

Roundtable News

The Trauma of School Closings



The Roundtable's first webinar was highly successful as a full house showed up to explore the pain of school closings.

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During an April 28 webinar on school closings, four Roundtable members from very different districts shared their experiences: **Morcease Beasley** of Clayton County, Georgia, a district with 55,000 students, 90% of them students of color with all students receiving free- or reduced-price meals. **Susan Enfield** of Highline Schools, south of Seattle, in which 10,000 of 18,000 students list a language other than English as their first language. **Christian Elkington** of Deer Isle, Maine, a small, rural, coastal district of 1,000 students, in which a lobster factory is the major employer and about half of the students receive free- or reduced-price meals. And **Michelle Reid** of Northshore schools, north of Seattle, with 23,000 students located in a high-tech hub.

Deciding to Close

Reid was one of the - if not *the* - first superintendents in the country to shut down her district, closing on March 5 after receiving multiple reports of the exposure of members of her students' households to the virus. With 26 of her 34 schools impacted in some way by an exposed or infected family member, and with little helpful input from state and county public health agencies, Reid said she made the decision to close after two volunteers at a school serving students with pre-existing medical conditions tested positive for the virus.

Making that decision earlier than most may also have given Reid's district more time to prepare. After consulting with community members, Northshore closed for one day on March 3 to offer educators a session on online learning, allowed students

back the next day to permit teachers to explain the situation to their students, then shut down on March 5 and began running online learning programs by the following Monday.

For Enfield, of Highline, the last day of school was a week later that Reid's, with the district closing on March 12. She too, wanted to provide a day for teachers to talk to students about what was happening.

Beasley, of Clayton County, benefited from early preparation also. The district made the decision to close schools a week before closure actually happened.

Elkington of Deer Isle perhaps had more time to prepare than the other three since ample warning from the west coast filtered into his relatively isolated region well before the virus appeared in the area. He was able to give his staff professional days to prepare for the closure, and even purchased cellphones for their use starting two weeks before the closure.



Morcease Beasley of Clayton County, Georgia

Meals

Each of these leaders described focused efforts to make sure that students' nutritional needs would not be compromised by school shutdowns. It is likely that the nation was surprised to learn how reliant on schools many families are to ensure adequate nutrition for their children. Highline began providing meals in early March and by the end of April was distributing over 600 meals weekly, planning to increase to about 1,000. Clayton County had served 210,000 meals by the time the webinar was held. Even tiny Deer Isle was prepared to distribute meals on the first day of its closure, March 13. During the webinar, Theresa Rouse informed participants that her Joliet, Illinois primary school district had distributed more than 40,000 meals.

Distance Learning

Northshore, with a large number of its parents employed by major tech companies headquartered in or near its district, was probably in a better position to begin online learning than most of the rest of the country. Donations from those companies helped transition the district into the current learning environment. T-Mobile provided hundreds of wi-fi hotspots to get students connected, and the district was able to hand out over 4,000 internet-capable devices. Reid, who was the subject of much media attention after her closure decision, understands Northshore's good fortune. "Many other districts don't have the resources we do, and I tried in each interview to talk about those inequalities. In fact, coronavirus didn't create them, it just illuminated them."

Other districts had more ground to cover. Clayton County has fewer technology resources to fall back on, but it

currently has 50% of its students connected and was able to issue devices to students taking advanced placement exams this spring. Highline has been able to distribute over 12,000 devices and 100 hotspots.

For Enfield, the virus has highlighted inequities, particularly broadband internet access. "Distance learning is going to be a part of our world moving forward in some way, shape or form," she said. "We're not going to snap back in fall to in-person learning. I predict that we're going to have some kind of hybrid or blended model . . . Internet access has to be a part of basic public education. Period."

Elkington's district has benefited from its small size, not only in its ability to do things like purchase cellphones for its staff, but by feeling that its staff better understands student's individual needs.



