



"Inspire Learning, Empower Learners"

School District of Arcadia

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Representative Treig Pronschinske
Room 20 North
State Capitol
PO Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708

Dear Representative Pronschinske,

I hope this letter finds you, your family, and your Assembly colleagues well. As we have all been busy navigating this pandemic, the schools across the state of Wisconsin have been working hard to provide for our students and families. I would like to ask for a few minutes of your time to provide you with a written update from the School District of Arcadia as we address the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As soon as we learned of the initial order on March 13th to close schools, we began planning how we were going to work with our students as we moved forward. We knew initially we had to ensure that our kids were emotionally safe. We engaged in an immediate plan for our staff to contact all students via telephone, online conferencing, and/or through email. We knew that this would be a difficult emotional and social adjustment for students. Initially, we also provided some enrichment and review materials. When we learned that schools would be closed indefinitely and then for the remainder of the school year, we knew we needed to continue the emotional support but also began the process of what would be described as new learning focused on our power standards. We quickly got Chromebooks into the hands of our high school students so that teachers could provide learning to our students via Google Classroom. Our teachers in grades PreK-8 began to put together learning packets for their students to be mailed and delivered by our transportation department.

Teachers have worked countless hours to ensure our students remain connected and have the learning materials necessary to make the best of an unbelievably difficult situation. We have teachers putting together science kits, reading to kids online, connecting with students through Zoom and Google Meet to help them with math problems, the list goes on. Further, these staff members are not working anything close to a "normal workday". They are making contacts early in the morning and late into the evening. Just as an example, I was talking with a teacher last week and he had to cut it short because he had fifteen students to call - and those calls were going to start at 4:30 PM. This is the dedication that our teachers are giving to our kids and families, not only in Arcadia but all of the state of Wisconsin.

Not only are we doing what we can emotionally and academically for students, but we knew immediately upon the closure orders being issued that our students would need to be provided with meals. The School District of Arcadia is the fourth poorest school district in Wisconsin with

76% of our students being eligible for free/reduced meals. Knowing that many of our families live below the poverty line and that it was also likely that many of our parents may be laid off or furloughed, we knew that we had no option but to ensure our students had food. We immediately began offering meals to students, in fact, we had meals ready to be picked up by families two days after we were closed. Initially, we had meals being picked up three days per week and we quickly realized that offering bulk meals (breakfast and lunch) was going to be more efficient. For the past five weeks, we have offered bulk meals that cover all seven days per week. We are currently providing over 13,300 meals to 953 kids in our district. Every Wednesday between Noon and 3:30 PM, families do a drive-through pick up at our elementary and high school locations. Our food service personnel and other staff volunteers have done some amazing things to make this happen. Through all of this, we have also developed some wonderful partnerships to provide even more food to families. Not only are students receiving USDA approved meals, but we have partnered with a non-profit group, Curds for Kids, to have cheese curds for families, we have developed a new partnership with Kwik Trip to purchase our milk which supports local farm families, we have purchased additional cheese and butter from Whitehall Specialties, AMPI, and Foremost, and we have been provided donated lettuce and other leafy greens from Superior Fresh. This is what community means - togetherness to help others.

While we are able to do many of these great things for our kids, this has not been without challenge. As noted earlier, we have 76% of our families living in poverty. Many of these families, because of financial struggles, do not have adequate internet or any internet at all. This creates issues with being able to equitably educate these students remotely. Many of our families do have cellular devices that they may be used to connect to the internet, but that is not an ideal connection for student learning. Beyond the poverty issue impacting internet service is the geography of west-central Wisconsin. The hills and valleys of our region cause many issues for some of our families having access to any type of internet or cell service. In fact, we face some of these same challenges for our staff. We have staff members who have no choice but to come into the school building to make their online connections because they do not have reliable internet at their rural homes. When you take into account our geography and our poverty level in the School District of Arcadia, we face some very serious equity issues for our students. Unless we begin to attack the lack of internet service issues like we did when providing electricity to all homes throughout the early and middle part of the 20th Century, we will continue to see rural areas of Wisconsin at a disadvantage. Broadband internet today is as important to families and society as electricity. The relevance of rural Wisconsin depends on reliable broadband internet if we hope to attract and retain young people and families in our rural communities.

In addition to the challenges already noted, nearly 70% of our student population is Latino and over 50% of those students receive some sort of English Language Learner (ELL) services from professionals in our school district. While that is even a challenge in the "brick and mortar" setting, that challenge is increased immensely in a remote/virtual learning environment. On top of the fact that many of our students are in need of ELL services, many of their parents speak little to no English. This becomes a challenge for staff when making their efforts to connect with students and families. We have a limited number of translators available to assist our staff which then delays communication. While it is a great challenge, we have amazing staff members who are doing everything possible to make things great while being faced with a very difficult situation.

Although we are continuing to face the challenges that I have shared, our staff has adapted and adjusted. Our staff has done everything it can to connect with our kids and to make learning

relevant. As we have navigated through this, our staff have collaborated with other a great deal to make sure someone is connecting with students. If a staff member cannot reach a student, they contact with another staff member or the principal to make additional efforts to also reach out. They have also adapted how and when they connect with kids. For example, for some of our kids and families, the only time to connect is in the evening because that is when a parent is at home and the cell phone is at home. If that has been the case, then our staff makes contact in the evening. In addition, our staff has learned how to better use online connections with programs like Zoom and Google Meet. Not only are these connections being used to connect to students, but our staff is using these platforms to engage in their Professional Learning Communities, to collaborate around planning lessons for kids, to engage in professional development, and more.

As we have navigated through all of this we have learned we can adapt, but it has also exposed many of the inequities and vulnerabilities that I have already mentioned. While we can do some of the learning remotely, it is not the same as making those face-to-face connections that many of our students need. The relationships many of these students have to a staff member are invaluable to their success. Remote/virtual learning can work for some, but for many, the “brick and mortar” setting is and will always be necessary and highly relevant.

While I firmly believe we have done a wonderful job from day one, we have had to grow, learn, and adjust. For example, one of the things that we would have done differently from day one would have been to ensure all of our students had a school-issued device for learning at home. Our district had not been a 1:1 device district where students took their devices home. We are 1:1 inside our school walls, but until now, students had not taken devices home with them. As we have worked through this school closure, and as we anticipate learning looking very different in the fall and beyond, we have now started the process of getting devices to all students K-12 and are also researching how we provide hotspots or some type of internet service to as many families as possible.

In closing, I want to share how important it is to continue to support our public schools in Wisconsin. We are charged with educating all students who come to our schoolhouse door, regardless of language, educational needs, family situation, or poverty status. While this time has been a challenge and it has further exposed the inequities that we face in various parts of the state, we are currently doing everything possible to ensure our kids have what they need.

As we move forward, I welcome your calls or emails so that I can explain our work and answer any questions you may have. I will also provide you with additional updates. Certainly, much work remains as we bring the current school year to a close, make every effort to have some type of summer school (likely virtual), and prepare for what looks to be a start to the school year this fall that may look very different from anything any of us have ever known.

Sincerely,



Lance Bagstad
District Administrator