

School on a Dial - Building a Pandemic Friendly School System

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School on a Dial - Building a Pandemic Friendly School System

In West Vancouver we have coined the phrase “School on a Dial” to describe the reality of teaching, learning, and schooling in a pandemic. As our Provincial Health Officer (PHO) guides the Ministry of Education’s reactive response to COVID-19, our school system must be prepared to be nimble and responsive to the rapidly changing guidelines; in essence, we must be prepared to dial up and dial down a myriad of services, structures and supports across the District in a sensitive and timely fashion. This paper examines the research and allows us to gain further understanding of the complexity of our current context with the intention of creating structures to ensure the success of schooling in West Vancouver in a global pandemic, specifically COVID-19. We are excited about this opportunity and are confident that it will serve as an important framework to guide thinking in the West Vancouver School District as schools reopen in September for the 2020-21 school year.

A mere five months ago, North Americans were watching the waves of COVID-19 crisis flood through Europe and Asia. From the time that the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Coronavirus disease 2019 outbreak cause by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS COV-2) to be a global pandemic on March 12 (Viner et al., 2020) the consequences have been far-reaching and swift-moving; by March 27th reports from the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) indicated that 165 countries had closed their schools nationwide, affecting an estimated 1.5 billion learners and 63 million teachers (UNESCO Supporting Teachers).

What began as emerging conversations in education circles about this virus and its horrific impact on communities overseas changed seemingly overnight for British Columbia when the B.C. government made the unprecedented decision to issue out of country travel

restrictions on March 12, the eve of spring break. At this time, our conversations in education quickly shifted from ‘them’ to ‘us’ as we landed in this unprecedented terrain and in the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in British Columbia. This became personal, professional, and all-consuming as we tried to find our footing in a landscape that has been mired by uncertainty, where the juxtaposition of silent fear and noisy expectations have since narrated all educational response planning.

The COVID-19 Storm Arrives in B.C.

When we closed our school doors in the West Vancouver School District for our regularly scheduled 2-week spring break on March 13, we were not sure what we would be coming back to or even when we would be coming back. The noise and confusion caused by the realization that COVID-19 was no longer something exclusively happening overseas was deafening as we tried to wrap our minds around how to sustain teaching, learning, schooling in a global pandemic. At this time, we carefully advised all school district staff to take their digital devices home along with other necessary materials as a ‘just in case’ measure. While we were cautiously still hoping that the tsunami that seemed to be coming our way might not arrive, our district leaders were quickly beginning to create contingency emergency response plans behind the scenes to deal with the ‘what if’.

On March 17, under the direction of Dr. Bonnie Henry, the Provincial Health Officer (PHO), and the Minister of Education directed all Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools to immediately suspend in-class instruction until further notice. At this time the proverbial educational floodgates opened as all school districts were surged into planning emergency remote learning opportunities for students. Although schools were not in session, the West Vancouver District Leadership Team

and school-based administrators began planning for what schooling might look like in an uncertain and rapidly evolving remote learning context.

Since that time schools, school districts, educators, support staff teams, families and students have been immersed in a flux of educational change. Initially these changes were the direct result of the emergency context in the beginning weeks of the pandemic. As the 2019-20 school year closed, and we actively plan ahead to the 2020-21 school year, the change is shifting to the opportunity of ‘by design’ rather than ‘by emergency’ as we continue to thoughtfully navigate the opportunities of how to transform teaching and learning as we reside in a global pandemic. During the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis our educational responses in spring 2020 were fueled by reactions. While we did our best to thoughtfully craft continuation of learning plans, our ability to design was impeded by the speed required. As we are looking ahead toward the new school year, we have time to engage in a process of thoughtful redesign which will involve ongoing collaboration across all spectrums of our educational system.

The British Columbia Context

The work ongoing in British Columbia is uniquely important as our province was one of the only jurisdictions in North America to have a partial return to school in June of 2020. The learnings from this time are being applied both in our province and across North America. The combination of a low rate of COVID infection, a flat curve to the COVID infections combined with a nuanced plan for student return to schools has led to many watching British Columbia closely.

In the West Vancouver School District as we have continued to strategically turn the dial on ‘schooling in a pandemic’. We have been tasked with building a pandemic friendly school system, which at the surface level appears to be the greatest oxymoron ever, but in actuality we

believe it to be the ultimate opportunity to transform public education. The notion of “school on a dial” may be a permanent fixture of our school system. The idea of thinking of school as a dial rather than a switch one turns on and off is an exciting opportunity. “School for a long time has been something you turn on or off. School is turned off on the weekends, during Christmas, Spring Break and the summer. And it is turned on from 9-3 Monday to Friday from September to June” (Kennedy, 2020). Rosenberg (2020) explained the current global response, “if the pandemic intensifies in a community, school will shift ...to an all remote model; if physical distancing is no longer required, school could shift to an all (or mostly) in-person model. Individual students may also need to transition from one model to another based on family circumstances” (p. 1).

The reality is the waves of COVID-19 will continue to crash around us for a long time. Until a successful vaccine is first invented, moved through the appropriate human medical trials and then finally made available to the general public, life as we know it will be forever changed. The uncertainty of a finish point for this pandemic continues to create tremendous noise in the education sector. What has emerged as certain during the COVID-19 crisis is the importance of schools. The feedback in our community has been loud and clear, school matters and the high expectations for learning continue regardless of the pandemic.

Lifejackets, Emergency Rafts and SOS Calls

The initial phase of the pandemic response planning emerged in an emergency context. There was a reactive urgency to keep our schools moving forward and the BC Ministry of Education directive was clear that our schools ‘were not closed’, in-person instruction was suspended. What emerged from this initial stage of educational planning was the realization that life jackets and emergency rafts were necessary but would not be sufficient to respond to the volume of SOS calls in our educational system. Since this time, we have learned that we need to

create the context for sustained, meaningful education for our students in multiple contexts - in school, out of school, and a blend of both. While the importance of equity is not new learning, the provision of equitable access to learning is now magnified. During the crashing early waves of the COVID-19 pandemic establishing equitable access to learning for all students wasn't optional, it was and continues to be absolutely critical.

We have also learned that we need to create the educational conditions necessary to swiftly change stations and to adjust the volume as we respond to the realities of the schooling in a pandemic. The SOS calls will keep coming and we need to be prepared to pivot, to shift and to not raise further alarm in a time when the contagion of panic sits near the surface of all educational waters. We are learning that the structures for these conditions need not just buoyancy but careful preparation, clear communication, and dedicated support for all stakeholders. We need to strategically build capacity in our system. To this end, we will be outlining the structures and considerations within the creation of a comprehensive K-12 system-wide plan for school-on-a-dial that will meet the needs of the community and respond to recent stakeholder feedback. In the following sections we will explore the concept of 'School on a Dial' as we ride the waves of change in the ongoing global pandemic.

Background

The past 25 years has been marked by several well studied examples of events that cause widespread disruptions to schooling. From the destruction caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Andrew in the impoverished southern United States to pandemics such as H1N1 and SARS, the importance of school during crisis situations has repeatedly emerged as an important theme. Although the responses to these catastrophes were diverse, the effect on the children that were at their nexus have been well documented and hence we can draw upon the lessons learned

to support our students immediately and as we reside in the global COVID-19 pandemic. The decision by the Ministry of Education to limit K-12 school attendance within British Columbia as a protective measure to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 within the general population came as a surprise to many in the education sector. Although many schools had been experiencing widespread parent-initiated absenteeism in the weeks prior to Spring Break, the unprecedented decision, made while many were still debating whether they were going to heed provincial and federal recommendations against non-essential travel, still felt bold and quite surreal. The following subsections will provide important background information which has pressed our attention and pushed our planning forward as we make continued informed decisions about the stations on the dial of schooling in a pandemic.

Learning from the Past: The Golden Oldies

Following the advice of our Provincial Health Officer (PHO), Dr. Bonnie Henry, many families chose to establish self-imposed “shelter-in-place” measures, limiting all social and physical contact outside the family home. Recognizing the central role of schools to provide care, face-to-face reopening was swiftly made available to the children of Essential Service Workers (ESW) and to our students with diverse learning needs and/or disabilities. Studies of H1N1 and SARS have shown that schools closures must occur for a minimum of 8 weeks to effectively mitigate an influenza pandemic when vaccines and non-pharmaceutical interventions are not available (Brown et al., 2011); accordingly, under the direction of the provincial public health officer, all schools in BC closed in April and did not reopen widely to the general population until June 1st, 2020.

Interestingly, when schools in B.C. reopened for voluntary attendance to the general school-age population, many chose to not return for the month of June. Reasons behind this

decision included continued concern around the dangerous spread of COVID-19 and uncertainty around the health and safety protective measures in the school environment. Another point of discomfort and inconvenience for families was the reduced hours, and varied attendance schedules in place, to account for new limits on the physical capacities within schools, leading many families choosing to not have their children attend, but rather keep them at home. Many also stated that they preferred to wait and watch to see what a 'safe return' could look like. Under the BC school restart plan 60, 000 students in B.C. did return on June 1st (Vancouver Sun, 2020). Students in Kindergarten through grade 5 were able to attend school half time while those in grade 6 through 12 attended one day per week. While the return to school was another drastic change for families in daily routine and structure, it demonstrated the safety in returning and began to establish the appropriate conditions for continued reopening in fall 2020, but the impact of continued disruption to the lives of students and families remains unknown. The fact that there is no finish line for the ongoing pandemic continues to create and to sustain systemic uncertainty both in the educational and public context.

Hurricanes are finite events, and despite the obvious and devastating physical effects, tangible recovery plans can be made and acted upon. Both the H1N1 and SARS epidemics were short lived and their effects more localized in comparison to the current novel Coronavirus - COVID-19. Despite the uncertain longevity of COVID-19, parallels can be drawn to some of the findings in ways to support children and families in the wake of school closures resulting from adverse global situations. In West Vancouver, where the financial context is markedly different from the areas hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina for example, the isolation and abrupt shift in social context experienced by a significant percentage of students may have lasting effects that are yet to be determined. Transitioning families and supporting those who may be fearful or experiencing

symptoms of anxiety or depression must be a central consideration as teachers and district staff plan for the fall.

Gil-Rivas and Kilmer (2013) noted in reference to effects on children who were victims of Hurricane Katrina that “changes in family routines, as well as social and tangible resource in the aftermath of disaster, may increase caregivers’ stress and interfere with their ability to parent maintain an environment in which children can process these experiences....these challenges have implication for children’s adaptation in the post disaster context” (p. 2). It has been well documented that disasters can lead to posttraumatic stress symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and behavioural and academic difficulties (Gil-Rivas & Kilmer, 2013; Hamblen et al., 2017; Schulenberg et al., 2008; Sprung, 2008). Schulenberg et al. (2008) noted the importance of having psychologists trained in disaster and trauma response to “provide information about typical and maladaptive responses...the potential benefits and applicability of mental health services and where mental health services may be found” (p. 85). Given the demand for and limited availability of school psychologists in the public school district context, this call to action can be extended to school counsellors and to teachers, who will likely be better aware of and have greater access to at-risk students and their families.

Looking for the ‘Fix It’ Station - Supporting Families

While the focus on supporting the mental health of students may be obvious, the challenge becomes how to do so when they are not physically present in schools. More complex still is that school staff are not privy to the complexities of the child’s current familial circumstances. When children are attending school in person the child may spend the majority of their waking hours within the highly structured presence of their classroom, and be required to function within the social norms established within their classroom community; the at home learning environment is

subject to different dynamics and pressures. Families may be subject to hardships related to the loss of employment or the requirement to work from home while providing care for their children, food security may be an issue. Still others may be experiencing struggles related to the inability to see extended family or friends, or anxiety related to access to resources or transmission of the disease.

