



# The AZ Rural Leader

Official Publication of the **Arizona Rural Schools Association**

WINTER 2020  
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## MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Over the last several months, I've been invited to countless zoom meetings where I've heard rural superintendents define the reality of the week, debrief on what worked for them, and might work for someone else. I've witnessed the tedium of dealing with the same misinformation, lack of information, and downright willful disinformation.

Not to be dramatic, but what I've seen is almost always impressive, and sometimes inspiring. I have seen applied common sense rise to the level great courage; sometimes even sacrifice. Like all of us, I could have done without this whole pandemic thing. I did not need 500,000 deaths to remind me of the value of life, and I did not need quarantines and social distancing to teach me how much I value human contact. Those I could have done without, but what I never want to live without is the experience of the leadership you have demonstrated. Thank you for allowing me to see it.

Our association is doing well, membership is over 160 which represents 143 districts, 427 schools, and over 197,000 students. As an association, we, meaning you, represent a large and growing numbers of rural districts, students, and communities all across rural Arizona.

For those of you who may not know, ARSA, ABEC, and AACSS, created The Final Mile Project to help schools make that "last Mile" connection to students who either do not have useable internet or cannot afford the internet which is available to them. The post-COVID world will make internet equity one of the most important needs our rural students have. We all know that virtual learning as an important part of instruction is here to stay, and if students do not have affordable; effective two-way internet capability, they will always be at an instructional disadvantage to all those who do.

Currently we are identifying schools and districts who have students without internet at home. We determine the scope of the problem and establish the capital cost to build out wi-fi internet to the homes of those students in need, and then we begin looking for funding. We all know that the federal government is on the verge of targeting impressive amounts of funding towards states. We are well positioned to receive a portion of this aid, which we will use to capitalize our projects. Please visit our webpage: <https://www.thefinalmileproject.com/>

Our 26th annual conference is scheduled for September 16-18, 2021 at little America again in Flagstaff. The theme of this year's conference is: "Facing Our NEXT Normal Together".

Again, I'd like to thank you for inspiration in difficult times. I'll make sure our next conference will be a celebration of how far we've come together.

One last thing. We've changed our newsletter's title from "ARSA Reports" to "The AZ Rural Leader", which we believe is more descriptive of who we are and who we want to become.

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# The Final Mile

By Sean Rickert, Superintendent Pima USD, ARSA Executive Board

It is only a mile from Madison Square to Union Square in New York City, and in 1880 this stretch of Broadway was one of the first electrically lighted streets in America and the world. A generation later in 1902 it was dubbed the Great White Way and the brilliance of the many illuminated signs captured the imagination of visitors from around the world. Fast-forward half a century and the brilliance and prosperity associated with electrification had permeated most of the western world, but access was not equitably distributed. By 1934 nearly nine out of every ten farms in France and Germany had electricity while nine in ten American farms were still without. The energy which drove the many innovations of the Roaring Twenties was enriching and enlivening much of America, but for many that prosperity was many miles away.

Similarly, in 2020 access to prosperity is closely connected to a community or an individual's ability to connect with the World Wide Web. The dot-com expansion of the nineties opened doors for much of America and the world. Internet connectivity enhanced many aspects of people's lives. Economically, supply chains were opened encouraging productivity and innovation. Culturally, barriers to the global exchange of ideas were eradicated, and recipes, ideas and fashions spread at record speed. Socially, people became connected in many new ways regardless of geography. Perhaps most importantly the ability to learn about anything and everything has been opened to those with access. For the last thirty years access to the internet has become the central measure of sophistication and affluence. Those with access are ahead of those who lack access in terms of their ability to achieve on almost every standard.

The most important and effective of the New Deal programs was the Rural Electrification Administration, or REA, authorized by President Roosevelt to address the inequities created by limited access to electrification. Within six years

of implementation the 90% of American farms without electricity had been transformed to less than half, and a decade later almost all were connected to the grid. This transformation also introduced two important new quasi-governmental institutions -- the cooperative and the public benefit (or service) corporation. In the name of the public welfare infrastructure was extended, resources were allocated and important services found their way into every corner of America. The resultant economic expansion made America the greatest nation in human history.

Now we are faced with a similar challenge. Internet access has become virtually universal, but there remain pockets where access is limited or lacking. Internet access can range from 10 megabytes per second (Mbps) to download and 1 Mbps to upload on a dial-up access to 1 Gigabyte per second (1G) down and up on a fiber-optic connection. The average American internet access speed is 55 megabytes per second (Mbps). In Arizona average access speed is much slower at 36 Mbps. While we have seen dramatic improvements in rural access, the challenge with technology continues to be keeping up with constantly moving goalposts. The goals articulated four years ago, for greater access at the 25Mbps/3Mbps standard fails to recognize that being future ready looks more like 100Mbps/100Mbps, a standard most of the nation and almost all of rural American is far from reaching.

The tools exist to move rural Arizona from where we are today to the standard needed to ensure all children have access at home to the tools required to access a quality twenty-first century education. First, the technology exists. We have identified tools that will enable the establishment of a network of fiber linked nodes capable of reaching all the households within a seven-mile radius. Within each home access points can be installed capable of providing 100Mbps/100Mbps access to wireless devices. Second, programs exist to provide the funding to erect the network.

