Plan, Pivot, and Roll!

One district's journey through lockdown and reopening

All schools in the United States faced tough decisions in early spring of 2020. When the Covid-19 pandemic forced the closure of schools and in-person teaching and learning, district and school leadership had to figure out how to ensure learning continued in a remote setting.

Fulton County Schools (FCS), located in the outer communities North and South of Atlanta, Georgia, was no exception. Fortunately, FCS has spent the past several years developing a long-term implementation plan to re-imagine teaching and learning supported by modern technology. FCS brought together district IT, curriculum design, professional learning, and district leadership to set a vision for teaching and learning experiences, defined by scenarios and use-cases.

Fulton County Schools Strategic Plan 2022 goal is to "prepare all students to graduate ready to pursue and succeed in their chosen paths." To achieve this goal, FCS focuses on personalizing the learning experience for all students, increasing literacy rates in the third grade, middle school proficiency in core subjects, and raising on-track graduation rates. In addition, the plan focuses on increasing student engagement and encouraging a positive mindset and demonstration of future-ready skills. Central to their digital transformation goals is to develop a learning environment that goes beyond simply bringing technology into classrooms. In the spring of 2020, the work done towards this strategic plan enabled FCS to quickly respond to the closing of schools by pulling from these policies, practices, and capabilities already in place to enact remote learning, and the professional development needed to support instruction in this new setting.

In addition, immediately before schools were closed, Superintendent Looney authorized the purchase of an additional 3,000 computers at a cost of $1.5 million for students in grades 3-12 as part of their current budget. They also began distributing thousands of devices already on hand through their device refresh program.

While it helped keep families and schools connected during the closure, Fulton County Schools' transition to remote learning did not happen without a few challenges and the need to reassess some digital tools and how they are used.

Some key concerns FCS had to address immediately were:

1. How do we know students' needs are being met academically, socially, emotionally in a virtual environment? Are issues of equity being addressed?
2. What needs to happen to ensure lower-income families have access to learning devices and Internet during school closures?
3. What are the ongoing evaluation and progress models needed in a virtual setting?
4. How do we ensure teachers still receive professional development and coaching support virtually?

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Addressing key issues

Initial solutions included students and teachers running their classrooms through **Microsoft Teams** and utilizing the tools in **Office 365** for a streamlined learning experience and to minimize parents and students trying to navigate multiple platforms.

All students in third through 12th grade received a device for home use along with a WiFi hotspot, if needed. Student and teacher devices had been previously upgraded to Windows 10, and having students and teachers on one device platform helped minimize confusion. It also took the burden off of parents from being "tech support" when a student's device did not look the same as what the teacher was displaying.

During the school closures, FCS teachers also re-imagined ways to meet both the academic and social emotional needs of their students:

Online Morning News Program

Susan Brandon from Lake Windward Elementary is using Flipgrid to create their Online Morning News Program.

"A morning news program is a great way to start the day and bring a sense of community to students. This is where we share everything from the weather to important school-wide announcements. You can easily make a student's day by celebrating their birthday and special accomplishments. Being out of school provides an opportunity to get creative with your news program."

I Do, We Do, You Do - Asynchronous Gradual Release

Jennifer Evans, a teacher at Ridgeview Middle School, puts a new twist on a common teaching strategy.

"Asynchronous learning consists of any activities where students receive instruction at their own pace on their own time. The gradual release education model has also been referred to as the 'I do, We do, You do' model of instruction. This is when the instructor gives direct instruction, transitions to an instructor supported guided practice, and then it culminates in an independent formal or informal assessment of what was learned.

Direct instruction (I Do)

I have used short instructional videos (FlipGrid, screen recording using PowerPoint, etc.) of guided or focused notes so that students can follow along and get the initial information. An annotated PowerPoint is another way for students to get the initial information for a lesson.

Guided practice (We Do):

There are many apps and websites that allow teachers to give questions to students that provide them with immediate feedback. **Quizizz** in "homework" mode is one used on a regular basis. Students can review exactly what they need to review in their own time. **Microsoft Forms** also allows students to practice. They can be set up to give hints for incorrect answers, and students can go back and edit incorrect answers until they are all perfect.

Assessment (You Do):

This portion can consist of either formal or informal assessments. Students can explain what they have learned in a Flipgrid which can be done at any time. Students can also just complete something as simple as a handout in Teams on their own time. In addition to this, students can complete a quiz or test in Microsoft Forms or **Illuminate** which would be a more formal way to assess. The main difference here is the lack of assistance during the assessment."