The importance of supporting the whole child extends to support the child's network and in turn, the child-caregiver dyad. Although parents may be rationally aware of the importance of talking to their children, tangible guidance will be required that focuses on aspects such as:

- creating an environment which encourages children to talk and ask questions,
- what to say and what not to say,
- prompting questions that encourage children to share their emotions,
- approaches that could be used to help children understand and cope with what has happened.

Moreover, resources that are accessible within the larger community context should be shared with parents as “interventions and support need to expand their focus beyond the target individual within a specific setting to include the whole family and attend to and address the family's specific needs” (Gil-Rivas & Kilmer, 2014, p. 9).

Given that each child's appraisal of their circumstances is both subjective and personalized, research has demonstrated the necessity to foster children's understanding of their cognitive function before therapeutic interventions should occur (Sprung, 2008). As such, teachers can play a central role in aiding children in their understanding of the mind so that more intensive and specialized interventions such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) can be more effectively employed by specialists in a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Cognitive Behaviour

Therapy is an 8-12 session transdiagnostic cognitive behaviour intervention. It includes four components: psychoeducation, breathing retraining, behavioural activation, and cognitive restructuring to target underlying negative cognitive constructs (Hamblen et al., 2006). The intervention has been used following national and international disasters in response to disasters and acts of terrorism and participants in the studies reported improvements in symptoms such as anxiety, grief, depression, and improved cognitive function (Hamblen et al., 2008). Given the intensity of the treatment, schools do not have the capacity to support individual students with CBT, however, early identification and building understanding of mindfulness and cognition within a group setting with teachers, counsellors and school psychologist, could lay important groundwork for all students who may or may not follow up with additional therapies. Creating MTSS structures will be explored later in this paper as an important response mechanism for educators to activate within a school context. An emerging goal moving forward will be to work collaboratively and more closely with community partners in health care, recreation, social services etc. to provide a continuum of wrap around supports for students and families.

What can be extrapolated from the significant parent-excused absenteeism during the spring is that there is significant anxiety and an abundance of caution in our parent community. The extended period of absence from the school setting by many of our students is an indicator of the anxiety that may be growing within the households of the community and signals that mental wellness supports for all stakeholders will need to be in place. The emergence from isolation will continue to be an area for direct focus as schools reopen in September 2020, particularly for students who have not attended since March 2020. Family therapist, Jodi Aman, emphasizes that this could mean a new, increased level of social anxiety for many youth as they shift yet again towards another life change as a result of the ongoing pandemic, which will require

parents to look out of signs of mental health issues in their kids (Vancouver Sun, 2020). Educators and school districts will need to be doing the same, creating an intentional, systemic focus on the development of trauma sensitive schools and trauma informed instructional practices.

Dial It Up - Supporting the ‘system’ while building new systems of support

In the April 2020 issue entitled “Crisis-Sensitive Educational Planning”, UNESCO’s COVID-19 Education Response cautioned that “initiatives that are put in place as part of an immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic should ideally build on and strengthen local strategies to sustain responsiveness and engagement at all levels of the education system” (p. 1.) School Districts, following the directives of Ministries of Education continue to engage in “crisis sensitive planning,” responsively preparing for and mitigating the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis UNESCO, 2020).

Throughout this crisis, all facets within the school system have been tested. In the editorial, Tofu is Not Cheese: Rethinking Education Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic, Zhao (2020) has challenged, “this is a crisis, but within which is the opportunity to rethink education” (p. 189). If we examine this statement through the lens of systems leadership written about by Senge, Hamilton and Kania (2015), and balance “short-term reactive problem solving with long-term value creation” (p.28) through collaboration and collective leadership, we have the opportunity to build relationships and to encourage systemic change. Senge (1996) further argued that uncertainty creates “philosophic communality between people in an organization” (p. 16).

A central element of the COVID-19 crisis is that it is steeped in uncertainty. Senge et al. (2015) outline three core capabilities that systems leaders must develop in order to foster collective action and leadership: (a) the ability to see the larger system, (b) the ability to support and encourage reflection and generative conversations, and (c) the ability to shift the collective focus

from reactive problem solving to active co-creation in the future. Applying these core capabilities to our the COVID-19 context, building time for reflective conversations, ongoing feedback, and co-constructive planning must involve and honour all stakeholders. Interested and passionate advocates for change have already come forward, sometimes as the most outspoken critics of the current system, our district's continued challenge will therefore be to encourage them to become engaged in the co-creation of new models which address their concerns as "real change starts with recognizing that we are part of the systems we seek to change," (Senge et al., 2015, p. 29).

The uncertainty that has followed the initial recognition of COVID-19 as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) has marked this pandemic as one without comparison as we wait for a second or third wave of infection or conversely, the development and distribution of an effective vaccine; our response as a school district will be dialed up or down as necessary. Another certainty has been grounded in the fact that all our national and provincial endeavors have followed the recommendations of the medical health experts grounded in current scientific research. The British Columbia Center for Disease Control (2020) works directly with federal and provincial partners on the surveillance, diagnostic testing and infection control measures for the COVID-19 outbreak. Rather than riding a merry-go-round of who to listen to, our political and medical health officials have worked in tandem to seek solutions to COVID-19. While there is local autonomy related to educational programming, all decisions related to health and safety made in our educational context have followed the directives of public health and our provincial ministry of education.

When schools in British Columbia opened for voluntary attendance with reduced capacity to account for physical distancing protocols in June offering school stakeholders- students, teachers, principals, district leaders, parents, consultants and policy makers and others, were

afforded the opportunity to explore the possibility of what school might look like and to actively begin the design process for the fall. The breadth and volume of resources available from lesson plans, to planning tools, to online materials and platforms, to research projects has been overwhelming. Clear and specific directives were key in the West Vancouver School District's response. Moving into building a pandemic friendly school system was not a time for going rogue but a time for collaborative innovation under the guidance of district leadership and school administration.

The Challenge of Finding a Rhythm Remotely

When schools closed the majority of districts immediately turned to information and communication technologies (ICTs) to ensure continuity of learning and while it has been documented that there is little difference in knowledge acquisition between online and face to face instruction, there is a significant difference in student satisfaction, and social-emotional, physical, and mental well-being (Cortese et al., 2020; Guan et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Zhao et al., 2005). “There is exactly one generation of... students who have participated in remote learning during extended school closures: the students enrolled in our courses and classrooms this past year” (Reich and Mehta, 2020, p. 5). Knowing that schools fulfill much more than knowledge acquisition but also play significant roles in the socialization and care of students, the impact of school closures on students globally has been significant.

Prolonged home confinement due to school closures during disease outbreaks may have negative effects on children's physical and mental well-being (Brooks et al., 2020; Rundle et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). In addition to the increased risks of neglect, abuse or food insecurity for the most vulnerable and at-risk students, when children are not at school they are less physically active, have less favourable diets, have more

screen time, and are prone to irregular sleep patterns. The closing of schools, even for summer vacation, and shelter-in-place orders, have been demonstrated to contribute to reductions in physical activity in students; combined with food insecurity due to uncertainty around the pandemic and as household stock up on shelf-stable foods and calorie-dense foods, there is a risk of weight gain and increased rates of obesity among children (Brazendale et al., 2018; Brooks et al., 2020; Guan et al., 2020; Rundle et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2020). The increase of obesogenic behaviours is of concern and therefore as schools build their remote teaching capacity, making physical education and health education a priority should be considered. Promotion of health-conscious schedules and practices that focus on healthy diet, physical activities and good personal and sleep hygiene should be included in the learning opportunities shared by teachers. In the West Vancouver School District physical literacy, self-regulation and co-regulation strategies have been actively woven into remote instructional plans as an attempt to help families find balanced rhythms on the home front.

Wang et al. (2020) remarked, “Stressors such as prolonged duration, fears of infection, frustration and boredom, inadequate information, lack of in-person contact with classmates, friends and teachers lack of personal space at home, and family financial loss can have even more problematic and enduring effects on children and adolescents” (p. 946). Post-traumatic and psycho-social stress caused by quarantine and confinement could have prolonged effects on students if not addressed. A study by Sprang and Silman (2013) following the H1N1 pandemic found that the rates of PTSD in children after exposure to isolation, shelter-in-place, and quarantine were similar to those who had experienced disasters and other serious traumatic events, and at levels four times higher than children who had not been quarantined. School routines are important coping mechanisms for children, especially those who are more vulnerable.

School closures and shelter-in-place measures create a lack of access to resources that many children rely on. Although going to school may have been challenging for students with mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression prior to the pandemic, the routines and structures of school provide predictability. Schools and the social networks within provide important touchstones for many students with neurodevelopmental disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or those who benefit from increased interventions such as the support of Speech Language Pathologists. In the absence of a predictable schedule and the added support of professionals such as teachers, principals, school counsellors, school psychologists, school behaviorists, speech language pathologists and others, our most vulnerable students are even more so at the greatest risk and in response to the symptoms of anxiety and depression may further trigger a rise in maladaptive behaviours. For these students, the return to school and “normal life” when schools reopen may be exponentially more difficult.

Even more concerning is that the precipitous decrease in contact between students and school personnel due to lockdown or shelter-in-place orders has led to a corresponding drop in the reported cases of child abuse and neglect. School personnel, coaches, and community members who work with children are legally bound to report signs of neglect or abuse. Within the first month of COVID-19 shelter-in-place measures, the states of Connecticut, California, Massachusetts, Michigan, Kentucky, New Hampshire and Louisiana all reported double-digit percentage drops in the number of child abuse reports (LeBlanc, 2020). Galea et al. (2020) urged that “it is critical that we have in place mechanisms for surveillance, reporting, and intervention, particularly, when it comes to domestic violence and child abuse. Individuals at risk for abuse may have limited opportunities to report or seek help when shelter-in-place requirements demand prolonged cohabitation at home and limit travel outside of the home” (p. 817).

“During crises, existing learning inequalities are exacerbated, and new ones emerge. This is due to various factors, from lack of access to technology, basic infrastructure and services, hardships encountered by some families and their inability to adequately support their children’s learning, to broader social conditions and circumstances” (UNESCO, 2020, School Reopening: ensuring continuity, p. 7). In order to mitigate the widening of the achievement gap, or perhaps, as coined by Dr. Easton-Brooks (2020), ‘the opportunity gap’, we must identify and address inequity and exclusions in education through the use of crisis-sensitive planning and trauma-informed practices.

On the Frontlines: Teachers

Galea et al. (2020) cautioned that a pandemic of mental and behavioral illness will follow the COVID-19 pandemic and that steps must be taken to mitigate it. At the frontline of the educational response to the pandemic are teachers and school-based personnel. Uncertainty linked to the pandemic, increased workload, the paradigm shift of the schooling model, and the reopening and reimagining of schooling has generated tremendous stress among teachers. It is essential that district leadership teams and school-based administrators take care of teachers and prevent teacher burnout from emerging. Sokal, Babb and Trudel (2020) stated that when teachers do not have the resources they need, and especially when sustained job demands are high, teachers experience chronic stress and eventually burn out. In a recent national survey on teacher stress and workload during the pandemic five important themes were unveiled (Sokal, Babb and Trudel, 2020):

1. Teacher concern for vulnerable students is one of the most stressful aspects of their job right now.
2. Teachers are seeing magnified inequities.
3. When giving teachers resources, less is more.

4. Perceived support matters to teachers' resiliency.
5. Teachers are concerned about effectively engaging students through remote learning and professional collaboration can help.

