

**BOUNCING BACK...**

Lessons Learned and Challenges Ahead

By Kim M. Smithgall

“There was no dress rehearsal. So people learned on the fly.”

Those sentiments from Port Jervis High School principal Andrew Marotta perfectly describe the first several weeks and months of the Covid-19 pandemic.

And, though more than a year has passed since the pandemic started, school leaders are still quick to acknowledge the boundless energy and effort put forth by faculty and staff to ensure students’ needs are met. A sense of awe still lingers...and rightly so.

EAT, TEACH, LEARN

“Everyone had to pivot and adapt – from the leadership to the custodians. Our cafeteria pivoted from serving meals in-person to using our buses to deliver meals to students’ homes. Our teachers abruptly changed from standing in front of 20 or 25 kids in a traditional classroom to teaching virtually. They learned very quickly,” Marotta said. “I’m proud of the work that was done in Port Jervis to make all of those adjustments.”

Scott Comis, principal of Brooklyn Avenue Elementary School (Valley Stream School District 24), echoed the comments. “We were venturing into a swimming pool that we’ve never been in – educating children in their homes. In essence, at the start of the pandemic, the teachers were in the children’s homes and vice versa. For many staff members, their kitchens turned into classrooms and they faced the challenge of learning how to deliver instruction completely digitally,” Comis said. “I was so impressed with the staff. It was so much work.”

As schools switched to hybrid learning, additional instructional challenges emerged, especially in cases where some students were learning in-person while others were simultaneously logging on to classes from home. “Teachers began teaching in two different modalities at once; it’s definitely challenging,” said Harry Leonardatos, principal of Clarkstown High School North.

Even the basics of where to stand became a puzzle to solve. “You have kids in front of you and then you have your kids online. So, the tough part was determining where to position yourself in the classroom and what microphone to use,” Leonardatos explained. “And you wouldn’t know what to do unless you actually did it and made adjustments in real time.”

Support staff were required to learn on the fly, as well. Kristen Lennon-McMahan, class assistant principal at Shenendehowa High School West, pointed to the work and commitment of her school’s monitors. “They’ve had to step in and learn new skills...and they’ve done so seamlessly,” she said.

In some cases, Shenendehowa teachers are completely virtual, while students are in the brick and mortar classrooms. Those students still need an adult in the room – in this case, a monitor.

“The monitors learned how to set up the new technology and help the kids while the teacher teaches remotely,” Lennon-McMahan continued. “They’re amazing; they completely altered and rewrote their job descriptions – and they made themselves invaluable.”

The progress since those first few months of the pandemic is also noteworthy. “Educators are able to see that they can engage students in ways they have never done in the past. They’re assigning students to breakout rooms to work collaboratively on projects and then can check in on everyone’s progress,” Leonardatos observed. “It was a learning curve, but I think for the first time, we are actually using technology the way it is supposed to be used.”

Comis concurred, saying, “Teachers’ use of technology has been elevated to a whole new level. It will never be the same again.”

LEARNING NEW WAYS TO LEARN

While faculty and staff were using new techniques and strategies for providing instruction during the pandemic, many students were simultaneously learning to learn in new and different ways.

“I’ve seen students relying a lot less on textbooks and more on themselves and their own problem-solving skills,” Comis said. “Here’s an example: I asked elementary students about hand sanitizers recently. One student immediately pulled out her tablet, Googled it and proudly announced that Lupe Hernandez, a student nurse, invented hand sanitizer. She had the answer in ten seconds. My point? A year ago, this would never have happened at the elementary school-age level.”

Regina Huffman, coordinator and chairperson of science in Sewanhaka Central High School District, has made similar observations about students

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

taking advantage of opportunities to be more self-directed in their learning. “I have some teachers who started that process by thinking outside the box and coming up with creative ideas on how to engage the students with activities that they can do at home,” Huffman said.

This included assembling kits of instructional materials for students to use at home or giving open-ended assignments.

“One teacher gave an assignment that involved taking photos of something that represented the concepts they were learning in class. The students’ pictures from around their house and their neighborhoods were amazing,” Huffman said, adding that local elementary-age students were just as inventive.

“The younger pupils were experimenting with seed germination using petri dishes and solutions that were sent home from the school. Part of the work involved students recording themselves on camera to show they were doing the activities correctly. Some students opted to take it further and to leave the camera on so they could observe how long the seed growth took based on the substances in the petri dishes,” she said. “Cool, right?”

