



SAANYS
SPECIAL
REPORT

APRIL 2020

PANDEMIC CHALLENGES



MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF A PANDEMIC AND SCHOOL CLOSURES

“During a time of crisis, everyone looks to the leader. The leader’s behavior and the leader’s priorities set expectations for everyone in the school. While no one has all the answers, this SAANYS document provides an excellent resource for activating the right conversations so we can make the most of the areas we can control and identify the best opportunities in those areas outside our control. I recommend it to any administrator at any time, but especially now as administrators work through the current COVID-19 crisis toward the renewed, stronger model of education they will build once the crisis is behind us.”

– JoAnn Bartoletti, Executive Director,
National Association of Secondary School Principals

Educators and school leaders from throughout the world have found themselves in a new reality: a pandemic, school closures, and hastening to provide essential services for children. Within such an environment, SAANYS is offering some advice and observations from your colleagues, as well as a variety of resources to consider in the coming weeks and months.

PAUSE AND ASSESS

“One of the first and most important things a district can do when you’re dealt a crisis like this is to pause and assess,” advised Stephen Tomlinson, superintendent of the Broadalbin-Perth Central School District.

He used the district’s decision about virtual learning as an example. Rather than jumping right into a solution, Tomlinson and his team put out a questionnaire to families to determine what resources students have at home (technology, internet service). “We knew it was extremely important that we had a good assessment of the availability of tools and Internet and

that this would be the only way that fruitful online or virtual learning could take place,” he said “From there, we turned to conducting an internal survey that allowed us to assess the comfort level of our staff to teach through virtual learning.”

With those assessments, the district could identify software that would be the most effective to continue the learning process. “Pausing and assessing helped us make clear decisions and define a path forward,” Tomlinson said.

Stuart Pollak, SAANYS president and principal of Sycamore Avenue Elementary School in the Connetquot Central School District, concurs that leadership and assessing and anticipating needs go hand in hand, commenting, “A large part of this for school building leaders is continually assessing and communicating about the very complicated issues affecting staff members and families. The role of essential employees, the responsibility of keeping team members safe while meeting community needs, and ensuring that every single student in one’s school is connected. We need to balance student accountability with the notion that parents have been thrust into the most difficult position of raising their child, teaching their child, and keeping them safe. Additionally, we have parents who are essential workers, medical professionals, and parents out of work. There is a lot of stress in those homes. The principal is the calming force.”

SUPPORT STAFF LEARNING

The Broadalbin-Perth team was able to determine that employees would benefit from more training on the Google platform and scheduled trainings just as the Coronavirus was emerging and it looked as if schools might close down. Other districts are taking advantage of time teachers may now have to devote to professional development. “We’re going to have a number of professional development opportunities for staff that they don’t even know about yet,” said Robert Mackey of Unadilla Valley Central School District. “They’ll have the chance to sharpen their skills, get better at their craft, and become an even better collaborative team.”

For school administrators in particular, keep an eye out for new virtual learning opportunities from SAANYS, its national affiliates, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). Added NAESP Executive Director Earl Franks, “During this time of uncertainty related to COVID-19, it is important to know that NAESP is committed to supporting you and your school community. With guidance from our NAESP National Coronavirus Taskforce, NAESP is making every effort to identify and disseminate resources, guidance, and best practices that address your current reality.”

LOOK FOR, AND CELEBRATE, THE GOOD

There’s genuine emotion in Mackey’s voice when he talks about the Unadilla Valley staff and volunteers who have stepped up during this pandemic – teachers who worked tirelessly to ensure learning packets were not only created and assembled, but also contained math manipulatives for students to use. And the volunteers who made 1,000 meals in just an hour so kids wouldn’t go hungry. Or the entire transportation staff who said they would stay on to deliver the meals and education packets to students. “A good majority of them are in the age range that’s more negatively impacted by the virus,” Mackey said.

