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Teaching During the 2020 Global Pandemic, Covid-19: An Autoethnography

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**Teaching During the 2020 Global Pandemic, Covid-19:
An Autoethnography**

A Project Presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
Minnesota State University Moorhead

By

Carin Elisabeth Omonuwa

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in
Curriculum and Instruction

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Moorhead, Minnesota

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic in the United States has changed how American Schools provide education to their students. It has led to innovative ways to ensure that teaching and learning continue no matter the circumstances. West Fargo Public Schools in West Fargo, ND is one example of how schools took a challenging time when education was questionable and made sure that learning was a top priority for our schools. They offered variations to typical schooling and created healthy learning environments for students. Educators across the school district worked together and pioneered a plan to guarantee that students would still get a viable educational experience.

Chapter 1:

The problem

The beginning of the year 2020 was a typical year here in the United States. We celebrated the new year and returned to life as normal post – holidays. We never would have guessed that 2020 would be a year for the history books. A deadly virus that originated in Wuhan, China quickly made it's spread across Asia, into Europe and eventually to the United States. This deadly virus became known as "Covid-19." As the virus entered the United States and spread the government started to shutdown businesses and schools. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020) How would education continue in spite of this deadly virus and how could schools take a proactive approach to make learning a priority?

Subject and Setting

Spring 2020: The state of North Dakota went into shutdown March 13th, 2020. (Burgum, 2020) (Appendix D) West Fargo Public Schools (WFPS) in West Fargo, ND quickly sprang into action knowing that education would have to continue somehow. The plan was for distance learning. All activities and assignments were asynchronous. If families did not have access to technology the school district gave families the opportunity to borrow an iPad from the school. The school year ended in distance learning.

Fall 2020: The state gave the school districts the freedom to create their own plan for returning to school in the fall. WFPS created a "Return to Learn Plan," many meetings were held over the summer months and the school board approved the "Return to Learn Plan" on August 11th 2020. The district would start the school year in the Hybrid model, where students would attend school for 2 days a week and then have 3 days of distance learning. Parents also had the

option to place their child into the district's virtual program where school was 100% synchronous, online learning. (West Fargo Public Schools, 2020)

Definitions of terms:

Asynchronous – Unscheduled times in the online learner's school day to do activities and lessons.

Distance learning – Online learning where activities and lessons are not in person and do not require teacher participation.

Hybrid – the splitting of students who go to the physical school building on any given day so to reduce the number of people in the building

Seesaw – An online platform of student driven digital portfolios also used for student, teacher and parent communication,

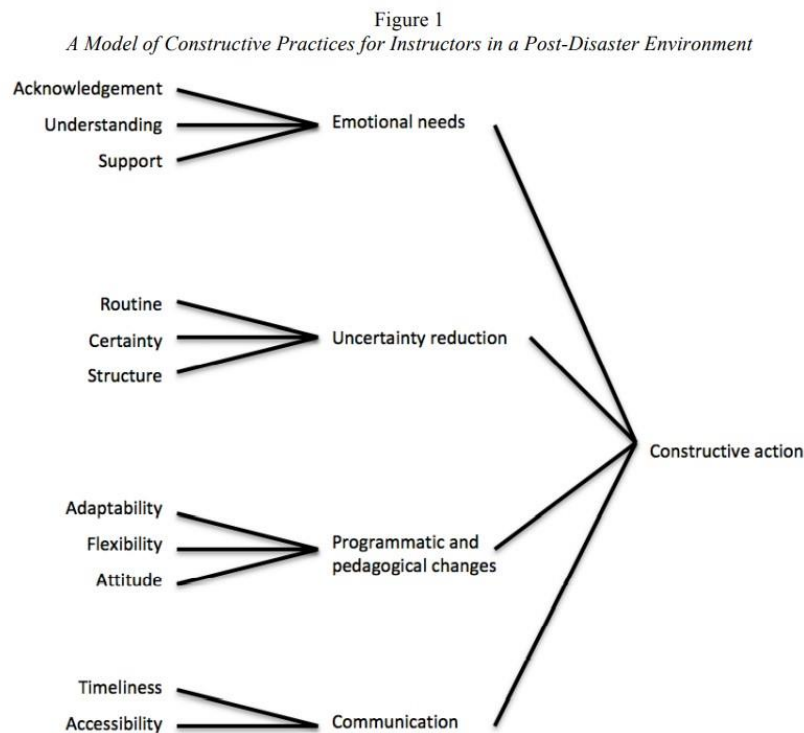
Synchronous – Scheduled times in the online learner's school day to be on an online platform and receive live lessons from an instructor.

