

Informing and supporting parents, educators, service providers, and policymakers on research-informed and promising practices, state and federal laws and policies, and the successes and challenges of stakeholders as they work

to improve and strengthen special education services for students with disabilities in California

THE SPECIAL EDGE



Volume 35, No. 1

Spring 2021

Bright Spots



What's Inside . . .

- Letter from the State Director 3
- Leading Through Service 5
- Labor-Management Successes 6
- Professional Development 8
- Paraprofessionals 12
- Responding to Trauma 15
- Preschools 20
- Opening Schools Safely 24
- Transition to Adult Live 27
- New Skills/Connections for Parents 30
- Adapting/Expanding Family Programs . . 33
- SELPA Content Leads 35
- Practices to Keep 44
- A Vision for Schools 47

Letter from the State Director

“Although the world is full of suffering,
it is also full of the overcoming of it.”

—Helen Keller, *Optimism*, page 17, 1903

This issue of *The Special EDge* was written while most school sites had been closed for months during the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, we are looking forward to a summer and fall of re-opening and reclaiming some degree of normalcy in our respective communities. Yet many students, families, and educators are still dealing with the aftermath of one loss after another—loss of instructional time, loss of community, loss of financial and food security, and even loss of family members. This time has made the economic disparities and the lack of opportunity in many communities to become more starkly visible.

While these conditions seemed insurmountable, thousands of educators and family members in California worked tirelessly to overcome the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and continued to serve and support students with disabilities. This newsletter captures some of their stories.

Through these accounts, we learn how school administrators and project directors provided, and continue to provide, leadership through their commitment to service and their communities. These stories illustrate how teachers learned to deliver safe, in-person instruction to students with disabilities who otherwise would not have been able to grow and thrive. They demonstrate how professional development providers devised ways to continue to support educators so that they, in turn, are better able to serve all students, regardless of where and how instruction is delivered.

These stories also highlight how students themselves are learning to provide emotional support to each other, and how resources and attention to mental health are making that possible—for all of us. They show how parents and teachers throughout the state are partnering in new ways and at more active levels than ever before, and how practitioners and policymakers used this period of disruption and isolation as an opportunity to work together as genuine partners, committing to the goal of student success as their first priority. In short, these accounts highlight how parents and educators have collaborated to re-imagine how schools can best serve the needs of each child and of the whole child.

Needless to say, the work that we have accomplished over the past year will undoubtedly change education forever.

— *Heather*



Heather Calomese
Director, Special Education Division
California Department of Education

Stacey Wedin: CDE Liaison and Editorial Consultant

Katie Maloney-Krips: CDE Contract Monitor

Noelia Hernández: CDE Administrator

Kristin Brooks: Manager, Supporting Inclusive Practices Project

Kevin Schaefer: Director of Equity and Inclusive Practices, El Dorado County SELPAs

Mary Cichy Grady: Editor

Janet Mandelstam: Staff Writer and Copyeditor

The Special EDge is published by the Supporting Inclusive Practices (SIP) Project. Funding is provided by the California Department of Education (CDE), Special Education Division, through contract number CN077046. Contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the SIP Project or the CDE, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement.

The information in this issue is in the public domain unless otherwise indicated. Readers are encouraged to copy and share but to credit the SIP Project and the CDE.

To request an e-subscription, please email
join-edge-newsletter@mlist.cde.ca.gov

To unsubscribe, please email
unsubscribe-edge-newsletter@mlist.cde.ca.gov

Please direct questions to
EdgeNewsletter@cde.ca.gov



Leading Through Service

Educational administrators across the country found themselves without playbook or precedence at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through waves of school site closures, they had to invent ways to provide the necessary strategies and supports for teachers to continue to educate students—a seemingly impossible task, especially at first. These leaders shouldered the added burden of not knowing how their decisions would ultimately affect the lives and futures of the hundreds and thousands of students and families they served.

Jeremy Sawtelle, administrator in the Instructional Services Department at the Shasta County Office of Education (COE), found footing by strengthening

existing relationships, adhering to the county's culture of service, and working through the initiatives he already had in place. Much of what had to be done “was definitely outside of the scope of what we typically do,” says Sawtelle, but “we said we'll do whatever is possible, whatever can work.”

Relationships

From the beginning of the pandemic, Sawtelle and his team worked to strengthen

the relationships that they had developed. They immediately met with the special education directors in the county, individually and in groups, to “discover the landscape” of the issues they were addressing. “You can't go into these difficult conversations as strangers,” he says. “These conversations have to come from the heart.” Sawtelle and others in leadership were intent on communicating a few clear messages: “We hear you and

can we be helpful in any capacity?”

No one at the Shasta COE assumed a “wait and see” attitude when faced with the pandemic, says Sawtelle. “We rolled out whatever we possibly could immediately. We started calling teachers and asking them, ‘What do you need right now? What are you hearing from your colleagues?’ They helped us find the pulse of what needed to be developed and then to develop it quickly.”

Culture of Service

Within five days of school site closures in March, the county office was training all administrators on how to conduct virtual meetings and training teachers on how to create a virtual classroom. “We had ongoing repeat sessions, individual calls with teachers,

walk-throughs on how to use their computers to reach students,” says Sawtelle.

Reaching every student posed a significant challenge. Shasta County consists mostly of small towns and rural areas, many lacking internet access—so many teachers didn't have access. In response, says Sawtelle, “we had drive-through conversations [with teachers] in parking lots.” To contact students in the more



understand the challenge. We're here to help. Now let's get to work.”

“We were all terrified,” says Sawtelle, when the full scope of the pandemic and its effects became apparent. He found that continuing to lead during terrifying times was more manageable in part because of the leadership of “our Superintendent Judy Flores and other members of our leadership team,” who continually ask, “How can we spread hope from our roles across the organization, and how

remote areas, staff posted signs in groceries store and gas station windows, informing communities of the school's efforts to connect with its students and providing information about how students could receive meals.

Once contact was established, some teachers had to learn how to provide instruction by phone. "Even though the student couldn't see [their classmates]," says Sawtelle, "they could feel part of the class and involved."

"Our transportation department really stepped up," he adds. "We did drive-through packet and meal delivery to door steps and at the front gates of some of the ranches."

Like many places, Shasta County also had to address contracts with teacher and employee unions. "This was a huge conversation," says Sawtelle. The guiding question, however, was "How can we go into this without an agenda?" he says. "We have to understand what teachers are dealing with personally, and if we don't hear them and respond to their personal needs, then they're not going to be able to support students."

System of Support

Shasta County had several initiatives in place before the pandemic that contributed to the county's ability to keep its focus on serving students, even in the middle of COVID-induced uncertainties. Many of these programs are available to other LEAs in California as part of the state's System of Support¹ for continuous quality improvement.

1. Read more about California's System of Support at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/csss.asp>

Open Access

Sawtelle had been working with the Open Access Project,² one of the state's four SELPA Content Leads,³ to expand the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in the county's schools. UDL's benefit as "a scientifically based approach to personalizing learning"⁴ is established in federal law. A recent report⁵ from the Economic Policy Institute on student performance and equity during the pandemic confirms the value of personalized instruction—and UDL—to ensure student success, within virtual or in-person classrooms.

Despite its proven efficacy, UDL was not an easy sell, says Sawtelle. Initially, "the only group we could get onboard was early childhood," he says, "but we didn't give up. We just needed to find a place to start." Sawtelle now reports that many school districts are interested—in part because of the spotlight the

2. Find the Open Access Project's webpage at <https://www.openaccess-ca.org/>

3. Background information on the SELPA Content Leads is at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/ac/selparesourcelead.asp>

4. McClaskey, K. (March 2017). Personalization and UDL: A perfect match. *Educational Leadership*, 74(6). <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar17/vol74/num06/Personalization-and-UDL@-A-Perfect-Match.aspx>

5. García, E., & Weiss, E. (2020, September). COVID-19 and student performance, equity, and U.S. education policy: Lessons from pre-pandemic research to inform relief, recovery, and rebuilding. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/the-consequences-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-for-education-performance-and-equity-in-the-united-states-what-can-we-learn-from-pre-pandemic-research-to-inform-relief-recovery-and-rebuilding/>

pandemic has placed on issues of equity and access for all students. With UDL practices established in preschools, Sawtelle adds, "we can say 'here's what it looks like'" and continue to expand implementation—and access—throughout the county.

Supporting Inclusive Practices Project

Pre-pandemic, Shasta COE also had received a grant to participate in the Supporting Inclusive Practices Project (SIP).⁶ The project's goal is to "spread the use of inclusive practices and co-teaching [strategies]," says Sawtelle. With these instructional approaches in hand, teachers are better able to include students with disabilities in general education classrooms and ensure access to the curriculum, whether delivering instruction online or in person.

"We found that schools across the county have varying degrees of understanding and implementation of full inclusion," says Sawtelle. His plan is to move slowly and steadily with inclusion as well as UDL. "With more professional development, more and more teachers are going to be part of that training—and understand the benefits."

Equity, Disproportionality & Design

While "awareness of mind-set bias" is part of conversations in SIP trainings, it is a primary focus of yet another SELPA Content Lead that is strengthening Shasta County's schools. The Equity, Disproportionality & Design

6. Read more about the SIP Project at <https://www.sipinclusion.org/>

(ED&D) project is working to reduce the disproportionate representation of students of color and multi-language learners within special education by supporting schools to redesign their systems using the lens of equity. As multi-layered as this work is, says Sawtelle, it begins and succeeds with authentic relationships.

ED&D explicitly teaches strategies for developing and strengthening relationships within the context of challenging conversations about race, equity, and disability. One of the strategies suggested by the project is the use of empathy interviews.⁷ Rather than staging a conversation that amounts to a compliance checklist, Sawtelle and his colleagues are carrying a different message.

7. To learn more about *empathy interviews*, go to <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/42/empathy-equity-empowerment-using-restorative-practices-build-character-and-community-while>

“We are asking special educators, ‘How can we serve you? How can we support you?’ The more we carry that message,” he says, “the more we’re having people show up to the table and get real with us. That is how you develop those relationships.”

Changing Systems

Despite a worldwide pandemic, Shasta COE has managed to maintain a focus on systems improvement. “It’s taken years for us to get to where we are now,” says Sawtelle. “We’ve done a ton of work with Improvement Science. Change takes time and resilience. But when you keep coming at it saying, ‘We’re here to help. How can we serve?’ When your message doesn’t change, then people start to lower their guard.”

Sawtelle is also committed to responding to existing needs. In order to create lasting systems change, Sawtelle believes that

proposed strategies must not only be a good idea and research-proven, they must address what a school is immediately struggling with.

Once you have established your reputation as being responsive to needs of the school community, he says, “then you start your story. Then you can say, ‘We didn’t come in with an agenda. We were responding to a need.’ You share that out, and another district comes in with its own need—attendance or communication or parent involvement—and then we ask, ‘What can we do here at this table?’”

Sawtelle is not a big fan of strict schedules for improvement. “Instead of a timeline view,” he says, “we start with, ‘We are available. Who’s ready?’ Then you start with the districts that are ready. That’s where you get your momentum.” ◀



Labor-Management Successes

Some school districts are able to adjust nimbly and effectively when faced with adversity—even during a world-wide pandemic. Well-functioning labor-management relations, according to Ed Honowitz, contribute to this ability.

Honowitz is the director of the California Labor Management Initiative (CA LMI),¹ part of the Californians Dedicated to Education Foundation² (CDE Foundation). Together with the California Department of Education, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, and other coalition members, the foundation works to strengthen public education in the state.

While the foundation's interests are wide-ranging—continuous improvement; science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education; family engagement; and more—the CA LMI works with leaders from schools and unions specifically to improve labor relations. While not directly involved with negotiations, CA LMI coaches school district management and union representatives on how to improve their communications and collaborative practices to develop labor-management partnerships.

“There was no playbook for any of this,” says Honowitz, referring to the pandemic. “People were

1. The CA LMI website is at http://cde.foundation.org/cde_programs/clmi/

2. To learn more about the CDE Foundation, go to <https://cdefoundation.org/who-we-are/>



inventing [their responses] on the fly.” But he saw many of the school districts that had worked with CA LMI benefitting from improved interaction, collaboration, and communication. “We were seeing things like joint communications coming out from both labor and management about the pandemic to staff and community.”

Dinuba Unified School District in California's Central Valley is one of those districts. Before beginning their work with CA LMI and before the pandemic, district leaders describe the place as having been “broken,” habitually caught up in adversarial labor negotiations that often became embarrassingly public, according to Dinuba Superintendent José Hernandez. Ed Honowitz describes the situation as having been “toxic” and “extremely strained.”³

Then things changed.

Through the opportunities that CA LMI provided, “we discovered

3. Koppich, J. (Septembr, 2020). Dinuba's journey: From conflict to cooperation. CA LMI Spotlight. <https://www.flipsnack.com/cdefoundation/dinuba-s-journey-from-conflict-to-cooperation/full-view.html>

we liked each other and had a lot in common,” says Hernandez. And because of the communication structures that CA LMI helped the district put in place, “we started talking about kids rather than fighting with each other,” says Greg Garrison, president of the Dinuba Teachers Association.

Today, labor and management at Dinuba “don't always agree,” says Honowitz. “They still have their issues. But slowly, over time, they've created a collaborative professionalism” that reflects a team of committed collaborators working for the good of the students.

Communicating and Developing Relationships

In many schools and districts, Honowitz says, “there is not that unique space to bring all of the players together to have meaningful conversations.” CA LMI works to help districts create that unique space. The process can start, he says, with “union leaders, district management, and board members participating in CA LMI convenings.”

To deepen the work and create “more effective communication” between labor and management, Honowitz says school districts need to create “clear and multiple structures for identifying and aligning goals.” Developing these structures gives district communities the opportunity to get know each other and understand

competing perspectives. They help to “flatten the organization and contribute to the enabling conditions for continuous improvement,” says Honowitz. He insists on the value of clear and structured space “not to just learn together but to reflect on the organization and what they want to change. And to build relationships.”

Honowitz has seen the benefits that emerge from these inclusive, layered communication structures. “Management creates more opportunities to listen to and listen for the voice of the staff to impact decision making.” As a result, management learns what people want to do and what they are willing to engage in—in effect, “become way more invested and accountable in the things they help create,” he says.

“If we can engage people in the process of developing solutions, then there’s a greater likelihood that you’ll end up with successful implementation. And unions don’t defer issues of quality to management; they are a part of owning and driving improvement.”

Addressing Special Education

Honowitz acknowledges that “the issues around special education are about as complex” as anything a school district faces and represent significant challenges, in particular, the volumes of compliance requirements and the dearth of resources. Special education is also uniquely challenging because “classified and certificated staff are both a part of educational delivery for services to children with disabilities,” making necessary

the involvement of both classified and certificated union leadership. But even with these complications, says Honowitz, “if you can approach issues collaboratively, special education can offer opportunities to create changes and improvement.”

Honowitz has seen districts create joint committees of special education department leaders and union leaders working together on issues that actually improve outcomes: How staffing should be conducted. How professional development can be improved. How classified and certificated staff can be integrated. With the support of CA LMI, he says, one district “brought together all of their paraeducators to talk about what was working, what they were proud of, what they wanted changed. Those people had never before been brought together in the same way.”

Working with CA LMI

Work with CA LMI is completely voluntary and is not part of any compliance review or accountability system. “It’s people reaching out and saying, ‘we want to build a more collaborative culture,’” says Honowitz.

CA LMI typically works with several school districts at once in multi-day summits. “Often times people need the opportunity to learn what is possible” from hearing how others are facing problems—and solving them. This experience gives educators a belief in the possibility that they actually can “create improved communication and more feedback systems.”

At the same time, the districts

that work with CA LMI often don’t make the same kinds of changes. “We’re not prescriptive,” says Honowitz. “We share what people are doing in the field and a set of frameworks for thinking about how to build more collaborative systems and structure within their organizations.”

During the pandemic, the organization’s summits are being conducted remotely. Honowitz misses the opportunity to “meet in person, or have dinner together.” He does point to one benefit of meeting remotely: “We’ve been able to record all of the presentations and make them available online.”⁴

Basic Stuff

Honowitz does not pretend that CA LMI has invented anything new. “Our work goes to some very basic stuff, like, ‘the less you know, the more you suspect.’ If people aren’t in the loop, if no one knows why a decision was made, they can get suspicious and make assumptions about intent,” he says. “That can play out in a lot of different ways” that are often counterproductive.

While most people are in favor of open communication, more clarity around decision-making processes, and structures for collaborative practices, few know how to go about changing long-standing patterns of poor labor-management relations. CA LMI does. ◀

Additional Resource

Why I Flattened My School, N. Barber, 2014, Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/why-i-flattened-my-school-nathan-barber>

4. CA CLMI resources are at https://cdefoundation.org/cde_programs/clmi/

Retooling Professional Development

Training of all kinds for teachers—face-to-face meetings, conferences, and classes—were canceled across the country in response to the coronavirus pandemic. These cancellations happened right at the moment when teachers most needed to learn new strategies—for example, how to teach remotely.

