



# School District of Jefferson

*Empowering Futures Together*

[www.sdoj.org](http://www.sdoj.org)

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**Jefferson High School**

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**Sullivan Elementary  
School**

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**West Elementary School**

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Dear State Senator Nass and Representative Horlacher,

“School Closure” is very misleading. We are anything but closed. Hundreds of operations continue both on-site and remotely from home offices and kitchen tables. I suspect you might be interested in how the School District of Jefferson (SDoJ) has responded to our ongoing public health emergency.

To better understand our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this backdrop is necessary.

As you know, the socioeconomics for Jefferson County is dissimilar to that of lake country or other such areas across our great State. The proud people of Jefferson County have supported district operating and construction referenda time and again. Their tremendous support for schools such as Jefferson, Fort Atkinson, Johnson Creek, and Lake Mills to name only a few are evidenced.

The SDoJ has 39.27% of our students who qualify for free or reduced meals. As set by the federal government, in order to qualify for free meals, a household of four must have income of \$33,475 or less. To qualify for reduced meals, the income level moves up to \$47,368 for that same-sized household.

In 2010 the people of the SDoJ supported a construction referendum in the amount of \$35,190,000 providing our high school students a state-of-the-art facility to learn in.

In 2016 and 2018 our citizens approved non-recurring and recurring operations referendums respectively; again, pointing to the continued value placed on education. Regardless of our demographic, the people recognized great opportunity afforded their children through their local public school. As such, they vote ‘Yes’.

Four years ago, our School District leadership worked with teachers to keep abreast of 21st Century learning and equipped our K-12 grade students with Chromebooks. High school students take their Chromebooks home each evening. The middle school students check their Chromebooks out during homeroom each morning returning them to charging stations at the end of each school day. At the elementary level, each K-5 classroom is equipped with a classroom set of devices for student use.

Prudent business decisions such as implementing energy efficiency projects, making changes to employee health insurance plans and carriers, and establishing an employee career ladder are a few practices that have allowed our rural school district to maintain fiscal stability during difficult times.

We have used grants, e-rate dollars, and other funding sources to supplement as much as possible to expand upon our WIFI hotspots and bandwidth to better assure the continuity of learning.

Our teachers and support staff have embraced training in online learning management platforms such as Schoology, Google Classroom, GoGuardian, and Seesaw. This training has provided our students with a competitive edge for future careers and educational opportunities.

Then mid-March 2020 bounced into the picture. The world became very familiar with terms such as Coronavirus, COVID-19, social distancing, PPE equipment, school closures, Google Hangouts, and Zoom Meetings.

Gov. Evers announced the first school closure while we were on spring break. During spring break, we mobilized classroom access honoring the new social distancing and sanitation orders. Nearly overnight we organized a very succinct drive-through pick up for band instruments, student Chromebooks and student medications. Items were sanitized first and proper protocols adhered to.

The week after spring break our teachers quickly learned how and what to teach in a new virtual teaching and learning environment. Training even took place virtually! When considering college training, student teaching experience, and all of their experience as a teacher is in a physical, face-to-face environment, this is nothing short of spectacular. I am proud of the adaptability and creativity of our teaching staff and I am sure you are too. Quite frankly, they are stressed out and miss their students.

We worked with 10 to 20% of families who have zero or sub-par internet. Similar to the 1930s when the government realized the necessity to bring electricity and phone to rural America, today's endeavor to bring broadband to rural America is paramount.

To mitigate this, we provided WIFI hotspots where we could, but this was met with inadequate bandwidth issues. Our IT department expanded WIFI access in the parking lots of our high school and two elementary schools. It is noteworthy that not only students are using this drive-up access, but community members are too.

Additionally, families reportedly lost jobs, income, and daycare. We realized the necessity to work *with* our families and not serve as an obstacle or a stress inducer. Virtual learning became optional for families who may need to rely on older siblings, for example, to babysit younger siblings. Increasingly families chose to cancel cable, WIFI, and other such "frills" to help assure they paid their rent and kept food on the table.

For students who were not engaged in the new virtual learning, teachers reached out via phone or email. They talked with families, expanded upon relationships, and encouraged student engagement. When teachers learned of strife or obstacles such as daycare, food, medication, money, job loss, or clothing, teachers reached out to District pupil services staff.

School District counselors, social workers, and psychologists quickly jumped to action. They pointed families to resources, provided guidance, and established daily or weekly check-ins.

