Public Education's Response to COVID-19

Promising Practices for Addressing Common Challenges:

Personalized Learning

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The American Institutes for Research (AIR) launched a national survey in late January 2021 to gather insights on public school district experiences in the 2020–21 school year, including how districts continued to adapt to the persistent and evolving challenges of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May and June 2021, AIR interviewed a sample of leaders in districts that responded to the survey to learn more about the challenges and promising practices they described in their survey responses, with a focus on innovative practices from which other districts can learn or that they can replicate in their own context. This brief summarizes findings related to personalized learning from these interviews with district leaders. For more findings, check out the project web page at https://www.air.org/project/national-survey-public-educations-response-covid-19.

In 2020–21, some districts coupled new remote learning systems with personalized learning approaches. This brief includes profiles of the challenges and promising practices related to *personalized learning* for four districts across the United States:

- Lander County School District, Nevada
- Newton-Conover City Schools, North Carolina
- Regional School District 15, Connecticut
- School Administrative Unit 16, New Hampshire

NV				
Nevada	Town	Medium Size	Medium Poverty	Primarily In Person

Lander County School District

Used an Adaptive Curriculum to Personalize Instruction

The Challenge

In the 2020–21 school year, the sudden shift to remote instruction pushed Lander County School District to adopt and adapt to new technology "overnight instead of over a number of years," according to Superintendent Russell Klein. "And so, the pandemic really was an excuse to really convey to the staff as a whole the need for changing the model." Because the district and its students are in a remote location, staff had to quickly ensure that all students had both internet access (e.g., hot spots) as well as the devices (e.g., laptops) they needed to learn remotely. Staff also had to ensure that all students had access to learning materials and content remotely.

Promising Practices

One of the main technology supports that Lander County School District began using for remote instruction in the 2020–21 school year was a remotely accessible adaptive curriculum, which allows students to access content through multiple instructional designs, learn at their own pace, and customize their instruction based on their specific learning needs. While teachers can differentiate to meet students' needs in person, Superintendent Klein recognized that "one teacher teaching a whole group class may not have that flexibility to get some of those nuanced differences." At the elementary level, teachers used the remote adaptive curriculum to support scope-and-sequence decisions and ensure their lessons were on grade level; at the secondary level, students could work through the material independently and at their own pace, as either their primary curriculum or a supplementary curriculum. Using the remote adaptive curriculum also enabled teachers to have a consistent instructional approach for both in-person and remote students.

Transitioning to a remote adaptive curriculum helped staff narrow students' learning gaps and gave students more choice and autonomy in their learning. Superintendent Klein explained, "[We want to] create a classroom that is different than it has been in the past," where students can focus on solving real-world problems and collaboration. The district plans to continue using the remote adaptive curriculum in the future to support instruction during student absences or staff leave. Staff were surprised to see that even high-achieving secondary students did not move significantly further ahead in the curriculum (i.e., above their current grade level) when they had the chance, which made the shift more manageable for teachers.

For more information on remote adaptive learning, check out publications from the World Bank (https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/considering-adaptive-learning-system-roadmap-policymakers) or the U.S. Department of Education technology plan (https://tech.ed.gov/files/2017/01/NETP17.pdf).

Newton-Conover City Schools

Strengthened Remote Instruction Through a Flipped Classroom Model

The Challenge

Newton-Conover City Schools has been working to implement more learning technology and tools for several years. For example, the district joined the Modern Teacher Network to prepare students for "digital convergence" and to make time a variable in learning rather than a constant (i.e., moving toward a competency-based model). The district also created professional development for teachers on personalized learning so that students could "chart their own course" in their education. To ensure they had the infrastructure to support learning technology and tools, Newton-Conover City Schools partnered with the 1Million Project to ensure that all students had access to the internet and devices at home. However, with the sudden switch to remote instruction in the 2020–21 school year, the district still had work to do to ensure that students could successfully learn remotely.

Promising Practices

In 2020–21, Newton-Conover City Schools convened a remote learning task force, which reviewed academic standards to identify key expectations for each grade span and prepare expectations for instruction in response to pandemic-related disruptions. Staff used a framework on instructional design developed by the Friday Institute and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to prioritize standards and clarify expectations for both remote and in-person instruction in 2020–21. The switch to remote instruction also pushed the district to adopt a digital curriculum, which proved to be preferable to the previous curriculum they had been using in person. At the school level, staff increasingly used their LMS, adopting and adapting practices over time to find what worked best. Teachers used a variety of other technology tools (e.g., Edpuzzle, Nearpod) to provide students with personalized learning materials in a flipped classroom model. Because the district had previously implemented a single sign-on, the district was able to ensure that students and families could easily access and navigate the various learning tools and applications independently.

Newton-Conover City Schools focused on preparing educators for hybrid and remote instruction by creating remote learning coaching and teacher leadership positions to test technology, create professional development, and support teachers across the year. According to Chief Academic Officer Heather Mullins, "I firmly believe you've got to have some infrastructure with human resources. You need digital learning facilitators, instructional coaches … somebody has got to be able to support those teachers."

Mullins remarked, "[O]ur teachers … truly learned how to 'multiply' themselves…. They've learned how to leverage technology so that they are everywhere in the room, and that teachers may be doing 28 different things with 28 different kids."

For more information on flipped classroom models, check out the Center for Teaching's "Flipping the Classroom" page (https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/flipping-the-classroom/).

