44 United States: Central Falls public schools

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Type of intervention: governmental (public school district)
Website: https://www.cfschools.net

General description

Central Falls is a small urban school district located ten minutes from Providence, Rhode Island, in the United States. Historically an immigrant community, the Central Falls public schools serve about 2 900 students, 82% of whom speak a language other than English at home, the majority Spanish speakers. Almost half (48%) of enrolled students from preschool until the last year of high school are English language learners. Moreover, the vast majority of students are eligible for the free and reduced National School Lunch Program, which is an entitlement programme in the United States designed to support nutrition for all children.

After the Governor of the state of Rhode Island closed schools on 18 March 2020, ensuring education continuity involved overcoming several challenges, including: language barriers, need for special education services, lack of technology and other resources at home, and lack of peer learning and direct teaching interaction. In addition to those academic barriers, family support is limited. Students also faced significant social and emotional needs. Aside from the intrinsic academic challenges, additional challenges related to living in poverty were factored in, such as lack of food, shelter and safety, which significantly contribute to the risk of falling behind academically during school closures.

Thanks to a determined and collaborative leadership, and support from the city government, the district was able to implement a strategy for online learning within about ten days of school closures. The programme has successfully engaged a majority of the low-income students within the district and keeps growing. The solution includes distributing digital devices, and a strong support policy for families through communicating in their language; providing a compiled list of educational resources to teachers and families, and training teachers to use the learning resources; and arranging to provide food to families.

Main problems addressed

When the city of Central Falls decided to close schools, the school district leaders' main priority was to prevent the already existing academic gaps among students from increasing. Many of the students arrived in the Central Falls district already with significant academic gaps and unmet social and emotional needs. Trying to meet their needs represented the biggest challenge for the district.

First, the district leadership focused on procuring devices for every household in the district. But ensuring that each family had at least one computer was only part of the issue. Making sure that the families could connect and learn how to use these resources was another. Families faced not only a lack of financial resources to pay for the cable services, but it was difficult for them to learn how to use the hotspots quickly, which would allow them to connect to the Internet and access the online resources.

It took at least three weeks to distribute all of the equipment. The district initially provided printed materials and other resources to make sure students had an option in case families could not connect to the Internet. Six weeks following school closures, some families still had trouble with the technology or did not have the skills to use it. It appeared that a small number of families preferred printed materials to the digital distance-learning platform. As a result, the district is working on continuing to provide those families with printed materials from which they can learn without direct guidance from teachers or classmates.

After ensuring that students were equipped with the appropriate technology and were able to connect to the Internet, the second priority was to maintain student engagement. A priority for educators in the district is to support families so they can support their children. A big hurdle in this respect is teaching them to navigate distance learning, which is the first time for many of them, in a language they do not often understand.

The third priority was to compile a list of online sites and resources that teachers could use, such as distance-learning guidelines for multilingual learners. Given the characteristics of the population, these resources had to be multilingual and use a multi-tiered approach to address the needs of every student. For instance, the resources that were adopted included sites in Spanish to support families who spoke that language and had limited proficiency in English so they could be more directly involved in supporting their children's learning. One example is this full Spanish curriculum for learners over 15 provided by Mexico's National Institute for Adult Education.

Mobilising and developing resources

To procure devices for all students and ensure that they could connect to the Internet, the district created a plan to distribute laptops and Chromebooks to each household. This process took time to research and then to distribute all of the materials needed to the identified families. The district's technology department prepared an inventory of all the available computers in the district and who was assigned to them. It also sent staff to each of the buildings on school campuses to search for more available laptops and Chromebooks. A list was then generated to provide at least one computer per household. It soon became clear that the district was short of equipment and additional computers and laptops needed to be purchased in order to provide each family with technology. As the district's budget could not cover all of the cost, the

district leadership requested additional support from the city. The district arranged to distribute computers at one of the schools twice a week and offer technical assistance to help parents resolve their technical problems.

It was essential to identify multiple online educational resources that were reliable and useful to support teachers teaching on line. The district leadership discovered an over-abundance of online resources. The challenge was to evaluate what was relevant for the district. They assigned a team that included directors, central office staff, teachers, principals and other specialists to assess the appropriateness and quality of the sites and resources available. Teachers have also been collaborating, sharing websites that they think are the most appropriate for students. In particular, they look at multilingual sites and multi-tier components to address different grade levels and language proficiency needs.

The whole process has mobilised all the human resources in the district: the technology team and two employees tracked and tallied all resources, and worked with central office staff (four to six staff members) to map out a distribution plan to ensure that every house was receiving the resources needed. The superintendent, the assistant superintendent, the school principals and the directors met daily in the beginning to review plans and ensure alignment and co-ordination. These meetings have continued after the initial stage, but have become less frequent (two to three times a week). At the school level, principals are leading the curriculum implementation and the co-ordination of grade-appropriate standards and schedules, including frequent meetings with all teachers and support staff to align support and co-ordinate implementation.

Fostering effective use and learning

After ensuring everyone received their devices, the district provided appropriate professional development to support teachers. They created Google classrooms for teachers to share resources and support and learn from each other. They also engaged distance-learning consultants to provide some research-based guidance and support. The experience that staff are gaining teaching on line may influence their teaching after the pandemic.

To support families, the district organised multiple family meetings to address their questions, bringing together families, students and teachers. Over time, the district has increased its focus on academic learning to balance it out with its focus on social and emotional learning. As a way to support students (and families) to focus on their learning engagement, the district developed an engagement rubric (Box 44.1).

Box 44.1. Engagement rubric (supporting students in their learning engagement)

1. Made contact with teacher (at least once a week).
2. Actively engaged in distance-learning activity.
3. Produced evidence of work.
4. Completed assignments for class.
5. Participated in reading challenge.

