



July 20, 2020

Dear BPS Families,

Let me begin by saying how immensely grateful I am to have the opportunity to serve as the superintendent of Bixby Schools. Nearly 30 months ago, I was attracted to BPS for a wide range of reasons, including the district's strong academic reputation; its focus on excellence in athletics, arts, and student activities; the quality of its teachers, administrators, and staff; and the progressive vision and leadership of the Board of Education. Yet, more than any other reason, I was drawn to BPS because of the tremendous level of community pride and commitment evident at every school in this district.

Over these few years, we've been through a lot together, from a historic teacher walkout, to the record-setting floods last May, to the terrible COVID-19 pandemic this year. Throughout this time, I have always valued your support and encouragement, as well as your candid feedback, suggestions, ideas, and, yes, even your criticism. My team and I have worked diligently to improve our accessibility, visibility and transparency. We need your continued input and active voice because we are committed to making decisions that promote the values of this community and prioritize actions which will positively affect children in our school district. Working together, we have the power to be even better and to make BPS the outstanding school district our children and grandchildren deserve.

That brings me to the point of this letter. Our community, state, and nation are going through a very stressful and disorienting time. Not only are we dealing with an unpredictable and deadly pandemic, we are also experiencing smoldering issues rooted to race relations and social inequities. Add to this what will certainly be a highly contentious political campaign season and we have all the ingredients to feed the fires of distrust, anger, and tribalism.

Please do not misunderstand me. I actively support civil discourse, debate, and all the other trappings of free speech. It is what makes America great, and it is a cause I spent ten years of my life actively supporting as a United States Marine. Yet recently, I have been disheartened by the level of acrimony associated with some of the discussions surrounding how and when we should reopen our schools - both on social media and in face-to-face conversations. We are each entitled to our own opinions and perceptions, and have the absolute right to share them openly. However, what is not productive is delivering comments designed to belittle, antagonize, and disparage the viewpoints of others with whom we do not agree. I have observed too much of this. As a result, we have been compelled to remove comments from our Facebook page which are either profane or unnecessarily hostile towards others. We are not trying to censor anyone's speech; however, there is a line of decency that we cannot permit individuals to cross.

As I said earlier, I recognize this is a stressful time. Families are legitimately concerned about the health and safety of their children. Students are both anxious and fearful about returning to a school environment where social distancing is difficult, if not impossible to achieve. People seem to either support the wearing of masks for all or are against their use altogether. Teachers and staff are worried about their individual health and the safety of potentially vulnerable family members who they may expose when they go home each day. Teachers are also apprehensive about the potential demands that will be placed on them to resume in-person instruction while simultaneously helping to remediate academic gaps, integrating new technologies, providing support for students who are learning virtually, protecting students in their classrooms, dealing with children's social and emotional

needs, and supporting families who may be overwhelmed with new expectations and disrupted learning. School leaders are troubled by the prospect of missing any step, any precaution, or making any decision which may inadvertently subject a person to this terrible virus.

At the risk of coming across as overly preachy, I am suggesting today that we need to move beyond these relatively minor differences and seek to find common ground. Part of this relates to agreeing to assume the best intentions of others and to seek to understand other perspectives. To endeavor to use words which unite rather than divide. To commit to the premise that we are all trying to do our best to serve, support, and protect our students, our community members, and our employees. To strive to model for our children and each other how to disagree with passion, yet also with respect and courtesy. To bring out the best in all of us and adorn ourselves with the personal qualities of empathy, grace, and patience.

Even in these challenging times, we can make the best of our circumstances and proceed with dignity, respect, and common interest. Together, we have a shared mission to empower every child with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes they will need for success in life. Even when not in school, children are learning important attributes from us - about resiliency, courage, strength, and compassion.

With the recent passing of civil rights leader, John Lewis, it seems appropriate to end with a quote he made during difficult times: *“What I try to tell young people is that if you come together with a mission, and it's grounded with love and a sense of community, you can make the impossible possible.”*

We have a challenging few months in front of us. I am confident we will continue to work together in the best interests of our children and the entire Bixby community. Again, thank you for your trust in me and your support of Bixby Public Schools.

Warm regards,

Rob Miller
Superintendent