

# Schooling is changing forever in several key ways

## EDUCATION LAB

There's no going back.

That is the consensus emerging from education leaders across the country as the nation enters a second year of schooling in a pandemic.

A public school district in Arizona is looking to become a service provider for parents who have pulled their children out to home-school them. In Oklahoma, students are having a say in where and when they learn. And educators everywhere are paying closer attention to students' mental well-being.

"None of us would have ever wanted to go through this," said Deborah Gist, the superintendent of schools in Tulsa, Oklahoma. "We have a chance now to make it something that will change teaching and learning forever for the better."

At the outset of the pandemic, schools nationwide had to make swift and drastic changes in public education to keep students learning. And while teachers, principals, district leaders and parents forced to shift to virtual learning are eager for an end to the emergency measures, many are already looking ahead and considering which education solutions have worked well, and what parts of public schooling should be permanently altered.

The changes to schools go beyond the sudden dive into education

technology. In fact, some of the most exciting education solutions forced by the pandemic have very little to do with giving every student a device.

In many districts, educators are reconsidering old norms about schedules and thinking about how to incorporate more community based learning. The pandemic's disruptions have also forced schools to get more proactive about communicating with families, especially in places where remote learning has turned homes into classrooms. Some educators are listening more closely to student and parent voices, and a few are even going door to door. And they're placing greater weight on the emotional well-being of all members of a school community, a gratifying development for experts who have long called on schools to pay attention to the way home life can affect children.

"This is a disruptive moment" for schools, said Robin Lake, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) at the University of Washington, Bothell. "There are so many discoveries, realizations — so much innovation," she said.

CRPE collaborated with the RAND Corp., Chiefs for Change, the Council of the Great City Schools, and the education consulting firm Kitamba last year to assemble and survey a panel of more than 375 school district leaders and charter management organizations from around the country about changes the pandemic has wrought. (The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation sponsored the project and is among the many funders of The Hechinger Report and Education Lab.)

The big take-away: "Public education will never be the same," according to Lake. "They said, 'We're never going back fully to the old ways.' "

Forced by necessity to be more flexible to individual student needs, some schools are thinking about how they can better design learning around kids'

interests and passions. "The ability to be unbounded by the offerings that are in a school building and the kind of one-size-fits-all approach has been liberating for people," said Lake.

Tulsa Public Schools is one example of a district thinking about education solutions outside the classroom box. Even before the pandemic forced its schools to go remote, the district was piloting ways to move education out of the classroom and into the community. One program, Tulsa Beyond, gave a small group of students at several district high schools — in partnership with educators and community members — the opportunity to design and implement a new vision of what high school should look like.

The resulting three models varied, but each called for real-world, hands-on, work-based learning experiences. The new models had been operational for a semester when COVID-19 forced them to pause. But the pandemic also opened a door after all Tulsa schools closed when COVID-19 hit, according to Andrea Castañeda, the district's chief innovation officer.

"All of a sudden [students] got a level of independence, time management and decision-making autonomy that a traditional school usually doesn't afford," she said, which whetted their appetite for more such opportunities.

Now, the district is determined to sustain the program and create new, richer opportunities that could eventually take all students outside school more often.

"We're going to be able to grow and expand on [learning outside the school building] more than we would have been able to do before the pandemic," said Gist, the superintendent. "Our students need the ability to learn outside of their school through internships, through apprenticeships, through

concurrent learning with higher education and technical schools.”

The district is going to be “investing heavily” in these programs in the future, according to Castañeda, using federal coronavirus relief funding to support the design and administration of this doubling down. “Our goal is to have rich programming available across the district,” she said.

In Arizona, schools across the state have taken advantage of loosened regulations to get creative about education solutions, according to Emily Anne Gullickson, CEO and founder of the nonprofit A for Arizona, which funds innovation in public education.

“That flexibility to adapt quickly allowed school leaders to step back and look at what is and isn’t working and how to pivot quickly,” Gullickson said.

Her organization has given grants of \$20,000 or more to schools and districts to launch a number of new programs. The proposals included after-hours study groups for third graders to work with a qualified teacher or tutor to stem learning loss during the pandemic; an outdoor learning hub to reengage students who weren’t attending online classes; and an in-person small learning community with social and emotional supports for students suffering from trauma.

Vail School District in Vail, Arizona, had parents in mind when it applied for and received a \$60,000 grant from A for Arizona to offer school services a la carte to the 150 families who switched to home schooling during the pandemic and need extra support. “We were thinking as educators, but just as much as parents,” said Darcy Mentone, a spokesperson for the district, who was part of the brainstorming team that came up with the idea.

