

THROUGH PREPARATION AND ADAPTATION, ARKANSAS SCHOOL DISTRICTS DELIVERED DURING THE PANDEMIC

Lessons and plans from Cedarville, Dumas, Lakeside, and Nettleton School Districts



On March 28, two days before Arkansas public school students were set to return from spring break and continue their education distantly as mandated by the governor, an EF-3 tornado ripped through Jonesboro. All lives were spared, fortunately. There was considerable damage but not to any of the local Nettleton School District's facilities. Nevertheless, the tornado did a number on a couple dozen homes in the district, completely destroying some. COVID-19 school closings had turned living rooms into learning spaces, and now there were Nettleton students who did not have a place to do their classwork, school or home.

"When the tornado hit, there were families who lost everything," said Nettleton School District Superintendent James Dunivan. "I know every family that was affected and every student." The district has been in touch with each, Dunivan said, and once the families' more immediate needs were taken care of, students were given the resources to catch up on work and continue their studies.

During the pandemic shutdowns, public schools throughout Arkansas had to cater to students on a more personal level to ensure all were being educated and that the food insecure were being fed. With schools closed and the normal supply lines to kids severed, district leaders have adopted the logistical savvy of generals to reach their students. And, like in Dunivan's case after the tornado, sometimes this required deploying reinforcements on a household-by-household basis.

Public education continued in Arkansas even when school buildings were closed. Superintendents have both embraced virtual learning and found innovative workarounds to educate students who lacked the technological resources. And for the kids who used to get their meals from school, the superintendents found workarounds for them too.

Open Pantries

On March 18, three days into the first round of school closings, cafeteria workers of the Dumas School District were making meals for students in the community. Their families could get the food via drive-by pickup or delivery for the ones who could not make it. The district bused food north to Gould and

south to Winchester, running four routes twice per week. Each delivery or pickup had enough food for two or three days.

Many Arkansas children rely on their school for food; one in four are food insecure, according to the Arkansas Food Bank. School closures would have limited some kids' primary source, were it not for school districts' mobilization of food pickups and deliveries. Dumas, a Community Eligibility School district with about 1,200 students, doles out 625 to 700 meals per day to students in and out of the district, which continued during shutdowns.

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In Cedarville School District, more than 75 percent of the district's students, about 550 per day, receive meals. When schools closed, the district's bus drivers worked half-days to make deliveries. Thanks to a Child and Adult Care Food Program grant secured by Elementary Principal Rebecca Cook, Cedarville can provide breakfast, lunch, and dinner to all of the children in the district who need it at no cost. The normal passengers were not onboard, but school vehicles still delivered precious cargo. With funding mechanisms still in place, Arkansas school districts adapted from bringing the kids to the food to bringing food to the kids.

Delivering them a safely distanced education proved a separate challenge. After campuses closed, virtual and distant became synonymous with learning. The technological resources that powered this new learning, however, are not ubiquitous across Arkansas. To keep students as plugged in to their classrooms as possible, superintendents prioritized access to personal hardware and the internet; and teachers, they say, impressed on the new-fangled mediums.

Distant Learning

Lakeside School District Superintendent Shawn Cook ponders the disaster-protected saferoom for his district's internet servers, the same ones that are now the waypoint for schoolwork from the district's 3,500 Chromebook-toting students, and he laughs. "I never expected the campus to be fine," Cook said, "but we couldn't access it."

That became a reality for all Arkansas public schools when on April 6 the governor closed the doors for the remainder of the school year and turned educators to alternative methods of instruction (AMI). Fortunately for Cook, a mix of community support and prior planning proved fortuitous safety nets. "I didn't plan for a pandemic," Cook said, "but I did plan on giving parents options." Those options included students learning with native technology.

Three years ago, the district began purchasing Google Chromebook tablets with the goal of having a better than one-to-one ratio of devices to students. Today, Lakeside has 4,100 devices, enough for every student and teacher, with extras to sub in when one breaks. When schools closed, students were at home with tablets with which they had already become accustomed. They continued learning and collaborating on the Google Classroom platform they already knew. And if a tablet broke, a school bus could drop off a replacement while picking up the one that needed to be fixed, a practice adopted by several districts.

Tablets can be lifelines in virtual education, but they lose a lot of functionality without the internet. Zoom, Facebook, Google Classroom, and even email for simply sending assignments back and forth need the internet to operate. At the beginning of school closings, this was not available to about 200 Lakeside households. So, the district conducted a survey, found the homes that needed internet, and after getting a sweetheart deal from Resort TV Cable to connect the unconnected houses, Lakeside was able to get more than 99 percent of its students online. Mathew Thornton, an administrator who oversees the district's IT, called the partnership with the local provider a godsend. The district does not take this level of connectivity

for granted because in many Arkansas school districts, internet access for students is not a given.

Internet Access

Dumas School District Superintendent Kelvin Gragg would like, after the dust settles, to make all of his district's schools internet hotspots. After all, school parking lots — the ones where campus internet extends to the public — became a common parking spot for students to connect for schoolwork. Superintendents also ran into students at Starbucks, McDonald's, and other places with free Wi-Fi, so they could access any of the myriad virtual platforms on which their teachers were getting creative.

"You get to see a lot of your rock stars shine during this time," Lakeside School District Superintendent Shawn Cook said. Of course, internet access is key to the delivery of such instruction.

On a good day, one unaffected by inclement weather, only two-thirds of Nettleton School District's 3,500 students have internet access, a portion pretty close to the statewide percentage of households that are online, according to 2014-18 U.S. Census data. How are educators supposed to share and receive work from the students that go without? In a state where almost 20 percent of homes do not have internet, Arkansas superintendents both embraced online education and found innovative workarounds to educate students who lack the resources.

"There are some places where we run buses that have no internet," Dumas' Gragg said. That is true for many rural districts. And in these cases, school districts routed assignments, on paper or flash drives, just as they delivered

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food. Along with the applications that allow for instant interaction with students, many teachers texted and received pictures of completed assignments.

In Dumas, they contacted all secondary students, and the ones who did not have internet access were sent paper copies. Gragg said his district would probably have to spend some money on copy machine maintenance after the workout they got during schooling from home; the district also spent more on paper. Pandemic-related financial setbacks have been minor, so far, superintendents report, but many are planning for future hits. Gragg is not yet filling some vacated staff positions in anticipation of a weakened economy eventually lowering property tax revenue. With districts fully funded by the state for through the next school year, Gragg is “cautiously hopeful” about future funding from the state. Lakeside’s Cook praised the governor’s funding of schools. And Nettleton’s Dunivan said, “I’m not worried about a district not making it because of money,” praising the governor, the Department of Education, and legislators.

Keeping These

In the Cedarville School District, Superintendent Kerry Schneider has planned with his principals to have remedial time scheduled into the next school year, both during and after school. “We have a lot of catching up to do,” Schneider said. As much as COVID-19 wrecked plans and altered future ones, Arkansas school district leaders have also found some pandemic-forced operational tweaks worth keeping.

Many manual operations that went digital will remain so. For example, Dunivan will continue distributing Nettleton’s 500 or so annual contracts virtually for digital signature, a shutdown discovery. His district also purchased a chemical fogger to disinfect classes and even buses, as he expects a focus on hygiene to continue beyond the pandemic.

Cook anticipates more virtual days in the future, perhaps quarterly for teachers and students to have the practice — “like fire drills.”

There were no drills for keeping students educated and fed during a pandemic. Still, Arkansas public school superintendents showed adaptability and determination that proves they were prepared.