

District Highlights

Newtown Public Schools

Welcome to the inaugural issue of District Highlights from the Newtown Board of Education. District Highlights will be our new quarterly newsletter, constructed by the Board of Education Communications Sub-Committee for the Newtown community at large. We are a bit late with this issue which was supposed to be out in June due to the pandemic that descended on us in March, right before we were supposed to start work on this issue. However, while it delayed us it also gave us a chance to highlight major accomplishments within the Newtown Public Schools, namely the creation and roll out of our Alternative Learning Plan (ALP).

At our first virtual sub-committee meeting, we discussed what this newsletter should be about. The Alternative Learning Plan, ALP, was our mountain to climb - and what a mountain it was! All of the staff throughout the Newtown Public Schools, from teacher to Superintendent, found themselves coming up with new ways of providing instruction to thousands of students with only a little bit of lead time to prepare. We have met with staff through various areas of the school district to present a picture of what this task was like, including (but certainly not limited to): learning new technology, adjusting curriculum, creating new procedures, and finding creative new ways to engage learners of all ages.

So please join us in learning about our challenges and achievements that members of the staff have gone through over the past couple months.

Daniel Cruson Jr. and Deborra Zukowski
BoE Communications Subcommittee

Curriculum Delivery

By Daniel Cruson Jr.

On March 13th, 2020 Newtown Public Schools closed down for an indefinite period of time, leaving parents, students and staff wondering what education would look like for the foreseeable future. Prior to that point preparations had been underway on an Alternative Learning Plan (ALP) that could be leveraged if this exact scenario occurred. March 13th had been scheduled as a Professional Development day for focused work on the plan, and on that day the need to implement the in progress plan suddenly became a reality.

I recently had a chance to sit down (virtually) with 3 teachers from across the district to discuss how they went about implementing the plan, and what challenges and successes they have had during the journey. The three teachers that were kind enough to spend an hour of their day talking to me were:

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**Board of Education
Communications
Sub-Committee**

Members:

Daniel Cruson - Chair
Deborra Zukowski

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- Karen Dreger, a 2nd Grade teacher at Head O' Meadow Elementary
- Jill Gonski, a Special Education teacher at Newtown High School
- Bonnie Hart, an 8th Grade Math Teacher and Coordinator at Newtown Middle School

The three have very different backgrounds and skill sets, but they also had some very similar challenges and successes to share with me.

Technology was something that all three mentioned as an early challenge to implementing the plan. Ms. Dreger shared that prior to the closing of school her grade level didn't make use of Google Classroom so it was unfamiliar to not only the teachers but also their students. This led to a steep learning curve for all involved in using the technology. This challenge was echoed by Ms. Hart whose class did not use Google Classroom as part of their regular curriculum for teaching Math. She also mentioned a challenge of converting some areas of the curriculum to digital from the normal pen and paper approach, areas such as graphing which students would normally do with pencil and graph paper. Both indicated that their students managed very well making the transition to Google Classroom and now feel comfortable using it every day.

Ms. Gonski's two sections of Life Skills, an interactive curriculum that connects General Education students to Special Education students as mentors as well as that teaches vocational skills through practical applications. However it is difficult to facilitate lessons involving social connections and in person work when students and teachers are required to remain physically distant. Additionally her students have a variety of special needs that make it hard for them to work virtually, such as some being non-verbal. While Google Meets gives a way to meet with her classes on a regular basis, the district has also purchased other platforms geared toward special education learners that have been successful in helping to overcome the barriers that were originally present.

All three teachers echoed that they could see continuing to use these new tools in the course of regular learning once school is back in session. All have found benefits to the platforms that would be able to supplement their regular lessons and how they interact with students that might need some extra help. Ms. Hart said she had become a tremendous fan of Google Classroom and Ms. Dreger said she was surprised at how quickly the students succeeded with a brand new platform.

A second challenge that all three shared was they recognized early on that the lack of social interactions was a problem for their students. Ms. Dreger saw in her 2nd Grade classroom the need for the kids to be able to see each other and be kids. Additionally she noted that teaching lessons like reading to students is a challenge when you are not physically there. Further up the grade ladder Ms. Hart saw her 8th graders lose the benefit of real time interactions through questions and answers with each other and the teacher. Finally Ms. Gonski's class was built on the interactions of Mentor's and Mentee's which could be accomplished through email but just wasn't the same. Once they got rolling with Google Classroom though they saw the students begin to benefit from virtual meetings with fellow students. They noted that full class lessons in that format were a challenge, but smaller groups with a shared screen could be beneficial at higher grade levels. Meanwhile at lower grade levels, it was more about letting the kids be social with each other through the use of snack meetings or sharing time, than trying to teach full lessons - until they got used to the technology.

