

School Administrators Association of New York State

Vanguard

SPRING
2021

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**LESSONS LEARNED AND
CHALLENGES AHEAD**

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RECONNECTING, AND
MOVING FORWARD**

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Steve Hage
 SALES CONSULTANT – READING
 518.935.0874
 steve.hage@zaner-bloser.com

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Vanguard

SPRING
2021

Practices

from practitioners

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8 Airport Park Boulevard
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(518) 782-0600
Fax: (518) 782-9552

Managing Editor
Michelle B. Hebert | SAANYS

Editorial Board
Karen Bronson | SAANYS
Peter DeWitt | Educator, Author
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Paul M. Fanuele | Spackenkill
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Layout & Design
Sharon Caruso | Graphic Designer

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A message from

Betty A. Rosa

New York State Commissioner of Education

The Connections That Hold Us Together

It is entirely appropriate that this issue of *Vanguard* is dedicated to the theme of bouncing back better. Because bouncing back better isn't merely a political slogan, but rather a timely call to action.

The vaccines have arrived, and the longer days and warmth that come with spring are just around the corner. After a long, dark winter, we are all longing for the sense of renewal that comes with this welcome change of seasons.

In a year like no other, we have all witnessed tremendous acts of heroism, compassion, and professionalism. Parents, teachers, and the entire education community have worked so incredibly hard to provide New York's students with the best education possible in the face of extraordinary, unprecedented challenges. It is truly awe-inspiring to witness the work you and your colleagues do every day to ensure our students receive the instructional and support services they need.

It all starts at the top, with you, our school leader. You set the tone. You make the hard choices. You model the work ethic that your staff sees and emulates. But you can't do it alone. No one can. We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to our local boards of education, our district administrators, classroom teachers, counselors, psychologists, social workers, bus drivers, maintenance staff, clerical workers, support staff, and, of course, parents and families.

Together, you make certain that our students receive not only academic instruction, but tech support, counseling, social and emotional support, healthy meals, and so much more. It has been nothing short of inspirational to see how much has been accomplished this past year.

But the pandemic has also exposed and exacerbated inequities that exist throughout every facet of society. People of color, the poor, and women (especially the single head of a household) have been impacted hardest of all. It should therefore come as no surprise that our most vul-

nerable students — those with the greatest needs — have also suffered disproportionately during the pandemic.

The sudden shift from in-person to remote learning has been particularly troubling and problematic. Far too many students in poverty, already at a disadvantage from attending under-resourced schools, have had little or no access to the devices and internet connections they need to participate in virtual classes.

Students who attend poorly funded schools, however, are not the only ones suffering from a lack of connectivity. Schools are incredibly fertile ground for developing and nurturing human connections. It is where children make friends and learn to interact with one another. So, with the sudden shift to remote and hybrid instruction, many students lost their social connections. Some have become isolated and withdrawn.

But I believe in my core that much better days are just around the corner. As educators, we will take the lessons learned from this past year, and we will build back better for our students.

The state education department is holding a series of digital equity summits (<http://www.nysed.gov/digital-equity-summits>) with the singular goal of ensuring digital equity for all students. We will concentrate on making up for the learning losses experienced this year by our students. We will become equity warriors, working to create school settings that are diverse, equitable, and inclusive. And we will focus on the needs of the whole child — making certain to always consider not only how students are performing academically, but also how they are doing physically and emotionally.

Whether the connections are digital or human, we will make those bonds stronger and more accessible for all. The sun is warming the ground. The soil is fertile. It is time to return to our gardens, roll up our sleeves, and continue our work.



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WEEKS 3 & 4:

Developing A Cultural Intelligence: Strategies for being a Culturally Responsive and Relevant Educator

This highly interactive session will take participants through the identification of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogical practices. The session will also identify ways in which leadership can not only support culturally competent learning environments but also have a culturally relevant school/district. The session includes examples of how to design culturally sensitive/responsive learning opportunities for students through active participation. We will look at and participate in several key instructional outcome areas as well as identify several technology-rich integration strategies. In addition, we will look at ways to create a more inclusive school/district culture that is both inclusive and equitable.

Ken currently holds an M.A. in Education with a specialization in Educational Technology as well as New Media Design and Production. He has worked as an Educator for over 20 years and spent most of his classroom experience teaching technology at the Middle School level. As a part of his active involvement within the Educational Technology community, Ken is an Apple Distinguished Educator, a Microsoft Innovative Educator Expert, and a Google Certified Innovator. Ken has worked extensively at the policy level with a number of State Departments of Education, Ministries of Education, and was appointed to the Educational Technology Task Force formed by a previous California State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Ken regularly gives keynotes, presentations, consults, and leads workshops, covering a wide variety of Educational Technology, Equity and Inclusion, Anti-Bias/Anti-Racist, Multimedia Literacy, Cultural Intelligences, Visual Storytelling, and Instructional Design topics. Ken is the ISTE Digital Equity PLN 2018 Excellence Award winner.

**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.

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2**

Group Mentor Coaching



“SAANYS mentoring has changed our administrative team...Our administrators have valued and cherished the time they have spent with their SAANYS mentor, who skillfully used questioning and scenarios to give them tools to solve their own challenges and build a plan to move forward with confidence and collaboration.”

Shelley Rossitto
Executive Director, IT & PD, Monticello Schools

Contact

For more information about this program, contact Karen Bronson, SAANYS director of professional learning, at kbronson@saanys.org, or Bonnie Tryon, SAANYS mentor coordinator, at btryon@saanys.org.





REFLECTING,

Reconnecting and Moving Forward

By Pat Fontana

Stress, burnout, and mental health issues have been – and will continue to be – very real challenges for school leaders. A renewed emphasis on making connections, building relationships, and developing the social and emotional aspects of learning will be critical for school leaders, for their own motivation as well as that of their staff and students, as we move forward.

The sudden and drastic changes in education over the past year have been challenging enough for seasoned educators and administrators. Some experienced educators feel that the changes brought on by the pandemic are just too much for them and so have decided this is a good time to retire. Burnout is a very real possibility, between remote classes, stressed out students, and the fear of virus transmission.

For school leaders who took on their new roles just prior to or even during the pandemic, these shifts in focus and delivery have been an especially serious source of apprehension. New school leaders have faced the challenges of learning their jobs and taking on new responsibilities in the midst of a myriad of changes in the education field.

Dr. Larry Dake is one of those who have taken on a new job in school leadership in the midst of the pandemic. In addition to his work as the newly appointed Binghamton City School District assistant superintendent, Dake has published a timely book, offering solid advice for educators and leaders in education, whether they are new to the field or have been in their positions for years.

“Take time to be intentionally reflective.”

“Keep personal connections alive.”

“Give yourself some mental space.”

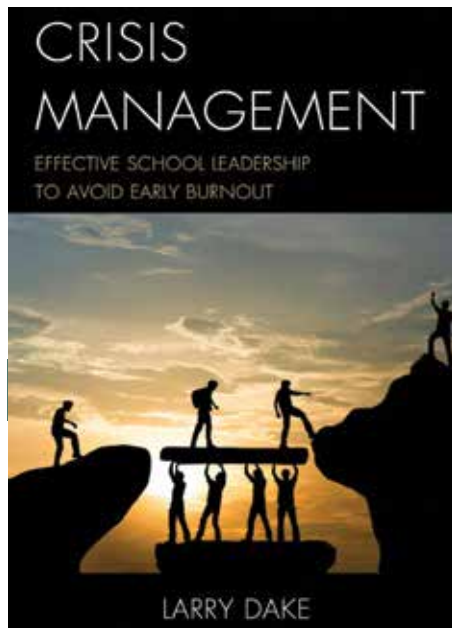
These and other key pieces of leadership advice are the basis of Dake’s recently published book, *Crisis Management: Effective School Leadership to Avoid Early Burnout*, written to help school leaders navigate through crises while continuing to be excited and passionate about what they do. In describing his book, Dake says it contains advice on “all those things I’ve struggled with, things that nobody talked about or talked about enough.”

Now finishing up his eleventh year as a school administrator, Dake took on his current position in Binghamton in July 2020, returning to the district where he started his career as a student teacher. His leadership career began in August 2010, with the role of Vestal’s coordinator of instruction. He then moved on to become the George F. Johnson Elementary School principal and then assistant superintendent for personnel and secondary education in Union-Endicott. Dake also teaches, as an adjunct professor in the Binghamton University Educational Lead-

ership program, returning to the program in which he participated several years before.

Dake says that every position has had a consistent theme. In each, he says, there have been “things that have been

“I feel like I’ve had a lot of first years. The key is not to have a second first year in the same position.”



changing,” whether that was the end of a recession or the beginning of a pandemic. The key for him has always been to “figure out how to work with people and move forward.”

That, in fact, has been, and continues to be, a template for him: How do you work with people, learn quickly, then try to build relationships? He adds, “I feel like I’ve had a lot of first years. The key is not to have a second first year in the same position.”

MAJOR STRESS RELIEVERS

One of the big takeaways from his book, Dake says, is “talking about stress and anxiety and avoiding burnout.” As part of his research, he interviewed principals and other administrators who told him stories about having a trusting relationship with their staff as being a major stress reliever for them.

Acknowledging that every administrator is going to make a mistake, and that there are always situations that could be handled better, a great stress relief for him is “going home at night knowing the staff trusts you and you’re doing things for the right rea-

sons.” In his own case, he adds, “They know I’ll be consistent.”

Mental space, “not always being in reactive mode,” is also key to reducing stress as a school leader, particularly during the challenging and uncertain days of the pandemic. Dake advises that “it’s impossible to be all things to all people at the same time.” He points out that one of the early mistakes a new leader can make is to try to be responsive to everyone’s needs, to try to solve all the problems.

While it’s natural to want to help people, if that’s the only mode a leader is in, he says, “That’s where I’ve seen people burn out early in their career.” It’s important to create some space, to get some breathing room for being able to enjoy family or outside hobbies, and to get out of the office at a reasonable time to be able to do all those things.

How to do that? Take notifications off your phone. Set up basic email expectations with staff. Over the weekend, or when taking some vacation time, check email but do not respond to it. Although Dake says he will answer the phone because that could be an emergency, it’s important to “set expectations that email will not get a response until Monday.”

REFLECTIONS AND CRITICAL CONNECTIONS

Time is a critical aspect of a school leader’s ability to deal with stress. Although time may seem to be a precious commodity, it is still important to set aside some time to be self-reflective. Dake points out that at this time the “ups and downs are lower lows and higher ups than we would normally experience.” Being self-reflective, taking time at the end of the week or the end of the month to think about meetings, conversations, and other events, can be a very valuable learning tool, especially for new leaders.

It is also helpful to acknowledge

small wins, particularly since it can be very difficult to see huge gains in any one area in a short period of time. Thinking about strategies that are easy to implement but that can have large results can also be helpful. A small win can be as simple as a phone call, a home visit, or anything that helps the leader make a personal connection.

Dake emphasizes that keeping personal connections alive is in itself a win. Those connections might be with staff, parents, or the students themselves. School leaders are finding that they have to make an extra effort during the pandemic to reach out and engage with students who are not in the building all the time.

A DIFFERENT LEARNING CURVE

One leader who has found that she had to be more creative and came up with new ways to make those connections is Erin Rueckert, ninth- through twelfth-grade counselor at Granville High School. Rueckert started her job in December 2019, just before the holiday break, then had about two and a half months of relative normalcy. She was meeting with students and getting to know them just as everything shut down and then shifted to remote learning. She says it has been “a very interesting year,” even though it was tough, particularly when the situation for her and her students, primarily seniors, was so uncertain.

The usual learning curve for a new school counselor completely shifted at that point. The focus now, says Rueckert, is on mental health and on social and emotional needs. She works with teachers and families to figure out what the student needs are, to make action plans, and to keep the students engaged in school so they can feel connected. She adds, “If they’re not in a place where they can focus and learn, they’re not going to do well academically.”

Celebrating small victories is also an important aspect of Rueckert’s work as she tries to maintain optimism for herself as well as for her students. Motivation is a challenge for everyone in the uncertainty of the pandemic and one of Rueckert’s challenges now is

how to encourage that motivation.

Jennifer Lee-Alden began her work as assistant principal for the class of 2023 at Shenendehowa High School in mid-August 2020. Although she had previously served as a summer school principal, she found that much of her learning curve in her new position has also been focused on student engagement efforts.

