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## Seeking answers in a COVID-19 world

As the coronavirus is forcing school districts to grapple with the challenges of how and when to reopen, the realities of state funding cuts, along with the challenges involved in distance learning, ensuring equity, and serving students with special needs, DA is here to help you find solutions.

Our team of editors is focused on shining light on districts and programs that are innovating, on giving a voice to thought leaders whose ideas can be turned into action, and on helping you navigate the complex maze of legal, health, logistics, and other issues.

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As always, if you have suggestions or ideas to share, feel free to email me at [eweiss@lrp.com](mailto:eweiss@lrp.com).

—Eric Weiss, executive editor

## Reasons to visit [DistrictAdministration.com](http://DistrictAdministration.com)

### Wi-Fi buses narrow digital divide

How the School District Of Manatee County in Florida deployed 25 buses to bring broadband access to unconnected students during school closures.

[DAmag.me/manatee](http://DAmag.me/manatee)



### Gaming guidance

Stay-at-home screen time use sparks discussion over how much is too much, particularly for students who compete in esports.

[DAmag.me/screentime](http://DAmag.me/screentime)

### Free books bolster ELL literacy skills

Teachers, school districts and community organizations are getting books to students to maintain reading comprehension skills while classrooms are closed.

[DAmag.me/freebooks](http://DAmag.me/freebooks)



## DA Events by color

While reading this issue, look for the colors within individual articles to indicate a related DA event that you may want to attend, as well as the target audience.

- **Superintendents Summit**  
current superintendents
- **Superintendents Academy**  
aspiring superintendents
- **Academic Leadership Summit**  
chief academic officers; executive directors/assistant superintendents of curriculum, teaching and learning, and innovation; directors of curriculum, deputy superintendents
- **Technology Leadership Summit**  
chief information officers, district technology leaders
- **Technology Leadership Academy**  
chief information officers (CIOs), aspiring CIOs, technology leaders and leadership teams
- **Future of Education Technology Conference**  
technologists as well as administrators educators with interest in technology
- **Academic Esports Conference & Expo**  
academic, technology and athletic leaders

## Special ed groups share free resources

To support students in online learning, a group of special education organizations has banded together to create and curate a hub of learning materials.

[DAmag.me/freesped](http://DAmag.me/freesped)

## How schools may change forever

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[DAmag.me/forever](http://DAmag.me/forever)



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# Streamlined Group Medicare Advantage starts with a health care team that's on your side.



**Mark Laurrie**  
Superintendent  
Niagara Falls School District

Niagara Falls City School District and UnitedHealthcare: A Group Medicare Advantage plan that keeps working for retirees, year after year.

## Please tell us about your role as superintendent, and how that relates to choosing group plans for your employees.

**Mark Laurrie (ML):** I'm responsible for making recommendations on any outlay of money in any way, shape or form. And since health care benefits for retirees are a huge part of our \$150M budget, it's something I'm very involved with. I rely on my knowledgeable team to make recommendations to me, based on their extensive research. I'll ask them a series of questions before I'm fully comfortable, because it's my responsibility to bring their suggestions to the board of education.

## It's your job to answer for how the Niagara Falls City School District allocates funds?

**ML:** Yes, I answer for the decision to engage UnitedHealthcare. I trust my team, number 1, because they're good at this. And number 2, I will ultimately question them up and down until they satisfy my concerns. It's good that I'm not the most knowledgeable health care person, because I can ask questions that users will ask, before we take it to the board. This is a well-scrutinized decision, vetted by multiple parties who know what they're talking about.

## What are some of your biggest priorities when it comes to choosing retiree health care?

**ML:** Because our contracts are so rich in the area of benefits, even when our members retire, they're able to keep a very rich benefit package. The benefits need to be very particular, very precise, very clearly explained, very much in line with what they were promised as employees under their contractual agreement. [And in about 2015,] this group called UnitedHealthcare came to us. From the onset, UnitedHealthcare was a match made in heaven for what we were dealing with from the perspective of the retiree and the district.

## What made you decide to switch to UnitedHealthcare's Group Advantage Medicare plan?

**ML:** It started with UnitedHealthcare's plan, which felt directly in line with what the retirees were entitled to. It was followed by extraordinary customer service—which retirees need more than ever. Added to that was a communication system to the district that made audits, transactions and problems minimal, seamless—and then go away. In my role as a superintendent, in the course of a day, there are nearly 100 things I'm thinking about. The benefits for retirees and UnitedHealthcare usually fall between 98 and 99 on my worry list. Really. From my position, it's been one of the easiest things to manage.

## Do you feel that UnitedHealthcare provides you the support you need as the plan sponsor?

**ML:** Yes. I really don't worry. I don't think about it. They just support us. They show up at events, they keep us informed. It is a very seamless, quiet, taken-care-of, happy thing. I can't tell you the last time I had a board member come to me with an issue about UnitedHealthcare.

## Do you feel that your UnitedHealthcare team has been available to help you with any questions or concerns?

**ML:** I do. And it's more than just having the right plan. It's UnitedHealthcare's ability to communicate clearly what our retirees are entitled to, what they're supposed to have. We never hear a complaint about the communication of UnitedHealthcare. I think UnitedHealthcare does a very fine job of meeting retirees where they are, in terms of their skill level and understanding how their packages work. That's a really important thing. Because when it's your own mother, or father, or grandma—I'd want to make sure they were comfortable understanding their benefits. I think UnitedHealthcare does it well.

**For more information, visit [uhc.com/k12retirees](http://uhc.com/k12retirees).**





## 5 steps for building stronger schools after COVID-19

Helping students achieve brighter futures in a radically transformed world

By David Miyashiro

**C**COVID-19 has completely disrupted the lives of our students, teachers and communities. But here's the thing: Most of us recognize that the education system has been in need of disruption for years.

We need to see this crisis as our chance to do more than return to the status quo ante. Let us seize this opportunity to reorient ourselves to the real challenge: helping our children achieve brighter futures in a radically transformed world.

### Acting on our mission statement

At Cajon Valley Union School District in California, our mission statement—"Happy Kids, Healthy Relationships, On A Path To Gainful Employment"—responds to today's challenges. Now more than ever, we seek to support the happiness of our kids with learning that helps them build healthy relationships with their peers and teachers, and to deeply understand their personal strengths, interests and learning styles. When this takes place, kids actually like coming to school, whether it's physical or online.

