***Our current reality of COVID-19***

Educators are working in unprecedented times with coronavirus shutting down most schools for weeks without much (if any) notice. No teachers or school leaders had preparation specific to dealing with a pandemic like the COVID-19 virus. Many schools are providing meals to students multiple times a week to make sure students are fed while not at school. Other schools are responding with online content to keep students learning and cognitively active. Some teachers have formed driving caravans to parade by students homes and let them know they are missed. News stories have shared students using 3D printing machines to help make medical masks for local hospitals. Some schools have opened up Internet access outside of district facilities (or even buses) to allow for students and families to connect to the Internet if they don’t have it at home. Many district leaders have advocated for support staff to receive payment while on quarantine so that they can survive, take care of their families, and come back to their jobs when school is back in session. In lots of situations, staff are becoming more unified rallying around their efforts to support each other and the kids they serve.

Families are seeing first hand what educators do daily to plan, deliver and support kids. Planning lessons, caring for kids and keeping students engaged is just part of meeting the needs of a classroom of students and varying levels. Many parents will probably value educators more because of the care they are currently providing their kids all day long. Educators too are seeing how families are responding to their students by filling their role as primary educators and caregivers. Thanks to the coronavirus and quarantine for many, families got inadvertent permission to spend more time together than they have in the past. This includes eating meals together, playing board games, and learning together. Some parents are actually sitting next to their children to read books together, engage in online classes and create fun videos and some actually post them on social media. There is good that is coming out of this unique pandemic.

The numbers of people with coronavirus continues to grow and the uncertainty of heading back to school is real. Many states are waiving standardized tests for the year. Figuring out how finalize grades, identifying how to get personal supplies back to students for an early summer and figuring out what staff can continue to do for students and families are still questions for many. For graduating seniors, student athletes missing out on spring activities, and finishing the year for educators are all supreme disappointments with school not in session.

***Our privilege & responsibility***

Educators have both a privilege and responsibility to educate students and develop them as individuals. This privilege and responsibility is taking unique shape right now with educators finding creative ways to connect with students and families. Some educators were more prepared than others to connect with students online and provide electronic resources. Some educators have been able to hit the ground running and have been able to continue learning asynchronously even sharing lessons with a larger audience than even their classroom. Certainly the resources students have at home also plays a big part in their ability to accept resources from the teachers that educate them like a home computer and Internet access. In most cases, educators are leveraging all the resources they can to support students and families in their local communities.

Many parents have shown genuine appreciation for everything schools are doing to support them. Despite many parents balancing their parent and work responsibilities, they understand the strain on educators during this unprecedented time as well. Everyone is hoping the world is back to normal soon with the hustle and bustle of the day and kids back to school. However, some students will eventually head back to school with a new paradigm and different expectations. For some, learning at home was beneficial and more efficient. For others, sleeping a little later and routine break helped them focus on the academics. Yet for others, they can’t get back to school soon enough for not only the academics but also the social aspects the school environment provides. Many parents too will be eager to send their children back to school. Parents of special needs students need specialized instruction provided. Parents of students in the arts and sports want to see their kids active again. But others may continue with homeschool or online education options after managing these options the last couple weeks. Regardless of students and parents excitement to head back to school, there will be a new norm and some new expectations.

***A pandemic providing permission***

Many schools were already offering online classes and flexible learning environments but the coronavirus forced schools to get creative quickly with new resources and flexibility. For most, there will be no going back to the traditional learning environments before COVID-19. When schools are back in session, students may expect more online options, flexible learning spaces, and more movement throughout the day like they got used to when they were home perhaps. This may also be the case of many educators. Some found ways to deliver learning that worked better than some of the traditional methods they used before being forced into quarantine. This is going to change the norm for both educators, students, parents and school leaders.

The new norm and expectations is where some school leaders will cause a big divide for school leadership. Some school leaders will defend the traditional school setting and try to forget COVID-19 all-together. Some may choose retirement when they get pushed by their school boards to expand online courses and flexibility learning opportunities. For others, COVID-19 was the permission they needed to get staff onboard to providing online coursework and deliver resources to students in flexible ways. Even others will find a new balance to the school environment figuring out how to better balance academics with students overall well-being. Servant leadership will shine through.

My thoughts were confirmed recently when a Simon Sinek video was shared with me of him talking with his team during one of their huddle meetings. He shared that the current pandemic is actually not that unique and cited other times in history where challenges actually promoted innovations to those organizations willing to embrace it. See Simon sharing insight with his team via their Zoom session here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6spNnsD-XOY&feature=youtu.be>

******As an Educational Leadership Professor at Drake University, I’m proud of the leadership I’ve seen and how many school leaders have responded to this untimely pandemic. “Drake Together” is the motto at that has united us at the university which has also not been immune to the challenges and hardships this health pandemic has caused. Hopefully there is not another health pandemic for years to come but there is no doubt other situations will arrive that will continue to challenge education. COVID-19 has proven to shine light on not only educators but also the professionalism and work ethic of health care workers, truck drivers, and others who persevered to support others when they were needed most.

Besides the people that gave us hope during this health pandemic, we also experienced the CDC working faster than they ever have before to approve a vaccine. The President of the United States and the Congress provided stimulus monies to people with bipartisan support which has never happened before. Governors in many states shut down businesses overnight to reduce the spread of the pandemic. Private businesses pivoted faster than ever before to provide medical supplies needed to support medical professionals and fight the pandemic. It will soon be school leaders time to shift faster than they have in the past as well.

When people have new experiences they create new norms. We will eventually be back to our routines but the paradigm of “school” will be different. Students may now expect more online classes, more learning resources, more movement throughout the day, a later start time, more authentic projects, and less standardized testing. The challenge and opportunity for leadership is to embrace this new norm, leverage what we learned from our recent experiences, and find ways to meet the needs of more students and families. It is a worthy opportunity school leaders should be ready to leverage. The recent health pandemic we have all lived may just be the permission leaders needed to shape the future.

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