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detroitk12.org

March 23, 2020

RE: Open Letter to Michigan Leaders on Public Education during COVID-19 Crisis

Dear Michigan Leaders,

I hope this letter/email finds you and your family in good health. Let me begin by thanking Governor Whitmer for her strong and reflective leadership during these difficult times. Although her decision to close schools for three weeks was not an easy decision, it was the right one. She made that decision by listening to those on the ground who were seeing the unconfirmed COVID-19 cases surfacing and how it was only a matter of time until confirmed cases would cause unprecedented health concerns and chaos among school employees, children, and families, within schools across the State.

As the Superintendent who represents the largest school district in the State and as a leader who has seen the rising challenges that COVID-19 is causing in the largest city in the State, I ask that you read this letter/email with the same openness that the Governor demonstrated two weeks ago when the issue of closing schools was in front of her.

Since that time, Detroit Public Schools Community District has implemented measures to ensure that we continue to educate and empower our students and families every day. The District has taken the following actions:

- After sanitization, we promptly opened 58 schools to serve as “Grab & Go” meal sites that distribute breakfast, lunch, and printed learning materials by grade and subject.
- We have served about 70,000 meals in the first three days and provided access to over 41,000 printed learning packets to all Detroit students, regardless of enrollment location.
- We launched www.detroitk12.org/covid19 to provide relevant information regarding District programs and services. There have been over 16,000 unique visits to the academics area of this page.
- Through District single sign-on applications, we provide access to iReady (K-8 math and reading lessons tailored to each student based on work already completed during the academic year), myOn (tailored access to age appropriate reading materials for elementary students), and for High School students access to Khan Academy for SAT/PSAT practice.
- District staff made personal calls to about 80% of our District families, that work will continue this week, and the District’s Homework Hotline provides one-to-one tutoring assistance by certified teachers for the full academic day and into the evening.

This week, we will begin offering video instruction for families tied to the learning packets that can be accessed from any smart device. For those with access to a computer, we will also be designing specific lessons in ELA and Math in the iReady portal. In order to continue and expand the robust initiatives already occurring, I have outlined this letter in a simple format that states the issue, explains the problem, and proposes a solution for your earnest and immediate action.

Students Rise. We all Rise

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Recommendation #1: Close Schools until Next School Year and Require Enrichment through Online Learning

School districts need guidance to determine how to best leverage limited resources to support students. For example, do we need to plan to make up lost instructional days? Does this extended closure mean an extended year into the summer? Do we attempt to salvage the rest of the school year by shifting all resources to an online learning platform? Do we prioritize learning for graduating seniors? The list of questions is endless. This crisis grows worse daily. If we project our future based on trends in other countries that have been battling COVID-19 for a longer period of time, then we must come to realize that we will be fortunate if degrees of societal normalcy return by June. With that said, it is best to officially close schools until next school year. Other states have already made this decision. How can we possibly justify opening earlier if other states have closed schools? Family and employee health anxiety is too high to have students return to school prematurely. Opening too early will lead to numerous challenges, mainly extreme levels of student and employee absences that will undermine the expected learning experience in schools.

Declare schools closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic year. Require all districts to develop an online learning platform within a reasonable amount of time. This can include distributing laptops with internet access to families. (This will require the flexibility to use federal and state education funds differently and support from the business and philanthropic community.) Lessons can be prerecorded via video and posted online by grade level and subject area. Similar to higher education online learning platforms, teachers can post lessons on district websites and students will submit coursework through cloud storage solutions or email. The learning process should be considered enrichment for students, not required since it will be impossible to ensure equal access to all students. However, districts should be required to offer the learning opportunities just the same. Requiring that students submit assignments would disadvantage those who are in homes where survival is priority right now (employment, access to food and maintaining stable housing), not learning from home. There are also significant challenges for students with disabilities being required to learn independently from home without direct face-to-face support.

