Impacts of school leaders responses to extended school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

PREPARING FOR EMERGENCY
REMOTE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Publication Release Date: June 18, 2020

Research and writing by
Dr. Christopher Harrington & Elizabeth LeBlanc
In March 2020, the spread of the novel coronavirus intensified to the point that states across the nation began the emergency closure of schools that would eventually result, for many, in the cancellation of face-to-face instruction for the remainder of the 2019-20 academic year. While many schools and districts were seemingly blind-sided by this turn of events and reeled from the rapid closure of the physical school buildings, some were well-prepared and student learning continued with relatively little disruption.

This research study, conducted by the Institute for Teaching and Leading (i4tl), captures the stories of three individual school systems that have navigated the shift to emergency remote teaching and learning with a high level of success. While these schools still experienced challenges with the rapid shift, their stories illustrate how forward-thinking leadership poised their students, staff, and families for success in handling the challenges with which other schools continued to struggle.

The first phase of this study captures the ways in which the leaders of three school systems prepared for the continuity of learning leading up to the first day of the extended school closures in their states. Interviews with leaders from Prospect Mountain High School (New Hampshire), Milton Area School District (Pennsylvania), and Taos Academy Charter School (New Mexico) revealed how their efforts toward implementing a student-centered education model that leverages digital curriculum positioned them for success. This research brief discusses the efforts of these leaders.

The second and final phase of this research study is currently in progress, and it will reveal how effective these school leaders’ preparations for the shift to fully-remote learning were in providing learning continuity for students. Teachers of these schools are being surveyed to glean their perspectives, and the school leaders will be interviewed once again to discuss the impacts of their previous planning efforts.

The future of the 2020-21 school year is clouded with uncertainty as public health officials suggest that a resurgence of the novel coronavirus may occur at some point during the next school year. The Institute for Teaching and Leading hopes that the stories of these schools and the findings of this study will help school leaders move forward as they proactively prepare their future learning continuity plans. Leaders of schools across the United States and beyond may use the findings of this study to help understand some possible impacts of thoughtful planning around the continuity of learning for students.

The following pages provide a narrative of how Prospect Mountain High School, Milton Area School District, and Taos Academy Charter School planned for learning continuity during the extended school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. School leaders cited specific preparations and related actions within eight general themes: (a) leadership planning; (b) technology access and technical support; (c) learning management system/platform planning; (d) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (e) professional learning and staff support; (f) parent and family support; (g) communication; and (h) school operations.
Located in rural New Hampshire, Prospect Mountain High School (PMHS) serves approximately 450 students in grades 9-12. The school operates within a traditional educational model with a relatively large adoption of instructional technology and teacher-created digital content and assignments. Prior to the extended school closures ordered by state of New Hampshire officials in March 2020, PMHS students and staff were well accustomed to the use of mobile computing devices in the form of laptop computers and the use of Google Classroom, which includes functionality similar to that of a full learning management system. When all schools throughout the state of New Hampshire were ordered to be closed by state officials, PMHS staff were able to step up to the challenge of remote teaching and learning with a little time to prepare.

School superintendent, Tim Broadrick, was not surprised by the statewide school closures. "Back in February, we saw this coming; we knew it was a possibility," Mr. Broadrick stated. "We knew there was a possibility that schools may close on a long-term basis for this school year, and we wanted to get ahead of things." Nearly two full weeks prior to the announcement that schools would be closed across the state due to the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic, Mr. Broadrick met with the high school leadership team to determine what actions needed to be taken in order to prepare for a shift to fully remote learning.

The PMHS leadership team's conversations began with discussions about whether learning could continue at home. Fortunately, in the years leading up to Spring 2020, PMHS had already implemented a one-to-one computing device initiative, whereby each student and each staff member was given a laptop computer for school use. In addition, the school adopted the use of Google Classroom, which enabled teachers to create and curate digital content for students to access anytime and anywhere they had internet connectivity – this included at home. Since approximately 80% of the instructional staff were already using Google Classroom on a regular basis for instruction, the leadership team was confident that little needed to be done in terms of providing technology access to students and staff to continue learning during the school closures. Mr. Broadrick noted that specific professional development was provided to teachers needing to further develop their skills related to using Google Classroom.

