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Leading School Divisions During a Pandemic

September 24, 2020

School division leaders across the Commonwealth have difficult and complicated decisions to make every day, including decisions regarding personnel, schedules, student and staff safety, transportation, special education, and finances just to name a few. On a typical day, these decisions are all encompassing. Now, factor in a pandemic....

It goes without saying that if you are reading this, your life has drastically changed since March 13, 2020. On that day, our Governor closed schools across the Commonwealth. Since that time, we have not been able to have significant and consistent face-to-face engagement with our students and families. We, along with our school communities, desperately miss our 'normal'.

While this is a challenging and stressful time, we know that one thing will make it more successful. That one thing; a commitment to *Work Together*. We need to *Work Together*, now more than ever. Together, we may never know if we did too much, but it will be very apparent if we did too little.

School divisions are committed to *Work Together* with our school communities to make our 'normal' a reality sooner than later. As for our current reality, we know there are challenges. We understand that the responsibilities and priorities have changed for the families in our school communities. The routines of everyday life have been turned upside down. Dining rooms have now become work stations. Financial hardships are more widespread. Childcare has never been more important. A nutritious meal will never be taken for granted again. The challenges are countless, and at times there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel.

For school division leaders, like the leaders proudly representing the 19 school divisions that make up Region VII, professional challenges have drastically changed as well. Topics like school budgets, school division policies, and furniture allocations are now sharing time with health screenings, face shields, and hand sanitizer.

Typically, we would ask questions like the following:

- “How are we going to train all staff on new Title IX regulations?”
- “Do we have enough in our budget to hire an additional guidance counselor?”
- “When will the renovation project be completed?”

Now, in addition to the previously mentioned questions, we are also asking the following:

- “How many face masks and face shields should we order?”
- “How do we reach students who don't have reliable Internet at home?”
- “How long does a teacher have to self-quarantine if their father they last saw in-person 10 days ago tested positive for COVID-19?”

Leading school divisions during a pandemic is challenging at the very least. However, the picture we are describing is not just for school division leaders. These topics and questions impact parents, guardians, neighbors, businesses, and students throughout not only Southwest Virginia, but all across the Commonwealth.



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Every school division has the goal of providing in-person instruction for five days a week as soon as they possibly can. Until then, critical decisions need to be made by instructional leaders, as well as school boards. The decisions made by school boards to move to in-person learning for four days a week, hybrid learning, or distance learning are decisions not made lightly. There are serious concerns to consider regarding the safety and well-being of students and staff, as well as the desire to have students back in schools. Information is presented to school boards about health metrics, trend data, and the latest colored maps from our local health departments. A broad range of public comments are shared by the school community at their school board meetings.

Information is also presented to school boards about feedback from teachers and staff who express serious concerns about returning to school in-person. There are concerns expressed by staff about personal health, the health of loved ones, the health of their students, and the health of the school community. Additionally, at the same exact time, feelings and thoughts are expressed about how desperately we want students back in our classrooms. There are concerns about the social and emotional well-being of students. There are concerns about the positive impacts of in-person instruction and the importance of socialization. The concerns expressed about being in-person are equivalent to the positive impacts of being in-person. Both are strong, and both are existing at the same time.

So, what do you do?

School divisions do not decide on instructional plans overnight. We have been working on this for months, and have involved school board members, teachers, technology staff, counselors, administrators, parent surveys, and regional and state collaboration. We have been assessing recommended health measures and maximum capacity limitations in our classrooms, learning spaces, and buses. We are in constant communication with health departments and our local government officials. We are truly taking a collaborative approach to help make our decisions.

We also take into consideration the populations that make up our school divisions. Some have thousands of students and hundreds of staff members. Some are smaller, but the voices and opinions matter just the same. Each one of these individuals and their families could feel like a hybrid schedule works, or a 100% distance learning model works for them. Some may feel that in-person instruction for five days a week is the only way for them, while others are too concerned about underlying health issues to set foot near a school. The variables to consider are enormous.

Regardless, we know that each of us have to develop and implement a plan, and that plan is not perfect. Our plan is the best that we could come up with right now, with what we know right now. We will undoubtedly have to make changes and adjustments as we go. We don't promise to be perfect, but we do promise to do our best.

