

# DA

District Administration®

October 2020

## THE BUS STOPS HERE

9 logistical busing realities  
on which to pause 20



**Real-world ready**

The changing future of work 14

**COVID-19 dashboards**

Interactive heat maps assist with  
decision-making 4

**Teaching in a pandemic**

Preparing for the final leg of a career  
as if it were a football tryout 6

**Sponsored Content:**

Supporting learning and  
engagement with audiobooks 24

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**A sub-optimal situation**

Bolstering substitute  
teacher pools 26



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## Recommended reading

I fondly recall riding the school bus as a child. It was the part of the school day where I could connect with friends, finish homework (yes, I was a procrastinator), and get into some harmless mischief.

But as schools have reopened and transitioned to more in-person learning, the logistics that districts are dealing with to maintain social distancing amid COVID-19 are beyond challenging. This month's feature on busing focuses on nine key realities that districts need to consider when making decisions. See page 20.

Another issue that has become a harsh reality is the shortage of substitute teachers in many districts, especially as many veteran educators decided to retire or drop out of the substitute ranks rather than risk getting sick, and with others opting to work remotely when possible.

Our report on this topic looks at how districts large and small are coping with the need to recruit more substitutes, and to retain this larger pool of subs in order to fulfill their missions. See page 26.

And don't miss our Districts of Distinction section, where the focus is on community and family engagement. Our top honoree in that category is Bakersfield City School District in California, which has turned around low-performing schools with a focus on family involvement. See page 8.

Finally, also part of the Districts of Distinction section, we take a look at the future of work. Getting students ready for the real world, which will operate increasingly as a gig economy and, with COVID, a remote one, is changing education. Take a look at how this new focus is changing education in several districts on page 14.

—Eric Weiss, executive editor

## Reasons to visit DistrictAdministration.com

### 10 priorities for reinventing schools

Restarting schools this year provides superintendents and their teams an unprecedented opportunity to reinvent K-12 instruction by prioritizing equity.

[DAmag.me/reinvent](https://www.dmag.me/reinvent)



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### Real-world is key to online learning

Projects that are relevant to students' everyday lives are key to engaging them in remote instruction this school year.

[DAmag.me/real](https://www.dmag.me/real)

### Improving immigrant student outcomes

The first step is for administrators to ensure communications with families are culturally relevant.

[DAmag.me/outcome](https://www.dmag.me/outcome)



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### Teacher job satisfaction during pandemic

More than two-thirds of teachers agreed that the COVID pandemic has made the public more aware of what they do.

[DAmag.me/satisfaction](https://www.dmag.me/satisfaction)

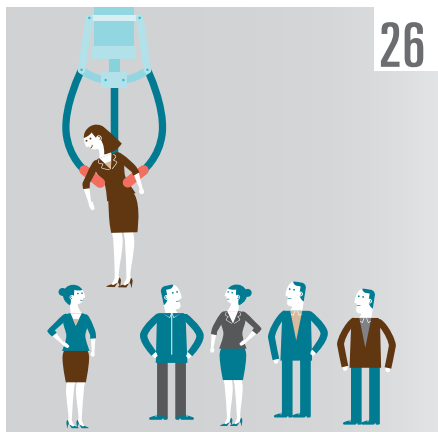
### COVID could drive principals from their schools

Building leaders report high levels of stress over the health of staff and students.

[DAmag.me/turnover](https://www.dmag.me/turnover)



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26



8



## FEATURES

### 20 The bus stops here

9 logistical busing realities on which to pause

*Melissa Ezarik*

### 26 A sub-optimal situation

Bolstering the pool of substitutes in preparation for teacher shortages

*Chris Burt*

### 8 How parent engagement drives rising achievement

Bakersfield City School District turns around low-performing schools through family outreach

*Matt Zalaznick*

### 14 Real-world ready

Five ways the future of work is changing education

*Matt Zalaznick*

## DEPARTMENTS

### 6 Leadership Insights

Preparing for the final leg of a career as if it were a football tryout

*Jeff Remington*

### 32 Last Word

Building habits: The foundation of effective teams

*Amy E. Miller and Jenny McGown*

## COLUMN

### 30 5 ways to create a great esports space

Key physical space considerations for setting up your program, and students, for success

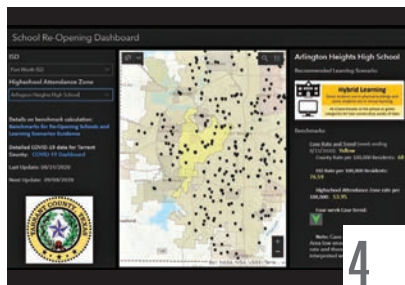
*Elliott Levine and Bryan Shark*

## BEYOND THE NEWS

**4** COVID-19 dashboard assists with decision-making

**5** Full-time, in person openings in half of districts

**5** Superintendents group launches new equity cohort



4

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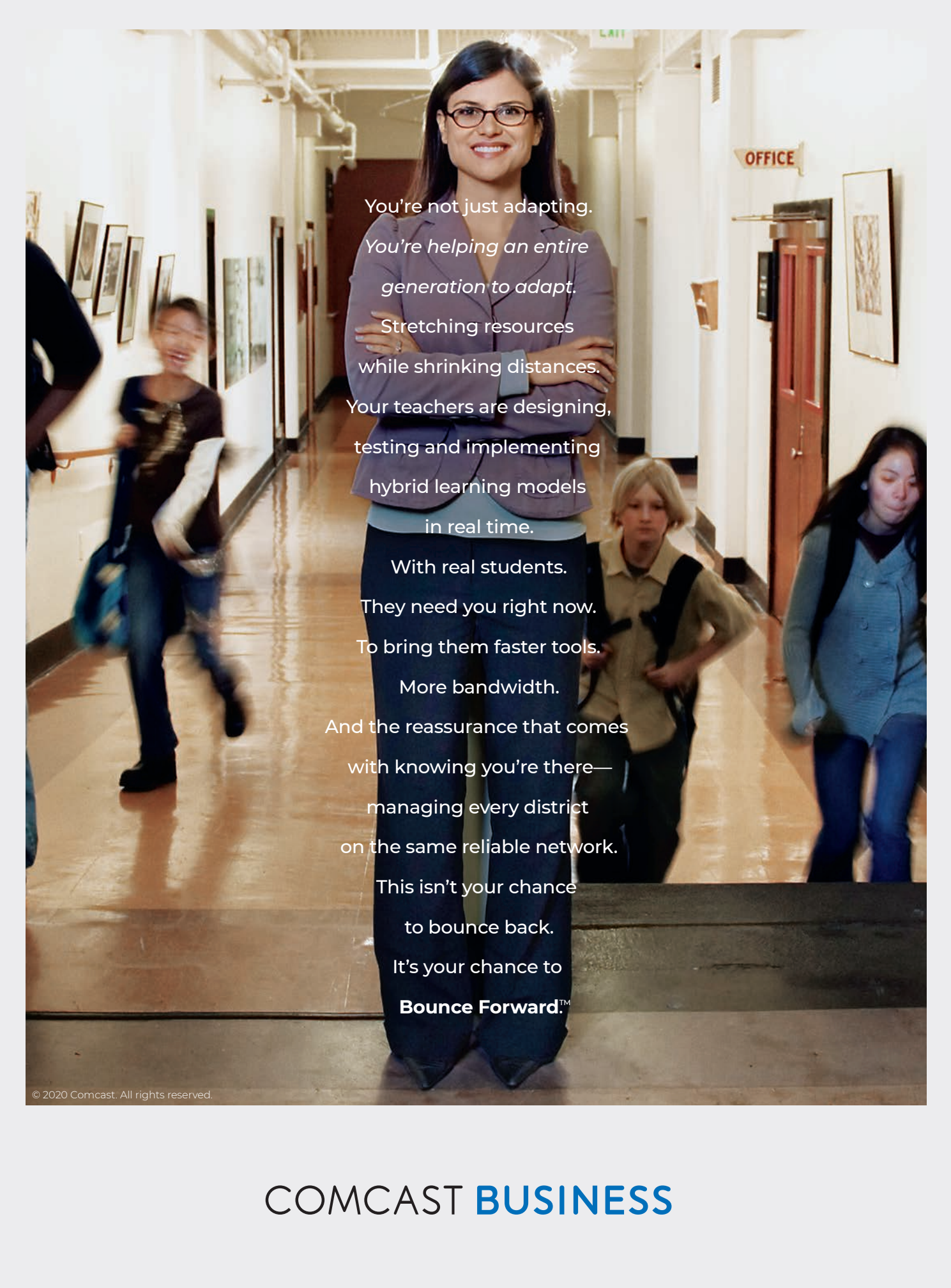
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COMCAST **BUSINESS**

# COVID-19 dashboard assists with decision-making

*Interactive heat map and a multitude of data provide indicators for education leaders*

Over the past few weeks, individual school districts across the country have released their versions of dashboards to keep staff and the public informed of cases and outbreaks of COVID-19 in their communities.

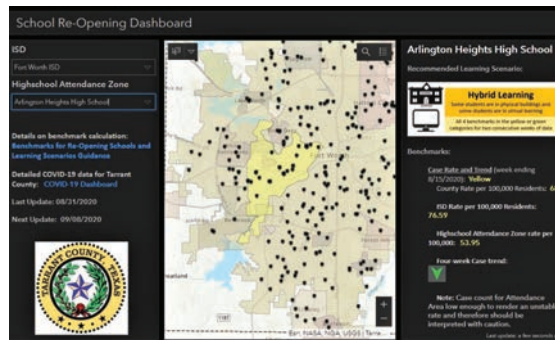
The data can help school boards and district leaders make decisions about when and how they can safely reopen for hybrid or in-person learning, subject to a number of guidelines, including those from county and public health agencies.

