



Lessons Learned from a COVID-19 World:

MSBA Q&A with Board Chairs and Superintendents

On **June 2 and June 4**, MSBA hosted a series of moderated discussions featuring superintendents and school board members from across the state who each shared their experiences and lessons learned over the past three months. They shared district success stories, challenges, unexpected opportunities, and what they are doing to prepare for the upcoming 2020-21 school year.

Introduction to the Panelists:

Paula O'Loughlin, Moderator, MSBA Associate Director of Board Development

Ryan Butkowski, School Board Chair of Sauk Rapids-Rice Public Schools

Dianne Mathews, School Board Chair of Hermantown Community Schools

Nancy Denzer, School Board Chair of Winona Area Public Schools

Kelsey Waits, School Board Chair of Hastings Public Schools

Cassidy Bjorklund, School Board Chair of Moorhead Area Public Schools

Dr. Matt Hillmann, Superintendent of Northfield Public Schools

Julie Critz, Superintendent of Alexandria Public Schools

Dr. Noel Schmidt, Superintendent of Virginia Public Schools

Dr. Teri Staloch, Superintendent of Prior Lake-Savage Area Public Schools

Dr. Aldo Sicoli, Superintendent of Roseville Area Schools

What are one or two of the biggest lessons you have learned in the past three months?

- Consistent and frequent communication with all stakeholder is crucial. Everyone is under stress and wants to know what is happening. It is important to have grace and patience with others. Share information as it becomes available to lessen the burden being placed on us all.
- Personal relationships between students and staff are more important than we ever knew. There is no substitute for being face to face and greeting students with a smile and hug.
- Minnesota public schools are the most efficient in the country. We can adapt and change instructional models much faster than we anticipated, and as a result, we've likely advanced education much faster than it would have happened under normal circumstances.

What have been the challenges, successes, and unexpected opportunities during this time?

- **Challenges:**

- Moving to a distance learning model has disproportionately affected marginalized students, including students of color, low-income students, and student with disabilities. Many students do not have access to their own electronic devices or the internet. Parents and guardians may not have the wherewithal to assist their students in learning or supervise their student to ensure participation. For other students, closing schools has taken away their daily refuge. Instead they are stuck in the chaos happening at home, causing a decline in their mental health as well as their academic progress. Special education students and students with behavior disorders have been deprived of the daily one-on-one assistance they received in the classroom.
- Adapting to distance learning has been a continual learning experience. The pace and scope of the work has been exhausting for the entire staff and families. While some students are thriving working remotely, a lot of students are struggling. Some schools are using multiple online learning platforms which can be difficult for families. It has been essential to work with staff and families to make sure the needs of students are being met.
- Working remotely has shed a light on the importance of the one-on-one personal connections between staff and students. Teachers miss their kids, and kids miss their teachers. Seeing one another online is great, but nothing can replace a knowing smile and comforting hug.
- It has been difficult to answer the bombardment of questions coming from the community about things school districts have little to no control over. Districts provide as much information as possible, but everyone is at the mercy of the state. Educators like to be visionary, not reactive. Thus, it can be frustrating for all involved to wait for answers.
- **Successes and Unexpected Opportunities:**
 - Entire staffs have risen to the occasion and banded together to deliver quality childcare, nutrition, and education to the students in their districts. People have stepped up and performed duties they are not accustomed to performing, and have done so with grace, humility, and a service mindset.
 - While graduations may not have looked the same, some schools found the graduates enjoyed the experience nonetheless, and plan on incorporating some new traditions into their celebrations.
 - Teachers are finding more time and ways to collaborate, and administrators are finding more time to connect with their staff. Instead to traveling to different buildings across the community, people are meeting virtually and saving the stress, time, and money involved in travel.
 - Families and communities are invested in education like never before. Whether it is responding quickly to a survey, volunteering to help deliver meals, or helping make sign to celebrate graduates, the community is showing they care and are willing to help.
 - For some districts, attendance, student engagement and participation, and academic success is on the rise. Students are enjoying the flexible timelines, self-paced schedule, lack of micromanagement, diminished social pressures, and ability to learn in their own space. It is demonstrating to districts that school can look different and still be effective. It has become an opportunity to transform schools from a “one-size-fits-all” model and learn what is working for students. Districts are connecting differently, assessing differently, and hearing different voice. Now they are taking everything they have learned and figuring out how to implement it in the classroom.
 - While teachers have always loved their students, this experience has given them a unique perspective and better understanding of their students’ home environments. They now have more empathy for the daily struggles and stresses their students are facing.



The impact of COVID-19 has brought to light the many gaps and inequities that exist in our education system. What are the specific gaps that have become magnified in your district and what is your board doing to address those inequities?

