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# Vanguard Practices

FALL/  
WINTER  
2020 from practitioners

This magazine is published  
three times a year by the  
**School Administrators Association  
of New York State**  
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Latham, NY 12110  
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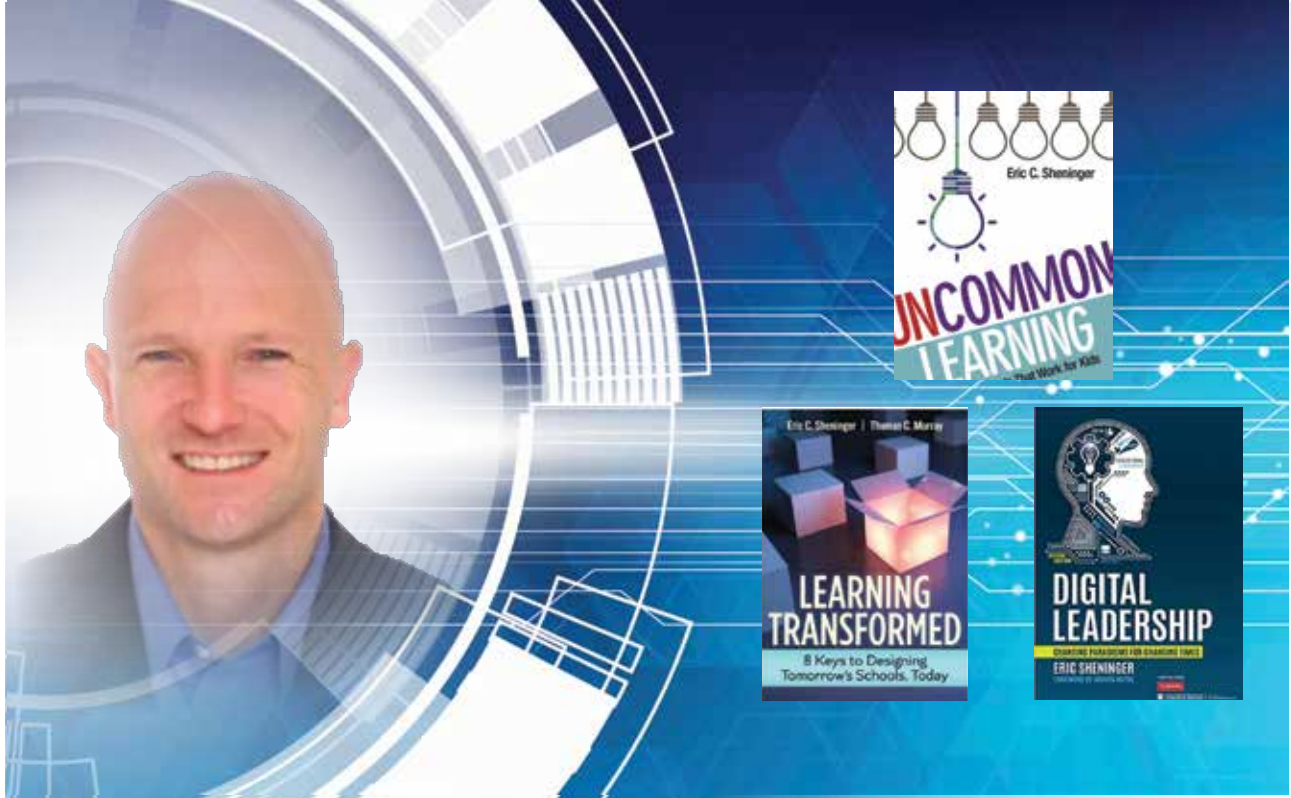
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**ERIC SHENINGER ON...**

# Digital Leadership TODAY

By Ellen Ullman

When it comes to leadership in a digital world, Eric Sheninger – author, innovator, speaker, and the award-winning former principal at New Milford High School – has a lot to say. Currently serving as an associate partner with the International Center for Leadership in Education, Sheninger has worked with hundreds of schools and districts on their digital transformation.

*Vanguard* recently spoke with Sheninger for insight into how school leaders can support their teachers and communities as they navigate this school year of hybrid and remote lessons.

## TIME MANAGEMENT IS PARAMOUNT

“The biggest challenge I see is that everyone is trying to use traditional methodologies in a remote environment, which doesn’t work,” says Shenerger. “Teachers are working longer and harder than ever and many are becoming stressed to the point of breaking.”

Shenerger goes on to offer some advice. It is crucial to help teachers find ways to free up time, he says. Leaders need to work with their teachers to map out frameworks that help them with this. Introducing a hybrid or flexible schedule — in which students spend chunks of time remote and working independently — gives teachers the time to breathe, focus, and plan. Another idea is to have teachers dedicated to either the remote or face-to-face students so they don’t have to focus on both groups simultaneously.

Going with a blended learning strategy can also help teachers get back planning time. There are several ways to implement blended instruction, which combines face-to-face and online learning. One district Shenerger works with uses a rotational teaching model. For each class, the teacher starts with direct instruction. Next, small groups of students move through various “stations” and do targeted instruction, personalized/adaptive learning, and independent/collaborative work. During this time, teachers can meet with students one-on-one or plan future lessons. Classes end with a closure activity.

School leaders need to find ways for teachers to work differently. As Shenerger says, “We need to ask ourselves: ‘How much of the curriculum has meaning in the real world? What has the most value to enable our learners to be successful?’” Let your teachers know that it’s okay to apply that type of thinking to condense the curriculum. Support them as they try new things and reassure them. Let them know they can focus on the standards that are the most important.

“Essentially, it comes down to rethinking how time is being used. That’s one of the biggest struggles for teachers right now. We have to [look

through a teacher’s] lens to see how time is being used and come up with strategies to free the teachers.”

## EXPAND YOUR DEFINITION OF EQUITY

When we hear the word *equity*, we tend to just think about technology and internet access. Shenerger reminds us that equity is about making sure all students have what they need, when they need it, including non-tech resources like food, emotional and academic support, feedback, and so on.

Are your students meeting the outcomes you set forth? If not, you need to look at all of your supports and resources, including digital, to make sure every learner gets what he or she needs. “Put systems in place that focus on improving outcomes for all students, whether it’s inclusion, fairness, or making sure rigorous standards are laid out for everyone,” he says. “The challenge is making sure there is scaffolded academic content and support.”

It’s not always about the amount of resources but about how those resources are used. Leaders must strengthen their communication, perhaps with surveys and outreach, to find out what is needed for success. “Look at changes to scheduling and how you can provide the supports to identify and close gaps. Invest in the supports that are needed to help those kids get to the next level.”

## ENSURE THAT EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY IS BEING USED

It’s up to school and district leaders to make the remote learning experience something everyone wants to be part of. Shenerger’s recommendations include moving away from one-size-fits-all learning, helping teachers find a balance between synchronous and asynchronous learning, and providing adequate training and resources so that teachers learn how to deliver engaging, interactive online lessons.

When he visited classrooms, Shenerger noticed that students in hybrid classes were not talking because of social distancing. Leaders need to

Work with teachers to incorporate voice, choice, path, pace, and place to make digital learning relevant.

help teachers figure out how to use Google Meet or Zoom breakout rooms so that the students in hybrid or remote classes can talk to each other. “We have to up our game so that students gain the skills and competencies they need, including collaboration and cooperative learning. It’s so important.” Once we get them talking, we then need to get them answering questions collaboratively and solving problems to build competencies and master standards.

Work with teachers to incorporate voice, choice, path, pace, and place to make digital learning relevant.

- **Voice:** Whenever possible, let students have a say during the learning process. Some digital tools Shenerger has seen teachers use to effectively get student responses are Nearpod, Seesaw, and Canvas.
- **Choice:** Give students control over their learning by using choice boards or playlists.
- **Path:** Find ways to let students determine their own paths during remote or hybrid learning. Examples include customized curriculum, asynchronous virtual courses, and independent study.
- **Pace:** Let students manage their time to complete self-paced activities.
- **Place:** If possible, allow students to attend school remotely at home or come to school for in-person learning.

## NOW IS THE TIME TO UP YOUR FEEDBACK PRACTICE

No one was trained or prepared for this, and school and district leaders spent a lot of time this summer focusing on health and safety protocols instead of on distance-learning strategies.

When it comes to feedback, says Shenerger, we usually tell people what they want to hear instead of having conversations about their practice.





Although the latter might not be positive, it's the only way to move forward. Making people feel good is a necessary component for developing a positive culture, but it shouldn't come at the expense of shying away from the problematic and thought-provoking conversations that are needed to drive change.

Focus on feedback that is timely and specific. Your goal is to help your teachers internalize what they have to do to meet or exceed expectations. By modeling this type of feedback, you can help teachers learn how they can in turn offer feedback to their students.

**The biggest challenge I see is that everyone is trying to use traditional methodologies in a remote environment, which doesn't work.**

Feedback can help bring people together, especially in these challenging times, but you have to deliver it well. We typically think of feedback as something you "give" to someone else, but Sheninger says that if the goal is to help others grow, then feedback needs to take the form of a dialogue. "Delivering feedback in the form of a monologue is an outdated process that can be improved whether you are working with kids or adults," he says. "Think about creating conditions in which the receiver will value the recommendations."

These five components of feedback can ensure that it's beneficial to everyone:

1. **Positive delivery**, including words and body language: Don't just focus on areas of improvement; focus on a broad plan for growth that reinforces good practices.
2. **Practical and specific**: Focus on things the teacher can do immediately and will have an impact.
3. **Timely**: Essential if you want the feedback to be a catalyst for improvement.
4. **Consistency**: To create a growth culture in which everyone feels supported.
5. **Use the right medium**: Do not give feedback over email or text. When possible, do it in person or over video, with phone as a backup.

Teachers and students want feedback that provides the motivation to improve. When we focus on messaging that encourages the receiver to value the recommendations, it's a big win for everyone.

## MOVING FORWARD

Above all, leaders need to make sure their teachers are working differently – not doing twice as much work. Understand that they will not be able to cover the entire curriculum. Be empathetic, provide support, and give them feedback on how to grow. Focus on the standards that are the most important.

"For virtually everyone, hybrid learning represents a monumental shift from what has been done in schools. Now we must accept this fact and work to get it right until the pandemic subsides."

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ELLEN ULLMAN has been writing about education technology since 2003. She lives in Burlington, Mass., and is the former editorial director for eSchool News.

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## HYBRID LEARNING:

# Timely and Timeless

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By Pat Fontana

Emma Pass literally wrote the book on hybrid learning. *The Hybrid Teacher Survival Guide* is scheduled to be published in the spring of 2021. Given the current COVID-19 environment, however, she has released an abridged version for teachers who need it now, to help them survive their ever-shifting classroom situation.

