Schooling Covid-19:
Lessons from the sudden transition to remote learning

Gregg Vanourek
Twitter: @gvanourek

Public Education Foundation Summit:
The Future Is Now:
Can Public Education Rise to the Challenges of Covid-19? 
January 14, 2021
“This moment is the curriculum.”

-Jon Kabat-Zinn
“Experience is a hard teacher. She gives the test first, the lesson afterwards.”
-Vernon Law
Methodology

Goal: understand the response to the covid-19 crisis with remote learning initiatives:

1. What did they do?
2. What worked well, and what didn’t?
3. What enabled them to respond as they did?

- 40 interviews (education executives, principals, teachers, and parents) from 8 leading charter networks
  - 140,000+ students
  - predominantly low-income students (71-100% f/rp) and students of color

- Information on their remote learning programs
- Review of national reports on public education for context

Two Sets of Findings:

I. Five key actions to serve students during the transition to remote learning
II. Four attributes of resilient organizations able to respond to a crisis
5 Key Actions
(to serve students during the transition to remote learning)

1. Meet students’ social, emotional, and nutritional needs
2. Place technology in the hands of every student and educator quickly
3. Re-create the structure of the regular school day and regular grading practices
4. Reach out to individual students and families regularly
5. Embrace a team approach to teaching, with a common curriculum at the center
“Hungry students can’t learn.”

“During this time we made sure to start every conversation with ‘How are you doing?’ We made sure that we started with humanity and kindness and taking less for granted.”

– Brett Peiser
1. Meeting Social, Emotional, and Nutritional Needs: Examples

- daily wellness surveys to identify issues
- wellness offerings to address needs
- meal programs
- bedtime stories
- funny cooking videos
- hip hop at home
2. Rapid Tech Distribution

“We knew technology would be the gating factor regarding whether students would continue to receive an education.”

-Dacia Toll

- Rapid survey of families to learn about their tech needs
- Massive mobilization and rapid deployment of devices and materials, with central command, field operations, supply chains (sourcing new devices)
- Preloading all devices with the necessary software
- Robust tech support program + swapping out malfunctioning devices at student doorstep
- Free data plans for families (partnerships with providers)
- Communication blitzes to teachers and families
3a. Clear and Strong RL Design Principles

- Lead with our “care for the whole person” value and keep our community together. We need to have enough touchpoints and direct contacts to make sure we have a pulse on our kids and each other.
- We create a shared “container.” Having a consistent instructional approach and schedule will enable efficiencies (family communication, tech issues, and curriculum design) and collaboration.
- We need a simple, clear plan that we can execute well. None of us has ever done this before. The more complexity we add, the harder it will be to do it well.
- We need continuity and consistency. We—our scholars, teachers, and families—need consistent routines for remote learning and remote community that will become a source of stability and comfort.
- We are designing for “most.” There will be no effective plan that works for every single student, parent, and teacher. We will need flexibility and extra support for the students, families, and staff who need it.

(Source: Achievement First)

Other examples: simple, simple, simple; reading is our top priority; accessibility; clarity of responsibility; workable for families.
4. Reach out to students and families regularly

“One striking observation was how thoughtfully and systematically they reached out individually to students and parents.”

- Rapid reconnaissance to learn who needs help with meals, devices, connectivity
- *Advisor System*
  - check in on student and family needs
  - provide emotional support
  - gather feedback on how RL going for students & families
- Effective use of data and dashboards to learn what’s working vs. not, track progress, make informed decisions
- “Lean startup” approach: “build, measure, learn”; pivot
5. Team Teaching Approach, with Common Curriculum at the Center

Innovative use of teaching teams:
• Lead planners design network-wide lessons
• Master teachers record video lessons for wider distribution
• Some teachers focus on grading and student feedback
• Other teachers focus on checking in with families and one-on-one video calls with students to address stumbling blocks

• Benefits:
  1. Deploy teachers according to skills, strengths, interests, and experience
  2. Allows teachers closest to students to follow up with them
  3. Flexibility for teachers with children of their own at home
4 Attributes
(of resilient organizations able to respond to a crisis)

I. Strong mission, values, and culture
II. Excellent leadership (including agility in operations and decision-making)
III. Strong talent and teams
IV. Vibrant school community and close relationships with families
II. Excellent Leadership

• Key factor: pre-existing organizational health:
  • Was the school already high functioning with teaching, learning, vision, strategy, culture, execution, innovation?
• After-action leadership review: Did leaders do the following?
  1. Diagnose the main problems quickly?
  2. Marshal their teams to make quick but smart decisions about ways forward in the swamp of uncertainty?
  3. Adjust their priorities and pivot their operations on a dime?
  4. Tend to the organizational culture and help staff succeed, or just put out fires?
  5. Get overwhelmed by chaos and just cope, or rise to challenge and even see opportunities?
“Never waste a good crisis”
“Inside the word emergency is emerge; from an emergency new things come forth. The old certainties are crumbling fast, but danger and possibility are sisters.”