TEACHING AND LEARNING RESOURCES

Public Television Stations providing “Learn at Home” programming

- All nine Public Broadcasting Stations (PBS) in New York State are offering “Learn at Home” educational programming in response to school closings. Each of the stations has multiple digital channels, which allows programming to be directed toward specific age groups (pre-K to grade 4 and grades 5-12). For more information on specific programming, visit your local PBS station.
- In its “Newshour” show, PBS has also posted a BrainPOP video that explains the coronavirus to children; it also includes a follow-up quiz and other resources. Link to: <https://bit.ly/2vTiUTb>
- Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center: Supporting Continuity of Teaching and Learning During an Emergency: <https://bit.ly/2JIXWzo>
- NYSED’s digitized catalogue of learning activities: <https://bit.ly/2Un95X5>
- Resources from BOCES, RICs and school districts: <https://bit.ly/3bqD0mM>
- TEDed Lesson Plans: <https://bit.ly/2UqsV3T>

Mackey also talked about the community support, including businesses and residents sharing and reposting district information. Even when he found that the district didn't have enough cooler space to hold all of the student meals prepared by volunteers, the local yogurt company stepped up. "When there's a crisis or something comes up, this company calls and asks what they can do to help," Mackey said. "When I told them we needed a refrigerated tractor trailer for food storage, the guy said, 'I never would have guessed. We don't own any tractor trailers but let me see what I can do.' A few days later, they were bringing us a refrigerated tractor trailer with enough diesel to run for a month. And not only that, we opened the doors and it contained more than 5,000 dairy items—milk and yogurt—to hand out to our students with the meals."

THINK AHEAD

While it may be easier to consider the day-to-day needs of students and staff, it's advisable to also begin thinking about some upcoming activities. For example, how will you handle school budget publications and the actual budget vote? What about prom? And the biggie: graduation. A number of districts, including Broadalbin-Perth, are considering such creative solutions as virtual graduation ceremonies.

REFLECT AND LOOK FOR THE SILVER LINING

"Good leadership in public schools always requires a reflective activity," said Tomlinson. "I don't think that time is now in the current crisis, but there will be a time when I sit down with our team and reflect on what we did and how it went." Gathering your own team, reflecting back on what worked well and what could be improved will only better prepare you for future emergencies that affect large numbers of students and staff. This is also a time to review all procedures and policies and decide which, if any, can be modified for the better.

During this time of reflection, you might also look for a silver lining. "Think about this: some of us had five days to totally transform public education for 100% of our students into something we would never have been able to do without a crisis," Mackey concluded. "School communities around the state, and even the State Education Department, should indeed be reflecting on and taking pride in the collective efforts that are seeing our students through this unprecedented time," commented SAANYS Executive Director Kevin Casey. "There's no script for this – Regents exams being canceled, developing new grading policies, thinking ahead to graduation and summer – these are adjustments and decisions being made quickly yet thoughtfully, balancing educational needs with the health and safety of our students and staff."

WELLNESS, MENTAL HEALTH, AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

After first addressing the immediate needs of feeding students and establishing at-home learning options, schools turned to addressing students' mental health needs.

"At this point in time, we're concerned first and foremost about the social and emotional well-being of our children," said Tomlinson. "They have gone from being in classrooms, seeing smiling faces and interacting with compassionate people who care about them one day to being without those interactions the next day. It's important that we take a giant step forward and recognize those students' needs."

TEACHING AND LEARNING RESOURCES

- **Khan Academy:**
<https://www.khanacademy.org>
- **Common Sense Media** – Resources for Educators: <https://bit.ly/2UDIMvX>
- **National Geographic Education:**
<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/education>
- **Smithsonian Learning Lab:**
<https://learninglab.si.edu/>
- **National Education Association (NEA) Learning Plans:** <https://bit.ly/3bvLKrS>
- **NASA projects:**
<https://go.nasa.gov/2Jg5nYW>
- **Virtual field trips (from Common Sense Media):** <https://bit.ly/3dyqROH>
- **Virtual field trips (from Parents.com):**
<https://bit.ly/2Jg5Jie>
- **Twitter:** Resources are being shared under the hashtag #virtualschools
- **Facebook** - Support for educators who are planning online learning:
<https://bit.ly/2Ji89ga>
- **ELL version:**
<https://bit.ly/3aqf9DE>

Amy Molloy, director of education for the Mental Health Association in New York State (MHANYS), agreed. “Now that kids aren’t in school, they might be pulled away from the trusted adults that they had,” she said.

