THE MOTHER OF REINVENTION
HOW SYSTEM LEADERS RESPOND IN A CRISIS

By Robert Rothman

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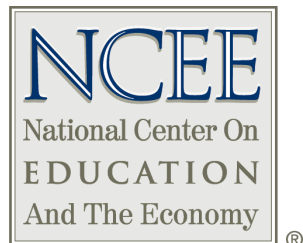
Online lessons. Food drop-offs. Zoom mental-health counseling. Since state officials closed schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, district leaders across the country have quickly developed new approaches to ensure that students continued their education and that schools continued to provide students with meals and support to meet their social and emotional needs. Although some traditions—like senior proms—had to be curtailed, districts are doing their best to make sure that learning and development do not stop.

Though the approaches vary, depending on the local context, they all reflect the ideas emphasized in NCEE/NISL's district supports: systemic and strategic thinking. And they reflect what the superintendents had learned from their research into the policies and practices of top-performing jurisdictions. They are tapping teachers' expertise and giving them opportunities to exercise leadership, and they are maintaining high expectations for learning for all students.

While the district leaders are proud of what they have done and how educators, parents, and students have stepped up and responded to the difficult circumstances, they nevertheless have faced some challenges. Some changes in policy, such as grading, have proven controversial. And the shift to an online world has laid bare the glaring inequalities in American education, where some students have access to a wealth of resources while others struggle.

To be sure, the future of schools remains uncertain. It is unclear when schools will be able to reopen, and when they do, under what circumstances. Some top-performing jurisdictions, which have already started to reopen their schools, can point the way. But district leaders are convinced that the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic will endure, and that education in the next few school years will reflect a "new normal."

Online Learning

When states across the U.S. ordered schools closed in March, district leaders knew that the only way to ensure that learning continued was through the internet. But while some districts had experience with online learning, none had done so district-wide, full-time, and so everyone in each district needed to get up to speed—quickly. That meant ensuring that students had access to hardware and Wi-Fi, that teachers knew how to operate their classrooms remotely, and that lessons were available so that classes could resume right away.

The **Seneca Valley School District** in Pennsylvania, a suburban district near Pittsburgh, was more ready than most. The district had developed a pandemic plan in 2009, during the H1N1 epidemic, and the assistant superintendent who helped develop it at the time, Tracy Vitale, was now the superintendent, so she pulled it off her shelf and gathered a team—including a school board member with a degree in public health—to update it. "Experience and tenure in a district matters," Vitale said. "You can pivot more quickly when you have experience."

The plan stated, in part:

> The Seneca Valley School District will provide planned instruction for all students through every available resource of the district. Within this plan, teachers will utilize the district's curriculum and available resources to provide instruction of new concepts/skills aligned to grade level and course specific standards. Teachers will assess the learning of their students and provide support based upon student progress. To receive learning feedback, students are encouraged to attend regularly and provide evidence of their learning as instructed. High school students will continue to obtain credit towards graduation. This plan will be posted on our website and important points are shared through our "School Messenger" communications to all district families.

The district had some additional advantages: it ran its own cyber academy since 2008, which was created to compete with state-run cyber charter academies that had attracted about 100 students from the district; it also had arrangements with neighboring districts to teach through distance learning courses for which the home district lacked teachers; and it had participated in a pilot state program to provide online classes during snow days, called "Flexible Instructional Days" (FIDS). The district had also had a 1:1 laptop-to-student ratio in all grades except kindergarten. When COVID hit, the superintendent, school board members and school administrators hand-delivered over 500 additional laptops to their kindergartner's homes. The district also had Professional Learning Communities with their teachers already established and kept those running virtually through their closure so that teachers could continue to collaborate and share ideas. But the scale of the COVID-19 challenge was larger than anything Seneca Valley had faced before.

To meet that challenge, the district turned to its teachers. "I have always as a leader believed you get more out of teachers if you treat them as professionals and then get out of the way," Vitale said. So she asked teachers to spend the week of March 16 to put their instructional

systems in place, including deciding which online platforms to use (although her IT Director cautioned against the use of platforms like Zoom, because of privacy concerns).

