March 31, 2020

Dear OEA Member:
I’m sure that you have heard from your local leaders and from your colleagues about the new distance learning guidance that the Oregon Department of Education released last evening. In that guidance, ODE Director Colt Gill said that it was likely that Oregon’s school closure period would extend through the end of the current academic year and because of that, school districts would need to transition from providing supplementary education to providing distance learning for all of Oregon’s students.

In this moment of uncertainty - at a time when the structures and day-to-day routines that our students, our communities, our colleagues, and we as individuals have relied on for normalcy are eroding at a frightening pace – educators have been asked to take on a monumental challenge in order to provide our students with some sense of stability in their education.

This transition will be difficult. It will be messy and imperfect. It will exacerbate the issues of education inequity that plague our nation’s educational system. And it will ask our educators to navigate new, uncharted, territory without adequate access to the tools or trainings required to fully develop an online curriculum.

The distance learning guidance itself is a product of denial, calling itself “Distance Learning for All” and spending a great deal of time acknowledging the serious equity issues associated with distance learning, but failing to provide any real solutions to address the issue. In essence, “Distance Learning for All” willfully leaves many of our students behind.

However, despite these deeply rooted inadequacies, educators will do what we have always done: we will take the resources available to us and we will provide our students with the best learning experience we possibly can. We will make sure that our students feel loved and acknowledged in a time of national crisis. And we will make space for families who are already struggling to keep their heads above water, providing them with empathy and understanding as we ask them to take on an even larger and more direct role in the education of their children.

ODE’s new guidance raises a host of new questions that must be answered. How will student progress be tracked during this time, and what accommodations will be made for students who don’t have the tools, the access, or the time to engage in distance learning? How will districts address the inherent issues of inequity that will pervade the proposed distance
learning model? And how will educators be evaluated as they rapidly shift highly refined and long-developed pedagogical practices to a new modality in matter of days.

OEA will not only work to seek answers to these questions, but we will fight to ensure those answers honor and value our students and educators as they undertake this task together. While we will strive to reach collaborative agreements with districts on how to best serve our students, we have not and will not cede our right to demand to bargain over new issues that arise during this rapid transition to a new modality of instruction.

I also want to clearly acknowledge the anger, fear, and frustration that educators throughout our state and throughout our nation are feeling right now. In the rush to move our students’ education online our leaders are essentially asking educators to accept the fact that some of their students aren’t going to receive the education they need or deserve. Moreover, the constant whipsaw of guidance and the perpetual movement of expectations is making it harder and harder for educators to do their jobs while they continue to work in what is already an unyieldingly difficult environment.

The pressures the COVID pandemic has placed on our communities, the role our public schools have played in responding to those pressures, and the fierce dedication educators have displayed for our students during this time has awoken the nation to a truth we have all known for decades: our public schools are more than just a place where students learn – they are essential infrastructure and our communities wouldn’t be the same without them.

The coming weeks and months will be difficult. Our nation will continue to be tested in new and unexpected ways, and Oregon’s public education community will not be immune. But I believe that working together we will be able to face those new challenges head on. And that by continuing to harness our collective voices and by collaborating with other stakeholders in our community, we will push our leaders to develop plans and guidance that reflects that hardships our students and educators face in these new and difficult circumstances.

I am continually in awe of the resilience of our public education community, and of the dedication each of you continues to show for your students.

Thank you,

John Larson