

TO: House Education Committee

FROM: Jackie Wilson, BRSU Superintendent

RE: Testimony: BRSU Response to COVID-19

DATE: March 26, 2020

The Bennington Rutland Supervisory Union (BRSU) team of leaders and teachers geared up quickly to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. We have had success in some areas and struggled in others, but everyone has pulled together to respond to the crisis with the goal of serving our children and their families.

The BRSU is large geographically (450 square miles) and our communities have diverse needs, with great variation in socio-economic status and access to broadband. Figuring out how to deal with our diverse population will be one of our greatest challenges. While we have always been aware of the inequities that exist in our system, this crisis has brought them to the forefront. Too many of our children live with food insecurity and too many of our children don't have internet access. These issues are state and community issues that will require solutions that extend way beyond what we can do as a school system, but for the short term they have become central to our work.

Below I will speak to our three mandated areas of service: food, child care for Essential Persons, and Continuing Education:

FOOD SERVICE

On March 18, we launched our food service program and to date it has been a huge success. This is largely due to the leadership of our Food Service Director, Kelly Foster and her committed team of kitchen staff.

We are currently feeding 413 students a day, approximately 40% of our K-8 student population. Meals are prepared in four of our schools and distributed to eleven communities. Student meals are ready for pick up at 11:00 each day and include a lunch and breakfast for the next day. We also provide a delivery service and use our 4 minivans to accomplish this. Each van has a driver and a deliverer - 344 of our meals are delivered.

We are selling fewer lunches in our schools with the exceptions of two locations and we expect that our costs will be greater than usual. Our overhead is the same -- but food costs are likely to be higher. More pre-packaged food drives cost up and the fact that we can't do "offer vs serve." Our to-go bags have more food than a child may select on his own at school, which of course is a good thing under these circumstances. We are also spending a lot on "to go" packaging.

Challenges: As we expected, with every passing day staffing becomes a greater challenge. This week we lost two of our kitchen leads because they came under the "exempt" category and as the virus spreads we have great concerns about being able to maintain staffing levels. Next week we are moving to a three-day program instead of a five day. This will solve our current staffing issues but we are worried about future sustainability.

CHILD CARE FOR ESSENTIAL PERSONS

To date, we have not had success with launching a program. The greatest roadblock is securing volunteer staff. Understandably, most of our staff is unwilling to volunteer to serve in this way. Social distancing cannot be enforced in a classroom setting and most educators and support staff are not willing to put themselves and their families's health at risk.

I'm currently working with the Manchester Town Manager, John O'Keefe and Laurie Metcalfe from the Northshire Day School. Northshire Day School may be able to take some additional children if we can provide staff. We are meeting on Friday morning to see what we can do. Our biggest challenge with a private provider partnership will be figuring out the finances. I don't have any solutions yet.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

For the past two weeks we have relied upon paper learning packets but we are gearing up for a longer term solution. We've been meeting with teachers, instructional coaches, our tech experts, special education directors, principals, and curriculum experts to develop a plan that is reasonable and doable. We haven't gotten there yet.

Challenges:

- Internet access - While many of our teachers could deliver on-line learning and do so in grades 5-8, many of our children don't have reliable internet access. We can't go solely to an on-line learning platform because it would result in gross inequities of opportunity.
- Special Education - How do we provide the services we need to provide? Our special education leaders are working hard on this and receive reams of guidance on a daily basis. Guidance from the AOE will be essential in this area.
- Paper Learning Packets - This week I started to receive concerns about our paper learning packet distribution and the possibility of virus contamination. We have put some protocols in place to alleviate fears but as the virus spreads I'm sure this concern will spread. We also need staff in our schools to copy materials and compile learning packets. We are starting to experience challenges with finding staff willing to come into our schools to do this work and I imagine this reluctance will grow.
- Distance Learning for students in grades K-4 - What does this look like? We are and will continue to spend considerable time on articulating what a developmentally responsive distance learning program looks like for young children.
- Teacher readiness for on-line learning - For many elementary teachers, delivering on-line learning is new and requires training. We are currently offering on-line training modules to help in this area.

Overall, I'm most concerned with issues surrounding equity. I'm concerned that the gaps will widen and I'm not sure yet how to manage that. I also think we need to be aware of the fact that many of our families will be under tremendous financial stress and many families will be dealing with sickness. We need to be sure to develop a plan for continuing education that is sensitive to the crisis we are in.

I'm encouraging my staff to stay connected with their students and their families. Our children and families need to know we are there for them. We need to be aware of the fact that some parents will have the time and skill to provide educational support at home, and others will not. We need to set expectations but they can't be overwhelming. The most important thing is keep our children and families healthy and well.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

I know that as we enter an extended period of school closure, other issues will surface in the areas of master agreements (i.e. working conditions) and finances. Some of these are just starting to bubble up and I'm sure they will require considerable attention in the future.