

Real-life educators thank parents and makeshift educators for heroic efforts during pandemic

By the Erie-Niagara County School Superintendents Association

The Erie-Niagara County School Superintendents Association represents educational leaders from across Western New York. The current public health crisis has been disruptive and upsetting to all of us. Among the most distressing effects is the closing of our schools. The students bring the joy to the work of every person who works in a school, and we are heartbroken about the fact that this health crisis has separated us from them.

Since school has been closed, every member of our communi-

ty has been asked to step into a different role. Family members have become at-home teachers, often while also working from home. Our teachers have become their own children's teachers while at the same time offering remote learning for their students. School-based leaders have been on the front lines of supporting teachers, students and families as we have transformed every school from an "all bricks" operation to an "all clicks" operation literally overnight. School staff members of every job description have aided our food service in the preparation and distribution of meals to

families experiencing food insecurity. School board members have been extremely supportive as we enacted our "Continuity of Learning," emergency meal distribution and access to child care plans for our communities.

The Erie-Niagara School Superintendents Association wants everyone to know how much we appreciate the efforts of our students, families, staff members and board members to assure children are learning, and receiving the necessary emotional support, even though schools are closed. Our people have always been the strength of our communities, and your support and resilience is what sustains us during these difficult days.

Much has been written recently about the fact that the modern world is increasingly dominated by VUCA – volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. This current health crisis represents all of those things. Those who think and write about VUCA tell us that nearly everything in the modern world, especially helping children learn and working through crisis, requires that we work closely together with our partners. Fortunately, banding together in the face of difficult circumstances is exactly what we Western New Yorkers do.

We know from our partners in government that the current "New York on PAUSE" will take some time to "un-pause." We know many of you want to know when students can return to school, but we all need to appreciate the difficulty of the decision that Gov. Cuomo and our regional leaders must make with respect to reopening schools. We know that there are no easy answers, which is why they have needed to consider many factors in making a determination.

So, in the meantime, we forge ahead together. The region's superintendents would like to thank our families for helping your children remain engaged

with remote learning until it is safe for us to return to in-person learning. We also appreciate our teachers and students, for continuing to adapt to remote learning so readily. We know remote learning is not a long-run substitute for in-person, collaborative and hands-on learning. However, we really appreciate everyone's willingness to take advantage of the opportunities that it represents at a very difficult time.

We want to offer special thanks to our graduating seniors for your patience as we work through the difficult decisions

that remain about proms and graduation ceremonies. These traditions are important to every school community, but we'll need time, and direction from public health officials, to develop plans to celebrate safely.

Most of all, please know how privileged we feel to serve our school communities in leadership. Every school superintendent is committed to working beside our stakeholders to help our communities thrive in the face of this current public health crisis, and recover from its effects once it abates.

Graham (cont.)

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develop that plan," Graham said.

He shared disappointment that the closing means no spring interscholastic sporting events for Grand Island's student/athletes.

"All of our athletes from middle school through high school are greatly saddened to miss out on our spring sports program," he said. "We were looking forward to using our new grass diamonds behind the high school for softball and baseball, as well. I would like to recognize our spring coaches for staying connected with their players during the closure. Many of our coaches continue to send workouts and specific training options for their athletes to follow so they are ready when we are able to resume."

Concerns About State Funding
A concern for Graham and other superintendents through the state is the potential of financial gaps within their budgets because of this COVID-19 pandemic.

"We are mindful the state has a significant gap within its own budget as it relates to the response to this pandemic. We are strongly advocating our federal representatives to assist NYS with this gap and, in turn, assist public schools," Graham said. "A freeze in state funding will fall hardest upon Western New York school districts, which lag well behind the rest of the state in overall school funding. WNY schools possess the least capacity to raise

local revenue through property taxes. Furthering our budgetary concerns is the fact that our overall state budget will only be balanced with a federal infusion of aid (\$10-15 billion) to deal with the pandemic."

"Cuts to public school aid of the magnitude required, absent substantial federal relief, especially once our school budgets are finalized, threaten to leave Western New York's school districts instructionally insolvent in the near term, if not fiscally insolvent in the long term," Graham added. "In my view, such an appropriation should minimally include \$17 billion for New York state and \$1 billion directly to New York state's public schools to compensate for lost aid from the state. The school aid portion should be targeted directly for public schools to be appropriated via an act of the Legislature and Gov. Cuomo."

"Now that we know that this emergency closure of schools will stay in effect until the end of this academic year, I would like to thank our parents for helping our students remain engaged with remote learning. I also appreciate our teachers and students for their willingness to adapt. Furthermore, I want to offer special thanks to our graduating seniors for their patience as we work through some of the difficult decisions," the superintendent concluded.



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