She says that during normal times, the assistant principal is “the person that has to do the student discipline.” However, she has found that she has had to refocus her efforts on outreach, including home visits, phone calls, and emails. She has been developing a process of reaching out to students to keep them engaged. This is all a huge challenge for everyone. She adds that she is also working with parents, who are looking for help themselves. Although they may be dealing with issues of their own, they really want their kids to be successful.

Lee-Alden also points to the social and emotional impacts as being prevalent this year. She sees the mental health of students and their families as being in crisis. For her, communication can make the difference, but it can also be seen as a stigma. As she is reaching out to find kids and families who are struggling, she finds that they don’t want anyone to know they are struggling so she has to find a way to put it all in a more positive light.

KEEPING THE FLAME ALIVE

One of the reasons Dake says he wrote his book was because the lessons he learned as part of the leadership program are “not necessarily the things that make or break you in the first year.” Although the courses taught important lessons about issues such as budgets and legal issues, the more important aspects of leadership, especially today, are managing time



well and building relationships. These are the areas that will help new leaders reduce their stress and help them keep the flame alive.

“When things get back to as normal as they can be,” Dake emphasizes, “those efforts will pay off.” It can be difficult for a first-year administrator who does not get immediate positive feedback but who should know that their efforts will pay off in the long run. He encourages new leaders to find a mentor, someone they can bounce ideas off of and someone with whom they can “process stuff within a safe space.”

Lee-Alden says there have been high points for her even among the challenges of the past year. She stresses that her administrative team is truly a team with “a very positive vibe.” They are all welcoming and the principal is really a leader for the team. They all work together to “do what it takes to help the kids succeed.”

Rueckert says for her the high point is “seeing the support of our community and how our community has supported what the school district’s decisions have been.” She adds that she is encouraged by “how willing families and teachers are to work together to support the kids.” She anticipates a time of personal growth going into the new school year, as she is “looking to learn and improve on practices that can better support students.”

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

No one is quite certain what the classroom will look like in September. Dake says, though, that “as we look forward to September there is a little bit of a feeling that we can pick up our head and start thinking about the future.” He adds that “now is the time to really engage with the school community, to start talking about

Equally important is talking about what we are doing now that we may need to continue doing. He emphasizes that “having those conversations helps build consensus.”

what are the things we need to do differently.”

Equally important is talking about what we are doing now that we may need to continue doing. He emphasizes that “having those conversations helps build consensus.” Especially important are the connections that were made with families through video conferences. There are a number of ways in which this relationship building could benefit students, staff, families, and administrators in the future.

Dake says that “if we take a step back and think about what was lost in this year, it really is that in-person piece when everyone is together. When we can emphasize those opportunities with those communities, we’ll have

made a real difference in putting this back together.”

Dake just submitted a proposal for his next book, which will be “focused on the theme that there are little pieces in our leadership that may not be visible to us, but they can become problematic.” Leaders, new and experienced, can fall into habits and if those aren’t addressed, they can grow into major rifts in their leadership.

As to the fall, Dake says it’s critical to “go back to focusing on relationships with students, with staff, with the communities.” Everyone

will be craving a sense of normalcy, including school leaders. It will be important to be present, to be accessible, to show an investment. Rebuilding and reinvigorating, keeping the flame alive, will involve prioritizing “those moments where you have students, staff, and community in the same space. Those are going to be unique opportunities that we’ve lost in the last 18 months.” Going forward, they can be “tremendous opportunities to rebuild that community and to make it even better.”

PAT FONTANA is a business writer and communications trainer with a background in corporate training and community college instruction. Her business, WordsWorking, focuses on improving workplace communications, concentrating on the fundamentals of human interactions.

RESOURCES

Crisis Management: Effective School Leadership to Avoid Early Burnout

Published in 2021, Dr. Larry Dake’s book, available on Amazon, is touted as a helpful guide that will “assist aspiring and practicing school leaders with strategies to navigate transitions, balance relationships, and manage their time more effectively.”

Chapters include titles such as:

“The Grass May Look Different, But It’s Not Always Greener... One Administrator’s Story”

“Is It Lonely at the Top? Navigating Leadership Isolation and Loneliness”

“The Goose That Lays the Golden Egg: School Leadership and Time Management”

Dake also includes “must read books for prospective and practicing school leaders” as well as a helpful survey instrument for school leaders.



P practices

from practitioners

Bouncing Back Better

SPRING
2021



F Y I

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OPINIONS



“You may not always have a comfortable life and you will not always be able to solve all of the world’s problems at once. But, don’t ever underestimate the importance you can have because history has shown us that courage can be contagious, and hope can take on a life of its own.”

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Opinion Contributor,
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Building Back Better

P

BUILDING
BACK BETTER



By Michelle Mastrande

It is almost exactly one year to the day that I packed up all of the essentials in my office as a middle school assistant principal and weighed which things would be most needed in the next few days. We were set to close our doors for maybe a week, possibly two, to get a better sense of the impact of Covid-19. In those same moments, a colleague in the district called to tell me about a vacancy in the district as an elementary school principal. Elementary school? Me? I had devoted 17 years to middle school and was certain that wherever my career took me, these adolescents would be at the heart of it.

I was intrigued, but distracted, as she rattled off all of the positives of the position and assured me it would be a great fit. In truth, I had been thinking lately of pursuing a new path and finding an opportunity to devote myself to a growing passion for alternative education – particularly at the middle school level. Yet, I cannot deny that I felt a door crack open during that phone call, a light cast on shadows that had just begun to fall. It is hard to put into words how very much those steps to my car felt measured and heavy on that March afternoon. I did not know for certain how the chips would fall with regard to schools, Covid, my next steps – but on every level I knew my life would somehow never be the same.

Fast-forward to March of 2021 and I am finishing nine months in my new role as the proud principal of School #5. And boy, do I mean proud! At times I have to check myself in conversations with colleagues who look at me with perplexed faces as I tell them I am happier than I have ever been, that this year has been awesome, and it is quite possibly the best decision I have ever made. Yes, you heard me right, people. This crazy, exhausting, 24/7, world-on-fire, building from the ground up year is my favorite year of the past two decades. How is that even possible? you ask in a year where the summer vacation we desperately use to recharge was swallowed whole by rooming measurements, ever-changing and always too late guidelines, hours spent on spreadsheets and in last-minute interviews to fill newly created sections? How is that possible in a year where it sometimes felt like I was perpetually holding my breath, while walking on a tightrope, blindfolded, and carrying the weight of 400 students and nearly 100 staff members? There is still so much I am unsure of in my new role – but for every uncertainty, I have found my footing on some pretty indispensable truths about our role as building leaders.

The first of those things that I will use to “build back better” is my commitment to lead from the heart.

This year, more than ever, I have seen and heard and felt the heart of the community we serve. I felt in the spring as we navigated together the challenges of remote learning, as families grieved the loss of loved ones and struggled to find the most basic provisions. I heard it in the voices of my new students when we met virtually over the summer and they eagerly shared their excitement to return to school after such a long absence. I saw it in the faces of the parents who dropped their kids off on the first day of school and had trusted in the safety protocols we had put in place.



And then it was all around me. It was in the heart of my colleagues who went above and beyond each day, setting aside their own fears and concerns, to provide stability, joy, and knowledge to the students in front of them. It was in the heart of the custodial staff, who not only worked 24/7 to make our schools safe and compliant with all guidelines, but also took the time to mark out safe distances in our hallway in the colors of the rainbow so it would be less intimidating to our returning students. It was in the tremendous support of our PTA, who quickly found ways to think creatively and infuse a sense of normalcy into our school day, welcoming the children back with thoughtful gifts and planning a “safe” pumpkin patch. I found it every single time I made a late night phone call to a parent or a staff member and needed to have an impossibly hard conversation about Covid-19. The

heart that was poured into everything, by everyone, time and again this year is what we must use as the foundation of all things as we build back.

I believe we must all recognize how adaptable we have all become. It can get hard after many years in education to not feel confident in our roles as teachers, masters of our content area, leaders on our grade level, or within our buildings. And quite often alongside confidence comes comfort – and a sense that things are really, really good just the way they are. This year stripped that all away. It forced us to use our confidence in a different capacity – not standing on the assumption that we are already doing things right, because the old ways of doing things were shattered by hundreds of pages of state guidelines telling us they were now “wrong.” This confidence required us to take a leap of faith, to trust one another and ourselves, and find a way to fly. All of us. We learned to embrace new technologies that

allowed us to provide students with relevant and engaging lessons, that allowed for connections and conversations, while still keeping everyone safe. We let go of our insecurities about others watching and critiquing us, and we joined 1,000,000 Google Meets, invited parents and students into our literal living rooms, and figured out how to stream to those students at home, while meeting the needs of the ones in front of us. We rewrote curriculums, paradigms for professional development and faculty meetings, protocols for PE, art, music, and recess. And we have soared. Today marks 120 consecutive days that our school community has come together to learn and to grow. There is not a person in our building who has not shattered the limits of their own expectations, found resilience when it was needed most, and proven beyond all doubt that there is literally nothing we can’t accomplish together. This new confidence will be the foundation of our building back.

I truly feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to take on a new position of leadership in the midst of the incredible challenges facing our world. I have been tested in ways that

I could not have anticipated. I have had to make myself vulnerable before our school community – students, staff, and parents – so that they could see we were truly in this together. I have learned to listen and ask for feedback at every step and it has been invaluable as I navigated unfamiliar territory. As a working parent, I cherish the opportunities technology has afforded me to connect with my own children’s teachers, the PTA, and the school in ways that had previously felt off-limits to those who could not attend in person. We have shattered those barriers and opened up so many new means to communicate and connect in method, frequency, and language. We will use these opportunities as we build back to create equity among our families and

strengthen our home-school partnerships.

This year for me has been personified by the connections we have made to one another. We have had to work so hard to provide our students with opportunities to collaborate and have fun, to embrace new tools for communication with families, and to come together as a staff to support one another. I very much look forward to a time when I will be able to look on the faces of my students and staff, without the hindrance of a mask. I cannot wait to see the gap-toothed smiles of first graders, give high fives on the car caravan line, and play kickball at recess. I want to have cake with my colleagues in the faculty room and celebrate weddings, baby showers,

and new grandchildren in style. I am excited to attend concerts and school plays and welcome parents back for all of the events that are so important to our community. The connections we have built this year run incredibly deep, as those found in adversity often do, but they will prepare us even more to embrace the joy of all the opportunities we have missed when they return. And they will. We will build back better than ever before.

MICHELLE MASTRANDE is the principal at North Oceanside Road Elementary School #5.



