

Roundtable News

Whiplash and the Roller Coaster of Reopening

What began as an insightful October 5 conversation involving three superintendents from different districts representing different approaches to reopening quickly turned into an equally fascinating discussion of the plight of schools amidst the greatest public health crisis in a century.

Laurie Dent (r), Sunner-Bonney Lake Schools in Washington — 10,000 students in a middle-class, bedroom community that is 70% white; **Gregory Hutchings, Jr.** (below) of Alexandria City Public Schools, Virginia — 16,000 students with home languages from 120 different nations and a 61% FRDC count; and **Matthew Montgomery**, (following page) from Revere Local Schools in Ohio — a rural, suburban, high-wealth district enrolling some 2,700



hundred students—set the table. Then some two dozen Roundtable superintendents sat down to take part in the meal.

The three districts have taken different approaches. “We are all in, for all students, five days a week,” reported Montgomery. Knock on wood, he reported, things have gone relatively smoothly.

“We’ve been on a roller coaster,” said Dent. “We were ready to open on a hybrid model in September, but the county health department closed us down.” Again ready to reopen just the week before the Roundtable meeting, schools were closed when local forest fires threatened community homes. “We are getting off the roller coaster. The ride is over for us. The whiplash effect was too stressful for our families. They needed some predictability.” The district remains fully virtual.

ACPS, according to Hutchings spent the summer sorting through its options before reluctantly deciding that only virtual schooling made sense for at least

the first quarter. The reports of the working committees allowed the administration to explain its recommendations to the board. “We know virtual learning is not the best environment for our students,” said Hutchings soberly. “It’s not the best option. But it’s the most useful and feasible.”



That conversation launched a discussion that revolved around eight big issues challenging schools and school leaders.

1. Health Departments Overwhelmed. “If you haven’t lived through contact tracing yet,” advised **Eric Byrne** of Rye, New York, “you really need a plan. In my experience, health departments are completely overwhelmed and unable to do it for you.”

2. Confusing Advice. At the same time, Byrne warned, “The guidance we are receiving is unreliable at best.” He was echoing an earlier comment from Matt Montgomery: “I struggle with the different recommendations coming through. The advice from WHO, CDC, and American pediatricians all differs. Then we have the Ohio Department of Health and 88 local health agencies. The advice doesn’t jive.”

3. Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner. “One of the things that keeps me going is conversations like this,” commented **Jody Goeler** of Hamden Schools, Connecticut. “This is lonely work. In the district, there are few I can share the challenges with. I run to release the stress and some days I want to just keep running.” Goeler’s comments opened into the need for self-care. “Recently, I’ve seen real son-of-a-gun superintendents reduced to tears,” said **Chris Elkington** of Deer Island, Maine. “I’m talking about tough people that I had thought would be unbothered by anything.” It turned out that Dent,

Hutchings, and Montgomery all use jogging as therapy. “The world’s been turned upside down in a year,” said Hutchings. “As professionals we seek perfection, but we can’t predict what tomorrow will bring. We need to give ourselves some grace.”

“The notion of group therapy with local and national colleagues is a critical piece of self-care,” concluded **Theresa Rouse** of Joliet, Illinois.

4. Real Time Leadership Required. This is a crisis requiring “real time leadership,” insisted Dent. The real world intrudes relentlessly. Forest fires in her community meant that “some lost cars. Some lost homes. Some lost everything they had. People were evacuated. We were dealt a different hand. Nobody gives you a playbook for that. We had to get families back on their feet.”



Carla Santorno of Tacoma, Washington, spoke of the killing of a young Black man in the community as a huge issue in the city. Meanwhile, activists lobbied to get Woodrow Wilson’s name off a local high school because of his racist past.

And then the district had to investigate charges that it had hired a Proud Boy. “When I wake up,” said Santorno, “my first thought is, ‘Okay, are we on the front page of the paper today?’ ”

The coronavirus doesn’t offer hall passes excusing schools from the ongoing social and environmental challenges the United States faces.

5. From Educational Institution to Social Services Agency. “Back in March,” said Goeler, “we went from being an educational institution to being a social service agency. That way we could ensure our kids are fed tens of thousands of meals and they had the technology they needed. None of us ever imagined we’d be providing hotspots and paying cable bills and doing what was required to keep kids engaged.” Communities, states, and the feds need to face up to the reality that districts have put themselves in big financial holes to meet this emergency.

6. Staff Coming from Outside District. It’s easy to focus on people within the district and worry only about the ZIP codes for which you are responsible,

pointed out Hutchings. That presents challenges aplenty in his highly diverse district.

“Two thirds of our staff come from communities outside the city. That means that everything that is happening in the communities bordering our district has a ripple effect. These other divisions also have an impact on how and whether our schools can open.”

7. Give Ourselves a Hand on Technology. Unbridled pride in how much progress schools have made with technology since March suffused the meeting. “A positive for us is our distance-learning model,” said Dent. “I’m proud of what we’re offering our students now.” Said Rouse: “We’ve spent more money on technology this year than I can shake a stick at.” “Remote learning? What we’re delivering today versus what we delivered in the Spring is a different world,” reported Byrne.

8. Get Ready for the Second Wave. At least one superintendent who had been reading his history worried about a second wave arriving in the winter.

“I can totally sense the second wave is beginning to trickle in,” said Byrne. “We are repeating exactly the same mistakes that we made with the 1918 pandemic. Ignoring experts. Arguing about masks. Politicians pretending the problem will solve itself. A second spike was deadly. We will have another spike.” With Thanksgiving approaching, virus infections setting new records nationally, and the school roller coaster rumbling into life again, Byrne’s October words were prophecy.

Applause and Prayers

Christine Mahoney, recently retired from East Granby Schools in Connecticut offered a beautiful and touching final word. She said:

“I first have to applaud you, individually and collectively. This work that we do is tough enough in good times. It is overwhelming and very draining in these times. I’m glad I’m not in office any longer.

“I think about all of you . . . all the time . . . every day. This is just too much. Too many things have come together in a destructive way. It’s destroying people. For those of you who are believers, I want you to know I am praying for you.”