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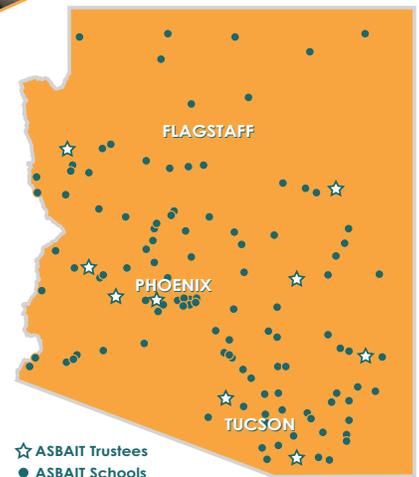
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# Advantages of a Rural Education

By Dr. Andy Smith, Associate Faculty and Coordinator for Teacher Education Programs at Prescott College, and J. Ron Hennings, Associate Faculty Education Department Core Advisor Coordinator, M.Ed. - EDL Principal Certification Program Professional Preparation Programs

Rural schools offer robust opportunities for students and staff to participate in the day to day operations and activities afforded to their respective communities. The following are some examples of the relationship between stakeholders.

## Schools as 'Centers of Community'

When at times it seems that any form of government feels disconnected, rural schools provide a strong example of local government where community input and participation are welcome. As the center of the community, rural schools host events including wedding receptions, Halloween carnivals, church services, and even funerals. Often open for delicate situations including emergencies, rural schools can and do provide a local meeting point for any given moment. Additionally, it gives the chance for individuals to participate civically whether on a local governing board or committee.

## Curricular 'Cultural Congruency'

Cultural congruence is a process of effective interaction between the provider and client levels. The model is based on the idea that cultural competence is ever evolving; providers must continue to improve their quality of communication, leading to improved delivery. The teacher – student interaction in a smaller setting allows for a higher-level awareness regarding delivery of the curriculum and the opportunity for quick feedback and reflection.

## School-Staff 'Ethnic Cohesion'/'Social Cohesion'

Building shared values and a common enterprise is another facet of rural schools. Whether it be attending a sporting event or a school concert, social cohesion is important for the dynamics of a community. Social cohesion helps guide and direct the mission and values of the school and celebrate achievements.

## Students as 'Participants vs. Observers'

Rural schools, and perhaps depending on their size, supply students a wealth of opportunity regarding participation. From sports to clubs and councils, rural schools open doors. Creatively, there are not many moments where a 7th grader can win a science fair, compete in a spelling bee, play a trumpet, and start a basketball game all in the same day. Considering this, teachers also have the opportunity to participate at an extensive level.

## Nature-based Education

Students in rural environments develop a sense of the natural rhythms of life where daily routines, seasonal changes and weather patterns provide 'Ways of Knowing'. The interdependency of all forms of life is evident at the personal, family and community levels.

## Synthesized Learning vs. Siloed Knowledge

In rural schools' teachers teach across a myriad of content courses offering a natural synthesis of learning. Rural Education is a practical blend of theory and practice where application of knowledges is foremost. Historically, the one room schoolhouse enjoyed the wisdom of one teacher across several grades and topics, and although the requirements of certification may have disrupted history there are still moments where this is a prominent aspect of a student's life.

## 'Can – Do' attitude

Rural citizens develop a robust sense of self and collective efficacy. The two prevailing values in rural communities are 'Show Me' and 'If it needs doing, then let's get it done'. In rural small schools their is a powerful sense of 'urgency' as in 'If it will provide for greater opportunity, then let's implement it tomorrow'. Together we can make it happen.

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# Why We're Living in a Footnote of History

By Dr. Gene Kerns, Vice President and Chief Academic Officer

Last spring, the word that kept coming to mind amid the COVID-19 disruptions was surreal. Things seemed so unbelievable that one had to ask, Is this real? Is this actually happening? Or is it a dream?

Now, after months of disruptions, the sense of "surreality" has rubbed off. We have become accustomed to the abnormal as our "new normal." In a healthy way, our thoughts have shifted from questioning realities to determining how best to address them.

With a protracted back-to-school season this fall, multiple instructional models (remote, in-person, hybrid) in place, and sudden transitions back to all-virtual services in some districts, Arizona's 2020–2021 school year remains in tremendous flux. Questions have abounded, particularly around assessment. Should we still screen students with interim assessments? Can we administer them remotely? If we test remotely, does that impact our data? Are norms being updated? How do we compare growth and progress this school year to growth and progress in previous, "normal" years? How can we gauge the extent of the "COVID Slide"? What do we do about it?

In general, educators set very high bars for themselves. They strive to make everything as perfect as it can be, even as conditions work against them. This can create a lot of pressure, and we need to be realistic about just how perfect things can be when we're working in far-from-perfect conditions.

## **Making the most of educational data this school year**

If it has not dawned on you already, let me point out that we are currently living in a footnote of history. Ten, twenty, and even fifty years from now, when people look back at longitudinal student data from this period, there will always be an asterisk or footnote to remind them that the data and results must be considered through the lens

of the disruptions caused by COVID-19. These are imperfect times, and all results from this period must be considered through that lens.

And it's not just that data will need to be considered relative to our current conditions. In some cases, there will be an absolute void—in other words, no data to consider. Think, for example, of the longitudinal data void created by the cancellation of summative tests last spring. There will never be any state-level summative data for the 2019–2020 school year. Given that most accountability models also consider student growth, states are now wrestling with what the absence of 2019–2020 data means about growth scores moving forward. Depending on the growth model used, one year of missing performance data could create multiple years of missing growth data.

