Learning Will Continue

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Introduction

On March 17, 2020 Laura Kelly, the Governor of Kansas, issued an executive order to close all school buildings for the remainder of the academic year. This occurred just days after President Donald Trump declared a national emergency (Trump, 2020). These decisions sparked immediate response from the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), as well as from school superintendents across not only Kansas, but the nation. One certainty remained: learning would continue.

School leaders across the United States were required to think in new and creative ways due to the global pandemic of 2020. While the fear of spreading COVID-19 caused school buildings to close across the nation, school leaders remained focused on the needs of students. Kansas was the first state in the nation to close schools. As preparation for next steps began, the question of exactly what learning would look like was foremost in the minds of not just school leaders, but all supporters of education. School crisis plans did not typically address the type of pandemic situation where students could not be together in classrooms. School leaders had to draw on the skills known to be impactful during intense change such as developing teacher talent and leadership. Instructional transformation was necessary and managing the resulting culture shifts was required while navigating the demands in the moment. It is important to know what was going through the minds of school leaders and the beginning steps they made to ensure learning would continue during this time. We can learn from the collective expertise of school leaders as we envision the future.

The KSDE developed a survey designed to collect data to answer the questions surrounding the challenges addressed by school leaders as the pandemic closed school buildings. While this was an unprecedented time, the opportunity to learn could not be bypassed. Evidence of how schools navigated the unknown brought on by the abrupt change of instructional delivery can help inform school crisis plans, curriculum and programmatic offerings, school leader and teacher preparation programs, as well as local and state policy.

Wichita Public Schools (USD 259) Superintendent, Dr. Alicia Thompson
  School buildings will be closed for traditional classes beginning Monday, March 23. Learning will continue, but it will look different. Kansas districts have been directed to develop "continuous learning plans." Exactly what that looks like for WPS is yet to be determined. It is important for you to understand that while school will look different, learning will continue in some form. There will be no delivery of any type of instruction to students prior to Monday,

March 30, 2020. Please remain tuned in to your email and phone messages, as well as the district web site, for specific instructions about learning opportunities going forward.

Valley Center (USD 262) Superintendent Cory Gibson
Although school facilities will be closed, we are making plans for education to continue for all students. During the contingency planning sessions, USD 262 Leadership teams have been discussing a variety of topics including how we can best meet the ongoing learning needs of our students, provide breakfast and lunch, and connect families to child care resources. We know there are many questions, and we are working with KSDE, KDHE, and other related agencies and will give you the most up to date information as soon as we possibly can.

Literature Review

EdWeek (2020) asserted that 124,000 schools serving over 55 million students were impacted by closures due to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020. In Kansas, 286 public school districts and 69 accredited private schools serving well over 500,000 students were impacted. School leaders were asked to lead through unprecedented change. As the need for rapid change became clearer, leaders' skills and disposition were tested. These leaders navigated difficult decision making with ever-changing information and while communicating those decisions to students, families and communities. They moved rapidly to ensure that social emotional needs were addressed, that children would have access to breakfasts and lunches, and that learning would continue in a remote format. School leaders would need to pull on their skills and dispositions to lead during this pandemic time.

Research on school leadership and its effect on rapid school change is synthesized in the *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A System Framework* (The Center on School Turnaround, 2017). This framework builds a strong foundation for looking at skills and dispositions necessary to lead through rapid change, such as the pandemic of 2020. The framework was developed by the Center on School Turnaround-WestEd, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency, that works with education and other communities. This organization has roots in a bipartisan initiative from 1966, that allowed congress to create regional laboratories across the country to improve education and learning for students. The intention was to create a starting point for the vast amount of available research in school leadership and to supplement, as well as to build a broad understanding of the impact on school leaders during times of rapid change.