"WE KNEW THERE WAS A POSSIBILITY THAT SCHOOLS MAY CLOSE ON A LONG-TERM BASIS FOR THIS SCHOOL YEAR, AND WE WANTED TO GET AHEAD OF THINGS."

- TIM BROADRICK, SUPERINTENDENT

Prior to the statewide school building closures, all PMHS students were surveyed to determine whether they had the necessary internet access to continue learning at home. Those few individuals who did not have the necessary access received additional support in order to correct this issue. In addition, the school's technology department staff members began working with all teachers and instructional staff to prepare them for the remote use of technology. According to Mr. Broadrick, "Our technology department was already primed for this shift. We have an excellent technology support team, and they had a proactive attitude toward going into this, so the process was quite smooth." With a robust technology help desk ticketing system already in place, there was little concern about being able to provide the technology support for remote digital learning. The technology team focused its efforts leading up to the school closure by developing and posting instructional "how to" videos to be made available to teachers. These videos enhanced the technical support related to the use of digital tools and resources for instruction.
In the week leading up to the school closure, the school leadership team collaborated with the teachers’ union leadership to define the expectations for the remote delivery of instruction to students. The expectation was that all teachers would be using Google Classroom to post lessons and related assessments online for students to access at home with their school issued laptop computers. Specific professional development was provided to those teachers who needed assistance making this shift to digital teaching and learning.

Teachers were expected to reduce the amount of curriculum being taught during the school closure to focus on what each teacher believed to be the essential content of their courses. "We, the teachers and the administration, jointly believed that we needed to be available for our students," Mr. Broadrick noted. Therefore, teachers designated three hours of each school day to what they called "office hours," a regular, designated time when students and parents could count on teachers being available to support the students remotely via Google Meet.

There was further agreement that teachers would require a minimum of three formative assessments per week, as determined by each individual teacher; at the same time, grading and performance reporting would be reduced, with the traditional grading system remaining in place but assignments simplified, deadlines eased, and “late” work accepted in all classes. With these adjusted expectations in place, teaching and learning would continue, and students were expected to progress academically. In addition, attendance in the remote learning setting was determined based on whether students were engaging with their online coursework and/or communications with their teachers.

While these preparations went fairly smoothly, Mr. Broadrick noted, “Developing the plan to deliver and provide special education accommodations to students proved to be a little more of a challenge.” The school leadership team understood that face-to-face supports were not an option during the school closure, so instructional staff (including the school's paraprofessionals) and school leaders aimed to maintain frequent contact with the families of those students in need and provide as much support as they could virtually while also complying with state and federal requirements. "Our team recognized that this was not the ideal situation for providing services, but we were confident we would be able to help all students move forward during this crisis," reported Mr. Broadrick.

While the continuity of teaching and learning was a priority for PMHS, the school leadership team understood that communication with families and making sure that all families were healthy and safe during the COVID-19 crisis was the greatest priority. According to Mr. Broadrick, "We knew we needed to provide meal services to families in need, and that communication prior to the school closures and during the school closures would be essential for our school community." During the two weeks prior to the closing of the school, the administrative team mapped out a communication plan for students and families. This plan included holding class meetings prior to the school closure to inform students of the possible closures and to give them guidance on how to continue learning at home with digital resources. In addition, teachers provided opportunities for students to practice using Google Classroom for this specific purpose.

In addition, Mr. Broadrick and the school administrators provided communications to parents and community members prior to the statewide announcement of the school closures. These communications outlined that extended school closure may become a reality, and they provided an overview of the provisions that were being put in place in anticipation of that event. Mr. Broadrick stated, "This was a proactive measure on our part. We felt we needed to do this to provide transparency throughout our community to assure parents that we had a plan.”

