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RE-ENTRY AND BEYOND:

COVID-19 IMPLICATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR K-12 SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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COVID-19 is more than a short-term disruption. It has also highlighted pre-existing shortcomings and challenges of our education systems, in ways that will only compound in future years if they are not addressed now. As a result, even during the immediate and unplanned disruption of this year, successful leaders and teachers must focus on the future – on the ways that education for ALL children will need to change to not only be prepared for future disruptions, but to unleash more self-sustained learning for educators and students no matter the context. This means working backwards from a vision of future learning to the systems that will support it. Leaders should be working now to put in place the operational, instructional leadership, and teaching practices that will proactively build those resilient systems in their schools and districts for sustainable impact.

The following topic areas are intended to frame thinking, discussions, and planning around the range of priorities and conditions that leadership teams must address in the midst of and eventual wake of the coronavirus crisis. We understand that these areas are intertwined, but by disaggregating them here we can sharpen focus on each of the variables that will influence the system as a whole.

Districts must develop and implement a plan of action to address a breadth of instructional needs: how instructional tools like curriculum and assessments will be focused and prioritized; how instructional practices will shift to accommodate both learning loss and continued uncertainty; how professional development can both happen more remotely and successfully arm faculty and families

with the skills and strategies to deal with all of these and other changes; and professional collaboration (i.e. Data Teams) that can reinforce and accelerate necessary shifts in instructional practice.

The plan also must address the possibility of a second interruption of in-person instruction next year. This year, education leaders were cut significant slack by families, communities, media and political leaders for not being prepared for this unexpected and fast-moving crisis. If a second interruption occurs next year, stakeholders may be far less patient with school leaders.

FUTURE-FOCUS

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, many districts were focusing on a wide variety of shifts, as advancing technologies change the skills and knowledge that students need to be prepared for in the workplace and society. They were monitoring successful innovative practices found in our nation's most rapidly improving schools. With the enormous challenges districts now face, some will address immediate challenges and take their eye off the more fundamental changes that are coming into focus. While there is urgency in meeting the basic needs of students, families, and staff, we must also maintain a laser-like focus on the necessary changes that were revealing themselves prior to COVID-19. We need to use the crisis as the tipping point to make needed shifts in our education system and not retreat to what was becoming an outdated model.

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INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

Depending on the state, students will have missed 8-12 weeks of instruction—or perhaps more. This presents immense challenges, and requires rethinking of fundamental structures of schools and instruction. How can district leaders ensure an appropriate foundation and scaffolding for what is to come in the curriculum? Do you pass students on to the next grade? Do you make many of them repeat the grade despite what research tells us—that retaining a student is the greatest indicator their dropping out of school?

- For both instructional purposes and SEL/relationship reasons, many districts will consider moving teacher and students together for the next school year. Many are planning to do this for one marking period. Some are making plans to loop the teacher for the whole year, and others are planning to have teachers team-teach with the next grade teacher for part of the first marking period. Others are committed (at the secondary level) to move to interdisciplinary instruction. In all these cases, of course, the devil is in the details: How do you support teachers? What decisions do you make about advancement, and how? What do you do with kindergartners in this scenario? Also, what do we do for students transitioning between schools (elementary to middle or middle to high), where collaboration between teachers is already challenged? What role will individual schools have in these decisions, and how will policy be set by the Superintendent's Office and the Board?
- It is crucial to recognize that teachers cannot cover all the missed standards without expanding the time kids will be in school in the future. But given budget and contracts, that is not going to happen, so districts must make the difficult decision to recalibrate, identify and decide on the most important learning (power) standards that are a prerequisite for future learning. These power standards can exist within content areas and across content areas, as well as those standards which can be accomplished through an integrated curriculum. The first marking period of next year must focus on those priority standards—and so too should long-term learning.
- Next fall, based on their home instruction, some students will have met these prerequisite standards; others (especially sub-group kids) will not. This will require teachers to have very differentiated instruction in their classrooms. For students lacking mastery, they will need to develop Quad A skills in these respective standards. For those with the basic mastery of the standards, teachers can help develop Quad D skills. Therefore, teachers will need to shift their practice from covering content and delivering instruction to managing the learning process for students. This leads to a major professional development need for teachers.

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ASSESSMENT

Districts must identify, administer and use the data from reliable assessments to determine the status of each student's skills and competencies in the high priority standards required for future learning. And those assessment must do more than simply record where a student happens to be on their return; they must point toward ongoing actions – structural and instructional – that can help to prioritize teacher time and accelerate learning. While most districts have talked about the need for reliable formative assessments, not all have put them in place, but they must now be effectively applied as part of the reentry plan.

ACHIEVEMENT GAP

"Gap" students were behind other students when we left school in March. Whatever the root causes of the gap, the extended break has only exacerbated and likely expanded that gap. Consider how students at home with families that had Internet access, multiple devices, parental time for support and the means to supplement uneven remote curricula could still meet or even exceed state standards compared to families that did not have the same opportunities. Inequities that show up and are sometimes accentuated at school became the daily uneven footing for those who didn't have the resources or time to supplant a brick and mortar school experience.

