Opportunity Thrives - Episode 09.mp3

[00:00:00] Hello and welcome back to our ninth episode. Opportunity drives where we are committed to better supporting the needs of today's secondary students.

[00:00:08] Through interviews with students, teachers, administrators, technologists and education influencers, we want to understand what's working today in our schools, what's not, and how we can have a positive and lasting change for our students. And we would love to hear your feedback and suggestions on our show. You could just click on the podcast notes to leave us or a view. You can provide input or send us questions. You can also reach out to us at info. An opportunity thrives Scob in a rush to keep students learning amid school closures. Education leaders had to utilize whatever resources were available, which often translated to students who were working from different programs for every subject. We have asked a great deal of both educators and students to learn new concepts while adjusting to new platforms, all while managing new logistics for online learning. While schools and districts plan for the upcoming year, there is an opportunity to consider how to streamline resources and reduce confusion for students. In this episode, we will talk with two district leaders to discuss their strategies for creating virtual learning solutions to enhance continuity of resources so that teachers can focus more on connecting with their students and students can focus on learning. We're excited to introduce our first guest, Amy Hallstein, who is the deputy superintendent for Charles County Schools in La Plata, Maryland. Amy is a 29 year veteran of the Charles County Public Schools who began her career in 1987 as a teacher and was quickly promoted to vice principal of the elementary school where she was working. She went on to become principal of the school in 2000, and later she moved to a different elementary school in the district where she was credited with a drastic increase in student achievement. She received the Washington Post Distinguished Educational Leadership Award and was the Charles County Public Schools 2011 principal of the year. We are delighted to have you on the show. Welcome, Amy.

[00:02:06] Thanks, Jason, so much, appreciate the invitation. Glad to be here today to discuss this important topic.

[00:02:13] Well, we're glad you're here as well. We also are very excited to have Dr. Kimberly McClain, who is the blended learning coordinator for Cincinnati Public Schools, with us today. Kimberly has over 20 years of experience in public education as a classroom teacher, an online and virtual instructor and administrator and instructional designer, emphasizing curriculum development in a virtual setting. Kimberly has spent the last fifteen years working an online and hybrid learning environments with a focus on middle school and primarily with at risk and specially circumstanced student populations. She's also studied leadership in K-12, online and virtual school environments. And it is great to have you here with us today, Kimberly.

[00:02:53] Thank you. Jason, I really appreciate the invitation.

[00:02:56] Absolutely. Well, first of all, how are you both doing? I'm pretty sure that this situation has not been easy on either one of you, to say the least. As it seems, things have evolved from business as usual to almost utter chaos. And then back to business as usual, especially when it comes to remote learning.

[00:03:15] Amy, how about you? I know that you were one of the first districts to go online to get your program up and running in an extraordinarily short amount of time. What would you share about the program that you developed and how it's been working for you and your educators and your students?

[00:03:30] Thank you, Jason. Well, we certainly did get online learning in a very quick turnaround time.

[00:03:39] We're getting better.

[00:03:40] I'll say that as the weeks progressed and as with any new program, you enhance and you learn and you continue to be able to provide a better program for your students. It was challenging to move completely to virtual learning and not only introduce a new way of teaching and learning to our teachers and students, but also to provide the professional development for both groups with new learning platforms, new materials.

[00:04:15] So I would say that, yes, we are continuing to get better.

[00:04:21] There are still challenges ahead, but we feel very good about where we are right now in Charles County and providing learning for our students.

[00:04:32] Excellent. So when you think about as one of the early adopters of this transition, what were some of the major hurdles that your district faced in creating that virtual program so quickly?

[00:04:44] So we had a lot of challenges. I'll say it that way that we really needed to think about.

[00:04:50] First of all, we tried to keep in mind when we were making all these important decisions that we had to design a program that would meet a variety of needs, but also keep in mind that families were facing some very serious challenges.