"WE, THE TEACHERS AND THE ADMINISTRATION, JOINTLY BELIEVED THAT WE NEEDED TO BE AVAILABLE FOR OUR STUDENTS,"

- TIM BROADRICK, SUPERINTENDENT
Milton Area School District (MASD) serves approximately 2,000 students grades K-12 in rural north central Pennsylvania. The district has been in the process of comprehensive K-12 digital conversion for the past 5 years, and these efforts have proven very valuable as the district was forced to shift emergency remote teaching and learning resulting from state-mandated schools closures in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to MASD school superintendent, Dr. Cathy Keegan, “It was very clear that the work that we have been doing over the past 5 years has contributed to our success in shifting to emergency remote learning.” Prior to the extended school closures within the state of Pennsylvania, MASD implemented a one-to-one computing device initiative, coupled with a growing use of digital curriculum at all grade levels, in an effort to support a forward-thinking, innovative learning model aimed toward the personalization of education for all students.

“As the COVID-19 pandemic began to intensify throughout the nation, Dr. Keegan and her leadership team recognized that they may need to close schools for an extended period of time. Two weeks prior to the official closure of schools in Pennsylvania, the MASD leadership team began meeting to develop plans for the continuity of learning. According to Dr. Keegan, “Our first step was to go to our school Emergency Management Plan (also known as an all-hazards plan) to consider what aspects of our schooling needed to be addressed.” After consulting that document, Dr. Keegan formed a cross-functional team within her staff to address the relevant processes and decision points in order to continue learning through an extended school closure. Fortunately, MASD already had a process in place for remote learning in the form of a formal "Flexible Instruction Day" plan already approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. This plan detailed the structures and supports the school district has put in place in the event of temporary school closures, which in Pennsylvania are most likely to be caused by inclement weather. However, this particular plan also aligned with the needs presented during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each student within the school district was assigned an individual computing device for their schoolwork as part of their regular educational program prior to the school closures. Students in grades K-5 were assigned tablet devices, and students in grade 6-12 used laptops computers to complete their coursework. Dr. Keegan indicated, “With our teachers’ union already on board and supportive of digital instruction, we were well poised to provide effective educational experiences for students outside of the physical buildings. We did need to work with our local internet service provider, though, to make sure our students had internet connectivity at home to the greatest extent possible.”

Dr. Keegan also indicated that the technology systems to support the digital curriculum and remote teaching strategies were already in place, and the only adjustments that needed to be made from a technological standpoint was to revisit the way the school district delivered technical support to students and staff.

Realizing that the traditional technology help desk structure was not adequate for fully remote learning, the school district’s technology department added a technology chat line for technology staff and instructional coaches to use as students, families, instructional staff, and administrators continue to work remotely. In addition, the school district developed a robust technology help desk website which included “how to” tutorials related to using technology at home.

The MASD remote learning plan to provide effective instruction for students during school closures was based heavily on...
the use of digital curriculum and computing devices. Anticipating the need to move to fully remote learning, the district leadership team committed to utilizing only the regular technology tools and systems that were already in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. "We understood how important it was to keep our process as streamlined and as familiar as possible to the students and families during this shift," Dr. Keegan stated. "Making this change was going to be a very stressful time for everyone involved, so maintaining a familiarity of tools and resources as well as our processes and procedures was extremely important."

While the rapid shift to emergency remote teaching and learning was disruptive to the educational process, the district was committed to maintaining growth in student learning. However, the district leadership team understood that in order for learning to occur, there were some basic needs of the students, families, and staff that needed to be addressed first. Specifically, the team focused on making sure students and their families had access to meals and health-related services. One critical procedure that was established by the district was that all administrators and teachers were responsible for maintaining communication with students and their families to help ensure their health and safety. To help support families effectively, teachers and staff engaged in professional development that emphasized the types of conversations to have with families and how to direct the families to resources they needed. According to the plan, all instruction would be suspended until the basic needs of students and their families were addressed.