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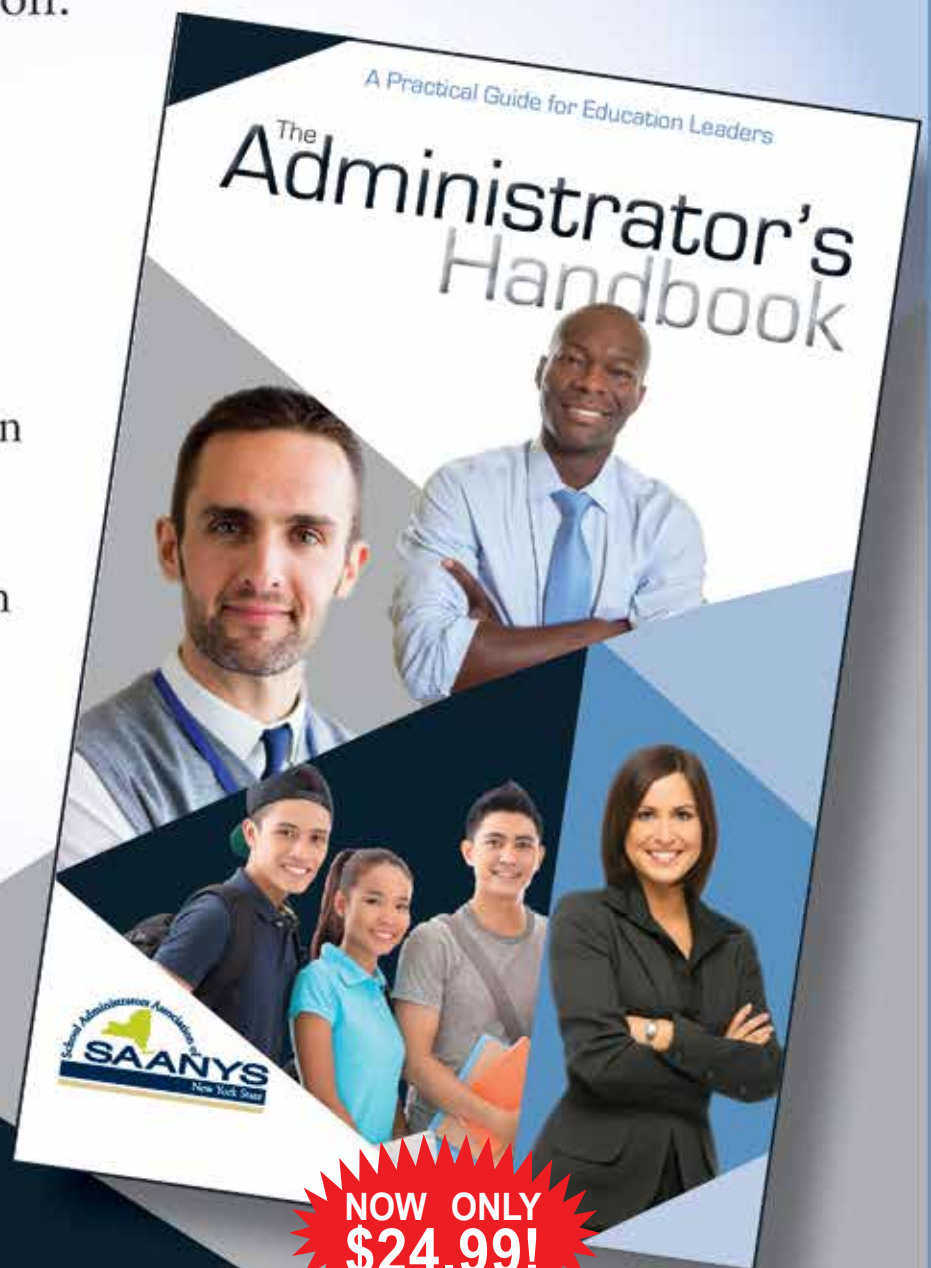
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Plainedge Addresses

Mental Health During Covid & Beyond



By Bridget Murphy and
Nicole Duffy

The Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the educational landscape over the last year. Mental health concerns and issues have been at the forefront of issues that have escalated during the Covid pandemic. Staff at Plainedge School District worked together to creatively meet our community's mental health needs during a time that has presented unique challenges. A major focus for our administration has always been to ensure that we meet our students', staff's, and families' mental health and social emotional needs. The 2020-21 school year presented the district with different challenges and opportunities during this unprecedented time.

Plainedge School District is a suburban district located in Nassau County on Long Island. The district has approximately 2,700 students enrolled in our schools. During the 2019-20 school year, our special education department, in collaboration with our superintendent, Dr. Salina, and our board of education, spearheaded a mental health initiative. Through ongoing conversations with our students, families, and staff, we learned that many families were struggling to find mental health supports. Additionally, our mental health staff reported that they were dedicating a large amount of time to helping these families and were experiencing limited success for a myriad of reasons. Overall, the process was not leading to the connections these individuals needed.

Our district decided to partner with Northwell-South Oaks (a local mental health hospital and treatment center) to bring in a multitude of mental health services to meet the needs we had identified. These services include:

- One psychiatrist from Northwell, on-site in our schools, weekly for four hours to:
 - Conduct psychiatric evaluations
 - Appointments are typically fulfilled within three days.
 - Psychiatric reports are done within two weeks.
 - Provide team consultation.
 - Provide medication consultation.
 - Participate in Committee on Special Education (CSE) meetings.
- Connections to mental health supports
 - District families (including staff members) have access to a concierge-like service to assist them in getting access to a myriad of mental health supports (counseling, medication management, etc.) for a variety of mental health needs including:
 - Anxiety, school refusal, autism spectrum disorder, depression, eating disorders, behavioral difficulties, suicidal ideation, ADHD, and more.
 - Referrals are tailored to each person's insurance-approved providers.

- Appointments are made for individuals in often less than two weeks.
- Referrals have spanned K-12 and include general and special education students.

- Assistance with connections to NYS Office of Mental Health and SPOA.
- Dignified transport for students in crisis to an appropriate hospital setting to evaluate their needs.
- Ongoing professional development surrounding mental health topics provided to district staff and families.
- Topics have included suicide risk assessment and prevention, mental health during Covid, parenting children with behavioral issues, talking to your child(ren) about grief.
- Priority connections to Northwell-South Oaks staff to answer questions and provide guidance as needed.

In addition to contracting with Northwell, Plainedge hired one dedicated, doctoral-level school psychologist, Rebecca Lefkowitz, with a clinical background to facilitate, screen, and follow up with all potential students, families, and staff referred to the program. Dr. Lefkowitz provides the critical connection component for our program by ensuring that school staff, families, students, and outside providers are all in frequent communication. The addition of this position (along with another hire for our social emotional learning initiative discussed later) has been an invaluable component to the success of this initiative. Additionally, the increase in staff has brought the number of school psychologists in the district to nine, making our student to school psychologist ratio 300:1, far exceeding the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommendations. Our mental health team also includes eight guidance counselors, two social workers, and social work interns from YES Counseling Center.

From its start in September 2019 to December 2020, we have yielded



the following outcomes from our partnership:

- 46 on-site psychiatric evaluations
- 29 psychiatric consultations
- 7 evaluations and admissions intakes at South Oaks Hospital
- 111 counseling connections have been made for families, students, and staff
- 1 student has utilized the dignified transport to an inpatient placement
- 10 students have been placed in the partial hospitalization program.

This initiative, which began during the 2019-20 school year, had shown a significant positive impact on our entire school community by the time school closures began. The increased need for mental health support during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly during the closure and into the new school year, was felt acutely across not just the district, but worldwide, as the months stretched on. To address the increasing need for support, we expanded our platform to reach as many students, staff members, and families as possible. We spoke about our program at PTA meetings, and district school psychologists presented parent Zoom meetings on student mental health signs, symptoms, and available resources. We also created videos (in our in-district television studio) with school staff members. Presented to every student, the videos aimed to destigmatize the effects of “big feelings” and advertised support staff who were available to help. Since we have implemented these layers of support, parents have reported that the process of finding mental health supports and navigating the system is simpler and

less daunting. We have also been able to address mental health issues before they become a crisis. As a result, more students have remained healthy and in school. In addition, our program was the recipient of the NYS Office of Mental Health's What's Great in Our State award in the fall of 2020.

As part of our focus on mental health, the district recognized that in order to build a more resilient learner, we needed to address social emotional learning and skill building at a much younger age. During the 2019-20 school year, Plainedge formed a committee of stakeholders with the goal of identifying a social emotional curriculum for our elementary schools. The committee reviewed several curriculum choices and, in January 2020, chose Competent Kids, Caring Communities (CKCC), a program from the Ackerman Institute for the Family. As noted on their website, "CKCC is a schoolwide program whose mission is to develop competent kids within the context of caring communities through building social emotional competencies and strengthening home/school partnerships. CKCC is highly rated as a 'select' program by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)." As part of this program, the district hired a doctoral-level school psychologist with a background in trauma-informed practices, Melissa Minervini, and an elementary-level guidance counselor, Elyssa Ditzio, to focus on the success of the program. The committee intended to implement the program at the start of the 2020-21 school year.

Unfortunately, our district, along with the rest of New York State, closed

in March and did not reopen for in-person learning for the remainder of the school year. While developing our reopening plan for September 2020, the special education and guidance departments, along with support from the office of curriculum and instruction, decided that implementing the CKCC curriculum was vital to meeting our students' needs as they returned to school. During the planning process, we also recognized that our classroom educators were taking on a high number of new technology initiatives and curriculum changes to adapt to the demands of a new learning environment due to Covid-19. We determined that we needed to creatively look at our implementation plans to move forward.

Our elementary students returned to school every day for in-person learning in September (unless a parent/guardian opted for the fully remote learning option). We worked with our support staff and physical education teachers (who are familiar faces to our students) and the technology department to adapt the CKCC lessons to our new classroom environments. Staff have recorded weekly CKCC videos that are presented every Monday. Follow-up activities are taught by the classroom teachers throughout the week. Each lesson runs approximately 20 minutes and engages students in a variety of topics including coping skills, identifying feelings, executive functioning skills, self-regulations, relationship skills, and responsibility taking. Each lesson starts with a deep breathing/mindfulness activity to get students ready for the lesson.

Feedback on our program has been incredibly positive. Staff and students have reported that the lessons and activities effectively address their social and emotional needs in and out of the classroom. Families are provided with materials to bridge the gap from school to home and assist with generalizing these new skills across natural environments. As we mentioned earlier, we recently expanded on our weekly CKCC video to include a developmentally appropriate video about "big feelings." The video included pictures of friendly support staff in the building that students could seek out if they wanted to talk.

While Covid-19 has brought much heartache to our nation, it has also shined a light on an issue that our school communities need to address. With the support of our families, staff, central administration, and board of education, Plainedge has found light in what sometimes feels like the darkest of times. We are proud of the programs and supports we have put in place to meet the mental health needs of our community and expect these programs to grow as time passes.

BRIDGET MURPHY is the director of special education at Plainedge Public Schools.

NICOLE DUFFY is the assistant director of special education at Plainedge Public Schools.





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Implementing Positive Change During Covid



By Gretchen E. Rosales

When we shuttered our doors in March 2020, we had no idea of the extent that our students would be separated from us. It was heartbreaking to experience the permanency of the Covid pandemic and realize how we simply could not put a timeline on the separation of our school building and all the people who filled it. Elba is a small, rural farming town, located between Buffalo and Rochester; our school is the heart of our community. It is the hub, the central location where our families meet for sporting events and concerts, and for art shows and parent teacher conferences.

Our children, like all children everywhere, fill our classrooms with vibrancy and energy. It was devastating to see how quickly all of the life was emptied out of our school. The community became silent.

Out of necessity, we quickly determined that our three most important needs would be communication, accessibility, and community-connectedness. The practices that we implemented began from necessity and have now become an integral part of how we operate.

COMMUNICATION

We learned early on that communicating effectively would be integral to any measures that we might need to take. When we first closed down, our communication motto became about getting news out quickly, concisely, and to all of our families. Elba Central School has a large Spanish-speaking population, so a bilingual response was necessary. Thankfully, our administrative team has members who are fluent in Spanish and we also have an interpreter/translator on staff. We could send out emails and update our website and social media accounts as necessary, but we also found that some of our families needed verbal communication when the written word was not sufficient. Of course, that meant more time on the phone, but we had the capacity to make that happen. Having administrators and staff members who were willing and able to answer the phone helped our communication practices immensely. This was one of the reasons for our success. The multifaceted approach to communication allows us to reach a much wider range of families and we have continued to implement this practice.

Our website received so much more traffic than ever before. Using it as a central point for communication became key, so organizing our materials and messages became essential. We also needed to make sure we had our resources translated to Spanish. As an administrative team, we became much more intentional about our materials. For example, could we use one concise learning

menu for students across grade levels, instead of several different sites that students/parents would have to access? Principals updated their pages weekly; it was important for families to see that although our building was closed, we were still active and engaged in our school community. Updating our pages with a new message each week allowed us to stay connected in real time. In addition to posting important academic news, we found it necessary to provide information about mental health, and as the spring turned into summer, share resources on how to talk to our children about racial injustice, diversity, and the protests in our country. We were experiencing a tumultuous time for sure, and we wanted to make sure all of our families had important resources to help heal from divisiveness. Keeping our website updated as a wide-ranging source of information and resources has been an important practice to continue. Now, I have made it a part of my weekly “to do” work; I update my pictures that I take of the week, link new resources for mental health or diversity awareness, and update academic expectations. The families have appreciated this communication immensely.

Further helping us to communicate resulted in a more frequent use of our social media accounts (our district Facebook page, and our administrative team’s accounts on Twitter and Instagram) to share information. We found that sharing via a range of methods allowed us to connect with parents and students. Not only did we share logistical information (learning plans, meal distribution, supply pickups), but we used it as a way to connect with our students by sharing pictures of ourselves to let our students feel they could “see” us, oftentimes still in the building, or out delivering meals. We felt this was an important part of letting them know we were still a part of their school. This is also a practice that we utilize much more than ever before; it has been a surefire way to increase our audience and ensure that our message is widespread.