Hybrid learning is a timely topic in the midst of the pandemic but is nothing new to Pass or to many educators throughout the country. She has taught in a hybrid learning environment for several years and, as an educational technology consultant, helps other schools make the transition for their staff and students. Although admittedly not a “tech person,” Pass believes that technology makes a huge difference in any classroom and makes hybrid learning possible for both the student and the teacher.

**A TRADITIONAL START**

Pass has landed in Fort Collins, Colorado, by way of Las Vegas and England. She began her teaching career in a traditional brick and mortar school. Her sixth-grade English classes in Las Vegas were “incredibly large” and “incredibly diverse.” As soon as her teaching career began, though, so did her journey into remote learning.

The school received a grant for Chromebooks and her administration “decided to go with technology.” Given the challenges of her class makeup, Pass was very excited about the new opportunities. She was in a position with “almost impossible teaching tasks without the technology.” With the Chromebooks in her students’ hands, she was able to differentiate for her students to meet their specific needs and to keep them engaged.

**THE LAUNCH OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY CONSULTING**

The move from Las Vegas to England, to accommodate her husband’s new job, opened up some interesting new areas for Pass to explore. She began work as a “supply teacher,” which is essentially a substitute teacher and, while learning about their school system, noticed a lack of technology in their educational model.

Pass then connected with a consulting company, Canopy, that is focused on enhancing learning with digital technology. She became an educational technology consultant, using her experience and learning about new tools and new technology along the way. The job involved traveling “all around the UK teaching teachers how to use technology and computers in their classroom.”

Consulting was the perfect culmination of the excitement Pass first felt when her students received those Chromebooks back in Las Vegas, combined with the possibilities that technology held in store for teachers going forward. Educational technology, she says, “encompasses a lot. It could be anywhere from learning how to use physical devices — computers,

iPads, any virtual reality you might have access to in your classroom.” Software, including apps and learning management systems, is a significant factor as well.

With a degree in English, Pass says she can empathize with those teachers who tell her they are also “not really a tech person.” She says, though, that you “don’t need any special knowledge” to make technology work well in the classroom.

**INNOVATIVE LEARNING MODEL WITH A HISTORY**

When Pass returned to the states, she accepted a position with a school in Fort Collins, Colorado. That school, the Poudre School District Global Academy (PGA), was using the hybrid model when she arrived. In fact, they launched as an online school in 2009 and then transitioned to hybrid learning about three years later. So, even though hybrid learning is truly an innovative model, it has actually been in use for many years at some schools.

Clarifying the terms “blended learning” and “hybrid learning,” Pass explains that “a lot of these terms are still evolving as we go,” as we are still entering new territory. She adds that the “general consensus is that blended learning refers to the

tools you are using. It’s a blend between traditional tools such as paper and books, combined with technology such as computers, apps, and educational websites.

Blended learning can take place in a traditional brick and mortar classroom.

Hybrid learning “refers to the place where the student is physically learning — in the school building and remote online.” Hybrid learning typically involves staggered schedules, depending on their grade and learning needs. The elementary school student may be in the physical classroom on



Tuesdays and Thursdays, for example, but learning remotely on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. At PGA, which is K-12, there are different schedules for the elementary, middle, and high school students.

**BEST OF BOTH WORLDS**

When Pass first started teaching, her story was similar to many others across the country. She says she “worked like a maniac,” putting in ten hours a day and working on the weekends. Now she says, she absolutely loves her job. “Personally, the best of both worlds. I love teaching with technology and love the remote and online teaching aspect.”

In a hybrid learning model, she is able to do the “fun, in-person school activities but also spend time working on the technology aspects” when the students are home and learning remotely. She says the hybrid model has “afforded me a work-life balance that I didn’t know was possible in education. It has given me a way to be a teacher and have a life.”

**PREPARATION FOR A SUDDEN TRANSITION**

Her years of experience teaching in the hybrid learning environment prepared Pass, as well as her fellow teachers at PGA, for the sudden transition that occurred in most schools across the country in March 2020. She remembers the exact day, March 16, when she and her colleagues were having lunch and discussing what they had heard from their administration about the possibility that students would not come back to the physical classroom after that weekend.



That day ended up being the last time anyone was in the school building, including the teachers, for a very long time. Pass says, “The plan we made in that ten minutes of lunch would carry us through remote learning in the spring and fall of 2020 with nearly 100 percent student retention, and virtually no instruction time lost.” PGA is a school of choice, so retention is important to its success as well as to the success of its students.

Pass adds that the smooth transition “was possible due to our nature as a hybrid school and our staff, students’, and parents’ familiarity with the tools and technology, and our systems and organization for delivering instruction work remotely.” She says she doesn’t share this story simply to boast, as she understands the challenges so many schools have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, she wants to emphasize “the benefit of a hybrid model, that can easily transition into emergency remote learning due to disease, weather, or any other number of reasons, as well as a model that meets the needs of students, families, for whom traditional education is not working.”

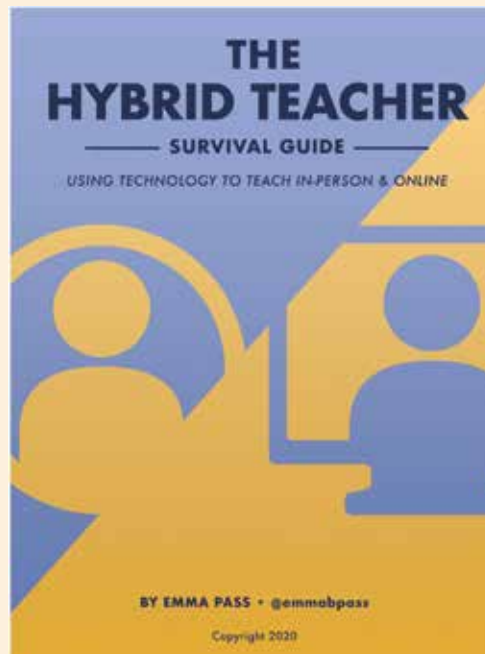
**PATIENCE, FAILURES, AND ULTIMATE SUCCESS**

When asked about her advice for the teacher who is suddenly thrust into the world of hybrid learning or remote learning, Pass immediately responded by saying, “Be very patient with yourself as you learn.” She added that it “does take time to learn all of these new tools and methodologies” and she recognizes that teachers are having to learn “an entirely new way to teach as well as doing an already difficult job.”

Second, she advises teachers to expect a lot of failure. However, they should “fail forward. Celebrate failures as an indication that you are trying.” Sometimes technology just doesn’t work. That’s when it’s time to say, “All right, we’ll just have to try this another day.” As Pass explains, “Freaking out when the technology is not working doesn’t help anybody.”

Finally, she urges teachers to “seek out those resources to help you learn about those tools that will benefit you

**Emma  
Pass**



Emma Pass offers the abridged version of her book now **for FREE**, to assist fellow educators with navigating through

the challenges of our current times. The full book will be available in the spring of 2021. *The Hybrid Teacher: Survival Guide* is available online at <https://www.edtechemma.com/the-hybrid-teacher-book>.

**In addition, Pass offers virtual professional development via videos on her website – <https://www.edtechemma.com/shop> and on YouTube – <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOrPCmsxq4DT2P3pazTApNA/videos>.**

Emma Pass can be contacted through her website <https://www.edtechemma.com> and via Twitter <https://twitter.com/emmapass>.



**THE ADVANTAGES OF FLEXIBILITY**

Pass urges administrators to “take advantage of the increased flexibility in schedule” when moving into a hybrid model. She suggests giving teachers a half day when they are “not responsible for any instruction so they have more time to learn about the new method of teaching.” For example, at her school, students are on campus for a half day on Wednesdays. During the

second half of that day the teachers have the opportunity to collaborate with each other.

In addition, a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning can benefit everyone in a hybrid learning environment. Older students, in particular, need that asynchronous learning model so they can develop executive management skills that will prove beneficial to them as they move on into adulthood.

Administrators should support professional development, Pass says. It is also helpful for administrators to hear from teachers about their challenges, needs, and successes, in the remote and hybrid learning spaces.

### ONE MODEL DOESN'T WORK FOR EVERYONE

The hybrid learning model does not work for every student or every family, and they figure that out very quickly, Pass notes. She adds that “every student has different learning needs. We’ve been trying to do one model of education for a long time and that doesn’t work for every student.”

She has seen tremendous benefit for the students participating in hybrid learning at her school. Some students have social anxiety and they are “physically sick and cry, being anxious about going to school every day.” In the traditional model, they might simply not attend school on days when they feel overly stressed and anxious. Students in the hybrid model, though, “have a day at home between coming into the school building” and that helps those students thrive.

In the hybrid model and now, in the remote environment, there is “a lot of teaching on organization, time management, and motivation.” There is also a great sense of school community and socialization, which helps students and teachers. However, there are still challenges, especially for parents.

For the younger students, especially, families may not be able to provide learning support for students on remote days, either because of work schedules or other factors. There are options for cohorts or small groups of students to study together during

remote or online days, but that can also be a challenge, especially during COVID-19.

Students as well as teachers who are highly extroverted may prefer in-person contact and may even struggle with remote learning and teaching. However, most hybrid models are set up so that remote learning alternates with in-class instruction, so students and teachers do not have more than one day without that in-person contact.

### HYBRID LEARNING AND THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

Pass says that she can imagine a “school where students’ schedules are need-based.” She adds that “if we had a model where you have a class of students that you see regularly and that are working independently, the students who need more support would have tutoring or small group sessions. The students who need more support would have regular interventions.”

In her consulting work, she provides hands-on learning with the tools that teachers and administrators are using to help them be more successful in the hybrid learning environment. She gets a lot of positive feedback. In one school where she consulted specifically on the hybrid model, she says that “everybody feels really excited about what they’re doing.”

Pass thinks there will be many more hybrid schools across the country going forward, as well as online schools. She says, “Technology is advancing to the point where it’s feeling a lot more practical and possible for students to be learning online.” In addition, given the challenges presented by COVID-19, “we’ll be seeing a lot more options for flexible learning.”

The pandemic and its related issues have “shined a light on the digital divide in our country, including the lack of access, devices, and technical skills.” Pass and others like her are working on bridging that divide. She says her “great hope is that this does impact education.”

She is seeing more of an emphasis on social and emotional learning now, as the pandemic has made everyone

realize that some things, like testing, are less important. She would like to see more technology for teachers and more hybrid school models in the U.S. going forward.

The challenges that teachers are currently facing made Pass realize that they need the information and guidance she provides now, even though her book was not scheduled to be published until the spring of 2021. So she worked out an agreement with her publisher and now offers the abridged version of the survival guide, along with other bits of advice, to help teachers and administrators work through this new world of educational technology.

### THE SWEET SPOT

Having started as an online school, transitioning to hybrid learning three years later, PGA in Fort Collins had to transition back to online learning only during COVID-19. Learning was 100 percent remote during the height of the pandemic but returned to the hybrid model in October. Students and teachers have been eager to get back in the classroom for at least part of the week but are well equipped to handle the remote portion of their learning schedule based on their extensive history with the hybrid learning model.

