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May 21, 2020

Sen. Duey Stroebel
18 South
State Capitol
PO Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707

Rep. Robert Brooks
Room 216 North
State Capitol
PO Box 8952
Madison, WI 53708

Rep. Rick Gundrum
Room 304 North
State Capitol
PO Box 8952
Madison, WI 53708

Rep. Timothy S. Ramthun
Room 409 North
State Capitol
PO Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708

Dear Senator Stroebel and Representatives Gundrum, Brooks, and Ramthun:

I hope this letter finds each of you, your families, and your staff and colleagues well. Your representation for Washington County residents is much appreciated.

Thank you for your attention to this update from the West Bend Joint School District #1 on our continued response to the extraordinary circumstances and challenges brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The West Bend School District is the 21st largest public school district in the state of Wisconsin, educating about 6,300 students in nine schools and a community-based 4k program. Throughout our preparation for, and response to, the school closure, we have centered our efforts around two main goals: provide and maintain access to learning and services for our students and families *and* engage our students in robust distance learning.

Throughout this extraordinary time, our main concern has been for our students. The concern goes beyond our privilege to provide all of them a meaningful and challenging education through a distance format. It extends to concerns for their physical and mental health, their access to enough food, and their safety in the community and at home.

Distance Learning

Even though our school buildings are closed, teaching and learning and integral support services have not stopped. Distance learning for the WBSD students was carefully planned for all grades by administrators and teachers to incorporate various online tools such as Canvas



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and Google Classroom, and other tools like activity packets and access to library books. Google Meet and Canvas Conference are two tools being used by teachers and students to connect via video for support or a classroom activity.

Our staff have been working very hard to remain connected to students and families through the video tools and phone calls, as well as emails, postcards, car parades through the school neighborhoods, videos with lessons, games, and contests, and a variety of engaging activities on their social media platforms such as “Spirit Days.”

Access to Distance Learning and Support

Immediately upon the school closure in March, our Technology Department implemented a plan to get Chromebook laptop computers and Internet access to students who did not have these tools at home. For the 2019-2020 school year, about 2,000 students in grades 5-9 of the West Bend School District already had district-issued Chromebooks to use at all times, but for a number of families in our district, a home computer and good Internet access is not a reality. To date, more than 1,000 district-owned Chromebooks have been loaned to students to effectively complete their distance learning. In addition, we have given out over 100 Internet hotspots.

Despite the success in quickly loaning Chromebooks and disseminating Internet hotspots, two troubling challenges with a move to distance learning are 1) maintaining equitable access to our learning resources, and 2) a lack of equitable home learning environments. We have observed the following inequities:

- parents or other caregivers who are unable to support student learning on a daily basis
- families with *no* Internet access in their home and thus unable to access the instruction
- people within one household sharing one computer among a number of family members
- families trying to use Internet hotspots as a sustainable way to support significant online activity in the home
- Internet bandwidth in the home that cannot adequately support the needs of both the parents working from home and students learning from home
- older siblings who are the main child care provider for younger siblings while their parents are working either inside or outside the home
- children in community daycare settings during the day because their parents are essential workers outside of the home



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Address Food Insecurity

Approximately 29 percent of WBSD students qualify for free and reduced breakfast and lunch. With the pandemic causing widespread unemployment, the number of children facing food insecurity in our communities is a real concern.

Since March 16, our Nutrition Services Department has provided free breakfast and lunch for weekdays to any students ages 18 and under living in the school district attendance area. In March, staff prepared and distributed about 16,000 meals. In April, this increased to more than 35,600 meals. With one week to go in May, the number of meals currently stands at more than 30,600 and we expect that to rise to more than 40,000.

Disseminate Critical Information

Prior to the school closure, we established a “COVID-19 Response Team” made up of staff overseeing areas critical to the success of the WBSD such as teaching and learning, finance, human resources, facilities, etc. Daily video conference meetings have allowed us to be proactive in our planning to address concerns, but we have also been required to quickly react to changing conditions within the state and Washington County.

An integral part of the response team’s role is to ensure clear and frequent communication with our students, families, and staff to further build confidence and trust in the WBSD at a time of great stress and uncertainty. Prior to the school buildings being closed, we set up a webpage on the West Bend School District website to list each message sent from the superintendent’s office to families. It also features trusted information for parents on COVID-19 and the coronavirus, tips on effective distance learning prepared by our school counseling staff, outdoor learning suggestions, and even videos prepared by our staff to help remain connected to students and families.

After establishing this trusted line of communication, each school principal then began sending weekly newsletters to their specific population of students and families with updates and encouragement.

In addition, we set up a special section of our West Bend School District Staff Intranet for our more than 800 staff to both disseminate pertinent information and answer questions in a timely manner. Our communication to employees also includes a weekly e-newsletter called “HR Update” to all staff to provide clear information on the myriad of human resources-related questions.



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We have set up pages on the West Bend East and West Bend West High Schools websites to provide the most up-to-date information for our more than 550 seniors. This includes graduation updates and details on various tributes to each Class of 2020.

Courageous Efforts

All professionals working closely with children are trained to recognize and accommodate each child's strengths and weaknesses in relation to their academic, social, and emotional progress. The ultimate goal is that each child is not only respected and cared for, but is ensured equal opportunity to succeed. This integral part of education cannot stop when all school services are provided at a distance.

Our teachers, school counselors, special education coordinators, library aides, therapists, and everyone else have gone above and beyond to continue to realize that goal for *all* our students during this public health emergency. They have been challenged to find new and creative ways to engage students and families and I am proud to say they have done a wonderful job.

Thank you for taking the time to learn more about the West Bend School District and our response to the challenges and changes we have faced in this pandemic. I welcome your call or email so I can answer your questions and provide additional detail.

Sincerely,

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