

DeVos Highlights Schools' Innovation During COVID-19 Closures

By Evie Blad on May 21, 2020 4:47 PM



In the rapid switch to remote learning this spring, some schools developed new approaches to everything from parent engagement to science lessons.

Those innovations will not only help educators as they consider how to reopen schools that were closed to slow the spread of the coronavirus, they may also inform the broader conversation about how to "rethink" education, U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos said Thursday, touching on a theme she's carried throughout her time in the administration.

DeVos held a web conference for reporters, discussing online education strategies with state and district-level administrators, creators of education materials, and charter school operators. The crisis has created an opportunity to reexamine how schools operate, she said.

"Navigating the last couple of months has been challenging on many fronts, but I'm inspired in how each of you has risen to the occasion in many ways, and how you've empowered students to continue learning," DeVos told educators on the call.

The call came as district and state-level education administrators around the country consider when and how to reopen schools. On the call, leaders floated an array of options, including reopening to in-person learning, remaining in remote instruction, or adopting a hybrid approach that blends the two. And, regardless of what approach a school takes, educators will likely have to continue some remote learning for students and families with heightened health risks, those on the call said.

Participants included Eva Moskowitz, the founder and CEO of Success Academy Charter Schools in New York City; Los Angeles Unified Superintendent Austin Beutner; Khan Academy Founder Sal Khan; and leadership from the Alaska, Florida, and New Hampshire state education departments.

The road to remote learning has been rocky for some. Around the country, schools have reported challenges securing internet access, meeting the needs of students in crisis due to family job loss, and even locating some students who've never logged on to their remote platforms. And some parents of children with disabilities have said their needs are not being met remotely.

Schools also face the possibility of financial constraints and state budget cuts as they start the 2020-21 school year.

Here are some remote learning strategies educators and administrators highlighted on Thursday's call.

Blending Approaches

Alaska's Mat-Su Borough School District built its approach to online learning on years of work developing choices for students, Superintendent Monica Goyette said.

DeVos visited the district, 50 miles northwest of Anchorage, on her "education freedom" tour last year. The school system has about 19,000 students spread over an area the size of West Virginia, Goyette said. And students have long been able to cobble together educational offerings, including home school, AP classes, remote instruction, and career and technical training.

That personalized approach informed the district's remote transition, Goyette said. Administrators sought input from families on preferences related to screen time, method of instruction, and other issues, she said.

Rethinking Family Engagement

The remote learning experience has caused Success Academy to rethink parent engagement, and it's considering holding parent meetings online, even after school buildings reopen, Moskowitz said.

"Why do we always have parents come to schools?" she said. "Why not have all of the meetings virtually for parents who are working two jobs?"

Los Angeles Unified also worked to engage parents, who were taking an active role in helping their students learn from home, Buetner said. Principals hold virtual coffee hours with parents and have seen surging interest throughout the closures. The district also started a charity to help meet families' immediate needs, and it launched a mental health support line.

Engaging Partnerships

Educational administrators on the call said they had worked with internet providers to help connect students to hotspots and private donors to provide materials for families in need.

The Los Angeles district will extend its partnership approach to summer school, Buetner said. The district, the second largest in the country, will team with the Fender guitar company to offer students virtual guitar lessons. An animation studio will provide online drawing classes. And movie director James Cameron will assist with a virtual course about the Titanic that will blend physics, biology, and history.

"While we recognize there is no substitute for being in these school buildings, we are doing our best for the communities we serve," Buetner said.