

School District of St. Croix Falls

P.O. Box 130 ~ St. Croix Falls ~ Wisconsin 54024 ~ (715) 483-2507 ~ Fax (715) 483-3695

Mark Burandt
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Rita Platt
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Principal

Joe Connors
Middle School
Principal

Peggy Ryan
High School
Principal

May 15, 2020

Dear Senator Schachtner :

Please find the letters from the three building principals in the St. Croix Falls School District to give credence to the difficult times, challenges and most importantly the successes during this unprecedented time we face in public education. The hope of these communications is that practical and positive decision making will take place in Madison in regards to public education in a time when our students, families, communities and state need us more than ever. While you will see many successes in these letters, please do not misinterpret those successes for a long-term fix or solution. What our staff has done here is nothing short of exemplary, but it can not replace quality face-to-face instruction. In order to have quality face-to-face instruction, we must continue to provide resources to the public schools that will allow us to continue to do the job so many people depend on us for.

While this communication is lengthy and you are a very busy person, it is my hope that these 3 letters will tell a complete picture.

I thank you for your time

Mark C. Burandt, Superintendent

St. Croix Falls High School

I'd like to share St. Croix Falls High School's experiences from March 18 until now. I am proud of our staff, students and parents for the exemplary job they are doing in moving education forward at St. Croix Falls.

When we began hearing about schools in other countries and states shutting down, we began assessing our readiness to address the situation. While our students are already each individually equipped with a laptop or Chromebook, we needed a better count of students who might have challenges because of internet access. After surveying our students, we were able to provide a hot spot to all of our students who reported no internet or even slow or undependable internet. This background work took place in advance of the actual closure. As you are well-aware, preparedness is critical to successfully moving through this pandemic.

While students were still in session on March 16-17, teachers completed finals so that the work for the quarter could be wrapped up. Teachers also worked with students, showing them how to log into Zoom sessions. As far as other components of online learning, our students were already adept at using Schoology, an online platform for education. They

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were also well-versed in Google prior to the shut-down. Our past use of technology coupled with our training of students on some new platforms provided St. Croix Falls students with a solid starting point in online education.

Students, teachers and parents were well aware that while school may only be online for a month, it may also be online for the duration of the year. Everyone went into the shut-down understanding that the situation could change quickly and we needed to be prepared for any number of scenario. This flexibility and adaptability also played a key role in our success during the past several weeks.

Clear, consistent communication were also critical in this situation succeeding. My staff and I clearly communicated with students and parents that teachers would focus on essential standards, that student learning would be assessed, and that students and parents would receive feedback on student progress. It was critical that students and parents understood that this was not simply an extended vacation. The online period represents a significant length of time in education, and we could not allow our students to fall behind because of our circumstances.

I built a schedule for staff that has been a foundation to our online program. No longer could we run classes for 55 minutes, seven periods a day. Instead, teachers were assigned Zoom times and office hours. This allowed students and parents to understand when specific teachers would be available or instructing. Teachers understood that their scheduled assignments were to be adhered to so that all staff could be guaranteed fair time with students.

Teachers send an email to all of their students on Sunday evening or Monday morning, outline the plan and assignments for the week. Then, staff use a variety of platforms, including email, Google, Zoom, Schoology and teacher websites to provide instruction. All of this information—about weekly emails, platforms for instructions, scheduling, contacting teachers and technical assistance--was sent to parents and students in a mass email prior to the closure. Every day, students receive announcements containing celebrations of students, necessary notices and coming events. Again, a clear, consistent and pro-active message was key to our success.

I'd like to share a couple examples of what some high school teachers are doing. Our choir teacher, Shawn Gudmunsen, continued Mental Health Monday—a program geared toward using music to help students emotionally. This program, which Mr. G started last year, has consistently brought 90 to 100 percent of his 90 students to Monday's Zoom meetings. His choir is also working on a virtual performance of the alma mater which will be used for our virtual graduation. Ms. Germain, an English teacher, has been working through Romeo and Juliet with her freshmen. They have used their own

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technical savvy and submitted assignments that demonstrate our students are engaging with each other and with the material in a meaningful, effective way without breaking social distancing guidelines. One group of students combined individual performances into a group performance by using a green screen. Ms. Germain's American Literature class has frequently had 100 percent of students attend classes. Ms. Wolff is working through senior papers using google docs, Mr. Paulson is using Zoom to teach calculus and recording messages about wellness for his students. Our special education aides are holding zoom meetings with students every day, reading aloud to some, explaining problems to some, and simply connecting with some who are isolated and alone. All teachers are in constant communication with their students helping them master essential standards and moving education forward.