[00:05:08] We have a number of our students that live in rural areas were not able to have Internet connection, even if we were to be able to provide a device, they didn't have the connectivity. Another challenge in that area that I really didn't know is that hot spots were not going to work if we didn't have cell tower availability. So that was one of our first challenges. In addition, when we're looking at what a traditional day is going to look like for a student and the teacher, we had to keep in mind that many families were facing challenges such as they were working as a responder to the health pandemic. They were working in hospitals or were police officers and had to leave their families now with small children at home. And even our teachers looking at what their schedule was going to look like, we had to keep in mind that they also had their children home and that they were not only teachers, but also had to had to supervise their children and help them with their education. So all of these decisions we tried to make with all of that in the forefront of our minds because we didn't want to design a just distance learning program that was really going to be so difficult that it was going to close family crisis any more than our folks were already facing. So those were first challenges. And later on in the podcast, I can explain how we met some of those challenges.

[00:06:48] Excellent. I have a good friend who manages the city and he says in crisis mode, you have to focus on the essentials. And that sounds like exactly what you all did. So great job getting that started.

[00:07:00] You really do. You have to focus on the people first and make sure that you're taking care of your school community because they were counting on us for that. Then you start layering on the instructional activities.

[00:07:14] Excellent. Well, thank you for doing such a great work on that. Kimberly, would you share a little more about how your district is accommodating remote learning needs?

[00:07:24] I would be happy to. One of the first things our district had to address is we're a one to one device district in the classroom, but we weren't a one to one take home device district. So creating opportunities for students to get devices and access so that we could transition to a virtual program was critical, providing all the needs for the family that Amy addressed. How are we going to handle students who need school lunches? How are we going to handle students and families who don't have access to the Internet? So we had to roll out very quickly. And one of the challenges we faced was just the MBK ambiguous nature of the early quarantine. No one knew how long it was going to go on for. Decisions were being made daily and weekly by our state government and by the federal government on how we were going to approach the future of schooling. And so it became this challenge to anticipate what would what was going to be needed. And so the big critical element for us was communicating that we were there to support people providing training for parents on how to access all of our communication tools, our virtual learning platforms, how to access their teachers from their home environment, training teachers on how to use those platforms and all the technologies available to even how to train teachers on how to get phone calls and get their voice mail remotely from the school. I mean, that seems like a simple problem, but it was one that we had to work out for the entire district. So those were some critical issues in trying to accommodate remote learning needs.

[00:08:55] Boy, I think you hit the nail on the head when you said not only was there uncertainty, but there was an incredibly rapid pace of change and making decisions. And that environment is certainly challenging. And I think it sounds like you erred on the side of communication, which is a really smart thing to do when you think of operating in that environment of rapid pace of change and uncertainty. What were some of the

challenges that you and your leadership team faced as you navigated this very quick transition?

[00:09:24] Our key one was the devices we passed out that first week. We did everything on paper and it was great. We had really wonderful community connections and businesses offering to make copies of learning plans for thirty five thousand students. It was just this unheard of support. And it was beautiful. But then we wanted to transition to that online learning. And so we had to really very quickly figure out how are we going to get the majority of our students devices access to the Internet and how are we going to get their families up to speed on the expectations, what they would need to do and what the behavior should be over the next few weeks until the end of the school year? That was definitely absolutely our biggest challenge.

[00:10:09] It brings to mind something that that I've I've heard said a few times throughout this, and it just resonates so much. And it's Maslow's Before Blooms. It's making sure that our families and our students are taking care of. Before we, you know, continue on down the path of academic learning. It sounds like you do. You definitely did that.

[00:10:29] It's funny you mention that, because one of the little things that we shared among our team was a new Maslow's hierarchy with Wi-Fi at the bottom because we just hung out. We just can't should without it.

[00:10:40] We usually operate on some themes for the year and message. And one of our messages, we actually had t shirts made that said you have to Maslon before you can blue.

[00:10:53] That's beautiful. This is such a coincidence.

