

# Canastota Central School District

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## District Office

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March 21, 2020

Good afternoon,

As promised, I will be providing our school community with periodic updates on issues related to the coronavirus issue that has significantly disrupted our regular educational program. One of the most frequent questions school officials have been asked about in the past week since Friday, March 13th has to do with the timing of the decision to close school. People have noted that several neighboring districts formally closed through April break as early as Friday, March 13th in the afternoon. Why did Canastota wait to announce the long-term closure until Sunday, March 15th? I'd like to provide you a quick review of our process, and outline the facts that governed our proper response to this difficult decision.

**Fact #1:** School districts put school aid in jeopardy if they close schools without complying with established state and federal guidelines. In this case, districts were told that they could close if they were formally ordered to do so by a supervising governmental agency, if there was a confirmed case of coronavirus with a student or staff member, or if a local State of Emergency was declared, allowing districts to make the decision to close locally without losing aid.

**Fact #2:** None of the above criteria existed until the afternoon of Sunday, March 15th, when Madison County declared a State of Emergency. This fact was further substantiated in the declaration of a State of Emergency by Madison County Board of Supervisors Chairman John Becker on Sunday, March 15th. The announcement on the County website states that "This declaration gives the school districts the ability to close if they so choose." As of today, there are no students or staff diagnosed with COVID-19, and there was no order to close by a supervising governmental authority. Within minutes of the state of emergency declaration, the School Messenger system began notifying families that Canastota would exercise the ability to close made available through the Madison County declaration.

**Fact #3:** School Board members and administrators are obligated to act in the best interest of the students and taxpayers that we represent. This issue was never, and will never, be about making a choice between the safety of students and money. The reality is that we can and should act responsibly in managing both the financial and safety elements of district operation. At the end of the day, our schools are closed this week just as the districts who made the decision to close last Friday, March 13th. The decision of the Canastota leadership team allowed the district to check both boxes – safety and responsible financial stewardship. If we declared a closure into mid-April on Friday, March 13th, we would have done so with no indication our aid would be intact. Sacrificing several weeks of state aid would cost the district hundreds of thousands of dollars.

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In fact, based on a 180 day schedule, the district could have lost over \$59,000/day in state aid. District leadership is obligated to get answers to questions with such enormous financial implications, not to act without adequate information and clarification. By collaborating with local authorities and neighboring school Superintendents, we made the decision that was in the best interest of all members of the school community that we represent.

**Fact #4:** There was no immediate need to make such a long-term decision with wide-ranging implications last Friday, March 13th – before we had adequately coordinated with local and regional officials. This is a key point, as this is a clearly articulated element of the guidance information distributed to school districts. Absent the local State of Emergency declaration, a confirmed district case of COVID-19, or an order from a supervising governmental agency, the district’s closure would not meet the requirement for relief under Governor Cuomo’s 180-day waiver that was so widely publicized on Friday, March 13th. There were conditions attached to the waiver, and knowing this, district leadership determined that working in concert with County officials and neighboring districts who shared our commitment to both safety and financial stewardship. This coordination happened throughout the weekend of Saturday, March 14th and Sunday, March 15th, and as soon as the necessary sequence of events occurred, the district immediately disseminated notice of the long term school closure.

**Fact #5:** As the situation evolved Friday afternoon on the heels of Governor Cuomo’s declaration of emergency, the district decided to call a Superintendent’s Conference Day for Monday, March 16th. This decision was made for two primary reasons:

1. This allowed parents time to arrange for supervision and day care several days in advance
2. This gave the district an opportunity to have adequate clarification on the requirements of the 180 day waiver, and to undertake in-depth discussions with County officials to make an informed decision.

On Sunday morning, March 15th, the district decided to notify families that Tuesday, March 17th would become an “Emergency Closure Day” (better known in more typical years as a snow day!). Fortunately we have had an easy winter, so we had the luxury of using some days if necessary. Understanding that the County would have to make decisions within the next few days, using emergency closure days gave parents adequate notification that would allow them to make supervision arrangements.

As you can see, the district has done its due diligence in navigating through the unprecedented circumstances confronting educational institutions. Ultimately, our decision was informed by the input of County officials, educational advocacy authorities and legal experts. When provided with the full set of facts, I trust that you will agree with me in concluding that our actions resulted in the right outcome in terms of safety of our students and responsible management of district finances. If you have any questions or would simply like to discuss this further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,  
Shawn D. Bissetta  
Superintendent of Schools