Emma Pass is excited about what the future holds for her students and for hybrid learning. The hybrid model of 50 percent in person and 50 percent online, she says, is the “sweet spot for students and parents in terms of education, community, and social support.”

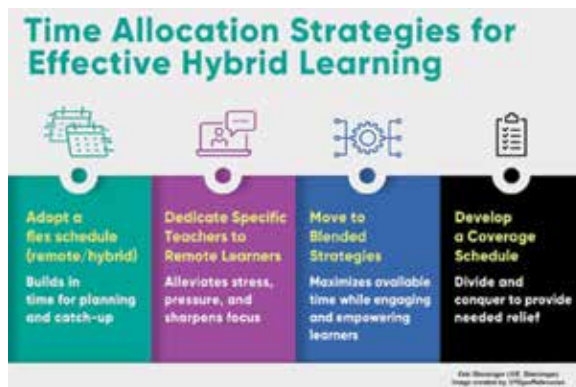
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PAT FONTANA is a business writer and communications trainer with a background in corporate training and community college instruction. Her business, WordsWorking, focuses on improving workplace communications, concentrating on the fundamentals of human interactions.



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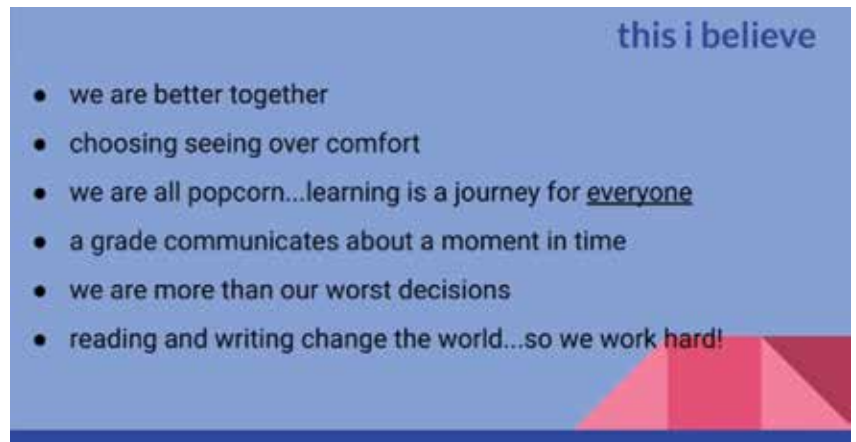
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Created by Diane Cunningham & Randy Hall for PNW BOCES



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## OPINIONS

"Everything should be about pulling kids out of the screen."

– Sal Khant

"We need to be really careful about over-resourcing our teachers. Don't send that email with one more tech tool that can be used, it can be overwhelming and lead to anxiety. Less is more...."

– Dr. Gregory Brown

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Remote Learning

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# Remote Learning: Running with It



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By Diane E. Lang, PhD

While much of the remote learning that took place in spring 2020 was reactive, it focused on core subjects – English, mathematics, social studies, and science. Music, art, physical education, and sports drew less attention. However, there are some very interesting New York State examples of innovative remote teaching in the area of the coaching of team sports. Given current public health challenges, teachers and coaches need support and opportunities to “relearn, rethink, and redefine” coaching, teaching, and learning for remote learning to be successful (Niess and Gillow-Wiles, 2017, p. 499).

The model shared here illustrates this reconceptualization in action.

The remote, virtual format presents dynamic structural challenges to quality physical education and coaching of team athletes. In the Somers Central School District, the coaches of the Somers High School track and field team innovated and provided rich experiences to secondary students. These physical education and sport development activities also activated lifelong technology fluency and social emotional learning.

### VIRTUAL TRACK AND FIELD

In spring 2020 the coaches of the Somers High School track and field team engaged over 100 team members in three virtual meets. The first two included only Somers High School scholar-athletes. The virtual meet set up involved holding an organization meeting on a digital platform. Coaches presented and explained events. Then team captains engaged in live drafts of squads for the meet. Scholar-athletes could be heard cheering and yelling with joy as the draft unfolded. The meets involved asking team members to independently practice and perform the meet events with social distancing measures in place at home or on the road and then report their measurements and times on a wide array of track and field events. As the first two meets were so successful, the coaches expanded the scope of the virtual meet concept and challenged nearby Arlington High School from the Arlington Central School District to a socially distanced, 100 percent virtual meet. In the third virtual meet, the 2020 Tuskers Quarantine Invitational Virtual Meet, over 200 athletes participated.

### THE 2020 QUARANTINE INVITATIONAL MEET

The 2020 Tuskers Quarantine Invitational Virtual Meet was announced in April 2020. Students were sent the logo and descriptions of the classic and innovative track and field events that would be completed April 24 through April 26, 2020 in backyards and on town roads with social distancing in place.

The events included classics like the:

- 55 meter dash
- 200 meter dash
- 400 meter dash
- 800 meter run
- 1600 meter run
- Women's 3,000 meter run, and
- Men's 3,200 meter run.

As well, some new innovative events were designed to address the fact that many of the field events would be hard to duplicate safely in the home-based, virtual meet settings.

New events included the:

- Vegetable can shot put
- Stationary ball toss
- Basketball toss
- Frisbee throw
- Plank challenge
- Standing long jump
- Multijump and
- Multievent (involves six events completed in a row).

Somers pole vaulter Alexander Pedersen, grade 11, said, "This was the best thing I did while in quarantine!" His twin, Nicolas Pedersen, a thrower on the team, taught Alexander how to use classic shot put methods to send a 12 ounce can of vegetables a staggering 63 feet 6 inches, almost as far as Nicolas who sent it 68 feet 6 inches. As part of the virtual meet, the students were asked to use devices such as cell phones, laptops, GPS watches, and other devices to measure and record lengths and speeds. Further, they had to report their scores and data electronically.

### DIGITAL CONNECTIONS

Through the coaching and meet process, students were taught how to use digital timers, monitor runs with GPS watches, and use personal devices to time as well as digitally record practice and meet performances. They also learned how to digitally track progress toward goal achievement, how to measure using measurement apps, how to upload data to shared spreadsheets, and more. Further, interactive team meetings were held as digital meetings on Zoom, and the Team App was used to communicate weekly workout plans, events, and news. While expanding one's skills and

strength in the track and field events is a physical endeavor, the entire team experience was directed and managed through a sophisticated virtual web of devices, digital documentation, and software. Mid-distance runner and pole vaulter Ciara Murphy, grade 12, said, "Using the Strava app, we could track times, paths, and analyze progress for everybody. We were running not just for ourselves, but for our team. Tech kept us connected as we trained." Scholar-athletes were fully engaged in developing both track and field skills and technology skills. "Digital literacy can be defined as the ability to use digital technologies to create, research, communicate, collaborate, and share information and work. Digital literacy involves both a knowledge of technology and the ability to use it" (New York State Education Department, 2020, p. 10). There is little doubt that during the invitational meet, scholar-athletes were honing both their track and field skills and their digital literacy skills.

### SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

One of the cataclysmic traumas of the 2020 period of state-mandated quarantine and school closure for secondary students was the social isolation that resulted. The virtual meets brought scholar-athletes together virtually. They met on digital platforms and shared successes on the team app. They cheered and hollered in joy on digital platforms as they shared their track and field successes and challenges. They learned to be resilient and have a sense of humor about themselves as their coaches demonstrated humility and participated in the events and shared their action photos. As well, they learned that one can engage in social emotional self-care by connecting with others with shared interests such as track and field. Further, scholar-athletes learned that while your plans may have challenges as did the 2020 spring sports calendar, one can create alternatives that are a compromise but can still be engaging and satisfying. Mr. Jesse Arnett, head track and field coach for Somers High School, is confident that the virtual meet format allowed team members

to be “at their best” social-emotionally and physically “despite the uncertainty” of the pandemic (Haggerty, 2020).

**FINISH LINE**

Every coach and scholar-athlete hopes that we will not need a 2021 Tuskers Quarantine Invitational Meet because the coronavirus pandemic will be controlled. However, if conditions require it, there is now a structure in place and it could be used again. More significantly, we have witnessed the use of remote learning track and field coaching and teaching to expand skills within the sport, expand student social emotional learning and resiliency, and develop students’ digital fluency in ways that will be useful throughout their lifetimes. The model of virtual meets is one born in a pandemic that has traction running forward.

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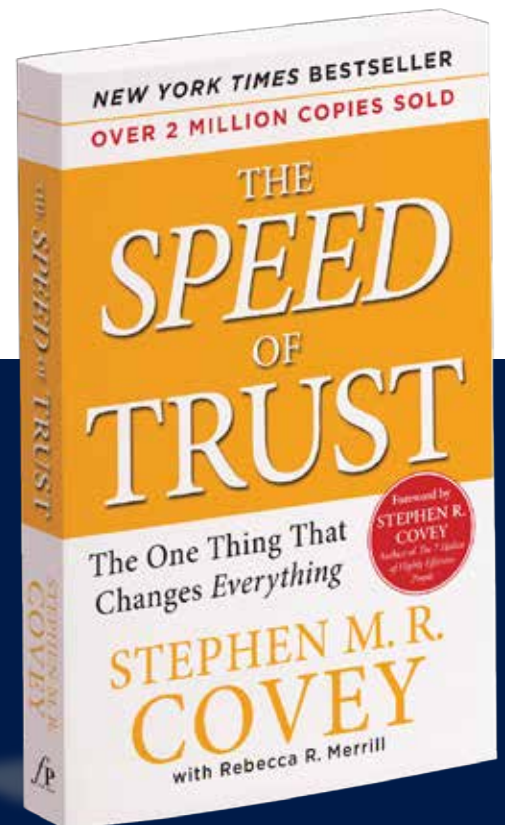
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This Is What Forward Looks Like.  
A Rural School's Progress Toward:

# Digital Equity and Excellence



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By Sunshine Miller

## **WATERSHED**

Newfield Central School District is the only category four, high-need rural school district in Tompkins County. The district was hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to digital learning. There was no 1:1 strategy. Students and teachers did not have a learning management system that was routinely used to work collaboratively and digitally. The district's devices were aging and failing due to lack of funds, inventory, asset management, and high IT department turnover.

The district is nestled in the hills of the Finger Lakes and is geographically disconnected from the digital world as well as economically disadvantaged with regard to digital equity. COVID set the stage for long hours for district employees struggling to meet the needs of the small learning community, reassessing digital equity, and looking for answers to the glaring inequities the community was facing.

A nearly complete administrative turnover in July has the district working to creatively build anew. Below are a few of the ways the learning community has risen to the challenge and is working to pull ahead with ideas for integrating, investing, and innovating with digital technologies and remote instruction.

