

## Beyond The New Normal

A new phrase, “the new normal,” has popped up in our nation’s lexicon. The phrase applies to all facets of society – from the workplace to recreational activities to our education system. The COVID-19 global pandemic has prompted an abrupt end to life as we know it and ushered in this unknown, new normal which, according to Governor Andrew Cuomo, is based on logic, science and a phased-in reopening of society after months of working and learning remotely for most educators.

To help schools prepare for this new normal, the governor has established a statewide task force of education stakeholders focused on reopening K-12 school districts and how to “reimagine” K-12 education. This research brief outlines innovative strategies New York school leaders are employing to foster positive academic and socio-emotional student development. These strategies involve leveraging educational technology as well as school-community partnerships.



### Reopening schools

In addition to being guided by a public health focus on reducing the rate of transmission of the COVID-19 virus, New York’s statewide task force on reopening schools reviewed considerations such as behavioral and operational strategies like wearing masks, social distancing, routinely washing hands, disinfecting and deep cleaning of buildings and workspaces and staggered work and school schedules.

School leaders will also have to grapple with the [long-term mental health](#) issues that this global pandemic may produce for students. These issues run the gamut from direct virus exposure, infection or family loss to economic struggles to a myriad of personal family struggles that might have been exacerbated during the pandemic including marital discord, domestic violence, abuse and addiction issues, according to news outlets. Some early childhood professionals say the trauma of this

pandemic can be categorized as Adverse Childhood Experiences or [ACES](#), making it rather inevitable that many students may need a swath of mental health supports post-pandemic.

It is important to conduct a mental health needs assessment with the school community upon school reopening, says Jill Cook, assistant director of the American School Counselor Association. Cook’s views coincide with a common phrase repeatedly stated by educators and psychologists during this pandemic: “Maslow before Bloom.” This phrase references the importance of feeling safe, secure and healthy before you can fully learn, mature and self-actualize as a person. According to Cook, “Some may immediately want to turn the focus to academics upon return, but it will be important to provide a way for all to process this shared event we are experiencing before, during and after students return to the school.”

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **Going forward, school district leaders will need to have Plan B strategies in place to provide consistent support and enrichment to students.**
- ▶ **Schools should leverage partnerships as a way to address gaps in teaching and learning and emotional support.**
- ▶ **Partnerships tend to be mutually beneficial and low-cost.**
- ▶ **Educational technology should be infused in the curriculum, not just tacked-on to it.**
- ▶ **Innovative thinking including leveraging BOCES services can aid budgeting plans for technology.**





## Partnerships

Mental health partnerships can help ease the burden of support needed for K-12 students and families upon school reopening. The William Floyd School District in Suffolk County has an agreement with a NYS licensed OMH and OASAS provider to offer mental health services to the district's students and families, according to Robert Vecchio, president of the district's board of education. **OASAS** (NYS Office of Addiction Services and Supports) is a state-run program which gives money to non-profits and other entities to provide substance abuse and addiction programs and services. "Our OASAS program has been small by design and every year has helped a couple of dozen students, we do see a lot more activity and request for services on the mental health with their [New York State] OMH (Office of Mental Health) services. They also provide outreach services for families in need to take care of food needs etc.," notes Vecchio. This partnership has "established a link to community-based services that were not adequately available" prior to the partnership, according to Vecchio. These programs have "minimal expense," he told NYSSBA. Their relevance to the current pandemic cannot be stressed enough. "I truly believe in the next two years when this crisis is no longer in the shutdown phase we will be dealing with the PTSD and ancillary issues that come from that and

there will be a surge in the need for mental health and addictions services for our students, families, and staff. I think there will be funding opportunities on the federal level thru SAMHSA, [the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration], and on the state level with OMH and OASAS if done correctly to benefit all of those we serve," Vecchio told NYSSBA.

Finding ways to help students avoid a **COVID-slide** is top of mind for many school leaders and educators. Dr. Ray Sanchez, superintendent of the Ossining Union Free School District, decided to forge a tutoring partnership between the school district and Pace University to provide academic and socio-emotional enrichment to students so they would have another layer of support during the pandemic. Since Pace University's graduate education students would typically have been fulfilling their clinical experience in K-12 classrooms this past spring, this partnership is mutually beneficial for both the school district and the university. Ninety Ossining elementary school students are receiving academic and socio-emotional enrichment from these pairings, while Pace graduate students are getting clinically rich experiences by working with the district. The program, which involves, on average, 30 minutes of tutoring time across multiple days went synchronous at the end of April. The program also provides a way for the district's students

to connect with another person, so it is enriching from a socio-emotional standpoint too, notes Sanchez. He hopes to scale up the program so that it will include middle and high school students. It's a mutually beneficial partnership that has no overhead and has the added benefit of giving families a little bit of a break, Sanchez told NYSSBA. He plans to continue the effort post-COVID 19 because, he says, regardless of how we come back to school, this type of program shows responsibility to families' needs.

K-12 partnerships with higher education are a source of economic viability and sustainability when it comes to student learning. Peter Turner, director of the Institute for STEM Education at Clarkson University, explains the reach the university has with neighboring school districts. "We have several outreach programs that we work on with school districts both in the North Country (basically all of the St. Lawrence-Lewis counties, as well as Carthage, Salmon River and others) as well as a growing connection with several schools in the Beacon area," he told NYSSBA. Many of these programs cost little or nothing to the school district. "In almost all cases they are grant-funded and so have no direct cost to the school districts. That is not universally true. Robotics... is run through **COSER** agreements..." says Turner.

