



West Orange Public Schools
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Superintendent of Schools

J. Scott Cascone, Ed. D.

December 4, 2020

Dear West Orange Public School Families,

I hope this finds you and yours well and you enjoyed a happy and restful Thanksgiving recess. As pursuant to previous weeks, I would like to provide the school community with an update on school reopening as it relates to the current status of COVID-19 positivity rate in our community and the overall public health situation.

As had been previously outlined in the COVID [Metric Letter](#) local positivity rate was the primary metric which the school district administration identified and has been utilizing in concert with local medical and public health authorities for assessing the feasibility and advisability of opening schools. This represented a useful metric, as it could be cross-referenced with the state department of health COVID-19 [Risk Matrix](#) which provides public health recommendations for local health departments for K-12 Schools.

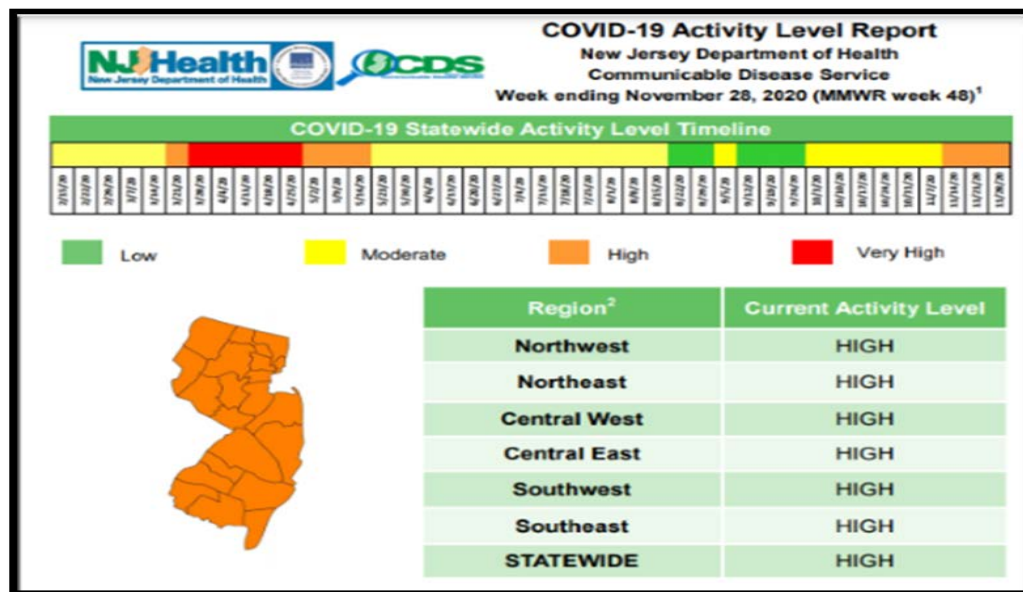
The local positivity rates had been ranging between 15 and 17% over the last several weeks. However, earlier this week, I was informed by the West Orange Department of Health and Office of Emergency Management that the township would be changing the formula by which positivity rate was calculated. The rationale for this change was to bring local practice in alignment with the formula being utilized by the state. While it is unclear as to exactly when the state started using this revised formula, it was no later than November 21.

The previous formula which was being utilized by the local Department of Health measured, over a seven day period, the total number of positive tests over the total number of positive and negative tests recorded since the beginning of testing last year. The new formula also uses a seven day look back. However, it uses a total number of positive tests over the total number of positive and negative tests within just the same seven day period. The 7-day Pre-Thanksgiving positivity rate was 16.05% using the old formula and 11.9% with the new formula. [Calculating \(SARS-CoV-2\) Laboratory Test Percent Positivity: CDC Methods and Considerations for Comparisons and Interpretation](#)

How can we interpret this formula change and the decrease in percentage? First, it is important to realize that while the calculation formula has changed, the benchmark percentages distinguishing the levels of risk: low, moderate, high and highest have not changed. Utilizing the new formula and based simply on the revised community positivity rate one could conclude that the community is now closer to the moderate range of risk (3-10% Positivity). However, we are also seeing the largest numbers of positive cases in our community since the onset of the pandemic. In fact, between the dates of November 10 and December 1 there were 420 positive cases. At the height of

the first spike between April 19 and May 2 there were 329 positive cases. Regardless, we can safely assume that the new formula is being used by the state to assess the level of risk by region and when referring to the table below one can see that the entire state is now in the high level of risk.

[COVID-19 Activity Level Report](#)



It is also worth noting, that during the first wave the percentage of cases involving school-age children was below 2% and in the second wave which we are encountering the percentage of cases represented by school-age children is in the range of 13%.

In conferring with the district physician, local Department of Health and Office of Emergency Management they have advised to utilize the next 3 to 4 weeks as an opportunity to track this data with some degree of longitudinality to determine exactly what this new calculation formula means. Of course, this is a difficult time during which to establish a baseline owing to the onset of cold and flu season, and the increased social interaction and travel associated with the holiday season. However, if we are witnessing not only a consistent decrease in the overall positivity rate as indicated by the revised formula but also a leveling off and decrease in overall cases this will bode well for an attempt at reopening schools in the new year.

It is important to understand that transitioning from a virtual model in which many staff members are presently working at home to a hybrid model in which all staff members will be reporting to work as well as students requires some degree of preparation. As such, and not knowing exactly how the data will play out in the upcoming weeks, the district administration is beginning the preparation of a prospective timeline for the reopening of schools in the 2021 calendar year.

Certainly, if we were to see the level of both regional and local risk move from the high range into the moderate range as indicated by the positivity rate index this would position the district well to re-open schools in the 2021 calendar year.

In the meantime, with recently modified and augmented daily virtual schedules at the elementary and middle schools and ongoing evaluation of the schedule at the high school, we are confident that this will provide sound qualitative enhancements to our virtual offerings. I've also emphasized strongly to the leadership team and their staff of the importance of now that we have come to the end of the first marking period and trimester at the elementary school level to conduct exhaustive analyses of grades and student performance. Also essential will be proactive outreach to parents and students in the development of individualized academic and social emotional support plans to help bring students up to speed on an as needed basis. I am happy to report however, as evidenced by recently released honor roll numbers from our secondary schools as well as survey feedback from parents relative to the functionality and effectiveness of the virtual program that we are meeting with a high degree of success.

I thank you for your time and consideration and wish you a safe and restful weekend.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Scott Cascone". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

J. Scott Cascone, Ed. D.
Superintendent of Schools