Professional development (PD) providers by nature are committed to the importance of supporting the teaching profession and teachers.¹ So the realization that nearly everything they did, at least for the foreseeable future, needed to go online caused even the most internet-savvy providers a moment of panic. And then they found their footing.

Two initiatives were especially quick to adapt to an exclusively online world: the State Performance Plan Technical Assistance Project (SPP-TAP) and the Supporting Inclusive Practices Project (SIP), both funded by the California Department of Education, Special Education Division.

These two projects had already developed an expertise in proven methodologies for effective professional development: they

1. United Nations. (August 2020). *Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond*. https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf

focused on the content that was needed, they worked to make events interactive, they provided follow-up coaching and support, and they created opportunities for feedback and reflection. And they had experience planning and conducting events online.

Yet not everything easily translated from the in-person to the virtual. How these projects



took advantage of the opportunities inherent in virtual platforms may contribute to permanent changes and improvements in the entire professional development field. The challenges have certainly made these two providers more intentional in their work.

Strategies for Authenticity

“We had to get more creative when we went all virtual,” says Connie Silva, the director of SPP-TAP. Silva’s project supports efforts among schools and school

districts to address issues of disproportionality.² Early in 2020, she and her team had dozens of consultation sessions lined up with school and district teams across the state. These sessions, says Silva, typically involve “courageous conversations”³ that address such topics as racism, implicit bias, and equity. Facilitating these conversations is difficult enough

in person, as they often elicit fear and other strong emotions. Are they possible online?

“Even if you’re accustomed as we are to doing things on the web,” says Silva, “when you have to do something that you know is best in person, that’s a different kind of challenge—and a whole different story.”

One of the first things the project’s program manager Susan Stewart did was contact William Aal at Tools for Change.⁴ Aal has spent decades refining strategies for how to have difficult, challenging, and courageous conversations in virtual settings. While Stewart knew that in any environment “you can’t rush these conversations,” she also learned that slowing things down “is even more important online.”

2. For a full discussion of disproportionality in special education, go to <https://www.exceptionallives.org/blog/disproportionality-in-special-education>

3. For more about courageous conversations, go to <https://courageousconversation.com/about/>

4. Find the Tools for Change website at <https://toolsforchange.org/bill-aal/>

Aals slows things down, and you never feel like you're left in the dust."

Another corollary challenge involved bringing in more voices. "If you're actually facilitating a conversation about equity, you have to get all the voices in the room," says Stewart. Keeping gatherings small is part of the strategy. But even in a relatively small training space, it's been Stewart's experience that "there are always a few people who are really comfortable sharing." She and Silva are interested in bringing in the other voices that aren't so comfortable.

"It's actually easier online," Stewart says, "to make sure that everyone's voice is heard." They have discovered that online PD can over-ride the power of personality as well as the intimidating prospect of speaking up. The project makes full use of online breakout rooms and such tools as virtual whiteboards. These spaces and tools can embolden more introverted personalities, while making visual collaboration and brainstorming possible.

Including all voices requires additional layers of consideration, "everything, from how you invite people to talk, to how you design who can talk and when, to what kind of tools you choose," says Stewart. "If you're working with parents who don't have access to Zoom and just have internet on their phones, you make the phone the primary meeting platform. We have to remember who we are working with and then level the playing field. Not leaving anyone behind," she says, requires careful

consideration of personal access and experience. "It's key to consider if there is a power differential. And, if there is, to plan to minimize the difference," says Stewart.

"Just getting their voices heard. That's more important than making sure we get something on a sophisticated software platform," says Silva. So if the old-fashioned conference call is the best way everyone can be included, that's what is used. "It's back to the equity issue."

Saving Face

Kristin Brooks and Kevin Schaefer are addressing similar challenges. The executive director for the SIP project and the director of equity and inclusive practices for El Dorado County SELPAs, respectively, Brooks and Schaefer support statewide efforts in LEAs to include students with disabilities in general education settings. This work leads them, too, into difficult conversations about equity. In the face of that difficulty, they have learned how to use virtual platforms to their advantage.

Brooks calls it a "safe behind the curtain" principle. Schaefer says "people are more willing to be vulnerable in a chat room as opposed to in person."

He and Brooks are strategic about how they support these exchanges. "A lot of it is setting up that conversation at the beginning" of a training or PD event, says Brooks. This set-up includes defining "the parameters and creating that safe space" by giving participants advanced warning of a conversation that may be challenging to their way

of thinking or way of serving students.

Brooks recalls a recent training when "we were going to talk about some tough stuff." Everyone was informed in advance of the topic and the plan—and were given the option of logging out if they were uncomfortable and then logging back in later. "And if we go into a breakout room" during a training, says Schaefer, "you can choose to join that breakout, or you can choose to stay in the main [virtual] room. You can turn your camera off, and you can change your profile name to just be anonymous." In this context, people can still be present and perhaps more honest about their needs and fears than they might otherwise be—or they can simply listen and learn from the struggles and honesty of others.

Advantages

Online meeting platforms have also allowed Brooks and Schaefer to be "more responsive in the moment" to the needs of the participants, allowing them a kind of nimbleness that is not possible in a large conference room filled with 1,000-plus bodies. In a recent session, says Brooks, the plan was for participants to go into breakout rooms to continue a conversation about equity and race. But rather than force the original agenda, she suggested that the participants take a break so that everyone could "self-reflect and come back for that next session. I think it was a relief for a lot of people," she says. "The chat was getting pretty heavy, and people didn't want to relive it all over again in a small group."

Online learning also lends itself to rapid, almost real-time feedback on what is working and what isn't. Brooks and Schaefer debrief between back-to-back webinars, which allows them to "pivot as needed," says Schaefer. "So if we spend too much time on direct teaching, or we spend too much time on theory, or not enough breakout time," they quickly find that out and adapt the next event in response. "We're learning along the way about what folks are really engaging in." Online environments, he says, have "forced us to really analyze what we offer, how we develop it, and how it's going." He and Brooks also will take spontaneous polls, use virtual whiteboards, or conduct discussions—all unscheduled but in response to participants' real-time responses to what they're learning.

"We got really creative in this last series," says Brooks. She was brainstorming with a presenter about what people are missing from the loss of in-person conferences and was inspired to offer what she calls a "conference in a box. We knew that folks were missing the tangibles—the grab bag, the conference stickers, the re-usable water bottle—whatever is their take-away that reminds them that 'I was here and connected with other people.'" So before the online event, she and her SIP colleague Dawn Berlin packaged and mailed kits to the first 300 registered participants. These items—a book, a journal, water beads, and

more—were used and referenced throughout the training. "People were excited," Brooks says, about this concrete way of connecting—albeit remotely.

Practical Benefits

On a very practical level, Brooks sees another advantage to online training. "When you're in person, you have to be presentable and on time and look like you're attending every moment." Maintaining that appearance, hour after hour, can be exhausting, she says. Online events reduce some of these stressors.



Lower Expenses, Expanded Reach

Both projects quickly realized the financial advantages of providing PD services remotely. The costs of travel, hotels, meeting space, and food are immediately eliminated. "And the wonderful thing about doing things virtually is that an LEA can now invite its whole team" to participate in a training event, says Silva. "We can invite additional facilitators to provide support, because all it means is an hour of their time," not the investment of

an entire day or more of getting to an airport, flying somewhere, navigating cabs or car rental, and other logistics. "In one day, we can meet with four or five teams" that are in far-flung corners of the state. "Susan and I can be there, CDE reps can be there, our consultants can be there. That is just not possible face to face."

While costs decrease, participant numbers increase. "This year, instead of serving 30 districts, we're serving 130," says Silva. "At the same time, some of our consultants are now working with 30 districts across the state, which is impossible if everything is face to face." SPP-TAP is also able to offer LEAs greater choice in the consultants they work with, since they no longer have to be in the same geographic area.

Yet another benefit of online events is that they are easily recorded and made available asynchronously to those professionals who missed the live broadcast. This capacity for endless "replay" also contributes to a broader reach for training. "Our audience has increased, and our ability to support educators across the state has deepened," says Schaefer. He talks about an online PD series he and Brooks designed for paraeducators. They had 700 registrants, and 230 showed up. But people "registered to get access to all the material," says Brooks. "They use our archived events and then turn around and train all their staff."

Limitless Viewing

Recorded online trainings are also helping to dissolve the challenges of capacity. “When you’re working with districts like Los Angeles that are ginormous,” says Brooks, “Zoom maxes out at 1,000.” But once an event is recorded and archived, interested professionals can access “the resources that go into each session and topic and use all of it to train all of their staff at a time that’s convenient,” says Schaefer.

“There are a lot of things we can do online that we couldn’t do otherwise,” says Silva. “And I do think we’re learning how to create some sense of connectedness,” says Stewart.

After the pandemic they plan to “continue to use some of the new platforms that we’ve discovered, continue to take advantage of the full engagement opportunities.”

At the same time, says Silva, “our preference is to see people face to face, because we know what a difference that can make.”

The Loss

With all of the advantages of online learning, the leaders of both projects place virtual learning second best. How adults fare in strictly remote settings—and how their learning may be compromised—remains to be studied.

Brooks, however, has quickly recognized how distance learning has blurred spaces. Online events do not give people the opportunity to step, literally, away from their daily patterns and places to immerse themselves in a new learning space and experience.

“The home and the workplace have become the same,” she says. “And the conference space is only in your head. In the middle of a conference, I have two teenagers on distance learning, I have my husband in the other room, I’ve got my dogs barking, we’re in the middle of a pandemic—we have all this emotional stuff going on and we’re having to compartmentalize.”

Brooks also laments the fewer occasions for reflection, which is vital to learning that takes hold, for teachers⁵ as well as students.⁶ “It’s really hard to reflect when you’re by yourself watching something.”

She has witnessed participants in online chat rooms typing such statements as, “Oh my—this is amazing! I’m crying. This is life changing.” But she wonders, “how are they holding and keeping this information?”

“When you’re in person and you walk out of a session, excited about what you’ve just heard, you start talking to others about how to use the information. You’re passing business cards around, standing in line to talk to the speaker, exchanging plans for the next sessions, meeting others for dinner or a glass of wine so you can keep talking about what you’ve just learned. But at home, when you click ‘end’ on Zoom, it’s ‘Bye,

5. Twelve Benefits of Reflective Teaching and Learning. *Reflective Teaching Journal*. <https://reflectiveteachingjournal.com/benefits-of-reflective-teaching/>

6. Costa, A. L., & Kallick, B. Learning Through Reflection. (2008). In *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/108008/chapters/Learning-Through-Reflection.aspx>

everyone,’ and you just leave the meeting. You’re already home and you just go fix dinner?”

Brooks and Schaefer mitigate these factors by naming them, “acknowledging that folks are managing a lot of things right now,” says Brooks, and that work conditions are unusual. “Acknowledging that and having grace and kindness through all of it,” says Schaefer.

During online events, they tell participants to “feel free to check on, check off, whatever you need.” We talk about setting our own learning targets for engagement,” says Brooks. She encourages participants to “think about what they need to get through these events.”

After sessions, they also encourage participants to “call us in 10 minutes to say it all over again because you didn’t get it, or call us tomorrow,” says Brooks. “The processing piece takes people different amounts of time.”

Schaefer agrees that any online platform, no matter how sophisticated, still presents a barrier. “But I think what’s lost most is the emotional connection that is created in a live event. When there is an emotional connection to the presenter and the content, the audience leaves with a deeper commitment and understanding of that content.”

Expanding the reach of training and information is a good thing. Keeping costs down is important. But in the long run, forming and maintaining human connections may be most important factor to ensure that learning lasts—however it’s done. ◀

Valuing Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals—sometimes called paraeducators, program aides, instructional aides, or educational assistants—are instrumental in making individualized learning possible for many students with disabilities (Section 3201, 20 United States Code Section 7011[11]). While the work of a paraprofessional is directed and overseen by certificated staff (often a classroom teacher), paraprofessionals can supplement, reinforce, and strengthen classroom instruction in many ways. They often lead small groups, help students understand directions and complete tasks, support the management of difficult behaviors, provide ideas for adapting lessons, reinforce social-emotional supports, and more—all in the interest of ensuring that students have the opportunity to benefit from their education.

As important as they can be to instructional success, paraprofessionals often report feeling unprepared and underappreciated,¹ and their

burnout rates are high.² Schools that promote collaboration, communication, and professional development for these dedicated staff members, however, have a different story to tell. CHIME is one of these schools.



Located in Woodland Hills, California, CHIME was founded on a commitment to full inclusion for all students, regardless of the nature or severity of their disability. As a result, the percentage of students with significant disabilities is higher at CHIME than in most non-charter public schools in the state. This cohort of students has also secured the importance of the

school's paraprofessionals.

In general, the school has worked hard to establish “a strong culture of collaboration” among all staff, says Erin Studer, executive director of Charter School Programs for the CHIME Institute. “We have always been a school that works in teams to support all of our students,” whether or not they have a disability. “They are not your kids or my kids, they’re our kids.” Studer believes that an established culture of collaboration and inclusive partnerships allowed all staff to more readily—and more successfully—transition to online learning at the start of the pandemic.

CHIME had “a full distance learning program up and going five school days after closure,” says Studer.

Communicating

When the school held meetings about how it was going to navigate the pandemic, “it was everyone,” says Studer, “the teachers, the paraprofessionals, the maintenance staff, the office staff. Everyone was kept up to date. There was clear messaging across the organization that we were going to put together a high-quality online program, just as we had a high-quality in-person program. And that everyone had a role to play.”

1. Giangreco, M. F. (2002). The paraprofessional conundrum: Why we need alternative support strategies. University of Vermont. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/51067325.pdf>

2. Garwood, J., Van Loan, C., & Gessler Werts, M. (2017). Mindset of paraprofessionals serving students with emotional and behavioral disorders. *Intervention in School and Clinic*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451217712958>

Renay Marquez agrees about the importance of clear messaging. Marquez is a paraprofessional and an advocate for others in that role. The founder of Paraeducate,³ a website of resources and supports for paraprofessionals, she saw that “becoming virtual required a lot of communication” in the district where she works. “We are a team at the end of the day,” she says, referring to all of the people who work together to educate students with disabilities. And to be successful, teams need to share the same game plan.

According to Marquez, school administrators play an important role in establishing and executing that plan. In her district, she says, “Administrators have worked to make paraeducators part of the staff.” Site-level decisions “take into consideration my job and the way I work. Teachers work with us as equals. Students respond to us the same way they respond to teachers. That kind of attitude comes from the leadership in the school. I feel very fortunate in that fact.”

This sense of being included and treated as equals has continued into the pandemic. When almost all professional development went online, “we were given the same training that classroom teachers received in distance learning,” says Marquez.

Designating Time

CHIME used additional strategies for maintaining successful team connections and supporting paraprofessionals. “We’ve calendared weekly office hours,” says Studer, “where we set aside

3. Paraeducate is at <https://www.paraeducate.com/>

about 90 minutes every week to be there for paraprofessionals.” These online meetings give paraprofessionals an opportunity to meet in a face-to-face platform “with an administrator and with a member of the special education team to get their questions answered, get any technical support they might need, or just air some concerns they might be having. That has been a valuable piece of our support plan for paraprofessionals.”

Studer says these office hours are separate and “different from our collaboration time when paraeducators are included on teaching teams and given time to think through what the next week’s classes are going to look like, what materials need to be prepared, and what materials need to be modified.”

Providing Support

CHIME has always honored the work of paraprofessionals. Well before the pandemic, the school had in place a two-year training program that was designed specifically for the paraprofessionals it hired. “We certainly paused that for a few weeks” at the start of the pandemic, says Studer. “But after returning from spring break, our special education staff had transitioned those training modules to all online. Some were synchronous and some asynchronous—and we found even greater participation rates doing it that way.”

Studer is mindful of the practical needs of the school’s paraprofessionals. “We designed the school day differently so that

they could work in collaborative and creative ways” throughout their shifts. “Our planning has always been in grade-level or department-level teams. In the past, paraprofessionals have not always been able to be part of that.” They are now, “and I think including them has helped them feel they were an effective part of the team.”

This kind of scheduling to address the unique needs of paraprofessionals is something on Marquez’s wish list. When school sites were open, she says “you had all of these incidental meetings with your general education teacher. Or you’d see your co-worker in the hallway and you could touch base quickly” to ask questions and get answers to that one puzzle that just popped up about a particular student or a lesson. “Now those things aren’t happening.” She would like to see more schools dedicate meeting and support time that is specifically geared to paraprofessionals.

