May 18, 2020

Patty Schachtner, State Senator
Room 20 North State Capitol
PO Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708

Dear Senator Schachtner,

I hope this letter finds you, your family and constituents well. As we have all been busy navigating this pandemic, the schools across the state of Wisconsin have been working hard to provide for our students and families. I would like to provide you with a written update from the Siren School District as we address the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. As soon as we learned of the initial order on March 13th to close schools, we began planning how we were going to work with our students as we moved forward. From the beginning, it was our intent to make certain our students were to remain safe, healthy and stable within this traumatic climate.

Our Administrative Team immediately planned for our staff to contact each and every student via telephone or email. As we learned, this was a difficult time for students and families both emotionally, socially and academically. Within days of the announcement, from the Governor’s office about the indefinite closure of our school, we started distributing chromebooks and academic resources to our students, in addition to setting up technology hotspots throughout our district. Our high school students each have their own learning device but the middle school and some elementary students were issued a device, temporarily. Our teachers in grades PreK-8 began putting together learning packets for their students to be delivered weekly with our meal delivery service.

Teachers have worked countless hours to ensure our students remain connected and have the learning materials necessary to make the best of this unthinkable situation. We have teachers putting together science kits, reading to kids online, connecting with students through Google Classroom and Google Meet to help them with instructional activities. Moreover, these instructors are having to modify their working hours to accommodate family infrastructure and technology. In essence, they have had to become extremely creative and resilient throughout this process. They are making contacts early in the morning and late into the evening. This is the commitment that our teachers are giving toward students and families, not only in Siren but all throughout the state of Wisconsin. Not only are we doing what we can emotionally and academically for students, but we also realized that upon the closure orders being issued that our children and families would need to be provided with meals.
The Siren School District has approximately 60 percent of our students being eligible for free/reduced meals. In other words, we have high poverty in our area. Facing the reality that many of our families live on a limited means and that it is also likely that many of our parents may be laid off or out of work, we feel that we have a responsibility to ensure our students have meals to eat. We have been delivering meals to families, through the use of school vans driven by our bus drivers. Every day of the week between 9:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m, we deliver food to each family within our school who has requested meals. In addition, we deliver and pick up homework packets each Monday on the food routes. We offer breakfast and lunch with each delivery. We are currently serving just over 104 families and just over 576 meals per day (that includes breakfast and lunch). Our food service personnel and support staff have done some amazing things to make this happen. Through all of this, we have also developed some wonderful partnerships to provide even more food to families. Not only are students receiving USDA approved meals, but we have received food donations from local area businesses such as, Block and Cleaver and Burnett Dairy Cooperative. They each offered cheese and/or beef sticks to all families.

Our district has really navigated through this difficult time with prudence and integrity, but it has been challenging as well. As noted earlier, we have many of our families living in poverty. Some of our families, as a result of financial struggles, do not have adequate internet or any internet at all. This creates issues with being able to equitably educate these students remotely. Most of our families have cell phones that they may be used to connect to the internet, but that is not the most efficient method for student learning. Moreover, internet services in our area is a constant struggle for students and households alike.

As you may know, this has been an amazing challenge for the district and its members. With that said, we have amazing staff members who are doing everything possible to make things great while being faced with a very difficult situation. Although we are continuing to face this challenge, our staff has adapted and adjusted. Our teachers have done as much as possible to connect with our students and families and to make learning relevant. As we have navigated through this, our staff has collaborated together to make sure someone is connecting with students. If a staff member cannot reach a student, they contact another staff member or the principal to make additional efforts of communication. They have also adapted how and when they connect with students.

As we have navigated through this unexpected scenario we have learned we can adapt, but it has also exposed the forlorness as well. While we can do some of the learning remotely, it is not the same as making those face-to-face connections that many of our students need. The relationships many of these students have to a staff member are invaluable to their success. Remote/virtual learning can work for some, but for many, the “brick and mortar” setting is, and will always be, necessary and highly relevant. While I firmly believe we have done a wonderful job from day one, we have had to grow, learn, and adjust.
As we have worked through this school closure, and as we anticipate learning looking very different in the fall and beyond, we have now started the process of planning for the next chapter in this pandemic riddled environment in our area. Consequently, I want to share how important it is to continue to support our public schools in Wisconsin.

We are charged with educating all students who come to our doorstep, regardless of language, educational needs, family situation, or poverty status. While this time has been a challenge, it has further exposed the inequities that we face in various parts of the state, still we are currently doing everything possible to ensure our children and families have what they need for academic success. Moving ahead, I welcome communication with you, so that I can explain our story and answer any questions you may have. I will also provide you with additional updates. Certainly, much work remains as we bring the current school year to a close and make every effort to have some type of summer school, whatever that may look like and prepare for the fall semester. Thank you for the consideration and support for the Siren School District.

Respectfully,

Kevin Shetler, Ed. D.
Superintendent