

STATEMENT FROM THE BLAINE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT BOARD OF TRUSTEES
By R. Keith Roark, Chairman

The Board of Trustees of the Blaine County School District is committed to transparency in dispatching its obligations to our students, parents, teachers, staff and community. To that end, I want to address some of the concerns that have been expressed by concerned members of the community.

On Saturday, March 14, 2020, within hours of learning that the first case of coronavirus had been confirmed in Blaine County, we made the decision to immediately close our school buildings. Given how fast the virus spread regardless, we can only imagine how much worse things would have been had we not acted so quickly. Immediately following the closure order, our leadership team began planning for distance learning. This district, from the time of its formation, has operated on the traditional classroom learning model. Transition from that model to an alternative program is not a simple matter. Furthermore, the highly contagious nature of this virus dictates that our distance learning plan will, to the greatest extent possible, ensure the safety of our students and staff during whatever period of time it will be in place.

Many parents and students are frustrated with the speed at which our administrators are rolling out the distance learning program and the board fully acknowledges and understands that frustration. Online learning is the best, quickest and simplest alternative to classroom learning and many people have asked why we have not already gone online. What people may not understand, however, is that as many as one quarter of our students and some of our teachers do not have high-speed internet access and some families have been forced to terminate their internet service for economic reasons. Thus, our administrative staff is tasked with having to roll out two different distance learning programs: one for students with high-speed access and one for those without such access and both programs must be in place at or very near the same time.

Because teachers will not have the opportunity to observe and communicate with students face to face, a protocol for maintaining at least some one-on-one contact had to be designed prior to starting distance learning. Additionally, state and federal law requires the district to extend equal educational opportunities to students with special education needs and that mandate dictates further adjustment to any plan for distance learning. We are not offering excuses but merely stating the facts and circumstances that must be faced and dealt with as we leave classroom instruction and transition to an alternative.

Finally, our highly skilled and well-regarded teachers have been working hard to develop content that can reach both students with high-speed internet access and those without it. This kind of retooling does not take place overnight and our teachers have invested tremendous time and energy to meet the challenge. Our distance learning plan was actually completed on March 21, subject of course to on-going revisions and adjustments dictated by further study and experience going forward. Unfortunately, we failed to communicate quickly and effectively with the public about the distance learning plan and its components. As chairman of the board I take full responsibility for this oversight and the confusion it has caused. I have taken steps to ensure that the plan is posted on our website [here](#) and distributed to all media outlets and updated as we move forward.

We are well aware that some school districts have implemented online learning more rapidly than we have. It must be noted, however, that no district in this state has suffered such high rates of infection and we have not had the luxury of developing and implementing our distance learning plan in an

infection free environment. There are still many districts in the state in which no coronavirus cases have yet been confirmed. In fact, our school closure and commencement of planning for distance learning occurred at a time when the State Board of Education was advising school districts to keep their schools open.

The Board of Trustees fully understands its duty to provide a quality education to all students in the district. Nonetheless, the health and safety of our students and staff is a priority and if that concern has slowed the rollout of our distance learning plans we hope the community will understand. We are extremely appreciative of the support received from this wonderful community and also appreciate the questions and criticism some of you have expressed. There is no playbook, no manual to guide us; the board and our entire staff have no choice but to play this by ear.

These are times no one ever imagined and we do not claim to have easy answers to every challenge. But we can and do promise that every senior who was on track to graduate before the school closure will still graduate, assuming they satisfactorily complete distance learning assignments. Every student in every grade in every school will receive all of the quality instruction we can possibly deliver. Every teacher will be supported and every teacher will do his or her very best to keep our schools on task no matter how hard this pestilence hits our community. This school district will not just survive, it will emerge from this crisis stronger than ever.