

A Spring Unlike Any Other – Wade Smith

The mountain snow, quickly fading from the hillsides that distinguish our beautiful valley, serves as a reminder of the changing seasons. However, the normal progression into spring this year is anything but typical for our entire community as families grapple with the devastating impacts COVID-19 is having on our daily lives and routines. Our public schools are no exception. What normally would consist of activities such as end-of-year music and drama performances, state assessments, and pomp and circumstance for seniors, the impacts of school campus closures have rocked our annual customs and traditions. It breaks my heart, and theirs, that they have been robbed of some of the rich capstone experiences; other than maybe the cancelled state assessment part.

On Friday, March 13, Governor Inslee issued an emergency proclamation to close all schools in the state of Washington effective Tuesday, March 17. The order called on all schools to remain closed through at least April 24, 2020 in an effort to aggressively slow the spread of COVID-19. Governor Inslee later extended the school closure directive to the remainder of the school year. I'm proud to report within one week of receiving the charge to close schools, we were among only a handful of districts across the state to launch a robust Distance Learning program for all students. With a commitment to equity, our plan hinged on customized learning packets for preschool through 5th grade students with an online experience for our secondary students in grades 6-12. I could not be more proud of our staff who rallied to the call, putting kids and families first. Just days after schools were shuttered we deployed over 2,000 Chromebooks and WiFi hotspots to ensure equity and access for all secondary grade students. The day after closure we stood ready to feed students with grab and go food bags, serving over 9,000 meals to hungry students over spring break alone. Additionally, our support staff are stepping up to provide childcare to our valley's critical access workers who in turn keep our community safe.

I was recently asked during an interview, "What have you learned since being forced to transition into a distance learning model as a result of school closures?" As I reflected, my response was less about new learnings and more about confirmation of my deeply held beliefs. Public schools are built on the ideology learning is a social interaction and engagement between students and adults serve foundational to its structure. Our institutions are framed by the understanding the human species is a social creature that longs for community and contextual learning. Elementary students learning how to take turns playing foursquare on the playground, secondary students performing with their peers in harmony on the stage, upper classmen debating the literary merits of *The Great Gatsby* in class, or dealing with a tough loss on the ballfield - all of these are deeply woven into the fabric of a public school experience.

Although material can be presented, and valuable education occur over distance learning, it is far more difficult to replicate the authentic interaction and engagement that is best realized in brick and mortar settings. Despite these circumstances, my colleagues and I are committed to do everything in our power to fill this void. Teachers, intervention specialists, counselors, and support staff are reaching out to students to support them during these difficult times. Whether by phone, email, Skype, or personal letter, we are working hard to live our commitment of maintaining connection with our kids. Spring coaches creating individualized workout routines for students, guidance counselors assisting seniors with college applications over Google Hangouts, and elementary teachers writing personalized letters to their students on a regular basis are just a few examples. Although we are still learning our way through this new reality, every day we are making strides and getting better at it.

Despite these accomplishments and supports, the added burden school closure has placed on students and families is no doubt significant. My colleagues and I stand ready to help and assist. Whether accessing a healthy meal, assistance with your child's online education or weekly learning plan, or supporting your student's social/emotional needs, the Walla Walla School District is here for you. In addition, we are blessed to live in a community that maintains dozens of local agencies, community service groups, and religious organizations who also stand ready to lend support during this time of great need. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Working together and taking care of each other and our neighbor, we will get through this. We are a resilient and passionate community. That is the Walla Walla Way.