



Leaders to Learn From 2020/Coronavirus Summit: Key Takeaways

EdWeek's Leaders to Learn From Share Lessons From the Field Amid the Pandemic

Thank you to those who joined us for this event, which took place on Thursday, April 23, 2020.

Each year, Education Week identifies some of the nation's most exceptional school district leaders and their impact on student success in its special report. We asked them to bring their insights to bear on K-12 schooling's most critical challenge: The COVID-19 pandemic.

In this online summit, readers interacted with experts on teacher hiring, district leadership, technology, mental health, and social-emotional learning who are tackling the new challenges the coronavirus has created for districts.

Here are takeaways we've distilled from those discussions with you, the Education Week readers.



Leadership in Mental Health and Social-Emotional Learning

► **Moderators:**

- **Corey Mitchell**, Staff Writer, Education Week
- **Christina A. Samuels**, Associate Editor, Education Week

► **Leaders:**

- **Nellie Aspel**, Director of Exceptional Children, Cleveland County Schools, N.C.
- **Jeff Wellington**, Supervisor of Special Projects, Hamilton Township School District, Hamilton Township, N.J.

In Hamilton Township, N.J., Wellington has worked for years to cultivate awareness about the harm that adverse childhood experiences can inflict on children and the adults who work with them, while Aspel, the director of exceptional children for Cleveland County Schools, N.C., has built systems of supports for students with disabilities and those facing trauma. They addressed ways leaders can adapt their strategies to maintain services for vulnerable children.

Key Takeaways:

- **Ensure students are eating and having other basic needs met.** The lack of basic needs can cause stress, and stress can lead to mental health concerns and issues.
- **Counselors should reach out weekly**, by phone or virtual platform, to the students they worked with before the school closures.
- **Create a weekly newsletter for students.** In Wellington's district, the newsletter includes information on ways to relax, ideas to help with anxiety, gratitude activities and a COVID-19 time capsule activity.
- **Staff may need help, too.** Have an administrator check-in with them weekly. Encourage everyone to establish boundaries between work and home.
- **Maintain contact with a few colleagues** to preserve your own mental health. Get together once a week virtually and talk about what is happening in your lives personally and professionally.
- **Teachers should build social-emotional learning** into online lessons, and more intensive services can hopefully be provided through a pre-existing delivery framework.
- **Consider summer check-ins** to assess student needs prior to school reopening in the fall.
- **Remember that low-tech methods**, such as sending home letters with a self-addressed stamped envelope, can be a great method to reach families/students who don't have regular access to email or the internet.
- **Make sure teachers are aware of warning signs** in students, and know who should be alerted in their building or district.
- **This crisis could be an opportunity to develop some positive outcomes.** Among them: greater equity in access to devices and the internet, more focus on content mastery, increased parent support and engagement, stronger relationships, and increased use of project-based learning.



Leadership in Closing Gaps

- ▶ **Moderator: Andrew Ujifusa**, Assistant Editor, Education Week
- ▶ **Leader: Shari Camhi**, Superintendent, Baldwin Union Free School District, Baldwin, N.Y

Camhi has expanded career-technical “academies” for students and created multiple opportunities for them to explore future career options while still in high school. Under Camhi’s leadership, black and Hispanic students in the lower grades in Baldwin have outperformed their peers on New York state exams. She shared how she’s confronting the new demands of leading her district’s response to COVID-19.

Key Takeaways:

- **New ideas.** When you're thinking about implementing a new idea, Shari Camhi has some advice: Resist the label. "I have learned never to label anything," she said. "When you label, you give people the opportunity to rally against something. When you give them a winning/successful product, they rally behind it."
- **Be careful about “looping.”** Although the idea of "looping" (or keeping teachers with the same group of students for at least two years) might sound attractive because of the pandemic's disruption, Camhi has two notes of caution. First, she says, students will be hurt all the more if they are placed with a "weak" teacher. Second, she says, teachers would have to learn new curriculum, which would be a big challenge for the district.
- **Be supportive, but be bold, too.** If it's best for kids, then it's best, Camhi says. "Different is scary. Educators are used to doing things the way they have always done it. Most educators went from being students to being teachers and don't know another world," she said. "That's ok, but it's not real life for most people. So, be supportive, be visionary, be bold! And be prepared for everything!"



