



# MAKING TOUGH CHOICES

P-H-M administrators and teachers focus on developing an education model that will support all types of learners and continue to ensure that **every student** has a positive and successful educational experience that meets their needs – both inside and outside the traditional classroom.

*By Dr. Jerry Thacker, Superintendent, and Lucha Ramey, Director of Communications of Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation*



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*Editor's note: This is the third in a year-long series featuring Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation.*

It reads like something from a George Orwell novel ... a microscopic enemy declares “war” on the physical and psychological well-being of the citizens of the world. Hospitals become the front line in a fight against a worldwide pandemic. The assembly lines of industry powerhouses grind to a screeching halt, shifting gears to produce vital medical equipment. The “free world” shelters in place. Homes across the country become workplaces and school houses simultaneously – in an instant – all while the laundry and dishes continue to pile up! No person, industry or country on the planet has escaped the effects of COVID-19. But through it all, the education of our children had to continue. If ever there was a real-world exercise of growth mindset, flexibility, resourcefulness and fortitude, it has been the past three months.

From the onset, whether we wanted to admit it out loud or not, we all instinctively knew the educational system would be severely impacted by the coronavirus. For five to six hours a day, school buildings hold not only dozens or hundreds of students, but also dozens of staff of various ages carrying out a multitude of job responsibilities throughout the building and throughout the school district. Our schools are in essence miniature villages. One positive case of COVID-19 in one building could effectively shut down an entire district.

This was the scenario that Avon Community School Corporation faced. On Monday, March 9, the suburban Indianapolis school district made the wise decision to close its 12 schools and move to eLearning after the Hendricks County Health Department shared news of two Avon students displaying symptoms of COVID-19. Initially, the hope of Avon Superintendent Maggie Hoernemann was that after two weeks of deep cleaning of the two affected buildings in-person classes

could resume on March 20. However, as we all now know, that did not happen for Avon or for the rest of us either. Penn-Harris-Madison wasn't too far behind. By Thursday of that same week in the late afternoon of March 12, we notified parents that students would not report to school on Friday, March 13 or Monday, March 16. We told them to prepare for extended eLearning for an undetermined length of time.

This was a hard decision for the P-H-M Board of School Trustees and P-H-M Administration. However, after countless hours of discussion of multiple scenarios over several days, it was clear that this was the safest choice not only for our students and families, but also for our staff. Safety has always been the top priority of the P-H-M Board and Administration. With that as our guiding principle, we had to put the well-being and health of our community first.

Like many school districts across the country, our early communications to our families about the coronavirus were reminders about hand hygiene, covering of the mouth and nose when sneezing, avoiding the touching one's face and eyes, and avoiding close contact with those who were sick or who had travelled overseas to countries on the CDC watch list. We ramped up the cleaning of high traffic/high touch areas in our classrooms, throughout our school buildings and administrative offices. P-H-M's first communication to mention COVID-19 came on Tuesday, March 3, followed by our second parent communication a week later on Tuesday, March 10.

Things evolved at lightning speed during that one-week timeframe. Indiana's first confirmed coronavirus case was announced on Friday, March



Tweet from Bittersweet Kindergarten Teacher Mrs. Breeanna Wallick on the first day of eLearning.



Tweet from Mary Frank Elementary 4th grade Teacher Mrs. Lindsay Helman.



P-H-M Food Service employees handed out nearly 91,000 meals during the shutdown (March 16-June 3).

6. By the following Tuesday, March 10, administrators from the three largest St. Joseph County school districts met with leaders of the St. Joseph County Department of Health (SJCDH) to discuss the evolving health protocols and procedures for COVID-19. At this point, Indiana State Department of Health Department (ISDH) testing data showed six positive cases. Most cases were in the central



Tweet from 4th grade Teacher & Mom Mrs. Helman on the first day of eLearning.



Tweet from Bittersweet's Mrs. Wallick.

part of the state with no confirmed cases in St. Joseph County. Our discussion with the SJCDH also involved their notification process and the circumstances under which a school, or an entire school district, would close. We were advised not to make any changes to our academic or extracurricular calendars. The guidance provided at this time was for the elderly and those with serious medical underlying conditions to avoid large gatherings. After that meeting, we updated P-H-M families on what we had learned from SJCDH.

The P-H-M Administration Team reconvened the following day, Wednesday, March 11, and reviewed the major events that our schools were scheduled to host in the coming days and weekend. These were some of the big ones that we were most concerned about:

- ▶ **Regional Robotics Tournament** (*40 high school FRC robotics teams from across Indiana and Michigan amounting to a crowd of more than 5,000 students, coaches, mentors, parents and fans for the three-day event hosted at Penn High School*)
- ▶ **District Elementary Spell Bowl** (*@200+ fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students participate in a districtwide event with numerous P-H-M staff on-hand assisting, and another 600 hundred parents and family members in the audience*)
- ▶ **National Junior Honor Society induction ceremonies** at each of our three middle schools
- ▶ **ISSMA preview concerts** at our middle schools
- ▶ **P-H-M DVT & Planetarium public shows** (*with the Digital Video Theater holding 100 people*)
- ▶ **P-H-M Education Foundation fundraiser event**

This list doesn't include the fact that some of our buildings were being used for church services or that our Community Adult Education program conducts evening classes in some of our 15 buildings. When we looked over our list, we noticed that not only were these large crowd events, they were also events that brought large numbers of people from outside our school communities into our buildings. How would we clean and re-clean all of these areas to keep them safe for students and staff the following instructional day? Even if these events were considered safe, we weren't sure that we had the custodial manpower to effectively clean these areas and ensure proper disinfection and sanitation for our students and staff by Monday morning.

