

**An Unprecedented Time for Schools**  
**Journal Era Column**  
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The Governor's mandate that K-12 school districts close beginning March 16 through at least April 5<sup>th</sup> is certainly an unprecedented event for school districts. The COVID-19 pandemic has also resulted in an unprecedented challenge for students, families and our community of Berrien Springs. As the first reported cases of the COVID-19 virus have been confirmed in our community, the reality of this challenge can alter our perspective on life itself. However, as the events of the past week have unfolded, our resolve as educators has been strengthened through our ongoing experiences to support the needs of our students and their families.

Berrien Springs Public Schools activated a district Pandemic Response Plan on Friday, March 13<sup>th</sup>. Several components of that plan involved access to remote learning opportunities for students over an extended period of time. These learning opportunities included ongoing educational services for special needs students. Additional student services were also addressed in the response plan including providing daily meals through the school's food service program. Essential staffing for ongoing operations of the school district were also identified in the response plan. And though one can never fully plan for an event of the magnitude and scope of the COVID-19 pandemic, for the most part many other educational essentials were addressed during the first week of this event.

Online learning opportunities are being made available to students in grades 3-12. These opportunities involve a variety of learning platforms including Google, Schoology, and Facebook. Students in YK-2 were provided learning packets that were sent home with students on Friday, March 13. The district's homeschool learners are able to continue their learning through a variety of blended learning opportunities. Through our state-wide virtual learning programs an additional 3,500 students are engaged in online learning opportunities daily. I recognize that some of our students do not have Internet access or high-speed Internet in their homes. However, for those students who have access and the ability to engage in remote learning they receive remote support from Berrien Springs Public Schools teachers through these learning opportunities.

Friday, the Michigan Department of Education released a memo that created quite the stir around the state, including within our community of Berrien Springs. The message that reverberated around the state was that student learning during the mandated school closure does not count. Student learning always counts! Part of the learning process includes teacher feedback. Teacher feedback can take many forms including grading. Berrien Springs Public School teachers will continue to be actively involved in providing our students with multiple forms of feedback on a regular basis throughout the mandated school closure period.

The purpose of Friday's communication from the MDE was to remind school officials that MDE does not have the authority to grant school districts the ability to count these days toward the 180 days and 1,098 hours required by law. Only action by the state legislature can forgive days or hours during the mandated school closure. Our local legislators informed local school leaders the matter will not be addressed by the Legislature until the mandated school closure is over. At that time legislators will know the full extent of the instructional days and instructional hours missed. We all need to trust our legislators to make the best decision for our students when the time is right.

I am very proud of our teachers, instructional staff and principals as they continue to support learning for our students during this very challenging time. And during this unique challenge we are gaining some new insight into student learning through a variety of delivery systems. Our students also deserve to be recognized for their willingness to engage in these unique learning opportunities.

Last week the district's Food Service program served 1,268 lunch meals. These meals are available for pick up in front of the high school. Lunch meals are also delivered to the Rivers Springs Estate Mobile Home Park. A weekly schedule for pick up and delivery is posted each Monday on the school district's website. This operation only happens through the collaborative effort of the food service staff, transportation staff and custodial staff.

Ongoing communication about the impact of the Coronavirus on the operations of the school district will be made available on the district's web sites, social media pages and through the continued use of School Messenger, a communication system that provides the ability for the school district to push out parent notifications through email, text messaging, and/or telephone messages. Communication timeliness remains a challenge as this situation remains very fluid with rapid changes in information that occur at a moment's notice. The district will continue to provide students and parents with frequent updates, notifications and useful information to assist them educationally throughout the mandated school closure.

Just as health officials are learning more about the Coronavirus each day, our school district is learning about remote learning and educational support. Though our efforts are not perfect, as we aren't always able to meet every unique student and family need, our heart is motivated by the district's vision statement, "Inspiring students to think, learn, achieve and care in a global community." It is an honor for all of our district employees to serve this community, its students and families while making a positive difference in the lives of all. It's the Shamrock way!