



CITY of NORTHAMPTON

PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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Dear Mayor Narkewicz, and School Committee Members

I understand that people want assurance as to whether or not schools are safe. At this point there have been and likely will be more school community members who test positive for COVID. At this time there has been zero school transmission within buildings of the Northampton Public School District. This means none of the cases of COVID in school community members have originated at the schools. Our job as public health professionals is to reduce risk to the greatest extent possible. Full risk elimination is a promise we can never make, as it is a faulty one - from getting in a car each day to the food we put in our bodies, every choice in life contains risk, and the two examples above, like COVID, contain risk mitigation efforts - seatbelts, airbags, USDA inspection, and restaurant inspectors.

We can reduce the risk of contracting COVID in four ways:

1. All school community members limit social interactions outside of the school setting,
2. All students and staff conduct screenings through the schools' daily self symptom checklist. The protocols listed there, include reporting symptoms to the school nurse as soon as possible.
3. Timely contact tracing upon detecting confirmed COVID, and
4. Access to testing.

We have worked hand in hand with NPS staff to develop the daily checklist screening.

We have offered NPS staff access to testing with the remainder of our CARES act funding through the end of December. We continue to contact trace in accordance with DPH and CDC guidance. Additionally, we continue to implore our residents to limit any interaction outside of the household, as our data - local, commonwealth, and nationwide - continue to inform us that these social interactions are the primary drivers of spread.

The Northampton Health Department (NHD), DESE, and the Command Center under the direction of Governor Baker, continue to advocate for in-person learning for our children to the greatest extent possible. Studies are showing that the negative public health impacts of keeping students out of school, particularly for our BIPOC and low-income communities, will far outnumber the cases of COVID that will be transmitted in schools. We are confident that if and when cases do appear within our schools we can quickly detect and isolate them, temporarily shifting a limited cohort of students out of a school building to remote learning during quarantine, while maintaining a healthy learning environment for the remainder of students.

The NHD continues to remain a dynamic organization responsive to the needs of its residents. During the height of the spring surge, we employed eight nurses who served Northampton and twelve additional communities. By next week, we will have a dedicated staff of five nurses solely serving the Northampton community, performing COVID-19 case investigation and contact tracing.

Our daily new case average in Northampton since November 1st has ranged from 2.79-3.93. During this time of increased workload, we have maintained a 95% contact rate with cases. Any cases identified with children or other school affiliation have been fully cooperative with contact tracing efforts. We have reached 100% of contacts related to schools. The 5% of contacts that we have not been successful in reaching are usually due to an incorrect phone number in the system or someone not answering their phone when we call.

So far this school year in Massachusetts, 75 school-based clusters have been reported, and 208 cases have been linked to these clusters. A cluster is defined as two or more confirmed cases residing in separate houses, with a shared exposure such as a school setting.

To reiterate, most cases of school community members who have had COVID did not originate in that school setting. When looking at the nearly 3000 COVID-19 cases have been reported among school staff and students across the commonwealth this school year, Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) has determined that the vast majority of exposures and subsequent infections occurred at home or as a result of social interactions, not as a result of in-school transmission.

When a student or school employee tests positive, public health nurses and contact tracers work to identify their close contacts, both at school and outside of school. To meet criteria to be a close contact, an individual must have had to be within 6 feet of the person for a cumulative duration of 15 minutes or longer within a 24 hour period during the confirmed case's infectious period. When a school staff or student calls a school nurse about daily self checklist symptoms the nurse will work within the building to create a list of close contacts. This list will only be used and contacted if the person tests or is presumed positive.

Should someone in the schools be defined as a close contact of a confirmed case, Public Health authorities order those close contacts to begin quarantine and seek testing at an appropriate time. Given the proactive measures schools are taking, which include daily health screening, mask wearing, distancing measures and many other public health mitigating factors, we ultimately identify very few close contacts during our school investigations. If anyone's status of exposure were to be questionable, we have and will continue to err on the side of caution.

To date, despite students being in NPS buildings since September 17th, we have had very few confirmed COVID-19 cases in NPS with staff and students. But what should stand out is that we have not had any in-school transmission due to the incredible work of our NPS staff, nurses, and due to the caregiver and student compliance that has often exceeded expectations. This means our systems are working.

Touting these successes does not mean we are content with stagnance. We continue to strive for ways to improve process, communication and opportunities. Kate Kelly transitioned from her role as Leeds Elementary School Nurse to Public Health Nurse and as of December 2nd has stood up weekly meetings between NHD's Public Health Nurses and NPS' Nurses. These meetings include but are not limited to: how to continue to ensure robust communication and debriefing and working through innumerable permutations of school-related scenarios. We have also implemented a shared HIPAA-compliant database for communication between the NHD Director, Public Health Nurses and the NPS COVID School Nurse Lead and the Director of Health, Safety, and Equity Programs. This improves ability for in-school contacts can be identified and traced as soon as possible.

Our community response has recently been bolstered by the ability to offer asymptomatic testing through the NHD to identified populations as well as large scale asymptomatic testing in December and January through UMass.

We understand that anecdotes and, frankly, rumors are rampant regarding insufficiencies in contact tracing in other parts of the state. However, this is due to the unique structure of public health in the Commonwealth. We can only report on how we are working cases which are made apparent to us. We cannot control cases that may occur in other jurisdictions or other states, which may not end up being reported to us. We are working with state DPH and our legislators to continue to highlight the administrative burden this places on staff, and the threat it poses to visibility and continuity of data throughout the Commonwealth.

The message we want to leave you with is the following: we first and foremost want to recognize the incredible efforts the school staff, students and their caregivers have taken to understand and respond to the quickly-evolving information and guidance related to this pandemic. Thank you to all of the students for wearing their masks and following the new rules at school. Thank you to grown-ups who diligently monitor their student's health daily and err on the cautious side with runny noses and upset tummies. Thank you to all of the teachers, ESPs, maintenance staff, and administrators for your terrific mask-wearing and messaging to your students. We recognize that taking your own health precautions while messaging and enforcing them with your students are time consuming and often-stressful layers on top of your usual roles. Thank you. We are heartened by the children and staff who are within the walls of NPS buildings and doing an incredible job.