Leadership in Education Technology

- **Moderator: Stephen Sawchuk**, Associate Editor, Education Week
- **Leader: Mark Breen**, Director of Technology, Vail School District, Ariz.

Breen wants all students in the Vail, Ariz. district to be comfortable with technology—both its conceptual applications and specific skills like coding. As the nation pivots to an unprecedented experiment in remote learning, he shared how Vail is adapting to the technology challenges at hand.

Key Takeaways:

- **Create an infrastructure for remote learning.** Breen explained that Vail had invested in a learning-management system and spent a good half a year allowing teachers to pilot it before choosing one and additional months training all teachers on it. The LMS provided the springboard for the district’s move to remote learning. The district supplements with Zoom and other tools but core instruction is generally provided through this system. Still, Breen said, a

“challenge has been trying to keep teachers using district tools and not going too far off the reservation. We circle back to the ‘why’ on that and remind people it’s to protect teachers and keep kids safe.”

- **You may need to invest in additional training.** Breen believes the “baptism by fire” moment of online instruction means more teachers are likely to embrace technology use in the classroom when regular classes resume, and so the district plans to continue to invest in PD and support.
- **No testing could raise equity problems.** The suspension of testing worried some participants because of lack of information on student progress. “One concern we have is figuring out how to address gaps in learning that may be caused from this,” Breen noted.
- **Think about how to reach new students for the 2020-21 school year.** There are concerns about the fall and how to on-board students who were not enrolled before the pandemic. Breen said Vail will use its digital learning coordinators to reach students and families via email, texts, phone calls, newsletters, and shout-outs that help build an online community.
- **Online learning won’t replace in-person.** “I think this will cause us to expand and become more comfortable with technology but technology can never replace face-to-face interactions,” Breen said. “I don’t think humans are wired that way, we crave those connections.”
- **Some of the big challenges of online learning:** Whether to revamp lessons and routines; teaching new concepts is much more difficult in an online setting; making lessons engaging and interactive; finding common time to meet with students; special education; the “digital divide”; subjects like art and orchestra that are difficult to teach and model online.



Leadership in Teaching and Learning

► Moderators:

- **Madeline Will**, Staff Writer, Education Week
- **Sarah Schwartz**, Staff Writer, Education Week

► Leaders:

- **Marsha Francis**, Program Manager, Fulton County Schools, Atlanta, Ga.
- **Jana Beth Francis**, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, Daviess County Public Schools, Ky

With school buildings shut down for months, if not the remainder of the academic year, teachers are struggling to both adapt to remote instruction and to address equity gaps with their students. Marsha Francis and Jana Beth Francis shared insights into how district leaders can support teaching and learning during this unprecedented time.

Key Takeaways:

- **Tap teachers and student-teachers for support.** Marsha Francis said that many tech-savvy student-teachers are taking on the larger lift of remote instruction, while continuing their own development. It's an opportunity for them to shine, she said. She also is encouraging principals to identify teachers who have shown ease with online learning to support their peers during this time.
- **Give teachers time to recharge.** The transition to remote learning has been overwhelming for many teachers. School and district leaders should encourage teachers to be patient with themselves as they adapt, attendees said. Marsha Francis said she checks in regularly with her teachers and shares ideas for self-care, while Jana Beth Francis said her district plans to take some time off from professional learning this summer to give teachers a break from their computer screens.
- **Be a source of clarity.** Teachers, parents, and students are all looking for guidance during this time, attendees said. "Being a leader right now means taking in all the different information, distilling it down, and sharing pertinent information to appropriate stakeholders," Marsha Francis said. And learning should be kept at the center of everything schools are doing now, Jana Beth Francis added.
- **Keep student learning at the center.** In remote learning, teachers can't cover the same content in the same way that they would in the classroom, participants said. Still, school and district leaders discussed how they prioritized standards and learning goals for the rest of the year. "We encouraged teachers to dig deep into the goal of every lesson and consider the best way to deliver the lesson virtually," said Jana Beth Francis.
- **Plan for the challenges yet to come.** Dealing with the moment's crisis is everyone's top priority, but attendees also discussed the need to plan for a summer and fall that may look very different from past years. Jana Beth Francis said she is creating a "Gap Analysis Protocol" to identify where students need extra support in the coming year. She's also working to improve teachers' capacity for formative assessment and differentiation, skills that will be crucial next year. And Marsha Francis is figuring out how to begin the teacher hiring process for next year using new tools, like virtual job fairs.



