



## **Local Schools Establish COVID-19 Task Force** *Strive to Develop Collaborative Approach to Virus*

**December 17, 2020 (New York Mills, N.Y.)** – With the COVID-19 pandemic continuing to cause a variety of challenges for the education sector, several local school districts have teamed up to establish the “Oneida County Schools COVID Task Force” (OCCTF).

The special task force, formally launched in early December, is comprised of the superintendents from eight school districts – Holland Patent; New Hartford; New York Mills; Oriskany; Sauquoit Valley; Utica; Waterville; and Westmoreland. Together, and in consultation with other local and state leaders, including Oneida County Executive Anthony Picente, Jr., the OCCTF is in the process of developing a collaborative approach to address COVID-19. Finding ways to overcome common hurdles to consistently offer in-person instruction – which the OCCTF strongly feels is the best method of instruction – is a top priority.

“Despite each school district being unique, we all want our schools open to in-person learning on a regular basis,” said Westmoreland Superintendent of Schools Rocco Migliori. “While the recent increase in the number of positive cases certainly makes it more difficult to remain open to in-person instruction, more cases is not always the primary reason for school closures. There are so many other causes, and the task force is closely examining all of them to come up with solutions that work for everyone.”

The OCCTF believes the quarantining of individuals and the shortage in staffing it can create – not actual positive cases – is often more of a road block to routinely keeping students in school. The recent influx of positive cases has impacted the Oneida County Health Department’s contact tracing efforts, but the OCCTF is encouraged by the department’s recently implemented new strategies to improve efficiency, including the utilization of a new text messaging tool designed to increase the amount and speed of contact.

“We are trying to come up with safe ways to prevent a significant reduction in staffing after every positive case for local and state health officials to consider and hopefully implement,” said Holland Patent Superintendent of Schools

Jason Evangelist. “Now that parts of Oneida County have been designated as a ‘yellow zone,’ it is even more important for schools in the county to have a coordinated, uniform plan of action.

We are all in this together and facing the same circumstances.”

“Every school district should receive clear and consistent guidance in which to act upon. The process of determining if an individual should self-monitor, quarantine or isolate should also be clear and not vary from school to school,” added Utica Superintendent of Schools Bruce Karam. “Most importantly, the decision to implement a mode of instruction during a pandemic, whether it be hybrid or fully remote, must depend on individual school district circumstances; such as the size of student enrollment, the number of teachers, along with other critical considerations such as transportation and the shortage of substitute teachers.”

Unlike in other parts of the country, according to data, schools in the Central New York region are not major drivers of COVID-19 spread. The OCCTF, along with Oneida County Executive Picente, point to this as reason to be hopeful about consistent in-person instruction becoming more attainable.

“Our schools deserve a lot of credit for the positivity rate among school-aged children in our area being so low,” said Picente. “All of our school districts worked diligently to create responsible reopening plans and implement all necessary protocols and precautions. It is why I believe schools should remain open, and Oneida County will continue to do everything it can to assist.”

In addition to the issues surrounding in-person instruction, due to parts of Oneida County being designated as a “yellow zone,” much of the OCCTF’s immediate efforts will be dedicated to finalizing and carrying out a testing plan, which is required for in-person instruction to continue in schools. The rollout of a vaccine, return to in-person instruction in January and the feasibility of athletics and other extra-curricular activities are also of significance.

For more information about the OCCTF or any questions, please contact New York Mills UFSD Superintendent of Schools Dr. Joanne I. Shelmidine at (315) 768-8127 or [jshelmidine@newyorkmills.org](mailto:jshelmidine@newyorkmills.org).

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