Here are five ways we have been acting on our mission:

**1. Getting our kids fed and connected:** Along with setting up food distribution centers at all of our Title I schools, we made sure kids brought home their devices (we're 1-to-1) and ensured they had access to reliable internet. We did this so they could do schoolwork, but most important, so one of their teachers could work with them via video chat every day.

**2. Rethinking academic delivery through a model of support:** Since the online shift, we have used an elementary school model for all grades, with one primary teacher consis-

**When this is all over, we are going to learn what our students love most about school, and it's not going to be the content. It's going to be the people who take a deep, abiding interest in them.**

tently guiding a small group of students. Expecting middle and high school students to interact for 30 minutes with five to seven different teachers every day doesn't work online. In fact, it barely works in person.

**3. Focusing on relationships and human connection over content delivery:** We leveraged the quick transition online to fully realize our goal of moving to a support-first learning model. Reading, math and other content areas moved to online programs, enabling teachers to focus on relationships first and content second. In this model, students have someone they can reach out to immediately for support, which is critical when their world is upside down.

**4. Personalizing academics:** Because of their closer relationships with individual students, teachers can identify specific challenges, expand the online offerings for a few students at a time, and customize content playlists to deepen the academic experience.

**5. Building self-knowledge to develop persistence:** For years, our district has been piloting a World of Work curriculum that builds students' self-awareness through self-assessment tools and encourages exploration of academic and career pathways. The engagement that ensues is important, given the growing risk of absenteeism when school moves online. Our students are in a great position to persist because they understand school success directly impacts future opportunities.

In this time of crisis, but also in our future "new normal," the role of educators is not to be deliverers of content, but champions of human development. When this is all over, we are going to learn what our students love most about school—and it's not going to be the content. It's going to be the people who take a deep, abiding interest in them. And once they have that connection, students can begin to build their pathways to the future, ready to engage the challenges that will most surely await them there. **DA**

### ABOUT DAVID MIYASHIRO:

David Miyashiro is superintendent of the Cajon Valley Union School District in California. The district has achieved systemwide success with blended and personalized learning, and all teachers and students have 24/7 access to their own district-issued laptop, internet connectivity, and a digital ecosystem of robust resources and creativity tools. Miyashiro was named 2016 Superintendent of the Year by the Association of California School Administrators Region 18.



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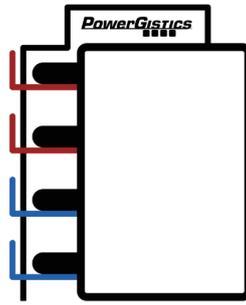
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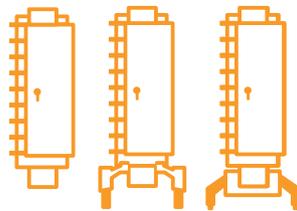


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# How to combat the 'COVID slide' when schools reopen

*Starting the 2020-21 school year early and lengthening the calendar could offer more equity*

Questions of equity will be even more important to answer when schools reopen as “COVID-19 slide” learning loss will have impacted some students—and districts—more than others.

Administrators will have to assess students and use the data to develop interventions, a group of education experts said in a May webinar hosted by NWEA, the nonprofit testing agency.

“We’re going to see significant learning loss,” said John King Jr., CEO of The Education Trust and former U.S. Secretary of Education.

District leaders can use in-person and summer school to begin to help students catch up. Also during the summer, teachers will need time to plan differentiated instruction to address learning loss once the school year begins.

Starting the 2020-21 school year early and lengthening the calendar into next summer may be the best way to provide equity for students and narrow achievement gaps that have widened during coronavirus closures, Harris Cooper, a professor of psychology and neuroscience, said during a Duke University webinar in May.

All students slide in math during the summer. But when it comes to reading, middle-class students generally maintain their skills while their lower-income



**LOOK OF LEARNING—** Classroom environments will change significantly if schools reopen in fall 2020 with students and teachers required to wear face masks.

classmates tend to fall behind, said Cooper, who researches homework and after-school programs. “The impact of the long summer break and the longer pandemic break is going to make even more dramatic the impact of achievement gaps based on ethnicity and income.”

### What will the school day look like?

When schools reopen, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District may split classes in half and have groups of students attend on “A Days” or “B Days.” This would allow for social distancing of students at their desks, CEO Eric Gordon said.

The district may also offer evening sessions to learners who need to catch

up, as well as institute staggered start times that would require keeping buildings open up to 12 hours a day. Older students would likely continue with more online sessions, but be able to come into schools for tutorials and teacher assistance. “I think it’s going to be a menu,” Gordon said. “It’s going to be several options that meet the needs of our community.”

Leaders at St. Lucie Public Schools in Florida are hoping for as much face to face learning as possible, but they are preparing for social distancing and other public health measures.

Administrators are planning for a 12-to-1 ratio of teachers to students when the school year begins, Chief Academic Officer Helen Wild says.

“With our desire to keep class sizes small, we don’t expect to be able to do full face-to-face,” Wild says.

St. Lucie’s teachers are receiving ongoing professional development in online instruction and some have begun developing their own programs.

“If we have a situation where we’re in and out of school, or a particular student is in and out of school, our teachers can transition to virtual much more seamlessly,” Wild says. —Matt Zalaznick

## More practical matters

Lori Villanueva, superintendent of Coalinga-Huron USD in California, says administrators must answer the following questions before schools reopen:

- How can desks be arranged to maintain social distancing?
- Will sufficient cleaning supplies be available to schools?
- How will schools test students for COVID?
- How will students and teachers wearing masks affect learning?
- How will social distancing be maintained on school buses?
- Will students be allowed to play team sports, and if so, which ones?

### Students will need more SEL support when school returns

Social-emotional learning supports will be key when schools reopen because students will return with varying degrees of anxiety and stress.

Teachers will need time to talk openly and honestly with students to determine how they are feeling and how the coronavirus closures affected them emotionally, says Karen Niemi, president of CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning). “We have to think innovatively about how to structure the school day so we can prioritize relationship-building.”

“We also have to think about how to structure the learning environment,” she adds. “Personalized and competency-based instruction tends to lead to more supportive learning environ-

ments, which will be even more critical at this moment when we know kids are feeling stressed.”

Administrators should consider adding professional development for teachers in trauma-informed teaching practices. Educators should also be encouraged to adjust their responses to behavioral issues with less punitive measures.

