



feature story

The Ultimate Design Challenge

Redesigning our schools to meet the needs of students, staff amidst a global pandemic

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“These are all our children, we will either profit by, or pay for whatever they become.” This James Baldwin quote is one of my favorite quotes and speaks to the need to ensure that we are meeting the needs of all of our students. This pandemic has affected us all both personally and professionally, it has challenged our staff, and has impacted our students and their families in profound ways.

As an elementary school principal, I hold a deep-seated belief that all children deserve a school community that ensures their success, and by investing in our children we can fulfill the promise of our great nation. As school leaders, we are facing the ultimate design challenge: How do we redesign our schools to meet the needs of students and staff in a global pandemic? I have been a school administrator for 13 years, I have faced many challenges in that time, but never have I had to completely redesign a school in a matter of months. In working with the other elementary principals in my district and my Lander school leadership team, we designed our plan for this school year based on several core principles including relationships, flexible instructional design, and eliminating barriers.

Relationships

Building and maintaining positive relationships with our students and their families is a core value at our school. In order to accomplish this in the midst of this pandemic and bouncing between remote learning and in-person learning, there are several things that we put in place. First, we started the school year with one-on-one meetings with all of our students and their learning guardians. We did this either in-person, using social distancing or via Zoom, depending on the preference of the family. This meeting allowed our teachers to introduce themselves, share our approach to instruction, discuss how we can meet their child's needs and also gave the guardians a chance to share details about their children and their individual situations.

A second way we have prioritized relationships is through the implementation of a morning meeting and a closing circle. Our teachers employ a responsive classroom, trauma-informed approach to their classrooms. The teachers start each morning with a meeting, at this meeting they greet one another, the students share what is

happening with them, they do an engaging activity and end with a morning message that transitions into the learning goals for the day. We find that this time helps to ease students into the school day, helps us learn more about each other, model and practice social skills, and set up a positive learning routine. We end each day with a closing circle, during this time we reflect on the learning for the day, preview the next day and answer any lingering questions. This time allows a predictable end to the school day and teaches the students how to reflect on their learning.

A third way in which we prioritize relationships is by scheduling student lunch and recess with their classroom teacher. In addition to supporting social distancing by not having students in large groups, this has also created a time during the school day, which is low pressure, non-academic, and a chance to model and promote positive social interactions. Previously lunch and recess was a common time in which students had difficulty and struggled with appropriate decision making. This time has now been transformed into a time in which students and their teachers genuinely take time to enjoy each other, play games, and get some physical activity and fresh air, which is important to the wellbeing of everyone. We are able to set up lunch bunches with our remote learners as well, to help keep them feeling connected socially, to their peers.

A fourth way in which we prioritize relationships is by using our after school staff meeting as a time for open office hours with teachers. Instead of holding our traditional staff meetings for the first few weeks, we prioritized our teachers' time to meet with families. This late afternoon time was reserved for staff to have an open Zoom meeting and invite families in to ask questions, get updates, and share challenges. As a school leader, I had to find other ways to accomplish our typical staff meeting business but by freeing up this late afternoon time, our teachers were more available to families outside the traditional school hours.

Lastly, we find that prioritizing clear and consistent communication, especially in this day and age of so much misinformation, has helped to strengthen the relationships with our families and community. Starting in July, I began sending weekly letters to our school

community to let them know where we were at with the planning process for opening of school and what things they can begin to expect as we start the school year. Additionally, upon reopening, I created a Family Handbook which has quick access to everything that they may need from bus information to lunch information, in one place for ease of access. I also create daily video announcements that the teachers play each morning as a part of our morning meetings, which help to celebrate all students, share things that are happening and make them feel connected to school. Lastly, I send a weekly digital newsletter at the end of each week with important updates, ongoing items, and updates from our Parent Group. All of these consistent and timely communications allow for transparency and helps to build trust with our community.

Flexible Instructional Design

Personalized learning is certainly a buzz word in education; however, the Mayfield City Schools has embraced a comprehensive approach, which we call our All-Access model of instruction. All-Access instruction does not happen without the commitment from amazing teachers who go above and beyond for our students. We believe that all students, in every classroom, should have access to deep and authentic learning opportunities that allow them to use both content and foundational knowledge to find and solve problems, create, collaborate, think critically, and communicate thoughtfully. We employ this model through a workshop style approach, in which core content is taught through mini-lessons and multiple exposures, and students are provided customized learning experiences through small group and one-on-one sessions with their teachers.

We have pivoted between all remote instruction and in-person instruction this school year. When we returned to in-person instruction, 5 days a week, families were given the opportunity to keep their children in remote learning. As a school, we made the difficult decision to keep the students with their same teacher, first and foremost because of our core belief that relationships matter most and secondly, because our All-Access teaching model can support this type of teaching. Our teachers have taken on the challenge of concurrently teaching their remote students (which we call our Zoomies) and our in-person students (which we call our Roomies). We were able to support this model because of our foundation of All-Access teaching and learning. Our recent instructional data is showing that our Zoomies and our Roomies are still learning at high levels. Anecdotally, families and students have, for the most part, been pleased with our flexible learning model. An added benefit of

keeping our Roomies and our Zoomies with the same teacher has also come in allowing students the flexibility to stay home if they are feeling under the weather. Families simply contact the school, let us know that their children aren't feeling well enough to come to school, but can still learn from home, and the learning continues. Additionally, we have even had occasions where a teacher isn't feeling well enough to come into school and they were able to Zoom into their classroom and teach from home, this flexibility protects the health of everyone.

Relying on digital tools to help supplement instruction and provide personalized interventions is another pillar of our All-Access classrooms. We primarily rely on Lexia Core 5, Dreambox and Zearn as ways to support the different learning needs of our students.

These adaptive programs help us target interventions and extensions tailored to the needs of our students. As a school leader, these tools also help me have a 30,000 foot view of how our students are learning and reflect on data with our teachers.

Lastly, we have redesigned the role of our Paraprofessionals to be academic coaches for our students that need the most support. We took a look at our data and identified students who needed extra support, especially our Zoomies. Each Paraprofessional now has a caseload of students that they check in with each day, they set goals, provide interventions and work with the teachers and students as additional support to make sure that they are learning at the highest levels.

Eliminating Barriers

Equity is another buzz word that is floated around in education. Throughout this pandemic, we have seen the gaps widen for some of our most vulnerable students. As a Title 1 elementary school, we have seen a disproportionate effect on our students and families. Oftentimes we think of equity with the narrow lens of giving "more" to students that need it. Another important component of equity work is eliminating barriers that are within our reach.

At Lander, there are several ways in which we work to eliminate barriers. The first way in which we did this was to give each student AND staff member a device to support their teaching and learning. Additionally, we partnered with a local nonprofit to provide wifi hotspots for families that were in need. By simply eliminating the access barrier, we were able to see a huge increase in the engagement of our students.

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