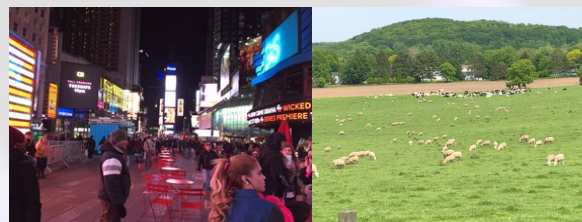




RSA TODAY

News for New York State's
Rural Schools

April 2020



I don't live in New York,

I live in New York

"Communities Committed to Educational Excellence"

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**David Little,
RSA Executive
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CHALLENGE AND TRIUMPH

The state's response to the COVID-19 crisis contained a daunting directive to its public schools: Shut down now. Immediately switch from classroom instruction to providing each student with daily instruction at their home. Continue to feed them, no matter where they are. Finally, set up day care for the children of all those health care workers on the front lines of fighting the pandemic. For rural schools, the challenges were particularly daunting. In an ever evolving environment (with few answers to the multitude of questions) few community partners and fewer financial resources than their counterparts in more populated areas, rural schools were far from exempted from the state's demand. Indeed, in many communities they were and are the only hope of addressing community wide problems. So they waded in.

To comply, New York State's rural schools would have to overcome significant logistical challenges. Unlike their urban and suburban counterparts, rural students would be located across vast stretches of land, often in remote locations. They would frequently lack sufficient internet access to regularly receive instruction electronically. Multiple meals would need to be prepared and provided throughout those broad geographic regions. Staff would need to be hired or reassigned to provide day care, developing daily activities on a moment's notice. Everyone in rural communities, where schools are often the focal point, would look to their schools to lead during this unprecedented crisis.

The result? Rural schools have delivered and then some. Despite the loss of staff and students to their homes, lessons have in fact continued. Teachers learned overnight how to teach on line. They prepared packets of written materials for those students without internet service and began everything from Facebook counseling and individualized instruction to Zoom class meetings. Recognizing the emotional impact of isolation on children and adults alike, they've gone above and beyond the call to provide tension breaking messages of hope and reassurance. Some have hosted parades past student homes, where teachers and administrators have driven by playing music and shouting out encouragement in cars filled with pets and festooned with signs. In some communities they've been joined by police and fire vehicles and ambulances.

Cafeteria staff have turned into take-out specialists, preparing and packaging multiple

meals for regular delivery; often driven by the school's bus drivers. Teachers aides, no longer able to work side by side their charges have become day care providers and shown that teachers aren't the only classroom professionals with creativity and the ability to innovate seemingly on a whim (or the courage to continue working in a group setting!) Everything from science to physical education is proceeding unabated, bringing students, families and communities together virtually, if not physically.



All of this has occurred without knowing how long the crisis will last, how long staff can be retained or where the extra needed resources will come from. The State Education Department has been diligent in finding answers to questions related to state testing and others, as well as interpreting regulations in light of the state's current circumstances. Nonetheless, questions remain; particularly for seniors in high school. Everything from what will be required for graduation and college entry to whether there will be a senior prom remain unanswered.

The list of questions for rural schools when the pandemic has passed will be both numerous and profound. As homeschool groups have (by necessity) sprung up as parents become instant teachers, will the rate of home-



schooling exacerbate the already declining enrollment in rural schools? Will the state realize the impact of the disparity in the provision of broadband internet and focus on providing it to rural students? Will it loosen the many restrictions on digital learning in the state? Then there are the financial implications. At present, the state is without revenue as the economy has shut down to maintain social distancing. Next year's state budget is subject to periodic reductions in state aid to schools if sufficient revenues don't arrive. What will that mean to fiscally challenged rural schools that already struggle to meet even the state's minimum cur-

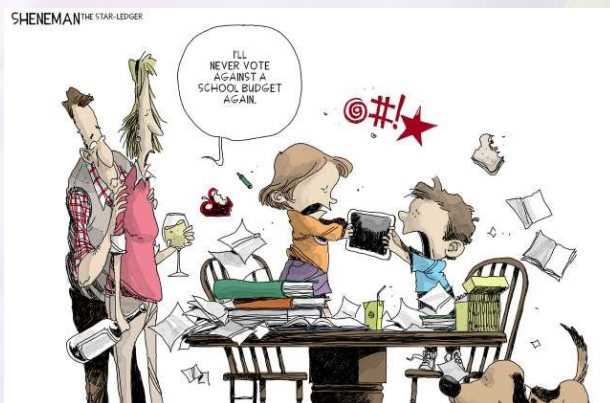
ricular standards? Will the state respond by allowing regional high schools; the two generation old (and successful) model of all of our neighboring states? Will it require small and struggling schools to merge, despite the often great distances involved?

