ERIC SHENINGER ON…

Digital Leadership TODAY

By Ellen Ullman

When it comes to leadership in a digital world, Eric Sheninger — author, innovator, speaker, and the award-winning former principal at New Milford High School — has a lot to say. Currently serving as an associate partner with the International Center for Leadership in Education, Sheninger has worked with hundreds of schools and districts on their digital transformation.

Vanguard recently spoke with Sheninger for insight into how school leaders can support their teachers and communities as they navigate this school year of hybrid and remote lessons.

TIME MANAGEMENT IS PARAMOUNT

"The biggest challenge I see is that everyone is trying to use traditional methodologies in a remote environment, which doesn't work," says Sheninger. "Teachers are working longer and harder than ever and many are becoming stressed to the point of breaking."

Sheninger goes on to offer some advice. It is crucial to help teachers find ways to free up time, he says. Leaders need to work with their teachers to map out frameworks that help them with this. Introducing a hybrid or flexible schedule — in which students spend chunks of time remote and working independently — gives teachers the time to breathe, focus, and plan. Another idea is to have teachers dedicated to either the remote or face-to-face students so they don't have to focus on both groups simultaneously.

Going with a blended learning strategy can also help teachers get back planning time. There are several ways to implement blended instruction, which combines face-to-face and online learning. One district Sheninger works with uses a rotational teaching model. For each class, the teacher starts with direct instruction. Next, small groups of students move through various "stations" and do targeted instruction, personalized/adaptive learning, and independent/collaborative work. During this time, teachers can meet with students one-on-one or plan future lessons. Classes end with a closure activity.

School leaders need to find ways for teachers to work differently. As Sheninger says, "We need to ask ourselves: 'How much of the curriculum has meaning in the real world? What has the most value to enable our learners to be successful?'" Let your teachers know that it's okay to apply that type of thinking to condense the curriculum. Support them as they try new things and reassure them. Let them know they can focus on the standards that are the most important.

"Essentially, it comes down to rethinking how time is being used. That's one of the biggest struggles for teachers right now. We have to [look through a teacher's] lens to see how time is being used and come up with strategies to free the teachers."

EXPAND YOUR DEFINITION OF EQUITY

When we hear the word *equity*, we tend to just think about technology and internet access. Sheninger reminds us that equity is about making sure all students have what they need, when they need it, including non-tech resources like food, emotional and academic support, feedback, and so on.

Are your students meeting the outcomes you set forth? If not, you need to look at all of your supports and resources, including digital, to make sure every learner gets what he or she needs. "Put systems in place that focus on improving outcomes for all students, whether it's inclusion, fairness, or making sure rigorous standards are laid out for everyone," he says. "The challenge is making sure there is scaffolded academic content and support."

It's not always about the amount of resources but about how those resources are used. Leaders must strengthen their communication, perhaps with surveys and outreach, to find out what is needed for success. "Look at changes to scheduling and how you can provide the supports to identify and close gaps. Invest in the supports that are needed to help those kids get to the next level."

ENSURE THAT EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY IS BEING USED

It's up to school and district leaders to make the remote learning experience something everyone wants to be part of. Sheninger's recommendations include moving away from one-size-fits-all learning, helping teachers find a balance between synchronous and asynchronous learning, and providing adequate training and resources so that teachers learn how to deliver engaging, interactive online lessons.

When he visited classrooms, Sheninger noticed that students in hybrid classes were not talking because of social distancing. Leaders need to help teachers figure out how to use Google Meet or Zoom breakout rooms so that the students in hybrid or remote classes can talk to each other. "We have to up our game so that students gain the skills and competencies they need, including collaboration and cooperative learning. It's so important." Once we get them talking, we then need to get them answering questions collaboratively and solving problems to build competencies and master standards.

Work with teachers to incorporate voice, choice, path, pace, and place to make digital learning relevant.

- **Voice:** Whenever possible, let students have a say during the learning process. Some digital tools Sheninger has seen teachers use to effectively get student responses are Nearpod, Seesaw, and Canvas.
- **Choice:** Give students control over their learning by using choice boards or playlists.
- **Path:** Find ways to let students determine their own paths during remote or hybrid learning. Examples include customized curriculum, asynchronous virtual courses, and independent study.
- **Pace:** Let students manage their time to complete self-paced activities.
- **Place:** If possible, allow students to attend school remotely at home or come to school for in-person learning.

NOW IS THE TIME TO UP YOUR FEEDBACK PRACTICE

No one was trained or prepared for this, and school and district leaders spent a lot of time this summer focusing on health and safety protocols instead of on distance-learning strategies.

When it comes to feedback, says Sheninger, we usually tell people what they want to hear instead of having conversations about their practice.

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HIGH-AGENCY, PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Pace — Enable self-management of task time

Choice — Facilitate student control.

Place — Accommodate multi-modal learning

Voice — Empower all students to be heard.

Path — Infuse variety and adaptivity.

Eric Sheninger (@E_Sheninger)
Image created by @RigorRelevance

These five components of feedback can ensure that it's beneficial to everyone:

1. **Positive delivery**, including words and body language: Don't just focus on areas of improvement; focus on a broad plan for growth that reinforces good practices.
2. **Practical and specific:** Focus on things the teacher can do immediately and will have an impact.
3. **Timely:** Essential if you want the feedback to be a catalyst for improvement.
4. **Consistency:** To create a growth culture in which everyone feels supported.
5. **Use the right medium:** Do not give feedback over email or text. When possible, do it in person or over video, with phone as a backup.

Teachers and students want feedback that provides the motivation to improve. When we focus on messaging that encourages the receiver to value the recommendations, it's a big win for everyone.

MOVING FORWARD

Above all, leaders need to make sure their teachers are working differently — not doing twice as much work. Understand that they will not be able to cover the entire curriculum. Be empathetic, provide support, and give them feedback on how to grow. Focus on the standards that are the most important.

"For virtually everyone, hybrid learning represents a monumental shift from what has been done in schools. Now we must accept this fact and work to get it right until the pandemic subsides."

Although the latter might not be positive, it's the only way to move forward. Making people feel good is a necessary component for developing a positive culture, but it shouldn't come at the expense of shying away from the problematic and thought-provoking conversations that are needed to drive change.

Focus on feedback that is timely and specific. Your goal is to help your teachers internalize what they have to do to meet or exceed expectations. By modeling this type of feedback, you can help teachers learn how they can in turn offer feedback to their students.

Feedback can help bring people together, especially in these challenging times, but you have to deliver it well. We typically think of feedback as something you "give" to someone else, but Sheninger says that if the goal is to help others grow, then feedback needs to take the form of a dialogue. "Delivering feedback in the form of a monologue is an outdated process that can be improved whether you are working with kids or adults," he says. "Think about creating conditions in which the receiver will value the recommendations."

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ELLEN ULLMAN has been writing about education technology since 2003. She lives in Burlington, Mass., and is the former editorial director for eSchool News.