

MARQUETTE AREA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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William Saunders, Superintendent

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December 8, 2020

Dr. Michael Rice
State Superintendent
608 W. Allegan Street
P. O. Box 30008
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear Dr. Rice:

Since March of this year our public schools have faced unprecedented challenges which have forced us to restructure much of what we do. Maintaining a strong academic program while addressing the safety and social-emotional well-being of our students and staff is our top priority. Designing and delivering quality instruction in both face-to-face and virtual formats has taken substantial time and effort. The burden this has placed on our educators and families is paramount. In writing to you, we ask for your support in advocating for our public school workers who, during a pandemic year, have served tirelessly on the front lines to educate our children.

Our school community is enduring the challenge caused by many additional responsibilities as a result of COVID-19. Numerous families in our school district have opted for full or partial virtual schedules during this year, and for others, the transition to virtual learning has not been by choice. At Marquette Area Public Schools (MAPS), some students, and classrooms, have been forced to quarantine two or three times. This places families in constant flux between in-person and virtual learning, sometimes with very short notice. In addition to students who have tested positive for COVID-19, students who may be experiencing symptoms or who might be considered a close contact of someone with the virus are expected to quarantine. One school in our district with 340 students has experienced over 150 cases of students and staff having to quarantine, and in many cases these quarantines have lasted for two full weeks of school. This equates to the loss of over 1100 days of face-to-face instruction.

Though MAPS has provided every student with a Chromebook or iPad to support student learning both in school and at home, not all families are equipped to provide support for their students' learning needs. Families have encountered several barriers, including: slow or unreliable internet access, parents' lack of understanding of technology and its capabilities, and parents' inability to be present to support their children during a day of online learning. Additionally, financial hardships, illness or quarantine, and mental and physical health struggles

Mission Statement

*With an exemplary staff and rigorous curriculum, our mission is to maximize the academic potential of every child.
(Adopted 1/28/2013)*

have proven to add stress on a family's ability to participate fully in the educational process. As a result, many students are having difficulty participating in instruction, or perhaps are not participating or communicating with the school. Teachers and other school staff are spending a significant amount of time reaching out to maintain connection with students and families to try to support their instructional and emotional needs. In the normal setting, school staff respond to visual cues of students' needs. With the addition of distance learning, this becomes challenging and worrisome. Therefore, students' learning, as well as their safety and well-being is not always detected, particularly when they are not engaged or in communication.

Educating during a pandemic presents a host of new challenges. Planning, delivering, and assessing lessons in multiple modes (face-to-face, online, and hybrid) is extraordinarily complex. Each lesson or activity previously created for face-to-face instruction must now be recreated for both face-to-face and remote delivery. Adaptations, such as recording videos, creating web-based assignments, and communicating expectations with students require exorbitant time and effort. Further, educators lacked the time needed to adequately prepare for blended instruction.

Unlike the traditional face-to-face classroom structure where teachers operated from one gradebook, one attendance platform, and a standard daily schedule, this school year has added multiple facets to all of those aspects of recordkeeping. Due to the varied opportunities for students to attend school in our district face-to-face, fully virtual, or on a hybrid schedule, school staff are managing three separate structures to maintain student records. Unlike within a traditional classroom setting where the instructor is readily available to troubleshoot and answer student questions, virtual learners and their families require time from teachers and other school staff to answer questions or trouble-shoot technology issues via phone call and email. Nearly every teacher in our district has students learning online and hybrid, which has created a significant increase in the need for their availability to communicate with virtual families outside of the school day, during which they are still teaching their face-to-face classes.

Designing high-quality instruction requires time and collaboration; however, this year teachers have less of both. In the past our teachers were allotted time before and during the school day to plan their instruction, communicate with families, collaborate, and research. To more safely cohort students and keep them socially distanced, most schools have adjusted schedules and procedures, which has placed added burdens on teachers. In some buildings, students report directly to their teachers' classrooms, remaining there for most of the day, including mealtimes. Teachers are now responsible for ensuring proper handwashing, temperature checks, monitoring for symptoms, cleaning, sanitizing, managing mask breaks, and keeping students socially distanced. Our special education teachers have been tasked by the Michigan Department of Education Office of Special Education (MDE-OSE) to create multiple learning plans that are not required by federal or state rules. These responsibilities take away from teachers' ability to plan the high quality instruction they value and our students need.

Marquette Area Public Schools, like so many other schools around the state and nation, is experiencing shortages across all jobs and disciplines. Perhaps even more pronounced is the lack of substitutes and temporary workers. These shortages are only more exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic. The effect this is having on our teachers is profound. Teachers are sacrificing planning periods, lunches, and breaks to cover for co-workers to get through the average school day. Due to these extreme scarcities and the compounding loss of time within the traditional workday, teachers are providing instruction even when ill or on quarantine.