Virtual Program – The online learning program organized by the school district

Chapter 2: Literature Review

When reflecting on the way to teach during Covid- 19 it was important to reflect on past situations that have affected the way education is handled. We can learn from the past. How did teaching continue after major natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods or earthquakes. How did students continue learning during times of war? How did teachers conduct schooling during other pandemics like Covid – 19?

First, one such catastrophe that hindered education from continuing as normal was earthquakes. Wright and Wordsworth surveyed University students and professors after a seemingly chaotic school year where multiple earthquakes hit an area called Christchurch in New Zealand. Through their surveys four themes emerged. The figure below elaborates on these themes.



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The important themes that were revealed through these interviews were as follows, emotional needs, uncertainty reduction, programmatic and pedagogical changes, and communication. Each were explained in detail and quotes from students and instructors were included. As I read, I found these quotes relevant to the situation that teachers and students are experiencing during the Covid – 19 pandemic.

“...it was important that instructors acknowledged this uncertainty and the difficulties many students were facing. Students appreciated instructors who acknowledged the difficult nature of the current environment” (Wordsworth & Wright, 2013 pg. 147).

“As instructors, we did not feel we were adequately prepared for an emergency of this magnitude. However, it follows that in order for students to manage their own responses to crises in a University environment, they first need to see it modeled. From a pedagogical perspective and as seen from the student responses, instructors serve the function of modeling effective coping, leadership, and communication behavior.” (Wordsworth & Wright, 2013, pg. 152).

We as educators have an important role in providing as much normalcy in the event of crises. Effectively communicating with students, adapting curriculum, and providing consistency are important in uncertain times.

Another trying time to education are times of war. In her article, Helen Raptis discussed how teachers taught during World War II, and recorded many stories about education during that time of war. Schools during the war time supported a nationalistic mentality and supported the governments war efforts. Often, they were required to support the war effort through food conservation, the sale of war savings stamps, and the collection of scrap metals. (Raptis, 2018, Pg. 450). Again, the importance of schools on the social and mental wellbeing of the community was mentioned.

On page 449 of her work Raptis noted that changes to how education was conducted during this time of war were significant in both how it was conducted daily and the curriculum shifts that took place. Teachers were given more social tasks and this significantly changed education. Often during her interviews Raptis would hear stories of classroom work being disrupted due to the need to perform air-raid drills (Raptis, 2018, pg 449) This was a change that was necessary in order to keep the children safe. Procedures and drills were a daily interruption thus changing how education in the classroom was performed.

This is significant in relation to the Covid – 19 pandemic as there have been many interruptions to the “normal” education system and yet learning must continue. The impact that schools have on communities is astronomical.

Another example is how the United States proceeded with education during the Spanish Flu Pandemic. Cetron, Markel & Stern looked at several different cities in the United States to see how they reacted to the 1918 – 1919 influenza pandemic. The article goes into detail about how these particular cities dealt with this pandemic and attempts to continue education through that unprecedented time.

During the 1918 – 19 Spanish flu Pandemic the discussion of school closures on the economy and the family structure was discussed. Many of the same issues that have risen from our school closures are similar to that of the United States during this pandemic. The hardships of school being closed and the effects on the community and the wellbeing of the student is a concern of schools across the nation. (Cetron, Markel, & Stern 2009, pgs.1076 - 1078).

The 1918 – 1919 Influenza pandemic was obviously before the times of internet and the technological advances that we have today. Though probably quite difficult at the time the city of

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Los Angeles utilized the postal service and had students correspond through the use of mail – in modules for students to complete.

“Thus, Los Angeles offers an interesting model for contemporary schools interested in creating Internet-ready study materials...in the advent of school closure.” (Cetron, Markel & Stern, 2009, pgs. 1073 - 1075).