[00:10:57] Well, it's it's it's funny how we're all operating independently and sort of we all saw the same most important critical elements, and that's making sure that they're taken care of. So it's great to hear. I think many of us in the initial stages did exactly what we had talked about, Amy, just focusing on those essential things.

[00:11:19] What are some of the things that you could share, those key components that you believe will be important for districts to focus on as they develop and evolve? What could even potentially become a long term virtual learning program?

[00:11:33] I think that, as I said, we've learned a lot through the last seven weeks and we're looking into the future to see how their challenges are there. But we can make them temporary challenges and that distance learning really can flourish. And if we look at this in a positive way, this may be one positive out of the closure of schools is that it's giving us an opportunity to think of how we educate our students in maybe a different way. And the future may look different in education. When when schools reopen, if they reopen in the fall. Another thing that we learned through the last few weeks is that we can not forget how important it is to take care of the social, emotional needs of our children. So as we were communicating and we learned that it was critical to communicate often, but to move slowly, we phased in our distance learning program very purposefully so that we were not overwhelming any of our stakeholders. And I think that that's critical for districts is that you have to have a phased in program so that you're adding layers of instruction. And we chose to add our phase in the new additions every two weeks.

[00:12:59] But along with all the instructional activities, we have a very vibrant, social, emotional part of our program where we're utilizing our school psychologists with a call in line. If families are feeling that there's some social emotional needs that are arising in their home situation, that they can call their school psychologist for advice.

[00:13:24] We also are utilizing our guidance counselors in that way. So we've set up Google phone numbers for each of our guidance counselors so that we can continue to provide counseling and therapy for our students. The third thing in that same venue is that when we opened up Microsoft teams, which is our platform for asynchronous instruction, we noticed that although children were so excited for the lesson that they were more excited to see their friends and their peers and their teachers. So we learned through that that we're opening up the chat box either at the beginning of the lesson or at the end of the lesson so that kids can just talk to one another, because for many of them, they're feeling very isolated.

[00:14:15] So that was a big aha moment for us that we can't just focus on instruction. We also have to focus on the social and emotional well-being of all of our students.

[00:14:29] That's so smart. And I'm sure that their parents and families appreciate so much that you attend to that. Kimberly? I'd love to hear your perspective on that as well. What are your thoughts on the most essential elements that we should be thinking about when we make this transition to distance and online learning?

[00:14:47] Well, I'm I'm going to be honest. Amy spoke to like the whole district needs and my focus has been the last few weeks on on what teachers and families need to get online. And we have created, like, model lessons that we would like our teachers to use using research based blended learning practices. What are the best ways to put instruction online? What is the best way to support students that are have exceptional needs? Those sorts of things. And so we came up with kind of a bullet list of what our expectations out of teachers. And part of that is like a weekly guide for parents just communicating. This is what we'll be doing in class this week. This is where you access that information we have. We want teachers to post clear methods of communication. This is how you can reach me. This is when I'll be online for some office hours. That sort of thing. And then we've supplemented that with a lot of professional development. We developed a professional development calendar that offers four to five classes a day on different aspects of technology for our teachers, for our parents, for our students, for administrators, for basically anybody in the district who wants to learn about this kind of new future. But our biggest key has been teaching people to be effective communicators, that in online learning you have to loop constantly. You refer to something. Once you come back to it later, you communicate it again. It's because you're not there in person, in the classroom. And like Amy spoke about, the kids are missing that. And so making those connections is just so critical.

[00:16:19] I couldn't agree more. And I love that you've both touched on different parts or different facets of the same concept. So looking at it from the family's perspective or a student perspective. And then, Kimberly, at the teachers perspective, I'm going to I'm going to talk a little bit more about sort of the next steps on that. I heard a term called Failing Forward, and I have never failed forward so much in my whole career, so publicly. So, so frequently, so often. And I think that one unique part is that in this period of uncertainty and rapid change is that we have grace for that. That feeling forward and

that continuous learning. And Kimberly, when when you think about your experiences that you and your district have had, what are some of the lessons that you take away and that you've taken away from this as you first launched it and from up till now? And is there anything that you're going to take and change as you start to plan for longer term use?

