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Rep. Jill Billings
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Dear Senator Shilling, Representatives Doyle, Oldenburg and Billings,

I hope this letter finds you, your family, and your colleagues well. I would like to provide you with an update from the School District of La Crosse as we address the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 public health emergency. I will say, unequivocally, I could not be more proud to serve this community as Superintendent of Schools. The spirit, resolve, dedication, and collaboration – particularly displayed during this pandemic – are profoundly inspirational.

With nearly half (48%) of our district student population identified as economically disadvantaged, another 14.1% students with disabilities, and 6.3% English language learners, the transition to school closure and remote learning in the face of the COVID-19 public health emergency arrived with both a jolting reality and uncompromising intensity for our community's families. In times of turbulence, the public school system does provide a blanket of calm.

Our community's most vulnerable, marginalized, stigmatized, and under-resourced students prior to March 18th, 2020, were going to remain in compromised, unyielding, and unpredictable environments without the benefit of the consistency and stability provided by the schoolhouse and the resources (both human and material) within. To that end, we endeavored to work on a rapid response, two-phased approach that included an initial phase called, *Digital Connections and Continuity*.

Via *Digital Connections and Continuity*, we rallied personnel from all sectors of the organization to ensure basic needs were being addressed. For example, via a coordinated effort with our bus company (GoRiteway), we were able to establish thirty (30) delivery locations throughout our city where free meals (lunch & breakfast) were delivered to anyone 18 years of age and younger. The meals are now delivered seven (7) days a week. As of May 12th, we have delivered a much-needed 103,716 meals to our community's youth (March: 16,961; April: 55,025; May: 31,730). As of late, we are seeing approximately 25,000 meals distributed Monday – Thursday, and another 8,000 Friday – Sunday.

The staff delivering meals are frequently showered with effusive thanks and praise by the youth and families accepting meals. The experience is simultaneously heartwarming and heartbreaking depending on the stories families/children chose to share. The well-balanced, nutritious meal (consistent, dependable, delivered sustenance) has been one less thing for many families to worry about in a time of built-in anxiety. On many occasions, the thanks our staff receives from parent(s)/guardian(s) is filled with appreciative tears as the collective stressors surface and our school district's actions are recognized and viewed as a beacon in what some feel is a general fog or malaise.

School clothes closets were moved to accessible areas near front entrances of school buildings; staff members in PPE provide necessary clothing and hygiene items for the many, many families in need as more and more families are finding themselves devoid of the most basic resources.

Further, we worked diligently with our translation services (e.g. Hmong and Spanish) to establish effective lines of communication via highly skilled interpreters to ensure incoming and outgoing messaging was positively reaching intended audiences, and in turn, any follow-up questions/needs were addressed as quickly as possible. All students and families are being impacted by COVID-19, the resulting barriers are, however, disproportionate. We have been working diligently to mitigate inherent barriers.

Additionally, we have worked to ensure students are connected to WiFi (and we believe at this point all are), so important social/emotional connections can be maintained with educators, school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists. Not only did we purchase and provide mobile WiFi hotspots (in some cases), we also made our meal delivery buses mobile hotspots as well. Further, even though our schools were closed, we expanded the WiFi at our building sites, so families could access WiFi by simply parking near one of our many building sites.

Also, during this time period, we developed and published our *Guidance on Supporting and Responding to Student Safety Concerns During COVID-19* document. We simply noted that our collective care and genuine concern for our students and families remains steadfast during the closure. To that end, *Guidance on Supporting and Responding to Student Safety Concerns During COVID-19* document was developed to provide step-by-step support in four major areas:

- 1) Concerns regarding a student's safety and/or possible maltreatment.
- 2) General concerns about a student or a family's well-being.
- 3) Concerns regarding a student's mental health.
- 4) Concerns regarding suicidal ideation.

In phased two, *Continued Learning*, we moved from enrichment, extensions, and re-teach loops in scope and sequence models, to new learning and new assignments with formative feedback on those assignments. Educators worked tirelessly to identify priority learning standards per unit of instruction per course, and then harvested and shared applicable digital learning resources.

We have endured financial costs, no doubt. We have experienced a few heart wounds along the journey as well. The learning curve – for everyone – has been steep to be certain. Yet, the care and concern for our community’s youth has driven the personnel within the School District of La Crosse to dig deep, modify, adjust, innovate, create, evolve, and aspire to find goodness and hope for a brighter tomorrow.

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 would also like to expand on some of the “baked-in challenges” our families face, and some of the different approaches that may help mitigate those formidable barriers. Certainly, much work remains as we finish up the school year, begin the summer session, and prepare for the start of the school year this fall.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Randy Nelson", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Randy Nelson
Superintendent of Schools