Connecting Personally

Some of the most important questions paraprofessionals have about students often have nothing to do with academics, but rather with social-emotional issues or mental health. Because of the amount of time paraprofessionals spend working one-to-one with students, they often know individual students well and can provide important insights into what services or modifications might be helpful.

Yet, connecting personally with students is one of the challenges of online learning, and many

educators are concerned that students' personal or emotional challenges or trauma may go unnoticed⁴ in online settings. As a result, they may not get the help they might otherwise receive. Paraprofessionals are in a good position to provide that help.

Marquez does not see herself as a natural relationship builder. In fact, just the opposite. "I'm really very much the unemotional co-worker," she says. "My response to most challenges is, 'Let's just put our heads down and do this.' But I've taken and run with the fact that every day I need to check in with my students personally and ask them how they're doing." When she senses a student struggling for any reason, "I ask for a breakout room" from the online classroom so she can talk to the student privately. "It's about developing rapport." Making personal connections, says Marquez, "is the main reason kids come to school anyway."

To capitalize on the many skills of paraprofessionals, CHIME

4. Sparks, S. D. (September 2020). Triaging for trauma during COVID-19. Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/triaging-for-trauma-during-covid-19/2020/09>

has designed a program called Additional Adult Support that takes place for 90 minutes "every afternoon for all of our grades, K through 8," says Studer. During these sessions, paraprofessionals offer online "academic support and homework help to any students in a way that mirrors what we do in the classroom," where paraprofessionals provide small-group or one-to-one support. "It's that vision, only in distance learning. It also makes excellent use of their time—learning and supporting student acquisition of skill and knowledge. And that hopefully helps us proactively address this 'COVID slide' that we're all anticipating in student learning."

Many parents, teachers, and students are justifiably concerned about learning loss while school sites are closed. The anticipated loss may be even more devastating for those students with disabilities who don't thrive in virtual learning environments. In this light, the kind of individualized, supplemental instruction and support that paraprofessionals provide takes on renewed value. ◀

Resources

- Effective Strategies and Approaches for Paraeducators to Support Children During Virtual Learning* (YouTube video). April 2020. ParaPotential. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhWgutx_55U
- National Survey of Public Education's Response to COVID-19—Research Brief: Spotlight on Students with Disabilities*. October 2020. American Institutes on Research. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/COVID-Survey-Spotlight-on-Students-with-Disabilities-FINAL-Oct-2020.pdf>
- Paraprofessionals Making the Difference During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. 2020. AFT. https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/covid19_paras-difference.pdf
- Pivoting Between Paraprofessional Support in Inclusive Schools and Distance Learning*. (2020). The TIES Center: National Technical Assistance Center on Inclusive Practices and Policies. <https://tiescenter.org/resource/dl23-pivoting-between-paraprofessional-support-in-inclusive-schools-and-distance-learning>
- Utilizing Paraprofessionals to Support Virtual Learning*. April 2020. EDPlan. <https://www.edplan.com/blog/post/utilizing-paraprofessionals-to-support-virtual-learning>

Social Connections

When classrooms are remote, most students miss their friends along with all of the social clubs and activities that are part of school life. This loss suggests one more place paraprofessionals could step in to support students. "Paraprofessionals can contribute to connection and continuity by facilitating social peer interactions of the sort that might have occurred in school during lunch, free play opportunities, or on the playground during recess. This may involve implementing social connections online (e.g., via a videoconferencing platform) among a student with a disability and classmates with or without disabilities." From *Remote Use of Paraprofessional Supports for Students with Disabilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, by M. F. Giangreco, University of Vermont Center on Disability & Community Inclusion, at <https://ed.sc.gov/districts-schools/special-education-services/information-about-covid-19-coronavirus/paraprofessional-planning-covid19/>

Responding to Trauma in Schools

Pandemics disrupt routines; force isolation; and cause job loss, financial insecurity, and homelessness for many—while threatening almost everyone with the possibility of serious illness.

These realities place near-constant stress on people everywhere,¹ stress that is particularly toxic for those already facing mental health challenges. Children and youth are particularly vulnerable because they are often less able than adults to change circumstances that are unpredictable or threatening. And when they are struggling with mental health issues that are exacerbated by something like a pandemic, they cannot learn.

Mara Madrigal-Weiss is one of the many educators who is fully aware of the pandemic's mental health implications for students and adults alike. The director of two departments at the San Diego County Office of Education—Student Wellness and Positive School Climate and the Foster and Homeless Youth Education Programs—Madrigal-Weiss has been on the front lines

of California's efforts to address trauma during the pandemic.

When school sites closed last March, she says, schools rushed to create resources for parents to use in support of their children's learning. "But what we heard loud and clear," she says, "was that many parents were not prepared to handle it." They were already facing countless disruptions and uncertainties. Even new resources



for mental health support were predicated on "the assumption that the parents were ready and able to seek out what we thought they needed, and then utilize those resources and services," says Madrigal-Weiss, "But many of our parents were experiencing their own trauma." Their jobs were no longer secure, and many struggled to pay their rent or their mortgage. They were worried about elderly parents or extended family members contracting COVID. And all the while they were trying to

provide security and basic needs to care for their children—who were now at home full time. It was unrealistic, she says, to expect them to "easily navigate the multiple resource recommendations when they were already facing multiple challenges."

Then bright spots emerged. "What we found a few weeks into this was that many youth saw their parents struggling and didn't want to add to the burden. So youth started supporting youth. It's clear that our kids were very much aware of the impacts of the pandemic and demonstrated compassion towards their family members and their friends."

Given this phenomenon, Madrigal-Weiss and her team went to work. "We created

a teen mental health guide so that when students are talking to each other late into the night, and mom and dad are struggling in the next room, and the youth are thinking, 'I don't know what to do,' they have this resource." This *Teen Guide to Mental Health and Wellness*² "provides mental health self-care tips as well as the phone

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic—United States, June 24–30, 2020*. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>

2. *Teen Guide to Mental Health: Taking Care of You and Your Friends*, is at <https://covid-19.sdcoe.net/Portals/covid-19/Documents/Health Practices/Mental Health Teen Guide April 2020.pdf?ver=2020-04-01-154404-163>

numbers for relevant crisis lines for those facing urgent issues,” says Madrigal-Weiss.

Adapting to the New Classroom

Madrigal-Weiss and her staff are also supporting teachers to be aware of vulnerable students. Again she acknowledges how much educators have learned since the start of the pandemic. “At first many assumed that changing from in-person learning to virtual classrooms was as easy as flipping on a computer; the teaching and learning would be set. Well, it’s not that easy. When you have three or four siblings who are sharing the same space, and you’re asking each child to turn on his computer and get to his lessons; when the parents are scraping by and trying to get out to the job that they might still have, and there’s no one there to monitor the kids”—any single piece of this scenario can create insurmountable difficulties for a student.

Along with the logistical challenges, Madrigal-Weiss describes layers of emotional and developmental complications. “Some students don’t want to show you the space they live in,” she says, especially teens, who have developed their own carefully guarded persona at school.

According to Madrigal-Weiss, it’s developmentally appropriate for teens to share with others exactly what they want to share and no more. “It’s only through trust and relationships that are built up over

time that students will want to share their real selves with us,” she says. “This pandemic and virtual learning suddenly propelled us into their personal space, without taking all the nuances into consideration. We jumped in, and few of us bothered to ask them if that’s OK.”



Madrigal-Weiss believes that breaching the teen persona poses a threat to students—and can create a barrier to learning. When teachers started conducting classrooms remotely, she says, “we found kids reporting that their speakers didn’t work, or pretending their cameras were broken—not because they didn’t want to engage in school. Of course they do—they’re social beings. But because they might be ashamed or embarrassed, or they might have other struggles that leave them vulnerable.”

Her advice: “Stop forcing. Instead, find the compassion and curiosity to work with the youth. Ask questions away from the group, troubleshoot what might be the issues. I know it’s important for students to be in class. But if they’re not comfortable, they will

not engage and they will not be learning.”

To help teachers pause and consider student vulnerabilities, Madrigal-Weiss and her team created another resource, the one-page guide *Helping Vulnerable Students Feel Comfortable with Online Learning*.³ The feedback

they received about the guide resulted in a training Madrigal-Weiss and her team developed, “Building Engaging and Supportive Virtual Classrooms.”⁴ The training provides practical strategies for creating trauma-informed virtual classrooms, including building awareness and responsiveness to

the personal and emotional needs of students in online settings.

“We have to be willing to deal with the reality as it is and not just default to what we have always done. We have to be open and responsive to new considerations and practices. That has been the greatest lesson,” she says.

Staff Wellness to Promote Student Wellness

The positive influence that teachers can have on their students continues when classrooms go

3. *Helping Vulnerable Students Feel Comfortable with Online Learning* is at <https://www.sdcoe.net/student-services/student-support/Documents/MentalHealth/COMOLineLearn-Page.pdf>

4. Find the training flyer at https://www.sdcoe.net/student-services/student-support/fyhes/Documents/Homeless/building_virtual_classrooms_flyer.pdf

online. And with the added stress of a pandemic (or fire or flood), students now more than ever need thoughtful, aware, and caring adults in their lives. But teachers face their own struggles, and that's where Madrigal-Weiss has been focusing her recent energies.

Success in the classroom, she says, stems from people in leadership positions "caring about their staff as human beings and not just as staff members. If teachers don't feel supported, if the administration doesn't care about their emotional wellness, their mental health, or their lives, if teachers are traumatized by their own circumstances, then how can we expect them to be able to care about those things for our students? Because it's their job? In the middle of a global pandemic we know that's not enough.

"It's extremely difficult to practice compassion with our students and families," says Madrigal-Weiss, if the system is not compassionate towards you.

She offers concrete advice for school leaders: "Have intentional conversations." In these conversations she suggests that leaders, "listen first. Then ask staff how they prefer to be supported. It's about being real and demonstrating authentic compassion."

She invites educational leaders to "build your own mental health literacy and capacity. You have to lead by modeling. Mental health and emotional wellness is a huge, glaring issue facing all of us right now. We are living in a state of shared trauma. And if you know that as a leader, then you want to learn how to support and help

That's just what a good leader does."

With the proliferation of and advancements in online professional development opportunities, she says, "it is our responsibility as leaders to learn and engage in all best practices that support and enhance the wellness of our school communities."

How schools address mental health throughout the pandemic, she says, will have long-term effects on the future mental health of children. "Our students are watching how the adults are responding. And when we do whatever we can to stabilize the mental and emotional health of the adults, we have healthier staff members to support our students. The pandemic has given us a unique opportunity to provide to our youth real-time lessons and model how to address adversity."

Madrigal-Weiss takes the focus on mental health one step further. "What this pandemic has also shown is that we can't continue to do things for students or to them or at them. We need to bring them alongside us by giving them the resources and information they need."

In her work on the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission and with the Youth Innovation Project, she's heard youth ask for information about mental health "more in the last year than ever before." She reiterates how impressed she has been by their strength and resilience during the pandemic. "These teens are amazing, and they stepped up. They want us to provide them with resources, information, and

strategies to address mental health and those [mental health] skills that are going to last a lifetime."

Madrigal-Weiss is in good company when she insists on the importance of directly addressing the stigma of mental illness, especially among children and youth.⁵ Research⁶ shows this stigma to be a pernicious barrier to success in school and in later life. "If we really want to flip the switch," she says, "then we start with our youth. It will be a better day when they know they can say, 'I'm experiencing anxiety. Or depression. Or thoughts of suicide' and get the help they seek without fearing negative consequences. The day our students openly discuss mental health challenges as freely as they can discuss a physical health challenge—that's the day we know we have pushed through the barrier of stigma."

Research also shows that children and teens have better mental health outcomes and are better able to cope with trauma when social-emotional learning (SEL) is part of their school curriculum.⁷

5. Mukolo, A., Heflinger, C. A., & Wallston, K. A. (2010, February). The stigma of childhood mental disorders: A conceptual framework. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 49(2): 92–198. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2904965/>

6. Brian K. Ahmedani, B. K. (2011). Mental Health Stigma: Society, Individuals, and the Profession. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 8(2): 4-1–4-16. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3248273/>

7. Suicide Prevention Week 2020: Hope, Resilience & Recovery. Each Mind Matters. <https://www.eachmindmatters.org/spw2020/>

Further studies have demonstrated how SEL both increases protective factors and reduces the risks associated with suicide.⁸

California's efforts to teach SEL are "phenomenal," says Madrigal-Weiss, because SEL "builds emotional literacy and problem-solving skills. SEL teaches students how to engage." In addition to a curriculum of mental health literacy, she would like to see more explicit instruction on the fact that mental health is a continuum and ranges from being well, to needing to engage in coping strategies, to seeking referrals for service.

Mental Health and MTSS

California's work to include SEL in the school curriculum is currently part of its Scale-Up MTSS Statewide (SUMS) Initiative,⁹ a joint project of the Orange County Department of Education and the Butte County Office of Education. Since 2015, these agencies have been working together to introduce and strengthen a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) in school districts across the state.

Rhonda Marriott manages the Learning Support Services Team for SUMS. She says that, while many states have adopted a MTSS model to strengthen positive behavior and academics in schools, California is unique in having "explicitly called out the

importance of social-emotional learning and instruction" through its MTSS framework. With the onset of COVID, she has seen an increased "hunger for SEL and an openness to learning more about it."

Communities of Practice

The social and emotional learning that is part of MTSS in California "aligns completely with CASEL," says Marriott. CASEL¹⁰—the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning—was created more than a quarter of a century ago by educational leaders and researchers who determined that high-quality, evidence-based social and emotional learning is an essential part of a child's success in school. This collaborative, however, is guiding SEL work in California from more than one direction.

In 2016, a group of California educators joined a CASEL-formed community of practice designed to promote SEL in schools nationwide: the Collaborating States Initiative.¹¹ From this membership, Sacramento, Orange, and Butte County Offices of Education created their own state-level Social and Emotional Learning Community of Practice (COP) to promote SEL statewide through county offices. That effort is growing.

Before COVID, this state-level

COP¹² was just getting established. Now dozens of educators, school psychologists, administrators, counselors and intervention specialists are working together on a number of goals that are designed to strengthen and support SEL through MTSS in California's schools:

- To build capacity at county and district levels to promote SEL best practices within an MTSS framework
- To align SEL to a variety of supports, such as PBIS, Restorative Practices, and Trauma-Informed Education
- To strategize the inclusion of SEL into Local Control and Accountability Plans, Differentiated Assistance, and other county-office supported processes
- To address the challenge of integrating inclusive, research-based SEL approaches into practice and systems
- To learn from successful SEL efforts in districts and schools
- To support the behavioral, social-emotional, and academic success of all students, especially those impacted by trauma.

Marriott is convinced of the benefits of communities of practice.¹³ With educators having

8. Social Emotional Learning, Part 2: Trauma-Informed Instruction (n.d.). Partnerships for Action, Voices for Empowerment. <https://wapave.org/social-emotional-learning-part-2-trauma-informed-instruction/>

9. The SUMS website is at https://ocde.us/MTSS/Pages/California_SUMS_Initiative.aspx

10. To learn more about CASEL, go to <https://casel.org/sel-framework/>

11. Blad, A. (2016, August). Social-Emotional Learning: States Collaborate to Craft Standards, Policies Collaborating States Initiative. Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/social-emotional-learning-states-collaborate-to-craft-standards-policies/2016/08>

12. California Social and Emotional Learning Community of Practice. https://ocde.us/EducationalServices/LearningSupports/HealthyMinds/Documents/SEL/CA_SEL_COP_072419_FallSpringMtgs.pdf

13. Why communities of practice are important. Creating Communities of Practice. <http://www.communityofpractice.ca/background/why-communities-of-practice-are-important/>

so much on their plates, Marriott says that COPs “secure this protected time when you can meet. They provide an opportunity to share evidence-based resources and opportunities to collaborate and network across districts and counties, to develop plans and relationships, and to have dialogues about barriers.”

These COPs are also informing professional development trainings and resources,¹⁴ says Marriott, “determining those best practices and supports” and ultimately helping to “put into the hands of educators, from the classroom teacher all the way up to administrators at the district level,” the skills, tools, and strategies they need to support their work with students, “particularly around trauma-informed practices and suicide prevention.”

Resources to address trauma

14. Orange County Department of Education. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Resources. <https://ocde.us/EducationalServices/LearningSupports/SEL/Pages/SEL-Resources.aspx>

and help prevent suicide are an essential part of California’s version of MTSS in its design as a continuum of supports, especially at the supplemental and intensified levels. However, all efforts to support student mental health, says Marriott, start with building relationships. Healthy and helpful relationships in schools serve as vital supports for mental health and are part of universal instruction for all students in an SEL curriculum.