While many of the dashboards simply show numbers of cases for their schools, others developed by states or counties can be far more robust and far more informative.

For example, in Tarrant County Texas, which encompasses the Fort Worth Independent School District, education leaders and families can view an interactive heat map of districts throughout the area and recommendations for reopening—shown in green for in-person, yellow for hybrid and red for virtual.

With data updated every Monday and district comparison information, administrators can see how other districts are faring and make smart decisions. The map currently shows some districts in Tarrant County are not ready to reopen live, but most show positive signs they can reopen in some fashion.

“The new dashboard, along with our existing education guidance, is designed to help our school leadership and parents understand their local COVID-19 infection rates so they can make the best decisions for their children,” says Tarrant County Public Health Director Vinny Taneja. “Right now, the health status of many of the school zones has improved to a point where a hybrid learning model may be appropriate.”



**TEMPERATURE CHECK**—Educators and families in the Fort Worth, Texas, area can select an individual school to view COVID data and recommended learning scenarios based on it.

### Checking the map

After going to the website, users can select their specific school district and even an individual school. Once chosen, the district will be highlighted in the map in the center of the screen with a color shade. A menu on the right gives recommended learning scenarios—in-person, hybrid or virtual—and then lists a number of benchmarks, including case rate and trend for the week, the county’s rate of infection per 100,000 residents and then the district’s rate.

It also lists the high school attendance zone rate per 100,000 and then a four-week case trend. For example, though Diamond Hill Jarvis High School is in the red zone and recom-

mended for virtual learning, its two-week and four-week case trends show a green arrow pointing down. Good news, but still not ready to reopen.

To fully be green, case numbers must be below 5% over a seven-day period. None of those areas has met that criteria yet. Districts can choose to reopen, but it would be against county health officials’ guidance at this time.

“The data metrics in Tarrant County show that the COVID-19 situation has improved enough in several school zones, shown in yellow, to allow the hybrid model of learning,” Taneja says. “The areas indicated in red are still best suited for virtual learning, as they present a high risk of spread posed by COVID-19.” —Chris Burt

### When to reopen?

Tarrant County Health officials’ guidance to schools on reopening offered recommendations, including:

- The seven-day moving average percent of people who test positive (also known as the positivity rate) should be at 10% or less, ideally less than 5%.
- The rate of cases reported for the county must be 100 cases per 100,000 population, or less than 2,000 cases per week.
- At least the last 4 weeks of data must show stable or declining case counts.
- The seven-day moving average for COVID-like illness (CLI) percent should be trending lower for at least the last 2 weeks.
- The percent of hospital beds occupied by COVID-19 cases must be at or below 10%.

# Full-time, in-person reopenings in half of districts

The full in-person instruction model appears to be, by far, the most common one adopted by school districts this fall. Researchers at the Center on Reinventing Public Education, a non-partisan research center, collected information from a nationally representative sample of 477 school districts between August 17 and 21, at which point most plans were considered finalized and many schools were already in session.

Almost half (49%) had plans to reopen fully, while 26% were starting fully remote and 12% planned for a hybrid model. Regardless of which approach they chose, 85% of districts offered families the option of fully remote instruction. Some districts studied had not yet announced plans.

The analysis revealed major divides by geography and student demographics.

Rural communities were most likely

to open fully in-person. While 65% of rural districts moved forward with that plan, only 24% of suburban and 9% of urban districts did the same. In fact, few urban districts offered any in-person instruction to start the year. Nearly 4 in 5 began fully remote.

In addition, high-poverty districts were more likely to start the year in remote learning. Students in these communities are more likely to need more support socially, emotionally and academically; households in poverty may have less dedicated space for children to work as well.

Overall, few districts are mixing their models by prioritizing some students for access to in-person instruction. Only 8% are varying in-person time based on grade level (with younger students generally getting priority on in-person instruction). Less than 3 in 10 districts are prioritizing some students (e.g., stu-

dents with disabilities, students requiring extra help, students who are falling behind) for some or additional in-person time in their reopening or contingency plans. For example, these districts might offer limited in-person instruction for some specific groups of students while all others are remote, or might provide full-time in-person instruction to some groups of students while most are in a hybrid model, or might provide extra instructional time for certain groups in an in-person model.

The report, “Getting Back to School: An Update on Plans from Across the Country” ([DAmag.me/backtoschool](https://DAmag.me/backtoschool)), poses this question to school districts: Will the instruction provided and the supports offered to students and families ensure that student learning continues—regardless of whether it’s delivered remotely, in-person or both?

—Melissa Ezarik

## EQUITY

# Superintendents group launches new equity cohort

Superintendents can collaborate with colleagues on advancing educational equity through a new cohort initiative being launched by AASA, the School Superintendents Association. Members will participate in virtual meetings focused on changing district policies, improving school climates and building cultural responsiveness to increase achievement by all students.

These activities will guide leaders in self-reflecting and engaging in productive conflict to change instructional practices and behaviors.

“To achieve equity, we must reduce the predictability of who succeeds and who fails in our schools,” says Luvella Brown, superintendent of Ithaca City School District in New York.

“We must cultivate the unique gifts of every young person and we will truly transform this country. Shame on us if we don’t use this opportunity to address the inequities that have plagued our schools for generations.”

Activities will include:

- Using a needs assessment to develop short- and long-term goals for districts
- Developing case studies and actionable plans based on real-time district issues
- Designing ways to keep leaders accountable when implementing equity plans
- Crafting actions that foster love, liberation and belonging in school districts

• Identifying ways in which school districts can create more equitable experiences and outcomes for all students

“We want our students to know they can fully participate in our democracy as valued members of our pluralistic society,” says Sharon Conterras, superintendent of Guilford County Schools in North Carolina. “We want them to embrace and act on the knowledge that their voices actually matter.”

The cohort will engage a minimum of 30 district teams and include at least the superintendent, a cabinet-level administrator and a principal. To join the conversation via social media, use the hashtag #supts4equity on Twitter.

—Matt Zalaznick



## Teaching in a pandemic

### Preparing for the final leg of a career as if it were a football tryout

By Jeff Remington

I'm all in. In entered the classroom this fall for my 35th year and my final full academic year before I am eligible to retire in January of 2022. I did not expect to encounter a pandemic.

Like many teachers, I have anxiety about in-person teaching during the pandemic but I'm excited to use this teachable moment of COVID-19 to guide my students on a journey to change our challenged world. As an older teacher in a number of increased-risk groups for COVID-19, I am treating this as if I am training for an NFL Combine. I will need to be in the best physical shape possible to increase my odds for a better outcome should I contract the virus.

Since mid-June, I have lost over 20 lbs. I have stepped up cardio and weight training as well and all but eliminated processed foods from my diet. I did not do this to look better for a beach visit. No beach visits were in my travel plans during the pandemic. I've been cocooned since mid-March when COVID-19 hit. I've cocooned out of love, love for others. I believe that the small sacrifices of wearing masks, staying at home as much as possible and social distancing all help the chances of others surviving this pandemic. It puts me in a better position to care for loved ones in my family who are at higher risk for COVID-19. Cocooning will also put me in the best possible position to help serve my students and their families by reducing the risk that I would be the one giving them this virus when we return to the classroom.

As a public servant, I carry out the tough decisions that leaders above me have to make. Their decisions put me and other essential workers in positions of increased risk of contracting COVID-19. I know they wrestle with those decisions on sleepless nights and I have empathy for them. We are all in a difficult spot where we need to balance health concerns which can be life-threatening and economic concerns that can also be life-threatening.

#### ABOUT JEFF REMINGTON:

A public school science & STEM teacher in the Palmyra School District in Pennsylvania, Remington has over 35 years of experience. He has enthusiastically championed the power of STEM and mentorship as a means to improving people's lives. In addition, he has taught at the graduate and undergraduate level for over 20 years at Lebanon Valley College.

### Being cocooned has given me pause to reflect on my career. That has been a gift.

I find inspiration from the selfless courage of frontline workers, like my daughter who is a nurse and my son who is a law enforcement officer. Both serve urban areas where equity and poverty issues compound COVID-19 and increase everyone's risk. My extended family is a family of service workers as well. Like so many others on the front lines, we do our part and we do it with love. We risk not only our health serving the public, but we risk the health of our closest loved ones when we come home from work.

#### A final chapter summarized

Being cocooned has given me pause to reflect on my career. That has been a gift. It's been a career that has been blessed with opportunities to use my teacher voice to inform policy and practice in regard to STEM, workforce development, poverty, equity, sustainability and education at the state, national and international levels.

I can summarize my career in the two words, which a pastor friend of mine shared through a version of the Sermon on the Mount. The two words are LOVE and LEAD. We must first love all we encounter through empathy, compassion, relationship building and genuine caring. Only then do we have the capacity and grace to truly lead by example. Gandhi lived those two words. Throughout my career, I have had two quotes from Gandhi that have helped focus me on loving and leading: "Be the change you wish to see in the world" and "Live simply so others may simply live." These quotes can truly change the world for the better.

I have been so grateful for the opportunity to serve my community. Although this last leg of my teaching career is a bit awkward with the pandemic, I truly hope my community shows appreciation for me and so many other essential frontline workers. Show love for us all by social distancing, wearing masks, staying home as much as possible and avoiding going to high-risk social gathering places.

By doing this, we will show respect for all people, make our schools safer and give our economy the chance it needs to get back on its feet.