### **EPIPHANY**

The crisis the district faced in the spring provided an opportunity for the district to reassess, readjust, and reimagine the digital strategy. I joined the IT team in late August and worked with the network specialist to develop a plan to roll out 1:1 devices to our reporting students (approximately 75 percent of our students). We relaxed our BYOD policy, buoyed our filtering systems, pulled devices in from classroom carts, and managed them for 1:1 deployment. These strategies forecasted the need, in the event of full closure, to shift instruction to include digital independence and equity for all students.

The immediate disadvantage of too many students and too few devices led to some creative problem solving and support from our regional partners. The team moved quickly to dismantle computer labs and prepare desktop and AIO devices to deploy to virtual families. Our virtual families who needed devices were also benefactors of Groton Central School District's kind donation of 100 Chromebooks. With many barriers, hurdles, and setbacks, the team has deployed devices to every reporting student in just one month and to every virtual family requesting a device.

In tandem, the district adopted and launched G Suite as our learning management system. Four days of training before we opened our doors

on September 10 led to the building of more than 400 Google Classrooms that are serving as base camp for all of our students in our hybrid learning model.

### **IT TAKES A VILLAGE**

Building a 1:1 strategy is challenging without a pandemic, and although we have been able to develop a piecemeal deployment, the team is acutely aware that the need to build uniformity is imperative. A surprising and unwelcome plot twist in our 1:1 story came in the form of a splintered supply and demand chain that has made purchasing and building device infrastructure nearly impossible.

We are working closely with our local Staples. The store manager, JT, has a child in the district and believes in the strength and promise of community. As we run into the perils of lack of asset management as bizarre as the need for 300 charging blocks for iPad deployment, and as basic as cleaning supplies, JT has had our back. He is currently running down 75 Android tablets to deploy to our kindergarten students and build our Chrome fleet from the bottom up while we await shipment of Chromebooks.

We face adversity with providing supplemental instructional technology as well. Dealing with a wide variety of other shortages, from document cameras to VGA adapters, prompted us to reach out to other local stalwarts of our larger tech community. One thing many of our virtual families struggled with throughout the spring was the lack of ability for students to show their work.

Performance-based classes like art, band, and the sciences highlighted the need for document cameras for our teachers as well as students. The supply and demand chain breakdown dealt an additional sting, and the need for a creative solution became evident. We found a 3D printing for document cameras for our virtual students on Thingiverse and forged a plan to ask students to reproduce and reimagine an on-the-cheap substitute. Unfortunately, we found that the district's only 3D printer is seven years old and not operational. Enter a local tech company, Zynect, owned and operated by Dirk Swart. We sent the

file to Dirk, and he and his company did a run for us.

The promise in the collaboration is an eventual competition where students work to solve this real-world problem and work through the design challenge with career inventors and business owners. This will provide an opportunity for our students to discuss digital equity while creating solutions for their relevant needs. We are invested in building partnerships with our incredibly rich tech community at large (Newfield is just seven miles from Ithaca, home of Cornell University and multiple tech companies) and hope to develop internships and mentorships for students within these partnerships.

### **BECOMING**

The district is keenly focused on building interesting, relevant, anti-racist, culturally responsive, and affirming curriculum. There is much work to be done on this front, and our rebuilding phase in terms of our digital infrastructure offers the opportunity to utilize tech as a tool for providing equity on multiple fronts. G Suite as our LMS has provided a vehicle for core content but the district wants to ensure equitable access to enrichment activities as well.

Kids Discover the Trail is a program that takes Pre-K through fifth-grade students on curriculum-based field experiences to the eight discovery trail sites in Tompkins County. The traditional field trips that are inaccessible due to COVID are transforming to include interdomain Google Classrooms for the discovery trail educators from the Ithaca Sciencenter, and will likely include all of the discovery trail partners over the course of the year. The need to stretch ourselves beyond the school-day brick and mortar limitations that have been shattered by remote and hybrid learning has caused all of us to think more creatively and collaboratively. A silver lining of the pandemic is the ability to integrate experiences with our trusted partners and work to bring the field experiences into the district. Students will someday return to the beloved site of the discovery trail. For now, we look forward to interactions



with the partner sites and reimagining field trips and field studies.

**FUTURE TENSE**

Providing access to extracurricular and enrichment activities for our older students will focus on career and college readiness. The district has a vision of creating a middle and high school experience that looks and feels more like a college experience. This shift would include courses and classes that are delivered digitally and include certifications and micro-credentialing opportunities. We are working with cyber.org to build pathways for students to hone their skills and resumes through certifications before entering degree programs or the workforce with a focus on recruiting students from the global majority, BIPOC, and young women.

Building a system for delivering digital content means opening the door for the creation of a virtual academy. The seeds for the academy will take root in this first year of reimagining and restructuring. Ultimately we plan to have a fully virtual option for

students that will incorporate the best of what we've built, and provide equity and access for our students who desire a different model for learning. The academy will live alongside the brick and mortar and prepare our small school to fend off the impending threat of virtual charters. The goal is to offer a virtual model of education that is connected to the public school system, supported by our incredible highly qualified staff, enveloped by the rural community, and focused on problem-based learning, digital excellence, and exploring and understanding the natural and cultural history of the community.

**FORWARD**


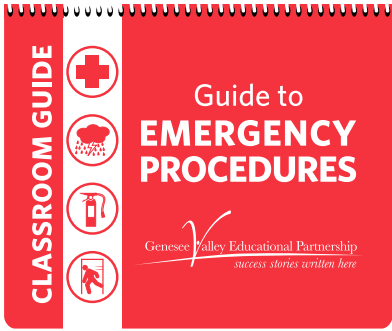
The outlook in those first few weeks was dismal. However, I've found a recurring theme in our work to move online. We very well may have had the worst-case scenario in terms of technology, but greater than that challenge is the collective, creative, hive mind, excellence of the people in our district. Three brilliant network specialists, Chris, Harold, and Bob, who

care about kids and are raring to go, make a difference. The best teachers in Tompkins County are showing up every day to do the work even though it is challenging and filled with the need for flexibility and creative solutions. We also have an administrative team that abandoned the focus on our pathologies and believes in our immense potential, and a community like no other. We are doing this thing. It's messy and exhausting. Transformative and amazing. This is what forward looks like.

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SUNSHINE MILLER is the director of technology and professional development at Newfield Central School District.

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# What Ten Years of Blended Learning Have Taught Us



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By Gregory S. Brown, EdD,  
Diane Cunningham, EdD,  
and Randy Hall

Harnessing the power of instructional technology to support student learning is the most pressing goal in most schools, districts, and universities today. For the last few months, leaders and teachers have been working to meet the challenges of blended and online teaching and learning to ensure that all students learn and thrive. Together, for the last ten years, we have worked with teachers to design and deliver online and blended experiences for students across the Hudson Valley.

We share key lessons from three distinct perspectives (school administrator, curriculum designer, and instructional technologist) with the hope of helping leaders and teachers take positive steps toward creating quality blended and online learning experiences for all students.

1. **REIMAGINE YOUR WHEN AND WHERE**

Traditional schools were never designed to support blended learning, a model that weaves face-to-face teaching with online learning and allows students control over the time, pace, and place of learning (Horn and Staker, 2015). Designing quality blended learning experiences forces us to consider the “where” and “when” of education as much as the “why” and “what.” One of our blended teachers reflected, “I was used to having students arrive to my class and they were on my time. Now, I’m in their space and on their time.” Leaders need to help teachers understand this shift and provide them with the flexibility needed to create a blend of in-person, hybrid, and remote learning experiences by challenging traditional structures (schedules, attendance, and seat time requirements) that get in the way of student and teacher choice over the pace and place of learning.

2. **EMBRACE YOUR INNER LEARNER**

Before last March, you probably had never had to lead a full-time online school. During the first weeks of the pandemic, we all felt a little like it was our first year, rife with uncertainty, mistakes, and a feeling that we were only a few steps ahead of those we led. During our collective first-year experience, we must establish strong communities of learners who openly share their successes and failures. We have to steepen the learning curve by being vulnerable and assuming the role of lead learner who:

- takes risks publicly;
- collaborates with others;
- seeks regular feedback;

- admits failure and perseveres;
- learns from mistakes and tries again; and
- shows themselves and others grace.

3. **GIVE TEACHERS WHAT THEY NEED**

Now that we’ve had a bit more time to plan for this model, we need to take a long-term look. We’ve learned that becoming a good teacher in a blended model takes time and practice – it is not as easy as flipping a switch. Leaders, teachers, and students will benefit from a clear commitment to quality professional learning experiences. Provide professional learning that focuses on curriculum, and technology, allows time for practice and reflection, maximizes collaboration, and contains job-embedded expectations (Guskey, 2009). Be careful not to “over-resource” your teachers – less is more, even for teachers. Teachers need time to process, act, and reflect. Leaders can leverage power to make space and time for teachers to learn and grow.

4. **MAKE LEARNING RELEVANT**

Authentic curriculum is more important now than ever before. When our curriculum is designed around narrow topics, students struggle to make connections to their interests, experiences, and other disciplines. This leads them to memorize facts, apply formulas, and seek the right answers. While we strive to maintain student engagement in a blended model, we need to start with curriculum that is authentic, meaningful, and relevant. Leaders can champion such a vision for curriculum that supports depth over breadth by helping teachers focus on:

- broad concepts (sustainability, culture, leadership) instead of discrete topics;
- essential processes

- (investigation, persuasion) instead of rote skills; or
- current local and global problems or issues (bias in media, immigration policy) instead of hypothetical problems.

5. **AMPLIFY STUDENT VOICE**

Our teachers already provide choices for students, hoping for more engagement and better outcomes. However, providing choice alone does not mean that we activate student voice. Teachers amplify student voice when they require students to engage in inquiry, solve problems, create, innovate, advocate, and teach others – for purposes and audiences beyond the classroom. As leaders, we amplify teachers, and in turn students’ voice, when we grant them similar authentic experiences. The teachers we’ve worked with were most successful and fulfilled when we:

- treated them as designers of their curriculum;
- set clear expectations for authentic tasks;
- provided models and criteria;
- allowed time for revision;
- gave feedback during the design process; and
- valued reflection.

6. **LESSONS NOT TASKS**

If your teachers simply ask their online students to turn in assignments or take an online quiz, they may be leaving out the best of their instructional practice. On their own, these tasks can never replace quality instruction. We have found that providing teachers with a simple, flexible model (WARM UP, LEARN, DO, and WRAP UP) can enable both beginning and veteran

teachers to feel more confident in designing and delivering remote, hybrid, synchronous, and asynchronous instruction. Ask and look for these four



discrete elements in any lesson:

**WARM UP** – spark student interest, activate prior knowledge, articulate learning target(s), convey the “why”

**LEARN** – introduce new content and skills

**DO** – practice, apply, and assess learning

**WRAP UP** – pause, self-check, review, reflect, share, set goals.

7. **WEAVING IT ALL TOGETHER**

When teaching in a blended model, the face-to-face and online learning segments can often feel disconnected, leading to a fragmented experience for students. Designing quality blended instruction requires that teachers intentionally weave the face-to-face and online segments. Use these questions to help your teachers ensure coherence:

1. How am I connecting my face-to-face and online lessons?
2. Which modality (synchronous or asynchronous) better supports my instructional activities?
3. Am I leveraging the advantages of each modality?
  - Synchronous segments are ideal for connection and community building to strengthen class culture and relationships.
  - Asynchronous segments can efficiently and effectively allow learners to pursue self paced lessons that will build independence and self-regulation skills.

