

# FULFILLING THE CORE MISSION OF EDUCATING CHILDREN:

## Exemplary Local Crisis Responses During the Pandemic

By Terry Spradlin, Executive Director



**W**hen the theme of this issue of *The Journal* was chosen late last year by Dr. Michael Adamson, ISBA director of Board Services, neither he, nor any of us, could have imagined how timely and appropriate it would be. As you read on the cover the theme is *Making Hard Choices in Tough Times*. That is

precisely what school board members, school administrators and teachers have been doing since early March in response to the global novel coronavirus pandemic.

During the pandemic, Governor Eric Holcomb issued more than 30 executive orders that established stay-at-home requirements and provided guidance on public health, safety and governmental services. Many of the executive orders have had indirect or direct impact on the delivery of K-12 public education. While the nearly 7 million Hoosiers adjusted to pandemic and stay-at-home orders during the spring, schools were required to change instructional delivery methods to meet a total of 160 instructional days, or at least 20 additional days of remote/eLearning from April 2 through June 30 (the statutory end date of the school year calendar).

Thank you for your commitment to students across the state of Indiana and your steadfast dedication, as school board members and educators, to model effective leadership during a time when it has been so desperately needed. I've made that statement before,

but it bears repeating. Serving the best interest and learning needs of your students hasn't been easy, but you have done it to the best of your ability. You are to be commended!

In May, I invited board members and administrators to share success stories in managing the essential business of your school corporation during the COVID-19 pandemic. I received many replies with stories of effective governance measures boards have taken, administrator or educator success stories in serving students, and other news about how K-12 school communities rallied to support schoolchildren during this public health crisis. I am pleased to spotlight the efforts from many school corporations from around the state.

### STUDENT MEAL DISTRIBUTION

**In East Allen County Schools,** Superintendent Marilyn Hissong shared their impressive story of rapidly increasing weekly food distribution to help keep students nourished.

"As we continued to see grocery store shelves diminish, restaurant doors closing, and many families financially affected by the COVID-19 virus, the staff at East Allen County Schools continued to provide one of the highest necessities in life, FOOD! Within 10 weeks of meal pick-up service, East Allen County School district provided 462,690 meals to those in need during this unprecedented time. The food



service staff, along with administrators, teachers, custodians, and paraprofessionals, all worked together as a team to provide these nutrient-filled meals to the children in our community. One thing that is always certain and remains to this day, food has a way of bringing everyone together!”

Don DeWeese, **Community Schools of Frankfort** superintendent, shared a similar story, indicating that the school corporation distributed 106,374 meals to students at 23 distribution sites from March 15 to May 22. **Monroe Central School Corporation** provided multiple “grab and go” lunch locations along with delivery services for those living in rural areas, according to Michael Morris a board member. Morris acknowledged that the team efforts of the director of Food Service, cafeteria workers, and other school staff were crucial to the success of their program to serve thousands of meals.

In a few communities, including **Mooresville Schools** and **South Ripley School Corporation**, food service became even more challenging when a tornado caused power outages in multiple school buildings, forcing relocation of food storage to offsite freezers. The school corporations of **Milan** and **Jac-Cen-**

**Del** aided **South Ripley** with freezer space. A local food pantry assisted Mooresville Schools by storing food, and in turn, the school corporation allowed the pantry to use kitchen space to help prepare donations diverted from now-closed restaurants into family-sized food packages for distribution. South Ripley also delivered extra meals to police, fire, EMS, and even utility workers who were working to get power back to the town of Versailles. In **Mt. Vernon Community School Corporation (MVCSC)** in Fortville, a community food drive collected non-perishable donations and delivered them to a local food pantry for their “Pack the Pantry” event.

## STUDENT AND STAFF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Maria Bond, director of Community Relations for the **Mt. Vernon Community School Corporation**, reporting on behalf of Superintendent Jack Parker and Board President Kellie Freeman, mentioned the school corporation’s efforts to address the social and emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing of students and staff while conquering the challenge of extended eLearning during



A Mt. Vernon Community School Corporation bus collected non-perishable donations in a local neighborhood and delivered them to a local food pantry for their “Pack the Pantry” event.