Let's lead our children to a better life and a better future, a future filled with reimagined education, endless opportunity and invigorating hope. Let's lead by our example. **DA**



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# COMMUNITY AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT/ BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS

Category winner: Bakersfield City School District 8

Feature: Real-world ready 14

Category finalists 18



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# HOW PARENT ENGAGEMENT DRIVES RISING ACHIEVEMENT

Bakersfield City School District turns around low-performing schools with focus on family involvement

By Matt Zalaznick



**COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS**—Educators in California's Bakersfield City School District have seen a surge in parent involvement—and academic improvement—since the school system created a team of family engagement advocates.

## Bakersfield City School District (Calif.)

District size:  
**32,000 students**

Superintendent:  
**Harry "Doc" Ervin**

Initiative launched:  
**2014**



**A** surge in family engagement has fueled a major turnaround in student achievement at the Bakersfield City School District in California, this month's District of Distinction winner.

Several years ago, only a few parents would show up to most district events.

Now, these meetings and activities are attended by hundreds of parents who also serve on advisory councils and regularly attend various support sessions at the district's 34 family centers.

This summer, parents played a key role on a task force that developed the district's COVID reopening plan, Ervin says.

"We told parents, 'You have to play a role,'" Superintendent Harry "Doc" Ervin says. "We cannot be the biggest elementary district in the state and be considered one of the lowest-performing."

## How to engage parents

When Ervin became superintendent in 2014, about eight of the district's schools were considered low performers. One condition that stood out to him was a lack of parent involvement, which both he and the state of California consider a crucial factor in student success.

Ervin and his team hired a family engagement advocate for each of the district's 43 schools. They also put four new area administrators in place to oversee parent involvement initiatives.

Ervin also created a superintendent's parent advisory council.

The district began recruiting parents by making it clear that they would have a chance to participate in both their child's education and district operations, says Dee Dee Harrison, the coordinator for family and community engagement.

The district further strengthened these relationships by offering classes on parenting skills, technology, financial literacy and other areas of personal growth.

These learning sessions end with a parent graduation ceremony that children can attend.

"Parents are able to have dialogues and realize they're not in this alone, that they're struggling with the same types of things," she says.

These events—which also include parent cafes and parent universities—have allowed families to make crucial connections with educators and with each other. This has, in turn, led to higher participations in PTAs, booster clubs and other school organizations, Harrison says.

The district also gathers parent feedback frequently. In a spring 2019 survey, for example, more than 90% of parents said they feel welcome at their student's school. Another 86% said they were satisfied with the response they got when contacting their school with questions or concerns.

"A lot of parents really want to be a part of the work we do," Harrison says. "There's the excitement of getting involved, of being empowered, and knowing their voices matters."

## Principles of parent involvement

The fact that 88% of Bakersfield's students receive free or reduced lunch doesn't discourage the district's educators from



**ERA OF ENGAGEMENT**—Bakersfield City School District events and activities are now attended by hundreds of parents who also serve on advisory councils.

promoting parent involvement and high achievement, Ervin and Harrison say.

Another crucial step in increasing family engagement is making it a priority at every level of the district, from the central office to school principals to classrooms, Harrison explains.

"Just because we want parents there doesn't mean they will come," she says. "When you have the support of district leadership, it trickles down and schools understand we have to have parents on campus. Our people have to believe this is good work."

Since the initiative began in the 2014-15 school year, chronic absenteeism has dropped, from 15.85% to 12.5% in 2018-19.

At the end of each meeting or event, Ervin says, educators reinforce for parents four important concepts:

1. Parents are educational ambassadors.
2. Parents are essential to building a culture of high expectations.
3. Parents are partners in the educational process.
4. All decisions focus on the best interest of kids.

"Just because we're a large urban district doesn't mean we can't operate as a high-performing district," Ervin says. **DA**

**"We told parents, 'You have to play a role.' We cannot be the biggest elementary district in the state and be considered one of the lowest-performing."**

*—Superintendent Harry "Doc" Ervin, Bakersfield City School District*





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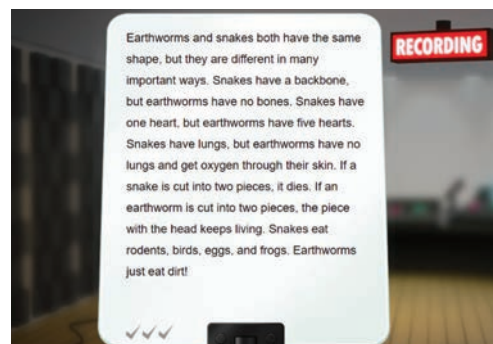
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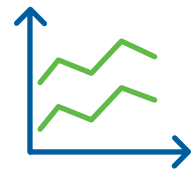
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# What administrators need to know about Focus Skills and student learning

Q&A with Dr. Gene Kerns and Dr. Katie McClarty

## Q: What are Focus Skills—and what sets them apart from other skills?

Simply stated, Focus Skills are the building blocks of learning in reading and mathematics. Obviously, all K–12 skills are important, and students benefit from learning any new skill. Yet certain skills are more critical than others, because they're crucial *prerequisites* for future learning and are essential to students' progression. These are the Focus Skills.

## Q: How do Focus Skills align with state standards?

Focus Skills are based on each state's learning standards, and we provide custom lists of Focus Skills for every state. Generally, the skills themselves do not vary greatly. What *does* vary is the grade level at which specific skills are taught, based on how states sequence their standards.

## Q: Which grade levels have the most Focus Skills?

In most states, grade 1 has the highest number of reading Focus Skills. This isn't surprising, given that students are learning fundamental skills in phonics and decoding that are crucial to their literacy development.

In math, Algebra I generally has the highest number of Focus Skills, as students learn advanced concepts they'll need for success in later high school and college math courses.

## Q: Why are Focus Skills so relevant now?

Students had unequal access to distance learning opportunities last spring, and we expect to see wide performance variances as a result this fall. Focus Skills allow educators to prioritize content and to first address the most important learning gaps for students.

## Q: Are Focus Skills relevant for both in-school and remote instruction?

Absolutely. Whether districts are providing instruction face-to-face, remotely, or in a hybrid/blended model, Focus Skills help educators to identify what *must* be covered and what can, if necessary, be set aside. This is why we're making our Focus Skills available to everyone: so educators can focus their limited instructional time on the skills that matter the most.



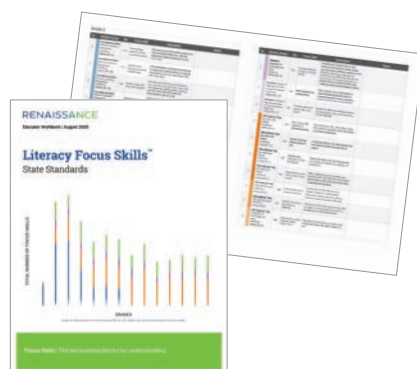
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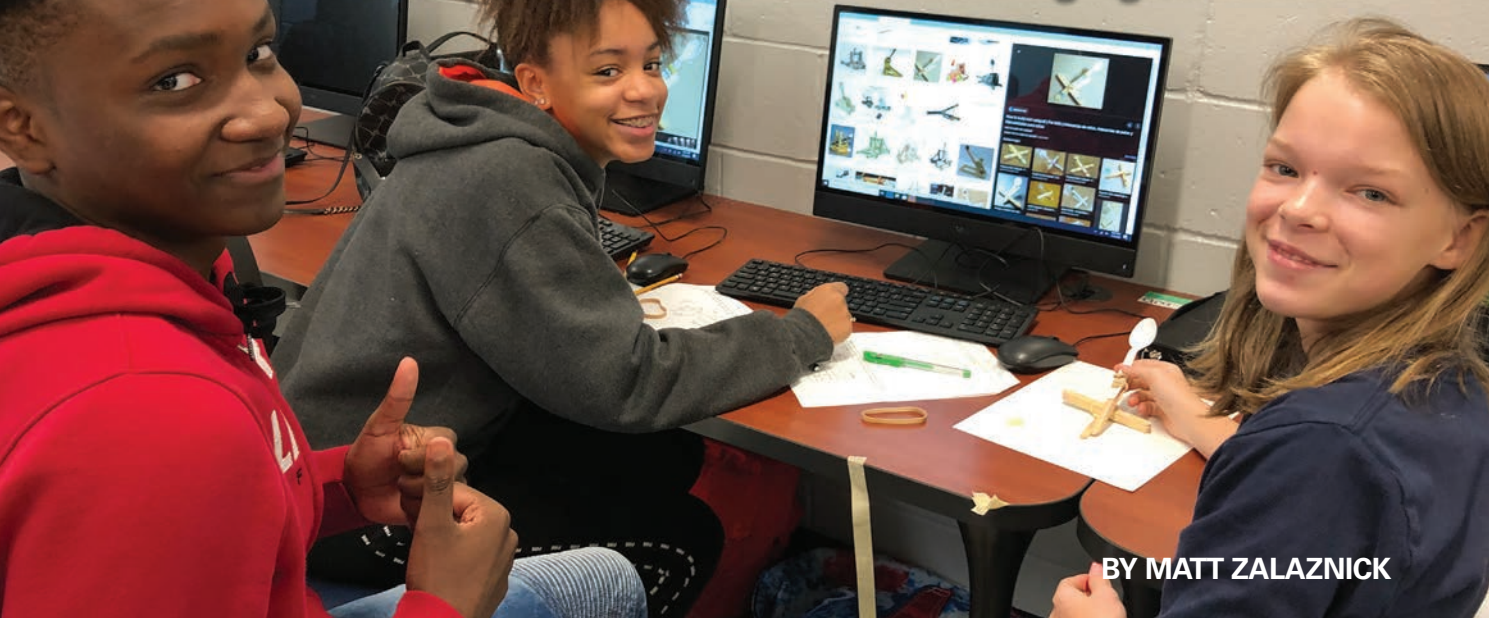


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# Real-world ready

Five ways the future of work is changing education



BY MATT ZALAZNICK

**S**tudents will need flexibility as they face a future of work that will operate increasingly as a gig economy and—since the COVID outbreak—as a remote economy, says one K-12 expert.