“Now is the time to make kids feel cared for, attended to and loved,” Niemi says. “It’s an opportunity for us as policymakers and educators to rethink what it means to be educated by focusing on all aspects of student development and human development.”

Before schools reopen, teachers can learn breathing skills and other mindfulness techniques for calming



**PARADE WITH PURPOSE**—Gresham-Barlow School District teachers have focused on students’ social-emotional well-being by remaining visible and staying in touch.

themselves down, and pass these skills on to students, says Katie Rosanbalm, a senior research scientist at the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy. “For kids to be in a mindset where they can learn and absorb information, they have to feel calm, safe and secure. Not all kids are in safe environments at home, and child maltreatment is a growing concern.”

Some stress on educators has been reduced, however, by the cancellations of SATs, ACTs and other standardized tests. This has given teachers new leeway to experiment as they build their online instructional skills, says A. Katrise Perera, superintendent of Oregon’s Gresham-Barlow School District.

“If we can drop these tests as fast as we did that tells me one thing, they’re really not that important,” says Perera, a member of the *District Administration Leadership Institute*.

During online learning, the district’s teachers have assigned more student-centered work that challenges learners to “think and do,” adds Gresham-Barlow’s assistant superintendent, Lisa Riggs. —*Matt Zalaznick*

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## Top superintendent concern: Funding

Districts don't have the necessary funds to implement policies that would keep students safe in school buildings. That's a top concern coming out of a newly formed COVID-19 advisory panel established by AASA, The School Superintendents Association.

"The panel determined that everyone would have to practice social distancing when schools reopen, which suggests that schools would need to adopt a staggered schedule where a select number of students would be in the physical building at a certain time while the rest continued online learning," says Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of AASA.

The panel noted that schools must conform to guidelines from the CDC, White House and, in many instances, governors depending on state laws.

When schools reopen, staff and faculty may need to take temperatures of students before they can come into school, mandate the use of face masks and protective equipment, and clean

each building at the end of every day. "These are all major expenses, but where is this money going to come from?" says Domenech.

The answer could be from a \$200 billion fund, which the AASA and 11 other national education organizations requested that Congress provide in a recent letter to legislators. States are cutting the education budget, and CARES Act funds are "just a drop in a bucket that's hardly going to get anything done," says Domenech.

Additionally, many students still don't have web-enabled devices or internet access, and with remote learning likely to continue for an indefinite amount of time, schools need these extra funds to ensure online learning is accessible.

"Keeping students safe is going to require money that schools don't have," says Domenech. "Luckily, we have sharp minds who are brainstorming these solutions in this new task force."

—Steven Blackburn

## TECH EQUITY

## What to do as hot spot discounts end

Many mobile hot spot discount programs that districts suggested for families are reaching their limit, and school leaders are concerned about monthly rates families will have to pay to maintain student internet access during school closures. Prior to the pandemic, there were discount programs that companies dedicated to continue providing at \$10 per month, says Christine Fox, who spoke on the topic of broadband leadership at FETC® 2020.

While plans are varied, some programs just require families to fill out an application that proves their children are on a free or reduced lunch plan. Yet, hardware for many of these programs are now on backorder.

"Every district should look at how many families need support, what their

local providers are and what levels of internet access they have," says Fox, who is deputy executive director at State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA), a not-for-profit group for state education agency leaders. "There isn't a one-size-fits-all."

She suggests looking at how CARES Act funding or E-rate funds can support on-campus access for when schools reopen. Also, SETDA maintains a list of national programs for digital access (DAmag.me/setdalist). The association recommends, too, that district leaders support a recently introduced bill (DAmag.me/connectionsbill) to provide E-rate program support for Wi-Fi hot spots, modems, routers and connected devices during emergency periods relating to COVID-19. —Steven Blackburn

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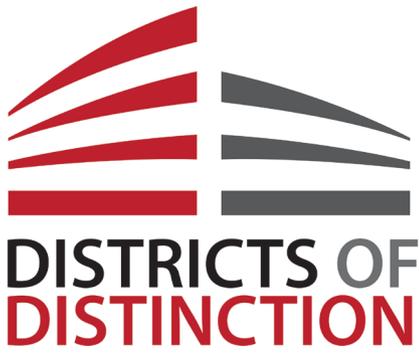
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# 'CRAFTING' STUDENT SUCCESS ONE 'BLOCK' AT A TIME

Cherokee County School District brings Minecraft: Education Edition into the classroom through extensive training and PD

By Steven Blackburn



**IMPROVING THE GAMING EXPERIENCE**—When piloting Minecraft: Education Edition, Cherokee County School District educators provided feedback to game developers that led to the creation of “class codes” in the 1.12 release. The codes prevent students from altering the work of their peers.

Students at Cherokee County School District use the digital resources found in the game Minecraft: Education Edition to build various structures that complement

lessons learned in the classroom. For example, students make models that depict the five stages of the water cycle and build their interpretations of what cities across the British Empire looked like. Meanwhile, high schoolers learn about supply and demand by creating and selling items to their classmates in other “cities” using Minecraft dollars. “The teacher throws in scenarios throughout the lesson, saying their raw materials have run out or that they have flooded the market, which requires students to adapt,” says Shannon Carroll, supervisor of instructional technology at the Georgia school district.

In March, students made up 10,000 of the total 45,000 worldwide users who were active on Minecraft, and ranked second in Georgia, eighth in the nation and 20th worldwide.

“We believe that game-based learning programming like Minecraft Education is one of the best ways in which to engage students and have them own their learning,” says

## Cherokee County School District

District size:  
**42,441**

Superintendent:  
**Brian Hightower**

Initiative launched: **2017-18**



Superintendent Brian Hightower. “CCSD is ‘all in’ on the role of technology for student learning in our schools.”

### More than just playtime

The initiative began when Cherokee County was one of 20 districts chosen by Microsoft to pilot the game in 2017-18.

During the roll out, 60 teachers voluntarily participated in separate two-day training sessions. “Many of our teachers weren’t gamers, so we got them comfortable with the program and showed them how to create lessons based on state standards on the first day,” says Carroll.

Microsoft provided funding for six trainers from the Northwest Council for Computer Education to work one-on-one with teachers on the second day. “The NCCE trainers had teachers share past lessons and came up with ways to improve them with Minecraft,” says Carroll. Teachers then presented their ideas to students with trainers offering guidance.

Now, teachers who want to implement Minecraft in their classroom must go through a similar two-day PD program with district instructional technology specialists who are certified to teach the course.

