



Legislative Matters Related to Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19)

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Remarks to Guilford County Delegation of the North Carolina General Assembly on March 31, 2020

Priority I: Employee Compensation and Benefits

Good morning, and thank you, Board Member Garrett and Chairwoman Hayes. This morning we plan to focus on the impact of the coronavirus on Guilford County Schools (GCS), and most importantly, on the more than 73,000 students we serve.

Twentytwo million children across the United States rely on the free or reduced-price lunch they receive at school, and every one of them is eligible for free breakfast as well. In GCS, more than 65% of our students qualify for free- or reduced-price meals, a common indicator of poverty.

Since last Monday, I'm proud to announce that GCS has served more than 184,000 meals to children. Our dedicated school nutrition and transportation staff are preparing and distributing these meals without protective covering and without additional pay, while the vast majority of Americans are working from their homes.

- We ask the North Carolina General Assembly to immediately ensure the minimum of time and a half pay for all essential hourly employees. I fear that without this critical and immediate step, some employees may cease to report to work. Consequently, Guilford County is facing the risk of massive child hunger.
- We also ask the legislature to provide over-time pay, bonuses or other incentives for mandatory personnel needed to provide essential services such as daycare for the school-aged children of hospital workers.
- With state testing and performance pay currently on hold, we encourage the General Assembly to reallocate state dollars budgeted for performance pay to increasing for teacher and principal compensation statewide.

- We ask the legislature to fund emergency leave requirements for all employees, **regardless of funding source**, and encourage legislators to ensure public school employees have access to unemployment benefits and other emergency leaves if schools remain closed longer than anticipated.
- We also ask you to join us in advocating at the federal level for the same ability to offset additional expenses for emergency family and medical leave and emergency paid sick leave as private and parochial schools, businesses and other employers under the Family First Coronavirus Response Act.
- Currently, many part-time, hourly employees in school nutrition and other critical areas do not qualify for state healthcare coverage. Healthcare coverage should be available for all mandatory public-school employees, part-time or fulltime, who are fulfilling these critical roles.

Personal Protective Equipment and Employee Healthcare

- We respectfully ask the legislature to provide additional funding for personal protective equipment for our frontline employees, including but not limited to childcare workers, custodians, school nurses, school nutrition workers, transportation workers and others who are ensuring that our students are well cared for during the coronavirus pandemic.

Employee Evaluations and Contract Renewals

- We are asking the General Assembly for some statutory relief from the required evaluation and notice cycle for teachers.
- This relief would entail allowing districts that have one observation completed, have provided teachers with notice of potential non-renewal in writing and have provided at least one other letter of direction/action plan in the personnel file to use that information to complete the summative evaluation.
- We also ask that the legislature waive the requirement to have the third observation this year for all teachers, as well as the requirement for a peer observation for the 2019-20 school year.
- Lastly, we ask the General Assembly to Allow Email and NCEES notification of non-renewal (by June 1) to satisfy the requirement of notifying teachers rather than the formal letter currently required.

Census

- We also ask that the legislature allow non-mandatory staff, as part of their work-at-home duties, to contact community members and parents about participating in Census 2020. For example, non-mandatory staff could make calls from home to GCS families and Guilford County residents.

Priority II: Distance Learning

In less than two weeks, GCS and other school districts statewide have flipped more than 385 years of public schooling practice by shifting to online learning. As we rushed to prevent learning loss K-12 through distance learning, the inequities in access quickly became apparent.

While we're incredibly proud of the work our teachers and instructional personnel have accomplished in such a short time, access to a 1:1 device (laptop, tablet, etc.) that supports online learning, as well as internet connectivity, remain a challenge for many students, teachers and teacher assistants.

- Students, teachers and teacher assistants need access to a 1:1 device (laptop, tablet, etc.) and broadband, high-speed internet services that can support distance learning. Additional technology/capital allocations will be needed to support a statewide 1:1 initiative to bridge these digital divides.

