



RIVER VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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RE: River Valley School District – Review of District Operations During COVID-19

I am writing to you to inform you how our school district is serving our students during the COVID-19 crisis. To describe the challenge our school district faced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is difficult because of the numerous messages to which we had to respond. Our administrative team met both Saturday, March 14, and Sunday, March 15, to determine what would be the best and safest plan of action.

The concerns we faced were parental fear of sending their child to school and, if we canceled school, what would the families do for meals and child care. We already were aware that school buildings would be closed at the end of the day on Wednesday, March 18. In our communication with our medical consultant, Dr. Furukawa, he indicated that we should close as soon as possible and get our staff and students safe at home, so we closed at noon on Tuesday, March 17.

The positive involved was the timeliness of the closure because we had spring break planned from March 23 to March 30. Therefore, our staff took the time over the two weeks to prepare to connect with students in a virtual format on April 6. We had not done any virtual learning prior to this time, so it was important for staff to make preparation so we could begin the process quickly.

The obstacles and logistics for sending out instruction and delivering meals were very challenging. The challenges we discovered during this process are as follows:

1. How do we reach all of our students virtually? We sent out a survey to determine which families had access and which families needed assistance. Because our district is a 300 square mile rural district, we had a number of areas which did not have access. As a result, we purchased and delivered over 60 hotspots to improve the connectivity. We also set up Wi-Fi access in our parking lot for those who could drive to the lot and communicated to our students regarding other areas in our communities with public Wi-Fi.

2. How would we work with our youngest students? Each teacher contacted the families of their students to determine what supplies they needed to work at home. We set up delivery routes to provide instructional supplies and materials. Teachers also post videos, lessons, and activities on a family sharing app where guardians can respond and even students can connect with teachers.
3. How would we provide meals to those in need? We were aware of the number of students on free and reduced lunches and we were concerned about how we could connect with them. Because we have a 300 square mile district, we had to determine how we were going to deliver their meals. We ended up setting up 11 delivery routes serving over 500 breakfasts and 500 lunches daily. We used our assistants and volunteers to package the meals and deliver them. We began at 6:00 am preparing the meals and would begin deliver them from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm. Providing nutrition during this time was important to many, and we knew we had to meet that need because of the unemployment and the financial situation of our families.
4. How would we engage students who were struggling? Our teachers made initial contact followed up by the counselor and or principal and continuous connections from teachers. We had a number of students who struggled with the virtual format. This is one of our major concerns as we get back to school. The reasons for not being as engaged ranged from lack of time, poor understanding of technology, lack of parental involvement, lack of motivation, and lack of connectivity.
5. How do we meet the goals of the Individual Education Plan for our students receiving special education? This was one of our biggest concerns. Many of our students in special education received a significant amount of help each day from their special education case managers in order to access the virtual learning curriculum. We will not know until school is fully back in session how much remediation will be needed for our special education students and struggling learners and if compensatory educational services will be needed to address any regression.
6. How would we respond to the English Language Learners? Our ESL teacher made numerous contacts but the lack of connectivity and the challenge of the material became a huge concern. Also a concern included Spanish-speaking parents who had difficulty working with their English-only speaking children. We were able to provide translations of all activities and work going home, but we had a number of families who still had difficulty connecting with teachers. Again, we will not know until school is fully back in session how much remediation will be needed for our students who had limited support at home because of a language barrier.
7. We had technology challenges. Families throughout our community stated that they did not have internet capabilities that allowed their students to effectively take part in online learning. We have been delivering paper instructional materials to students that have requested it for learning or that do not have internet service. We provided hotspots but the problem was most noticeable in families that had several children needing to be on the internet and the parents needed to work from home for their jobs.

8. An issue that we never really thought would exist was screen fatigue. Students actually were tired of being on their Chromebooks for long periods of time. We realized that we needed to adjust our types of assignments to include more project-based learning.
9. Finally, one last area that was challenging is the rise in mental health issues in not only our students but also the adults in their lives. We believe this will continue as long as the nation is in a state of emergency, and we need to take that into account as we determine our expectations of our students.

Our staff has responded remarkably well but are still missing seeing their students face-to-face. We are going to get feedback from our families and students regarding the experience. We will use the feedback to improve our virtual format so that we can have a consistent plan in place in case we are in the situation again. One of the obvious areas for improvement is better access and different technology. Many of our teachers gave interactive lessons which are far better than simply pushing out reading and then testing the information. Also, our health offices and front offices in each of our buildings need to be upgraded to meet the safety guidelines.

This has been a tremendous learning experience and I feel we have responded to the needs of our families in a very proactive manner. The educational process was different and we were unable to plan as effectively as we would have wanted, but with more planning time and experience of what worked and what didn't, we will be able to provide a more robust virtual learning experience for all of our learners.

Please continue to support us in whatever means you can. We appreciate what you are doing and the challenges you are facing.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,



Thomas E. Andres
Superintendent

TA/pw