In order to create continuity of learning for students that can be reasonably maintained inside and outside of the physical classroom, the needs and working conditions of teachers must be prioritized. Since the global closure of schools, teachers have been asked to perform multiple roles and functions, often with little notice, guidance, resources or prior training. School districts must step up to support their educational teams "in order to ensure that our children get the best education possible during both distance learning and when returning to the classroom, supporting teachers and listening to their voice will be important to ensuring these essential members of the educational team remain resilient" (Sokal, Babb and Trudel, 2020).

Central to the steep learning curve experienced by teachers in the Kindergarten to Grade 12 context was the rapid shift from face-to-face in person learning to an online model. "Online learning can take a wide variety of shapes and forms due to the numerous ways to combine the basic ingredients such as technology platforms (learning management systems, broad-casting platforms, social media platforms etc.), media modality (texts, animations, videos, audios, etc.), temporal arrangements (synchronous and asynchronous,) instruction approaches (direct instruction, inquiry-based, product-orient, flipped classroom, etc.), student arrangement (small to massive groups), teacher roles, and more such as frequency of interactions among students and instructor" (Zhao, 2020, p. 193). Teachers scrambled, under constant public scrutiny, to transition to a previously unimaginable classroom reality in a matter of days in order to maintain connections and pedagogical continuity for students. "Most teachers [were] not adequately prepared for the transition of provision of [online or distance] education, and families [were] not ready to facilitate

and monitor daily home-based learning, especially with multiple children” (Distance learning UNESCO, 2020, p. 3).

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted that many educators lacked the basic ICT skills necessary to thoroughly support students and learning through online platforms, and although professional development is necessary, it may continue to be delivered through online channels for efficiency and in order to comply with physical distancing protocols, further complicating and limiting access for teachers requiring the most support. Teachers must be comfortable with the technology in order to realize its full potential. Again, the importance of creating opportunities to collaborate and build further professional relationships is proving to be one of the most effective forms of professional development. Support and time will be ongoing needs for school districts to provide to teachers to enable them to form and access these professional learning networks. An important feature of the pandemic professional learning cycle will be monitoring the development of teachers’ capacities and actively addressing the related professional needs in ‘real time’ so that the professional development plans and opportunities are timely and meaningful.

Teachers and other educational professionals will need to build their own social-emotional and resilience competencies in order to help them navigate the uncertainty and accompanying anxiety associated with the pandemic and to mitigate stress, burnout, and “pandemic fatigue.” Staff will also need information and instruction on how to engage in crisis-sensitive and trauma-informed practices. The safety, health, and mental and emotional wellbeing of all staff must be intentionally nurtured and woven into school district pandemic plans if staff are expected to have the capacity to support students in challenging circumstances.

In the face of adversity, we look to leaders for the answers. In a recent article titled Teaching, Learning, and Caring in the Post-COVID Era, Berry (2020) called for a systemic

approach to whole-child education and the need to inspire and “reorganize people and programs... to work together more effectively to teach, heal, and mentor” (p. 3). As such, leadership at this time needs to be collective while at the same time coming from the collective. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced educators and educational stakeholders into the position of working towards the shared goal of providing meaningful teaching and learning to students while ensuring their ongoing wellbeing and engagement. This is a complex and layered challenge that will require relational capital and authenticity of all in the system.

The current context has dictated that change is both inevitable and inescapable and therefore, Michael Fullan’s (2016) teachings of “letting the group change the group” is timely (p.46). Although the context may differ from district to district, implicit in the Collective Leadership model is that meaningful and sustainable change “requires coordinated leadership development of both teachers and administrators” (Eckert, 2019, p. 478). Collective leadership leverages the capacity of educators in many roles to accomplish complex leadership work.

Implicit in any leadership model is the need for relational trust and supportive environments for all stakeholders. Eckert (2019) summarized the University of Chicago’s 5 essentials of school culture and climate that indicated the probability of success (p. 482):

1. Effective Leaders - administrators/principals work with teachers to develop a shared vision,
2. Collaborative teachers - teachers work together to improve their practice and promote professional growth,
3. Involved families - the entire staff works to build relationships with parents and everyone connected to the school community,

4. Supportive environments: the school is safe and supportive of all stakeholders - students, staff, and families,
5. Teachers are clear, engaging and academically challenging.

Two groups of stakeholders within the West Vancouver School District function within separate collective agreements with the School District at the local, municipal, and provincial levels. Special considerations need to be taken into account to ensure that changes made do so within acts and regulations established within these documents. Additionally, union representatives, with whom the District continues to have positive relationships, will continue to be included and consulted on decisions involving their members.

Our current context is complex and infinitely uncertain; therefore, it requires innovative thoughts and practices. Although the traditional school model is siloed by nature, in which faculty work with specific age groups and/or within separate disciplines, as we move forward innovating to meet the needs of our staff, learners, and their families during and post-pandemic response, teacher-teams will need to be created and supported through the provision of relevant professional development and resources. With the vision of providing personalized learning for all students, many traditional, siloed teaching roles may need to be shifted within schools and at the District level. These shifts will need to focus on ensuring shared responsibility to meet the many diverse needs of schooling in a pandemic. All stakeholders will need to build shared understandings and will ultimately need to accept that our new reality, while physically distanced, demands more intentionality with respect to networking and greater flexibility.

Parents as Partners

Within the context of West Vancouver, following our locally developed guiding pandemic response principles of “comfort, care, and connect,” the first steps taken after the initial school

closures was for school-based staff - teachers, student support staff, and administrators- to follow up with families and students to connect and ensure that children's needs were being met not only at the most basic levels (access to food and resources) but that students had access to wireless networks, devices, and assistive technology and tools as necessary. If students did not have access, school-based administrators made arrangements for school-owned devices to be loaned out to students or worked with corporate partners to secure devices and wireless access. In order to ensure the continuity of learning, a mix of technologies and platforms were used to deliver curriculum. Equity, inclusion, and ease of access were of central importance during the planning, design and delivery of online resources and lessons in an attempt to not further exacerbate existing social and educational inequalities.

Reich and Mehta (2020) have drawn the oversimplified equation: Student Learning = School Learning + Home Learning. As we turn the dial on schooling amidst the pandemic response, in-person school-based learning is inversely related to at-home learning i.e. if in-person learning decreases, the only way to main student learning is for home learning to increase. Parents and caregivers are the ones who will bear this burden. Although the level of parent involvement differs from family to family, most families have seen a dramatic increase in the amount of time that parents have spent supporting (or supervising) their child(ren)'s learning. As many parents balance these new time commitments and responsibilities with their children with their previously held responsibilities such as work, an awareness and commitment to improving school-home communication and support for parents is necessary.

Parents will also benefit from support in understanding the benefits for social-emotional learning, physical activity and literacy, and activities such as mindfulness lessons, that promote

physical and mental wellbeing. Schools, health professionals, media, and the Ministry of Education can support these initiatives through the provision of resources, lessons, and messaging.

Bayham and Fenichel (2020) caution that whenever and where-ever possible, child-care arrangements should be taken into consideration within school closure plans. In British Columbia, the Ministry of Education set out expectations that the children of Essential Service workers (ESW) would have tiered full-time access to in-person schooling during the initial period of school closures, although how individual districts interpreted its implementation was diverse. In response, the West Vancouver School District, opened an exclusive site for the K- Grade 7-aged children of Tier One Essential Service Workers and students deemed vulnerable, staffed by teachers and educational assistants who supported the learning and social-emotional needs of the children in attendance. Although the school was a success, it was limited to the children of Essential Service workers and several weeks later, when schools reopened for voluntary attendance, the ESW's children returned to their "regular" schools.

If school closures reoccur in the fall, schools should consider engaging the support and increased capacities of school-based Parent Advisory Councils (PAC) to create "microschools", cooperatives where children rotate between a small group of homes to enable one parent to support and provide care for the children while the others go to work (Reich & Mehta, 2020). PACs, who often focus their attention on fundraising, will have less capacity to do so given the limited contact and potential financial hardships experienced by some. Community grants could be researched and accessed in the absence of traditional fundraising campaigns or activities. PAC focus can be directed to supporting and amplifying school messaging and how best to communicate with teachers. If some parents can take on roles for tech-support, they may be able to form networks to facilitate access for other children and families with the community. Community building and

information meetings will likely also shift to online platforms and therefore PAC bylaws and means of communication may need to be reexamined to ensure that they are responsive to the current landscape. Additionally, PACs should use the time to closely examine their practices and budgets to look for creative and relevant ways to continue to support schools and enhance student experiences.

Given the increased flexibility of the schools and work schedules during partial or full closures parents may wish to invest the time they previously spent volunteering at the school into running virtual clubs. The clubs could range from several sessions to year-long engagements offered to multi-aged groups affording students the opportunity to connect with others and hone a skill or interest in topics as wide-ranging and diverse as the parent volunteers' involvement.

Doing a systems check while navigating the emotional waters

If we examine our current state of flux through the lens of education reform, it is undeniable that the pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to evaluate our current system and build the capacity to make changes and improvements. Reflecting on the COVID-19 pandemic response in education through Cohen and Mehta's (2017) 5 characteristics of successful educational reform, we can make many connections:

- First Reform: *The reform offers solutions to problems that people within the field of education identified and "they met felt needs for the people who would implement them"* (p. 646). If we take into account our current need for physical distancing measures to control the spread of the virus, and the drastic measure to close schools globally, we have had to rapidly investigate and move some of our learning to a online delivery model. While this has been challenging, it offered many students and teachers more personalized solutions that better met the needs of many students.

- Second Reform: *The reform offered solutions that “illuminated a real problem that educators had not been aware of or couldn’t figure out how to solve” (p. 646).* A year ago, it would have seemed unthinkable to even propose that online learning (both synchronous and asynchronous) could be achievable on a system-wide scale. Within a matter of days, teachers transitioned to supporting their students and their learning remotely, partnering with outside agencies and parents to enable continuity of learning, even while schools remained closed.
- Third Reform: *The reform “satisfied demands that arose from political, economic, or social circumstances of schooling; these reforms worked because there was strong popular pressure on and/or in educational organizations or governments to accomplish educational purpose” (p. 646).* School closures forced school systems and teachers to ensure more equitable access to learning by moving to online delivery, however, schools first needed to ensure that all students had access to the necessary devices, assistive technology, resources, and wireless networks necessary; when it was not available, schools, along with community partners worked together to create solutions for these rapidly emerging challenges.
- Fourth Reform: *The reform “offered the educational tools, materials, and practical guidance needed to put the reform into practice or they helped educators to capitalize on existing tools, materials or guidance” (p. 646).* School closures created an urgency for teachers to investigate and put to use many of the technological tools that were already at their disposal, essentially creating a necessity for all teachers to move to a new baseline of their ICT skill set and knowledge.

- Fifth Reform: *The context of the reform must be “roughly consistent with the values of the educators, parents and students they affected” (p. 646).* Knowing the context is central to building shared understanding and relationships. Without these understandings, shared vision and strategies cannot be created and collaboration cannot occur.

Although teachers may seem to be the frontline of much of the change experienced due to school closures, especially with respect to students and their families, school-based and district administration are often the first responders when emotions are running high with staff, and parents. Many have expressed feeling pandemic fatigue and cognitive overload as their COVID-19 roles continue to expand. Called upon to provide accurate and timely information, ensure safety and adherence to the ever changing recommendations and protocols, establishing budgets and prioritizing resources amidst shrinking allowances, planning and supporting teacher professional development, and ensuring that the individual educational and social-emotional needs of staff, students and parents are met have led many school and district leaders to experience pandemic fatigue. Compounded by the new reality and sedentariness of online meetings, administrators and school district leaders have been called upon to be crisis-managers, all the while wearing a smile and a facade of calm. Acutely attuned to the swirling uncertainties surrounding the pandemic, school administrators and district leaders, by the very nature of their roles, see themselves as the ones who help, not the ones who ask for help, and therefore attention should be paid to ensure that additional supports are also available to them if they are to continue at the current pace.

