

'In the Loop' with the Lewiston-Porter Board of Education

Lew-Port has come a long way through COVID-19

BY JODEE RIORDAN
Board of Education President

It has now been one year since the pandemic shut down our schools, and life as we knew it changed.

In the March 20, 2020, "In the Loop," I wrote: "We are doing everything in our power to provide for the education of our students and for the well-being of all in our community. This crisis may get worse before it gets better, but we will get through it. We will get through it together."

We have gotten through it, and we have gotten through it together. The pandemic may not be over, but we are hopeful that the worst is now behind us. While vaccination efforts continue to improve, and restrictions at the state level are slowly rolled back, we ask that everyone remains vigilant, stays safe, and continues to be patient. We will get there.

We have come a long way from the full closure that took us from March 15 through the end of the 2019-20 school year.

Lewiston-Porter schools reopened in September, both returning students to campus and creating remote learning. On any given day, Lew-Port is currently running what amounts to four different school systems, with over 1,500 "hybrid" students either on campus or online that day, approximately 400 "remote" students learning online every day, and 150 "daily Lancers" on campus (L-P's ELLs and certain special education classes).

Schools are open, but teaching and learning looks a lot different than anything we were used to, and it has been incredibly challenging.

On behalf of the Board of Education, I want to thank our school community. Lewiston-Porter's teachers, staff and administrators have gone above and beyond to make this work, while caring for their own families. Our counselors, social workers and psychologists have worked tirelessly with our teachers and administrators to support Lew-Port's students and our families through this crisis.

Our food service professionals made sure no child was hungry, as Lewiston-Porter provided free meals to all students, feeding kids on campus and delivering meals to those at home. The community, over and over again, has come together to support, encourage and celebrate our students and teachers, and we are forever grateful.

I also want to thank Superintendent Paul Casseri. He has led our district valiantly through this crisis from day one. He has communicated directly with the community openly and honestly. He has taken full responsibility,

not just for educating Lew-Port's students under extraordinary circumstances, but for the very lives of our 2,000 children, over 300 employees, and every person in this community by extension. He has the full support and appreciation of the Board of Education.

Lewiston-Porter has continuously reached out to our school community to see how things are going and how we can improve in these unprecedented times. While nothing has been ideal this year, the results of the latest survey show families approve of current learning models and feel well supported emotionally. Data derived from in-district, individual student assessment (via AimswebPlus) shows students in both the hybrid and remote models demonstrated positive growth. This progress is consistent across the district.

This is not being seen in all districts, and is a credit to the hard work and dedication of Lewiston-Porter's teachers, administrators and especially of our families.

While things continue to change very quickly, one thing that has not changed is the guidance under which we operate from the New York State Department of Education, New York State Department of Health, and the Niagara County Department of Health. In the past few weeks, there has been a very strong push from some parents to return all students to campus five days per week. To be clear: Lewiston-Porter is committed to returning all students safely to campus, five days per week, as soon as the New York state departments of Health and Education deem possible.

That said, the Board of Education remains steadfast that Lewiston-Porter will not go against the state guidelines or state laws that remain in place to protect the health and safety of our students, teachers, staff and community.

Lewiston-Porter will continue to operate in accordance with its reopening plan. In July, Lewiston-Porter was required to submit the reopening plan to the State Department of Education in accordance with the guidelines outlined

in the State Department of Education (NYSED) Reopening Guidance. The plan was fully vetted by the community, through a series of six parent forums and one faculty/staff forum. All elements of the plan were negotiated with the district's five bargaining units. The plan was approved by NYSED.

We do not yet know if any changes to our operating plan, once state guidance is altered, will require additional submission and approval.

The Board of Education will meet at 6 p.m. Monday, March 22, and we encourage you to join us via Zoom. Meeting credentials are posted on the Lew-Port website, www.lew-port.com.

One of the most important duties of the Board of Education is to listen to the public, and we anticipate a large volume of community comments regarding current operations. Individuals wishing to address the board should send an email to the district clerk (mbarile@lew-port.com) or contact the office at 286-7266 prior to the meeting.

•Six years ago, the first weekly "In the Loop" was published in The Sentinel. From that first "Loop": "Each week, I will keep you 'In the Loop' as to what your Board of Education is working on and the exciting events happening in our district."

At the time, we were in the middle of budget development, advocacy at the state level (we had just met with Chancellor Emeritus Robert Bennett and Assembly members Jane Corwin and John Ceretto on the negative impacts of the GEA and unfunded mandates on our district), and the search for our new superintendent. (We were down to three candidates; *Spoiler Alert*: We chose Paul Casseri!)

More than 300 "Loops" later, I have done my best to keep our community informed and engaged. I admit, I never thought I would be reporting on life during a plague, and I look forward to announcing it over, when the time comes. To everyone in L-P, thank you for your support and for staying "In the Loop" for the past six years, and this year especially.

North Tonawanda: Pappas announces Lumber City COVID Relief Initiative

North Tonawanda Mayor Art Pappas announced a new path forward as the city emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic: The Lumber City COVID Relief Initiative.

With the passage of the federal stimulus bill, North Tonawanda is slated to receive \$3.3 million in federal aid, which will help as the city emerges from the most prolonged crisis it has faced in decades.

A press release stated that, while the City Council has been faced with lower revenues and cuts in state aid due to the pandemic, NT has fared pretty well compared to other cities around the state.

"The city was riding a wave of development and growth prior to the pandemic, which has left us poised to rebound better than most places," Council President Robert Pecoraro said.

While the city will not see the windfall of nearly \$60 million Niagara Falls will receive, the \$3.3 million will help address areas that have suffered due to pandemic-related cuts, including infrastructure, parks and recreation, and strengthening the city's finances.

"The cuts in AIM and CHIPs funding has hurt, but the difficult decisions made by this

council has left us in a position to come out of this crisis strong and resume the growth we have been experiencing in the Lumber City," Pappas said.

The funding will be distributed by New York state within 30 days of the initial federal distribution to states. Pappas said he looks forward to discussing the plan in further detail with city officials in the coming days.

Winter Parking Restrictions Lifted

Pappas and the Common Council would like to let the residents of North Tonawanda know that, as of Monday, March 15, the street parking ban will be lifted. If a winter storm does arrive, they request residents use judgement and remove their vehicles from the street.

Give us the scoop!

We welcome your submissions.

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