Through these relationships, Marriott says, “we discover if a student’s needs are being met and how we can help if they’re not.” Then the learning can begin. ◀

Additional Resources

Addressing Staff Wellness and Mental health During COVID-19 (CDE Webinar). <https://www.facebook.com/CAEducation/videos/378650743354286>

Advance SEL in California: Final Report and Recommendations. September 2020. Education First. <https://www.beyondifferences.org/advanceselinca/>

CASEL’S SEL Framework: What Are the Core Competence Areas and Where Are They Promoted? <https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CASEL-SEL-Framework-10.2020-1.pdf>

Mental Health Impacts in Schools. Child Mind Institute. <https://childmind.org/report/2016-childrens-mental-health-report/mental-health-impacts-schools/>

Mental Health Resources. Orange County Department of Education. <https://ocde.us/EducationalServices/LearningSupports/MentalHealth/Pages/default.aspx>

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Resources. Orange County Department of Education. <https://ocde.us/EducationalServices/LearningSupports/SEL/Pages/default.aspx>

Resources for Staying Mentally and Emotionally Healthy. San Diego County Office of Education. <https://covid-19.sdcoe.net/Health-Practices/Mental-Health-Resources>

Youth Suicide Prevention. California Department of Education. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cg/mh/suicideprevres.asp>



Preschool During a Pandemic

Preschool during a pandemic is difficult to imagine. Toddlers and young children thrive on physical movement and free play—not quarantines and social distancing.¹ Children with disabilities face additional challenges, especially when their disability is related to a sensory or attention issue or when it calls for physical therapies or one-to-one aides, and their only recourse is virtual alternatives.

Three preschool programs in the state let the needs of children and families guide their response.

Staying Open

At Poway Unified School District in Southern California,² “our decisions are always based on student need,” says SELPA Director Jeanette Anderson. “And when you have preschool programs, you have two challenges,” she says. “You have some kids [with significant disabilities] requiring a lot of support, and then on top of that they’re so young. Those are the kids who are going to struggle most

with virtual learning.”

The value of early intervention, says Anderson, helped to drive the district’s decisions to keep some preschool classes open and in person. “Providing services to kids as early as possible—that’s where you’re going to see the most impact in terms of improving the overall experience of their life just in general. Ultimately,” she says, “we



County Office of Education’s Inclusive Early Education program.⁴ When asked how she is dealing with the challenges of preschool during the pandemic, she first gives a shout-out to preschool workers everywhere. “They were on the front lines—essential workers from the very beginning.”

These essential workers have proven themselves to be a creative and adaptable lot, many redesigning their programs to stay open safely, and at the same time finding ways to offer remote options for children who, for example, are medically fragile, or who have a family member who can’t risk exposure to the virus. And of

know that our youngest students with significant disabilities receive more adequate support when it’s in person. So that’s been the Poway focus—to get kids back in in-person sessions. But we’re trying to balance that, trying to make sure everybody also feels safe.”

To address that second goal, the district developed a comprehensive guide³ to maintaining safety measures during the pandemic.

Joy Garcia directs the Shasta

course in some areas of the state, the pandemic outbreak has been so severe that everything has had to shut down, at least for a time.

What does remote preschool learning look like?

Virtual Preschool

“When talking with my staff” about adapting to site closures, says Heather Richardson, “someone said, ‘This is rough.’” Richardson is director of early childhood

1. Allvin, R. E. (2020, March). Making connections: There’s no such thing as online preschool. NAEYC. <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/mar2020/theres-no-such-thing-online-preschool>

2. The website of the Poway USD Preschool is <https://www.powayusd.com/en-US/Departments/Learning-Support/Preschool/Preschool>

3. Poways’ School Reopening Guidebook 2.0 is at <https://www.powayusd.com/PUSD/media/Communications/2020/Reopening-Plan-Guidebook.pdf>

4. Read more about Shasta’s early childhood services at <https://www.shastacoe.org/instructional-services-division/early-childhood-services-department/early-education-instructional-services-clone>

education for the Winzler Children's Center,⁵ part of Eureka City Schools. Her response to her staff member: "Of course it's rough. But we also have opportunities to provide types of services this year that we've never had before." The pandemic has allowed us to be creative. We are doing amazing things."

Both Richardson and Anderson see the challenges of remote learning as similar in some fundamental ways to the challenges of in-person learning. "It's trial-and-error," says Anderson, "and dependent on the particular student." And what works today, she says, may not work tomorrow. "But for the most part, I've seen our teachers perform magic in engaging these dynamic little people" in online classrooms.

Making online learning successful for preschoolers with disabilities is, says Richardson, "much the same as getting kids to attend to circle time" in the in-person classroom. "We make things engaging, and we make sure that children are interested in whatever activities we plan."

Remote learning for preschool also requires enhanced levels of planning and coordination. Parents of preschoolers with disabilities who attend the Winzler Center remotely receive weekly learning packets so that students "can tune into their Zoom classroom, and they're all doing the same thing—they feel they're a part of the classroom," Richardson says. "Their general education teacher

talks about what they're doing, and then the special education teacher follows up." Parents also receive weekly phone check-ins from both the general educator and their child's special education teacher.

Garcia says that her virtual programs "look awesome right now." In the two remote classrooms that Shasta offers, the teachers have "built enhancements to help families provide age-appropriate educational experiences at home." Not only are packets of materials mailed or delivered to families, "but there's additional online content for them that corresponds to what's in the packets." And it all coordinates with the activities in the remote class.

Flexibility on the part of staff helps make these new learning models work. "A student may not be attending in the way you expect them to attend," says Richardson. "But we only have so much control. Sometimes it's better when we don't have as much control, and we allow the student to make choices. Then they learn in a more meaningful way." She encourages parents and staff members to remember "the benefits of inclusion," which involve creating context and exposure—and trusting that every child can and will learn and develop at his or her own pace.

With so many school and early care sites shut down, many Individualized Family Service Plan⁶ (IFSP) meetings have moved online, along with classes. Garcia knew that some parents "were feeling uncomfortable moving to

home video visits that were just one-to-one with their provider or special education teacher." To help parents become comfortable in a virtual setting, "we started offering small online group events," she says, "parenting sessions for parents who have children with disabilities and an online session called 'Me Time,' which also includes meditation and self-care." Garcia had several goals: to give parents an opportunity to learn valuable skills, to connect with other parents, to stay connected with the school, and to develop confidence in working from virtual platforms. With this confidence, Garcia's hope was that "they'll re-engage and stay engaged within the individual services that are being provided to them online." Garcia's plan worked. Parents became more willing and able to take part in IFSP and other meetings.

Leadership and Partnerships

The right kind of support for staff certainly helps to create an environment for success in this previously uncharted terrain of virtual preschool. "There's a learning curve," acknowledges Anderson. "Teachers have to learn how to use the technology, and they also have to be able to experiment with it and feel safe with it, so that when it doesn't work well, they don't feel like they've failed. It's that continuous cycle of improvement, where we try it, and if it works, we go with it. And if it doesn't, we try, try again."

The success that programs have seen also involves an eagerness to "learn new skills that are going

5. Read more about the Winzler Children's Center at <https://winzler.eureka cityschools.org/>

6. To learn more about the IFSP, go to <https://earlyinterventionot.weebly.com/the-ifsp-meeting.html>

to benefit all of the kids,” says Richardson. “We have a great partnership with our school psychologist and a Board Certified Behavioral Analyst, who have come in to help us.”

Garcia sees a silver lining in being pushed to provide remote learning during the pandemic:

“In some way, delivering services from afar has helped us become more inclusive. When building these activities and the packets, [teachers are] thinking about each child in their group, using UDL practices,⁷ and really thinking through what it’s going to take to make sure every child can access the content and material and participate.”

Parent Engagement

Student engagement can’t happen in preschool, however, without parents. Knowing this, the teachers at Winzler offer virtual office hours. The families that Richardson and her staff serve can “call or Zoom in” to stay connected to the school and to share with staff what they and their children need.

Because not all parents are able to maintain a virtual classroom for their child, “our providers have been fantastic,” says Richardson, “stepping in and providing support. It has a lot to do with building community. The families know that we have open doors and open ears”

7. Read more about UDL in early childhood settings at <https://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/presentations-and-webinars/ConnPow-ersBTJ%281%29.pdf>

and that the staff will do its best to respond to whatever the need is, from helping them access a digital platform to offering a more flexible schedule.

An unforeseen benefit to forced virtual preschool settings, according to all three of these early



childhood leaders, is how teachers are working with parents as a team. Teachers and related service providers are coaching parents in how to work with their children in the home. As a result, Anderson says, “there’s this new level of connection between the school and the home that provides parents more opportunity to see what’s going on in the classroom. I think that is beneficial.”

Garcia agrees. Typically, parents drop kids off at preschool—where they learn. Then the parents pick their children up and go home—where they play. Now, “rather than operating as a tag team,” she says, “parents and teachers are becoming partners, collaborating” in support of the child’s learning.

“Parents are a child’s first and most important teachers,” says

Garcia. And now all remote preschool activities “are geared toward the child and toward the parent. This is similar to what you would find in an early intervention program” through Early Start,⁸ where supports for the child with a disability are provided to

the entire family in the home and other natural environments. As a result of virtual learning, Garcia is seeing parents of preschoolers become more engaged and accomplished as learning boundaries are dissolving. “How interesting,” she says, “to think about how this is happening at home for the student with the parent, who then is making the adjustments that typically have to be done by teachers

and aides in a preschool classroom.”

Supportive Programs

Right before the pandemic, Shasta had put in place several initiatives that, according to Garcia, highlight the importance—and power—of family-school-community partnerships and that have strengthened Shasta’s services during the pandemic. One of them is Help Me Grow.⁹

Garcia talks about the spheres of influence in a child’s life that can affect the child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) outcomes. But the main three, she says, are “the school, the family, and the community”

8. For more about Early Start, go to <https://www.ceitan-earlystart.org/>

9. For more about Help Me Grow, go to <https://helpmegrowca.org/>

With herself as “school,” she sees Help Me Grow as allowing “us to leverage support from the other two spheres” in order to strengthen student outcomes. Garcia and her team ask families, “What are all the things you need to help your child thrive?” They then leverage the power of the resources in the school and community. All aspects of a family’s situation are important, especially during a community crisis, she says. “It’s hard to think about an IEP goal when you’re not sure about your electricity.”

Richardson is full of praise for California’s Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP)¹⁰ and the additional guidance that initiative has given “on how to incorporate families and family observations” into virtual settings, and “on partnering with families in completing assessments.” Here, too, parents are learning more about their child’s education, in this case, about the assessment process. This year, she says, parent progress report meetings are “going to be

10. To learn more about the DRDP, go to <https://www.desiredresults.us/>

more of a conversation than they have been in the past. Parents have really been partners in preparing their child for kindergarten.”

Keeping a Family Focus

Richardson is convinced that any current success in Eureka’s preschool is in great part because of a longstanding commitment to “designing our program to fit the children and families. It’s so important to see families first, and then to fit your program to them.”¹¹

She does not pretend that it is easy. “We have so many different kinds of families. But reflecting your kids in your classrooms and in your lessons—that is key.” Since working parents do not have time to be their child’s full-time teacher, she says, figuring things out with them “is really tricky. With every family we talk to, we make it clear

11. For more about designing early childhood programs around the families served, visit the Family Engagement in Early Care and Education Learning Series of resources from the Head Start National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement at <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/article/family-engagement-early-care-education-learning-series>

that we’re trying our very best to support them.”

Preschool educators walk a fine line: they are trained in pedagogy and teaching strategies for young children while they recognize the parent as the first and most important teacher for each child. Maintaining a balance requires “partnerships and relationships with families that are meaningful,” says Richardson. “It’s about meeting your families where they’re at. You’re not talking at them. You’re not telling them what to do. You’re saying, ‘I see that this is what your family is able to do and this is your structure. Here are the things we can share with you. You can fit them into your family’s routines and culture in the best way you can.’” ◀

Additional Resource

Position Statement: Technology and Interactive Media. (2012, January). National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media. <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/technology-and-media>



Opening Schools for Students with Disabilities

When California schools abruptly closed last spring, the adjustment to distance learning was difficult for all students, but Tom Kissinger says one group of students was especially challenged.

“I can’t think of another population that needs the consistency of day-to-day contact with their peers and teachers more than students with disabilities,” says Kissinger, assistant superintendent of the Del Norte Unified School District. The need, he says, “is not just academic. It’s behavioral, it’s social and emotional, it’s helping them develop the skills they will need later in life. You can’t replicate that virtually.”

That’s why educators from densely populated Orange County in the south to rural stretches of the North Coast have worked this year to provide in-person learning, wherever possible, for students with disabilities. In some cases they have created special classrooms for students with significant disabilities or for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

Ensuring Safety

But as districts prepared to bring students with disabilities back to class last fall, the first priority was safety. Following public health guidelines, comprehensive district plans included designing the classroom environment for physical distancing, minimizing

contacts, and monitoring for signs of COVID-19.

Orange County’s School Reopening and Safety Plan—Special Education Services,¹ for example, lists such specific requirements as ensuring safe transportation to and from school, staggering arrival times and locations, limiting non-essential visitors, serving individual meals outdoors or in classrooms, regularly cleaning and disinfecting



shared surfaces and equipment, and observing such general precautions as mask-wearing and hand-washing.

“We had an extensive plan for the return,” says Analee Kredel, chief of Orange County’s Special Education Division. “We’re trying to create the safest environment for staff and students.”

1. Find Orange County’s plan at https://ocde.us/SPED/Documents/Main_Page/Links/2020-2021_School_Reopening_and_Safety_Plan_-_SES_9.24.20.pdf

The division operates 14 full-time school sites for 400 students with significant disabilities. Each of the county’s 27 districts can refer students to this self-contained program, which is housed on general school campuses.

Meeting the Need

Bringing these students back for live instruction was important, Kredel says. “Our students have some of the greatest challenges with distance learning as they

require a higher level of assistance to participate. Additionally, many struggle with attending to task, sitting for long periods of time, and challenging behaviors.”

The district employs a cohort model for each classroom, and students remain with their cohort throughout the school day. Given Southern California’s mild climate, the district urges schools to keep doors and windows open, “and we’re

trying to create as much outdoor learning space as possible,” Kredel says.

In the county’s Irvine Unified School District, a regional Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) Program at University High School is serving 100 middle school and high school students for onsite learning four days a week. The program, which draws students from throughout the county, is one of the largest in the country, says Principal David Longo.

“Our students had a hard time with virtual learning in the spring,” says Longo. “They need the opportunity for direct instruction from teachers who can sign.” Classes are limited to no more than 14 students with a teacher. “Every service professional here has a level of competence in sign language, and anyone attached to an IEP is fluent in sign.” Most of the students have parents who do not sign, he says, and some have never met a deaf person. “Half of our teachers are deaf. Students meet successful adults here. They have role models.”

The rest of the school is following a hybrid learning model, with students on campus two days a week. Some of the students in the DHH program are attached to a cohort of general education students and attend classes full-time along with their sign interpreters. “But all have some level of connection to mainstream education,” says Longo, “whether it’s physical education or graphic design or other classes. It’s working really well.”

Orange County students with disabilities who are not part of either of these programs were offered a choice between distance learning or a full day of in-person instruction in a classroom cohort. They remain with their cohort for all classes and activities. For those at home, an individualized distance learning plan was developed in alignment with their Individualized Education Program (IEP).

At the other end of the state, the needs of students with disabilities are similar, but the

logistics are different. There are 41 school districts spread across the Humboldt-Del Norte Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA), and each local school board determines whether classes will be virtual, in-person, or hybrid. Executive Director Mindy Fattig says approximately 30 per cent of the students with disabilities in the two counties are attending classes in person. “They have a wide range of needs,” she says, “and they rely on social interaction.” In Eureka city schools, “80 percent are coming on campus for some of their education,” says John Leonard, director of student services. Like others, he stresses the importance of in-person learning “to address more than academic goals. It’s difficult to address social-emotional needs from a distance.”

Addressing Challenges

Nowhere in the area is the attendance greater than in the small, three-school district of Fortuna, where 90 percent of the students with disabilities—all but those who are medically fragile—have been back on campus full time since August. “It was important to get them back,” says Superintendent Glen Senestraro, “because connectivity was an issue in rural areas. Kids couldn’t physically access a computer.”

Once the students were back, so were their supports. “One-to-one aides and assistive technology were brought back,” says Fattig. “Students get all the necessary services through the IEP process.”

As districts began in-school instruction, they also began to assess any loss of learning that may have occurred when classes were

virtual. Humboldt County’s The Road Ahead² framework instructs school to revisit students’ IEPs “in partnership with teachers and parents to reflect each student’s evolving needs” based on time away from such services as occupational, physical, and speech therapy while schools were closed.

