employees and staff. The Pennsylvania Department of Education provided a health and safety template, requiring districts to craft detailed plans in four primary areas, cleaning, sanitizing, disinfecting and

ventilation; social distancing and other safety protocols; monitoring of student and staff health.

“A lot of these dynamics are changing every day,” he said. “We need to be agile in what we do so we can adapt to what is thrown at us.”

### **Changing guidelines**

The biggest challenge, Kopicki said, is “the way the guidelines and recommendations consistently change. There are no definitive mandates.”

The six-foot rule is one example. While the CDC maintains that six feet of space between students’ desks is ideal “when feasible,” local health officials have said three feet of distance is more realistic.

On social distancing mandates, Council Rock School District's draft reopening plan requires a minimum of three feet between students, with no face-to-face seating, and the district will try to achieve more whenever possible, up to six feet. Bucks County Health Department Director David Damsker told school officials in a recent meeting that a strict six-foot mandate at schools "was impractical."

County guidance calls for classroom configurations to be “altered for maximal social distancing, with as close to six feet as feasible. However, in order to meet the needs of students, this may be less than six feet in many situations.”

The county’s health department addressed some answers to common questions in a June 30 statement, including the safety protocol that will be followed if a positive case is reported in a school.

Schools will not be shutdown if a case surfaces, but health and school officials will work with the student or staff member to identify close contacts since the onset of symptoms to help with contact tracing efforts.

“We will work in conjunction with the principal and/or the superintendent on next steps for efforts to continue school/classroom activities without sending all contacts home,” Damsker said. “Depending on the situation, this may involve simply conducting enhanced surveillance for signs and symptoms and increasing sanitation and hygiene in the affected areas. Multiple cases may involve modifications to social distancing or mask usage.”

### **‘Our primary focus hasn’t changed’**

Despite the unpredictable nature of what's to come, Kopicki said education and safety are two top priorities that haven't changed, he said.

"The pandemic never changed our primary focus, meeting the educational needs of all kids, and meeting kids where they are at," he said.

He praised the district's teachers, who continue to offer solutions. "We are not aware of teachers refusing to come back. In fact, they are asking, 'How can we help? How can we make this a better situation?'"

For Jacobs, the collaboration is a "silver lining."

"In 25 years of teaching, I've never felt more connected to colleagues than I do at this very moment," she said. "No one else knows what we have to figure out. Teachers have been a lifeline for one another."

Griffin said she feels for the pressure that district administrators face in trying to meet the needs of their communities.

"They are getting conflicting advice, data that changes and recommendations that change day to day," she said. "They are trying to meet needs of their communities."

"Parents have to work. School has become essential for so many people — for some many reasons beyond reading, writing and math — and people are trying in any way they can to make it work. The fear is we are not looking at all the important pieces or we are focusing on one thing to the exclusion of another."

*Staff writer Chris English contributed to this report.*

## **Pennsylvania requires a health and safety re-opening plan that includes:**

- Identification of a "pandemic coordinator" and/or "pandemic team" with defined roles and responsibilities for health and safety preparedness and response planning
- Steps to protect children and staff at higher risk for severe illness
- Steps to take in relation to isolation or quarantine when a staff member, child or visitor becomes sick or demonstrates a history of exposure
- Expectations for the posting of signs in highly visible locations, that promote everyday protective measures and how to stop the spread of germs

- Procedures for cleaning, sanitizing, disinfecting, and ventilating learning spaces
- Procedures for the safe use of cafeterias and other congregate settings
- Protocols for sporting activities consistent with the CDC Considerations for Youth Sports for recess and physical education classes (guidance for organized school sports will be published separately)
- Schedules for training all faculty and staff on the implementation of the Health and Safety Plan
- System for ensuring ongoing communication with families around the elements of the local Health and Safety Plan including ways that families can practice safe hygiene in the home.

**Each Health and Safety Plan may also include the following to the extent possible:**

- Guidelines for hygiene practices for students and staff
- Guidelines on the use of face coverings (masks or face shields) by staff and students
- Protocols for classroom/learning space occupancy that allow for six feet of separation among students and staff throughout the day when appropriate
- Methods of limiting the number of individuals in classrooms and other learning spaces, and interactions between groups of students
- Methods of staggering the use of communal spaces and hallways and ensuring regular cleaning
- Procedures to limit the sharing of materials among students
- Processes for identifying and restricting non-essential visitors and volunteers
- Protocols for adjusting transportation schedules and practices to create social distance between students
- Processes to communicate and coordinate with local child care regarding on site care, transportation protocol changes, and when possible, revised hours of operation or modified school-year calendars.