

EDUCATION DURING A PANDEMIC

Face time, not Facetime for younger students

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When our 3,000-student school district closed on March 13, 2020 because of COVID-19, little did we know that it was the end of in person instruction for the remainder of the school year. Nor did we know that we would face even bigger challenges in September as the pandemic continued.

Like many other districts, we encountered difficulties and spent countless hours determining the best way we could serve students. Here is our story.

A year ago, our immediate challenge was devising a strategy for remote learning. Although we are a district committed to using and teaching 21st century technology, we needed to start using digital tools at a level we had never imagined. Our faculty and staff had to identify, understand, and implement a variety of platforms including Zoom, learning apps, and new hardware, all while showing students how to access the same.

At the same time, we wrestled with instructional schedules to determine what worked best for our teachers and families. We tackled lesson planning to shift our highly effective classroom practices to distance instruction.

Throughout the spring we encountered significant challenges. Many of our younger students were reliant upon help from their parents, who were trying to juggle their own work-from-home schedules. We struggled to find a balance between synchronous and asynchronous learning, and we were concerned about learning gaps caused by the abrupt departure from traditional schooling.

As the school year ended, the pandemic remained a threat and we all faced the challenge of planning for the fall. To examine possibilities, we formed a "Reentry Task Force" comprised of parents, students, teachers, administrators, community members, health professionals, transportation officials, and online school experts.

The Task Force was broken into approximately a dozen sub committees that specialized in critical elements like scheduling, best instructional practices, mental health support and safety/health. The task force held weekly video calls starting in June to develop a detailed plan for reopening schools in the fall.

A priority emerges: In-person education for K-5

During our initial meetings, a priority quickly emerged, based upon the available

research and our own experiences in the spring: Our youngest children needed to be in school full-time. But how to do that, given the social distance guidelines?

Enrollment in our Westchester County district has been declining in recent years, which provided some flexibility with physical space in grades K-5, especially if we utilized gyms and other specials rooms. But to adhere to distancing guidelines the district would need to reduce class sizes to no more than 10 to 12 students per room.

Our custodial staff, building administrators and engineers helped map the space in each of our four buildings, and we devised a plan to optimize use of all available spaces.

The next hurdle was staffing, as smaller classes would require more personnel. We imagined splitting each elementary class into two rooms. A teacher and a teaching assistant could go back and forth between the two rooms during the day, while keeping all the kids in the class connected via Zoom.

We prepared a proposal for our school board to hire 32 new teaching assistants to fulfill this plan. Then we decided to go one step further and bring the sixth grade back full-time at the middle school as well. That brought the new teaching assistant count to 37 and a total price tag of \$1,850,000. To cover the cost, we would have to dip into our reserve funds.

We knew it was a lot to ask of our school board. But if there was ever a cause to use emergency savings, surely it is for educating our students to the best of our ability during a global pandemic. Our Board of Education wholeheartedly agreed.

When school started in September, all students in kindergarten through sixth grade had the option of attending school full-time. Ninety percent of those children filed through the doors. Parents of the remaining 10% preferred to have their children use eLearning full time. Those students were grouped into one class per grade with dedicated eLearning teachers.

I will always recall those first few days when our halls and classrooms were once again filled with the children's laughter and excitement. There is nothing like the sound of children to remind us that we are here first and foremost for them. They are watching how we respond to this monumental challenge and it is our responsibility as a community to tackle the difficulties together.

I'm happy to report the feedback from parents has been overwhelmingly positive and full of gratitude. As a school administrator, I have never been prouder



First grade teacher Keri Cash gives a reading lesson in person and via Zoom, simultaneously. Half her students are in the room and the other half are across the hall with a teaching assistant. ❖ Photo courtesy of Somers Central School District

of our staff and school community. We had showed that we could face the toughest challenges by coming together. It embodied our district slogan of moving Forward in Excellence.

The hiccups have been few and far between. We have only had a few days that the kindergarten through second grade school, Primrose Elementary, has had to close for COVID-19 contact tracing. The third through fifth grade school, Somers Intermediate, has not closed.

Measuring success

In a typical year, our school district administers the STAR learning assessment in September, January, and March. This school year we chose to add the assessment in November, as well, to measure the efficacy of the new elementary instructional model. The results showed that the emergency funds had been well spent. The November elementary school STAR assessments revealed a 5% growth in reading scores from September to November, compared with a typical 3% growth from September to January in a normal year. The gain in elementary math scores were 7%,

compared to 5% in a typical September to January period, in half the time.

The numbers show we are closing the gap in learning from last spring to now. We believe that having students in classrooms gives us the best opportunity to get them up to speed and minimizes the impact of the pandemic on their education. Our experience suggests there is no replacement for in-person instruction for our youngest learners, especially over a long period of time.

As the pandemic persists and New York State issues related guidelines and requirements for schools, we remain committed to our goal of keeping the youngest students in school full-time. The district has a plan in place to administer COVID-19 tests to the required number of students and reopen quickly if the Somers area reaches high positivity rates.

New, large-scale initiatives are never implemented without missteps, and we have made our share. We will remain flexible, and we will continue to work with teachers, parents, and students to adjust and improve. We are constantly re-evaluating our path forward, and so far, it appears our schools and our students are headed in the right direction.