- Many students are having a difficult time having their basic needs met, like getting nutritious meals. To meet this need, most schools sent home surveys to determine where and to whom meals need to be delivered. Transportation departments and support staff have also been heroes in this area. Some districts are providing curbside pickup for meals at each student's home, others are stopping along their traditional bus route, and some are setting up meal pickup stations across the community.
- One of the biggest inequities brought to light during the school closures has been the lack of access to reliable internet. Districts have helped students find hot spots in their area, sent hot spot devices home, identified areas with free wi-fi, or worked with nonprofits to help families pay for internet service. However, these solutions only work if broadband is accessible where the students live. Some students live in the country or in areas where reliable internet just is not available.
- The lack of access to personal electronic devices has been eye opening. Even if the family has access to one or two devices, there are still struggles over how to prioritize who uses them and when. Mom needs the laptop for her job, brother is using the tablet for his remote science class, and little sister is stuck waiting until someone else is done. It makes it impossible to have a consistent schedule of classes for students to attend online. Some districts have been lucky enough to provide devices for every student. Other districts sent home surveys to determine if families had devices at home that could be used so the school's limited resources could be distributed where there is a need.
- COVID-19 has put different stresses on different families. Some parents can work and other cannot. Some students have family members either sick with COVID-19 or that have succumbed to the virus. Some students have adequate supervision at home and other have chaos. Issues like these have created huge social-emotional gaps between students. To help overcome these issues, districts are providing mental health and social worker services when possible. Other schools are ensuring that students are being held harmless for things outside of their control. This can include flexibility in attendance requirements and grading practices. Some districts are making one-time reductions in graduation requirements not required by the state.
- Families where English is spoken as a second language or not spoken at all is another marginalized group affected by COVID-19. During this time parents have become the teachers and are struggling to navigate online learning. Adding a language barrier only exasperates the struggles. Bilingual employees have become essential to aid ESL families. These employees have done home visits and connected with families online to explain the online learning platforms and learning expectations.

How has your board team communicated with one another, students, staff, and the community?

Common methods of communication

- Live-streaming meeting on local TV and the internet
- Recording meetings and posting on website
- Mass text messages and emails
- Surveys to all stakeholders
- Webinars
- Shared online documents (for staff)
- Weekly newsletters from teachers
- Speaking on the radio
- Recorded messages to students



No matter the communication method the district is using, keep in mind:

- You can never communicate with stakeholders enough.
- Constant communication between the superintendent and board is essential.
- Boards should let the superintendent and staff manage daily operations and focus on asking questions, staying informed, and supporting the staff.
- Emphasize transparency, clear messaging, and building trust with stakeholders.
- Practice using new platforms before using them with the public.
- Translate documents into common languages used by families in the district.
- The board and superintendent should have a communication plan and speak with one voice.
- Give the public access whenever possible but be careful how you let the public participate in board meetings. (See tips in [MSBA's Guide to School Board Meetings by Telephone Conference or Other Electronic Means](#)).

What are the issues that are top of mind for you as you look ahead to next school year?

- Transportation is going to be a huge problem. What if the students come back to come in shifts requiring multiple trips back and forth along the bus routes each day? What if the students come back to school on alternate days requiring the buses to transport students to school and meals to students at home? Districts already struggle to find bus drivers and increasing routes will only increase the problems.
- Developing plans for all possible learning models including remote learning, having all students at school, and hybrid models. Each scenario has its own obstacles to overcome and preparing for all eventualities is going to be a challenge.
- Increasing broadband and technology access so students are prepared on distance learning in the fall.
- The budget, the budget, the budget. While the amount of funding from the state is not supposed to change for the upcoming school year, the distribution times may differ from when they were in the past. Districts also must plan for the loss of funds from activities and meals.
- With the current 9:1 student to teacher ratio recommendation, an increase in staff may be needed. This will have obvious implications on the budget, but also causes logistical issues of where to put everyone so they have enough room to be socially distant; but districts do not want to over hire and have staff with nothing to do if the schools close again.
- Contending with the inevitable long-term effect on academic and social-emotional development. The learning loss is going to be great. Many districts are taking the summer to reevaluate their online learning plans and make improvements where needed. This includes increasing relationship building while working remotely. Students this year were given time to get to know their teacher in person. Students in the fall will not have that opportunity.

What policy changes – whether at the local, state, or federal level, do you think are necessary to ensure we can create the very best conditions for our students?

- It is more important than ever to expand broadband so every student across the state can access quality, consistent internet.
- Reevaluate education standards, seat-based requirements, and graduation credits through an equity lens and determine what a student really needs to know to be successful.
- Allow districts more flexibility in transferring funds including designated funds.
- Allow districts the flexibility to have non-licensed employees or employees licensed outside of a given



subject area teach students under the supervision of a licensed and qualified teacher.

- Reevaluate student discipline laws and policies that result in disparate outcomes for marginalized students.

What advice would you give your fellow schools board members and superintendents?

- This is the time for school boards, administrators, and staffs to work as a team, to build trust, and to have unity of voice. No one can get through this without the help of their colleague. So, remember everyone cares and everyone is working hard. Give everyone a little grace, patience, and empathy.
- This is an opportunity for schools to be creative and think outside-of-the-box to make things better for all students. COVID-19 has shown districts their faults and inequities, but it has also revealed strengths and ways schools can improve. This is a great time to collaborate, share ideas, and learn from one another. Minnesota schools, working together, can close the gaps and eliminate the inequities that exist today.