Mitigating Learning Loss

Fattig says schools in Humboldt-Del Norte are looking at students’ pre-Covid goals “and seeing progress or the lack of progress and looking for ways to mitigate loss. Can we mitigate loss by direct instruction?” For some students, she says, the answer is yes. “They are making up any losses quickly now that they are in school.” For others, services may be provided during the summer. In Del Norte, Kissinger says, “We brought back the school psychologist and speech therapist to do assessments, to get a bead on where [the students] are.”

Orange County’s Learning Continuity and Attendance Plan³ suggests that because school shutdowns occurred so quickly, school teams did not have sufficient time to create or implement comprehensive distance learning plans and that some students “may have experienced regression of some skills.” To address this learning loss, the plan says, “general education and special education teams work collaboratively to ensure learning gaps are identified and filled” and

2. Find Humboldt County’s framework at <https://hcoe.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Road-Ahead.pdf>
3. Orange County’s attendance plan is at <https://orangecountyclassicalacademy.org/lcap>

IEP goals are monitored.

“I like to think we supported our students through distance learning,” says Kredel. “We’re in the process of determining learning loss now, and that is a critical piece.”

Maintaining Inclusion

Another critical piece of special education in California has been the emphasis on inclusion in general education to the fullest extent possible. While inclusion may be harder to achieve during the pandemic, it is still a goal the educators strive for. “Inclusion is a huge part of our protocol,” says

Kissinger. “We’re trying to maintain inclusion as close as possible to what it was before COVID, but that’s a challenge because we’re also trying to maintain stable cohorts of students. We have to make sure it’s safe and be aware of who is going in” to general education classrooms.

“Our students—and their aides—also attend general ed classes on Zoom,” says Fattig. “And some students in special day classes participate in non-academic classes on Zoom as well.” Although the students in her program have significant disabilities, Kredel

says, “we are continuing to look for opportunities for more of our students to be included in virtual instruction with their peers.”

Over the past year as schools have pivoted from the old “normal” to distance learning to hybrid or in-school instruction, Eureka’s Leonard sees “one silver lining in this, and that is more communication with parents.” Fattig agrees: “Our collaboration has been stronger than ever. We want to support parents to support their kids. We’re sharing common frustrations; we’re all in this together.” ◀



Secondary Transition During the Pandemic

“COVID is happening; other things are happening, too,” says Sue Sawyer, president of the California Transition Alliance.¹ Sawyer’s statement points to the state’s two-pronged approach to supporting students with disabilities during the pandemic as they transition out of school and into adult life—to work, live independently, and/or pursue postsecondary education or training.

Even though many school sites are closed, schools and local educational agencies (LEAs) must continue to provide transition services to students and young adults with disabilities,² as those services are outlined in each student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP).³ In response, staff on school campuses across California are creatively delivering virtual transition services to students who normally would be receiving on-the-job training and in-person instruction in using public transportation, for example,

or prepping for interviews—a full range of skills that would help them get and keep a job and navigate their lives as adults.

And at organizations like the Alliance, Sawyer and others are continuing their established work of developing resources and programs

disabilities the opportunity to learn marketable job skills, along with job-seeking and job-keeping skills. Students learn many of these skill through actual work experience while they are still in school.

During the pandemic CDE can provide some services remotely, such as career exploration. At the same time, Wavrin says, “We have to defer to the LEAs and local Department of Public Health for work placement.” And for most grantees, that meant both the classroom and community-based components of transition would be virtual.



to help youth make positive transitions to adult life. “We still need to do the same things,” she says. “We’re just doing them on Zoom now.”

Transition during a pandemic “is new for everybody,” says Nicholas Wavrin, education program consultant at the California Department of Education (CDE).⁴ “We’re all learning together.”

Wavrin supports grantees—LEAs, including school districts, Special Education Local Plan Areas, and county offices of education—of CDE’s WorkAbility I program,⁵ which offers students with

Missing the Community

Missing that live community connection has been the hardest part of school site closures for Tedra Trimm, a transition coordinator at Riverside Unified School District. The district directly serves 800–900 high school students through WorkAbility, but Trimm says the services are extended “to anyone with an IEP.”

“We were used to bringing in a lot of community people [prospective employers, transit and college officials, etc.],” Trimm says. “We had field trips and a big career day with 60 to 70 people working with our students. How do we get those professionals in front of our students?” As in most districts, the answer is “virtually.”

1. The California Transition Alliance website is at <http://www.cattransitionalliance.org/cattransitionalliance.aspx>

2. United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. Dear colleague letter. (2020, August). <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/transition/products/2020-transition-guide-letter-08-31-2020.pdf>

3. To learn more about the IEP, go to <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/iep-overview/>

4. Find resources for secondary transition planning at CDE’s website: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/st/>

5. To learn more about WorkAbility I, go to <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/sr/wrk-abltyi.asp>

“We brought Riverside Community College⁶ into the virtual classroom for presentations,” says Trimm, “and the students could ask questions about applications or financial aid.” The local transportation agency’s presentations also are online now. The district then created a Virtual College and Career Center,⁷ with “help wanted” ads and links to colleges, Career Technical Education programs, military resources, and more.

Transition Coordinator Laura Williams works in Riverside’s life skills program with students whose disabilities are moderate to severe. While classes for students with mild to moderate disabilities are all virtual, the students in high school and the adults who are receiving transition services in Williams’ classes “need more support.” As a result, they are on campus for part of the day twice a week in small cohorts. Williams says that many of her students are on “a certificate of completion track and will transition into adult day programs. It’s not the competitive integrated employment we would hope for.” But, Trimm quickly adds, “we’re working on that goal.”

Meanwhile, Williams is creating a school-based business where her students learn about “following directions and completing a task” by making beaded lanyards for masks. Her students also are learning such

functional skills as how to set a table and do their own laundry.

With most of the classes delivered virtually, Williams says, “parents are a lot more aware of what skills I’m working on, and I get a lot more feedback than ever before.” Trimm sees that parental involvement in virtual lessons, too. “The parent is often next to the student. They are able to support the student and ask questions. It makes our IEP effort more cohesive.”

Because the district is unable to place students in jobs during the pandemic, the transition coordinators are working closely with the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR).⁸ “We’re getting students connected to DOR,” says Jennifer Walker, the third member of Riverside’s transition team. “We’re helping with resumé building, interviewing, job training. If we have prepared them enough, once they leave us we hope that DOR can place them.”

A Challenging Transition

Christi Freels knows that “it’s a challenge to train our students virtually.” Freels is one of the job developers at the Willenberg Career and Transition Center⁹ in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The students at the center range in age from 18 to 22 and have moderate disabilities; most have certificates of completion from high school.

“We’re all about independence,” she says, and helping her students have “a full, rich life. We have to prepare them for life after school.” Pre-COVID, for most that meant

8. To learn more about the DOR, go to <https://www.dor.ca.gov/>

9. To learn more about the Willenberg Career and Transition Center, go to <https://willenbergsec-laUSD-ca.schoolloop.com/>

a job. They worked at a variety of businesses, including restaurants, hospitals, day care programs, and retirement centers. But all work has stopped. “Every site we had, we lost,” she says. And as a result, many of the students “will have lost two years of job training.”

To compensate for the absence of in-person instruction, Freels has “made slides of the information we normally teach our students” and presents them on Zoom three times a week. The virtual lessons include travel training, instructions on how to fill out employment applications and prepare for interviews, and communication skills.

The center partners with Kaiser Permanente in Project Search,¹⁰ an online school-to-work apprenticeship program that helps students gain employment. And Freels has been keeping in touch with the businesses that had employed her students pre-COVID. “We’ve had a long relationship with many of them,” she says. “I hope that with the continued support of our community partners, and our amazing students, the work environment opportunities will be plentiful” after the pandemic.

Even in a virtual world, Freels, who has been working with students with disabilities since 1985, stays in regular, direct contact with her students. When they first come to the center, she says, “Most are stepping out of a controlled environment; many have no self-advocacy [skills]. Without the safe, comforting environment we build, some kids are upset and struggling.” She maintains email contact and

10. To learn more about Project Search, go to <https://www.projectsearch.us/who-we-are/>

6. The webpage for Riverside Community College’s Career Center is <https://www.rcc.edu/student-support/career-center.html>

7. Riverside USD’s Workability I Virtual College and Career Center is at <https://sites.google.com/riversideunified.org/virtualcollegecareercenter/home>

shares text messages with them, and “I have a lot of phone calls,” doing what transition professionals seem to invariably do: encourage, support, counsel, and guide students—however they can.

Building Timeless Resources

The pandemic hasn’t stopped the California Transition Alliance from producing materials to foster a smooth transition into adult life for students with disabilities. “The pandemic has just made the work more challenging,” Sawyer says. “We are juggling what young adults need to handle their transition during COVID to participate in work-based learning in a virtual environment, but also developing resources they will need at any time.”

Last spring the Alliance collaborated with the Supporting Inclusive Practices project (SIP) on a series of seven webinars¹¹ that deal with various aspects of transition, including assessments, the role of parents, collaboration, and legal mandates. The Alliance also produced a series of how-to videos that, Sawyer says, “provide curriculum resources and are available to anyone who works with students on transition.” All of these resources are still available, current, and useful.¹²

And, despite the pandemic, the Alliance continues to work with a statewide coalition of school

11. Find the Alliance-SIP transition webinars (be sure to scroll down the page) at <https://www.sipinclusion.org/what-we-do/resources/>

12. Find these transition resources at <http://www.catransitionalliance.org/content.aspx?id=1561&title=Resources>

administrators and the California Departments of Education and Rehabilitation “to explore the high school diploma,” says Sawyer. “We’re trying to develop alternative pathways to a diploma, which means you can get a job and qualify for financial aid” when you leave school.

Perhaps the most-viewed of the Alliance’s pandemic resources is *Let’s Work*,¹³ a film documentary about eight young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their experiences and successes in the world of work.

With a grant in October 2019 from the State Council of Developmental Disabilities, the crew was ready to begin filming “when COVID hit,” says Liz Zastrow, an Alliance board member who worked on the production with filmmaker Joey Travolta. Despite the pandemic, the production schedule held. “We hired 27 individuals, all young adults with disabilities, to make the documentary,” says Zastrow. Most worked behind the camera, and some “stepped into leadership roles, informing families of schedules and mentoring others in how to use Zoom.”

The unscripted film is “by young adults to young adults,” says Sawyer, and it has two principal goals: “To show that people with disabilities can work, and for parents to start conversations about work early, certainly in kindergarten or preschool.”

The film was premiered at the San Diego International Film Festival. “COVID taught us some things, like how to do a premiere over the

13. View *Let’s Work* at <https://www.youtube.com/letsworkca>

internet,” says Zastrow. The film also was shown to business people and state legislators “to show them that these students can work.”

The young adults who worked on the film “all keep in close contact,” Zastrow says. Some, she says, will be part of a “peer mentorship program we’re developing for California.”

A Positive Spin

And there are more positive stories to emerge from supporting transition during a pandemic. Jana Stewart, who supervises the Riverside transition team, says, “Our students actually are accessing tech in a way they never have before. We’ve seen some of the students on the [autism] spectrum more engaged than we would have seen in school.”

And CDE’s Wavrin tells the story of a student in Murietta Valley who, pre-pandemic, had a community-based job assembling fishing equipment at a tackle shop. While the student could no longer work at the shop during the pandemic, Wavrin says, “The school could still contract with the shop, which delivered the equipment to the student, who would do the same task from home.” Not only did this arrangement benefit the student, he says, “It was an example of how WorkAbility was helping a business to stay in business.” ◀

Additional Resources

National Technical Assistance Center on Transition. *Distant & Remote Resources—2020–21 School Year*. <https://transitionta.org/covid19>
Transition Resources. Riverside Unified School District. http://riversideunified.org/departments/special_education/transition/transition_resources

New Skills and Connections for Parents and Families

Nearly every parent of a school-aged child has struggled during the COVID-19 pandemic. School site closures, quarantine restrictions, new learning platforms—none of these things are easy to incorporate into lives that are already complicated and busy. The challenges are often compounded for parents of children with disabilities.

The Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for some children call for one-to-one instruction, modified and adapted curriculum, and one or more related service providers. Ensuring that a child receives all of the necessary educational and related services while staying safe during a pandemic can be a near-impossible balancing act for everyone involved.

It's not surprising that schools struggle, too. In a survey conducted by The School Superintendents Association,¹ three out of four school districts reported that during the pandemic, educational and related services for students with disabilities have been the services most difficult to provide.²

At the same time, many families

1. The website of The School Superintendents Association is at <https://www.aasa.org/home/>
2. The National School Boards Association. (2020). *School Leader Voices: Concerns and Challenges to Providing Meaningful IDEA-related Services During COVID-19* (p. 9). National School Boards Association. [https://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/AASA_Blog\(1\)/Advocacy%20IDEA%20White%20Paper%20FINAL.pdf](https://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/AASA_Blog(1)/Advocacy%20IDEA%20White%20Paper%20FINAL.pdf)

in California report doing OK, and they are grateful for the efforts that schools and districts have been making to provide services and instruction for their children. The following experiences, recommendations, and ideas from parents who have children with disabilities highlight just a few of the bright spots in this landscape. These accounts also reflect some common operating principles on the part of both parents and educators: clear communication, creativity, and dogged determination to figure out what will work for each child—with a great deal of patience and forgiveness guiding the process.

Communication

Elena Bramble is program director for the Rowell Family Empowerment Center,³ which serves families of children with disabilities in six northern California counties. The parents she sees who are the “most happy,” she says, are those whose districts “are maintaining communication, calling and checking in with them, answering questions about academics” and instruction.

Caitlin McNamara agrees about the importance of communication. McNamara is the support services program director for Support for Families of Children with Disabilities,⁴ a San Francisco-based Family Resource Center.

3. The Rowell Family Empowerment Center website is at <https://rfenc.org/Home/>
4. The Support for Families of Children with Disabilities website is at <https://www.supportforfamilies.org>

She says, “whether there are pandemics or fires or floods,” it’s critically important “to increase communication among families, schools, service providers, and community organizations. By gathering as many ideas as possible from stakeholders of all kinds, “people are going to be able to brainstorm and partner around creative ideas to best meet the family where they are at and support their needs.”

Sarah Bennett is a social worker at Support for Families. With as many people as possible working together “to think outside the box,” she says, there’s a better chance of discovering “what can be done to minimize some of the stressors that are on the child, and the more we can expedite learning.”

Expanded Circles

IEP meetings offer one of the best places to talk about a child’s learning. Myrna Kelly, a family resource specialist at Support for Families, encourages parents to think beyond educational circles when considering whom to invite to these meetings. “My daughter’s pediatrician attends,” she says, as do teachers who were part of the child’s previous IEP teams. “A lot of our kids transitioned to new schools this year, so they are with a brand new team or new teacher.” Many of these educators and service providers have not met the child in person, “and getting to know someone virtually is very difficult,” she says. “Providers who have worked with your child in

the past can give important input and can paint a picture of what that child needs.”

When working with schools under the current exceptional circumstances, Kelly also insists on the importance of candor, especially with the IEP team. She tells parents, “Just be honest about what’s working and what’s not. You’re the one who is sitting there every day. So if your child is running around and won’t sit in front of the computer, don’t wait. Let the teacher know right away that this is an issue.”

Kelly also encourages parents who do not think their child is being served appropriately to “reach out and request an IEP meeting.

Talk about those concerns immediately. There could be changes, additions, or accommodations that could be done right now. You don’t have to wait until you go back to [school] in person.”

New Learning Environments

Some children with disabilities, especially those with attention issues, manage and even thrive with distance learning. Virtual platforms can leave others, however, “on sensory overload, causing stress and impeding their learning,” says Bennett.

Bennett describes a situation with one family that was trying to

use distance learning with their child. “When Zoom came on, the child started screaming,” says Bennett. “The neighbors were complaining because they’re all at home working.” The virtual classroom turned out to be “so triggering that [the child] can’t move forward—and transitions are so hard.” The family let the school know about the challenges and



stress they were experiencing. In response, the school district team contracted with an outside agency to bring aides into the home to support the child. “I felt like this team really heard that family and was supportive.”

Kelly appreciates similar flexibility from her daughter’s school in Oakland. “I was able to sign a liability agreement⁵ saying, ‘We know the risks of getting

5. The kinds of questions parents may want to ask themselves when considering issues of liability related to in-person learning during a pandemic can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/community/schools-childcare/back-to-school-decision-checklist.pdf>

services in person. We’re willing to wear our masks, take our temperature. If we get any signs of COVID, we will cancel that appointment.’ We are willing to take that risk.”

JoAnna Van Brusselen, a bilingual education coordinator and parent with Support for Families, has seen other schools create helpful adaptations so that online learning

works. One of her daughter’s sixth grade classes “was triggering her into a complete and utter violent meltdown,” she says. In response, the school created for the daughter her own virtual resource room with a paraprofessional. In that one-to-one virtual space, “they can work on what the class is working on,” rather than

logging into the larger classroom. “It hasn’t been 100 percent successful, but it’s been much better than her having to go into the classroom and have a meltdown.”

