



MORTON

UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 709

May 21, 2021

‘Well, we did it’

The headline above is what we told our teachers Friday morning at our annual awards banquet, and it pretty much sums up how we feel about this historic school year.

We did it, indeed.

Focus on the “we” part of that, because it was truly a team effort. Our goal for



Morton’s finest assemble at the Bertha Frank auditorium at MHS

2020-21 of “safe classrooms, successful outcomes” could not have been achieved unless every link in the chain held. We are thrilled to report, now that we can look at this school year in the rearview mirror, that every link in the Morton District 709 chain – our students, our staff, our families, our School Board, our community in general – met the challenge despite the stress that was put upon it.

Congratulations, Morton. Job well done.

Those who have been reading these weekly messages know that we have used them primarily to communicate our health and attendance ups and downs in the midst of a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic.

We're dispensing with this week's COVID chart because first, our numbers are low and so there's little to report, and second, because we are now committed to looking forward with hope and optimism – hope that this is all behind us, optimism that whatever the future holds, we can handle it.

As School Board Vice President Tim Braker told our teachers today, “you all did the right thing, not the easy thing,” and “the people of Morton really appreciate what you’ve done” as they, too, now look forward to a coming school year in which “healthy quarantines, social distancing and ‘pull up your mask’ are a thing of the past.”



School Board Vice President Tim Braker

Indeed, consider this our transition from “weekly health and attendance update” to “weekly education update,” which is what we’re supposed to be all about, first and foremost.

On that front, we celebrate the just-completed academic year in [this video](#) we call “Making It Happen.” It covers in less than five minutes what transpired over nearly 180 days, but that’s what life is made of and what we remember – those special moments in time.

We celebrate all of our staff members who stepped up to deliver in-person classroom instruction from opening to closing bell, distinguishing them from the vast majority of their peers across the state.

Specifically, we recognize Morton Junior High teacher **Gena Jones**, winner of this



Award winners Caitlin Gschwend, Don Sturm and Gena Jones

year's Dana Ashby Award for outstanding work with special needs children; Morton High special education aide **Caitlin Gschwend**, winner of the Potter's Hand Award for outstanding service by a non-certified employee; and District 709 instructional coach **Don Sturm**, winner of the Master Potter Award for Excellence in Education.

The comments in their letters of recommendation speak for themselves. If Ms. Jones is “the most awesome teacher in the history of the universe,” known for her encouragement to students to “never give up,” Ms. Gschwend “builds relationships like no other” and is both “a sounding board” and “a shoulder to cry on.” As for Mr. Sturm, he has few peers as a coach, mentor, master of technology and “catalyst for positive change.” In short, he just “rocks.”

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the Herculean efforts this past year of top administrators Dr. Troy Teater and Dr. Craig Smock.



Dr. Hill and Dr. Teater pitch in to serve breakfast on Friday

Dr. Teater, among his many other duties, spearheaded our remote learning program and oversaw the transition of many students back into the classroom.



Dr. Hill and Dr. Smock preside over Friday's awards ceremony

Meanwhile, perhaps no one in the district saw their duties change more than our own "Captain COVID," Dr. Smock, who not only had a direct hand in our pandemic preparation and oversight efforts but helped keep our collective morale up through his weekly "Making it Happen" collection of photos chronicling the school year. Quite simply, we could not have done it without him.

This school year has been nothing short of remarkable and reassuring in so many ways, and it is with an immense sense of satisfaction that we bring it to a close. Before we know it, we will start down the path of preparing for the next one.

In the meantime, have a wonderful summer, everyone. It has been an honor.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey W. Hill, Ed.D

Superintendent

Morton Community Unit District 709