### HERE ARE A FEW SPECIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF MVCSC IN ADDRESSING SEL ISSUES:

- Principals sent weekly wellness surveys to students, which included the option for a counselor, principal or staff member to contact the student.
- Principals sent surveys to parents requesting feedback on their individual eLearning experience, including any challenges with the internet, eLearning and how their child is doing in general.
- Teachers, counselors and principals were tracking former at-risk students, as well as new at-risk students due to the pandemic. Communication attempts and all connections were tracked in effort to help the student.
- Principals, counselors and teachers connected with at-risk students individually via phone or Zoom, encouraging them and helping them in whatever way they could.
- MVCSC behavior specialists conducted nurture groups with many elementary classes. In these engagements, students would practice skills needed to respond to each other and discuss their needs during this stressful time.
- One high school teacher offered her students to substitute a “Corona Act of Kindness” for an assignment. She did this after learning of some of her students’ specific family challenges of having to care for a loved one during this time. All her students completed at least one act of kindness.



- Several community morale-boosting activities helped keep the Mt. Vernon community connected. A few of these activities were a “Super Staff Challenge” (dinner sponsored by a local utility company), social media themed days, uplifting video messages, creating a staff cookbook, and staff parades led by a bus and local law enforcement.



Mt. Vernon Community School Corporation’s Kelsey Rusk, Fortville Elementary Kindergarten Teacher, shares how she misses her students through the districts’ daily social media campaign on “Miss You Monday.”

the pandemic. Ms. Bond shared, “There were many triumphs, celebrations, and many lessons learned. MVCSC was fortunate to have been a 1:1 technology district for five years and have had several (single) eLearning days prior to the pandemic. With this experience, our staff and students were able to make lemonade out of lemons and embrace this unique learning challenge.”

At **Wawasee Community School Corporation**, Superintendent Tom Edington shared, “When the virus interrupted our regular teaching

and learning, employees jumped into recovery mode to maintain educational, social, emotional, health and nutrition functions for our students and community. We adapted as situations changed to include the remainder of the school year. What I’ll remember later will be the ‘can do’ attitude of our caring staff and community!”

### STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND CONNECTIONS

Michael Morris, **Monroe Central** board member, described their efforts to keep students connected and engaged. “Many students had birthdays during the shutdown and were unable to have traditional birthday parties due to social distancing measures,” he said. “In an effort to raise spirits and show the students that they were missed, several teachers and staff members would form a caravan on student birthdays and drive to their home and sing ‘Happy Birthday’ from their cars. The elementary school faculty and staff also conducted a last day of school parade. The parade drove through the neighboring towns with car decorations and messages of encouragement and congratulations for the student’s successful completion of a challenging school year.”

From Dr. Edington at **Wawasee CSC**: “The other bright light from the past several months is the variety of videos made by teachers, staff members and parents to keep connections and honor others during stressful times. Virtual end-of-year award programs were a wonderful way to connect to those kept physically apart due to these unique times.”

### STAFF AND SENIOR RECOGNITIONS

**Clinton Prairie School Corporation** Superintendent Amanda Whitlock shared that her school corporation launched a yard sign





Clinton Prairie Jr. Sr. High School Principal, Kirsten Clark (left) and Jr. Sr. High School English/Language Arts Teacher, Sarah Sabens (right) show support with their “Gopher Great” signs.

campaign to recognize graduating seniors as well as staff. She said, “Our teachers have been rock stars throughout this changing time in education. We wanted them to feel the love as well. Our administrative team drove to each staff member’s home and placed a Gopher Great sign in their yard.”

Morris, from **Monroe Central**, also described their efforts to recognize seniors. “A social media Senior Spotlight was created for our 2020 Senior class, which included a picture, their future plans and their favorite memory from their time in school. Our athletic department also had a Spring Sport Senior Day, where the AD and school mascot went to each senior’s house to take a picture and present a certificate and flower. The picture and athlete’s profile was also posted on social media to showcase their achievements. Signs with each senior’s name were also displayed in front of the school. A Celebration Parade is planned for what was originally the day of our graduation ceremony. Although the formal ceremony was pushed to July, we wanted to do something to honor them on the day their graduation ceremony would have taken place.”