While it was a hard decision to make, it became clear that P-H-M had to postpone large community events for the remainder of the week through Sunday, March 15. This was not a popular decision. Postponing many of these events was in essence canceling them. The staff hours of planning that went into the development of these activities was huge. It was a decision that impacted thousands, many of whom were outside P-H-M. The determination was also made to put off all school field trips and travel to extracurricular activities.

And while we were beginning to craft the message to be sent to our families on Wednesday, March 11, we learned in a late afternoon news conference from

the County Health Department leaders that St. Joseph County had its first positive case of coronavirus. We were now certain that we had made the right choice to suspend activities for the rest of the week. In our parent communication, we stated that “P-H-M Administration will take the rest of this week to examine what future action may need to be taken.”

What would come next was imminent. We all felt it. We, like many of our fellow school districts across the state, started mentally preparing for what would come next. And just a day after we had postponed all of our large community activities and limited student participation in extracurricular activities, on Thursday, March 12, Gov. Eric Holcomb issued his first executive order limiting non-essential gatherings to no more than 250 people. Gov. Holcomb instructed schools to follow the guidelines for such gatherings and advised them to closely examine student participation in extracurricular or co-curricular activities. He also gave school corporations a 20-day waiver to use as needed for the remainder of the academic year. The power was now in our hands to make the tough decision, to

close or stay open. With input from the P-H-M Teachers Association and in consultation with the School Board, we erred on the side of caution and notified families that students would not report to school starting Friday, March 13. We built in some breathing space for our teachers, staff, students and families by using two waiver days right away and didn’t start eLearning until Tuesday, March 17.

We were the first school district in the St. Joseph County area to shut down. While the decision to close was obvious and natural, it wasn’t easy. We knew it would be a huge disruption in the lives of our families. However, while not ideal, instruction could continue by moving out of the classroom and going online. P-H-M is very fortunate to be a 1:1 district and has been utilizing eLearning for seven years. When making the call to cancel school due to the weather, we always ask ourselves, what is the safest choice for our students? Are the students safer staying at home? What are the risks? It is, of course, always more beneficial for students to be in school with teachers for in-person instruction. But having the option to easily transition



On May 20, the last day of eLearning, P-H-M Athletic Fields were lit up for 20 minutes to honor the loss of the Spring 2020 sports season for Penn High School student-athletes.

instruction to the online platform allows us to always put safety first. We didn't view this decision any differently.

P-H-M's "Triangle of Success" connects teachers and parents to support our students. Communication and collaboration between adults is what sets students up for success. This is our guiding practice and works under normal circumstances; it was going to be needed now more than ever. In this new virtual environment, teachers would be remote and the parents would become the main facilitators helping their students at home, one-on-one. Parents and teachers would have to work together to educate students in this new homeschool setting.

Some things were tricky to figure out. While we are 1:1 with technology, only our middle and high school students take their Chromebooks

home with them. At the elementary level, they are kept at school. Kindergarteners use iPads, which aren't necessarily ideal to access extended eLearning exercises. While teachers used their first two waiver days to prepare their first eLearning lessons, our school staff coordinated parents coming to the schools to pick up student personal items left behind. Our IT Department worked with elementary school principals to coordinate the distribution of extra Chromebooks that we fortunately had on hand. Our Building Techs would shift from not only supporting the technology needs of teachers and staff working from home, but to also supporting our students, who were now using their devices 100% of the school day and off hours as well.

A major factor that was not overlooked and that we grappled with was the awareness that many students are school-dependent. Many of our students depend on the two meals per day they receive at school. When students are physically with us, we are able to do wellness checks. The social emotional connection that we make with students is key, and for many students it is vital. School is their safe haven, away from less than ideal situations – or even worse – abusive homes.

Also not forgotten, is that about 80% of a school district's workforce are school year employees, not year round. Over time for larger school districts, many operations have become almost 24-7. But a school system provides educational services, which means we primarily function only when students are present. Bus drivers don't work on snow days, neither do teachers' aides and educational assistants. We also don't operate our before and after school care for elementary students on inclement weather days. What would an unexpected and extended closure mean for our hourly school year employees?

The decision-making process for schools, across the state and country, was multifaceted and multi-layered. No choice was without an implication; the ripple effect seemed endless. This meant ongoing and informative communication with our two most important stakeholders, families and staff, would be essential.

