

Keeping Learning on Track in a Crisis: Lessons from Roaring Fork School District's COVID-19 Response Spring 2020

Roaring Fork School District

A diverse rural district high in the Colorado Rocky Mountains took care of families first, then focused instruction on a common curriculum of essentials.

Key lessons:

- Providing support to families can remove barriers to learning.
- Increasing centralized curriculum coordination can balance educator autonomy with the need to collaborate across schools and teacher teams.
- The pandemic and the switch to online communication drove parents to engage with their student's schools, and the learning process itself, in new ways that school systems should hold onto after the crisis passes.

Number of schools: 13

Number of students: ~5,700

Grades served: PreK-12

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, District Details, 2018–2019 school year.

Families with income below the poverty level: 6.7%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates, 2014–2018.

The Roaring Fork School District stretches along a river of the same name in the Rocky Mountains. Its 13 schools are nestled in valleys about an hour's drive from two of Colorado's high-end resort towns—Aspen and Vail—where many parents work seasonal jobs.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced officials to shut down ski slopes and empty hotels and restaurants, leaving many households without income. At its worst, in late April and early May, wages of low-income workers had dropped by 30 percent in Garfield County and 70 percent in Eagle County,¹ the two counties served by the district.

¹ "Economic Tracker," Opportunity Insights Track the Recovery website (based on data from Earnin and Homebase and reported in the July 17 update).

Almost 30 percent of residents are Hispanic, and they have been disproportionately affected by the virus. By late summer, almost 2,000 residents in these counties had tested positive for COVID-19, which, given their small size, makes these counties among the hardest-hit in the state of Colorado.² Federal data prior to the pandemic [estimated that 87 percent of households](#) in the area had broadband internet, which meant that some students likely would not have reliable access at home.

When the governor closed the state’s schools to fight the pandemic, Roaring Fork focused on meeting the needs of families first, but never lost sight of the instruction students could not afford to miss.

The district started by reaching out to ensure families had their basic needs covered and students had the tools they needed to start learning. Meanwhile, the instructional team focused on building centralized units of study, which reduced the burden on teachers who were now expected to deliver instruction differently, and the potential for variation across teachers and schools. This helped district leaders ensure all students would cover material they needed to start the next school year on track, and also created structures for collaboration that leaders hope to hold onto after the pandemic passes.

Prioritizing the well-being of students and families

The small district’s family services team is bilingual and bicultural and serves as a liaison between families and schools. It collaborates with educators and serves as parents’ advocates in the school system. In the first few weeks after school closures, the superintendent said, “We decided at first to take care of people rather than jump right away to academic learning.” He explained,

Our first order of business was checking in on families, and making sure people had appropriate information, that they were getting information about what was going on with the schools, that they had access to economic resources, that if folks were . . . some people were immediately losing jobs.

The district, like others across the country, quickly mobilized to provide food assistance to students and their families, and quietly wielded its political influence to make sure it could support families that could not prove citizenship.

After spring break the family services team began a two-week push to reach every one of the district’s 4,600 families by phone. They referred between 400 and 500 families to community organizations for assistance, which stepped up to provide a drive-through food delivery system using school buses. Together they distributed up to 1,200 meals per day, sending tote bags of food home for weekends. The family services team continued working closely with 1,500 families through the spring—a 50 percent increase over the previous year’s caseload.

² “COVID-19 United States Cases by County,” Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center website (data reported are as of August 17, 2020).

Before the pandemic, the district had already assigned every student in grades 3 through 12 a Chromebook, and teachers already had some experience with Google Classroom. The family services team helped to identify any remaining students who still needed devices or internet access. The district reached an agreement with Comcast to provide service to families. It also worked with a community partner who would walk families through setting up access and partnered with organizations to provide broadband access in high-density housing areas, such as apartment complexes and mobile home parks.

The district referred eligible families to WIC and TNF for support and provided rental assistance to others using money the district and community organizations raised. By summer the team distributed \$150,000 in assistance to families.

As the superintendent noted, the slow start of instruction didn't sit well with many families who saw neighboring districts, including wealthier resort towns, launch academic work right away.

