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Redesign Resiliency: Kansas Secondary Redesign Schools Navigating COVID-19

Jay Scott

“All K-12 school buildings or facilities, whether public or private, used for student instruction are to close and cease in-person instruction until May 29, 2020.”

This announcement came from Governor Laura Kelly on March 17th, 2020, in response to the spread of COVID-19. As soon as those words came out of Governor Kelly’s mouth, you could nearly hear the collective gasp of every person across the state, most especially educators, students, and families. This executive order made Kansas the first state in the nation to close school buildings until the end of the school year. It was a drastic, courageous, and controversial decision made by Governor Kelly, via close consultation with the Kansas Commissioner of Education, Dr. Randy Watson. The decision was viewed by many inside and outside the state as an overreaction to the pandemic, just another example of government overreach, and jeopardizing the education of students while putting undue pressure on families during a crisis. The critics weren’t aware of all the deliberations ahead of the decision, including consulting with the country’s top health official, Dr. Anthony Fauci, as well as all county health officers and school officials all across the state. Over time, the Governor’s decision proved to be a wise decision as virtually all school buildings in the United States closed soon thereafter and remained closed throughout the rest of the school year.

An announcement of this magnitude for schools obviously was unprecedented and left educators across the state scrambling to completely pivot to a remote learning model. The purpose of this article is to share the experiences of secondary schools that are part of the Kansans Can School Redesign initiative as they navigated through a remote learning environment during the last quarter of the 2019-2020 school year. Those experiences will be in the context of three questions posed to secondary educators engaged in the School Redesign initiative:

- 1) In what ways did the partaking of the Kansans Can School Redesign affect your school's/district's transition to Continuous Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) (A) Before the pandemic, what specific redesign strategies was your school/district able to continue employing during Continuous Learning that enhanced student learning? (B) During the time school buildings were closed, in what ways did the strategies noted in your response for (A) help students to continue to learn and grow?
- 3) As you reflect back on the last quarter of the 2019-2020 school year, what makes you most proud about your staff, your students, and your families?

The Governor’s announcement to close school buildings for the rest of the school year came in the middle of the week Kansas schools were initially closed due to COVID-19. The previous week (March 9 - 13), the Governor had announced that Kansas schools would close temporarily the following week (March 16 - 20), which happened to coincide with approximately 60% of Kansas schools’ Spring Break week. The idea was to disinfect school buildings extensively that week and hopefully students could return safely the last week of March. As it turned out, the coronavirus had a different idea. Over the weekend of March 14th and 15th, the spread of the

virus picked up speed and intensity, leading the Governor, Dr. Watson, and other top officials to gather that weekend and make the decision to close school buildings for the rest of the school year. While the Governor was preparing for the pending announcement, Dr. Watson, who had been in daily contact with superintendents, reached out to a group of Kansas-Teachers-of-the-Year to ask them to band together and form a larger taskforce to develop guidance for schools during this time of closure. This was the beginning of what was referred to as the Continuous Learning Taskforce. Dr. Watson contacted these educators on the weekend and by Wednesday, March 18th, a nearly 80-page document of guidance, titled Continuous Learning (CL), was produced by a taskforce of approximately 40 educators from all across Kansas. Even though the Kansas State Department of Education's (KSDE) brand was on the guidance, it was created and produced by current teachers and administrators in Kansas, in close consultation with the KSDE. Research by Carr & Walton (2014), found that participants "who were primed to act collaboratively stuck at their task 64% longer than their solitary peers, whilst also reporting higher engagement levels, lower fatigue levels and a higher success rate" as cited in Gaskell (2017). This collaborative spirit and culture amongst the educational community in Kansas was, and remains, a significant advantage as all schools faced an unprecedented, uncertain future.

Governor Kelly made her announcement on Tuesday, March 17th, and KSDE, due to the incredible, tireless effort of the CL Taskforce, was able to release the CL Guidance on Thursday, March 19th, to allow schools as much time as possible to plan for "school," albeit with all buildings closed, starting the following week. The guidance was as comprehensive as possible, with topics ranging from how to establish a purpose and objectives for student support to a sample five-day professional learning plan to prepare for a remote learning environment. Organically, three themes emerged from the guidance: 1. The concept of "less is more" in regard to the standards being learned during this time; 2. Extend grace to all parties, including yourself; and 3. Focus on teacher-student relationships first and foremost. These themes became the calling card for the CL guidance, serving to galvanize our schools across the state in as unified an approach to student learning as possible.

