



BRRF
SCHOOL DISTRICT OF BLACK RIVER FALLS
Inspiring Excellence

May 14, 2020

I hope this letter finds you and your family well! Thank you for your leadership at the state level and your advocacy on behalf of the people of Wisconsin, specifically in our area. I wanted to take this opportunity to share with you some of the exceptional work that the School District of Black River Falls has done during these unprecedented times. Our hope is that this message will help to inspire and inform decisions in Madison which will provide our schools with legislation that contains practical procedures and adequate financial support for the important work ahead of us. I'd also like to share a bit about what some of our greatest unknowns are moving forward and how deeply this impacts the work that we do.

As things rapidly began to unfold in early March, our District provided face to face academic services right up to March 18th, and then was able to quickly adjust and continue to provide services through a blended model of content delivery throughout our system. Our high school has been a 1:1 technology device building for several years, thus, they had zero downtime and continued with the high quality instruction that had been happening during "normal" times. The rest of the system took two days to prioritize essential learning and create meaningful at home experiences for our students prior to us having them ready for either family drive through pick or bus delivery of that. We were able to provide devices beginning at the second grade level. We have continued to provide new academic content every two weeks since that time; each time parents have actively come to turn in completed work and take home the next installment of their child's educational materials. Our staff are reaching out twice per week for all of our families, and some of our support services are also helping to circle around more frequently with those families that are really struggling to keep it together. I am so incredibly proud of the monumental efforts of our staff in their agility in flipping their classrooms and relationships to a digital format at the drop of a hat! People sometimes criticize schools by saying that we get stuck in a rut and are slow to change; that couldn't be further from the truth in these recent weeks. Perhaps what gives me the greatest sense of pride is in how deeply our staff cares for the emotional well-being of their students during this time. Social media in our area is flooded with families expressing their appreciation for staff members that have gone significantly above and beyond any reasonable expectations to check on their student or their family in general. We know that during stressful times, relationships matter more than anything.

Another area that continues to impress me, as a member of the Black River Falls School District and community, is the incredible food service delivery that we are currently operating. Our District's typical population fluctuates between 1725 and 1800 students; we are currently making meals for 1,400 children under the age of 18. We have transitioned to a one day per week meal delivery system in which every child receives a large bag with five breakfasts, five lunches, five snacks, along with juice and a gallon of milk. Our food service staff takes great pride in the meals they are providing and do not rely on pre-packaged foods; our staff is cutting fresh vegetables, making chicken roll up sandwiches, packaging personal pizzas, adding fresh fruit, and recently has partnered with the Jackson County Dairy Promotion Committee to be able to include fresh cheese curds in ALL 1,400 meal bags. Additionally, Superior Fresh, out of Northfield, has donated clams of fresh lettuce for the past three weeks. Talk about creative problem solving! Many of our other employee groups are assisting with this work as well. We fully understand that our primary role is educating our children, however, we know that families are in different stages of being able to function right now and their most immediate needs must be met before we ask them to "Zoom" into a conversation with their teacher. The fact that the number of meals being distributed each week continues to grow is a testament to the fact that family situations are rapidly changing, as well as the fact that the service is necessary and appreciated! Our last full day with students was Tuesday, March 17th and meals began being delivered on Wednesday, March 18th. We've

made some alterations based on feedback, however, we continue to disburse meals from one of our elementary schools and the high school as well as drive our buses to 11 other sites throughout our attendance area for families to come to pick up their meals. We have already made the commitment to continue this throughout June and will continue to evaluate for the remainder of the summer.

All of these adjustments brought on some challenges with connectivity; rural communities simply do not have the same resources that others do. I want to be clear that while our community has over 62% of our school families qualifying for free/reduced price meals, the connectivity issue is not a poverty issue, it is a fundamental inequity within our state and nation. If we are truly committed to making sure our rural communities continue to thrive, we have got to do something systemic to address this connectivity issue. Prior to the first day of our building closures, we surveyed families asking if they wanted meals, where they wanted to pick them up, if they had connectivity, and if they had a device other than a cell phone. We personally called everyone that didn't fill out the electronic survey and ended with 100% participation. Remember, we had two days to create the plan, execute the survey, and get those responses. We have bought wifi devices for families, however, their rural location does not always allow that to solve the problem. Additionally, we've helped families with connectivity by making sure they could drive to any of our school parking lots and connect to the wireless network from the building. Again, we feel fantastic about the services we are able to provide and the agility in which we were able to transition into these plans.

Our focus has been, in large part, about making the next best decision with the best information available at the time. As our academic year is beginning to wind down, (we complete on May 28th), our focus is shifting to what fall will look like. I have no concerns that our staff will be able to thrive within whatever guidelines we establish. That is not to say that they are exhausted and desperately in need of some "down time" far away from their computers! My concern is for our students that will be coming to us from unhealthy households, students that abruptly stopped their counseling from the spring and have not restarted, our students that had little to no academic support during the closure and how we can try to backfill and repair the months of these students going without. In short, I feel that our current situation is increasing the equity gap for our students and the amount of time, personnel, and resources needed to address this is a complete wild card at this time.

I focus hard on providing services to our unique community in whatever ways the support is needed and we are able to provide. This is not a competition as to what district can outdo the other, but a challenge throughout our state to be able to provide what is needed now, while still being able to reasonably plan for the coming future. We don't yet know what the fall of 2020 will look like as the information literally changes on a daily basis. We also don't yet know to what level our schools will be funded. One thing I am confident in is our fantastic team of dedicated professionals will rise to whatever challenges may come and do all that they can to ensure our children are cared for, learning, and thriving in that new environment! If you are ever interested in knowing more about the successes and challenges that we face in the Black River Falls community, or have suggestions or feedback for us, please don't ever hesitate to reach out.

Your partner in education,

Dr. Shelly Severson

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