

Schools learn to cope with shifting education needs during pandemic

Technical schools struggle to make up for no hands-on learning

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FREMONT - The past year has seen an ebb and flow of emotions for educators as the COVID-19 pandemic put a pause on in-person learning for many students.

Samantha King, a social studies teacher at Vanguard Career Center in Fremont, felt the sting of not being able to interact with her students in person, something she's been accustomed to in her seven years as an educator.

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King, like many educators, said she took for granted being able to see her students every day. Although she is now able to see her students daily — while wearing masks, of course — the spring of 2020 brought a seismic shift in education as the pandemic forced the closure of virtually all local schools including Vanguard.

From bleak to hopeful

As Fremont City Schools dealt with the pandemic over the past year, District Superintendent Jon Detwiler has seen his disposition change from having a bleak outlook to hope for a brighter future.

Teaching at a technical school, which relies on many hands-on classes and trade school training, made it especially challenging for King and her Vanguard colleagues.

"They're hands-on learners; I'm a hands-on learner," she said.

When rumors were churning that schools would be shut down last March, Detwiler said most educators believed it could not happen. The idea of the governor closing schools was "way too much of a response" to the novel coronavirus, Detwiler said.

Well, Gov. Mike DeWine did just that, asking schools to go to remote learning last March and continuing through the end of the school year.



As the virus spread through the country, shutting down schools and businesses, reality set in for Detwiler and FCS, knowing they too would soon close.

"I'll never forget that sense of urgency," Detwiler said.

It was a Wednesday

It was Wednesday, March 11, 2020, when Detwiler saw the closures coming and decided to have the district stop coming to school for the next week starting on Monday and by Thursday momentum of the virus and upcoming closures expedited the process and the school decided to close that Friday instead of waiting.

"The fear and the sense of urgency had grown so much we actually canceled Friday and we thought maybe we'll do the best we can and try to do the online learning and maybe be back in a couple of weeks," Detwiler said.

That couple of weeks turned into the rest of the school year as the district was then forced to adjust, from an in-person learning environment to seeing

school buildings go largely unused, aside from cafeterias where staff put together meals to distribute to hungry families.

Proms, events and graduations were either canceled or altered to accommodate the health mandates requiring social distancing and mask wearing.

One thing that was entirely canceled before it could begin, which Detwiler said hurt him the most, were spring sports.

Although practices were in full force, games had not yet begun and in addition to spring sports cancellations, most winter sports were not able to crown team and individual champions.

"Soon as we got passed the point where we knew we couldn't have any of our spring sports, I kind of realized, OK, this is probably real," Detwiler said.

At first the superintendent said he believed kids would return to school in April. But COVID kept spreading and the state went into a lockdown in which businesses were shut down.

With school closures, families were left scrambling to find care for children who would be learning at home rather than in a classroom.

But blizzard bags, containing homework assignments that normally were distributed on snow days, would not be enough to continue furthering a child's education.

Detwiler said there are so many details in running a school and to moving classes entirely online opened up another set of peripheral challenges for the district.

Students would need internet access, computers and would have to find focus while completing assignments and tests at home to finish the year.

Planning during pandemic

As spring turned to summer, Detwiler said the district continued planning for the possibility of a return to school full time and was able to return on a hybrid learning model. Students could come to classes twice a week while still offering online-only instruction full time for those who preferred.

A glimmer of hope came in October when the district was able to go back to full-time school as the county's spread was no longer considered severe only to have to go back to the hybrid model as the county went from an orange designation to a red-coded designation signifying that the virus was widespread.

During the course of the pandemic, the district sent out thousands of meals to families each week as they either stayed home completely or attended school through the hybrid model.

Every Wednesday, cafeteria staff load up bags of breakfast and lunch bags to send home to families.

Detwiler said he remembers early in the pandemic when students had to drop off homework assignments and pick up meals, a process that smoothed out over time.

The federal government stepped in and in quick fashion, Detwiler said, to help ensure no student went hungry.

"We never saw the federal government move so fast," Detwiler said. "They basically opened up those regulations to make it happen. Usually it's a long, slow cumbersome process."

As the year went on, Detwiler said the district was concerned as case numbers were rising during Thanksgiving and Christmas break.

When DeWine announced in January that schools willing to commit to either a hybrid or full-time back-to-school plan in order to jump the line for the

vaccine, Fremont City Schools was among those district to sign up knowing in-person learning trumps any online curriculum.

The only caveat was schools needed to commit to opening on March 1.

FCS is currently running a hybrid model, something they have been doing with a plan to return to five days per week of in-person education on March 22.

Pandemic brought division

Detwiler said the pandemic has been challenging when it comes to decision because with so many families in the district, someone is bound to not like a decision the district makes.

"There's such a wide division," Detwiler said. "I was getting calls every day about what people thought."

In some cases, a family would question why the district is going back to school at all during a pandemic. In other calls a family would question why the district is either not going back full time or at least more frequently.

"I've never in my life experienced anything like that," he said. "That's probably been the most difficult thing for me. We all want to try and meet the needs and get to win-win situations and that just hasn't been the case."

One thing the pandemic forced the district to do was to ensure they are in the 21st century when it comes to technology. And they now know flexibility moving forward and adapting to anything that is thrown at them will make for a better school district.

As if the challenges of the pandemic were not enough, the district had to finalize builds on four elementary buildings and continue a Ross High School expansion during the pandemic.

Work did stay on track, new elementary buildings opened last fall and Ross High School is set to open during the 2021-2022 Christmas break, but for all that work, Detwiler said the school wished it could have held planned open houses to christen the new facilities while giving locals a chance to tour the buildings they helped pay for.

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