

When Oregon schools shifted from face-to-face instruction to distance learning, the timeline for the transition was extremely short and most schools were unprepared for this modality of instruction. It became immediately apparent that the digital divide was going to be one of the largest hurdles to overcome in an attempt to ensure all students stayed connected to schools. Schools who had Chromebooks available devised ways to get them to their students. It became evident, however, that even if students had an electronic device, many students did not have internet access. Additionally, many teachers lacked proper hardware or bandwidth to provide classes via electronic means and were either forced to come into the building, regardless of whether or not they were in a high risk category, or spend hundreds of dollars out of pocket to upgrade their internet and/or hardware. Those students who could not access education through electronic means were relegated to paper packets of assignments.

As teachers began to connect with their students, it became apparent that school was not the first things on many students' minds. Teachers heard from students that there was no food in the house or that a family member was sick and they didn't know what to do. Many teachers reported not being able to connect with students and then made home visits to make sure they were o.k. Even with these efforts, many struggled to connect.

Even in normal circumstances there were tremendous inequities in our school system and it quickly became clear that this was only going to be exacerbated through a distance learning plan. ODE's initial focus was on caring and connection, which was definitely consistent with what we were hearing from educators across the state. So many Oregon students experience housing insecurity, food insecurity, and lack of proper health care. Districts were really good about making sure families were getting communications around supports that were available, but we heard from our members that families whose first language was not English were having difficulty navigating the system to access the supports. Educators across the state helped with food distribution and worked hard to connect families to agencies that could give them the supports necessary to meet their basic and immediate needs.

Training in online systems was also difficult, both for educators and for students. There was little time for districts to provide professional training, and most educators took it upon themselves to learn digital platforms, especially those involved in Specially Designed Instruction for whom tele-practice and tele-medicine were outside the norm. In many cases there were licensure issues around telepractice, especially for Speech and Language Pathologists. Special Education teachers are spending an inordinate amount of time working with parents around students' individualized education plans, and teachers throughout the state reported they were able to connect with about half their students in a group format and spent a great deal of time working to make contact with those who were not connecting online.

What we need from the Oregon Legislature is not to let school return to normal. As we begin bringing students back to school, we need to bring them back to a system that is better than normal. Health and Safety needs to be the number one priority in returning to school. This means smaller class sizes where social distancing is possible, something not currently feasible in a state that, before the pandemic, experienced the third highest class sizes in the nation. Additionally, given the likelihood school may once again have to shut down, we must take

advantage of the time we have between now and September to ensure there are social safety nets available for our students and families. We must do better for our students, and that means more resources for our schools in a time when all evidence points to the very real possibility there will be fewer resources. I implore the legislature to do everything possible to keep our public schools whole during this difficult time.