



THE EDUCATION DIVIDE

AMONG THE MOST DIFFICULT PANDEMIC CHALLENGES HAS BEEN FIGURING OUT HOW STUDENTS AT ALL LEVELS CAN ATTEND CLASSES SAFELY. SCHOOLS ACROSS THE PITTSBURGH REGION ARE TRYING VARIOUS COMBINATIONS OF ONLINE AND IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION, AND THE ADJUSTMENT IS EASIER FOR SOME THAN FOR OTHERS. BY DONOVAN HARRELL

It's been hard for McKeesport Area School District Superintendent Mark Holtzman to see his community struggle with adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic. Before schools in the district started their first nine weeks on Sept. 2, students and families grappled with food insecurity and a lack of access to the internet and technology devices.

"We went through a lot of issues with connectivity and access and things that I've been kind of screaming about for many years as an advocate for our community and our children," said Mr. Holtzman, who graduated from McKeesport Area High School in 1997.

The pandemic has exacerbated long-standing inequities in the region, he said. And many of these struggles existed decades before the health crisis forced schools across the state to close their doors in March. "I've taken just about every opportunity I could to talk about meeting the needs of our children."

The McKeesport Area School District is not alone in its struggles as school districts across Allegheny County have been forced to adopt new, evolving approaches to education for 142,550 students in 280 public schools. When the novel coronavirus began spreading to the U.S., Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf issued an order, on March 13, that required school districts to shutter their buildings for 10 days to help mitigate the spread of the virus. By March 30, the governor had extended the closures indefinitely as the pandemic showed no signs of slowing down.

As part of Mr. Wolf's move to temporarily close schools in the spring, districts were instructed to develop Continuity of Education plans. The Heinz Endowments-funded Research for Action, a Philadelphia-based research organization, reviewed the proposals of each of the 43 districts and 13 charter schools located in Allegheny County. According to the study, those with plans that showed strong potential learning opportunities during the pandemic served lower rates of economically disadvantaged students and students of color. Schools in wealthier districts were better positioned to pivot to remote learning since they were more likely to have the resources to provide students with devices and remote learning options.

Hit especially hard by these closures were school districts like McKeesport Area, which encompasses the City of McKeesport and its neighboring municipalities of Versailles, South Versailles, Dravosburg and White Oak. Median household incomes for the district range from \$29,312 to \$56,128, according to U.S. census data, with McKeesport, the largest community, having the lowest median household income while White Oak has the highest. In McKeesport, 32.9 percent of its population live in poverty, according to census statistics. One hundred percent of the district's roughly 3,300 students in the district depend on free and reduced lunches, Mr. Holtzman said.

After assessing challenges and student needs in preparation for the current school year, the district opted for a blended attendance model. Students attend class in person five days a week on a two-hour early-release schedule. During those two hours, students can work on remote learning assignments or other activities.

Since classes resumed on Sept. 2, roughly 1,000 students chose to completely attend remotely, Mr. Holtzman said. With these students attending online, the school district was able to adjust its seating to better accommodate social distancing guidelines.

"We came to the conclusion that our children need to be in schools," Mr. Holtzman said. "They need to be in schools because the activities that they're involved in are almost as important as what they learn in the classroom."

Several McKeesport Area High School students had mixed reactions to the combination of in-person and online instruction, wanting more of the former but appreciating the flexibility of the latter.

Junior Nya O'Neal, 16, was glad to be back in the classroom to "have the opportunity to be around my teachers and other students."

But ninth-grader Isaiah Johnson, 14, said, "Shorter classes give teachers less time to teach, and sometimes you can't ask questions because they have to get done with the lesson."

Calise Johnson, 16, also a junior, echoed that sentiment, though she and Isaiah saw benefits of having much of their schoolwork online, "meaning you can do it anywhere, at any time and turn things in that way as well," she said.

McKeesport Area partnered with Comcast to address challenges with students' internet access through the company's



Broadcast journalist Craig Melvin of NBC's TODAY show visits McKeesport High School in September during an event in which Comcast Western Pennsylvania donated laptops to the school district.

Internet Essentials Program, which provides connectivity at reduced prices. On Sept. 18, NBC's TODAY show visited McKeesport Area High School, and Comcast provided 2,500 laptops for students, teachers and staff in the high school and middle school.

The overall goal is for the district to provide devices to every student, but the district is not quite there yet, Mr. Holtzman said. The school received \$1.8 million in funding from the CARES Act for devices and additional costs related to the shutdown, including sanitation equipment and expenses related to additional safety procedures.

In fact, school funding experts predict sharp drops in revenue as a result of the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. Pennsylvania districts are projected to lose more than \$1 billion in local funding in the 2020-21 school year—a decline of about 4 percent of their total local revenue.

Because of these pending losses, the Endowments and other foundations have worked to recognize and respond to funding and social needs gaps that were caused by the pandemic in the affected districts. The Endowments donated more than \$600,000 in support to school communities hit hardest by the pandemic and in need of resources to transition students to virtual learning.

Among the Endowments grantees that are providing instructional support to students, such as laptops, tablets and tech training, are Neighborhood Allies, a grantmaking nonprofit that supports development in economically struggling neighborhoods; the Allegheny Intermediate Unit, which provides instructional services to the 42 suburban districts outside of the City of Pittsburgh; and the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Rosanne Javorsky, assistant executive director of teaching and learning at the AIU, said the agency received a \$200,000 grant from the Endowments and used it to purchase more than 1,000

devices such as laptops and tablets and other technology for under-resourced school districts and families in need of devices and internet access, including McKeesport Area.