ACCESSIBILITY

Making ourselves accessible during a pandemic proved to be a challenge in itself. We found that we needed to be creative with our meetings, utilizing Zoom and Google Meet just like the rest of the world. As the year wore on, we found that we had so many more families participating in virtual events because it was easier for them to manage in their workday. Parents who worked an hour away found it much more accessible to attend a parent teacher conference via a quick Zoom log-in. We had seemingly found the solution to increasing participation in our conferences! This was one practice that we found to be a long-standing one that we could implement. Making our conferences available in this manner out of necessity provided a permanent way for us to increase our home-school connection.

Along the same vein, we needed to find ways to make our activities accessible to parents and the community at large. For example, our little town loves our basketball program; it is not uncommon for our community members to attend evening games long after their own children have graduated. Once we received the green light to commence with sports, we wrestled with how we could connect with our community, even when they could not be in the gym in person. Our athletic director found a way to broadcast our games, and with some tech-savvy community members, along with generous donations from our sports boosters, we were able to make it possible for all of our families to see athletes play the game they love. Just recently, our girls’ varsity team won their fifth sectional title and we had unprecedented numbers of viewers. Once the broadcast ended, the community members took to the streets to cheer the girls along in their victory parade. We will continue to broadcast our games so that homebound community members, working parents, and fans from afar can tune in to support our athletes.

COMMUNITY-CONNECTEDNESS

We found that, more than anything else, our community wanted to help our school. When there was an initial mask shortage, a teacher requested fabric to make some; within a day, the teacher had enough fabric to make over one hundred masks. Our farmers pulled up with trucks of potatoes, onions, cabbage, and other produce; when families picked up breakfasts and lunches for their children, they were also able to take as much produce as they needed. A local church dropped off a large supply of yogurt for us to pack in lunches, and a local ice cream company donated enough treats for all students to have in their take-home lunches on a hot day.

One of our staff members runs a free clothing and hygiene store within our school, but we had no way to allow anyone to shop. We had all of the necessities that our families needed, but our doors remained closed. Instead, the staff member who managed the store took matters into her own hands and connected with families who might be in need and

then began to deliver packages of toilet paper or toothpaste. We find that now, more than ever, our families are seeking out items of clothing or shoes because they are experiencing a financial crisis. We continue to maintain a fully stocked store for the needs of our families.

When it became evident that our senior class would have a very different end to their school year, community members stepped up to make a basket for each student, full of surprises and treats to brighten their mood. A local photographer donated her services to do cap-and-gown photos for families and also donated pictures of the graduation ceremony to each family. A local greenhouse shared flowers to decorate our outdoor venue for graduation, as we could no longer use the auditorium due to Covid restrictions.

More than ever, we had realized the importance of the community connection in our school. Community members were able to provide services that we could not. Allowing others to



help us through challenges reminded us that in good times, we still need to foster connections.

The Covid pandemic has changed the educational landscape in ways that we could not have planned for. However, as with any conflict that presents itself, finding ways to adapt positive change is critical. Shifting the ways that we have implemented communication, accessibility, and community-connectedness has brought about positive change in our small school.

GRETCHEN E. ROSALES is the principal of Elba Junior/Senior High School.



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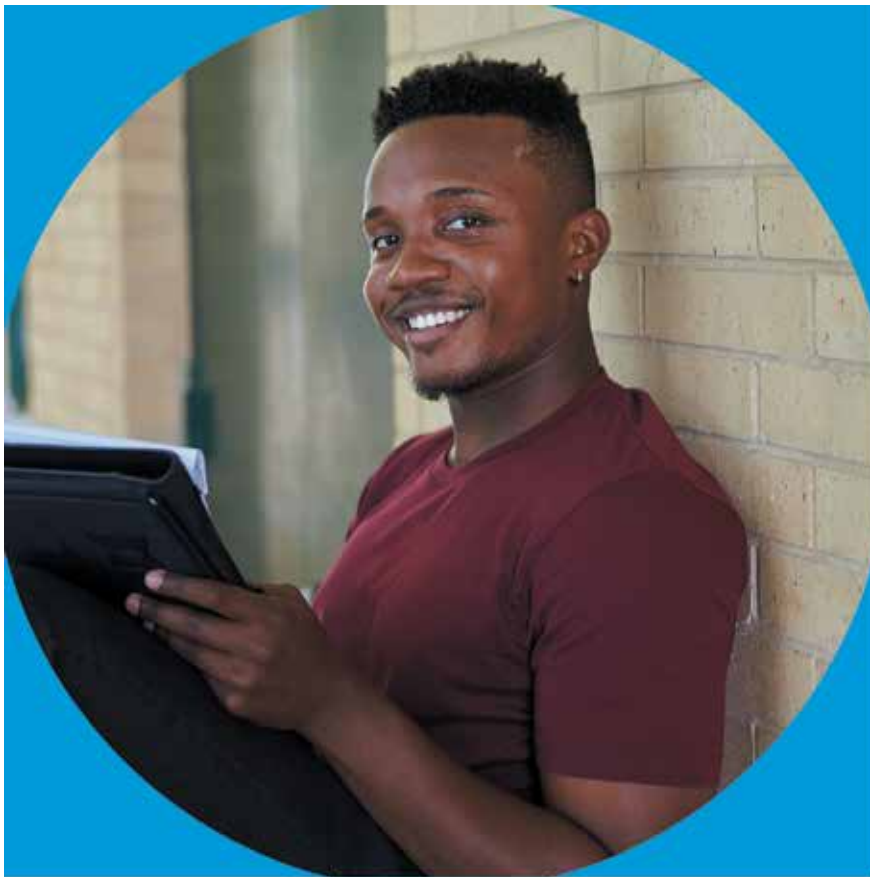
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Reigniting the Spark of Awesome School Projects



By David R. Ashdown

BUTTERFLIES, COCKROACHES, AND BAT BOXES, OH MY!

After the unprecedented events of the last year, the very thought of a return to a traditional school year is enough to inspire a bit of hope in pandemic-weary educators. A normal school day, without some or all students learning remotely, with a normal lunch period (and for our younger students, recess!) sounds too good to be true. Yet, one has to wonder what sort of learning experiences await students upon their return to the classroom.

Will it be more activities on Chromebooks or other digital devices? Or perhaps some fraction activities utilizing the interactive flat panel displays? Or maybe the students can watch a YouTube video of monarch butterflies being released into the wild. As someone who has trained teachers to integrate technology for the last 20 years, I'm surprised to hear myself say it... It's time to put the devices away and to refocus on providing students with authentic, engaging, and creative classroom projects.

As a new teacher in the late 1990s, I had the benefit of working alongside a number of master teachers whose passion for their trade and their content area was self-evident. These teachers each found a way to turn their own interests into exciting and memorable projects for their students. There was Mr. Jordan, a fifth-grade teacher who built bat boxes with his students, placed them on the school property, tracked the daily movements of the bats, and calculated the number of insects eaten. There was Mrs. Anderson, whose love for teaching ancient civilizations resulted in the most impressive papier-maché pyramids, wooden castles, and ornate costumes ever created by sixth graders. As educational leaders know well, every school has these gifted teachers who have a special ability to inspire students in creative ways.

In a category alone was Mr. Romack, a middle school science teacher who also happened to be the same globe-trotting entomologist who produced the insect collection that awaits visitors to the New York State Museum. Mr. Romack's classroom was a regular menagerie of snakes, lizards, rodents, and his prized collection of over 200 hissing Madagascar cockroaches! Aside from his own classroom, Mr. Romack's outdoor education program provided every young person in the district with opportunities to go out into the local woods and learn to identify insects. I'll never forget the looks of wonder as he would show the students a rare and endangered luna moth. He would gently place the large, exotic-looking, bright green moth with a five-inch wingspan on a young student's head, only to have it fly away a few moments later accompanied by gasps of excite-

ment and awe. It was like magic; and I knew this was the kind of teacher that I wanted to be. (Side note: Mr. Romack recently coauthored a book entitled *In Your Backyard: A Family Guide to Exploring the Outdoors*.)

Those first few years of teaching, prior to the new standards movement and the new assessments that followed, were quite exciting. I was able to incorporate my love for music and literature and have the students write blues songs in iambic pentameter; this project culminated in a "blues night" where parents and community members were invited to hear their kids "sing the blues"! I did fall short in what would have been the pièce de résistance: organizing a schoolwide maple syrup making operation. As it turns out, it's difficult to get approval for having students standing around large kettles of boiling sap!

As my professional life shifted from classroom teaching to providing professional development for teachers in the use of technology, I tried not to lose sight of those inspiring moments and projects that shaped my early experiences as an educator. The EdTech community in those days of the early 2000s emphasized not using technology for the sake of technology, but incorporating it in meaningful ways. Still, between the interactive whiteboard boom, 1-1 laptop initiatives, then iPads and Chromebooks becoming ubiquitous in classrooms, many teachers struggled to keep pace with the classroom technologies they were expected to use.

Enter Covid. After more than a year of remote learning, Google Classroom, video meetings, recording lectures, and grading digital work, it is safe to say that most educators can check the box on "integrating technology." The collective technology skill level of educators in New York State has increased exponentially during these challenging times. Now school leaders, teachers, parents, and students all deserve a break from relying on technology so heavily. It's time to power down and regroup.

Every school leader can likely point to innovative projects within their school communities that were



running smoothly or gaining momentum prior to the pandemic. Schoolwide or community gardens, hiking trails, community service activities, outdoor education programs, and innovative classroom projects led by outstanding educators can be found in every corner of New York State. As students and teachers are returning to normal after extended periods of isolation, it's time to celebrate and promote the sort of "good old-fashioned" creativity that can provide students with positive learning experiences they will remember for the rest of their lives. Technology can be an important part of the process, but it should not be center stage. Upon returning to school, let's not settle for watching a YouTube video of monarch butterflies being released. Let's raise monarch butterflies in classrooms again and watch the students' eyes light up as they release them from their own hands!

DAVID ASHDOWN is the assistant director for instructional technology at the WSWHE BOCES in Saratoga Springs, NY, where he assists 31 school districts with incorporating various learning technologies into classrooms.

Leading with Love in the Logistics



TRANSPARENCY



By Tara K. Grieb

What does it mean to build back better? For many, moving on post-pandemic means taking the systems that we have created and assessing their value beyond triage. Districts and buildings are assessing the value of dismissal and arrival plans, regular use of 1-to-1 devices or streaming platforms that they didn't have before, and methods of class coverage that had to be innovative. Teachers either enhanced their tech skills or embraced technology because there was no other choice, and perhaps they even enjoyed some of its efficiencies and abilities. This pandemic has not been for the inflexible.

It nudged some and forced others to change, shift, and innovate. For some it was a challenge faced with optimism. For others it has been a very trying and frustrating experience.

As a small rural district in upstate New York, we met the challenges we faced head on. We increased our bandwidth, deployed hotspots and meals to families in need. We implemented a spring curriculum, then designed a virtual platform for fall using Google Classroom and Meet and a host of other products. These plans and logistics, I am sure, are much like those of my colleagues across the state. We all figured out how to deliver instruction in hybrid and virtually. We learned how to contact trace, screen temperatures at arrival, arrange furniture, and plan for multiple gears and moving parts. When recommendations changed or staffing issues arose, we learned how to flip between hybrid and fully remote instruction and back again. As problems arose, we solved them.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit that the pandemic gave a welcome push in inciting change across the board in use of technology or structural change. When not in a pandemic, creating a movement to get an entire district on board with a new platform or process often takes several years to pilot, prove, and implement consistently. The pandemic forced our hands and pushed us to become experts in a variety of new areas. For that I am grateful, but this is not the benefit or change that I value the most or that I feel is the most important.

It is easy to write about the programming and process that you and your district designed to weather the tides of the pandemic, but I feel that the most valuable lessons and methods are not about logistics at all. Rather, the most important takeaways from this pandemic are about transparency, honesty, and vulnerability in leadership. As I reflect on the past year, the moments that I am most proud of were some of my weakest, which in turn became some of my strongest.

After a few months into this experience I quickly realized that the social emotional toll was unpredictable and widespread. Some of my strongest students were falling off the radar, not com-

pleting work, and struggling across the board with the isolation, fear, and change that the pandemic brought. I began advising my staff that our usual predictors of behavior and work ethic did not fit this mold and that we must be prepared for any and every student to have an adverse reaction to the effects of the pandemic, to lose motivation, to stop performing and more. At the same time, I began to notice that my new teachers, who I expected to be struggling and uncertain, were doing quite well and that it was my own age group, the people with 15-20+ years in education, who were having difficulty. I was having difficulty, if I was being honest with myself.