Being innovative in how to continue education was as important then as it is now. Educators have always and will continue to always make learning a priority no matter what is happening in the world.

A common connection between these articles is the importance of schools on the economy and well-being of students and the community. The welfare of the children seemingly rested on the school system, not only that, even the outcome of society did too. The lessons learned from teaching through other times of crisis can be extremely valuable. Learning from the past as we move into the future, post-covid “new normal” using this time in education to guide how future times of crises are handled.

Students need predictability, routine and a sense of normalcy through a chaotic time. Though these times have been challenging in the education field, educators and schools have come together to return to learn during the Covid-19 pandemic. West Fargo Public Schools stated it best in their Return To Learn plan for the 2020-2021 school year.

‘In periods of uncertainty, services focusing on social emotional learning become a priority and relationships are the primary focus of SEL development in West Fargo Public Schools. We know that school closures may have caused chaos, unpredictability, and fear. A child who has experienced this trauma might feel unsure of what to expect

when things change. Predictability and routine can help children who have experienced traumatic events adapt to transitions in the classroom a little easier so that they feel safe and ready to learn.” (West Fargo Public Schools, 2020, pg. 5).

Chapter 3: Methodology

Spring 2020: Distance Learning

Elementary school students would receive assignments via the home-school communication platform known as “Seesaw.” Teachers would send activities to their students on Seesaw. For the first month most of these activities were review. Teachers and students also had the ability to connect via Microsoft Teams, a video chatting platform. If families did not have access to technology the school district gave families the opportunity to borrow an iPad from the school.

Summer 2020: Planning

As quickly as we finished a very different school year ending it seemed we were already preparing and planning for the coming school year. A lot of different plans were coming into the discussion through WFPS and the school board. Many parents pushing for schools to fully reopen, five days a week. The Covid-19 cases in ND were on the rise and the county where WFPS is located, Cass County, ND, the cases were also on the rise. (North Dakota State Government, 2020) Many teachers wrote to the school board members and Superintendent. I was one of them. I was pregnant heading into my 3rd trimester and honestly wanted school to start out distance learning until the Covid cases decreased. The school board voted to start the school year in a Hybrid situation while giving parents the choice to do schooling virtually, 100% online.

Fall 2020: Virtual Teaching

Due to the numbers of parents wanting to enroll their child in the Virtual program WFPS had to assign teachers to the virtual classrooms or hire new teachers for the program. My principal sent me an email asking if I wanted to teach 3rd grade virtual for the school year. After

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a very short consideration period I enthusiastically said yes. (M. Shea, personal communication, August 17, 2020, 3:21 pm).

The Virtual Program was a completely new concept to WFPS. There has never been anything like this in the school district. We, as virtual teachers, did not know what to expect. We sat through days of Professional Development at the beginning of the school year that had little to do with the Virtual Program. The virtual teachers along with curriculum coaches put together a schedule of synchronous and asynchronous times/activities for the kids to do. All synchronous times would be live meetings via Microsoft TEAMS and all asynchronous activities would be via Seesaw.

Here is the original schedule:

Asynchronous (Unscheduled) Learning Opportunities					
Daily:	Twice weekly:	Asynchronous Weekly:	Specialist Lessons Weekly:		
Choice Reading 20-30 minutes	Learning Activities for Writing	1 Reading	3 Physical Education		
Learning Activities for Reading	Learning Activities for Science	1 Writing	2 Music		
Learning Activities for Math	Intervention as assigned	2 Math	2 Art		
DreamBox Lessons		1 Science	1 Media		
			1 Counseling		

