

PHS will be host to state COVID testing site

Symptomatic students plan confirmed

By Sarah Nigbor

PRESCOTT – The Prescott School Board voted unanimously Tuesday, Sept. 21 to provide COVID testing onsite at Prescott High School at no cost to the district, students or families with parental consent required. The board also voted 3-2 to continue following a student symptom procedure for exclusion that will require symptomatic students to stay home for 10 days, test negative for COVID or acquire a different diagnosis to return to school.

The state-onsite testing will be housed in Facilities & Grounds Supervisor Mike Hoikka's PHS office off the vestibule (his main office is at Malone Intermediate School). It will be fully staffed and overseen by state employees. Testing will be free to students, family or anyone in the school district, available 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday.

District and parental consent forms will be required for any testing if students are under 18. A student 18 and older can consent to testing without parent permission. These forms can be filled out online at COVID Connect (<https://register.covidconnect.wi.gov/en-US/>); parents can pre-register their children. The PCR nasal swab test will be the method used, which according to District Nurse Cassie Butler is the "gold standard" for testing. Results have been coming back in about 14 hours; they're guaranteed in 24-48 hours.

Butler and will receive results, which are confidential, at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. each day; families can get them online in real time. If a result is positive, Pierce County Public Health will work with the family to determine next steps. To start, appointments will be walk-in, but if demand is high, appointments may be necessary.

"My goal was to eliminate the barriers that our community is having in finding testing and finding free testing," Butler said. "Some places are charging doctors' fees."

Having testing onsite will streamline the process and take a burden off staff, Superintendent Dr. Rick Spicuzza said.

"We are very thin on staffing and what they're being asked to do," Spicuzza said.

When asked about possible additional enforcement burden, Butler said on-site testing will save her "hours of time."

No limits are imposed on number of tests. The vendor notifies PCPH and the district nurses, but other school staff does not receive the information.

School board member Tanya Holub said it's another way to give options to families.

"I absolutely believe we'll have a little bit of pushback from people about this, but in the end, this is something that you don't have to opt into," she said.

If a student tests positive, Butler will work with PCPH to determine the student's exclusion time and their household contacts.

"We internally have been notifying close contacts," Butler said. "Giving them that power and that knowledge to know that their student was a close contact, but we're not excluding."

She receives test results no matter where students test.

"This gives people freedom of choice," Board President Mike Matzek said. "They can choose to use it or not."

Symptom procedure

The board voted 3-2 (Matzek and Board Vice President Steve Sizemore voted no) to cement the student symptom procedure for exclusion. What does that mean?

A student will be asked to get a PCR COVID test to rule out a positive case or obtain an alternative medical diagnosis to return to school once identified as being symptomatic. If one of these options is not done, the student will be required to stay home for 10 days.

Spicuzza said parents should keep children home if they have symptoms, for everyone's well-being.

"It's just the ability for us to identify people



Parents are reminded to keep their children home if they're showing symptoms of sickness. School Nurse Cassie Butler said staying home a day doesn't automatically trigger a COVID test or 10-day exclusion. It depends on the symptoms. Art courtesy of vecteezy.com

that are contagious, but we also have to identify when it's appropriate for students to stay home," Spicuzza said. "Even before COVID, it's very common knowledge as a parent that if children have a fever or they're vomiting and things like that, you keep them home."

COVID cases in Pierce County and PSD are on the rise again.

"I know that parents are in a double bind, but my principals will share story after story or teachers will share story after story of students being sent to school, unfortunately with some of these symptoms," Spicuzza said. "You're symptomatic, you're not testing, then we have to treat you as if (you're positive) and that you would be home for 10 days."

If a student is identified by the school nurse to have one of these symptoms, he/she will be sent home:

- Persistent cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing while at rest
- Loss of taste or smell

If a student has multiple of the following symptoms identified by the school nurse, he/she will be sent home:

- Fever of 100.4 or higher
- Sore throat
- Excessive nausea, vomiting or diarrhea
- Unusual congestion/runny nose
- Unusual fatigue, body aches

After a 10-day quarantine, students can return to school 24 hours after being symptom free, Butler said.

"It's not instantly we're jumping to send this student home," Butler said. "Last year loss of taste or smell was big, not this year. This year we're seeing headaches, sore throats, congestion, maybe fever."