How do we fill this void?

With the absence of normative data coming from summative tests, interim assessments are filling the gap. We may not have state test data, but stakeholders are still concerned about gauging students' learning loss. Interim assessments' normative scores can address this question and help us to do a lot more. Schools still need to screen students for dyslexia, run their Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) models, and disaggregate performance data to locate and address inequities.

## **Understanding the true impact of the "COVID Slide"**

To support schools while they are "in the footnote," Renaissance recently released the largest national longitudinal study targeted specifically at gauging the COVID-19-related academic disruptions. The How Kids Are Performing report looks at the back-to-school reading and mathematics performance of 5.3 million students across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Overall, the report shows mathematics performance has been significantly more impacted than reading performance, with

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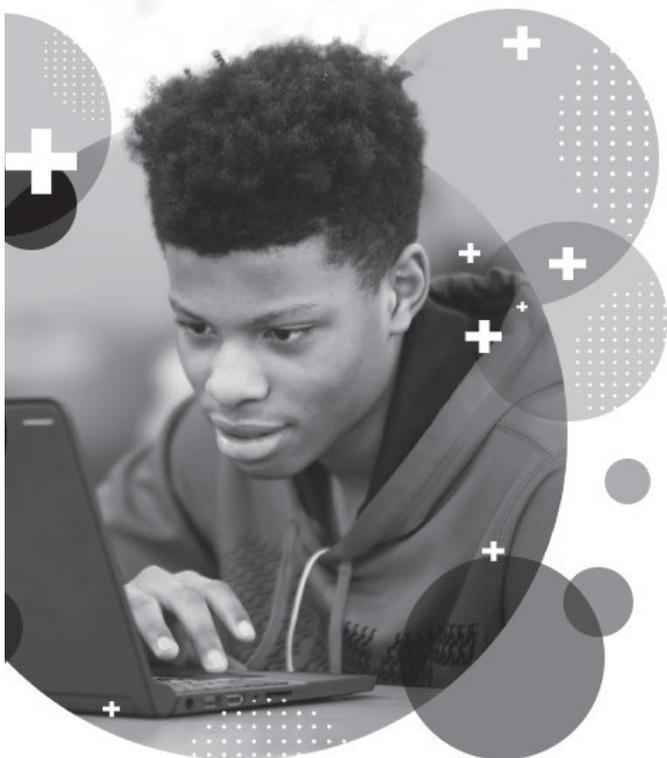
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# Maintaining Strong Internal Controls in a Virtual Environment

By Dennis Maschke, CWDL Audit Partner

While hope is on the horizon with the national rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine, most organizations started the new year under the same conditions as they ended the last – remote working arrangements, reduced personnel and a reliance on virtual interactions. As a result of all of these workplace changes, internal controls over financial reporting may have been unintentionally relaxed, and controls that were once effective no longer suit the current environment. If you haven't already, now is the time to examine your existing internal controls over operations and financial reporting to determine if your framework is effectively mitigating risk.

To help you get started, here is a list of best practices for maintaining strong internal controls during this uncertain time:

## **1. Identify New Risks**

Remember that it is management's responsibility to identify new risks that arise when there are changes to your existing system or environment. Has a reduction in personnel or a shift in responsibilities resulted in a failure to segregate duties? Has the work-from-home environment caused you to implement digital approvals and, if so, has IT performed an analysis of passwords and other system safeguards to determine the reliability of those approvals?

## **2. Modify Your Controls as Needed**

Existing internal controls should be reassessed to determine if they address any new risks you have identified. Consider that with any changes to controls, financial policies and procedures will likely need to be modified, and formal roles and responsibilities may need to be altered.

## **3. Document Changes**

Changes or additions made to your controls need to be documented and maintained, not only for audit purposes, but also for departmental integrity. Documenting the reasons for the changes, not just the changes themselves, is important, too, as well as when these changes were implemented.

## **4. Monitor New Controls**

As always, new and existing controls should be tested to ensure they are operating as intended.

## **5. Communicate with Your Staff**

Your staff needs to have a full understanding of changes in controls. Make sure you are communicating clearly with your team, addressing questions and monitoring changes to roles and responsibilities to ensure implementation.

## **6. Communicate with Your IT Department**

Remote work means that many of your new controls will take digital form. Management should work closely with the IT department to design and implement effective electronic controls for this new environment. Because virtual work elevates the risk of cybercrime, your IT department should have practices in place to actively monitor and test the organization for phishing and other forms of internal and external threats.

## **7. Communicate with Your Auditor**

Your audit is likely to be remote, so you need to coordinate closely with your auditor to plan accordingly. Functionally, the audit will likely require innovative means of conducting interviews, communicating status updates and sharing documents securely. Even

*(continued on page 22)*



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# Research to Improve Academic Outcomes for Students

By Dr. Melissa Sadorf, Stanfield ESD, ARSA President Elect

Across the country, the Regional Educational Laboratories work in partnership with educators and policy makers to develop and use research that improves academic outcomes for students. Since May, 2020, Arizona has participated with the REL Region 15 Comprehensive Center Team in a Rural Community of Practice. Both Arizona Department of Education personnel and ARSA executive board members have participated in the work that the CoP is doing. In addition to Arizona, Region 15 encompasses California, Utah and New Mexico. All members of the CoP recognize the unique challenges that rural communities face, especially in the last year with COVID, and come together regularly to share best practices with each other.