As a research-based Center, WestEd scholars conducted a meta-analysis of existing leadership research. They determined there was strong evidence these four areas are most impactful when examining school change and improvement efforts. This model was developed as a framework to assist states, districts, and schools working to change educational systems. **Turnaround Leadership** (Baroody 2011, Brady 2003, Hitt 2015, Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins 2008), **Talent Development** (Anderson, Steffen, Wiese, & King 2014, Darling-Hammond 2000, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen, 2007, Guskey 2002b, Hallinger 2003, Hassel, Hassel, Arkin, Kowal, and Steiner, 2006), **Instructional Transformation** (Anderson, Leithwood & Strauss, 2010, Tomlinson, Brighton, Hertberg, Callahan, Moon, Brimijoin, Conover & Reynolds, 2003), and **Culture Shift** (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, Epstein & Sanders, 2000,

Lambert 2002, Masumoto & Brown-Welty 2009), are the keys to school turnaround and ultimately, improvement. These focus areas are key to navigating change for education systems to address when successfully changing schools as well as fundamental practices for school improvement. Further, they clearly articulated a systems framework to include each level of education the state agency, the local district, and the school.

The KSDE preparation and professional development work aligns to the *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A System Framework* (The Center on School Turnaround, 2017). As a system, the framework articulates the key components that successful school leaders employ during change. Each of the four areas are critical to effectively and successfully facilitating the change process. While some change is meticulously planned, other change is forced due to circumstances outside the superintendent or principal's control. That certainly occurred in 2020 as the governor ordered the closure of school buildings. School leaders were required to use the foundational skills they had to lead through rapid change as they addressed the immediate academic, social-emotional and nutritional needs of students.

Building on the knowledge, skills and dispositions of school leaders, change was the only certainty. This framework provided a structure to look at the skills needed by school leaders to navigate the movement of instruction to a remote format. It was evident that the delivery mode of teaching and learning would certainly look different. Questions surrounding nutritional and emotional health needs of students demanded immediate attention. Issues related to athletics and year end programs and commencements swirled. And yet, at the core of the KSDE mission is to support the learning needs of our Kansas students and educators. This mission was even more crucial as educators and school leaders responded to immediate essentials while strategically thinking about the remainder of the school year.

KSDE Initiatives

Without delay, the Kansas State Department of Education responded. Under the direction of Commissioner Dr. Randy Watson, KSDE tapped into the expertise of current and former "Kansas Teacher of the Year" cadres, giving them the charge of developing guidance for Kansas educators to meet the immediate need of supporting learning outside of the normal practices for students in Kansas. In less than 72 hours this Continuous Learning Task Force, a group of dynamic and differentiated Kansas educators, developed what would become the model of continuous learning in Kansas. Although the Continuous Learning Task Force created guardrails, each individual school system was given the local control to build a structure that worked for their students. Plans did look different based on individual district's needs, across the state.

Members of the Continuous Learning Task Force were divided into grade level and content groups. In partnership with several units within the KSDE, including the secondary and elementary redesign coaches, director of accreditation, director of public relations and the director of information technology, the continuous learning groups met under these unusual circumstances. Each of the virtual meetings was focused and filled with creativity, despite the members having responsibilities to their own classrooms and leadership positions. Discussion topics included access to devices, availability of internet capacity, how parents would handle the new learning with minimal support, what community partnerships could be made,

communication framework models, and perhaps most difficult, how students would continue to be held accountable.

Upon completion of the many late-night Zoom conversations, and having given the shared documents to the KSDE for branding and online publication, the birth of something completely new and exciting had arrived on the heels of a state and nation in pandemic. On March 23rd 2020, just days after Kansas' governor had declared that all Kansas school buildings would be closed for the remainder of the school year, an exciting momentum was evident and Kansas students were on track for learning remotely. Dr. Watson and Dr. Brad Neuenswander, Deputy Commissioner of Education, digitally gathered together via Zoom all 286 public school superintendents and 69 private school system administrators, and shared the new continuous learning plan. Dr. Watson shared that the state board of education was prepared to waive the standard 1,116 hours of required seat time for students, upon the submission of every system presenting their plans for continuous learning based upon the new document. Each submission had to have the approval of the local board and superintendent, as evidenced by dated and original signatures. All plans were to be submitted to the director of accreditation no later than April 8th, 2020 for approval and presentation to the state board of education at their April 14th meeting.