“This is important not just to learn how to use Minecraft, but to understand our philosophy,” says Bobby Blount, chief information officer. “This is something you don’t just play in class. You are using it to enhance your lesson.”

Since 2018-19, more than 142 teachers from 34 schools have participated in 45,080 minutes of professional development. Additionally, seven teachers have passed Minecraft’s official Global Minecraft Mentor program online.

### Getting stakeholders on board

The district communicated with parents and members of the community that students would not just be playing games in the classroom. “We went to great lengths to make sure our stakeholders knew that Microsoft had turned up the volume on the product by offering a standards-based education resource,” says Blount. “Even though it isn’t playtime, we want learning to be fun.”



**CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE**—An internal newsletter for administrators, teachers and staff features creative student builds and innovative Minecraft teaching methods.

### Remote and in the classroom

During school closures, teachers still assign Minecraft lessons, and students who want to collaborate need to share their virtual worlds with each other since everyone uses separate networks at home.

Before COVID-19, students led class by working together in groups to build various structures. “In a classroom setting, teachers can steer group discussions and observe how students work together,” says Blount. “They can say, ‘This is not how you strategize a problem. Take a look at what this group is doing and emulate their behavior and strategies.’”

While students can build structures manually by having their digital characters pick up virtual blocks, the education edition features coding components that teachers encourage students to use. “We have some third-graders who are using coding to build a wall, for example, that would be in an AP computer science course,” says Carroll. “We have had students going from being shy and disengaged to leaders in the classroom.” DA

*Steven Blackburn is an associate editor at DA.*



“We believe that game-based learning programming like Minecraft Education is one of the best ways in which to engage students and have them own their learning.”

—Superintendent Brian Hightower

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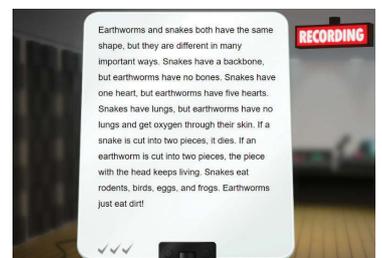
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*Game-like assessments*



*Interactive lessons*



*Digital oral reading fluency assessment*



# Districts of Distinction ed tech category finalists

DA honors four K-12 districts as Districts of Distinction runners-up for incorporating education technology in professional learning and in the classroom

By Steven Blackburn

## TEACHING WITH TECHNOLOGY TRAILBLAZERS

**Palm Beach County School District (Fla.), [palmbeachschools.org](http://palmbeachschools.org)**

**CHALLENGE:** As the 10th largest U.S. district, Palm Beach schools struggled to provide all teachers with consistent and comprehensive digital skills training for new technology. “It was the wild west,” says Mike Goldstein, technology program specialist. “At some schools, new technology would just sit on the shelf.”

**INITIATIVE:** Principals began selecting teacher leaders, called Trailblazers, to build each school’s digital culture. PD takes place in blended learning environments where Trailblazers learn to adopt common language and standards-based instructional practices using tools such as SMART boards and Chromebooks. Trailblazers share their expertise with colleagues and other schools.

**IMPACT:** More than 2,000 of the district’s 2,400-plus Trailblazers are Google Certified Educators. They have deployed 110,000 Chromebooks and have taught 1,700 educators how to use SMART boards. “This has enabled teachers to provide engaging standards-based digital instruction that meets the needs of all learners,” says David Atwell, manager of educational technology.

## BADGE IT

**Katy Independent School District (Texas), [katyisd.org](http://katyisd.org)**

**CHALLENGE:** District leaders wanted to ensure every teacher had access to relevant technology and related PD.

**INITIATIVE:** After a successful pilot in spring 2018, administrators rolled out a virtual microcredentialing platform districtwide so teachers could learn how to use new ed tech tools. To earn a badge, teachers complete an asynchronous course and then show evidence of the tool being used in the classroom, providing a reflective summary of how it improved learning, as well.

**IMPACT:** Teachers are actively involved in the program because the badging platform has a digital leadership board that displays all of the badges that their peers have earned. Educators also display physical leadership boards on their classroom doors. In 2018-19, 858 teachers received 8,126 badges. “It develops a friendly competition,” says Darlene Rankin, director of instructional technology.

## NAME, STRENGTH, AND NEED INITIATIVE

**Wilson County School District (Tenn.), [wcschools.com](http://wcschools.com)**

**CHALLENGE:** District leaders wanted to help teachers form stronger relationships with students, many of whom felt disconnected at home and at school. Yet teachers felt ill-equipped to meet student needs, and inequitable access to digital resources and support was a related issue.

**INITIATIVE:** With the K.I.D.S. roadmap, teachers identify strengths and unique needs of each student. Implementation teams updated and uploaded standards-based online resources and activities in a systematic repository. These resources were then organized into unified digital courses with common assessments in science and social studies, on which teachers get PD and support.

**IMPACT:** From 2015-16 to 2018-19, every high school rose from Level 1 to

Level 5 in literacy and numeracy on state assessments. In 2018-19, Wilson County was one of only four districts in Middle Tennessee to achieve Exemplary status on state testing data. From 2017-18 to 2018-19, the number of chronically absent students fell by 500.

## FUTURE WORKFORCE AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

**Huntsville City Schools, Huntsville Alabama, [huntsvillecityschools.org](http://huntsvillecityschools.org)**

**CHALLENGE:** District leaders wanted to improve its high school manufacturing programs. Also, the programs’ 3-D metal printers were expensive to maintain and required high levels of expertise to operate.

**INITIATIVE:** Students and teachers receive additive manufacturing training using two metal 3-D printers from the National Center for Additive Manufacturing Excellence and the U.S. Army’s Combat Capabilities Development Command. This partnership also formed an academic pathway for students entering the workforce, or enrolling in two-year training programs or higher ed. Auburn University and Huntsville City are developing a curriculum so students graduate high school with a certificate in additive manufacturing and college credits.