We urge our legislative representatives to seek Interstate and federal government cooperation on the expansion of WIFI/Broadband access, particularly in underserved areas, similarly to historic initiatives to expand electricity, telephone access and other utilities nationwide. We urge state officials to negotiate with telecommunications companies to:

- Expand high-speed internet connection.
- Provide internet service for students who receive free- or reduced-price meals at no charge or at a significantly reduced rate.
- Provide funding to pay for internet service for these students ensuring they receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) as mandated by state and federal law.
- Provide funding for public schools to expand student WIFI and broadband access through the purchase of personal hotspots.

- Additionally, the North Carolina General Assembly can request that all public colleges and universities—which are currently in-session online only—that have hotspots in their student housing facilities/apartments relocate the hotspots to public housing developments.
- The colleges and universities can also redeploy their outdoor hotspots to K12 school parking lots so students can access the internet in the school parking lot closest to their home. As North Carolina receives federal funding, higher-ed institutions can replace the hotspots that the colleges and universities provided to public housing developments and public schools (parking lots).

Graduating Seniors

- Given the disruption the pandemic is causing students, particularly our graduating seniors, we need to ensure that college acceptance letters to state university system schools and community colleges are honored and not rescinded, and we encourage the General Assembly and the State Board of Education to consider legislation and policies that ensure as smooth a transition as possible for our graduating seniors.

Testing and Accountability

- While we're pleased that North Carolina's application for a waiver of federal testing accountability requirements for 2019-20 has been submitted and granted by the United States Department of Education, there are several state laws tied to the results of EOCs/EOGs that the legislature will need to address.
 - We ask that the legislature return promotion and retention decisions to local school districts so we can ensure that all current third grade students who were in good standing when school closure occurred are promoted to fourth grade.
 - We also encourage the General Assembly to provide additional funding for appropriate screeners for all fourth grades to help educators identify and develop appropriate strategies to address students with potential deficits in reading.
 - We seek funding for diagnostic assessments to further identify skill gaps for intervention purposes.
- Districts will also need additional and flexible funding to provide comprehensive professional learning for K-3 teachers in early literacy, and to plan and provide appropriate summer and extended school programming.

Advanced math placement (2019-20)

- Currently, GCS leads the state in identifying and enrolling students of color and other under-represented groups in gifted education.
- We ask the legislature for the flexibility to ensure that all student demographics are represented in advanced math and academics. Our concern is that by prescribing the method to determine placement, the State might inadvertently disrupt this important work in GCS.

Exceptional Children

- Compensatory services may be applicable during online direct instruction for all students and in cases where students with disabilities were not provided the option to engage online, or could not access distance learning successfully, even with appropriate supports and services.
- Distance learning and related services may not be feasible in all cases, specifically for medically fragile students and students with more profound disabilities.
- Additional funding for compensatory services owed should be made available by the General Assembly in these cases; local school districts should not have to use current allocations to provide these additional services.
- Additional funding also should be allocated to support students who may not yet be identified as needing specially designed instruction. The additional funding would provide supports including remediation, online tutoring and reading intervention opportunities for those who may not yet be identified as Exceptional Children but are demonstrating the need for additional support.

Career and Technical Education

- Students, particularly graduating seniors, may need waivers from various professional standards and licensing boards regarding professional and industry certifications requirements, and/or additional funding and time to fulfil those requirements following high school graduation (e.g. clinical hour requirements for certified nurse assistants).
- And, while it is not coronavirus related, we also ask you to once again advocate for the inclusion of \$1.5 million annually in the State budget for two years to

support GCS' signature career academies, an economic and workforce development initiative that will be even more critical in the post-pandemic economy.

Student Attendance Requirements & Calendar Waivers

- We also ask the General Assembly to waive compulsory attendance laws and the issuance of mandatory letters regarding chronic absenteeism for 2019-20.
- We also seek calendar flexibility regarding the number of required student days or hours for 2019-20.
- Lastly, in terms of our academic priorities, we ask for regulatory relief and the flexibility to be able to use e-learning rather than make-up days for school closures due to inclement weather, power outages, police actions and other issues (e.g. Illinois, Indiana, South Carolina, Ohio, and Pennsylvania).

