

May 12, 2020

Senator Patrick Testin
Room 131 South
State Capitol
PO Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707

Dear Senator Testin:

I am writing you to follow up with you on a conversation that I had with one of your aides last week and to let you know how we are handling the COVID-19 school closure at the Port Edwards School District. First, let me begin by stating that we are very fortunate at this time to not have had any students or staff who have contracted this illness. However, the lives of all of our students and staff have been affected in ways that are too numerous to completely list in this letter.

We made the decision on March 13 to close schools starting on March 16 in order to give our staff time to prepare to move their educational duties to an on-line and/or off-site format. The teaching staff and paraprofessional aides worked to create lessons and communicate information to families. Additionally, we made accommodations for students and parents to retrieve necessary materials from the school buildings.

Moving to an on-line/virtual format was not too complicated at the high school level as we have had a long established 1:1 technology initiative. All of our high school students are issued Chromebooks each year. At the middle and elementary school levels we do not have a 1:1 program in place, so we worked with families to check-out devices as needed. Initially, our teaching staff sent packets of work to students, but as we have been able to make more contact, we have converted to only sending packets to students who still do not have consistent access to the internet.

There are some major pitfalls to the virtual and on-line formats that have become very evident. First, it is quite difficult to teach many of the necessary skills associated with classes such as welding. However, teachers have been as creative as possible, our Family and Consumer Education teacher has done lessons where students prepare meals or foods at home. However, it is difficult at best to generate great excitement for a science experiment done by a teacher remotely rather than by the students in the classroom. Quite frankly, we are not able to replicate the experience or generate the excitement online or virtually that we are able to in the actual classroom. School is a social experience and in part meant to socialize our students, this is a challenge in any format other than in person.

To the credit of our staff, they have been rock stars in being flexible with their teaching and making sure that we have as many connections to our students as possible. In this, we have identified students who have struggled with mental health issues, our school counselor is certainly as busy as she was prior to the school closure. Our typical week sees staff connecting each Monday, assigning work and answering questions. Staff are then available each day to work with students on-line, to hold classroom virtual meetings and to provide students with feedback. I know of some instances where staff have met with students online for 2 or 3 hours consecutively on a daily basis to tutor and give additional instruction. Further, our paraprofessional aides work to reach out to students each day. However, it should be plainly evident that virtual/on-line is no replacement for in-person. There is no way that this current semester is equal in content to similar past semesters. This situation becomes especially difficult when older students have been suddenly thrust into the role of caretaker on a daily basis for their younger

siblings due to parents working, how does that student concentrate on school and providing child care. This is the case with several of our high school and middle school students. Each student is faced with unique circumstances and our staff is continually working to be flexible and understanding in this current situation.

The District food service staff has risen above the many challenges that exist when converting a cafeteria style food delivery system to a totally “to-go” system. This change has been taxing on their patience with vendors and their ability to predict the daily number of participants. The food service in Port Edwards has provided weekly 2200 to 2400 meals. The food service is open for the drive-up to-go service 3 days a week. For this particular group of staff members, this has been an intensive “all hands on deck” experience. I have personally made contact with this group on almost a daily basis during the entire school closure. Each week it seems as if this group has overcome a new challenge. At the beginning of the school closure, our food vendor pushed back delivery day without announcing this, so our staff was waiting for a truck on Wednesday that didn’t come until Thursday, talk about a mad scramble to keep things running when the food doesn’t show up. This group had to get really creative when a couple weeks later about a dozen items that were ordered didn’t show up or were damaged. I am thankful that we have such dedicated staff in our food service, they continue to persevere.

The school maintenance staff also moved quickly to accomplish quite a few tasks in the first few weeks of the school closure. Within about two weeks of the closure, our summer cleaning routine was nearly completed. Additionally, this group has worked to address items that often get put off until another time or never get accomplished because they run out of time in a normal summer. At this point, this group has moved forward with several summer projects with the hope of being able to tackle a fairly extensive list of repairs and minor upgrades. Additionally, this group is prepping as much as possible at this point for cleaning when students and staff eventually return.

I also want to take a moment to comment on the work of our two school principals. These individuals have personally called numerous students and parents during the school closure. In fact, our elementary principal personally tried to contact any parent in grades K through 6 who had not responded to school emails or calls. Our 7-12 principal has worked to personally contact nearly 40 sets of parents regarding the school work that their children were supposed to have completed, but who hadn’t attempted the work. Often, these principals are dealing with stressed parents and stressed staff members and working to assure both groups that we will do all that we can to help the students.

Moving forward, there are some other items of interest that I want to share about graduation, summer school and grading. In terms of graduation, we have decided to move that back to August 8th in order to allow time for the reopening of the economy and services. To be sure, we have celebrated our Senior Class on Social Media and we have worked with individuals to put signs in the yards of our Senior Class. With summer school, we are looking to reschedule that for early August in an effort to possibly meet with students at school, at this point those plans are tentative, but moving forward. With grading, at the middle and high school levels we have converted to a pass/fail/incomplete system. The rationale behind this change is to limit the impact of this crisis on student’s GPA’s and overall progress. We know that there is no way to virtually offer everything we typically do in-person. We do not want grades to be either inflated or deflated by the crisis and felt that the intellectually honest response was to change grading temporarily this semester only. If this situation continues into next school year, we would look to possibly move to a more standards-based grading system.

In closing, I want to share two stories of how this crisis has affected our community and schools. One story will have a positive ending and the other has yet to play out. Shortly after the school closure and

Safer At Home orders were put into place, I learned of a family that unfortunately was losing a family business and going bankrupt. Unfortunately, this health crisis happened at the same time, so this will make things especially difficult for this family to recover. As this family struggles with their own personal crisis, they are confronted with a pandemic and as one of these family members works in our school with our students, how does that staff member possibly maintain the positive influence with students that we expect? This family has much to overcome and we will do our best to help them through this time of struggle, but this crisis is far from over for them.

The second story I want to share is about our Senior Class of 2020. This class has had a terrible ending to their school career, they are truly missing out on the many positives that come at the end of the Senior year. However, rather than feel sorry for themselves, the Senior Class Officers with the consent of their classmates have started a campaign to raise money for three local charitable organizations that are helping the community during this crisis. Our Senior Class has titled this effort #2020RiseAbove and invites other school groups and Senior classes in the area to do their own campaign to help the community. This group has truly learned the lessons of being active citizens! Check out their efforts: <https://www.wisconsinrapidstribune.com/story/news/2020/05/08/coronavirus-port-edwards-seniors-raise-funds-local-organizations/3090561001/>

Thank you for your time and please let me know if you have any questions. We have much to do going forward and I will keep you updated.

Sincerely,

Kyle Cronan, District Administrator

Port Edwards School District