Despite these adaptations, Van Brusselen says she cannot report current school success for her daughter. “Before the pandemic she was flourishing—and now she has regressed severely.” Van Brusselen describes her daughter, who is in middle school, as “very high need,” and who had a team of 15 providers working with her pre-pandemic.

Since March, “I am now her only in-person team member, sitting alongside her and doing everything they’ve asked of us. It’s been really,

really challenging.” In the face of this challenge, Van Brusselen has nothing but good things to say about her daughter’s service providers.

The team of therapists, she says, “have been open and creative with ideas. They’re working as a really cohesive team—her vision therapist is working with her occupational therapist who is working with her case manager. They’re all working with her paraprofessional. They all want her to be successful.” Van Brusselen is in contact with her daughter’s educational team members “almost daily, brainstorming what would be good ideas for her.” She describes them as “understanding and flexible,” trying to find for her daughter “a successful place.”

Describing herself as “a parent who has always pushed for services,” Van Brusselen says, “I did not let them cut her services short ever.” The pandemic, however, “has changed my perspective as a parent,” she says. “Honestly, I’m just really grateful that they keep trying.”

Collaborative

Relationships

Family Resource Specialist Deanna Tran says that “collaboration with all of his providers” has been the key to the school progress for her son during the pandemic. Her son, who is seven and nonverbal, “has flourished during distance learning. He has gained many skills. His fine motor skills have significantly increased, [along with] his ability to keep attention. That’s not something I’d seen before. I’d have to chase him around, and getting him to write one letter was a huge deal. But now he’s writing sentences and he’s reading. These are huge milestones. His supports and strategies are working.” She believes that her son’s success is also the result of the relationships she has developed with his service providers, and her consistency in “communicating our concerns clearly.”

Partnerships

Gillian Davidson, parent mentor coordinator at Support for Families, sees an increased level of partnerships between parents and teachers as a silver lining to the pandemic. “Parents are more fully recognizing themselves as part of that provider team. The parent

is really the most important and most essential teacher for the child. Sometimes that gets lost.” The learning demands of the pandemic, she says, have “given success back to the parent.”

With many special education services now being delivered remotely, Davidson also sees parents developing “new skills to interact with their child” as the child is learning. This experience, according to Davidson, has “helped to build the confidence of some parents,” which, she says, doesn’t often happen when a child with a disability has several teachers and service providers.

Some parents, she says, are embracing the fact that they are more involved. “They’re framing it differently: ‘Yes, I have to be here with my child. Yes, it takes up a lot of time. But I have also gotten to see my child master new skills.’” Another silver lining, she says, comes from parents “now having a better understanding of how difficult it is to teach a child and what teachers go through every day—because now the parents are doing it.” ◀



Adapting and Expanding Family Programs

The demands of the pandemic have empowered some parents and provided a context for stronger family-school connections. School site closures also have strengthened and expanded programming for some family centers.

Before last March, Rowell Family Empowerment, which serves families of children with disabilities in six rural northern California counties, had a well-established social-skills program for children with autism: SLATE. Then the pandemic caused all in-person sessions to be canceled.

When first considering the prospect of moving SLATE online, Program Director Elena Bramble admits saying to herself, “Are you kidding? This is a social skills program. And for children with autism. How are you going to do that online? But then,” she says, “I started thinking about it and about how we can take this opportunity to teach children with autism how to interact online.” With distance learning becoming only more prevalent at all levels of instruction, she knew that children are “going to have to know how to interact with the computer and others on other computers in a real way.”

So she pitched the idea to her executive director. In a week and

a half they developed an online version of the program and started sending a weekly program “toolkit” home to families.

Some of the children who participated were nonverbal, so “we allowed their typically developing siblings” to join the online event, says Bramble. “Modeling is so important. So big brother could come on, and it helped” to support interaction for the child with



autism. The program provided direct instruction on “how distance learning works,” says Bramble. For example, “how ‘we can’t hear anyone else if you just start talking.’ We taught them how to take turns and to mute the screen.”

These instructional successes came in part through shared physical experiences in small-group settings. “We would put playdough in the toolkit,” says Bramble. “Then everyone would log in to a group—at the most we had four children in each group

and one leader. Everyone would start playing with the playdough, talking about how it feels and what you can make. Through the course of the session we would help the children interact,” coaching them about how to appropriately ask, hear, and respond to a question, and how to share thoughts and ideas.

“We went on one virtual field trip each week,” says Bramble. She and other staff members “would log in on our phones and take the children on the drive with us.” One time they went to a restaurant and each of the children got to order food. “Then we delivered it to their homes” and the children had lunch as a shared online experience. “Another time we went shopping so they could pick out the craft

items they were going to use the following week. We boxed the items up and the parents came by and took the boxes home.” The next week the children all worked on their craft project together.

On another field trip “we were able to walk through a store to show the children all of the social distancing stickers, all the new plexiglass that’s up everywhere, all the people in masks.” Bramble and her team familiarized the children with what the world looks like in a pandemic.

Feedback

Once a week the SLATE team meets virtually with parents to ask for feedback about what is working and what is not. They also seek ways to provide support for any behavioral issues or interventions. “We got so much positive feedback,” says Bramble. “The parents really appreciated that their child got to see what ‘normal’ might look like when we do finally go back into stores.

“We also sent home masks and shields so children could practice putting them on. One parent told me that her child wouldn’t wear a

mask for more than a second—and he had a doctor’s appointment coming up and he had to wear one.” Rowell staff had been showing parents how to coach their children to wear masks. The child with the appointment ended up being able to “wear a mask for a full 45 seconds, which was enough to get them into the medical building and then into a room where he could take it off. The mom was thrilled.”

Expanding Good Ideas

Bramble and her team expanded what they did with SLATE to other programs. “We did a similar

thing with Sensory Day,” which provides early intervention support for children under five. Using the same playbook, “parents came and picked up a sensory toolbox, and we interacted via the computer.”

Despite connectivity issues and computer fatigue on nearly everyone’s part, Bramble and the staff at Rowell continue to expand and enhance their virtual offerings using dance, music, playgroups, and more—finding success wherever they can. It’s great, she says, “to make a difference in those families’ day-to-day life.” ◀



SELPA Content Leads: Retooling and Adapting

In 2018, the California Department of Education and the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence awarded four Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA) with grants to strengthen educational systems and services for students with disabilities. Each SELPA focused on one of four areas: improving educational access, providing evidence-based practices for students with autism, addressing issues of equity to prevent disproportionality in special education, or supporting students with disabilities who are also English language learners.

The following four projects received grants:

- The Open Access Project at the Placer County SELPA,
- The Evidence-based Practices for Students with Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities Project at the Marin County SELPA,
- The Equity, Disproportionality & Design Project at the San Diego South County SELPA
- The Improving Outcomes for English Language Learners with Disabilities Project at the Imperial County SELPA

Referred to as “SELPA Content Leads,” these projects are part of a coordinated statewide System of Support for schools and local educational agencies (LEAs), including other SELPAs. All four Content Leads had previously developed a clear roadmap for their work and were operating in full gear when COVID-19 hit. While some of their gears have shifted in response, each one has kept working to improve school systems and outcomes for students with disabilities.

What follows is a description of the work of these Content Leads, the challenges they face while continuing their work during the pandemic, and the creative changes they have made in response to the new educational landscape.



The Open Access Project¹ was built on the conviction that students with disabilities can be academically successful when they are able to participate in and actively engage with their learning in meaningful ways. That participation and engagement can happen in three ways:

1. The Open Access Project webpage is at <https://www.openaccess-ca.org/>

(1) when educators apply the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)² across all learning environments, including the general education setting; (2) when students are afforded the opportunity to use digital tools and assistive technologies (AT) as part of instructional design and assessment; and (3) when the access needs are met of those students who have complex communication challenges and who require Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) strategies and supports. The project’s goal for this third cohort is to offer, throughout California, training to educators

2. To learn more about UDL, go to <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>

in appropriately identifying the AAC needs of students and then providing them with the most effective AAC tools.

By early 2020, the project was on track to select, train, coach, and mentor regional representatives who would serve as specialists in their geographic areas. Each regional representative specialized in UDL, AT, or AAC following a series of two- or three-year courses of learning and practice. Through ongoing cycles of training and coaching, and by incorporating principles of Implementation Science,³ the project planned to

3. Bauer, S., & Kirchner, J. (2020). Implementation Science: What Is It and Why Should I Care? *Science Direct*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S016517811930602X>

firmly embed new and improved approaches to providing access throughout California. Project efforts had already been proven successful for six of the state's 130 SELPAs by the time COVID-19 hit.

With the pandemic, the original vision of the plan didn't change, but the need for another kind of access superseded all others.

Project Director Jillian King was getting "a clear message of angst from special educators. They were overwhelmed," says King. "There were no clear parameters for them" on how to continue serving their students in virtual settings. And King knew that setting up and planning for instruction through distance learning required "a different mindset. It's

a very different approach to teaching." King and her colleagues responded. Going above and beyond the project's contract, they immediately went to work to create the website that would address this angst: *Accessible Distance Learning: Making Distance Learning Accessible to Students with Disabilities*.⁴

4. The Accessible Distance Learning website is at <https://sites.google.com/placercoe.k12.ca.us/accessible-distance-learning/home>

This site "provides a curated place to get started" by offering carefully selected best practices and strategies—"a way to gear up for distance learning" without overwhelming people, says King. "We also wanted to create resources for specific providers—occupational therapists, physical



therapists, resource specialists," says King. So the team developed extensive sets of role-specific resources as well.

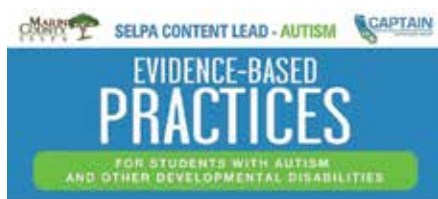
King has great admiration for all of the teachers across the state who responded to the need to profoundly change the way they worked, and "who will be continuing to learn how to provide distance learning instruction and to develop their skill set. We plan to support them in doing this," says King.

The work that Open Access was contracted to do with teams from LEAs across the state, "which was the meat and potatoes of what we were designed to do," was paused in March 2020. "But we're now back on track," says King. As with nearly all professional development providers, Open Access has

shifted all of its trainings to virtual platforms. "That was a huge challenge and a huge amount of work—how to keep participants active and engaged when everything is online."

Despite these challenges, the project's energies have not dwindled, and the Open Access team seems to have funneled the

energy it used for travel into serving even more teams. In the spring, we "went ahead with the application process and ended up selecting 30 teams with the idea of spreading the work out over time," says King. This number represents eight more teams than were part of the project's original goal of 22. Open Access is also in the process of developing a guide for how to provide effective online learning to adults. King wants to "get it out of the box and make the training engaging, relevant, active."



The SELPA Content Lead for Evidence-based Practices for Students with Autism and Other Developmental Disorders¹ is serving as a second home for CAPTAIN—California Autism Professional Training and Information Network. CAPTAIN was already nearly six years old and a successful, established community of practitioners by 2018 when the other SELPA Content Leads got their start. Its goal was to train educators to implement evidence-based practices for students with autism to improve outcomes.

With funding as a SELPA Content Lead, CAPTAIN is strengthening these established efforts. Ann England, who coordinates the project with Patty Schetter, says the goal now “is to put in place leaders who are trained in the science of implementation, who know evidence-based practices for autism, and who then work with SELPA directors and regional implementation leads to scale the work and create local capacity.”

Since 2006, CAPTAIN has been working to respond to the request from parents for schools to do more for students with autism. The report of the California Legislative Blue Ribbon Commission on Autism “still guides our work,” says

1. The website for Evidence-based Practices for Students with Autism and Other Developmental Disorders is at <https://www.marinschools.org/domain/2468>

England. One recommendation from that commission “was to create interagency relationships, which we did with the regional centers, the state and federally funded family support agencies, and the schools.” It was important, she says, “to get working together to learn about how to implement evidence-based practices for autism.” CAPTAIN has also created a clearinghouse of resources,² information, and tools, which are all on the CAPTAIN website.

The COVID Pivot

While “we are definitely determined to maintain our efforts to achieve the goals of the grant—to build capacity, sustain, and scale-up efforts—we did pivot” when COVID hit, says England. Like many other educational leaders, the CAPTAIN Leadership Team turned its attention to making its trainings, tools, and resources on evidence-based practices for autism all available virtually.

“We also wanted to make the resources on the website as current as possible. What we kept hearing, though, was that everyone was being given way too many online resources, and it was becoming overwhelming,” she says. In response, CAPTAIN chose quality over quantity, carefully selecting and curating “tools and resources to support our individuals with autism and their families and educators.”

To make the material accessible for as many users as possible,

“Our main resource was the Padlet

2. These CAPTAIN resources are all available at <http://www.captain.ca.gov/resources.html>

that we created in English³ and Spanish,⁴” says England. A Padlet is a web app that allows users to post videos, links, information and more. CAPTAIN took full advantage of the app’s possibilities.

The CAPTAIN Padlet is organized through a landing page of four columns of resources. One is devoted to resources for students with autism, including social stories⁵ that help them understand what is going on during the pandemic. A second column provides resources for teachers to enhance their skills in distance learning. A third provides resources for parents—or for educators who are coaching family members—on how to support their child’s learning at home. This column includes videos on how to use visual supports and other evidence-based practices. The fourth column lists technology resources to help families at home. “We considered what is critical and important, what doesn’t cost a lot of money, and what can be especially helpful during home instruction during school closures,” says England.

Since rolling out the Padlet at the end of March, the project has been giving presentations about distance learning for students with autism. Recordings of those presentations are housed on the Padlet and the CAPTAIN website, as well.

The number of CAPTAIN’s presentations at Community

3. The Padlet in English at <https://padlet.com/SELPACAPTAIN/xr3r3q3szpyf>

4. The Padlet in Spanish is at <https://padlet.com/SELPACAPTAIN/c4ibcglc414h>

5. To learn more about *social stories* for individuals with autism, go to <https://www.abaresources.com/social-stories/>

Advisory Committee (CAC)⁶ (CAC) meetings have increased dramatically during the pandemic. These online meetings, where England talks with families about how to support distance learning for their children, have advantages. “They’re not a big statewide webinar with hundreds of people,” she says. “You meet at 6:30 at night and there are maybe 20 to 40 parents. This smaller, live context offers parents the chance to ask and get their questions answered. We had always wanted to interact more with our CACs—and COVID helped us to do just that.”

Several regional leaders have taken the presentations that are on the project’s Padlet and customized them for their own CACs as they go about building local capacity.

Increased Collaboration

“A huge upside for COVID is that educators now are needing to collaborate even more closely with families in a way that is really child-focused,” says England. One innovation that has been particularly successful for CAPTAIN is the project’s partnership with the UC Davis MIND Institute to support families during distance learning through ECHO Telehealth.⁷ This learning platform creates opportunities for parents, teachers, and service providers to interact, collaborate,

learn, and problem solve during creative, real-time sessions. Each session involved a didactic portion, where a new strategy or evidence-based practice is introduced to the participants by an expert. This is followed by a case study presented by one of the participants. “This



‘all teach, all learn’ approach,” says England, “helps to build the expertise and confidence of the participants as they gain insights from one another week by week.”

Many of the topics that CAPTAIN addressed when it piloted this approach in the spring, such as school-home collaboration and strategies for setting up effective learning environments, answer questions that are regularly asked by families and educators. “We recorded the sessions and put these on our CAPTAIN website,” says England, preserving the privacy of participants while still making important information available. In this way, the educators who are facilitating the groups “don’t have to recreate the didactic,” says England. “They can show those presentations to their group, and then run the rest of the meeting with their own local case studies.”

This approach began as a way

for the project to respond to the conditions of the pandemic. “Then we thought this would be good to implement in all of our 17 CAPTAIN Regions,” says England, commenting that many regions are writing these kinds of meetings into their 2020–21 Regional Plans.

“It seems like they’re all thinking that’s a great way to interface and provide support, especially during school closures.”

CAPTAIN held its annual Summit virtually this fall. The pandemic did not deter attendance. “They all showed up,” says England. “The CAPTAIN Cadre are extraordinarily passionate,

dedicated, excited, and motivated to do this work to improve outcomes for students with autism.”

