

Executive Summary

The schools we know well--classrooms teeming with learning and discovery, lunch breaks, sports and extracurricular activities--now seem like the distant past. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues into the annual back-to-school season, school leaders have ventured into the uncharted territory of providing digital learning to all students and now must figure out how to safely reopen schools in some form. Schools will need help. But how? And from whom?

Education associations can provide school professionals, leaders, and parents with critical ideas and templates about how to adapt to this new normal. Students will return to school with vastly different needs and experiences, educators will be challenged to assess and meet each students' needs. School leaders need time to balance social distancing with the movement of students, the length of class days and issues such as transportation. Even serving lunch in the building or having 25 students in a classroom may be impossible. Perhaps most importantly, education associations can help their wider communities understand the evolution of K-12 education and how we must accelerate those changes, including support for digital learning.

Logistics are only the beginning. The trauma of this pandemic will increase the need for schools to provide mental health services at a time when, pre-pandemic, school counselors, social workers and psychologists were taxed by increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicides. Some students will return having experienced the loss of friends and family members; for others it is the loss of family income; and still for others it is the loss of a sense of security. We know well that children simply cannot learn well when they are emotionally overwhelmed. Schools will confront these challenges, and most will need to make connections between mental health professionals and teachers. Associations can help create the templates for better relationships between agencies to work in the best interest of students and their families.

Additionally, schools are going to need to prepare for the next wave of the pandemic. Associations are compiling and can help facilitate best practices, including unique abilities to emphasize equity, discovered during this almost instantaneous move to distance learning.

Within these uncertainties, education associations can also provide information to school professionals, leaders and parents concerning new leadership models that emphasize teamwork, collective engagement, and sharing.

“Before the Pencils are Picked Up”

Predicting the needs and adapting tools to meet the challenge: A key role for associations

By Richard M. Long, Learning First Alliance

We know schools will be different when they re-open. But how? As the education community is facing this new, ceaseless challenge of uncertainty, some federal and state government leaders seem to expect that schools will simply swing their doors open and start where the pencil was put down in March. However, educators need time and resources to rethink, build and implement the wide-ranging supports needed for their students, staff, and families. Exacerbating that challenge are expected cuts to programs and staff.

Yet the education community has a strong consensus on the challenges ahead and workable options exist. This is an opportunity for the members of the Learning First Alliance to work together to share ideas and innovations and show leadership across the sector. Associations disseminate professional information faster and more effectively than government agencies and in this intense period could play a key role in improving how education is provided to students.

This paper will explore the roles of associations in impacting these challenges. These ideas are based on a series of interviews with teachers, policy professionals, thought leaders, superintendents, professional development specialists and others.

Immediate issues to address together include:

- 1) Who is driving the public and media narrative on education? And, can we create time for education stakeholders to redefine instruction before the school doors open?
- 2) How do educators work together to ensure the coordination of services – health, mental health, welfare, as well as education for students and their families?

Ideas for working congruently but independently:

- 3) Where to begin instruction and how do we tailor instruction for children who will likely have vastly different and many more needs than when they left school?
- 4) How to provide social-emotional services to the students, educators, and families who will need support?
- 5) How to prepare for a second wave of COVID-19?
- 6) How to manage the immediate and pending funding cuts by state and local governments to K-12 schools?

These are areas where associations can work collaboratively on outlining what is important for schools to be successful.

To do so, first, we must change the narrative: We must emphasize that student and staff safety takes precedence over economic issues. Schools should not open simply to give children a place to go while their parents are at work, and students and staff need to feel safe to succeed. Schools must be effectively cleaned, and everyone must be screened before schools can plan to open. Education associations need to expand their already robust networks of interactions to make it clear to their members that they are not alone, that their problems and challenges are part of a common concern. They will need to share these stories with their business communities, their political communities and the media. Plus, they need to give them the coordinated tools to communicate those ideas to the wider public.

And, it should be stressed that it is about improving education for all students, not simply picking up a pencil. Educators need time to plan how to provide the hybrid (blended) learning. The hybrid model will be needed as schools will need to have some students working at home, while others are working in classrooms. Social distancing will mean that having 25 students in a room will not work. However, to do this educators will need time to determine appropriate services for each child. For some students this will also include access to mental health programs for those who may be traumatized from abuse, neglect or illness in their families.

Educators need to be able to take every resource and coordinate it, and none of that happens in an instant. Like Major League Baseball, schools need their “spring training” to plan what needs to be done, train everyone in the hybrid environment, and implement the new plan with the tools needed. In short, schools need a Pre-opening month, not the typical week, to get ready. Associations will need to help make the case for the need for time to bring all of these new ideas and needs into play. Associations can also provide templates, based on their members’ experiences, to others so that educators are using experience to guide them.

Second, educators must address students’ mental and physical health care needs, and associations can help schools develop the key elements of partnership agreements with other public agencies for these services. Some of these agreements can build off of existing community school models, but all are going to need to make congruent the differing ethical requirements of each agency, profession, and system so that all are operating in the best interest of the child. Teachers also should share and receive information for educational purposes. Associations can not only provide the templates that schools have developed but also the awareness that each profession can have different standards of care that must involve the sharing of information.