Definitely some silver linings among the pandemic chaos.

POSITIVE SHIFTS IN COMMUNICATIONS EFFORTS

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in some positive changes for school communications and family outreach, as well.

“It was our job to figure out what to do to increase communications in Port Jervis,” Marotta said. “Number one: you try a variety of things. Number two: you give many reminders – not threatening reminders, just friendly reminders. And you record things for parents to watch on their own time.”

For Marotta, this meant holding live online parent forums on Google Meet and also livestreaming events and then making the recordings available for later viewing. The district also set up its communications systems so email messages and/or robocalls could be targeted to specific groups (e.g., just the junior class).

“And even when we send emails, we’re using screen captures or a short video to explain what’s in the email,” Marotta said. “Parents and students can review the communications in the way that works best for them.”

Huffman has seen an increase in effective communication in her district, as well. “We had a parent portal and a student portal all along, but it wasn’t used as much as it is now,” she said. “We’re also using texting to reach families and we now have the ability to text in different languages, so we’re reaching an even broader audience. These tools are so important for our families; if parents aren’t aware of what’s going on in the schools, they can’t be advocates for what they need.”

In Shenendehowa, school leaders used video technology to record positive messages for students and parents. “We wanted them to see us and to see that some things were still normal,” Lennon-McMahan said. “We did one video series where we held up inspirational messages for students. When it was my turn to do one of these videos, I decided to do a funny one. So, I held up the inspirational message in front of me, and our son, who was a senior last year, was dancing and running behind me like a lunatic. It was funny and it was humanizing... and it was a way to show families that even with everything shut down, we were there with them.”

MEETING AND CELEBRATING IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD

In Clarkstown, school staff members increased social media postings, using Instagram and Twitter to highlight and celebrate student accomplishments virtually. Port Jervis was among many districts that livestreamed and recorded portions of its graduation ceremony; the district also added in some live components based on student requests.

“We tried to touch as many bases as possible,” Marotta said. “How often do you get a recording of your kid’s graduation ceremony and also some live elements? I think this approach to graduation is going to stick around for a while. People loved it.”

Families also reacted well to districts holding parent meetings online rather than in person – even if it was a forced situation to abide by safety protocols. Leonardatos opted for a Google Meet format to hold a ninth-grade orientation meeting. Many districts held parent teacher conferences and class scheduling meetings in online formats, as well.

“We received great feedback from parents about this,” said Leonardatos. They were able to log in from work or home and it was so much more convenient for them. This gave us more accessibility to parents than ever before. It’s one of the pandemic-related things that worked really well and we’re going to use that [remote meeting] option going forward.”

UNPRECEDENTED COLLABORATION

As school leaders reflect on the time between the early days of the pandemic and now, they are also quick to touch on the unprecedented level of collaboration that has been taking place. In Port Jervis, this included regular 1:00 p.m. meetings between the superintendent and leadership team.

“We really collaborated with our superintendent, Mike Rydell,” Marotta recalled. “We met every day. We had a running agenda, a fluid agenda. The superintendent would say, ‘Tell me what’s happening. What are you hearing? What do we need to do next?’ It wasn’t a top-down ‘Here’s what we are doing.’”

Similarly, administrators recognized the value of using this approach in their buildings and beyond. As chair of the Rockland County High School Principals Association, Leonardatos would normally organize monthly in-person meetings with his colleagues from other schools in the

“We have so many more opportunities now to make connections and exchange ideas without having to leave the office. Or maybe we’ve had those opportunities for a long time but we just were too busy to realize it.”

region. “During the pandemic, we met via Zoom and got together more often – sometimes every week. People wanted to connect and exchange ideas and information during that time and technology made that possible. We’re back to meeting monthly, but we kept the virtual aspect of the meetings. Attendance at the meetings is better than ever before. Previously, we might have had 10 or 12 people. Now, we have as many as 50 in attendance. We have so many more opportunities now to make connections and exchange ideas without having to leave the office. Or maybe we’ve had those opportunities for a long time but we just were too busy to realize it,” Leonardatos mused.

Shenendehowa educators and leaders also built on already established collaborative platforms – in this case, professional learning communities (PLCs). “I am just one part of a larger leadership team here. I’m pretty lucky in that regard; anything we did, we did as a team and that’s beneficial for any administrator,” Lennon-McMahan said.