Just some of the work done with Region 15's CoP involves laying foundations for practice sharing

across the Region. The CoP started its sessions looking at hybrid learning and sharing what is working in the field in the four states. Issues around broadband and access have also been explored. Reopening plans, mitigation plans and the transition back to the school building offered an opportunity to collaborate and share ideas through the lens of communication, different learning models, scheduling, and provision of essential services. Highlighted was the importance of SEL, and a spotlight by Dr. Pate from the National Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School. Additionally, the CoP was able to them overlay the potential of health partnerships to support students, no matter their learning delivery status. The Nevada DOE shared their focus on Indigenous Education called "Essential Understandings for Indian Education" that is currently being

*(continued on page 16)*

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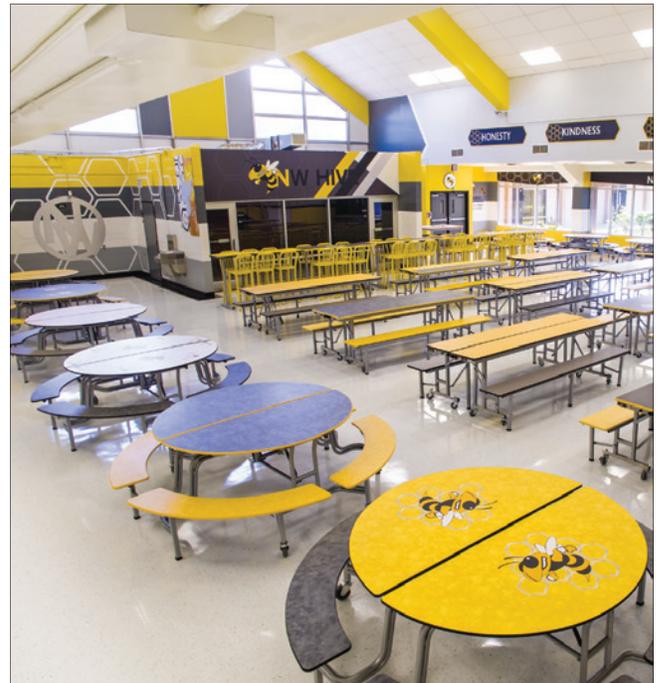
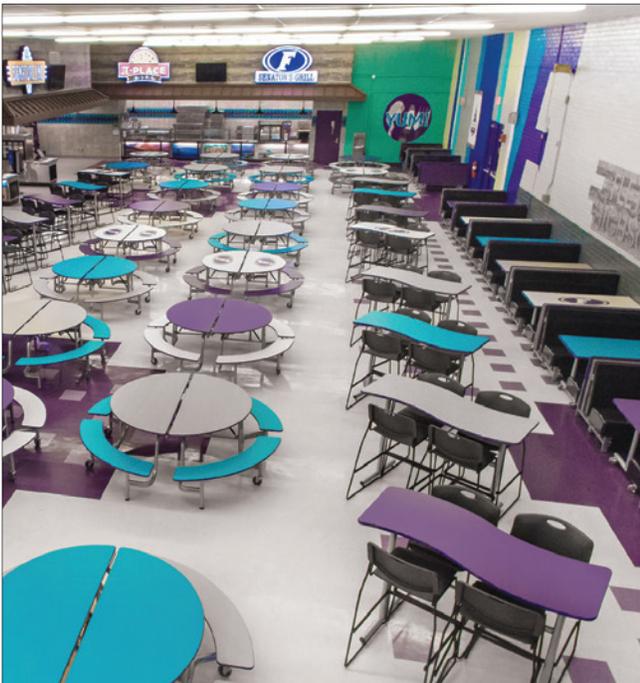
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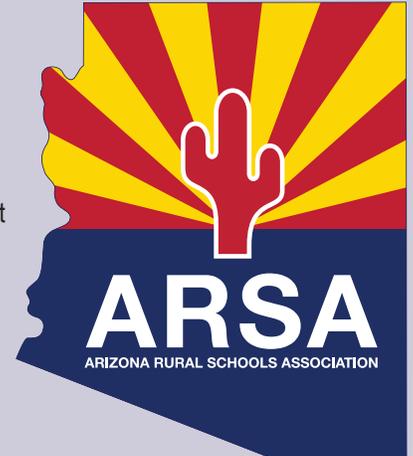
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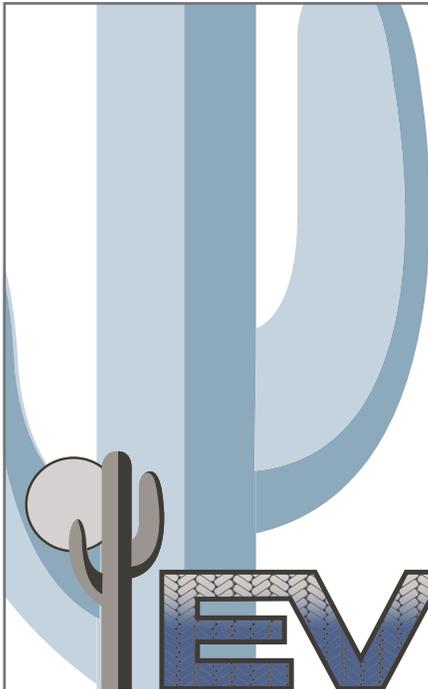
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Through the Rural Utility Service, the descendant agency of the REA, grant funding is available for just such a program. Management of the service would be provided by either a non-profit organization, or a governmental or quasi-governmental (public service corporation) agency. It is possible that management could be contracted with private providers, cooperative agencies or municipalities. There are a number of regulatory questions still to be addressed. Third, models are currently being developed to demonstrate the efficacy of the technology. These models are being set up in a number of rural communities across Arizona. Based on their performance we will be able to answer many of the questions.