We know that our students learn best when in front of a teacher. Distance learning has its place, and our staffs will continue to work diligently to make this program a success. However, nothing takes the place of interacting with others in a structured setting that provides guided instruction in a hands-on environment. In-person instruction has social, emotional, and behavioral benefits as well. Our goal is to get back to in-person instruction for five days a week when it is safe to do so. Each school division and locality will have its own unique challenges to overcome to get there. Some localities may be in the midst of a serious COVID-19 outbreak. Some school divisions may be limited on the amount of bus drivers and buses needed to safely transport students with appropriate distancing on the bus. Until the goal of every single school division is met to provide in-person instruction every day of the week, we will continue to work with what we currently have, and create the best instructional model for our school communities given our current situation.



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All along this journey, we have continued to place the utmost value on feedback. We appreciate hearing and reading the viewpoints of students, families and citizens. We receive positive comments, and we receive pointed comments. We understand all sides. We know that while being the leader of a school division, the blame understandably points in our direction. We accept that willingly, and we get it. There are decisions that are made and recommendations provided to the school board that based on our responsibilities as a superintendent, fall directly and only on our shoulders. That doesn't always mean that we 'want' or 'desire' or 'like' to make those choices personally. However, professionally, and proudly serving in this capacity, we have to fulfill the obligations that we graciously chose to accept as being the superintendent of our school divisions. These decisions and recommendations are not easy, and at times they certainly conflict with how we feel personally. But we cannot and will not make decisions or recommendations from a personal perspective. Actions and recommendations can only come from a professional perspective. We are basing our actions and recommendations with our entire school community in mind. That doesn't mean consensus and that everyone associated with our school divisions - students, staff, families - agree. We do the best we can based on what we know, and act accordingly.

We say none of this to complain or to make you feel sorry for our school divisions or us. We chose this profession. We chose to proudly represent and serve our students and community. Even though we didn't choose these circumstances, we eagerly anticipate the day when we can be reunited with all of our students and their families. However, please know that many of us are anxious, stressed, and scared. We are worried about the health of our students. We are concerned about our loved ones. We stay up at night wondering how we can best take care of our dedicated teachers and staff.

Through it all, we also lead. We navigate our school divisions through these truly uncharted waters. Every school division has to weigh the pros and the cons of their current situation. Every school division has to assess their health metrics and instructional plans. Every school division has been asked to respond to the following difficult question;

“Do the benefits of in-person instruction outweigh the potential health risks to students, staff, and our school community?”

There is no right answer, just as there is no wrong answer. No matter what, every answer will be met with more and more questions. The result is a perpetual plan that is constantly changing and evolving, with the ultimate goal of eventually implementing in-person instruction for five days a week.

When face-to-face instruction does become a realistic option for all of our school divisions, it will look drastically different. Large gatherings of students in the hallways or the cafeteria will not be allowed. Social distancing and the proper wearing of masks by everyone in the building is non-negotiable. We wear our masks to protect others and expect others to wear their masks to protect us. Hand washing and sanitizing will be promoted in our schools. Frequent cleaning and disinfecting of the classrooms, offices, and school buses will be enforced by staff and administration. To make this work, and to stay in school, it will take the collaboration of everyone associated with our school divisions.



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As superintendents, we know we can't do this alone. We will rely heavily on our talented and dedicated teachers and staff. Despite the fact that our teachers and staff have worked countless hours training to best provide virtual instruction to their students, some people might say that by returning to school in-person, our teachers and staff will actually earn their paycheck. This is misguided, and could not be further from the truth. To prepare for virtual instruction, our teachers and staff have spent an entire spring and summer participating in professional development and preparing online resources for those students who choose distance learning. They had to quickly and drastically alter their own pedagogy and instructional delivery to provide a learning model never implemented before. And they did it in only six months. It took an enormous amount of work for school divisions to redesign and rebrand their instructional product in a short period of time. The teachers and staff that made this possible deserve all of our praise and appreciation.

