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Superintendent: Michael Davis

March 16, 2020

Dear Cushing ISD (CISD) Family,

Good evening, do hope all is well.

Purpose of correspondence

The purpose of this letter is to address Coronavirus Covid-19.

Pertaining to school closure

As you likely know, the CISD Board determined it was best to delay classes until March 23, 2020 with the possibility of missing additional time in the week(s) to come. We will not make an official decision to cancel next week, March 23-27, 2020 until the Board meets on Thursday, March 19, 2020. Once a decision has been made to further delay or start, we will contact our parents / guardians that night online and via K-12 alert.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) has not mandated school closure but left the decision to each individual district. The decision to close was tough because there were many pros and cons. Ultimately, we acted on rapid changing and imperfect information and decided to close this week. Please know that if we have a confirmed case of Coronavirus in Nacogdoches or Rusk County, there is a good chance that we will miss additional time.

To borrow a quote, “In the end, it will be impossible to know if we overreacted or did too much, but it will be quite apparent if we under reacted or did too little”.

Once we start back to school, CISD administration will provide you guidance on what to do if you have a sick child and the procedures we will take if we suspect your child is sick.

Factors that influenced closure for the week of March 16-20, 2020

Early last week, I discussed the Coronavirus Covid-19 situation with Board president Mrs. Lynda Langham. At that time, all signs pointed to starting school today, March 16, 2020. I even felt good about the decision to start. However, Mrs. Langham advised me to further research the matter on the Board’s behalf so that we could make the decision that best fit our community.

Our research focused on credible sources – the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), TEA, and the Texas State Health Department. All of those entities indicated the seriousness of the epidemic, but it was not until I attended the NEThealth meeting in Whitehouse on Friday of last week that school closure appeared to be the responsible choice for our community. The Board decided to post for an emergency meeting after discussing the key points presented by NEThealth officials.



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At the time of the emergency meeting, Nacogdoches ISD and Martinsville ISD had decided to close through Wednesday, March 18, 2020. The Houston Rodeo was cancelled, the Boys' basketball state tournament was cancelled, and UIL sanctioned events including practices outside the school day were cancelled through March 29. Furthermore, President Trump declared the epidemic a National Emergency, Governor Abbott declared it a Texas Emergency, and the Nacogdoches County Commissioners Court declared it a County-wide emergency. The CDC recommended groupings of no more than 100 people (and the recommendation later dropped to 50). Even with all of those happenings (and others) we kept an open mind about whether to cancel or proceed.

In the end, we chose to delay because we felt the community of CISD as well as all of East TX would benefit. At the NEThealth meeting, they presented the information from a greater East Texas perspective and not solely related to individual school(s). In short, their suggestion at the time was that East Texans needed to do what we could to prolong the epidemic curve. Meaning, NEThealth officials felt it was better for people to get sick over a longer period of time rather than everyone getting sick at the same time. Their reasoning was two-fold.

First, according to NEThealth officials, many hospitals in the area already operate at 90% capacity without considering the Coronavirus. If we do not act to slow the disease, then there is a high probability that the disease will spread in ways that overwhelms the medical system, not including other life-threatening issues. Their exact words were that schools were "mini-incubators" for the disease and that many kids would not know they were sick but that they would infect family members less equipped to handle the disease.

Second, any person with a compromised immune system is at great risk of catastrophic health problems once exposed to Coronavirus Covid-19. At Cushing ISD, we have several students and some adults with compromised immune systems. For the most part, persons 30 and under will have few symptoms. But, those within the last 30 years of life as well as those with compromised immune systems face a potential life-threatening illness once exposed.

Has any of the CISD family been exposed to Coronavirus Covid-19?