At the same time, we have an ongoing conversation via a google spreadsheet about our students of concern and our students who deserve a shout out for outstanding work. This way, we all have access to how our students are performing in other classes, events outside of school that may be impacting a particular student or group of students, and as importantly, how each student is doing emotionally. I have also conducted student surveys every 2-3 weeks attempting to compile information on student workload, technology, communication and emotional state. This information has helped educators understand a variety of perspectives on their students. It has also helped me to make adjustments to help students succeed. For example, students have been provided with catch-up days every two weeks, cumulative finals are being foregone this year and specific educators have needed to rethink assignments and approaches. We do these things in regular school—it is critical that we keep good practices in place during online schooling.

Extra curricular activities have not taken a break either. The Student Council planned and executed a Spring Fever week for students. The Zoom bingo night was such a success that Ms. Imhoff has been hosting bingo every Monday night. Our coaches have been communicating with their athletes, giving them ideas for workouts and keeping themselves mentally healthy. Our Community Service Day coordinator is working on a plan that will adhere to social distancing guidelines, but allow our students to give back to our community as they do every year. Our athletes and activities participants are being honored every day in our announcements. Last Friday, our student council observed Teacher Appreciation Week by driving to 28 teachers' homes, dropping off hot coffee and treats and honking with great enthusiasm as they came and left. Even in a closure, our students are a light of optimism and joy. We still find ways to celebrate together.

Special events have also been celebrated. On May 6, students received an Academic Awards Banquet in a Box. Because they could not come to the school for their

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celebratory event, teachers, aides, the guidance counselor and I brought boxes the banquet to the students homes. Each honoree received a family meal of lasagna, salad, breadsticks and brownies along with their certificates and medals. Families stood waiting in the front lawn and on the porch, eagerly awaiting this celebratory box. On May 13, the middle and high school guidance counsellors, the scholarship committee chairman and I delivered Scholarship Night flash drives and awards to 45 scholarship award winners. Again, families were excited when the deliveries arrived. Next week, our seniors will celebrate with a senior parade (approved by the county and state health departments) where kids in cars driven by parents will be announced at two different points as they drive through town to be acknowledged for their achievement. At 7 p.m. that night, our virtual graduation ceremony will go live. We aren't letting a pandemic take away special moments. We are simply adapting to make them happen differently.

This is a concise, but incomplete, story of what we have done. It has been unimaginably difficult at times. We have sacrificed a lot to make things happen and I am proud of our work. With any cuts to funding, our job becomes impossible. Please know that we take our responsibility to taxpayers very seriously in St. Croix Falls, and have proven to our district that funding for education is money well-spent—no matter the format of schooling.

From the start, St. Croix Falls High School made a commitment that we would not squander precious time in the lives of our students. We would not shrug and walk away from our professional and ethical obligations. We would teach, connect, support and encourage our students and parents. We have planned to succeed, and so we will. To simply say that our teachers are working hard doesn't at all represent the enormity of this task or the performance of my staff. We have lost the realization of work hours and weekends—if a student needs help, they get help no matter the hour or the day. We have challenged each other to raise the bar. St. Croix Falls High School is not simply enduring this pandemic or making the best of it until we return to normalcy—we are taking our students on a new course of education, keeping our expectations high and exhausting every possibility of making the online experience a great success. Help us to continue in our passion with the resources we need.

St. Croix Falls Elementary School

Since the closure of schools educators, children, and families have been thrust into new roles, have had to make tough decisions, and have been fighting waves of stress caused by near-constant feelings of uncertainty. But, together we are keeping our heads above water.

At St. Croix Falls and Dresser Elementary Schools much has changed, but even more has stayed the same. From the first day schools were closed educators rallied in

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teams to be sure we could provide both quality instruction and the loving support our families have come to expect of us. Teachers made packets, honed essential learning standards, learned to Zoom, created online adventures, and used daily online communication tools. We quickly filled Little Free Libraries all over the district with great free books for our young readers, made home fitness kits, and math games to give away. Not a day has passed where teachers haven't read a story on Facebook Live, offered an online class meeting, or called a home to chat with a missed child or a worried parent. Much to the surprise of teachers of all grades, we find ourselves busier than ever. This is not a "paid time off" situation for most teachers. In fact, for many, the hours are longer than before as we continue to adjust to a new way of doing things while maintaining the excellence we are known for both academics and social-emotional learning.

We have been forced to change. The way we teach has changed and, if I am frank, likely not ultimately for the better, face-to-face teaching and learning cannot be replaced with a worksheet and a computer screen. The content we teach has changed, in that we've had to pair it down to the truly essential concepts.