The **Kiski Area School District**, a suburban-rural district in western Pennsylvania, also built on its experience and relied on teacher expertise to develop and implement an online learning system. The district had been a Google for Education Reference District since 2017, recognized by Google for the outstanding use of technology in learning and a site for other districts to visit and learn from. The district also had had in place for four years a system of professional learning communities (PLC) in each school, in which teachers meet regularly to plan curriculum and lessons and share ideas about student learning.

Kiski Area also benefited from the fact that the principal of the upper elementary school, Brian Swartzlander, and the assistant principal, Dan Smith, had previously served as the district's technology coaches. The two teamed up to quickly develop a plan for online learning. "We had boots on the ground experience with that," Swartzlander said.

The district also maintained the PLC meeting times while schools were closed, to enable teachers to develop lessons and discuss any problems they were encountering, which Swartzlander called a "non-negotiable." The teacher teams also dedicated one meeting a week for professional development, where teachers led sessions to help their peers improve their online learning programs.

Caddo Parish School District in Louisiana, which includes Shreveport, engaged teachers in a different way to continue their instructional program. There, district leaders decided on a single online platform, Google Classroom, and asked all principals to ensure that every teacher was trained to use it. Then, the district enlisted what Angela Henry, the executive director of curriculum and instruction, called "super highly effective teachers" to develop weekly lessons for every subject area—including physical education, music, and art—at every grade level. The district then had teachers throughout the district use them and provide videos to show that they were doing so.

Districts also encouraged teachers to go beyond instructing students to meet with them regularly and maintain their personal relationships. After all, as Sandra "Sam" Himmel, superintendent of the **Citrus County School District** in Florida, put it, "teachers go into teaching because of kids. They don't go into teaching to watch kids on computers."

Citrus County had teachers contact students' homes if they did not see them logging in to the online lessons. If they could not reach the students or parents, social workers and counselors paid home visits.

Another Florida district, **Okeechobee County Public Schools**, also had teachers keep in touch with their students regularly. "We want to up engagement," said Pat McCoy, the assistant superintendent for instructional services. "We want to see the kids' faces and hear their voices. We want them to see us."

School Meals

District leaders know that, for many students, school is more than a place for learning—it is also a place where they get food and nutrition. Nationwide, [more than half of all students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunches](), and for many of these young people, the meal they get at school is the only substantial meal they will eat all day.

So when schools closed in the wake of the pandemic, district leaders knew that they had to make arrangements to continue meal services for the students who needed them. And this took some creativity.

One factor that worked in the districts' favor was a new policy from the federal government that permitted districts to receive waivers that allowed them to distribute meals to anyone, not just students who qualified for the subsidized meals. In Okeechobee County, at first, the district set up three centers where families could pick up meals—at a high school, library, and neighborhood center. Then the district deployed buses—no longer transporting students to schools—to deliver meals to 27 sites around the district. Okeechobee County provided hot meals every other day, then added breakfasts. To accommodate the increased work, the district added a second kitchen. Citrus County used a similar approach, beginning with "drive-through" meal pickups and then having bus drivers pass out meals at 11 sites and along 37 bus routes. "Several bus drivers were in tears," said Himmel. "They wanted to make a difference."

Allen Parish Schools, in southwest Louisiana, meanwhile, began by having cafeteria workers hand out meals, but had to stop because of concerns over social distancing. Instead, the district partnered with a company called Healthy Foods, which enabled families to order meals online

and have them delivered to their homes. Families can receive not only packaged foods, but also groceries like loaves of bread and fresh fruit.

Seneca Valley, which operates its own cafeteria services, had families pick up meals at four central school locations across 100 square miles. But for those who couldn't get to the central office, the athletic director, assistant athletic director, dean of students, and director of advancement delivered them to the families' homes. The school district also coordinated with a local dairy to secure thousands of cartons of milk that were then picked up by administrators so they could be distributed to families.

