

## **Plainville Citizen Op Ed, May 2021**

### Educating Through a Pandemic: Lessons Learned in Plainville Community Schools

Our Plainville Community Schools staff family has reached a point in the year where we can say that we have almost made it. As educators in Plainville, whether in my role as Superintendent or any position across our district, we have likely experienced many similar emotions. I think it is fair to say that we have all experienced a range of emotions that would have to include uncertainty, anxiety, overwhelm, stress, and exhaustion. While these are not the feelings we want to experience, we acknowledge that these feelings are natural in navigating difficult and incredibly complex times in which to be an educator or leader.

In Plainville, our pandemic experience started last year with a complete shift in how we provided education and support. That extended through the end of the year, and the many creative plans developed to end the year as meaningfully as possible. We were proud of our PCS efforts, despite many areas in which we made mistakes and learned through those mistakes.

In preparation for this school year over the summer, our entire leadership team worked incredibly hard, along with members of the various reopening committees across the district and in each school, to do our best to open schools on time, in-person to the degree we could, and to keep everyone safe. Developing reopening plans for the district and each school over about a 3-week period in July and then making them the reality was quite an undertaking and the challenge of a lifetime.

We began this year with a relatively brief, 4-week period of hybrid learning to allow our students, families and staff to adjust and acclimate to the new world they were returning to with a smaller cohort group. This strange new world was filled with masks, safety shields and barriers, anti-bacterial solutions, physical distance, technology being used just about everywhere, and dozens of other strategies and practices that had to be developed to get, and keep, the significant majority of our students in school, engaged, and learning.

Simultaneously, we had to be sure to provide the best education we could for our students who chose not to attend in-person school, for a variety of reasons. Our charge from state officials, and the goal of every educator, is to do our very best for all children we serve. This year, that required something special. When we returned to a full in-person learning model on October 4th, we did not know if it would last. We had every detail thought through, as much as humanly possible, and every resource provided to support a safe and successful transition, but when faced with an entirely new experience and a vast set of unknowns, one never knows for certain just how successful a plan will be.

Fortunately, in Plainville, our hard work and collective efforts were generally met with success. We were not perfect, as no district is, but in the grand scheme of what was being asked and expected of our district staff, we are proud of the education we provided to all of our students. The challenges and obstacles we have faced over the last 15 months have been truly incredible, and nothing that any of us was prepared for. Still, we pulled together, unified by our district mantra of #StrongerTogether. We did our very best not to let COVID-19 stop our important work of educating and supporting children across Plainville.

This effort did not come without difficulties, hardships, setbacks and frustration. We all experienced those things, whether a student, parent, family member, staff member and yes, your superintendent of schools. For those of you who know me well, you know that I care a whole lot and take much pride in our district, so doing less than our best for Plainville students and families was unacceptable. At times, I feared, as I am sure that my staff feared, that our best might just not be enough, and at times, it probably wasn't. However; at other times, we experienced tremendous success and triumphant outcomes that we can all look back on with a smile and a sense of satisfaction and achievement. Feelings of achievement and pride are best felt after overcoming a particularly difficult challenge.

I believe that through it all, the contact tracing and quarantining, the cohort shifts, online and blended learning, the modified staffing and schedules, the mitigation strategies, and every other obstacle and challenge faced, we communicated, we collaborated, we were innovative, we were mindful of the bigger picture and how our actions impacted others across our community, and we were more resilient than ever before. In fact, we all did our best to model the Plainville Portrait of a Graduate traits that we have come to know and celebrate through the Portrait Pioneer program.

As we look back and reflect with that sense of accomplishment, we must also look to the future. We must look to the immediate and more distant future to decide what will need to happen next? What do our students need in order to progress to their next level of progress and fulfillment? We must ask what supports and resources our staff will need, and whether we have staff in all of the right places to help our district move forward. We must look at the big picture of our district for an overall sense of where we stand, but then, we must drill down deep to the core to see where there are gaps in learning.

We have been in the process of looking deeply at district needs, and planning toward future aspirations for all Plainville students. Our leadership team has worked tirelessly to identify those big ideas, and I recently solicited feedback from all members of the community to gain insights from the community we serve.

In closing, we have much work to do. However; when I consider the team we have pulled together across our district, our district and school leaders, teachers, support staff, and all who impact our students each day, I know PCS is going to be okay. We are going to work together to rebuild and expand opportunities, and to do everything we can through significantly expanded summer programs and much more to come next year to provide our students every advantage and opportunity they deserve.

As Superintendent of Plainville Community Schools, I will end by saying "Thank You!" to all students, families, and staff. You have made this year the best that it could be and we will work together to make Plainville Community Schools better than it has ever been before. Similar to the Renaissance that followed The Bubonic Plague of Medieval times, we will build back stronger, more insightful, and with

an expanded outlook for a brighter future. We will do this as we have survived and thrived through every challenge... #StrongerTogether!