**IMPACT:** At one school, six of the 11 participating seniors who graduated in 2019 are working for local engineering and manufacturing companies. “Our students were ready to work after graduation because of the tools and skills they received through this partnership,” says Todd Watkins, director of career and informational technology. “Our students are learning to work on machines that GE and Boeing use to manufacture their jet motors.” **DA**



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# VIRTUALLY

# ANYWHERE

By Steven Blackburn

## ADMINISTRATOR ACTIONS TO SUPPORT VIRTUAL FIELD TRIPS

Students can be learning about spatial inequality in their school or home “classroom” one minute and then suddenly be transported to the densely populated capital of Tokyo to “feel” how people interact there. Classes studying the oceans and ecosystems can “swim” through the coral reefs without learning how to scuba dive (or getting wet). Algebra teachers can connect math concepts to real-world experiences that students are learning about in social studies by “taking” students to the Washington Monument to look at the many American flags flapping in the wind and calculate the total number of stars.

While virtual reality takes students (and teachers) to these and many places around the world they would otherwise never go, implementing virtual field trips for teaching takes time. But schools can often afford this technology with grants. With most schools now closed due to COVID-19, there are more opportunities for free virtual experiences than ever before (even if they can’t typically involve VR technology other than an iPad or

phone). Following are best practices for taking students on virtual field trips.

### Find the right network support

Before adopting VR technology four years ago, Round Rock ISD educators first needed to find out if their IT infrastructure could support it. “If they said no, then we would have needed to look for alternatives and help the person who made the request understand why we could not

### Lower-tech virtual field trips

Taking students on virtual visits to places around the globe need not involve buying virtual reality technology or physically being in school to use such technology. A list of 31 apps and websites—some of them free—for virtual field trips collected by Common Sense Education can be found at [DAmag.me/fieldtrips](https://www.dmag.me/fieldtrips).

support it,” says Jeff Uselman, director of instructional technology. The network must also be secure enough to keep student data safe.

Administrators must ensure tech support staff is available to maintain Wi-Fi stability and when teachers are using the technology for the first time. “Tech support staff could help the teacher and students troubleshoot possible issues with the devices, which would allow the lesson to run more smoothly,” says Julie Doyle, director of instructional technology and digital learning at the Public Schools of Northborough and Southborough in Massachusetts. “Tech support could also help teachers learn to manage the issues on their own so they will feel comfortable and confident to use the devices again.”

One of the three teachers whom Doyle helped pilot VR devices in 2018-19 was an instructional tech coach while the others had access to tech-savvy librarians.

Meanwhile, some platforms that use iPads, for example, operate on separate servers to prevent students from opening other programs on the school’s Wi-Fi. “Many six-graders will log on their tablet and say, ‘Ooh! YouTube!’ But then there is nothing on the screen when they try to open it,” says Library Media Specialist Michelle Davis of Magnolia School in Alabama, which first purchased 12 sets

**LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW YOUR DISTRICT CAN USE VIRTUAL REALITY** for learning by attending FETC 2021, Jan. 26-29 in Orlando: [fetc.org](https://www.fetc.org)

of iPad-based VR kits last summer. “We recently got 10 more but found that they were all connecting to a separate server, so I had to call my vendor to help put them onto the same closed Wi-Fi that our other iPads were connected to.”

### Get teachers comfortable with the technology

Ensure teachers understand how virtual field trips can benefit students. “These experiences are meant to enhance learning and to give students a different perspective than what they can see in an image or a video,” says Scott Webb, instructional technology coordinator of Bradley County Schools in Tennessee, which is in its first year of deployment.

At Polk County Public Schools in Florida, teachers began individually testing virtual reality platforms in 2016. Educators either reach out to the instructional technology team for training or participate in a monthly seminar that covers a different topic every session.

“I ‘drop’ teachers in a particular area and let them explore the environment,” says Teacher Engagement Leader Jessica Solano, who leads these monthly sessions.

Since many teachers struggle with connecting their content to other disciplines, Solano brings educators to places such as (a virtual) Times Square to discuss how students learn about landmarks in social studies and will use inquiry-based questions to connect math concepts. “On many of the buildings in Times Square, the windows are set up on equal rows, so I ask, ‘What do you notice?’ to get them talking,” says Solano. “I will then develop a question such as ‘I wonder how many people are on this street. How long does it take for the traffic lights to switch?’”

Solano adds, “it’s important to be immersed in a situation instead of me saying what we’re going to do in the virtual reality field trip,” says Solano. “Allow teachers to use it and pull out information from their experiences. It’s more concrete

## A Q&A with solution providers

### How can virtual reality experiences be accomplished remotely?

“VR creates real-world contexts for students. At a time when educators and students are physically distanced, leveraging digital options to create connected learning experiences is more important than ever. Now, with school closures, VR brings the world not just into the classroom but also the home. Some resources require no special equipment aside from a computer, tablet or phone.”

—Jennie Kristoffersen, chief academic officer, Nearpod

“VR experiences are becoming increasingly accessible. With just a smartphone, one can easily have access to some VR content. In times like this, it can be easy for students to think that globalization is a myth. With virtual trips and online multiuser sessions, schools can show students that we can make use of technology advancement to stay connected digitally, collaborate remotely across borders and combat a global crisis like this together.”

—Yuan Yi, producer and techno-social innovation strategist, Hiverlab

“Connecting students to their school community through virtual meet-ups, especially in this unprecedented time, is essential, as most thrive on sharing their ideas and experiences with their classmates. Providing access to online hubs and communication platforms with navigable structures, clear goals and a concise sets of resources offer manageable and meaningful learning journeys.”

—Audra Wallace, editorial director of Scholastic News Editions 3–6, Scholastic

“Using almost any device, students can access virtual tours. And if they have access to a VR headset, they can have a more immersive experience. Students can use a web browser to connect to online platforms. They can take virtual museum tours, explore other cities and even create their own VR experiences by using Google Tour Creator for free from National Geographic, Discovery Education, the *New York Times*, Google Arts and Culture and YouTube’s VR channel.”

—Ed Gillispie, VP and general manager of North America public sector, Lenovo

and relatable that way.”

This summer, Library Media Specialist Michelle Davis of Magnolia School in Alabama tested recently purchased VR goggles before showing educators individually how to use them during regular school days for two hours.

Teachers participated during daily planning—periods when all students are in physical education, allowing these teachers to collaborate. “This got them motivated to use virtual reality field trips, and then they came into the library with their classes and I helped teachers through their first soiree into it,” says Davis.

“For extended training,” adds Principal P.J. Sute, “I will get four or five subs to come in who will rotate among the grade levels. We came up with a schedule so the teachers can plan together and monitor classes for an extra hour.”

### Create proprietary content

In Bradley schools, administrators plan on filming two middle schools using a basic 360-degree camera and then uploading the content onto their platform for future VR field trips. “That way, our elementary students can tour the schools on their devices without having to go there to help with the transition,” says Webb.