Gig economy-workers switch jobs and roles regularly, functioning more like freelancers than long-term employees, says Rachelle Dene Poth, a DA columnist and technology teacher at Riverview Junior Senior High School in Oakmont, Pa.

“Students need to have varied skill-sets and be able to market themselves,” says Poth, who has also presented at DA’s Future of Education Technology® conference. “They also need to be able to self-assess and ask: ‘What are my skills?’ and ‘What do I need to work on?’”

Here are five key changes educators should consider making to better prepare students for the future of work.

## 1. Ensure equity begins early

Coding instruction begins in elementary school in California’s Compton USD to prepare students to succeed with STEM

technology in the ever-changing high-tech job market. Grants have allowed Compton USD leaders to create an ed tech feeder pattern that runs from elementary schools, where specialized coding coaches supplement STEM instruction for the district’s youngest students, all the way up to high school, Superintendent Darin Brawley says. “By the time they leave us, the opportunity gap related to brown and African-American students is eliminated so they can compete.”

In Maryland’s Montgomery County Public Schools, building a local talent pipeline for STEM fields was a key goal of free coding camps offered this summer to middle schoolers. The more than 900 students in the Montgomery Can Code online courses—taught by Montgomery College instructors—focused on app development using Apple’s Swift platform.

Administrators recruited students from underrepresented backgrounds and children living in poverty to participate. In fact, students from the district’s highest-poverty school got the chance to sign up

first, says Scott W. Murphy, director of the Department of Secondary Curriculum and Districtwide Programs. “We want to light a spark into IT and open access to students who may not have had these experiences before.”

## 2. Develop creators, not consumers

Teachers should create opportunities for productive struggle where students learn to work independently and manage their time, Poth says. This fosters a growth mindset that encourages students to brainstorm to solve problems

Over the summer, Compton USD students in 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade participated in free virtual STEAM camps where they worked in teams to create virtual Minecraft worlds and learned to write Scratch code to map out COVID hotspots and food deserts.

Some students used IBM’s Watson to create “chatbots,” the technology that companies and other organizations use to automate life-like responses to customer queries on their websites.



And in an introduction to esports, students competed in video gaming and explored the rapidly growing industry's other roles, such as broadcasting to streaming technology to marketing.

The district is now planning to build a studio where students can practice video-game announcing, or "shoutcasting" as it's called in the esports world.

"Did we want kids to play video games 12 hours a day? No, but we wanted that to be the hook into that industry," says Michele Dawson, Compton's senior director of educational technology. "We don't only want our students to be the consumers of technology, we want them to be the creators. Creators make the decisions about how the world is going to run."

The diverse district views STEM and coding through an equity lens. During computer science week, Compton USD has hosted talks by tech professionals who comprise the small number of Black programmers in the industry. These talks give students insights into how Apple, Google and other companies are recruiting students of color, Dawson says. And at an annual STEAM Fest, families explore career opportunities with major tech employers such as Boeing, Raytheon and Verizon.

### 3. Stress COVID-era skills

To eventually start their own companies, students would need to learn about every facet of the work environment. Educators can facilitate this, with makerspaces, project- and placed-based learning programs, and a strong focus on STEAM. They can also ensure students have opportunities to shadow professionals, Poth says. "They need a chance to explore the things that are happening in the real world and be able to navigate their way through it."

Students will require more than just technical skills in the future world of work, adds Richard M. Long, executive director of the Learning First Alliance, a partnership of public-school advocacy organizations. "Welders, for example, have to be able to read very complex charts and texts, and also to write instructions."

Should remote learning continue beyond COVID, teachers will need to develop students' self-reliance—teaching them how to make personal and professional connections, how to find credible information, and other DIY-type skills.

In Montgomery County, Maryland, teams of computer science campers followed the Everyone Can Code curriculum to prototype an app to meet the needs of a local company or nonprofit. The curriculum challenges students to solve puzzles to learn programming concepts. Students then got to pitch their ideas to instructors and local professionals, and then participate in a showcase at the end of camp.

Throughout this process, they not only learned programming but also practiced problem-solving, teamwork and project management—skills that can be applied to any career path, Murphy says.

### 4. Develop on-the-job learners

Businesses are looking to K-12 education to provide workers who can be trained and retrained as their industries change, says Long. In K-12, this requires educators to connect learning to the real world. For example, students who are not captivated by a math lecture can become highly engaged in shop class when they have to calculate angles to measure and cut wood to build something. "The future is not making it academically real, but *real* real," he says.

U.S. schools have not, traditionally, taken advantage of a centuries-old model—the apprenticeship—that could develop more adaptable workers. Now, a many districts are working with local employers and community colleges to create CTE programs where students learn on-

the-job electronic, artificial intelligence and welding skills. Students learn in classrooms for two or three days, and spend the rest of the time at an apprenticeship.

"Businesses are saying to education, these are the math skills we need and these are the lit skills we need, and it's not basic stuff," Long says. "Students get to see how the skills are applied the very next day."

### 5. Create your own curriculum

Because Mississippi doesn't offer an elementary school tech curriculum, educators at Madison County Schools developed their own. The goal: Get students comfortable with computers as early as possible to jumpstart their acquisition of skills needed for the future of work, says Nashandra James, instructional technology coordinator. The learning provides the foundation for computer science and STEM classes in middle school. "We had to make sure they can keep up when they make the transition," says James.

Elementary students start with basics such as keyboarding, drag-and-drop functions, managing files in the cloud, and creating spreadsheets and presentations. In later elementary, students use the internet for research and platforms such as Microsoft 365 to collaborate on projects. This teamwork begins developing students' communication and collaboration skills.

The program was designed by a team of instructional and content specialists who studied curricula and grade-level learning standards designed by other districts. And, like other future career-focused programs, students emerge real-world ready. **DA**

*Matt Zalaznick is senior writer of DA.*

## Don't force kids to go to college

College has been emphasized to the point that many families now see the alternatives—such as a career in the trades—as second class. Educators have to do a better job of detailing the lifestyle potential of these options for students and families, says Richard M. Long, executive director of the Learning First Alliance, a partnership of

leading public school advocacy organizations.

"You have to present it so it doesn't look like you're saying these kids have no future, when in reality they may have a great future with a ton of options," Long says. "There's a big demand for plumbers and people in those types of trades are making solid wages."



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# Districts of Distinction finalists: Community and family engagement/business partnerships

DA honors four K-12 school systems as Districts of Distinction runners-up for engagement and partnerships

By Melissa Ezarik

## **ALL IN ATTENDANCE CAMPAIGN** **Long Beach Unified School District** *lbschools.net*

**CHALLENGE:** Chronically absent students in Long Beach are prone to low academic achievement and are less likely to graduate from high school. In addition, daytime crime rates increase in neighborhood where chronic absenteeism is a common problem. In adulthood, occupational consequences include less stable career patterns and low-wage positions.

**INITIATIVE:** The district partnered in 2015-16 with the city, mental health agencies, the local department of health and human services, the housing authority and community-based organizations to launch a year-round attendance campaign. “All In” takes a city-wide approach to encouraging students to attend school every day, using evidence-based, non-punitive systems for a targeted group of students who missed over 3% of school.

**IMPACT:** The four pilot schools showed an average 9% decrease in chronic absence rates in the first year, while overall the district had a 3% increase in its chronic absence rate.

## **EAT ON THE BEAT** **St. Charles Parish Public Schools** **(La.)** *Stcharles.k12.la.us*

**CHALLENGE:** During new superintendent Ken Oertling’s listening tour of stakeholder groups, parents and employees expressed concern regarding the absence of resource officers at elementary schools. At the time they were only located at middle and high schools.

**INITIATIVE:** A partnership with the St. Charles Parish Sheriff’s Office provided

on-duty police officers with the opportunity to each lunch for free in elementary school cafeterias—engaging with students, faculty and staff while strengthening the relationships between school and community.

**IMPACT:** Eat On The Beat positively impacts students and school climate and culture, while being more cost-effective than hiring full-time school resource officers. The initiative is breaking barriers and opening opportunities for others from the community to engage with students in the school setting.

## **DISRUPTING THE STATUS QUO** **Tuscaloosa City Schools (Ala.)** *tuscaloosacityschools.com*

**CHALLENGE:** The report “Redefining the High School Graduate” committed to looking beyond the minimum for students. TCS leaders were concerned the system was just trying to meet the mark of getting students to graduate, rather than exceed it, and they started scaffolding exposure to workplace skills and post-secondary expectations through a partnership with the regional workforce council. Career-technical education has shifted to focus on helping students earn skills to launch a career rather than just hold a job.

**INITIATIVE:** The system partners with over 100 industries. A new course for seniors, Ready to Work, was developed. TCS also has worked to change the impression that career and technical education is for students who can’t go to college. The approach has buy-in from teachers and administrators, and TCS has worked side-by-side with industry partners to provide better opportunities for students.

**IMPACT:** Community engagement is at its highest and continued growth is expected. TCS initiatives have been instrumental in aligning focus areas across the district to meet the needs of students,

who now have many opportunities that didn’t exist five years ago. Graduation is now considered the minimum accomplishment.

## **READ TO SUCCEED – A LITERACY PARTNERSHIP WITH UNITED WAY OF THE PLAINS’ WOMEN UNITED** **Wichita Public Schools (Kan.)** *usd259.org*

**CHALLENGE:** Students who are not proficient by the end of third grade are four times less likely to graduate than their literate peers. When they live in poverty the odds against them skyrocket. Students from low-income homes are also exposed to 30 million fewer words by the time they enter kindergarten compared to their more affluent peers.

