

No Turning Back, Thankfully

By Dr. John W. Zesiger and Ashley ? Nunley



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"When there is no turning back, then we should concern ourselves only with the best way of going forward." This phrase has signified the transition the Moshannon Valley School District has made throughout the pandemic and continues to make every single day. Many districts were cocooned in the ideology of how school took place – face-to-face. Moshannon Valley never saw this unprecedented change coming but quickly emerged stronger because of everyone's determination and passion for migrating toward new and unknown territory. This is exactly the mindset the district enacted upon once learning of the spring 2020 closure. The plan was to continue to provide instruction in math and English language arts (ELA) through Google Meet from the first day of the closure without skipping a beat. Like many of the neighboring districts, all other core subjects and electives were simply review and enrichment activities. In addition, about 20 percent of students received paper packets for all materials because reliable Internet access limited digital participation.

It became clear in early April of 2020 that the pandemic would stretch well into the 2021-2022 school year, and perhaps beyond. There simply was no turning back. Through a collaborative effort, goals were set, and plans were made to move the district forward. The district spent April through August of last year diligently working on a three-part plan to make sure the instructional model in the fall of 2020 provided real-time learning in all subjects, every day, following the school schedule at both the elementary and secondary levels.

1. Equity & Access

Perhaps the greatest challenge the district learned to confront was related to equity and access. Moshannon Valley had to ensure that every student had the ability to learn in a virtual environment. Collaboratively, the district guided students and families on a journey toward accessing and utilizing resources. This meant providing Internet access for roughly 25 percent of the district. This was accomplished through business partnerships. A T-Mobile Project, Project 10 Million, offered free wireless hotspots and free high-speed data to families for a five-year period. In addition, Comcast Internet Essentials also provided discounted service to those who had access to Comcast. Finally, Verizon Jetpaks supplied to the district provided service where the other Internet access devices proved ineffective.

The district also increased the number of devices to guarantee 1:1 access for students in grades 4-12, and enough devices for all K-3 families who otherwise did not have access to a device. These Chromebooks and laptops were purchased in April of 2020 since there was apprehension about the technology supply in later months. Moshannon Valley next examined the digital component of their core curriculum and purchased additional electronic instructional materials to align with core content in grades K-12. The materials ensured enhanced digital capabilities for student learning including tutorials, digital instruction, online assessments and instant student-teacher feedback. With the pandemic still a major concern for the 2021-2022 school year, the district again expanded the 1:1 program to all students K-12.

The final component in the decision making was ensuring that all materials had a parent access feature that would assist families with the possible increased instructional role they may have to play their child's learning. The district realized the changes everyone was



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experiencing placed many out of their comfort zone. However, this metamorphosis was necessary for continued growth and transformation.

2. Building Relationships

Knowing the important role that families would play in instituting a virtual learning environment; families needed to learn alongside staff and students. The most important function was home and school communication; consistent and transparent throughout the pandemic and beyond by sharing weekly updates through the website, phone and email messages and Twitter. With the addition of a new instructional and technology coach, the district instituted monthly family virtual chats. The instructional coach taught sessions to families covering topics related to virtual learning including Navigating Google Classrooms, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and supports, as well as Internet safety through our monthly, *MoValley Family Chats*. The focus remained on *relationships*, as the district knew it would be people, not programs, that moved everyone forward during the pandemic. Keeping a balance between educating while ensuring equal parts inspiration, information and motivation played as big a role as instruction. The community and families of Moshannon Valley are continuing to build a partnership as the district transitions throughout the 2021-2022 school year. This collaboration will help increase equity and opportunities for every child especially as the district returns to many in-person events including *Back to School Night* and *new student orientation*.

3. Provide Professional Development & Self-Care

Staff members have been navigating instruction and assessment throughout the pandemic with a growth mindset. The district had to foster an internal growth that staff members were not initially able to see for themselves. Teaching in this virtual age initially challenged staff and required them to learn quickly. The district has collaborated with several outside experts to provide guidance with implementing new instructional materials including StudySync, Second Step SEL and Inspire Science. The creation of a technology and instructional coach provided embedded daily professional learning opportunities for both technology and distance learning instructional strategies.

Thomas Webb, English Department Chair, commented, "Teachers are feeling more confident in their abilities to teach remotely and share information in a flipped classroom. Our district has relied heavily on digital resources including Screencastify to record instruction so students unable to attend a live session could view the instruction convenient to their schedule, and Kami to allow students to annotate and show their learning."

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Teachers and staff have voluntarily attended weekly professional development sessions to continue to engage all students and formatively assess learning. Additionally, the district acknowledged that students' basic needs must be met before they are ready to engage in learning. Teachers have been implementing many SEL strategies through a K-8 program called *Second Step SEL*. This program helps students recognize and manage their emotions which has been crucial during this unprecedented time. Staff members have also received trauma informed training to learn how to recognize when a student's behavior may be the result of trauma or stress and in need of support. The district has also recognized that staff basic needs must

be met before they are ready to engage in professional learning and instruction. This same trauma-informed training also addressed staff needs for self-care. The district's voluntary Employee Assistance Program offers free and confidential support through counseling, referrals and follow-up sessions. Administration regularly inquired with staff about how they felt, and ensured fellow administrators received supports as well.

The district can now feel proud and successful while reflecting on its journey. This entire experience has helped to reveal a silver lining lesson: staff, students and families have had to be flexible and demonstrated a growth mindset. Students are receiving more opportunities to work independently and becoming better problem solvers. Students are now more accountable for their learning through online platforms the district incorporated; they can also progress at their own pace which enhances personalized learning.

Teachers and support staff have learned to be understanding of many situations that are out of their control, and let relationships supersede instruction when necessary. Teachers have had to work diligently to provide different strategies to instruct, assess and monitor and differentiate learning for all students. Families have continued to collaborate and implement tools and strategies to help support their child at home in a virtual environment. The truth is that while the district has experienced challenges, a new level of confidence has emerged. This is the confidence that the district no longer needs to reflect upon what it once was, but instead, continue to build upon the skills and strategies that have shaped the district into what it is today. These efforts have helped and will continue to develop digital citizens while building upon crucial skills students need in furthering their education, entering the workforce, joining the military or wherever their futures take them. For additional information, you may contact Dr. Zesiger at jzesiger@movalley.org