PLCs were also a vital part of the collaborative landscape for Shenendehowa teachers. “One of the things I’m proud of with our staff is that we really saw the importance of being collaborative with our colleagues through PLCs,” Lennon-McMahan commented. “Over the years, we did a lot of work around building relationships and this was a huge benefit for teachers because they were able to share best practices and talk through what worked and what didn’t.”

Once the pandemic hit, this foundation was vital. “Teachers worked together tirelessly to make sure their lessons were converted to the online environment,” Lennon-McMahan said. “We’re fortunate because teachers had PLC time built

into each week to do this collaborative work. That's been instrumental in their success."

HELPING STUDENTS ONE BY ONE

This cooperation, sharing, and collaboration also made it possible to identify and meet individual student needs as the pandemic continued to affect in-person learning. Leaders and educators regularly met to discuss children they were particularly concerned about and developed strategies to help; this approach continues.

Huffman and her colleagues were worried about students who weren't logging in to online classes and couldn't be reached. "The administrators split up the lists of students and each made personal calls to the families to try to reengage the students," Huffman said.

Some heartbreaking situations were revealed during these outreach efforts. Leonardatos spoke about his efforts to help an immigrant student who stopped attending online classes.

"We checked on him and found out that he needed food, so our food service department made deliveries directly to the student's home," Leonardatos explained. "But, ultimately, we found out that his mom had lost her job and there were multiple families living in their apartment; these housemates were taking the food that came from the school, the mom had no way to buy groceries, so the student had nothing to eat. Forget thinking about broadband; this kid was hungry."

Leonardatos and his staff purchased grocery store gift cards so the mother could go shopping. Then, they found out that the family had no transportation to get to the grocery store, so staff members volunteered to drive them, along with providing some nonperishable foods that the student could prepare for himself. Later, Clarkstown staff members followed up by delivering a Wi-Fi hotspot so the student could attend his virtual classes. "Luckily, we don't have a huge number of students in those circumstances, but it was certainly an example of starving in the shadow of plenty."

Marotta sums up these situations perfectly: "We used to say we're all in the same boat, right? But no, what has

become even more clear with this pandemic is that we're not all in the same boat," he said. "We're all in the same storm. And some kids are on yachts, some kids are on a big shipping boat, and some kids are on a houseboat. Then, there are some kids who are in a solo kayak, some who are in a rickety little fishing boat that has holes in it. And some kids are hanging on by a life preserver...and some kids are drowning."

Lennon-McMahan has seen first-hand some Shenendehowa students who were hanging on by life preservers, perhaps close to drowning. She spoke about a poignant experience involving one child. "When the pandemic first started, she was sent to a homeless shelter. I was very worried about her; she was just so incredibly isolated. I got permission from the shelter to visit her," Lennon-McMahan said. "When the weather got nicer, we would meet outdoors and I would bring her care packages. Other times, we would use Google Meet. One day, I asked her during one of these meetings if she needed anything. Out of the blue – and this is such a teenager thing – she sheepishly asked if I could get some nail polish for her. That was the situation. She's a teenage girl, isolated and alone and her simple request was for nail polish. It can really break your heart."

The pandemic has endless stories like these...and countless times when school district personnel went the extra mile to help just one student...and then another student...and on and on.

LOOKING AHEAD

These are the stories that will be on the minds of school administrators as they consider what needs to happen to "come back better" for the 2021-2022 school year.

In Port Jervis, Marotta has already committed to continuing to encourage students to give voice to what they want. And he will find a way to honor the requests, including those for pep rallies and the more recent request for a homecoming dance. "Even if



the dance has to be outdoors and I'm stringing up picnic lights in the parking lot, I'll make it happen," he said, and only half-jokingly added, "If people call me up and say they want a pink pony...Well, maybe you can't get a pink pony, but you might be able to contact a zoo, right? You might be able to get some therapeutic animals for the kids. It's up to me to listen and be responsive."

In this way, Marotta is continuing to build on the supportive culture that's ingrained in the Port Jervis district. Huffman has the same focus.

"We have to make sure that we still have a sense of community. And we need to keep in mind that some students had a really rough time when they were home," she commented. "Also, we have to continually build relationships with the larger school community so we can give people the help that they need. You can have all of the technology and all of the equipment, but if you don't have the trust of your parents and students – enough trust where they feel comfortable asking for help – then nothing else really matters."

