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Lynn Cota, Superintendent

Lynn Cota - House Education Committee Testimony

4/10/20

Today is the 18th school day since Vermont Schools were closed for in-person learning due to COVID-19. Normally, 18 days doesn't feel like much, but in our current reality it feels like it's been a very long time since we last had all our students and staff members physically present in our schools. In the last 18 days our school staff members, and educators from around Vermont, have accomplished extraordinary feats. With very little lead time, educators and administrators have problem-solved solutions to extremely complex problems within tight timelines.

I'm going to give you some examples of things that have been happening in the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union. Very similar things are happening throughout Franklin and Grand Isle Counties and the rest of Vermont.

Highlights

In FNESU, our food service staff is serving meals to 1512 children each day, resulting in more than 15,000 meals that are delivered each week out of our four production kitchens. Our numbers continue to rise, which is certainly a reflection of the needs within our community.

Administrators, curriculum leaders, teacher leaders, technology specialists, and behavior specialists have collaborated remotely to develop and provide professional learning opportunities to teachers and staff in order to help them develop the necessary skills to navigate our current maintenance of learning phase and get ready for the continuation of learning phase that begins on Monday.

Teachers, special educators, speech and language pathologists, counselors and our behavior team have been designing both online remote learning opportunities and equitable hard copy learning resources for those students without internet access each week. They have been learning how to use new tools, persistently working to connect with students and families through a variety of means, maintaining contact logs, teaching logs, and serving as a hub for matching families with much needed services like childcare, internet, financial, unemployment, mental health and food resources.

At the same time, teachers have been designing the new learning opportunities that will begin on Monday. Some teachers have found creative ways to manage their own limited broadband access. I have seen and heard about examples of teachers driving to school parking lots to access wifi in order to send materials, connect with students, and download work. In another case, I've heard about a teacher driving to an in-law's house to access better internet while sitting outside on the porch in order to social distance from loved ones while providing learning opportunities and making connections with students and families.

Love and Care

Our work as educators is centered around students. Navigating this new reality absent the physical presence of our students is challenging. Not only do our educators miss our students, our students are also missing us. Our staff members have creatively found ways to show love and care to students by placing signs and messages in bus windows, having staff parades follow busses on the meal delivery routes, launching video messages through social media, screencasts, phone calls, emails, and group digital meetings.

Giving to our Community

Our staff members have begun learning how to sew face masks and are now also using 3-D printers to make face shields for essential workers. We have partnered with the Child Development Division in order to match the childcare needs of local Essential Workers with the available childcare resources within our community.

Student Services

Our special educators, clinicians, counselors, OT/PT/SLP therapists, and nurses have all been learning how to offer tele-services with children who need that level of support. Special educators have been working to navigate the complexities of providing special education services remotely to students. They have collaborated with classroom teachers and parents to ensure that each student eligible for special education services has a "Distance Learning Services Plan" that focuses on ***Reasonable, Appropriate, Essential Skills in light of our circumstances to identify how educational progress will be maintained.*** Distance Learning Plans were created with multiple options, individualized and in collaboration with families. Some options include offering consultation and parent training to families, asynchronized opportunities in which videos with learning materials are sent home to be completed at family's discretion, or direct instruction with video conferencing with staff. For those students who do not have internet available, learning materials will be sent home and staff will follow up to the best of their ability through phone calls to provide services.

Greatest Challenges

Some of the greatest challenges we have faced have centered around the limited broadband accessibility for our students and staff members. We have worked hard to help families access some of the free internet options that have become available as a result of COVID-19. It's been challenging for our teachers to connect with students who do not have internet access, and the amount of time and persistence needed for this is tremendous. Planning to provide equitable opportunities for these students is one of the greatest barriers to distance learning. This presents an equity issue for our learning community.

We are struggling to make connections with some students. Not only do they not have access to the internet, they also have limited phone access. I learned just yesterday that some families have run out of pre-paid minutes on their phones and are unable to afford to buy more minutes until their benefits begin, which makes phone calls between students and teachers impossible.

Another barrier is that we do not have enough devices for all of our students. We are able to provide devices to all of our students in grades 3-12 and those in younger grades who receive special education

services and most of our second-grade children. We intend to purchase devices for our K-1 students, but there are long-wait lists for these critical tools for remote learning.

Lessons Learned

Some of the lessons we have learned during this time: Communication is the key during a crisis like this. Communicating early, and often, has built trust within our community. We have received a lot of positive feedback and appreciation for the work we have done to connect families with resources, provide real-time updates, and share plans for what is coming next.

We've also learned that as a team, our best work comes from an all-hands-on-deck approach. We have embraced a team leader method and collaborate and share the knowledge and resources we have available to us for the good of the whole. It is only because of this teamwork that we can manage the monumental amount of work that has come our way. We have come together to do great things in just 18 days. Things we would've thought were unattainable a month ago.

I am blessed to lead in FNESU, a system that is nestled up in the far northwest corner of our state. I'm so proud of our staff who are working so incredibly hard to meet the needs of all our students and families while balancing the needs of their own children at home, their limited internet access, and the tremendous time pressure we find ourselves under. We have embraced the idea that flexibility and setting reasonable expectations for our students and families is incredibly important.

Our staff has risen to the challenge and continue to inspire me on an everyday basis. Much of the work that is happening in the world of education isn't as visible as it is when school is in session. Make no mistake, our teachers, administrators, and staff are carrying a heavy load, working harder than ever, and doing it with grace, compassion, and extreme dedication to our students. I'm reminding them often to be careful about their own well-being, because I know they are working harder than ever before.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today. Thank you for the thoughtful leadership and service you are providing Vermonters during this unprecedented time.

Respectfully,



Lynn Cota
Superintendent