At the same time, approximately twenty members of a KSDE team were convened to calibrate the expectations and review process of each plan. Discussion was held on the process for returning the plans and how clarifying information would be gathered if necessary, from each system. The private schools were reviewed by members of the accreditation faculty who work closely with these systems. In the end, 355 continuous learning plans were submitted, and approved by the Kansas State Board at their April meeting representing all public and private KSDE accredited schools in the State.

Initial Teacher Led Initiatives

KSDE acknowledged the need for diversity of voices was critically needed during this time of crisis. Drawing on the greatest strength of our education system, KSDE turned to educators. These teacher leaders from across the state were called upon for their expertise and perspective as a vision was created for our state. As guiding documents were thoughtfully, yet rapidly, prepared and supported by the State Board of Education for districts not only during this time, but for well into the future. Empowering teacher leaders was key.

Cooper (2009) noted that empowering teachers into leadership roles has an effect on student achievement, supporting the definition of developing, retaining and sustaining teachers as a leadership skill necessary for change. Further, Hunzicker (2017), developed a progression of descriptions, including the nurturing of a teacher and the nature of the setting, as a tool for developing the teacher to teacher leader. Teacher dispositions included risk-taking, being a lifelong learner, being a team player and the desire to make a difference, highly necessary for teacher leadership. Leaders who foster teachers to lead may be more successful than those who do not have the capacity to build these skills in teachers.

Cooper (2009) further described teacher leadership as difficult to define from the principal viewpoint. Furthermore, Childs-Bowen, Moller, and Scrivner (2000) agree that the best definition of teacher as leader shows teachers working in "professional learning communities to affect student learning; contributing to school improvement; inspiring excellence in practice; and empowering stakeholders to participate in educational improvement" (p. 28).

Borko (2004) states that healthy professional learning communities can create a safe space for professional learning to occur. Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth (2001) concluded the work of building communities of learners among teachers was arduous and consumed much time. They (2001) further state, "to foster such discussions, the professional development leader must help teachers to establish trust, develop communication norms that enable critical dialogue, and maintain a balance between respecting individual community members" (p.7). The guiding documents produced by teacher leaders in Kansas, provide evidence of the professional learning and expertise that occurred during this time of rapid change.

In his early research, Guskey, (2002a), noted that meaningful professional learning should focus on what the school system wants to achieve in terms of learning and learners. The purposeful planning and consideration for the effectiveness of professional learning were crucial for successful talent development among staff. Grissom, Loeb, Master (2013), in their quantitative research on the portion of a principal's time spent monitoring professional learning, noted that when building leaders spent more time in classroom observations, these schools were also noted as having higher student achievement. Moreover, Grissom et al. (2013) found direct coaching of instructional practices positively affects school improvement efforts.

Momentum Grows with Subsequent Initiatives

An amazing teacher led "next-step" opportunity arose out of the work of the Continuous Learning Task Force. Unexpectedly, the state Public Broadcasting System (PBS) reached out to invite a partnership of televised learning opportunities for families. Kansas Teacher of the Year award winners were invited to digitally record lesson for airing on the state's PBS stations. Next, it became evident that our Kansas parents needed support, so KSDE redesign specialists, with input from educators, created virtual parent camp opportunities for parents to gather and share concerns and receive support. Ultimately, Kansas had created an opportunity for all students, supported by their families, to continue learning.

Based on the foundation laid by the continuous learning work, teacher leaders from across the state collaborated to develop a grade level banded set of competencies. By the finish of this project, over 1,000 Kansas educators worked to develop the new model based on our current State Standards. While a lengthy document was developed, the clarity surrounding what students should know and be able to do is a stride forward and may provide an ease of instructional change should the need arise in the future. Perhaps, this may also be the end of the traditional "snow day," as we know it, and in fact, even during those moments, learning for Kansas students can continue.