I have always believed that good leadership is not from above but alongside your people and leading by example. I've believed that a good leader is willing to cover a class, clean a spill, participate in any event, roll up their sleeves and do whatever needs to be done. In that spirit, I realized that what was needed most here was honesty and transparency coupled with a willingness to be vulnerable.

Often as leaders we are expected to be stoic, unaffected, and composed at all times. We are required to think and solve problems as they arise and calm others when they are uncertain. All of this was necessary during the pandemic, and yet I felt it was important to admit when I was struggling, when I was uncertain, when I felt overwhelmed, with my staff, my students, and my school community.

I began with my staff, further analyzing and discussing that predictable behaviors among students and adults had flown out the window. Some of our most reliable people and strongest teachers and students were struggling the most. The tried and true methods built on years of experience, trial and error, did not fit the mold that the pandemic was creating for



them. I shared my own uncertainties and frustrations with them but also shared what I was doing, as a person not a principal, to get through the hard times. I talked about moving between fear, anger, and sadness, and feeling like I was never off duty. I shared my feelings, wanting to help them solve issues as they arose but often feeling like I was making it up as I went along. Really, I was making it up as I went along. We all were, but there was comfort in all of us admitting our fears and facing our challenges together.

Soon thereafter I reached out via email and video to our students and our parents. My own children are seniors this year. As a result, I have additional perspectives on the effects of the pandemic on students and families as well as the feelings of loss, especially for seniors. I did my best to speak to them as a principal and as a mother. I shared my own grief regarding the loss of milestones, events, and activities that normally happen for students. I did my best to validate the loneliness, lack of motivation, and anger, and shared that I was concerned for my own children's mental health. In turn, it helped them to be reassured that I was equally concerned about them and their students.


Within a week we began Friday shout-out videos. I solicited names from teachers and students asking who deserved a shout-out for the week. I was overwhelmed by the response. I expected our teaching staff to give kudos to our students who were working hard in adversity, and they did. What I did not expect was the teacher-to-teacher recognition,

and the students' shout-outs to their teachers and their peers for working hard, not giving up, and doing a good job. Each week a video went out to the community and was met with overwhelming positivity and appreciation. Occasionally the videos would close with my own commentary, struggles, and positive vibes. Again, this was done to send the message that we are all people, human beings, trying imperfectly to maneuver this situation.

While we are not at the end of this situation we can certainly see the light looming in the distance. There are many processes that we have created that I know we will keep toward innovation, efficiency, and increased support systems for our students and school community. Nonetheless, the most valuable lesson from this entire experience has been leading with transparency, being willing to be vulnerable and admit fears and frustrations, and handling the

curveballs as they come together. Too many of us get caught up in the politics and process of leadership. We align with the traditional expectations of a leader. Some may call it leading with your heart as well as your experience. Some may say it's leading with love in the logistics. I call it shedding the should and leading with humanity. Whatever you call it, it is a process that I will carry with me beyond the pandemic and for the rest of my days as a leader of a school and a builder of community.


TARA K. GRIEB is the principal at Stissing Mountain Junior/Senior High School in the Pine Plains CSD.



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Reimagining RTI During Covid-19



By Gina DiTullio, EdD

It is hard to believe that our schools closed down and went fully remote almost one year ago. On March 13, 2020, we were informed that we would be closing for a two-week period to deep clean our buildings. We had no reason to believe it would be any longer. Here we are, almost a year later, just returning to a hybrid model with about half of our pre-K-6 students attending two days per week for in-person learning. To say that transitioning directly to fully remote learning was an adjustment would be an understatement, but we have managed. The silver lining in all of this has been the gift of time.

Instead of looking at this crisis in a negative light, we have attempted to use the time we have to evaluate our practices and try something new. Most notably, we have completely revamped our approach to RTI this year, and it has been much more effective for all involved.

Last year was my first year as principal of School 46 in the Rochester City School District. When I was placed at School 46, I felt the need to listen, learn, and absorb what was working and evaluate what was not. I asked many questions, and received input from our professional staff. One of the practices that felt a lot like compliance to me was our RTI process. We spent our meetings discussing the paperwork and checking the boxes, but we never had deep, meaningful conversations about the root of the students' struggles and how to best support them in the classroom. To me, it felt like everyone was going through the motions, but we didn't have a lot to show for it in the end. When Covid-19 hit, these meetings were abandoned. There was really no way to ensure that we were providing proper interventions while we were using the existing format. On its face, this sounds like a bad thing; but it ended up being a very good thing. Reimagining RTI meant forming a new team, strengthening our Tier 1 supports, and developing a new process for Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports.

FORMING OUR MTSS TEAM

As it usually goes, we were underutilizing the knowledge and expertise of our related services providers, including speech, OT, PT, our psychologist, and our social workers. In the time I had spent as an assistant principal in special education programs at BOCES, I had learned to value our related service staff. I understood how having an expertise in areas like language acquisition, fine motor, motor planning, and memory can play an important role in developing student support plans. The RTI process we had in place did not take advantage of any of the knowledge and expertise of these disciplines. Step one was redefining our team to include not only the classroom teacher and administrator, but also our instructional intervention teachers (who support reading

and math instruction), our speech pathologists, occupational therapist, physical therapist, psychologist, and both of our social workers. Forming a new team allowed us to break out of our silos and work together to more holistically evaluate and plan for the support of each student. We also redesigned our RTI form to be much more comprehensive.

BEEFING UP OUR TIER 1 SUPPORTS

In my conversations with professional staff, as well as my own observations, it appeared that we could be doing more at the Tier 1 level to support our diverse student needs. Therefore, our first task as a team was to compile a menu of Tier 1 supports that could be used with every student in every classroom. We wanted to ensure that we were all utilizing the same information and taking advantage of the expertise of our related service providers. The Tier 1 supports menu was designed to include supports for ELA, mathematics, language, fine motor, gross motor, English language learners, and social emotional supports. Some suggestions on our menu include using broken crayons or golf pencils for students who have an awkward grasp; providing alternative seating options for students who have trouble sitting; using painter's tape on the floor to clearly mark off sections of personal space; providing daily schedules posted clearly for all students; keeping the room free of clutter; and paying attention to the traffic flow. We also included academic strategies such as structured reading support (e.g., the three read strategy) and structured writing support (e.g., use of sentence stems).

The purpose of creating a Tier 1 supports menu was twofold. First, we wanted to ensure that every teacher in the building had access to the same information for consistency. Classroom



teachers can only be expected to know so much, and we wanted to ensure that we were utilizing the wealth of knowledge and expertise that we had in the building. The activity of creating the Google Tier 1 supports document was helpful in bringing us together and breaking down the silos we were living in. Second, we wanted to ensure that we were doing everything possible at Tier 1 so that we could more accurately identify students for Tier 2 or 3 supports.

A NEW PROCESS FOR TIERS 2 AND 3

The new form we designed is filled out before meeting with a student who is referred to the MTSS team for Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports. The new form is much more comprehensive than the form we were previously using. Specifically, we now include any and all testing that has occurred, both formal and informal testing. All faculty who work with the student are asked to fill out their part of the form, including information about the student's strengths, needs, and any information from the parents' perspective. The presenting concern is described in terms of what it looks like and when it is most/least likely to occur. Next, we list and discuss any Tier 1 and/or 2 supports that are currently being implemented with the student and how the student has responded to those interventions. Next, we hypothesize about the root cause of the problem and recommend interventions as a team, including information about how data will be collected to monitor the effectiveness

of the interventions selected and a timeline for implementation. At the meeting's end, we set a date to reconvene and evaluate the intervention data, ensuring that we include progress monitoring and a reasonable timeline to collect data.

REFLECTIONS

The pandemic allowed us the time to reevaluate and reimagine our process for supporting students in a multitiered intervention system that was just not working. Our new model, which is much more comprehensive and thorough, has allowed us to work together in a way that is much more effective and collaborative. Teachers have reported feeling more supported and much less isolated in the RTI

process. They now have a team of professionals providing suggestions and support both during the meeting and supporting with the interventions in the classroom. Teachers are leaving the meeting with a plan for exactly what strategies will be implemented, who is supporting the implementation, and what evidence we will collect to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention strategies.

We honestly may not have had the time to refine our RTI process and redesign it to the level that we did, had it not been for the pandemic. Covid-19 brought with it so many issues that forced us to work differently. The formation of an effective and efficient MTSS team and the complete redesign of our RTI process have been

accomplishments that we are very proud of. I am looking forward to continuing to refine the process as we slowly return to in-person learning, and eventually fully open our schools.

GINA DITULLIO, EdD, is the principal of School 46 in the Rochester City School District.



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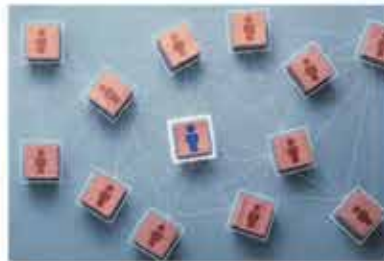
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A Year Later ...

Building a Brighter Future



By Laurie Guyon

It's been quite a transformational year for educators around the globe. We shifted from what we traditionally do in the classroom to a completely virtual classroom. We then tackled all sorts of variations of hybrid teaching. To say it's been a year of change is an understatement. This shift has made some gaps glaringly obvious, but it also shows us new and innovative ways to reach every learner. The change has been and will be challenging. But if it's for our students, it is worth it.

When I reflect on my experience over the past year, I see many shifts in teacher needs and comfort levels around technology. Our BOCES Model Schools program started planning for the shutdown in February when we created an online toolkit website with tutorials and resources that we knew teachers would need right away. These included setting up their Google Classrooms and using Meet. The website was distributed widely and posted on the NYSED site as a resource. The videos had over 17,000 views this past year.

Once the shutdown happened last March, we shifted to offering immediate help to our teachers on the skills they needed daily. We offered office hours and kept adding to our online toolkit based on the questions that we received. We created a daily newsletter with links and resources for educators and parents. We offered weekly webinars on the tech tools that teachers were using. I had a booking link that allowed educators to schedule time with me to meet and get immediate help and guidance. Over this past year, I hosted over 350 meetings and office hours. Model schools hosted over 220 webinars with about 1,700 participants attending. Our daily newsletters had over 55,000 views. Additionally, our other school support programs, including teacher leader development, multimedia services, and school library services, offered even more training and resources based on teacher input and needs.

I am also fortunate to host webinars in the evenings and weekends with NYSCATE. These webinars allowed for an outstanding global outreach. I had many educators reach out for additional help through email and Twitter. We built a community that helped support each other. In the beginning, NYSCATE offered office hours on various topics for educators to come in and ask questions and support each other. There was a lot of laughter, and we were able to share ideas and troubleshoot together. These experiences allowed me to see some general trends of what is working and what is worth keeping as we move forward.

Teachers are looking for best practices, time-saving techniques, and the ability to share resources. Using the mantra of “Go slow to go fast,” educators are encouraged to take the time to build relationships, establish protocols, and teach how to use technology. Teachers who took the time to develop their classroom community found early success in engaging students. They were meeting their needs no matter the teaching model. By teaching how to use the technology, they found students missed fewer assignments and were more successful. We all know the pressure of getting through the required curriculum, especially during a pandemic. Giving teachers space and time to build community will foster this success and help students’ overall well-being. Looking to the future, we see that more time spent on social and emotional needs before diving into the curriculum or alongside the curriculum will be important.

When sharing ideas and resources, teachers need access to ideas and best practices. In one school that I work with, teachers created a shared Padlet where they put resources, ideas, and “aha” moments. It was an invaluable tool for educators when they are struggling with something. We start many of my training sessions with an opening that allows participants to ask questions, air frustrations, and talk about their wins. It builds the community and encourages discussion. We celebrate everything. While that may seem counterintuitive, it helps the emotional state of our educators. They have a chance to ask for help and to share a story. Sometimes just talking

helps create solutions. If nothing else, it allows us to laugh along or cry along with them and offer support. One teacher who moved from one class to another all day long just wanted to discuss where she could go to hang up her coat, make a parent phone call, or decompress. These are examples of things that can be easy to solve and take a burden off their shoulders. Moving forward, we need to establish protocols for our daily routines both in our classrooms and schoolwide. Common planning time, team meetings, and shared resources are necessary for our teachers to feel supported.