Summary

At the center of all this white noise are the needs of students, and, in order to best support the students and their learning needs, considerable attention needs to be paid to all those who make up each child’s education network- parents, teachers, principals, school support staff, outside

supports. While we can draw from the lessons learned from previous pandemics and disasters that directly affected students and resulted in interruptions in schooling, the global effects of COVID-19 are still emerging, even as the numbers of infected individuals climbs, and the virus continues to spread and morph. As we learn more about its physical effects, so too are we learning about ways to mitigate its spread and support all of our stakeholders.

Section 1: The Dial - B.C. 5 stage plan

Many jurisdictions from March 2020 forward discussed their situation in opposing terms - schools were either open or closed or students either learned in-class or online. So much of the debate in the United States seems predicated on the belief that in-person learning is the only way to do schooling. U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos (Blitzer, 2020) has recently argued that students must be back in class and insisted that it is safe to do so. Rather than the hyper political world in which US decisions are being made and the seeming absolutes of opening or closing schools, the “dial” notion in British Columbia is being driven by health officials and health outcomes. The initial dial produced in the early stages of the pandemic explained the 5 stages with little detail:

Education stages for K-12 students
Stage 5 Suspend all in-class instruction for all grades and students. Remote and online learning for all students.
Stage 4 *Current stage In-class learning for children of essential service workers and vulnerable students. Remote and online learning continues for most students.
Stage 3 In-class learning for students in kindergarten to Grade 5 on a part-time basis. Access to in-class learning as needed for grades 6 to 12 on a part-time basis. Remote and online learning continues to be available for students.
Stage 2 In-class learning for all students in elementary school (K to 7) on a full-time basis. In-class learning for secondary students (grades 8 to 12) on a part-time basis. Remote and online learning continues to be available for secondary students.
Stage 1 A return to full in-class instruction.

This came out as the system was in Stage 4 after spring break. As the system moved closer to Stage 3 and out of Stage 4 in May, the stages were updated with additional details:

STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4	STAGE 5
SCHOOL DENSITY TARGETS 100%	SCHOOL DENSITY TARGETS K-7: 100% Grade 8-12: 40%	SCHOOL DENSITY TARGETS K-5: 50% Gr. 6-12: 20%	SCHOOL DENSITY TARGETS K-12: 20%	SCHOOL DENSITY TARGETS K-12: 0%
In-class instruction: K-12: 5 day per week	In-class instruction: K-7: 5 days per week Grade 8-12: 2 days per week 5 days per week available for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Children of essential service workers ✓ Students with disabilities/ diverse abilities ✓ Students who require additional supports 	In-class instruction: K-5: 2 to 3 days per week Gr. 6-7: 1 day per week Gr 8-12: 1 day per week 5 days per week available for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Children of essential service workers ✓ Students with disabilities/ diverse abilities ✓ Students who require additional supports 	In-class instruction: K-12: Limited 5 days per week available for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Children of essential service workers ✓ Students with disabilities/ diverse abilities ✓ Students who require additional supports 	In-class instruction: K-12: None Suspend all in-class instruction for all grades and students
	Remote/online instruction: Balance of learning	Remote/online instruction: Parent/Guardian choice to return to in-class instruction optional Balance of learning	Remote/online instruction: K-12: Majority of all students	Remote/online instruction: K-12: All Students

Unlike many jurisdictions around the world that see school opening as binary - either they are opened or closed, British Columbia has clearly identified different stages which are guided by the health officials at the time- our “school on a dial”. As they prepare for the fall, they are now

further clarifying their stages by creating various steering committees to look at adding greater detail to each stage. There is still a tension as decisions are made based on the health conditions of the time but also ones that are workable for the school system. Political leaders while engaged in the issue, are following the leadership of health officials rather than trying to influence it.

By taking a dial approach, there is acknowledgement in the system that it is very likely there will be shifts over the year and implies that the experience may not be the same for all children. Whether it is different at different ages, or determined by need, the school on a dial allows differentiation for experience. The likelihood of a “second wave” in the late fall or winter further emphasizes the need for not taking a simple open or closed approach to schools. The ability of any model for the fall to shift in its in-school capacity is crucial.

Section 2: What’s the frequency?

Miriam-Webster defines frequency as “the number of repetitions of a periodic process in a unit of time”. During the COVID-19 pandemic the cascading effect of the global crisis has been immense. Currently over 100,000 reported coronavirus cases have been reported in Canada. Economically thousands of people have lost their jobs and/or professions. In British Columbia since March and April, it is reported that nearly 400,000 jobs have been lost. Federal government COVID-19 emergency benefits have surpassed the cost of \$95 billion dollars. Wellness Together Canada has reported its highest numbers of calls for mental health resources, this includes substance abuse, domestic abuse and physical wellness. The frequency of crisis events is beyond significant and has had a tremendous impact on our school system.

The high frequency of personal and professional upset as a result of the ongoing pandemic is significant and worth noting prior to delving into each respective context in our school system. Our awareness of the traumatic nature of this unprecedented time is not to be understated. Finding

ways to provide ongoing support to students, families and staff has been and will continue to be a consideration in all district planning. Acknowledging trauma will help foster resiliency so that with each shift in frequency we are better able to bounce back adjust to the new uncertain rhythms of COVID-19.

There are many definitions of trauma but one emerging definition emphasizes that traumatic events do not have to threaten life, or even health, but rather “challenge a person’s assumptive world” and an individual’s beliefs on how the world works and how life will unfold (Helmke, 2020, Begleuy, 2019). This pandemic has continued to press individuals into an uncertain space and will continue to do for months to come. Therefore, trauma informed practices will prove to be a necessary component of all educational planning at multiple levels in our system.

Another component of our planning centers around the development of self-determination and resiliency. The loss of control during this pandemic has compromised stability, routines and undermines emotional safety for many. This in turn has compromised many individuals' sense of agency resulting in the pervasive feeling of helplessness, which has the potential to then shift into disengagement and isolation, followed by possible depression or explosions of anger (Hanson & Hanson, 2018). Offering choice and supports can counteract with the loss of agency (Helmke, 2020). Recognizing that ownership and control are essential elements of learning and human motivation will be essential in countering the potential negative impacts of the pandemic. Correspondingly, finding ways to maintain connections, to support choice, to foster autonomy, alongside of bolstering human agency in learning experiences for students and staff alike will be critically important.

Wehmeyer and Zhao’s research (2020) on self-determined learning will be an important touchstone as we plan for the varied frequencies of schooling in a pandemic. Our abilities to

responsively turn the dial on effectively educating in pandemic conditions will also center on relatedness-supportive teaching and the establishment of caring relationships that promote student ownership and self-determined learning. Teaching students to manage uncertainty has always been important but now it has become a vital life skill. In these pandemic conditions “the goal is not to eliminate uncertainty but to teach students to manage it” (p. 77).

Managing the complexity and uncertainty of the global pandemic will require human regulation and resiliency. Conceptualizing self-regulation within self-determined learning theory focuses on “how people strive for and then maintain the most optimal level of adjustment possible” (Mithaug, 1993, p. 52). Adjusting the frequency of pandemic trauma alongside of building resiliency will continue to be necessary. Building resiliency is best supported when individuals post a traumatic event are surrounded with safe, known routines in a context where the world is safe a place. Feeling a sense of closeness or belonging helps individuals recover from trauma as part of the recovery process is looking towards trusted adults or peers to help make sense of traumatic experiences and to deal with difficult emotions. While the uncertainty of which way the dial will be turned as we educate in pandemic conditions, the relationships that we nurture and protect will be paramount at all frequencies in our educational system.

Section 3: Station 1 - The Elementary School Context

The youngest learners in the elementary context begin their journey in kindergarten - some still at the tender age of four. Traditionally, the school district has cultivated a relationship with the Learning Partnership, a Canadian charity that aims to bring “together business, educators and strategic partners to design and deliver innovative education programs focused on early learners”.

The kindergarten experience begins in the spring before the official September starts with a “Welcome to Kindergarten” event, an event that welcomes new kindergarten students and their parents into the school. The aim of the event is to “engage children, parents and caregivers, schools and communities to make early learning a priority at home and prepare children for school.” Schools relish the event as our first contact with families with whom we are about to embark on a voyage that potentially could last eight years. The event enables students a first look at the school, and teachers a chance to meet the families, answer questions, and set the expectations that schooling is a shared experience. Welcome to Kindergarten was one of the first casualties of the 2020-2021 school year, marking the start of the new normal for the coming school year. While a drive-thru-model event did take place, it lacked the depth of the event in its former glory and provided a tangible example of why careful consideration and planning is necessary as we launch a new school year.

As we plan for the fall, the central question that should guide all within the entire Kindergarten to Grade 7 or elementary system is: what knowledge, skills and attitudes should be focused on? The new model cannot be the watered down drive-through model, however, as Eckert (2019) cautioned, “if teachers are already at capacity with their instruction responsibilities- adding additional work- even if it is meaningful, will not necessarily improve outcome for students” (p. 500). “For all their incredible growth and resilience during the pandemic, students are returning to school with mixed experiences with remote learning, new gaps in their understanding of core curriculum content, and the wounds of recession, family job loss, police violence and pandemic-related deaths. Schools are being asked to do much more for students with greater needs and disparities with far fewer resources, after an exhausting spring” (Reich & Mehta, 2020, p. 13). To

respond to the tension between mounting obstacles and meeting students' learning needs, we need to focus on doing fewer things and doing them well (Reich & Mehta, 2020).

Doing Fewer Things Well

To this end, Mehta and Peebles (2020) have suggested “Marie Kondo-ing” the curriculum. Marie Kondo is a Japanese organizing consultant, television host and author who is best known for her guidance on decluttering homes by keeping only items that “spark joy”. Now, with the uncertainty around schooling, the curriculum could be thought of as similarly cluttered with too many topics and too little depth. Mehta and Peebles recommend having teachers and administrators “Marie Kondo” the curriculum by dividing it into 5 buckets:

1. Topics that spiral - as many topics repeat over the years, determine when this topic will be taught and there may not be any need to catch most students up on this.
2. Nice to haves - topics, across disciplines, that some group of adults thought it would be nice if students knew but are not essential. Many of these can be let go.
3. Sequential topics - identifying what building blocks are necessary but considering “just-in-time” learning as opposed to “just-in-case” learning.
4. Essential Topics
5. Skills - like reading and writing that require repetition but can be integrated that they are better contextualized with other topics.

In order to satisfy the Chicago Schools' fifth essential of school culture as outlined by Eckert (2019) that “teachers are clear, engaging and academically challenging” (p. 482), professional development and teacher preparation will need to be timely and meaningful. As such, the West Vancouver School District, in partnership with the West Vancouver Teachers Association, undertook the innovative steps to move two existing professional development days into the

summer to provide just-in-time support, tools and resources to teachers prior to the start of the new school year. During this time, clear expectations can also be shared around communication, assessment, differentiation, lesson planning and delivery. Time will also be set aside for training on trauma-informed and crisis sensitive practices to ensure that staff are better equipped to support students, some of whom may have had a 6-month break from face-to-face instruction.