[00:17:24] That's a good question, actually. So one of the things we built was some blended learning guidelines for teachers. It's just a quick one pager of the basics. And the last bullet item on that list is it's OK to fail. The important thing is that you self reflect and make a change because as you're learning something new, you're really just going to mess it up. And instinctively, most teachers just want to take what they do in the classroom and plant that online and see if they can emulate it. And that's really not how the best blended weren't learning really works. And so you can't force families until like a bell schedule, for example, you can't say, well, you're in my first period class and I expect to meet with you in the same hour every day that I would face to face in a classroom because families have different demands and they have multiple students and they don't necessarily have that access. So giving teachers permission to fail, giving students permission to fail, and then dealing with those frustrations, addressing them and then creating pathways to correct them is far more important than what you do online or put online or create online.

[00:18:30] And so just reminding people that making mistakes is part of that learning process. And moving forward, you're going to make a lot of mistakes. And that's OK. We're always constantly improving and trying to get better. But that's a hard lesson, I think, for teachers, because one of our jobs is to correct mistakes and point out the mistakes of other people so that they can learn from them. But I'm not so sure that we're all as good or self-aware in identifying our own. So it's helpful to have programs in place and avenues in place for them to address those issues.

[00:19:01] Well, sure. It's nice that you keep looping back to that same statement about you have the grace and the latitude and the opportunity to grow from from what you've done to how you move forward. So I think that's really important. Amy, on on your side, I'd love to hear your thoughts on this as well. Have you all determined any areas or plans that you could change your bottom by moving forward based on what you've learned?

[00:19:25] Well, as I said earlier on, we certainly we certainly learned as we went along. A lot of what Kimberly said, we learned as well.

[00:19:35] We talked a lot about accountability for students and that this should be a time of giving grace for students when it comes to grading. We spent a great deal of time just trying to determine what would fourth quarter grades look like, we have seniors that are ready to graduate and they need credits in order to, you know, make that walk across the stage. So that was a challenge for us at first to be able to come up with this accountability piece, especially for our students who did not have connectivity. So currently, our count, we have added, as I said, in phase three, where we have actually created one hundred and sixty five courses that are being offered, along with paper packets for students that do not have Internet access. So we have meal distribution sites where we also pass out the learning packets. So that was a challenge for us, that we had to take a step back and look to see how we could best meet kids needs. And as you said, give students grace during this time period when it comes to grading.

[00:20:54] I'm going to shift gears a little bit to start looking towards the future. I know it is way too early to know, even right now, what's going to happen this fall. We have that uncertainty. We have that rapid pace of change. When you all think about that. What type of different scenarios are you planning for? Kimberly, you want to start that off?

[00:21:15] Sure. So right now, our district is planning for three potential models, which is a return to full face to face instruction. A return to a flipped or blended learning classroom model. Or a fully online model. And one of the great things that has occurred from this crisis is that even if we return to full face to face instruction, our district leaders are looking at the potential of future closures.

[00:21:40] And so they want teachers to start blending more online and being prepared for an immediate stop. And this could you know, it can apply to this crisis, but can also apply to other things like snow days, something as simple as that. And I know there are districts nationwide that already do digital snow days, but our district has not. So this is a new direction for us. So that's one of the models we're looking at. And then in a flipped model, we're trying to figure out what is attendance look like when you have to socially distance students? How much of the information goes online and how much is

handled in person. And this is so new to so many people in the district. The question becomes, how do we prepare them in the next 10 weeks to be fully online or even partially online? So we are definitely examining those models. We have a lot of input from a lot of really great professionals that are trying to develop best practices for our teachers. And then how do we prepare our students and families to make that transition?