Soon after the CL guidance was released, I began meeting with secondary schools involved in the Kansans Can School Redesign project in my KSDE leadership role. We generally met once a month pre-pandemic but stepped up our meetings to twice per week due to the pace of change during the pandemic. As those facilitated conversations evolved, one theme emerged: schools involved in the redesign project were making a fairly smooth transition to teaching and learning while school buildings were closed. When surveyed about this theme, the following responses emerged from staff in Kansas secondary redesign schools:

1) In what ways did going through the Kansans Can School Redesign process affect your school's/district's transition to Continuous Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The biggest part of the redesign process that helped us during the pandemic was the purposeful focus we made on having a strong culture among our staff. From the beginning of redesign, we understood that the culture we had as a staff would be tested and must be strong in order to withstand the big changes made through redesign. After going into emergency distant learning, it was clear our culture had helped us and was something we were able to lean on as we went through this unexpected change.

Brandi Fowler, Teacher - Eisenhower Middle School (Liberal Public Schools)

I believe it affected our response in one specific way; the culture of change and resilience we had built through our redesign process these past three years. Our staff, students, and parents had already grown accustomed to our "Change on the Fly" mentality that has dominated our redesign process. Making quick, and in some cases, radical changes based on data and success factors, and implementing those changes immediately, has been a staple of our process. So, when faced with the need to revamp our delivery, expectations, and curriculum our staff did not flinch, our students put their heads down and went to work, and families had a sense of comfort knowing we could and would develop a plan that would work.

Curtis Nightingale, Principal - Bennington JSHS (Bennington Public Schools)

Overall, I think our staff and students were able to adapt to the change quickly and with less stress than districts who had not experienced the redesign process. Staff were able to make quick decisions about how to tackle the issues at hand because that is something we have done often in the last two years. We also have a strong bond between staff - forged through the redesign process. These bonds allow our staff members to lean on one another when they faced frustrations and difficulties throughout Continuous Learning. Our administration was great at leading the change because they had led great change through redesign. While Continuous Learning wasn't something they had done before, they were used to challenging their staff with novel problems and working with them to find good solutions. For the last two years, we have been working to instill an ownership of learning in our students through redesign. Throughout this process, students have learned to identify what they need in their education and communicate that to the adults who are there to serve them in the process. Not all of our students flourished during Continuous Learning - it was a struggle for some - but, even students who struggled to compete work or attend virtual classes owned up to their responsibility in their learning.

Whitney Linenberger, Teacher & Pilot - Dighton JSHS (Dighton Public Schools)

- 2) (A) Before the pandemic, what specific redesign strategies was your school/district able to continue employing during Continuous Learning that enhanced student learning?
(B) During the time school buildings were closed, in what ways did the strategies noted in your response for (A) help students to continue to learn and grow?**

We were not only able to continue using numerous redesign strategies in our Continuous Learning Plan, but also, they became the catalyst in our ability to quickly adapt to a second order change that had to be made in a matter of days. For example, many staff members were able to continue to team-teach content similar to how they did in large group instruction. This helped to share the workload so that there was also time for individual intervention and check-ins for students. Another example is personalized learning time that is built into students' schedules. Students had already been trained and expected to manage their time more effectively and to plan ahead to complete assignments and seek assistance if needed. Last, with a greater focus on the social/emotional health of our students and the collaboration that we have done with our school social worker and counselors, staff was attuned to identifying underlying needs of students and colleagues and then knowing to contact the social worker and counselors as resources to provide students and staff with the support that they needed for their mental well-

being. And, while these strategies, along with several others, were quite helpful and definitely noted by staff, students, and parents, we had our fair share of struggles to make contact with students and to help them get the resources they needed. However, our entire staff has developed such a roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-to-work mentality throughout our redesign process that they worked relentlessly together to do whatever it took to reach our students.

Ashley Kappelman, Principal - Liberal High School (Liberal Public Schools)

We focused a lot on design thinking and getting our kids to think differently. We also connected with many outside partnerships and allowed teachers autonomy, which was also very helpful. They felt like they had the ability to make decisions on helping kids, giving grace and fully committing to connection with the individual students. We used student choice, student voice and put all our focus on the social-emotional state of the students while still being able to help them learn academically during this time. Part of redesign is focusing on the student and not the system. This is what our teachers did.