Time will tell, but for now the one aspect of this crisis that has not been a surprise is that rural schools have shown themselves to be resilient, resourceful and ready to lead their communities.

NEXT FEDERAL RELIEF BILL MUST PROVIDE RURAL BROADBAND

We desperately need school data on the shortfalls of hotspots, connectivity, and 1:1 devices for distance learning. We've got 8 days to accrue data before the politicians come back to Washington. We're circulating an urgent call to all 50 states for schools and districts to share data through this survey.

http://www.digitalwish.com/dw/digitalwish/covid_stimulus



A CASE STUDY IN RESILIENCE: HOW A RURAL SCHOOL RESPONDED TO COVID-19

BY: JEFF BABBITT

It's often been said that times of crisis bring out the best (or worst) in someone. The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly put this adage to the test, stretching us to our very limits, testing our capabilities, flexibility, creativity and patience. For public schools, COVID-19 has tested the mettle of administrators, the fortitude of faculty and staff, and the creativity of communities in facing a challenge unlike any they have encountered before.



Genesee Valley Central School, along with other schools across the state and nation, revamped operations and instruction in the wake of the coronavirus. In a quickly evolving situation, this rural western New York State school of approximately 600 students (PreK-12) crafted a plan to remotely engage students, families, faculty and staff in order to keep the educational process going and to ensure that the essential needs of families were met.

Revamping Instruction in a Moment's Notice

For educators who've spent their entire careers teaching face-to-face, the challenge of adjusting methodologies and practices to distance learning was daunting. Genesee Valley's teachers, along with peers across the country, didn't have weeks or months to get up to speed—they had mere days. Dr. Brian Schmitt, Superintendent of Genesee Valley, encouraged teachers to focus on the relationships and primary needs of families. "We immediately developed a meal, technology and school supply delivery plan and tested the myriad of ways we communicate with families," said Schmitt. "Our main focus is always to support the students, families, staff and community."

Kellie Schmidt, now in her eighteenth year teaching at Genesee Valley, was faced with retooling her second-grade class for virtual instruction—and fast. The solution: Facebook. "Facebook allows me to post lesson plans and worksheets, links to educational sites and videos," said Schmidt. "It's the closest thing we have now to a classroom." Schmidt's second grade private Facebook group has 52 members and sees an average of 25 posts per day. The group includes videos of Mrs. Schmidt reading students a bedtime story, pictures of proud students holding up their completed work for all to see, and parents sharing resources and words of encouragement with each other.

Social Studies teacher Donna Slawson had little trouble adapting to an online learning environment. "My students have been using our online learning platform (Microsoft Teams) all year, so we made the transition to remote learning quite well," commented Slawson. She's up early each morning posting assignments by 7:00 a.m. and spends her school days chatting online with students, answering questions and clarifying expectations. "My students enjoy setting their own schedule, working at their own pace, and having the ability to reach me at their convenience," said Slawson. "These students are learning such great lessons about time management and have such an intrinsic motivation to learn."

Technology Limitations and Solutions

Reliable access to technology and the Internet is paramount in online learning. In a region where upwards of twenty percent (20%) of district residents do not have access to high speed Internet, Genesee Valley ensured that all had equal access to learning resources by meeting students' most basic technological needs. The school loaned out 180 iPads to students who needed access to a device for instruction. In addition, Genesee Valley worked with local libraries, village offices, and other community organizations to provide access to free Wi-Fi for families without internet service.



Some teachers navigated the path from in-person to virtual instruction quite adeptly, while others faced a steep learning curve. Enter Lindsay Simpson, Genesee Valley's Technology Integration Specialist. Simpson supports faculty and students in all grade levels by coordinating online platforms, hosting training sessions, troubleshooting problems, brainstorming solutions, and creating resources to coach students and teachers in online etiquette and expectations.