Structural Highlights and Considerations

As we move the dial between the stages of educational pandemic response, many considerations need to be made to account for health, safety, and physical distancing protocols. The following table outlines highlights and considerations for system-wide Provincial stage-based plans for elementary schools in West Vancouver as developed by a group of administrators, district leadership staff and in conjunction with teachers:

	Elementary	Highlights	Considerations
Stage One (Regular)	100% in-person attendance		
Stage One No COVID Vaccine	100% in-person attendance with adaptations		
Stage Two	100% in-person attendance with adaptations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staggered entry • Staggered recess • Staggered lunch • Staggered dismissal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit student movement where possible: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teachers go to classrooms ▪ Limited spaces being used in the school ▪ Physical distancing protocols in place ▪ Designate space use throughout school property (playground, traffic flow, etc.)

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Establishment of lunch expectations, guidelines and routines by teachers ▪ first three full days of school, school will end 20 minutes early to accommodate teachers staying for supervision
Stage Three	50% in-person attendance with adaptations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staggered entry • Staggered recess • Staggered lunch • Staggered dismissal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prep time built into the end of each day (22 min early dismissal) • ESW students with classroom teachers everyday • Daily teacher check ins with entire class (½ in-person, ½ virtual) • Teacher-created asynchronous learning opportunities will be provided to students not in attendance on the day • Assessment and feedback will be prioritized during in person instruction time, but feedback will also be provided for asynchronous learning • Synchronous and asynchronous opportunities delivered by specialist teachers such as Physical Literacy, Music, Media Literacy, STEAM (could be a unit of inquiry, project-based learning opportunity, ADST, art education, etc.)

Recommendations

While discussions have already begun around potential changes to structures and scheduling, the unpredictability of the course of the pandemic and the subsequent responses has reemphasized the need to closely examine how the learning will look and what is important. To this end, UNESCO (2020) has recommended that some of the following be considered in its

COVID-19 response documents on distance learning strategies and nurturing the social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people during crises:

- Examining and adjusting curricular objectives
- Prioritizing humanitarian social caring
- Examining readiness and context for available ICTs
- Ensuring equity and inclusion and supporting vulnerable students and families
- Supporting teachers' capacity to plan, facilitate, and engage with students and parents
- Personalizing instruction through in-person, and asynchronous and synchronous online learning opportunities
- Emphasizing the value of the arts, culture and play to promote wellbeing
- Emphasizing the importance of physical literacy and physical wellbeing
- Promoting mindfulness and kindness practices
- Promoting communication and networking

Summary

Central to supporting the youngest learners in our district is ensuring that all stakeholders perceive that a thoughtful and collective plan is developed and implemented, and that communication is clear and transparent. Students, parents, teachers, administrators, support staff, and district-based staff need to ensure that the model, while needing to be flexible and personalized, continues to be responsive, marrying pedagogy, curriculum, and mandatory protocols within a culture of care and mutual respect. While this will continue to be challenging given the uncertainty of the pandemic, even having the most skeletal of plans as a starting point will provide some reassurance to all of those working within the system.

Section 4: Station 2 - The Secondary School Context

It is likely that we will have between 25-100% capacity in our secondary schools next year and this may change during the year. While it's easy to focus on the logistical issues and search for the simplistic, least disruptive solutions, there is also the chance to look more broadly at systemic changes.

The first challenge to tackle for the fall is the timetable. And there are dozens of possibilities. In British Columbia, we have become very familiar with the term “density” when thinking about our schools. Rather than a percentage of students attending, the government will limit the overall density to a portion of the traditional density of the building. The timetable discussion helps set the context for the other, one might argue more important topics like the possibilities of hybrid learning and assessment that need to take place. In a recent forum of over 40 secondary administrators from across Metro Vancouver, 100% of them hoped that we actually would not be at 100% capacity for the fall, as they see a lower capacity as an opportunity to truly rethink the high school experience. A further value of the density conversation instead of looking at a percentage of time each student attends, allows for different students to attend in-person at different rates.

Timetable

Selecting a block schedule is not new in British Columbia. Gore (1997) compares the use of linear, semester and Copernican timetables in relation to performance on exams. All three models have been used in our province, and each have their merits. In order to plan and prepare for September 2020, West Vancouver School needs to develop Secondary timetables that align with each stage of the Ministry of Education's Restart Plan. All West Van Schools have existing

linear timetable structures, so it was decided to be best to use these as the base for planning rather than adopting a new model. The school district has robust International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement programs which have timelines that work best with year-long courses.

The timetable plans were guided by key big ideas:

- The health and safety of staff and students
- The need for frequent quality in-person instruction
- Equity, access, and student support
- Scalable, consistent, and easy to understand between the stages 1, 2 & 3
- Increased synchronous in-person or virtual blended learning
- Teacher workload and equity

The following models will be used based on the different possible densities:

100% Regular Current 2020/21 Timetable

Time Period	Activity	Minutes
8:30 – 9:42	Block 1	72 min
9:46 – 10:18	FIT Block	32 min
10:22 – 11:34	Block 2	72 min
11:44 - 12:56	Block 3	72 min
12:56 – 1:42	Lunch	46 min
1:42- 2:55	Block 4	73 min

This first model is exceptionally unlikely and not one we will likely see until there is a vaccine. It does not take into account any changes for COVID. Beginning with the next one

there are adjustments to account for social distancing and reducing overall density in the building.

100% Timetable with COVID Adaptations

These suggested adaptations could be scaled up or down - depending on Health and Safety Guidelines and Recommendations.

Stage 1	Linear 100% Covid				
	Day 1	Day 2	Day 1	Day 2	Day 1
8:30 - 9:39 8:40 start for 8s and 9s 69 min	1	1	2	2	3
9:44 - 10:53 69 min	2	2	3	3	1
10:58 - 11:43 45 min	Stagger FIT 11/12 & Lunch 8/9/10 (Teachers would have an early or late FIT)				
11:48- 12:57 69 min	3	3	1	1	2
1:02 -1:47 45 min	Stagger FIT 8,9,10 & Lunch 11/12 (Teachers would have an early or late FIT)				
1:52 - 3:01 Grade 8/9 dismissal 69 Min	4	4	4	4	4

321 Min					
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With the 100% model with COVID adaptations, some of the changes include a later start and earlier finish for certain grades, the elimination of large break times, and the staggering of FIT (Flexible Learning Time) and Lunch for different grades. In this model the cafeterias could either be open or closed.

Stage 2 - 50% Density - 4 Half Days in School Per Week (No Lunch)

Draft Times	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:30 - 9:40 70 min	1 A	3 A	See FIT Day Schedule	5 A	7A
9:45 -10:10 25 min	FIT A	FIT A		FIT A	FIT A
10:15 -11:25 70 min	2 A	4 A		6 A	8 A
45 Minutes	Clear	Clean		Lunch	
12:10 - 1:20 70 min	1 B	3 B		5 B	7B
1:25 - 1:50 25 min	FIT B	FIT B		FIT B	FIT B
1:55 - 3:05 70 min	2 B	4 B AC	AC	6 B	8 B AC
330			285 min		

One of the lessons of the spring has been the need for more opportunities for daily contact so the 50% density model looks at a morning and an afternoon shift rather than a day on and day off plan. The morning and afternoon shift model also eliminate the need for a lunch break which is seen as a major challenge for social distancing. There is the opportunity for either synchronous or asynchronous learning with morning and afternoon cohorts of students. On Wednesdays, there is a flexible day that would allow for class check-ins as well as for teachers to book in for extended labs or other requirements.

The 25% model just takes the 50% model and divides it in half and holds to the same principles. This differs from the spring 25% model, as it emphasizes attending more regularly even for shorter periods of time.

Grade 8 Considerations

Of particular concern for the fall are grade 8's. It was one thing to finish a school year with a hybrid model, but it is quite different to start a year with a hybrid model. In the West Vancouver system with K-7 and 8-12 schools, the grade 8 year is crucial with the important transition. Some of the shifts being made include podding students with fewer teachers, adjusting assessments away from traditional letter grades and blocking out time to support social-emotional learning.

Summary

The secondary plan is intended to ensure high frequency with students attending at least 4 days a week for partial days at 50% capacity and 2 days a week for partial days at 25% capacity. Like with elementary, the communication around the plan is crucial to ensure buy-in from students, staff and parents. Hybrid learning in the spring did not have student or parent

buy-in at the high school level so it was poorly subscribed. It is crucial for the fall that the majority of students participate in the in-class learning for any of the models to be successful.

Section 5: Station 3 - The Special Education Context

The special education context is fraught with complexity at the best of times. This has been magnified during the global pandemic as equitable access to learning has been significantly compromised during the period of suspended in-person instruction, remote learning and reduced in-person instruction for vulnerable students. Interestingly in the midst of the ongoing global pandemic the opportunity to continue to reform current special education practices has been illuminated. A spotlight has been shone on the inequity of learning experiences for many students with diverse learning needs or disabilities during remote learning without the physical, regular access to attending school in-person.

On March 30th, BC school and district staff returned to work post spring break. At this time in-class instruction was suspended and the directive from the Ministry of Education was to ensure that vulnerable students who may need special assistance were supported. Districts were left to figure out what these supports would be in the new context of COVID-19 but the priority on supporting the learning needs of vulnerable students was clear. The Ministry of Education has taken the approach that they will set the large vision and tenets, then each respective school district will have the ability to operationalize them in our districts. The province's four guiding principles (in priority order) are:

1. Ensure a healthy and safe environment for all students, families and employees.
2. Provide the services needed to support children of our essential workers.
3. Support vulnerable learners who may need special assistance.

4. Provide continuity of educational opportunities for all students.

For this section, the third priority will be most crucial to our discussion.

Inclusive Dancing in the Moonlight and Shadows of COVID-19

A spotlight on educational inequity for vulnerable learners has certainly been illuminated during COVID-19 but many would argue that this light has been shining for a long time. In Canada it is unclear exactly how many children receive ‘special education services’ but according to provincial figures up to 20% of enrolled students require some additional support (Whitley, 2020). Figures from Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia, Alberta, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick show that there are more than 750,000 students receiving special education services out of about 4.3 million students enrolled in these provinces alone (Whitley, 2020). These numbers represent a significant population of students requiring additional support to successfully navigate the slippery dance floor of schooling a pandemic.

Shining light on inclusion and exclusion during the pandemic is therefore essential. Educators will continue to need to find new footing in providing support and balancing the unique needs of vulnerable students during the pandemic. The pursuit of human dignity and belonging remain at the forefront of all-inclusive education practices. Inclusion Education Canada (2020) defines inclusive education as how we develop and design our schools, classrooms, programs, and activities so that all students learn and participate together. The essence of this and the realities of COVID-19 safety measures related to physical distancing and personal isolation have confounded the complexity of inclusion.

The concept of inclusion can be nebulous without a clearly defined rationale as to its importance. This section will first explore the literature related to inclusive education and its unrefuted importance. Then research related to the six principles of special education and multi-

tiered systems of support will then be examined as key factors in creating the conditions for universal access, inclusion and equity for all students during the pandemic and beyond. The special education lessons learned during the initial months of the COVID-19 crisis will be woven into this section to shape future thinking and to guide recommendations for implementation as we prepare for inclusive ‘School on a Dial’ in West Vancouver.

Turning the Dial on Pandemic Inclusive Education

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic there has been an ongoing critical effort to reconceptualize special education and to establish inclusive education policy. Understanding the history of inclusive education, and its impact on our schools, will allow us to understand where we are coming from which in turn allows us to understand our present, and will ultimately help us create a better future. The ongoing pandemic affords us with the opportunity to reform special education practices and to learn from past mistakes and successes. This section will delve into the literature focusing on the history and underpinnings of the inclusive education movement. During the pandemic when in-school instruction has been compromised the doorway into exclusion for students with vulnerabilities is dangerously open. The ongoing COVID-19 landscape will require both educator focus and systemic intentionality to ensure new doorways into innovative, inclusive educational practices are kept open in order to ensure equitable access to learning is afforded to all.

