

Bowler School District

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May 20, 2020

Senator Robert Cowles
Room 118 South Room 13
PO Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707

Representative Gary Tauchen
West State Capitol State Capitol
PO Box 8953
Madison, WI 53707

Dear Senator Cowles and Representative Tauchen,

I hope this letter finds you and your families safe and well during these unprecedented times. I am reaching out to thank you for your support, especially during these past few months. I know our staff, students, the Board of Education, and the community greatly appreciate all you do to support schools in Wisconsin.

I also want to share how the Bowler School District is serving and will continue to serve our children and their families despite the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and request your continued support as you make difficult decisions in the days and weeks ahead.

The Bowler School District made the call on March 13th to close the school per the Safer at Home order beginning on March 18th at the end of the day. At that time, we shifted our school days on March 16th and March 17th, training students on how to use their electronic devices at home to continue their learning. In addition, we surveyed our families to find out who needed technology to continue learning online. We never imagined this would be the last day for face-to-face instruction for the entire school year. On Thursday, March 19th, and Friday, March 20th, we spent the school day time as a staff working together to figure out how we could continue to provide for our students. The amazing staff at Bowler shifted from face-to-face instruction to virtual instruction in 2 days!

It was also determined in greater detail that approximately 20-30% of our families did not have any Internet access and another 10-20% did not have reliable Internet access. This included several of our teachers as well. Fiber optic cable was not and still is not available in many of the homes of the Bowler School District. Satellite and cell phone access is also unreliable in the Bowler School District due to the lack of cell towers and the heavily wooded and rolling hills. Without Internet access, we needed to find ways for our families to access online materials. We believe it is critical to provide equitable opportunities to learn for all of our children. Therefore, a secondary plan was created to provide instructional packets to children who would not be able to access the Internet. The lack of Internet access also challenged our district to provide services to our special-needs students.

To address the Internet challenges, the Bowler School District enacted several plans. First, we added wifi hubs to 5 of our school buses. These buses continue to park at strategic locations throughout the district for 2-3 hours at a time in order to provide internet access and to continue to support our local bus contractor. Our families are able to pull up to the bus and access the Internet from their vehicles. In addition, the district purchased 15 Cradlepoint wifi access devices and added 5 more hotspots to our already existing 10. We were required to change our data

The Bowler School District does not discriminate on the basis of any characteristic protected under State or Federal law including, but not limited to sex, age, race, color, national origin, creed, religion, pregnancy, marital or parental status, sexual orientation, handicap, or physical, mental, emotional, or learning disability.

plans in order to allow for unlimited access to the Internet. Our technology person has been forced to work on creating security measures for these devices through the cell phone company. It is unfortunate that some businesses took advantage of the situation and charged our district service charges and fees to change our contract to meet the families' needs. The Stockbridge-Munsee tribe has also been an amazing partner by increasing their signal strength at several locations throughout the reservation to allow for families to access the Internet from their vehicles as well. **This situation has shone a huge spotlight on the inequity to Internet access for small rural school districts. There must be a way to close this digital divide and ask for your help in doing so.**

In addition to the lack of Internet access, more than 60% of the student body of the Bowler School District qualifies for Free and Reduced Lunch. We know this number is much higher as families have too much pride to complete the application or find the application process too cumbersome. Our highest priority was to ensure that our children's nutritional needs were met. We knew the longer the school was closed, the longer our students would go without food. Our food service staff, along with the majority of our paraprofessionals, provide two meals a day for 290 children in our district. Our student population is 360 students. The North Branch Bus company helps to deliver these meals directly to the families. We know the service this business provides to our school and have tried to meet our contractual obligations.

The Bowler School District also recognized the importance of creating a communication plan to reach all of our families. With the COVID-19 situation changing rapidly, we established a daily communication plan through email, social media, and phone calls to keep our families informed of the changes. We were able to adjust this back to a weekly basis. The lack of cell phone reception and Internet access has required our district to provide written communications to families via the postal service.

The district recognized rather quickly the importance of mental health and wellness during this time. The support our children and our families needed and still need is rather extensive. The Pupil Services team has created a Social-Emotional program to address students' needs. Every week individual and class meetings take place in grades K-6 to assist with the mental wellness of our students. The staff has used teleconferencing, phone calls, and even some personal welfare checks for our children and families. It has been challenging to follow the Safer at Home guidelines and still meet family needs. These same 3 staff members have also created check-in opportunities to ensure the mental well-being of our staff is also being monitored and addressed.

The Safer at Home order closed our physical facilities and all school property except for essential work needed to provide learning and meals. We have been able to completely close our facilities on Tuesdays and Fridays to allow for cleaning of the building and the natural destruction of the virus. We have had to increase our sanitizing procedures and increased the use of materials and products. It has been challenging for us to get the PPE needed to pack and deliver the meals twice a week. Safety is the utmost priority. Again, community members have stepped forward and provided hand- sewn masks for the employees. We are just now being able to purchase other PPE to support our safety measures.

Now our focus is the next school year. The uncertainty continues to challenge our small rural district. We are building plans to address each situation. **Our greatest challenge is making sure we have access to the Internet. I am asking that you please do everything you can to ensure the digital divide is conquered for the Bowler School District.** It is already challenging to create plans for the next school year with the ever-changing situation. Removing the digital barrier would be a tremendous help.

We continue to explore other partnerships. Our plans are trying to figure out how to follow social distancing and small groups not only in the physical facilities of the school but especially on school buses. Almost all of our

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children ride the bus to and from school. Knowing the importance of having schools reopen, I am concerned about how we can safely protect each staff member and each child. Health care support is also a challenge for our district.

I cannot speak for other districts. When it comes to being the hub of the community, we take this very seriously. We have invested heavily in making sure businesses continue to survive, employees are still being paid, contracts are honored, and our families' needs are met with meals and services. We have tried to bridge the digital gap the best we could at significant investment for a very temporary educational solution.

As we create our plans for the new normal, I would ask you to please consider how we can ensure the safety of all staff, children, and families. Health care support, PPE, monitoring of staff and children, and training to handle COVID-19 situations are all areas of concern. Please make sure we continue to receive the funding we need to continue to provide services to our children and families.

I know you also have difficult decisions to make every day. I ask that you please keep in mind that every school district has unique needs. Please keep our children, families, and communities at the forefront of the decisions you make with a focus on what is best for all. I am asking for your continued support. I do believe together we will get through this!

Yours in Education,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeffrey Sauer".

District Administrator
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