8. **FOCUSED FORMATIVE FEEDBACK**

While students are learning new content and adjusting to the blended learning model, it is even more important that they get focused, formative feedback. Research tells us clearly that quality feedback is best given when students can use it while they are learning. It must focus on specific

learning criteria, communicate strengths, raise questions, and offer actionable suggestions. Leaders can help teachers maximize the potential of descriptive feedback by encouraging them to (a) use a variety of methods to make feedback accessible (written, audio, video); (b) make students partners in the assessment process by requiring self-feedback; and (c) structure and guide peer feedback so that students learn from each other and strengthen their collaboration skills.

9. **THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE RIGHT JOB**

Excitement over a new tech tool often leads teachers to choose the tool before carefully examining the learning target. When they do this, they may lose time, fail to move students closer to the learning target, and create unintended consequences. Yes, teachers must learn to use new tech tools, but not at the expense of the learning goals. Here are three questions to help teachers choose the right tool for the right job:

1. Which tool will serve my instructional goal(s) and best support the intended means of expression (individual or collaborative, written, verbal, visual)?
2. What do I, and my students, already have in our toolbox that can facilitate this desired expression?
3. Which tools or apps are approved for use with students in my school?

10. **BRIDGE THE DISTANCE**

The relationships that teachers build with students both support and sustain the hard work of teaching and learning. In fact, we have research to show that the effect size of strong teacher-student relationships on student achievement is high (Hattie, 2015). In the blended context, teacher presence in the digital space is also a high impact practice. Teachers embracing

a blended model must learn to use a variety of communication strategies and develop an online voice in order to sustain supportive teacher-to-student as well as student-to-student relationships. Leaders can look for and model the following practices:

- regular communications using multiple modalities;
- acknowledging submitted work and providing ongoing feedback;
- facilitating online discussion and collaborative student work; and
- embedding social and emotional check-ins.

While this school year will certainly be unlike any we have experienced before, focusing on these lessons can help us shape both the present and the future of education. We believe that good teaching and learning is good teaching and learning whether face-to-face or online. Our job as leaders is to keep the focus on what matters most: assuming the role of lead learner, balancing curriculum and technology, and modeling best practices.

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Greg, Diane, and Randy have collaborated within the OC21 Program (Online Course for the 21st Century) and the New York State Learning Technology Grant at PNW BOCES.

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# How to Effectively Deliver Tests and Assignments During Remote Learning



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By Castle Learning

While school districts are still working through the varying plans for the first part of the 2020-2021 school year, many leaders project that some virtual teaching will continue throughout the entire school year. The ability to be flexible requires educators to evaluate educational tools for their utility and ease of use for remote teaching. Many teachers say that assigning and grading work and tests has been one of the most challenging aspects of teaching virtually.

Every digital assignment or test that teachers give to students requires the teacher to complete five steps before uploading it to the learning management system and/or gradebook.

1. Create questions aligned to the curriculum.
2. Add relevant resources for students to use.
3. Ensure legal rights to use the content.
4. Provide special accommodations and differentiation.
5. Preview the assignment from the students' perspective.

Many web or cloud-based resources make these five steps simple. The resource needs to be flexible for in-person, remote, and hybrid learning environments. The flexibility gives the teacher a tool they need to “work smarter, not harder,” improving instruction and preventing burnout.

### **PROPERLY CONSTRUCTED AND ALIGNED QUESTIONS MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

Question design like multiple choice, drag and drop, matching, choose all that apply, extended reply/short essay (constructed response), and fill in the blank allows the teacher to select a variety with increased difficulty for critical thinking.

A solid software design allows the teacher to create unique questions on their own or modify an existing question. A share function allows a team of teachers to collaborate and spread the workload. The software should allow activities to be carried over annually for future use.

Effective question banks make scaffolding intuitive by providing students instant instructional feedback for learning and growth.

### **ADDING RELEVANT RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS**

Most software packages allow users to add resources and notes for students to access. Examples include attaching a PDF document or video, or adding a website/URL link.

### **ENSURING TEACHERS COMPLY WITH COPYRIGHT LAWS**

Many new teachers may feel insecure about their rights to digital resources due to copyright laws. Many open resources are available on the internet. Please ask teachers to refrain from using material they do not have the license to use or if they are unsure of the origin.

### **TEACHERS CAN PROVIDE ACCOMMODATIONS, SCAFFOLDING, DIFFERENTIATION, AND TIME LIMITS**

Teaching virtually with outdated technology makes providing accommodations, scaffolding, and differentiation unnecessarily challenging. Luckily, newer technology solves many of the most common problems. Students who don't speak English as a first language can use text-to-speech and Google Translate for assistance. Teachers can allow some students extra time to take a test and can issue retakes of an assignment if the student doesn't meet a set mastery level.

Generally, students should have limited access to assessments or activities to promote academic integrity. You may choose the window of time, the duration, and available accommodations. This feature is especially useful for asynchronous remote teaching.

### **DELIVERING DIFFERENTIATED VERSIONS OF ASSIGNMENTS TO VARIOUS GROUPS**

Students in various classes benefit from similar assignment modifications, such as a different pace or number of questions. Creating separate “classes” for multiple groups has the added benefit of making assigning differentiated material quick. It takes mere seconds to assign “Ten Questions about Chapter 1” to group A and assign “Twelve Questions about Chapter 1” to group B.

### **PREVIEW THE ASSIGNMENT FROM A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE**

The software should allow the teacher to view an activity from the student's view, reducing errors and

miscommunications common with remote learning. A preview allows the teacher to make changes or edits before deploying to the students.

### **INTEGRATIONS WITH DIGITAL PLATFORMS**

Although there are many virtual resources, ensuring integration with common learning management systems (LMSs) like Google Classroom, Schoology, or Canvas can increase effectiveness and save time. Integrations reduce the number of places students need to look to keep track of assignments and grades.

### **PRACTICING, STUDYING, ASSESSING, AND REVIEWING**

Any assignment can serve multiple purposes. When assigning content, decide if you want students to use it for practice, studying, assessing, or reviewing.

### **PROVIDING OPPORTUNITY FOR RETAKES**

Does your current resource offer an automatic retake option? A retake option provides students multiple attempts to meet a set mastery level. You can choose to give that option automatically or manually. Most teachers prefer auto-retakes because their task load is reduced. To select the automatic retake, simply set up the designated mastery level when you issue the original assignment. The data report from the retake provides the teacher with progress monitoring and growth evaluation.

### **A FINAL NOTE**

Make sure your software package gives you the power of flexibility and the ease of simplicity to meet today's virtual learning environments. Great teaching tools not only improve student learning outcomes, they also reduce teacher frustration and burnout.



# Enhancing Our Assessments Through Gamification



---

By Danielle Pallatto and  
Dr. Alex Rivera

We learned from an early age that playing games can be lots of fun. Some people pour hours upon hours into game play. Their objective is to beat the game! As teachers we can tap into that kind of engagement through the experiences we put in front of our students. Gamification (applying game elements to nongame environments to encourage higher participation and motivation) allows us to create unique experiences that can allow for differentiation as students choose which of the additional elements they will take on.

There are numerous applications and platforms to implement this type of learning experience (one that supports both in-person and remote learning). Programs like Quizlet and Flippity provide students with the opportunity to turn flashcards into digital learning tools with game like features. Another application, Gimkit, helps disguise learning about time and money as an exciting game. Each correct answer will earn the student money, but be forewarned, an incorrect answer can be costly! Additionally, a platform called Deck Toys uses teacher-made presentations to create interactive, gamelike lessons. Teachers can add differentiation features, while students can choose their own path of learning through a “self-exploration” feature. Another program, Factile, turns your lessons into one of America’s favorite games, Jeopardy! Teachers can create their own questions that best fit their needs, or choose from hundreds of templates designed by other teachers. Remember to keep your hand close to the buzzer and make Alex Trebek proud!

While fun and engaging learning experiences are important, the data these tools provide are equally valuable. As a teacher, I value all components of these gamified tools. I look for what it can bring to both my students and myself. Many of these applications and platforms collect data in real time and allow teachers to reflect on their work and make changes going forward. The data I collect, whether it generated from the app, or from my own observations, is of great value. I am able to improve my own instruction and strategies based on my students’ performances. I also share this data with my students! I find it to be a great opportunity to help students set their own goals. With an increased use of technology and games in the education world, I have also begun exploring having students create their own games using these platforms. While it is still a work in progress, together we are enjoying every step of the way!

From a principal’s point of view, these tools (and others like them) allow for immediate understanding

of student strengths and needs. Real-time data helps ensure that instruction is closely aligned with the needs of the learners in the class. Teachers are able to use the data gathered from these tools to organize grouping and build their lesson plans. Lastly, teachers can communicate their findings with fellow educators to discuss what practices have worked for others and what problems persist when teaching the same content. With remote learning still an option for some, we want to continue being creative and purposeful in how we engage and assess our students

DANIELLE PALLATTO is the third-grade teacher at George A. Jackson Elementary School in the Jericho School District.

DR. ALEX RIVERA is the principal at George A. Jackson Elementary School in the Jericho School District.

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# Using Voxer in Our Schools



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By Danielle Pallatto and  
Dr. Alex Rivera

Successful integration of technology can reshape what teaching, communicating, learning, and planning look like in our schools. At its best, technology integration is seamless with little thought given to the fact that we are even using tech tools. Students, teachers, and school staff are more actively engaged in various activities that fit in seamlessly with the everyday routines of the school. The happenings within our schools can be fast paced and require attention to detail.

To support communication among school personnel, Voxer is a tool that can help us stay connected and communicate more effectively during the school day (no matter if we are working from school or home). Gone is the need to schedule a meeting or craft an email. As soon as there's information to share and a decision to be made, Voxer provides an opportunity to leave detailed messages in real time that can be retrieved immediately at the touch of a button (or when time permits).

When the need to meet in person does arise, we can only hope that everyone arrives on time (otherwise information may need to be repeated). It's a very real challenge getting teachers and/or administrators from various schools/buildings to meet in one place. Voxer allows us to be strategic not only when we schedule meetings, but in who needs to be "present" for what. School personnel can establish

a series of chats with colleagues that allow you to disseminate important information as soon as it's ready to be shared. You don't need to rely as heavily on face-to-face meetings for sharing and reviewing information. Whether you are voxing with a colleague to discuss planning a lesson or voxing with administrators about professional development ideas, communication and collaboration can be greatly enhanced through this platform.

