

Assisting School Leaders in Overcoming Challenges Related to Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Schools are undertaking social distancing measures to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to unprecedented challenges for school leadership. This essay explores four such specific challenges: 1) teacher-student connectedness in virtual learning, 2) inadequate computers and internet access, 3) food insecurity, and 4) lack of child-care. Related possible solutions are reviewed, such as the SPM model and alternative child-care options. Based on the findings, the author provides a holistic model. Future research can build on this model to provide school leaders with additional strategies to address educational challenges encountered during unforeseen pandemic situations.

Keywords: alternative childcare, COVID-19, food insecurity, internet access, online instruction, school leaders

The worldwide escalation of COVID-19 resulted in it being announced a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020a). At the time over 12 million people were infected by COVID-19 globally, of whom 3.11 million were from the United States (WHO, 2020b). Consequently, the U.S. government declared a national emergency on March 13, 2020 (White House, 2020). One of the initial steps to prevent the pandemic spread was social distancing, which included school closures. However, such closures caused tangential negative implications, such as a decline in the workforce because of unforeseen child-care responsibilities at home (Bayham & Fenichel, 2020).

While plans were being made to relax the school closures, a report by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2020) indicated 179,990 new child cases between 7/9/20 and 8/6/20, a 90% increase of infected children in four weeks. Such a surge adds to the uncertainty of how COVID-19 pandemic will unfold. Thus, school leaders are required to be prepared for unforeseen school closures and prolonged transitions to remote learning. Consequently, school leaders are encountering several challenges. Attempts have been made by certain schools and organizations around the world to address these challenges. The present essay explores some of these attempts by reviewing the following two questions:

- What are the **focal aspects** related to the following challenges: 1) teacher-student connectedness in virtual learning, 2) inadequate computers and internet access, 3) food insecurity, and 4) lack of childcare?
- Are there any **solutions** to these challenges?

The goal of this essay is an effort to aid school leaders in their planning process during the pandemic.

CHALLENGES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

According to Yoder et al. (2020), establishing student connectedness with teachers, ensuring students well-being, and reducing stress among students and their parents proved crucial in addressing challenges related to school closures. Building on this finding, the following four specific challenges encountered by school leaders during pandemic related school closures and their possible solutions are explored in the present essay: 1) teacher-student connectedness in virtual learning, 2) inadequate computers and internet access, 3) food insecurity, and 4) lack of childcare. An overview of these aspects is presented in Figure 1.

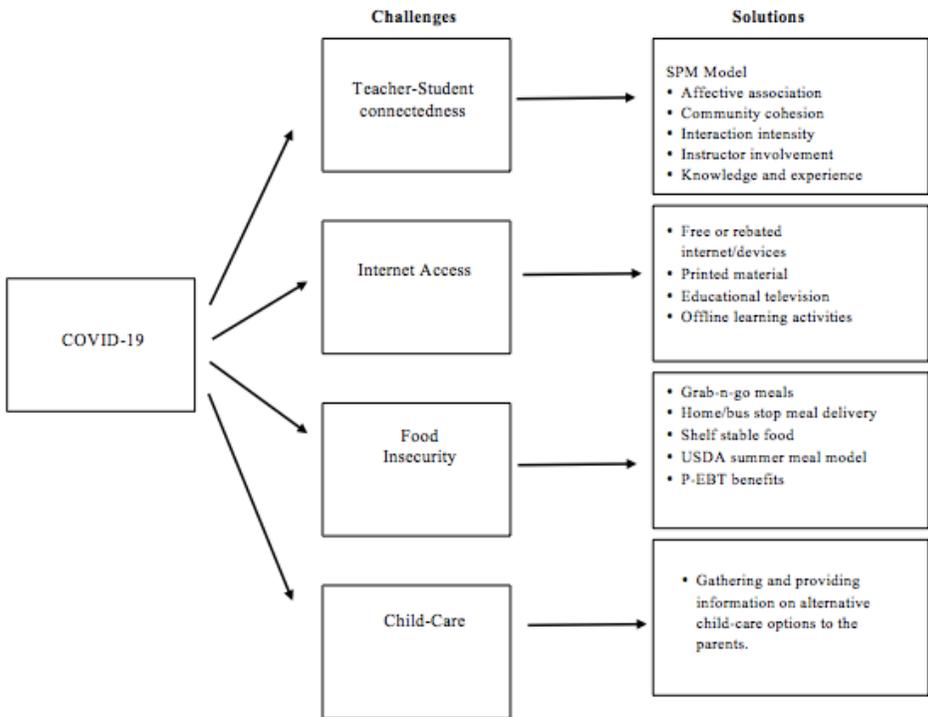
Teacher-Student Connectedness

Research indicated prolonged school closures and remote learning causes feelings of disconnectedness (Kerka, 1996) and psychological and sociological problems among students (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Conversely, higher feelings of connectedness leads to higher student engagement in learning (Walberg & Greenberg, 1997).

