



# Blair- Taylor School District

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We would like to tell you the story of how the students, staff, and community of the Blair-Taylor School District have faced the challenges associated with COVID-19 with strength, endurance, flexibility, and empathy in order to meet the needs of our students and families.

It felt like we had fallen into a science fiction movie. During the morning of the Sectional Boys Basketball game, we were told that we had to reduce the number of attendees at the game to little more than players and their immediate families. The little crowd worked extra hard to cheer on the team, which helped them come away with a victory. Celebration on the way home quickly became despair when we learned that the rest of the play-off season was being canceled due to COVID-19. That was only the beginning...The very next day, under the direction of Governor Evers, Andrea Palm, the Secretary of the Department of Health Services, ordered all schools to be closed until April 6th in an attempt to “prevent, suppress, and control” the disease.

After getting over our initial shock, the staff in the Blair-Taylor United Campus flew into action. Our motto was to “stay the course, and keep everything as normal as possible” in order to keep the learning going and reduce the fear of the unknown. The school was a flurry of activity all weekend as the teachers worked so hard to prepare materials for students that copy machines broke down! On Monday we met with staff and students to roll out the plan for continuous learning while away from school. Walking the halls on Tuesday, one could hear lessons taking place in every classroom on how to use virtual platforms, such as Google Classrooms, and hear explanations of the resources and packets of materials that were being sent home to hold us over until we would be back. In addition, students took a survey on their internet accessibility at home. Tuesday afternoon the media blew up with the word “indefinitely” that was used, among other things, by the Governor to describe the length of the school closure. Students were in tears, “What does this mean? Will we be back? Will we have prom? What about graduation? What will we do for 8th Grade Recognition?” We did not have answers for them but told them that we will stay the course and prepare for whatever comes our way.

There was no right or wrong way for how to proceed with “school” following the proclamation, but we chose to continue with learning expectations, homework to be “turned in,” etc. at the middle-high school, mostly in an attempt at “keeping things normal.” Some lessons were rearranged in order to teach more difficult concepts *when students come back*. Some students banked on coming back to school and decided to put off learning until that time. Some students and staff found that the virtual learning environment had a lot of benefits, and they excelled. We began to “take attendance” initially because we thought we may be required to report attendance, and then later kept taking attendance as a way to make sure we were

connecting with every student regularly. Students who did not respond to the daily emails or Google Classroom requests for attendance were contacted by their homeroom teachers and later by the principal if communication did not improve.

The Governor's announcement on March 24th that we would not be returning to school this year hit us all very hard. We were really holding out hope for a chance for in-person closure with our students and the opportunity to have all of the end of the year activities and events that usually take place. Knowing that we were in this remote learning environment for the long haul, we shifted gears and got ready. More packets and materials were prepared for our youngest learners. Elementary teachers ramped up their communication home through regular class zoom meetings, storytelling videos, lessons, and more. Parents reached out to elementary teachers asking for their help in encouraging their children to learn. Parents of children of all levels reported finally understanding what their children were learning at school as they were learning right along with them! We found that many families who felt they had adequate internet connectivity really did not. Limited data meant that students could only connect with their teachers and virtual classes for a couple of weeks a month before the data ran out. With a final message, students would write, "We are out of data until April 23rd. I will return to our meetings and turn in work then." We struggled very much with acquiring hotspots that we could distribute to families to help reduce this break-in learning and contact, but we delivered them as soon as they arrived. Many students and parents requested paper copies of work to do as students struggled to keep organized and parents struggled to support online learning.

Students began to ask if we were going to recognize students who qualified for third quarter Honor Roll and the other things we celebrate at our monthly recognition events and at the "Wildcat Way Wallapalooza." What about recognizing "Students of the Month?" What better time to acknowledge the work that students are doing above and beyond? How about Wellness Day? Don't forget the 6th Grade Orientation, 8th Grade Recognition, Senior Exit Interviews, and Senior Award Ceremony! In the midst of all that was going on, those important recognitions and celebrations had been pushed to the side, but the students were right! We needed to find a way to celebrate. With a steep learning curve, we quickly increased our learning of the use of programs that would enable us to go virtual with these events. As we got better at it, the events became more collaborative and maybe just a bit more polished all while doing our best to model good digital citizenship and internet security. It really was fun to produce these virtual events; students and families gave us a lot of positive feedback for doing them, too. We are still holding out hope for an in-person prom and graduation ceremony later this summer, but if that will not be possible, we will do the best we can to celebrate these milestone events virtually.

This "remote learning experience" has been harder on some students and families than others. The initial enthusiasm began to wear off. Many parents, who are essential workers, continued to work full time leaving students home alone to be motivated to work in social isolation. Parents who initially found enjoyment working with their children found it harder to motivate them as time went on. Some students struggled to find the discipline to work from home, and some had other demands such as increased hours at work and caring for younger siblings that kept them from schoolwork. Even though they were encouraged to take breaks for their own health and well-being, teachers spent hours, days, nights, and weekends, communicating with students and parents through email and Google Chat. These conversations have become less academic in nature and more related to students' and families' emotional health. Coaches continue to reach out to their athletes, many of whom are struggling as they

watch their senior year slip away. While this experience has taken an emotional toll, it has also helped us grow stronger together!

Throughout this experience, our food service coordinator and her team have been amazing at providing healthy food for children. So much gratitude has been shared by our families for having fresh fruits and vegetables, not having to take small children into the store to get food, and for the menus! The number of children we feed, over 500 each week, has grown almost every week. It is a huge undertaking to prepare and distribute, but all staff who are involved do so with a smile on their face.

In the face of the adversity and fear brought on by COVID-19, it is important to focus on the positive things that have come from this experience. The communication and relationships between parents and staff have grown immensely. We have learned to better rely on each other for advice and strength. Students and staff have proven to be much more flexible and resilient than we all thought we could be. Students who were too shy to ask questions in person have had to overcome those fears and now chat - video chat mostly - with their teachers and peers with ease. Those of us who never thought we could use Google Classroom, Zoom, or iMovie now use it without thinking twice and feel we may be onto something as a great enhancement to our instruction and communication in the future. Our amazing community has poured out so much love through Facebook posts, hearts and paw prints in window, chalk art, emails, and more. Companies, organizations, and individuals, such as our FFA Alumni, PTO/Booster Club, and Curds for Kids and Superior Fresh, provided food and encouragement for our students and families to help them get through this difficult time when incomes have been reduced and farmers had to dump milk. When this is all over, we must remember the lessons we have learned about what we can do and what we must do to hold each other up and maximize our potential. This isn't the culminating year of education that we ever would have wanted or dreamed we would have for our seniors, but we can hope that they, along with the rest of us, have learned valuable lessons that will make us stronger, more empathetic, more successful people in the future.

We will gladly provide you with updates of our student and staff progress as we move forward in this uncertain future. Feel free to reach out with any questions or recommendations you may have for us. Thank you for your support!

Sincerely,



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Superintendent



Lynn S. Halverson  
Elementary Principal



Dana T. Eide  
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Katie Belitz  
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