The Public Schools of Northborough and Southborough plans to pursue this as well in addition to filming historical landmarks in the area. “We also want students to create those tours themselves,” says Doyle. “Not only do we want students to virtually engage in the tour but to understand what technology tools were used and what process was needed to create the tour.” **DA**

Steven Blackburn is DA’s associate editor.



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**More online: Curriculum tips,**  
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# Delivery of Special Education-Related Services During School Closures

Supporting students with in-home teletherapy

**A District Administration Webinar Digest • Originally presented on April 9, 2020**

*As the need for social distancing is prompting extended school closures across the country, school districts are considering new ways to keep students connected and engaged in school activities. Because continuity is especially important for students who receive special education-related services, PresenceLearning hosted this webinar to support districts that are looking to deliver these services to students via in-home teletherapy.*

---

## **Kate Eberle Walker, CEO, PresenceLearning**

Schools are deeply engaged in ensuring students have equal access to learning. We have been working to transition districts to online delivery of special education services: Running teletherapy and tele-assessment training, and setting them up to use our proprietary teletherapy platform to continue serving students at home.

## **Kristin Martinez, Clinical Director, PresenceLearning**

While the scope of the current move to online education and therapy is unprecedented, we have identified best practices to support schools, service providers, and families and students in implementing online special education services.

Here are four steps to get started.

**1. Research platforms and features related to service delivery.** Select a feature-rich platform designed to support therapeutic activities including screen sharing, multiple video feeds, the ability to upload materials and interactive tools. Investigate internet speed requirements and tech support. And be sure to choose a compliant platform that protects student privacy.

**2. Develop service delivery guidance for special education staff.** Understand ideal-circumstance best practices, but consider accommodations and modifications for current circumstances as well as compliance.

**3. Start with what you know—your skills, experience and knowledge of each student.** Consider any school-based accommodations in place for students to engage with computer-based learning. What might they need online?

**4. Expect wonderful opportunities to work with students in home environments but prepare for hiccups.**

## **Dr. Glendora Tremper, Coordinator, Special Education, Springs Charter Schools (Calif.)**

Springs Charter Schools has six schools serving 9,600 students, including 1,400 special education students. We have 17 student centers and quite a few different programs. Before the pandemic, we were providing speech and occupational therapy, and psychoeducational and academic testing services online; we were 13% online. Now, all services are online.

Here are three steps we took to fully transition online.

**1. Gather information.** We used a multipronged approach—from consulting with our legal counsel to reviewing all information from federal and state governments. We connected with our agencies to determine readiness levels and reached out to see where we were as a district.

**2. Create a comprehensive communication plan for district staff, providers, parents and students.**

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**3. Support your staff's emotional well-being.** We hold virtual staff meetings, which also allow everyone to share how they're doing.

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---

To watch this web seminar in its entirety, please visit [DAmag.me/ws040920](https://DAmag.me/ws040920)

For more information about live online special education-related services, please visit [PresenceLearning.com](https://PresenceLearning.com)



# SCREEN SMARTS



GETTYIMAGES.COM/ELENA MALYSHEVA

**Providing guidance,  
not rules, on screen time  
and use of devices—during  
school closures and once  
buildings reopen**

**By Matt Zalaznick**

**S**creen time, social media, video games and various other online and digital activities are pretty much the only way students can maintain social lives under stay-at-home orders.

Parents and educators should therefore not worry too much about how many hours students over the age of 5 spend on a screen.

“We have done a good job of terrifying people about screen time,” says Chris Ferguson, a professor of psychology at Stetson University in Florida. “The evidence suggests that screen time in and of itself is not a good predictor of anything and that it’s not poisonous in the way we might have convinced parents.”

Spending time with friends and peers is developmentally essential for the well-being of teens and pre-teens. So, adults should ensure that children and teenag-

ers are completing school work, as well as getting enough sleep and exercise.

“Kids can go up to six hours a day without any noticeable change in mental wellness,” Ferguson says. “If everything else is balanced, their brains are not going to rot because they’re playing video games four hours a day.”

So, should educators readjust their notions of “too much screen time” for students, both while schools are closed and once buildings reopen?

### **Encouraging digital wellness**

All screen time is not created equal, notes Chief Technology Officer Rich Boettner of Hilliard City Schools in Ohio, which has been a trendsetter in screen-time management.

“If you remember the Food Pyramid, we differentiate screen time in the same way,” Boettner says. “Choosing to do

some things in large portions and choosing to do others in smaller portions is good.”

Hilliard City Schools’ Digital Wellness Project, which educators launched in 2018, has since grown into a state-wide and national initiative (DAmag.me/digitalwellness).

In the 1-to-1 iPad district, digital wellness means helping students differentiate between productive screen time and passive computer use, says Mark Pohlman, director of instructional technology.

The district’s technology leaders have developed lessons that, for instance, help students cope with FOMO—the “fear of missing out” they may experience when



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# SCREEN SMARTS

binging on social media to see what classmates are doing. These activities guide students in exploring ideas of self-identity and self-value (see “Driving digital wellness,” p. 24).

Some digital wellness lessons are meant to take place at home. In one activity, a family can watch a short video clip about screen time and then discuss how to balance computer use.

Of course, the district is hardly anti-edtech. Teachers also encourage students to innovate with digital tools, Pohlman explains.

“We’re teaching kids how to produce projects by creating various forms of media with tools on their iPads and the apps we provide,” he says. “We talk to students and teachers a lot about not just being consumers with their devices.”

## Students *can* disconnect

Can students survive an entire school day without their phones? How about a whole school year? The answer is a resounding yes in at least two districts.

Six months of surveying the community—and of researching the links



**PHONE FREE**—A group of students at Forest Hills Central High School in Michigan used hand-held recorders instead of their cell phones this year to capture interviews for The Central Trend student news site.

between smartphone use and teen anxiety and depression—led administrators at Kalispell Middle School in Montana to require students to leave phones in their lockers from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Students could previously check their

phones between classes and at lunch. And teachers had discretion over whether the devices could be used for research or other class activities.

Since the rule change, homeroom teachers are leading the school’s screen time reduction initiatives.

For example, they have held class discussions about how cell phone use at night—particularly when students listen for the pings of social media posts—leads to poor sleep that can affect memory, says Jeff Hornsby, assistant principal at Kalispell, part of Kalispell Public Schools.

