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A one-stop shop for navigating back to school

COVID-19 has school district leaders across the country working to figure out how to reopen for the coming academic year.

Will students attend in person, remotely, or in some hybrid fashion? How will schools support students with special needs and those with no or limited internet access at home? How can schools combat the “COVID slide”?

The DA staff has been focusing on these and other pressing questions for months, talking to district leaders and other education experts to highlight ideas and solutions for reopening.

A special section of our website, [DAmag.me/coronavirus](https://www.districtadministration.com/DAmag.me/coronavirus), is your one-stop resource center for all of this content.

I hope you find it useful and we welcome your feedback and coverage ideas.

—Eric Weiss, executive editor

Reasons to visit DistrictAdministration.com

Why relationships can prevent a lost school year

The pandemic and online learning have shown that all schools should become 1-to-1—not just with computers, but also for cementing student-teacher relationships, one advocate says.

[DAmag.me/lost](https://www.districtadministration.com/DAmag.me/lost)



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Educators can help dismantle systemic racism

Teachers can foster anti-racism practices in schools and build equity by developing students’ identity, skills, intellect and criticality.

[DAmag.me/dismantle](https://www.districtadministration.com/DAmag.me/dismantle)

COVID and online learning: Lessons learned in Florida

Teachers should hold students to high academic standards but offer some flexibility for families contending with the health and financial impacts of the coronavirus.

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DA Events by color

While reading this issue, look for the colors within individual articles to indicate a related DA event that you may want to attend, as well as the target audience.

- **Superintendents Summit**
current superintendents
- **Superintendents Academy**
aspiring superintendents
- **Academic Leadership Summit**
chief academic officers; executive directors/assistant superintendents of curriculum, teaching and learning, and innovation; directors of curriculum, deputy superintendents
- **Technology Leadership Summit**
chief information officers, district technology leaders
- **Technology Leadership Academy**
chief information officers (CIOs), aspiring CIOs, technology leaders and leadership teams
- **Future of Education Technology Conference**
technologists as well as administrators educators with interest in technology
- **Academic Esports Conference & Expo**
academic, technology and athletic leaders

Formula for a school district turnaround

Superintendent Ken Hamilton and his team in Mount Vernon, New York, have built three themed high schools, replaced middle schools with neighborhood schools, and added on-site health care.

[DAmag.me/mtvernon](https://www.districtadministration.com/DAmag.me/mtvernon)

New era of equity

Ithaca City School District Superintendent Luvelle Brown sees a new way forward for all students—if education leaders can resist a ‘return to normal.’

[DAmag.me/luelle](https://www.districtadministration.com/DAmag.me/luelle)



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Mark Laurrie
Superintendent
Niagara Falls School District

Niagara Falls City School District and UnitedHealthcare: A Group Medicare Advantage plan that keeps working for retirees, year after year.

Please tell us about your role as superintendent, and how that relates to choosing group plans for your employees.

Mark Laurrie (ML): I'm responsible for making recommendations on any outlay of money in any way, shape or form. And since health care benefits for retirees are a huge part of our \$150M budget, it's something I'm very involved with. I rely on my knowledgeable team to make recommendations to me, based on their extensive research. I'll ask them a series of questions before I'm fully comfortable, because it's my responsibility to bring their suggestions to the board of education.

It's your job to answer for how the Niagara Falls City School District allocates funds?

ML: Yes, I answer for the decision to engage UnitedHealthcare. I trust my team, number 1, because they're good at this. And number 2, I will ultimately question them up and down until they satisfy my concerns. It's good that I'm not the most knowledgeable health care person, because I can ask questions that users will ask, before we take it to the board. This is a well-scrutinized decision, vetted by multiple parties who know what they're talking about.

What are some of your biggest priorities when it comes to choosing retiree health care?

ML: Because our contracts are so rich in the area of benefits, even when our members retire, they're able to keep a very rich benefit package. The benefits need to be very particular, very precise, very clearly explained, very much in line with what they were promised as employees under their contractual agreement. [And in about 2015,] this group called UnitedHealthcare came to us. From the onset, UnitedHealthcare was a match made in heaven for what we were dealing with from the perspective of the retiree and the district.

What made you decide to switch to UnitedHealthcare's Group Advantage Medicare plan?

ML: It started with UnitedHealthcare's plan, which felt directly in line with what the retirees were entitled to. It was followed by extraordinary customer service—which retirees need more than ever. Added to that was a communication system to the district that made audits, transactions and problems minimal, seamless—and then go away. In my role as a superintendent, in the course of a day, there are nearly 100 things I'm thinking about. The benefits for retirees and UnitedHealthcare usually fall between 98 and 99 on my worry list. Really. From my position, it's been one of the easiest things to manage.

Do you feel that UnitedHealthcare provides you the support you need as the plan sponsor?

ML: Yes. I really don't worry. I don't think about it. They just support us. They show up at events, they keep us informed. It is a very seamless, quiet, taken-care-of, happy thing. I can't tell you the last time I had a board member come to me with an issue about UnitedHealthcare.

Do you feel that your UnitedHealthcare team has been available to help you with any questions or concerns?

ML: I do. And it's more than just having the right plan. It's UnitedHealthcare's ability to communicate clearly what our retirees are entitled to, what they're supposed to have. We never hear a complaint about the communication of UnitedHealthcare. I think UnitedHealthcare does a very fine job of meeting retirees where they are, in terms of their skill level and understanding how their packages work. That's a really important thing. Because when it's your own mother, or father, or grandma—I'd want to make sure they were comfortable understanding their benefits. I think UnitedHealthcare does it well.

For more information, visit uhc.com/k12retirees.





What students need now: Custom learning pathways

District leaders must lay a policy foundation to enable schools to provide students with individualized learning experiences so they can thrive

By Scott Muri

School buildings across the country are quiet, but a school's role in local communities has never been more apparent. Take Ector County, Texas, where I am superintendent, as just one example. In a matter of days, our teachers moved classes online to ensure that 34,000 students could continue learning. Each week, they produced hours of engaging video content as part of a daily remote learning television show that airs on local stations. Teachers provided timely two-way communication with all students, and principals monitored daily instruction online.

It's been amazing, and not surprising, to see our educators respond to the coronavirus pandemic. Like other superintendents, I am honored to work alongside our education heroes.

Addressing the 'COVID slide'

Our greatest challenge regarding student learning lies ahead. The emergency shift has revealed what's at stake with a prolonged disruption to student learning. A report from NWEA, the nonprofit that creates assessment solutions, projected staggering learning losses for students returning as early as this fall.

Learning loss is not a new problem, but the "COVID slide" estimates that students in mathematics are especially at risk, losing enough skills that they could fall nearly a full grade level behind where they normally would be.

Now is the time to think differently. It's not just a moment to consider how to address an unprecedented learning loss crisis over the next couple of years. It's an opportunity for laying a policy foundation to enable schools to meet every student where they are and provide them with individualized learning experiences to ensure they're able to thrive after graduation.

