

3 building blocks to succeed in the coming school year

Taking steps to meet students' basic needs, ensuring connectivity, and advancing innovation will be key to success this year

By: [Tom Burton](#) | August 19, 2020



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This coming school year will look and feel much different at [Princeton City School District](#), at least at the start, because of COVID-19. Nearly 4,400 of our students will participate in a rotating, hybrid learning model where students will be split into two groups with one group in class for a week and then learning remotely the next. When not in school, students will learn through the support of digital and non-digital learning packets, synchronous instruction, and live office hours. Additionally, more than 1,600 students will participate in complete remote instruction, which was an option we offered to all families.

Needless to say, the pandemic has presented (and continues to present) many challenges. When we were first ordered to close our buildings in March, it was devastating for our educators and students alike. Despite having a high transient rate and a majority of students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, we were having a banner year and seeing growth well beyond the one-year metric, which is a standard measure of the Ohio Department of Education.

With suddenly no longer being able to be face-to-face with our students, we needed to quickly figure out how to continue to progress, improve achievement, and support our students. It was important to stay true to our mission statement of 'empowering each student for college, career, and life success.'

This involved three building blocks: meeting students' basic needs, ensuring connectivity, and advancing innovation. We believe the steps we took to address these three critical areas, which continue to be a priority for us, have set us up for success and can similarly help other districts best serve their students this year.

Meeting basic needs

Moving to remote learning took on a plethora of meanings for each district. For Princeton City School District, which is located just north of the heart of Cincinnati, our first concern was meeting our students' most basic need for food.

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Our food services department immediately began to work in concert with our transportation department, support staff, and volunteers to make sure any student in need would continue to receive food during school closures. This included providing grab-and-go meals at six elementary buildings twice a week, as well as providing students with the option to go to any bus stop to receive meals.

Our district also partnered with community organizations such as churches and food banks to provide additional meals for our students. These invaluable community-district partnerships enabled us to

collect, package, and distribute much more food – more than 150,000 meals in total – than we ever could have done by ourselves and really underscored the overall importance of having close relationships with community organizations year-round.

Ensuring connectivity

After food distribution was met, ensuring access and connectivity was our focal point – remote learning simply is not possible without devices and WiFi access. As evident by [data findings](#) from one of our instructional partners Curriculum Associates, lack of access (not surprisingly) disproportionately and adversely impacts low-income students, so we wanted to do everything possible to help close the equity gap and ensure all of our students could continue their learning at home.

This involved the distribution of more than 3,000 Chromebooks to students, starting at the high school level and working down to elementary students, where we found the great need for the devices as well. We also made sure all of our support staff had access to devices. Then, the next step was ensuring WiFi access.

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I truly believe WiFi should be universally available for all, and we – from the district level up to the state and national level – need to do everything possible to make this a reality for our students. In Princeton City, we brainstormed every way possible to provide this access. This included having a district bus, which is typically used as a mobile book center, to go around the community providing a hot spot for up to 60 students at a time. During the daily routes, the bus would visit many different areas, school sites, and apartment complexes in the community to allow students to connect and complete online assignments in programs such as [i-Ready](#) or communicate with their teachers using [ClassDoJo](#). Each week we saw more and more students get online because of the increased accessibility. And while this was a tremendous start, it still was not enough.

Our district purchased additional MiFi units and went to apartment complexes throughout the community and asked building managers to distribute and house the units. We specifically asked them to keep one MiFi unit in the main office and one in another common area, such as a laundry room, to maximize the number of students able to connect to the Internet while at or near their home. My assistant superintendent, director of pupil personnel, and I headed up this distribution – it was important to convey that at the highest level of our district this was a top priority and concern for us.

Advancing innovation

With students having devices and connectivity, we saw daily engagement continually increase across the board. We also saw our teachers innovate in ways they never have before – even teachers who might not have fully embraced technology before were really jumping in. It was so impressive. From creating YouTube channels to delivering lessons and conducting office hours via Zoom and Google Hangouts, to creating online exercise videos from our phys ed teachers, the sudden shift to remote learning showed our team just how much we were capable of doing. I'm certain that many of these innovative best practices will continue long past this pandemic.

Like other districts, we provided our teachers with a lot of support to assist them with the shift to remote teaching. This included ongoing professional development, how-to videos created by our tech department, a dedicated page of instructional resources our staff could utilize, and a lot of ongoing communication, both at the district and teacher team levels. Throughout the process, we were deliberate in setting expectations and timelines, doing regular check-ins, and staying the course so that we could keep as much normalcy – both for our staff and students – as possible.

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We also tapped into businesses in the area to not only support our connectivity initiative but to provide students with truly unique learning experiences. For example, we are working with several Fortune 500 companies as well as mid-size and small local businesses to help provide additional MiFi units and other necessary items. Further, we extended opportunities to have our students participate in the online health lessons and virtual events offered not only locally but across the state. We also have a longstanding college and career success program with more than 450 local businesses where students can earn work ethic certificates upon completion of the program.

Now, more than ever, is the time for education leaders to step up to support students. I always say there is a big difference between commitment and compliance, and at our district, we are truly *committed* to doing everything possible to provide this support. This was true before the pandemic and continues to be our focus now and as we look ahead to the future.

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