In conclusion we must keep in mind the importance of ensuring universal access to a quality education. In response to the obstacles to educational opportunity created by segregation a century ago the U.S. Supreme Court responded,

“Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.” *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483, 1954 (at 493)

This sentiment applies just as well to the importance of providing access to internet connectivity. More recently the court considered the importance of state action to provide equitable access to educational opportunities and found, in the words of concurring Justice Harry Blackmun,

“In my view, when the State provides an education to some and denies it to others, it immediately and inevitably creates class distinctions of a type fundamentally inconsistent with those purposes, mentioned above, of the Equal Protection Clause. Children denied an education are placed at a permanent and insurmountable competitive disadvantage, for an uneducated child is denied even the opportunity to achieve. And when those children are members of an identifiable group, that group — through the State’s action — will have been converted into a discrete underclass. Other benefits provided by the State, such as housing and public assistance, are of course important; to an individual in immediate need, they may be more desirable than the right to be educated. But classifications involving the complete denial of education are in a sense unique, for they strike at the heart of equal protection values by involving the State in the creation of permanent class distinctions.” *Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202, 1982 (at 234)

The extent to which technology in the home can effectively deny a child access to an education has expanded exponentially over the last few years, and we are in a position to establish patterns of service that will overcome the potential deficit. In 1882 the technology existed to light the first mile from Union Square to Madison Square, and those who could, traveled to marvel at what had been accomplished. Now we have the opportunity to reach out and bring access to the prosperity made possible by a more interconnected world to those in rural Arizona by bridging the gap and taking it the Final Mile.

*(continued from page 5 - Advantages of a Rural Education)*

### **Prevailing Work Ethic**

Rural citizens demonstrate pride in work. Attention to detail and due diligence of effort are valued. Trans-generational reputations for honesty and dependability are valued.

### **No student is anonymous... All students are known and valued**

The ability to “know” every student is a comfort of the rural school. Families appreciate the ability to speak with staff and administrators about personal issues and concerns without bureaucracy and anonymity. A parent once remarked, “my children like our school because everyone can be friends, and everyone tries to stay friends”. It is a positive observation about the culture and atmosphere in rural schools.

### **Opportunities for Shared Leadership**

Opportunity is evident not only for administrators, but for teachers and staff as well in rural schools. Considering the size and scope of the community, all stakeholders can contribute regarding leadership. Many current administrators had their first chance to test their abilities as small school athletic directors, summer school principals, and any number of administrative duties. In these moments, schools can be a safe place to test leadership ability and knowledge which can lead to further career exploration. ■

*(continued from page 11 - Research to Improve Academic Outcomes for Students)*

used in schools across the state. Finally, Region 15 staff launched a workgroup of CoP members that focused on funding opportunities for rural communities, with discussion around funding layers, braiding funds, and how and why to consolidate funds.

If you are a rural school leader and wish to learn more, please contact Dr. Melissa Sadorf at [msadorf@roadrunners24.net](mailto:msadorf@roadrunners24.net) for more details about the Region 15 Community of Practice. This rural community of practitioners is certainly a stellar example of “Stronger Together!” ■



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grades 4 and 5 taking the largest hits.

The report does two major things. First, it offers new insights around the actual scope of the "COVID Slide." While several reports targeting COVID-19 learning loss have been released, some of them as far back as April, all of these were either much smaller in scope (e.g., involved data from only a handful of states) or were simply predictions based on historical data and a variety of assumptions. According to Paul von Hippel at the University of Texas, most of the previous reports were, in this sense, "statistically informed guesses" (Barnum, 2020).

Such predictive approaches were the only viable ones early "in the footnote." Megan Kuhfeld, a co-author of one of the earliest and more widely circulated predictive reports, noted that these reports "took on a life of their own" and were "sometimes spoken about with far more confidence than we have in them as researchers" (Barnum, 2020). Now, with actual fall 2020 assessment data available, we can move from making guesses and predictions about the COVID Slide to definitively quantifying its impact.

<https://videos.renaissance.com/watch/hQ4fqzAkwZ92Ch1UnAvQwt>

The report's authors discuss key findings—and explain what surprised them most

**Second, the report offers a reference point for schools and districts trying to contextualize what they see in their own data.** Thought leaders in the assessment community have been somewhat divided in their guidance on which tools best fit our current situation. While the value of formative assessment tools has consistently been upheld, some have questioned the use of more formal assessments. Despite some indecision on the part of thought leaders, the vast majority of schools have continued to administer their typical interim assessments. They recognize the need for the information these assessments provide.

With back-to-school assessment results now in hand, school leaders are looking for a way to compare what they are seeing in their own data

with what is happening nationwide. Are our dips on par with the dips seen by others? Are the grades we are seeing as the most impacted the same as others are seeing? Are there particular ways that we should disaggregate our data to check for performance and equity gaps?