But the support-first strategy paid off as students re-engaged for remote learning: student attendance was better during the pandemic than in the previous school year.

Balancing tight and loose to ensure learning continues

District leaders initially took a dim view of remote learning. The chief academic officer stated bluntly: "The instructional methodology that we were left with was lacking most of the things that we believe are highly effective in instruction." They knew learning would suffer without face-to-face interactions among students and teachers. Nonetheless, they felt they had to find a way to help teachers deliver instruction—including new content—as effectively as they possibly could under the circumstances.

Their solution was to get tighter on curricula, set a few ground rules, and then allow teachers to use the strategies and approaches they felt would best reach their students. The superintendent said this challenged his long-standing belief in decentralization, but he viewed some tightening as necessary:

We didn't want to just say okay, teachers, go figure it out. We wanted to say okay, teachers, we've identified this preferred platform. We've identified this preferred curriculum format.

District leaders developed a six-week unit for each grade and subject. During the two weeks immediately following spring break, teacher-led, content-based teams reviewed the curricula for the rest of the school year, identified the essential elements that students would need to start on grade level next fall, and developed units of study that would ensure every student could learn this must-have material.

District leaders then set the expectation that teachers would administer the designed unit, taking them to the end of the school year. The district also set a grading policy that limited how much a student's grade could drop during the closure. High school students would retain their third-quarter grade if they showed competency in the final quarter. If they failed to show

competency, their grade could only be reduced by one level. As the superintendent explained, “We wanted much more emphasis on formative feedback, really deemphasizing grading, and really deemphasizing mistakes.”

The district launched formal instruction, but it eschewed real-time teaching. It wanted to make remote instruction easier for teachers, many of whom had children at home, and to maximize flexibility for parents and students. Teachers provided students and parents with a “week-at-a-glance” resource that outlined the material and assignments teachers expected students to cover each week. Teachers established “office hours” during which they would be available to help students. Crew—advisory groups in which students meet with a teacher to focus on nonacademic matters and build relationships—continued to meet in live, in 20- to 30-minute sessions. Lead teachers hosted some live lessons, but the district did not require students to attend.

To support teachers, the district designated Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons for professional development and co-planning.

Teachers initially bristled at the notion of delivering common units. The CAO explained that they eventually won teachers’ support for the centralized curricula by emphasizing that common units would allow teachers to easily hand off their classes if they became ill themselves, and would ensure greater equity by making it easier for specialists to adapt curriculum for students with disabilities and English language learners.

Some teachers also felt that pulling back on formal grading left them with few options for incentivizing students to engage. Students, parents, and teachers alike felt that students did not have enough productive access to teachers via office hours and spent too little time in live instruction. In a survey of more than 2,300 students, parents, and teachers conducted just a few weeks into remote learning, 61 percent of teachers reported that they had seen fewer than one in five of their students in office hours. Only 27 percent of students reported that their remote learning lessons were “quite or extremely helpful.” While the majority of students and parents (68 and 76 percent, respectively) felt that students completed their assignments, only 15 percent of teachers reported that most of their students submitted their work. These results prompted district leaders to shorten teacher office hours, but increase their frequency, and to ramp up the amount of live teaching.

Finally, the CAO noted that the strong bond the district sought to build between teachers and students had frayed with remote learning. He noted that students and teachers with good pre-existing relationships weathered remote learning better than those with weak relationships. For the fall he acknowledged that he and faculty would need to figure how to establish and sustain student-teacher and teacher-administrator relationships, even as remote learning continued.

Lessons for this fall

Roaring Fork started this fall with fully remote learning. At the time of our interviews in June, however, district leaders were planning for both fully remote and hybrid contingencies.

As summer started, childcare was a preeminent concern. By the end of July, unemployment claims in these counties had dropped to nearly pre-pandemic levels.³ Parents are back to work—for many that means 60- to 90-minute commutes to their jobs in resort towns, taking them away from home for long stretches of the day and unable to help their children with schoolwork. To prepare for schools' reopening, the district reached out to community partners who are organizing childcare providers in the region.