The MASD instructional plan called for teachers and instructional staff members to center student learning experiences primarily on enrichment and review of content learned prior to the school closures. Teachers and school leaders were also expected to work collaboratively to determine the essential content of their courses to be taught during the school closures and to focus instruction on that content. No traditional quizzes and tests were expected to be administered during this time; instead, teachers used informal student performance evaluations through formative assessments and "checks for understanding" to determine student learning. Coupled with this style of carefully planned instruction was the implementation of accommodations for students in need. The planning for such accommodations occurred as part of the planning conversations prior to the shift to fully remote learning.

In addition to the professional development on communicating with families to ensure wellness, the district leadership team provided professional learning opportunities specific to technology and time management. Teachers’ skills and comfort level in the use of existing technology tools and resources were reinforced for use during remote teaching and learning, and emphasis was placed on how teachers could structure their day in ways that prioritized their instruction and allowed them to interact with students and their families remotely.

Other aspects of the shift to remote learning the school leadership team needed to address focused on general school operations. At the top of the list of priorities was the need to provide meals for students during the school closure. The district plan was to provide "grab-and-go" meals each day. This would mean that approximately 500 families would need to be served each day, and the district planned on having administrators come to school three times per week to distribute meals.

Although the school district was planning to keep the educational experience as consistent and as similar to the face-to-face experience as possible, it was understood that student and teacher schedules would need to vary, and the process of taking attendance and grading would also need to change. Although the physical school buildings in the district were closed, teachers and administrators were expected to attend all regularly scheduled meetings virtually through video conferencing. This expectation of practice was consistent with the school district teachers union collective bargaining agreement. Attendance was taken daily through classroom meetings held via video conference. While not all students would be able to connect synchronously in this manner, regular check-in calls from teachers would supplement this attendance process. In general, attendance would be based primarily on student engagement and communications with teachers.

The grading process at MASD was also changed significantly. Instead of students receiving earned grades on an A-F scale, the plan for the remainder of the school year, assuming that schools would remain closed through the end of the school year, would be that all courses would be using the “pass/fail” grading scale, and student learning would be assessed through informal formative assessments and student engagement in general.
Taos Academy Charter School (TACS) is a small charter school located in northern rural Taos, New Mexico. Serving approximately 230 students in grades 5-12, the school is structured as a fully blended learning environment in which students typically attend school onsite only two days per week, with different grade levels attending on alternate days of the week. This schedule is made possible through the school’s integral use of digital curriculum for all core subject areas. Students at TACS are expected to work through their digital course content for their core subject areas independently either at home and sometimes at school, depending on the needs of the student. When students attend classes onsite two days each week, they attend seminar-style courses along with 21st century courses aimed at developing the technical and social skills necessary to succeed in their futures.

Students, instructional staff, and administrative leaders at TACS were well-versed in working in a digital learning environment. In mid-March 2020, the state of New Mexico issued an executive order declaring all schools throughout the state to be closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These particular closures occurred right before TACS was scheduled for their own spring break. Knowing that school closures were a possibility, the leadership team at TACS began informally discussing learning continuity plans the week before the spring break. This process started with conversations between two of the school leaders at TACS, Dr. Traci Filiss and Mrs. Elizabeth LeBlanc.

With a general plan outlined by Dr. Filiss and Mrs. LeBlanc, a full staff meeting was held just before spring break began to initiate discussions with staff. The deeper level of planning for learning continuity occurred through the leadership of Dr. Filiss and Mrs. LeBlanc over the spring break period, and the resulting plans were fine-tuned with remaining members of the school leadership team before presentation to the entire staff.