Because to reopen schools as they were before, to revert back to a century-old school model, would do little to help those students with the biggest learning gaps.

Even in ideal circumstances, the one-size-fits-all school model has failed to adequately confront the summer slide. Decades of learning data have told us that students lose a significant amount of the knowledge they learned the previous school year. Yet students advance to a new grade level as though they've retained everything from the spring and are ready to resume learning brand new skills.

Even in ideal circumstances, the one-size-fits-all school model has failed to adequately confront the summer slide.

This applies to all subjects, but unfinished learning in math is especially problematic since it is cumulative. Over time, students will fall even further behind, making it harder to catch up.

Designing custom learning pathways

Policies could help ease the burden for teachers, students and parents. As documented in "The Iceberg Problem," a report published last year by New Classrooms Innovation Partners, many federal and state policies that govern our schools—on everything from accountability to assessment to content and curriculum—were designed to improve outcomes within the grade-based operating model. The inadvertent impact of these policies may be that they've undermined our ability to understand and address each student's unique learning needs.

In Texas, we have embraced one policy recommendation from that report: using Math Innovation Zones for extra flexibility in designing custom learning pathways for each student. This solution is particularly relevant now, because we know that every single student will have experienced widely different learning trajectories over these months when schools have been closed. These approaches are still grounded in college and career readiness, but flexible in how students might get there.

There are no simple ways to fix the unprecedented challenges ahead. Budget cuts and the social and emotional toll of COVID-19 are top-of-mind. But, through innovation, we can keep the focus not on getting back to the old way of doing things, but on what students need. **DA**

ABOUT SCOTT MURI:

Scott Muri has been superintendent of Ector County ISD in Texas since July 2019. He previously spent four years leading Spring Branch ISD in Houston, which accomplished narrowed academic achievement gaps in five areas. He also oversaw the redesign of the compensation system and recruiting efforts to improve hiring and retention. Muri has also taught or held leadership positions in Fulton County Schools (Ga.) and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (N.C.).



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Breaking new ground on college success

District of Columbia schools providing graduates with support throughout college

Educators in District of Columbia Public Schools have decided their role supporting college-bound students no longer ends at high school graduation.

The district has launched the first-of-its-kind DCPS Persists program to pair 750 of its graduates each year with coaches who will counsel the students throughout college.

“We know that many of our students are taking the post-secondary journey alone,” says Chancellor Lewis Ferebee. “As a student, especially if you’re a first-generation college student, there’s oftentimes so much you don’t anticipate, and we want to remove all the barriers.”

The coaches will begin work before high school graduation to help students through the important steps of choosing a college, finding scholarships and applying for financial aid and campus housing, says Erin Bibo, DCPS’ deputy chief of college & career programs.

The coaches will also leverage the district’s Smart College Choice initiative, which uses data—such as college graduation rates among Pell Grant recipients—to forecast the colleges where individual students are most likely to complete a degree. Once students begin college, coaches will remain in regular contact with the students and even visit them on campus whenever possible, Bibo says.

The coaches also will connect students with campus support systems. “There will be a pretty high dosage of support, and it will be differentiated,” Bibo says.

Identifying persistence potential

Teams at each high school will consult with central office to choose the students that will benefit most from DCPS Persists.



PAVING THE ROAD TO, AND THROUGH, COLLEGE—DCPS Persists, the District of Columbia Public Schools’ new college success program, will provide 750 students each year with coaching that begins in high school and lasts throughout their time in higher education.

Since the program opened, a few hundred students have applied, including Eric-Kevin Atanga, a senior at Cardozo Education Campus, who plans to study architecture at the University of the District of Columbia in the fall.

“Nobody in my family has been to college, and having someone to help me means everything,” says Atanga, who immigrated to the U.S. from Cameroon as a teen. “The program is helping me to understand what college is and what I’m supposed to do.”

DCPS Persists staff will also use data to identify the academic subjects that the graduates are struggling with in college to determine where the district may need to bolster its own curriculum.

“I think this is revolutionary,” says Art Mola, principal of Cardozo Education Center. “When we looked at the data that showed our students were

not completing college, I asked myself, ‘Am I contributing to them leading robust lives as adults or am I prolonging the failure a couple more years and it becomes somebody else’s problem?’”

DCPS Persists has been funded for the next five years by the A. James and Alice B. Clark Foundation. To sustain it, district officials want to leverage the program to create an alumni network. The idea is that these graduates—after they complete college and enter the workforce—will return to the district to support future high school students.

“The research is pretty clear that having a significant relationship with a caring adult outside of the home can be a major resiliency factor,” Ferebee says. “We’re looking to become an alumni network and cultivate this talent-sharing with DCPS graduates coming back and providing support.”

—Matt Zalaznick

Study: Inequitable pathways to education leadership

An analysis of 4,689 Texas assistant principals and their progress to promotion from 2001 to 2017 reveals that inequities begin early in the education leadership pipeline.

Despite having equivalent qualifications and more experience, on average, assistant principals who are Black or female take longer to reach the principalship or don't reach it at all. Prior research had identified gaps in promotions at the top levels of school and district leadership, and this study delves further by focusing on time to and probability of promotions once an individual has taken that first administrative step.

After holding education, experience, school levels and school location constant, Black assistant principals were 18% less likely to be promoted than White candidates. Black candidate promotions took an average of 5.27 years, versus 4.67 years for their White peers.

Analysis of high school principals revealed a difference in promotion by gender. Women were 5% to 7% less likely to be promoted to principalships in these schools than men. And the longer woman remained as assistant principals, the less likely they were to ever win a promotion. Women who did become high school principals had a longer wait than men—5.62 years versus 4.94 years.

All of that is in spite of an overwhelmingly female teacher workforce that is becoming more racially diverse. “We find that diversity exists in the pipeline, but the pipeline tends to squeeze out women and Blacks much earlier than studies of school leadership usually capture,” says Guthery.

Published in the June edition of the American Educational Research Association's journal *AERA Open*, the findings are from a study by Lauren Bailes at the University of Delaware and Sarah Guthery at Texas A&M University—Commerce.

State and district policymakers can take action on rectifying race and gender equity gaps by:

- establishing metrics of success within school districts that rate equity in promotion for equivalently qualified individuals who aspire to leadership positions.
- examining the rates of promotion and average time to promotion for assistant principals by gender and race.

When inequities are identified, establishing a mentorship program may help. Women and people of color in assistant principal roles can be matched with principals who have a track record of training and promoting a diverse group of assistant principals.

“Increasing the diversity of school leadership,” the study notes, “is likely to result in addressing the academic needs of an increasingly diverse student body.”

Learn more about the study results at DAmag.me/principalpromotion.

—Melissa Ezarik

DISTANCE LEARNING

Classroom pets liven up virtual learning

Classroom pets serving as guest stars in online learning sessions this spring gave students separated from teachers and friends a social-emotional learning boost.