When students return for school year 20-21, most will have been away from traditional schooling

for 5-6 months. Remedial classes for those that have fallen behind cannot be the singular "go-to" for districts responsible for making up half a year's worth of learning while teaching all of the current year's worth, simultaneously.

It is certainly not a job for the faint of heart. Given that all students experienced some form of trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic, the equation to help the most vulnerable students becomes more complex and multifaceted. Students that struggled with a typical curriculum and forming positive relationships at school before the break will require intentional plans to meet mental health needs, social emotional learning development and time for rebuilding relational trust with adults in school. For those students suffering the most acute forms of trauma the need to address the 3rd "R" (relationships) to assist students will be heightened in dealing with this critical challenge.

While all students will benefit from a return to the ebb and flow of school with the educators who care for them, those who suffered the most have the most to gain with love, support and relationship building. It is true that a rising tide raises all boats, so schools should consider reuniting students with their teachers from last school year and distill learning standards to their most essential form for future learning. Support and the execution of differentiation from re-teaching to enrichment would be the final piece of bridge building that will not only get students back in the swing of school but have them learning the moment they cross the threshold into their classrooms.

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REMOTE LEARNING IS MORE THAN ONLINE AND DIGITAL

Online/digital delivery is just the point of the spear of remote learning. We need to help districts develop a plan for the potential second interruption next year from in-person to remote instruction. The home becomes the primary center of instruction when this occurs and many of these homes are not organized or trained to assume this role. Districts need to help create the environment and supports for remote learning to effectively occur. Districts also need to plan curriculum elements (scope and sequence, project and independent learning) in ways that are more student centered, which will serve instructional goals whether instruction is in person or remote.

WHOLE CHILD/WHOLE FAMILY

While we have always known that families are central to effective learning, COVID-19 has made their importance even more vital. We need to shift our thinking from Whole Child to Whole Family. This has a major impact on the strategies we use, the required professional development, the staffing patterns, and the need to become an integral family-school liaison for all families and children in our schools. Teachers, administrators and other staff must have this become part of their job responsibilities. This starts with a strategic plan for cultivating positive learning relationships between students and staff in concrete and deliberate ways that are woven into daily school life.

IT IS MORE THAN SEL – IT IS AN EXPLOSION IN TRAUMA AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Over the past couple of years, schools have been increasingly moving to create SEL plans. Some districts have approached this as a secondary priority that their schools needed to address. Other districts saw it as a core responsibility equal—if not more important—to academic preparedness. The districts that treated it as a core responsibility are now having more success at dealing with the dramatic increase in the trauma and mental issues that children are experiencing due to the dynamics of the COVID-19 crisis. All districts need to have a much deeper commitment to the SEL/mental health/trauma dynamic they now find themselves in.

HEALTH AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

To provide the most insightful advice and resources available and to take meaningful proactive measures in the event of a second outbreak next year and beyond, districts need to strategically engage the community-at-large for the ultimate benefit of students and families. The goal is to expand or create services that support students' academic achievement, address their physical and mental health, and offer broader and more convenient ways for families to interact with the school. We also recommend that districts convene an advisory board of medical experts and health leaders. These may include the Department of Health and physicians to help establish a plan for safety practices for staff and students as face-to-face environments are resumed. They also need to know how to monitor future outbreaks and related safety concerns.

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BUDGET CHALLENGE – DOING MORE WITH LESS

At the same time that districts will receive a wide variety of budget demands to deal with instruction, mental health and other related issues, they will also face declining revenue in most states. The budgeting process, which for years has been a “forward-focused approach” in most districts, will not work in this new environment. Rather, a “future-focused approach” needs to be taken, and new processes and systems will be required, reflecting the prioritization of high impact relationship building, academic focus, and intervention as needed.

CONTRACT CHALLENGES

All of the above will require new and innovative approaches by administrators, boards and teacher unions/associations. Recovering and learning from this crisis, and how it will change education systems long term, is a shared challenge for every layer of the school system, and engaging union partners early and creatively will be crucial to design effective solutions to the complex issues.

PLAN FOR POSSIBLE SECOND INTERRUPTION

Parents, taxpayers, media and politicians may be more critical of school leaders if they are not fully prepared for a second interruption. Superintendents need to have a comprehensive plan to deal with all the items mentioned above and then effectively manage its implementation should a second interruption occur.

PRIORITIZING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

All of the challenges above leave districts with a wide array of development/staff support needs than ever before: to address the plans for student grade-advancement and monitoring; the prioritization of key standards and related performance tasks within an integrated curriculum; and delivering differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all students, to name a few. Yet with the intense need for in-person time with students, the traditional PD programs will not be possible. We also know that with the budget shortfalls that districts face there will be a tendency to not want to fund PD. Therefore, more innovative approaches must be found to deliver the increasingly needed PD/support from boardroom to classroom, and central to this will be a combination of online and executive coaching options.

Traditional PD programs will not be possible.



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