

“Find a Wing, Not a Weight”

By Daniel C. Smith



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Prior to his role as an assistant principal, Mr. Smith served as Kiski Area's supervisor of technology integration for three years. He is also a Google Certified Trainer, a title he has held since 2017.

It would be an understatement to say the last 18 months have been a whirlwind in the field of education. Our entire world and way of doing things was flipped upside down and led many of us to question our profession. At Kiski Area Upper Elementary School, we use the phrase, “*Find a Wing, Not a Weight*,” to describe the mindset toward barriers and obstacles in education. It helps us focus on the positive in any situation, including COVID. Now that things are headed on the slow path toward “normal” once again, what does the new “normal” look like? What role should the practices adopted during the pandemic play in the future of education?

Obviously, those are loaded questions and ones which will evolve over time and practice, but we cannot forget the lessons learned during the height of shutdowns and distance learning as they will help create that future. Join us as we “Find a Wing, Not a Weight” related to the new “normal” of education and educational practices of distance learning to be woven into the fabric of our “new” normal.

As you know, all schools were closed in March 2020, creating the greatest challenge to our field while also creating the greatest opportunity ever imagined. It was an opportunity to redesign educational systems to the smallest detail; to design schools in the image of how it ought to be - a system designed to reach ALL learners, meet them at their current level and extend their learning to the maximum extent possible. Schools overcame amazing obstacles in the name of continuing our core mission, educating students and preparing them for their futures. Some of our attempts to overcome obstacles were proven to be ineffective, inefficient or not in the best interest of the students we serve. However, some of those changes had a positive impact on the student population and those are the ones to be examined throughout this article.

Student learning begins with engaging students, which has traditionally been a challenge for intentional non-learners. Engagement takes many forms and is an art mastered by some educators while the pandemic opened the door for others to also become masters. Picture the anticipatory set of a lesson in a traditional classroom. The learning objective prominently displayed along with a bell ringer or start-up activity welcomes students to class. Students enter the classroom and get a sense of what they are learning for the day. That has been standard practice for many years and has served our field well, but what did anticipatory sets look like during the pandemic?

The same anticipatory sets during the pandemic involved teachers outside their homes measuring their sidewalks or pools to introduce lessons on measurement; teachers creating volcanoes in their yards as a method to get students interested in chemical reactions; families working together to create a dramatic reading of today's act in a Shakespeare play; or physical education videos where teachers modeled technique using whatever equipment they had available at their home. What do all of these anticipatory sets have in common? They are catchy and draw the learner into the lesson effectively. In the music industry, there is what is known as the “hook,” a melody which brings the listener into the song because it has rhythm and gets caught in the listener's head. Because of the physical distance created during the pandemic, we, as a profession, were forced to improve our “hook” knowing we no longer had a captive audience. Rather, we were competing with TikTok, YouTube and the rest of the distractions usually mitigated within our school environments. The examples described above are but a few of the many ingenious ways educators provided a segue into learning. Remembering to “hook” our students as they reenter the traditional classroom will be an important part of the new normal.



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Teamwork and Professional Learning Communities are terms utilized frequently in our field, and for good reason. The foundation of any organization lies in its ability to capitalize on the human assets available to maximize success. When faced with the uncertainty of educating during distance learning, educators turned to each other more than ever to work together for mutual benefit. In some instances, this interaction may have been institutionalized, while for others it may have been out of self-preservation, but the product of these interactions was very clear...better lessons. Students

received the technological expertise of one teacher, the organizational abilities of a second teacher and the storytelling ability of another teacher to meld a lesson which encompassed the strengths of all involved. It was almost as if we could take the best attributes from each staff member and put them together into a "super" lesson. We all know practice makes better, and this process was repeated over and over again, inching ever closer to perfection. Working together in this fashion has been a goal of education for many years, and the pandemic propelled our field in that direction at a pace never before seen. As we move back into traditional models of instruction, we owe it to our students to continue working together to maximize the success of each and every lesson through teamwork. Staff members have different strengths and those should be celebrated as we work collectively towards combining the elements of education during COVID with the traditional models.

Everyone knows the importance of formative assessment and using them to redirect instruction and learning. However, when coupled with differentiated learning, formative assessment was taken to another level during the pandemic by many educators. Differentiated learning using formative assessment data allows students to be homogeneously grouped during any specific lesson to create a learning environment conducive to growth since for that particular skill they would be surrounded by classmates with similar skill sets. This allows the lesson to be directed for a specific group of learners, assists staff members with creating their assessments and allows feedback to be useful to more than one learner at a time. These things together create a situation where students can work together in groups of similar ability levels and learn from each other as well as the teacher. When learning moves on to a new skill, the process starts over again, and the students get shuffled according to the new set of data and the new skill. This approach of moving students back and forth between

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educators focusing on delivering instruction in different modes for different learners has traditionally been thought too time consuming and difficult to manage, but during Distance Learning it became as simple as a few clicks to move students between groups based upon data. The result was many educators were able to meet students at their learning levels and transition students in real time, using data-driven decisions made to maximize student growth. Moving back to traditional structures of the school day will create an opportunity to

continue differentiated learning for student benefit.

Soft skills are a sought-after commodity in the modern-day job market, and soft skills are advanced within the traditional setting as well as the distance learning setting. Verbal and non-verbal communication, problem solving, digital literacy, critical thinking, professional writing and work ethic are soft skills stressed in the distance learning approach to education. Students had different resources at their disposal while learning from home and sharpened their abilities to overcome barriers to learning which will make their skill sets more honed to the modern-day workplace. As we transition back to traditional models, we need to make sure we include an emphasis on those soft skills not usually associated with the traditional classroom.

Educators reflect on their performance and make improvements for the good of the students they serve. Allowing that to be our motivation makes implementing the strategies proven effective during distance learning the logical choice. We also need to accept the fact that educational paradigms take time, effort and patience to grow into systems which are truly beneficial to our communities. There will be many successes to be celebrated along the way as well as many learning opportunities to improve our approach. With time, effort and patience, the new normal of education can become a better system which prepares our students for their futures. All aspects of educational communities worked diligently to continue the mission of educating students throughout the most unique time in our lives. Many of the changes in our field, borne out of necessity, are effective practices which need to be continued. Educators across the state, the students we serve and the communities we embrace are all looking to us as school leaders to intertwine traditional practices with the elements of distance learning to create a new normal of education which will serve our students now and into the future.

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