

Plainville Citizen Op-Ed, April, 2020

When we entered the year 2020 in January, there was obviously no 2020 vision about what the future would hold for the entire world, the United States, Connecticut or Plainville due to the impact of COVID-19, coronavirus. The idea of all life as we know it, coming to what in many respects seems to be a sudden halt, just wouldn't have entered our minds prior to it actually happening. Although we witnessed the spread of this virus across the first affected countries of China, Iran, Italy and a rapidly growing list of others, I still don't believe that we expected such a profound and widespread impact on America just over one month ago. Still, here we are with much of our state's operations and businesses partially or fully shut down, learning to exist under a temporary new normal and awaiting the next Executive Order from Governor Lamont with new directives, allowances and guidance about what the future will hold.

During the lead-up to COVID-19's widespread impact on Connecticut and Plainville, regular meetings involving Governor Lamont, Commissioner of Education Cardona, State and Regional Health Department leaders, and town and district leaders began to occur frequently in preparation for an unknown, but inevitable impact on our existence in Connecticut. However; as much as initial warnings and considerations were shared, the reality and onset of change seemed like it came about almost overnight.

On March 9th, I and all state superintendents were advised that a closing of Connecticut schools would likely be inevitable, and would likely happen as soon as March 16th, just one week from that announcement! Given this reality and the clear need to prepare for a worst case scenario, several steps and actions were taken across Plainville Community Schools. Since this represents just a brief overview of a few key measures, it serves as an outline of the hundreds and thousands of small and large efforts undertaken to first prepare, then implement, monitor and continually improve our distance learning capabilities with each passing week.

On March 10th, I called an emergency meeting with our district administrative team to develop clear action steps and a timeline of preparation. After our three-hour meeting, everyone jumped into action and did their part as a team member to ready the *troops* for action. As part of the plan, we converted our scheduled Professional Learning Community (PLC) time on March 11th to focus on school closure planning and preparation. Since the high school had conferences that evening and no scheduled PLC time, their work had to be done through common planning time and other virtual communications. Ultimately, everyone did what they had to do in order to prepare as well as they could for Phase I of Plainville's Distance Learning Plan.

Ironically, as more information was released to district superintendents, it became clear that I would need to close schools effective March 16th. At that time, districts had two options with the Connecticut State Department of Education: 1) to treat the days off as if they were snow days to be made up in June and on April vacation, or 2) to apply for a state waiver allowing the district to offer distance learning opportunities through technology platforms, which would allow districts to continue teaching and learning, and those days would count toward the state required 180 school days. As superintendent of Plainville Community Schools, I decided to apply for the waiver based on two key factors: 1) Outstanding, talented and dedicated teachers and support staff who I knew would rise to meet the challenge, and 2) Plainville's outstanding technology, hardware, software, technology support team, and training.

Our application for the waiver was submitted on March 13th at 2:00pm and I closed all Plainville schools from March 16th - March 27th for an initial 2-week period awaiting further updates from health officials and the governor. Our waiver was approved on March 16th and Plainville never missed a day of teaching and learning. At the time, we also didn't add days to the end of the school year or subtract them from April vacation, as other

districts had to do. Although that requirement was later removed and the waiver no longer required, I am proud of our team's responsive ability to shift teaching from our schools to the homes of teachers and families within a matter of a few days!

Admittedly, this distance learning system has been a constant work in progress and we have needed to amend our plans, adjust based on feedback, add in the half-day Wednesdays for students to allow them to catch up on work, get a little down time, and also allow teachers to continue sharing ideas, learning new technology tools and collaborate with peers. These half- day Wednesdays have proven critical for all and were well received, but we continue to seek additional ways to provide such important downtime and enrichment time for children and learning time for teachers. We will continue to assess and modify our programs as needed, and meet multiple times each week with various groups of administrators and teachers to continually modify and improve our programs for students and supports for teachers and staff.

Phase II of this distance learning plan involves increased educator and student "face time" through Google video meetings, assignment of support staff to assist students and teachers in meeting the needs of students, and additional expectations for instruction and social-emotional support. I will say that the biggest challenge has been finding the just-right balance of high expectations and new learning to move our students toward grade level expectations, while also addressing the evolving social and emotional needs of our students and families. It has been important to understand that each home and family has different needs and challenges based on many factors (parent technology comfort/ability, parent career and availability to support their child(ren's) learning, the number of devices and students in one home, student needs for support, and much more).

As a district, we have done our absolute best to meet each challenge head on, providing Chromebooks to all students who need them in grades 3-12 initially, and then

down to grade 1, and supporting younger students with alternate technology, paper copied packets of materials, and additional resources. We have also supplied thousands of meals to those in need, and done so with great care, service and quality. Plainville is an exceptional community with terrific schools, and that is due to our district team. I have talented colleagues in our district's central office hub and school leaders that I can count on in every way. I have teachers who are going the extra mile to do all they can to support students, and I have so many other staff members that are each playing a part in the big picture to support students, teaching and learning in this new, remote world. I also have custodians and maintainers coming to work every day to keep our buildings spotless through deep cleaning, and getting a head start on other school cleaning and maintenance projects that normally happen in the summer, if time allows. We have a great collective school district team, and I am proud of them!

In closing, I will be the first to admit that we are not perfect and have stated this since the start, but Plainville is in much better shape than many unfortunate districts who are still trying to get technological devices to students, let alone deploy the devices and training that teachers need to help students succeed. The district structures and systems, such as our Professional Learning Communities, that have facilitated the development of team capacity and collaboration, teacher leadership development, and exceptional preparation of the staff members, have proven to be the foundation for success in this new distance learning environment.

Plainville has a wonderful balance of outstanding resources, thanks to our Board of Education's vision and the town's continued support of these needed resources. Last but certainly not least, I am extremely proud of our students for their hard work and perseverance through all of this change. We have amazing students in Plainville, Pre-K through grade 12, and in our Adult and Continuing Education program, and we will do all that we can to take care of them, honor them and celebrate their contributions to Plainville

during these challenging weeks ahead. On April 21st, Plainville is being recognized by the Connecticut State Department of Education as an exemplar district of distance learning, and I am proud of that, not because it brings positive attention to the district, but because it means that our students are getting the best we can give them, and I am committed to ensuring that remains true.