Some Cushing ISD students and their families (as well as other community members) have been somewhat exposed or directly exposed to Coronavirus Covid-19 as reported by the individual(s). Additionally, there have been students, parents, and faculty that have travelled to areas of concern out of the United States or to other States within the US border. There have been multiple persons that have travelled to multiple Counties with confirmed cases. That said, we do not have any evidence of a confirmed case in our district or County (as of 10:30 PM March 16, 2020). We know of at least two individuals that have been tested and they are currently pending results at this time.

What has the school done since cancelling school this week?

On March 16, 2020, CISD administration met to discuss how to provide educational services to our kids while we are closed for the short-term (now) and for the long-term (if need arises). As you can imagine, this is a major



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pivot for our school as well as others. There is no protocol and the situation is a bit unprecedented. Some schools in Texas have shut down indefinitely. Many other schools in our area have shut down for two weeks with the possibility of further delay and some states have mandated their schools to shut down for the next several weeks. It is a trying time, but at Cushing we are in this together. It was important to us that our parents and guardians hear directly from the school in person and not simply from a survey.

That said, starting today, March 16, 2020, and through tomorrow, you will likely get a call from someone from the school (likely a teacher or an administrator). The main purpose of the call is so that you have the ability to express to someone in person your concerns, questions, thoughts, or even fears. We also have some questions that we would like for you to answer as part of our outreach to help us to determine how best to provide educational service delivery to each of our students. Once we hear from you, we will take a further step into the uncharted waters of providing educational services from a closed campus. Currently, we have plans to provide our students virtual support as well as hard copy lessons if needed.

Most importantly, we will compile your questions and concerns and try to address them to a broad audience in an easy to read format so that we can remain on the same page.

During our administrative meeting, we also discussed and or started the following:

- We discussed providing dual credit and AP support – TEA has been very flexible with schools, but dual credit and AP courses involve a third party which will require an extra-layer of support. Our Dual Credit and AP students will be reached by our Counselor Mrs. Gina Gresham if not already. We feel confident that we can help our Dual Credit and AP students.
- We discussed our school board's desire to provide lunch and breakfast to our students and set up times for pickup and or delivery – During our phone outreach, we will be gathering data on how many students will need a breakfast and lunch during the times we are closed. We originally planned to give a sack lunch each day that came with a packaged breakfast for the following morning. However, it is our understanding that the USDA has balked at that idea and instead we have to offer a distinct breakfast and lunch offering. That said, our students in need of meals will have a breakfast available for pick-up (or delivery in some circumstances) each day from 8:00 AM to 9:00 AM and a lunch available for pick-up (or delivery in some circumstances) each day from 11:00 AM to 12:00 PM.
- We discussed who would maintain the portion of our website that is dedicated to providing information on COVID-19 including information, procedures, and protocols – I expect to get a lot of use out of this portion of our school website. In the near future, we will try to answer questions and concerns that you pose and provide school correspondence that we feel is vital to our school community.
- We began to further disinfect and deep clean our campuses – our onsite custodians have been cleaning and we have had outside cleaning companies to come in and provide estimates on further cleaning.
- We have researched PEIMS coding and policy related to state funding – Our board passed the needed resolution to continue to pay our employees during times of closure at the emergency meeting. However, there were other human resource issues to that we needed to research, e.g. what to do for quarantined teachers (if any in the future, etc.).



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- Furthered steps for virtual learning that may be needed for school closure lasting for a longer duration.
- Discussed scholarship information and timeline for helping our students in those regards.

As you can imagine, the list of things to do is vast and each bullet leads to a trail of other things to do.

What has the state of Texas done to help schools?