Through discussions with educators, it became clear that some best practices can be shared with others. Teachers showcased simple fixes like a whiteboard visible on camera with quick reminders or notes. One teacher I worked with puts one earbud in to hear both her in-class and online students simultaneously without all the noise. A group of teachers uses the same “must do” and “may do” document to build a routine for their students. These are simple and effective ways to increase engagement and opportunity for success.

The need to learn the best tech tools also became superimportant. There were specific tech tools that allowed teachers to do what they always have done but in this new environment. Some tools transformed the learning process for their students.

Most of my schools use Google Workspace for Education (formerly known as G Suite for Education). Teachers leveraged the LMS tools, like Google Classroom and Canvas, to give their students resources and assignments. Those who took courses with me also explored how to use these tools for formative assessment and feedback.

Teachers shared their favorites often in our sessions as well. For example, teachers found that Seesaw offered students the opportunity to share their learning process with teachers through various activities. It also provided a solution to communicate effectively with parents. Teachers embraced Nearpod for its



ability to control student devices to make sure everyone is on the same page. They also embraced its ability to engage students through drawing activities, open-ended questions, collaborative boards, and interactive videos. Many teachers found Kami to be a lifesaving tool to use the PDFs and worksheets they often use in the classroom online. The ability to annotate, collaborate, and offer feedback made this tool a “game changer” for many teachers. Finally, teachers embraced creative activities using tools like Buncee. They had their students creating presentations and infographics in a fun and visually appealing way.

Finally, there were teachers who not only embraced the changes but used them as an opportunity to flatten the walls of their classrooms. One teacher created digital thank-you cards for nursing home workers and American Red Cross workers and sent them out globally. Another classroom is learning Spanish while exploring the UN Sustainable Goal of clean water and sanitation. They are creating presentations to share with schools in sev-

eral Spanish-speaking countries about nanofilters and biosand filters and proper hygiene and sanitation practices.

Many times teachers have said that they found these new ways to communicate with students something they want to keep forever. They have gotten a window into their students’ home life and said hello to many pets and stuffed animals. Students are often choosing to stay on a call with the teacher just to chat about their day. Students who are often quiet in a traditional classroom are finding their voice through Flipgrid or interactive chats. Educators who were resistant to trying new things in their classrooms are forever changed by what technology can do for their students. Some have said that they would love to continue to teach virtually as it offers new and exciting opportunities. Many are excited to have their students back face-to-face but will continue to offer digital experiences.

Educators are superheroes. We know that already, but they more than proved it over and over again during the past year. Teachers’ ability to use technology and transform the learning experience for their students has grown exponentially. While many traditional teaching methods are still important, like creating a classroom community, other transformative ideas have taken hold. There is still work to be done, and I do not doubt that our educators will embrace the work because it will help our students learn.

LAURIE GUYON currently is the coordinator for Model Schools at WSWHE BOCES.



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Positivity in Action for Remote Social Emotional Learning



By John Trotta

The Covid-19 pandemic shocked the world and led to an abundance of concerns, challenges, and constraints. What started as confusion and nervousness quickly transitioned and developed into a new and disconnected reality. Entire communities were dealing with tremendous loss, hurt, and sadness. In addition, humanity had to find innovative and novel approaches to complete everyday tasks as businesses were shutting down and industries shifted to working remotely from home. We, as members of school communities and human beings, are still fatigued, suffering in our own ways, and will be forever changed.

However, it is comforting to know that during such devastating times, school districts served as a trusted partner in the community, often symbolizing the “nucleus” of the town.

School buildings and employees had unique opportunities to serve constituents physically with food and transportation services, emotionally with continued love and support, and intellectually with academic knowledge and the latest health updates.

March 2020 presented uncharted territories for schools across the nation and also initiated a courageous time of adaptability, resiliency, and revival growth.

For years, with the best of intentions, schools have presented students and teachers with resources related to the “growth mindset,” applying “grit” and persevering through challenges, being self-aware and connecting socially and emotionally to better understand themselves and empathize with others.

While these practices and approaches have been instilled effectively in the lives of learners of all ages, 2020 vigorously enabled students and teachers to apply these skills firsthand as disoriented remote learners in a gloomy and frightened world.

It is encouraging to witness a new discipline develop into a healthy habit. A significant amount of thinking “outside the box,” noteworthy creative collaboration, and sometimes the reductive and staying “inside the box” approach lead to new levels of growth.

Schools are still not perfect and the current state of students, teachers, and school leaders is still concerning. However, we keep falling and getting back up. Schools have efficiently developed some stronger and better ways to complete tasks.

Below are some lessons learned by students, teachers, and school leaders, as well as some pandemic improvements.

LESSONS LEARNED BY STUDENTS

“School really is not that bad” – Most students, regardless of age, experience frustrations with school. However, after spending

extended time learning virtually or having limited access to the classroom, it is safe to say most learners miss the joyfulness of the physical school atmosphere.

“My teachers care a lot” – You can see the hearts of teachers from a mile away. Whether it was a car parade, birthday phone call, finding new ways to engage students in fun lessons, virtual extra help, or an emotional check-in, teachers crushed it in 2020. Students noticed the efforts of their teachers and appreciated it profoundly.

“We need a break from technology” – While many school-aged individuals are still putting their head down and looking at their devices longer than recommended, it was pleasantly surprising to see students start to desire being active or outdoors rather than being on a technological device.

“I am more accountable than I thought” – As learners returned to school with masks and were required to follow social distance guidelines, they were asked to be more reliable and well behaved than ever before. The vast majority of students were extremely respectful of the new boundaries and rose to the occasion, showing that they can demonstrate a heightened level of self-control when needed.

“Life is full of frustrations” – Many students realized how hard remote learning can be and how much meticulous effort is required to succeed academically when teachers are not physically teaching you face-to-face. Some learners stepped up and applied extra elbow grease to progress in school and yet, many students did not. However, schools will not be defeated. Institutions continue to support students academically, socially, and emotionally, as students are displeasingly aware and extra-

cognizant that life is not always a “walk in the park.”

LESSONS LEARNED BY TEACHERS

“We love our kids more than ever”

– Teachers are some of the most dedicated, selfless, and considerate people around. While it is hard to believe, teachers found even more ways to show their students love during the pandemic. Educators missed their students immensely and went above and beyond to connect. It was common to see teachers dropping off items to their students’ homes or spending hours upon hours learning new programs to record themselves and present educational content in a new way with no real preparation time. That is dedication and they did it because they love their students!

“Versatility to infinity” –

Minute-to-minute, teaching is one of the hardest professions around. Educators are constantly interrupted, shifting from one task to the next, changing plans, and making sacrifices to keep students in a healthy place and present information in an effective way. The pandemic called on educators to be even more multifaceted when they had to become virtual teachers. Parents at home supervising their children during remote instruction gained a strong appreciation for educators as they saw them patiently working with students and adjusting to ever-changing circumstances.

“We still love and hate technology” –

Teachers will probably always have a love-hate relationship with technology. We love it when it works and hate it when it doesn’t. The pandemic continued to prove that philosophy true. While Zoom calls and Google Meets became the new classrooms and there was minor comfort being home and

teaching lessons, coaching students and troubleshooting parents through the technological encounters were time-consuming. Sometimes a teacher's email account looked like a technology helpdesk!

“Do what matters most, seriously” – As schools have been shifted to virtual, hybrid, or in-person settings, it was a requisite for teachers to “trim” some of their content and teach more of what really matters most. Decluttering resources and presenting a more concise and condensed unit doesn't mean easier. In fact, it is more stressful and burdensome to adapt curriculums, but it has forced teachers to “put first things first” academically and connecting with students emotionally. Sometimes the most memorable lesson a teacher can present is to help a child know they have someone who cares about them.

“Make positive assumptions” – The pandemic reinforced the truth that we have no idea what is going on in the lives of students when they leave our classrooms. Sometimes we are frustrated when a student comes to school unprepared or is not working up to their full potential. We want the best for our students so we innocently disregard the possibility that the learner is dealing with grueling circumstances. Teachers are now giving students the benefit of the doubt and taking time to better understand their students by making positive assumptions and asking better questions to support learners.

LESSONS LEARNED BY SCHOOL LEADERS

“Listen more actively” – Unfortunately, most people reading this article had to say good-bye to someone they loved during the Covid-19 pandemic. There is no competition in loss, but school

leaders are constantly hearing troubling news. If they are not “putting out a fire” or “cleaning up a mess,” a school leader is hearing unpleasantness in the life of a student, family, or staff member. The pandemic encouraged leaders to realize how critical it is to listen with the intent of understanding rather than always responding with a solution. Everyone was hurting and many still are. People needed an open ear and school leaders provided that.

“Slow down” – Another buzzword over the last few years has been “mindfulness,” and schools strive to incorporate “cool down” methods for students. However, Covid-19 demanded leaders to look in the mirror and realize that they do not have superpowers and cannot sustain always being hurried and giving all of themselves to everyone else without putting on their own oxygen mask to breathe.

“An attitude of gratitude” – While leading during turbulent times is not the most enjoyable experience day-to-day, it certainly compels a leader to contemplate and discern how fortunate they are to serve people who trust them. Sometimes a smile from a young student, genuine conversation with a colleague, or grateful phone call from a parent makes leaders realize there is such beauty in the field of education.

“We are always moving forward” – No matter what is thrown at us, we will always evolve and move forward! Students, teachers, families, and schools are resilient.

PANDEMIC IMPROVEMENTS

In addition to the many valuable lessons and much wisdom gained, one can only guess what shifts in education during 2020 will stay and which will go. Below are some pandemic improvements that are predicted to stay:

“New” Empathy – People will be more considerate and sensitive to others' situations. While we never know what is going on in someone's life, Covid-19 taught us to not assume negatively, but see the best in others.

Creative Thinking and Problem Solving – If schools can figure out how to distribute hundreds of student devices, teach learners remotely, and a few months later develop plans to have students safely return to school following social distancing guidelines, you bet they will continue to solve other problems as they are presented.

Virtual Meetings/Events – Whether it is a PTA meeting, board of education meeting, back-to-school night, or parent teacher conferences, it is probable there will be more virtual opportunities for parents and community members to participate in events virtually. Many sporting events are now being livestreamed. Communities will likely not want the virtual option to attend events to go away.

Digital Calendaring – Students, teachers, and school leaders started using their digital calendars so often that it is now habitual. While “event overload” can be overwhelming, it will be hard to not use online calendars for invites or events post-Covid-19.

Technology Platforms – Even teachers who were uncomfortable with technology started using different platforms (such as Google Classroom or Seesaw) to streamline the process of sharing files between a student and a teacher. Being able to submit and grade work digitally is here to stay.

More Outdoor Learning – Schools did all they can do to spread students out and get them outdoors whenever possible. Classes enjoyed reading and writing outside or just taking a walk to get some fresh air! Mother Nature is pleased!

Virtual Read Aloud/Assembly – While it is contemporary for a teacher or principal to livestream a read aloud or assembly on Twitter or other platforms, many schools never tried it until the pandemic. There is a lot of convenience to gathering your entire school in an instant.

Online Registration/Ordering – For schools that were still using paper registration or buying school apparel with forms, the transition to online is a no-brainer. Having technology work for you is life changing!

IN CLOSING...

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a troubling reminder of pain and trauma. 2020 was a messy and heart-wrenching year. We are still hurting, and healing is necessary. However, we have learned a lot and have become more empathic humans.

It is my sincere hope that every student, teacher, and school leader make their own lessons learned and pandemic improvement list. Together we can keep making things better!

Thank you to every student, educator, family member, community member, school leader, and of course, the first responders for caring about humankind and striving for progression.

JOHN TROTTA is the assistant principal at Polk Street School in Franklin Square Union Free School District.



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Leading Through Risk



By Brian Rhode and
Kristen C. Wilcox

The Covid-19 pandemic has created a myriad of challenges for school leaders all across New York State and the entire country. The reopening of schools offers another set of challenges. Returning to school and “how it’s always been done” may not be plausible. Successful postpandemic schools require leaders to take on risks as they make changes to their programs, modify options for the delivery of instruction, and run their facilities. It is important to understand how leaders can help their staffs navigate risks as they attempt to rebound from the challenges posed by the pandemic and prepare for whatever the “new normal” will be.

From our research in positive outlier schools in New York State, we offer insight into what leading through risk looks like and explain why approaching the challenges ahead requires a unique set of leadership strategies.

