



Necedah Area SCHOOL DISTRICT



Necedah Area School District

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Dear Senator Marklein and Representative Kurtz,

I hope this letter finds you, and those you care about, doing well. If there is one thing I am certain, there is no greater time for leadership than during a crisis, and I am grateful for your weekly updates and support as we navigate these uncharted waters of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, I am thankful for your support of our Necedah School Community, and would like to provide you with an update regarding the impact of the pandemic on your constituents.

With the onset of the closure of our school building, our staff jumped into action. All hands were on deck as we reflected on our priorities, stabilized resources, and planned our strategies to meet the needs of our children and families. Serving a school community with almost 60% of our students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, we knew we had to address inequities of resource and circumstance. The following strategies were put in place to address our needs:

Communication and Collaboration:

- Family communication was a top priority and a district communication plan was put in place. We knew our families would need to be strong partners for virtual and remote learning to take precedent. Our communication plan included weekly Facebook Live sessions, regular family letters and phone messages, and weekly principal/family virtual engagement sessions.
- Our engagement priority was 'relationships first.' We knew additional burdens were placed on our students and families, and their well-being was of top consideration when we communicated and collaborated around student success.

Learning Services:

- Every student was provided with an Ipad or Chromebook to take home. Although our high school students had a practice of taking home their school-issued device, our PK-8 grade students did not. We quickly put in place a process for ensuring every student had a functional device to take home on their last day of instruction in the building. We later purchased additional devices, chargers, and other tools needed by families to successfully navigate a virtual world.
- Administrators and teachers delved into extensive professional development for delivering online content, and developed practices for using virtual platforms in a safe and secure manner with students. We also developed other remote learning materials, knowing we have families that do not have access to the Internet, and have no service providers in their geographical area.

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- The technology department immediately placed an order for additional devices, Internet hot spots and learning platforms that teachers and students would need to virtually communicate and collaborate. A 'Ticket Support Hotline' was established so students, staff and families could get ongoing support and additional technicians were hired to support the ticket system and professional development needs.

Other Essential Services and Support:

- The food service department prioritized the nutritional needs of every child, and given our rural school community, decided to 'deliver' food to our families. They quickly began ordering food products and packaging containers. To date, the department has served over 30,000 meals to over 600 students, using ten bus/van routes.
- Counseling services ramped up their services, by creating processes and protocols that supported students and families with virtual services to ensure student needs were being met. Staff held weekly student support meetings, and home visits were made by counselors and principals when a student was not engaging, or was targeted for individualized support and care. The goal has been that every family has phone contact from their school at least one time per week, and documentation is kept to ensure follow-through.
- The building and grounds and bussing departments began ordering additional sanitation supplies and put procedures in place to ensure there was effective daily sanitation of all surfaces on our buses and in our building. Bus routes were created for food delivery, and all hands were on deck to provide for the deliveries (paraprofessionals, administrative assistants, bus drivers, and cooks).

Stories of Success:

- A student leadership group created a document to share with our community that highlights all our local essential businesses, the services they are providing and contact information. These local businesses are highlighted each week on our school district Facebook page.
- We have had many heart-warming messages from families and many community members who have reached out to donate to, help with, and support their schools. I feel compelled to share the testament of a parent, to help shed a light on the important role our schools have played during this pandemic and highlights the priorities of the work we do every day:

Some of our families have some very serious things taking place in their lives, and this family is no different. Even through personal challenge, this parent's sentiments are deep, and reflective of various supports the school provides. Her testimony includes: *I thought I would give you an update on how things are going here on my end during this COVID -19 stuff. I was super stressed out when this all started because I had to now be 5 teachers for my child. My child has a 9:00 am class with his teacher every day. It lasts an hour on Google Meets. I am so thankful for the iPad because it helps him to see his friends and teachers during this time away. He meets at 1:30 pm for math with his special education teacher and an assistant every other day. Tuesday he gets to meet with his occupational therapist. He has packets of homework sent home with lunches....and his speech teacher has online stuff for him on DoJo. I have not done much in science, but we go for walks and find bugs and nature things all the time. He has done artwork, which we shared with his art teacher and she loves his stuff. I haven't been doing much on the recorder for music. I wanted to make sure to let you know his teacher has called to check on him once a week, and wrote hand-written letters home to every student. She is a very good teacher and has a big heart. My son's occupational therapist has been my rock. When I get stressed out as a parent she tells me how amazing I am doing and helps me to calm down. The special education teacher has*

seen progress in my son and calls once a week also to check in. This is why I love Necedah Schools. The dedication your teachers have to help us parents and any student get through this has been awesome. I just take it one day at a time. Some days are good math days...some days are good writing days. We take hour long breaks, but I don't feel like he has fallen any more behind. He also already met his goal back in February, and that calms me down a bit also. We have also been in touch with his upcoming special education teacher in order to plan for next year's transition. My other son misses his friends. He is getting things figured out, with the help of his principal. I have been in touch with the school nurse, who has been helpful as we plan for an upcoming procedure. My daughter is struggling a bit online, but her teachers are giving her time to catch up. She wishes she was in sports and follows her coach on Facebook. She also missed prom and this broke her heart. I have amazing kids and we will get through this.

This one parent's sentiments speak to the various supports our staff is providing to students and families, and in culminating, represent many sentiments of other families. The number of emails I have received with gratitude for meal service is beyond comprehension. We have learned a lot through our close collaboration with families; however, it certainly doesn't come without some challenges. Nothing can compare to the relational benefits of the quality of experience offered in our classrooms, and as predicted, the engagement of our students has been dwindling as we head into the final couple weeks of virtual/remote education. Our families are tired, and our students miss their peers and staff. Teachers have been diligent in reaching out and connecting with students and families, but virtual fatigue has begun to settle in for everyone.

As stated from an eighth grade middle school president to his principal, *"I feel like I can speak about the majority of the student body by saying that it's (virtual learning) very hard to focus. Because everyone is in their home environments it's hard to focus; normally the house is a place for relaxing after a hard day of school. But mixing those two was not the way to go. Along with the lack of focus, there's no motivation."*

As this fatigue and frustration grows, learning gaps will widen. As we consider the start of school in the fall, there will never be a more crucial time for our staff to reflect on the needs of every child, plan for remediation, and prepare to accelerate learning by focusing on student strengths. There will be deep levels of time and commitment put in by teachers in the coming weeks and months to prepare for this unknown.

I am incredibly proud of our teachers and staff as they immediately stepped up to the plate to offer 24/7 support to our children and families. They abandoned current practices, including contracted work hours, and embraced new ways of thinking and learning, all while trying to take care of their own families. Our families embraced their new role in educating their child(ren), and rallied to figure out how to make it all work, sometimes in the face of their own personal struggles. It has been amazing to watch the stamina, resilience, and fortitude of all our community stakeholders. This challenge has truly been a test of my personal leadership, and I am grateful for the outpouring of support for our efforts.

As our economic times become more burdensome, I understand the complex decisions ahead of leadership throughout the state. I would be honored to support you in any way I can, as you confront the reality of these economic hardships. There are decisions to be made on all our parts, and collaboration will be key.

Your Partner in Nurturing Great Communities,



Tanya Kotlowski, District Administrator

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