Health and Human Services

- As we seek to “flatten the coronavirus curve” of new infections and with public health officials expecting the virus to recur in the fall, fulltime nurses (including licensed practical nurses and clinical medical assistants) will be essential to have on staff when schools re-open.
- In the state's largest school districts, many students live in shelters, hotels/motels, temporary and transitional housing. Students in the five shelters in Guilford County are disallowed by the shelters from attending GCS childcare centers at this point.
- However, we ask that North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and/or the General Assembly require social workers and/or other trained educators, along with county nurses, to conduct wellness checks on these students in transition (as defined under the federal McKinney Vento Act).
- Similarly, minors in juvenile detention are also entitled to a free and appropriate education. Which government body is making certain that they have access to technology—hardware and WIFI—along with access to district teachers?
- We will also need expanded and coordinated services by Department of Health and Human Services to ensure students in crisis do not fall through the cracks.

- Research and experience from past economic downturns – even without a major public health crisis – indicate that children and families will experience significant trauma. As hope decreases and despair and desperation increase for some, rates of domestic violence, crime, child abuse, hunger, homelessness and other devastating childhood experiences also increase dramatically. Many families were in crisis before the coronavirus pandemic, and the additional trauma will only make matters worse if we don't find new and better ways of supporting them.
- We urge you to plan ahead of time to meet students' physical, social and emotional health needs that will likely be exacerbated by this crisis. Services should include counseling and wellness checks to ensure student safety and support.
- We also encourage the General Assembly to expand technology and WIFI access to support telehealth initiatives that will increase student and family access to appropriate medical care, while also ensuring that critical health information is shared with those directly involved in each student's development.

With schools closed, students with significant disabilities and their families require an increase in the hours of service provided for in-home therapies and respite. Without an increase in hours, students with disabilities who normally receive these services at school, are shortchanged in comparison with similarly situated families whose services did not take place at school, and the quality of life for the student and family can deteriorate rapidly.

Budget

- Public school employees are stepping up and taking leadership roles in responding to the public health crisis caused by the coronavirus. We ask the General Assembly to pass a state budget for 2019-20 that provides a pay increase for all of the state's public-school employees. Currently, our classified personnel are the only state employees who did not get a pay increase this fiscal year, even while they are serving on the front lines of the pandemic.
- And, while we are proud that GCS has opened three childcare centers for the children of our dedicated health care workers, we are now being asked to pay for this out of the additional education funding that Governor Roy Cooper has allocated for school districts.
- This creates a huge inequity. No other district will step forward to assist its county's hospitals if it requires making the difficult choice of using the limited

- funding for childcare, or to pay our employees and purchase technology for our students. Childcare should be allocated through a distinctly different funding source.
- Childcare is just one of several unfunded pandemic-related expenses GCS is experiencing, however. We have already spent more than \$250,000 on soap and custodial supplies and services, and we're only in week two of school closure.

Sanitizing and securing buildings, expanding hotspots, purchasing devices, investing more in digital resources, training teachers in online learning, expanding remote work and meeting capabilities, creating and staffing crisis hotlines and call centers, printing public health as well as instructional materials for families to use at home, all represent unbudgeted expenses.

- The General Assembly should also make public schools and public-school districts tax exempt. This would generate significant savings and would help us stretch our limited dollars even further as we purchase cleaning supplies, personal protection equipment, technology and other major coronavirus-related items. This action would also address longstanding inequities between the state's public schools and other North Carolina government entities as well as private and parochial schools, which are tax exempt. Making public schools tax-exempt would eliminate a unique and outdated feature in state law. Public schools, like other government entities in North Carolina, have long been considered tax-exempt organizations in other states.

In Summary

- Lastly, it's vitally important that adequate representation of North Carolina's largest school district superintendents is included in decision-making as we move forward with the daunting challenge of rebuilding our state's education system.
- The issues facing large districts are not identical to those facing suburban and rural districts. I know that Edna Wallace of RTI, who regularly convenes the state's largest twelve districts, is ready and willing to represent the collective issues of the large districts. Superintendents of large districts also stand ready to serve, and should be engaged as policy decisions are being developed.

Thank you for all that you are doing for the residents of Guilford County and the great state of North Carolina.