The third big point to come from our discussion was the importance that staff collaboration played in getting through the challenges of this new learning environment. Ms. Hart talked about how her fellow grade level teachers used a Google Doc to share their progress through their shared curriculum and how they all could see that they are going to finish up the year where they would have hoped to be normally.

They also worked together to share ideas for lessons and used Google Forms for common assessments.

Ms. Dreger told me about the fact that the elementary grade levels were collaborating not only amongst the teachers in the same building, but also across all 4 elementary school buildings to share ideas and resources. A representative from each building would meet weekly with representatives for their grade level at other buildings to ensure a close alignment among all 4 schools.

Meanwhile, within the individual buildings, the grade level teachers continue to work closely within their cohort like they would during a normal school year. However, the individual teachers have taken on the responsibility of focusing on a given subjects for the entire grade, instead of each teacher teaching all subjects to their own classroom. For instance, one teacher would take on delivering the writing lessons while another would take on the math lessons. Ms. Dreger shared that the students have shared being excited by this approach to teaching, they enjoy (and some even look forward to) seeing different teachers for different subjects.

Being a special education teacher and the only one teaching her class, Ms. Gonski's collaborations took on a different form. Instead of having fellow classroom teachers to collaborate with, she meets with the service providers like the Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, etc., who work with her students on a regular basis. She works with them to develop strategies and resources that she can use with her students when delivering her lessons virtually. She also regularly collaborates with her students' parents to find the best way to help deliver lessons and meet the variety of needs they have.

In the end, it was clear that Ms. Dreger, Ms. Hart and Ms. Gonski all felt that the students, parents and staff had risen to the occasion and overall had succeeded despite the odd circumstances in which they found themselves. They all saw positive takeaways from the experience of having to build and implement the ALP over the past few months. They see that not only staff, but students and parents have learned new things that will be of use to everyone now and into the future, regardless of where we may have to go from here.

Special Education

By Deborra Zukowski

Quickly pivoting to distance learning is difficult for most students, teachers and families, but especially so for many with special needs. During the traditional school day, students with special needs are eligible for individualized access to educational, functional, and social services provided by highly trained special education teachers and specialists along with assistive technology when needed. Depending on their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), students may be provided with one-on-one and small-group instruction for reading, writing, and mathematics. They may also have instructional materials adapted when part of mainstream classes. In addition to educational support, some students are provided with functional and social services including speech and communication therapy; physical therapy for access to and use of facilities throughout the school; occupational therapy to better participate in classroom activities and learn general life skills; and social/behavioral support and counseling.

The move to distance learning was especially challenging for special education students and teachers since much of the support provided required face-to-face interactions, often assisted by specialized materials and tools. These interactions build close bonds between a student and his/her teacher that also improved the student's overall educational experience. Unfortunately, the speed with which the district had to move to distance learning left little time to fully develop the practices needed to

digitally model such interaction and some of the services that required close contact or specialized equipment were not able to be provided outside of the school setting.

Since distance education started, special education teachers, specialists, and Newtown special education administrators have been working together with families to make the educational experience as successful as possible. One of the major efforts was to try to emulate teacher “presence” so that the very important student/teacher bond could be maintained. A focus for all grades was to ensure that teachers were there in voice and/or video. Depending on the type of content, the special education teachers now complement instructional materials with audio recordings that students can play back as many times as needed, hearing their teacher’s voice each time. In some courses, like math, it is possible to go a step further with virtual whiteboard-like videos that include voice overlays and so provide the content both visually and audibly. And for other courses, such as science labs, the teacher records a full video with step-by-step demonstrations that students can work along with and/or play back later.

While the lessons are prerecorded and not interactive, the teachers supplement the lessons with small group video review sessions and individual check-ins. For the latter, some special education teachers personally talk with every student they support for up to 30 minutes at least once per week, and sometimes more. During the call, the teacher helps the student and his/her family with goal-setting and instructional follow-up as well as checking to see how they are doing overall. For some teachers and students, this weekly method of individualized attention works even better in the distance learning mode than it did in the classroom because the teacher is able to solely, and regularly, focus on the needs of the student and his/her family.

As of May, the overall feedback from parents/guardians has been positive. They appreciate the care and work that teachers are providing their child(ren). However, knowing that many students and families are still overwhelmed, the district is striving to further improve the distance learning experience. Teachers and specialists are holding frequent video conferences and sharing ideas to improve their outreach. Special education administrators are constantly reviewing their guidance for their staff. With collaboration among the district staff and suggestions from families, Newtown’s support for students with special needs is expected to continue to improve.