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:15 – 8:30	Morning Meeting	Morning Meeting	Counseling Lesson	Morning Meeting	Morning Meeting
8:30 – 8:45	Student Work Time on Asynchronous Activities	Student Work Time on Asynchronous Activities	Student Work Time on Asynchronous Activities	Student Work Time on Asynchronous Activities	Student Work Time on Asynchronous Activities
8:45-8:55	Whole Group Reading	Math Group 1	Reading Group 5	Whole Group Reading	Reading Group 1
8:55-9:05		Math Group 2	Intervention Group as assigned		Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists
9:05-9:15	Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists			Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	
9:15-9:25	Whole Group Math	Math Group 3	Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists		Whole Group Math
9:25-10:00		Student Work Time on Asynchronous Activities		Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	
10:00-10:10	Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	Reading Group 2	Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists		Whole Group Writing
10:10-10:20				Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	
10:20-10:30	Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	Reading Group 4	Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists		Reading Group 6
10:30-11:00				Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	
11:00-11:10	Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	Reading Group 3	Writing Group 2		Reading Group 5
11:10-11:20				Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	
11:20-11:30	Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	Reading Group 4	Asynchronous Specialists		Reading Group 6
11:30-11:40				Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	
11:40-11:50	Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	Reading Group 4	Asynchronous Specialists		Reading Group 6
11:50-12:00				Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	
12:00-12:35	LUNCH				
12:35-1:35	Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	Intervention Group as assigned	Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists	Student Work Time or Asynchronous Specialists
1:35-2:35	Optional Synchronous Specialist Time	Optional Synchronous Specialist Time	Optional Synchronous Specialist Time	Optional Synchronous Specialist Time	Optional Synchronous Specialist Time
	Intervention Group as assigned	Intervention Group as assigned	Intervention Group as assigned	Intervention Group as assigned	Intervention Group as assigned

(West Fargo Public Schools, 2020).

To help the families in my class have a better idea of the times that their child would need to be online I simplified the schedule.

Here is my simplified schedule:

<p style="text-align: center;">Mrs. Omonuwa's {Virtual} Daily Schedule</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Synchronous</p> <p style="text-align: center;">* Scheduled live meetings on Microsoft TEAMS with Mrs. Omonuwa</p>			
<p>Monday</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o 8:15-8:30: Morning Meeting o 8:45-9:15: Whole Group Reading Lesson o 10:00 – 10:30: Whole Group Math Lesson o 11:00 – 11:30: Whole Group Writing Lesson o 11:30 – 11:50: Writing Small Group #1 	<p>Tuesday</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o 8:15-8:30: Morning Meeting o 8:45 – 9:05: Reading Small Group #1 o 9:05 – 9:25: Reading Small Group #2 o 10:10 – 10:30: Reading Small Group #3 o 11:00 – 11:20: Reading Small Group #4 o 11:20 – 11:40: Reading Small Group #5 o 11:40 – 12:00: Writing Small Group #2 		
<p>Wednesday</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o 8:15 – 8:30: Counseling Lesson o 8:45 – 9:05: Math Small Group #1 o 11:20 – 11:40: Math Small Group #2 o 11:40 – 12:00: Math Small Group #3 	<p>Thursday</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o 8:15-8:30: Morning Meeting o 8:45-9:15: Whole Group Reading Lesson o 10:00 – 10:30: Whole Group Math Lesson o 11:00 – 11:30: Whole Group Writing Lesson o 11:30 – 11:50: Writing Small Group # 3 		
<p>Friday</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o 8:15-8:30: Morning Meeting o 8:45 – 9:05: Reading Small Group #1 o 9:05 – 9:25: Reading Small Group #2 o 10:10 – 10:30: Reading Small Group #3 o 11:00 – 11:20: Reading Small Group #4 o 11:20 – 11:40: Reading Small Group #5 	<p>Each student will participate in 2 Reading Small Groups, 1 Math Small Group and 1 Writing Small Group WEEKLY!</p>		
<p style="text-align: center;">Asynchronous</p> <p style="text-align: center;">* Unscheduled Seesaw Activities</p>			
Daily:	Twice weekly:	Asynchronous Weekly:	Specialist Lessons Weekly:
Choice Reading 20-30 minutes	Learning Activities for Writing	1 Reading	3 Physical Education
Learning Activities for Reading	Learning Activities for Science	1 Writing	2 Music
Learning Activities for Math	Intervention as assigned	2 Math	2 Art
DreamBox Lessons		1 Science	1 Media
			1 Counseling

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To begin the 2020 school year we were able to meet with each student and their parents for one – to – one conference times. This was beneficial to ensure that parents understood the requirements and schedule. Many parents and students were able to connect but a good number of students did not. I went into the school year not sure who would show up daily and if they would know how to handle the virtual learning classroom. As a teacher I became the IT department for any technological issue that my students and parents were having. I was making tutorials and step by step videos to enable my students to connect and feel comfortable with the computer and platforms that we would be using daily. (See Appendix A, and Appendix B).

