

DISASTER PREPARATION AND BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLANNING

PUBLIC SCHOOLS - LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic was a huge awakening to public school districts across the country, as many found out how unprepared they were to respond to a global health crisis and the riptide of events to follow. Even those with robust disaster preparation plans found themselves underprepared for the rapid succession of disruptions.

This bulletin highlights some of the lessons learned while navigating through the COVID-19 pandemic and how these lessons can be applied and implemented into future disaster preparation and business continuity planning for your district.

In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced school districts around the country to close their doors and abruptly change the traditional school learning model. Districts quickly adopted remote and hybrid learning programs, aiming to protect the health and safety of students and staff, some becoming a 1:1 technology district within a few weeks.

However, while some districts were equipped with enough hardware to hand out, and teachers and students trained in remote learning, many schools scrambled to change how teachers taught and students learned. As a result, a myriad of issues arose or were exacerbated. Decreases in student engagement and social-emotional development, teacher fatigue and resource disparities became forefront issues.

Ventilation in school buildings was another issue brought up by the pandemic. Per public health officials and government mandates, administrators implemented vigorous cleaning and sanitizing protocols, enforced social distancing and mask mandates, and continued to adapt to ensure they were fulfilling their mission to educate students. However, during lock-down, many school buildings were left vacant with mechanical systems turned off.



Dated Infrastructure

Over the summer of 2020, every US state developed reopening plans, providing recommendations to districts on everything from academics and health mitigation measures to food and nutrition and school transportation (Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics, 2022). The pandemic offered an opportunity for districts to upgrade their physical infrastructure and retro-fit ventilation systems; however, a survey by Education Week staff reported that upgrading ventilation systems was among the least common safety measures promoted by states (Education Week, 2021).

Do you have enough power to support tech? One teacher in New York State responded, “We have two outlets with two plugs per classroom so we have to plug extension strips into both in order to plug in smart boards, desktops, phones and a pencil sharpener. If you need anything else, we usually have to unplug the sharpener.” Throughout the pandemic, many districts set up hundreds of hotspots, worked with their communities to set up eLearning hubs and developed partnerships with Internet providers. Schools in more rural areas, with fewer cell towers in range, must keep up with Wi-Fi services.

Educators and Teacher Fatigue

Technology and support may be more accessible now, but for many educators, adjusting to teaching remotely was an entirely new skillset to learn. As learning organizations, school districts must invest in the learning and development of teachers as well as students. Strikingly, data from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) shows that less than half of district reopening plans publicly committed to increasing time for professional development and planning during the school year.

Staff mental health and well-being was a frequently elevated concern from stakeholders. Educators were forced to reinvent how they perform their jobs, which is not a quick or easy feat. Many teachers report being overwhelmed between shifts in learning models (hybrid, remote, in-person), standardized testing scores and data entry, meeting the learning goals of individual students, limited access to resources and the pandemic itself, among other concerns. One study found that by November of 2020, 77% of educators reported working more hours than in the prior year, 60% of educators enjoyed their job less and 27% were considering leaving (Horace Mann Educators Corp., 2020). Additionally, 44% of teachers who left their jobs during COVID-19 cited the pandemic as the main reason.

Are an equal number of resources being put towards the well-being and mental health of staff as those allocated to meet competitive score results? At the 2022 National and State Teachers of the Year event, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona called attendees to “transform our appreciation of teachers to action... It’s not enough to say we’ve got to lift the profession, or [focus on] teacher appreciation – we really have to start putting policy and funding behind this. That’s the bottom line. It’s time for action.”

Resource Disparities

Parents must be supported with the ongoing training and resources they need to help their children succeed academically. The pandemic uncovered resource disparities in low-income areas and non-English speaking households. Many of these families did not have the same access to resources or did not know how or where to get help or information. Districts must give parents equitable access to their own education. Providing parent hubs/portals with a database of free resources in their preferred language, tutorials and videos on how to use the remote learning technology, and other district announcements would be beneficial in helping parents support and engage their children.

Innovation

Embracing innovation is not the same as rejecting past practices. During the pandemic, students and teachers learned new technological tools, an unanticipated learning opportunity districts must continue to strengthen and build upon. As one school district reflects on the lessons learned from the pandemic, “There will be many opportunities to use this new level of technology literacy to engage students to learn in unique ways” (Aurora Public Schools (APS), 2022). This also allows the opportunity to pivot to operate remotely when possible. Innovation became an area of increased focus during the pandemic and will continue to help districts develop and execute agile solutions during future disasters while still honoring traditional teaching and learning methods.

SUMMARY

The most basic requirement of business continuity planning is to keep operations up and running during a disaster with as little downtime as possible. In that regard, the switch to remote learning may arguably be one of public education’s greatest accomplishments. While the transitions caused by the pandemic were rapid, schools responded quickly. The secondary impacts, however, provided a huge awakening to district leaders and the many lessons learned will change public education indefinitely.

Moving forward, districts must consider these lessons as they develop their disaster preparation and business continuity plans.

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