

DELRAN TOWNSHIP SCHOOL DISTRICT

CASE STUDY: COLLABORATION IN A CRISIS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When COVID-19 hit New Jersey, Delran Township School District acted quickly, with all of their players - district administration, education association leadership, principals, and educators - pulling together to address both the academic and societal challenges in their community.

Their deeply embedded culture of collaboration and trust between the district and education association allowed Delran to quickly:

- Convene a Coronavirus Task Force, comprised of representatives from the education association and administration, several weeks before New Jersey schools closed
- Convene the entire education association executive board and all district administrators to develop guidance for transitioning to remote instruction
- Arrange an additional (non-contracted) teacher work day to prepare for remote instruction
- Transition to remote instruction within 24 hours of New Jersey schools closing
- Empower existing school-based teams to address the crisis within their schools without waiting for direction from the district
- Ensure efficient and consistent messaging among administration, educators, and the community

DISTRICT OVERVIEW:

- Four schools (pre-K – 12th grade) in Burlington County, New Jersey.
- Suburban
- Approx. 3,000 students
- 23% eligible for free or reduced lunch

“No doubt the quality of our response is directly proportional to the depth of our collaboration.”

- Brian Brotschul,
Superintendent, Delran
Township School District

They credit their response to their long-standing culture of education partnerships and collaboration which includes a tradition of joint administration/educator planning and decision making, transparent communications, a culture of assuming good intent, and a willingness to evaluate situations from alternative perspectives. Planning for the transition to remote learning began before schools closed, and included robust teacher preparation and support. Their remote learning plan was developed jointly by administration and the education association and was implemented quickly and smoothly.

DELRAN'S JOURNEY

Partnership and collaboration are deeply embedded in the culture of Delran Township School District. In the five years since they've begun their journey, they've used collaboration to:

- Select a new teacher evaluation system
- Develop school-wide academic goals for with joint analysis of data
- Develop interview questions, centered on collaborative mindsets, for key administrative positions to help ensure incoming administrators support the collaboration
- Participate in the district's strategic planning (each of their four schools embarked on a deep self-study that led to drafting goals for the school board, essentially implementing strategic planning from the ground up, instead of the more typical from governance down)

The collaborative work is fostered by the established structures summarized in the box to the right. Delran's school leadership teams (SLTs) are led by the association representative, the principal, and a teacher. SLTs in every school gather educator input and opinions, and use those to determine initiatives. The SLTs also reinforce and communicate messages from the district to educators. Sharing the leadership teams' work at association meetings has helped the district identify needs as well as mentoring opportunities across schools.

It's important to note that in Delran all school staff have the opportunity to collaborate. Educators who aren't on the SLT are part of the feedback loop that keeps the SLT in tune with the pulse of the school. These feedback loops are another part of Delran's culture. Educators know they can offer their honest insights because they can trust that the conversations are confidential.

The district enjoys transparent, open communication between administration and educators, and a high level of trust. Their partnership has allowed all sides to look at issues from other perspectives, solicit and respect varied input, and confidently ask questions and voice opinions. As Brian Brotschul puts it, "Collaboration is cultural, and it is widespread throughout the district."

IMPLEMENTING COLLABORATION:

Delran's collaborative structures help sustain and grow their success:

- District- and school-level leadership teams
- "Feedback loops" within the schools to identify needs
- Transparent communications among administration, the education association, and educators
- Stable tenure of leaders dedicated to collaborative relationships
- Administration and association representatives jointly attend collaboration training events

"Our members on the front lines have a platform to share their voice through the school leadership teams."

- Amy Yodis, President, Delran Education Association

IN THE FACE OF CRISIS...

“Members not already in association leadership are now significantly discerning a deeper level of involvement in the association. Younger members, educators without a whole lot of experience, are stepping up for different roles to support teacher success in this crisis. All of that directly ties back to the work we’ve done in collaboration.”

- Kathy McHugh, Recording Secretary, Delran Education Association

This solid foundation allowed Delran to quickly pivot from collaborating around student success to redefining their operations and tackling student, faculty, and community safety and wellness. Brotschul describes how they were able to react to COVID-19: “All of a sudden we’re in the Super Bowl of collaboration, and we were able to hit the ground running as a group - the entire school district was able to move forward and that would not have been possible at all without five years of really developing our craft.”

Delran’s transition plan to remote learning was developed jointly by district administrators and Delran Education Association’s executive board, and presented to all faculty before New Jersey’s schools closed. To support faculty, the district created a master document to house videos, links, and articles so that educators have a central place to access helpful resources.

Delran’s COVID-19 response plan includes two remote learning plans: one for pre-K through 5th grade, and another for 6th through 12th grade.

The younger students were initially mailed a “paper and pencil” packet of material for their subjects, transitioning to a digital platform after spring break. The delay allowed the district time to ensure all students had technology, knew how to use it, and that it was operating properly. Free internet access is provided for qualifying families.

Before schools closed, all middle and high school students were surveyed to determine home internet access and device availability so that alternate instructional delivery could be arranged for those who need it. These students started online learning as soon as schools closed, with assignments posted to Google classroom. The first week of remote learning was limited to review material, to allow the students to transition to the online platform without the added stress of learning new material. Final exams were suspended for the school year.

DELRAN'S RESPONSE TIMELINE

Mid-February:	Established a Coronavirus Task Force, which included the president of the education association. Their focus was operational and based on basic human needs: food, clothing, and shelter. They developed a four-phase plan to move forward: immediate response when schools close; post-spring break (two plans, depending on whether or not schools re-open); summer 2020 (including tentatively rescheduled graduation and prom dates); and the 2020/2021 school year.
March 11:	Met with all faculty. The situation was evolving very quickly, CDC guidance was changing, and there was a lot of confusion. Staff was understandably concerned, but there was a high level of trust between educators and administration because of their history together.
March 15:	Delran Education Association's executive board met with all district administrators to develop guidance for transitioning to remote learning. The group finalized the presentation to educators, based on input from all.
March 16:	New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy announced schools to close on March 18.
March 16:	The transition plan was presented to all faculty, and was well received. This was a (non-contracted) "snow day," that the teachers agreed to work.
March 18:	New Jersey schools closed.
March 19:	Remote learning began in Delran Township School District.

COMMUNICATING IN THE CRISIS

One of the founding principles of the partnership – a commitment to open, transparent communications – became a central sustaining factor in Delran's response to COVID-19. Early on, the partners developed a crisis communication plan to help ensure that educators would hear a unified message from just a few sources.

While district messaging focuses on virtual learning needs, the association's communications to educators are more personal, addressing issues such as wellness, navigating home life while teaching remotely, and financial concerns. Brotschul distributes a weekly email, which McHugh says has become incredibly meaningful to Delran's educators. Minimizing the number of channels educators are receiving information from, and providing consistent and open messages has helped Delran's educators feel both informed and cared for during this stressful time.

Want to learn more? myschoolmyvoice.nea.org/collaborating-for-student-success
