

Gibraltar Area School District

3924 Hwy. 42, Fish Creek, WI 54212-9755

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5/22/20

Dear Senator Andre Jaques and Representative Joel Kitchens,

I hope this letter finds you, your family and your colleagues well. I would like to provide you with an update from Gibraltar Area School District as we address the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic put every district in the United States of America in a precarious position. Our responsibilities to teach, care for, and academically advance students while learning at home for approximately 12 weeks of the 2019-2020 school year posed a significant challenge. Not only have we accomplished a continuation of learning for all students, but we did so in an expedient and efficient way.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have closed our school campus, but it has not deterred us from continuing our commitment to providing Gibraltar students and families with both the educational and non-educational support they need to thrive during these challenging times. While our educators are working tirelessly to engage students in continual learning, the District is also working behind the scenes to support the efforts of our teachers and ensure that the basic needs of students and families are being met:

- We have continued providing approximately 150 meals per day to students in locations throughout the district.
- Gibraltar Area School District will have delivered over 5,000 meals by the end of the school year.
- The District purchased and distributed 30 hotspots for families without internet access.
- Administrators have made personal phone calls to connect with students considered at-risk.
- Administrators have personally delivered devices and supplies to students and teachers.

Gibraltar Area Schools was prepared for remote learning prior to COVID-19 thanks to our efforts to provide instruction during school closures for inclement weather. As such, all students had an opportunity to practice remote learning prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. All Gibraltar students were provided with a 1:1 device, including iPads for all K-2 students, and Chromebooks and laptops for students in grades 3-12.

Though we feel our efforts have been largely successful, we have encountered significant challenges under remote learning. Remote learning used to maintain continuity of instruction during a short closure is very different from remote learning under the COVID-19 closure. Challenges include, but are not limited to:

- Student and staff mental health
- Ability to provide a full school year's instruction under the constraints of remote learning
- Resilience in student and staff learning
- IEP accommodations and implementation in remote learning

Further, new inequities have emerged under the COVID crisis that are blind to normal causal factors (ex. Socio-economic status). These include:

- Working and non-working families have different abilities to support their students' remote learning.
- Simple geographic challenges for internet access exist regardless of socio-economic status.
- Access to services for all students (mental health, school counselors, RtI) is a challenge for a rural district with a large geographic area.

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Despite the aforementioned challenges, our educators have continued to provide a high level of instruction to our students. This includes a continuation of instruction in all content areas, individualized academic interventions, and accommodations for students with individualized education plans (IEPs). Gibraltar Area School District has worked personally with each family in the district to help secure a safe and equitable environment for all children.

We are also working and communicating regularly with the Door County Health and Human Services Department to continue services with mental health counselors, school counselors, and other county services to help all children maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Plunging into remote learning has been no small task. We were fortunate to have 1:1 technology available for K-12 students, and to have already planned and carried out remote learning for a snow day prior to the state-wide shutdown. Despite the advantages of this unanticipated prescience, our teachers, students, and families have endured a myriad of difficulties under the COVID-19 shutdown.

Quality instructional design relies on researching best practice, taking time to plan and implement new strategies, and personal connections with students. Our staff has made extraordinary efforts to reach every student during the shutdown, but we still face challenges. We have learned that we must focus on the essential standards in each curriculum, and that mastery of concepts is central to success under remote learning. Many schools have spent years dedicated to this effort--a significant paradigm shift in traditional K-12 public education. Our teachers and students were forced to adapt to this new environment with no prior planning and in a matter of *days*. They have risen to the occasion, but not without significant effort. We are proud of our staff.

The benefit of hindsight points out the importance of our District's efforts to ensure that *all* students become proficient in their studies, but we are merely beginning the process of lasting, effective change. Looking forward, our school personnel remain 100% devoted to creating the best possible learning environment.

Gibraltar Area Schools is a committed servant of our District's students and families. We will continue to do our very best to ensure that *all* students receive the best possible education under any circumstance. We would welcome the opportunity to share our successes and challenges with our legislators, and hope that we are able to do so. Please reach out to us with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Tina Van Meer
Superintendent
Gibraltar Area Schools