



BENSALEM TOWNSHIP SCHOOL DISTRICT

DOROTHY D. CALL ADMINISTRATIVE CENTER
3000 DONALLEN DRIVE BENSALEM, PA 19020
(215) 750-2800, EXT. 4100
FAX: (215) 359-0181

SAMUEL LEE, ED. D.
DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

KIM J. RIVERA, SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT
ERIC PRICE, VICE PRESIDENT

March 3, 2021

Good morning Chairman Martin, Chairman Brooks, Minority Chair Williams, Minority Chair Haywood, and members of the Senate Education Committee and Health and Human Services Committee.

Thank you for all that you do for our Commonwealth, and the opportunity to share COVID-19's impact on the Bensalem Township School District. My name is Samuel Lee and I have served as the district superintendent since 2015. Bensalem Township is located in Southeastern Pennsylvania in Lower Bucks County, along the Delaware River, just northeast of Philadelphia. We have 60,000 residents, and span approximately 20 square miles. Bensalem is a vibrant, diverse community with the Pennsylvania Turnpike, Interstate 95 and US Route 1 bringing thousands more to and through our Township on any given day. We serve approximately 6,300 students in six elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school and have approximately 1,000 employees. Our FRL population is 58%, EL students make up 10% of our students.

Since the beginning of the pandemic our school board, administrators, teachers, staff, students, and families have been confronted with a series of unparalleled challenges in terms of engaging, planning and implementing educational programming which continues to provide robust and quality learning opportunities while protecting the health and safety of students and staff. This remarkable undertaking included: responding to ever-changing health recommendations and protocols; new and additional school building and vehicle cleaning processes and techniques; scheduling transportation and in-person classes and activities to maintain social distancing; providing in-person, full virtual, and hybrid learning opportunities; modifying extracurricular offerings; acquiring additional remote learning devices, ensuring internet access, and other technologies for students and staff; and purchasing personal protective equipment. A different set of standard operating procedures for our entire community.

Equally challenging were the frequent transitions required to keep kids learning and connected. The Spring 2020 closures required us to shift learning to an entirely remote media. This change in platform necessitated program, procurement, pedagogical, and logistical attention like never before. The compressed timelines tested our organizational and community capacity. I am proud to share that Bensalem responded with pace, agility and resourcefulness. Our remote platform and maintenance of presence kept our mission moving. It was adequate until we could all be back together.

Spring and summer were spent largely to plan for that reunion, or what COVID would allow. What transpired was the development of our return to school health and safety plan and refining and advancing several instructional models to accommodate multiple possible scenarios. Remote, hybrid, full in-person instruction, in consideration of plan requirements all had to be accounted for. Our CARES ACT allotment was quickly used for PPE, additional technology, cleaning and sanitation supplies and equipment, and HVAC modifications. To date \$1,827,581 has been invested to mitigate COVID-19 and support continuity of education. No recurring expenses were realized, but some of our mitigation solutions will be useful post COVID. We were and remain determined to keep our students, staff, and community safe while providing the best possible educational experience.

We have been open for in person instruction since September 8. Our special learners already in person for 4 days a week were joined on November 16 by two cohorts, each choosing 2 day a week in-person instruction. Our synchronous instructional model allows for family flexibility during the pandemic. This flexibility has been beneficial and comforting for families and has promoted academic coherence and consistency when physical presence is not always practical or permitted, as in the case of illness and/or quarantine requirements.

Although our mitigation efforts have shown to be relatively effective, we have had COVID in Bensalem and have had many students and staff quarantine. 230 Bensalem students became infected, as well as 103 staff members. Thankfully, all have recovered.

Current COVID trends are improving and preparations are underway to return all who desire to in-person instruction 4 days a week beginning March 22. We look forward to this, but until case counts decrease more as a result of mitigation efforts, safe conduct, and vaccinations we may be stressed through quarantine related staffing situations. We are doing the best we possibly can, but we have not matched our mission commitment. Student and family experience has suffered. Academic progress, most likely, has been compromised. We are deeply concerned about our student's well-being. Our COVID level efforts will need to be replicated long after this imminent threat has passed.

Concurrent to last spring's events was our annual budget cycle. The Commonwealth endured a comparable situation. An improving economy, years of our district exerting taxing efforts to near the Act 1 limit, multi-year, multi-fund planning and increased operational efficiency had us almost to budgetary structural balance. This after years of multi-million-dollar deficits brought on by dramatic increases in charter obligations, PSERS, and special education costs. A relatively optimistic fiscal outlook in Bensalem was tempered by possible COVID-19 impact. Here we are again, with budget development and the financial stresses of COVID. Specifically, a decline in aggregate assessed value of \$8,998,560, and the associated local revenue loss of \$1,484,319.67, and a record number of assessment appeals to be reconciled. It is true that we spent less last spring and early fall during remote instruction, but those savings stand to be eclipsed by anticipated future revenue shortfalls.

In short, we provide multiple educational options for our students to balance health, safety, and education; have provided transportation and health services support to our private and nonpublic partners throughout; served hundreds of thousands of meals; held co-curricular and athletics activities; advanced our technology footprint; and have maintained our mission. We have benefited by the support from our Board of School Directors, my colleagues in Bucks County, our Bucks County Intermediate Unit, The Bucks County Department of Health, our Mayor DiGiralomo, as well as Senator Tomlinson and Representative Tomlinson. Our community, my colleagues in Bensalem, and most importantly our students have been patient, understanding and have provided an example through their grace and perseverance.

Sincerely,



Samuel Lee, Ed.D.
District Superintendent

SL/spp