The AIU also offered professional development to teachers as they worked to restructure how they approach teaching in a virtual learning space. When it became clear that schools would be closed for an extended time, teachers began requesting professional development, explained Tyler Samstag, director of instructional innovation at the AIU. The training included instruction on teaching platforms such as Google Suite and Google Classroom “to help teachers develop those foundational skills so that they would be able to start teaching virtually.”

“It was a whole new skill set, even for folks who are going through teacher preparation programs currently” because many of the programs are not developed for entirely virtual teaching, he said. “The idea that overnight teachers had to transform everything they do in the classroom, I think obviously there’s anxiety associated with that.”

In mid-July, the AIU released a survey that asked its school districts, “If your district had to be one-to-one, provide one-to-one virtual instruction, could you do it?” Ms. Javorsky said.

“Eighty percent of our districts said they had enough devices that they could be one-to-one for their students, which is a huge difference from when [the pandemic] happened back in March, because many districts weren’t even thinking about one-to-one or they had a phased-in plan for one-to-one devices.”

Among the 42 school districts AIU serves, 25 districts have developed “hybrid” learning environments with students coming in on certain days while on others they study remotely, 15 districts are fully remote, and two school districts are offering in-person classes, five days a week.

The Fox Chapel Area School District, about 45 minutes from McKeesport Area schools, quickly adapted to the abrupt remote learning requirements at the beginning of the pandemic shutdown. In March, the district was able to move to completely remote instruction a few days after Gov. Wolf's order, said Fox Chapel Superintendent Mary Catherine Reljac.

Ms. Reljac attributed the prompt adjustment to district teachers and administrators who had previous experience with remote instruction. Also, with Fox Chapel's median income at \$168,073, according to census data, many students in the school district already had access to the necessary devices and remote learning infrastructure to make the transition.

Students in the district began the current school year on Aug. 24, and were given the option to attend school through a hybrid model in which they went to school in person two days per week and worked remotely for the other three days. Fox Chapel Area schools also offered two completely remote instructional models: one that provided synchronous, real-time learning and another that offered asynchronous, recorded instruction.

However, due to a nationwide spike in cases in mid-November, the schedule was temporarily adjusted, and all students were moved to remote instruction from Nov. 23 to Dec. 4, with elementary school students expected to return afterward to a five-day in-person schedule, while Pre-K students and those in grades six through 12 resume the hybrid model.

The Fox Chapel Area middle school students have a one-to-one device program, representing the ratio of students receiving iPads, Ms. Reljac said. The district, however, isn't officially a one-to-one district overall. In the future, she said, the school district may consider developing an official one-to-one device program.

Despite its advantages, Fox Chapel Area and its families have faced challenges. The months following the initial school closures were tough on the district, Ms. Reljac said.

Fox Chapel Area includes Fox Chapel, Aspinwall, Blawnox and Sharpsburg boroughs, along with Indiana and O'Hara townships, representing a mix of affluent and working-class communities. The district has 22 percent of its students receiving free and reduced lunch, and it saw some students and families struggling with food insecurity.

The district offered a feeding program where families could pick up a week's worth of food. Some who didn't previously need this support also depended on the meals because of the economic instability caused by the pandemic. Roughly 300 to 400 families each week sought meals, Ms. Reljac said. Waivers from the Department of Agriculture have helped offset additional costs.

In terms of technology, the district had to provide hundreds of devices to families, some who had limited equipment and needed supplemental support and others who didn't have any devices at all. There also were students who needed hot spots. A large portion of the devices went to elementary school students, who did not have as much experience with remote instruction.

Ms. Reljac agreed with Mr. Holtzman that the pandemic put a spotlight on inequalities in the region and across the country.

"I think that that's one of the most difficult things that I see as a leader is how different students struggle," Ms. Reljac said. "Even students who may be in homes that have enough food [but] haven't had technology and may also be struggling because they may be dealing with parents who are frontline workers, so there's that anxiety that comes along with that... You never really know what hardships go on behind closed doors for families."

She and Mr. Holtzman also said recommendations from the Department of Education and guidelines provided by the state and federal governments often came late and weren't very specific.

Adam Schott, a special assistant to the secretary of education in the Pennsylvania Department of Education, described the challenges of issuing guidance to the 500 locally controlled school districts in the state, each dealing with the pandemic in ways unique to their communities. State education officials had to "recognize that there are some core mitigation efforts that make sense wherever you are," while allowing for nuance.

Despite the many challenges posed by the pandemic, Ms. Reljac said, the region's strength lies in its collaboration between school districts and other community stakeholders.

"Everyone really opened their doors, opened their hearts, checked on each other, helped each other and shared," she said. "And I think that is something that really is a testament not just to the education in this region, but really to the people that make up Western Pennsylvania. It's something that I hope we continue moving forward in many ways." h

Fox Chapel Area School District students alternate between in-person and online classes. When these Kerr Elementary School children are in their building, coronavirus protection measures include plexiglass dividers as well as facial masks.



Courtesy Fox Chapel Area School District