Using Sway to Convey Assignments in Teams

Cathy Oravetz, a teacher at Webb Bridge Middle School, combines two technology tools to create a seamless experience for students as they completed assignments.

> *"During these digital learning days I am finding **Microsoft Sway** to be my all-inclusive assignment delivery system for my students. Sway is easily built using a card system, contains a bank of pictures and videos as well as quick access to files. Lessons may include your warm-up, instruction, supporting images and videos, rubric, and a means for turning in an assignment -- all in one easy-to-use location. (No more do I hear from students, "Where is that video?" or "Where is the rubric?").*

Self-created videos and audio supporting your lesson details can be added and students listen and watch the components of the assignment directly from within the Sway environment. For the teacher, reorganizing and revising a Sway is as easy as a click-and-move of the cards. And a benefit of this tool for students is their ability to quickly review parts of the assignment or lesson using the navigation button as they complete their work. Sway is my go-to tool during our digital learning sessions as it provides versatility in creation and ease of use for students. It also provides opportunities for teacher-created video and audio as a way to reach out to students and capture their attention. And the great thing is that the Sway can easily be placed in the resources area of Teams for students to access. A win-win with Sway and Teams!"

Class Discussions in Teams

Another teacher from Webb Bridge Middle School, Jana Bernhardt, is using Microsoft Teams Meetings to conduct synchronous class discussions.

> *"In my classroom, we typically have class discussions where we sit in a big circle, look at a text together, and discuss the big ideas in that text and how they apply to us. I wanted to bring that to our remote learning. Students read the text, annotate, and complete 5-10 minutes of pre-work and then join our class discussion using a **Teams Meeting**. Students should try to comment at least three times in the discussion.*
>
> *Most of my students were able to attend (I'm going to keep working on communicating ahead of time about the discussion), but I record the discussion and post it, so those that can't join in can listen and add their reflection for what they would have added. All my students reflect over the discussion and I was impressed by not only what they discussed, but the value they found in having it. My initial worries about their behavior in the discussion were unwarranted. I've learned that when high expectations are in place, they are maintained! I'm excited to try this again!"*

For more guidance on how to support teaching and learning using Microsoft Teams, take the free, online courses in the Microsoft Educator Center: Fostering a dynamic remote learning environment with student-centered tools

Ideas for ongoing evaluation and progress models in a virtual setting, visit: Feedback and assessment tools for remote learning

Optimizing the FCS Vanguard program

Professional development is a critical component as FCS ventures into a new way of adapting its teaching and learning environment. Placing technology into classrooms adds little without understanding the why behind using technology for learning. It is the teaching and learning that technology unlocks that drives student engagement and positive learning outcomes. Inspiring and guiding teachers to embrace these new capabilities, and provide rich learning experiences is the ultimate goal.

Well before the Covid-19 pandemic shut school doors, Fulton County Schools' Vanguard program has been the district's professional development community for providing training, education, and guidance to teachers across the school system. Their mission is to build the capacity of educators and leaders by personalizing learning through coaching and instructional technology.

Although the Vanguard program has been delivering training virtually long before the Covid-19 pandemic, facilitators and coaches in the program stepped up their work and moved all training, professional development and coaching to be delivered virtually, which facilitated greater scale and efficiency. A recent Reading Workshop delivered virtually was attended by over 400 teachers. Now more than ever, teachers are making the connection between instruction, student engagement, new learning opportunities, and the role technology plays in improving all of the above when done right. The Vanguard program not only delivers technology integration training, but they do it using the same principles and techniques teachers are expected to do with their students.

Moving forward into an uncertain school year

Fulton County Schools is beginning its 2020-2021 school year in a Universal Remote Learning setting while it awaits future guidance and data for safely returning to face-to-face instruction. As a supplement to its COVID-19 Closure Matrix, which governs their response to COVID-19 cases that may occur within FCS when the district is back to in-person instruction, the district has released a Reopening Matrix that outlines a slow-but-steady return to school. Both matrices incorporate current guidance from the CDC and Georgia Department of Public Health.

Regardless of what school looks like this upcoming year, key standards have been put into place for teaching and learning going forward in Fulton County Schools. The ultimate goal, whether it's face-to-face instruction, virtual, or a blend of the two, is to ensure all students are learning regardless of which model is used.

Follow Fulton County School's journey into the 2020-2021 school year on Twitter at @fultoncoschools.

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