

Up All Night: Education and the “New Normal”

There is a famous picture of a heart surgeon, sitting beside his patient after surgery. The operating room is a mess, medical supplies are everywhere, a colleague is seen asleep in the corner of the room, and the surgeon is clearly so exhausted he cannot stand. But the patient is alive and recovering.

Over the last few months, school districts across the nation have gone through a similar exhausting experience. We have given our all, made the improbable possible, and continue to embrace remote learning to serve our students each day. Our districts are operational, and our students are learning. Now, just like the patient after surgery, we must look to recovery with clearly articulated plans, processes, and protocols for our schools in a post-pandemic educational world.

The schoolhouse plays a vital role in the daily lives of students and school community members. That role has never been clearer. Author Simon Sinek asked, *“How will we continue to do what we do in a different world?”* As educators, we embrace this shifting “new normal” as we continue to serve our communities. We have been hindered in that process by the ongoing need to sort through changing guidance and come to terms with numerous unknowns while providing continuity of school operations. That continuity is critical for district and school leaders.

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The COVID-19 pandemic may usher in some degree of educational change, but one thing is clear—the one true test of leadership is our ability to meet the academic, emotional and basic needs of our students as this different world unfolds around us.

It is the next step in the process that keeps school leaders up at night. Moving our districts forward in uncertain times with limited guidance has the potential to create more harm than good, and endangers the recovery of the patient, our schools. Clear guidance, rooted in science and data, is needed. Health and education experts must outline specific plans and protocols, with multiple pathways leading to the opening of our schools. Modernization of our public schools, to provide normalcy in an abnormal situation, should be an outgrowth of that process.

We believe that achieving excellence in three key-areas will allow our schools to thrive during this crisis. Those areas are: continuance of operations, assessment and mitigation of current and post COVID-19 trauma, and planning for the reopening of schools.

Planning for Continuing Operations

We need to embrace ongoing communication strategies that provide outreach to all constituents. Establishing a sense of calm is critical. Using social media is one powerful way of doing this, however districts should also explore using other means of regular communication including targeted phone calls, individual remote meetings and focus groups, as well as online platforms and programs for specific assistance. The deployment of specialized staff to provide direct outreach to students and families is critical. Student assistance counselors, school nurses, specialized interventionists, and counselors should all have clearly defined roles in building and district communication protocols.

Recognizing that elements of the pandemic will change, leaders should incorporate processes into their short- and long-term planning that allow for the collaborative assessment and refinement of existing plans. Several states, such as Maryland and Massachusetts, have developed compelling operational frameworks to lean on. Developing plans that take varied student needs into account is critical. Building and maintaining purposeful feedback loops through student virtual focus groups, parent and staff surveys, and town hall, style question- and-answer sessions is critical. Utilizing information gleaned from those sources in planning sessions will contribute to the continual upgrading and refinement of a district’s plan to educate, feed and serve the social and emotional needs of all students.

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Planning for continued operations of the school district must include contingencies for the extension of remote learning in the fall.

This may require critical staff reallocation and the immediate repurposing of resources to ensure that remote learning takes place later. Staff, including security, secretarial, non-core instructional, and others that may be utilized differently within schools to meet student needs. Developing master schedules that incorporate the potential for split or altered sessions and account for the absence of students and staff who may be at high risk or fearful to return are also critical planning components. These scheduling changes will also necessitate a closer examination of transportation and meal needs.

Leaders must build iterative processes into their planning that allow for the ongoing refinement of operational actions that may need to be changed or altered with little or no warning. These practices may be reflected in policy and should assume alterations to grading policies, meeting procedures, curricular processes and personnel recruitment and retention. Given the financial uncertainties wrought by the pandemic, school leaders must examine budgets critically and identify essential expenditures while assuming the possibility of sharp budget reductions.

Pandemic & Post Pandemic Trauma - Students & Adults

There is little doubt that when we return from virtual/remote learning, school districts will need to provide a broad range of mental health, medical (nursing), and social/emotional resources for our students, staff, and school community. We will need to allocate resources to ensure that we have the training, personnel, programming, and outreach services necessary to meet the needs of the many students who have experienced some form of emotional trauma during the global public health pandemic.

Throughout the global health pandemic many of our students have been exposed to traumas including the loss of a family member or friend, isolation, depression, food insecurity, loss of parental employment, utilization of illegal substances, housing instability, and mental or physical abuse. Staff members may also have experienced traumatic stress. To deal with those realities, districts must be governed by strategies grounded in Trauma Informed Care and ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences). School leaders will have to do this in a time of economic downturn and decreasing funding for schools. The funding question is critical and planning now to address such diverse mental health needs is of critical importance.

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Virtual crisis counseling will be necessary in the short and near term. Our return to in-person instruction is months away. We will need to develop ways of supporting families during the summer, as they experience food insecurity, academic regression, and a lack of access to technology, and counseling services. A return in the Fall 2020 is a 50/50 proposition at best. Therefore, districts will need to be prepared for stops and starts due to resurgences in the virus. Hybrid models of instruction will be necessary as many families may choose not to return their children to public school until the public health crisis has resolved. As such, we must emphasize flexibility and agility in our thinking, work to strengthen school and home bonds, increase virtual training and online resources, and focus on staff wellness. We must expand our collective definition of what it means to provide continuity of care.

