

Legislative Matters Related to Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19)

March 31, 2020

Remarks for Superintendent Sharon L. Contreras, PhD

Priority I: Employee Compensation and Benefits

Good morning, and thank you, Board Member Garrett and Chairwoman Hayes. This morning we plan to focus on the impact of the coronavirus on GCS, and most importantly, on the more than 73,000 students we serve.

22 million children across the United States rely on the free or reduced-price lunch they receive at school, and every one of them is eligible for free breakfast as well. In GCS, more than 65% of our students qualify for free- or reduced-price meals, a common indicator of poverty.

Since last Monday, I'm proud to announce that GCS has served more than 184,000 meals to children. Our dedicated school nutrition and transportation staff are preparing and distributing these meals without protective covering and without additional pay while so many Americans are working from their homes.

- We implore the North Carolina General Assembly to immediately ensure the minimum of time and a half pay for all essential hourly employees. I fear that without this critical and immediate step, employees will cease to report to work. Consequently, Guilford County is facing the risk of massive child hunger.
- We also ask the legislature to provide over-time pay, bonuses or other incentives for mandatory part-time and fulltime personnel needed to provide essential services such as daycare for school-aged children of hospital workers.
- With state testing and performance pay currently on hold, we encourage the General Assembly to reallocate the bonus money budgeted for performance pay to increasing for teacher and principal compensation statewide.
- We also ask the legislature to fund emergency leave requirements for all employees, regardless of funding source, and encourage legislators to ensure public school employees have access to unemployment benefits and other emergency leaves if schools remain closed longer than anticipated.
- We also ask you to join us in advocating at the federal level for the same ability to offset additional expenses for emergency family and medical leave and emergency paid sick leave as private and parochial schools, businesses and

other employers under the Family First Coronavirus Response Act.

- We doubt that most Americans realize that local governments, including public school districts, have received the mandate to provide federal emergency leave – a mandate we support – without the federal funding to go with it.

Personal Protective Equipment

- We respectfully ask the legislature to provide additional funding for personal protective equipment for our frontline employees, including but not limited to childcare workers, custodians, school nurses, school nutrition workers, transportation workers and others who are ensuring that our students are well cared for during the coronavirus pandemic.

Employee Evaluations and Contract Renewals

- We are asking the General Assembly for some relief from the required evaluation and notice cycle, so we can avoid renewing teachers who are not serving children well.
- This relief would entail allowing districts that have one observation completed, have provided teachers with notice of potential non-renewal in writing and have provided at least one other letter of direction/action plan in the personnel file to use that information to complete the summative evaluation.
- We also ask that the legislature waive the requirement to have the third observation this year for all teachers as well as the requirement for a peer observation for the 2019-20 school year.
- Lastly, we ask the General Assembly to Allow Email and NCEES notification of non-renewal (by June 1) to satisfy the requirement of notifying teachers rather than the formal letter currently required.

Census

- We also ask that the legislature allow non-mandatory staff to ensure the census is conducted as part of their duties.

Priority II: Distance Learning

In less than two weeks, GCS and other school districts statewide have flipped more than 385 years of public schooling by shifting to online learning. As we rushed to prevent learning loss K-12 through distance learning, the inequities in access quickly became apparent.

While we're incredibly proud of the work our teachers and instructional personnel have accomplished in such a short time, internet connectivity remains a challenge.

The state should act rapidly to negotiate with telecommunications companies to:

- Expand high-speed internet connection;
- Provide at no charge or at a significantly reduced rate internet service to students who receive free or reduced-priced lunch;
- Provide funding to pay for internet service for these students ensuring free and appropriate public education (FAPE); and,
- Provide funding for public schools to expand student WIFI and broadband access through the purchase of personal hotspots.
- Additionally, the North Carolina General Assembly can request that all public colleges and universities—which are not in session—that have hotspots in their student housing facilities/apartments relocate the hotspots to public housing developments.
- The colleges and universities can also redeploy their outdoor hotspots to K12 school parking lots so that students can access the internet in the school parking lot closest to their home. As North Carolina receives federal funding, they can replace the hotspots that the colleges and universities provided to public housing developments and public schools (parking lots).

Graduating Seniors

- Given the disruption the pandemic is causing students, particularly our graduating seniors, we need to ensure that college acceptance letters to state university system schools and community colleges are honored and not rescinded, and we encourage the General Assembly and the State Board of Education to consider legislation and policies that ensure as smooth a transition as possible for our graduating seniors.

Testing and Accountability

- While we're pleased that North Carolina's application for a waiver of federal testing accountability requirements for 2019-20 has been submitted and granted by the United States Department of Education, there are several state laws tied to the results of EOCs/EOGs that the legislature will need to address.
 - We ask that the legislature return promotion and retention decisions to local school districts so we can ensure that all current third grade students

who were in good standing when school closure occurred are promoted to fourth grade.

- We also encourage the General Assembly to provide additional funding for appropriate screeners for all fourth grades to help educators identify and develop appropriate strategies to address students with potential deficits in reading.
- We also seek funding for diagnostic assessments to further identify skill gaps for intervention purposes.
- Districts will also need additional and flexible funding to provide comprehensive professional learning for K-3 teachers in early literacy, and to plan and provide appropriate summer school programming.

Advanced math placement (2019-20)

- Currently, GCS leads the state in identifying and enrolling students of color and other under-represented groups in gifted education and the most academically rigorous courses, including Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate and dual enrollment courses.
- We ask the legislature for the flexibility to ensure that all student demographics are represented in advanced math and academics. Our concern is that by prescribing the method to determine placement, the State might inadvertently disrupt this important work in GCS.

