Putting Equity at the Center of Distance Learning: Best Practices

By Megan Green | Categories: Thought Leadership, Implementation, Remote Learning

“We will do what we always do. We will meet the kids at the door and go from there!”
—Amy Lesen, elementary school coordinator, Corvallis School District, Oregon

At Collaborative Classroom, we work with many amazing educators across the country who are using our programs to make the world a better place. One thing that always strikes me about the people we work with is that we share a belief in supporting all children to develop as caring and responsible critical thinkers in the context of an inclusive community. As we move into another uncertain year, we can take stock of ways we were successful in the distance learning endeavor and apply what we learned.

When Elementary School Coordinator Amy Lesen shared the work Corvallis School District in Oregon is doing to make equity a central consideration during distance learning, I knew I had to share. Educational inequity is becoming even more pronounced across the country as we struggle with the demands of remote learning.

Amy stressed the importance of developing an “equity lens” for making decisions around distance learning. In her words:

“When we (the elementary principal team) had the realization that we weren't returning to school this year and we would be continuing distance learning, our immediate response was quite visceral. Knowing that the intense work we do every day in our brick and mortar buildings to reduce barriers for our most marginalized students and families was at risk, we set to work in developing a framework and lens that we could use to make decisions about building distance learning for our elementary students.”

Amy then shared some of Corvallis’ best practices for keeping equity at the forefront when making decisions around and executing distance learning.

**Best Practices for Decision Making**

- Create a **guiding question**. Here is the guiding question the Corvallis team created for their work:

  *While we engage in distance learning, how can we strategically hold our most marginalized and vulnerable student groups at the core of our instruction?*

- For each decision you make, also **ask yourself**:

  - *Does this decision align with the District mission/vision?*
  - *Have we kept in mind our personal and organizational core values when making this decision?*
  - *Who does this decision affect, both positively and negatively?*
  - *Does this decision ignore or worsen existing disparities or produce other unintended consequences?*
  - *What other possibilities were explored? Is the decision/outcome sustainable?*

- Use a **racial equity lens**. This often means having uncomfortable but necessary conversations about race, for which Amy
suggests the following:

- Be aware of the **shadow sides** of the compass (disbelief, fear, ignorance, fatigue). In Amy's words:

  "When we use the compass, we are referring to the Courageous Conversations About Race Protocol. When we have conversations about race, we introduce the compass and ask people to place themselves on it and use it as a tool to engage with/understand where others are entering the conversation. Ideally, we are all getting to the center, which requires moving across the compass. We've also come to understand that there is another component of the compass, one that we need to be equally aware of—the shadow side. It is important to understand the negative components to help us get to a place of understanding and action."

- Be aware of **detours**. In Amy's words:

  "Using primarily the work of Robin DiAngelo, we ask our white colleagues to understand the detours people take to avoid conversations about race. This is a critical step in moving any work around equity forward. This is a video we've used to help our staff deepen their understanding of whiteness. We have also read DiAngelo's book *White Fragility* to help us see when people are taking us on a detour."

- Be aware of **bias**. Implicit bias surfaces in times of crisis and stress.

- Embody **personal racial equity principles**. When you know your why, your what has more impact because you're walking in or toward your purpose.

### Best Practices during Distance Learning

#### Instruction

- Collaborate with specialists including ELD and Special Education teachers and counselors to meet the needs of all students.
- Consider what was working well in the classroom for the student and how that may be replicated or modified in a distance learning environment. For example, give families ideas for meeting sensory needs.
- When conducting whole-class meetings using Google Meet or Zoom, consider how to maximize participation and allow multiple ways of connecting with the classroom community. For example, tell the class on Monday that for community circle on Friday they will share something they did to help another person during the week, and give the students a sentence frame for the activity.
- Make social interaction a priority. This means allowing space for conversation and laughter. This can be through written messages you share, photos, and videos.
- Create predictable routines and limit the number of messages families are receiving. While you want to keep in touch, you do not want to overwhelm families. Consider creating a predictable routine of when things will be posted and when you will contact families.

#### Students/Families

- Consider the strengths of the student and family and how those may be leveraged in a distance learning environment.
- Be mindful of other responsibilities students and caregivers have at home during this time.
- Collaborate with families; maintain connections and offer support.
- Monitor participation and attendance and reach out to families who may need support.
- Differentiate your support for families. How can you be a resource, not a burden?

When engaging in this planning process, the Corvallis team relied on their previous learning with Courageous Conversations and Pacific Educational Group, and more recently, Culturally Responsive Teaching.
Like Corvallis School District, Collaborative Classroom is dedicated to transforming the school experience, developing students, and empowering educators by deepening their teaching practices. To learn more, please read our blogs, “A Conversation About Instructional Equity with Zarretta Hammond,” “Supporting All Readers Before and During COVID-19: A Conversation with Pajaro Valley Superintendent Michelle Rodriguez and Linda Diamond of CORE,” and “Resources for Reconnecting and Accelerating Student Learning.”