



Testimony for Assembly Informational Hearing on School Reopening Guidance June 24, 2020

My name is Dr. Lisa Olson, and I am proud to serve as the superintendent of Whitnall School District, located in southwest Milwaukee County. On June 10, both I and Lisa Elliott, superintendent of Greenfield School District received an email from one of our representatives asking about when we would be communicating to our parents about reopening this fall. We drafted a joint response because we share a municipality and because it represents the collaboration and communication that school districts have relied upon from each other during the school closure.

When thinking about how to prepare for today and considering what to share, I reflected upon our district's passion statement: *The Whitnall School District embraces the unique story of every child.* I am here to share our story.

On March 13, an hour after I made the decision to close our school district, the Governor announced the statewide closure of schools. As I prepared my testimony for today, I thought about two communications that I sent to my school board, during the early phase of the pandemic. These communications remind me of the decisions that needed to be made, stakeholders needing answers, and an overall chronology of fast-paced events and news, and I sent them at a time of immediate need - not knowing what might come next. These communications provide a clear and honest lens into the decision making process of school districts.

March 16 Email to Whitnall Board Members

Just wanted to take a quick pause and share what is occurring at the school district level with decisions and information related to COVID-19.

Over the past several days, I've tried to forward the relevant information to the board that is framing some of the critical decisions we need to make. Decisions from DPI and the Governor top the list. Often information from our other partners provides us a preview of the information before it is released to the public. My days now hold multiple conference calls with Milwaukee County officials, local health departments, and local and regional superintendents. We are receiving information from DHS, DPI, and legal counsel. And, as you are fully aware, the information is constantly changing. The other part of my days are meeting with our district team and problem-solving within Whitnall.

The decision to close for two weeks was done with the information we had from internal sources and was done in conjunction with several surrounding districts. The decision to extend spring break rather than begin online classes immediately was done for several reasons, but two primary ones. The first primary reason was to provide some time to plan and analyze what additional conditions may unfold that might provide more details to our planning. Our district was/is not in a place to implement online learning. Some districts may be able to organize this faster but we need time to plan and be intentional with expectations of our teachers and our families. We do not have a content management online platform nor have we done training with our teachers for either pedagogy or technical skills needed. The second primary reason is equity. In order to provide online learning, we have to ensure that all students have access to FAPE. It's why public schools exist. Outside of access to technology, students with an IEP or who have English language services or any other service must be considered. Access to adults who can help facilitate learning outside of school is also a limitation for some of our students. Saying we are doing online learning is not good enough and a disservice, if not planned.

Within our district, we initially focused our efforts on how to serve students when school was closed (meals, etc.) and wage and hour issues for employees. We are now transitioning our conversations to providing online learning starting after our official spring break. The information about waivers from the state today is definitely important in our planning. We will focus on all learners but prioritize our seniors to ensure they can meet graduation requirements in a timely manner. We will then focus on other high school students and move from there. We plan to serve all our students but need to prioritize our efforts and planning.

March 27 Email to Whitnall Board Members

I am not writing this email in response to anything that a board member has asked or questioned. In fact, quite the opposite. It is to provide you with the rest of the story, the story I don't have an opportunity to share. Maybe because today is Day 11 of making decisions in changing conditions and not really being able to provide answers to people who are desperately seeking them. Maybe it's just because I need to write down what's in my heart and head right now.

*When I decided to go into education, it was because I loved to learn and wanted to share and instill that love of learning with others. When I decided to go into educational leadership, it was to serve others and make sure systems were equipped to instill that love of learning to all learners. My choice is to be in K-12 public education and never do I say that I **have to** serve ALL learners but that I **get to** serve ALL learners.*

At Whitnall, we have 22.4% of our students reported socio-economically disadvantaged; I say reported because we know there are more but there is a social stigma with reporting this information. At Whitnall, we have 15.5% of our students who are in special education, a percentage above the state average. Those are public statistics available to anyone.

But what doesn't get reported publicly are all of the situations that are uncovered or shared as we work with families. The situations that are horrible to consider let alone know they exist. The information I know about staff, students, and families that gets shared in private and stays there. The mom who was crying when she called me because they don't have transportation to come to pick up the free meals and asked if her daughter would be allowed to ride her bike to pick up the meals.

So while some parents have publicly shared they disagree with my decision to wait to begin virtual learning, I will not enter that public arena to debate. I have shared the factors that were considered publicly. But the stories, situations, and information I have privately are not for the public. My decision was based upon our ability to serve all learners and would make that same decision again.

My heart aches for the students where school was their only safe place. My heart aches for students who don't have the support at home to help them once we begin virtual learning. My heart aches for students who are gifted, at-risk, have a disability, don't have a disability, have English as a second language, who will miss their spring sports season, their kindergarten field trips. My heart aches for all of them. My decision was for all of them.

Thank you for taking time to read this. It doesn't warrant a response or comment and I would prefer it that way. I just needed to share.

While this informational hearing is on school reopening guidance, it is important to recognize that school districts have been making decisions continually throughout the invasion of COVID-19, even before the statewide closure of schools. Those decisions are made with guidance from multiple outside sources but always with our students and community needs being a primary consideration.

We want our schools to be open this fall. I hope this is a common interest. We want to create a learning environment that is as safe as possible, mitigating as much risk as we are able. I hope this is also a common

interest. School districts have learned how to make decisions with high degrees of uncertainty, learning to be flexible, nimble, and adaptable as circumstances change.

There are key variables that are critical to our making plans to reopen this fall.

1. **COVID-19 Virus:** We will continue to work with our partners at the state, regional, and local levels to monitor health conditions and take necessary precautions to mitigate the health risk to our students and staff.
2. **Learning Environments:** We will continue to work with our partners at the state, regional, and local levels to create actionable and effective solutions to return to learning in school buildings this fall.
3. **2020-21 Budget:** As we enter into the second year of a biennial budget, we typically are aware of the financial commitment from the state. We are hearing there may be a budget repair bill taken up in the legislature and that it would likely mean a decrease to funding for education. This uncertainty significantly impacts our ability to respond and develop a plan to reopen. We need to know that the financial commitment promised for this upcoming school year will be there. The manner in which we reopen as safely and effectively as possible is contingent upon the resources to do so.

Every decision made these past few months has been done with diligence and with regard to the cost of the decision. While there have been expenses we have not incurred due to the school closure, there have been additional unanticipated expenses that we never planned for.. I am proud of the work my school board has done to analyze decisions and expenses incurred during the school closure by having lengthy discussions, weighing the options, and upholding their role of being good fiscal stewards of taxpayer dollars.

We have a local reopen committee that represents the stakeholders in our district and is working hard to gather input, communicate, coordinate, and develop a plan so we can reopen this fall recognizing all the variables that will still exist and trying to mitigate the health risks for everyone. Our goal is to communicate with our parents and students and community by August 1 our draft plan to reopen. If we share the common interest in getting our students back to schools this fall, I hope you will uphold the financial commitment promised to public schools this school year, and support school district leaders during this unprecedented time. We all are partners in this and need to work together as a community.