When the coronavirus shut down schools, teachers brought rabbits, gerbils, fish, guinea pigs, bearded dragons, hamsters, hermit crabs and other classroom pets home to join their online classes.

Teachers would read to their pets and let students write notes to the animals. Live streams allowed students to check on the critters throughout the day, says Jackie King, executive director

of Pets in the Classroom, a nonprofit that gives teachers grants to buy and care for pets.

Classroom pets “help provide a happy and positive environment,” King says. “When it all became virtual, the pets gave students a sense of what they had in class. Pets bring calm and familiarity.”

A recent Pets in the Classroom survey found that 69% of teachers used pets from school in online learning. Rewarding students for online participation during Zoom sessions, King says, is one way they were used. Pets also helped facilitate



CUDDLES FROM A DISTANCE—All varieties of classroom animals made their video conferencing debut during school closures.

discussions about students' emotional states under stay-at-home orders.

—Matt Zalaznick



ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Category winner: Williamsville Central School District (N.Y.) 8

Feature: Rural schools 12

Category finalists 16



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AUTOMATION ON MATH INTERVENTION

How Williamsville Central School District uses nongraded formative assessments to automatically adjust students' daily schedules for more support

By Steven Blackburn



IMPRESSIVE NUMBERS—Before automating math intervention, 84% of Williamsville Central School District students in grade 5 passed the final exam. Since implementation at all four middle schools, the district's passing rate has increased to 90%. The first pilot school now has a 95% passing rate.

Williamsville Central School District (N.Y.)

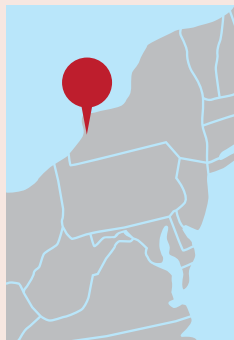
District size:

9,926 students

Superintendent:

Scott Martzloff

Initiative launched: **2015**



Williamsville Central School District has developed software that automatically assigns students to attend daily math labs for additional support if they get questions wrong on assessments, which all four of the New York district's middle schools administer every morning.

Later in the day, school officials post physical lists in hallways or on classroom doors that contain the ID numbers of students who need to attend the lab, which is led by specially trained academic support teachers. "Sometimes teachers just have to answer one question to clear up the misconception and then students are good to go," says Christopher McGinley, instructional specialist in mathematics. "The intervention is no longer a life sentence. There is a way to get out."

During school closures, district officials understood that students could not always answer these daily assessment questions, so intervention teachers staggered their Zoom office hours—allowing students to access them in addition to regular math instructors.

“Our program focuses on growth and improvement instead of grades, so students can really move forward in the curriculum and understand the concepts,” says Superintendent of Schools Scott Martzloff. “Having a real-time formative assessment that happens on a daily basis really drives this improvement forward.”

Gradual expansion to ensure scalability

While Williamsville schools had already been providing remediation efforts for its lowest-achieving students, district leaders decided to adopt an idea that a middle school math specialist came up with about six years ago to automate interventions for students struggling with math. In one year, in-house programmers created the software, which now connects to the student information system.

The district first launched a one-year pilot in grade 5 at one middle school and tweaked the program before expanding the initiative to grade 6 after experiencing positive results. “We wanted the program to be more readable and accessible,” says McGinley. “The tweaks involved switching from showing numeric data to more graphical representations so that teachers could get the information quickly.” Other updates now allow teachers to view and organize data in multiple ways to help drive decision-making.

The district later added more grades to the pilot and then added all four middle schools. “We didn’t want to expand the program too quickly so we could provide targeted support since implementation affected building logistics. It needed to be scalable,” says McGinley.

Students put more effort into work

To accommodate the math lab, schools repurposed preexisting intervention classes to take in the flow of students who would



CULTURE TRANSFORMATION—More students are now embracing learning and growth by requesting to participate in intervention math labs on their own.

need math interventions. Administrators also communicated to teachers and parents about the shift away from grading these assessments.

“Pre-COVID, we found that kids who are not assigned to the math lab are still choosing to go while others are realizing that they need to be more prepared every day before class,” says McGinley. “They are putting more effort into their homework and reviewing their notes.”

“Everybody’s budget is stretched, especially now during this global pandemic, so adopting such an initiative is a question of whether you want your students to grow and improve,” adds Martzloff. “For us, it worked well to implement this at the middle school level and I hope we can expand this in the future.” **DA**

Steven Blackburn is an associate editor at DA.



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“Our program focuses on growth and improvement instead of grades, so students can really move forward in the curriculum and understand the concepts. Having a real-time formative assessment that happens on a daily basis really drives this improvement forward.”

—Scott Martzloff, superintendent of schools

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How to pilot with success, drive teacher buy-in and support student achievement from the start

Istation gets the green light in San José after strict evaluation process

Never underestimate the power of a good pilot. That's how San José USD achieved teacher buy-in and smooth implementation of Istation programming and formative assessments in Silicon Valley's largest and most diverse school system.

After experiencing many positive results during various pilots, the California district had to adopt Istation Español and assessments—called Istation Indicators of Progress (ISIP™)—for grades TK-2 and ISIP for Reading in K-2. The success of yet another effective pilot led the district to agree to implementing ISIP Español and Reading for grades 3 through 5 at a later date. In addition to assessments, which provide real-time data and frequent progress monitoring, Istation offers research-based, computer-adaptive curriculum and teacher resources for measuring growth and differentiating instruction.

The district of over 30,000 students, 22% of whom are ELLs, selected each product after a rigorous examination.

"We have a very strict piloting process," says Rachel Powell, director of curriculum, instruction and EL services for preK-5. "If we go through the process properly and can tell teachers that their colleagues chose the program we are going to implement, there is less pushback. When we decide to pilot, we don't just say 'Go use it and tell us if you liked it.' We explain how we made our decision and why we think the program will benefit students and teachers. Teachers know we've done the work."

Cooperative procedure

To participate in a districtwide pilot,



"Quality drove us to Istation. We have a very diverse district, and we want culturally appropriate programs that support equity."

teachers volunteer and are selected based on grade and language of instruction. Pilot participants meet regularly to share feedback, discuss concerns and receive PD, then make anonymous recommendations to Powell's department.

"It's a great forum for sharing," Powell says of pilot check-ins. "We work through challenges together and get buy-in along the way."

Authentic Spanish is key

Istation Español distinguished itself from competitors right out of the gate.

"Quality drove us to Istation," Powell says. "We have a very diverse district, and we want culturally appropriate programs that support equity. Everything must be available in Spanish. Many companies do the Spanish component as direct translation, but Istation has authentic Spanish. We also get great data and reports."

Virtual PD in unprecedented era

To encourage teachers to use Istation properly, Powell's staff provides training that has been tailored with Istation's help. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Istation provided live virtual coaching sessions and on-demand training webinars to help educators make the transition to remote teaching.