Regional School District 15

Concrete Strategies for Differentiating Instruction

The Challenge

In summer 2020, the district reviewed their available data to determine priorities among academic standards to support teachers managing both in-person and remote instruction. Superintendent Smith explained that their goal was to "create instructional space, given all the mitigation [measures] under way." One challenge the district faced was the limited data available: They only had MAP (Measure of Academic Progress) assessment data from 2019 given the pause on testing in spring 2020; however, district leaders were still able to use these data to set academic priorities.

Promising Practices

Staff reviewed student performance by standard by grade, then reviewed the scope and sequence to ensure that students had adequate instructional time for new standards and standards not yet mastered. Staff also reviewed guidance across district curricula to identify "power" standards to prioritize. This process drove the development of curriculum guides for the 2020–21 school year, to help teachers stay on track with standards-based instruction while acknowledging the decrease in instructional time.

While adjusting instruction districtwide was a helpful universal strategy, staff knew that students would need more individualized supports in the 2020–21 school year. According to Superintendent Smith, "One of our early thoughts was that this was a much more individualized learning year in some ways, and students had multiple options in how to access their own learning.… Every student in your classroom, whether you have 10 students or 30, [is] going to have nuances in their learning gaps."

Given the lack of data needed to individualize instruction, Regional School District 15 began to increase the use of formative assessments and provide teachers with professional development. Staff created guidance on formative assessment use, including vocabulary and look-fors; started a book study on equitable instruction; and offered direct training in how to differentiate instruction. Superintendent Smith explained that it was important for the district to provide concrete strategies on how to differentiate day-to-day instruction: "I think we have a lot of esoteric conversations around differentiation, but we [need to say], 'Here are the six types of formative assessments that are most effective, and then here's how you use that data to drive your planning and instruction.'"

Regional School District 15 also worked to protect and prioritize teachers' planning time given its importance in effectively differentiating instruction. Superintendent Smith observed, "You have to plan with extreme intention on the students who are in front of you. You can't just pull a lesson plan from three years ago and deliver it the same way you did, because you have a spectrum of students in your class." The district plans to continue emphasizing differentiated instruction and the use of formative assessment data moving forward. According to Superintendent Smith, "This is what we were going to do before the pandemic. We backed off because it wasn't the year to do new instructional change.… [The pandemic created] newfound urgency and teachers being more receptive to having that open conversation than we might've met three or four years ago." The district has also reported seeing positive trends in their student data so far, indicating that their increased emphasis on differentiated instruction is helping students grow.

School Administrative Unit 16

Used Learning Management Systems to Personalize Instruction

The Challenge

School Administrative Unit (SAU) 16 has been working toward a competency-based education model since before the COVID-19 pandemic. Superintendent David Ryan noted that this approach is "personalizing instruction for students who are advancing along a growth continuum, as opposed to hard and fast rules," where students learn and take tests as they are ready. However, the sudden shift to remote instruction in 2020–21 pushed SAU 16 to transition to competency-based approaches and new technology faster than they otherwise would have, given the importance of allowing time for staff to adapt to new systems.

Promising Practices

Before 2020, SAU 16 already had transitioned to competency-based assessments at the elementary- and middle-school levels based on a matrix of "I can" statements and had begun using a learning management system (LMS) as a platform for students' demonstrations of mastery. In the 2020–21 school year, the district began using the LMS for remote instruction and redesigned classes to prioritize independent work time over direct instruction. This was intended to prevent students from spending days in long, webinar-style classes. Elementary staff who previously had been using the LMS primarily as a communication tool with families had to adapt and adjust to using the system for instruction. The LMS also enabled elementary staff to continue using performance-based assessments by aggregating student work over time, which reduced the need for testing to measure student performance.

While the district initially had planned to slowly implement the LMS at the high school level using a multiyear train-the-trainer model, in 2020–21, the district had to accelerate implementation across all grade levels to support remote instruction. According to Superintendent Ryan, staff stepped up to support this unexpectedly accelerated implementation: "We had to rely on our teachers to self-train or be self-advocates… We have people [at all levels] that were very skilled at [using the LMS], and they offered a significant amount of training on their own time." Secondary school staff also came together by department to identify priority standards; Superintendent Ryan recalled staff asking one another, "What is it that we absolutely need to make sure our students know and are able to do before they graduate from here? And how can we redesign our units to make sure that we can do that within the time that we were allotted [in a remote setting]?"

SAU 16 has seen relatively strong student growth over the 2020–21 school year and plans to continue using competency-based education approaches. By focusing on personalizing instruction and college and career readiness, staff have further emphasized the importance of equity, inclusion, justice, and advocacy for students who need the most support. Superintendent Ryan explained, "We want to give students more opportunity earlier on to start developing and learning more about their passions, and COVID gave us that opportunity. We got to really take a lot of risks. Teachers took a lot of risks with what they were doing because we had that flexibility, and we want to continue that … now we've had this chance to let loose and see what [works]."

For more information on learning management systems, check out the Bureau of Indian Education LMS overview (https://www.bie.edu/landing-page/learning-management-system-lms).

For more information on the Public Education's Response to COVID-19 project findings and publications, please visit the project web page at https://www.air.org/project/national-survey-public-educations-response-covid-19.

Demographic Icon Definitions

Geographic Region. Based on regional divisions determined by the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.).

Locale. Based on four locale categories (city, suburb, town, and rural) determined by the U.S. Department of Education (2019).

Size. Based on district enrollment data provided by the U.S. Department of Education (2019). Small = < 1,000 students; Medium = 1,000 to < 10,000 students; Large = 10,000 or more students.

Poverty. Based on child poverty data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau (2019). Low = < 10% of children; Medium = 10% to < 20% of children; High = 20% or more of children.

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