**INITIATIVE:** Read to Succeed (R2S) was born of the community’s commitment to increasing third-grade literacy and the graduation rate, as well as ultimately developing a higher-quality workforce. The program was the vision of an advocacy group that’s part of the United Way of the Plains’ Women United. Unlike many reading programs where adults read TO students, R2S maintains that students need to be the regular readers. The initiative brings together about 400 third grade students and volunteers weekly, with books selected based on student reading level and interest. Volunteers are trained to know how to support, encourage and correct growing readers. The program fits into scheduled reading intervention time and focuses on students who are close to proficient.

**IMPACT:** A spring 2019 evaluation showed that 97% of reaching coaches rated the program experience as positive; 92% would recommend volunteering to others. Staff members also feel supported, in a manner that doesn’t disrupt the school day. **DA**





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# THE BUS STOPS HERE

Nine logistical school bus realities on which to pause while planning for the remainder of this school year





GETTY IMAGES.COM/STEPHEN SIMPSON

**W**hat individually does the work of 36 cars and collectively transports nearly 26 million kids a day? It's the school bus, and like everything else related to education in the past six months, it has experienced major bumps in the road.

"You take the nation's largest system of mass transit and shut it down overnight—that's going to have a ripple effect," says Mike Martin, executive director of the National Association for Pupil Transportation.

Martin was a co-administrator on a project that pulled the school bus transportation industry together in an effort to help school district leaders plan for fall reopenings.

Formed in mid-May, the Student Transportation Aligned for Return To School (STARTS) Task Force released its 70-page report—featuring 27 guidelines and more than 250 individual tasks for consideration when determining how or whether to implement the guidelines for a district's operation—in July.

The aim: Ensure transportation directors know what their options are. "We tried to give them the broadest perspective possible and the widest array of choices," says Martin. "We didn't want to just create a report someone would put in a pile. We wanted to create a product that they will use and reuse as necessary."

"They" need not mean only administrators responsible for transportation.

"My primary suggestion would be that superintendents familiarize themselves with the report and discuss it with their transportation administrators and staff," says Charlie Hood, executive director of the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services, as well as another STARTS co-administrator. "It might provide them with a greater understanding of how they can help transporters be more successful in fulfilling their duties associated with resumption of on-site learning."

From where Hood and others involved in busing sit, the function is a crucial part of education. "Often it's discussed as an ancillary service, and I don't understand that perspective," says Martin. "I'm hopeful that the superintendents and business officials understand that transportation is indeed integral to education."

With that assumption in the forefront, administrators leading districts must know the following nine realities about bus transportation as decisions about this area, and others, are made.

### **1 An initial reopening plan is simply that—initial.**

For schools that opened full-time, if a COVID flare-up occurs the district will likely need to decrease bus services, points out Tim Ammon, a STARTS report co-manager. Those that opened under a hybrid model could pivot and wind up increasing or decreasing busing. And others that decided not to open initially will at some point be ramping back up, also impacting busing, adds Ammon, a consultant to districts and student transportation operations via his firm, Decision Support Group. In other words, officials this year will be "on this for all 180-ish days of school," he says.

### **2 Nearly all policy decisions have a trickle-down impact on busing.**

Although the STARTS team designed its report to accommodate variations of policies such as face coverings and contract tracing, transportation folks know that decisions on such items will greatly impact busing. "We've said from day one that the social distancing decision was the first domino effect," says James P. Regan, a consultant and



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managing partner with Capital Works Consulting Group, who works with transportation and other industries and co-managed the task force report project with Ammon. Once social distancing in the classroom was decided upon, the practice had to work on the bus as well. That might mean 10 kids with no masks, or 24 or 36 kids wearing face coverings.

## BUILDING A TOOL FOR TRANSPORTATION DURING A PANDEMIC

The Student Transportation Aligned for Return to School (STARTS) Task Force is a collaboration between the National Association for Pupil Transportation, the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation and the National School Transportation Association. And in about two months' time, the group compiled information and ideas for a report containing 27 guidelines and more than 250 individual tasks. Since the report's publication in July, the team has been working with districts to create standard operating procedures based on the guidelines, says James P. Regan, a consultant and managing partner with Capital Works Consulting Group, who co-managed the project.

Developing a comprehensive list of action items involved gathering information from state and corporate reopening plans. "We pulled from Starbucks, Walmart, McDonald's, Amtrak, United and others—any that had action items," says Regan. "Then there was a parting of the Red Sea—anything that was a 'what' became a guideline, and any 'how' became a task."

*The STARTS report and related tools can be downloaded at [napt.org/starts](http://napt.org/starts).*

### 3 Transportation pivots can't happen overnight.

The typical summer-long bus route development process was compressed significantly this year, and in some cases had to be redone again when the district's reopening plan shifted. The pace of change, which has continued into the new school year, is nerve-wracking for all, Ammon says. "People are going to have to be patient with the systems. These are very big ships that need some time to turn. And I'm not 100% certain that patience is in a great surplus at the moment."

Just how much time do these big ships need to turn? While that answer of course varies, Regan gives an example of an Ohio district that outsources transportation and has said it needs an eight-week lead time when the district wants to pivot from his hybrid model to 100% in person. Districts requiring a smaller fleet may be able to work with four to five weeks, and large urban districts could be looking at 12 weeks. Going from full distance learning to full operations would be a much bigger step than from hybrid to full, he adds.

Re-establishing bus routes and stops—even with routing software in use—requires a constant eye for safety, and last-minute information often requires modifications. "This is all while ensuing health protocols are in place for employees and students, and that they are trained and familiar with them," says Hood.

### 4 Pivots requiring extra buses would likely take even longer.

"Even if busing is a contracted service, it's not as if people have 100 extra buses and they're just waiting for a phone call," says Curt Macysyn, executive director of the National School Transportation Association and a task force co-administrator. The procurement process, even in an instance where the decision to spend the money is made quickly or where buying used buses is the plan, is sure to take time.

Staffing is also an issue. "It's not like you can take somebody off the street and say tomorrow, go drive a bus," says Macysyn. "It can take up to 12 weeks to train and license a driver."

### 5 Transportation staffing levels could fall to a point where busing can't operate.

The STARTS Task Force kept staff safety top-of-mind when doing its work this summer. After all, at some point operations would halt if too many staff got sick or didn't feel comfortable continuing in their work. "There's a threshold where transportation cannot fulfill its mission anymore," says Regan. So superintendents should be aware of what that threshold is and whether it's inching closer.

### 6 Managing transportation, especially now, requires a lot of collaboration.

"I have not seen evidence of a lot of collaboration between stakeholders at

## TRANSPORTATION APPRECIATION

School transportation officials see a major positive side to the pandemic: A greater level of awareness. "Folks have a broader sense of the various impacts that transportation has within the overall education realm," says Curt Macysyn, executive director of the National School Transportation Association. "People have a greater level of empathy for how seamless the process is. There are a lot of moving parts."

Mike Martin, executive director of the National Association for Pupil Transportation, sees the school bus as an "equalizer." During shutdowns, buses brought WiFi hotspots and meals to neighborhoods and as schools have reopened the bus gets kids to school, many of whom have no other way to get there. Bus transportation, he says, "really is integral to education."



this point,” says Regan, who notes that in many districts decisions were made without union input.

With any aspect of school operations, including busing, “the pandemic has made it more critical than ever to listen to employees and stakeholders at all levels,” says Hood.

As Ammon puts it, “easy left the building a long time ago.”

Transportation experts agree that district thresholds for moving between opening tiers are a must-communicate-widely factor. If operational leaders know that, for example, a 7% infection rate would cause the district to pivot, they can start preparing as the rate creeps toward that, says Regan. And if all stakeholders know the situation will be re-evaluated every 30 days, the timing of an announcement would not be a surprise.

Setting thresholds creates a level of certainty for a certain period of time, and that’s comforting in an uncertain world.

“It’s the perpetual uncertainty that has made this so difficult for everyone,” says Ammon.

## **7** Delayed reopenings may kill transportation funding.

Most districts receiving state transportation support report how many kids are riding on buses using an October count, says Ammon. “If we’re hybrid with 30% of kids out, does that mean we’re going to lose 30% of the funding? There are massive implications from an operational and financial standpoint.”

## **8** COVID-related data reporting requirements are approaching.

“Funding for anything that was pandemic-related could be covered under the CARES Act, which means accounting for new activity,” says Regan. “You almost need a separate balance sheet for the whole COVID side.” With transportation and other operational areas, he adds, “it would probably be beneficial

for a superintendent or business official to forecast their administrative requirements and then work to set up the data collection infrastructure.”

## **9** Transportation officials and drivers are ready to step up.

Regan’s message for district leaders is this: “Make the policy decisions you want, and transportation can respond. We’ve given you a tool to be able to respond.”

Macysyn is just as confident. “We’ve been doing this a long time. We’re well-trained professionals,” he says.