Leadership in Teacher Recruitment And Hiring

- **Moderator: Michele Molnar**, Staff Writer, Education Week
- **Leader: Gonzalo La Cava**, Chief of Human Resources, School District of Palm Beach County, West Palm Beach, Fla.

La Cava has led the Palm Beach County, Fla., district through a soup-to-nuts rethink of how teachers are hired and matched with schools and principals are supported to lead their buildings. He answered

questions about how to keep a steady pipeline of talent for the fall and documenting HR lessons learned for the day when this pandemic is declared over.

Key Takeaways:

- **Contingency planning is the only way to go with so many variables at play.** Before the COVID pandemic, La Cava's team was discussing topics like university partnerships, "grow your own" initiatives, and investing funds into artificial intelligence. "Our conversations have switched to unemployment, stimulus, budgets, and forecasting our financial situation, and our road map back to work," said La Cava.
- **Promote your employee assistance program in universally difficult times.** Employees are anxious now, and it's a sensitive topic. "We are dealing with students who do not have a structured school day, and teachers who are not only working with students but with their own children," La Cava said. So his department reached out early to let all staff know they could request support through assistance programs.
- **Develop a re-entry plan to address fears when it's time to go back to school.** When teachers and students return to school, have strategies in place to address the fears and anxieties of coming back to work.
- **Support new leaders with the new knowledge you're gaining every day.** Expose them early and quickly to the changing factors that are happening across the country. Whether financial, instructional, or adapting to a virtual world, this should be happening now.
- **Explore job fairs to fill positions—but always measure their ROI.** Job fairs at the Palm Beach Fairgrounds are where we get most of our teachers. We have ventured out to smaller more localized fairs and we are looking at the effectiveness of virtual fairs.
- **Develop an 'HR Partner' model as a broker of HR services to schools.** Palm Beach County uses an HR Partner model. The sole responsibility of these professionals is to reach out to principals, strategize, plan, and be transparent. They spend time with principals reviewing data and needs, and then target recruitment. There is an HR Partner for every learning community.
- **Keep teachers connected and motivated given the social distance mandate.** Palm Beach County's PD department is working closely with teachers during this remote working environment to support their needs and answer their questions. The HR division has also been providing training on its virtual platforms to keep them connected with the work.
- **The COVID pandemic, and the financial fallout that has gone with it, will mean retaining more employees.** People are still trying to figure things out and will not be able to provide the district with answers until they fully understand their financial situations. Palm Beach County has a hiring freeze on FY21 vacancies as it awaits word from the legislature. If there's an emergency need, waivers are requested and reviewed by a committee and the superintendent.
- **An HR 'Customer Care Center' can shift priorities and help in many ways during the coronavirus.** Over the past month, this group has been working with the Communications Department to provide guidance to district staff during these uncertain times. This branch of HR is designed to ensure that staff members get answers to their many issues and concerns in a timely manner. The center received more than 2,500 phone calls over the past month on multiple issues, including: substitutes, unemployment, job status, contract questions and many more. The work is being done remotely with a 5-member team.
- **When hiring new teachers who have little or no experience, look for their passion for students of any race or background.** They should express a willingness to work with all children, and want to make a difference. We can support their pedagogy.

- **Keep tracking HR data during the COVID pandemic.** Besides tracking what it always has, the district has added data points around virtual instruction, attendance, engagement of teachers in a virtual world, and future vacancies, among others.
- **Online substitute teachers are a possibility to consider** with partners and providers about distance learning. Many of their current subs are covering virtual classrooms and thus providing insight on the requisite skills and capabilities for future subs and teachers. Districts need to be careful that they do not create a greater equity gap, where affluent students stay home and get great subs while poor students come to school and get subpar instruction.