As stated earlier, we are working to solve problems that we have never seen before. Texas leadership has not made the decision to shut schools. However, I personally believe that the state has given us the flexibility to do what we feel we need to do and I appreciate them for what they are doing. TEA has been a huge help from day one. They have given us guidance from medical sources (such as the CDC) and over the last four days they have provided in-person calls for us to hear directly from the commissioner as he answers questions pertinent to education. There are many moving parts to what the state is doing. But in short, TEA Commissioner Mike Morath and Texas Governor Gregg Abbott have really worked together to provide schools information to tackle this rapidly evolving situation. Their help has been vast and I have compiled a short list below of things the state and or TEA has done (for certain the list is not all encompassing):

1. Set up a task force for educational delivery strategies for schools to use during school closure;
2. Set up a task force for help with special education needs;
3. Worked to provide clarification on whether or not schools can offer breakfast and lunch to kids in need;
4. Currently tracking schools that have closed and the reasons for such closures;
5. Provided guidance on paying employees;
6. Supporting schools that have decided to close or to remain open;
7. Provided operational adjustments that make sense for schools that remain open;
8. They have provided a website and direct email address to help with any COVID-19 concerns; and
9. Waived state accountability testing for the school year.

I am sure number 9 above caught people's attention. To be honest, I was surprised that Governor Abbott chose to eliminate state accountability testing for the year, but kudos to him. We do not have all of the ins and outs of that decision. But, from what I have read, promotion to the next grade level and graduation requirements are not tied to 2019-2020 state accountability tests. That is most important to know at this time. Other "optional testing" information can be further explored at a later date.

Is there any good news?

For certain! One of the things we discussed today was the fact that once we resume school we can really focus on teaching how we would like to teach without state accountability hanging over us. That is going to be a fun challenge and one we all want to embrace. It will be neat to see if teaching free from the stress of STAAR will be more beneficial to our students. We were the only district in Nacogdoches County to receive an "A" rating from TEA last school year. This year, we added a few programs that are not typical to most Texas schools, e.g. elementary Spanish and elementary 4H. We have many other programs as well. That said, we do not feel that



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we solely “teach to the test”, but it certainly drives many of our decisions. We fully intend to be able to offer our students a robust and valuable education upon re-entry and it is going to be fun.

Has the school received any initial questions?

We have fielded several questions. Most of the questions revolve around whether or not we will make up the school days we are missing. For the most part, the answer is “NO”. TEA has made it clear that they only expect schools to provide some sort of educational delivery during our times of closure. TEA has not given guidance on what education delivery should look like, but will waive all missed days as long as the school can attest to doing something, e.g. virtual instruction, a homework packet, or anything the school feels is valuable.

As stated, TEA has developed a task force to explore educational delivery options and best practices available to schools. That particular task force should release information in the coming days on some of the better ideas schools are coming up with.

Also related to school attendance is the fact that TEA will waive absences of kids whose parents keep them home for Coronavirus related concerns. Some kids are immune compromised and need to stay home and some parents simply do not want to risk their child being exposed. That said, parents can keep their child home with Coronavirus fears or concerns and the parent will not be penalized nor will the school lose funding. If you are a parent or guardian that keeps your kid home because of Coronavirus, we simply ask that you let us know that is the reason so that you and the school are not penalized.

TEA also suggested that schools ask their capable and willing parents to teach their children at home (with district provided support). In fact, that is a preferred mitigation strategy for schools that wish to remain open. The theory behind this suggestion is the number of students would drop drastically thus reducing the risk of exposure for all students. It would be a sacrifice for the greater good of the community for those willing and able to teach their child at home. Not only would it reduce exposure, but it would allow the children of those that cannot teach their child at home a place to go each day with less exposure.

We have also received more pressing questions. For example, “Will my kid graduate if they still need to pass an EOC course?” The answer is “it is certainly possible”. The state has given districts the ability to decide whether or not the student has met the requirements to graduate aside from state testing. So, in reality the school may say there are requirements yet to be met, but those requirements will not include state testing this school year.

Another question is whether class rank will be negatively impacted during this time. Soon, I expect the HS principal to begin discussing with students and parents class rank. Class rank is something that spans multiple years so during this time of closure (whether at CISD or elsewhere across the state), I do not see class rank being negatively impacted. Furthermore, I do not see gaining an advantage over someone during this time as we are all in this together. Even still, it is certainly a valid concern and we will make it a point to address those concerns with you soon.