Dr. Allen Bourff, superintendent, and Amanda Shera, board member for

**Hamilton Southeastern Schools**, shared the following on their unique senior night recognition celebrations: “In light of the months-long school closures and the elimination of significant end-of-year experiences for seniors, the City of Fishers expressed a desire to recognize the seniors of Fishers and Hamilton Southeastern High Schools and celebrate the milestone of graduation. A video tribute was produced that captured congratulatory remarks from individuals representing city, school, business, government, sports and entertainment. Conner Prairie opened its parking lots and grounds for an old-fashioned drive-in movie type event, featuring a video presentation on five big screens followed by fireworks. This was done on two consecutive evenings May 29 and 30, reflecting the dates of the original commencement plans for both high schools.”

**eLEARNING**

As stated in Dr. Aleesia Johnson, superintendent of **Indianapolis Public Schools**, and Board President Michael O’Connor’s column in this issue of *The Journal*, IPS had 6,000 students taking high school coursework that needed the right technology for digital learning essentially overnight. Of these, at least half did not have access to a device with a keyboard that they could use for school work. About 30% did not have access to a reliable internet connection. “But before we could focus on how to secure and pay for technology, we first had to figure out who were those students who needed it. More than 100 IPS staff members spent their time calling all our high school families to



Conner Prairie opened its parking lots and grounds for an old-fashioned drive-in movie type event, featuring a video presentation on five big screens followed by fireworks to recognize the graduating seniors of Fishers and Hamilton Southeastern High Schools.

determine which of them needed laptops, and to confirm reliable, safe addresses for them. These phone calls took place in at least five languages – English, Spanish, French, Swahili and Arabic – to ensure we were able to communicate with all our families.”

At **Benton Community School Corporation**, board member Bob Sondgeroth (also ISBA Region 4 Director) described the school district’s communication efforts for continuous learning implementation for students in the spring semester: “BCSC sent e-mail notifications through our Harmony Student Information System, we posted all letters on our websites, sent the information out to local news agencies, through social media, translating into Spanish for those that needed it, and mailed the letters out to those who do not have a valid e-mail address in our system.” Sondgeroth went on to share that “BCSC students accessed instruction and lessons through school-issued Chromebooks in grades 7-12, and K-6 students accessed materials through identified devices at home. The school corporation provided additional Wi-Fi hotspots outside its schools in the parking lots to allow additional and greater internet access. BCSC is also providing packets of materials for pick-up or by mail to those students that have communicated

the need for these materials due to limited access to connectivity or devices.”

## BOARD LEADERSHIP AND VIRTUAL BOARD MEETINGS

Regarding board development and leadership, Bob Gerber, school board member for **Tri-County School Corporation**, stated, “We needed to re-schedule our winter facilitated work session (school board retreat) to early April. With the early stages of the coronavirus shut down, I contacted Lisa Tanselle, ISBA lead attorney, on her advice and direction. Lisa recommended that we try having a “virtual retreat” versus any type of face-to-face meeting, for both legal and public perception reasons. We had a virtual retreat Zoom meeting on a Friday for six hours, from early afternoon to early evening. We met again with another Zoom session for several hours on Saturday morning. This worked so well that we also had a virtual school board meeting in May to conduct essential business. This is just one way in which we have adapted to the coronavirus pandemic.”

Regarding virtual board meetings that have been required and now permitted under current executive order, school boards from every region of the state were responsive to demonstrating effective board governance by conducting essential business remotely. Many different methods and online platforms were deployed, but the public and media continued to have access to these meetings, and board members fulfilled their oaths of office to provide timely leadership in the face of a crisis. This response illustrates that remote board member participation is viable during the pandemic and perhaps afterwards and ISBA will consider pursuing legislation to change the Open Door law to provide permanent flexibility.

Looking to the future regarding the commencement of the 2020-21 school year, your task of developing, adopting and implementing a school re-opening plan will be hard work and many difficult decisions are ahead. ISBA will continue to issue weekly guidance on our Coronavirus Resources page, including FAQs and model resolutions, which can be found on the ISBA homepage at: [www.isba-ind.org](http://www.isba-ind.org). Please let us know how we can continue to support your school board as you move forward with these tremendous endeavors. We will respond to your request for informational resources and guidance as quickly as possible. Finally, ISBA will continue to advocate for funding support to address students’ learning needs and the additional costs of meeting the IN-CLASS health and safety guidelines. 🏠



### Is a Superintendent, Central Office or Building Level Administrator Search in Your Future?

If so, give us a call to schedule a meeting with an ISBA representative to share our long-standing, proven process for finding the best applicants for your next superintendent or key administrative position.

#### Need more information?

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