Student Services

In addition to providing meals, districts also provide direct services to children and youth with mental health and other special needs, and these services were disrupted when schools closed. Although the situation was less than ideal, district leaders wanted to do all they could for the students who needed the most support. "One of our biggest fears was that the students who are most disadvantaged would come back to us more broken," said Lynne Kirby, the director of exceptional student education (ESE) for Citrus County.

In that district, ESE teachers, Title 1 specialists, and paraprofessionals meet regularly—virtually—with elementary students who need support. Counselors meet with groups each week. Speech and language therapists have a more challenging task, because they meet one-on-one with students, and their caseload is high, but Kirby said they are providing all the support they can. "They're doing a phenomenal job," she said.

In addition, teachers meet in grade-level meetings to discuss individual students and their needs.

In Okeechobee County, the district mobilized three crisis counselors, a social worker, and a youth coordinator to provide mental health support through telemedicine. The district also distributed materials to families on topics such as stress management and anxiety. And "if we see students need a pick-me-up, we make Zoom calls," said Katherine Williams, director of mental health and behavioral supports for the district.

At Seneca Valley, the district found that online testing for special needs was not feasible, because of concerns over validity and reliability. And so, worried that students might not be

identified for services they needed, the district agreed to provide services to "thought-to-bes," those students who might be eligible for support.

Lessons Learned

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted almost every aspect of society around the world. District leaders were not trained to overhaul their systems overnight, and their experience did not necessarily prepare them for it. But they knew they had to act, and act quickly, to continue to serve students and families. And their preparation in strategic thinking and system redesign equipped them to do so. In the process, they learned some lessons. These include:

Planning matters. For many districts, coming up with ways to deliver online learning, meals, and support services in short order was akin to "building a plane in the sky as you go," as Bridget Craft, the supervisor for personnel and school improvement for the Allen Parish Schools in Louisiana, put it.

But those districts that had been able to plan for closed schools fared better than others. Seneca Valley, where the district had developed a pandemic plan a decade ago, was in relatively good shape. But the district also had considerable experience with online learning and could make the transition in short order. "That's the primary reason we could pivot quickly," said Vitale. "We were prepared for closure."

Kiski Area also benefited from the fact that the district was a leader in online education and had considerable expertise in the area. March 13, 2020, when the governor ordered schools closed, was a "day that will live in infamy for us," said Superintendent Tim Scott. "We didn't have a whole lot of time to react."

But the two former technology coaches put together a plan quickly, Scott said. "We created a continuity of education plan before we were told we had to create one."

Communication matters. The disruptions caused by the school closures were unsettling to teachers, parents, and students. Districts that were able to keep everyone informed about how they were moving forward helped allay anxieties and earned trust.

The **Canton Area School District** in northeastern Pennsylvania found that many parents of elementary students were unfamiliar with Google Classroom, the platform they had adopted for online learning. So the district then adopted a supplementary system, known as Seesaw, which

was more parent-friendly, and "engagement in primary classes went up," said Superintendent Eric Briggs.

Briggs also sent a weekly email to all parents, keeping them informed of developments, and posted on the district website videos made by teachers of work students are doing at home.

Some districts established help desks to respond to questions about instruction or technology. At Kiski Area School District, the help desk received hundreds of calls when schools first closed. Now, the help desk receives about a dozen calls a week, said Scott. "It was expensive—about $5,000 a week," he said. "But that was money well spent."

Citrus County put in place help desks at each school, rather than in the central office, and found that parents preferred calling schools rather than what they referred to as the "Taj Mahal." A survey of parents found that between 95 percent and 98 percent of parents approved of it.

Still, not every parent is pleased with the turn of events. In Seneca Valley, a group of parents threatened to hold a demonstration to protest the district's decision to forego a traditional graduation ceremony. But the protest fizzled, reinforcing district leaders' belief in the importance of open and honest communication. "I underestimated how important communications would be," said Vitale. "I have two communications people; I'm regretting not having five."

Teacher leadership matters. The school closures have been particularly stressful for teachers, who have in many cases had to learn new technologies and a new way of teaching and spend long hours delivering lessons, meeting with students, and contacting parents. And many have had to do so while teaching their own children at home.