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I expect more questions in the near future and hope that you do not hesitate to ask anything you feel is important. As stated, we will try our best to answer the questions to a broad audience because others will likely have similar questions.

What is Coronavirus Covid-19 and what are tips to avoid it

According to the Washington State Department of Health, COVID-19 is a respiratory disease caused by a new virus called SARS-CoV-2. The most common symptoms of the disease are fever, cough, and shortness of breath. Most people with COVID-19 will have mild disease but some people will get sicker and may need to be hospitalized. Much has been learned about the virus in humans over the past weeks. However, health officials continue to recommend preventing the coronavirus by using the same measures that we employ to prevent the common cold and flu.

Those measures are as follows:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash. If a tissue is not available, use your elbow to cover your mouth and nose.
- If you've not already gotten one, a flu shot is encouraged.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick (stay 6 foot away!)
- Avoid being in direct contact with secretions from a sick person with COVID-19 (e.g. being coughed on, kissing, sharing utensils, etc.).

Where can I get more information on the Coronavirus?

Updated information from the CDC on coronavirus in the United States can be found at:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>.

The most recent information about coronavirus in Texas may be found at: <https://dshs.texas.gov/coronavirus/>.

Other important health information

This is a bit unrelated to the school, but I do feel it is a good time to mention that the blood banks in Nacogdoches are in need of additional units of blood. The East Texas Blood Center gets much of their blood supply by hosting drives at colleges and districts in the area. With many of the businesses, colleges, and school districts closing, their reserves are running low and we may soon face a crisis related to blood shortage. It is my understanding that CISD Board Member Mr. Bobby Brashears is working with the East Texas Blood Center to



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host a blood drive in conjunction with the local VFD. Once more information comes out on the particulars of that blood drive it would be great for our community to donate as much blood as possible. My understanding is that they will commit to limiting your exposure to the coronavirus as you “commit to life”.

Parting information

Ladies and gentlemen, I have written seven pages of information that you may never finish reading. But, let me part by saying that it has been a privilege and an honor to be the superintendent of Cushing ISD since 2008. I have certainly had my share of failures and my successes are always because of other people, mostly you as a community and especially the students, teachers, staff, and Board. I appreciate the school board for allowing me the opportunity and I appreciate their diligence in performing their school related duties. Their concern for the school and the community can certainly be seen in the tough decisions that were made last week.

I spent a little time writing this correspondence because I want you to understand why we made the decisions we made and for you to know the direction we are heading – even though that direction is not particularly clear. Sometimes you simply have to believe that we are all in this together and that we are going to make it with each other’s best interest at heart.

The hardest conversations I have had concerning COVID-19 were with my kids. My son, Abram now four, didn’t understand why I had to leave him last Friday during spring break to go to the Whitehouse NEThealth meeting after I had previously told him I was “off all week”. And my daughter, Faith Cora now seven, was devastated when she heard we may possibly not return to school next week. Her face was red and tears were running down her cheeks as she asked me if she should stop writing her book, “The Cows are in the Kitchen”. I asked her why she should stop writing her book and she said “because it is for my classmates and I am never going to see them again.” My heart ached for her as I tried to make her understand what was going on and that she would see her friends soon enough.

That said, as a dad, or a Day as my kids call me, I would certainly like to do a few things different. I would even like to hit the “reset button” on spring break. Perhaps like me some of you did not show your kids all the love you wanted to over the break. Now we have a second chance to an extent. Even though many of us will have to work this week, your kids are home. If given the chance, spend a little more time with them. You really don’t need to go anywhere – kids don’t want to go anywhere anyway if they can spend time with you. President Trump said to stay away from groups of 10 people. So I encourage you to spend time with your family. Read, throw the ball, find a little peace with the greatest gifts in your life and admire the person(s) they are becoming.

I hope you all stay healthy and safe. Please let us know if we need anything.

Sincerely,

MSD