Thank you to Chelsea Ciccio – special education teacher at Middle Gate, Marcia Stiman-Glacier – special education teacher at Newtown High School, and Maureen Hall – special education supervisor at Reed and Newtown Middle School for helping us better understand what they do and how distance education has affected their work. Their love of the students and zeal for teaching were abundantly apparent, and only partially conveyed in this article. Also, thanks from all of us to the special education administrators who are working shoulder to shoulder with the teachers to improve the overall experience for their students, including Deborah Mailloux-Petersen, Sonia Raquel, Maureen Hall, Dr. Paula Grayson, and Dr. Bonnie Voegeli. To contact a special education administrator, go to: <https://www.newtown.k12.ct.us/SpecialEducation>.

Student Voices


By Milan Chand and Hannah Jojo - 2019-2020 Student Representatives to the Board

In these unprecedented times this pandemic has shaken up the world, but Newtown High School and all the Newtown Public Schools have adapted expertly to the new Distance Learning Model. As students from NHS, we have experienced this fashion of learning first hand and although there are some challenges, the versatility and vigor of our student body has been unmatched. Moreover, teachers and parents are working harder than ever to make this “new normal” a little easier.

By utilizing the platform Google Classroom, teachers are sending student assignments, creating videos to explain topics, setting up office hours, and adapting with this new way of schooling with novel ideas. On a regular day, assignments are due at 11:59 each night giving students time to complete their work and manage their own time during this quarantine. Google classroom allows students to see all their assignments and due dates laid out on one screen, furthermore the application allows for multiple types of assignments to be submitted, giving teachers various ways to communicate and give work. For example, one piece of new technology many teachers are using is called EdPuzzle, which is a learning tool that shows a video and provides questions to submit along the way. Having experienced all of these types of distance learning, we can say that each teacher has figured out what works best for them as well as for their students.

The styles of distance learning, as well as the grading policy, have changed from the beginning of this journey. At the beginning, many teachers were unsure how to use google classroom and other tools of learning. As time went on, they started to figure out the details of how they would teach their students and developed a set routine for each week. For example, after the first couple of weeks, many teachers started learning how to post a video of themselves explaining a powerpoint. However, since this has been a learning process, everyone has truly found the best way to teach and learn, as well as be fair. When looking at grading, the new system puts less weight on this final quarter and gives students an option to change to pass/fail, while still maintaining a GPA value for the year. This system is a perfect balance for students and teachers alike by reducing stress, while also keeping everyone accountable.

Throughout this journey of distance learning, teachers of Newtown Public Schools have kept an open mind and continue to be enthusiastic and willing to try new types of teaching. It has been a trial and error process, but the teachers and students have stayed resilient and hard working. Students know what to expect from each teacher and can contact them if there are any issues or concerns. From our experience, we would say that distance learning is working very well and we are fortunate to be in a school district that is so dedicated to making sure this experience runs as smoothly as possible.



DID YOU KNOW?

We distributed over 650 chromebooks and hotspots to students that needed them to learn from home.

Unified Arts

By Daniel Cruson Jr.

The Arts is an exciting part of many student's school day, and something that many have come to recognize as an important of life in general during the past couple of months. Whether it is fine arts, musical arts or theater arts, many students in Newtown Public Schools look forward to spending time working with their teachers in these subjects. But how do you participate in a subject that thrives on collaboration with peers when you can't be in the same room as them? How do you instruct largely home-bound students in using materials that aren't available in a normal household? The answer is with a lot of creativity and cooperation with fellow teachers.

I had the chance to sit down (through a Google Meet) with a number Unified Art teachers throughout the district to learn how they have managed to convert their programs to fit within the Alternative Learning Plan (ALP). Janice Gabriel (Theater Arts at Newtown High School), Michelle Hiscavich (District Arts Coordinator), Kim Hosler (Elementary Art at Sandy Hook & Hawley), Tina Jones (Elementary Music at Middle Gate), Carol Skolas (Art at Newtown High School) and Mardi Smith (Orchestra at Reed Intermediate School).

Despite everyone having their own challenges, the focus of our Unified Arts teachers throughout this whole time has been finding a way to implement their lessons and curriculum with fidelity and quality. Many of the staff talked about collaborating with teachers throughout the country and even across the world to share ideas for ways to provide the best curriculum for their program despite having to do so remotely. Ms. Gabriel mentioned that even before schools closed down in Newtown, she was finding groups on Facebook and other platforms that were sharing their experiences with others to help them prepare for what was coming.