To aid in making comparisons, How Kids Are Performing includes the following, using data from 5.3 million Star Assessments administered this fall:

1. Information on changes in student performance, expressed in terms of Percentile Rank (PR).
2. Information on changes in student growth, expressed using Student Growth Percentile (SGP).
3. A time-based approximation of learning loss (e.g., "These grades started the school year 8–11 weeks behind expectations"—see the the graphic below).
4. A disaggregation of various factors by key demographics, including Free-Reduced Lunch, ELL status, Special Education status, Race/Ethnicity, school location (urban vs. rural), and school type (public vs. private/parochial).

While the new report offers many insights on the academic impacts of COVID-19 so far, an equally important consideration is how students grow and progress during the current academic year. Beginning with gaps of various sizes is one thing; seeing those gaps grow across the year is something else. For this reason, we suggest ongoing progress monitoring throughout the year using a variety of formative and interim tools. We cannot afford for a challenging situation to get even worse.

#### Maximizing the impact of daily instruction

Renaissance's mission, succinctly stated, is to accelerate learning for all. As a result, we believe that there's no need for yet another report that simply frames and admires the COVID Slide. Rural schools need additional support for resources to support clear next steps. This is why our very first

(continued on page 20)

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(continued from page 18 - *Why We're Living in a Footnote of History*)

step last spring, well before any analysis of COVID-19 learning loss, was to make available an instructional planning tool that would help educators deal with any eventuality.

When our Focus Skills Resource Center went online in June, educators across the country were able to instantly see a detailed listing of the most essential skills for progression in reading and mathematics, based on their state's standards of learning. Purposefully targeting these essential building blocks of understanding during instruction goes a long way toward mitigating the academic challenges presented by the COVID-19 disruptions.

But it doesn't end there. In many senses, 2021 will be "The Year of Interim Assessment." This makes sense, given the urgency in gauging and addressing learning

loss. Formative classroom assessments can provide a great deal of guidance, but some of the questions we have will clearly require information that only normed tests can provide. We don't have time to wait for our summative systems to go back online in the spring. Normed scores related to performance and growth can be provided by the best interim tools right now, so we can understand where our students are today—and how best to move learning forward.

*Barnum, M. (2020). How much learning have students lost due to COVID? Projections are coming in, but it's still hard to say. Retrieved from: <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2020/10/6/21504195/covid-schools-learning-loss-projections-nwea-credo>*

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more importantly, your auditor has the opportunity to see how other Districts are handling similar challenges and can be an outstanding resource.

While the pandemic created sudden and significant challenges in the workplace, it's possible to maintain a robust internal controls framework that adapts to the changing environment with strategic planning, adjustment of your controls and open communication with your stakeholders. At CWDL, we believe that an important part of an auditor's role is serving as a valued client partner to assist with implementation of best practices and continual District improvement on the whole. Contact Dennis Maschke, Audit Partner, at [dmaschke@cwdl.com](mailto:dmaschke@cwdl.com) or (480) 678-7462 to discuss any of these points or more specific challenges that your District is facing during these unprecedented times.

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# No Going Back From Remote and Hybrid Learning, Districts Say

By Benjamin Herold

January 7, 2021



Many teachers hate it. Millions of parents find it exhausting. A growing body of evidence suggests it has contributed to students falling significantly behind.

Regardless, livestreamed remote instruction is set to remain a significant part of K-12 education, long after the coronavirus pandemic is finally under control.

“There’s no going back now,” said Pedro Martinez, superintendent of the 49,000-student public school system in San Antonio, Texas, where voters recently approved a \$90 million bond to pay for new technology—including cameras and microphones that will be used to broadcast teachers working from their classrooms into the homes of thousands of students learning remotely across the city.

That’s just one of the models for live (“synchronous”) instruction-by-videoconference that has taken hold in the nation’s schools. Since March, districts have distributed tens of millions of digital devices while making massive investments in at-home connectivity, creating almost overnight the infrastructure necessary to support widespread experimentation.

As a result, teachers and students in many communities now spend hours each day interacting via Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams. In Guilford County, N.C., local education leaders took just six weeks to stand up two new full-time virtual academies, which at one point this fall served nearly 10 percent of the district’s 73,000 students. In Dougherty County,

Ga., a company that bills itself as the “Peloton of Education” provides the short-staffed local school district with certified teachers who livestream their lessons onto students’ laptops from hundreds of miles away.

“We really like the flexibility,” said Superintendent Kenneth Dyer.

For America’s schools, COVID-19 isn’t just a public health crisis. It’s also a budget crisis and a mental health crisis, an academic crisis and a racial-justice crisis. No one yet knows the full severity and duration of the resulting challenges. But a dozen experts consulted by Education Week—district leaders and pediatricians, economists and parents, ed-tech entrepreneurs and policy researchers—see a confluence of forces that will likely fuel continued demand for remote teaching.

For starters, clinical COVID-19 vaccine trials are just now beginning for younger children, meaning there’s little reason to believe that most of America’s 51 million public school students will be vaccinated by the start of the 2021-22 school year. The nation’s stagnant economy has also drained state coffers, leading many experts to predict that the nation’s school districts will continue to slash personnel. Even before the pandemic, many schools were facing a severe shortage of highly qualified teachers, especially in rural areas.

And perhaps the biggest wildcard is a surge in interest in remote schooling from a small but significant subset of families.