Additional Resources

There are 400-plus CAPTAIN Cadre who are experts in autism and are available to provide support in their CAPTAIN regions to leaders, educators, and families. To find a local CAPTAIN Cadre go to <http://captain.ca.gov/cadre.html>

The ECHO Autism: Special Edition series provides teachers and other educators with tools, strategies, and resources to coach families in how to set up new learning routines while supporting positive behavior during home-based instruction. <https://health.ucdavis.edu/mindinstitute/education/echo/echo-special-edition.html>

See *The Autism Community’s Response to COVID-19*, a newsletter in the Autism Spectrum News series, a quarterly publication of Mental Health News Education, at <https://autismspectrumnews.org/asn-summer-2020-issue/>

6. To learn more about CACs, go to https://cahelp.org/parents_students/parent_resources/cac

7. To learn more about ECHO Telehealth, go to <https://health.ucdavis.edu/mindinstitute/education/echo/index.html>



The Equity, Disproportionality & Design Project (ED&D)¹ at San Diego's South County SELPA focuses on reducing rates of disproportionality² in schools. ED&D supports educators to understand the inequities that exist within their systems, explore the causes of those inequities, develop plans to address the challenges that are unique to each school or district, build networks of support, teach intervention strategies, and monitor improvements.

Within a set of services the project calls its Equity Dispro Data System³ (EDDS), ED&D has developed an innovative data tool to customize the supports it provides throughout this process. Russell Coronado, the executive director of South County SELPA, and Executive Consultants Olivia Rivera, Marcus Jackson, and Ryan Estrellado make up the ED&D team.

1. The ED&D website is at <https://equityanddesign.com/>
2. See <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/diversity-and-social-justice/disproportionality> for an explanation of disproportionality in special education.
3. For more about ED&D's data system, go to <https://twitter.com/hashtag/WeAreEDandD?src=hash>

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires local educational agencies (LEAs) to address instances of disproportionality (Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP] Indicators 9 and 10⁴). “So part of this work is about meeting compliance requirements,” says Estrellado. “That is always going to be important.” But before 2020, he says, “there was some ambiguity about whether our work was a priority for folks.” School closures, however, “empowered



us to speak more directly to what is fundamental to the lives of students: how systemic things create the compliance problems.” The “systemic things” that Estrellado refers to can include any aspect of a system that serves to generate unequal outcomes. For example, unequal enrichment opportunities, behavioral policies that reflect implicit racial bias, history textbooks that omit events that are important to certain groups of students, and more. “That

4. Read more about these two indicators at <https://osep.grads360.org/#program>

systemic part—the long game,” he says, “has always been what we’ve tried to put in front of people as the main story” in the hope of helping educators move beyond the immediate need to correct disproportionality ratios and instead focus on recognizing and addressing root causes.

A Light on Equity

At the start of the pandemic, the ED&D team “thought school districts would prioritize developing distance-learning programs over the equity work we started in 2019,” says Estrellado. The pandemic, however, has shone a glaring light on inequalities in nearly every social sector, schools included. “We saw this in the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on communities of color,” he says.

Coronado agrees. Pre-pandemic, most educators were not thinking about the fact that “30 percent of their school population had no access to the internet,” he says. Or that upwards of 40 percent of students in some schools would miss meals if their school sites closed. With the onslaught of COVID, those facts became headlines.

“So it turned out,” says Estrellado, “our work continued to be a priority for districts. The pandemic created urgency and commitment to serving all students.”

As the extent of the pandemic’s effect on education—and on

students and their families—was becoming clear, “our work stayed the same,” says Estrellado, “but people’s priorities quickly changed. The long game became the short game. The timeline went from five years to ‘how do we get this done for kids tomorrow?’”

“The country is having conversations about equity right now, and folks want to act in a way that aligns with their beliefs,” he says. He often sees that people just don’t know where to start. ED&D gives educators a set of manageable changes they can make and strategies they can use immediately.

Going Virtual

Like the other SELPA Content Leads, ED&D was experienced in virtual meeting platforms. As a result, the team was able to place its training events and meetings online in March. “Originally,” says Rivera, “we were going to focus on north and south county. But because of COVID, we went virtual, so our reach has actually been greater. We’re at capacity.” Team members also continue to create and post online resources⁵ for anyone to access.

“At the same time,” says Coronado, “we micro-targeted specific SELPAs, LEAs, and districts that needed intense types of work.” The ED&D’s data tool is supporting these efforts and “has been a great accomplishment for this project and the SELPAs going forward,” he adds.

5. Find these resources at <https://equityanddesign.com/presentations-and-activities>

This tool, says Estrellado, “helps SELPA leaders achieve their equity goals by generating disproportionality data early and often. To support effective use of the data tool, the EDDS

“We’ve had data for a long time. And none it means anything unless we use it to change the way we work.”

—Russell Coronado

Project also includes training on communicating results, data ethics, and collaborative problem-solving using data.”

Data Literacy

That tool, however, highlighted an additional training need—one for data literacy. Defined as “the ability to transform information into actionable instructional knowledge and practices,” data literacy becomes invaluable when trying to meet state and federal monitoring and compliance requirements. While timelines for these requirements were extended in response to the pandemic, the requirements themselves, and the corollary work involved around gathering and responding to data, still remain.

“When you’re a SELPA director and you have those dates and what’s required looming over you, you have to put [your efforts] in high gear,” says Coronado. Given this context, it’s not surprising that “when we offer the data literacy

training, there’s a lot of demand for it,” he adds.

As valuable as the project’s data tool is, and in spite of the demand for it, ED&D is “being very methodical and intentional in the roll-out,” says Coronado. The project is “taking it slowly and in stages to make sure the experience is good and people get what they need.”

“We’ve had data for a long time,” he says. “None of it means anything unless we use it to change the way we work. Our value proposition is, ‘let’s think about how we use this data in interesting ways and how we connect people with each other, and with us, so we can change the way that we work with kids.’” The ED&D team wants this work to be challenging, “but not so challenging that it paralyzes us into just looking at the data and then walking away.”

To preclude paralysis, “there’s lots of consultation and interaction with us,” says Estrellado, “throughout these online data trainings and after. They can start in small ways. That is a relief for people.”

“We also tell people that the data tool is a great asset,” says Rivera, “but [it] will only work effectively if it’s part of an MTSS.⁶ So our project is doing MTSS trainings⁷ across the state. We integrate the fact that students come to school with different needs, characteristics, and

6. Multi-tiered system of support. See <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/ri/>. Also see “PBIS/MTSS as a Framework for Equity” at <https://pbisnetwork.org/equity/>

7. Read more about these trainings at <https://equityanddesign.com/blog/reimagining-edampd-events-virtual-design-workshop-on-may-13th>

values, based on their cultural, linguistic, religious background. We integrate that into helping teachers and educators understand the diverse space that students need.”

Transformation Through Relationships

Central to the work of the project is “attention to relationships,” says Rivera. “We build relationships and trust so we can talk about what’s working and what’s not working, without any judgment,” she says, adding that SELPA administrators are then “willing to let us know their deep dark secrets. And we can help them know how to approach their LEA directors and find out their unique needs.”

“Those relationships are essential to getting the work done” at all levels, says Estrellado. The project’s ultimate goal is to transform the classroom through relationships.

Research confirms the value of this focus by showing, for example, that high-quality teacher-student relationships are associated with

smaller discipline gaps and lower suspension rates for students of color.⁸ In general, positive relationships at school are a core element of effective instruction and student engagement.⁹

Jackson hopes that the pandemic will give teachers a chance to reflect on these relationships and re-set their goals. “The human-centered approach” that he and his ED&D colleagues are using is designed to give teachers the tools they need for that re-set. “We want to take advantage of this opportunity to empower teachers to get back to that passion that got them into teaching in the first place, so when they go back to their schools they can empower their students¹⁰ even more.”

8. Sarfo, A. J. (2017, July). For Equity, Build Relationships. Harvard Graduate School of Education. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/07/equity-build-relationships>

9. Cookson, P. W. (2017). *Exploring Equity Issues: Building Relationships for Student Success*. Center for Education Equity. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED585609.pdf>

10. Gunn, J. (n.d.). *How Positive Student-Teacher Relationships Create Resilient Learners*. Resilient Educator. <https://resilienteducator.com/classroom-resources/positive-student-teacher-relationships/>

Additional Resources

Big Ideas for Confronting Racism in Schools. (2020, September 23). EdWeek. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/big-ideas-for-confronting-racism-in-education>

Overcoming Racism. EdRedesign. Harvard Graduate School of Education. <https://edredesign.org/responding-systemic-racism>

Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and Beyond. (2020, August). United Nations. https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf

What Is Design Thinking and What Does It Have to Do with Equity? In *Introduction to Design Thinking*, K. Miller. <https://open.lib.umn.edu/designequity/chapter/chapter-7-what-is-design-thinking-and-what-does-it-have-to-do-with-equity/>

Racism and inequity are products of design. They can be redesigned. Equity Design. <https://medium.com/equity-design/racism-and-inequity-are-products-of-design-they-can-be-redesigned-12188363cc6a>



Improving Outcomes for English Learners with Disabilities

The goal of the Improving Outcomes for English Learners with Disabilities¹ SELPA Leads project is written into its title: to improve educational outcomes for English language learners with disabilities (EL SWD) by providing professional development and support to SELPAs, their respective County Offices of Education, and school districts. By providing professional development and consultative support, SELPA Leads help to strengthen the capacity of local educators and school leaders to address the needs of this cohort of students.

In its work, the project aligns a number of existing resources:² CDE’s California Practitioners’ Guide for Educating English Learners with Disabilities (The Guide), the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC), and the state’s English Learner Roadmap and principles. The project focuses on building an understanding of the interconnections among all of these elements, says Project Director Deborah E. Montoya, who, with her colleagues Vanessa Lopez and Lupita Olguin-Rubio, works “to

bring together expertise related to students who are ELs with disabilities, with a goal of building a common language—and then deepening our support” for these students.

“So much of the work we do is to facilitate, to consult, to collaborate,” says Montoya. “The SELPAs and their districts or county offices are the ones engaging in the real work and telling us where they want to go next. We give them the opportunity, the space, and the guidance to engage in reflective practices, because there are so many layers of needs amongst ELs with disabilities.”

She doesn’t pretend this work



is easy. “Our English learners are very diverse and have very different needs,” she says. The same is true of students with disabilities. Any effort to address the “compounding effects of our dually identified learners” is by definition complex.

Montoya and her colleagues work closely with the other SELPA Leads. The project’s collaboration with the SELPA Content Lead for Autism has led to the development of an

interactive crosswalk of Evidence-based practices for English learners with disabilities.³ Work with the Equity, Disproportionality & Design project has supported the team to engage with other SELPAs about culturally and linguistically appropriate pedagogy and the development of culturally and linguistically appropriate Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Collaboration with the Open Access project, whose focus is accessibility through Universal Design for Learning and the use of assistive technology, “has made understandings in the field richer in establishing their common goals of recognizing that all

students are general education students first,” says Montoya, “and that the services for English learners are part of the core general education instruction.” These rights exist prior to identifying a disability, and they serve to highlight the importance of distinguishing “language difference from language

disability,” she says. Her project helps educators and school leaders understand these distinctions—and educate students accordingly.

COVID Changes

This complex work has been made slightly easier during the pandemic because of the project’s original design. Imperial County

3. Find this interactive crosswalk at http://captain.ca.gov/documents/captain_ebp_ell_strats_FEB_2020.pdf

1. The project’s website is at <https://www.icoe.org/selpa/el-swd>

2. Find these resources at https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/documents/eldstnds_publication14.pdf

is located in a largely rural and remote part of the state. The project proposal in 2018 included a capacity for extensive online outreach to ensure statewide dissemination of the work.

These established virtual conferencing capabilities allowed the project to adapt quickly when all in-person meetings were cancelled. Not missing a beat was important, says Montoya, because “IDEA regulations have not changed in the world of COVID, and Title III regulations for English learners have gone unchanged as well. Even with everything so different around us, we still hold true to our obligations and commitments to support our students’ needs—albeit it looks a little different now than it did when we were in brick and mortar.”

Montoya and her team continue to do the work they initially set out to do. “We provide training,” she says, “and then reach out to say that we hope that this is the first of many conversations—because it’s really in the follow-up that we can meet them where their needs are.” The difference is that all trainings are now virtual.

More Individualization

Montoya has seen advantages to the COVID-related shutdowns. When all in-person events were cancelled, the project placed its training modules on its website⁴ where anyone can access them at any time. “COEs and SELPAs are using the materials to have deeper conversations. So that is a nice segue for us to continue to connect with the field.”

Because the project team does not have to travel to provide professional development, “we’ve now been able to progress to the next level of having collaborative conversations and consultative conversations in smaller groups—conversations on the topics that they feel are most pertinent.”

Having reflective conversations online is “the hardest challenge,” says Montoya. “When you’re in person you can gauge the room and anticipate some of the questions, or join a small group and have a private conversation.” In an effort to adapt to the new meeting conditions, Montoya and her team are customizing everything they do. “When a

4. Find the training modules at <https://www.icoe.org/selpa/el-swd/training-modules>

SELPA reaches out to us, we will hold sessions that are unique for that SELPA and their respective COE and the districts that they serve. And because this topic is a passion for them as it is for us, we build that relationship together.

“A spirit of service is something that we all seem to carry with us,” says Montoya, referring to all four SELPA Content Leads. “This belief in service to others—that’s what our system is built on—assisting and supporting each other so we can serve every child.” ◀

Additional Resources

A complete list of infographics from Imperial County SELPA in support of students who are English language learners with disabilities is at <https://www.icoe.org/selpa/el-swd/resources/infographics>

To subscribe to the Imperial County SELPA *Improving Outcomes for English Learners Newsletter*, go to <https://www.icoe.org/selpa/el-swd/newsletter>

The CDE Multilingual Support Division is publishing two monthly newsletters during the COVID-19 school closure: *The Distance Learning Parent Newsletter* and the *Multilingual Updates Newsletter*. Find them at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/elnewsletters.asp>

SELPA System Improvement Leads Project

The SELPA System Improvement Leads Project works collaboratively within California’s statewide System of Support to build the capacity of Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs), with a common goal of improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

The project includes SELPA Improvement Leads as well as SELPA Content Leads. Improvement Leads help to strengthen SELPA systems throughout the state by providing training on the effective use of data, root cause analyses, systems alignment, and coherence. Three SELPAs are Improvement Leads: El Dorado County Office of Education SELPA, Riverside County Office of Education SELPA, and West San Gabriel Valley SELPA. Read more about California’s System Improvement Leads at <https://systemimprovement.org>

Practices to Keep

One day, the coronavirus pandemic's hold on the country will fade, and people will return to some version of normalcy. While no one is certain exactly what the future of "normal" will look like, many scientists believe that COVID-19 will permanently change daily life, specifically in the ways people interact socially and the protocols medical systems put in place to ensure public health.¹

The pandemic, however, has also created other changes that will not be essential to public health once the virus is under control. Some of these changes might still be worth keeping.

Distance Learning for Students

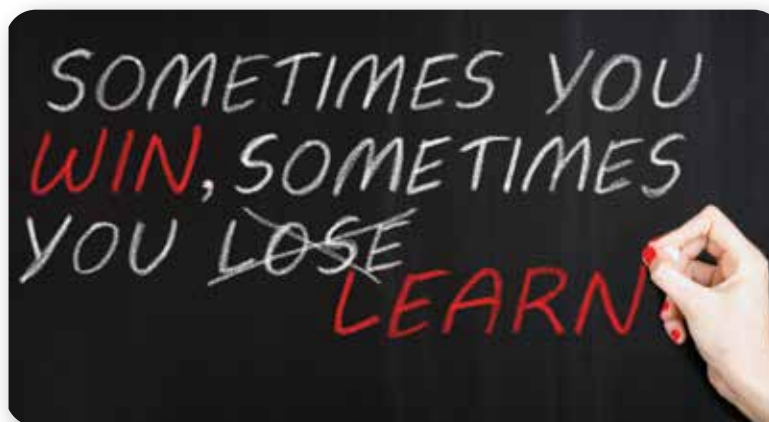
Sarah Bennett, a San Francisco parent and social worker with Support for Families of Children with Disabilities, acknowledges that online learning "does not work for a lot of children, whether they're typically developing or they have a disability. But it is working for some families," she says, especially for those families who have children "with special health care needs and kids who don't qualify for a home hospital program. [These families] would

like to keep the option to learn independently or learn online" once the pandemic is over. For them, the remote classroom "has been a good experience."

Jeremy Sawtelle at the Shasta County Office of Education also has seen students benefit from distance learning. "Frankly," he says, "distance learning is working for some of our more historically marginalized groups of students, including students with disabilities," and he's referring to a broader group

their schoolwork, offer suggestions, and provide general support. "It's 20 minutes of individualized conversation that's carved out for that specific student," says Sawtelle. This focused attention, he believes, contributes to greater student engagement. He has heard "numerous stories of students who were not engaged in a classroom setting" and who are now making clear progress in their online studies.