School administrators can use this tool to support teachers with immediate feedback. Teachers very much appreciate the prompt reply to their curriculum-related questions and value immediate feedback from classroom visitations. Voxer allows for voice messages that can highlight amazing aspects of what is happening in the classroom and can be shared with others. At the end of the day,

many of us appreciate not always being caught up in lengthy phone conversations with our colleagues or drafting lengthy emails.

Lastly, Voxer supports our professional learning. Educators can use this tool to facilitate book talks with one another, allowing for the sharing (and archiving) of multiple ideas. No matter your location, this tool allows us to come together from all parts of the world to learn from one another. We can enhance our professional learning network through connections that otherwise may not be possible due to geographic constraints.

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# Every Student. Every Day.

Making the Most of the Situation at Hand.



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By Gene Mancuso and  
Dr. Renée Williams

By the end of the 2018-19 school year, we had completed the investment in a 1:1 laptop program but we were not seeing the implementation that we had imagined. A stakeholder committee created a vision for digital teaching and learning, and this was followed up in September 2019 with technology expectations for staff. The purpose of this document was to clearly articulate expectations. Each of our major software programs was listed, along with benchmarks for us to evaluate positive movement toward our vision.

Each teacher's attainment of these benchmarks was measured in January 2020 and shared with the building principals and the director of professional development. Teachers had the opportunity to review building-level data at their faculty meetings. The purpose of the data was to support teacher attainment of the technology skills. Little did we know that shortly after this we would find ourselves needing to use these technology skills to maneuver at-home learning.

When school closed, we found ourselves like many districts. We had to create plans, deliver devices and materials, plan meals, and distribute hot spots. While planning, we knew the need to share information would be essential. Daily messages from the superintendent's office were sent via Twitter, the district webpage, school messenger, and email to the school community to connect us and to share updates. Principals led virtual meetings with teachers to help coordinate instructional goals and to share updates. The assistant superintendent for instruction communicated with teachers about the need to keep things simple, connect with students, and offer a myriad of professional learning to help fill gaps noted in our January data collection. Thought exchange was utilized to gather input from staff, students, and parents. Focus groups of students and their parents participated in sessions to share their thoughts about at-home learning and how we could improve. Professional learning opportunities were available both synchronously and asynchronously. Our technology services team of six people labored tirelessly to support technology working for all. Without having a 1:1 program and having this team, none of what we were able to accomplish would have been possible.

For instruction during at-home learning, office hours were established for classes, and teachers shared learning activities via our learning management systems (LMSs). They were able to put together some amazing learning experiences, but it was not perfect. We learned a great deal during this time that influenced our plans to reopen this September.

As we evaluated the numerous models for consideration to reopen a school district with 2,000+ students during a pandemic, we began with a public health and safety approach, but continued by building a community coalition that provided feedback and ideas in school operations and logistics, teaching and learning, equity and family need, and the area of social and emotional health. This community reopening task force included 77 individuals, including board of education members, teachers, parents, staff members, administrators, and a student. A community survey was created to get a pulse on issues for consideration for the subgroups. Meetings were recorded and posted on the district website for others to view.

From the onset, the purpose of the Honeoye Falls-Lima (HF-L) Central School District's restart model was to maximize in-person learning opportunities if school could not resume at full capacity due to COVID-19. Our intent was to provide in-person learning to the greatest extent possible, while also taking prudent steps to keep our students, staff, and community safe and adhering to any applicable public health orders. Our mantra became "Every student. Every day." The leadership team evaluated every possible schedule that was brought forward. There is only one word to describe this time — exhausting.

We had listened to the community concerns regarding consistency in scheduling. Students, staff, and families needed to know that they could count on the schedule we were putting forward. After considering all the possibilities, we landed where we felt we could best pivot in order to provide students continuity in learning. Parents were offered the choice of in-person, home-schooling, or fully remote instruction: 9.4 per-

cent of the student population is learning remotely, with another 5 percent home-schooling.

We landed with students in kindergarten through sixth grade attending school every day in person, and in classrooms where desks are six feet apart to allow for mask breaks during instruction. Where there were enough students learning remotely, students in these grades have a remote teacher to lead their learning. In grades 7-12, students are attending in hybrid fashion: half of the students at school learning at the same time their classmates are learning synchronously at home. Students are attending a full week at a time and then rotating to learning synchronously from home. Where we did not have enough students learning remotely, students in these grades follow their class schedules, but via online environments. Members of our reopening task force suggested we consider a full week for each set of students. This way students would be in school for five days, followed by nine days out of school. This would give a longer time period in between sessions for COVID symptoms to present. Every student. Every day.

There is nothing simple about what we are doing. No other district in our region has the same schedule as we do. Every teacher within our K-5 system who holds classroom certification took over a pod of students to make this work. While our kindergarten through fifth-grade students continue to have a teacher, their specials take place within their classrooms.



Adding so many more sections of each grade level added a stress to scheduling specials in grades K-5. The principals had to move to blocking instructional sections to make it possible. For example, instead of having every special, every week, in every grade level, the length of specials and the frequency changed. At the middle school, grades 6-8 moved to a block schedule of only four sets/periods per day instead of the usual eight. This allowed for fewer times a student had to join in a class from home and allowed for more uninterrupted time for student and teacher interaction. The high school was able to continue with their regular daily schedule, which drops two classes on Tuesdays through Fridays. Every student. Every day.

This approach will allow us to pivot to all online instruction and to in-person instruction. Students will not be moved into new classes with new teachers. The connections that teachers and students have made are critical to supporting learning. We do not want

to upend these relationships. For grades 6-12, students would continue with their current schedule whether it is in-person or totally remote. For grades K-5, tweaks have been made in the daily schedule to allow for less screen time in a remote setting. Every student. Every day.

The teachers' association worked with the district to create a memorandum of agreement (MOA) regarding expectations. Once again, clarity was important. Each side listened to one another. In the end, this unique situation brought us to work with and support one another's needs. In Monroe County, this is the only MOA in existence for this situation. Crafting time for teachers to collaborate, have independent planning time, and continue to take advantage of professional learning opportunities was a key commitment. To assist our parents and guardians, we have added tutorial videos to our website and we even staff a window for technology services to assist with devices for remote and hybrid students. Every student. Every day.

With safety, time, innovation, and careful consideration we have opened with a rate of satisfaction above 95 percent, according to thought exchange data reviewed from parents and teachers. Creating a vision for reopening and finding the right balance between clarity (we are using synchronous videoconferencing) and room for innovation (how you teach, instruct, and give feedback via online platforms) were instrumental. Once the boundaries were established, the instructional staff began the rigorous work of planning and teaching. Using the same systems, modeling the implementation, and sharing innovative ideas were roles the central leadership team relied on as the school year opened.

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# Positivity in Action for **Remote Social Emotional Learning**



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By Maureen Mulderig

When schools suddenly shut down in March due to COVID-19, educators throughout our state, and country for that matter, were left scrambling with how to deliver instruction to students remotely. Simultaneously, students were thrust into a situation that isolated them from classmates and teachers who had been a part of their life every weekday for the previous six and a half months. They had no closure and had to navigate being a student in a completely new situation with varying levels of support given family structures. It is safe to say that social emotional needs were greater than ever before.

While district responses were varied to meet students' mental health needs, the Clinton Central School District already had in its arsenal an online vehicle for meeting New York's SEL benchmarks. Clinton was already using The Positivity Project (P2) across their district K-12. This tier 1 SEL support character education curriculum has become a staple for over 650 schools nationwide (and 170 in New York State) since its inception in 2015. Since the daily digital lessons developed by P2 are a part of a weekly slide deck housed in a Google drive, Clinton didn't skip a beat.

Teachers continued presenting these lessons remotely using Google Classroom, still offering students the chance to keep the consistency in language provided by the use of the project. Students continued to explore their 24 character strengths (examples are teamwork, gratitude, love of learning, optimism, integrity) following P2's weekly character strength calendar. Rooted in the research on positive psychology, slides teach students the meaning of each strength, allowing them to recognize the strength in themselves and others. The slides include video clips, read alouds, questions, activities, and reflection. Additionally, students focused on the five elements of the "other people" mindset: being present and giving others their attention, knowing that their words and actions affect others, supporting others when they struggle, cheering others' success, and identifying and appreciating the good in others.

While Clinton was used to doing in-person, whole-school assemblies and events that further supported character strength instruction, the district had to get creative about how to incorporate some full school/district events into the implementation.

- Morning announcements on the Clinton website included messaging to reinforce character strength concepts.
- Through the leadership of special-area teachers, Clinton focused on the character strength of gratitude by having students submit expressions of gratitude,

which were compiled for their teachers into a video on the website. Likewise, staff did the same by gathering messages of gratitude for families.

- Focusing on the character strengths of creativity, appreciation of beauty and excellence, hope, and optimism, elementary children read the book *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (Rosen and Oxenbury) and then looked for teddy bears that teachers had displayed throughout the community. Teachers also created a rock garden where children could leave and take rocks painted with messages of inspiration.
- Middle school used weekly P2 videos starting out with the character strength, the definition of the strength, a video clip focused on the strength, and a weekly question for the students to think/reflect on. Challenges were presented to students, including stepping outside to remind themselves of the beauty around them. This activity focused on the character strength of appreciating beauty and excellence.
- At the high school level, a ray-of-sunshine email was sent out each week with inspirational quotes, videos, and creativity challenges – all put together by students.
- Districtwide challenges centered around character strengths were posted on the Clinton website as well. One challenge that centered around the character strength of humor was an awkward family photo contest. This inspired some family fun for certain.

In doing these projects, educators encouraged students to lean into the character strengths during a time of adversity.

Fast-forward to fall of 2020: Clinton and fellow P2 schools are now even more prepared in their ability to deliver SEL with their partnership with P2. Recently, The Positivity Project

released an additional component for partner schools called "P2 for Families." This resource is differentiated by grade level for each character strength, allowing parents/guardians to have conversations at home centered around the importance of character strengths and positive relationships. For each character strength of the week, families can find a character card that fully explains the week's strength, as well as a quote about the strength, a video demonstrating the strength, and three discussion questions for the whole family. It is proving to be a wonderful way to extend the learning students are doing in school whether in-person, hybrid, or virtual. Dinner table discussions are being transformed for families in partner schools.

While nothing replaces a visit to the library in person, a book list completely organized by character strength can be searched in the P2 resource database. Most titles include a link to order the book through Amazon, or better yet, to listen to the story for free via YouTube with just one click. For schools that are further along in their development or that already have project-based learning (PBL) in their instructional programs, PBL units are also a component of The Positivity Project.

