



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF NEILLSVILLE

Testimony 7-23-2020

Thank you for allowing me to join you virtually today, and thank you for your interest in the education of all children in the State of Wisconsin. My name is John Gaier, and I have had the great pleasure of serving the School District of Neillsville as superintendent for the past 24 years. The School District of Neillsville is a rural school of about 1,000 kids that covers approximately 400 square miles in Central Wisconsin. I will start by telling you that during my 24 years as superintendent, I have never experienced anything like the year 2020.

My testimony today will probably be significantly different than the testimony from representatives of virtual charter schools. The reason for that difference is choice. Kids and families that sign up for virtual charter schools expect to learn remotely. The 1,000 students and families in my district did not choose to be full-time virtual learners. Our students, along with our staff, were forced into a new reality where we quickly had to troubleshoot new protocols to help support our children and families.

Our district's first priority was the health and safety of our students and families. The School District of Neillsville has a high percentage of economically disadvantaged families, and a high percentage of special needs students that depend on us not only for academic support, but also for daily meals, and social-emotional supports. Fortunately, we have been able to continue to provide needed meals for our families throughout the spring and summer to reduce any food insecurities that they may have had, and our pupil services and special education staff continues to reach out to our most vulnerable students to check on their emotional well-being on a regularly scheduled basis. We also did not want to over-stress families with the concern of their children's grades, or overload them with too much school work at any one time. Our goal was to provide activities to exercise a student's brain without adding any additional stress to their family situation. That became an important challenge for our staff to work through with the families in which they served. We believed it would be unfair to grade student achievement based on a child's home life.

For the past five years the School District of Neillsville has been a 1-1 technology device provider for students in grades 4-12. Because of that experience, the vast majority of our students are familiar with virtual platforms and the use of devices for learning. Our staff has all been trained on different technology platforms in order to enhance their instruction. However, using technology in the classroom is significantly different than full-time virtual learning. Not having live access to teachers made learning more difficult for many of our students, and many of them became disengaged, even with all of the special outreach efforts of our staff.

DISTRICT OFFICE
JOHN GAIER, ADMINISTRATOR
614 EAST 5TH STREET
NEILLSVILLE, WI 54456
PHONE: 715-743-3323 (6)
FAX: 715-743-8718

ELEMENTARY/MIDDLE SCHOOL
MARCY KUNZE, ES PRINCIPAL
KORY POESCHEL, MS PRINCIPAL
504 EAST 5TH STREET
NEILLSVILLE, WI 54456
PHONE: 715-743-3323 (4)
FAX: 715-743-8715

HIGH SCHOOL
CRAIG ANDERSON RUSKIN,
HS PRINCIPAL
401 CENTER STREET
NEILLSVILLE, WI 54456
PHONE: 715-743-3323 (5)
FAX: 715-743-8714



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Not being able to attend school physically and trying to do all virtual in-home learning greatly magnified the inequities between families and between school districts. For example, in our district almost 25% of families have either inadequate or no internet connectivity. There are also numerous areas in our district that have no cell service at all. Therefore, almost 1 out of every 4 families in our district did not have an online learning option for their children. Our staff had to quickly develop other instructional learning plans for those students. **Statewide connection to both internet and cell service is a significant equity and economic development issue that must be addressed as soon as possible.**

The School District of Neillsville is proposing a blended plan to return to school in the fall. That blended plan will combine both in school and virtual learning days. We believe that this plan can be accomplished safely and effectively, but we need your help in the following areas:

- **Additional funding:** My district is a low revenue district, and without the low revenue ceiling increase last year we would have been in a very difficult situation financially. Your work to provide additional funding during these most challenging times is critical. Schools are facing increased cost for transportation, increased costs to add additional staff to help with new safety protocols and student achievement, increased costs for PPE and cleaning supplies, and increased costs to continue to serve students with remote learning opportunities. Funding to accomplish these new costs is going to be our lifeblood.
- **Immunity from Civil Liability for Schools:** Districts like ours are really making good faith efforts to try to reopen as safely as we possibly can to serve students and families. Because of those diligent efforts to serve the needs of Wisconsin communities, schools should not be subject to costly litigation for reopening.
- **Suspending Student Assessment Requirements for the 2020-2021 School Year:** The testing requirements take a significant amount of time out of each learning year, and our teachers and students need all of that time to focus on real learning. It should be noted that many institutions of higher learning are no longer requiring test like these for college entry.
- **Suspending the District Performance Reports for the 2020-2021 School Year:** With the disruption to learning in the 2019-2020 school year, we question the value that parents or the community would gain from those performance reports.
- **License Flexibility in Teacher Licensure and Bringing Retired Teachers Back to Work:** Having the flexibility to add staff that can help reduce learning gaps that we know increased because of the pandemic, and to use high quality substitute teachers for our regular teaching staff that may have to miss more than any normal year is important for student success.

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ELEMENTARY/MIDDLE SCHOOL
MARCY KUNZE, ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL
KORY POESCHEL, MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL
504 EAST 5TH STREET
NEILLSVILLE, WI 54456
PHONE: 715-743-3323 (3)
FAX: 715-743-8715

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CRAIG ANDERSON RUSKIN, PRINCIPAL
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- **Technical Changes to Pupil Counts and Transportation Aid:** Technical changes may have to be made to the required pupil count dates and the way transportation aid is calculated so that districts do not potentially lose funding during this unprecedented time.

I sincerely want to thank you for this opportunity to be with you, and I also appreciate that you so deeply understand that children should never face opportunity gaps based on where they live in our state. Together, we can take steps to make sure that never happens to children anywhere in the future.

Please know I would be happy to answer any of your questions at any time.

Thank you!

John Gaier

District Administrator

DISTRICT OFFICE
JOHN GAIER, ADMINISTRATOR
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NEILLSVILLE, WI 54456
PHONE: 715-743-3323 (5)
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