The most quoted statement from the Salamanca Statement (1994) is “regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all” (Messiou, 2019, p. 778). Inclusive philosophies, policies and practices emerged to bring special education support services into the general education environment in lieu of segregated

instructional programs for students with disabilities (Valle & Connor, 2019). Many researchers refer to the nebulous and limited concept of inclusion at policy levels in education. Woodcock and Hardy (2019) argue that there is a “need for a new language of inclusion, a language that does not gloss over the fact that we are all different, but instead unmask the power relations of difference in our educational system” (p. 130).

International and local policy has attempted to address the pertinent issue of inclusion and what constitutes appropriate responses to diversity in the educational context. Inclusion as a concept is founded in human rights and is evident in international agreements, federal and provincial policies (Valle & Connor, 2019). In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was signed and ratified by all but two nations (Somalia and the United States). This binding Convention stipulates a child’s right to participate in everyday events and opportunities and limits any attempts to restrict this right (UN General Assembly, 2007). Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognizes and specifically addresses the right to inclusive education for all persons with disabilities (UN General Assembly, 2007). The CRPD stresses that inclusive education is a fundamental human right for every child with a disability. The right to education applies to all children, even during a global pandemic. Article 24 describes the following as necessary components of school systems to ensure the inclusion of children with disabilities are able to realize this right. It is important to consider each component in relation to the current crisis context. The following list outlines the components of article 24:

1. non-discrimination – children with disabilities must be able to access education without discrimination on the basis of equality,

2. aim of education – education should promote the full development of all the abilities and potential of all children with disabilities, support them to participate fully in society and teach them with understanding of human rights, diversity, tolerance and respect for the environment,
3. no exclusions – children with disabilities must never be excluded from the general education system,
4. access to primary and secondary education – children with disabilities must have access to inclusive quality and free primary and secondary education in the communities where they live,
5. reasonable accommodation – students with disabilities must be provided with supports and services to help them have an education on an equal basis with others,
6. general support – students with disabilities are entitled to general support to enable them to get the most out of their education, this includes having enough resources and specialized staff,
7. individual education plans – every student with a disability should be provided with a plan that outlines the accommodations and supports needed,
8. providing for specific impairments - specific services may be required so that students with disabilities can acquire the life, language and social skills needed to benefit from education,
9. trained teachers – teachers must be trained to work effectively in inclusive environments (UNICEF, 2006).

Knowing that educational systems are challenged with ensuring that each component of article 24 is upheld during schooling in this pandemic. These components cannot be optional and

educational systems will be tasked with seeking meaningful and innovative solutions to safely implement equitable, inclusive learning opportunities for all of our students.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is the most signed convention in the history of the United Nations. It was signed and legally ratified by almost all countries in 2008. This convention states that all signatories to the Convention “shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels” and that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability (Hyde, 2017, p.5).

The Salamanca Statement (1994) is another critical point of reference for systemically reforming special education practices. This statement is considered to be an international breakthrough for inclusive thought in education and it promoted a whole new way of looking at special educational issues. Its focus is that schools should be built on inclusion principles and that segregation in education should be eliminated. The guiding principle that informs the framework of the Salamanca Statement (1994) is:

Schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas and groups (p. 6).

Inclusion is understood differently in different contexts, therefore the Salamanca Statement attempted to address this reality by formulating the term ‘the inclusive school’. “The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, whenever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences that they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates

of learning and ensuring quality education” (UNESCO, 1994, p.11). This quote is important on multiple levels. It refers to the importance of high-quality educational experiences for all students. It also shows the ambivalence in what is meant by an inclusive school (Nilholm, 2018).

Nationally the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms (1982) section 15 states that every individual in this country regardless of race, religion, national or ethnic origin, colour, sex, age or physical or mental disability is to be treated with the same respect, dignity and consideration. The purpose of section 15 is to prevent the violation of human dignity and to eliminate the imposition of disadvantage, stereotyping or prejudice. It also attempts to promote equal recognition at law promoting all persons as equally deserving. The Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms is an important part of Canada’s constitution as it emphasizes that all humans have a basic right to be included in society.

Locally the British Columbia Ministry of Education’s 2016 manual of policies, procedures and guidelines for special education outlines expectations regarding inclusion in our school system. This provincial Ministry of Education (2016) manual promotes:

An inclusive education system which students with special needs are fully participating members of a community of learners. Inclusion describes the principle that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning, achievement and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their educational programs. The practice of inclusion is not necessarily synonymous with full integration in regular classrooms and goes beyond placement to include meaningful participation and interaction with others (p. 2).

Provincial policy is to then transcend into local policies at the school board level. All public-school districts in British Columbia are mandated to have either board policies or administrative procedures that outline the practices and processes related to special education and

inclusion (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). These inclusion and/or special education practices are to address the barriers to accessing curriculum and to participation for students with disabilities, English as a second language and/or other diverse learning needs. Inclusive education practices have put pressure on schools to shift insular systems of services for students with diverse learning needs towards the creation of systems that are centered on the learner and the ecology of learning that includes the home, the community and the school itself (Lashley, 1994; Burrello, Lashley & Beatty, 2001; Sailor, 2009).

As the following weeks unfolded school districts moved in many different directions. Some replicated an online learning environment that mirrored in-person instruction while others began re-writing student individual education plans (IEPs) for the home environment. Some districts opened centralized spaces to provide home respite to families, while others proceeded with ‘over the fence’ home visits. The West Vancouver School District moved in a different direction recognizing there was an opportunity to begin to reform traditional special education practices responsively, and not reactively, was essential. The challenge has been to maintain an inclusive education approach to the realities of a global pandemic that’s health and safety protocols center around minimizing physical contacts, social distancing and isolation. The following sections outline two of the approaches that have guided our ongoing responses to turn the right dials of inclusive education during the pandemic phased return to school stages in West Vancouver.

The 6 Principles of Special Education

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts and independent school authorities are to “ensure that students with disabilities and diverse abilities have access to the same level of on-going learning as other students” (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 5). Specialized supports

are expected to continue, and school districts are tasked with considering models of alternative service delivery. Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are to also continue and the previously identified learning goals for students are to be a part of all remote learning plans. Special education teachers are currently continuing to work on continuity of learning plans for our designated students. These efforts have required creative and innovative approaches to addressing the challenges of remote learning and the realities of balancing the PHO directives related to health and safety in face-to-face student instruction.

Special education policy provides our special educators with a lens to guide programming priorities. This has proven to be especially important as special education teachers continue to navigate the complexity of education in the current landscape. The six principles of special education policy help “frame and focus” (McCall, 2018, p. 1) instructional decisions as special educators establish and maintain continuity of learning plans for students with disabilities or diverse abilities during the pandemic. Ensuring equitable access to learning for our special education students is crucial and, in most cases, increasingly complex during the COVID-19 crisis. The six principles of special education serve as important reference points in the ongoing planning processes for our students with diverse learning needs. The following sections will explore each principle in relation to the landscape of remote learning during the current landscape of providing continuity of learning for special education students in a pandemic.

Principle #1 - Zero Reject

Like all BC public school districts, our schools in West Vancouver must ensure equitable access to learning for all students. This means that all students with diverse or complex learning needs or disabilities have a right to public education and must receive the necessary educational services to ensure access to learning. The unique needs and vulnerabilities of these

students must be an active, ongoing consideration in all areas of educational programming at both the district level and in our classrooms. During the current pandemic situation, the zero-reject principle is directly linked to our Ministry of Education's third guiding principle of supporting vulnerable learners.

In the West Vancouver School District the zero-reject principle has driven our on-going work as we continue to build in-person instruction opportunities for students with special needs who are deemed not to have current equitable access to learning in our remote learning context. Many of these students returned to their 'home' schools for half-day in-person learning sessions with their teachers and education assistants during stage 4 in April and May. At this time school and district teams were having conversations daily about students' needs and how we could ensure their equitable access to learning is continued during the COVID-19 crisis. Robust academic and behavioural supports were put into place. Prior to stage 4 in-person instruction all involved staff participated in health and safety training prior to start of each session. Learning environments have been physically adjusted to meet all PHO directives and students are front-loaded prior to attending their in-person instructional sessions to build new understandings about school safety protocols during the pandemic. Parents were consulted regarding all health and safety protocols and were not permitted to come into schools. New routines regarding drop off, pick up and transportation had to be created to ensure safety protocols regarding entry and exiting our school buildings was tightly controlled. It has truly been a new landscape for special educators as they have worked to ensure that many new unique protections were put in place so our students attending in-person instruction could have equitable and safe access to learning during the pandemic.

“Normal times” have a new reality in the midst of a global pandemic situation and we are now also faced with the ongoing challenge of ensuring the equitable access to learning in a remote context. Currently in the West Vancouver context, the delivery of the continuity of learning plans is primarily through digital platforms. In spring 2020, a remote learning context was established where teachers outlined daily/weekly lessons and digitally communicated expectations with students and parents. As we continued our journey into this new remote learning landscape, synchronous and asynchronous online communication and instruction began to happen simultaneously across our school district. New feedback cycles and communication strategies emerging as our school teams work alongside our families to ensure that our students with special needs remain connected to both the learning experiences and their school communities. Teachers and EAs strategically engaged in daily two-way communication with students through platforms such as Google Meet and Microsoft Teams. Our district special education specialists worked alongside school teams to build online social skills friendship groups with peers through Google Meets to address the complexity of social communication goals during a remote learning context. Cross-role collaboration was essential as everyone worked and learned together as we moved through the initial transitional processes of pandemic education.

It now seems like a long time ago when our school teams did their initial reach out to students with designated special needs in early April by phone. At the district level we guided school teams through complexities of confidentiality, crisis management and establishing communication logs. In these initial conversations, staff were asked to assess how students and families were doing while at the same time contributing to a district priority scan of who are the ‘most vulnerable’ at that time. It is incredible to consider how much the instructional landscape has shifted over the past four months. Teachers and Education Assistants are still expected to be

actively reaching out to every student on their current caseload. We continue to be able to confirm 100% contact rates with every single designated student and his/her family in the West Vancouver School District. These conversations have continued, for many students with special needs the digital platforms are proving to be incredibly successful but there is a sizable group of students for whom this is not working. In these cases, in-person instruction has been essential and provided on a full-time basis as needed.

These initial steps have afforded us with significant insights to guide individual instruction, to create remote learning plans based on students' current IEP goals and to ensure the practices of inclusive education are upheld. For many students with IEPs it was and will continue to be important to emphasize that the use of a digital platform should not create a barrier to inclusion. It is crucial to note that there are students with complex learning needs who have not benefited from remote learning plans or the use of digital platforms. These students continue to require innovative, creative programming and in-person instruction. In these cases, school districts are activating in-person service delivery as part of their instructional planning. In these cases, the principles of zero reject will need to continue to be creative to ensure the delicate balance between students' equitable access to learning and educators' health and safety is protected.

Principle #2 - Nondiscriminatory Evaluation

West Vancouver Schools have a robust district screening process where students' needs are assessed and reviewed by several multidisciplinary teams prior to receiving special education services. Prior to the district screening, ongoing school-based team meetings first occur at the school level. These regular school-based team meetings consist of school-based personnel and district student support services staff. According to the BC Ministry of Education (2016), the intention of the school based team is to serve as “a problem-solving unit in assisting classroom

teachers to develop and implement instructional and/or management strategies and to coordinate support resources for students with special needs within the school” (p. 6). This is an important structure as it is the beginning of a formal evaluation process in our public schools to determine whether students may need additional assessments.