POSITIVE OUTLIERS: WHAT THEY ARE AND HOW WE STUDY THEM

As part of a state-funded research project, NYKids (housed at the University at Albany and guided by an advisory board including SAANYS) works to identify promising practices in positive outlier schools. We find positive outlier schools by identifying schools with trends of unusually better student outcomes taking into account the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and/or socioeconomic characteristics. While these schools are not always the highest performing in the state, they are remarkable for the outcomes they achieve in light of the demographics of the communities they serve.

The positive outlier schools that hit our radar in our latest college and career readiness studies had statistically significant above-predicted graduation rates for their students in comparison to other schools in the state. More about how these schools are identified can be found on our website at <https://ny-kids.org/>. The positive outlier school we highlight in this article is one of seven schools we investigated in our college and career readiness study, and it shared several common traits with other positive outliers in terms of leading through risk. Using a study design that included data collection on the school site, our team delved into the ways leaders in this school sought to prepare their students for college or career.

TACKLING CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS IN A RURAL COMMUNITY

The positive outlier school we highlight in this article is one of seven schools we investigated in our college and career readiness study, and it shared several common traits with other positive outliers in terms of leading through risk. Alfred-Almond Junior-Senior High School is a sprawling brick structure located along County

Route 21 in the southern tier of New York. Built in the 1930s, the school, as well as Alfred-Almond Central School District, is located between the towns of Alfred and Almond. The area that is home to Alfred-Almond Junior-Senior High School is a mixed rural community with one side being in close proximity to Alfred University and Alfred State College. This rural community has changed over the years as evidenced by increasing student transiency as well as more students growing up in poverty. Both of these shifts, along with other changes in the Alfred-Almond community, required leaders to be strategic about what to change as well as how to lead staff through the risks inherent when attempting to innovate.

CULTIVATING THE SEEDS OF INNOVATION IN THE FACE OF CHANGE

Overall, we found that leaders in the positive outlier schools we studied encourage faculty to take risks by first ensuring that they can trust that leaders have their backs when they are faced with tackling new challenges in innovative ways. In our prior research, we described how trust and reassuring communications are mutually constitutive. Leaders in positive outlier schools encourage trust to set the stage for risk-taking so improvements and innovations can happen within and across schools in a district (Lawson et al., 2017). Resting on a foundation of trust and reassuring communications, positive outlier school leaders poured resources and energy into offering rich, instructionally focused professional learning opportunities that develop individual and collective expertise and knowledge. At Alfred-Almond this was exemplified in the process used to enhance technology integration, which prepared them to be ahead of the pandemic curve.

INSTRUCTIONALLY FOCUSED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

According to NYKids research (Zuckerman et al., 2017) as well as that of others (Cobb et al., 2020), leaders play a pivotal role in helping frontline teaching staff take risks by orchestrating instructionally focused learning

opportunities that develop individual and collective expertise and knowledge. This expertise and knowledge then paves the way for staff to continually improve practice and spread those practices. This was exemplified at Alfred-Almond when leaders and teachers created a system for prioritizing and sharing knowledge about technology integration that in turn helped teachers develop the confidence they needed to pursue individual applications of technology in their classrooms while still being aligned with school and district goals and priorities.

Our research points to a culture at Alfred-Almond where sharing of professional expertise and knowledge was expected and prioritized. These values and commitments were apparent in their systems for instructional improvement that included a group known as “the breakfast club,” which was formally included in their district technology plan (Alfred-Almond Central School, 2021). This group was comprised of teachers and the district technology coordinator, who met once a month before school to discuss new technologies and how they might be applied to meet different student needs. This “club” functioned to help prime the teaching staff for risk-taking by creating an environment for shared understanding about the why behind using different technologies.

Part of the breakfast club work involved systematically exploring many different technologies, tools, and programs, and then only selecting those that they felt would benefit the staff and students the most. According to the district technology coordinator, “Every single program or idea we pilot through teachers K-12 and then they pilot for a certain amount of time...So, we have tried and true data from the classroom with students and teachers, and then, at that point, we recommend [the program or idea] to the administration.” This process allows the group to relay only the most effective programs, technologies, and ideas to other staff. The technology coordinator explained that they do not pass along as much as 75 percent of the products they pilot. This method of being selective with technology recommendations based upon the input of teachers in the group

helps ease the stress around the risks entailed with innovating. As the technology coordinator explained, “It’s so important to empower the teachers to have say, so it starts with the teachers having say in what happens [to] them, because they’re the experts.” Creating a sense of buy-in for teachers to adopt and use a new program or technology, however, is only one part of their formula for leading through risk.

This system of using a teacher-led group to pilot and filter technologies before adopting and spreading their use serves a second valuable, and perhaps more important, purpose. The staff members who pilot technologies become the local experts responsible for turnkey trainings to the rest of the staff. Since these teachers represent other frontline professionals, they diffuse the pressure that might come from teachers taking direction directly from an administrator and replace that potential stress with a more collegial peer-to-peer learning experience. As one district leader at Alfred-Almond put it, “But we have, you know, a

turnkey person who’s the go-to if you want some great ideas, and she’s willing to do that. She’s not me, she’s not administration, she’s a teacher....”

LEADING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

As we highlighted here, systems for instructionally focused professional learning foster advantageous risk-taking and contribute to what Bandura (1993), among others, calls collective efficacy. Collective efficacy serves to strengthen teachers’ adaptive potentials by galvanizing them as central players in rectifying program weak spots and innovating their practice. Beyond this is the flywheel effect (Collins, 2019) where momentum to take up new, innovative practices builds upon itself.

This article highlights only one positive outlier school, but draws attention to leadership practices we found among many positive outliers. What they show us are specific strategies leaders can use to pave a pathway through the various challenges

and forced changes the Covid-19 pandemic has prompted. As school leaders prepare for postpandemic learning, keeping these lessons about leading through risk are central to exploring the opportunity to retool and rebuild better.

BRIAN RHODE is the assistant principal at Algonquin Middle School in Averill Park Central School District.

KRISTEN C. WILCOX is an associate professor at the University at Albany School of Education, and NYKids research and development director.

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Integrating Workforce with Hands-on Teaching



By Lisa Meade
Terry Wheeler
Kait Warren
Kathy Juckett

Granville Junior/Senior High School is a rural school situated in the town of Granville, New York, on the border with Vermont. It enrolls students from the adjoining towns of Hartford, Hebron, Whitehall, and Hampton, as well as some students from bordering Vermont towns such as Pawlet, West Pawlet, and Wells. The JSHS (junior/senior high school) serves students in grades 7-12. The school district has a total population of about 5,000. Residents hold jobs in business and small industry, agriculture, the slate industry, and the New York State Department of Corrections.

Well within view of our junior/senior high school is one of our larger industry employers, Telescope Casual Furniture. Telescope has remained a remarkably successful family-owned business currently managed by the fourth and fifth generations, and headed by Kathy Juckett. More than 300 employees maintain a close working relationship with the Vanderminden family and management team. Much of Telescope’s success is owed to the talented and skilled workforce that takes pride in their craftsmanship, and the professional sales force who work tirelessly to ensure every customer’s expectations are exceeded by their Telescope experience.

Prior to the Covid pandemic, our school, Granville JSHS, began conversations with Telescope about how we could increase partnerships between the school and company. The company has always been a benefactor to the district. They provided an outdoor seating area for the JSHS as well as monetary donations to projects when requested. We began with tours attended by JSHS principal Lisa Meade, superintendent Tom McGurl, business teacher Terry Wheeler, Telescope marketing manager Kait Warren, and Telescope CEO Kathy Juckett. This group literally dreamed of a program that would allow our students to learn on-site through a business elective offered by JSHS. At first, we thought it might be a way to engage some of our most disengaged students. (We would later learn that the elective appealed to all kinds of learners at JSHS.) We spent a year meeting and discussing curriculum outlines and how those outlines translated to the workplace.

It was designed as a one-credit course. Students would work on-site at Telescope with Mr. Wheeler for half a year for two periods per day to learn employability skills and specific job skills in different areas of Telescope. Students would complete mini-units in many areas including research and development, information technology, manufacturing, maintenance, and marketing. They would also learn and complete certain safety and certification requirements.

Yet, like all of the other schools

around New York State, school was drastically impacted beginning in March 2020 with the start of the Covid pandemic. We had to hit pause on our planning but agreed to revisit it in the second semester of the 2020-2021 school year. In early winter of 2021, we met again as a planning group and decided that we would try our hardest to overcome the barriers Covid was presenting to us and still offer the course. We worked out schedules for students and followed the strict Covid protocols already in place at Telescope. What we feared couldn’t get off the ground most certainly did!

TEACHER PERSPECTIVE

As we began designing this program, we knew that we had to fulfill the needs and expectations of our attending students, as well as the needs and expectations of the Telescope administration. We also knew that in order to achieve this, we would have to incorporate the products, processes, and manufacturing philosophy of Telescope for everyone to receive the maximum benefit. As the curriculum started to develop, we included soft skills or “21st century” skill lessons about designing the life that you want, preparing for the working world, accessing resources for finding jobs, developing work skills and work ethics, learning proper workplace behavior, developing leadership skills, and increasing your value as an employee. We also developed some Telescope-specific lessons that deal with the history of the company, types of manufacturing (including the lean manufacturing concept that Telescope employs), and the evolution of their product lines. Still, it became very apparent that the best method of achieving everyone’s goals was a program of total immer-

sion. These students were best suited to this type of hands-on learning experience, while Telescope needed these students to walk out of this class with some essential manufacturing skills. Once we got the “all clear” from our school administration and everyone’s insurance concerns out of the way, the magic began to happen. The students were most content when they were learning, working on machines, and understanding the relevance of what they were learning. All of this I expected, but what I did not expect was the enthusiasm of the Telescope employees. They jumped in, heart and soul, to help train, encourage, and even mentor these young minds. It has been very gratifying to see this program come to life and to see it become an experience that will stay with a lot of people for a very long time. We are not just educating our students for more school, we are educating them for a life of their choosing. Many of these young people will come out of this program with a much keener idea about what they would like to do with their lives, whether that be trade school, college, the military, or going directly into the working world. Now they have a much better set of tools to make these life-changing decisions.

TELESCOPE PERSPECTIVE

The Telescope family is well seasoned after 118 years of business to understand that college is not the career path for all. The company has a strong belief that skilled trade craftsmen are just as valuable. Many young people hired in recent years are not able to complete certain tasks such as signing their name on legal documents, reading a tape measure, identifying hand tools by name, or using said hand/power tools. Many of these tasks are common in the household and in many trade applications. Plans are in place to teach these skills throughout the introductory course at Telescope.

Since Telescope is very rural-ly located, they are very vertically integrated. They have their own maintenance team, full of plumbers, welders, carpenters, electricians, millwrights, and mechanics, along



with a full tool shop where they build the majority of their own dies and machinery used to produce their line of outdoor furniture. When they first met with the school, they almost felt overwhelmed because they knew that the unique learning opportunities under their roof for students would be never-ending! Once the planning process began, it was clear that this program was going to be an unforgettable experience for the students, employees, and managing partners.

After months of collaboration, Telescope and their partners at the Granville JSHS had outlined an all-encompassing introductory class for the students. The students are currently engaging in a two-day introduction to every department. They have already completed installments in the sewing department, where the kids learned to sew their own throw pillow, assemble an eight-panel umbrella on a frame, and operate a heat-sealing machine. Recently, the groups of students have moved into the metal fabrication department where they've learned to punch metal and bend aluminum parts, all with a close eye on accuracy and producing quality materials. Very soon, the students will begin their introductory rounds with the polymer department, learning about powder coating and final assembly. Later, the students will take deep dives into an area of interest from one of the introductory departments. Each student is working closely with seasoned employees from each area not only to get the best experience from a training point of view, but also to gain an incredibly realistic working experience.

When the company first introduced this program to their employees, they were taken back by the reaction! The response was overwhelmingly positive. Many reached out to say how much they wish their high school had had something like this to offer when they were students themselves. A few employees reached out to say that they chose the military because there were no other options for them after high school and that their life path could have been very different if they'd had

other trade-like experience before graduation. It was exciting to see such a positive response, but also emotional to hear their stories. Many of the management staff have witnessed the employees with the students, and it's hard to tell which party is more excited and enthusiastic! The students are loving the hands-on work and real-life experiences, while the employees are showing great pride in their work with the way they carefully teach the students.