Additionally, P2 is completely aligned with NY State SEL benchmarks, and three additional partner school districts (Potsdam CSD, Baldwinsville CSD, and Westhill CSD) aligned the 24 character strengths and "other people" mindset directly with the NY State Mental Health Standards. Schools from Staten Island to Watertown to Mechanicville and those in between all have one thing in common – their unwavering commitment to social emotional learning regardless of the parameters COVID-19 has placed on schools.

In conclusion, with the creativity of teachers in the Clinton CSD and P2 partner schools across the country, these schools didn't bat an eye in continuing the focus on the social and emotional needs of students. Furthermore, when Governor Cuomo required SEL in NY school reopening

plans, 170 schools in NY State were ready with the digital resources and strategies provided through their partnership with The Positivity Project!

To learn about how The Positivity Project is easy and adaptable for teachers, and engaging and impactful for students, visit [posproject.org](http://posproject.org) or contact the NY State Leader, Maureen Mulderig (@MaureenMulderig) at [maureen.mulderig@posproject.org](mailto:maureen.mulderig@posproject.org). P2 provides very affordable SEL instruction that focuses on schoolwide common vocabulary and building a positive culture. A CoSer for BOCES component districts is also available.

MAUREEN MULDERIG has been a firm believer in the importance of social emotional learning throughout her 34+ years in education in New York State. She recently retired from her role as an elementary school principal for 21 years, the last few of which she implemented The Positivity Project in her school. She now shares her passion through her role as the NY State Leader for The Positivity Project. Other positions throughout her years in education include staff development specialist, national trainer, graduate course instructor and elementary school teacher.

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For more information about this program, contact Karen Bronson, SAANYS director of professional learning, at [kbronson@saanys.org](mailto:kbronson@saanys.org), or Bonnie Tryon, SAANYS mentor coordinator, at [btryon@saanys.org](mailto:btryon@saanys.org).



# Integrating Technology with Hybrid and Remote Teaching



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By Dr. Larry Dake and  
and Shannon Gillette

The 2020-2021 school year has kicked off like none other before it. While some schools have implemented hybrid schedules with students attending two days per week, others have opted for a fully remote beginning. Still others have one of many possible schedules that balance in-person, hybrid, and fully remote student needs. While scheduling uncertainty has become a fact of life, what is undisputed is that traditional in-person learning has been upended as never before.

In the southern tier, most school districts utilized their four allowable superintendent's conference days in September to provide staff with onboarding and training for hybrid and fully remote teaching and learning. Providing this training alleviated some stress levels; implementing such practices, however, has inevitably fueled anxiety among staff.

Professional learning around hybrid and remote learning has centered on two components: hybrid and remote teaching and technology integration. Both strands reinforce the other. For example, building capacity with hybrid and remote teaching and learning allows teachers and administrators to best support available technology such as Chromebooks, Zoom features, and Google Classroom. Furthermore, by helping staff navigate available technology, teaching and learning can be maximized. In our work with teachers and school leaders, these two strands have been central focal points for professional learning throughout the summer and fall. This article will share best practices around these two areas and highlight potential areas of growth as the school year continues.

### HYBRID AND REMOTE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Once Governor Cuomo announced that schools could physically return yet would have to enforce best practices around social distancing, it became clear that many school districts would experience some combination of in-person and remote learning. Throughout August and September, best practices around hybrid learning became focal points at the district and BOCES levels. As we dug into the research, it became clear that while fully in-person and hybrid learning appear to be inherently different, they are both governed by the same good practices around teaching and learning. In fact, hybrid learning – by leveraging Google Classroom, Schoology, or other platforms – may provide new opportunities for personalized instruction.

In *The Distance Learning Playbook* (2020), Fisher, Frey, and Hattie connect research-based visible learning practices to our current instructional reality. Rather than view these as dis-

parate realities, the authors correctly identify common themes among our “old” reality and our “new” reality. For example, fully in-person, hybrid, and fully remote learning are all centered on the need to reach students at their own individual learning level. Providing clarity and feedback to students remains central in all three models. Furthermore, understanding assessment and checking for understanding remain crucial. Whether in-person or remotely, teaching and learning's core is finding where students are and helping them achieve at higher levels. Finally, teacher and administrator mindsets are important. Any new practice – whether in-person or not – will come with challenges. Whether they are in-person, hybrid, or fully remote, we echo the authors when they write “what we do matters, not the medium of doing it” (p. 5).

To help make visible these common lesson elements, a sample lesson plan was developed as a model. This 40-minute, fully remote, secondary lesson plan can be found here – FDR court packing plan remote lesson <https://bit.ly/37A2nDY> – and is referenced below. The lesson design follows a tried and true method for planning lessons while being delivered in a fully remote learning environment. By making these connections explicit, teachers and administrators can visibly see how in-person and fully remote teaching follows the same essential process. The lesson content – FDR's 1937 court packing plan and separation of powers – is the vehicle through which essential standards and prioritized learning can take place in this plan.

The lesson plan follows a familiar, Madeline Hunter-style structure:

#### Essential Standards and

**Outcomes:** Our department-level professional learning communities identified priority standards to address throughout the year, regardless of content. NYS Social Studies Key Idea 1 and Writing Standard 2.d. are examples of prioritized standards.

#### Check-In/Welcome (5-10

**minutes):** During this traditional entrance task time, Zoom polls were leveraged to engage around

a higher order thinking question while welcoming students to class.

**Movement/Mindfulness (1 minute):** Using a windmill stretch GIF, students engage with the teacher in a brief movement activity before settling into the lesson.

#### Review Class Agreements

**(1 minute):** The class reviews the agreed-upon class norms/agreements at the beginning of each class. Establishing norms is especially crucial for remote learning (Fisher, Frey, and Hattie, 2020; Pass, 2020).

#### Direct Instruction (7-10

**minutes):** Direct teacher talk is a classroom element that should be deemphasized during remote learning. Ten minutes as a maximum amount of time are often necessary to introduce new concepts. But without direct in-person dynamics such as personal proximity, students can easily drone off when listening to lectures for too long.

#### Application/Practice (20-25

**minutes):** Utilizing breakout rooms is similar to putting students in small groups to collaborate. In this lesson, students were divided into groups to analyze primary source documents and then choose one document to present to the class.

#### Exit Ticket/See You Tomorrow

**(1-3 minutes):** Leveraging Google Forms for an exit ticket allows students to work on a collaborative document and revisit during asynchronous learning time.

#### Learning Extension

**(“Homework”):** Shared documents hold the potential to transform “homework” into something much more powerful. In this extension, students will collaborate on a shared understanding of this lesson.

The lesson elements above would be familiar to any teacher and make visible the similarities between fully

in-person and hybrid/fully remote learning. Once again, the lesson may be viewed at FDR court packing plan remote lesson <https://bit.ly/37A2nDY>. In addition, a sample remote lesson planning template can be found at <https://bit.ly/3kjwAQ>.

### BUILDING CAPACITY WITH TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION

As evidenced by the “converted” lesson plan above, transitioning teaching and learning from the in-person model to hybrid or remote models through technology is not an impossible task. However, as our region experienced in the spring, it is not an automated task either. For most districts, teachers and students had already begun the implementation of 1:1 devices. Having the hardware to launch hybrid or remote learning is a starting point, but the devices are only the beginning.

For hybrid or remote learning to be successful, several other factors are involved: internet access, platform availability and knowledge, and malleable mindsets. These factors impact all of the stakeholders involved in learning and require districts to expand their current models of technology integration to include parents, day care providers, support staff, administrators, as well as students and teachers. Our region is attempting to meet these needs in a variety of creative ways.

For the first time since its inception, our BOCES help service has been opened up to parents and students, allowing for a more direct line to technical assistance. We have created hubs,

resource centers, and learning centers dedicated to different stakeholder groups. These central places are aimed at helping with specific needs, like setting parent internet controls at home and offering student-made video tutorials to help students navigate hardware and software.

Many districts are incorporating integration specialists or teachers with additional technology assistance roles. These individuals have become the partners many teachers and parents rely on, offering solutions to common issues, standing in as sounding boards for new ideas and methods, researching recurring stumbling blocks, and facilitating the collaboration between teachers in remote settings.

In the southern tier, most of our hybrid and remote schedules include a day for stakeholders to reflect. For students, there is time to connect with teachers on topics or skills that need reinforcement, receive social and emotional support, and access opportunities for enrichment. For teachers, there is time to connect with students, as well as evaluate and collaborate with colleagues and visit technology hubs for quick tutorials on some of the different platforms in each school district’s digital portfolio.

With these elements working in the background, we can focus on erasing the current stigma of online learning as less than and create a repertoire of online learning experiences that meet the needs of our students during this unprecedented time and beyond. The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) suggests that

to address the disparity between what online learning was and what it can be, we need to harness our technology to increase student-teacher collaboration and communication, increase engagement with content and experiences specific to learning goals, provide data for personalization, and assess and provide feedback that is specific and timely. All of this seems to be synonymous with the first, best instruction of our in-person teaching model, and therefore attainable with the digital realm, too.

### CONCLUSION

Supporting professional learning with remote/hybrid lesson planning and technology integration reinforce one another. It is not enough to provide only one without the other. Our work with teachers and school leaders has emphasized the importance of persisting with both learning strands as we build capacity with remote/hybrid instruction.

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Syracuse CSD Teachers Create Engaging

# Lessons Through Virtual Instruction



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By Karin Davenport

At McKinley-Brighton Elementary School in the Syracuse City School District, students may be learning virtually, but third-grade teacher Melanie Amodio made it a priority to help students feel as if they were right there with her in the classroom.

“During our collaborative Teams meetings, we have created an environment that is welcoming and interactive,” Mrs. Amodio explained. “I treat my virtual class as if they are right here with me.”

We continue to take ‘brain breaks,’ incorporate granny’s wacky prizes, and meet together to have important discussions not just about academics, but about social and emotional aspects of learning, too. Most importantly, they are getting the goofy and silly Mrs. Amodio in front of them each day, which keeps them coming back for more.”

Using platforms like Seesaw and Talking Points, Mrs. Amodio said she was able to create a hub where students and families can find the daily schedule and schoolwork, as well as communicate with her easily. It has made the virtual experience easier, she said, noting that her goal is to make students feel as if they were right back in McKinley-Brighton, not behind a camera.

“I understand that right now these kids need us more than they probably ever have,” Mrs. Amodio added. “We are adjusting together as a third-grade class to all of the new responsibilities, changes, and challenges that we are facing as remote educators and learners.”

Salem Hyde Elementary first-grade special education teacher Dan Karleski said that virtual instruction brought with it some frustration and struggles, but ultimately there have been positives that have resulted from the change in instruction.

“Starting right off every morning at 8:00 a.m., we are able to see the excited faces of our first-graders ready to begin their school day,” Mr. Karleski said. “We have a PowerPoint that structures our day to help keep the students focused and engaged. From video links to Seesaw, WCNY, and sharing our work, we have been able to engage children in a variety of ways.”

