



June 24, 2020

Rep. Thiesfeldt, Rep Kitchens, members of the Assembly Education Committee:

My name is Michelle Langenfeld, and I have the honor and privilege of serving the more than 20,000 students in the Green Bay Area Public School District as the Superintendent of Schools and Learning. I'd like to begin by thanking you for holding this hearing today, affording me the opportunity to share our story.

John Dewey once said, "What the best and wisest parent wants for their child, that must we want for all children of the community. Anything less is unlovely, and left unchecked, destroys our democracy."

We cannot ignore the glaring inequities we witnessed among student groups across our state as a result of the school closure. Since March, school districts across the state have been working very hard to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 school closure, addressing our students' nutritional, educational, and social and emotional needs. As we move forward to the 2020-21 school year, as our elected officials, we need your help as you can play a very significant role in ensuring equity for all students during this pandemic.

The Green Bay Area Public School District is the fourth largest school district in the state, with more than 12,000 of our students qualifying for free and reduced meals, upward of 1,000 students are homeless during the school year, more than 3,000 students receive services for special education, and more than 4,500 students' first language is not English.

At the beginning of the school closure, we were able to adapt to a short-term closure, since the District had a 1-1 computer program for secondary students. In addition, the District had Kajeets, which could be sent home with secondary students who did not have access to Wi-Fi. However, as the school closure continued, we needed the ability to connect all students online and there were significant challenges. By the end of the school year, the District had distributed an additional 12,000 Chrombooks and 1,635 filtered Wi-Fi hotspots to students.

How You Can Help: Our current public health emergency has made it very clear that we can no longer view internet access as a luxury item, where only those who can afford it,

have it. With no vaccine in the near future, we know that we will have some children who will be unable to attend school due to health concerns, and that there very likely will be times when we will provide virtual learning due to COVID outbreaks. The Legislature needs to ensure that, similar to a public utility, internet access is available to all 4K-12 students, as well as improve internet access, cellular service and bandwidth across the state.

In addition to the digital divide, we focused resources and time ensuring a continuum of services, support and learning for our students receiving special education services, English Language services, Head Start programming, tiered interventions and those receiving McKinney-Vento services. We recognize that in spite of our ongoing efforts to implement special programming during the school closure as the result of the pandemic, our students are going to need additional time to make up for the months lost. Thus, beginning in July we will be providing our students with special education needs an in-person Extended School Year (ESY) experience. In addition, we also intend to provide additional services for our English Language Learners (ELL), but we know that there is still much more work to be done.

How You Can Help: During this unprecedented time, the District is requesting that you waive student teaching and clinical (therapy) hour requirements for pre-service special education teachers, extend the approval for virtual therapy and Medicaid billing, and provide increased funding for special education services. In addition, more financial resources are needed to provide services for not only special education but also for English Language Learners. For the last few years, the District has transferred more than \$30 million a year from Fund 10 to Special Education. With the additional costs that will be incurred to educate students during the pandemic, now more than ever the District needs those resources to ensure we meet the needs of all students.

While the District has been doing its very best with available resources during the school closure, we recognize that the impact of not being able to provide in-person direct instruction will have a deleterious effect on the achievement gap for some of our students. While we know that many children were well supported at home, other children were not due to parents/guardians needing to work outside of the home, family trauma due to loss of employment, or coping with illness or loss due to COVID-19. A mother emailed teachers from her hospital room as she was battling COVID-19. She apologized for her 3 children not being in class as she was not present to make sure that they were attending school. When visiting one of our 14 food distribution sites, I met a 12-year-old who had walked up to school to pick up breakfast and lunch with several younger children in tow. I learned that his mother was at work and that he was responsible for the children. I can't imagine a 12-year-old having to participate in remote learning while also caring for and making sure that all the other children are participating in school as well. While heroic efforts were made by teachers, staff, administrators and the community to do whatever it takes to

connect, and support students and families to address resource needs and provide support, for some children it quite simply has not been enough.

How You Can Help: As we head into the new school year, we need flexibility and additional financial resources. Recognizing that the school year will look and feel very different, we need flexibility in the hours and minutes required for instruction. Knowing that we will have staff that will be unable to return to school due to health-related concern and/or who will be out for extended periods of time (either in quarantine or recovering from COVID), it is important the Legislature consider reducing the 75 day WRS requirement before allowing retired educators to return to work to support students. In addition, we need to eliminate barriers to teacher licensure, and ask that the FORT certification requirement be waived. Finally, financial support will be needed. During this public health emergency, school leaders need to be focused on student and staff safety and student learning. They should not have to choose between hiring a teacher or purchasing PPE. They should not have to choose between hiring a special education para or another custodian to assist with the cleaning demands due to the virus.

As we plan forward for the 2020-21 school year, we have identified additional needs in order to safely return students and staff to school. With more than 8,000 thousand students needing transportation to and from school each day, we recognize that our capacity to transport children using social distancing guidelines on our school buses will be both problematic as there are not enough buses and/or drivers, as well as very costly. Also, with the increased need for regular and ongoing deep cleaning in 43 buildings, we recognize that there will be a need to purchase additional cleaning supplies, equipment and add custodial staff. And finally, because we intend to follow and implement the CDC guidelines to mitigate risk as students and staff return to a face-to-face, direct instruction learning environment at school, we will need to: purchase PPE, identify staff who will serve on point to ensure that safety protocols are followed in the event a student and/or staff member is exposed to COVID-19 and/or is presenting symptoms, add space to facilities if needed to quarantine any child and/or staff who is presenting symptoms and hire additional staff to support not only smaller class sizes allowing for social distancing, but also to address the ongoing social and emotional needs of both students and staff.

How you can help: The success of Wisconsin's workforce of tomorrow is predicated on our investment in students being well-served in public education today. Therefore, it is incumbent that our lawmakers take into account the needs of ALL students going forward, ensuring that school districts have the necessary resources to safely and equitably educate ALL students, which includes access to high quality instruction as well as social and emotional supports, no matter which educational setting (whether face-to-face in a school

building, virtual at home, or hybrid at school and home) a student is being served in as a result of this public health emergency.

In closing , according to legend of the Maasai tribe, the traditional greeting among them is “How are the children?” The typical response is “All the children are well.” By being able to respond, “All the children are well,” is an indication that things in the community are as they should be. There is a recognition that when All the children are made a priority and the community can provide ALL children what they need - including good health, safety, equitable access to resources and support, that the community is also well.

Today, I offer my assistance to you. Working forward, wanting the very best for all children being served in our schools, we can address the inequities that prevent all students from having access to virtual learning at home. We can ensure the acceleration of learning to close gaps as a result of the school closure. And we can provide support services that will best meet the needs of ALL students and families so at the end of the day, even in our reimagined educational ecosystem as a result of COVID-19, we can in fact say, “All the children are well.”

I thank you for your listening and for your service to the children and families across the entire state of Wisconsin.

Michelle Langenfeld, Ed. D.
Superintendent of Schools and Learning