A Message from the Superintendent: Ann Arbor Public Schools

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, how many times have we heard “When will this end?” and “When can we go back to school?” Undoubtedly, superintendents, principals, teachers and parents are being asked these questions by scores of curious young minds.

“Many things have changed about our schools and our day-to-day work,” said Jeanice Kerr Swift, superintendent of Michigan’s Ann Arbor Public Schools. “Our critical mission, however, remains the same—every child, every day.”

Long before the outbreak, Swift made this point during the fall meeting of the AASA Early Learning Cohort, co-hosted by Ann Arbor Schools and nearby Dundee Community Schools. (See video and photo highlights from the meeting.)

“In times of crisis, we do not abandon our core values; we double down on them,” said Swift. “When chaos surrounds us, we cling to our critical mission.”

AAPS has distributed more than 175,000 meals to needy students during the past six weeks in a demonstration of support to the community.

“Our buildings are closed, but school is still in session,” said Swift. “It’s vitally important that our children feel supported and feel connected to their teachers. (The pandemic) has caused everyone to focus on what matters most—connections with the community.

An important part of the Ann Arbor community, like any other school district, is the group of students that comprise the nation’s seniors. Their actions haven’t gone unnoticed.

“I’ve been extraordinarily impressed with the resilience of students, in particular the class of 2020,” said Swift. “They’ve been so impressive. They can easily make the case about how much they will lose at the end of the school year regarding graduation, but I hear so many examples about how humanity is so much more important than momentary loss.”

As an example, Swift points to Julie Heng, an Ann Arbor senior and editor of her high school newspaper, who authored an op-ed “During Coronavirus Pandemic, the Class of 2020 Matures,” published recently in the Detroit Free Press.

“The thing that impresses me is that I’m seeing scores of students reaching out to serve others,” said Swift. “The voices of young people give us hope. Particularly at a time when they could choose to be self-centered, they are instead looking to serve others. They’re reaching out and supporting each other. We have students creating personal protection equipment in their homes—face shields to donate to local hospitals. We
have one group of middle school boys who are creating a website to educate younger students about COVID-19. The list goes on.”

According to the leader of the Ann Arbor School District, it’s all about rhythm.

“Whatever the reality,” she says, “I am always looking to find a rhythm in consistency. I am worried about the toll it’s taking, but we all need to remember — it’s a marathon, not a sprint.”

Regarding when conditions caused by the outbreak will end, “it’s clear to us that we just don’t know,” said Swift. “The hardest answer in the world is that we don’t exactly know what the future holds. We do know that we will use science and facts as our guide. We will work through this process. We will communicate regularly, consistently, transparently and honestly. I know that doesn’t make the worries go away, but our commitment to our children is not going away.”

Watch the video: AAPS COVID-19 Update April 15: What’s Been Accomplished So Far

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