The TACS learning continuity plan relied on the continued use of the existing digital curriculum in order to keep students moving forward with their learning. Since the school already had an established online curriculum from a third-party provider embedded within a learning management system (LMS), and laptop computers already assigned to each student to take home as part of their regular learning process, the shift to a fully remote digital learning model was not very complicated from a technological standpoint. While only a few students relied on the school building for internet access, nearly all other students already had established internet connectivity to support digital learning. No additional technology needed to be purchased in the form of devices; however, Mrs. LeBlanc worked closely with an array of internet service providers to ensure all students had appropriate internet connectivity available to them in their homes in the first few weeks of the learning continuity plan.

In preparation for a possible extended school closure, additional technical training was provided to instructional staff to ensure each staff member was fully prepared to teach remotely. The school leadership team was committed to maintaining the existing level of accountability of students concerning their academic progress. According to Dr. Filiss, “We wanted to keep a “business-as-usual” mindset as much as possible for our students.” She continued, “Even if it was going to be a difficult thing to do for some students and families, we felt it was very important to keep consistency with our processes and expectations as part of a level of emotional and academic support for everyone.” Mrs. LeBlanc added, “We felt it was very important not only for our students that we do not lower our bar of what students need to know and be able to do, but for our teachers as well.” Mrs. LeBlanc explained that the teachers of the school still held
synchronous classes through video conference, but they did reduce the mandatory attendance in enrichment courses; instead, flexibility was extended to students so they could adjust their schedules as their family needs required. In addition, non-academic courses (hands-on, experience-based 21st century courses) and the student-centered advisory sessions were modified to account for the lack of face-to-face contact during the school closure.

“WE FELT IT WAS VERY IMPORTANT NOT ONLY FOR OUR STUDENTS THAT WE DO NOT LOWER OUR BAR OF WHAT STUDENTS NEED TO KNOW AND BE ABLE TO DO, BUT FOR OUR TEACHERS AS WELL.”

- ELIZABETH LEBLANC, DIRECTOR OF INSTRUCTION AND STUDENT SUCCESS

Providing effective remote learning opportunities for the students of TACS was not expected to be a significant challenge for the leadership team. As Dr. Filiss explained, “We already had this expectation embedded within our digital learning culture. There really wasn’t too much of a difference in how we were going to operate.” Mrs. LeBlanc elaborated, adding that specific attention was given to preparing to provide the proper levels of support and accommodations for students who need them. “Our instructional practices and our digital curriculum already have high levels of support built in. We are more than prepared to comply with state and federal guidelines and are confident our existing practices and learning plans already exceed that state-level guidance.” With a strong base for moving to a fully remote academic learning environment, the TACS school leaders were able to focus on planning support for social/emotional issues arising due to the pandemic.

The TACS school leadership team was committed to providing high levels of communication with families to ensure their needs, both academically and emotionally. At the heart of the school’s communication plan was the outreach to families to ensure their wellness. Academics were not the highest priority of the school during the first week of their learning continuity plan implementation, which occurred right after their spring break. “Making sure that our students and their families had what they needed in terms of basic necessities was our top priority. Their health and wellness were most important to us, and academics followed once we knew that the students and families were safe and healthy,” explained Mrs. LeBlanc. In addition, the school leadership team communicated consistently and proactively with families regarding what community resources were available to families beyond the school.

Consistent with the focus on wellness and health, TACS staff were able to also support the local municipal school district to develop a plan to provide lunches for all students while schools were closed. As part of this process, parent groups and staff volunteers from both TACS and the municipal schools coordinated schedules to distribute food to students. In addition, the local food bank and the local ski resort personnel, alongside churches, partnered with the greater school community to help support the learning continuity efforts for all students of Taos.
LOOKING AHEAD

The preceding pages provide an overview of the ways in which the leaders of three school systems scattered across the nation have anticipated and prepared for the emergency school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Each school leader implemented practices and protocols to provide students with the best opportunities to continue learning remotely, and each school system experienced both successes and shortcomings. This research brief attempts to provide some background information regarding the efforts of these leaders, and the Institute for Teaching and Leading will soon be publishing a follow-up brief that highlights the actual impacts that the preparations had on each school system’s continuity of learning.