

**Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee  
September 23, 2021**

**Presented by  
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Good morning, Chairman Martin, Minority Chair Williams, and distinguished members of the Senate Education Committee.

I am Michael Bromirski, superintendent of the Hempfield School District in Lancaster County. Before I begin my formal remarks, I want to be crystal clear that I am not here because of politics and I am not here to debate the legality of the August 31, 2021, mask order.

I am here today because I believe we all have a common goal – to ensure that all students across Pennsylvania have the opportunity to remain in our schools for in-person learning. To achieve this goal, it is important to understand how COVID continues to impact our schools, bring to light significant concerns regarding the PA Department of Health’s support of schools, and to offer to be a part of working toward a solution to help keep our students in schools for in-person learning opportunities. If we cannot be true partners in our efforts to address COVID in our schools, I am concerned that in-person learning will not remain sustainable and our students will miss critical learning opportunities.

The 2020-2021 school year began with most districts in Lancaster County opening for in-person instruction. In order to open our doors, a tremendous amount of time, energy and effort went into figuring out how to make this happen for those who felt comfortable with in-person learning. We developed strong partnerships with local medical professionals, including a large local medical organization, to ensure that we had regular and consistent updates regarding COVID and Lancaster County Data, as well as the opportunity to ask questions and learn directly from medical professionals on the front lines.

Although temporary closures to school buildings occurred in our county, most students in Lancaster County benefited from nearly a full year of in-person instruction and learning. Even when students were at home, due to quarantine or COVID, or by choice with virtual learning, Hempfield students were able to follow along with instruction remotely, as was the case in many districts in our area. This was not possible without countless hours of work, creativity, compromise, and committed caring by our teachers, support staff, administrators, and board members.

Though many meeting requests with the DOH went unanswered last school year, we were truly grateful for our daily phone conversations with the DOH nurses who received our COVID case reports and to PDE for trying to get us answers.

There was tremendous creativity in our schools with social distancing, cleaning, and teaching. There was a significant amount of compromise in not being able to have instruction and events happen in the ways we were used to, as well as a lot of patience and grace. Lancaster County schools, along with other schools across Pennsylvania, rose to the challenge and our students benefited greatly.

Fast forward to the summer of 2021 when COVID orders were lifted, and school leaders were preparing for the opening of the 2021-2022 school year. We were informed that we needed to develop a new Health and Safety Plan that met specific requirements, including obtaining community input. Most districts had their plans approved by their school boards in July and were ready to again open for in-person learning. Then, as COVID case counts began to rise, we began receiving electronic communications from the Secretary of Education and the Acting Secretary of Health in August, just as school was about to start.

In these communications, we were directed to communicate with their respective departments using specific email addresses. Email limits the ability to truly communicate and it does not allow for meaningful dialogue that brings about clarity and understanding regarding information that must be interpreted and ultimately, enforced. As school leaders, we began requesting meetings with the Department of Health. PDE and our local IU, IU-13, even advocated on our behalf for these meetings, but to no avail.

Before moving on to my next few points, it is important to know that during the previous school year (2020-2021), we, the school staff, did the work that the Department of Health was responsible for when it came to schools. This included:

- Case investigation work
- Contact tracing
- Communication with parents/guardians
- Quarantining students/staff
- Reporting COVID cases
- Submitting line lists

I am pointing this out specifically because one day before my school district opened for students, we were informed by the Department of Health that, and I quote:

*"...schools do not issue quarantine or isolation directives but rather assist the DOH staff with identifying close contacts. The CDC guidance adopted by the DOH and PDE will serve as*

*public health best practice recommendations for schools. There is no requirement to adhere to these recommendations although the DOH strongly encourages schools to follow these recommendations.” End quote.*

Through email, we needed to seek clarification because schools were already getting pushback about our authority to mandate masks, quarantines, etc. The response from DOH was and I quote:

*“Any close contacts identified by the school will receive legally binding quarantine orders from DOH. Schools would not be providing quarantine orders to close contacts, so there should not be concerns about legal authority there. We do strongly encourage schools/school boards to adopt policies that promote quarantine enforcement at the school level, as that is the best way to keep our children safe and learning in-person.” End quote.*

When further clarification was sought, through email, regarding what schools should tell parents, we asked if the following statement would be appropriate to share with a parent/guardian of an identified close contact:

*“As a close contact, we have provided your contact information to the DOH and someone from the DOH will be in touch with quarantine information.”*

We were told by the Department of Health that this statement would be a quote, *“perfect response.”*

