Dear Senator Tiffany; Representatives Swearingen; Representative Mursau; Representative Felzkowski:

I hope this letter finds you all well and safe during these times. Thank you for your leadership at the state level in support of the citizens of Wisconsin. I appreciate this opportunity to share how the School District of Florence County is succeeding in servicing our students considering all the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet we know there are more challenges to come.

Immediately upon our district's closure, a team of individuals came together to put together a makeshift food service delivery program. This model consisted of bagged lunches being available for pickup at one of four locations throughout Florence County. Simultaneously, conversations progressed towards implementation of a daily delivery to each home desiring to participate. Utilizing our in-house bus drivers, elementary support staff and district food service staff, along with our office staff coordinating daily logistics, we are now providing for and ensuring the delivery of more than 500 meals daily for our students. Also, to supplement the school food service program, a food pantry was established by school leadership and teachers. Twice per week, additional meals and snacks are delivered with the school meals via purchases from our local grocery store. Word has spread of this initiative, and now community members from within and beyond Florence County are contributing in support of this service to numerous families in need.

As food service delivery progressed, school administration, teachers and classroom paraprofessionals simultaneously began their work in identifying essential standards for instruction and a platform for delivery. During the first week of closure, staff identified online resources for our students, which are posted on our website, while their vision for utilizing the district's 1:1 technology platform for essential instruction progressed. Beyond just having 1:1 technology available, it was paramount to assure that all households had Internet connectivity. School leadership was optimistic that this could be achieved, and we set forth on a mission to make this a reality. So began the process of putting together several hundred devices for curbside pickup. Our elementary devices were not intended to go home, therefore more than 200 cases had to be ordered to protect each device.

Upon an initial survey of our students' families, it was determined that a vast majority of our households had broadband access, yet 28 households were not connected, and a few others had only limited bandwidth (we had well over 200 households with access, likely attributable to Florence County Post Office Box 440, Florence, Wisconsin 54121

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receiving a PSC Broadband Grant in 2017). Our most dire of challenges was of affordability, as numerous households had the opportunity to connect, yet they simply did not have the financial means to afford the service. Our IT Director tirelessly persisted over the course of the next few weeks to connect each household, and she never settled for “no” as an answer. Whether it was finding a way to provide Internet to their homes for free or reduced monthly costs, or acquiring needed hardware, we accomplished our goal of 100% broadband access for all (we are virtual for all of our students in grades 1-12, having decided to utilize hardcopy packets/resources for our 4K and kindergarten students). The school district ultimately did take it upon itself to incur a few thousand dollars in hardware and connectivity costs to assure Internet access for some households.

Our teachers have developed lessons that provide for rigor and structure of essential standards at both our elementary school and high school, with classes meeting for a part of each school day. Yet, we recognize that parents can’t commit full-time hours daily to their child’s education, so a balance had to be found - there is no doubt, inequalities and shortfalls exist all around. Yet, our teachers and support staff have gone above and beyond the daily scheduled instructional hours, and set office hours each and every day, with the expectation of being available to support students during what would be the regularly scheduled school day as needed. I don’t know of an educator yet that hasn’t gone beyond expectations, and answered calls or emails in the evening or weekend if needed - I know they have for my own three high school students. I’m so very proud of what they’ve accomplished and provided for our children in a short window during such challenging times.

Each day brings new challenges, and there is progress, yet I am concerned that inequalities will compound in time. Whether it’s due to ever-changing dynamics at the homefront, or as time persists, there are those students who need personal, individualized interventions and/or in-person support via our special education programs. Unfortunately, without personalized services, these students may begin regressing relative to their peers. Delayed compensatory services, due to challenges that the families cannot overcome on the homefront, compounded by restrictions of providing for any level of instruction at our schools, are going to exacerbate inequities until new, tried and true methods are developed. Yet our commitment to continuous improvement will persist.

Another forthcoming change upon return will be any needed screenings and support for our students and staff’s health and well-being. Like many of our rural schools, we do not have a school nurse. We rely solely on required emergency school nursing services; at this time we receive these services via a registered nurse who works full-time for a private provider. As I hear of some of the proposed ideas for daily or routine screenings upon our return, we surely will be challenged not only in capacity (time) to do what must be done, but in that our current staffing does not have the expertise and tools to administer what may be required. More importantly, none of our staff has the expertise to make critical decisions that a qualified school nurse has via the expertise of their training and credentials.

Regarding a probable return, we have explored what a mock classroom will look like at both our elementary and high school facilities. With our student grade levels ranging from the mid-20’s to mid-30’s in student enrollment, and even as a “two-track” (two teachers per grade level) instructional
program for the most part, our maximum capacity within the physical constraints of our standard classrooms, while respecting social distancing guidelines, will be 8-10 students. This doesn’t speak to the challenges we are likely to have in areas of instruction that require work at stations, such as in the science and technology education areas, among others.

Of my greatest concern is the mental health and well-being of our children. Let’s recognize that even as adults we have our own concerns of the safety of our families and self, and of all those around us. If we have the slightest of doubts, apprehensions and fears as adults, I can only imagine the impact these uncertain times are having upon our youth, and how this pandemic is going to impact them in the days and years to come. When we do return to our new normal, the support for our students not only in educational interventions, but of social and emotional interventions, will be paramount and in the highest of need and demand. Just like we know children need to be well nourished to focus and succeed in their academics, they need to also be of a sound mind. This will be paramount among all else when we return. Our district consists of two buildings, yet we have only one guidance counselor (who also serves as our District Assessment Coordinator). I question our capacity to adequately support the needs of those children who will have social and emotional challenges upon return. Additionally, our school psychologist services our district, in addition to three other regional schools. Her availability in support of students will surely be strained due to the changing dynamics of the student populations of four, distinct school districts. As a recipient of an awarded DPI mental health grant, I would ask for consideration that all or some of these dollars can be repurposed to provide for additional capacity in support of student services (e.g. school guidance, psychologist, mental health provider).

I’m so proud of what our staff has accomplished and continues to provide to our students from afar. From our classroom teachers and food service staff, to our support staff and bus drivers, we are providing continuance with the most normalcy we can during these times. Please feel free to reach out or let me know how I can further assist in providing understanding for our challenges, and why the continued support of our students is paramount among so very many other essential services. I believe our work has only just begun due to a pandemic that will surely be with us for some time, and even when we do emerge on the other end, there will certainly be enduring challenges. Although we are not together physically I can assure you and all others that our staff, and that of all schools throughout Wisconsin, will only continue to persevere in Positively Affecting the Lives of Children.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Ben Niehaus, District Administrator
School District of Florence County