Staff also report no longer seeing students glued silently to their phones in the cafeteria. “I’ve had several students thank me for adjusting the policy because now, they have people they can actually talk to during lunch,” Hornsby says.

The 10,000 students attending Forest Hills Public Schools in Grand Rapids, Michigan, were also told at the beginning of the 2019-20 school year to leave phones in their lockers during the academic day.

Students, especially high schoolers, have said they have enjoyed the time away from having to manage their

## Creating a culture in classes and at home

Teachers and administrators should set guidelines when helping students—and parents—navigate screens and the internet, says Thomas Arnett, a senior research fellow in education at Clayton Christensen Institute, which studies innovation.

### Here are some tips:

- In class, students should only use screens in a setting where others can see what they’re doing. “They shouldn’t be sitting in a corner where the screen is facing the wall,” Arnett says. “When on a screen, students should not be doing something that’s hidden.”
- Educators must be clear about the purpose of devices that are sent home, so parents can help students manage use. Problems can arise when homes don’t have the same internet filters protecting students that schools do. “I’ve heard from parents who are concerned that the school has given students free access to the internet and the parents weren’t ready for that,” he says.
- But know that managing tech use is not solely the job of educators. “Some of that falls within parents’ domain,” Arnett says. “School shouldn’t feel obligated to control students’ screen time away from campus.”



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## Driving digital wellness

Hilliard City Schools' screen-time initiatives have been taken across the state of Ohio by the nonprofit WOSU Public media. District administrators worked with the organization to establish a digital wellness pledge, with four pillars:

1

**Well-being = Balance is Best:**  
"I will maintain a balance between digital and face-to-face interactions in life."

2

**Citizenship = Be the Best You:**  
"I will be responsible, ethical, honest and literate in today's digital world."

3

**Etiquette = It's Cool to Be Kind:**  
"I will choose to be positive with others online."

4

**Safety = Be Aware:**  
"I will be safe online and protect private information."

Source: [DAmag.me/wosu](http://DAmag.me/wosu)

devices, Superintendent Dan Behm says. "I've even had students tell me they've made new friends."

Students report feeling more content, focused and refreshed, and this led them to also reduce their use of phones and social media outside school, Behm says.

"In my 19 years as a superintendent, this is one of the easiest things I've ever implemented," Behm says.

### Nonprofit swings into action

A new nonprofit, LiveMore ScreenLess ([livemoretoday.org](http://livemoretoday.org)), wants to help schools prioritize student wellness as they develop screen time policies and guidelines. The organization has held focus groups in which students have admitted they have poor communication skills. Some have even want to take a class on having conversations, says co-founder Maree Hampton, a public health expert.

"We've heard them say, 'We don't know how to talk to one another. We've relied on texting and social media to communicate, and now it's really awkward,'" Hampton says.

The nonprofit's survey of teachers revealed near unanimous concerns about

lack of students' sleep, bullying and depression, all of which can be linked to how young people use their devices, Hampton says.

LiveMore ScreenLess is creating a series of videos in which young people talk about navigating screen time in and outside school, and the actions they're taking to avoid being distracted by their devices.

### 'No world without screens'

Educators may also need to fine tune messaging to parents about screen time. That's because "engagement" no longer serves as the sole reason for ed tech adoptions, says Julie Evans, the CEO of Project Tomorrow, a nonprofit resource provider and STEM research organization.

"Parents have to see students are doing something on their devices that they couldn't do in a traditional classroom environment," says Evans, who has presented on screen time at the Future of Education Technology Conference® ([fetc.org](http://fetc.org)).

Educators, for instance, can use tech to show students simulations of molecular activity—something they couldn't do without a computer. In addition, ed tech

can be linked to students' development of college and career skills such as critical thinking, collaboration and creativity.

"People often say technology isolates people, but kids say the opposite," Evans says. "Kids tell us all the time that a primary benefit of using technology is the opportunity to collaborate and to communicate with each other more effectively."

Ultimately, in an era of widespread distance learning, students need guidance, not restrictions, on the use of screens, says Jordan Shapiro, the author of *The New Childhood: Raising Kids to Thrive in a Connected World* (Little, Brown Spark, 2018) who also teaches at Temple University in Philadelphia.

On the one hand, LGBTQ students have found a crucial sense of belonging in online communities that they may not experience offline. On the other side of the spectrum, social media can also connect students with hate groups.

"Educators play a huge role here in helping kids interpret these feelings of belonging as the good version or the bad version," Shapiro says. "Screens are such an integral part of the world we live in—there's no world without screens in it, anymore." **DA**

**DISCUSS SCREEN TIME WITH PEERS** at a Technology Leadership Summit or Academy, [DAmag.me/cioevents](http://DAmag.me/cioevents) or [DAmag.me/cioacademies](http://DAmag.me/cioacademies)

*Matt Zalaznick is DA's senior writer.*

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We are in a transformative age, both in the ways we instruct our children and the ways that they are learning.

As Mr. Dylan noted, ‘the times they are a’ changin’ – maybe now more than ever. Most of you have had to embrace distance learning. Most of you have had to find new ways to empower your staff and connect with students. And most of you are getting a first-hand look at the technology that has been embraced effortlessly by the young people at your schools.

Reaching students is paramount. We know they love to have fun—and they enjoy tasks where they can learn and be empowered. In esports, children are not only playing for fun, they are competing hard, collaborating together in online worlds and creating real futures from their virtual experiences.

Through our years of covering education and technology as well as hosting successful tracks at our other signature shows FETC® and UB Tech®, we at LRP Media Group recognize how

powerful the esports medium has become. So, we have launched a standalone event for video gaming and education called the Academic Esports Conference and Expo that will take place in Chicago in October. We have spent the past six months forming a world-class agenda that features the top thought-leaders in education and the industry’s brightest minds.

The Academic Esports Conference and Expo will bring together leaders from both K-12 and higher education to discuss the impact competitive video gaming—and its connection to learning—is having on schools from coast-to-coast.

Attend and get immersed in this incredible learning event. You’ll hear from experts on how to launch an all-encompassing program that includes curriculum; how to harness the best available technology; and most importantly, how to make this global phenomenon a game-changer for your students. See you there!

—Chris Burt, program chair, Academic Esports Conference & Expo

**MORE THAN JUST A GAME**—Schools that have implemented esports—both in classrooms and through competitive teams—are reaping rewards as students learn STEM-related skills while working together.



