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May 11, 2020

As I write this letter, we have passed the half-way point of ECASD's At-Home Learning on our way to closing out the 2019-2020 school year! With 18 virtual school days to go, who could have imagined when the closure began the many challenges we would encounter? Who could have imagined the persistent uncertainty we would face as the closure progressed? And who could have imagined that gaining clarity on even the smallest detail would be a cause to celebrate? Tackling the demands of the Safer at Home Order has been both exhilarating and frustrating.

On Friday March 13, 2020, we began to work with our community to prepare for the closure. Staff worked around the clock to prepare students and teachers for what we expected to be a three-week closure.

Since then, we distributed over 6,000 one-one-devices to students and educators, fully loaded with instructional programs and apps to maintain regular, daily contact between students and staff. The Technology team established drive-through services at the Administration Office to service technology, troubleshoot, and provide further distribution.

ECASD staff also arranged to provide drive-through meal service during the school week to any student 18 years or younger. We partnered with faith-based groups and non-profits to help families cope with food insecurity with pop-up pantries and week-end food backpacks. We also connected with our transportation company to establish Meals on Yellow Wheels for drop offs for families unable to get to the drive-through meal stations. To date, over 100,000 meals have been distributed to students.

The Building and Grounds crew took on the arduous task of deep cleaning and disinfecting 1.9 million square feet of school facility to prepare for a reopening. Hourly staff cleared lockers, classrooms, and gym areas of student and staff belongings. They bagged and labeled those belongings and set up drive-through systems at each school to return items. Other dates will be established for students and staff to return school equipment via this same system during the last week of the school year.

Learning that the Safer at Home Order would be extended through the end of the school year with facilities and grounds closed through June 30 resulted in a round of more challenging decision-making. We are working through such questions as what to do:

- to ensure the delivery of the essential learning standards to over 11,500 students in what for many is a new and unpredictable virtual world?
- to make sure that students and staff continue to learn and teach in an emotionally safe and accountable environment?
- to keep students safe in a virtual environment?
- to provide service to families who do not have access to the internet throughout the closure?
- to maintain services for all students, including mandated services to special education, bilingual, gifted and talented, economically disadvantaged, and homeless students?
- to continue support for students suffering from mental health difficulties?
- to provide training for educators so they can respond to the many needs of students?
- to find meaningful ways to celebrate graduation for the Class of 2020?
- to make summer school instruction available during the summer?
- to plan for the uncertainty of what school may look like for a September opening?



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On and on, these questions and so many others fill our days. With each instance, educators and those who support them rally to find solutions.

In ECASD, our decisions during the closure are informed by three values. We love our students. We take care of each other. We are in this together.

In holding to these values, we learned that we must continue to operate around three principles. We must provide equity and access for all students. Not all families have unlimited access to on-line sources and for some there is no access at all. Some are unemployed due to the virus. Many are struggling to meet basic needs. Providing access and equity demands individual resourcing rather than the resources students often share in school buildings – computers, textbooks, and materials like art supplies, hotspots, library books, etc.

We learned that lesson plans must be asynchronistic. Flexibility is key. In the virtual environment, family members typically need to share devices and online time. For many students, it is just not possible to be able to sit in front of a computer for the length of the school day. Therefore, teachers are required to develop lessons that can be accessed through various platforms – internet, mail, and phone. Teachers have experienced a huge learning curve of their own in mastering new ways to teach.

We also learned that what we do to deliver instruction and support to families and students must be sustainable. With only nine weeks behind us, we learned that students and staff have a limited ability to maintain the effort needed to conduct the usual business of schooling. We have for all practical purposes thrown our families into at-home schooling whether they chose to be there or not. There is an emotional component to learning from home that requires ongoing support for students, families, and staff alike. There is a financial component to learning in a virtual setting that requires redeployment and additional resources to keep the learning active and engaging.

You no doubt have your own challenges and questions in confronting COVID 19. I understand that you have multiple constituencies who demand your support. And, I understand that you have your own priorities to satisfy.

Please let me know how I and others in ECASD can work with you. In a time filled with uncertainty and conflict, this is also a time that calls for collaboration and cooperation, regardless of our positions, priorities, or beliefs. As you move forward, I ask you to consider what might be needed to keep the well-being of Wisconsin's students at the forefront of your decision making.

I hope that you are well and that your family and loved ones are safe. I expect you join me in looking to a time when the pandemic ends and we return to our more familiar routines.

Sincerely,

Mary Ann Hardebeck
Superintendent