Third: Where to begin instruction? Some students and some school districts will have thrived with virtual learning, others are likely to have fallen further behind, some students may have learned much more in some subjects but not others. Educators need the tools to assess these differentiated needs and determine interventions. Ideally, before schools open for all students (the Pre-opening), they should open sooner for those who need an immediate intervention. Perhaps adopting a “summer school” model that allows for highly focused instruction or an expanded “afterschool” model that can be a form of tutoring would work for some schools. The point being that building off of models we know is easier than creating entirely new programs. Summer schools are a good model for focused group instruction; while the afterschool model can be used to provide small group and individual tutoring. Education associations can provide the

justifications for the use of these models, as well as share examples of how these models are being adapted and applied.

Fourth, social-emotional issues are going to be significant. Some children will be coming back to school from families who are suffering, perhaps parents/caregivers are out of work and food security is an issue, and some may even have lost the place they lived. Others may have lost family or friends to COVID-19. Still others will likely suffer from anxiety and depression just from seeing the news. These emotional issues will need to be addressed for these students to learn, but most schools won't have enough counselors, social workers or psychologists to meet these needs.

Educators will need new ways to access care for their students. For some schools this will mean hiring more school professionals (nurses, counselors, social workers, psychologists), for others it will mean partnering with health departments, hospitals, and clinics. It could also mean working with private providers, offering virtual counseling services, a mixture of some or all of these *and* providing support to teachers and administrators to work with these other professionals. Educators will need examples of agreements, toolkits for professional learning on what these services mean and how they connect to learning, and guidelines for the different rules, statutes, and ethics involved with working across these entities. It will mean that everyone is going to need professional development on how to integrate information and work with new teams.

Fifth, we must make plans for the potential for future school shutdowns. Dr. Anthony Fauci of the National Institute for Allergies and Infectious Diseases and many others are predicting a second wave of COVID-19 later this year. Starting now, school leaders must review how well they functioned and what they accomplished during the initial emergency. Education associations can provide templates of how these evaluations can be done, as well as provide information on how to take those findings to adapt and prepare.

We know that preparation makes a difference. Looking to the next few months, "stakeholder engagement needs to take on new meaning. Educators at all levels should be allowed to give their input on what has worked, what should be changed, and how it should be changed. For instance, it is clear that many communities have limited internet access, and each school must plan around those constraints. Additionally, instruction for many students with disabilities, English language learners, and those in specialized career and technical programs did not translate well after the sudden shift from the classroom to the internet. Education associations can continue to share what schools have tried and what experts recommend.

Sixth, funding is going to be an enormous challenge. States already are reporting massive losses of revenues at a time when health-related costs are skyrocketing. The pressure on state budgets will likely mean cuts for K-12 education and other sectors. Associations are already pushing for significant federal help for schools and the children who need increased support, they must also show examples so that the public understands the impact of the expected cuts. Plus, finding new ways to direct resources such as the E-Rate can make a difference in students having access to the internet. Associations can provide information and guidance as some school districts aren't aware of these opportunities.

Educators also should use this as an opportunity to better engage parents, who have become much more involved in teaching their children during this crisis and could be greater allies in communicating the importance of each child's educational opportunity.

At the local level, school and district leaders will need to plan and prepare for cuts, which may translate to increased class sizes, fewer professional development opportunities, fewer specialists such as counselors, fewer arts and extracurricular programs and/or cuts to other services. These decisions need to be made with all school staff, parents and the community, and associations should share "stakeholder engagement" models and other tools to help schools engage their constituencies.

One example of a coping skill is for schools to expand their working relationships. Education associations can provide examples as to how to improve cross-district cooperation, such as programs for schools and districts to pool their resources for professional development, mental health services, technology programs, and other vital services. Associations can demonstrate how boundaries between schools can become bridges to working together on mutual problems.

Education associations can also provide templates on how to demonstrate leadership. Initial crises call for swift, bold, and direct decisions and actions. However, when the emergency has passed, school leaders will need to engage with stakeholders to ensure that every part of the education decisionmaking constellation has been able to discuss what needs to be done, why it is being done, and who is trying to get it done.

Another part of the equation has also changed: Team leadership is going to take on new meaning as parents have become more active in their children's learning. They will need time and opportunity to engage with staff. And, in a hybrid (blended) model, simple communications will become more difficult as school staff cannot communicate in hallways and through impromptu meetings. Associations, who by their nature are communications agencies, will have opportunities to share ideas and models with their members.

Summary

It is more imperative than ever for the association community to work together to support their members and the local schools across the country in this time of uncertainty and ongoing crisis.

Associations have many models that can help educators determine the best course for their local schools. The challenge now is to manage and adapt to the speed of change: Programs that took two to three years to implement need to be put in place immediately. Yet the expected budget cuts will likely upend the best laid plans and create more uncertainty.

Associations can expand on their mission of providing information, ideas and the opportunity for collegial discussions as each school district navigates new territories. Associations have the charts of previous experiences that can help local schools to plan and adapt. We must work collaboratively to best serve our students, teachers, administrators, other school staff and parents as we sail these uncharted seas together.