Through Seesaw, he noted, he has been able to assign lessons based on students’ needs, interact with each other, and build relationships. In the first week of school, he asked students to share something about themselves so he and coteacher Daniela Klamm could get to know them.

“Not only did we get a chance to learn about our students, we also found out how they best express themselves,” Mr. Karleski said. “We received writing responses, oral responses,

and even some beautiful artwork. This is one advantage that I see of virtual learning: we are not only learning about our students, but finding ways in which they learn best. There is not a more crucial time for teachers and families to bond together to ensure the success of children. We create a safe space for these students to learn, socialize, and at the end of the day just be kids.”

Having a set schedule for students has helped Lincoln students in Samantha Marnon’s seventh-grade math class.

“As a teacher my role has always been to engage, support, and challenge students,” Ms. Marnon said. “Now, I am doing the same thing, just virtually. I create interactive activities online to engage students using the Desmos activity builder and embed it within Canvas. I support students through live Teams classes whether they need help with the technology or the assignment itself. And I continue to challenge students and push the way they think about math in their world, now with the use of videos and other resources right at their fingertips.”

Like other SCSD teachers, she has also focused on including fun or social emotional questions and activities on a daily basis, which she said have been helping students warm up to virtual learning.

“I do not think online classrooms will be going anywhere anytime soon,” Ms. Marnon added. “I am excited to see what this will lead to, as I have always dreamed about utilizing the flipped classroom model. Now that more students have access to devices and are familiar with our online platforms, I may soon be able to do that.”

Corcoran English teacher Kubra Akturk also found a unique way to help students build relationships with her – and each other: a daily attendance question. To help students get acquainted with the Canvas learning platform, she asks a question such as “EXAMPLE.” Students are able to see each other’s responses, allowing them to get to know each other beyond academics.

“My virtual teaching experience has definitely been something to get used to,” Ms. Akturk said. “It’s different, but I am learning how to be quick-

ly adaptable. I feel like my role is important because I have the ability to be a familiar face to students, and someone they can depend on when times are uncertain.”

She noted that having a district issued laptop allows her to be productive both at school and work, giving her room to expand upon her existing teaching knowledge.

Nottingham High School social studies teacher Pete Sterpe said teaching virtually has helped him reevaluate some of his teaching methods.

“I am adapting and adjusting,” Mr. Sterpe said. “There are parts of this process that have caused me to look at what I did in my classroom before distance learning and reevaluate them. Technology will continue to be a greater part of education going forward, and I’m hoping we all come out of this as better educators overall. Teachers have always been important; but during this time, we are even more essential than ever. We are not just a tie to some sort of normalcy, but also have the responsibility of keeping our students on track and not letting this become a lost year for them.”

He added that his students have been fantastic, which has made the experience easier. He said collaboration with colleagues has also been at its best, with other teachers sharing best practices on a daily basis. Working together helps staff address the frustrations and challenges that arise from teaching virtually.

Students have been interested in trying new activities, including using QR codes in their presentations, Microsoft forms, and other options that allow them to complete tasks from their phones rather than computers, which sometimes have slower connections.

“I’ve found that being understanding about that and offering students other ways of showing they are paying attention than just being on camera causes students to be more willing to actually engage and connect,” he added. “There are tons of other ways students can demonstrate that they are learning. When it comes to seeing students and getting to know what they look like when they aren’t on camera, I’ve invited students to share their best selfie. We need to be willing to meet

those students halfway.”

In Mr. Sterpe’s class, students will have the opportunity to enjoy some cool online museum virtual tours, including exhibits at the Smithsonian that tie into course content; they also have more choice in both what they are reading as well as what form they want to use to demonstrate their learning.

#SCSDGivesThanks for all the teachers who are going above and beyond to find creative ways to engage with students during virtual learning, and for the students who are actively participating in this new form of learning!

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KARIN DAVENPORT is the communications specialist at the Syracuse City School District.



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# The Power of Choice During

## Uncertain Times



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By Paul M. Fanuele, EdD

COVID-19 has dealt us many challenges since it thrust itself upon us close to a year ago. It has created an uncertainty that seems to be prevalent throughout our everyday lives and decision making. Simple decisions that seemed easy just a short time ago now need careful thought before engaging. Decisions like finding a place to vacation or where to shop for certain items require a level of scrutiny never required before.

District-based decisions, such as creating plans to reopen schools, require time, energy, and collaboration in order to have a proper exploration and analysis of all the different variables. This enhanced level of inspection can lead people into inaction as all of the uncertainty wreaks havoc on our previously easy-to-make decisions.

Reflecting upon the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on decision making, one word resonated with me and I believe sums up the decisions we have made and will make in the future. The word is *choice*. We are tasked with choices every day and obviously making a good choice is important.

### DEFINITION/USE OF WORDS

Dictionary.com defines *choice* as both a noun and an adjective. The noun definition is “the right, the power, the opportunity to choose.” These three points are quite important and deserve being emphasized. It is our right to choose, it is an immense power to be able to choose, and it is a tremendous opportunity to have the freedom to choose. Uncertainty can paralyze us into inaction and let someone else dictate our choices. This can happen when we do not make a choice or simply just go with the flow, like not exercising our right to vote. Remember that not making a choice is indeed still a choice. It is a choice to let someone else decide for you. If people have no choice in what they do or how they do it, they will underperform and lack intrinsic motivation as they complete the task (Pink, 2009). Uncertainty cannot take away our power to choose. We need to be a driver of our life and decision making, not a passenger.

During these times of uncertainty, it is also important to choose our words wisely. Author Don Miguel Ruiz pointed out that we should always be impeccable with our words. People notice what we say and how we say it. Our choice of words has an impact on the success of anything we do. Today more than ever we need to choose our words intently, stand by our words, and try to always say what we mean and mean what we say. Our word choice makes a difference. It can be a calming voice in a sea of volatility.

### TOO MUCH CHOICE

Unfortunately, we can sometimes have too much choice. Although the general feeling is that having more items to choose from is good, having too much to choose from can be a detriment. Psychologist Barry Schwartz popularized the idea of the paradox of choice. Sometimes we can have so many things to choose from that we either waste time and energy choosing or we put our focus in the wrong place. Take our television providers, for example. Think about how many ways we can watch TV: Standard Cable, Apple TV, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, Roku, this app, that app. This can be maddening. More can sometimes be less. Since there are so many options out there, we need to set our priorities and know what and who are important to us: family, friends, our community, doing the right thing. We cannot stress over the simple decisions in our life, like our cable provider, but take our time with larger decisions, such as the most effective way to educate our students. Too many choices can take us off target. If we follow our priorities, stand by them, and remember our moral compass, our decisions will be solid. Otherwise, someone else might be setting our priorities for us.

Solidifying a district’s priorities can be a monumental task, especially when deciding upon a return-to-school plan following the school building closures due to COVID-19. There are myriad possibilities and opinions throughout the nation and state, let alone our own communities. I remember one hot July afternoon at a meeting of administrators under a tent when one of our principals declared that his school should go fully remote for the 2020-2021 school year. He was feeling drained by seemingly endless COVID decision making and went for an option that would cut down on choices. Conversation ensued over the weeks to come, not just among the administrators, but also teachers, staff, parents, students, board of education members, and even medical personnel. This principal eventually completely changed his mind, coming to see that, for his building and our small school district, returning to school as soon as possible with a hybrid and re-

mote plan in place was the best option, as it offered the community the power to choose. The best way to drill down to our individual district’s priorities was to involve all stakeholders in the process. Our return-to-school committee met countless times in order to narrow our choices to fit within our district’s priorities and create a plan that works for all.

### LEARN FROM OTHERS AND OURSELVES

Our lives are often filled with help from others when needing to make a choice. Our family, colleagues, and friends have hopefully helped us decide to be positive during the COVID-19 crisis. Unfortunately, we will continue to be inundated with choices to make and can be on our own for many of them. It is our power to make choices and our opportunity to make choices based on our own beliefs and values. However, just because we have the power to make our own choices doesn’t mean we need to make them alone. Asking for help is not a weakness, it is a strength. Although no one has experienced a pandemic in a hundred years, someone out there will have an idea that will help. We need to seek out mentors and learn from others. It is also important to include others in order to seek the different perspectives others can have. For example, a return-to-school committee could possess different constituent groups, all with a much-needed view on what returning to school looks like to them. In our case, the return-to-school committee, along with community surveys and forums, provided us the mechanism to listen to and learn from others.

Sometimes our choices might not work out. However, choosing to do our best whenever we can and learning from poor choices are vital. Think of it as either making a successful choice or learning from a poor one. As mentioned before, it is important to learn from others, but it is also critical to learn from ourselves. We as humans learn something new every day. We need to choose to have a growth mindset and learn, grow, and adapt to our ever-changing circumstances.

**STRENGTH IN HOPE**

Most importantly, we need to choose hope. Choosing to have hope requires us to be a driver and not a passenger; it reminds us to make decisions important to us and our community. Choosing to have hope requires us to believe; it requires us to view the world with optimism. Choosing hope leads to having more hope. It gives us the strength to proceed during difficult and challenging times.

We as a society are given a choice when faced with any fear or adversity, including the COVID-19 crisis. Author Zig Ziglar stated, "Getting knocked down in life is a given. Getting up and moving forward is a choice." Remember to draw upon hope and use the strength it provides to face our fears. Be a driver, filling the world with goodwill and positive change, and not a passenger who allows negativity to flourish. Here is an irony that occurs during challenging times. During times like these our hope is tested, but it is also when we need hope the most. Be comforted by the strength hope pro-

vides. Choose hope. Nelson Mandela eloquently said, "May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears."

**DEFINITION REVISITED**

Earlier I referenced Dictionary.com and the definition of the word *choice*. This time I would like to discuss the definition of *choice*, not as a noun, but as an adjective. *Choice* the adjective is defined as "of high quality," "superior," "first class," or "first rate." This is the way we need to handle ourselves during the COVID-19 crisis. A crisis is said to reveal someone's character. We have been asked to deal with something most of us never imagined. We have lost loved ones; we have lost a way of life that was all we have ever known. We need to be first rate as we tackle what some call "the new normal." However, remember that our choices determine "the new normal." We should not accept the conditions as they appear to us. We have the power and opportunity to choose to shape our reality.

**CONCLUSION**

Author Denis Waitley famously said, "There are two primary choices in life, to accept conditions as they exist, or accept the responsibility for changing them." COVID-19 and the sea of uncertainty it has left in its wake can paralyze us when it comes time to make decisions and lead action. We need to stay strong, learn from others, and remember that moving forward from adversity, as well as learning and growing as an individual, is quite simply a choice. A choice that is ours.

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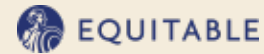
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