At the end of day one of the shutdown, Friday, March 13, we sent our fifth communication to parents. We laid out our early eLearning plan and schedule, letting families know that free meal service would be available to every student in the district, regardless of free and reduced status, starting on the following Monday, March 16. In all, over more than 10 weeks, we sent 17 communications to our parents via our emergency notification system using email, text messaging and phone calls. We also posted the information on our social media channels and District website.

Over that weekend of March 15 and before the start of the new week, we followed up with staff directly to lay out the plan for the coming week. While teachers had clear job expectations built into the virtual environment, what about everyone else? How can you pay staff with no real job responsibilities during a pandemic shut down? How do you avoid state regulations about ghost employment?





P-H-M Supt. Dr. Jerry Thacker and Penn Principal Sean Galliher helped deliver signs to seniors. More than 130 staff volunteered to deliver @800 signs.

We have all wished it and even said it out loud a time or two ..., “If things would just slow down enough, we’d have enough time to do ..., ..., and ....!” This is especially true in cyclical businesses like school districts. How could we make the most use of this time? Staff development was our answer. When would we ever again have a captive audience for 11 uninterrupted weeks? What better time to take advantage of people being locked indoors day in and day out!

Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation capitalized on this time for school year employee groups by providing intentional SEL professional development. We made the PD relatable to all employee groups, from classified employees, to bus drivers, to food service and custodial staff. We were laser focused on providing relatable information that, when we returned to our buildings, could impact school culture.

Most P-H-M employees did report to work that first week we were out and practiced social distancing while continuing to serve the needs of the school community. But with the establishment of online SEL professional development provided by P-H-M SEL Director Dr. Jennifer Sears, we had a plan for the rest of the extended period. This preliminary plan ended up

servicing us very well. Over the 11-week period, we were able to provide valuable staff development to key employee stakeholder groups who have multiple engagement points with our students, like bus operators, food service staff, teachers’ assistants, before and after school program employees. This PD would pave the way for positive interactions, engagement, psychological safety, relationships, diversity appreciation, communication, inclusion, resilience, and positive mental wellness.

On April 2, 2020, Gov. Holcomb announced that all Indiana K-12 schools would remain closed for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year. While warranted given the COVID-19 situation, nevertheless this was sad news for us all. The Governor also announced that day that he was extending the Shelter in Place Order from an end date of April 7, to April 20, 2020.

We all know that this was especially hard for the Class of 2020 seniors. Countless students, at all grade levels across the state, were missing out on academic competitions, musical and choir performances, dance and drama performances, art shows, athletic competitions and entire sports seasons. What we all treasure and value most as educators is being with our students. We enjoy watching them soar in their accomplishments and



Teachers and staff from Moran Elementary School organized an end of school year parade celebration. The route took them by the homes of 400+ students.

cheering them on in their extra and co-curricular activities. P-H-M staff at every level now shifted focus to helping the school year end as smoothly as possible for our students and families. We would continue to do eLearning until May 20. We would continue to serve nourishing meals three times per

day. We would continue to reach out and monitor our at-risk students. We would continue to provide SEL lessons not only to students, but also to staff sheltered in place at home. We would give our seniors fond memories to look back on. We would provide a virtual online Commencement for approximately 800

graduates until it was safe to hold an in-person ceremony. We would create new, fun end-of-school-year traditions, like parades.

In the end, our students, families, teachers and staff persevered in the tradition of P-H-M Excellence. Coupled with the stress, anxiety and economic impacts caused by the pandemic shutdown, we know the past three months have been a challenge for our students and families. It was definitely a growth experience for us all, teachers, school administrators and support staff included. We wouldn't have been able to do it without the commitment and partnership with our parents and teachers working together to ensure our students' continued academic success, at every level.

As the school year wrapped up, there was a lot of uncertainty about what the fall will look like. The Indiana Considerations for Learning and Safe Schools (IN-CLASS) re-entry guidance document for the 2020-2021 school year developed by the IDOE in cooperation with the Governor's Office provides







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Class of 2020 graduates enjoying their virtual Commencement in their homes.



Outgoing 5th grade Bittersweet student picks up her new Schmucker Middle School "swag."

guidance from the Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH) and the Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA). Planning for multiple scenarios for Fall 2020 can now materialize and be finalized. But make no mistake, more hard choices during tough times lie ahead. If the Spring 2020 taught us anything, it's that there is no crystal ball of how things will develop.

Nonetheless, P-H-M Administrators and teachers will focus on developing an educational model that will support all types of learners so that we can continue to ensure that every student has a positive and successful educational experience that meets their needs, both inside and outside the traditional classroom. Some of the key areas we will be focusing on as we work with teachers and parents to develop a re-entry plan for the 2020-2021 school year:

- ▶ Addressing and closing learning gaps
- ▶ Exploring hybrid models of eLearning and in-person instruction
- ▶ Technology tools and supports for both families and teachers
- ▶ School day models that will support effective social distancing *(including transportation, food service and recess)*
- ▶ Student engagement
- ▶ Social emotional learning

It will be a very busy summer for all of us indeed! 🐾



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