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WEBINAR 3 SUMMARY: LEADING SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN AN "OCEAN OF UNCERTAINTY"

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Carvalho,
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County Public
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Superintendent,
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Discovery Education *Equity Talks* is a live webinar series featuring our nation's top educational leaders with a focus on cultivating equity and excellence. Moderated by Dr. Luvelle Brown – superintendent of Ithaca City School District – these 45-minute segments are designed to provide guidance and support to educators across the country and internationally who are struggling with issues of equity that, while always a topic of concern, have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, nationwide civil unrest, and the need to rely on remote and hybrid learning.

Summary

When asked how school leaders are cultivating equity and excellence in the wake of nationwide school closures, a panelist responded that every day he "wakes up to an ocean of uncertainty." He fears that educators are being driven by ill-informed people to make decisions that are not in the best interest of students or their families.

Miami-Dade, however, did have many successes during this time. Dr. Carvalho stated that they had 100% connectivity with daily attendance levels at 93%. They distributed 115,000 devices being used by 11,000 hotspots. Additionally, 2.3 million meals were

delivered to families and students, with 20,000 hot meals delivered directly to the communities with the highest concentrations of poverty.

Similarly, Dallas ISD regularly connected with 98% of its students-- two to three contacts with each student every week. Dallas ISD already had a master plan for disseminating technology and was already deploying devices to students prior to the school closures, but they had to accelerate their timeline to meet the demand. Although approximately 36,000 families did not have connectivity, through the support of a foundation, the business community, and the school board, hotspots were purchased so families could connect.

The primary challenge for educators has been dealing with learning regression that was going to happen over the summer, particularly for fragile students (defined as the lowest 25% based on English Language Arts and math proficiency, English language learners, and students with disabilities, as well as students who did not connect when schools closed). Miami-Dade created a plan of five “non-negotiables,” which became a Gold Standard. The plan consisted of two summer sessions dedicated to fragile students, who would have access to mentors and tutors, followed by a two-week early start for the lowest 25% of students (approximately 46,000), allowing more personalized, individualized models of instruction. The plan included a stabilization component for the 2020/21 school year. Schools with high concentrations of fragile students, regardless of the school’s overall performance, would have an additional hour of personalized, adaptable instruction or attention, depending upon the student’s needs.

Although the plan for the full 2020/21 school year was unknown at the time of the webinar, Miami-Dade offered to its parents several options, including a plan for children of essential workers who needed their children to be in school and the implementation of safety measures, such as mandatory social distancing, uni-directional hallways, and meals delivered directly to classrooms. Parents could also choose to have their child participate in online learning 100% of the time with some monitoring by their classroom teacher. Finally, parents could also select a hybrid of in-person instruction and virtual learning from home.

Dallas ISD was planning to offer virtual summer to the neediest students, including special needs students, recent arrivals, and the Creating Accelerated performance program, which provides support to students furthest behind in literacy who are transitioning to the next grade level. High school students who need credits also may continue with credit recovery programs. Another program offered to

Dallas ISD high school students is the opportunity to earn both a diploma and an associate degree while in high school. Interested freshmen may participate in a virtual “boot camp” so they will not lose this opportunity.

Like Miami-Dade, Dallas ISD is considering how to meet the challenges of returning students to school buildings. For example, they have calculated that most classrooms can have a maximum of 17 students to follow social distancing guidelines. Furthermore, many of the parents of their students are hourly workers, and Texas law mandates that children under 12 must be supervised, which means going to school is critical for these students, though safe, socially-distanced transportation and implementing safety protocols will be significant challenges.

Naturally, both superintendents shared their budget concerns. They spoke about how the recession brought on by COVID-19 could possibly have more serious consequences than the previous recession because of the lack of federal support. Dr. Hinojosa said that, although Dallas ISD had been fortunate with their partnerships and has a healthy reserve for the short-term, there may be long-term financial consequences for everyone.

Pertinent Quotes

- “There are many kids in our nation that have always been in crisis. Now they have company. We need to mitigate academic regression, and if you don’t generate an opportunity out of the crisis, you are asleep at the wheel.”
- “Never let a good crisis go to waste.”
- “Education is the last industry that has not reinvented itself, but we are going to be forced to reinvent ourselves.”
- “We have to think about every system and process we currently have through the lens of racial equity, social justice, and opportunity, along with opportunity gaps/opportunity costs.”

- “We are finding the opportunity amidst the crisis, and shame on us, if through this, we don’t find solutions for those who, prior to this crisis, were already in crisis mode. This is the time to leverage their aspirations, their dreams, and create the opportunity that is God-given to them, period.”

Additional Questions/Commentary

- It was mentioned that you make two to three contacts per week with parents. We try, but how do you handle those parents who refuse to respond?
- Do you have a traditional summer program, and how do we get staff participation? How do you fund summer programs?
- In your opinion, what legislation must be enacted to ensure equitable federal, state, and local funding as we reinvent public education across the nation?
- How do you see the roles of the teacher assistant expanding to support these incredible ideas?
- Will hiring of teachers/staff look differently with this new evolution of choices for students and parents? Are you hiring teachers who will only work from home? How? Are you offering campus-only employment for teachers?
- Do you see an expansion of new positions, as the focus has broadened from students to students and families?
- What, if any, issues do you anticipate with unions given this “new” school calendar and schedule?
- Are other superintendents throughout your states having these same conversations? Or, are there some smaller districts that you think will remain the same? Or, is everyone looking at different plans on how to proceed?
- Is it typical that students with disabilities and English language learners are all piled in just a few schools, putting all the pressure of their growth on them?
- I’m a classroom teacher. How do you suggest I get involved in my district to help out with prepping and planning for next year?
- Is there a focus on expanding education budgets, considering that the role of educators is expanding from the school and classrooms to deeper into the communities?