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Tired of the constant microaggressions and racial discrimination that sapped their children's spirit in traditional school, some parents of color report feeling empowered by remote learning, which has given them new visibility into classroom instruction, curricular materials, and how the adults in public schools are behaving.

"They're not likely to give that up," said Annette Anderson, an assistant education professor at Johns Hopkins University, where she also serves as the deputy director of the Center for Safe & Healthy Schools.

Add it all up, and it's easy to see why players in the nation's multi-billion dollar ed-tech industry sense opportunity.

Back in 1997, for example, Michael Chasen helped create the popular learning-management system Blackboard. Fifteen years later, a private equity group bought his company for \$1.7 billion. Now, Chasen is back in the game, launching last summer a new company that aims to make Zoom more suitable for education, by adding functions such as assignments, interactive quizzes, and an attention-tracking feature that allows teachers to monitor what students are viewing on their screens. ClassEDU has already raised \$16 million in venture capital.

Remote instruction has "passed the acceptance barrier," said Chasen, who described the past eight months as hands-on training in online education for millions of students and teachers.

For some observers, though, that's cause for concern. The push to make permanent

a temporary "solution" intended as an emergency stopgap fits a long tradition of schools throwing good money after bad when it comes to ed tech, said researcher Audrey Watters, author of the forthcoming book *Teaching Machines*.

"I don't think making Zoom more quiz-friendly is particularly interesting," Watters said. "I wish we would just make a commitment to fund schools and prioritize the safety of students and teachers."

And for Jenny Radesky, an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Michigan who studies the ways mobile technology affects child development, the sooner most children can step outside the current "flattened, two-dimensional, technology-mediated" version of school, the better.

"We've all been through this traumatic experience together," Radesky said. "Kids are going to have to heal. The way that happens is through positive relationships."

Following are inside looks at how three school districts are seeking to pursue remote and hybrid instruction next school year and beyond.

Before shutting its physical doors last March to help slow the spread of COVID-19, the San Antonio Independent School District offered "pretty close to zero" live remote instruction, according to Superintendent Pedro Martinez.

Over the ensuing months, however, the district purchased 30,000 Chromebooks, distributed thousands of mobile hotspots, adopted a new learning management



*Teresa Vazquez, a teacher in Fort Wayne, Ind., remotely teaches a Spanish 1 class to students at Monroe High School in Albany, Ga., Courtesy of Elevate K-12*

system, and worked with city and state officials to help build fiber-optic networks in neighborhoods around the city. And after the district lost touch with one-fourth of its elementary students last spring, when most of the city's elementary schools could offer only an hour or so per day of live instruction, officials decided to change their approach.

During the first half of this school year, almost all of San Antonio ISD's 3,200 teachers provided live "hybrid" instruction from their schools. About 30 percent of their students were physically present in the classroom, while the remaining 70 percent followed along remotely from home.

Still, there were problems. For teachers, trying to keep in-person students engaged while also remaining visible on-camera for remote students proved particularly challenging.

"Our best teachers are very energetic," Martinez said. "They asked for additional equipment, so they can move around."

That's why the district decided at the last minute to include in its \$90 million bond proposal money for 1,600 camera-and-microphone rigs from a company called Swivl. The gear automatically follows teachers as they circulate in their classrooms, with the aim of creating a more dynamic livestreaming experience for remote students.

"I want that flexibility, as long as we can show children are still learning," Pedro Martinez, superintendent, San Antonio Public Schools.

Martinez said the purchase is a long-term investment that can help his district maintain hybrid instruction, even after coronavirus-related restrictions eventually end.

"I think the right mix is the reverse of what we have now," the superintendent said. "My ideal is when we can have 70 percent of students in-person and 30 percent remote."

San Antonio isn't alone. Ten percent of district leaders surveyed by the RAND Corporation last fall said they had adopted or were considering a similar hybrid instructional model. Another 19 percent said they were at least considering offering ongoing remote instruction, perhaps to specific subsets of students or to keep all children learning during weather emergencies.

To make that vision more feasible, some education leaders are already pushing for state-level policy changes. Since the coronavirus hit, for example, the Texas Education Agency has allowed schools to include remote instruction when

*(continued on page 28)*

calculating student attendance. Martinez is advocating that state officials make that change permanent.

“I want that flexibility,” he said, “as long as we can show children are still learning.”

Ed-tech entrepreneur Shaily Baranwal believes the nation is weary of remote learning because it too often amounts to little more than kids watching online videos. To rectify that, Elevate K-12 offers districts certified teachers who live all over the country, but run synchronous classes that can be livestreamed anywhere.

“Like Peloton,” Baranwal said, referencing the fitness-equipment juggernaut whose exercise instructors livestream workout classes via the tablets mounted on riders’ stationary cycles.

So far, Elevate K-12’s footprint is relatively small, with about 700 live classes delivered to roughly 200 schools per day. Baranwal said that figure is up 93 percent from last school year. A little over half the company’s current clients are fully remote, while the rest are mostly hybrid.

Among Elevate K-12’s power users is the 14,000-student Dougherty County, Ga., public schools, which serves the small city of Albany and its poor, mostly rural surroundings. The district first contracted with Elevate K-12 during the 2017-18 school year, using live certified teachers instead of paraprofessionals or software programs to provide remedial math and reading help to small groups of struggling students.