Michelle Reid of Northshore Schools, Washington

Wellness for School Leaders

Amidst the stresses of this unprecedented situation for schools, Elkington embodies the hard work and sacrifice required of the country's educational leaders. A member of his family has a pre-existing condition that makes her vulnerable to the virus. So, to carry out his duties (which require ongoing meetings with community members, staff and officials) Elkington has had to isolate himself. He had seen his family only twice in the ten weeks prior to the panel discussion.

For his staff, he's made school psychologists available and is emphasizing connectedness, using Zoom to allow educators to check in with each other frequently.



Susan Enfield of Highline Schools, Washington

For Enfield, "Health and family first." In collaboration with its teachers' union, Highline has launched a wellness campaign, using weekly videos to remind staff to care for themselves, and has partnered with an organization that promotes wellness for teachers, with educational resources available on stress relief. Enfield has been using those resources herself, both to relieve her own stress and to model for her staff. Social workers and other support staff are available, as well.

"Next year, the four things we have to keep focus on: reading, writing, math, and social emotional learning because of the loss that we're going to have over the next several months," Elkington said.

Enfield agreed. "I worry about the toll it will take on our teachers and staff when they see how much many of our students have lost. That's is going be very, very hard on them, because our teachers . . . care about our students."

Advice for Others

Communication was the key to maintaining good relationships, all the panelists stressed. Elkington reached out to his board early and held special meetings. Reid stays in touch with her board constantly and has brought union officials into her circle of close advisor's. "If you don't trust each other, then everything takes forever."

Enfield, who has been at her district for eight years, noted that longevity was a key to her success. She also thought now, with the upheaval caused by the pandemic, would be a productive time to re-evaluate the existing system and push for changes that would improve outcomes for students.

Elkington stressed the importance of confidence in your decisions: "I would say that you really need to trust yourself and your gut."

Beasley wants to see changes come from the crisis. "Make a decision to be better after this pandemic," he urged. "If this situation has shown us anything, it's shown us that we've got to be a voice for the voiceless, and we've got to make decisions to be better communities and to be better school systems after this pandemic. I keep asking the question, what would be the point of all of this if we're not better after it?"

Or as Chris Elkington likes to say: "When the world says, 'Give up,' Hope whispers, 'Try one more time.'"



Christian Elkington, Deer Isle, Maine

Here and There

Twitter

Follow the Roundtable on Twitter (@natsupers) Here are some "tweet" highlights of recent months:

What's Behind an Eye-Popping Drop in Education Jobs, and What's Next? Layoffs of hourly Workers big part of the explanation.

<https://t.co/XBL6zNzSnu>

CNN: Black-White inequality in 6 charts

<https://t.co/WyG3a7uRjf>

In England: Decade of progress in tackling pupil disadvantage 'wiped out' due to coronavirus.

<https://t.co/gGthde8xoK>

Educators call for schools to be 'safe havens' against racism

<https://t.co/nDQXZgNpwD>

Excellent statement from PDK International about brutality directed at Black Americans and educators' responsibility to promote social justice. <https://tinyurl.com/y9n4w3l4>

Superintendents to Vendors: Cool It! <https://conta.cc/3gwz5IG>

The complex question of re-opening schools. <https://tinyurl.com/ycheswaf>

Memorial Day: Let us all take a minute today to reflect on the sacrifices of the men and women who gave that "last full measure of their devotion" to protect the United States.

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Projected Teaching Reductions, Assuming 15% Cut in State School Contributions

Source: Learning Policy Institute (<https://tinyurl.com/yc3wnvp2>)

Largest Teaching Force Reductions, by State

Based on a 15% Reduction in State Contributions to Education Revenue

	Estimated Lost Teaching Positions	Teaching Force Lost to Cuts (%)
California	49,197	13.8%
New York	21,542	9.2%
Texas	17,596	4.2%
Washington	13,862	19.5%
Illinois	13,279	7.6%
Michigan	12,561	12.9%
Minnesota	12,231	20.5%
New Jersey	10,023	7.1%
Georgia	9,999	7.4%
Pennsylvania	9,366	6.4%