

January 12, 2025

Via Email

Dr. Jay Harris
Superintendent
Platte County R-3 School District

Dear Superintendent Harris:

The purpose of this letter is to express my concerns regarding the application of our DESE-approved Alternative Methods of Instruction (AMI) plan and DESE requirements based on the approval of our plan.

As you know, our schools were closed from January 7-10, 2025, because of unforeseen inclement weather, and the district designated those days as AMI. While I am not disputing the need to close school during that time, I am concerned with some of the decisions that were made as a result.

Platte County R-3 School District AMI Day Plan

1. According to our AMI day plan, we are supposed to provide equitable access to instruction to ***all*** students using a Chromebook or iPad. However, students did not have their district-issued devices at home during any of the four AMI days. Providing equitable access to instruction is difficult, if not impossible, in this scenario.
2. According to our plan, we are supposed to use various types of materials and assignments to effectively facilitate teaching and support learning, including textbooks, library and classroom books, packets and worksheets, manipulatives, learning games, teacher created materials, and student Chromebooks. However, in general, students did not have access to textbooks, library or classroom books, packets or worksheets, manipulatives, learning games, or Chromebooks.

While teacher-created materials were available to students, it was only accessible to those students that had access to non-district-issued devices and would have been further limited to only those households with parent-provided internet connections. Households that rely on district-provided internet connections might have been unable to access such connections because of the weather, and even if they had access to district-provided internet sources, it is unlikely ***all*** students had access to non-district-issued devices.

3. According to our plan, we are supposed to provide instruction on AMI days using teacher's notes with instructions and examples, downloaded instructions to a device, virtual instructions, and instruction provided through a learning management system. Because district-issued devices were not provided to students during this period, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the district to provide equitable access to instruction for students to comply with these requirements.

4. According to our plan, attendance is determined by the completion of lessons and activities turned in the *next day* of attendance, electronic submission of lessons and activities on the AMI day or the *next day* of attendance, or log of electronic, web-based, or app activity. Because district-issued devices were not provided to students during this period, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the district – and more importantly, many students – to comply with these requirements. Simply put, many students without district-issued devices might have been unable to complete lessons and activities electronically submit lessons and activities, or engage in any electronic, web-based, or app activity. It is also unreasonable to expect these assignments to be turned in or submitted during the next attendance day.
5. According to our plan, students are to be engaged in learning on AMI days using independent practice and application of previously taught concepts, app or web-based software, and virtual instruction. Because district-issued devices were not provided to students during this time, it is difficult, if not impossible, to engage students as required except for those students with access to non-district-issued devices and parent-provided internet.

According to our own website, we highlight our fortunate position as a one-to-one district, where *all* students have district-issued devices. In my opinion, this is fundamental to our AMI day plan and the requirements listed therein, and arguably, DESE’s approval of our application. Our website also notes that we want to make sure our students have the necessary technology tools available to engage in learning. In this case, the necessary tools would, at least, include the availability of district-issued technology devices.

Our website also provides clarity on what an AMI day will look like for students, noting that students will receive their assignments through their teacher’s Google Classrooms and/or Canvas, with attendance verified by participation in class virtual meetings and/or work completion. Because the district did not provide students with district-issued devices, it is difficult, if not impossible, for students without access to non-district-issued devices and parent-provided internet to receive assignments or complete them.

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

According to DESE, during AMI days school districts are required to use multiple types of materials and assignments to effectively facilitate teaching and support learning for the benefit of students. Regarding attendance, school districts must provide a method or multiple methods for determining the completion of activities that day.

DESE also requires school districts to provide equitable access to instructional materials, supplies, and/or equipment and access to *all* students, and in our case, a detailed description of how the district ensures that *all* students have access to the same content – not just those students with access to non-district-issued devices and parent-provided internet.

DESE provides examples of “equitable access to materials” such as:

- (1) providing technological devices to students.
- (2) the ability to check out a laptop for those students without access to non-district-issued computers.
- (3) a requirement for students to receive an instructional packet *before* leaving school and *prior* to a potential AMI day. Further, students without internet access due to location or power outage must have access to the same information and instruction that would take place virtually.
- (4) a requirement for students to be issued a Chromebook with assignments and instructions loaded onto the device *prior* to the student leaving school.

DESE rules regarding AMI days also include requirements related to communication, engagement, and completion, where school districts must notify students *before* they leave school and provide them with the materials they need to complete assignments, where students must be actively engaged in the learning process to count towards state aid attendance hours, and where students must complete and return their work on the day they return to school. It is unclear how it would be possible for our district and our students to comply with the requirements of our own plan or DESE’s requirements as a condition of approval of our application.

Sports and Extracurricular Activities

While there does not appear to be any state, local, or district rules or policies regarding participation in MSHSAA-sanctioned sporting events or district-sanctioned extracurricular activities that are scheduled during AMI days, our approach seems subjective and potentially creates unnecessary risk for students, parents, and staff.

Our schools were closed because of inclement weather, dangerous road conditions, and in some cases, a limited number of bus routes that were generally deemed to be more unsafe than other routes for buses to transit. In other words, because not all students had equitable access to attend school in person, the schools were closed district wide.

We offer dozens of sports and extracurricular activities for students, which is something that we should be proud of. While some of these sports and activities are seasonal, many are not. It is unclear how or why our district decided to allow students to participate in some of these events on certain AMI days, but not others. If it was unsafe for some students to attend school on a certain day, it might also be unsafe for some students to participate in scheduled sports and extracurricular activities on that day.

For example, if Sport A or Extracurricular Activity B had a scheduled event on an AMI day, some students would be able to attend but others might not. In addition to possibly being considered arbitrary and capricious, it puts pressure on parents and staff to accommodate the

needs of their kids and students to participate in those events – especially parents and staff who might live in areas that were not adequately plowed or treated, or who might not have vehicles that are reasonably capable of transiting road conditions considered to be dangerous and unusual. In other words, if schools are closed because of inclement weather, it is not unreasonable to suggest that sports and extracurricular activities should also be closed and rescheduled.

I ask that you review this letter to determine if we complied with our AMI day plan and DESE rules and requirements as a condition of approval of our application. Further, as a matter of policy, our Board of Education must decide whether we allow participation in MSHSAA-sanctioned sports and district-sanctioned extracurricular activities that are scheduled during an AMI day.

Again, I am not disputing the decision to close our schools during this time, but I am concerned about many of the subsequent decisions that were made because of school closures. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Mike Matousek
Member
PCR-3 Board of Education