

March 22 Update

I have stated often over the past several days that we are faced with more questions than answers during these unprecedented times. I wish that I had easy answers (or, at times, any answers at all) to the questions that I receive. Friday's flurry of communications from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and the Governor's Office did little more than to add to the confusion surrounding remote learning, instructional time, and "forgiven" days. This has raised one BIG question:

### **"Why should we do remote learning if it doesn't count?"**

Below, I have prepared two responses. The first is a simple answer, The second is a bit more complicated.

#### **Simple Answer**

The simplest answer I can give is this. Learning is always important. So is routine. At this point, we are unsure about when school will reopen. Health experts continue to make clear that an April 13 return to school is purely speculative at this time and that decisions made today could change as soon as tomorrow. One thing is sure. We want you to be ready when that time comes. Moving forward with elearning will assure that we have not lost important time. Staying in a routine will support a smooth transition back into school so that we do not lose instructional time getting students reacclimated once we return.

The alternative is doing nothing.

Why should I do the work if it doesn't "count"? The simple answer, again, is that learning counts. I am learning right now, and it has nothing to do with homework or grades. Before all this happened, I had never heard of "social distancing." I've spent a lot of time reading about it in these past few weeks. I'm sure the concept existed long before it became part of the national lexicon. It just didn't matter that much. It matters now. And while it is new learning for me, I can better understand what it is and why it is relevant because of important concepts I learned in biology, mathematics, and social studies in high school. I sure am glad that I didn't miss the four weeks in school when those were taught.

I am proud of the fact that you are anxious about your grades. As with you, I was concerned about my grades in school. In sports and in the classroom, I was a fierce competitor. I simply did not like getting beat. I also had goals that included getting into college, securing a good job, and advancing in my career - all doors that good grades opened. Quality grades reflected quality learning, so I was told. I do not want to diminish the fact that good grades open doors, but soon after receiving my first job, I found out that what I learned was more important than the grades I earned.

## **Complicated Answer**

That learning is more important than grades might not make sense to you now as it has been hammered into your head that grades are so important in the race to get into college or get a good job. That hasn't (and likely won't) change. That is why we are not giving out letter grades at this time, opting instead to give credit/no credit for remote learning. We don't want the lack of direct face-to-face contact with a classroom teacher or personal home situations to impact grades and grade point averages. Colleges and universities are recognizing this as well.

Many post-secondary institutions have made the difficult decision to forego using letter grades to indicate course completion during this shutdown. This past Friday, The University of Michigan sent out the following message.

*“Due to the unique academic and personal challenges our students are experiencing this semester in regard to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, all undergraduate courses will transition to an alternative grading policy in which faculty enter traditional letter grades, but students receive either “Pass,” or “No Record Covid” on their permanent transcripts.”*

I assume that higher education institutions are scrambling to develop contingencies for transcript review as part of the next year's admission process with the understanding that high schools across the country are faced with the same issue.

Is it worth doing the work now if we have to make up days anyway?

We have been receiving information in response to the COVID-19 pandemic from the Michigan Department of Education, the Governor's Office, and the U.S. Department of Education nearly daily. In each of these communications, we are given guidance based on current law and how we should deal with fallout of the spread of the virus including, ultimately, school closure. As this has been an unprecedented issue, the guidance we have been given has evolved quickly. Sometimes, it has meant that the guidance we received one day was upended the next. That was the case on Friday beginning with a 10:17 a.m. memo local school districts received from the Michigan Department of Education.

Here's a quick look at the timeline of information that we received/sent on Friday.

- 10:17 a.m. - We received an email from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) containing a memo that contained the following guidance:
  - “If an LEA or PSA can meet all requirements to transition to virtual learning, would the time during the mandated closure be counted as instructional time? No. There is no mechanism to earn instructional time during a period of mandated school closure. However, schools can and are encouraged to offer

supplemental learning opportunities to students using distance learning methods as they see fit. MDE will not be granting seat time waiver requests during this time.”