That goes for both busing leaders and drivers. “For the most part, drivers are looking forward to getting back to work,” says Martin. “They enjoy kids and like to serve their communities. I think they take great pride in their work. They miss their kids.” **DA**

*Melissa Ezarik is senior managing editor of DA.*



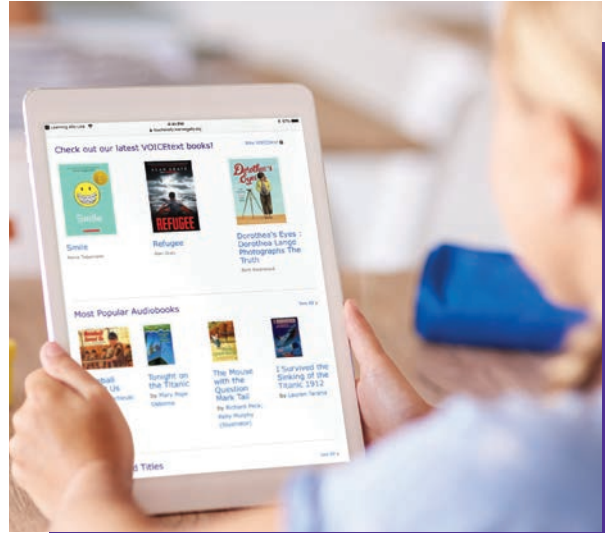
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# Supporting learning and engagement with audiobooks

## Q&A with **Learning Ally**



### **How can audiobooks help to support learning in remote and hybrid school environments?**

Audiobooks can play a key role in supporting struggling readers in a distance learning environment, provided they are paired with features that aid in absorption and enjoyment of content. With anywhere, anytime access to the largest library of curriculum aligned, human-read audiobooks, including popular fiction, classics and text books, that are paired with highlighted text, the Learning Ally Audiobook Solution is an ideal support for remote and hybrid learning environments. Students can read independently with the Learning Ally Audiobook Solution, allowing struggling readers to become engaged and confident learners. It also provides educators and administrators with a suite of reporting tools that allow them to differentiate instruction, keep track of student progress, and, perhaps most importantly, maximize instructional time. Students can access their books on nearly any device. If bandwidth/data is an issue, students can access their previously downloaded books even without the internet, easing the stress on households with shared devices or limited access to the internet.

### **What are some approaches to overcoming learning loss due to school closures and the summer break, particularly for struggling readers?**

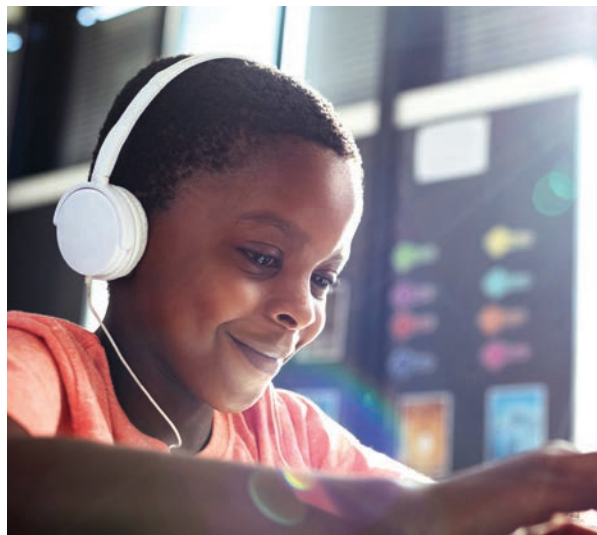
Students, especially those who struggle to read, can experience some amount of learning loss during any disruption to instructional time. The Learning Ally

Audiobook Solution helps mitigate this learning loss by helping students stay engaged in reading, even while at home. In fact, reading with the Learning Ally Audiobook Solution can actually accelerate learning because it allows struggling readers to access grade level content in a format they can easily absorb, thus bridging the gap between their reading ability and their cognitive capability. Human-read audiobooks with highlighted text build fluency, vocabulary, background knowledge and comprehension; they take the stress out of reading so kids can absorb and retain content; and they allow students to manage homework assignments independently and be prepared and excited to participate in class. For struggling readers, who normally face the challenge of catching up with the curriculum, and with reading itself, the Learning Ally Audiobook Solution can be a game-changer.

### **How can high-quality audiobooks help increase engagement in struggling readers?**

Students who struggle to read often struggle with engagement as well. They may feel embarrassed or insecure, and this tends to manifest in decreased participation, behavioral issues and even a complete disinterest in learning altogether. Reading with the Learning Ally Audiobook Solution takes the struggle out of reading, allowing young students to become engrossed in the content instead of struggling to decode. Once in middle and high school, audiobooks provide a means to ensure struggling readers keep pace and have the same opportunities to learn as their peers. It gives them the ability to work to their cognitive capability which is a huge confidence boost. High quality, human-read

**Developing a positive relationship with reading and learning at an early age is the most effective step we can take in ensuring they reach their academic potential and have the opportunity to thrive in school and beyond.**



audiobooks are crucial, because if the student isn't engaged, they won't bother. This goes hand-in-hand with the quality of the audiobook library. Learning Ally's library of more than 80,000 titles ensures that students of all ages have access to not only curriculum-aligned literature and textbooks, but popular fiction and series as well. The result is something for every student.

#### **Why is it so important for educators to identify reading deficits in students and provide intervention as early as possible?**

It's estimated that more than 10 million American students struggle with reading—about one in five—which is a staggering number. We already know that a student's inability to read can have a profound impact on his or her academic and emotional development. The result of not intervening at an early age could include financial and social effects as well. In fact, an estimated 41% of students with learning disabilities, including significant reading deficits, fail to graduate from high school; only 35% of adults with low literacy skills are actively employed, and, on average, they will earn significantly less than other adults. The sooner we address it, the more likely we are to stem the tide. Developing a positive relationship with reading and learning at an early age is the most effective step we can take in ensuring they reach their academic potential and have the opportunity to thrive in school and beyond.

#### **What are some key considerations when it comes to teacher professional development in literacy instruction and intervention?**

We believe in equipping educators with the tools, resources and professional learning they need to be successful, as well as up-to-date research and the ability to apply it in real world scenarios. Our professional learning approach is evidence-based and continually updated, informed by studies with educators. We employ an Engaged Learning Model to best serve the needs of educators and the students they support, recognizing goals for both near- and long-term positive student outcomes. All our professional learning courses are designed to give educators the opportunity to explore three basic tenets: Learn, Apply and Reflect. This methodology allows us to tailor an instructional plan to the educators' learning needs and help them immediately apply the learning to get results. Through our catalog of courses, educators learn how to get maximum impact from our solutions and can also dive deep into important content on dyslexia and early literacy.

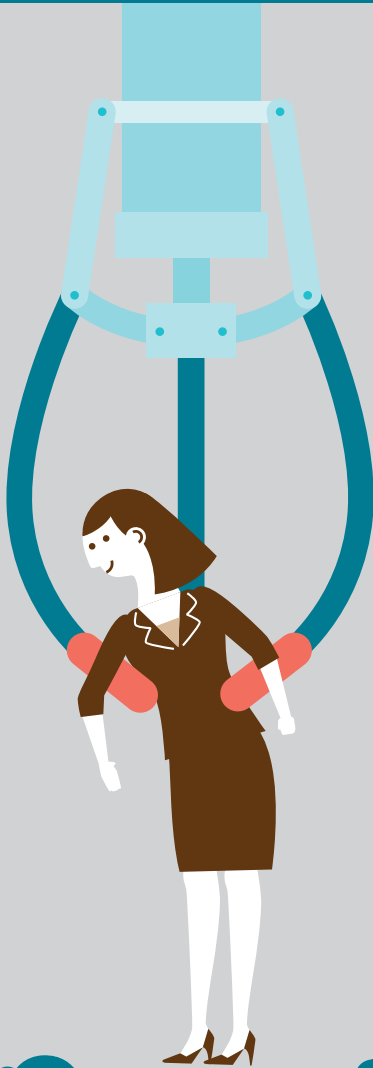


# A SUB-OPTIMAL

BY CHRIS BURT

# SITUATION

Districts large and small have been working to bolster their pool of substitutes in preparation for expected teacher shortages during the coronavirus pandemic. Will it be enough?



They are the “cadre of the willing,” the unsung heroes in every district. Substitute teachers are so valued by one school system that they are referred to as “guest teachers.”

From Los Angeles to Henry County, Ga., the need for quality subs this year is critical, with COVID-19 still lurking throughout communities. Facing the already steep challenge of getting students back safely, many district leaders spent the summer coping with the potential for instructional shortages this fall.

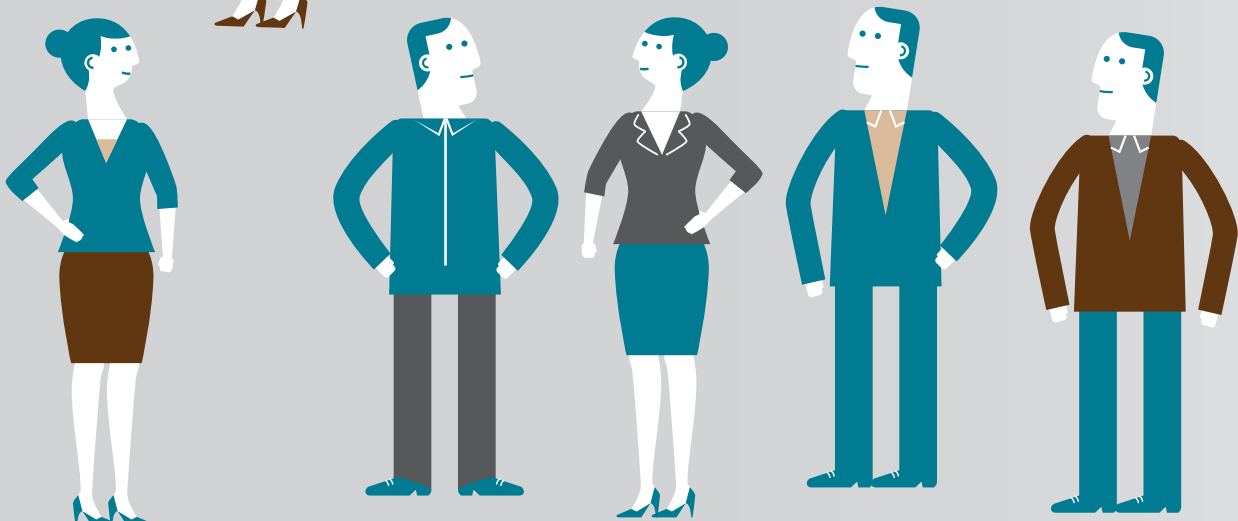
Understanding that remote learning is not a permanent solution and that

blanket policy changes from government aren’t forthcoming, school administrators constructed plans—some complex, some more streamlined—to ensure classroom coverage.

