

## **Distance Learning: A Simple Approach to Re-Defining Education**

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### **Abstract**

This article will examine vital components of a successful virtual learning program. The author details her experience in leading distance learning in an urban public-school setting and how she infused traditional educational practices with an innovative design to yield a rewarding experience for educators, scholars, and parents. The author discusses why shared vision, staff buy-in, professional development, engaging lesson activity structures, teacher communication, feedback and wellness are necessary components of a distance learning program. The article also provides a detailed description of the relevancy of each attribute's contribution to this innovative model. This article serves as an entry point to understanding what attributes should be considered when designing a distance learning program for school environments. The examination of these practices allows the reader to internalize how adding a simple, well designed structure, can greatly enhance the ever-changing learning environment for the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner.

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I lead an elementary school in a large urban district and I am not exaggerating when I say, COVID knocked the wind out of me, well, not literally but that is the feeling that I had in my gut when I was told that my staff and my students would not be reporting back to the campus. The thought of managing an entire school from my home caused extreme anxiety and I shuttered at the thought of the enormous amount of sense making that would need to take place. Everything was happening so quickly, there was a limited amount of emotional responses that could be captured. One memory that still jolts my soul is the moment I created my virtual campus teams. I sat at my computer typing and the words began to blur, I bowed my head and tears rolled from my eyes because in that moment I realized that everything that I knew to be certain about education seemed to be slipping, and I was desperately grasping for normalcy.

The new educational jargon "distance learning" was quickly becoming my new norm, and I understood my new responsibility of constructing clarity for teachers, parents, and scholars around this concept. I have been a Principal for seven years and in this role, I have encountered many assignments. I worked in economically disadvantaged schools, I led the first Elementary Computer Science pilot school in my district and I currently serve as the leader of a Talented and Gifted School. My experiences are vast, but I must say making "distance learning" the new norm will be my greatest accomplishment. I relish at the idea of a successful launch, but I recognize that this is a concept that yields a simplistic impression, yet presents school districts, leaders, teachers, and parents with a profound challenge. As I navigate this experience, I discovered that there are several attributes that contribute to a successful distance learning program.

## **Attributes of a Successful Program**

### **A Vision That Charts the Course**

My first mission involved reminding my staff of the vision we embraced from the beginning of the school year. Understanding who you are in any crisis helps you to define what you will do to succeed. You must determine what you want your program to resemble. Steve Jobs said, “If you are working on something exciting that you really care about, you don’t have to be pushed. The vision pulls you” (n.d., par.1). It was important to define the expectations and the service that my campus would provide to parents, students, and the school community. It was the role of the school leader to define the best path forward and implement a plan for delivering instruction, providing constant communication to parents, and working as a team. Each morning my entire staff used a virtual platform to stay connected. Two or three staff members would encourage the staff daily through words, poems, songs, laughs, tears, and meditation. Everything discussed, celebrated, and mentioned during our meetings aligned with our campus vision of high expectations and delivering immaculate service to anyone encountered during distance learning.

### **Staff Buy-In That Grounds the Work**

Redding and Viano (2018) believe that teacher self-determination in an innovative design and implementation fosters a high level of participation. In order to establish buy-in with my staff during the devastating pandemic, my campus held individual, grade level, and content level meetings to discuss a uniform process to educate our scholars and parents. An e-learning protocol that included: primary virtual classroom norms and expectations, virtual platform organization, lesson plan template, lesson cycle protocol, expectations for live lessons, class meetings, student wellness, and enrichment activities was provided to the staff. As a campus we looked at each component and created simplified techniques to accomplish scholar success. Educators readily adopted strategies and methods that represented their voice in decision making. Therefore, buy-in is relevant to distance learning because stakeholders have a vested interest of success in a system they helped create.

### **Professional Learning Communities to Accelerate Effectiveness**

Administrators, teachers, and staff members were challenged to innovate within days. This innovation is only possible through targeted professional development. It was important for teachers to have consistent interactions with students throughout the day. We vowed to maintain our student-teacher relationships. We wanted our teachers to see our students daily: live or pre-recorded. In order for this to take place, weekly professional learning communities must occur. Miller (2020) states that one of the purposes of PLC’s is to try out new strategies and engage teachers in a process that will promote innovative teaching practices and shared expectations for student success. Innovative teaching practices remained a targeted area of focus. Each week the administrators and teachers selected trainings that enhanced lesson planning, lesson delivery and student engagement. Providing educators with a virtual platform to share and collaborate best practices accelerates and improves teacher growth.