"There was a huge learning curve for many teachers to learn the online platforms," said Simpson. She and designated technology liaisons at Genesee Valley held an all-day training session for teachers on the Friday before the shutdown, and by the following Monday, many had already begun setting up and implementing their virtual learning environments. "Not only did our staff immediately start working hard to learn—they haven't stopped yet! Their creativity is amazing and the way they are working to try and create meaningful and fun activities for the home makes me proud to be at Genesee Valley through this crazy world-wide event. To say I have been impressed with their response would be a significant understatement. I am in awe of them!"

Combating Food Scarcity During a Time of Crisis

In many communities, public schools function not only as a provider of education, but also as a critical resource for basic needs, including medical, dental, mental health, food and nutrition. In a high needs district such as Genesee Valley, food scarcity is a real and daily concern, with fifty-three percent of students qualifying for the free or reduced lunch program through the NYS Department of Education. (Under the Community Eligibility Provision, 69% of Genesee Valley students qualify for free meals.)



The cafeteria staff, led by food service manager Kelli Zenoski, sprang into action immediately, devising a plan for providing daily meals for every student qualifying for free and reduced lunch. "With help from teacher's aides and bus drivers, we are sending out approximately 800 meals a day to Genesee Valley families."

“The response from our students and parents has been beyond amazing,” said Zenoski. “The smiles and even tears when meals are dropped off makes our efforts so worthwhile. We are humbled by the response so far. It is so rewarding to know that we have helped out our school and community.”

Maintaining Community While in Isolation

The mandated school closure, coupled with constant reminders about social distancing coming from all sides, is challenging for students and families. Students who are used to the social interaction inherent in a typical school day are coming to grips with a surprisingly reality: they miss school. “Many of our older students actually miss school,” commented Simpson. “They miss their classmates, they miss their clubs, they miss athletics and... (gasp!) they even miss their teachers!”

To continue the tight knit sense of community found at a small school like Genesee Valley, faculty have created structures and routines to keep students connected. Slawson hosts two virtual lunchtime gatherings each day for middle and high school students. “We use the time to talk about what we watched on Netflix over the weekend, silly videos, even what everyone is eating – anything to help us feel connected to each other now that we aren’t in school.”

Kellie Schmidt and her co-teacher Melissa Shafer reach out to their students personally to keep the lines of communication open. “Mrs. Shafer and I call each of our students,” said Schmidt. “From there, the students take over—they start calling us! Their parents text us, call, and post to our Facebook page continuously. They never hesitate to contact us for advice and to provide suggestions and ideas of their own that they would like to share.”

Facing Uncertainty with Resolve

While students and teachers have adapted their instruction and have settled in to a new routine for the school day, questions still linger. “On top of trying to understand what is happening in the world,” said Simpson, “students have been asking really practical questions like ‘will we have a senior prom?’ ‘Will we be able to cross the stage for graduation?’ ‘If there are no Regents Exams, will that affect my ability to graduate?’ ‘Will I have to re-take classes or double-up on classes or tests to catch up?’”

At Genesee Valley, the character word for the month of March is “resilience” and it’s exactly that trait that permeates the very fabric of the district. “I’m so proud of our faculty, staff and community” said Superintendent Schmitt. “Everyone continues to demonstrate patience, flexibility and a desire to do what is best for students. It gives me great hope for our future!”

“What has amazed me most about this experience,” said Slawson, “is how everyone in the Genesee Valley community came together. I see students supporting each other—responding to questions, motivating each other. I see other teachers lifting each other up and learning from each other, and our support staff feeding and delivering items to students each and every day. The presence of our community members online, participating in conversations, and sharing ideas has been inspiring. If nothing else, this crisis has shown what can be done when a whole community works towards one goal—I hope that it continues long after things have returned to normal.”



HUDSON FALLS, QUEENSBURY CHOIRS COMBINE FOR VIRTUAL 'HALLELUJAH'

The student choirs of Hudson Falls and Queensbury school districts combined for a virtual singing performance recently.

Choir directors Diane Havern at Hudson Falls and Matt Gaulin at Queensbury worked to bring the idea to life despite having students out of class.

The students sang their part of Leonard Cohen's famous song "Hallelujah" and it was combined into a video.

It is available for listening below:



Excellent job :)

COVID-19 HAS FUELED THE RAPID RISE OF TELETHERAPY-

BY RSA PARTNER GLOBAL TELETHERAPY.