The grant targets students living in remote, rural parts of the district with limited or no access to Wi-Fi and cell service, students in difficult family situations and high schoolers struggling to stay on track for graduation.

When the program is up and running, parents will be able to make a wide range of requests for services, including live instruction by a certified teacher and meeting spaces for “micro schools” organized by parents. It’s similar to what the district has offered to kids in its digital learning programs for 15 years.

The “menu” will also include social and emotional supports and instruction by trained counselors; art and music lessons; and access to the district’s online textbooks and instructional materials. It will even help students connect with clubs and other extracurricular groups to meet their social needs. This is a third option (in addition to its two existing digital programs) that will allow the district to aid homeschoolers who are struggling, according to Mentone.

None of this would have been possible before COVID-19. “Currently, in statute, none of this is legal,” Mentone said, but the governor’s executive order made it legal for the current school year. The program is also free to families and won’t have a fiscal impact on the district, she explained; it is paid for entirely by the grant. It will be up to the state Legislature to decide whether it will continue afterward.

Remote and project-based learning have prompted some educators to revisit the school day.

“There’s a great deal of respect now that learning can happen outside of the four walls. People knew it, but the regulatory environment wouldn’t have

suggested that was a fact," said Gullickson. The question now, she said, is: "How do we redesign school schedules? How do we readjust teacher schedules where they want to, [and] where students might flourish outside the 'traditional model' and still be public school kids?"

The CRPE/RAND survey showed some districts are considering a four-day school week for high school students so they can spend one day a week off campus, learning at career centers or doing community service, apprenticeships, internships and, in some cases, paid employment.

"We're hearing from school districts, 'Why do all teachers have to work from 8 to 4 every day?' " said CRPE's Lake. "Why not allow some to have flex schedules and some schools to operate part time to meet older students' needs around work?"

In Tulsa, two of the three Tulsa Beyond high schools are designed so that students gradually take control over their own schedules. "[They] imagined an approach that as kids moved from ninth to 10th to 12th grade, we relinquish more scheduling control to them," said Castañeda.

"Adolescents need the opportunity to exercise choice and experiment with independence in ways that ease them into the demands of early adulthood."

In Arizona, Gullickson sees staying power in these education solutions, because they've been built specifically to address student and community needs.

"Parents recognize that this is the time to reexamine and reimagine education and what those possibilities are for students," Gullickson said. "I don't see parents wanting to go backward."

In the CRPE/RAND study, educators said Zoom, Facebook Live and YouTube have been effective, lowcost ways to connect with families. And moving meetings online has increased community participation and engagement. That is, technology is prompting deeper shifts in how schools see the importance of communicating with students and families.

Dawn Ray, a speech-language pathologist at Arbor Hill Elementary School in Albany, New York, said she and her colleagues have discovered distance learning has improved communications with families. "Parents are a bit more timid about coming into the building," she said. But now, "we're invited guests into their homes."

The online format has allowed her more time to chat with parents once her work with children is finished, which allows her to respond to their questions and bolster the school-home relationship.

Getting a view into students' home lives has also underscored how important their mental wellbeing is. More educators are realizing "you're not going to achieve the academic gains that you want to see without attending to the social and emotional development of young people," said Karen VanAusdal, senior director of practice for CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning.

It's not a new idea, she said, but the pandemic has heightened educators' awareness. "They're really understanding in a profound way that relationships and social and emotional learning are at the heart of all learning," said VanAusdal.

Before COVID-19, some educators treated social and emotional learning as

separate from academic learning, she said.

Now, educators are building social and emotional learning into the virtual and in-person school day, including time for journaling, mindfulness exercises and circle time focused specifically on checking in on students' mental health.

Educators at the Phoenix Union district, an all-high school district in Phoenix, have paired an adult with every student to ensure some form of one-on-one contact daily. In El Paso, Texas, the district is installing a districtwide online daily check-in system where students sign in on their phones or devices to say how they're feeling, so educators can have an early warning of a student in need of help.

While school leaders express excitement about the possibilities ahead for public education, they're still feeling the stress of the present moment. "No matter what decision you make, there are massive negative impacts on people I am responsible for caring for," Gist said. "That is an excruciating position to be in."

The list of challenges the leaders confront is overwhelming, and some are nervous that funding cuts or a return to old regulations designed for the traditional school model could thwart some of the recent innovations. But Lake said the fact that the crisis is ongoing means solutions that show promise will likely stick.

"This wasn't just a snapshot in time," said Lake. "It's going to require us to be in a continual cycle of figuring out new and better ways to do things."

This story about education solutions was produced by The Hechinger



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