



Office of the Superintendent
Billings Public Schools
415 North 30th Street
Billings, Montana 59101-1298
Phone: (406) 281-5065 Fax: (406) 281-6187

October 21, 2020

Dear Parents, Staff, Students and Community Members:

First, thank you all for the work you do under normal circumstances and even more so for your extraordinary efforts during this pandemic. Everyone is exhausted by all of this – I see it in our students and our parents. I see it in our faculty and staff, and I see it in our administration. It may be a small consolation, but please know I appreciate your help every minute of every day.

There is a paradox within this situation: Although it seems like we have been at this for years and years, information is moving so fast and with such frequency, often it's hard to keep current and it can easily be misinterpreted. Thus, I write to clarify my contact tracing communication from Monday, October 12, 2020. I apologize for any confusion it may have caused.

First and foremost, *no one* in this District should use the 15-minute variable in our contact tracing responsibilities to avoid quarantining a student. The information as reported in some news outlets and also through some internal building communication asking for a scheduled 14 minute student movement in all classrooms, has led to confusion. Let me explain what I believe has caused this misunderstanding and a great deal of concern.

In our high school administrator meeting on Monday, October 12th the topic of contact tracing was discussed, specifically understanding the definition of a close contact from the Center for Disease Controls and Prevention (CDC). This precipitated a call to RiverStone Health to gain further clarification of the definition the CDC provides on their website. "For COVID-19, a close contact is defined as any individual who was within 6 feet of an infected person for at least 15 minutes starting from 2 days before illness onset (or, for asymptomatic patients, 2 days prior to positive specimen collection) until the time the patient is isolated."

Our students, like all students, move about a lot in the classroom and throughout the school several times during the course of a day. To the greatest extent possible, we manage which students are together, how students move, and avoid creating settings for students to be congregating in groups, because COVID spreads in close contact situations. The outcomes of a close contact determination are significant. A student determined to be in close contact is ordered to quarantine for 14 days, which means the student is excluded from school, from our classrooms, from friends, from activities, from any semblance of normal student life. We are keenly aware that such an exclusion affects not only the education a student receives, but the mental and emotional health of our students. Thus, we take the responsibility of determining close contacts very seriously, just as we are extremely cognizant in the other proactive measures we are using to help keep our COVID numbers as low as possible.

After our meeting, I sent this email to our administrators:

Administrators,

In an effort to continue to combat the COVID-19 virus, I want to remind everyone of the definition of a close contact. A close contact is an individual or individuals who are within 6' for 15 continuous minutes of a person who is identified as an active case.

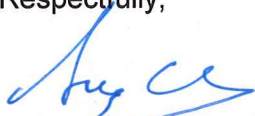
Please remind your staff and students to be cognizant of this definition and whenever possible, disrupt the 15 minute timeline, through movement, distancing and masking. This will assist our contact tracers in reducing the number of students and staff who are identified as close contacts and placed into quarantine, not to mention the obvious element of overall safety for everyone.

*Please be advised,
Greg*

My direction was not to use a technicality or otherwise 'game the system' to avoid quarantining students. We require students and staff to wear masks. We require frequent handwashing. We require cleaning our schools. We also require students and staff to social distance whenever possible. All of this is to avoid the spread of the virus, not to avoid quarantining students.

If there are questions about our safety measures or contact tracing duties, please contact Brenda, Randy or me as soon as possible.

Respectfully,



Greg Upham
Superintendent, Billings Public Schools