

## **This school year must include looking to the future**

*By Stan Rheingans  
Superintendent of Schools  
Dubuque Community School District*

Tomorrow, we will welcome students back to school for a third consecutive school year impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In these 17 months, we have experienced challenges not seen in our lifetime and have been forced to exhibit flexibility, perseverance and grit in new ways.

As we deal with the current realities brought on by COVID-19, we also remain deeply immersed in the work of tomorrow – knowing that our thoughtful and purposeful steps forward are key to our long-term success.

For the district, this means aligning our efforts to maximize the impact of our federal COVID-19 relief funds to meet the needs of our students. Through feedback and input from a variety of stakeholder groups, clear priorities emerged during our planning that echo the needs of the community. Below is a highlight of the priorities guiding our future work (view the full plan at <http://www.dbqschools.org/return-to-learn>).

### **Social-Emotional Health**

First and foremost, the social-emotional health of our students and staff universally rose to the top as the most significant concern of all stakeholder groups. A significant concern before the pandemic, it is not surprising that the pressures of the past year-and-a-half have only exacerbated the need.

To start the year, we are providing targeted, high-quality training to our staff to help them attend to their personal wellness so they can be at their best for our students. We are expanding social-emotional curriculum and screeners for students, and are enhancing brain-health spaces and direct services. Moving forward, we will collaborate with a variety of partners to significantly bolster our support of social-emotional health.

We must meet the most basic needs of our students in order to most effectively provide them with an outstanding educational experience.

### **Unfinished Learning**

At all grade levels, like schools across the nation, the pandemic has led to unfinished learning. This fact drives our work to put new supports in place to uncover and meet each student's academic needs.

Our early work in this area is already paying off. This summer, 300-plus first-graders received intensive reading support in our Summer Academy to reduce any summer slide. At the high school level, 20 students completed their credits to become members of the Class of 2021 and over 280 additional high school credits were awarded – both achievements that would not have been possible without strategic, intentional efforts to meet students where they are and push them toward success.

While efforts to regain unfinished learning will not be an instant fix, we are confident that in upcoming years, we will see positive gains through this additional, targeted support.

**Reducing Access Gaps**

Our learners with the most significant barriers – in particular, those who speak a primary language other than English and those in poverty – have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Moving forward, we are enhancing English Language Learner (ELL) supports, working to reduce chronic absenteeism by addressing obstacles to attendance, and taking steps to remove transportation barriers.

Community partners will play a key role in these efforts to serve all students.

**Community and Family Engagement**

COVID-19 has understandably reduced our ability to connect with families and our community. This year, we will focus efforts on bolstering connections at both the district- and school-levels. We will bring the district into the community in new ways, evidenced in our mobile registration and employment fair bus that traveled the community this summer to register families and conduct-on-the-spot interviews (and netting almost 20 new outstanding members to our team)! Moving forward, we'll rebuild student mentoring, reaffirm and welcome new business partnerships, and focus on engaging families in new ways at the school level.

The district can't do it alone and we are always better together!

As these priorities unfold into our future work, the continued impact of COVID-19 may be uncertain.

But one fact remains crystal clear: In the best of times and in the most challenging of times, our families and robust network of community partners will undoubtedly unite to but the needs of our students first.