- Articles and social media posts interpreted the memo as alluding to the extension of the school year as the only option to make up for lost instructional hours. (I must note here that no decision has yet been made about “forgiving” days or extending the school year by the State.)
- 12:00 p.m. - I met with area superintendents (virtually, of course) to discuss reactions and ramifications to the memo. We decided to “stay the course” in terms of remote learning for several reasons. Chief among them was the importance of keeping students engaged in learning and in a routine during the closure. With uncertainty surrounding a return date to school, we also felt that continuing remote learning offered the best opportunity to avoid the loss of learning in every scenario.
- 1:30 p.m. - The superintendents met again to review our plans and communication with the community.
- 5:00 p.m. - I posted my response to the Michigan Department of Education’s memo providing guidance on the use of remote learning. In that response, I noted:
  - “We understood that remote learning opportunities (RLOs) might not count toward instructional time or days. The pupil accounting manual and school code simply did not have this as a contingency. With this in mind, we continued to move forward with encouraging the process of having our staff create RLOs with the goal of providing opportunities to keep students in a routine and engaged in learning. At the time we made that decision, we had no idea (and to a degree continue to have no idea) how long school would be canceled. I continue to believe that offering these opportunities will support a smooth transition back into school so that we do not lose instructional time getting our students reacclimated once we return.” and,
  - “In terms of whether days will be forgiven or we will have to extend the school year, I have no idea. Our legislators understandably refuse to commit to a decision to waive days until they fully understand the eventual length of the shutdown. Health experts continue to make clear that planned actions could change as the situation evolves and that an April 13 return to school is purely speculative at this time. We will continue to use the best available information to make decisions and determine future actions based on several possible scenarios.”
- 5:50 p.m. - We received another email from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). In it, State Superintendent Dr. Michael Rice was quoted.
  - “With this public health emergency growing, the legislature will need to relax Michigan Merit Curriculum high school graduation requirements, teacher and administrator evaluation requirements, and other legal requirements. It will also need to ensure that all public school employees, salaried and hourly; all contracted service providers, instructional and non-instructional; and all substitute

staff members be paid during this period of emergency. This is an unprecedented time.”

- “We are encouraging every school district to continue providing enrichment and supplemental learning opportunities for their students, and we are glad to see school districts have chosen to do so during the COVID-19 school closure,” Dr. Rice said. “We commend the extraordinary measures that school districts are taking to meet the needs of our students.”
- “The state legislature should change state law to permit days out of school for this public health emergency to be counted as instructional days. Last year, the state legislature took similar action with the polar vortex January 29 through February 2, 2019,” Dr. Rice added. “Under the current conditions, the legislature should make clear in law that the school year will not be extended into the summer.”
- 8:01 p.m. - Governor Whitmer responded to the 10:17 a.m. MDE memo with the following statement (emphasis added).
  - "Earlier today the Michigan Department of Education issued a memo regarding Instructional Time During School Closure. I know it caused a lot of confusion and panic among schools, teachers, students, and families. I wanted to provide some clarification from the perspective of the Governor’s Office.

***The memo does not mean that school work done during the mandatory school closure won't 'count' toward grades, credits, or graduation.*** Each district should determine what services and supports they are able to provide during this unprecedented crisis. Many are focusing on meeting basic needs and are working around the clock to provide breakfast and lunch for hungry students. Other districts have the ability to provide more learning support as a result of one-to-one technology initiatives. I am in awe of the work that school employees are doing to support their kids and I applaud their efforts.

As you know, the situation has changed rapidly over the course of the past ten days. We do not know what the future will hold, but we are absolutely committed to ensuring the needs of our students, parents, and families are met as we navigate these uncharted waters. ***I will be working in the coming days to ensure our seniors graduate and that no child is held back as a result of our ability to provide face-to-face instruction during the COVID-19 school closure.***

To teachers, administrators, and support staff – I thank you for stepping up and helping your students and families.

To students and especially parents, hang in there. We will get through this."

The Governor’s message provides us with guidance that we can, indeed, count remote learning as credit. It is silent, however, on its use for instructional time. In his message, State Superintendent Rice has challenged the State Legislature to change state law to permit days out

of school for this public health emergency to be counted as instructional days. We have been in contact with our legislators encouraging them to work toward a solution to this issue as well. We have been told that a decision to “forgive” days will be made once we know how many days we will have missed in the end. With that in mind, we still believe that continuing our remote learning is vital to keeping our students on track.

By presenting this timeline, I hope to convey that we (local districts) continue to make our decisions in light of a great deal of uncertainty. Our decision to stay-the-course is guided by what we believe is in the best interest of our children. In a March 21 email to teachers across the State, MEA President Paula Herbart appears to agree. She says, “Right now, the best advice is to keep students engaged academically as best we can at home, to be as patient as possible while new information comes to light, and to heed public health experts on what’s needed to slow this outbreak.” Simply stated, continuing remote learning IS in the best interest of our children and families.

## **Conclusion**

I made a commitment long ago as an educator to teach kids to be independent in their learning and to value knowledge. I saw my role not as a deliverer of facts but as a guide and mentor. While I could not foresee the current situation, it does provide a unique opportunity to prove that education should not be confined to the four walls of a classroom. We are committed to supporting our students and their families during these uncertain times. Extended school closures should not be the end of learning. At some point, we are going to be back in school. I appeal to you to keep plugging away.