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"I Believe, You Believe, We Believe"

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It is with great honor and humble privilege that I address you this morning to discuss the most pivotal change in urban education in and beyond the classroom. As I sit here to address you today, let us put a face to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I want you all to take a trip of triumph, adversity, and change of traditional education...

Schools serve as a safe space for students. Physically safe, mentally safe, emotionally safe. This safety was abruptly interrupted when the Pandemic caused schools across the nation to close and scramble to figure out their next move. Lincoln Charter School proceeded a little differently. We never really closed... Our holistic philosophy wouldn't allow us to shut our doors when families needed us the most. It was during this time that our reputation as a Community School enabled the partnerships that we had established to thrive. We served as a community hub outside on the patio welcoming donations from community agencies who knew that we would distribute goods to families in need. Our focus was not only on educating our students but providing for the academic, emotional and social needs of the York community.

Parents drove through our gates excited to have socially distant interaction with other adults during a time of isolation. Community members were relieved to know that they could depend on Lincoln Charter School to meet the needs of their households even if their child did not attend LCS. We were able to serve as a hub for food; hygiene items and mental health check ins. Our mental health professionals provided service via Zoom for not only identified clients but anyone that may have been involved in a mental health crisis.

These steps, however, did not alleviate the stress of having a safe haven removed. A great number of our families were struggling with lost jobs, illness, death of loved ones with no closure, loss of housing, and food insecurities. At Lincoln Charter School, our team of teachers, maintenance workers, culture and climate personnel, technology technicians and food service workers pulled together to conduct thousands of home visits and well child check ins. We rented a van for delivery of school meals (5 breakfasts and 5 lunches) and weekend backpack boxes. Our team ensured that the homeless students had meals oftentimes catered to their environment. You can't give a family living at a hotel meals that require a stove or even a can opener. We discovered that one family that we were servicing was sharing her food with almost 20 other families. The schools that these students attended were not as aware of their circumstances as LCS had been. Just as a point of reference, during last school year,

we had approximately 25 homeless students. This number had increased due in part to the Zoom sessions that were being conducted. Educators were observing students living in hotel rooms or many individuals living in small spaces, "doubled up." Over the course of the school year, about 17 of the identified homeless were able to secure housing through resources and connections that the school provided. Yet, at the start of this year, we already have 30 homeless students.

The Pandemic has had positive outcomes. Our teacher – parent engagement has soured. This authentic connection that was established when parents served as co teachers cannot be erased. The collaboration that had to exist drew our parents even closer to the staff that they had entrusted their children to on a daily basis.

Scholastically, we have done our best to keep our students engaged and rigorously challenged by discovering various ways to integrate technology into academics through a digitally focused program. We learned that some elements of virtual distance learning are very effective and can be incorporated into post-pandemic teaching strategies. Now that vaccines are here, it has allowed us to reopen our doors and be very strategic in our efforts of addressing the already challenging academic progress of our students post-pandemic.

The days of traditional education are over. Schools, whether charter or traditional, have been given an unfair challenge and limited guidance on how we are to handle closing the achievement gap and managing the social and emotional needs of our students and staff, while assuring that the new COVID-19 variant doesn't interrupt our current learning environment as we keep everyone healthy and safe by continuing safety protocols and procedures recommended by the CDC and local Health and Human Services commission. Lincoln Charter School is dedicated to ensuring that we do our very best in all of our efforts. We stand strong in our conviction that the end is near. It is not just when the end of the pandemic will come that concerns me as much as what will be the effects post-pandemic on the progression of students' learning and social and emotional developments. We can't forget about our staff. They too have suffered the effects of adversity brought forth by this worldwide pandemic. It will be impossible for us as educators to meet the needs of our students if we do not assist our staff and identify when they need to step away and address their own social and emotional needs. We may get back to "normal" but the educational experience from 2020 and 2021 will have a ripple effect for years to come. How we react and address these ripples of adversity will determine if these effects will be felt for centuries and generations to come.