In West Vancouver Schools, our district school psychologists work alongside school-based personnel such as counsellors, administration, and classroom teachers in the school-based team meeting process. Frequently, district student support services staff such as our speech language pathologists, board certified behaviour analysts, gifted teachers, occupational therapists, vision/hearing resource teachers and other specialists will attend these meetings to ensure that the appropriate, non-biased perspectives are considered at this early point. District specialists are expected to attend school-based team meetings, school teams are asked to circulate agendas in advance to ensure that the appropriate district staff are in attendance. District specialists are also expected to bring a broad view and possible context to school teams who may be struggling with the day-to-day needs and complexities of particular students. The presence of district specialists at school-based team meetings has proven to be effective and important. School based team meetings are coordinated by the school-based learning support teacher/special educator with a school administrator present as an equal participant. These are all critical threads required to weave together a tightly managed referral process prior to further formal assessments. Parents are notified of this process and parental permission is requested by the classroom teacher for the school-based team to proceed with reviewing a student's case at the school-based team level. Parents are not part of the school-based team meeting as these meetings are intended to be internal problem-solving structures for the school team based on resources and educational

personnel. Parents are part of the follow up recommendations as teachers and staff then activate possible school resources and district staff to further support students.

After student cases are reviewed at the school-based team, referrals for further formalized assessments to the district screening committee may be made. Each month, the district screening committee meets to review the student cases referred by school teams. The district screening committee consists of four district school psychologists, one district counsellor and a director of instruction. School based staff are also welcomed to attend these meetings to present their individual student cases, if there are significant areas of complexity. The district screening committee reviews each case using the BC Ministry of Education Category Checklists prior to confirming either the need for a psychoeducational assessment or confirmation of a designation status. This system works efficiently through a series of steps monitoring student progress and ensuring that all existing evaluation is accurate and relevant. Parents are involved in the process as they must first consent and then contribute to the completion of their child's psycho-educational assessment. Upon completion of the assessment and district screening processes, parents are notified and engaged in a conversation with the district and school team to review support required.

In more complex cases involving mental or physical health, a District team, composed of relevant personnel, will also meet with outside agencies at the local health authority to review the assessment findings and recommendations to ensure that supports are in place to maximize student success. Parents, caregivers, and home teams would also be fully involved in these meetings.

There have been questions from both school and district personnel about how we will proceed with these important structures during the pandemic. While in-person special education assessments were initially paused in May and June, the school-based team has remained an

important structure as we continued to coordinate support systems for students with special needs during the pandemic. School-based teams are making referrals for students who are not able to equitably access learning through remote learning and requesting that in-person instruction is established. They are scanning their school communities to actively assess and prioritize the greatest needs to ensure all students are cared for during the pandemic. In June our assessments began but under new health and safety guidelines. This has resulted in a lag in assessment completion time and a growing list of students on our wait lists. To reduce the emerging numbers this year we opened our first summer assessment clinics in July. During this time our school psychologists prioritized the most complex cases and reached out families with offers to begin student assessments now. The feedback from families was tremendous and our school psychologists were able to complete ten complex psychoeducational assessments this past month.

The district screening committee has continued to be a vital structure during the initial and current phases of the pandemic. This committee has begun to morph during the COVID-19 crisis and has become an active advisory structure for school teams as we focus on collaborating and coordinating the necessary support for students with special needs. In the new school year ahead the district screening committee will need to play an important role in consulting with school teams to ensure that nondiscriminatory approaches to remote learning and in-person instruction are established for designated students with IEPs.

Principle #3 - Individualized and Appropriate Education

This third principle will be critically important as we continue to explore ways to ensure that our most vulnerable learners continue to be appropriately supported during the COVID-19 crisis. The Ministry of Education has clearly stated that the learning goals identified in a

student's Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) will continue to be part of their learning. IEPs are to be followed as part of the planning for on-going remote learning. In 'normal' times, the IEP is a tool to manage the implementation of direct services and personnel responsible for instructional delivery in the school environment. The IEP is a legally binding document that serves as an accountability structure informing ongoing instruction. In coordination with school personnel, the family and other outside agencies the IEP should guide all program planning including necessary adaptations, modifications and required supports for designated students. During this time of global crisis, the BC Ministry of Education Special Needs Students Order M150/89 and the Individual Education Plan Order M638/95 remain as legislated regulations that schools are to follow. IEPs are to continue and schools are responsible for ensuring that the learning supports provided align with the goals identified in the student's IEP.

Interestingly, some school districts engaged in the process of rewriting IEP goals to address the shifted instructional context from the school into the home environment. Rewriting IEP goals in a time of crisis is an interesting notion that requires systemic caution. The message from West Vancouver Student Support Services to school teams has been very clear that during crisis-mandated remote or in-person learning, the focus for students with an IEP should initially be on a singular IEP goal. Teams are asked to consult with families to prioritize what is most important right now and then program delivery should reflect these urgent needs. With no clear guidelines yet from the Ministry of Education around assessment during COVID-19, our directive is that IEP goals will be assessed and reported on as appropriate and applicable. School teams continued to be creative this spring as they addressed the realities of remote learning or in-person instruction for students with special needs. A creation of a frequently asked questions (FAQ) document outlined adjustments to the IEP processes in West Vancouver Schools. This proved to be an

important point of reference for school teams this past spring. This document addressed the following questions:

1. How do I complete my year end IEP reports?
2. What do I need to add to the students Communicating Student Learning document related to the IEP?
3. What does the 'year-end' IEP meeting look like?
4. What if everybody can't attend the scheduled IEP meeting time?
5. What if I can't comment on all IEP goals or objectives due to the remote learning context?
6. Do I need to have year-end IEP meetings for all low incidence students?
7. When can I have my IEP meetings?
8. What about Student Support Plans (SSP)? What are my year responsibilities for SSPs?

In order to ensure equitable access to learning, as previously noted there were many cases where in-person service delivery was required in order to ensure equitable access to learning for our students with diverse learning needs and/or disabilities. All possible in-person instruction has been carefully monitored and managed carefully to ensure that all PHO guidelines are followed. We have created clear district health and safety protocols to ensure staff are properly trained and physical environments are manipulated to meet the required physical distancing requirements. This has been vital in light of the physical needs of many students related to personal care and compromised capacity to physically distance. Initially, we considered a centralized model for possible in-person IEP 'check-ins' during the COVID-19 crisis, but we have learned more about the transmission rates between children and adolescents, we shifted away from this model. This past spring, we focused on supporting the inclusive 'home-school model' rather than centralizing special education services. Students were able to return to their home-schools for regular in-person

instruction. From a special education ‘best’ practice perspective this ensured that students were able to return to familiar learning environments and this eased students’ return to school after spending weeks in their home-environments. This also created a sense of comfort and normalcy for school teams as they returned to their classrooms to welcome back our most vulnerable students.

During the COVID-19 crisis we have discovered that the barriers of adult fear related to the transmission of this virus can block a school team’s willingness to activate in-person instruction for vulnerable students. While these emotional responses are completely understandable, we have a responsibility to ensure equitable access to all of our students. This has required on-going district leadership messaging and active support around the imperative of supporting vulnerable learners in the least restrictive environment. Weekly meetings were held all spring with all district specialists, school-based learning support teachers and education assistants. Significant time has been invested in working alongside school teams to build safe work protocols and to prioritize the importance of in-person instruction for our most vulnerable students in their ‘home’ school context. These practices will continue in the 2020-21 school year to ensure we continue with our inclusive forward momentum.

Principle #4 - Least Restrictive Environment

The fourth principle is the least restrictive environment (LRE) which mandates that students with disabilities should be educated with peers without disabilities. During the initial emergency phases of COVID-19 and in-school suspension of instruction the hope was that most students with disabilities or diverse learning needs would be able to complete their work, like the majority of students, remotely in the home environment. There were Google Meets and other on-line formats where teachers brought their students together remotely. All students received

invitations to be part this and our parents of students with special needs expressed repeated gratitude for these continued connections.

In spring 2020, school districts followed the direction of the public health officials (PHO) in British Columbia and suspended all in-school instruction with the exception of our Essential Service Worker School, which provided care for our children of first responders, health care professionals and others deemed to be working in the essential service areas of the pandemic. At that time to stop the spread of COVID-19 the PHO clearly stated that the most important thing that people can do is to stay home as much as possible and to limit contact with other people. Yet, the challenging reality quickly emerged that some students, because of their specific learning needs would require some level of in-person instruction from school staff in order to have equitable access to learning. School districts were therefore permitted to build in-person instruction into their continuity of learning plans for students with diverse needs.

Facilitating in-person learning opportunities was not just important but necessary to ensure equitable access to learning for students with complex learning needs. The reality of accessing learning remotely for these students may not be appropriate or even realistic. It is important to note that the reality since the start of this global pandemic that is what was once deemed a ‘normal’ school environment is no more. Many classrooms were empty, or near empty when we began in-person instruction on a very small, individualized scale. While students had access to school personnel and to their school environment, they were not educated with their peers without disabilities while in-class instruction was suspended. Since schools opened up to more students in June, decreased density ratios continued to factor into small class sizes and separation for students. The ‘new normal’ reality means that the least restrictive environment principle will be compromised in the COVID-19 educational landscape of physical distancing and PHO directives

limiting human contact. LRE is therefore currently compromised by its nature which “requires that students with disabilities be educated with peers without disabilities to the greatest extent possible” (McCall, 2018, p. 10), as sadly at this moment in the COVID-19 landscape there continue to be quite limited peer possibilities at this time.

Principle #5 - Procedural Due Process

Inclusive education is fraught with landmines if trusting relationships between school teams, parents and home teams are not established. There is a clear process for problem solving and for receiving complaints for all families in West Vancouver Schools. At the school level, it is expected that complaints go first to the teacher(s) involved and then to the school administration. In our context most situations can be addressed by the school staff under the skilled direction of the school principal or vice principal. If problems continue, then the conversation is to then move the concern to the district level. At this time, it is critical to ensure that all parties engage in active listening. This will also involve appropriate documentation and establishing visible steps towards resolution. This process is guided by the Director of Instruction of Student Support Services/Special Education. Most issues should be resolved at this level, but if not, complaints may next go to the Superintendent of Schools. After this point, if issues remain unresolved, then under Section 11(2) of the B.C. School Act parents can challenge a decision of an employee of a Board “which significantly affects the education, health or safety of a student”. An appeal process is then established, and the board is obliged to render a decision within 45-days. These procedures remain in place during the current educational context and important structures to ensure that families have avenues to express concerns and seek solutions with school personnel.

There are also external advocacy groups, such as Inclusion BC, who may also become involved as a support system for families as they attempt to navigate systems at the school and community level. In the Inclusion BC Parent Manual (2014), parents are reminded that “establishing good communication with the school can often prevent problems from arising or keep them from escalating” (p. 14). This is important, and from a system perspective appreciated, as we work together to support families of students with special needs. During the ongoing pandemic, local advocacy groups have been providing important support for families who are struggling and not receiving active support from schools. Fortunately, in West Vancouver Schools, this is not a current pressure point as we established our in-person instruction opportunities swiftly to support our students and families but what is emerging in other jurisdictions has been important to observe and learn from. The results of the BCEdAccess survey on April 8, 2020 were eye-opening and alarming. At that time, it was reported that only 27.5% of families who responded had heard from their Education Assistants. While in the presentation of this survey’s results BCEdAccess acknowledged the complexity of the pandemic situation, and expressed appreciation for the hard work of teachers and educational teams, the message was clear that school systems are being closely watched to ensure that equitable access to learning is provided to all.

Currently in this new context of remote learning, West Vancouver School District students who were already designated will continue to be supported through collaborative planning between their classroom teacher and respective specialist teachers (Special Education/Learning Support, ELL, Counselling, Gifted) on at least one goal of their IEP. Students requiring additional support, who have not had the opportunity to complete Psychological Educational Assessments with a District psychologist, will continue to be supported to the best of their classroom teachers’ abilities,

given that the COVID-19 guidelines around social distancing have compromised the ability to appropriately complete assessments.