[00:22:39] We talk about shattering norms just left and right. This is just changed everything that we all took sort of for granted as set in stone and changed it. So interesting.

[00:22:50] This is great for me because I spent the last 15 years and an online blended environment and I've always thought it was the school model of the future. And I'm so excited. It's awful to say, but I'm so excited we're being forced into it because I think people are going to see just how beneficial blending this education can be.

[00:23:08] Yeah, you're exactly right. And I, I, I'm hesitant to say this, but I've seen just personally and professionally so many silver linings to this. And and I agree with you. I think that this is one of them. Amy, how about from your perspective, what does your district planning for as far as preparation in the fall for a variety of different scenarios? Any any thoughts on that?

[00:23:33] I think that we have similar thoughts to Kimberly's district. We believe that one model is not going to fit every family's needs. And of course, we're at the beginning stages of planning, but we're thinking that there might be a school. There might be some choice for families based on the guidance that we're also getting from the state and from our health officials. So we're hoping that there will be possibility to have some face to face instruction, whether that be through social distancing. And we're talking about a days and be days. But we believe that probably the model that we'll be going with will be more of a hybrid model where there will be some face to face instruction and some distance learning instruction as well.

[00:24:24] So it'll be a blended program. We also started talking about is this an opportunity to have a virtual high school?

[00:24:33] And could students decide to opt to have completely virtual instruction where we would do a different model than we have right now? There would actually be all face to face instruction.

[00:24:50] But we're thinking that there are going to be families who, even if schools are open, are not comfortable sending their children back to school, and that we need to make sure that we also have options for those folks.

[00:25:06] That's great. I'm going to pick up on your your point about taking stakeholder input on that. I wanna expand on that a little bit.

[00:25:14] So when we think about not just the parents. What about the teachers and the students? They have all had this experience as well, participating in group remote learning for the first time over the last couple of months. So how are different stakeholders guiding the future of online learning decisions? Maybe, maybe more so than they have in the past. Kimberly, do you want to pick up on that?

[00:25:38] Sure, I would love to. And I'm going to actually piggyback off of Amy's comments about the virtual high school. We have one of those in Cincinnati public schools, but we're anticipate anticipating increased enrollment at that school because we're our feedback from parents is that some of them have discovered they love this model and they didn't take it seriously before or they weren't aware of it before. But now that they've been kind of forced into it, they're finding that their students thrive in the online space and that this is really working for them. So we're actually anticipating, just like Amy's district, an increase in enrollment in our virtual schools. And I can see I anticipate that parents will be making more demands for this type of education in the future because it does work really well for some students. And they should have those choices, like Amy said.

[00:26:29] Right. Right. Amy, is there anything that you would add in addition to that as far as educator and stakeholder involvement in the transition?

[00:26:37] Well, I think we all agree that it's critical to listen to all of our stakeholders and to make decisions with everyone's input. Their difficult decisions, though, just with deciding what graduation is going to look like this year. We have folks that absolutely do

not believe that there should be virtual graduation, while others feel that we should be having an opportunity for students to receive their diploma. So you certainly with that, with the distance learning plans for the future, you have a lot of folks who have differing opinions. So as district leaders, we listen to all of our stakeholders and we believe that in this case, we need to have options for for our families. And one size is not going to fit everyone in the future.

[00:27:32] But I agree with Kimberly that we this has forced us to see the benefits of distance learning. We didn't. Some of us who have been doing this for a long time did not see how this could possibly work. And there have been great benefits. Teachers are more excited about it.

[00:27:54] They didn't fully understand how they could implement distance learning, but teachers are problem solvers. So they have found a way to make this work. So I believe that we'll be listening to a lot of our community members in the future. And that would there probably won't be one decision. There probably will be multiple ways for kids to access education in the fall.

[00:28:21] I just I love to hear the way that education is changing in the future. And as we navigate that that change. Are there any specific Refaat resources that each of you have found beneficial as you've made this transition to online at distance starting? Is there anything that you'd recommend? And we you want to go and pick up?

