



School District of La Farge

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Senator Jennifer Shilling
Room 10 West
State Capitol
PO Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708

Representative Loren Oldenburg
Room 206 South
State Capitol
PO Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707

Dear Senator Shilling and Representative Oldenburg,

I hope this letter finds you, your families, and your colleagues well. I would like to provide you with an update from the School District of La Farge as we navigate the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today marks the start of the ninth week without staff and students in our buildings. Our 231 4K - 12 students left school on Friday, March 13, not knowing that it was the last time they'd be with their classmates and teachers. Our leadership team met that afternoon, just an hour before Governor Evers announced the statewide school closures, and we reconvened over the weekend to put a plan into place.

We closed the building to students as of Monday, March 16, while staff reported to school. Over the course of two days, we were able to pivot to online and home-based instruction, resulting in very little interruption in instruction for our students. Our new normal started on Wednesday, March 18, after a coordinated and comprehensive effort by the amazing and dedicated staff of this small, rural school district. Every student in grades 3-12 was sent home with a District-owned Chromebook, and with the help of Vernon Communications Cooperative, we were able to ensure that all of our students' homes had internet access. At-home learning kits for students in grades 4K-2 were assembled and distributed, and teachers built instructional websites as a platform to share resources, including daily videos to teach new content.

As a "singleton" school, each teacher represents his or her own grade level team or department, and therefore each were tasked with implementing an entirely new instructional model for their individual curriculum on their own. It has been a challenge to adapt classes to a completely online model, but staff have been creative, resourceful, and collaborative in making this process as easy and engaging for students as possible. While our hallways and classrooms are empty, school is still very much in session and will continue through the regularly-scheduled end of the school year in early June.

In addition to continuing academic activities, our school district has also been providing food service for our students and families. Since March 18, we have delivered breakfast and lunch to any child 18 and under who requested them in our small community. To date, our kitchen staff have prepared over 10,000 meals for distribution. We have partnered with our local food pantry to deliver extra food supplies for adults and families on weekends, and recently our FFA chapter began supplying families with gallons of milk each Friday.

Our school district is one of our community's largest employers. Early on, our School Board proactively determined that all staff members would retain their current contractual pay. Our non-certified staff have spent significant time deep cleaning and preparing facilities for future work, supporting students through online and home-based instruction, delivering meals, and engaging in timely professional development. We value the important work each member of our staff has contributed to continuity of instruction, nutrition, and other support services to students and families during the closure.

Though we are very proud of the ways we have been able to respond to these unforeseen circumstances, we remain concerned about our students. Our district serves a small rural community with over 56% of families identified as economically disadvantaged. The school is a hub which connects students and families to resources, including mental health services, family literacy, and even dental care. Vernon County was previously classified as a "childcare desert," and much of our community relies on public schools and their early childhood programs for essential daytime supervision. We know our students are missing the academic, health and nutrition, and social-emotional benefits of being in school.

One of the hardest implications of the school closure was the lack of, well, *closure*, particularly for our Class of 2020. We are a tiny school, and they are a tiny class - only 16 graduates this year. Most of them have been at La Farge since preschool, and are beloved by an extended community of teachers and staff, family and friends, and village residents who are all mourning the indefinite postponement of a timely and traditional celebration of their accomplishments. All of our students had to adapt to a spring absent of sports, dances, and social connection. Now they are tasked with navigating an uncertain summer, and first year as young adults.

We have learned so much during this closure. Our staff have become adept at using tools and strategies to deliver curriculum not previously necessary in our face-to-face classes. Though we have always been focused on relationships with our students, we have doubled our efforts at connection and worked intensely to individualize our communications and instruction to students and families. Each of our teachers reach out to students and families several times each week to communicate about non-academic concerns, and continue to maintain relationships. Many of our teachers have visited students' homes to drop off May Day Baskets or enrichment activities, or hold "driveway meetings" with individual students. Though we initially thought the school closures would only last a few weeks, we are now increasingly planning for a range of scenarios for schooling in the summer and fall.

Similarly, while we have always been rooted in strong community partnerships, we have learned the true value of wrap-around care for our students and families. Our community has rallied to support students and families, with donations to pay off negative food service accounts, purchasing yard signs recognizing our seniors, and the gift of school supplies such as markers, notebooks, and pencils to send home to support students' learning. What we have learned about online and blended learning, bridging relationships with students and families, and the value of coordinated community partnerships will lead our planning efforts in the future.

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 finish the school year, begin the summer school session, and prepare for the start of the new school year this fall.

Sincerely,

Meaghan Gustafson, Superintendent
School District of La Farge