



May 20, 2020

Dear Senator Devin LeMahieu and Representatives Terry Katsma and Tyler Vorpagel:

I am writing to let you know about the School District of Sheboygan Falls and our efforts around virtual learning and a continuity of operations during the COVID-19 school closure.

As you may know, our district is a model site for the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). We have been working on this initiative for six years and have been supported by a Scaling Up grant from DPI. In designing learning, our teachers have become skilled at removing barriers to learning and preparing lessons that all students can access. This has very much supported our efforts and made for a successful launch of Virtual Learning.

In addition, a team of administrators and teachers worked together last fall to prepare for Virtual Learning Days in the event of snow storms or other school closures. We even practiced a Virtual Learning experience in November and we were able to work out the bugs. Little did we know that our preparation and practice would lead to a successful launch of Virtual Learning for the extended school closure due to the pandemic.

We are very fortunate that we were able to send home Chromebooks with our students in grades 1-12 and iPads with our Kindergartners. We are also fortunate that we have been using Canvas, an online learning management system, for three years which allowed us to make the transition easily to virtual learning. Canvas may sound familiar to you, as it is the system used by the state's universities. In making a decision to use this system, we were forward thinking about preparing our students for beyond high school, as one of our commitments in Sheboygan Falls is to innovation.

Our youngest learners in Early Childhood and 4K are accessing their learning online via SeeSaw and we have also been providing materials to them during the closure. Parents of these students have appreciated the connections that their teachers have made.

One of the barriers to learning that we ran into early during the enclosure was student engagement. We have been tracking daily attendance through the use of our single sign-on platform called Classlink. This allowed us to see that we had over 80 percent attendance, but we strived for a higher percent. Teachers and principals began during week two of the closure to make every attempt to contact parents and students via email, video chats, and phone calls.

In many cases, we were able to determine that students were "absent" from learning due to Internet connectivity issues. Some of these we were able to resolve by providing mobile hotspots for our students. In other cases, we worked with families to find a work around, as being a rural district simply provided challenges regardless of our efforts. We installed free wi-fi in our elementary parking lot and also provided parents with a list of free wi-fi parking lots in our county.

In other cases, students did have Internet connectivity, but simply were not engaging. Some students were spending their days providing child care for younger siblings, other students were experiencing depression/anxiety or developed other mental health issues. Some students had simply given up. Our principals, teachers, and school counselors have made regular check-ins with these students and gone above and beyond in getting them to engage.

Our students identified with IEPs were given additional supports by deploying our instructional assistants with Chromebooks. They have been supporting our students online through individual and

small-group meetings and collaboration with grade-level and content-area teachers. Additionally, they have been participating in online professional development opportunities focusing on topics most relevant to the needs of the students whom they support.

Behind the scenes of Virtual Learning is an interesting story and I'm not sure I can begin to explain how much work is going on. Our principals hold staff meetings throughout the week via Google Meets. This helps them to stay connected with staff, update on topics from DPI, and troubleshoot any issues they may be having with technology or engaging students. Our teachers hold weekly virtual grade level or department meetings for instructional planning around essential standards and collaborating on best practices for virtual instruction. Our administrators hold weekly huddles on Google Meets to develop parent and staff communications, plan for grading, continue efforts in hiring new staff for next year, plan for events, plan for virtual summer school, and additionally we have begun to plan what the first 100 days of school might look like in the fall. Our district office administrators are on weekly webinars and virtual state-wide meetings to stay abreast of updates.

Given all the efforts described above, we continue to be concerned about the learning gaps that may be being created as a result of not having our students in front of us in our classrooms. We will continue our Universal Design for Learning efforts in the fall and find the best way to remove barriers and meet students where they are at. We have found creative ways to recognize student progress, celebrate our Seniors, and stay connected with our students. We will continue this in the fall, as one of our commitments is to support the whole student.

Since the closing of school, we have continued to provide meals to our students. We use our Food Service staff to prepare the meals. Our other staff that are not directly working with students are scheduled to distribute meals safely through a drive up system in one of our school's parking lots. When we began we were only serving around 200 to 250 children. We are now serving 450 children. Families who drive through each day report that they are very appreciative, as many have lost jobs and simply do not know how they would otherwise provide for their children.

Our district was able to quickly move to a Virtual Learning model because we were already allocating financial and personnel resources to technology and professional development in our efforts to support our learners in any environment. Our district has incurred additional costs to provide internet access to families that had no options, and for the purchase of materials and subscriptions to online educational resources. In several cases, we were able to make purchases at substantial discounts as a result of our existing utilization of services with vendors. As we look forward to what school might look like in the fall, the uncertainty of the needs of our students' mixes with the uncertainty of state economic conditions.

Thank you for taking the time to learn more about the School District of Sheboygan Falls and our response to the challenges we have faced during this unprecedented time. I will be retiring at the end of June and I simply cannot express how grateful I am to my staff and families who have persevered through this difficult time. I appreciate your service to the children, families and community and look forward to continued collaboration to ensure success for every child in Wisconsin.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jean Born".

Jean Born  
Superintendent