If a teacher notices a persistent cough or a student goes to the nurse on their own, the nurse will observe the student for at least half an hour and make an assessment before sending anyone home. She takes into account a student's medical history on file. Holub asked how confidentiality is maintained.

"More often than not, a student comes in themselves or a teacher calls or emails me during passing time," Butler said.

The district is not requiring quarantines for close contacts. However, if it was, Butler said there would be many. She acknowledged that the 10-day requirement, if a student is not tested or has another diagnosis, sounds tough, but the philosophy behind it is to keep schools open longer, teachers working and everyone safe.

Spicuzza said most families have been cooperative. Virtual school is not an option this year, so students sent home must obtain materials from their teachers or lessons in Google Classroom.

Matzek was happy the district will provide a testing site, but not on board with the symptom exclusion procedure. He would prefer it be a strong recommendation.

"I'm not comfortable with having a 10-day stay-at-home mandate for a student that, we're basically forcing them to get tested and I know that's what it was last year, but last year was a

different year and we were under a governor's mandate last year for most of the year," Matzek said.

Butler reminded him the procedure is outlined in the building's "Return to School" plans and supported by PCPH, CDC and other medical experts.

"We don't want kids in the buildings that aren't symptom-free," Matzek admitted.

"And that has happened every day since we started, is symptomatic students at school," Butler reiterated.

Board member Vicki Rudolph expressed support for the requirement, because the district is giving families another option to keep kids in school and students, staff and families safe by offering state testing.

"Since this is not above and beyond what we already agreed to this year, what the CDC has recommended, what everybody is saying is the appropriate timeframe for this possible infection to occur, I think at this point we've put it all out there to keep kids in school," Rudolph said. "We heard that parents wanted to make their own decisions, we're giving them that. It could keep us from having to make a drastic decision down the road."

Butler clarified that she, as a Registered Nurse, cannot diagnose students. The district will also not accept diagnoses from chiropractors. She also made clear that if a student is asymptomatic, the 10-day quarantine begins from the positive test date, per PCPH. If symptomatic, the 10 days begins from the day symptoms first appeared.

Holub said as a parent, she appreciates the defined symptom list and steps outlined, because it takes some stress out of knowing what to do.

"COVID is unfortunately still here and we're really struggling with it," Holub said.

Matzek said it should send a clear message to parents: Keep kids home if they're sick and make child care arrangements if you have to.

COVID update

Spicuzza informed the board PCPH is overwhelmed by new COVID cases and is unable to contact or identify new cases within 24 hours. He emphasized vaccinations and masking as the two most effective mitigation efforts to prevent the spread of the virus.

At the previous meeting, the board had tasked him with developing a matrix or a list of conditions that would trigger requiring masking and parameters for closing school or a classroom. Easier said than done, he said. Making this decision alone is not possible as he has no medical expertise, he added.

"No matter what line we'd draw, the school board would face criticism," Spicuzza said.

He asked the board which is more important: To keep buildings open at all costs or to maintain high quality instructional integrity? The schools are already "in code red," he said.

He recounted that Transportation Director Tim Rundquist has one substitute driver.

"What if we can't run a full fleet? Would we close or ask people to drive kids?" he asked.

Food Services Director Maggie Schmidt said having four food service staff members out would close a kitchen. Five would require moving to cold lunches.

Custodians are holding up so far, but a nighttime position needs to be filled, Spicuzza said.

"We are on the cusp right now," Spicuzza said. "What steps are we going to take to protect staff or to help support additional vaccinations?"

Building principals are covering classrooms at least one period daily at the high school and four days a week at the middle school. The substitute teacher pool is dwindling. As of Sept. 21, the county had 137 new cases (in the past seven days) and 13-14 percent of PHS was absent.

Spicuzza asked for further guidance as to who should decide building/classroom closures. But like the chicken and egg debate, a clear answer was not forthcoming.

Matzek said it should be up to a building admin, similar to a burst pipe scenario. Sizemore said the metrics should be derived by the school board, but he would need recommendations from staff.

"I don't run a middle school," Sizemore said. "I don't know what that number looks like. When does it become critical? We owe families a look at the decision-making process."