What hasn't changed? Our love for our students, our commitment to our communities, and our collective sense of hope for the future of public education. Recently I queried my staff wanting to know their thoughts on three questions that constantly are at play in my own mind.

1. What is the hardest part of teaching during the COVID crisis?
2. What "silver linings" do you see coming out of the closures?
3. What are your greatest fears for public education moving forward?

Their answers were deeply thoughtful and reading them brought to light needs, hopes, fears, and joys. I want to share some of that with.

What is the hardest part of teaching during the COVID crisis?

By far the most frequently noted hard parts were missing the kiddos, a fear that we are not doing enough to support our most vulnerable demographics, and a sense of complete and total exhaustion. As I mentioned above, educators are working harder than ever before but without the daily energy of the children, without the spark in their eyes as they "get it" or the sound of their laughter, it all feels hollow. Similarly, there is fear for our students who need the daily structure, nurturing, and love that they find in our classrooms. For too many children, school is their only safe place.

What "silver linings" do you see coming out of the closures?

Three common threads came from this question. One, our teachers are glad that this forced them to learn new technology tools, most of which they will integrate into their work with students in the regular classroom. Two, educators are grateful that some of the major inequities in society have been dragged into the light. Schools do way more than just teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. We are happy that all can now see that schools also feed students and offer them comfort, nurturing, counseling, social outlets, medical support, and love. Schools are the main spoke in a terrifyingly fragile sociological and

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economic system. The third silver lining is that St. Croix Falls and Dresser Elementary School teachers feel that the public recognizes that more than ever. We have felt supported by the community and hope that politicians have a renewed understanding of why fully funding schools is critical for the health of the nation as a whole.

What are your greatest fears for public education moving forward?

At the beginning of this letter, I made an analogy, public schools and all of the people associated with them are fighting what feels like waves from an angry tide that had turned against them. As I wrote above, we are keeping our heads above water, but it's hard work. The biggest fears teachers are sharing with me are that despite the positive feedback from our community, this will be used as a wedge to reduce school funding, cut teachers, and otherwise reduce the efficacy of public schools. We fear that big business and private interests will use this as an inroad for increasing online learning, selling programs, and opening more virtual schools that will not only be low quality but will siphon money from our brick and mortar schools. Any educator who has been a part of public education for more than a couple of years has seen schools and teachers become political pawns in a losing game. The concern is that we will be the victims of scapegoating. But, even more than that educators fear that the pandemic will forever change how we are allowed to interact with our students. Will we be able to meet in large groups? Will we be able to greet our children face-to-face each morning? Will we be able to give high fives and handshakes and hugs? We hope so. But, we are afraid.

St. Croix Falls Middle School

We are very proud of our online schooling at St. Croix Falls Middle School. While this is not the situation any of us hoped for, we are making the best of it and focusing on providing students with the best education possible. Each student in our school was provided with a chromebook prior to ending school in March. If the student was not in school at that time, we delivered a chromebook to their home using our bus transportation system. Along with the chromebooks, any additional materials teachers need students to have for classes are sent to homes using our bus transportation system.

Our school has all staff including paraprofessionals working and providing classes via schoology, email, zoom, flipgrid and a host of other platforms to meet student needs. Teachers have class hours daily and provide live meetings with students at their specific content time to answer questions about assignments and interact with students. While there has been a learning curve for staff and students related to what content to cover, how much and at what pace, we are settled into a good rhythm after one month. Our school principal has done full grade level zoom meetings with students to survey their learning needs and identify areas for instructional improvement. Students in grades 5-8 reported they are working 3-4 hours per day on school work. The 3-4 hours includes four core content classes and two exploratory classes. Each week, a teacher leader from each grade level sends parents and students an email for all the classes at their grade with a

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description of assignments students will have for the upcoming week. The email serves as a reminder to parents what students are working on in each class and allows students to plan their week of work. Additionally, students are given formative and summative feedback on assignment progress and assessed using a standards based grading model with grades found in Powerschool. The following lesson is one from our school guidance counselor who puts out weekly lessons with rewards:

Hello MS Students-

I sure miss seeing your smiling faces everyday! I hope you are all doing well! If you need anything please email or zoom me! I would love to help or connect with you! This week's lesson is on Honesty. You know that one of my favorite Character Traits is INTEGRITY which goes hand in hand with honesty. Doing the right thing even if no one is watching! Please watch the video and if you think you know where the fleur-de-lis is located in the middle school email me back and you could win a \$5 gift card. Since the lesson is about "honesty" please do not reply until you have "honestly" watched the video. Thanks and have a great week! Todd

<https://www.cbsnews.com/video/kindness-101-with-steve-hartman-honesty/>

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