The District pupil services department worked with generous local families and organizations. Donations of significant no-strings-attached dollars helped families and children. Local donors trusted our school district officials to get the money to the right people at the right time.

We worked with students in special education, those with 504 plans, and those with limited English proficiencies to meet the needs embedded in their individualized plans. Specialized teachers worked in concert with the classroom teacher, parents, and students to encourage engagement and learning. Daily or weekly phone calls and virtual meetings assisted in this one-on-one environment.

Here are a few facts to provide context to the shift to virtual learning:

- In February we hosted 4 Google meetings. In March 767, and in April 2,793
- We increased our Google files from February through April from 37,360 to 238,494. This is a 638% increase in volume.
- In February 329,000 emails were sent/received. In March 438,000. In April 539,000.
- We have maintained all normal operating meetings such as but not limited to RtI, IEPs, staff meetings, budget and finance, maintenance, human resources and payroll.
- We communicate with our nearly 300 staff and nearly 2000 families weekly.
- We have kept all employees employed and on the payroll in hopes of contributing to our regional economy.
- Our high school is scheduled for 360 evenings per year for school and/or community events. It also houses over 1000 students every summer for summer school. It is difficult to find "downtime." The school closure has allowed for increased focus on maintenance, projects, and cleaning needs.
- Our food service, paraprofessionals, and bus company have delivered nearly 30,000 meals to children. This has offered our bus company employees some work while contract reductions are in place.

To be transparent, we have realized some savings during the spring of 2020. Transportation costs, utilities, substitute teachers, WIAA games, and professional development come to mind as the top areas influencing dollars saved.

It will be wise to roll these savings into fund balance for 2020-2021 to cover unexpected costs and losses assuredly to be experienced during the upcoming fiscal year.

When considering the unexpected costs in cleaning, connecting students to the internet, shipping supplies, purchasing of PPE equipment, and the added expense inherent with a new look to graduation the costs outweigh the savings.

Gov. Evers has deemed daycare facilities essential from the beginning of the Safer At Home Order. Recognizing that nurses, for example, still need to travel to work, we maintained continuity of our physical building daycare contracts. This added extra expenses for daily cleaning of classrooms, bathrooms, and recess equipment above and beyond that which is routine weekly cleaning.

In the fall under the auspices of the Phase 1 at a 10-person maximum and Phase 2 with a 50-person maximum, we will significantly increase expenditures in cleaning supplies. A recommendation from DHS pointed to the potential need to hire more custodians.

Additionally, we continue to work with Red Cross, local food banks, and clothes drives to allow our facility to serve the greater good. Each of these has inherent costs.

Our small school district relies heavily on summer school. Parents rely on athletics, music, remedial, credit recovery and enrichment experiences for their children. This results in SDoJ serving over 1000 students per summer, from our district, neighboring districts, and parochial schools.

There is uncertainty if students will continue in a virtual learning delivery model over the summer. Ambiguity with Phase 1 of the Badger Bounce Back plan with a 10-person maximum combined with the unclear nature of reimbursement for students' full-time equivalency causes concern. This negative impact on our budget will be realized for three consecutive school years due to the 3-year rolling average in the school funding formula.

During the school closure time, we have identified shovel-ready maintenance projects that were already prioritized by our Board of Education as necessary. This provided work for our regional economy without going to referendum.

The children with the greatest needs during the regular school year are the same children but with even greater needs during a health pandemic. Reports across Wisconsin point to increased concerns of child abuse, sexual abuse, domestic abuse, lack of food, increased anxiety, 911 phone calls, and reach outs to school personnel for help.

Arguably the class of 2020 has lost much when considering the emotional losses. One senior boy demonstrated his resiliency when he was jogging past my office and I was walking across the parking lot. He shouted to me with a smile, "You Got This Rollie."

As you can see, we are a small rural school district operating on a tight budget. We make good, wise, and prudent budgetary decisions to stretch our dollars and respect the dollars we receive from our hardworking taxpayers. It has truly taken a village of committed adults in the community - both school employees and community members - who truly care about their school to make things work for our kids. I could not be more honored to work with such a caring group of individuals, and I could not be prouder of our student body for the resilience and flexibility they have demonstrated in the face of all the challenges we have in the present.

Thank you for serving the State of Wisconsin and representing your communities with honor. I appreciate everything you do to keep the thousands of school children in Wisconsin in your forethoughts as we navigate the road ahead. Thank you for reading our story.

Mark Rollefson  
Superintendent  
School District of Jefferson  
Jefferson, WI