As a teacher the day looked a little busier. My prep times became setting up the documents, videos and online media that was needed for the lesson that I would be teaching during the next block of time. Multiple meetings happen during the day. Any other teacher that I must meet with to discuss a student has to be virtual in my free times. Here is an example of my daily schedule.

8:00 am – Log in to TEAMS, start classroom meeting

8: 15 – 8:30 am – Morning meeting

8:30 – 8:40 am – Prepare for reading lesson, set up documents and videos as needed

8:40 – Log in to TEAMS classroom and start meeting, make sure to record lesson

8:45 – 9:15 am - Reading whole group lesson

9:15 – 9:50 – Prepare for math lesson, set up documents, websites and videos as needed.

9:50 - Log in to TEAMS classroom and start meeting, make sure to record lesson

10:00 – 10:30 – Math whole group lesson

10:30 – 10:50 - Prepare for writing lesson, set up documents, websites and videos as

needed.

10:50 - Log in to TEAMS classroom and start meeting, make sure to record lesson

11:00 – 11:30 – Writing whole group lesson

11:30 – 11:50 – Stay on TEAMS with writing small group #1

11:50 – 12:30 – LUNCH

12:30 – 2:30 – Record attendance, create Seesaw activities, assign activities for following day, comment on and approve student work on Seesaw, meet one on one with students or parents as needed.

2:30 – 3:30 – District meetings (virtual program, grade level or staff meetings)

The schedule was relatively easy for the students to follow and after a couple of weeks the majority of the students had regular attendance for the synchronous activities and were turning in their activities on Seesaw.

Overall, the virtual program was successful in being a viable alternative to the regular school classroom. Students continued to progress and learn when in person education was not an option. The virtual program for WFPS will continue through the 2020 - 2021 school year (West Fargo Public Schools, 2020, pg. 28).

Chapter 4: Reflection of Experience

Education through the internet is a relatively new concept especially in the elementary school setting. In the spring of 2020 when the schools were shut down unexpectedly, we had the issue of how to deliver a valid educational experience to ALL our students. We had to think about equity and equality. Some people had multiple computers, tablets and iPads in their homes while others had basically nothing. To combat that we sent out surveys to parents and called families to see what types of technology needs they had. If the students needed iPads they were able to sign one out from the district and if they needed internet access, the district worked with them to get it for their house or apartment. Getting students logged on to our learning platforms was a little bit of a mess and I spent numerous hours emailing and calling parents to walk them through step by step how to use their devices, Seesaw and TEAMS.

For the virtual program students were given a chromebook from the district. Many of the younger elementary students had very little experience with laptops and this also proved to be a hardship for many families as they navigated this new learning.

Being a virtual teacher, I quickly became an “expert” in technology and internet learning. I spent countless hours creating step by step tutorial videos and documents to explain the how to’s of different issues parents and students were having. I met individually with students and parents often to guide them through issues. (See Appendix A and B).

When it came to the actual teaching and learning in the fall of 2020 many students had it in their minds that it would be “easy” like how we handled the Spring learning, which was all asynchronous and mostly review of what had been taught in the beginning of the school year. A

majority of the students were surprised that there would be lessons to attend and activities to do very similar to a regular, in-person, classroom. The students did not always do their best and it was hard to set expectations when everything was delivered virtually. Students were often absent or not fully paying attention due to distractions in their living spaces. This was hard to manage as a teacher. I would teach the curriculum and often ended up giving mini-lessons on how to be prepared for class, and ignore distractions or find a space where there are no distractions. I felt like much of this took away from the curriculum I was expected to teach.

Overall, the Virtual Program is running smooth and students now have most of these issues under control. Students are attending, participating, and engaging in grade level classroom work. Though the Virtual Program was developed particularly for learning in the Fall of 2020. I think that with some tweaks and improvements the Virtual Program will be an educational experience that West Fargo Public Schools continues to offer to their students.

Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusion

The ability of a school district to offer a virtual program such as West Fargo Public Schools is a huge benefit to all stakeholders. Students and parents can rest assured that education is continuing, and the community can be grateful for schools being innovative in delivering education all while keeping students safe.