Our reason for writing stems from the question: How might we better enable schools to focus on the delivery of a quality online instructional program, the social and emotional well-being of our students, the adequate staffing of our buildings, and the safety of our school community? Solidarity from local, state, and federal decision makers is essential. Alleviating our schools of some mandates would lessen the strain on teachers, administrators, secretaries, and other school officials, thus providing them more time to focus on the most important aspects of education.

Unfortunately, certain mandates which place additional demands on our time may lack priority in light of our current circumstances. Testing (SAT, M-STEP, etc.), teacher evaluations, pupil accountability (e.g., State School Aid Act section 98a), and the record-keeping required for special education all include a significant amount of planning and paperwork. We assert the time spent on these tasks could be temporarily eliminated without damaging the quality of education we provide our students. In fact, changes of this nature would give our educators more time to focus on teaching and learning. As COVID-19 continues to interrupt our way of life, policymakers could maximize the quality of education our students are to receive by advocating for the suspension of bureaucratic mandates that are not vital for student learning.

Marquette Area Public Schools administrators are asking you to consider the following advocacy measures:

1. Extend the 2019-2020 waiver of State testing (M-STEP, PSAT, SAT, etc.)
2. Extend the 2019-2020 waiver of teacher evaluation requirements, including the requirement to evaluate probationary teachers.
3. Suspend the 2020-21 State School Aid Act section 98a reporting requirements.

Providing the highest standards of education for our students creates a need for accountability. However, this accountability is addressed in three different sections of the State School Aid Act with little consideration for the compliance time placed on instructional staff. Attendance and membership counts are necessary for funding yet these requirements are less than the transparency reporting under section 98a. Tracking two-way interactions can overtake actual instructional time with the focus turned away from the student and instead placed on accountability. The intent of the changes for virtual learning seemed to highlight flexibility but actually requires rigidity in reporting.

4. Remove the special education requirements that include writing contingency and recovery services plans.

Services and supports provided should be driven by the student's present levels of academic and functional performance. Teams should focus on these present levels and develop a plan that meets Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in any setting. This can be accomplished through the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) review process. Requiring teachers to spend valuable time on developing redundant plans and documents takes them away from providing academic, social, emotional, and behavioral supports and instruction to the most vulnerable of our students at a time when they are needed most. The State has not yet recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic. Any discussion of recovery services is therefore premature.

5. Grant teacher and administrator certification extensions and concessions

Suspend teacher and administrator recertification fees for the 2020-2021 school year, provide an option for teachers to obtain professional certification by offering the reading diagnostics and remediation course free of charge through a Michigan College or University, and extend all waivers associated with teacher certifications and permits through June 30, 2021 as was done in EO 2020-35 in April 2020.

6. Grant additional credit to school employees towards retirement

Employees in public education have worked through this pandemic to provide critical services placing their families and them at risk for potentially contracting COVID-19. At the same time, blended instruction has forced our staff to put in time beyond the traditional work day to ensure all students the best learning experience possible. Due to these factors, we are requesting school employees receive 1.25 years of service for the 2020-2021 school year.

7. Grant additional funding for Social Emotional Learning (SEL) training and programs and school counseling services

The amount of stress, uncertainty, and continual disruption of consistency that COVID-19 has placed on educational staff, students, and families requires both immediate and long-term attention. Creating emotionally and physically safe, supportive, and engaging learning environments that promote all students' social and emotional development during and post-pandemic is critical to student achievement.

As administrators we are compelled to advocate for our students, staff, and families. Amidst unprecedented challenges, our community has shown patience, grace, and resiliency. Student learning and well-being remain our most important goals and must be prioritized. By supporting the reduction or suspension of unnecessary mandates and advocating for the items listed above, you can assist us in providing the highest quality education possible while COVID-19 continues to interrupt normal school operations.

Most Sincerely,

Marquette Area Public Schools Administrators

William Saunders, Superintendent
Marquette Area Public Schools

Sandra Barnes, Special Education Supervisor
Marquette Area Public Schools

Jonathon Young, Principal
Marquette Senior High School

Amanda Erspamer-Berry, Assistant Principal
Marquette Senior High School

Chris Messano, Assistant Principal
Marquette Senior High School

Andrew Crunkleton, Principal
Marquette Alternative High School

Robert Reichel, Principal
Bothwell Middle School

Stephanie Anderson, Assistant Principal
Bothwell Middle School

Dr. Travis Smith, Principal
Cherry Creek Elementary School

Dr. Sarah Kemppainen, Principal
Graveraet Elementary School

Kevin Hooper, Principal
Sandy Knoll Elementary School

Zack Sedgwick, Principal
Superior Hills Elementary School