Broadalbin-Perth is taking a two-pronged approach to help support students and families. First, the district’s communications team has curated developmentally appropriate social-emotional resources, videos and activities for each of its four schools; these resources are easily accessible on the district’s website.

“We also had our director of special programs and building leaders working with counselors to use a three-tier system to identify every single student and what level of vulnerability the student is facing during this time,” Tomlinson explained. “The most vulnerable are receiving regular personal communication from Broadalbin-Perth staff. The students who are less vulnerable may be communicated with less often, but they are still receiving communication. And this is not simply an email; it’s personal communication through a video chat channel or phone call. It’s extremely important to us that these children know that they can express their anxieties during this time.”

Some districts are even sending counselors on the buses that deliver food and/or homework to children, practicing social distancing (of course), but communicating with and supporting children just the same

“Keeping teachers and counselors connected with their students is really important. You can’t underestimate the relationships that kids have with adults in school,” Molloy emphasized. “Sometimes, families struggle themselves with being able to provide that trusted adult relationship. So that’s hard.”

And adding in the types stressors that accompany a pandemic can easily exacerbate any underlying mental health problems. To help families during this challenging time, Molloy suggests maintaining routines as much as possible. “Schools can continue to set expectations that are very clear for students and families, but also be a little flexible when needed,” she said, describing how one district continues to record and broadcast student announcements and the pledge of allegiance. “Having the morning announcements sends a clear message that they’re still doing work for school.”

STAFF WELL-BEING

In addition to ensuring students are supported, Molloy encourages school leaders to also consider staff wellness. “Everyone’s trying to do their job, but they’re still worried about their family members, they’re worried about their children, they’re worried about their pensions and they’re worried about their students, especially those who are vulnerable,” Molloy commented. “We need to ensure our staff members are getting the help or support they need — even if it’s just getting a chance to vent or express frustrations or connect in some way with each other.”

Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, takes it one step further. “As is the case with our first responders and medical personnel, it’s vital for superintendents and administrators to do everything they can to keep themselves from getting sick,” he said. “Their leadership and the work that they do is very, very important at this point in time.”

Pollak echoes this sentiment, “Like many of my fellow administrators, I feel that I have never worked harder in my life than during these past weeks. But as I said, the principal is the calming force, so it is imperative that we take care of ourselves so we can take care of our school communities in turn. At the end of this, we will be able to say that we not only survived but thrived when crisis came knocking on the schoolhouse door.” ■

MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING RESOURCES

- **Mental Health Association in New York State:** <https://mhanys.org/>
- **National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) – Preparing for infectious disease epidemics: brief tips for school mental health professionals:** <https://bit.ly/33O6kBn>
- **NASP - Talking to Children about COVID-19 (Coronavirus): A Parent Resource:** <https://bit.ly/2wHT3On>

OTHER RESOURCES

- **Multilingual Resources** <https://bit.ly/3bw5uLY>
- **Pandemic planning for school districts and BOCES:** See the guide at: <https://bit.ly/3btdkpO>

Visit <https://saanys.org/news/coronavirus-resources/> for the most up-to-date resources and guidance from the NYS Education Department, the US Department of Education, the governor’s office, CDC, and other official sources.

Visit <https://saanys.org/events/> for virtual learning opportunities for SAANYS members and their teams, including SAANYS Connect, a new virtual way to learn and share on the topics most vital to school leaders in NYS.