At the November and December Syosset Central School District (CSD) board meetings, Superintendent Dr. Thomas Rogers discussed the district's plans for dealing with rising COVID-19 infection rates.

In November, Dr. Rogers introduced [New York State’s Micro-Cluster Strategy](https://forward.ny.gov/cluster-action-initiative), which the state implemented in mid-October. The Micro-Cluster Strategy provides a complex formula for deciding whether schools will close. Three cluster zones are considered: yellow, orange, and red zones.

As of December 10, Governor Cuomo announced new metrics for entering cluster zones. The Micro-Cluster Strategy identifies areas where the positivity rate went up sharply and the reasons for the increase.

According to the [New York State website’s updated metrics](https://forward.ny.gov/cluster-action-initiative), one of the leading standards to enter a Yellow Zone now is a 3% positivity rate on a seven-day average over the last ten days. The area must also be in the top 10% in the state for hospital admissions per capita over the past week and experience week-over-week growth in daily entries. A geographic region requires a 4% positivity rate on a seven-day average over the last ten days. It needs to be in a sector that reached an 85% hospital capacity to enter an Orange Zone. They need to be 21 days away from reaching 90% hospital capacity on the rate mentioned above after a 50% increase in hospital capacity for an area to become a Red Zone.

Prior to the December update, the first criteria for a geographic area to enter a Yellow Zone were if the positivity rate was greater than 2.5% on a seven-day running average for ten days. The positivity rate needed to be greater than 3% to enter an Orange Zone and greater than 4% to enter a Red Zone.

Dr. Rogers explained that they were “in the dark” of knowing any testing data and the hospital fill rate for a localized area, so they were unsure of where Syosset was precisely in terms of how close to being in a Yellow Zone they were. They can see, however, the positivity level data and the case data per zip code.

“It doesn’t appear that we will be in a yellow zone immediately,” Dr. Rogers said. “But cases have been going up sharply in the last week or so, which is worrisome.”

Since September 8, over 150 people in the Syosset learning community have been placed into quarantine. Syosset has gotten 17 cases that were more than 14-days-old as of November 14, and according to Rogers, there had not been further transmission through the school environment.

“This is not an invitation to take more risks,” he said. “We are on the right side of the risk line.”

The positivity rate is only one factor that the board will consider deciding whether to close schools.

Under this strategy school districts will also examine the number of cases of COVID-19 on a daily average basis based on zip code. In a zip code that has greater than 10,000 people, there must be greater than five cases per day on average. In a zip code with less than 10,000 people, there must be an average of greater than three instances per day.

Closing of schools will be done on a school-by-school basis. Syosset schools are not in a Yellow Zone yet, but if they do enter it and want to continue in-person instruction, [Mount Sinai Hospital must test 20% of students and staff](https://www.syossetschools.org/Page/866) every two weeks for COVID-19 and will use the school campus as a testing site. At the end of the two weeks, the positivity rate is compared to the surrounding areas’ positivity rate. If the school has a lower rate, it will be allowed to remain open.

“We would think that this is likely to occur because we don’t believe schools are a place there’s a lot of transmission,” Dr. Rogers said.

Continuous testing will continue for as long as the school remains open. In the Syosset School District, 20% of the population would be about 1,700 or more because it includes the staff. However, this is only comprised of students and staff that are on-site.

Rogers revealed two plans made by the board if Syosset schools fall under a Yellow Zone: a Plan A and B.

The board’s “Plan A” involves outsourcing testing to an independent third party that they would draw up a contract with, which was proposed in the board’s agenda at the December meeting. As mentioned earlier, testing would be done in a school building and would occur during the school day. Parental permission would be a requirement for students. According to Rogers, it would not cost much money to the school district; the testing company would bill the student or staff’s insurance who is getting tested. The only cost would be if a “youngster” did not have insurance. In that case, the district would cover the expense of that person’s test.

“Plan B” would be put into action if many school districts are designated Yellow Zones simultaneously. It would lead to a spike in demand for COVID-19 tests and may overwhelm testing companies to the point they have an insufficient capacity. In this instance, the board would have its own staff trained and administer the tests themselves. The state makes training and testing kits available for free.

“I think we should put into place the ingredients for Plan B so that we can control our own destiny,” Rogers said, “but still pursue Plan A as the preferred way of taking care of the testing.”

Contact tracing is put into action every time a positive case of COVID-19 appears, involving building principals, building staff, and bus surveillance. The board can interview staff about procedures in classrooms to determine the source.

“The board has invested deeply in getting kids back into in-person education,” Rogers said. “We don’t want to lose the value of that investment in in-person education by having to close.”

The district is tracking all individuals who have tested positive and who have been quarantined. The number of cases can be found on the [Syosset School District’s website](https://www.syossetschools.org/Page/834).

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