However, further work was needed. The KSDE, in partnership with two of the education service centers, began working on a framework for competency-based instruction. Grade level banded

competencies were created and then passed to a larger team of Kansas educators to provide 20 instructional examples for each grade band. In the end, each Kansas system was provided an over 900-page resource document that combined grade level bands. Notably, competencies were grouped to include a combined set of science, technology, engineering, art and math (STEAM) standards and the combination of the competencies in the humanities areas. Kansas education systems were now ready to move our students out of the traditional brick and mortar buildings to remote learning when, or if, the pandemic or another crisis arises in the future.

Challenges Identified

However, one important task remained. At their April 2020 meeting, the Kansas State Board of Education asked for a follow-up to the plans submitted. The State Board wanted an evaluation of the plans to be gathered, analyzed and shared at their May meeting. They asked the report to review three key items, (1) what changes have been made since the development of the original plan, (2) what systems have learned from the implementation of continuous learning that was not known prior to implementation (for example, students do not have appropriate access to technology at home, etc.) and (3) what percentage of the students were engaging in the continuous learning process. Specific survey questions, as well as narrative open-ended responses were collected to respond to these three focus areas.

The Kansas State Department of Education administered the survey in early May 2020 designed to capture the challenges faced by school districts due to the pandemic across the state. The digital survey was sent to all 286 school districts and to 69 privately accredited schools in Kansas. A total of 343 responses were received from all 286 public school districts and 57 of the 69 private and special purpose schools for a response rate of 96%. The survey was sent to the top leader, typically the superintendent of schools, to complete. Data was collected and categorized by responses. An open comment space was provided for each question. This narrative data allowed school leaders to further expand on their particular situations and to provide further feedback to the KSDE.

Access to internet and technological devices

As schools moved to remote learning, access to both a device and Internet were required for ongoing communication, as well as for teaching and learning. Respondents were asked to determine the percentage of their families facing the challenge of reliable access to internet in their home and access to a technological device for learning such as an iPad or laptop computer. The 343 total respondents could respond to as many barriers as they perceived as impacting the students in their schools. Table 1 details their collective responses.

Table 1

Total Number/Percentage of Districts Reporting Barriers Encountered while Providing Continuous Learning Opportunities

Barrier	n=Districts Responding	Percentage of Respondents

No valid means of contacting families	81	23.6%
Families not responding	141	41.1%
Lack of technology skills	166	48.4%
Lack of Internet service	235	68.5%
Inactivity of students or truancy issues	263	76.7%
Other	108	31.5%

While the majority of families had some level of access, reliable Internet access was varied across our state. Further, access to a technological device was also documented for many families as a barrier to learning and communication. As districts made learning plans, access was a critical foundational need. Many families had limited access to reliable Internet service. Two districts indicated that more than 50% of their families had limited access. Six districts estimated 31-50% of their families lacked access, while 74 districts estimated 11-30% lacked access. Most districts (n=261) districts reported that less than 10% of their families had no or limited access to internet capability. The disparity is evident especially within our poorest families, as well as isolated rural areas. Monetary need was noted in 110 districts as a reason for limited access. Many school districts were able to reach out to business partners who provided internet hot spots to students and families.

In addition to access to internet, access to a device was also documented as a challenge for families. Many districts provided a device to all students. Other districts provided a device for only certain grade levels. For example, some districts described providing a device only to high school students. Younger grades most often were impacted by the lack of technology in the form of an iPad or laptop computer. Fifty districts indicated that families in their district experienced limited access due to lack of a device. This lack of technology led to challenges contacting families. In fact, 81 or 23.6% of the respondents indicated this was a challenge in their schools.

Online Learning Delivered

School leaders who made purposeful decisions regarding delivery of remote teaching and learning were asked about the delivery of online instruction during the time of a "stay at home" executive order by the governor. While technology was a necessary component in considering whether or not digital learning modes were even possible, other issues were considered during the decision-making stage. Many issues had to be immediately addressed related to the delivery of online instruction. These included questions such as:
> Was remote learning developmentally appropriate?
> How could districts respond to technological access needs?
> How would children with special needs be accommodated?
> Did all teachers have the skill set to teach digitally?
> How would learning be assessed?
> Would new material be presented or would the focus be on review of previously learned material?