Jarred Fuhrman, Principal - Basehor-Linwood High School (Basehor-Linwood Public Schools)

3) As you reflect back on the last quarter of the 2019-2020 school year, what makes you most proud about your staff, your students, and your families?

The fearlessness displayed by both our students and staff. Teachers made many efforts to continue engagement at a middle school level through lunch times on zoom, trivia nights, reverse parades, dropping materials and prizes on students' porches. Teachers quickly had ideas of how to move forward, and weren't afraid to reflect on what was working, what was not, and to make pivots to meet student needs.

Inge Esping, Assistant Principal - McPherson Middle School (McPherson Public Schools)

Our people worked their tails off to try to support students and families from principals all the way to food service. I am so proud of the work and more importantly, how seriously the majority of our people took this task on. We are NOT perfect, but we served students and families well. That was reflective in the majority of the responses we received from students and parents.

Fred Van Ranken, Superintendent - Twin Valley Public Schools

As these secondary redesign schools, along with all other schools across Kansas, adapted to a tremendously challenging learning environment with very little time to prepare, they collectively leaned into the challenge, relying heavily on what they had learned and experienced throughout their school redesign effort. One term a few school leaders used to describe their staff and students during this time was resilient. According to Tough (2016), "one of the most important forces shaping the development of skills like resilience or grit turns out to be a surprising one: stress." If there is one emotion redesign schools experienced collectively as they progressed through the redesign process, it would be stress. When you are challenged to rethink and reimagine every aspect of school, and then to actually implement and continually improve a new system of teaching and learning, there are naturally many anxious moments full of stress. The redesign schools had already experienced high levels of stress by the time COVID-19 showed up and so, in some ways, they were more prepared to deal with the magnitude of change and its associated stress.

Another theme present in the responses from the secondary redesign school leaders was their students being self-directed in their learning. As redesign schools focused on personalizing learning and on social-emotional skill development pre-pandemic, this focus turned out to be advantageous during the remote learning environment all schools were in during the spring of 2020. Redesign secondary schools had already made the shift from a teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered classroom, with high levels of inquiry and student voice and choice in what, how, and at what pace a student learns. As Fullan (2007) states, “When adults think of students, they think of them as the potential beneficiaries of change. They think of achievement, results, skills, attitudes, and jobs. They rarely think of students as participants in a process of change and organizational life.” Through the redesign process, schools engaged the students in thinking about the transformational changes that needed to take place to redesign the system. By following this practice, students were empowered to not only participate in the system-level change effort but also begin to exert autonomy and “own” their learning more in and out of the classroom. This student empowerment paid dividends during the remote learning environment caused by COVID-19. Students were already practiced at being self-directed so their transition to online learning was much more seamless.

Lastly, a theme of schools utilizing the design-thinking process to navigate the transition from on-site to remote learning was evident. As schooling has become an increasingly complex, due to expansive technology, and a much more personalized experience, schools have begun turning to using a design-centric approach that puts students at the center when considering system-level changes. Kolko (2015) states, “Design thinking, first used to make physical objects, is increasingly being applied to complex, intangible issues, such as how a customer experiences a service.” If ever there was a complex, intangible issue, it was trying to educate students via online learning only during the spring of 2020 in Kansas. In the Kansas Can School Redesign project, design thinking is the basis for the process of planning, implementing, and then continually improving a newly redesigned system. Schools empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test solutions all while keeping students at the center of their thinking. Having practiced deeply in using design thinking during the redesign process, the secondary redesign schools were able to re-ignite their thinking when it came to developing a new model in response to the closure of school buildings.

In conclusion, the secondary redesign schools responded as well as can be expected to the greatest adaptive challenge in education in most people’s lifetimes. Staff and students modeled resiliency in the face of what seemed like insurmountable odds at the beginning of this challenge, and that resiliency, developed earlier through the redesign process, carried them through the remainder of the school year. Students in secondary redesign schools showed high levels of self-directed learning and engagement, due to the paradigm shift from an adult-centered to a student-centered environment where students had more voice and choice at the system and classroom level before the pandemic caused schools to close. Design thinking is a fluid, customer-centric approach redesign schools had adopted to transform their system. This process was tailor-made for having to move from an on-site learning model to a remote learning model in one week’s time. Redesign schools were able to use design thinking to respond to a rapid, highly-adaptive, and forced change. Using the lessons learned from school redesign, secondary schools were able

to accomplish what some thought impossible; keeping students engaged and learning without stepping inside of the school.

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