Superintendent Kenneth Dyer was so

happy with the results he turned to Elevate K-12 to help solve an even bigger problem. His district employs about 1,000 teachers across 21 schools. But it often started the school year with as many as 50 vacancies.

“If everyone could have an effective teacher physically in the classroom at all times, we would certainly prefer that. But that’s not possible in every school system in the country,” Kenneth Dyer, Superintendent, Dougherty County, Ga., Public Schools.

In a country that is short an estimated 100,000 teachers or more, that’s a common problem, said Emma García, an economist with the Economic Policy Institute. And while clear data on COVID-19-related teacher retirements, resignations, and layoffs remain difficult to come by, cratering state budgets offer plenty of reason to believe that shortage is about to get worse.

“We know from plenty of previous recessions that after a crisis, there’s a cut in the number education jobs,” García said.

Dyer cautioned against hiring third-party instructors as a cost-saving measure. His district now pays Elevate K-12 for 15 remote teachers, most of whom are live-streamed onto large-screen televisions in physical classrooms that students attend in person. The district saves some money, because it doesn’t have to provide benefits to the teachers. But there are also added costs, Dyer said, such as paying paraprofessionals to help with classroom management when a physical teacher isn’t present.

That fits with advice from García and other experts, who stressed that no matter what



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schooling looks like in 2021 and beyond, the combination of learning loss and trauma that children and families have experienced will require more educators, not less.

The real value of live remote instruction, according to Dyer, is flexibility. If there’s an Advanced Placement course that 10 students at one high school and 10 students at a separate high school hope to take, Dougherty County can now contract with Elevate K-12 for a single remote teacher who can be livestreamed into both schools simultaneously. There are also options to hire Elevate K-12 teachers to provide synchronous instruction for just three or four days a week, or just a few periods a day.

Some may worry about converting teaching into “gig work,” with educators going from being professional unionized employees to becoming independent contractors along the lines of Uber drivers. (Baranwal responded by saying that Elevate K-12 teachers, 83 percent of whom are women, “want the flexibility to work at the hours that work best for them.”)

And an even more fundamental concern is that even the best live remote instruction is a poor substitute for face-to-face teaching. On that, the Dougherty County superintendent agreed—to a point. “If everyone could have an effective teacher physically in the classroom at all times, we would certainly prefer that,” Dyer said. “But that’s not possible in every school system in the country.”

*(continued on page 30)*



Officials in the 73,000-student Guilford County, N.C., school system learned something surprising from their COVID-driven foray into remote learning.

“It offers parents a unique opportunity to be much more deeply involved in their children’s education,” Superintendent Sharon Contreras said. “They actually get to observe instruction regularly. That hasn’t happened before.”

Prior to last school year, online offerings in Guilford County consisted mostly of asynchronous supplemental and credit-recovery courses for high school students. The district was still recovering from an ill-fated experiment with 1-to-1 computing several years earlier, and schools still had to contend with a significant digital divide

in the surrounding community. As a result, teachers’ live instruction availability was limited to an hour or so per day in the weeks immediately after the coronavirus hit.

Many parents weren’t happy. So this summer, the district decided to triple the amount of live remote instruction schools offered.

“Expectations changed dramatically,” said Chief Academic Officer Whitney Oakley. She and Contreras wanted to avoid hybrid instruction as much as possible, believing it’s not realistic to ask teachers to teach in two fundamentally different ways at the same time. They also wanted to provide certainty to parents who knew last summer they wouldn’t send their children

back to physical school at all during the 2020-21 school year. And the biggest challenge they faced was funding: There wasn't enough money to allow teachers to be all-remote or all-in person and to allow for appropriate social distancing inside classrooms.

"Parent choice is going to drive much of this conversation. Districts would be wise to think about how they're building out these new options," Annette Anderson, Education Professor, Johns Hopkins University.

Anderson advised. "Districts would be wise to think about how they're building out these new options."

The district decided to create two of its own full-time virtual schools: The Guilford eLearning Virtual Academy, serving grades K-5, and Guilford eLearning University Prep, for grades 6-8. By mid-Fall, more than 7,000 students were enrolled in the two fully remote schools, which offered several hours of live remote instruction each day, as well as alternative scheduling options (such as evening hours) for families who needed flexibility.

Such new models of schooling have been a godsend for many parents, especially those raising Black children, said Johns Hopkins education professor Annette Anderson. The opportunity to virtually invite educators into their homes, observe how the adults in school interact with students, and protect the emotional well-being of their children has totally shifted many parents' relationships with public schools, she said.

According to the recent RAND Corp. survey,

that process has already begun. Across the country, roughly 2 in 10 district leaders have adopted or are considering their own virtual schools for the long haul.

In Guilford County, for example, Superintendent Contreras is already planning for how to make the district's new virtual academies permanent, as well as possibly continuing the remote instruction that is now happening from traditional schools.

There are funding and equity challenges to consider: If students move out of their home schools and into the new remote schools, for example, funding and staff will follow, a shift that some principals and parents will surely resist. As COVID-19 recedes, as is hoped, there will also likely be a closer look at exactly how remote learning has been for the nation's students, especially those who are most vulnerable.

But Contreras said she hears the voices of parents who believe their children are thriving under the new model. She also believes there are real opportunities to better serve thousands of students who currently slip through the cracks of physical schools, often because they are homeless or raising children of their own.

"We intend to ensure that pre-K through grade 12, we continue to have some remote options for students in the future," she said. ■

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