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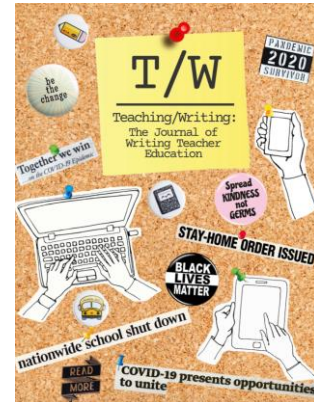
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Bringing Out the Best of Leaders, Teachers, and Students in the midst of COVID-19: Lessons Learned from Russell County, Alabama



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Introduction

Change is inevitable; however, the immediacy of certain situations often leaves leaders without the opportunity to prepare for that change. The most recent worldwide crisis, COVID-19, changed the world we once knew and even so, resurfaced our educational landscape. At the onset of the pandemic, educational leaders in the United States had no idea of the implications related to COVID-19 and how it would forever alter the school buildings we grew accustomed to. Educators and families unquestionably could not have anticipated the 2019-2020 school year ending in the manner it did.

At the onset of school closures, the pandemic opened the door for new learning opportunities for teachers, students, and parents. As doors shut, the school's purpose remained the same. Continued learning experiences were at the forefront of educators' and guardians' minds as all stakeholders prepared to navigate unfamiliar roads ahead. At the mercy of the governors' public health orders and state department of education guidelines, systems were tasked with providing continued learning opportunities by means of virtual instruction, packet instruction, or a blended approach. It was with that transition that the face of public education might forever be changed.

The Continuity Plan

The Russell County School District is nestled in the heart of Russell County, Alabama and composed of approximately 3,512 students. Comprised of seven total schools, Russell County has five elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. On average, students reside in rural areas of east Alabama and come from homes of low socioeconomic status. Regardless of the demographics, the Russell County School District proudly declares to be "on the move." Carrying out that motto each day, the leaders of the Russell County School District validated that statement while navigating the uncertainty of COVID-19 and its impact on public education.

Russell County's Approach

As of March 2020, classrooms across the district expanded beyond the four walls of the traditional classroom. While many school systems already had one-to-one initiatives, Russell County was currently in the planning stages of implementing a one-to-one program at the secondary level. Even though the system was not officially one-to-one, all schools had a myriad of technology devices on hand and teachers received professional development focused on technology on a regular basis. Additionally, the superintendent gifted every teacher with their own Chromebook in January which ended up being an unexpected blessing that supplemented the availability of technology during the pandemic.

Collaboration on behalf of teachers and students has always been the foundation of Russell County's leadership. As news was released, and the COVID-19 crisis became widely known, school and system leaders quickly convened to develop a plan in case the pandemic closed schools. School closures in Alabama presented another opportunity for the school system to shine while supporting the growth of students in Russell County. Leaders, teachers, students, and parents joined forces to guarantee that learning was not interrupted despite the widespread pandemic. As more information was passed down from the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE), district leaders quickly responded by developing a plan for continued learning in the midst of COVID-19's uncertainty.

Russell County School District's superintendent led the mission with expectations that every student, regardless of socioeconomic status, home internet status, or grade level would be provided the opportunity to continue meaningful learning experiences until conditions returned to normal. Dr. Brenda Coley, the system's superintendent, was determined to accomplish the system's mission and vision, no matter the cost. With her team of district leaders, each department collaborated to remain certain that equity and access was not hindered, and every hurdle was addressed before it was encountered. As each neighborhood school had its own distinctions, the leadership team quickly brought in each individual principal to provide input and feedback related to the results of district collaboration. Principals, a vital part of carrying out the system's vision, provided valuable feedback, communicated the vision to teachers, and helped make every step of the way fruitful. Thus, the creation of the Russell County School Closure Plan materialized.

The School Closure Plan

In response to the Alabama State Department of Education's Academic Continuity Plan, leaders within the Russell County School District collaborated to produce the district's response and plan for continuous instruction. Led by the department of curriculum and instruction, directors and principals collaborated to brainstorm

ideas related to what would work best for the students and families. With students at the forefront of every decision that was made, district leadership emphasized the importance of “people over process” throughout each stage of planning. Not knowing what students and families were experiencing during the economic downturn, the system made sure to remain flexible during the fourth nine-week grading period.

The Russell County “School Closure Plan” was drafted by district and school leadership and was well-received by teachers. Valuing teacher buy-in, district leadership communicated the vision with teachers through a series of webinars, virtual question and answer sessions, professional development sessions, and surveys. Through these techniques, the leaders were able to ease the minds of teachers by addressing all concerns before virtual learning began. With the best interest of students’ achievement and social emotional needs in mind, leaders and teachers collaborated on behalf of the students’ needs. The plan communicated important dates, teacher access to school buildings, teaching schedules, lesson planning, and communication logs to keep all stakeholders involved for the remainder of the school year.