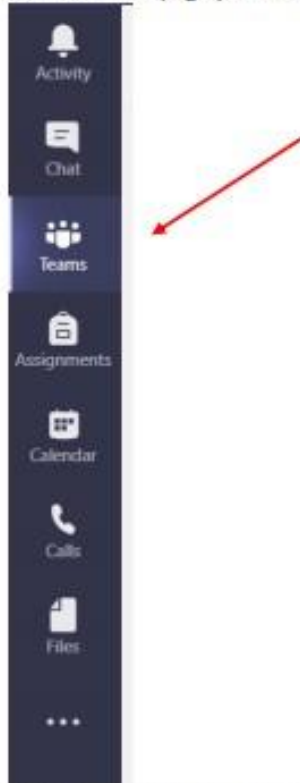
In conclusion, I learned that there are so many factors to consider when education needs to continue during a time of crisis. The many different voices that school districts must listen to will likely have many different opinions of what to do. The stakeholders that the school board had to hear included students, teachers, parents, and community members. During the 2020 covid-19 pandemic I felt that too much emphasis was put on the economy and the community members instead of thinking about how the children and teachers being in the schools would increase the chance of spreading the virus. As inconvenient as it was to end the 2019 – 2020 school year in distance learning it helped slow the spread of the virus. Having students and teachers return to school in the fall of 2020 only increased the spread and has caused this pandemic to continue.

Appendix A

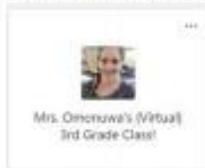
1. Log in to your school issued device. Username is your Student ID, password is your student ID with a Wf in front of it...
 - a. Example Username : 12345 Password: Wf12345
2. Click on the TEAMS icon on your desktop



3. On the TEAMS page you'll see a bar on the left hand side. Click where it says "TEAMS"



4. You should see my class "landing pad" it looks like this...



5. Click on there and when prompted click to "Join Online"

Appendix B

Your student will need to connect via the student app, through a webpage on his/her device. Below are steps for setting up Seesaw at home.



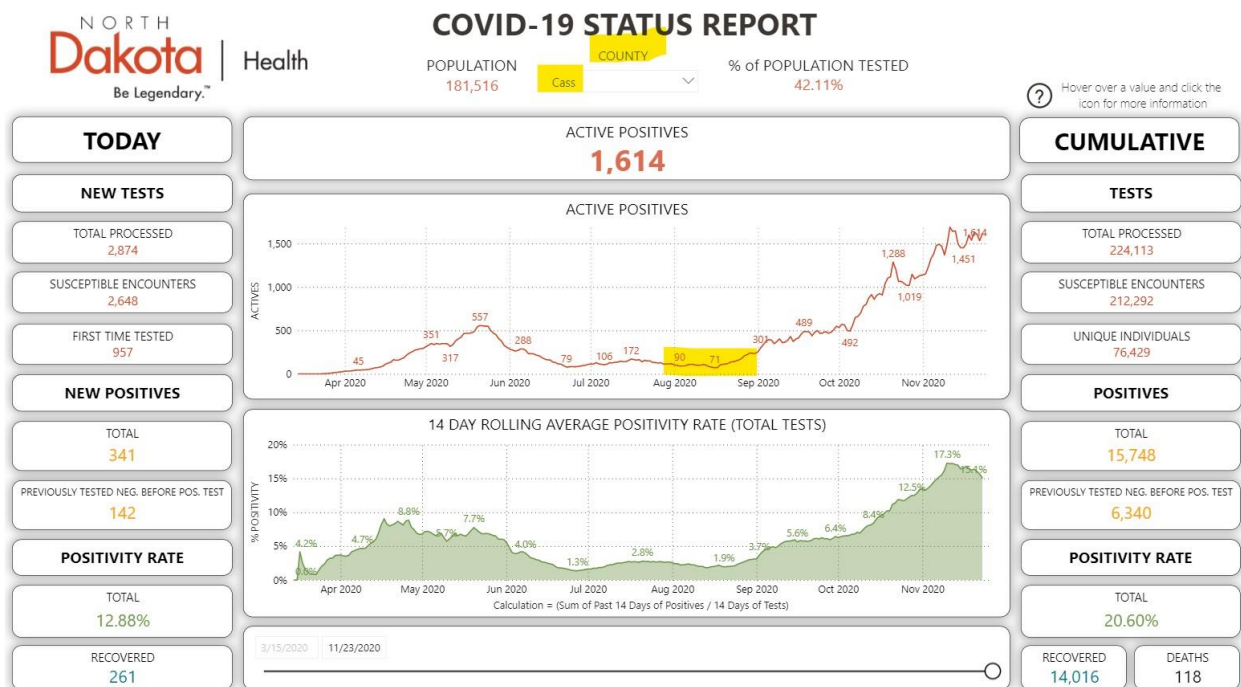
Set up your child in the Seesaw Class App:

1. For laptop or desktop computers, **go to app.seesaw.me**
2. Click **I'm a Student**
3. We provided home learning codes: **Enter the text code** or **scan the QR code**

Link: https://app.seesaw.me/api/home_code/

Home Learning Code:

Appendix C



(Cass County Government, 2020)

Appendix D



EXECUTIVE ORDER 2020-03

WHEREAS, COVID-19 is a severe respiratory illness, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, a new strain of coronavirus that is spread from person to person, posing a threat to the health and safety of the residents of North Dakota; and,

WHEREAS, no drug or vaccine is currently available to treat or prevent COVID-19; and,

WHEREAS, as of March 13, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates there are more than 132,000 confirmed cases in 123 countries worldwide and more than 1600 confirmed cases in the United States; and,

WHEREAS, United States Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar declared a national public health emergency for COVID-19 on January 27, 2020; and

WHEREAS, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020; and,

WHEREAS, on March 13, 2020, President Donald Trump issued a declaration of national emergency due to the growing COVID-19 crisis in the United States; and,

WHEREAS, the North Dakota Department of Health activated its Emergency Operations Center in January 2020 and has been actively coordinating and in communication with health care providers, schools, universities, childcare providers, businesses, churches and the general public to make sure North Dakotans are educated and as prepared as possible to assist in reducing the spread of COVID-19; and,

WHEREAS, proactively implementing preparedness, containment and mitigation measures to slow the transmission and reduce the impact of the virus is in the best interest of North Dakota and its citizens; and,

WHEREAS, preparedness, response and recovery from the COVID-19 virus requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach across federal, state, tribal and local governments, as well as private and nonprofit sectors.

NOW THEREFORE, Doug Burgum, Governor of North Dakota, by virtue of the authority under Article V, Section 1 of the North Dakota Constitution and North Dakota Century Code 37-17.1, hereby declares a state of emergency in North Dakota in response to the public health crisis resulting from the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), and hereby

Executive Order 2020-03

Page 2

orders activation of the North Dakota State Emergency Operations Plan (SEOP) in order to assist local and tribal officials, to prevent injuries and save lives, alleviate hardships, implement appropriate response and recovery actions and future mitigation measures, and facilitate restoration of services and infrastructure.

All state agencies are ordered to provide response resources and capabilities pursuant to their respective responsibilities detailed in the SEOP. The Adjutant General is authorized to activate and make available North Dakota National Guard resources to support state agencies and local and tribal governments based upon normal cost share agreements.

This order is issued on the foregoing bases and under the following conditions:

1. The Governor is vested with the executive authority pursuant to Article V, Section 1 of the North Dakota Constitution; and,
2. The Governor is vested with statutory authority to issue executive orders to minimize or avert the effects of a public health emergency pursuant to Chapter 37-17.1 of the North Dakota Century Code; and,
3. The Governor and the State Health Officer are vested with the statutory authority under North Dakota Century Code 23-07.6 to implement appropriate isolation and quarantine measures; and,
4. The Governor is vested with statutory authority under North Dakota Century Code Chapter 39-12-23 to permit and prescribe definite excess limitations as to size and weight for the operation of motor vehicles in emergencies and to meet unusual conditions for the general welfare of the public; and,
5. A coordinated and effective effort of all state departments is required to minimize the impact of disasters and emergencies in this state.

This order is in effect immediately and shall remain in effect until it is rescinded.

Executed at Bismarck, North Dakota, this 13th day of March, 2020.



Doug Burdum
Governor

ATTEST:



Secretary of State

Deputy

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