It also became essential to establish a different relationship with parents and families. Connecting students with resources and staff support is not enough; students also require the support of their parents, siblings, uncles and/or whoever is at home. Communicating with families using trusted school staff was key. The traditional phone call with a voice message, a flyer or a letter was not sufficient to communicate effectively with all families. The district relied on home-school liaisons to convey the message and to point parents in the right direction. The main way to communicate announcements was through Facebook and the district's

website. The district instructed parents to check those platforms frequently for announcements. A team also contacts families, carefully recording phone calls, communicating via Class DoJo, Facebook messages and conversations. The objective is to guide parents through the distance-learning protocols and make sure every household has full access to online learning.

Finally, to address the severe needs of some families for food and nutrition, a crucial prerequisite to learning, the district organised meal distributions for families twice a week where they can pick up enough free food until the next distribution. District leaders understand that not only students, but also their families, are in need of food during the crisis.

Implementation challenges

As mentioned above, a key implementation challenge was related to technology equipment, connectivity and IT skills. Four other implementation challenges are noteworthy: 1) dealing with teacher unions; 2) balancing academic, and social and emotional needs; 3) communicating with non-English-speaking families; and 4) keeping students engaged with learning.

The delivery of school curriculum on line made some staff positions redundant or unnecessary. For example, substitutes, cafeterias workers, bus drivers and other positions needed to be modified or changed to meet the new demands. This was a challenge for multiple staff and their union representatives, for whom the priority was to secure continuity of employment. District leaders made a commitment to keep as many staff employed as possible. They created new schedules, routines and practices for hundreds of employees. They also maintained open communication with state and union leaders to make sure everyone worked together to support every employee. Under the guidelines of the State Department of Education, teachers received additional professional development days to support them in teaching remotely and in implementing the district's strategy.

Finding a balance between academic, and social and emotional needs was another challenge. Not only did students and their families require social and emotional support, but so did every staff member in the district. District leaders needed to be flexible regarding the job situation and at the same time provide social, emotional and professional support to staff, students and families. They created a collaborative environment and pushed each other to maintain high expectations for the district, for its students and their families. Staff communicated daily to co-ordinate how to move forward in every aspect of the organisation.

Reaching all families who speak a different language at home was another challenge. The Director of English Language Learning co-ordinated the academic and language support that teaching assistants would need to provide to monolingual teachers. School principals also created schedules and structures to make sure that multilingual staff was available to other staff when reaching out to families. The district is also compiling a list of online learning resources that meet the needs of multilingual learners and all students: it aims to identify appropriate sites that are multilingual and multi-tiered; rank the best sites; and gradually disregard or eliminate sites that are considered less appropriate given the students' context.

Finally, teachers and all the staff made a significant effort to motivate students to stay engaged with learning. As mentioned above, they developed an engagement rubric for students and regularly communicated with families to ensure that students remain on task, but this remains a challenge. Realistically, this is an experimental process and the real impact this crisis will have on students' academic experience is still unknown. This is even truer for at-risk communities that absolutely need optimum conditions to succeed.

Monitoring success

The fact that many students are able to learn on line is a great success story already. District leaders are confident that within 2-3 months of school closures, 80-90% of students in the district will be able to engage with distance learning. District leaders have set specific targets to make sure that 100% of students are brought to the level of engagement necessary for actual learning to happen.

Teachers are doing their best to support their students. The challenge is to offer them the necessary support to do their job effectively. The teachers demonstrated great professionalism in engaging with this teaching method, for which most were not prepared. One indicator of success is that not a single teacher refused to work during this time. They teamed up and collaborated to meet the children's needs.

The district leaders and educators accepted the fact that when in the middle of a crisis, they need to be flexible towards how ready the students and families are to learn.

Adaptability to new contexts

This case in a district in the United States is in some ways similar to many other communities across the globe that experience a shortage of resources and a challenging poverty context. The district managed to pull resources together to provide teachers and students with the basic elements to adjust to distance learning.

The ability to mobilise resources makes the difference in this context, which may be different in lower income countries. However, this experience in the United States may be of interest to many other world communities, because the district serves a very poor community with limited resources. The opportunity gap will most likely be exacerbated during this time, and recovery programmes to catch up academically when the crisis is finally over are already being prepared.

At this stage, organising distance learning does not appear to be desirable or optimal for the concerned communities, but lessons can be drawn, especially for teacher professional development and collaboration after the crisis.

Box 44.2. Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

1. Communicate challenges effectively to all stakeholders to make sure everyone is involved in the decision-making process.
2. Allow experts to provide feedback on the needs of each school. Experts are curriculum leaders, special education directors, language directors, teachers, principals, etc.
3. Maximise human capital to reach everyone in the district. Home-school liaisons, multilingual staff, teachers, leaders and anyone else who has a relationship with parents are key to share a clear vision to manage the initial stages of the response to the pandemic.
4. Connect with community organisations like the health department, mayor's office, city council and other community leaders to collaborate in a coherent way and to make sure communication flows to all stakeholders, in particular students and their families.
5. Continue to send messages of support and understanding ("we are in this together and we are going to succeed"). Providing positive support to teachers, students, community, leaders and other stakeholders allows for a positive dynamic progression towards better implementation of high-quality education. Every day is a new challenge, but it needs to be confronted, as a team, allowing for growth and supporting creative decisions every step of the way.
6. Continue to create opportunities to grow. The state has allocated additional professional development days to support teachers during this process.
7. Continue to look at protocols and procedures to identify future potential needs, like summer schools, additional distance-learning opportunities and other opportunities for students to catch up and make up for the academic gaps created by the pandemic.

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