Teachers, using Google Classroom and other educational technology tools, awakened the virtual movement with innovation, hands-on, and minds-on experiences for all students in the Russell County attendance zone. Virtual instruction brought new and exciting learning experiences which included live video conferencing, pre-recorded and edited video instruction, small group, and individual instruction. While the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected many families across the United States, Russell County believes the pandemic also had a positive effect on public education.

COVID-19’s Impact on Teachers and Students

With most students participating in virtual instruction, teachers and students embraced the “new normal” and exceeded expectations. Even through virtual instruction, students and teachers remained face-to-face, engaged, and creative. The teachers, like always, planned, collaborated, and went above and beyond on behalf of each individual student in the district. Lessons were recorded in garages, students experienced virtual field trips, and remediation based on individual need took place on a daily basis.

As educators are subject to much criticism, the courage, hard work, and dedication of educators during the pandemic must be documented. COVID-19 truly brought out the best the world has ever seen from public educators. With students remaining the focus of everything Russell County does, the School Closure Plan truly brought out the best in students as well. Looking back at the data, most students participated

virtually and when students were unable to participate virtually, packets of materials and resources were given to students that mirrored virtual instruction. When faced with a blended approach, teachers taught virtually on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and teleconferenced students with packets on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Additionally, separate packets were provided for special education students based on Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals.

More specifically, students and teachers excelled in the area of writing instruction, collaboration, and feedback. While writing is a vital part of English Language Arts (ELA) instruction, it seldom receives the devotion it needs to foster deep writing success in all learners. Additionally, as more and more students enter the classroom below grade level in reading, the ability to write is often overshadowed by a students' focus on learning to read rather than reading and writing to learn. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, brought out the best of students and teachers in the area of writing to learn. As each instructor planned instruction based upon the School Closure Plan, creativity and innovation in lesson preparation and delivery soared.

Upon release of the ALSDE Continuity Plan, state leaders also released a document they named "critical standards." As students, especially in high school, had the potential of being passed on to the next level credit bearing course, the state and system wanted to make sure each student had the knowledge of "critical standards" in order to enter the next grade level or course with the skill they needed to be successful. The critical standards, organized by grade level, were the focus of all virtual instruction, especially the standards on the critical standards chart that had not been covered during the first, second, and third nine weeks.

Many of the standards included on the ALSDE Critical Standards Chart cover vital writing skills students need to read and respond to text. Through standards-based instruction, students and teachers were able to expand their writing skills without the barrier that classroom management sometimes presents in the face-to-face setting. Without behavior issues, students and teachers were able to engage and explore the writing process in a deeper and focused manner. When learning difficulties took place, students had access to instructional videos and resources immediately, unlike having to wait until the next day of class in the face-to-face format of school. The ability to get immediate and individualized assistance supplemented the students' learning experiences while reinforcing essential skills.

Standards-based instruction was not the only aspect of writing that was positively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Prevalent across the district, teachers and students soared above expectations by collaborating and providing feedback through writing. Often difficult to implement in the physical classroom, students and teachers were able to collaborate with each other, learn from each other's

experiences, reflect, and provide feedback to peers. Writing, beside other aspects of virtual learning, is the area district leaders saw students shine the most. Students, due to a number of factors, have the potential to be shy, reluctant to participate, and scared to present in face-to-face classes at times. Teachers in Russell County, on the other hand, expressed a much different experience through virtual instruction. One teacher in particular shared that students were more vocal when they were able to write their responses as compared to participation in the face-to-face setting. She shared the meaning behind her thoughts by stating that often times in a physical classroom, outspoken students typically take over classroom instruction. In the virtual classroom, writing skills, feedback for writing, and collaboration increased since writing was the main mode of response during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Takeaways

Building upon the innovation and impact Russell County teachers had during the pandemic, one must reflect on the importance of teachers. As more money is poured into instructional technology, researchers have documented the single most important factor responsible for an increase in student achievement, the teacher (Strong et al., 2011; Wayne & Youngs, 2010). Research on teacher effectiveness has also highlighted that “without good teachers, no educational reforms will succeed at helping all students learn to their full potential” (Strong et al., 2011). Even though Russell County saw much success through technology and virtual instruction, the success was largely because of the hard work and expertise of classroom teachers. As public health orders are being lifted and a new school year looms in the near future, it is important to reflect on the experience teachers, students, and stakeholders had during the first half of 2020. That experience will prepare schools and systems for the road ahead as the focus on virtual instruction and resources is at an all-time high.

Flipped Classrooms

With most of 2020’s educational delivery being virtual, educators must reidentify with the characteristics of the flipped classroom approach. Flipped classrooms, widely used in recent times, focus on students becoming familiar with material while at home to allow for more time during school for collaboration and extension of knowledge.

