

Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES

Positive Impacts



By Lisa Rizzo

March 13, 2020, will be the day I will forever remember as the start of the pandemic. I remember that day not only as my 51st birthday, but also as the day our school buildings were closed and the lights were turned off. The grocery stores were running out of groceries, and fear of the unknown took over our lives. Almost a year later, we have learned so much about each other as well as our students and families. Moving forward, there are parts of my professional life that developed during the pandemic that I never want to let go of.

I feel more connected to my staff than I ever have and they are so much more effective in implementing remote instruction than they were one year ago. Building back our school will mean staying connected, continuing to support remote engagement, keeping families involved, and scheduling for maximum connectivity.

STAY CONNECTED

As the coordinator for special education programs at the Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES, I am one of three full-time administrators who support 350 students in five locations with a full continuum of special education services (8:1:2, 12:1:1, and 12:1:4 programs). With smaller class ratios and more intense needs, our staff is able to work closely with students and parents. We are so fortunate to have school social workers who work with our students on social emotional and mental health needs. This was a critical component to keep a pulse on our students, some of whom have varying degrees of mental illness. Staying connected during the first wave of the pandemic was extremely challenging. Every home did not have technology, staff was not well versed in Zoom or Google Classroom, and the fear of the virus was inhabiting our thoughts for large portions of our waking hours as well as our sleepless nights.

One staff connection our administrative team established in March 2020 was to assign an article for each staff member to read and respond to each day via email. While this initially sounded insurmountable, it established routines (checking email, keeping a work mindset), kept us connected on a common goal as we all looked forward to each other's thoughts. The articles covered digital curriculum, social emotional curriculum, and coping with "working from home during Covid-19," to name a few. We learned so much about each person's skills, needs, and personalities. When we returned to in-person learning in September, our relationships were stronger than when we left for the shutdown. Together, we had processed fears of the virus in our homes and in our schools. This made us all stronger and connected us with

experiences that we shared during the shutdown. We were united. The connections we established will remain as we move forward knowing we have overcome some of the darkest days in education. We are confident we can tackle obstacles together based on our shared experiences during the pandemic.

SUPPORT REMOTE ENGAGEMENT

We had a long way to go in order to get our staff and students up and running with technology at home. We needed to create remote instruction and learning first. Engagement would come along once we had the elements in place. The framing of the structure to match the vision required the materials and the knowledge to fully implement remote instruction. We had to provide the technology and then the skill set for students and staff to make their homes effective learning environments. The hard technology came from sharing resources and support from our IT department. Simultaneously, we were implementing platforms and learning digital curriculum. As leaders, we worked tirelessly to meet our staff needs and push a bit to move them outside of their comfort zone. Our teachers learned new technology and new digital platforms, and delivered remote instruction for the first time in their careers. When we entered the school year in September, we knew there would be starts and stops – requiring a fluid transfer from in-person to remote instruction. We built the technological capacity implementing 1:1 Chromebooks for students, and instructed them in-person with the technology to be effective remotely. We worked to provide trainings in Buzz platforms, N2Y, and using Google Classroom efficiently. Our colleagues throughout BOCES left no stone unturned to assist each other in areas that were new for some of us and held practices for others. Staff trained other staff members on the digital platforms – the program and professional development and IT department were also supporting staff to be efficient with remote instruction. The process of developing confidence and

skills in our teachers had a big payoff. While monitoring student usage using Go Guardian, we saw that our student engagement was running around 85-90 percent on most remote days. We see this component as being a part of our future in some capacity.

FOSTER FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Remote student engagement is deeply embedded in family engagement. This was especially true for our division as we serve 100 percent of students with disabilities. Professionally, I can confidently say, we are closer than ever to our parents, grandparents, and guardians. Most of our students required guidance and support within the home setting to be engaged in remote instruction. Our teachers worked endlessly to teach parents how to sign in to the digital platforms, creating confidence, and checking their daily schedules. We provided hard copies by mail to students who required the additional piece of paper to follow along with lessons. Of course, we had some students who did not have the required support at home to engage in remote instruction. Our social workers would make contact with parents to make a plan to work together to help the students log on. Throughout our return to in-person learning, sprinkled with remote instruction during quarantines, our relationships with our families have been notably stronger and more consistent. The relationships cannot be undone and that only furthers the support for each student in engagement. By drawing our families into the process of educating their child, a partnership was created that has endured and strengthened to promote student learning. We know that this will continue to be a critical part of our school spirit.

SCHEDULES MATTER

What we learned from March through June we used to restructure our in-person instruction for our 8:1:2 high school grades 9-12 located at our campus building. This approach to cohort our students will continue as one of the most effective changes we made due to the pandemic but improves overall student engagement.

Our approach to scheduling had to change. There were too many teachers involved with each student to have the most meaningful connections remotely. Previously, students changed classes in a more traditional model seeing up to six different teachers a day. When we needed to limit exposures and cohort our students, we created teams of two teachers. The students would remain in their own classroom while the teachers would switch classrooms to instruct their subject area for part of the day. This significantly decreased the amount of movement within the building and the exposures that would happen by mixing students by class period. This also facilitated the process when a classroom was quarantined or we were on remote instruction. The students only needed to manage two teachers' instruction rather than six, and this improved connections and engagement. The connectivity that was

created between staff and students based on quality time together is evident. We will carry this practice into the future as we schedule students for increased interactions with fewer teachers.

As we embark on building back our school, we will use our new foundation to restore the greatness of the old, while bringing in the new. Like an old house, we can let go of the leaky faucets and the drafty windows while we breathe new life into our school by polishing some of our practices and installing updated, efficient inner workings. We will stay connected with each other and make time to check in with each other. We will make it a smart school with all the technology we can harness to open opportunities for each of us. We will bring the families into our new school to have a voice at the family table. We

will arrange our school to be most efficient in our scheduling for students to engage and connect with staff. Together we believe, building on what we have learned during the past year, the best is yet to come.

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