"Everyone at Istation has been really attuned to our requests and needs," Powell says. "We can be difficult to work with because we are picky, but that's why we chose Istation."



Istation



RURAL RESOLVE

How educators in small, rural systems have committed to finding innovations amid challenges of school closures and online learning

Closing schools and moving online has amplified many of the challenges rural school districts were already facing. In rural Gilmer County, West Virginia, for example, even students who have home internet access sometimes get caught on the wrong side of the digital divide when the weather's bad.

"We have students who don't have internet or their internet is so poor that it goes out when it's raining," says Kelly Barr, a 7th-grade math teacher at Gilmer County High School. "Hopefully, this situation will shed light on the digital divide we're dealing with."

When Gilmer County's schools closed, students without home connectivity had to snap pictures of completed homework packets and find a way to share it with teachers. If they were successful, they got a boost in their grade, says Barr, who presented on STEAM integration in rural schools at DA's 2020 Future of Education Technology® Conference.

The plight of these students—with

the possibility of further disruptions next school year—has given renewed momentum to national efforts to close the digital divide. Accordingly, rural superintendents and teachers remain committed, and some have even found new opportunities in the adjustments the coronavirus outbreak has forced on their students.

A shift to self-paced learning

In rural North Texas, school closures created an opportunity. The disruption accelerated Sunray ISD's journey toward a new model of student-driven instruction that has been freed from the strictures of standardized tests, Superintendent Marshall Harrison says. For the last few years, the district has been anchoring its curriculum in research-based, self-paced learning that will allow high school seniors to graduate with associate's degrees, says Harrison, a member of the District Administration Leadership Institute. "Self-paced learning is going to drive our curriculum from here on out. We hope to come out on the

other side of this and show people that the days of pen-and-paper and standardized testing is stepping our society backward."

Remote learning requires teachers to give up some control of instruction as students become independent thinkers, Harrison adds.

The long-term goal for students: earn dual credit at Amarillo College, graduate with an associate's degree and then be able to easily transfer to nearby West Texas A&M University or other institutions.

The biggest challenge Sunray ISD faces is the cost and speed of internet connections in the rural community. "What COVID-19 has done is bring parent involvement back into the system," Harrison says. "When this is all said and done, the respect level the community has for teachers will increase tenfold because they'll understand the challenges."

Rural districts pick up STEAM

Ed tech issues are somewhat easier for rural district leaders to solve when

students are inside school buildings.

Gilmer County has used \$220,000 in state grants to create STEAM labs that transformed its K-5 and 7-12 buildings into West Virginia “model tech schools,” says Barr. The district has also relied on the community to augment instruction in the labs, which contain walls made of LEGO bricks, multiple types of robotics equipment and a variety of circuits.

“We’ve been really fortunate to partner with some local businesses who not only donated funding to our buildings but have also donated services,” Barr says.

Employees from Thrasher Industries—an oil and gas surveying company located about an hour away—have brought drones to the elementary school to show students how the devices are used in industry. The company also plans to hire and train graduates straight out of high school.

Barr recommends that rural educators follow Gilmer’s model of combining grants with business partnerships to intro-

duce students to new career and academic possibilities that don’t require college.

PD is key to rural tech integration

Establishing digital equity in rural schools relies on more than just equipping students with computers and broadband.

Project Tomorrow, a nonprofit resource provider and STEM research organization, has been providing teachers in three high-poverty Kentucky with PD in using mobile devices for instruction.

Rural districts have smaller IT staffs, so teachers may get less assistance when integrating technology, says CEO Julie Evans, who presented on the PD project at FETC 2020. Educators also have to help rural families get used to the devices and make them comfortable that students can use the internet safely. “When teachers have confidence that all students have access to technology and the internet outside of school, it does change the way they think about the use of those devices throughout the school day,” Evans says. “Teachers

can be more innovative in extending the learning experience.”

Ensure digital equity remains a priority

As schools reopen, district leaders and their teams will have to consistently track which students need devices and reliable, high-speed connections at home.

In the Mount Greylock Regional School District in western Massachusetts, principals and library media specialists reached out to families to determine who needed adequate technology, says Eileen Belastock, the CTO and director of academic technology.

The pandemic has made digital equity a No. 1 priority in many districts, says Belastock, an FETC 2020 presenter on data privacy and student engagement. “I hope it will continue to be in the forefront. I’m concerned that, once this is over, schools are going to take back hotspots and take back devices.”

Going forward, she advises, school leaders should continue offering any PD teachers have received in online instruction during closures, and guide families as students use new online platforms such as Zoom and Google Classroom.

For example, before districts adopt certain free online resources, educators and families need to determine whether those tools protect students’ privacy. “We have to see this as not just a coronavirus issue,” Belastock says. “A silver lining is that this will show us what we have not done in online learning.” **DA**

Matt Zalaznick is DA’s senior writer.

COLLEGE ACCESS ISSUES IN RURAL DISTRICTS

Rural students enroll in college at lower rates than do their suburban and urban peers. Jennifer Glynn, the director of research for the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, has been studying these college access issues.

PROBLEM: Smaller staff numbers in rural schools mean students may have less access to counseling.

SOLUTION #1: Educators should begin making college plans with students in middle school so they take the correct courses. Waiting for junior year is too late.

SOLUTION #2: Have college students and high school seniors accepted to college mentor young students through the application process.

HERE’S A LIST, WITH SOME SOLUTIONS:

PROBLEM: Rural schools offer fewer AP, IB and other advanced courses that prepare students for college work.

SOLUTION: Replicate the model used by the Mississippi Consortium for Educational Access, which connects a group of rural high schools in the state with colleges and universities that offer distancing learning AP courses.

PROBLEM: The lack of nearby colleges means rural students aren’t exposed to college life.

SOLUTION #1: Rural educators should begin talking to students about college in the early grades, using presumptive language such as “when you go to college” rather than “if you go to college.”

SOLUTION #2: Encourage teachers to wear college gear and hang banners from their alma maters in schools.

DISCUSS ONLINE INSTRUCTION with other district tech leaders at an upcoming Technology Leadership Summit or Academy. Learn more at **DAmag.me/cioevents** and **Damag.me/cioacademies**.



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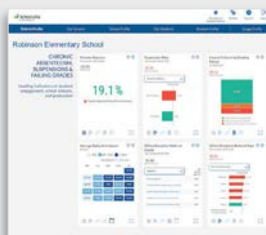
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Districts of Distinction achievement gap category finalists

DA honors three K-12 districts as Districts of Distinction runners-up for closing the achievement gap with at-risk or minority student populations

By Steven Blackburn

AGENTS OF CHANGE

Fordland R-3 School District,
Fordland, Mo., fordlandschools.org

CHALLENGE: In 2015, the number of graduates who attended two- and four-year colleges declined. Money and a lack of choice were roadblocks for students to enroll in AP and dual-credit classes.