Bring on the subs.

As long as the pandemic ebbs and flows, there will be full-time teacher absences. And that will mean a heavy lean on those pinch-hitters and relievers.

“They’re so valuable to the district,” says Micky Savage, director of human resources and labor relations for Grand Rapids Public Schools in Michigan. “People get sick. People need to take a



leave of absence. When that happens, we have to have someone with a passion for teaching and educating students that can step in.”

Officials in districts such as Grand Rapids (with 11,000 students) all the way up to Chesterfield County Public Schools in Virginia (60,000 students) note the importance of those being called on to replace those on the front lines.

“All systems in the next 12 to 24 months will be judged on their ability to pivot between the face-to-face and virtual learning space,” says Thomas Taylor, deputy superintendent of schools in Chesterfield. “The quality of your programs, the quality of your educational experience, is all going to hinge on your ability to be flexible and pivot from one learning experience to the other. If substitutes are not a critical part of that strategy, you’re missing the boat.”

How vital are subs? Kelly Education president Nicola Soares says her staffing agency handles approximately 80,000 assignments per day in 41 states. More than 20% of those are for subs alone, and the number has grown since the pandemic began.

“The last four or five years, the increase of the full-time teacher vacancy openings that we were asked to service was increasing from 25% to 30%,” Soares explains. “I think we will see an increased rate of attrition of full-time teachers. What has become a temporary solution in terms of substitute teachers ... has now become a permanent solution.”

Here’s what districts are faced with and what some are doing to proactively address an even greater subs shortage than usual.

### **Budget and staffing challenges**

Tight budgets, traditionally low wages for subs, and teacher shortages have put district leaders in a challenging position, especially during a pandemic. Valerie Suessmith, chief human resources officer for Henry County Schools south of Atlanta, notes staffing is strong but says curriculum areas such as science and math and especially special education

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**“I think we will see an increased rate of attrition of full-time teachers. What has become a temporary solution in terms of substitute teachers ... has now become a permanent solution.”**

—Nicola Soares,  
Kelly Education

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could be “problematic because it takes a specialized skill.”

Taylor at Chesterfield Schools has felt the pinch of substitute shortages over the past few months. In August, he says his pool of subs should have been 1,000 but was hovering around 700. The lofty sweet spot many districts reach for is essentially half of the number of teachers they have—so his district should have a pool of 2,500 subs.

“I think that’s a luxury. I’ve never worked in a system that has had even remotely close to that,” he says.

Taylor’s situation isn’t unique. Similar-sized districts such as Wichita Public Schools, which have a stable pool of subs now, could be left scrambling during certain periods—holidays and flu season—and may be forced to consider longer-term measures such as a nine-week remote period from December into January.

“I just don’t know if we’re going to be able to pull it off,” says Wichita superintendent Alicia Thompson. “What happens if a nurse contracts this? What happens if clerical folks need to come out, or the principal, or the whole administrative team? What happens if there are no leaders in the building? Those are the spaces where we feel like we’re vulnerable, per se.”

Such concerns are real for many districts, says Nathan Burroughs, senior research associate at Michigan State University, who has done several studies on substitute teacher shortages—including one survey of district leaders in his state that showed 86% reporting a decline in supply of subs over a five-year period. In fact, 64% said their districts are short on subs several times per week.

“The substitute teacher problem is the first area where you’re seeing an emerging crisis in staffing,” says Burroughs, who also notes a lack of data and research to track substitute staffing and wages. “I’ve got real questions about a small- and medium-sized district being able to address this because as the shortage becomes more severe, the competition between neighboring districts becomes that much more intense. The least resourced districts who have the most need may lose out.”

Taylor is worried about a specific cohort of his substitute teachers in Chesterfield.

“If there’s a disproportion representation anywhere in that pool, it is of retired persons, and of course, they’re in the [COVID] risk category,” he says. “That is of grave concern to us because should we return to a face-to-face environment, we want to put our employees in a place where they are safest. For many of our substitutes, they may look at us and say, it’s just not worth it.”

Though school districts often turn to retirees to fill substitute gaps, they are becoming less of the makeup of those available at staffing agencies like Kelly.

“People tend to think that the majority of our talent pool is retirees from the



**SHARE:**  
**DAmag.me/subsituation**

More online: Case study of a district using tiers of substitutes to better target potential hires, plus a graphic of substitute statistics and states that stand out

## A SUB-OPTIMAL SITUATION

profession, but that's not the case," says Soares. "Less than 10% opt for a substitute teacher position post-retirement. Given the health issues and barriers, we're probably not going to be recruiting a lot of those folks in the near term."

### Pressing on with plans

Leaders at Shelby County Schools in Memphis, Tenn., a district that relies heavily on retirees in its pool of 1,400 substitutes, recognized they would have to be more aggressive about hiring subs.

"We typically have windows where we open up our sub pool, but we just opened the floodgates," says Yolanda Martin, chief of human resources. "We've hired 76 new subs since March. And we're actively recruiting more. We wanted to be very proactive."

Many school leaders say they have solid strategies for handling substitutes this year, even with myriad issues swirling around them.

LA Unified, Henry County and most other districts began by polling their pool of subs to find out if they're returning.

Districts can go further, by providing professional development opportunities, including virtual instruction, while boosting pay for veteran subs. Some have tabbed specific substitute leaders at every site.

"We've got a designated person that will help facilitate this whole process in each school site," says Martin at Shelby County Schools. "Whether it needs to be: deploy this person from the sub team; facilitate splitting the class; assign technology; ... or provide backup lessons and videos, those things are organized and ready to go."

One of the most important strategies districts is creating larger pools of permanent subs. Burroughs at Michigan State believes that's a smart strategy moving forward as long as "you've got the resources to do it. Because you can offer them some job stability."

Other solutions may not have the same kind of impact, especially long-term.

## 5 WAYS TO RETAIN AND BUILD SUB POOLS DURING A PANDEMIC

1. Call on nontraditional instructors, such as professionals who may have lost their jobs.
2. Partner with local colleges and universities and military bases to find potential subs.
3. Consider college students who are only home in the area because their courses are virtual this semester.
4. Listen to subs and praise them, making them feel part of the team.
5. When all else fails, leverage existing staff—coaches, facilitators, counselors, interventionists and librarians—to serve as a part of the school-based sub team.

**MORE ONLINE:** Details on each of the above ideas, [DAmag.me/subsituation](https://DAmag.me/subsituation)



"The short-term kinds of fixes of increasing the hourly pay rate, particularly for subs that are meeting the need, it's not sustainable," says Soares of Kelly Education. "I think it's really important that we need to start shifting the conversation and understand and recognize and agree that the workforce model is changing."

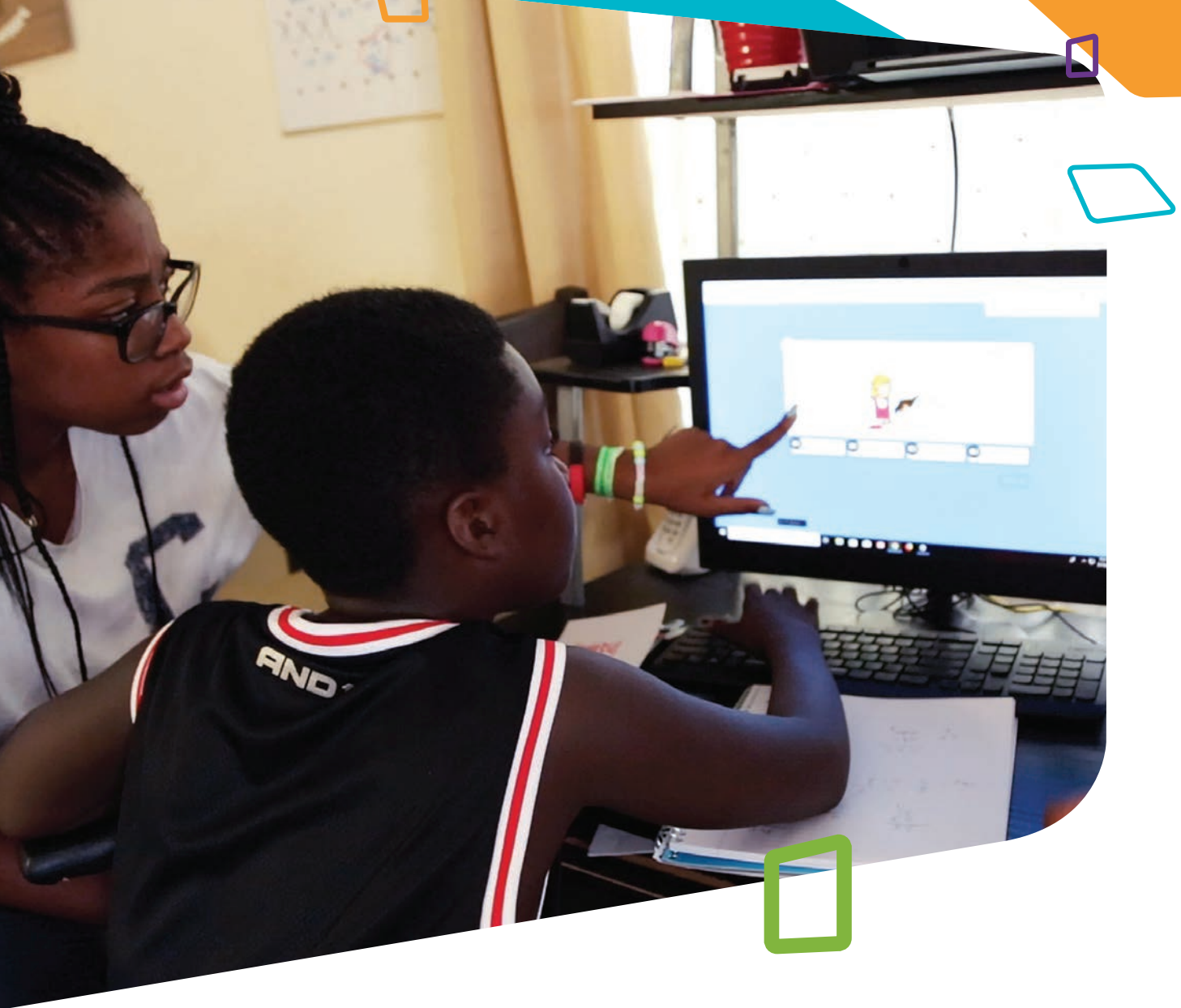
Taylor cautions taking a cavalier approach. When absences happen, don't be left asking, "Does the responsibility fall on their grade level or department chair, or the assistant principal or principal supervising them? Do we just go