A second reason that some students with disabilities may be more successful in online environments has to do with their social-emotional lives. When they learn at home, says Sawtelle, "they're in a setting where they feel comfortable and safe. The obstacles of that social piece," he says, are removed—"the tension of the lunchroom," for example, "with



of students than just those who are medically fragile. "Many of our students have not been able to be as successful," referring to the structure of in-person classrooms, "ow that they are experiencing a different environment, with new supports and strategies, some of them are able to tell us what they actually need to be successful."

Sawtelle attributes this new-found success in part to the personalized attention that often accompanies online classes. Using video calls, teachers are contacting students one at a time to talk with them about

the questions of 'where do I sit?' and 'who do I sit with?' And they can get so caught up in what just happened to them socially in the hallway that they can't concentrate in class. When you remove that, academically some of these students do so much better."

Sawtelle also points to issues of physical comfort. Students who are learning better at home than they did at school are dismantling the presumption that sitting on a couch rather than on a hard wooden chair discourages learning. Or that allowing growing children to eat

1. Bower, B. (2020). What will life be like after the coronavirus pandemic ends? *Science News*. <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/covid-19-coronavirus-life-after-pandemic-ends-predictions>

whenever they're hungry erodes discipline or concentration.

At the same time, Sawtelle says, "We can't just ignore the social setting. We can't just say they'll be fine working digitally for the rest of their lives. It's not realistic and it's not healthy." He sees two questions as defining "the conversation we need to have": How do we make schools inviting, comfortable, and emotionally supportive places for all students? And how do we provide individualized instruction that leads to student engagement? Answers to these questions, he says, will tell educators "what to change in our school sites and our systems" so that all students can learn and thrive once sites open again.

Distance Learning for Adults

Distance learning has been advantageous for many adults during the pandemic, as well. Elena Bramble, Program Director of the Rowell Family Empowerment, views meetings and programs online as "a good thing" for her organization, and she plans to continue using these new platforms post-pandemic. "We had thought about some of this distance stuff and the virtual things for years," she says, "but we really weren't sure how to go about doing all of it." The pandemic forced their hand and, for her agency, "it has been a great eye-opener."

One significant benefit, she says, is increased parent involvement. At virtual parent meetings during the pandemic, she says, "we're getting around 80 percent participation, which is unheard of." Bramble attributes this higher attendance rate to a few things. "Our parents didn't have to find child care for

their special needs child in order to make this meeting, and they didn't have to drive." When a parent lives in a remote setting with miles to travel to attend a meeting, or in a densely populated city where traffic and parking are daunting issues, not having to drive represents a definite advantage.

In addition, the program was inviting and flexible. Bramble encouraged family members to come to the meetings even "if you don't have another place for your children to be". Bramble describes the accommodating nature of virtual parent meetings. "We had a few kids run in and run out and grab mom's hair and hang all over them," says Bramble, "but the parents were willing to be there and to be okay with it. So I hope we can continue that interaction."

Erin Studer at CHIME Charter school took full advantage of online learning environments. "Nothing ultimately replaces in-person activities," says Studer, "either in school with children or in professional development for adults." But he expects online activities to continue, even when not required. Studer also anticipates more careful calculations for how and when to use virtual platforms. "What is the best use of everyone's time?" he asks. "What are the advantages that we'll be able to leverage as we give everyone maximum flexibility over their schedules? Some of that is to be determined," he says.

Kristin Brooks and Kevin Schaefer of the Supporting Inclusive Practice Project (SIP) agree that learning typically happens best through face-to-face interactions.

The best, however, is not always possible. Professional development providers are discovering ways to create relationships online, where information can still be shared effectively and authentic exchanges can still happen—especially when the only other option is not having them at all. Online sessions also are easily recorded, disseminated, and viewed countless times. Post-pandemic, Brooks and Schaefer are looking forward to using and refining a hybrid model of professional development.

Increased individualization

Many educators, like Preschool Director Joy Garcia, have seen an increased focus "on how we meet student needs because we're having to change modalities" from in-person to online classrooms. "We're being really thoughtful about it right now," she says. More than ever, Garcia is hearing teachers ask such questions as, "Are kids engaged? Are we giving them what they need?" This focus is really lovely," she says, and she hopes it lasts.

Sawtelle has seen a similar trend, particularly through an increased interest in Universal Design for Learning (UDL). He hopes that this sharper focus will not only last, but get stronger. "We have been preaching UDL for years," he says, referring to studies² in neuroscience and brain development that confirm

2. Shi, T. (2019). Neuroscience-informed Pedagogy with UDL Principles for Quality Instructional Design. In W. Kilgore & D. Weaver, D., (Eds.), *Connecting the dots: Improving student outcomes and experience with exceptional instructional design*. Pressbooks. <https://instructionaldesign2improvelearning.pressbooks.com/chapter/chapter-6/>

the importance of teaching through a lens of student variability. “The conversation about UDL is finally at the table,” he says. With so many school sites closed and students learning virtually, “we can’t do a one-size-fits-all right now. And if you do a one-size-fits-all, it’s not going well.” The pandemic, he says, is “breaking that mold.”

Sawtelle does not pretend that a wholesale application of UDL and personalized learning, even in the smallest of school districts, is an easy undertaking. But he has seen the pandemic give teachers an incentive and opportunity to individualize their instruction in ways that they may not have considered before the pandemic. He plans to build on their experience and “keep selling UDL. I couldn’t be more optimistic about the future than I am right now.”

Authentic Partnerships

A third COVID-influenced change that educators hope remains and expands when the pandemic is over involves “more connected partnership with parents,” says Jeanette Anderson, SELPA Director at Poway Unified School District. As parents have had to support their children to learn at home in virtual classrooms, many of those parents are developing a greater appreciation for the challenges that teachers face. At the same time, they are having authentic conversations with teachers about how to solve learning problems. These conversations are leading to “improved communication with parents.

“We talk about the educational environment as a community-based experience that actively engages

all participants,” says Anderson, “My hope is that there will be a greater mutual understanding and a stronger community in which we educate kids, instead of this ‘us vs. them.’”

Attention to Mental Health

Anderson’s sentiment is echoed across sectors. It is no longer “us vs. them,” also says Mara Madrigal-Weiss, director of Student Wellness and Positive School Climate at the San Diego County Office of Education. “It is ‘we.’” The pandemic, she says, “has leveled the playing field. We are all in shared trauma, in shared grief.”

With the stress and disruption that COVID-19 has caused for millions of people, Madrigal-Weiss believes the pandemic may have underscored, more than any other single event, the importance of systems of support for mental health in schools. Continued attention to this topic is one thing that she hopes becomes one of the pandemic’s legacies, along with strengthened efforts to coordinate services.

“We all have these amazing resources and knowledge base,” she says—listing county behavioral health services, law enforcement, and juvenile justice/probation offices, in addition to schools. “We’re all youth-serving agencies. Only together will our systems thrive.”

Education Post-pandemic

Throughout history, plagues have changed cultures—and sometimes for the better. The cholera pandemic in Europe in the early nineteenth century, for example, highlighted the importance of sanitation. Sewer systems, education about the importance of personal hygiene,

and public health efforts in general changed for the better as a result.³ The polio epidemic of the early and mid-twentieth century in the United States paved the way for two important social movements—universal design⁴ and independent living⁵—both of which were led by people who contracted polio, and both of which continue to benefit society at large.

Many parents and educators hope that the ways that schools change in the wake of the pandemic will follow a similar trajectory. Many of these changes have been made especially visible through efforts to serve students with disabilities. And each one of these changes—personalized learning and UDL in every classroom, more widely and conveniently trained and informed teachers and families, increased levels of authentic parent-teacher-community partnerships, coordinated mental health services, and the proliferation of a genuine and heart-felt caring for one another, regardless of role or status or ability—deserves permanent attention long after COVID-19 fades. By making these hopes real, every student will be better served. ◀

3. Davenport, R. J., Satchell, M. & Shaw-Taylor, L. M. W. (2019). Cholera as a ‘sanitary test’ of British cities, 1831–1866. *The History of The Family*, 24(2), pp. 404–438. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6582458/>
4. Whatever Happened to Polio? (n.d.). National Museum of American History. <https://amhistory.si.edu/polio/howpolio/social.htm>
5. Ed Roberts, the Disability Rights Movement and the ADA. (n.d.). Google Arts and Culture. https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/ed-roberts-the-disability-rights-movement-and-the-ada-aapd/VwLy4PBo_Ty9Jg?hl=en

A Vision for Post-Pandemic Schools

When the coronavirus pandemic is over, neither Kristin Brooks nor Michael Roe is hoping schools return to their pre-pandemic versions of normal. Brooks is the executive director of Supporting Inclusive Practices (SIP),¹ a project of the California Department

of Education, Special Education Division. Roe is the executive director of Leadership, Innovation, and Outreach² at the Riverside County Office of Education.

They both would like educators everywhere to “capture this moment and re-

imagine a learning experience that far transcends what we currently have,” says Roe. “What if right now we could begin to create the next step and the next iteration of what learning could be?”

Those next steps would not focus much on learning loss. “Our kids had already been suffering a learning loss” when schools were fully operational, says Brooks. This loss, or at least insufficient student progress, is something both she and Roe believe is tied to

1. Read more about the SIP Project at <https://www.sipinclusion.org/>
2. Read more about Leadership, Innovation, and Outreach at the Riverside County Office of Education at <https://www.rcoe.us/leadership-innovation-outreach/>

the pressure on teachers to cover a defined span of curriculum at an arbitrarily set pace—regardless of how students are faring. “Teachers need permission and support to consider learner variability before delivering instruction,” says Brooks, describing how many educators



feel they need to obtain permission to slow down or adjust instruction so that struggling students can catch up or get on board. “Learning loss hit all students without discrimination during the pandemic, and we need to rethink how we support them all.” Part of this rethinking, she says, calls for “mastery-oriented feedback,³ which is critical before [using] summative assessments⁴” if student are not to be left behind—especially students

3. Read more about *mastery-oriented feedback* at <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/engagement/effort-persistence/mastery-oriented-feedback>
4. Read more about *summative assessments* at <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/engagement/effort-persistence/mastery-oriented-feedback>

with disabilities.

The post-pandemic learning experience that Brooks and Roe imagine involves specific changes that they believe would transform schools for the better. These changes involve developing a laser focus at every grade-level on developing skills, involving students in decisions about their own learning, personalizing (i.e., individualizing) learning⁵ for every child,⁶ and using ongoing formative assessments⁷ with mastery-oriented feedback to inform instruction and intervention.

Entry Point

Roe currently sees education as having “too much focus on compliance” and not enough on the skills that students need, such

5. To learn more about *personalized learning*, visit the Institute for Personalized Learning at <https://education-reimagined.org/resources/institute-personalized-learning/>
6. Ray, R., Sacks, L., & Twyman, J. (2017). *Equity and Personalized Learning: A Research Review*. Council of Chief State School Officers. http://www.ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2017-12/Advancing_Equity_through_Personalized_Learning—A_Research_Overview_0.pdf
7. To learn more about formative assessments, go to <https://www.nctm.org/Research-and-Advocacy/Research-Brief-and-Clips/Benefits-of-Formative-Assessment/>

as critical thinking and reading comprehension. “So the first big thing we learned was that the entry point” for school progress for every student, especially those who are struggling, “was not the content; it was skills. Without them, students can’t master the content.”

In Roe’s experience, teachers, especially those in the later grades, operate from “the assumption that the kids along the way have already learned [essential] skills.” Too often, he says, this assumption is faulty. As a result, many students find themselves falling farther and farther behind as their school years progress.

At one point in his tenure as high school principal, Roe learned that nearly 70 percent of students were entering ninth grade without the prerequisite math skills they needed. “So you have 7 out of 10 kids in class having no idea what’s coming out of the teacher’s mouth. It was a deer-in-the-headlights moment.” In response, he gave his math teachers permission to refocus their teaching away from curriculum pacing and instead to simply make sure that students “understand the skill—do it well and know the ‘why’ behind it.” He hypothetically proposed to his staff: “Act like summer school doesn’t exist.’ And that is a different way of teaching.”

One key remedy, he says, is “our ability to see where’s this kid really at.” But he’s in favor of more than the teacher’s ability to address skills and deficits. “What’s even more important is the kid’s ability” to assess their own learning.

As a school principal, Roe used

Lexile levels⁸ to start inviting this kind of student agency. The Lexile scale is a measurement of a student’s reading ability. “For a kid who leaves school as a senior, the magic number is right around 1250⁹—there they are going to be more apt to be successful at the next level because they’ll be able to comprehend what they read,” whether that next level is in college, trade school, or a great-idea start-up. “The Lexile piece really connected with the kids because they could see throughout the year the progress they were making. We’ve learned that there’s great power in that.”

This “Lexile piece” also demonstrates the importance of paying ongoing attention to each student’s place on the continuum of acquiring skills and knowledge. In short, the use of formative assessments.¹⁰ “The formative assessment piece has never been more important than it is now,” says Roe, with teachers, parents, and students themselves concerned about learning loss. His vision for using these assessments includes, again, student agency, which he says is particularly important for recovering deficits.

8. To learn more about *Lexile levels*, go to <https://thesparklynotebook.com/understanding-the-value-of-lexiles-in-the-classroom-literacy/>

9. Wilkins, C., Hartman, J., Howland, N., & Sharma, N. (2010). How prepared are students for college-level reading? Applying a Lexile-based approach. Institute of Education Sciences. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED513585.pdf>

10. For even more about *formative assessments*, go to <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/108018/chapters/Formative-Assessment@-Why,-What,-and-Whether.aspx>

“When students are able to assess their own learning, and when you as a teacher have created an entry point for that kid and scaffolded the material down,” he says, that creates the stage for “closing two, three, and even four years’ worth of learning loss in one calendar year.” This kind of competency-based, personalized learning approach, says Roe, requires an immediate response to any student who “starts to fall through the cracks. We intervene with that kid and accelerate the student’s learning.

“Once they see how they can improve their skills and move up the competency-based scale, students start seeing the content in a very relevant way. They’ve got voice in how they can improve their learning. And when they understand their process and their status, the energy changes. Then you’ve got ‘em!: engaged and motivated students.”

Students as young as those in second and third grade can help inform their own learning.¹¹ Many know, for example, how they can best learn to spell (e.g., by writing words down, saying them out loud, singing them, having a partner “write” words on their back, etc.). By acknowledging and responding to students’ awareness of what works for them, teachers empower them to be part of their own learning.

“With a focus on the learning and not the teaching,” and with students assessing and monitoring

11. Zeiser, K., Scholz, C., & Cirks, V. (2018, October). *Maximizing student agency: Implementing and measuring student-centered learning practices*. American Institute for Research. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED592084.pdf>

themselves, “you’re starting to re-imagine education,” says Roe. “Then we can actually have conversations about exiting kids from special education.”

Intentional Chaos

Before anything in schools can change, however, Roe thinks that educators at all levels first need to make friends with chaos. “If you’re building capacity, if you’re building leadership, it’s going to be incredibly messy,” he says. “The private sector gets this.” But, in his experience, many in public education have yet to learn the value of the mess that change requires.

Leadership “is not just about compliance and management,” he says. “There needs to be an inspiring aspect to it.” Successful change, Roe says, also requires school leaders to “involve teachers on the front, during, and after critical decisions are being made” and to make sure that they “see their role in making those decisions.”

Roe believes he has a great deal of company in his hope for a post-pandemic shake-up in education. “Many leaders are out there with their teachers saying, ‘Let’s stop this for a second. We know that what we’re doing right now isn’t meeting the needs of about 50 to 60 percent of our kids. So what if we offer a different future that empowers risk?’ This is the hard part for a lot of administrators to understand,” says Roe. “You’ve got to give your teachers permission to take risks. And you’ve got to be right there with them, high-fiving them” and providing encouragement for the next iteration of the effort, whatever the outcomes.

“I don’t believe that teachers fear change.” He sees fear as “not being prepared for change.” And it’s the administrator’s job to prepare them.

Wholesale adoption of personalized learning may lead to massive disruptions in schools, he says. “But if you’ve got the right

kind of leader, who doesn’t pretend that everyone has to be perfect all the time,” then it’s possible. “We’re going to make mistakes. How we respond to those mistakes speaks to how far we’ve come as a community.”

Learning and changing is uncomfortable and disruptive for children.¹² There is some paradoxical comfort—and strength—for adults to know that it’s no different for them. ◀

Additional Resource

Restarting and Reinventing School: Learning in the Time of COVID and Beyond. (2020, August). L. Darling-Hammond, A. Schachner, & A. K. Edgerton. Learning Policy Institute. https://restart-reinvent.learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Restart_Reinvent_Schools_COVID_REPORT.pdf

12. Lichtman, G. (2015, July). *The key to school change: Getting comfortable with discomfort.* Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/getting-comfortable-with-discomfort-grant-lichtman>