A Quickly Evolving Landscape

There are times that the system must undergo a profound shock to pave the way for innovation. In the case of remote therapy, coronavirus may have just done that. While the gradual shift from face-to-face therapy to online therapy was already gaining momentum, before COVID-19, the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic have taken the therapy world by storm and have changed things practically overnight.

As quarantines and lockdowns continue across the country, even those therapists who have been opposed to remote therapy are suddenly embracing teletherapy out of sheer necessity. While it is highly unlikely that face-to-face therapy and counseling services will ever wholly vanish (they are still needed for some high-risk patient populations), for the majority of those requiring therapy, things may never again be the same.

Recently, the Lancet published a rapid review of the psychological effects of quarantine, which range from boredom and frustration to anxiety and even PTSD. The evidence is clear: Social distancing, while necessary, can be severely detrimental to mental health. These conditions naturally translate to a higher demand for therapy. And since that's not an option in many places right now, there's no choice but remote therapy.

Effectiveness and Benefits of Teletherapy

While it may not seem that way, teletherapy itself is nothing new. Already research in the late '80s and early '90s demonstrated the efficacy of teletherapy, and it has gradually become mainstream since then. There is strong evidence that teletherapy can work well for practically any condition and age group.



What's more, for specific populations, teletherapy is the delivery of choice, for instance, patients in rural communities or those with certain disabilities.

In the mental health arena, online mindfulness interventions are on the rise. Research has shown that mindfulness-based interventions generally have a small but significant beneficial impact on depression. Another study found remote therapy to be as effective if not more effective than face-to-face therapy for treating depression.

And the benefits of remote therapy are substantial. It has been shown to be more affordable, more convenient, and many clients consider it to be more confidential than face-to-face therapy. What's more, online therapy provides a vastly more excellent selection of therapists to work with, due to the elimination of geographical constraints.

Boosts from the Government and Insurance Industry

The Trump Administration made a fateful decision on March 17, 2020, which may have supercharged the migration to remote therapy. On that day, it was decided to expand Medicare telehealth coverage broadly. This

was done in the hopes of weakening the anticipated spike in Coronavirus cases and deaths, by extending services without risking more people on the streets and in doctors' offices.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services made a move to expand the telehealth benefit on a temporary and emergency basis under waiver authority and the Coronavirus Preparedness and Response Supplemental Appropriations Act.

This expansion covers care and counseling that is provided by a broad range of professionals offering telehealth to patients, from doctors and nurse practitioners to clinical psychologists and licensed clinical social workers.

This watershed event in the history of teletherapy was met with Dr. Ken Duckworth's, (Medical Director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)), assertion that last week was "the biggest week in telehealth policy in American history."

"Prior to this waiver, Medicare could only pay for telehealth on a limited basis," according to CMS, such as when people in a "designated rural area" had to travel to certain types of medical facilities for the virtual service.

Experts say that, with this policy change, telehealth (which is the umbrella under which teletherapy is included) shifted into overdrive after years of incremental progress. The government realized that, as the number of Americans infected with COVID-19 rose rapidly, they needed to act as it was a matter of life and death.

This monumental change on the national level has given states broad flexibility to cover telehealth through Medicare and reimburse health providers for telehealth services at the same level they would for face-to-face care.

What's more, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced that it would waive penalties for potential HIPAA violations during the Pandemic, effectively lowering the barriers to teletherapy.

With the government paving the way, it hasn't taken insurance companies long to follow suit. Private insurance companies have already begun to expand their coverage of telemedicine and teletherapy as well.

What the long-term Medicare and private insurance coverage landscape for telehealth will look like in the post-Coronavirus world is anyone's guess. But most medical and mental health experts agree that the dramatic shift in virtual care that is underway is probably here to stay, and perhaps will continue to increase well into the future.

Help Your Students Cope with the Crisis

The response to the COVID-19 Pandemic is unprecedented. Because of our unique role in children's K-12 education, we feel a responsibility to do what we can to assist schools, therapists, and students with this transition to online learning and seclusion. To ensure that our students remain engaged and supported, our therapists are providing complimentary "Support Sessions" to the country's youth. We are also assisting schools by training their therapists for remote therapy. [Click here to learn more.](#)