If COVID-19 did nothing else, educators in Russell County agree that the level of collaboration, innovation, and feedback has increased because of the pandemic’s shift to virtual instruction. With Google Classroom being the main resource used by Russell County, teachers were able to provide focused instruction, feedback, and remediation in a flipped classroom setting that would be difficult to offer in a 58-minute class period.

Remediation

Summer slide is a term used to describe the loss of information students may encounter while being at home during the summer. Many schools and systems provide programs and resources to combat summer slide and to lessen the effect of being out of school when returning. COVID-19, of course, has the potential to widen the gap even more and cause schools and systems to spend more time remediating from the start and spiraling missed skills throughout the year.

As students reenter the school buildings, learning loss and the effects of learning from home is the focus of much conversation in the K-12 arena. As curriculum companies flood the market with resources for school systems, educational leaders are searching for the best method to assess the learning loss and providing remediation and support for student weaknesses. The Russell County School District has had much conversation about assessing the learning loss and plans to use a number of methods to assess and remediate during the 2020-2021 school year.

With curriculum programs being purchased and implemented combined with pre-assessments being developed by teachers, students will return to school (either virtually or face-to-face) with the opportunity to immediately begin working on weaknesses in order to continue progressing forward. Additionally, in addition to learning new grade level standards, the teachers will have the opportunity to spiral in the missed skills from COVID-19 into classroom instruction. Spiraling the weaknesses throughout daily instruction will help students interact with the material on a frequent basis which will, in turn, support the foundation students need to advance through coursework.

Writing Instruction

For systems looking for assistance with virtual writing instruction, the Russell County School District showed to be a leader in collaboration, student discourse, and feedback. As writing is a large component of educational assessment, teachers and students excelled when provided the opportunity for virtual learning. In addition to the stages of the writing process, students learned valuable lessons related to writing when exposed to formats of digital media, presentation software, and online classrooms. What better way to promote twenty-first century and new literacies than transitioning to a virtual classroom amidst a global pandemic? While students were once compared across nations, it was during the COVID-19 crisis that all students were equal and faced the challenge of transitioning to virtual learning.

Importance of Leadership

The biggest takeaway from the COVID-19 pandemic was the importance of leadership. The precedence set in Russell County should be looked upon as a model for schools and systems in need of quality educational leadership. Initiated by the superintendent, the Russell County School District modeled cohesiveness, support, and care for the most important resource, it's people. While the "process" of education sometimes takes precedence, the system modeled a valuable lesson during the COVID-19 crisis, which showed that caring for the people involved in education over the process of education is of utmost importance.

Conclusion

Effective teachers focus students on the central reason for schools to exist – learning (Strong et al. 2011, p. 341). Even though COVID-19 closed the doors of the school, educators across the nation soared beyond expectations to continue offering valuable learning experiences in the absence of a physical school building. Furthermore, the Russell County School District is excited to continue offer virtual learning experiences and learning support to students in the years to come. Depending on upcoming guidance from the Alabama State Department of Education, the teachers and students of Russell County are prepared for a virtual or face-to-face reopening plan.

In the words of the system's Superintendent, Dr. Brenda Coley, "Trials come in our lives as a manner to make us stronger and better. We have worked tirelessly to ensure that students are receiving sustainable remote learning, especially in disadvantaged areas. Together, we have compiled our strategies and resources to assist us in navigating this challenging era."

She continued to say, "When I reflect on how our school district, like many others, have provided learning opportunities to our students through technology, I am amazed by how creative and innovative educators have become. Some of us are instructing in ways that we would have never imagined as a result of this pandemic."

Highlighting notable achievements during the pandemic, the Superintendent stated that the system has:

- served more than four thousand meals during school closure;
- distributed more than one thousand Chromebooks to students in order to engage student learning;
- expanded internet access for students by sending out Wi-Fi-enabled school buses at various community sites;

- received at \$20,000 “Be Healthy” Grant for students at two elementary schools;
- prepared a face-to-face (within social distancing guidelines) graduation for over 180 seniors of Russell County High School.

She concluded the list of accomplishments by stating, “As educators and a community of learners, we are now better prepared to deliver quality instruction at a distance and face-to-face after reopening whenever that may occur. We know, without a doubt, that these COVID-19 experiences have evolved us closer to our destiny of excellence” (RCSD, 2020, p. 4).

The beginning of the article referenced the fact that COVID-19 has forever changed our educational landscape. As such, schools are better prepared to provide virtual learning throughout the regular school year and/or school closures. School systems in the southeast frequently are the victim of school closures due to weather events that have the potential to affect the safety of students and families while at school or on the way to school. School calendars frequently include “weather days” that are accounted and reserved for times such as these. Now, with the lessons learned in the midst of COVID-19, our educators are more prepared than ever to continue learning experiences by means of virtual instruction when schools are closed for weather. Largely, because of the virtual aspect of COVID-19, educators will recover from this crisis with new tools under their toolbelt which will, in turn, positively affect the educational experience in the United States of America.

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