

St. Cloud State University

The Repository at St. Cloud State

Teacher Development Faculty Publications

Department of Teacher Development

9-8-2021

COVID Disruption Requires More Than Providing a Device: How Districts are Engaging Students and Families Online

Jennifer Hill

Tracy Reimer

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/ed_facpubs



Part of the Educational Technology Commons

COVID Disruption Requires More Than Providing a Device: How Districts are Engaging Students and Families Online

As school districts pivoted to online delivery in the spring of 2020, the urgent need for each student to have a device in hand and internet connectivity was a remarkable challenge. Immediate action was taken, incredible financial investments were made, and creative problem solving peaked to provide students access to the tools needed for online learning. Despite this laudable feat, districts are entering the third school year disrupted by COVID and confronted with the Delta surge, disheartening student learning loss, and an emerging reality that hybrid and online learning models are not going away.

Truancy issues, unresponsive home supports, and parental deficits in technology skills have challenged schools. A repeat of last year is not an acceptable option for our country's students. With the intent to guide schools toward more effective practices, 55 Technology Directors detailed how their districts engaged students and families online.

Increasing Attendance - Addressing Truancy

Absenteeism was mainly addressed by school districts through contact with parents and students. Communication between home and school occurred through a variety of methods including home visits, conferences, phone calls, and software alerts. Home visits often included delivery of both food and school assignments. A team of staff members were called upon to make these connections including deans, counselors, social workers, principals, advisors, distance learning liaisons, student success coordinators, student care teams, family literacy specialists, and classroom teachers. Districts noted the need to exercise compassion, prioritize relationships, and problem-solve when working with families during the pandemic.

Partnering with Parents and Caregivers

Technology Directors listed an array of efforts aimed to address the range of support and instruction caregivers provided their child(ren) in distance and hybrid learning models. Open communication was key. To learn what families needed, districts distributed polls and took actions based on findings. Staff, teachers, and administration held virtual office hours, and support was offered online and in person. Personalized Zoom, Google Meets, and phone calls were offered and extended beyond the school day to help with homework in the evening. When needed, students were offered the opportunity to come to school in-person to work on their homework.

Synchronous online learning was offered to students in real-time to encourage engagement. Advisors met with students to develop success plans, and students were given additional supports if needed through the formation of small groups and paraprofessional assistance. In other scenarios, parents were encouraged to attend class with their children when able. Virtual Community Education programs and Family Literacy nights were utilized to help connect with families.

Building Tech Savviness in Parents and Caregivers

Districts implemented proactive, conventional, and innovative strategies to support adult caregivers with technology questions. Proactive efforts included distributing *how to* documents, short videos, and posting online resources in multiple languages. The aim was to help caregivers use digital tools, troubleshoot devices, and operate software applications. In addition, districts limited the number of apps and platforms teachers used to help alleviate "parent paralysis."

Conventional approaches included caregivers contacting the teacher, calling the school, and emailing the school office. Districts created a physical help desk, a support phone line, and an online portal specifically to provide students and families with technology assistance.

Innovative strategies often involved using financial and human resources in new ways. In some districts, staff members were hired to bridge family-technology concerns. While in other districts staff members were redesignated with titles and responsibilities such as Tech Team Digital Navigators. Districts organized technology information sessions and invited families to the school campus, met with families individually to provide assistance, and made home visits. School districts attempted to serve the larger community by offering technology related community education classes.

In conclusion, Technology Directors emphasized the importance of the human factor of education. Districts were most effective when teams collaborated with a service approach aimed at meeting the needs of students, families, and communities.