Exceptional Children

- Compensatory services may be applicable during online direct instruction for all students and in cases where students with disabilities were not provided the option to engage online, or could not access distance learning successfully, even with appropriate supports and services.
- Distance learning and related services may not be feasible in all cases, specifically for medically fragile students and students with more profound disabilities.
- Additional funding for compensatory services owed should be made available by the General Assembly in these cases; local school districts should not have to use current allocations to provide these additional services.
- Additional funding also should be allocated to support students who may not yet be identified as needing specially designed instruction. The additional funding would provide supports including remediation, online tutoring and reading intervention opportunities who may not yet be identified as Exceptional Children

but are demonstrating the need for additional support.

Career and Technical Education

- Students, particularly graduating seniors, may need waivers from various professional standards and licensing boards regarding professional and industry certifications requirements, and/or additional funding and time to fulfil those requirements following high school graduation (e.g. clinical hour requirements for certified nurse assistants).
- And, while it is not coronavirus related, we also ask you to once again advocate for the inclusion of \$1.5 million annually in the State budget for two years to support GCS' signature career academies, an economic and workforce development initiative that will be even more critical in the post-pandemic economy.

Student Attendance Requirements & Calendar Waivers

- We also ask the General Assembly to waive compulsory attendance laws and the issuance of mandatory letters regarding chronic absenteeism for 2019-20.
- We also seek calendar flexibility regarding the number of required student days or hours for 2019-20.
- Lastly, in terms of our academic priorities, we ask for regulatory relief and flexibility to be able to use e-learning rather than make-up days for school closures due to inclement weather, power outages, police actions and other issues.

Health and Human Services

- The coronavirus pandemic showed us, once again, how woefully inadequate our current student to school nurse ratios are. Given the complex health and medical needs of our more than 73,000 students from prekindergarten through grade 12, we urge the General Assembly to provide a fulltime nurse for each school, each school day.
- In the state's largest school districts, many students live in shelters, hotels/motels, temporary and transitional housing. Students in the five shelters in Guilford County are disallowed by the shelters from attending GCS childcare centers at this point.
- However, we ask that North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and/or the General Assembly require social workers and/or other trained educators, along

with county nurses to conduct wellness checks on these students in transition (as defined under the federal McKinney Vento Act).

- Similarly, minors in juvenile detention are also entitled to a free and appropriate education. Which government body is making certain that they have access to technology—hardware and WIF—along with access to district teachers? I am sure that it is not lost on you that most children in detention in Guilford County are black and brown boys.
- We will also need expanded and coordinated services by Department of Health and Human Services to ensure students in crisis do not fall through the cracks.
- Research and experience from past economic downturns – even without a major public health crisis – indicate that children and families will experience significant trauma. As hope decreases and despair and desperation increase, rates of domestic violence, crime, child abuse, hunger, homelessness and other devastating childhood experiences increase dramatically.
- To address these issues, we encourage the General Assembly to increase allocations for school social workers, and to increase the Department of Health and Human Services’ resources for behavioral health clinicians, services and programs.
- We urge you to plan now to meet students’ physical, social and emotional health needs that will likely be exacerbated by this crisis. Services should include counseling and wellness checks to ensure student safety and support.
- We also encourage the General Assembly to expand technology and WIFI access to support telehealth initiatives that will increase student and family access to appropriate medical care, while also ensuring that critical health information is shared with those directly involved in each student’s development.
- With schools closed, students with significant disabilities and their families require an increase in the hours of service provided for in-home therapies and respite. Without an increase in hours, students with disabilities who normally receive these services at school, are short-changed and the quality of life for the student and family can deteriorate rapidly.
- Fully fund costs associated with the provision of childcare services for school-aged children of hospital workers.

Budget

- Public school employees are stepping up and taking leadership roles in responding to the public health crisis caused by the coronavirus. We need the General Assembly to do the same and we ask the legislature to pass a state

budget for 2019-20 that provides a pay increase for all of the state's public-school employees. Currently, our classified personnel are the only state employees who did not get a pay increase this fiscal year, even while they are serving on the front lines of the pandemic. This is unjust and must be addressed.

- And, while we are proud that GCS has opened three childcare centers for the children of our dedicated health care workers, we are now being asked to pay for this out of the additional education funding that Governor Roy Cooper has allocated for school districts.
- This creates a huge inequity. No other district will step forward to assist its county's hospitals if it requires making the difficult choice of using the limited funding for childcare, or to pay our employees and purchase technology for our students. Childcare should be allocated through a distinctly different funding source.
- Childcare is not only pandemic expense, however. We have already spent more than \$250,000 on soap and custodial supplies and services, and we're only in week two of school closure.
- Sanitizing and securing buildings, expanding hotspots, purchasing devices, investing more in digital resources, training teacher in online learning, expanding remote work and meeting capabilities, crisis hotlines and call centers, printing public health as well as instructional materials for families to use at home, all represent unbudgeted costs.

In Summary

- Lastly, it's vitally important that state legislative planning committees for COVID include adequate representation of North Carolina's largest and most complex school districts in the decision-making process as we move forward with the daunting challenge of rebuilding our state's education system during this pandemic.
- The issues facing large, urban districts are not identical to those facing suburban and rural districts. I know that Edna Wallace of RTI, who regularly convenes the state's largest twelve districts, is ready and willing to represent the collective issues of our members to legislators.

Thank you. We'll now take any questions you may have...look to Deena Hayes, who will facilitate the discussion and Q&A period.