Our nursing staff, teachers, and administrators went way above and beyond during the 2020-2021 school year and are continuing to go above and beyond during this school year. From start to finish the amount of time it takes school employees to effectively work through one COVID case in a school is hard to quantify. Below are some examples of what we do:

- Speak with parents/guardians to learn about the COVID+ individual including positive test date, symptom onset date, actual symptoms, where they may have contracted COVID, how they got to and from school, who they may have been around, and if they are involved in extracurricular activities.
- Spend time contact tracing – walking through the student/staff member’s daily schedule, reviewing seating charts, reviewing bus and school videos, and interviewing students/staff to identify contacts.
- Speak with every parent/guardian of a close contact, answering questions about testing, what to do if they develop symptoms, and timelines for returning to school.
- Spend time completing DOH required forms for the work we completed.

I'm sharing this because I truly wonder if anyone, other than school staff, has a true picture of what we do daily because of COVID. This work is in addition to the time we need to focus on teaching and learning, facilities, general safety, or policy work, all of which demands additional time and accommodations by our staff due to COVID.

So far this school year, Hempfield School District has submitted 50 COVID case reports to the Department of Health. Last school year we would have talked to a DOH nurse or Epidemiology Associate for just about every case. This year, we have talked to a DOH nurse two times.

Despite the DOH stating they would provide direct communication; parents are not hearing from them. To my knowledge, they are not issuing legally binding quarantine orders. Some districts have reported that a few parents received an automated call from the Department of Health, but the message provided little to no important information.

On a personal note, one of my daughters was quarantined at least 5 separate times by her school district last school year, after being identified as a close contact, and yet we received zero calls from the Department of Health. Not one.

Parents are looking to us, the school districts, and are questioning how we can exclude their child from in-person instruction because the DOH has not contacted them. We are attempting to abide by the directions we have been given by the DOH, but they are not following through on their stated responsibilities.

On August 31, 2021, a new mask order was issued after many schools in Lancaster County already opened with masks optional. To say that this change caused an extreme amount of anger, frustration, and volatility in our communities is an understatement. Though Hempfield's school board meetings have remained generally civil, that has not been the case elsewhere. Board members and school leaders are being threatened. School officials are being told we could be held personally liable for not following the order. In the span of one day, I was informed that I could be arrested if I followed the Order and if I didn't follow the Order. Our communities are divided and faith in public education is diminishing.

We are deeply concerned about the long-term effects of the damaged relationships between schools and communities. How we work through the implementation details of this Order will have long reaching impacts. Additionally, with increasing teacher and staff shortages, the current climate is having a detrimental effect on finding staff to work in our schools. This, too, will have a long-term, adverse impact on the continuity of public education in Pennsylvania.

The current Order conflicts with the FAQ and emails we received. We often receive emails late on Friday afternoons that state schools must, should, and/or are recommended to do certain

things, but the Order does not state these new instructions. So, are we to follow the interpretation as outlined in the FAQ or the actual Order? If schools are to implement or enforce an order, we deserve the opportunity to get direct and timely answers to our questions.

On Sunday, September 19, 2021, Lancaster Newspaper (LNP) published an article in which a Health Department spokeswoman said, quote “The Health and Education departments have been working with schools to educate them on the mandate and risks of noncompliance.” End quote. In a school setting, “working with” does not mean one-way communication or notification through email.

If I had to make general statements about how the PA Department of Health handles our questions, it would be that when we do receive a response, it:

- 1) Is general in nature and does not provide specifics,
- 2) Often redirects us to an FAQ that is not helpful,
- 3) Is incomplete or just simply doesn't answer the question(s) we asked, and
- 4) It raises more questions.

I am not sure how it has become the public schools' responsibility to educate our entire community about the importance and effectiveness of mask wearing, vaccines, quarantines, etc. The responsibility, and I quote “To promote healthy behaviors, and prevent injury and disease to assure the safe delivery of quality healthcare for all people in Pennsylvania” end quote, belongs to the PA Department of Health as it is their mission.

After being applauded for figuring out how to open our schools for in-person instruction, schools have become the new front line in the battle over mask wearing and other COVID mitigation efforts and it is simply not sustainable. Instead of being supported, we are being blamed and threatened. From all sides.

Help us get back to what all our schools should be focused on – providing an exceptional education to our students. We are here and waiting for the opportunity to directly address these concerns with Acting Secretary Beam and we are willing to work together, with all of you, to ensure that our schools can remain open for in-person learning. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania owes this to our students and communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.