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Senator Alberta Darling

Sen.Darling@legis.wisconsin.gov

State Capitol

Madison, WI 53708

Dear Senator Darling:

Thank you for your efforts and leadership in these difficult times. I want to share how the Hamilton School District is responding during the COVID-19 pandemic and mandated school shutdowns that changed almost overnight how we fundamentally operate.

Unprecedented times calls for unprecedented action. Our families are learning in a virtual environment made possible because of the creative, flexible and persistent efforts of our staff. They work each day with consideration and care and go above and beyond to help families overcome many obstacles of learning from home. Consider the following:

- All Hamilton students in grades 5-12 are issued a district Chromebook. Should those devices need repair, we established a touch-free process to exchange devices.
- Principals worked individually with families to ensure they had internet access and younger students would have access to a device. We deployed approximately 20 hotspots and 60 devices to families in need.
- We had planned to implement Seesaw, a learning management platform, next fall. Those plans were expedited so that all students, grades K-6, could use the system which enhanced at-home learning opportunities.
- Teachers now primarily use Google Classroom and Seesaw to deliver instruction. The use of those platforms has exploded during the pandemic. We saw Google Hangouts (virtual meetings) increase from 188 last semester to 60,000 in the last two months. More than 435 Google classes were created this spring. More than 107,000 posts and nearly 70,000 comments on student work were made utilizing Seesaw during the 69,000 family visits since March.
- When technology is a hurdle for families, teachers have created hard-copy packets and delivered them to homes when necessary.
- The district continues to support the needs of more than 550 families of students with disabilities through Google Hangouts, conference calls, and small-group and individual support. The special education team consults with teachers and administrators to ensure student needs are met and continue to evaluate students who may need additional services.

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- Special Services teams provided families with access to suggested home schedules, routines, break activities, and additional offerings to connect and help maintain social and emotional wellness.
- Communicating with families, staff and community has been a top priority. Our [COVID-19 webpage](#) includes coronavirus information, safety tips, mental health resources, meal pick-up locations, remote learning resources, answers to frequently asked questions, and each of the letters sent to families and staff during the pandemic.
- Students and staff throughout the district have reached out to support the community through donation drives for food, protective gear and sanitizing material that were provided to food pantries, hospitals, families in need and other community groups.
- Staff have been flexible in this new environment. Support staff have taken on different roles to support classroom instruction. Many staff members are responding to the needs of students by scheduling 1:1 meetings, coordinating support and creating specific check-in times for students who are struggling. It has been our goal to let families know that they are not alone.
- We made the decision to keep staff employed. Not only does this send a message to our staff about their value to our organization, as a large employer in the area, we have significant economic impact on our community.
- Maintenance projects planned for the summer are being completed early.
- The community has expressed enthusiastic support for our staff. Testimonials to the incredible work they are doing is pouring in through our [Hamilton High Five program](#). This [video that highlighted the support from the community](#) was popular on social media.
- Currently, we are working to offer virtual summer school courses to students in grades K-12.
- Although there are many unknowns surrounding the start of school in fall, we are preparing for various possible scenarios.

We are proud of the work we have done to support students and families. However, there have been various challenges, obstacles, disappointments and setbacks that we are working through. The cancellation of sports, concerts, and end-of-year events are opportunities lost forever for our students. While we place an emphasis on social-emotional learning, we are concerned about the specific emotional needs of students that are more challenging to manage using the virtual learning model. We are deeply concerned about the academic progress of all of our learners, and especially concerned about our at-risk students. As we look to the future, there will be greater demands placed on staff to acquire new skills to handle these new and different situations and expectations. Our need to have highly trained staff has never been greater than for the coming school year. All of these situations will pose new challenges and put stress on our current resources.

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As state leaders, it is important for you to know the actual impact of the pandemic on local school districts. It might be assumed that schools are saving money on facility and contracted services, but we also have additional expenses for food service, technology resources, special service needs, as well as many other areas such as lost revenue due to fee refunds, uncollected rental and lease payments. As we resume operations in fall, we may need to put more resources into our organization to comply with recommendations and guidelines for restarting school. We are rethinking everything from bussing to lunches, to health room protocols, to classroom instruction and even student movement within the building during the day. Any of these changes will place a stress on our resources. I am hopeful we can work together to ensure a successful start of the new school year in fall.

I am so fortunate to be part of a school district with dedicated, hard-working and caring individuals. Our students and families continue to amaze me with their spirit and grit, even in these challenging times.

Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions so I can explain our work and answer any questions that you may have.

Sincerely,

Paul Mielke, Ph.D.
Superintendent
Hamilton School District

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