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NORTH AMERICA SCHOLASTIC ESPORTS FEDERATION

**CHANCETO COMPETE, HAVE FUN**—Whether gaming on consoles or PCs, students from K-12 districts across the country have parlayed their talents into scholarships and careers around esports. Event attendees can check out the arena on the expo floor to see how players compete, collaborate and win.

### Event partners and session standouts

Among the conference’s highlights is a signature track, Academic Development, focused entirely on gaming’s application in the classroom, as well as impactful instructional strategies, course ideas and best practices that position students for future paths through esports. Many of the sessions were developed by the North America Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF), which offers academic and scholastic resources, including state-approved high school esports curriculum and support for schools.

Another program partner, the National Association of Esports Coaches and Directors (NAECAD), has produced a number of learning sessions and top speakers, including the esports industry’s Kevin Hoang of Twitch and Matthew Birris of Riot Games. Organizations that serve scholastic esports also will be on hand to present, including those from the High School Esports League, the Varsity Esports Foundation, the Florida Scholastic Esports League, the Emerald Foundation and the Olive Tree Initiative.

### Distance learning works for esports

The Academic Esports Conference features several sessions that address how to leverage esports to overcome challenges presented by distance learning.

Because esports is uniquely positioned as an online-first portal, it is one of the very few extracurricular activities that still can be played when all other programs are halted. Speakers will discuss both the benefits and challenges that this kind of environment presents to K-12 school districts.

### Gaming up close

What would any esports event be without an esports arena? The expo floor at the conference will be highlighted by a stage filled with live competitions and demonstrations, shoutcasters and instructors who will provide feedback on the games being played. Attendees will not only be able to see and experience the latest technology and hardware offerings on the show floor, but also be able to connect and network with a variety of vendors to help explain the latest education innovations and opportunities.

### Technology matters

The driving force behind esports is technology and infrastructure. The IT track features 12 sessions that will help attendees get their programs off the ground ... or take it to the next level. Some of the top experts in esports—from companies such as Twitch and HP, as well as IT directors at large school districts—will show participants what’s possible as they build or rebuild through technology. Some of the topics will include:

- An introduction to the video games being played
- Outfitting your program, startup needs and working with vendors and bundlers
- How to turn a computer lab into a competitive arena for less than \$5,000
- How to take your arena from good to great
- Understanding how live streaming is shaping education

### Emerging trends

To truly leverage esports, it helps to be on the cutting edge. Because of the changing nature of the games and the technology, it is vital that esports directors and their athletes keep pace. This track will discuss the future of esports in schools, the need to diversify and be more inclusive, the benefits of embracing emerging tech such as virtual reality, and how faculty can help students build a virtual professional development portfolio. The ET track also will look at the wellness of athletes as well as best practices to ensure they remain healthy and empowered.

### Keynote speakers

Last but not least, the conference features two highly acclaimed keynote speakers. Constance Steinkuehler, professor of informatics at the University of California, Irvine, will present on “The Intellectual Life of Esports” and the benefits of having an academically enriched esports program. Adam Garry, senior director of strategy education for Dell, will discuss “Breaking Down Silos: Connecting K-12 and Higher Education”—including building a collaborative pipeline that puts students on a path to success through esports as they grow from children to teens to young adults. **DA**



## Digital equity: Solving the technology issue through collaboration

Government, telecom companies, the business community and school districts must work together to overcome significant obstacles

By Lenny Schad

As district leaders look beyond the current school year, they must take the lessons learned and develop strategies that will help them move from a crisis management philosophy to one that incorporates virtual learning into everyday practice.

One of the most prevalent gaps in the virtual learning scenario is student devices and connectivity. For years, there have been discussions about digital equity, but as an education system we were never able to solve it. COVID-19 has forced every district to take on digital equity as a key element to defining and operating under the current circumstances.

### Taking a new approach

When analyzing digital equity from a technology perspective, there are three factors to consider to fully remediate this issue: a device in the hands of every student and teacher; the ability for these devices to connect to the internet anytime, anywhere at an affordable price; and existing Wi-Fi infrastructure.

The reason digital equity remains an issue is that school systems have been trying to solve this problem on their own. Solving it will require taking a different approach and understanding this is a community issue, not a school district issue. Resolution can occur if, and when, the following groups come together: the local, state and federal gov-

**The solution requires a different approach and understanding that this is a community issue, not a school district issue.**

ernments; telecom carriers; the business community; and school districts.

To get a device into the hands of every student and teacher, school systems will need to reprioritize budgets. It is highly unlikely there will be a huge influx of new funds to accomplish this, which means school systems must look at existing funds and current allocations.

### Establishing partnerships

Discussions at the federal level regarding Title monies and removing some restrictions on what these dollars can be spent on could provide new opportunities for school district budgets. Reprioritization discussions will require the abandonment of some “sacred cow” expenditures, and must focus on not only the purchase of the devices, but also ongoing maintenance, support and life-cycle replacement. This is a great opportunity for a school system to establish financial partnerships with local businesses.

The ability for devices to connect to the internet anytime, anywhere will require partnerships with business communities, housing departments and telecom carriers. In conjunction with mayors’ offices, school systems have an opportunity to work with community centers and other local gathering spots to encourage public Wi-Fi installation.

Conversations with housing departments and apartment complexes should encourage this for tenant access.

It is commendable how telecom carriers have offered hot spots to school districts nationwide at a discounted monthly rate. But most of the discounted rate programs were short term.

I am confident that school systems and telecom carriers can partner to come up with a long-term monthly fee that is both affordable to school districts and profitable for carriers. Finally, changes to federal regulations such as E-rate must be considered to assist in the funding opportunities currently unavailable.

### Providing reliable Wi-Fi infrastructure

We can solve the device and the anytime, anywhere internet connection issues, but if there is not an adequate, reliable Wi-Fi infrastructure, it is all for naught. It impacts homes with and without internet connectivity.

Solving this problem will require local governments, school systems and telecom carriers to work together. This group must map out the current Wi-Fi infrastructure coverage for their communities; identify the types of monthly data plans available; and develop a comprehensive implementation strategy.

Digital equity can’t be solved by simply addressing the technology needs outlined here. It includes age-appropriate access to systems, instructional resources, staff and training. The problem will not be solved quickly, but defining the strategies and solutions necessary to move forward should be our focus. **DA**

*Lenny Schad is DA’s chief information and innovation officer.*

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