

Districts try to prepare strategies to test, trace

NY schools expect some cases despite prevention

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New York school districts are busy fine-tuning every possible method to keep the coronavirus out of their buildings.

But they are also planning for what to do if the virus does rear its head inside, because education leaders and health officials know that at least on a statewide level, it is a matter of when, not if.

Orange County Health Commissioner Dr. Irina Gelman said her department is planning for a potential resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall, and schools are one part of that.

Just as there have been cluster outbreaks related to birthday parties and other gatherings, Gelman

said the same is likely in schools.

“When you have a global pandemic of this scope and magnitude, it’s expected that there may be clusters in congregate settings,” she said. “So I don’t see how a school setting would be any different.”

So when cases do arise, a key will be

contact tracing — charting who have been in contact with the infected person, whether a student, staff member or parent, and determining who else needs to be tested and isolated.

How to track an outbreak was pushed to the forefront recently when Greenburgh-North Castle, a special act district based in Westchester County, had a staff member test positive during their in-person summer school.

The district got wind of the positive case on a Wednesday night, July 22, and closed the building where the person worked for the remainder of the week. But the following Sunday, less than 24 hours before they were set to reopen, another staff member tested positive.

“A school closure would be something significant, when you have widespread community transmission...it’s not something that we would recommend lightly.”

Westchester County Health Commissioner Dr. Sherlita Amler echoed a similar sentiment: It would be hard to cover all the nuances of a containment situation with a blanket number of days a building should close.

“It’s not a situation where you’re making all the decisions based on the first information you get,” Amler said.

Contact tracing is a more complicated process than many realize, Amler said.

That person had been on the original list of possible contacts put together by the district, said teachers union president Anthony Nicodemo, but had not been told to quarantine by the health department.

They were set to report to the school that Monday. More staff members and some students tested positive in the following days.

How testing will be key to school reopening

The cases at Greenburgh-North Castle have been a jumping off point for Nicodemo and others to call for more centralized, clear and cautious procedures from the state when schools have positive cases.

According to the state Department of Health guidance released in mid-July, schools are required to notify their local health department when anyone within school facilities tests positive.

They must “develop and maintain plans to support local health departments” in contact tracing, develop protocols under which infected, symptomatic or exposed individuals can return to school and identify the conditions that would lead to closing a building.

The local health department is supposed to play a key role in all of the cases, but in a state as large as New York, the working relationship between districts and their departments can vary.

In Putnam County, public health nurse Shanna Siegel was appointed by the county health department as the COVID-19 point person for schools.

They started communicating with the county’s six school districts about the coronavirus in February. Since March, Siegel has been having weekly calls with superintendents.

“The main thing that we’re doing in Putnam County is just facilitating that open conversation,” so districts know exactly where to turn if something happens, Siegel said.

But not every district has had such an open relationship, said Bob Lowry, deputy director for the state Council of School Superintendents.

When the council asked its members two weeks ago what their major concerns were, a big one was the inconsistent advice some districts were

Current guidance says that being within six feet of an infected person for 15 minutes or more makes you a contact, but beyond that it can be a case by case situation: Was the person symptomatic? Were they masked? Were they talking, singing, yelling? How long were you next to them? How close were you? All of those are questions, Amler said, would be considered.

In classroom settings, the issue of “proximate contact” arises, which is defined as being in an enclosed space with an infected person. State guidance recommends “precautionary” quarantine in those cases, but, again, there would be room for discretion.

Vaidian said a student who is in a classroom with an infected individual for six hours would be considered significant exposure. A student in a classroom for 10 minutes and wearing a mask would not be considered significant exposure.

The formal decision of whether or not someone is a contact is made by the health department, because only the health department has the authority to place someone in mandatory quarantine.

A district can tell people that they may have been exposed “[The school] can tell them, ‘We think you’re a contact and you can’t come to school,’ ” Amler said.

“They can deny entry to the school for any reason they want, within reason, but to actually put someone in quarantine, that’s a different authority. We don’t do that unless we have solid information that says that a person is either a case or contact.”

Gathering that solid information takes time, which raises the issue of whether or not an entire building should close in the meantime and who makes that call.

Sullivan County Public Health Director Nancy McGraw said that, in normal circumstances, the decision to close a building lies with the school.

But in light of the pandemic, the bestcase scenario is that the decision would be made in consultation with the state education and health departments and the county’s public health officials.

getting from their local health departments, Lowry said, with some departments passing the buck to the state.

“I think issues around treating cases of infection, that’s an example of something where greater clarity would be helpful,” Lowry said.

The New York State United Teachers and the United Federation of Teachers echoed the same sentiment in a statement Wednesday, demanding that the state issue clear, universal protocols for when districts must close a building and how contact tracing will be performed.

The unions are also calling for a statewide directive to close any school building that has a positive case for a full 14 days. The statement cited the situation in Greenburgh-North Castle, as well as positive cases that have flared up at schools in other states.

“This is no time to take risks,” NYSUT President Andy Pallotta said. “If the state allows school buildings to reopen, districts must be prepared to close them in the event of a positive case.”

‘It’s not something that we would recommend lightly’

Health officials also might have their own opinion on how to handle a case in a school.

Dutchess County Health Commissioner Dr. Anil Vaidian said the need for closure depends on the situation.

“School closures to me are not something that would be effective if it’s just one classroom and just a cluster of cases,” Vaidian said.

Further clarity is needed on who outside the district has the authority to close a building, said Jay Worona, deputy executive director and general counsel for the state School Boards Association.

The issue of authority led to confusion in March over whether or not schools could shut down ahead of the statewide order to do so in mid-March.

Whether a building is closed or not, contact tracing takes more than just time. It also takes staff.

New York has nearly 700 school districts, and local officials fear of the potential to be overrun if the virus quickly spreads.

Some counties, like Westchester, are utilizing the state’s contact tracing partnership with Bloomberg Philanthropies, which gives them extra people to fall back on.

Still, the ability to manage a surge, school-related or otherwise, depends on its size.

“Could there be an event where we don’t have the capacity?” Amler said. “We’ve already been there once, that was in March. So it’s possible. But we will do everything possible for that not to happen.”

Staff writers Katelyn Cordero and Heather Yakin contributed to this report.

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