

Your View by Quakertown superintendent: This isn't 'school' as we knew it but we're taking care of students

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In Quakertown, we are very sensitive to what our neighbors are going through, both from a mental health and financial standpoint. Inherent in the privilege to maintain our paychecks by law as public educators, we feel there is an obligation to continue to serve our students and others.

I want to assure you that since our school buildings closed on March 13th, district employees have been working harder than ever.

Since a week before Bucks County schools were closed, all 13 superintendents have participated in a daily conference call facilitated by the Bucks County Intermediate Unit's executive director, to discuss what each district was doing in regards to safety issues, how best to feed students in need, how best to communicate with students and their families, and how to jump teaching and learning into a virtual world.

Three times a week I've been meeting online with business, health care and Quakertown municipal leaders to focus our respective resources on helping

families and businesses in all six municipalities during this unprecedented event. A significant part of the district's strategy is tightening our fiscal belt by presenting the school board a no-tax-increase budget this week, the first in over 50 years.

It has been a humbling experience watching our education professionals develop and roll out an eLearning plan overnight. At the district level, we met virtually at least once a day to ensure the behind-the-scenes work got done. Immediately after schools were closed, our first set of priorities was to ensure our students were OK, and that we could connect to them.

Building principals, the Office of Teaching & Learning, our technology team and Pupil Services staff connected with families to provide resources for students and faculty. Our food services team is now providing meals to all students — private and public, from three locations.

During the first week out of school, the high school administration team reached out to 107 parents of at-risk seniors who have yet to complete graduation requirements. Summer school started early this year, with the objective to have everyone graduate on time. And Pupil Services administrators met virtually with nearly 90 sets of parents of students with individualized education programs and gifted individualized education programs that are expiring so we remain in compliance with state mandates. By the end of May, another 290 IEP/GIEP meetings must be conducted to remain in federal compliance. School psychologists are working to support mandated deadlines for evaluations where we have signed parental consent to evaluate during the shutdown.

Character is often defined by doing the right thing, while no one is looking. That's been happening every day with our teachers. For the first two weeks, they did a phenomenal job staying connected with students. Many posted photos and videos on Twitter with the hashtag #qcsdshareyourlearning, and students devoured the content.

Nothing replaces a teacher in a classroom, along with students walking the hallways and having lunch together every day. It builds community, respect, and love. Students love their teachers and our teachers love them right back. It doesn't stop there.

High school coaches are "meeting" with their student-athletes, sending videos about how to stay in shape, both mentally and physically. Many of our teachers, support staff and coaches are doing this while tending to their own children and challenges at home.

Our philosophy in designing our state-mandated Continuity of Education Plan is to provide as many learning opportunities and support to as many students as we can. No doubt, it isn't "school" as it was one month ago, but it represents our best faith effort to take care of our students. Without it, the average predicted learning loss could be up 70% of the work completed this academic year.

Superintendents across the country are actively seeking the silver lining, the myriad opportunities out there with this COVID-19 crisis. Public education will be positioned to be in a much better place when we get back into our schools.

Bill Harner has been superintendent of the Quakertown Community School District for seven years.