

Portage Area taking steps to protect students and staff

Prior to the closing of school buildings last March, the school district had already implemented extra cleaning and disinfecting routines as information of the coronavirus entered the news. With the start of the new school year right around the corner, superintendent Eric Zelanko wants the community to know those steps along with a host of others are in place to protect the health and safety of Portage Area students and staff. While Zelanko admits there is still a chance COVID-19 could spread in the schools, he feels the district is doing everything it can to lower the risk.

One of the primary concerns he has heard from community members is about children being required to wear face coverings during the school day. While Governor Wolf's orders require their use when in public, Zelanko investigated ways of distancing or isolating students to allow them to remove face coverings in the classroom.

Looking at barriers many businesses are installing, Zelanko considered ways to do something similar around student desks. "It seems everywhere I went I saw businesses using creative solutions to protect their employees from customers," he said. "If they could do it, why couldn't we," he went on. After considering a number of possibilities, Zelanko settled on what he calls desktop shields.

With the concept in mind, Zelanko called on Technology Education teachers Dennis Link and Bill Bearer for help. Using the district's CADD software and CNC router, a prototype was made. After a few minor adjustments, materials were ordered and production began. Built from a type of corrugated plastic cardboard with a viewing window on the front and side, these shields will help protect students from their peers in the classroom. While similar commercially produced products are available, Zelanko indicated the district is producing the shields at a fraction of the cost. "As happens here all the time, this staff steps up to the plate when it benefits our students. I can't thank Mr. Link and Mr. Bearer enough for their efforts," he said.

However, they're not alone. While Link and Bearer cut the frames for the desktop shields on the CNC router, other staff members are currently attaching the viewing windows. Zelanko stated he is sometimes overwhelmed by the response of the staff when he asks for volunteers. "We couldn't do half the things we do if not for efforts of the staff," he said.

For K-3 students who use the same desk each day, the shield will be attached to their desktop. Students who move from classroom to classroom will carry their ultra-light shield with them. Zelanko expects students to personalize their shields with stickers and markers. Even with the desktop shield, Zelanko encourages students to still wear a face covering while seated at their desk. "We can't let our guard down if we want to get this virus under control," he said.