without education? None of those are acceptable answers to us."

Instead, value that pool of subs and stay connected to them, especially in this unique environment.

"We have no baseline data to really forecast [the near future and staffing]. There probably wasn't data in 1918 with the last pandemic," Martin says. "A big part of work in education space is recruitment, but it's more about retention, because you lose at a much higher rate than you gain staff." **DA**

*Chris Burt is associate editor of DA.*

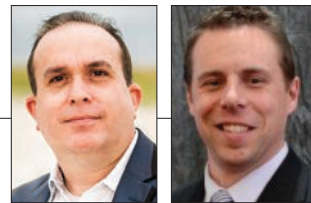


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## 5 ways to create a great esports space for your school

Key physical space considerations for setting up your program, and students, for success

By Elliott Levine and Bryan Shark

Esports is a hot topic right now in today's educational environment, where the vast majority of students have never been part of an extracurricular program previously. When these students log in and start playing games online, their GPAs go up by an average of 1.7 points and their school attendance records increase by 10 percent.

These are significant numbers in a world where engagement is seen as a leading indicator of academic success. With the rapid growth in gaming, K-12 schools and higher ed are responding with esports programs and getting their physical spaces set up to accommodate this emerging educational program.

Realizing it's not enough to simply join a workshop, invest in computers and purchase a few chairs for students to sit on, districts are benefitting from professional development and an experienced consultant to get their esports programs set up and operating.

Here are five key considerations when implementing an esports program:

**1. One size does *not* fit all.** Think about ergonomics before buying furniture, desks and other components. Avoid the "coolest" options and think about the learner who will be sitting at a desk for three to four hours. Schools may buy equipment after reading about the benefits of esports but possibly have not considered the potential pitfalls with that approach. Thinking proactively about the right technology, as well as the furniture and its flexibility and functionality is critical. For

### It's important to build a culture that promotes digital citizenship and sportsmanship.

example, chairs should reinforce healthy computing habits and tables should offer height adjustability.

**2. Appropriate, inclusive furniture.** Schools must provide a learning space that supports a diverse range of learners. Students could be 4- to 6-foot-tall and weigh 80 to 200+ pounds. Working with a furniture manufacturer like MiEN Environments, spaces can be developed to accommodate all and promote a very diverse and inclusive environment.

**3. Space to play.** As popularity and participation grows for esports, schools should gradually establish and invest in space where the team can meet, discuss strategy, plan practices, scrimmage and bond. Start with a multipurpose space, such as a makerspace that can also flex to a gaming room or be utilized by CTE programs. An effective gaming room has ergonomic player seating. Old computer and science labs may be ideal esports arenas. Creating gaming space in a high area of visibility, such as a media center or common space, will encourage participation and offer a fun spectator experience.

**4. Meeting areas.** While gaming is not intended to be played on the couch, comfortable collaborative meeting areas allow athletes and coaches to plan and debrief are necessary. These areas can be outfitted with soft seating because players are not live on a computer, but collabo-

rating and discussing with their peers, sponsors and/or coaches. Whiteboard table surfaces and/or mobile whiteboards can support gaming brainstorming and strategizing in meeting areas. Large monitors in these areas will also allow players to review film and strategy.

**5. Safe, inclusive environment.** Give careful consideration to what infrastructure is necessary to maintain a safe and inclusive environment. Go beyond hardware, considering technology to monitor for symptoms that includes a mechanism to alert you when a student is being harassed. It's important to build a culture that promotes digital citizenship and sportsmanship.

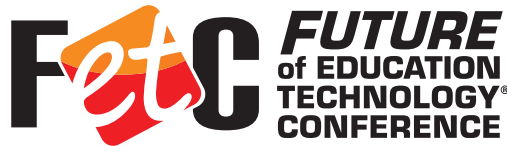
**A space where students can thrive**  
Rapid growth for video gaming in both K-12 and higher ed is helping schools to improve student engagement and boost recruitment. With the fall 2020 athletic calendar tabled for the foreseeable future, schools may be looking at esports as a viable alternative. In fact, amidst COVID-19 this is now the one competitive activity that students can remain part of, and if necessary, compete from home.

To design the best space, follow the above tips and work to create a flexible, ergonomic, multifunctional environment where students can thrive. **DA**

*Elliott Levine is co-founder of Healthy Player One, and chief academic officer for STS Education, a national ed tech services firm. Bryan Shark has been a leader in the PK-12 education industry for nearly 20 years. Currently he leads the sales and customer success teams at STS Education. Bryan previously focused on esports initiatives.*







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## Building habits: The foundation of effective teams

**Building effective teams tops the list of critical responsibilities of school and district leaders in today's interconnected world.**

All of us are trying to build capacity, confidence and potential within our teams to create big ripple effects.

In today's increasingly collaborative and interconnected world, building effective teams, not surprisingly, tops the list of critical responsibilities of education leaders. In the quest to unlock the magic of effective teams, Google conducted *Project Aristotle*, a study revealing that the success of a team had little to do with personalities, expertise or years of experience. Rather, individual talent and intellect repeatedly took a back-seat to what author Shawn Achor calls "collective intelligence"—the synergy and success that comes from nurturing and capitalizing on the sum talent of the team.

In our district, we describe the culture and mindset of effective teams as "we not me" and recognize that the precursor to unleashing collective intelligence is psychological safety. To ensure a team's ecosystem flourishes, certain habits—learning and meeting habits—must be constructed. Habit-building fosters a symbiotic relationship between team members that ensures success and prevents large-scale failure. Considering our current reality, psychological safety needs to be at the core of everything we do to support students, teachers, and families.

### Learning habits

So, how do leaders develop new learning habits and avoid creating a culture that is apathetic, anxious or resistant to change? First, leaders must recognize that a team's ecosystem should include a symbiotic relationship between psychological safety

and shared accountability for outcomes. Through this balance, teams are safe failing forward and discussing the causes behind such failures without feeling of shamed, incompetent and disappointed.

In a psychologically safe environment, team members can be vulnerable and share learning experiences to avoid replicating those mistakes or use those lessons to predict where future failure might appear. Anthony Kim, co-author of *The New Team Habits* and CEO of Education Elements, describes the creation of such learning habits as the "process of sharing mistakes [that] allows us to grow and transfer learning."

Individuals then become accountable to each other in advancing the organization's shared vision. To deepen the psychological safety needed to cultivate learning habits, leaders can follow recommendations from Amy Edmonson, author of *The Fearless Organization*:

- Frame the work as a learning question, rather than an execution question.
- Acknowledge your own fallibility.
- Model curiosity to create a necessity for other's voices.

### Meeting habits

All of us have been in meetings where one or two people take the conversation hostage or decisions are made prior to the meeting yet input is requested to make people feel like they have "ownership." These ineffective meeting habits often result in disengagement and the destruction of "we not me."

Although Project Aristotle proved there was no "magical formula" in team composition, two team meeting habits, ostentatious listening and equality in conversational turn-taking, did result in increased team effectiveness

By Amy E. Miller and Jenny McGown

and contributed to psychological safety.

One way to develop these two skills is to begin meetings with a check-in. This is a small habit that can have a much larger ripple effect. A check-in is an opportunity for everyone to share and for others to listen. We use check-ins in our district to develop relationships, focus on specific items affiliated with work, or provide leaders with insight on how people are feeling. This has been especially critical in our virtual meetings for people to continue to feel connected to one another and the new work streams affiliated with at-home learning. Examples of check-in questions include:

- **Get-to-Know-You-Better:** If you could present a TED Talk (professional or personal) what would you present?
- **Project Based:** What are you seeking to learn or contribute today?
- **How Are You:** What color represents how you are feeling today?

As you assess the current health of your team(s), reflect on whether or not psychological safety is part of your ecosystem and consider how a simple meeting habit like the "check-in" might enhance team connectivity and success. Ultimately, all of us are trying to build capacity, confidence, and potential within our teams to create big ripple effects. As leaders, our investment in cultivating the learning and meeting habits of effective teams will unleash our collective intelligence and garner better results for the students and communities we serve. **DA**

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*Amy E. Miller is the executive director for curriculum and delivery, and the New Team Habits Champion, at Klein Independent School District in Texas. Jenny McGown is superintendent of the Klein ISD.*





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