Therefore, to increase students' feelings of connectedness in remote learning, the North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) leaders integrated the Social Presence Model (SPM) into their online instruction. SPM focuses on promoting a purposeful and engaging online learning experience “through the development of three interdependent elements - social, cognitive, and teaching

presence” (Garrett Dikkers, et al, 2013, p.158). It comprises five teaching elements: affective association, community cohesion, interaction intensity, instructor involvement, and knowledge and experience.

Figure 1
Challenges and Possible Solutions for School Leaders During the COVID-19 Pandemic



1) **Affective association** encompasses establishing emotional connectedness with students. To achieve this goal, teachers used audio and video-based instruction and maintained consistent communication with students through instant texting, phone calls, emails, and discussion forums. They provided prompt, constructive feedback; compliments; and acknowledgments.

2) **Community cohesion** is the extent to which students consider their classroom as a community. To achieve this, some teachers had students post their biographies to understand their needs. Another teacher used greetings and emphasized using names when referring to others. Some other teachers encouraged positive interactions in blogs, discussion forums, and Animoto videos.

3) **Interaction intensity** is the extent to which teachers and students interacted. Teachers increased their interaction levels by asking questions, rewording, and motivating students. Some used social tools, such as Twitter, Facebook, Google Voice, and Pronto to interact with students. Some others created games using Microsoft PowerPoint, Excel, Word, QuiaWeb (www.quia.web), and Classroom Games (www.uncw.edu/edgames) to teach and help student to practice skills.

4) **Instructor involvement** is the extent to which teachers are involved in students' learning. Teachers indicated their involvement mainly by providing consistent and prompt feedback and being available to the students every day.

5) **Knowledge and experience** refers to the sharing of knowledge and experiences. Teachers developed assignments that required students to connect the knowledge learned in the classroom with real-world experiences. To gauge students' prior knowledge and experiences, teachers conducted pre-assessments and asked for students' input.

Serving Students Without Access to the Internet or a Computer

School closures mandated schools to switch to remote learning. However, the National Center for Education Statistics documented 14% of K-12 students with no internet access at home, resulting in over 9 million students unable to complete their schoolwork (USA Facts, 2020). To overcome this difficulty, some school districts are collaborating with internet companies to provide free or rebated internet access to students. Other districts are buying and allocating devices and hotspots to the students (Noonoo, 2020), while some are providing printed learning material to avoid complete reliance on the internet (Noonoo, 2020). Kearney and Levine (2015) suggested that public television broadcasts could be used to design educational programs for students without internet access. According to Castelo (2020), teachers can use offline apps such as the Google Keep app, Chromebook app hub, or Chrome Webstore apps to create offline educational activities for students. Chromebooks can also be used to download and store learning materials for later use.

Food Insecurity

Many students depend on schools for food. However, because of the COVID-19 related closures, unemployment and poverty are expected to increase, causing over 17 million children to face food insecurity (Feeding America, 2020). In response, some school districts are providing single day delivery of five-day meals, home and bus stop meal deliveries, and the USDA's shelf-stable food packages. Local school administrations can adapt existing programs such as the

USDA's summer meals to ensure a continuous food supply. Recent congressional provisions such as the Families First Coronavirus Act (FFCA) enables states to utilize electronic pandemic meal replacement benefits (P-EBT) to provide school meals at reduced prices (Kinsey et al., 2020). Additionally, Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health developed a mapping tool (ArcGIS, 2020) to complement the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This tool aims to assist policymakers in designing effective food distribution strategies across the nation. These efforts are further assisted by social media to strategize planned shopping by SNAP and non-SNAP shoppers to avoid bulk purchasing during the pandemic emergency.

Alternative Child-Care Options

A recent report by the University of Oregon's RAPID-EC Research Group projected 60% of families to lose child-care providers due to COVID-19. Lempel et al. (2009) found a reduction of medical personnel by 6 to 19% because of child-care responsibilities at home due to school closures. Child-care is crucial for families that work in the pandemic crisis. To assist parents in finding emergency child-care, Child Care Aware of Southern New Hampshire (2020) took specific measures. They collected information using phone calls, e-mails, and surveys about a) open, closed, or soon to re-open child-care programs; b) early childhood and afterschool programs to gather information about those who are willing to offer child-care; and c) names of individuals willing to provide child-care (in their home, a family's home, daycare, school-age program or a temporary 24-hour residential child-care program). They also created a flyer detailing the information thus gathered and distributed it to the parents.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic presents school leaders with a calamity leading to various consequences. Overcoming such a crisis requires an integrated plan of action. By facilitating the multi-pronged management procedures such as promoting teacher-student connectedness, ensuring adequate access to internet and devices, securing food distribution, gathering information on alternative child-care options, and disseminating the collected information among parents, a school leader serves as a centralized resource person for students, parents, and teachers.

Figure 1 serves as a starting point for school leaders as they begin the planning process and is expected to evolve with future research. Further, researchers can incorporate the continually evolving solutions as delineated in Figure 1 into standard operational practice manuals. Such manuals will serve as

useful resources that can be referred to by school leaders during future school-related emergencies.

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