INITIATIVE: All students can now take dual-credit classes and the AP test at the district's expense; it pays half of the tuition and the entire book cost for all students while families pay the other half. Later, the district reimburses families 100% if students receive As, 75% for Bs and 50% for Cs. Students on free or reduced school lunch qualify to have the entire cost of tuition reimbursed to them immediately.

IMPACT: Students now compete for and receive scholarships and admission to schools that they most likely would have never considered before the initiative. Nearly half of every class is usually enrolled in AP courses and well above the global average pass the exams. "Our students believe that they can achieve anywhere and anything because they see themselves succeeding on tests taken by the best and brightest," says Superintendent Chris Ford. "Our educators strive to enable students to achieve more than they ever thought possible as they recognized that they are not defined by the size of their town or money, but by the effort they put into their success."

ADVICE: Professional development to improve teaching and learning is key to student success, says Ford. "But you must be willing to put up the capital upfront and be patient with the results."

SUMMERTIME: MORE LEARNING, LESS LOSS

Tuscaloosa City Schools,
Tuscaloosa, Ala.,
tuscaloosacityschoos.com

CHALLENGE: Over the last decade, overall student proficiency hovered in the low-to-mid 30s with high-poverty schools remaining in the single digits. "While we poured millions into improving outcomes, we remained oblivious to the fact that summer learning loss was placing a crippling damper on sustained learning benefits to students," says Andrew Maxey, director of special programs.

INITIATIVE: In 2016-17, the district allocated funds, human capital and district-level communication bandwidth to develop summer programs that could last 25 days. Now, the school system works to attract more than half of the entire elementary school student body. "While summer school is a common practice across the country, it is almost never transformative for a school nor is it often implemented at scale," says Maxey.

IMPACT: In 2019, students in grades 3 through 5 enrolled in summer learning experienced no learning loss in reading and gained one month of learning in math. Their peers lost four months in reading and two months in math. Summer learning students in grades 6 through 8 gained one month of learning in reading and nearly two months in math while their peers lost nine months and two months, respectively. Summer learning K-2 students also outperformed their peers.

ADVICE: Start early because summer learning requires funding and time. Next, plan to a scale that your district can succeed in. Lastly, be intentional about purpose and results. "We are very specific about the students we recruit to programs and the outcomes we want," says Maxey.

EQUITY IN FACILITIES

Lansing School District 158,
Lansing, Ill., d158.net

CHALLENGE: Over the last decade, the district has become increasingly diverse with more students representing economically disadvantaged populations. While these students have demonstrated significant needs, they were learning in under-equipped, outdated facilities.

INITIATIVE: The district renovated and expanded four schools to provide improved technology, learning resources, social-emotional supports, nutrition, academic spaces and enrichment opportunities. Four facilities feature interactive whiteboards and document cameras in all classrooms, kinesthetic alternative seating and 1-to-1 technology. "Very few highly diverse school districts in the U.S. have managed to make these types of major, long-term building improvements in the service of students," says Superintendent Nathan Schilling.

IMPACT: From 2015 to 2018, the percentage of students in grades 3 through 8 meeting or exceeding state standards increased from 15% to 24% overall. Special ed children started meeting state benchmarks in D158's new schools. State site-based budgeting mandates revealed equity in operational expenditures with about \$13,000 in spending per pupil in 2019.

ADVICE: Schools need to explore renovation and expansion. Schilling also recommends keeping existing portions of buildings intact. "This lowers the cost of construction compared to starting from scratch," he says. Other advice includes securing no-interest Qualified School Construction Bonds, developing facility expansion plans that ensure instructional continuity and keeping school in full use by incrementally moving staff and students. **DA**





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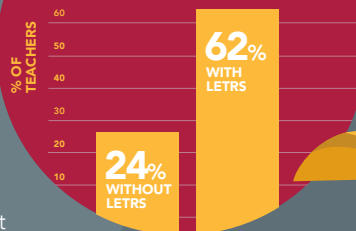
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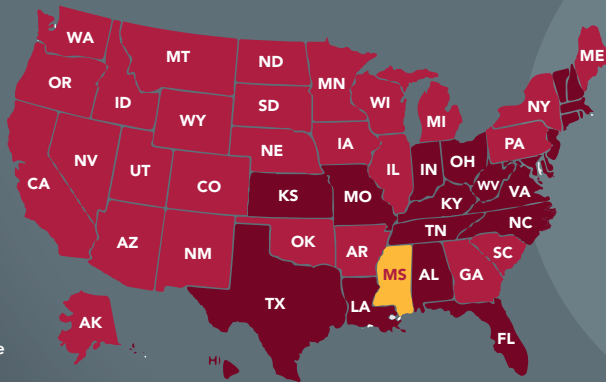
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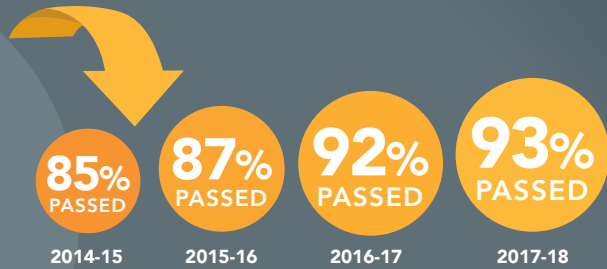
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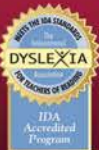
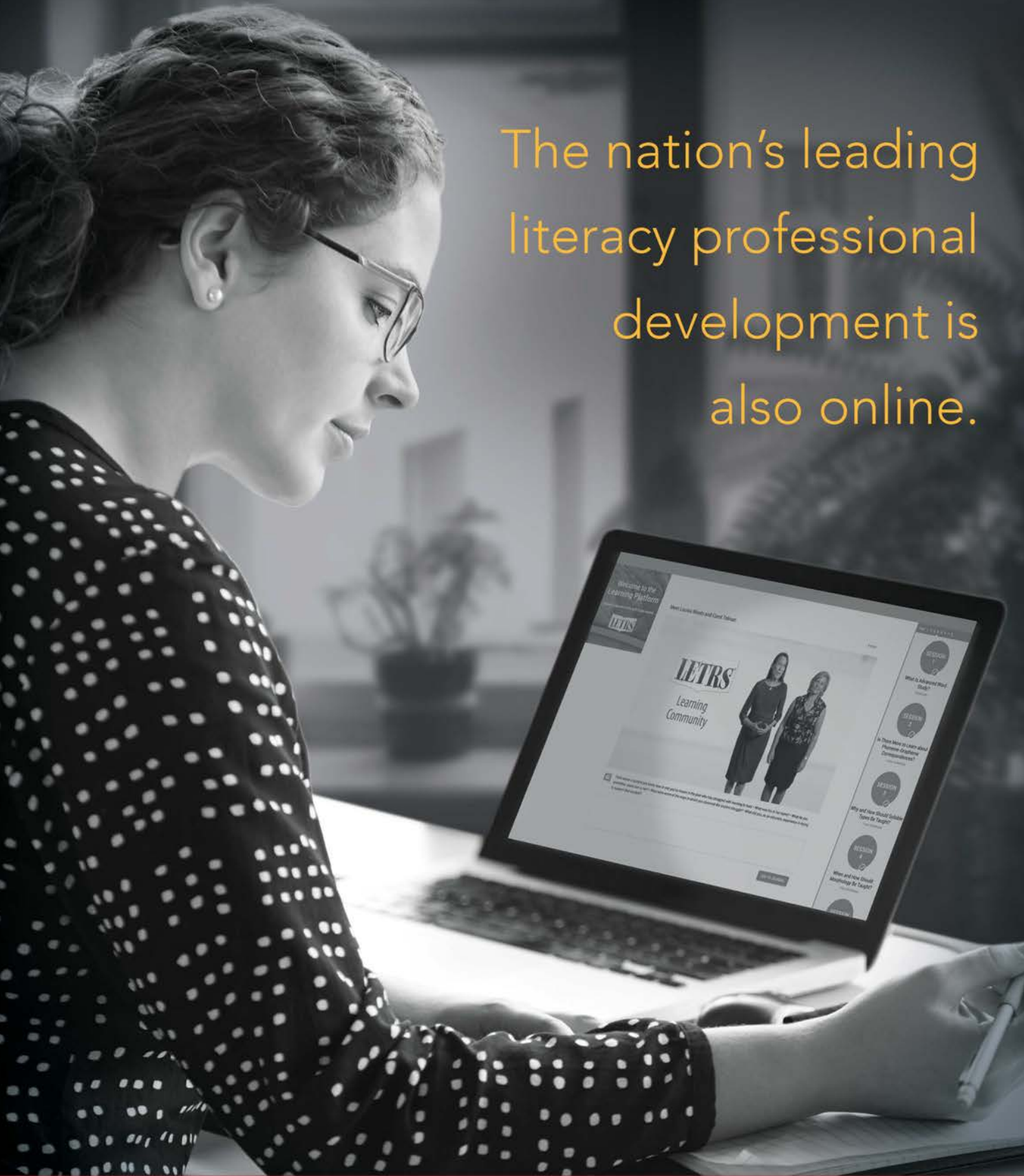
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PANDEMIC'S PURCHASING PUNCH