Committed to the ongoing learning needs, and with children and teachers in different physical places, technology had to be part of the solution. Online websites, learning management systems,

packaged programs, and teacher created digital materials were evaluated and implemented. In just a few short weeks, plans were disseminated to families and students. Learning would continue.

For this question, a range of percentages was provided to represent the amount of instruction delivered online. The divisions of percentages of online instruction were 0-24%, 25-49%, 50-74% and 75-100%. School leaders were asked to provide their best self-reflection estimate of the percentage of learning opportunities provided in an online delivery mode. All online instruction would be recorded as 100%, while no online instruction would be zero. Table 2 details the responses of the 343 respondents estimating the percentage of instruction delivered entirely online.

Table 2

The Number of Districts Delivering Some to All Instruction via Online Delivery Methods

	0-24%	**25-49%**	**50-74%**	**75-100%**	**N/A**
Elementary	32	44	60	200	7
Middle Schools	7	16	39	263	18
High Schools	11	10	26	252	44

Each respondent answered the question as it pertained to each of three banded grade levels – elementary, middle school and high school. Thus, each grade level contains 343 responses. Due to the inclusion of all accredited schools, it should be noted that many districts did not have all three levels of schooling. For example, 44 respondents indicating they did not have a high school. While the majority of children received at least some instruction online, many children were exposed to very little online learning delivery instruction and thus, little to no instruction at all during this time. All online delivery was more prevalent for older students than for younger students.

Table 3

The Number of Districts Delivering Some to All Instruction via Paper-Based Packets

	0-24%	*25-49%*	*50-74%*	*75-100%*	*N/A*
Elementary	38	31	55	212	7
Middle Schools	10	10	27	277	19
High Schools	13	6	20	261	43

Concurrently with online instruction, paper worksheets and other learning materials were frequently delivered via paper "packets." Table 3 highlights the number of districts utilizing paper packets by banded grade levels. For example, 212 districts reported using paper packets for 75-100% of their instruction at the elementary level. However, 38 districts reported a 0-24% use of paper packet instruction for elementary students. Some districts required the return of completed packets, to varying results.

Schools often combined these two learning delivery modes, with many districts reporting using both online and packet delivery modes. For some districts, packets were review materials and it was never intended for these materials to be completed and returned. For others, it was mandatory that students complete the materials and return them for formal grades. While the technology needs were being put in place for families, some systems choose to deliver packets for a time, and then transition to more of an online, synchronous virtual meeting with students. While each district went about delivery of instruction in various ways, at the heart was the desire for learning to continue, even when teachers and students were not in the same physical location.

Solutions and Next Steps

So, what have we learned? What is next as we consider the future of education? What is possible regarding in and out of school learning? Many questions emerge.

As a state, we should be very proud of our efforts to ensure learning will continue for students in our classrooms. We moved quickly and efficiently, we used resources available to us, and we worked collaboratively. Without hesitation our Kansas educators jumped in to develop something that had never been created before. We had strong leadership from the Kansas State Department of Education. Yet, strategic questions can guide our quest for an even stronger learning system for the future.

> How can we capture the power of technology to better enhance learning in the future?
> How do we address the inequalities in access that became quite evident during remote learning? How do we need to support the professional learning needs of inservice teachers?
> What changes need to occur in teacher and leader preparation programs?
> How do we support school leaders in this time of new learning for educators?
> What might a competency-based system contain?
> How do teacher preparation programs need to change to address the new realities before public education?

The *Four Domains for Rapid School Improvement: A System Framework* (The Center on School Turnaround, 2017) provides a lens through which to look at the challenges faced during this time that mandated rapid change leadership. Each domain was evident as school leaders navigated the change to remote teaching and learning. It was also obvious that there was integration among the domains as solutions were created and plans implemented.

