

Testimony June 24, 2020 Assembly Education
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Thank you for recognizing we are working around the clock to meet the unique needs of our communities at this time and providing us with the opportunity to testify virtually. I am Kristine Gilmore, the proud Superintendent of the D.C. Everest School District located in central Wisconsin. As I begin my 18th year as the Everest Superintendent, I can say with complete candor that no other time has presented us — our students, staff, families, businesses and communities — with as many unique, and every-changing, challenges. On March 13th we, like the rest of districts across the state, closed our schools. While it was an event we had anticipated and had begun preparing for, it's a reality that none of us had dealt with before and that "newness" was a bit unsettling. Initially we hoped the closures would simply be a few days or weeks of inconvenience - but we all know how this story unfolds. In a matter of days, we operationalized remote learning for our 6000 students. Luckily, we live in a community that supports our district's push for innovative instruction, and we had invested in 1:1 technology for all students.

Remote learning was challenging.

Although every one of our students was equipped with a school iPad, some of our families did not have internet at home. We arranged at-home hotspots for them. Some of our rural areas didn't have a reliable internet to connect to. So, we created WIFI hotspots in the parking lots of our schools. To help one of our more remote neighborhoods, we are looking at building our own tower in rural Easton, WI.

We all know technology doesn't always function as it should — and that some of our parents and guardians may not be as tech-savvy as our students — so we created a tech hotline/helpline for them.

And our remote learning certainly wasn't perfect.

Some of our teachers were unfamiliar with the technology needed to engage kids in meaningful learning.

And some of our students disengaged from their teachers and their classes. I can personally attest that my senior son was less than motivated about school, especially while he was missing out on all of the things he most loved about school. But we continued to do our best until the last day of school. We learned a lot about our learners, how to engage students from afar, and how to really get to know and work with our families.

And remote learning wasn't the only challenge. When your community is in crisis — in this case, facing a pandemic — as a school district, it is our responsibility to help our community address their most pressing needs. Every day, we asked ourselves: What is most important to our community *right now*?

We knew parents would need to adjust to a new reality of working from home while having their students at home or need to find childcare so they could go to their essential workplace. By the end of week 1, we had personally checked in with every family. We listened to their concerns and provided individualized modifications.

We created an 8 am to 8 pm bilingual hotline so family members could speak with someone who could clarify the new expectations and answer their questions.

We understood the number of families struggling financially was going to increase rapidly and that with local food pantries closed, we needed to immediately remedy the situation. So, we launched a grab-and-go meal program in our school parking lots providing free breakfast and lunch bags to any member of the community who needed them. Our community — noted for its perennial generosity — paid for the cost of adult meals through donations. Our high school grew fresh lettuce and our middle school provided fresh vegetables from our hydroponic and outdoor school gardens. We were even able to assist our local farmers by providing families with the eggs, milk and cheese they produced. We did draw the line when someone offered us a semi-truck of loose potatoes. We took some, but not all.

We delivered food, clothing, and school supplies on weekly basis to our families who were without transportation.

We assisted our local law enforcement by cleaning the Everest Metro Police Department as they didn't have the disinfecting expertise or supplies.

We provided supplies and cleaning services for our local voting venues to ensure our community was safe when they exercised their right to vote.

And throughout, we retained and paid all our employees, including our contracted bus company.

Why do I share all of this with you?

Over the years, we have established relationships with our board, staff, families, businesses, and Everest community that are built on trust. And together we have learned that although the challenges may seem overwhelming, we know **what to do**. We understand, respect and support one another. So, in times of crisis, we roll up our sleeves, ask people what they need and want, and then we remove the barriers and push away the excuses, and we get to work serving others. With challenges comes great opportunity.

As we plan for a safe re-opening, we have reached out to our families, spoken with local business leaders and consulted with our Chamber of Commerce, and are surveying our staff. Overwhelmingly, our community wants our schools to *safely and responsibly* open. A small number of families seek a blended approach and about 10% want or need a completely virtual option.

In order to do so, we will need to address a number of challenges:

- Transportation
- Cost of additional staffing and finding staff
- Licensure
- Building layout and social distancing
- Cost of PPE/cleaning and disinfecting
- Opening of a K-5 virtual school in a matter of two months
- Assist families with food insecurity

- Meet the needs of families with very different viewpoints and priorities
- Ability to change and react to any situation that comes our way-we need to be a nimble organization

Here's where you come in. You can help us do what is right for our communities by removing legislative barriers. Not forever, but for *now*. For this particular moment in time when our communities need us to provide them with safe, reliable, responsible and effective learning opportunities in a highly fluid pandemic situation. This includes items like 3rd Friday count, Bus Ridership counts, mandates around assessments and attendance.

Provide us with immunity from those who ask us to provide school, but then try to tie our hands in litigation.

Deal with Wisconsin's inequalities — including high quality internet for all citizens. High quality school options for families- no matter where they live.

Give us access to retired annuitants (teachers) so we may ask them to work full time during our time of need. We may need virtual teachers for first semester or one year. I believe this group of individuals may be our answer.

Help us do what we are meant to do: Take care of our kids and communities.

Our staff, teachers, administrative teams, and school boards are capable of meeting the challenge. Our kids need us more than ever and they certainly deserve nothing less.