

## **'There Is No Guidebook': Being the Principal in the Age of Coronavirus**

By Denisa R. Superville on March 18, 2020 5:21 PM

Virtual calming corners for students. Online staff hangouts instead of in-person team meetings. Student advisory groups on Zoom. Video morning greetings for students.

This is what the principal's job is looking like right now in the age of coronavirus.

"These are things that pop into our heads when we are trying sleep at night," said Kelly Corbett, the principal of Otsego Elementary School in Otsego, Minn., listing of a stream of ideas that she and her staff are knitting together to keep their colleagues and students connected while schools are closed because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"What else do we need to do? How can we make this better? Because there is no guidebook."

With nearly 40 million K-12 students across the country out of school, principals will play a pivotal role in ensuring that student learning can continue in some form—and there are vast unknowns with that—and that students can still get some of the mental health and social-emotional supports they would have had access to if they'd been in school.

It's unclear when students will return to school. While most have declared initial closures of two to three weeks, that is likely to change. Kansas has announced that students will not go back to school this academic year and governors in Ohio and California have said that their students are unlikely to return before the summer.

For Corbett, being principal and an instructional leader at this moment means being calm. Yes, she is working on making sure that teachers are developing high-quality lessons, answering questions about content and teaching, and helping trouble-shoot along the way when teachers start using a digital platform they've really only used for short periods, mainly snow days.

But being that calming and motivating presence is essential, she said.

"I think that's the most important thing that leaders need to do right now," she said. "We need to be prepared. We don't need to panic. We have the resources in front of us. We have great educators. We just need to plan."

"There will be bumps in the road; there will be glitches. Things happen."

But school leaders have to be open and ready to share information as the situation rapidly evolves.

"That's kind of my main job—to make sure that the information is accurate and timely," she said.

"When people have access to information, their anxiety level goes down and they are able to plan better."

### **A Sudden Pivot to Online Learning**

Kerensa Wing, the 2020 National Association of Secondary School Principals Principal of the Year, was in her school this week with the instructional leadership team helping teachers get up to speed on some of the technology they would need over the next few weeks. Some needed help making video lessons and how to conduct video chats.

"It's new territory for me," Wing, the principal of Collins Hill High School in the Gwinnett County, Ga., district, said of the shift to full-time online learning. "One day I'm suddenly in charge of an online campus, with students and teachers who haven't done this for more than two days. We're all going to learn and grow together and come out at the end at a better place."

Before students left, the high school surveyed students to find out how many don't have access to the internet or a device at home. Five families called to ask for books or alternative assignments to the online courses that most students would take while schools are closed.

Most of the lessons and activities will be accessible on a cellphone. Students can also use an Xbox or a PS 4 gaming console if they have internet access, and cable providers like Comcast are providing free internet service.

Cognizant that students may also be sharing devices while at home, lessons have been pared down from 55 minutes to 30 minutes. (Wing said she knows that's not enough for an Advanced Placement class. Those students have additional readings and other work assigned.) Students also have the ability to watch a video assignment, complete it in writing, and send a photo of the completed assignment back to the teacher.

"The teachers are trying to be considerate of the fact that they are sharing technology during the day," she said. "We are being flexible with the submission times."

If students do not sign on for any virtual work for three days, school staff will reach out to the parents. They're also encouraging parents to ask their children to show them their work, and not just take the student's word that they are completing their assignments online.



"That's the teachers' biggest fear—it's that the kids don't get online and do [the work]. If we are doing this for several weeks, what happens when they return?"

Teachers will also try to arrange digital "office hours" and video chats with students so that they can see and interact with each other in a live setting, she said.

For her part, Wing is also trying to keep in touch with the school community with daily updates. And she sent out a "messenger" laying out expectations for students, what parents can do to help, and where students can pick up meals during the closure. She said she'll try to do one every week.

"We want to continue the learning," she said. "We want to keep it positive, be patient with folks. We are going to be patient with their learning curve. We want them to be patient with the students' learning curve. This is the first time they will be online for more than two days in a row."

### **Virtual Mental Health and Social-Emotional Supports**

Attending to student's mental and emotional needs will be challenging when students are outside of their reach and surrounded by news that's scary for adults.

While few schools have had to amass instructional digital content for months on end—many districts had to experiment for shorter periods, for snow days and hurricane closures, for example—meeting the non-academic needs can be a harder task during prolonged closure.

Corbett said she's been working with teachers on creating engaging lessons.

"The teachers can have the most beautifully designed lessons, but if it's not engaging, it really doesn't matter," Corbett said.

Student engagement is a focus at Corbett's school. There's lunch with a teacher day, lots of small group instruction to help students and teachers get to know each other. Corbett also has lunch with students once a month so they can ask her questions.

Mindfulness and self-regulating practices are built into classrooms. Students have access to calming corners where they can take a time out to play with a squishy ball, water globe, or relax.

They've tried to build in those practices into the virtual lessons planned during the closures. Teachers plan to greet students with a video message in the morning, similar to what they would have heard in

the classroom. The school day will follow a familiar schedule, including with mindfulness breaks built into the schedule.

"It could be everything from counting your breaths, different ways to regulate your breathing, physical activities," she said. "We'll have to figure out the best way to keep those experiences going when the students aren't here."

The school's two social workers and counselors are coming up with self-regulating activities that students can do at home. The physical education teacher is also crafting a list of activities for parents. Students will also have the ability to message their teachers directly.

### **A Keeper of Hope**

At Elk Grove High School in Elk Grove Village, Ill., teachers were spending this week preparing lesson plans for students—while maintaining social distance.

While students are out of school this week, there's no online instruction planned, giving teachers additional time to prepare for when it starts later in the month, Principal Paul Kelly said.

On Tuesday, the school's student advisory group met on Zoom, a video conference platform, and they had a lot of questions for Kelly and Associate Principal Arturo Senteno about what could be ahead.

A senior, who planned to play softball in college, wanted to know what's going to happen to the softball season. Another had questions about a friend who does not have internet access at home. How was she going to do the assignments? Another had questions about what happens if they needed personal attention. What if their grades dropped as a result?

In many cases, Kelly didn't have all the answers. He told the student that he was unsure whether the season would continue, but his contributions were valued.

"It's hard when you're not able to answer the question, 'Is my career over?' " Kelly said.

"You could sense it in these kids' voices—it all comes down to, 'How can I make life normal?'" Kelly said. "It's really sweet that these kids would ask us questions about life, but they would be asking their teachers those questions."

But he tried to reassure them that the staff will be understanding.

"We really do use the word grace," he said. "People are going to operate with a lot of grace. We know that our staff truly cares about our kids. They are going to understand that this is a challenge, unlike any we've faced before. It will require everyone to work extra hard to ensure that the young people meet the expectations that have been set and be flexible about when something is completed."

Kelly hosted an online meeting for the staff, and they too have tons of questions. "How can we make this right for students? How can we make this work?"

He said he's confident that teachers will do their best for students, but his message for them now is to take care of their own emotional health.

"You are only going to be able to help the kids if you are in the right emotional space," he said. "Take care of the stresses in your home, with your family, and we will work together to make the e-learning work for kids."

For him, being a principal right now means inspiring hope.

"I think my role shifts completely into this symbolic keeper of hope," he said. "My role in this family is to make sure that we know that we are trying to get them whatever they need, having staff members feeling like we care about them as humans and as families, and all of the details of their professional lives will get resolved."

It's a similar message for students.

"We are here," he said. "We are still going to be here. We're going to pick up the phone. We're going to answer the emails. School is such a critical cornerstone of a stable society, and... a principal needs to be a big part of that... ."



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