



Friday, May 1, 2020

Dear State Senator Erpenbach, State Senator Marklein, State Representative Novak, and State Representative Pope:

It's hard to believe that we have been "closed" for a full seven weeks now. I fully support the Stay at Home Orders issued by the Governor and Secretary Palm. I truly believe that their quick actions have saved lives, prevented additional transmission of the COVID-19 Virus, and also prevented our hospitals from becoming overwhelmed with cases of the virus. It has been an extremely steep learning curve for us in many ways, but there have been many bright spots in the past seven weeks as we continue to serve our students.

Despite the "closed" notations on our entrances and our website, we are anything but closed. Hundreds of operations continue behind the scenes, distantly from our home offices, and around our students' kitchen tables.

We are a small rural school district in the southwest part of Wisconsin. The area we cover is large in geography and like much of the Driftless Region, rather hilly and ecologically diverse. We have families that live in Villages that have access to the internet, and those who live in the rural towns that don't. There are many families that may have access but it is of poor quality. We also have a poverty rate near 40% for our students and they depend on the meals that we would be able to provide them daily at school. In the past seven weeks our teachers have connected with over 90% of our students. Transportation shortages and isolation are issues that many of our school children and families also need to overcome.

Our staff is small. Therefore, our staff have been overworked in managing the response to this crisis. Nonetheless, they sally forth with high expectations and a positive outlook - providing high quality instruction to students, printing packets for delivery for the students they haven't been able to reach online, and communicating nearly daily with their families, regardless of whether they respond to phone calls or emails.

Our school administration staff is also very small. We don't have the support that other school districts have, even though the state rules and requirements are the same of operating a school.

We have a small administrative support team that are busy completing required components like reporting for state and federal, audits, and budgeting requirements. There is little extra time to lend a hand for additional support for the extra administrative tasks that emerged during the COVID-19 closure and crisis, yet they do so anyway without complaint.

Our graduating class this year is only 26 students. It is our smallest class in recent years. Did you know we have two sets of identical twins this year? That is the first time that has happened in a school district of our size in memory. It's another fun fact about the Class of 2020. They were born post-September 11, 2011, and they will graduate and come of age in a pandemic. These two historical events have bookended their childhood. Our seniors are incredible. They have taught me many lessons on flexibility, care, and resiliency. They listen. Most of them are going into professions or are interested in studying professions that are "helpers" in "social, human, and public services." One cannot help but wonder what influence world events have on their choices. Another fun fact is that we had two senior boys that were a part of the State Track and Field Team last year that took fourth place in the State in the 4 x 800 meter relay. They were looking forward to competing again this spring but have managed the disappointment with grace beyond their years in age.

Even though there is disappointment, there have been bright spots and silver linings throughout all of this.

- About two years ago, our School Board voted to have chromebooks issued to all students on a 1 to 1 basis in grades 5-12. We also had classroom sets of chromebooks for grades 4K - 4. This fact alone is amazing in a school district of our size and of our budget. It was our school board's and administration's foresight that the nature of schooling was transitioning to this type of delivery. We wanted all kids to have access to the same technology and acquire the skills that their peers in other school districts received. This infrastructure was critical in allowing us to continue schooling during the COVID-19 closure.

We had purchased approximately 90 chromebooks to replace the ones that would be phased out in the 2020-21 school year. We were fortunate to have made that purchase earlier in the spring and so those Chromebooks were issued to students in grades 4K to grades 4 that did not have them.

Not all families have broadband access, and as aforementioned, those who do have access - it is not always sufficient. Rural Wisconsin continues to lag behind the rest of the state in access to high speed internet. It is expensive to "wire" broadband to rural America. There needs to be more attention paid to this inequity. High speed internet access must be treated as a utility and a right for all Wisconsinites - much as the Rural Telephone Utility was promoted throughout the 1930s. If economic development is to succeed, and if our children in rural areas are to compete (or at least keep up with) their peers in suburban Wisconsin, they need affordable high speed internet access. To mitigate this, we have deployed 24 hotspots to our families. This is to cover

approximately 18% of our students in our school district who have no or sub-par internet service.

- About five years ago, we began exploring different online learning management platforms through our BOOST Consortium. This consortium was a partnership between five school districts in Southwest Wisconsin so that we could provide additional learning opportunities to our high school students in classes that we may have had enough students to support. For example, Spanish IV, or AP Spanish, Calculus III, etc. As a result, about four years ago, we began using Schoology. Our middle school teachers and 5th grade teachers have been using Google Classroom for approximately the same amount of time. These learning platforms have been instrumental in delivering new content to students, connecting with students for demonstrations of skills, and for assessment, as students are able to take quizzes and submit materials and assignments online. Again, I attribute this to the foresight and innovation provided to our administration by our school board and the tenacious work-ethic of our teaching staff to use these platforms to their maximum capacity.

Since the closure, ZOOM accounts have been created for free, and CESA 3 has offered support for this type of premium account for school employees, as well as access to another video-conferencing platform called Bluejeans. These have enhanced our approaches to teaching and learning for our students, but also enhanced our collaboration among our staff and our ability to further connect with parents.

- Our food service staff was among the first to step up to the challenges during the closure. On the first day we closed, March 16th, the food services staff met and mapped out an ambitious plan to feed every child and adult in the school district that needed the meals. For seven weeks they have been preparing breakfasts and lunches for approximately 25% of our families.

Another bright spot is how the communities in our school district have risen to the challenge of feeding hungry children and families. Our district is large in area as it covers 13 towns/municipalities and villages. We have had an uptick in financial donations both to our food pantry program and our delinquent lunch balances account. While we have not attempted to collect on our lunch balances since school closed, as we're sensitive to the fiscal hardships that many families are experiencing during the closure, our community has indicated that they would like to relieve the stress experience by many families. We are beyond appreciative for their generosity.

A local women's service organization, the "Blanchardville Women's Club" has also taken charge of feeding children and their parents. This past school year was the first year that the Club had organized a food pantry out of our high school building. During that time they have sent home sacks of groceries with students. That program grew from 12 students initially, to about 14 students after January 1. When we closed on March 13th, the Club decided to take on a weekend "backpack" program from the elementary, which

added 20 more students to their roster. Late in March, the Club added adults/parents who resided with these students. This food is provided through Green Cares and Southwest Community Action Program through Second Harvest Food Bank. It is funded entirely on donations and fundraising from this small group of women in the Club and donations from the community. The last weekly number of individuals fed was over 45 children and their parents. Since March 13th, our numbers have doubled.

As you can see, we are a small but mighty school district. We operate on a shoe-string budget and every four to five years we have to ask our community for an operational referendum. As timing would have it, this November we planned to ask the electorate for a recurring referendum. Under normal circumstances, it is a “big ask.” However, funding in the time of COVID-19 and a pandemic is a new ball game. From the stories above, you can see that 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 more proud of our student body for the resilience and flexibility they have demonstrated in 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 Southwestern Wisconsin in your forethoughts as we navigate the road ahead. Thank you for reading our story.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jill Underly
District Administrator