

Chapter 121

Unexpected Opportunities: School Leader Perceptions on the K–12 Transition to Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the nation's schools closed. Students and families were asked to shelter-in-place and the nation's schools were charged with the challenge of educating students through online modalities. Novice and veteran teachers alike needed to quickly assimilate to virtual teaching and online learning modalities. Students were asked to adjust from face-to-face lessons to screenshots of material from within the confines of their homes. Parents were asked to assume the roles of teacher assistant, tutor, and learning support, all while juggling other personal or work challenges. Leading and coordinating all of these efforts in towns and cities across our nation were school leaders, many of whom may have felt lacking in their own skill set related to online teaching. This research study will explore the perceptions of these leaders. Almost 50 North Carolina leaders shared their perspectives on their own experiences. Conclusions from this research will be pertinent in recommending steps and considerations for future events of this magnitude.

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INTRODUCTION

The world of education changed drastically in March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States. At some point during the middle of March, all schools scrambled to move to some form of virtual learning for all of their students. For many colleges and universities, while the move to online learning was challenging, typically faculty at this level have had some level of skill in teaching online (Ceglie & Black, 2020). Recent data from the National Center for Educational Statistics reports that there were nearly seven million students taking online courses in degree granting postsecondary institutions and nearly 70% of all college students have taken at least one online course as of 2018 (United States Department of Education, 2019). There is no specific data regarding how many courses are offered online, but given the number of students taking courses, it is safe to assume that virtual learning is becoming more commonplace in colleges and universities.

This transition to an increased utilization of online learning has not followed the same pattern for what has occurred in K-12 schooling as only approximately 2.7 million students have taken an online course which converts to just under 5% of all students taking any online coursework (Bustamante, 2019). With this small number of K-12 students being enrolled in online learning, it is clear that this is not the norm at this level of schooling. Perhaps more importantly, it would be unlikely to have a significant number of these teachers having had training or experience teaching in virtual environments. In March 2020, ClassTag, who is a free communications tool used by over two million families, conducted a survey of teachers. The sample of 1,247 teachers revealed that almost 57% of them stated that they were not prepared to facilitate online learning (ClassTag, 2020). In addition, they also reported that they did not have the appropriate support. Forty-three percent noted that they alone were responsible for deciding what online tools they would use for their instruction. Given a lack of experience and training, it would be impossible to expect that these teachers would be able to readily find and implement the most appropriate technology tools to support online learning for their students.

There are many areas of life that will be forever changed because of the COVID-19 outbreak, and there is no doubt that education is at the top of the list. Some question what education will look like in future K-12 classrooms as the long-term impact of the move to virtual instruction is unclear. As of this writing, states and school districts across the United States are working to determine how learning will take place as efforts to socially distance students will likely continue until a vaccine is provided to all for the virus. Many districts are examining the possibility for remote instruction to continue through this current school year; however, they are also concerned with the potential detrimental impact of this type of learning on children. While it is difficult to measure the impact on student learning, some reports are emerging that have suggested bleak outcomes the longer that students remain out of the physical school building (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). In one model, researchers hypothesized a return to normal class structure in January 2021 (which did not occur). Even in this model, they predicted that students with high-quality instruction would have lost 3-4 months of learning time and those with low quality instruction (often students from disadvantaged backgrounds) could see losses as high as 11 months. Of course, this assumes a return in January 2021 which has not occurred and that a longer interruption will result in learning losses amassing to over one year (Dorn et al. 2020). Scholars hypothesize that even in quality schools, the transition to online instruction hurts many students as teachers and students learn to transition to this new mode for learning. In schools with low quality instruction, less qualified teachers coupled with lack of parental support has hurt learning for many students. In addition, to make matters

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