Ms. Gabriel was the first to mention the challenges of running a class that normally requires collaboration between students. She teaches acting class and while she could teach pieces remotely one on one with students, many times acting requires the energy from your fellow actors as well as the audience. The nature of a performance changes just by being in a one on one environment. Ms. Smith faced a similar challenge when teaching orchestra. Part of the pleasure of music is working with a group and hear the harmonies that are made by many instruments playing together.

Both Ms. Gabriel and Ms. Smith cited challenges with technology. In Ms. Smith's case, technology could have helped a bit with multiple students playing music together, but the technology and connectivity was not optimal for this use. Ms. Gabriel ran into slightly different issues because many of the apps that would have let her make up for the lack of the normal equipment used to teach Theater Production (such as virtual light and sound boards) did not meet the state mandated security standards that they must follow.

Ms. Skolas encountered a variation on Ms. Gabriel's issues of needing to teach without the normal materials to do so, except in her case it was trying to teach ceramics without the materials normally used for craft projects. These are not materials that a student would normally have access to at home and not obtained easily. Additionally her work was normally done in 3D but because it had to be reviewed remotely and couldn't be done in person she had to convert her normal lessons to a 2D medium.

When it came to getting past the challenges, the common theme was creativity. Every teacher found ways to adjust their curriculum in new ways, not only getting the lessons done but embracing the

new situation the students and staff found themselves in. Ms. Skolas, Ms. Hosler and Ms. Jones all spoke about getting the students outside with their projects. Ms. Skolas created a lesson around the history of cairns and even branched off into science with a lesson on why environmentalists don't like them. Ms. Hosler created an "elements of art" scavenger hunt that sent students outside to find artistic materials and do projects with them. They also spoke about encouraging the students to do these projects with their families, promoting togetherness during this time of community isolation.

Ms. Hosler and Ms. Jones both noted seeing a new side to some of their previously quiet or shy students. These students were more likely to reach out to their teachers when they could do so through email or other technology, and started to show more confidence. Ms. Jones also shared the way she used technology to bring back one of her students' favorite class starters. In the classroom she would start with a guess the song icebreaker using a song they had learned in a previous class. She did this via video, but to add another element of fun to it for the reveal she used an Instagram filter to change her appearance in a way that related to the song and give her students a laugh.

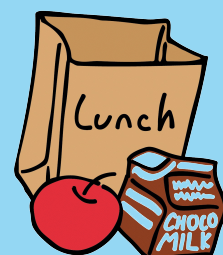
By the end of our discussion, it was clear that everyone had put a lot of effort into finding a way to make the arts a part of every student's school experience despite the challenges presented by distance learning. As a positive to going through this whole experience, the teachers all mentioned learning new things that they look forward to incorporating into their classrooms when the students return. Ms. Hiscavich did share that discussions around next year are already happening in her department, so they can be prepared with needed resources should the ALP continue into the next school year.

To paraphrase something that Ms. Skolas shared with us during the call, everyone seemed to be excited about the possibilities of the new normal instead of waiting for the old normal to come back. It is clear that this new normal will be enriched by the experience gained over the last few months.

I would like to thank the unified arts staff for taking an hour from their day of teaching to speak with me for this article.

DID YOU KNOW?

Since schools closed, Newtown Public Schools has provided 12,301 meals between Head O'Meadow, Newtown Middle School and Newtown High School (Data as of June 3rd)



A Closer Look

with Carla Tischio, Grade 5 Reading and Language Arts Teacher

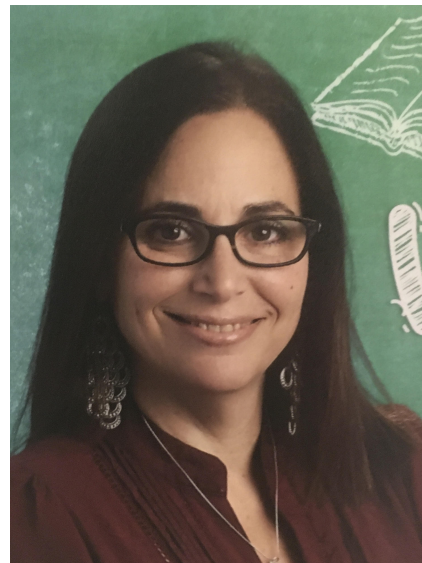
By Deborra Zukowski

Please give a brief history of your time with the Newtown Public School District.

I joined the district in 1996 as a kindergarten teacher. From there, I moved to second grade for one year. When Reed was set to open, I volunteered to move to fifth grade because the thought of opening a new building sounded exciting to me.

Has the way you prepare for your classes changed because of distance learning?