The reality is that for our teachers and staff, a return to in-person instruction actually comes with many sacrifices. This isn't like a store re-opening, or a restaurant welcoming patrons back. This is opening our doors to welcome our students back to school for the duration of our school days. This isn't a transaction or picking up a meal to-go. This is school. This involves teaching, counseling, nurturing, and caring for a school full of students for the entire school day. This is different. Our staff will potentially place their health at risk every single day they come to work. Our staff will balance the stress of that risk against providing a service to our students and community that we know is needed now more than ever. Our staff will risk a 14-day quarantine from their own families if they come in close contact with a colleague diagnosed with COVID-19 at work. Our staff will balance teaching students in-person with mitigation strategies and adaptations that we would have never dreamed of six months ago. At the same time, they will be providing virtual instruction to students who have chosen distance learning for health reasons or out of an abundance of caution.

Additionally, we will have secretaries and aides riding buses and taking temperatures. We will have custodians and maintenance staff cleaning and disinfecting areas. We will have school nurses cautiously tending to sick children. We will have cafeteria staff preparing much needed meals for students in their classes and to take to their homes. We will have bus drivers doing their best to get students to school on time despite having significantly reduced capacity. We will have computer and network techs whose workload will be doubled, but their eight hour contracted day will remain the same.

For those sacrifices, we hope you will join us in supporting our staffs. They need our support now more than ever. Please be patient with us as we provide education in a way we never have before, and in an environment we never imagined. Our technology might not always work perfectly. We request your patience while we try to work out the kinks in our scheduling, school procedures, and transportation issues. The bus may be several minutes late and the car rider line might be slow in the morning. So please be patient with us as we embark on this journey together.

Continue to provide our school community, especially our families, with grace as they deal with the constant unknown and daily changes. We have multiple students and parents who are struggling each and every day trying to balance school, work, childcare, food, finances, etc. Many of our parents and students are frustrated, tired and overwhelmed. They are once again looking for our help, support, compassion and empathy. Some are worried how they will get the next meal on the table as they can't work because they have to be at home with their children while school is completely virtual. Some wonder why their honor roll student is now making D's and F's. Some are exhausted after spending five hours after work each day with their child in the evening so they can complete all of their asynchronous assignments. The struggle is real, and it seems that there is no end in sight.



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Teachers, staff, students, families, and school division leaders are all experiencing challenging times. By taking the time to understand each other, and to listen to each other, we all can get a better sense of the challenges all of us are experiencing. We are not going to be able to help each other through all of our struggles if we don't rely on each other for support. We need to collaborate with each other, and communicate with each other. We need to unite as a school community. Let's *Work Together*, and meet all of these challenges to do what is best for all of our students.

A quote attributed to Socrates says, "The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new." We want everyone to know how proud we are of our students, staff, and school communities while building our 'new', and how much we truly care about all of you. We want to thank everyone for their flexibility, patience and understanding during the COVID-19 pandemic. Please continue to provide us with the same type of flexibility, patience and understanding as we move forward with our plans for the 2020-2021 school year.

Sincerely,

Region VII Superintendents

- Mr. Scott Meade, Bland County Superintendent
- Dr. Keith Perrigan, Bristol City Superintendent
- Mrs. Melanie Hibbitts, Buchanan County Superintendent
- Dr. Mark A. Burnette, Carroll County Superintendent
- Mrs. Haydee L. Robinson, Dickenson County Superintendent
- Ms. Susan Tilley, Galax City Superintendent
- Dr. Terry E. Arbogast, II, Giles County Superintendent
- Mr. Kelly Wilmore, Grayson County Superintendent
- Dr. Brian T. Austin, Lee County Superintendent
- Dr. Gina Wohlford, Norton City Superintendent
- Dr. Kevin W. Siers, Pulaski County Superintendent
- Mr. Robert F. Graham, Radford City Superintendent
- Dr. Gregory A. Brown, Russell County Superintendent
- Mr. John I. Ferguson, Scott County Superintendent
- Dr. Dennis G. Carter, Smyth County Superintendent
- Dr. Christopher B. Stacy, Tazewell County Superintendent
- Dr. Brian C. Ratliff, Washington County Superintendent
- Dr. Gregory C. Mullins, Wise County Superintendent
- Dr. Scott L. Jefferies, Wythe County Superintendent