[00:28:43] So we we didn't want to bring to our students and teachers new programs that they had no familiar familiarity with. So we chose APACS learning for our secondary schools. Apexes, a program that we were utilizing for great credit recovery.

[00:29:04] And the folks in Apex were just phenomenal in helping us tailor this program so that it could meet the needs and our core subjects. So that was our selection for the secondary were utilize their tutorials and their curriculum. We had our content specialist look at the fourth quarter and they chose critical content that we believed students needed to master so that they'll be successful in the next course next year. So Apex has been out of just a wonderful resource for us.

[00:29:42] And then our online platform, we're utilizing Microsoft teams and we plan over the summer to provide professional development to our teachers because we haven't turned on all of the bells and whistles and Microsoft teams.

[00:29:59] And we're thinking that that will be a way for us to have a learning management system in the fall. And that was a challenge for us because we didn't have a learning management system when we went into distance learning. So those are the two resources that we've really counted on to be our foundation.

[00:30:19] And then we built upon those two.

[00:30:23] Wow, that's interesting. Boy, what a what a sort of forced quick change on that. Kimberly, what about resources that you all have found helpful and beneficial in the stress, a transition?

[00:30:38] Well, like Amy, we've relied a lot on Apex, your tutorials and the available information online because we were already using apexes our credit recovery system. But we also had a learning management system in place. We're using school ages. So we were able to bring teachers online in that space and families online in that space. But one of the best things we did, and I highly recommend to every district in the country is we partnered with the local universities, Education Department and got together with their instructional design students and said, our teachers need help. Your students need classroom hours. Let's make this work together. And so we've part nerd with them. They're going to work with us through the summer just to get our teachers up to speed on what good online blended learning looks like. And it's just such an excellent partnership. And then promise not to laugh. But Twitter networking is amazing because if you can find an article written by someone about best practices, you can probably find that someone on Twitter and then start asking questions and make connections. And so that has been a wonderful just building. Networks across the Internet has been a wonderful resource for us.

[00:31:49] Wow. It's so smart. But, you know, back to my earlier our Becky, our earlier conversation on those silver linings. I mean, who would think that this would spur so much innovation so quickly and so rapidly? That's such great ideas, both of you. Thank you. So I'm going to start to form closure and say, if each of you have one final either

word of encouragement or a piece of advice for other districts, you are going through the same process. What would you share with them? Amy, you wanna go first?

[00:32:17] Sure. Just a summarizing statement. I would say move slowly, communicate often and listen to your school community.

[00:32:28] Great words of advice. Kimberly, how about you?

[00:32:31] I'm going to put a teacher's perspective on this. I think teaching often happens in isolation. And as we move on into blended learning, you need to not be isolated. And you need to be learning from each other and don't recreate the wheel and look to each other for resources and support and help and assistance and then demonstrate that to families and other people and how you can build support networks even when you're socially isolated from each other.

[00:32:59] That's right. I think in the t shirt that Amy talked about, you have to Mazlo before you can bloom. And social interaction is certainly a part of that. So I just want to say wow and thank you. I think that this has been a fantastic and lightning conversation. I want to thank you so much for joining us today. Your advice and guidance are going to be beneficial to districts. Whoo hoo! All of us are navigating these very same challenges in the ongoing transition to blended and virtual learning. We wish you the very best as you continue to develop your programs. Both of you stay safe and healthy. Thank you for your time.

[00:33:38] Thank you. I really appreciated the opportunity to share and listening to Kimberly's ideas the same.

[00:33:46] Thank you. Thank you for having me. And Amy, it was great to learn from you.

[00:33:49] Yes. I think it's always so great to learn from our our peers. Thank you both again for your time today.

[00:33:56] We look forward to listener feedback on today's show. Please reach out to us with questions or comments at Kento at Opportunity Transcom or write us a review on Spotify or Aitken's. Thanks so much for listening in today. And we will see you next time.