

To: House Education Committee

From: Danielle Corti, Board Chair, Oxbow Unified Union School District

Re: Pandemic

Date: January 14th, 2021

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify today. I am testifying on the behalf of the Oxbow Unified Union School District. I will be speaking today about our students, our families, our faculty and staff, our communities. How are we doing? What do we need to know? What are we learning? Challenges, opportunities.

- 1- Students and families
- 2- Faculty and staff
- 3- Communities.
- 4- Challenges & Opportunities

Students and families are fully saturated. By that I mean like sponges soaked with water there is not room for more. Not more work, not more changes, not more information. That is really the best way I can describe it. The federal program providing food access for children has been extremely positive for our community. Our staff at Bradford Elementary with the support of all the schools were able to roll out meals to all students in our district (and SU) almost immediately. This was a great opportunity to provide an area of equality to all students. Poverty and lack of access creates significant obstacles for many of our families in our district. This has made it clear how valuable this program is and can be. Is there a way this can be maintained? Could we look at universal meals for all schools in the state? As far as equity of education and support due to the pandemic the disparities between students/families living in poverty and those that are not have widened. If the family can have a parent stay home or provide guidance and oversight for the at home learners, the system is working to keep kids learning. Not necessarily "on track" but learning. However, if there is little or no support at home the ability to students to learn suffers. Older students that can are working to support themselves and their families and doing schoolwork when they can. Yet in other family's things have not changed much financially. Younger students in our district are going to school every day and that has had a positive impact. The differences of schedules from building to building and grade to grade is a constant stress for families, students, and the staff. The ability to reach students that need both educational support and social emotional support is extremely difficult and at times impossible. Our community much like the national landscape has groups that feel school should be open and there is

nothing to worry about and others that feel that the risk is too great to have any time in the buildings. We struggle to balance these perspectives. Our students and families are going to need extra support and services over the next few years to recover. I feel that focus on recovering is paramount. Many student and families have experienced extended trauma and stress due to the pandemic we need to support their recovery.

Faculty and staff, they are surviving. The reality is they are doing amazing work in a horrible situation. Much like our families they are dealing with constant changes. While at the same time worrying about their health and safety while being on the front lines. In OUUSD's case no working budget until last night has added additional pressure and uncertainty. To transition to remote learning investments had to be made in technology. Both for computers and infrastructure. Internet service and access is an issue in our communities, and many have had to use hot spots or go to the schools to sit in cars to access the WIFI. The teachers and staff are not only teaching they are triaging the students as they come to the building and participate in ZOOM. The elementary schools have worked together to create teacher groups, one to focus on supporting the remote students and another group that is responsible for in person learners. This creativity has helped. To move forward having students back in the buildings as much as possible should be our goal. For that to happen I believe the schools need extra funding or support and the teachers should have access to the vaccine. The best thing for kids is to be in school and the best way to do that is to have a safe environment for them to return to. Knowing that the next budget cycle is going to be exceedingly difficult, we need the ability to have as much money available as we can at the local level to go directly to students. Last year there was a health insurance increase of almost 13%. Our district will not be able to shoulder that type of increase without making cuts to staff and programs. Doing that when we know that student needs are higher than ever before is unacceptable.

Our community is overwhelmed. We are struggling under the weight of Covid -19, constant changes, 8 months with no passed budget, the residual effects of Act 46, the ballooning cost of health insurance and decreasing enrollment. Trying to communicate with our community through Zoom has been challenging. The community's connection with the school, students and staff has been severed by not being able to attend events or even enter the buildings. The ability for us to move forward is going to require extreme amounts of support and creative thinking. As a community we cannot continue to support the increasing cost with fewer students. Having just survived a long budget process it is clear to me that change is needed, and something must be done.

Challenges there are many. How do we bring students back and help them recover, learn, and grow? How do we give the teachers the tools and resources to do their job? How do we pay for services, supplies, and programs that are needed? How do we build our new district after Act 46? How do we communicate effectively through a pandemic? How do we keep parents involved and engaged when they cannot come to the

buildings? We need to throw out the old map and realize that a new way must be found. As a mom when my kids were little, and we were running late I would make the mistake of trying to rush them out the door so we could be on time. Well maybe we got there but we were a train wreck. I think that it is important for us to look at our system and figure out what is essential. What is really NEEDED by the students, teachers, administrators, and our communities. Trying to force us all to achieve "normal" seems like forcing a toddler out the door only to arrive as a train wreck.

We have seen the power of universal meals. In our community this program has been a huge positive. We have seen how well this works. Can we figure out how to continue or modify it to a hybrid system (half state funded/half local funded?). The power of collaboration our district has learned to work together over the last 10 months. The teachers and staff have problem solved to make it work. Can there be a way to encourage collaboration and cooperation across the state (without merging) We are starting to build a new district we have the opportunity to decide what that looks like. Can we encourage creative ways to help students, families, and the staff to work on recovery? Can we commit to controlling cost of health insurance and creating a tax system that is less complicated and does not send your tax rate soaring when a few students move out of the district. These are the areas that I see as priorities.

Thank you very much for your time. Please feel free to contact me with any questions. Thank you for all your work for our communities and state during these unbelievable times.

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