The current reality is that many traditional special education procedures and processes are on hold. What we are seeing emerge in different districts is that those who have strong relationships are having success, but those that typically relied on process to make progress are seeing their divisions exacerbated. In West Vancouver Schools, we have tried to get ahead of these frustrations by personally reaching out to our most vulnerable learners and their families. This direct contact by the phone has allowed learning support teachers and district specialists to gauge the frustration level in our community and to prioritize in-person instruction. Our school teams and district specialists have been directed to continually prioritize based on the greatest need and to utilize our crisis support systems to ensure we are responsive to emerging problems rather than reactive during the pandemic. Our human relationships guided by the ethic of care, compassion and professionalism are critical right now to ensure that our system does not add to the pressures that families may be feeling. The sensitivity of our school and district teams complemented by our long-standing positive home-school relationships is continuing to afford us with the gift of time as we reboot our educational programs in the pandemic learning landscape.

Principle #6 - Parent Participation

According to the BC School Act, section 7(2) parents should be full collaborative partners in educational programming for our students with special needs. The delicate navigation of this requires the skillful implementation of appropriate individual educational plans alongside positive relationships with our families of students with special needs. The rights of parents in the educational process are significant and critical for all educators to be aware of. The advocacy of

parents and parent communities is an important driver in ensuring that our school systems are ensuring the various rights and procedural safeguards are described in ways that parents fully understand.

During the first weeks post the COVID-19 pandemic ‘return to school’ we relied on the good will of the families of children with special needs to support their children, and in some cases to provide full programming for their children. This was both a challenge and an opportunity. For some families who are already well connected to their child’s school and their program, this is presented as a continuation of the learning in a new setting. For some, though, this proved to be incredibly overwhelming and near impossible. It is these parents, those who feel the stress and burden of remote learning and may have other challenges as a result of the pandemic, that we continue to be the most concerned for. Never have parents been greater partners in learning for all students than during remote learning and the ‘new normal’ of schooling in a pandemic.

Teachers across our school district have repeatedly reached out to communicate in a universal fashion to families that staff are here to not only support students, but also their families. Special Education Teachers and Educational Assistants continued to reach out to families by phone on a daily basis or digitally on MS Teams or Google Meet platforms. Their efforts were two-fold. First, as an ongoing check-in structure focusing on ways to continue to support student learning emotionally and academically. Second, as a continued means of ensuring that the personal connections that we have worked so hard to establish between schools and families prior to the pandemic are not only maintained but strengthened. In-person instruction and the transfer of care of our most vulnerable students during in-person instruction and the return to our schools has required direct, open and on-going communication between our families and teachers. Parents have important information to share about how life has been during the pandemic

for their children. As educators we must continue to listen and learn from their experiences. We must take their lead and then build our in-person instruction accordingly based on the areas of current greatest need. These partnerships will continue to be critical in the new school year ahead as the stress of a pandemic situation continues.

Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

A comprehensive integrated approach to preventing and managing learning and behaviour challenges in our schools is a formative task (Lane et al., 2020). A certain challenge is that students face many conditions outside of school which impact their ability to succeed. Without the provision of additional support while in school many students will struggle with accessing learning. A certain challenge in the midst of the ongoing global pandemic is that in-school instruction has been compromised and many students have not been attending school as they once did. This reality is layered with limited access to external supports such as respite care or community services such as counselling, physiotherapy, support groups etc. As a result schools have become the epicenter of support for students and families. This section will delve into the literature supporting building strategic multi-tiered systems of support and potential ways for schools to address the intersecting inequities of this crisis.

In British Columbia, the public expectations are continuing to mount in regard to return to school plans and the five Ministry of Education stages. A COVID-19 inclusive education survey on April 8th circulated by provincial advocacy group BCEdAccess (2020) stated that families are needing the following:

- Counselling/mental health support,
- Respite,
- Curriculum, inclusion, community and connection,

- Patience with low or no expectations,
- To not be forgotten about.

The BCEdAccess summary report (2020) concluded that “education has responded swiftly to the pandemic and has had some success in supporting families of students with disabilities and complex learners. The report also shows that there are ongoing large gaps in meeting the needs of families equitably within the crisis learning environment”. As an educational system, we are needing to be able to swiftly respond to the learning gaps for our most vulnerable, making our ability to ‘turn the dial’ essential to ensure equitable access to learning and tiered support systems.

A tiered systems approach provides an important structure for supporting the development of the whole child, and when implemented carefully it can create the necessary conditions for inclusion. Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) are not just about academic achievement, they involve a comprehensive focus of support for all areas of a student’s growth and development. The creation of designing, implementing and assessing a comprehensive, integrated and three-tiered (Ci3T) model of prevention (Lane et al., 2020) will be examined in relation to the learning gaps that have been exacerbated during the pandemic.

The importance of considering a student’s social-emotional development alongside cognitive growth is an increasingly understood element of instruction. For students with diverse learning needs or disabilities, this is an essential element. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) recently published a roadmap for reopening schools which asserts that social-emotional learning (SEL) is “a critical foundation for supporting students and adults in the midst of great uncertainty and stress” (CASEL, 2020, p. 4). CASEL maintains that schools should be looking at SEL as a “transformative foundation for reopening” (p.6) and working towards creating safe, supportive, and equitable learning environments will require adults to:

- Engage in practices that affirm diverse social and cultural identities;
- Cultivate a sense of belonging and community;
- Provide structures for physical and emotional safety;
- Use engaging, relevant and culturally responsive instruction built on an understanding of how children and adolescents grow and develop socially, emotionally, and academically;
- Create a space for student voice and agency;
- Offer frequent opportunities for students to discuss and practice anti-racism and develop collaborative solutions to address inequities; and
- Provide tiered supports that meet the needs of all students.

These are important markers for planning conversations knowing that schooling in a pandemic will continue to push educators into new spaces and places. In the West Vancouver School District, our response planning for our students with diverse learning needs and disabilities has been strategically built on a tiered system of support. Having this as a backbone has allowed our educational teams to maintain relationships with students and families during the pandemic and to provide the necessary support. While there have been limitations to the amount of physical support due to health and safety protocols, there has been an intentional direction to maintain frequent contact, ensure open communication and to operate from a community perspective. In-person instruction at students' school sites or individualized remote learning plans based on current IEPs has been guided by the Ci3T model of prevention.

The Ci3T approach involves supporting a student's multiple needs through the comprehensive and responsive lens of academic, behavioural and social development. This is a complex undertaking that requires proactive approaches and high-engagement teaching. Creating a pandemic friendly education system will continue to require a mantra of 'all hands on deck'

alongside systemic recognition of the many demands placed on educators. Highly engaged teachers are well supported at multiple levels. Previously the ultimate challenge in establishing systems of MTSS was helping teachers shift from reactive to proactive classroom management and discipline systems (Lane et al, 2020). Now teachers are challenged with leading learning in a global pandemic where navigation of both in-person and remote learning will be required. This layered with the necessity of trauma informed practices puts tremendous pressure on teachers and needs to be systematically considered in all school/district planning processes.

Teachers have many demands on their time and often work under difficult conditions. As such, district and site leadership are crucial in providing the time, professional development, and clear commitment to implementing tiered models with proactive methods if teachers are to embrace new practices successfully (George, Cox, Mich & Sandomierski, 2018).

Since the spring of 2020, all emergency educational plans included elements of care, compassion and connection. All district communication in West Vancouver has focused on human needs first and building assurances that we are all in this together. This has been especially important for our students with diverse learning needs and disabilities.

During a time when exclusion and distance are global themes, inclusion in education has been an integral part of all pandemic planning in West Vancouver Schools. Our response planning has included a tiered approach to ensuring our most vulnerable students have access to equitable educational opportunities. A district wide continuity of learning plan was created with specific considerations for complex learners. Educational teams have been asked to respond to the following questions in relation to all instructional planning during the pandemic:

1. What are you doing to support students with special needs in a coordinated way?
2. What is appropriate?

3. What is reasonable?

Section 6: Turning Up System Capacity, Riding the Waves and Adjusting for Context

It is easy to put out a “model” for the fall, the greater challenge will be the ongoing work to ensure that the system has the capacity to implement the model, then the ability to adjust as we go and finally can further align to ever changing community contexts. While we have been adjusting the dials between the ‘stations’ of the elementary, secondary and special education contexts, the reality in our public schools is that all of these stations are actually systems embedded in each other. For the purpose of this paper we have teased each ‘station’ out but in practice their interdependence is systemically critical.

Building system capacity is complex. The research related to how teachers learn best repeatedly lands in collaboration with peers. Berry (2019) highlights the importance of collaboration in teachers making instructional changes in their practice. He argues, “If there is a silver lining to be found in all of this, it is that the crisis has *required* educators to look to partners who can help them address their students’ many needs. Suddenly, it’s not just the directors of community schools who insist that the whole child matters.”

The system in British Columbia is building from a place of strength. The system is remarkably consistent (Coughlan, 2017) with very little difference between high and low achieving communities and has been praised for the collaborative nature of its teaching force. This consistency will serve it well during COVID as it is not starting with the great disparities that can be present in many jurisdictions.

Another impact or effect of COVID is its impact on school budgets. Either expectations will have to be tempered or budgets will have to be increased. The “more with less” mantra is being used a lot in education right now. Budgeting in West Vancouver has been described (Seyd,

2020) as “finance staff did some fancy footwork to plug an anticipated \$6.7 million deficit hole in next year’s budget – most of that due to an expected 45 per cent drop in fee-paying international students. Usually tuition from those students provides 13 per cent of the West Vancouver school district’s revenue. Next year that will likely shrink to six per cent.” So at the same time there are calls for new services to support COVID related challenges, budgets are shrinking. The need to find new partnerships will be increasingly important to deliver services.

The human realities of COVID-19 have been charged physically and emotionally. During this first wave of the global pandemic we have experienced and witnessed the crucial importance of navigating this virus’s unsettled waters. Repeatedly since March 17th, our school system has been taxed with redesigning health and safety protocols to ensure that the physical safety of staff and students is at the forefront of all educational planning. Since this time we have also realized that emotional safety also needs to be an upfront consideration in our planning. The emotional toll of the current context is significant and swirling swiftly around all of us as pandemic fatigue roots. Increasing anxiety and depression rates are also emerging as we all grapple with the uncertainty of what is to come in the fall of 2020.

As final plans for the fall are developed it does seem the community is looking forward to being dissatisfied - upset if students are not in school learning and upset if students are in-school and thus their health is at risk. While British Columbia has a major advantage for the fall having had its schools open on a part-time voluntary basis in the spring this goodwill has its limitations.

Conclusion

“Beyond the response to the current crisis, the efforts to deploy distance learning at scale across all levels of education provides valuable lessons and may lay the foundation for longer-term

goals of building more open inclusive and flexible education systems after the COVID-19 pandemic has passed” (Distance learning, UNESCO, 2020, p. 2).

Our hope is that this group project will assist our planning this summer as we collaboratively work together to ensure the many dimensions of schooling in a pandemic are considered and addressed.

Our system’s flexibility to turn dials and shift between stages will be critical in light of the uncertainty of the ongoing pandemic. There are no easy answers as we look to the fall, but the need to be thoughtful and far more planned than we were in the spring is crucial. West Vancouver has the highest performing public education system in British Columbia, and British Columbia, at least according to PISA, is at or near the top of the world. In many ways we are winning in the old world, the challenge for us now is to be nimble enough to rethink our system while continuing to ensure public confidence, and student success.

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