Fiege voiced that implementing a matrix is impossible due to unknown variables. For example, the availability any given day of subs or ability of other staff to cover.

"Everyone likes black and white," Fiege said. "The school board wants a matrix, staff want a matrix. But this is the most gray thing that I think we've circled around for ... weeks now, trying to figure out how can we make this black and white. Every district that we've talked to that's tried to make it black and white, they've rolled back either small or major components of that matrix because it hasn't worked or hasn't applied to the situation they tried to apply it to. Then people get mad when schools shut down."

Matzek stuck to his belief that building admins know their buildings best, that no matrix or metrics will be a catch all.

"At the end of the day, it's really a gametime call for admins to make decisions," Matzek said.

The board agreed the issue was too large to tackle that night, but directed Spicuzza to send out a letter to inform families of leading indicators and a list of triggers that may prompt building admins to make closure decisions. Families are advised to have alternate plans in place.

Other business

•The board approved four new hires: Joan Korfhage as interim varsity girls' basketball coach; Jenny Lyons as middle school cross country coach; Cassie Smith as an eighth-grade math teacher; and Sue Gerdes as district finance coordinator, beginning Oct. 7.

•The board approved the Project SEARCH agreement with River Falls School District for the second year. The program provides fifth-year seniors a little more support in the transition into the world of competitive employment.

•The board approved the PHS student overnight trip to Lac du Flambeau Reservation Sept. 30 through Oct. 3. More than 300 students have participated in the program over the past 20 years.

•The board voted to allow Athletic & Activities Director Andrew Caudill to put the Prescott boys' basketball team on a consideration list for the 2022-23 Milwaukee Bucks Prep Series, which give players the opportunity to compete at the Fiserv Forum and attend a Bucks game. Significant fundraising will take place if selected.

•The board voted to add an extracurricular position to the handbook for theater 6-12. The person will be paid \$5,100 per season (fall, winter, spring). The consultant currently serving in the role understands choreography, staging, music, bill rights and stage creation. The hope is to create a longer-term vision and solid theater program and department.

•The board approved a renegotiated contract with SDS Architects, saving PSD \$5,000.

•An updated employee handbook was approved.

•The Facilities Advisory Committee will meet Oct. 13.

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homecoming kick-off, encouraged students to get vaccinated.

"We need just about 400 more to get to the 70 percent level ... at the end of the day we all understand the issue of herd immunity, that is the point where we can begin to not have to worry about this virus anymore and we cannot do that without young adults stepping to the plate."

UW-System President Tommy Thompson also spoke to students and attendees about getting vaccinated.

"I never want to close down campuses again and that is why we have instituted a mask policy that not everyone supports and I get that, but we have to make sure that our professors, faculty and our students are protected in every way they can," Thompson said.

He also congratulated the Falcon football team on a 3-0 track record this season.

"River Falls happens to be 3-0 and you took on that poor school in Northern Illinois and you trumped them 71-13, a record score for River Falls, what a great kickoff," he said.

Thompson also applauded the university on its successes in infrastructure and academics.

"I want to take this opportunity to say thank you to the faculty. We have some of the finest professors, instructors and teachers in the UW System at the River Falls campus and they do a great job," he said.

The university is currently at a 63 percent vaccination rate and the percentage keeps increasing each week. UWRF has continued to offer incentives to reach a 70 percent population of vaccinated students as well as creating resources for students to get their vaccine on campus with no hassle.

"I'm very excited, new



(From left): Chancellor Maria Gallo, Gov. Tony Evers, Freddy Falcon and UW-President Tommy Thompson take center stage at the UW-River Falls University Center plaza to not only begin homecoming festivities, but encourage students to get vaccinated. Photo by Melissa Thorud

things are happening each day this week and it has been a fun first homecoming so far," said Chancellor Maria Gallo.

The overall younger population has been slow to get

vaccinated, Evers said.

"I think for a lot of young people they just don't think about it and I don't think there are a whole lot of young people that are anti-vaxxers ... I just don't think

it is a huge part of their life and every student and young adult that gets a vaccine is making sure they don't pass it along to someone else," he said.

This week, UWRF will

host several events to get students and the community excited for homecoming. The football game is on Saturday Oct. 2 where they will take on WIAC foe UW-La Crosse.