District leaders felt that they would need to get even tighter with instruction, have more materials ready to present, and work more closely together. In early June, district content leaders joined the district's operations and administrative teams to set the basic outline of the fall plan. Principals then sorted out how to operationalize those plans for their schools. The district shared information and sought feedback on a rolling basis from parents.

The district content teams mapped out weekly and quarterly learning goals by grade and subject. Instruction would begin on grade level. The teachers who convened for the district's Summer Academy—an annual summer professional development opportunity—designed units for the fall. The district concluded the summer in August by engaging all staff in a week of planning. Formative assessment would be used to help guide instruction and support.

Looking beyond the pandemic

Each of the district leaders we interviewed spoke of lessons that will carry beyond the immediate crisis.

Leverage community partnerships. Before the pandemic, Roaring Fork was committed to supporting families to remove barriers to learning. The superintendent said the district was already looking at ways to form partnerships with community organizations that could help provide children health care and other essential services to students:

Our schools in any community are uniquely positioned. They're trusted, they're central, they're everywhere, and so we should be using the infrastructure we offer—whether it's our facilities, transportation, or simply, our access to kids.

In some ways, he said, the pandemic “has been an accelerator of that vision.”

Engage parents. During the crisis, parents connected with schools in new ways. Shifting parent meetings to a virtual format increased participation. And supporting their students at home thrust many parents directly into the learning process for the first time.

The district's family services director wondered if there might be ways to sustain both forms of parent engagement after the crisis passes:

It melts your heart to see these stories of resilience, and parents that were like, ‘I never was interested in my kid's school learning, and now I'm doing it right there with them, and we've got a system, and I'm really proud of what I've done.’

³ “Economic Tracker,” Opportunity Insights Track the Recovery website (based on data from the Department of Labor and reported in the August 14 update).

To ensure quality curriculum, balance centralized resources with educator autonomy. The urge to centralize in a crisis is natural. A crisis demands speed and certainty in decision-making. Centralizing curriculum, however, runs against strong traditions of teacher autonomy, which had long flourished in Roaring Fork. District leaders made the somewhat unpopular choice to centralize planning of a common curriculum to help ensure all students would finish the school year prepared to continue grade-level work in the fall.

The superintendent noted that though he has generally favored decentralization, centralizing some lesson planning helped ensure students received essential material during a crisis. It also helped encourage collaboration among teachers in the same grade or subject in different schools and made it easier for bilingual and special education teachers to participate in that collaboration. According to him, the question is: Can they sustain that cross-team collaboration? Or will the district's previous tradition of educator autonomy overtake it when the crisis passes?

More than getting by

The superintendent concluded his interview by noting that he never doubted that his administrators and teachers would be able to handle the enormous task put before them last spring, but he also noted that this crisis will continue to affect the school system, perhaps for a very long time:

I felt like we were always going to be alright, and we would always navigate this as well as we could, make a lot of mistakes, and course-correct along the way. I just keep looking at it that way. I don't think that this is a tunnel we're going to come through and say, 'Oh, we're back to daylight.' We're just going to continue to navigate this.

In the near term, Roaring Fork will continue to support families and stay focused on curriculum. Over the longer term, leaders in the district hope that Roaring Fork schools emerge from the pandemic with a lasting commitment to unity in curriculum, building on parents' newfound understanding of and confidence in their children's learning, and expanding their community partnerships to provide even more comprehensive and coherent support to the community.

| About This Project

This is the first qualitative analysis released as part of the American School District Panel (ASDP)—a national effort by CRPE, the RAND Corporation, Chiefs for Change, and Kitamba to surface and examine trends in the policy and practice of school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs).

This groundbreaking effort will enable district and CMO leaders an opportunity to share their perspectives and contribute to decisions about education policy and practice. Researchers will survey leaders and staff from a representative panel of school districts and CMOs across the country, as well as conduct a complementary set of qualitative studies, following these districts and CMOs over time to monitor trends.

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While this analysis draws upon the help of many people, fault for any errors or omissions rests with the authors alone.