The legislative rumors of requiring students to continue credit attainment through virtual school or pure online learning with no time for transition would be disastrous. Such a decision would leave behind thousands of students who would not have the family support structure to navigate through the faceless and nameless bureaucracy of virtual education. There would be no accountability or oversight for learning. History has shown in states such as Indiana and California that virtual learning academies have been plagued with scandal, including misuse of funds, inaccurate data reporting and enrollment inflation. While the Michigan education system must continue to forge ahead into the 21st century and increase its use of technology, there remains a digital divide in over 50% of Michigan's households. One only needs to understand the travesty of the Education Achievement Authority (EAA) to realize that rapid, untested changes in systems with required online learning hurts children, namely those who are economically vulnerable. To this day we continue to see how students lost required skills, knowledge and credits as a result of the failed experiment to shift an entire sector of the population to an experimental and untested system of learning. The consequences would be even greater for the entire State. The solution here is continuing learning opportunities that are enrichment based, not required.

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Recommendation #2 Continuation of Full Funding from the State for the Remainder of Fiscal Year 2020

Through the commitment to fully fund school districts based on the Spring FTE count until the end of this fiscal year, all school districts will ensure the full employment of salaried and hourly employees. This will allow school districts to develop and implement online learning platforms to continue to provide students with structured learning opportunities during this crisis. It will also allow school districts to feed students and families. In addition to the academic benefit, this reduces the economic downturn of the State's economy by ensuring that district and school employees are employed and continue to have a paycheck and health insurance. This model also allows school districts to transition into the fall smoothly to prepare for the next school year.

Layoffs and/or salary reductions will create undue havoc for school districts as they attempt to provide a return to normalcy for children and staff during this crisis. Laid off employees would lose their health insurance and be forced to file for unemployment—shifting the burden back on the State and causing a considerable hardship for families during a public health crisis. If the Legislature does not fully fund school districts for the rest of the fiscal year, then layoffs and/or salary reductions are inevitable. Eventually, this will also cause many smaller districts to close due to deficits now or for the upcoming school year. This will only create more uncertainty in our entire state.

Recommendation #3 Ensure that Graduating Seniors are Promoted and Receive Credits

Current seniors should be able to graduate based on the number of credits that are required minus their last semester. If additional credits were planned to be obtained during the last semester then those can be obtained through summer school or waived by school districts. School districts, through teachers and parents, should decide which students are promoted to the next grade based on their academic status prior to closure. Middle and high school students should be required a semester less of credits moving forward based on this crisis and assuming school resumes in the fall. School districts should be required to offer courses through summer school in subsequent years if a student or parents would like to make up credits or courses that were planned to be taken during this past semester that were lost.

In summary, I appreciate the time you have taken to read this open letter. It is written to offer you practical solutions to real problems that we are all responsible for solving. Our State is facing unprecedented challenges, and our students, teachers, and families are looking for decisive answers. Our District will continue to provide instructional support and meals to our students in the coming weeks, however, we must ensure that funding will remain available in order to provide these services and pay our employees. Please do not delay in action. Do not take another recess before making hard decisions. This crisis is not improving. Your proper action will provide school districts clarity on how to ensure more normalcy and calm to communities. Lastly, do not act based on politics or ideology. No one has time for that right now. The systems, processes, and infrastructures are not in place for large scale shifts to required online learning, a forced early return to school, or private/public virtual school.

I am here to problem solve with you through these difficult times. You can reach me at Nikolai.vitti@detroitk12.org or (313) 873-7922.

Sincerely,

Nikolai P. Vitti, Ed.D.

Superintendent

Detroit Public Schools Community District

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cc: Governor Gretchen Whitmer
Lt. Governor Garlin Gilchrist
State Superintendent Dr. Michael Rice
Michigan State Board of Education
Governors K-12 Policy Team
Michigan State Senators
Michigan State House of Representatives
Detroit Caucus
Detroit Board of Education

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