BY ARIANA FINE

How COVID-19 has created ed tech procurement challenges—and what school district leaders are doing to navigate purchasing realities

With the quick-changing landscape of ed tech and the plethora of products available, incorporating evidence-based programs is key for districts under tight budgets, even in normal times. That's the case even more so now, with COVID-19-triggered digital learning necessities and the looming threat of budget cuts. While many products are currently being offered for free, costs will eventually kick in.

The questions are many. Are the programs improving outcomes? What type of research exists? What roles should district leaders play in educating vendors on what they need?

Here's a look at eight big realities related to ed tech purchasing during school

closures and how to they navigate current and future buying decisions.

1. Providers are being flexible about pricing structures.

In Wisconsin, where procurement is under local control, vendors are adapting to district needs, such as by structuring pricing by usage and not by license to fit how the product is being used, explains Janice Mertes, the assistant director of teaching and digital learning for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

2. Provider pitches are often overwhelming.

Districts are inundated with calls and emails from what vendors are offering. They need help, says Candice Dodson,

executive director of the State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA), adding that state departments and organizations, such as SETDA, should help with vetting. The Universal Learning Technology ID collaborative vendor project, announced in May 2020 by International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), is one such effort. With IDs assigned to ed tech products, administrators can more easily search for what they need.



MORE PARTNERSHIPS FOR TECH PURCHASING HELP

Utah School Technology Inventory (www.uen.org/digital-learning)

Connected Nation partnered with the Utah Education and Telehealth Network on the project, working with more than 1,000 public schools to gather more than 17,000 data points. The initiative tracked how schools use technology, including how teachers and students access digital content, devices and platforms.

Digital Promise (digitalpromise.org)

This nonprofit was authorized by Congress in 2008 as the National Center for Research in Advanced Information and Digital Technologies. It commissions and conducts research studies on educational product effectiveness among other initiatives.

Education Technology Joint Powers Authority (edtechjpa.iusd.org)

This purchasing consortium was formed by four school districts, which coordinate purchases of products and services to benefit member agencies. It enables district leaders to take an active role by joining others to gain better ed tech pricing and vendor responsiveness.



The project is being supported by CoSN, the Jefferson Education Exchange, Project Unicorn and SETDA.

3. Such pitches may be more targeted, thanks to feedback.

Mertes sees more vendors customizing case studies to show Wisconsin districts the effects of demographics and changes on instructional sizes. Companies are getting more savvy in what they need to pitch; by understanding an individual district's base core framework and resources, they can more effectively collaborate to accomplish their learning objectives within the district's existing ecosystem, she finds.

That includes an increase in support of pilot programs. Districts are more savvy about sharing perspective and experiences with vendors, including product experiences, lifecycles usage and issues. She has also observed an increased number of districts completing requests for ed tech reviews.

4. There's no shortage of resources available to help with buying decisions.

As with Wisconsin, Indiana schools are under local control for ed tech procurement. But state-level vendor conversations help schools define best practices, says Dodson of SETDA.

The new SETDA Coalition for eLearning portal, its edWeb community and a series of webinars offer educators case studies, e-learning planning documents, vetted tools and resources from nonprofit and for-profit private sector partners, district pilot examples and more. It enables district leaders to learn more about the "language" of pricing negotiations and transparencies, and the possibilities of shared purchasing and utilization throughout the district.

With more than 7,000 ed tech products and services, it is not feasible for

individual districts to develop individual expertise on so many products because of different technology environments, number of initiatives, demographics and more, says Bart Epstein, CEO of the Jefferson Education Exchange.

5. Districts are hungrier than ever for data on program success.

In 2017, the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education, Digital Promise and the Jefferson Education Accelerator hosted the EdTech Efficacy Research Academic Symposium, after a year-long collaboration between 150 education leaders.

District decision makers expressed interest in knowing more about what their peers are doing. It is a collective action problem, Epstein explains. While district leaders don't take (or have) the time to document their ed tech efficiency and efficacy details, they want to benefit from the insight of others who document why and what ed tech decisions they made. A resource was needed to investigate the academic reasons by building a system for collecting feedback.

In October 2019, the nonprofit formed steering committees for the Ed Tech Genome Project. Its year-long mission is to build an evidence-based framework around 10 variables connected to ed tech implementation success or failure, and why tools work differently in various contexts.

6. Purchasing ability is limited now but districts are still adding to remote learning infrastructure.

During the challenges presented by school closings due to COVID-19, Mertes finds districts are "skinning down" purchases but customizing what they already have in place to their remote learning needs. By doing so, administrators are seeing where their ed tech gaps may be and choosing to



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purchase integrative programs, such as a standalone resource with specific content assessment capabilities, or creation and collaboration tools.