School districts must also recognize the intersections of trauma and mental health concerns. Psychiatrist/educator Silvana Galderisi recognized this when she wrote, *“Mental health is a dynamic state of internal equilibrium which enables individuals use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society. Basic cognitive and social skills; ability to recognize, express and modulate one's own emotions, as well as empathize with others; flexibility and ability to cope with adverse life events and function in social roles; and harmonious relationship between body*



and mind represent important components of mental health which contribute, to varying degrees, to the state of internal equilibrium.”

The frightening reality for schools is that no one is immune to student mental health crises, including suicide. As the current health emergency becomes more dire and families’ financial circumstances worsen, schools must provide a network of support for our students.

We will need to support families in their efforts to gain access to resources that include but are not limited to: water, food, clothing, mental health services, and child care. Those families may also need IT support, hygiene resources, grief support, financial assistance, help navigating mental health services, and access to community housing and transportation assistance. To do this, we must continue to foster partnerships with the greater community that supports our students, families, and professionals. We must strengthen families by offering access to a network of organizations and partners that are equipped to assist with various phases of crisis response.

The potential for transformative change begins with the recognition that schools are more than academic institutions. Our students need to know how much we care about them and want to ensure their full development. Our efforts must always be grounded in the development of the whole child, because our children are depending on us.

Opening of the new school year:

On March 16, 2020, New Jersey Governor Murphy issued an executive order closing all schools beginning Wednesday, March 18th. He stated, *“While this closure will be for at least two weeks, they will remain closed until such time as it is deemed by health officials to be safe for them to reopen”*. Now, in May we are officially closed for the rest of this school year. As a result, our focus has shifted to finishing this year virtually and figuring out what we need to do to reopen in September.

The reopening of schools should come with the same fanfare as any start of a new school year. The joy of seeing our students back in our schools and the satisfaction of hearing them learn and play cannot be de-emphasized. The start of every school year is joyous, but the next one will be very different.

The date of school closure in New Jersey and across the country should be etched in the history of education. We have never made such an enormous effort in such a short period of time. The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the ability of school districts across this nation to deliver learning to our students in a different way, but the schools we return to must be different. We cannot go backward from this experience. We must use the lessons learned from it to adapt our educational system for a post-pandemic world.



To continue traditional education in our schools we will need protocols, procedures, and processes that provide a healthy environment for those who learn, work and visit our buildings. Education is a social experience that requires some amount of personal interaction. Finding the path back to face-to-face learning will require data-driven decision making and collaboration with health and education officials.

However, we must also realize that our students, teachers and educational institutions can also thrive while utilizing some aspects of remote learning. The key is the word “some”. Education is more than “ABC’s and 1 2 3’s”, it is also about social-emotional learning, personal contact, and learning to interact with others. We have an opportunity now to develop new remote learning and instructional opportunities outside of the classroom that are as valuable as the classroom

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experience. For decades we have been told that schools were “not like the real world.” Tell that to the children and their parents sitting at home attempting to do schoolwork and jobs on their devices. Education has entered the real world. There is opportunity to advance strategies that continue to embrace the real world while knocking down many of the proverbial walls that fail to connect all students to powerful learning.

Instead, let’s discuss the issues and concerns that surround the modernizing of education. Some of the most pressing of those include:

EQUITY | This issue is perennial in education. As we move forward, we must address equity of quality instruction, equity of resources, equity of opportunity, etc Why shouldn’t every student have a laptop or Chromebook and Internet access as standard-issue tools of learning? Why can’t internet providers ensure that students in every community have access to the free Wi-Fi that allows them to learn and collaborate?

RELEVANCE | Learning--in person and remote-- needs to be relevant, enabling students to make connections to learning, work and experiences outside school walls. A renewed focus on relevance will help answer many basic questions. Can schools connect to the outside world, experts in various fields, and industry leaders? Can connections with other students and schools bring increased relevance to student learning? Can ideas that are relevant right now remain so in a post-pandemic world?

DEVELOPMENTAL APPROPRIATENESS | Remote learning is not for all grade levels, all the time, or for students who may need additional support. Experts in learning theories and the developmental readiness of children need to work with classroom educators to determine what is and is not achievable in a remote environment. How do we maximize learning between the two environments? Is there an age or grade level where remote instruction can or should start?



FAMILY STRUCTURE | Changing the educational system will also change the family structure, and needs to be addressed, along with the topic of developmental appropriateness. How will families handle changes in traditional education and can they adjust to those changes? What impact will proper supervision of students have on the family?

Reopening our schools will present many challenges. Some of those challenges involve traditional summer practices and experiences, while others are new to the times we live in. Just as the patient mentioned at the beginning of this essay was on the road to recover, so our schools are on the same road. Just as the patient hopes that he will be better after the surgery, and able to start on the next chapter of his life, we too hope our schools are on the road to recovery. We are anxious to return to our educational lives, and in the process be able to do things we were never able to do before.

Clearly we will see teaching in new light as we go forward, and our current awareness will be laid bare in that light. We need to come together and collaborate to find the best answers to the many questions we will face in the coming days, weeks, months and years.

During this pandemic many educational leaders have banded together to share, ideas and think through the chaos collectively. Our group of New Jersey superintendents has done that--coming together to collaborate and address critical issues that we face all who learn and work in our schools. Fans of *Game of Thrones* understand the axiom *Winter is Coming*. For schools and school leaders, we know as we head toward June, *Summer is Coming*, and we must be prepared to find new ways to meet the needs of all learners. Join us on June 4 as we host the first in a series of Virtual Town Halls devoted to building upon our collective capacity to serve students, staff, and our communities. Please contact us at Info@RestartED.org for more information.