But district leaders have found that they were successful when teachers took on leadership roles in planning and developing lessons and keeping the continuity of learning. Both Kiski Area, in Pennsylvania, and Citrus County, in Florida, had well-established professional learning communities that stayed active while schools were closed to ensure that teachers could continue to collaborate. At Canton Area, meanwhile, all teachers jumped into the process by becoming Google-certified, which required 15 hours of instruction and a three-hour test. "Teachers have been the true champions," said Superintendent Briggs.

Challenges Remain

Despite these successes, district leaders acknowledge that the transition to the online world has not gone completely smoothly, and that they face some continuing challenges in maintaining it. But they remain committed to facing those challenges and ensuring that all students continue to learn and develop. The challenges include:

Inequities in resources. Throughout the country, the shift to online learning in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the gulf of inequality in American schools. More affluent students are more likely to have access to computers, Wi-Fi, and quiet places at home to study than their less advantaged peers. As a result, online learning might widen the achievement gap.

District leaders have tried to reduce those inequities. Many surveyed parents right away to see how many had access to computers and internet, and made plans to provide devices to those who lacked them and expand access to broadband. For those still not able to get online, the districts also prepared paper packets of assignments.

Citrus County, for example, distributed 7,500 devices, "at a drive-through, like at McDonalds," said Himmel, and delivered 500 laptops to kindergartners at their homes. As a result, the district only needed to provide paper packets to less than 10 percent of students. Seneca Valley, meanwhile, reached a deal with Verizon to provide Wi-Fi hot spots to homes that lacked them, and other districts set up hot spots in school parking lots.

While those efforts might have reduced inequalities, they did not eliminate them. Some students continue to lack resources for online learning. In Canton, a rural district, for example, internet access remains spotty, meaning some students cannot take advantage of the online instruction. "We're so spread out, none of the major internet providers will invest money to lay underground cables," said Briggs, adding that he has intermittent cell phone service on his 25-minute drive to his office.

Services for students with special needs. When schools closed, many district leaders were concerned that they would not be able to follow the Individual Education Programs (IEPs) for students with special needs. This would put them out of compliance with federal law, and more importantly, harm the education of millions of students.

District leaders note that, in some cases, online instruction can benefit students with special needs; for example, voice controls and font controls can help students read and communicate. In addition, districts have deployed staff to help ensure that students with special needs receive one-on-one attention.

Nevertheless, these systems might not be enough, said Himmel of Citrus County. "Our largest challenge is our ESE students," she said.

A fair system of grading. Although district leaders worked hard to continue instruction while schools were closed, they recognized that the instruction would be far different from what had happened the rest of the school year. That set off a heated debate. How should they grade student work? How will they evaluate students' performance over the school year when a fourth of it took place under very different circumstances?

For Kiski Area, the answer was clear: continue to grade as they always graded. For one thing, grading would send a signal that the instruction still counts. And it would ensure that teachers continue to treat all students the same. "We're sticking with grades because we're concerned about equity," said Scott.

But other districts concluded that their regular grading system would be unfair, and they switched to a pass-fail system for the online work. "How can you fairly, equitably grade a student who doesn't have equitable access?" said Briggs of Canton Area.

Other districts opted for a hybrid approach in which they would hold students harmless for the grades they received in online courses; if the student's grades went up, they would receive a boost in their average for the year. But if the grades went down, the lower grades would not count.

Not Going Back

When schools will reopen is uncertain. And when they do, they might look very different: students on staggered schedules; desks six feet apart; no lunchroom; no assemblies.

But for district leaders who have overseen a massive experiment in a new form of education, there will be no going back to the way things used to be.

For one thing, many students may opt out of schooling, preferring to remain homeschooled or enrolling in a virtual school. But in addition, the experience that teachers and students have had—and the extensive training and practice teachers have had in implementing it—has the potential to transform schools, said Owen Clanton, administrative director for middle schools for the **Calcasieu Parish Schools** in Louisiana.

"I see public education embracing what we keep talking about—the 21st century classroom," he said. "We have an awesome opportunity to redefine how we do education."