Dodson cautions against integrating new programs into the digital learning mix. She points to budget as one reason; schools need to be strategic about what they spend as budget adjustments due to 2020's school closures are unknown.

"If you have to do more digitally, like we are doing now with school closures, you may need to reject certain programs in favor of those that work more efficiently in engaging kids online and in teacher professional development," Dodson says.

7. Current usage data is needed for future decisions.

With social distancing and professional conference cancellations due to COVID-19, educators don't have the informal networking and information-sharing time to learn from each other, Epstein says. Most administrators are also overwhelmed by

the crisis, doing what they can to deliver services to students, keep technology systems up and help their educators.

"It looks like it will be feast-or-famine for ed tech companies," says Epstein. "Now is the time when schools need to understand what they already have. As for free [products] being offered, if those programs can support schools, the tech could become part of the schools' permanent plan. Programs that aren't being used efficiently—and the schools realize it—will not be spending priorities going forward."

Dodson suggests school districts look over the summer at what they have purchased, what schools have been using and what parents are comfortable with.

Tools, such as the LearnPlatform ed tech effectiveness system (learnplatform.com), enable schools to inventory, streamline and analyze their ed tech.

8. Implementation and support are more challenging for educators and staff during school closures.

"Ed tech has gone from a nice-to-have to a must-have," says Epstein. Big additions come with challenges, however. "Implementing tech in ordinary times is hard, but now, students, teachers and administrators are all remote. It is several orders of magnitude more difficult to do tech in these unprecedented times with untried technology. Districts can underestimate how much time it takes with training, support, supplies and more."

"We are currently studying how much it matters to give teachers substantial agency over the technology that makes it into their classrooms," says Epstein. "If a school changes from a tech product that is used and the teachers have no say over it, the implementation success may be different. When teachers don't feel heard or when they are not given enough planning time, it really matters." DA

Ariana Fine is a Connecticut-based writer and editor.

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CHANGING TUNES

A photograph of a man performing on a stage. He is wearing a dark t-shirt and pants, and has his arms raised in the air. The stage is equipped with several microphones on stands and a large speaker. In the foreground, the backs of several audience members' heads and shoulders are visible, some with their hands raised. The background shows a stage with a staircase and some equipment.

As K-12 music classes were being reshaped by longer-term trends—such as wider inclusion of coding, pop and hip hop—the coronavirus outbreak forced all instruction online.

While music education relies heavily on students being able to play their instruments together in person, band leaders and teachers adjusted—and continue to adjust—in ways they say will enhance instruction even when students return to classrooms.

“Ensemble classes contain some of the highest levels of interpersonal communication—you’re making split-second

decisions with other people without saying anything to make a piece of art more beautiful,” says Peter Perry, instrumental music director at Richard Montgomery High School in Rockville, Maryland. “One of the big takeaways from being quarantined and locked down is that technology is a very powerful tool, but it doesn’t beat human interaction.”

Music business requires digital skills

The music business has moved almost entirely into the online and digital worlds, says Perry, whose school is a part of Montgomery County Public Schools.

During online learning, music teach-

ers can help students develop the skills needed on the engineering side of the music business, such as using digital tools to record themselves, and then editing and mixing their performances.

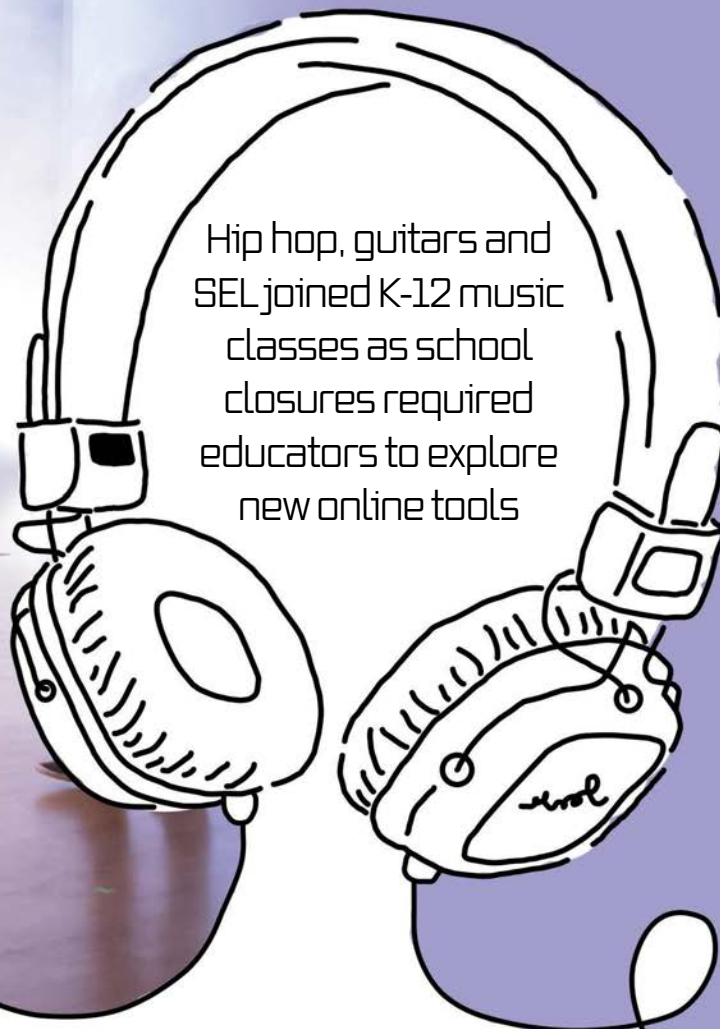
“They can use the knowledge they have about music and ensembles, and apply it to create what they believe is a good recording,” Perry says.

Teachers can also assign musical excerpts that students can listen to and then record themselves playing—using just a smartphone. The recording can then be submitted for feedback.

This technique could be used for individual student assessments once

TABLETTUNES—In a sign of the trends changing K-12 music instruction, a band comprising University of South Florida student teachers and a professor perform concerts with only their iPads.

By Matt Zalaznick



schools reopen. If these performances were recorded at home, teachers and their ensembles would have more time to devote to full rehearsals, Perry says.

Also in the online and digital realms, the iPad is the newest instrument students and teachers are learning to “play.”

David Williams, a professor of music education at the University of South Florida, has formed an iPad band with his student teachers that has performed on campus.

The tablet and its GarageBand app are effective tools for teachers who want students to create their own compositions, says Williams, who presented at FETC® 2020 on how to integrate iPad

music in K-12 classes.

“The iPad allows students to create original music to accompany whatever they’re learning,” says Williams. “If they’re doing a social studies project, for instance, they can put together music to demonstrate what they learned about Alexander Hamilton.”