Yes. While fifth grade teachers always worked from the same curriculum, we never had to be so "in tune" with each other before. Over the last couple of months, planning and creating lessons that were close to identical was a shift because we all have our own personalities and ways of doing things. It has been difficult but also a necessary part of supporting each other and families through this.



Prior to the move to distance learning, what were some techniques you used to engage students in the classroom? Did you change the techniques when initially moving to distance learning and how have they evolved since then?

In school, one technique that we all used a lot was conversation. "Turn and talk" was a phrase that could be heard in almost any classroom. Losing the "good peer pressure" that comes along with in-class learning has challenged teachers to come up with other ways of engaging students. New platforms like Peardeck and Jamboard that give students the ability to interact with the content through drawing and audio lessons have been powerful tools. In addition, offering live Google sessions, while not the best for whole class teaching, have been a means to provide some messy, chaotic and beautiful human interaction that is so reminiscent of a fifth grade classroom. The meetings start out awkward, but ice breakers like a quick game on Kahoot relax everybody into their authentic fifth grade selves.

Have you had to change the way you present the material (teaching technique/emphasis as well as use of technology)?

Earlier, I mentioned Peardeck and Jamboard. Those are two tools I have learned about since distance learning began. They are mostly for engagement. The most powerful teaching tool I've come across is Screencastify. With this Chrome extension, I can record a whole class, small group, or individual lesson that targets a specific skill. Additionally, when students turn in writing, I can give timely and meaningful feedback using the writing tool and the voice over recording together. It's powerful because the students can hear my voice and see the suggestions I am making on their work. Inflection matters. Writing the same words in an email or Google comment box, it would be very difficult for the students to hear how appreciative teachers are of their hard work and/or how supportive they are of the work ahead. Repetition matters. In addition, students can play it and replay it to increase understanding. Unlike sitting in a small group, when the lesson is over, it's over.

How did you facilitate teamwork among the students in the classroom? Are you still able to encourage such teamwork and if so, how? Also, do you know how your students manage to build effective remote teams.

I haven't explored this fully yet. However, shared Google docs have been an effective way of asking students to support each other. After a Google Meet, I set students up with a document or slide show they can all contribute to, then copy and paste the work into their individual submissions. Next week, I plan to put them in teams to complete an at-home scavenger hunt. They can use email to communicate the items they find. Then take pictures and insert them into a shared Google Slides.

Has the way you evaluate your students' efforts and work changed?

We definitely held them to a standard over this period of time, but we kept the work consistent, so everyone knew what to expect. In addition, we gave a lot of flexibility to families as to when and how they get the work done. It's hard to believe, but a lot of growth can be seen in the work of our students. I'm sure the independence and perseverance needed to complete the work has grown them in ways we may never be able to measure.

If you could change anything related to distance learning (whether feasible or not), what would it be?

I'm not sure if it's feasible or safe, but I wish my students could have a semi-private Google Meet to work on projects together. If I could somehow have five Google Meets going at the same time, so that I could switch from screen to screen to check on them. That would be an excellent way to pull in some of the students who are reluctant to join in on the distance learning and add back some of that positive peer pressure I mentioned earlier.

Is there something you are doing differently now that you plan to continue to do once the schools reopen?

As I mentioned, Screencastify is a power tool. Used effectively, it can allow teachers to literally teach more than one small group at a time. An interventionist on Google Meet could meet with children across the building without anyone having to leave their rooms. On both platforms, teachers can record their computer screens and send home lessons that mirror the day's work--making school accessible to students who are home sick or out for any reason. These lessons can also support students (and parents) that might be struggling with homework. Like everyone else, I have had my struggles through this time. But mostly I am excited about what I have learned and can't wait to see the impact my new virtual teaching skills have in my actual classroom.

Is there anything else that you are now doing differently that you feel should be included in this conversation?

This experience has exposed many weaknesses and strengths in our system. The weaknesses were obvious and probably pointed out enough. However, the strengths were more subtle and were the actual backbone of our success. First of all, the power of the interdependence of our community--parent to classroom, classroom to classroom, administration to teacher, and Newtown to the world--can't be underestimated. If we didn't know before that "it takes a village", we know now. Many of the technologies I spoke of earlier were made free and available to teachers just to support us through this time. In addition, communication among all parties had to be clear and timely. Everyone needed to bring their A game. We had to trust and support each other in ways we never have before. I could not have taught my students through this crisis without the absolute trust and support of their parents. Moreover, through this ordeal the reciprocal nature of our education system became crystal clear. Everyone has a role to play. When we take on those roles with love, bravery, (and technology), we can move mountains together.