Leadership in Serving Homeless Students

- ▶ **Moderator: Arianna Prothero**, Staff Writer, Education Week
- ▶ **Leader: Johnnye Waller**, Assistant Superintendent of Auxiliary Services/Student Services Director, Lee County Schools, Sanford, N.C.

Waller has helped create footholds for the most vulnerable students: those experiencing homelessness. Among many other roles, she serves as the district’s homeless liaison, educating staff about the signs of homelessness and connecting families to support. She spoke about how to address this population at a time of unprecedented disruption.

Key Takeaways:

- **Stay in close contact.** The single most important action that Waller says her district has done is to keep in close contact with their homeless families, either through class, meeting virtually with school counselors, or check-ins—at an appropriate distance—from social workers. Each student participating in Project Lift-Off, an enrichment program for middle school students who are experiencing homelessness, has been assigned a mentor from the Project Lift Off staff who also makes routine contact with the student. Teachers notify school counselors and social workers if a student has stopped logging into class.
- **Remain adaptable.** “It has been interesting to see how the needs of our students change day to day,” she said. “We think we have things worked out and then we hear of something we never even thought about.”
- **Prioritize these investments.** Lee County Schools has taken to help support the district’s homeless students:
 - **Meals:** In addition to food distribution sites, Lee County Schools is also delivering food to students who don’t have access to transportation. School counselors take meals to homeless families three days a week, giving them an opportunity to check in on students.
 - **Internet access:** In addition to providing homeless students with laptops, the district has given them mobile internet hotspot devices. The district has also extended the range of the

WiFi in their school buildings so it covers school parking lots so families can access internet there.

- **Finding Students:** If Waller's team is unable to make contact with a particular student, they turn to family members, community agencies, and law enforcement to help track them down.
- **Partnerships:** Taking inventory of the additional resources that exist in your community and partnering with other groups to help provide students with the basics is also important. Partnerships with other community nonprofits has helped Lee County Schools provide meals, internet, and mental health support services.



Leadership in Finance

- ▶ **Moderator: Daarel Burnette II**, Staff Writer, Education Week
- ▶ **Leader: Nolberto Delgadillo**, Chief Financial Officer, Tulsa Public Schools, Okla.

Delgadillo worked to make the budgeting process more transparent and understandable for the school community in Tulsa. He shared how he'll put that financial expertise into high gear as Tulsa, like other districts across the country, navigates a new financial reality amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Key Takeaways:

- With a looming recession, manage community members' expectations by charting out for the public what a layoff scenario might look like.
- Attempt to pair budget cuts with your district's academic strategy. Don't get rid of programs that are key to the district's long-term goals.
- Reconsider what your district's calendar looks like and see if you need to spend more money extending the school year or extending summer school to help students catch up academically.
- Let the community be the "sounding board" for when determining what to spend money on or where to cut the budget. "The more you advocate and discuss the initiatives you want to invest in, the more opportunities you get to have your plans scrutinized and (hopefully) further shore up your belief/intention to invest in that idea," Delgadillo said.



Leadership in Food Service and Equity

- ▶ **Moderator: Sarah D. Sparks**, Assistant Editor, Education Week
- ▶ **Leader: Betti Wiggins**, Officer of Nutrition Services, Houston Independent School District, Texas

Wiggins believes that school meals are as important to students as what they are learning in the classroom – and that school meals are a key ingredient in ensuring that students succeed academically. She shared tips for meeting students’ food needs during this critical period.

Key Takeaways:

- If the district has a sudden spike in poverty, consider applying for districtwide funding for federal and state meals programs. Providing all students with food can make it more likely that families who have unprecedented food insecurity issues will accept meal support.
- If possible, provide multi-day packages of food and allow parents to pick up food without their children, to reduce the need for people to leave their homes.
- Provide personal protective equipment, including masks and gloves, to all staff, and consider the age and health of those who are preparing food and interacting with the public to limit exposure to the virus by more vulnerable people.

Related Webinar: [Food for Thought: How School Meals Can Support Learning](#)

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