Online music delivers social-emotional support

Music can play a major role in helping students cope with school closures and other coronavirus disruptions, says professor Scott N. Edgar, director of bands and music education chair at Lake Forest College outside Chicago.

“The social web our students cling to has been ripped away from them and it’s our job to keep them as connected as possible,” Edgar says. “We have to continue to make art very personal for students to help build the skills to encounter trauma and isolation.”

Music teachers should instead focus on having students respond to, connect to and create music.

“This is going to require offering many more opportunities for students to have



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CHANGING TUNES

voice and choice in the artistic process,” Edgar says. “They will take a more active role in creating their own work.”

This shift should include allowing students to explore more diverse styles of music and examine the historic environments in which that music was made.

“If we can widen our perspectives and allow students to have more ownership of their own artistic education, this is an opportunity for students to receive more personalized education when we get back,” Edgar says. “Teachers are going to

have students who are insanely motivated to come together and make art again.”

Beyond Beethoven and Bach

Over the last several years, a growing number of K-12 music programs have been adding hip hop, electronic dance and other popular music to their repertoires in an effort to becoming more “learner-centered,” says Williams, the music professor.

This often means having students collaborate in small groups to create their

own music or record versions of hit songs.

“Even without saying the words ‘technology’ and ‘popular music,’ you end up doing both because that’s typically what students want,” Williams says. “They want to make popular music on instruments that are digital.”

But it’s not all synthesizers, samples and sound effects—many schools have also added guitar instruction and modern rock band classes over the last several years, Williams says.

A wider music palette is an example of how music instruction has become more culturally inclusive in recent years, adds Denese Odegaard, the immediate past president of The National Association for Music Education.

“Music lends itself to that so well because of all the rich cultures, traditions and backgrounds of our students,” Odegaard says. “Sharing this music allows students to understand each other better.”

While some K-12 administrators have made it a priority to provide an instrument to every student who wants one, music remains at the back of the funding line in some schools and districts. Other schools and districts rely on outside groups—and parent fundraising efforts—to provide funding for instruments and music instruction. “Music can take up a large part of the budget,” Odegaard says.

What coding sounds like

A growing number of music teachers are also adding STEM and coding skills to their classes, says Catie Dwinal, a music teacher with Quaver, a music education company.

Some teachers are having students build instruments while also learning the science behind how sound is made. Students also can use the Scratch program to create and play virtual instruments.

“A lot of teachers are finding that coding and music go along together quite well,” Dwinal says. “Because the process of learning to code and learning how to compose a piece of music is so similar, it’s an easy way to connect the two skills.” **DA**

Matt Zalaznick is senior writer.

Modern sound bites: Trends in music instruction

Denese Odegaard, the immediate past president of The National Association for Music Education, detail some of the major trends in music education, aside from school closures and the shift online:



New ensemble types: Large traditional ensembles remain popular but, driven by student interest, more schools are also adding hip hop, electronic music and rock bands.

Additional student voices: Culturally responsive music teachers are giving students “voice” to share the music of family backgrounds.



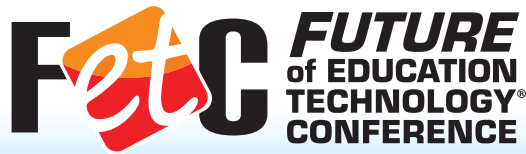
Recognition of brain benefits: Educators are informed by research that shows how the brain benefits from learning music. Music students are more engaged in school and perform better in other classes.

Use of formative assessments: Teachers in other subjects can model the ongoing assessments conducted by music teachers, who, by necessity, provide students with constant feedback during rehearsals.



More device types: More schools are giving students computers or iPads so they can record performances or complete work and return it to the teacher through Google classroom. Some schools are starting new classes, such as music production, using iPads.

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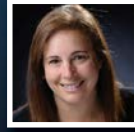
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Fostering safety and confidence as educators return to school

Seven tips to help K-12 districts prepare—and encourage everyone’s input

By Allison Velez

School districts across the country are busy brainstorming what the new classroom will look like and addressing logistical issues such as class sizes, cafeteria alternatives and spacing of student desks. Signs will likely be posted throughout classrooms and hallways reminding everyone of the need to social distance, wash their hands regularly and avoid touching their face. But these changes only address the physical obstacles of restarting classrooms.

The true challenge is creating psychological and emotional stability.

Recognizing rising anxiety, depression

Numerous mental health experts have documented a significant uptick in mental health issues largely due to the isolation and anxiety related to the COVID-19 crisis. Paladina Health, for example, has seen a doubling of patients with mental health issues this past April compared with April 2019. There was a 58% increase in patients whose chief complaint was anxiety and a 24% jump in depression issues. Such problems can manifest as insomnia, headaches, indigestion or lack of focus or productivity.

District administrators need to be aware of these symptoms. Until a vaccine or proven treatment is available, employees will likely continue to be concerned about their own health, and that of loved ones. They may be

It’s important to address employees’ total needs—physical, mental and emotional.

distracted by the onslaught of negative news. So it is unrealistic to expect them to return to school the way they were.

Transitioning to in-school work

What should districts do to help employees make the transition to the workplace? First, be flexible, starting with the review and update of paid time-off and leave policies. Employees should not feel guilty when taking time off to care for their health or the health of a loved one. And they should not be penalized if they don’t immediately return to previous work schedules or productivity standards.

Here are seven tips for making school employees feel comfortable in this new work era.

1. Involve employees in the process of creating safe workspaces. Consider forming an employee safety task force that can work with administrators to implement new policies and procedures.

2. Communicate thoroughly, frequently and honestly. Provide updates on what the district is doing to keep employees and students safe. Set expectations and encourage two-way communication regarding concerns and results.

3. Encourage daily check-ins between staff and administrators. The importance of asking “Are you okay?” cannot be overstated, whether teachers are physically back in the classroom or

still teaching online in the fall.

4. Be prepared to make special accommodations. Remember that some employees are at high-risk and others perceive themselves to be at greater risk of COVID-19 complications.

5. Create a more relaxed, fun atmosphere. This could include whacky contests or other nontraditional activities.

6. Focus on wellness. Promote healthy behavior in the schools by offering daily meditations, yoga or guided breathing routines that could be hosted in the gym or auditorium during teacher breaks.

7. Encourage employees to take advantage of district-sponsored employee assistance program resources. If you contract with an onsite health care provider, work with its mental health professionals to advise on treatment options for high-risk employees.

Planning ahead

As you move forward with plans to reopen schools (or even if you plan to keep teaching online), it’s important to implement a holistic approach that addresses employees’ total needs—physical, mental and emotional.

You are not expected to become a mental health expert overnight; solicit the help of outside professionals.

This is a different time that demands different strategies and resources. Start planning thoughtfully and creatively now to foster an inviting learning environment upon reopening. **DA**

Allison Velez is chief people officer for Paladina Health, a provider of direct primary care that partners with school districts across the county to offer health care solutions.

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