The company is grateful to the Granville School for bringing forward this opportunity and helping to bring Telescope's brainstorming efforts to life. The Granville school's staff and administrators are a great group of forward-thinking team members who are very clearly striving every day to provide better opportunities for the local, soon-to-be adults. The program has tremendous room for growth and further concentration in specific departments and skills.

DISTRICT PERSPECTIVE

This partnership, though only in its infancy, has been on the mind of the superintendent since arriving in Granville four years ago. Very early on, Mrs. Juckett and Mr. McGurl discussed how their two organizations could establish a work-based learning program to benefit students as they began to look at what their futures hold. Telescope is an amazing company and true asset to our community. Yet, for some reason, it has been a largely untapped resource. The management team at Telescope has been fantastic to work with. The response to this program in our school, the community, and at the company has been extremely positive. Hands-on industrial training, under the tutelage of seasoned craftsmen, is a benefit that would be the envy of many. This program has an appeal and value for students who are interested in an industrial career, as well as for students who are simply looking to investigate their career options in a more formal manner. We can only hope that we can continue this partnership with Telescope and

perhaps other business entities within our community.

IN THE END

In the end, we've already realized that even the obstacles presented by a pandemic can be overcome. It would have been easier to keep this "plan" as a someday item, but in many ways the disconnectedness between learning and students over the last, pandemic-impacted year created an urgency for us to see it through. The ideas for expanding the project include a summer internship program for students at Telescope and expanding the number of students involved. We've all heard time and time again that "it takes a village to raise a child..." and this project is a perfect example of that adage. Granville's students in the Telescope laboratory classroom are the grateful beneficiaries of Telescope's willingness to be part of a much-needed solution within our school. The lessons our students will learn in this course will impact their school experience in many ways, some of them yet to be measured or quantified.

TERRY WHEELER is a business teacher at Granville Junior/Senior High School.

KAIT WARREN is the marketing manager at Telescope Casual.

KATHY JUCKETT is the chief executive officer at Telescope Casual.

LISA MEADE is the principal at Granville Junior/Senior High School.

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At Pavilion School...

“Failure Is Not an Option”



By Charles Martelle

I am a fan of voyager films of the sea and space. I love those moments when the crew is faced with a seemingly insurmountable problem and they have to innovate with scarce resources to overcome the challenge. Most of you may recall *Apollo 13* when Ed Harris says, “Failure is not an option,” or perhaps you remember the German classic, *Das Boot*, and the scene when they are stuck at the bottom of the sea. These examples show the indomitable spirit of humanity and let us see our best side, when leadership and teamwork prevail.

There are also examples of mutiny and human depravity as in *Sea Wolf* or *The Terror* when poor leadership and human weakness show the dark side of human nature. The pandemic dealt us a formidable challenge, and there is ample evidence in which individuals and groups have risen to the occasion or succumbed to dysfunction. At our small rural school in Pavilion, New York, our community, teachers, and staff have risen to the occasion. We vastly expanded our technology capabilities, we have made more connections with our community, we have become experts at scheduling puzzles, and our students have cooperated with us at each step; however, our greatest accomplishment this year has been the renewed spirit of teamwork and collaboration among our staff.

Like all other schools, we have had to deal with closing school and reopening in various forms. Additionally, over the past month we have planned and implemented a return to an in-person, four-day week schedule. Within that time, we have had to develop a way to teach kids when they are fully remote, when they are hybrid, when some are remote and some are hybrid, and all sorts of other complications of which you are probably all aware. Each time someone in a meeting lays out a significant challenge, I respond, "We dealt with the shutdown, we can figure this out." And then we do. Along the way the spirit of innovation just became the norm. Our teachers scour their schedules looking for windows of opportunity to better serve our students. Committee meetings are alive with discussions, and creative ideas have become welcome. In each case we develop new ways to handle these issues, we test them, talk to everyone involved, and then implement them.

I will share a small sample of the spirit that has infected our staff while planning to move to a four-day week in-person model.

- Our agriculture teacher came up with an idea to utilize a little used contractual perk to overcome a supervisory issue.
- Our chorus teacher spent a lot of time measuring out 12-foot web networks on the floor so that she could maximize our space to allow for more chorus students. She also used some creative scheduling methods so students could attend chorus more often.
- Many teachers found ways to rearrange the desks in their rooms to allow for a few more students to fit with social distancing.
- The head of our maintenance department told our entire reopening committee that they were doing a wonderful job. He tells us repeatedly, when facing problems, "We'll make it work."
- In order to reduce class sizes, our special education teachers and general education teachers have worked out scheduling arrangements and split classrooms.
- Our two counselors were able to create a new lunch period so that we could reduce our numbers in each lunch.

Over the course of this year, my principal has made it a point of policy to personally reach out to teachers or others impacted by changes. Through our committee work, conversations, and impromptu meetings, we have made a lot of accommodations to our plans that might not have been significant, but they reflected the wishes of certain individuals or groups. At times,

these add work or other burdens; however, so long as they did not disrupt instruction or diminish our overall goals, we accommodated. As a result of this leadership style, our teachers and staff believe that if they come up with good ideas, the ideas will be heard and enacted if possible. This authoritative leadership style expanded the creative energies of our staff to examine each possible change and offer ideas and opportunities that would not have otherwise been acted upon.

This is the phoenix out of the ashes that we must bring forward and utilize in the years to come. When we face problems unselfishly, honestly, and with the sincere desire to resolve them, we do more than fix the issue of the moment. We create a culture that will carry on that process within each team and committee. Individuals will take it upon themselves to seek out new and better ways to do things and then share that with the group. Innovation will continue to come from unexpected sources and hopefully this will spread to our students.

CHARLES MARTELLE is the assistant principal at Pavilion Middle/High School.



together

Addressing Trauma in School:

A Leadership Path



By Susanna Hobrath

Most of our students and staff have experienced some level of trauma through the pandemic, ranging from not seeing friends and frustration with virtual learning, to uncertainty about the virus or loss of a loved one. During these challenging times, many students are returning to the classroom with new or existing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). They may also have pandemic-related trauma that falls outside the current ACE categories. Administrators need a way forward to help staff and students navigate the upcoming school year.

The leadership practices of Leader in Me create learning environments that empower students to develop the skills they need to build resilience and thrive.

EFFECTIVE TRAUMA-INFORMED INSTRUCTION

Students who have experienced trauma need structure and predictability. Leader in Me schools strive to create an environment that is safe, nurturing, and reliably positive. A key goal is to create a physical and social emotional environment where the worth and potential of every student are affirmed. Educators create a school day that begins with a morning meeting, allowing students to check in and set a focus for the day, and ends with a recap of the day’s events so that students leave with a feeling of accomplishment. When their days follow a rhythm, some of the stress of uncertainty is taken away from students.

Another component of Leader in Me schools that goes a long way to reduce the effects of trauma is a focus on social emotional learning. Using *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* as the foundation, students are taught skills to achieve both personal and interpersonal success. These lessons are taught from kindergarten through high school, allowing students to internalize the skills necessary to be the leader of their lives. Many trauma-impacted students never hear this message. Encountering adults and students who hold the paradigm “Everyone can be a leader” brings hope to students.

Partnering with the community is also important. Reaching out beyond the school walls is crucial to bringing services and opportunities to students at risk. Leader in Me schools invite community members to join in their learning journey so that students can share their experiences as leaders, and students also go out into the community to gain new perspectives and leadership opportunities. This intentional

expansion of the school community allows students to feel a sense of belonging in more parts of their world.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS WHERE POSITIVE EXPERIENCES ACCUMULATE

Leader in Me schools operate from a core of highly effective paradigms because the way educators see the world directly affects their students’ outcomes. When facing the challenges of educating students with ACEs and additional trauma, a paradigm shift is necessary. These paradigms guide decisions and are used to create systems and structures that allow all students to be successful, experience school in a positive way, and grow as leaders in their school and community.

Positive experiences are like currency, and they add up like deposits in the bank. Emotional bank account (EBA) systems are a feature of many Leader in Me schools. The entire school community is encouraged to consider their actions as either a deposit or withdrawal to others, and the EBA system allows everyone to keep their bank account balance high. Students affected by trauma are suffering from a deficit of positive experiences. Regular and consistent deposits that are meaningful to the student can turn a negative balance into a positive one. Making deposits for others and practicing gratitude can also allow trauma-affected students to see their own worth and potential.

Students who have experienced trauma often have behavior issues in school. Taking a different approach to discipline can turn a negative experience into a positive one. It is important for educators to understand that behavior is communication. The question shifts from “What have you done?” to “What has happened to you, and how can I help?” In a Leader in Me school, all students know that they are loved and supported. Educators use Habit 5: Seek first to understand,

then to be understood, as they practice empathic listening with students. Hearing the student’s side of the story in a nonjudgmental way and listening without interrupting allows students to feel valued and understood, rather than compounding the trauma they have already experienced.

EMPOWERMENT OF STUDENTS WHO FACE ACES TO DEVELOP THE SKILLS NEEDED TO THRIVE

Teaching leadership and life skills is not enough — students need the chance to practice those skills. Leadership roles and events give these much-needed opportunities to students. In a Leader in Me school, classroom, schoolwide, and community leadership events engage students’ voices in planning, leading, and reflecting on events. A system of leadership events is in place to provide students with consistent opportunities to develop, practice, and demonstrate leadership skills, as well as to celebrate their accomplishments and acknowledge their progress. When students hold classroom and schoolwide leadership roles, they are not only developing their leadership skills, they are more motivated to come to school and become more engaged in learning.

An important step in developing leadership and life skills is for students to take charge of their own learning. Student-led achievement allows students to gain the skills necessary to thrive as a self-directed learner. Leader in Me empowers students with the mindsets, skills, and supportive environment they need to lead their academic achievement. Students lead their own parent teacher conferences, track their progress and achievements in a leadership portfolio, and set wildly important goals. When students understand how to set themselves up for academic success, they can apply those skills to any area of their life and begin to mitigate the effects of trauma.

Paradigm of Leadership		Paradigm of Potential		Paradigm of Change		Paradigm of Motivation		Paradigm of Education	
NOT THIS	BUT THIS	NOT THIS	BUT THIS	NOT THIS	BUT THIS	NOT THIS	BUT THIS	NOT THIS	BUT THIS
Leadership is for the few.	Everyone can be a leader.	A few people are gifted.	Everyone has genius.	To improve schools the system needs to change first.	Change starts with me.	Direct and control student learning.	Empower students to lead their own learning.	Educators focus solely on academic achievement.	Educators and families partner to develop the whole person.

MUTUAL SUPPORT, HIGH TRUST, AND STAFF MENTAL WELLNESS

Collaboration among educators is a crucial step to ensuring student success. Many schools had TBTs, PLTs, and other meetings in place before the pandemic. Keeping or creating these collaborative times will be even more important when students return in the fall. Systems and structures that support students with ACEs and additional trauma cannot be created without the input and support of families, educators, and staff from across the school. Collaborative planning time allows educators to set academic and behavior goals, analyze data, and share strategies and supports that benefit everyone.

Leader in Me schools also recognize that a high-trust culture is necessary for change and growth. Staff begin by modeling high-trust behaviors in their interactions and intentionally build a trusting culture in their classrooms and across all areas of the school. Students who have experienced trauma

may have lost trust in adults and other students. Through direct instruction about what trust looks like, sounds like, and feels like, students can begin to develop trust in their school community and learn behaviors that create trusting relationships with others. As Dr. Stephen Covey said, “You cannot talk your way out of a problem you’ve behaved your way into.”

Finally, staff in a Leader in Me building live and model the seven habits. This makes staff mental wellness a priority, and staff regularly engage in learning and activities designed to help them apply the habits to their own lives. Highly effective practices and paradigms are a common language allowing staff and leadership to co-create systems that help everyone to balance their work and personal lives and gain personal and interpersonal success.

A PATH FORWARD

While it is uncertain what the long-term effects of remote learning, school closures, and the trauma of living through a pandemic school year will be on students, it is certain that the students who return in the fall will not be the same – and neither will the educators who welcome them back. Teachers always have important work to do, but the coming school year will be one of the most important ever. Creating a leadership school using Leader in Me practices ensures that students will be returning to a place where they are valued, cared for, and set up for success.

SUSANNA HOBRATH is a Leader in Me coach and consultant for Franklin Covey Education.

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