



WEST BLOOMFIELD  
SCHOOL DISTRICT

GERALD D. HILL, PH.D.  
SUPERINTENDENT

March 25, 2020

Dear Honorable Governor Gretchen Whitmer,

Thank you for your proactive and compassionate leadership during this worldwide coronavirus pandemic crisis. The people of Michigan are fortunate to have a leader willing to make tough decisions in order to safeguard the health and welfare of Michiganders.

I'm writing to express my concerns regarding the continuation of learning and the safeguarding of social/emotional health of children in our educational institutions across the state. Similar to adults, the daily life of students has changed dramatically over the past two weeks. It's hard to remember, but everything seemed to start fairly normally during the week of March 9<sup>th</sup>. Little did we know then the extent of the crisis that would be thrust upon us.

We, my leadership team and I, in the West Bloomfield School District, had an initial discussion on March 9<sup>th</sup> about the possibility that our schools could be shutdown at some future point. This led us to begin defining the issue as a series of challenges and solutions. What follows are some of what we addressed in developing and implementing our Cloud Learning Initiative.

**Challenge 1:** How would we react to a widespread school closure, similar to what was taking place in the Seattle area? What did we need to do to plan for such an event? Who should be a part of the planning effort?

**Solution 1:** We determined that we would alter the agenda of a previously planned meeting of our District Learning Design Team, scheduled to meet on Wednesday, March 11<sup>th</sup>. That agenda would become focused on creating a plan of action to address the myriad of issues involved in shutting down our schools. How could we "have school" while our facilities were closed? The Learning Design Team, consisting of teachers, principals, central office administrators and a school board member, determined that we needed to devise a plan that kept students learning and teachers teaching. We knew of a school district in the Seattle area that had done just that through a cloud learning platform. We looked at their plan and began adapting it to our context.

**Challenge 2:** How could we, a team of just 25 people, possibly make plans for an entire school district of 5700 students, over 300 educators, and 8 schools, plus a Special Education Transition Center and an early college campus?

**Solution 2:** We determined that I would cancel school (a snow-day minus the snow) for students on Friday March 13<sup>th</sup> and have all staff across the school district participate in



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what we called a Cloud Learning Planning Day. The District Learning Design Team created the agendas for the day. The principals and teachers in each of our schools used the entire day to plan for delivering instruction in a Cloud Learning environment. Learning support function groups (food service, maintenance, transportation) also held meetings to develop their plans on how to best support teaching and learning during a shutdown. Little did we know on Wednesday that you would announce an order, the next day, that a statewide closure of schools was to begin the week of Monday, March 16. This made our planning exercise more real, as we'd begin executing it immediately.

**Challenge 3:** What platform could we utilize to deliver instruction in a virtual learning environment?

**Solution 3:** Since many of our teachers and students were already using Google Classroom, we determined that it was the best approach systemwide. We created templates that teachers could use for instructional lesson planning.

**Challenge 4:** How could we ensure that all students had access to a technology device and the internet at home?

**Solution 4:** We are a one-to-one technology device system in grades K thru 12 and had an adequate supply of Chrome Books for each of our 5700 students but we needed to determine how to distribute those devices to students not already having one at home. We arranged for parents to pick up Chrome Books and learning packets at their child's school. Principals called all families who had not picked up learning packets and Chrome Books on the first days of distribution. We then personally delivered the materials and devices those families via school busses. Regarding internet access, we established a system to determine whether or not families in our school district had internet service in their homes. For those not having access, we purchased and supplied hot spots on an as needed basis.

**Challenge 5:** What would be our process for taking "attendance"?

**Solution 5:** We developed a Google check-in document that students would fill out for each period at the secondary level and that for each teacher at the elementary level. The daily/hourly check-in includes some form of interesting activity or reflection related to that day's activities. Our attendance (ADA) for the first week of Cloud Learning was very similar to our ADA average for September through March 12.

**Challenge 6:** Would we teach new content or simply offer review and/or supplemental learning activities?



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**Solution 6:** We decided that we wanted our Cloud Learning to match as closely as possible the learning taking place in our classrooms on a daily basis. This meant introducing new material, holding “discussions,” completing assignments and creating authentic assessments (products) showing student understanding.

**Challenge 7:** How would we serve special needs populations (special education and ELL)? Would we be able to meet FAPE?

**Solution 7:** Our special educators reviewed the IEPs of each student on their respective caseloads and developed ways to deliver those services, where practical, to students in a virtual environment. We fleshed out our plans and reviewed them with legal counsel in light of the USDOE and State FAPE guidelines, which have been adjusted for the current crisis. We believe that, although the delivery method has changed, the IEPs are being implemented in ways that meet FAPE.

There are many more challenges that we’ve addressed, some we anticipated and others we did not. With each new challenge, we clearly state the problem/issue and then develop creative solutions to overcome those obstacles. We are building and modifying the system as we go. The dynamic nature of the work necessitates both collaboration and communication between and among all of our stakeholders. Thus far, the feedback we’ve received from students and parents has been very positive and appreciative.

Why are we successful in implementing our Cloud Learning Initiative? There are two main reasons. First, we’ve been implementing our Portrait of a Graduate for the past two years. Through the implementation process, we’ve been modeling the 4Cs elements of our Portrait of a Graduate. We are constantly **collaborating, critically thinking/creatively problem-solving, communicating** and **contributing** in order to support our students learning and social/emotional needs. This crisis has tested our capacity to lead through difficult times by applying the elements of the 4Cs to address the issues we’re facing.

The main reason we’re succeeding, however, is because of the relationships we’ve established within the WBSD learning community. Those relationships between adults (teachers, principals, support staff, administrators, school board members and, parents) are critically important. Mutual respect, openness and trust anchors our ability to work as a team to support students. Additionally, the positive relationships that our students have with each other, with their teachers and other adults, provides a source of strength that is being called upon during this crisis. As one of our principals recently wrote in a letter to his staff, “We hold a conviction that it is our work on relationships, culture, and accountability over the course of a school year, and a school career, that allows us to be as effective as we are in a virtual environment. The students and staff know each other, and feel a sense of accountability to one another, along with a responsibility to support



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one another. Without the strong relationships you have built, our online success would not be near what it has been.”

**The final challenge:** As this crisis plays out, what we are looking for from the State of Michigan, whether it be the MDE, the legislature, or you, in the Governor’s Office? We need the State of Michigan to legitimize our efforts and count these critical days of instruction. We don’t want the days to be “forgiven” - we want them to count. Your leadership, guidance, support and permission to continue doing what’s best to effectively meet the needs the students we serve is essential. Anything less fails our children. We’re confident that you are up to meeting this challenge!

Yours on behalf of children,

Sincerely,

Gerald D. Hill, Ph.D.  
Superintendent