MEETING MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

School administrators and educators feel that students' mental health and social emotional needs will be among the biggest challenges in the upcoming school year. Most school-aged children have likely experienced a sense of loneliness, fear, grief, and isolation at the very least; others are facing much more serious mental health issues. Recent data – including some

alarming statistics — show that there is good reason for school personnel to be concerned:

- Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that one in four young adults says they have considered suicide because of the pandemic.
- In a national poll by the C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital, 46 percent of parents surveyed said their teen showed signs of new or worsening mental health since the pandemic started.
- A survey by Navigate/Zogby Strategies revealed even higher levels of parental concern, with 78 percent of respondents indicating that they were very worried or somewhat worried about the mental health impacts of the pandemic on K-12 children.

Northern Rivers Family of Services’ Kathy Wright regularly sees the pandemic’s effects on students, as Northern Rivers operates numerous school-based mental health centers in the Capital Region. (Wright is director of the Behavioral Health Center at Malta through Parsons and director of the Home-Based Crisis Intervention program.)

“The mental health issues we’re seeing are similar to what we saw before the pandemic, but they have increased in intensity and frequency,” Wright said. “It’s mood disorders, depression and anxiety. We’re also doing more work around grief.”

As districts start planning for children’s mental health needs in the new school year, Wright advises sensitivity and flexibility — two things that districts have had a lot of general experience with since March 2020.

But, from a mental health perspective, Wright said, “I think that children will still be feeling the effects of stress when they return to school. So, it wouldn’t surprise me if this leads to difficulties with executive functioning. Students who may have had no challenges in the past organizing their work or completing their homework may suddenly have issues with these activities. There may also be increased irritability and tearfulness, along with foggy memory and decreased

motivation.”

These circumstances will likely impact academic achievement, Wright said. “Remember that academic performance isn’t going to just kick right back in when students return to school. I imagine it’s going to take a bit of time, so if it’s possible to be patient with lower output and lower outcomes for a while, that will be helpful.”

Wright, school leaders, and educators are also expecting some fears about returning to classrooms.

“We have students who have not set foot in the school buildings since last March. So, by the time we get to next September, that’s a year and a half that they haven’t been in the school building,” Lennon-McMahan said. “We keep asking ourselves how do we transition people? How do we help kids have a feeling of safety when they haven’t been around large groups of people? We’re a large school; every class at Shen — grades 9-12 — has between 700 and 850 students. That’s a big undertaking and it’s going to take some flexibility. For example, some kids will need an individualized plan to return.”

Wright agrees and advises districts to plan some time for students to be in the school buildings over the summer. “I realize that summer is usually a time for districts to do capital improvements or deep cleaning, but if there are opportunities to bring students back to the buildings for low-demand, fun activities, it could be very beneficial,” she said.

In some cases, districts already have a head start on these strategies. For example, Shenendehowa counselors identified small groups of fully remote students who were struggling and falling behind. The students were invited to spend a few hours in school as part of the district’s Grad Lab program.

“We provided busing and the kids come in at 7:45, grab breakfast, and go to their assigned rooms. There, they work with an instructional aide who helps them log in to their learning portal and prioritize their assignments. At 10 a.m., the kids pick up their lunch and are transported home,” Lennon-McMahan explained. “Some of the students I work with have high levels of anxiety

46 percent of parents surveyed said their teen showed signs of new or worsening mental health since the pandemic started.

and even that small bit of transition coming into the building and working with a couple of adults has been very helpful. It’s been a very safe way to expose them to the building and help them realize that we’re nice people and we’ll be welcoming them back with open arms. Two of the students even asked if they could transition to hybrid learning.”

Valley Stream School District is also trying out some new support activities in anticipation of increasing student needs next year. “Instead of just having social workers and psychologists see children individually or in small groups, we have them also pushing into classrooms now,” Comis explained. “Once a week, every classroom gets a whole-class visit from a social worker or psychologist. They present lessons and have discussions on a topic related to the current challenges — nervousness or anxiety, for example. It’s not a therapy session, but it’s a way to provide more general social emotional support. We’ll continue with that in the coming school year.”

MID-FLIGHT SOARING

Of course, with the natural chaos inherent in the Covid-19 pandemic, next year just might be another opportunity for school leaders and educators to have a repeat performance of learning on the fly.

This time, they have more than a year’s worth of flights to know that they can soar.

KIM M. SMITHGALL is an award-winning communications specialist and freelance writer, designer, and photographer.