–Rebecca Solnit, Hope in the Dark
“Bad companies are destroyed by crises; good companies survive them; great companies are improved by them.”

-Andy Grove, former CEO, Intel
Crisis Leadership: Key Elements

1. *humanity and grace under pressure
2. seeking credible information from diverse array of experts
3. forming brilliant crisis response team
4. communicating reality, urgency, and hope
5. being present, visible, available
6. radical focus
7. making big decisions fast
8. empowering leaders at all levels
9. *restoring psychological stability (not just financial/ops)
10. *purpose and values as guide
11. create a sense that we’re all in it together
12. operating rhythm with small wins
13. long-term perspective
14. *anticipating and shaping the “new normal”

Design Thinking Principles / Discussion

1. Curiosity (What’s next for public education? What if we could start over? Why not try X?)
2. Look Closely and Go Deep (“worm’s eye view”)
3. Reframing (e.g., from requirements to individual and organizational needs)
4. Bias toward Action (avoid “analysis paralysis”)
5. Radical Collaboration (“isolation is fatal”)

Discussion Questions:
1. Your top learnings from covid schooling so far?
2. Ideas for moving forward and improving your schools (this year and beyond), inspired by this epic challenge?

Five Key Actions: 1. Meet students’ social, emotional, nutritional needs, 2. Place tech in hands of every student and educator quickly, 3. Re-create structure of regular school day and regular grading practices, 4. Reach out to individual students and families regularly, 5. Embrace a team approach to teaching, with common curriculum at center.

Four Attributes: I. Strong mission, values, culture. II. Excellent leadership (including agility in operations and decision-making). III. Strong talent and teams, IV. Vibrant school community and close relationships with families.
Schooling Covid-19: Lessons from leading charter networks from their transition to remote learning

By Gregg Vanourek

The Appendix

Gregg Vanourek
Web: https://greggvanourek.com/
Twitter: @gvanourek
About the Author

Gregg Vanourek is a teacher, trainer, author, researcher, and parent of school-aged children in a charter school. He runs Gregg Vanourek LLC (training and development) and is an adjunct faculty member at the University of Denver, Stockholm Business School, and Stockholm School of Entrepreneurship.

Vanourek is co-author of three influential books, including *Triple Crown Leadership: Building Excellent, Ethical, and Enduring Organizations* (McGraw-Hill), *LIFE Entrepreneurs* (Jossey-Bass), and *Charter Schools in Action: Renewing Public Education* (Princeton University Press).

- Email: gregg@greggvanourek.com
- Web: https://greggvanourek.com/
- Twitter: @gvanourek
“Schools are communities, not just places of learning. We saw how humanity, grace, and love rose to the surface during the pandemic. This was a top finding from the interviews: the focus on humanity and community, the giving and receiving of grace during times of struggle, and the bonds between teachers, families, and youth engaged in the shared purpose of education and the common challenge of overcoming hardship together.…. (They) had a strong sense of community among teachers and families before the pandemic, and it helped them navigate the crisis.”

-“Schooling Covid-19”
“Schools are in the center of the pandemic. We are people’s first call when something happens…. We’re also going to start the day with… all of the homeroom students together…. We want to make sure that they continue to feel a part of a learning community.”

-Jessica Sie
“...this pandemic has been a teachable moment for all of us, especially students. The stakes are high, and our children are counting on us to fight this mighty battle well, devise the best plans we can muster, learn and adapt as conditions change, and keep them safe, well, and supported, even as we bounce between modes of schooling. There is no way to know how long this season of adversity will last. In the meantime, we must figure out how to honor our promises to our schoolchildren.”

-"Schooling Covid-19"
“It is not in the still calm of life or the repose of a pacific station that great characters are formed.”

-Abigail Adams

“You can’t surrender to the options before you. There’s always another way.”

-Cory Booker, civic entrepreneur, U.S. senator
In a crisis, empathy has to come before productivity. People who are scared are not going to be productive. They're just not.

- LASZLO BOCK, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER OF HUMU
“The signature of the truly great versus the merely successful is not the absence of difficulty, but the ability to come back from setbacks, even cataclysmic catastrophes, stronger than before.”

–Jim Collins, How the Mighty Fall
“The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday’s logic.”
-Peter Drucker

“Turbulence is the beginning of a fruitful process of transformation.”
-Indra Nooyi
former Chair and CEO, PepsiCo