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## **Design an Engaging School Lesson Activity Structure**

The Kaiser Family Foundation found that “students 8-18 watch TV, surf the internet or use another type of media while doing homework” (as cited in Bnat, 2017, par. 3). Therefore, we must understand that distance learning requires teachers to be skilled and informed on how to present live or pre-recorded lessons. Often traditional lesson cycle times are long and require extensive explanations and examples. In order to cater to the needs of the students, we service during virtual learning a lesson cycle was designed that took into account the theory that in order to capture the technology attention span of students, the lesson must quickly focus on important concepts, sustain focus while other things are going on, access relevant memories, and shift the attention quickly as relevant concepts are presented. In order to do this, a lesson cycle was created that included four components: Start, Hook, Explore, and Finish. This allowed the teacher to decrease the amount of time spent in a traditional lesson cycle and focus the student’s attention on the information that was a necessity to understanding what was being presented. This simple structure also allowed the teacher to tailor the lesson to the needs of students who may find the information challenging as they participate in a distance learning environment.

## **All Teachers Connect With Students**

One of the most touching moments for the staff was a story where a teacher described an experience of compassion. Every day one of her students would come into her virtual office hours and sit quietly, she would offer help, but soon realized that the student found comfort and a sense of peace by sitting in the presence of their teacher. Just allowing the student to sit quietly each day made the student’s life a little more comforting, and that symbolism represented the importance of having a designated time to contact students and parents. During the pandemic, it is crucial that students and parents have access to teachers. Therefore, any effective distance learning program requires strategic planning of how teachers and staff members will provide office hours, face to face live lessons, and wellness checks for students and parents. It is important that virtual office hours be provided daily and offer a consistent time frame for service. This ensures a concrete time for students or parents to check in with teachers to ask questions, receive intervention, or just providing a moment for students to feel a sense of normalcy. Providing a “family friendly” schedule is also a necessity for any distance learning program. Scholars should receive a balanced distance learning experience that fosters aligned curriculum yet embraces the social needs of everyone; therefore scholar schedules were designed to have face-to-face and pre-recorded lessons with their core teachers during the mornings and in the afternoon they participated in individual reading, technology, extra-curricular clubs, and interactive elective classes. Designing a schedule that will allow scholars to connect with all teachers provides student confidence throughout the implementation process.

## **Feedback and Coaching to Maximize Performance**

John Maxwell stated, “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care” (1998, p. 107). This is also true for distance learning. As a leader it is important for you to provide a structure that allows your staff to see that you are learning as they learn. It is imperative that the administrative team be co-teachers on any technology platform being implemented. This allows the administrator direct access to all assignments, parent messages,

student feedback, and grades. This improves the validity of the feedback. I found that there were three direct ways that teachers and staff members should receive feedback. They are:

- feedback on daily postings, messages, and assignments,
- feedback on live lessons and pre-recorded lessons, and
- feedback on the implementation of weekly Professional Development.

The administrative team created a shared virtual platform that stored feedback information for all teachers. Each week the administrative team developed targeted expectations for feedback. This new system of teaching requires a feedback approach that provides teachers and staff with support and ideas to improve scholar success and participation. The National Center for Systemic Improvement (2013) authored a brief called *Improving Teacher Practice and Outcomes for all Learners*. It contains research that supports coaching as a highly effective practice to improve teacher performance when implementing a new system. Scheeler, Ruhl, and McAfee (as cited in National Center for Systemic Improvement) note that feedback is most effective when it is “specific, positive, timely, and corrective” (p. 6). Therefore, an effective distance learning program must include a system for coaching and feedback for all instructional delivery types. Administrators must have a quick and simple way to monitor teacher pedagogy. Using a form that includes all teacher instructional links and publishing it on a campus shared technology drive is a key component of feedback success. Allowing an administrator to have all teaching environments on one form provides access and simplicity to instruction thereby providing the means of an evaluation system that can be accomplished with fidelity.

### **Staff and Student Wellness**

Self-care and wellness for all stakeholders, staff, scholars, and parents is a necessity for distance learning. One of the first measurable actions that can be completed involves sending out a wellness survey to your staff and scholars and utilizing the information collected to outline how you will proceed with campus support. Obtaining data of this magnitude affords the Counselor and the Nurse the opportunity to set up virtual office hours, complete guidance lessons, and perform virtual wellness visits for each grade level and content teacher. These actions mentally support staff, scholars, and parents as they manage their emotions, moments of isolation, and disheartening reality of helplessness. During this time, it is incumbent on school administrators or school systems to provide a comforting mechanism that leverages balance to all stakeholders during this difficult situation. Having a wellness component to distance learning provides all entities with a prescriptive method to endure their hardships as they maneuver to their wellbeing.

### **Conclusion**

Distance learning presents challenges on many fronts: technology, scholar participation, teacher scheduling, and parent understanding. Yet, with a well-structured, systemic plan virtual learning can be administered effectively. The strategies presented provide the tools needed to create an academic sound educational environment that yields educators, scholars and parents a rewarding experience.

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