The following is adapted for Marion County Public Schools with NSPRA permission from David Luther, retired Public Relations Officer for Jefferson City Public Schools in Missouri.

WHAT WENT RIGHT!

We humans often have a bad habit. We sometimes focus on the negative things in our lives and fail to recognize the positives. Media and social media do not help much in this regard. Bad news is typically more likely to get published, broadcast, and shared, and as much as we might not want to admit it, we read and watch these stories. Reporters will sometimes use the terms “soft” or “fluff” for positive stories. That’s a shame, because some of these stories are the most remarkable.

Monday was the first day of school for 32,411 Marion County Public Schools students, and things ran amazingly well given the pandemic world we’re experiencing. However, a lot of students didn’t show up at all. Some buses ran late. Some students weren’t even registered. 270 seventh graders – 115 face-to-face and 155 online -- did not have their required immunizations (more than double last year). One student even got sick and put a bus out of commission temporarily. No doubt almost every student, parent and teacher had something go wrong. But what about the other side of the story? What went right?

- **21,949** students showed up for face-to-face learning – about **68 percent** of students present on opening day. Another **10,462**, or **32 percent**, appeared for MCPSonline learning. These rates are consistent with our parent surveys this summer indicating 70 percent and 30 percent for face-to-face and online, respectively. We anticipate **42,978** students during peak enrollment in October.
- **7,483** students had a safe bus ride to and from school. Though much lower than usual, those riding the bus enjoyed dependable service with a smile. Our **264** buses cover an average of **35,117** miles every day. Our district is a big one – 1,650 sq. miles, larger than the state of Rhode Island. Our bus drivers, aides, and transportation folks do tremendous work!
- Just under **2,500** children and their parents benefitted from Marion Afterschool Programs (MAP). As well, **85 percent** of participating schools already have waiting lists for Marion Afterschool Programs.
- Our cafeteria workers served **6,657** breakfasts, **13,913** lunches, and **902** afterschool snacks in our **50** traditional schools plus another **136** afterschool dinners. There were healthy choices available (although more than a few cookies were eaten, too). **67 percent** of our students are eligible for free and reduced meals – two out of every three. For some students, these were the **best meals of their day**. For some students, these were the **only meals of the day**. Our Food Service workers are amazing!
- Over **3,200** teachers, principals and other instructional and support staff greeted students, helped them find their classes, began the teaching process and in general did an exceptional job. This includes **231** teachers brand new to Marion County. This did not happen by accident. Most teachers and school personnel spent much of their
summer preparing for the next school year so things started right. And we still have 25 teaching positions open as of today!

- Schools were clean and grounds were manicured. Our maintenance workers and custodians spent the summer renovating buildings, reworking cafeterias, putting down new carpet, pulling up old wax on tiled floors, making sure windows were fixed, roofs were repaired, air conditioners worked, floors were swept, and, in general, getting schools ready for staff and students.
- Our new superintendent travelled nearly 60 miles visiting 12 of our 50 school campuses in person – 99 minutes in driving time alone. She spent quality time with principals and parents. A few students even gave surprise hugs to her.
- Secretaries, receptionists, and other office staff greeted students, and we all know as the year goes along, these people handle thousands of jobs, and virtually every one of these jobs will in some way impact students.
- When it comes to communicating, our Transportation Hotline fielded 1,167 phone calls while our Technology Service Desk received 591 calls, mostly for student password resets and schedule changes. Our district-wide telephone network handled 56,909 phone calls -- 18 percent more than last year including 26,669 incoming, 9,234 outgoing, and 21,006 internal calls. In essence, this means over 1,516 hours, or 91,006 minutes, of focused talk time communicating on the first day of school. Even with this, communication can always improve.
- Our district Payroll Department is delivering paychecks to 2,933 teachers during this first week of school.
- District administrators, principals and School Board members spent much of their time making sure the district remains focused on doing what is right for students.
- Last Friday, 264,627 emails were sent and received through our district-wide network. The average day on the MCPS network involves 185,785 emails.
- Our Warehouse crews distributed these items to schools and departments leading up to Opening Day: 4,720 gallons of Peroxy Cleaner/Disinfectant; 4,208 gallons of hand sanitizer and pumps; 1,219 boxes of gloves; 468 tubs of Lysol® wipes; and 281,715 cloth face masks.
- The coordination of 42,978 expected students, over 7,000 employees, 400+ portable classrooms, and 50 schools with 7 million square feet of space does not happen by accident, and it won’t happen at all if someone doesn’t mind the switch.
- Even carlines were freshly efficient on the first day of school – something parents and administrators rarely say!
- Finally, masks were abundant on every campus, classroom, cafeteria, and common area.

I believe this will truly be an amazing year for MCPS! Look, I’m a Public Relations guy, so I know people will say, “Well, he’s paid to put a positive take on everything.” True confession: my day was stressful, too. I drove to 13 campuses between 7AM-2PM. Here’s what I discovered once again: this is a wonderful community in which we live, and despite what school grades are, what Tallahassee says, what politicians rant about our district, and how COVID-19 has impacted us all, we have great schools, great teachers and great students! Are there problems? Absolutely. Are they insurmountable? Absolutely not! (Though some are tougher to solve than
The main thing we must do is keep our eyes on the target, and for MCPS this means always doing what is right -- for students.

Please share your own “what went right” perspective with others from time to time. When teachers and other staff do a great job -- tell them (this goes for all of us: parents, families, colleagues, bosses, etc.). When your kids experience success -- celebrate! When you see something that needs to be improved – tell those involved and be part of the solution, not the problem.

Here’s to a wonderful 2020-21 school year!