

'Like a spiderweb:' How a Thanksgiving-weekend gathering led to an entire school district shutting down

December 8 2020, by Alex Putterman



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A single gathering of high school students in Avon, Connecticut, over Thanksgiving weekend led to the shutdown of the entire Avon school

district through Dec. 14, in a case that illustrates the far-reaching potential consequences of large get-togethers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The process that led to the closures began earlier this week, when contact tracers with the Farmington Valley Health Department connected several positive tests to a party attended by local high school students. As they began to trace the contacts of everyone who had tested positive or been exposed, the ripple grew quickly.

Between students who had tested positive and others who had attended the gathering, as well as their siblings and other contacts, the entire district was affected.

Typically when individual students have tested positive for COVID-19, their [school districts](#) have asked those in certain classes to quarantine or sometimes closed the schools they attend for several days. But this case was different, said Jennifer Kertanis, director of the Farmington Valley Health District.

"When the additional cases and the contact tracing put such a burden on the health department and the school system, when we're quarantining classrooms and groups of people and having to worry about additional family spread where we have siblings, it's just like a spiderweb," Kertanis said. "At a certain point we just have to call a timeout and let this run its course for the full 14 days."

Kertanis noted that COVID-19 spreads "very, very easily in households," which presented a particular problem in this case. In any school district, families will inevitably have children spread across multiple schools.

Eleni DeGraw, an Avon parent who was elected in November to the [state legislature](#), said she understands why some [parents](#) or students might be

frustrated but that the district had made the necessary choice. Families can have children in multiple schools, increasing the potential exposure to the virus and the potential for spread.

"When you start looking at that plus the number of teachers that we have who may have been in contact with someone who was exposed, it comes down to having enough people in the building to provide the education that needs to be provided."

Carol Subinski, co-president of the Avon High School PTO, said the decision was a surprise to some parents—particularly those with younger children who had attended school in person most of the fall, even when the high schools were using a hybrid model. Still, Subinski said she understood and supported the choice to close schools.

"I think people's reaction depends in part on how they feel about the virus," said Subinski, who had already pulled her two high-school kids from in-person classes for fear of post-Thanksgiving spread. "If you're a little bit more cautious then you're probably a little more onboard with the decision, and if you think everything should be open then you're more upset about it."

On Wednesday, Avon superintendent Bridget Carnemolla announced that the entire district—five schools in total—would shift to remote learning through Dec. 14 "to allow time for the full implication of this social gathering to be addressed."

"Today, we learned of positive cases among high school students associated with a common social gathering outside of the [school](#) environment over the Thanksgiving break," Carnemolla wrote in a letter to the community. "As we have worked to conduct contact tracing today we have determined that there are potential contacts and connections across all of our schools."

Carnemolla wrote that Avon has not recorded any cases of COVID-19 transmission in schools but noted that "resources are strained by contact tracing and quarantining" whenever a [student](#) tests positive.

"It is in this vein again that we ask all in our community to assist us in reducing the spread of the virus so that we can keep our schools open and our students and staff healthy," she wrote.

Kertanis said the pause will let contact tracers "truly understand the magnitude of the number of people who will test positive over the next 14 days and the implications of that."

In Avon Facebook groups, some parents criticized the students who had gathered, as well as their parents, while others questioned why the full district should close in response to one incident.

Claudine Fasano, a parent, said she was "relieved" when the schools shut down. One of her children had been enrolled in remote classes all year, and she had pulled her other child out of classes after Thanksgiving because she anticipated an increase in cases.

But while Fasano and her husband work from home and can care for their kids without much inconvenience, she recognizes the tradeoff for other parents.

"I know it's not easy for everybody," Fasano said. "For us we were relieved, but for everybody else I know it can be so disruptive. So, mixed feelings."

As the parents noted, the incident in Avon demonstrates the potential danger of large gatherings at a time when private get-togethers in Connecticut are currently capped at 10 people.

Since the state's second COVID-19 surge began in September, health directors have pointed to informal gatherings as a significant source of [coronavirus](#) spread. The message intensified ahead of Thanksgiving, when officials worried that family gatherings would spur increased transmission—and therefore increased hospitalizations and deaths.

Health officials have said any Thanksgiving effect won't be fully noticeable in the state's numbers until the coming week. But in Avon, thousands of students and parents have already felt it.

"We need to just emphasize to all parents that are sponsoring or hosting these types of social gatherings that include individuals outside the immediate household, we are seeing spread," Kertanis said. "They have huge implications for schools, siblings, resources that it takes to do the [contact tracing](#) and to communicate about the quarantine, I just would hope that parents would take this a little bit more seriously."

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