Turnaround Leadership

Turnaround leadership is defined as the prioritizing of improved communication, the monitoring of short- and long-term goals, and customizing and targeting support to meet the needs of the improvement process (The Center on School Turnaround, 2017). Narrative comments indicated that school leaders used surveys to gather information from students, parents and community members. Cited was the use of a variety of measures to gather information including frequent parent, community, staff and student surveys and data collection, community partner meetings, site council meetings, newspaper editorials and the use of social media. Additionally, grade level

meetings and "team partnerships with local businesses to work on embedded projects" were cited as beneficial by respondents. School leaders cited the creation of a series of processes and events to encourage and develop relationships with students, parents and the community. School leaders restructured building policies to ensure that student would have more grace in relation to homework assignments and time to complete such work. These reduced and reevaluated homework practices shifted the focus to the whole student by proactively addressing needs versus reactively addressing the needs. Targeting support to meet the needs of students and staff was paramount in school leaders' responses.

Talent Development

Talent development is defined as the recruiting, developing, retaining, and sustaining talent, targeted professional learning, and the stating of clear performance goals (The Center on School Turnaround, 2017). Talent development became a key component as school leaders identified those with the knowledge and skills to help adapt during this rapid change time. New leaders emerged from the teachers who were technological leaders. Those principals who were strong strategic thinkers, mentored others as they shared their thought processes, not just with fellow building leaders in their district, but with others across the state. Further, school leaders were already thinking about new hires and the type of skill sets which would support ongoing change. These skill sets were described as "flexibility, reflective teachers and learners and those that could add to the team progress with an openness to learn new things." Finally, school leaders articulated the need to teachers who had the "ability to build strong relationships."

Instructional Transformation

Instructional transformation defined, means to diagnose and respond to student learning needs, the provision of rigorous evidence-based instruction, and the ability to remove barriers and provide opportunities (The Center on School Turnaround, 2017). Instructional transformation was the domain where the most change was noted. School leaders saw the need to immediately "personalize learning for teachers." Districts moved from traditional time and content to flexible digital instruction. Teachers who were already strong in the use of technology shared their expertise with others. Teachers learned from their students, who often were adept at using various applications and platforms. Even very young children learned to use zoom, SeeSaw, Canvas, and various other learning management and engagement applications. The transformation was summed by one school leader, "professional learning is specifically targeted to the needs of our students."

Data analysis that includes both academic and social/emotion support was critical. School leaders felt "personalizing learning is at a high level." With a focus on the whole child, "strategies to reach our goals are a constant conversation." This is transformational for many schools.

Culture Shifts

Culture shift is defined as the ability to build an atmosphere focused on student learning and effort, the solicitation of action on stakeholder input, and the ability to engage students and

families in pursing education goals (The Center on School Turnaround, 2017). Culture shifts were evident as districts moved to digital communication and meeting modes. Very used to a time on task system, school leaders had to trust their staff to be focused on the job at hand, even when that could not be readily seen. One respondent articulated, "True team work. Everyone is part of a team that has real voice in what we do as a school. This has been a grassroots effort." Another indicated, "Our school was already focused on being teacher-led, which is creating a shared focus. We have asked for and received a lot of input from staff and they feel part of the redesign work" so the processes in place made the conversations smoother during this pandemic. Finally, one school leader summed up the culture shift process in this way, "We did it together…We did it to fit our community, students and staff. If you do it any other way, it won't work."

Summary

As we learn from our past and anticipate future needs, we are poised to build a stronger and more equitable education system. Teacher and school leaders are empowered to provide voice for the future of teaching and learning in our state. These voices will guide the refinement and improvement of a competency-based system that ensures learning will continue regardless of time or place. As we examine how school leaders navigated the uncertainty brought on by the pandemic, we can better plan for the future. What we have learned will impact crisis plans, curriculum, programs, policies, and preparation of new teachers and leaders. As we move forward, we must continue to collect data related to the impact of the decisions made during this time of rapid change.

The collaborative system of school and teacher leaders, institutions of higher education and the Kansas State Department of Education is the foundation for positive learning systems in our state. Teacher and school leaders will use their voice to impact change. Teacher and leader preparation programs will adapt to the new challenges faced in classrooms across our state. The KSDE will provide the support and framework for redesign and adaptive change to occur. We look forward to the work ahead as we work collaboratively to prepare our Kansas students to lead the world.

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