The Masters in Arts in Teaching (MAT) program at Clarkson works with the majority of Capital Region school districts. Clarkson's teacher preparation program, unlike many, includes a full-year residency, notes Catherine Snyder, chair of the department of education at Clarkson. These resident teachers have been working with school districts remotely during the past few months. "Our candidates pivoted to online learning along with their mentor teachers.... The feedback we have received from our district partners has been positive. They have appreciated the fact that our candidates have remained with their faculty, and in many cases, have been able to offer cutting-edge solutions to virtual instruction challenges based on their Clarkson course work," says Snyder.





These “cutting-edge solutions” stem from course work the teacher candidates take at Clarkson. It was a happy accident that the residents in Clarkson’s apt-titled course, ED 560 Modern Teacher, applied their learning as a springboard for student support during the COVID pandemic. “A large part of that class involves learning how to engage students and differentiate instruction through technology. While the course was not designed with COVID-19 in mind, it meant that our students were very well prepared to integrate engaging strategies into their virtual lessons along with strategies to reliably assess student learning. They were able to balance synchronous and asynchronous teaching, engage in full class and small group instruction, and communicate clearly with students and parents,” Snyder told NYSSBA.

### Remote learning

Remote learning has been a subject ripe with challenges for many school districts across the nation. The numerous problems that remote learning has highlighted during on-site school closures include lack of

professional development for teachers, lack of broadband access for students and lack of robust online curricular offerings. These concerns prompted Governor Cuomo to partner with the Bill Gates Foundation to [reimagine education](#). This collaboration will focus on how technology can bridge the gaps in online K-12 teaching and learning such as barriers to learning and online access. The project will also focus on educational technology in higher education.

Whether it be a lack of robust online curriculum to provide students or some extra one-on-one academic attention for students, many non-profits and other organizations have filled these needed niches for school districts. For example, [UPchieve](#) provides free virtual math tutoring for teenagers 13 years or older from lower [socio-economic](#) backgrounds. Schools can set up a [partnership](#) with UPchieve which includes free student tutoring and postsecondary counseling. UPchieve provides school districts student app usage information. [The New York Public Library](#) is now providing tutoring to New York school students via a partnership with Brainfuse.

In addition to tutoring and homework help, [Brainfuse](#) provides writing assistance. Services are accessed simply via a New York Public Library card. Finally, partnerships do not need to be complicated. In California, the [Los Altos School District](#) is getting creative with partnerships. Each school in the district has a parent-initiated tech group that offers students technical assistance during this remote learning time.

### What’s the long-term strategic value of being an innovative educational thinker?

Educational technology is not new, but for many districts across the nation, the abrupt shift to remote learning has highlighted the challenges school districts face with online learning. Dr. Michael Nagler, superintendent of Mineola Union Free School District, has been working at the forefront of educational technology integration in the school district for the last eight years. The district is a member of the [League of Innovative Schools](#), which is a distinguished group of 114 U.S. school districts that are on the cutting-edge of learning and school leadership. Mineola has been at

Purchasing Technology Equipment using Multi-Year Planning

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Summer of	Total \$ amount of equipment	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
2006	250,000	50,000	50,000	50,000	50,000	50,000					
2007	300,000		60,000	60,000	60,000	60,000	60,000				
2008	305,000			61,000	61,000	61,000	61,000	61,000			
2009	325,000				65,000	65,000	65,000	65,000	65,000		
2010	125,000					25,000	25,000	25,000	25,000	25,000	
2011	250,000						50,000	50,000	50,000	50,000	50,000
	Totals	50,000	110,000	171,000	236,000	261,000	261,000	201,000	140,000	75,000	50,000
	1,555,000	Over 5 years the total budget caps out at 261,000									

### Five Year iPad Budgeting Plan for Mineola Public Schools

“We purchase a large amount (usually around 500 ipads) and pay for them over 5 years. In NY it is permissible to do this through BOCES, otherwise Apple also has financing options. Hypothetically, if you spend \$250,000 your first payment is \$50,000. When the lease is paid you replace all of the ipads you bought. So you create a cycle of replacement every 5 years and you total budget in years 6 is \$250,000 (\$50,000 for every year 5 years in a row) so you are able to scale quicker and cheaper.”

– Michael P. Nagler, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools, Mineola Public Schools



the forefront of what many districts are just experiencing now, Nagler told NYSSBA. For example, the district has students make “a digital portfolio of their ‘best’ work. We teach them HTML5 in fifth grade, so they learn how to code while collecting artifacts of their work. When they graduate they take a digital vitae with them,” says Nagler. The district transitioned to live instruction via Webex fairly seamlessly, but still found

won’t return as well as when students re-enter in the fall. That said - it is important for students to return to the routines and socialization in schools albeit socially distant.” For him, this pandemic shows that schools need to move much quicker when it comes to educational technology. Nagler thinks school districts are slow to the gate with technological innovation. “Schools move at a glacier pace when we need the

their work upon project completion is up to them, but doing so is not indicative of effectively using technology in education, says Cronk.

## Conclusion

Developing new partnerships and continuing beneficial ones should be top-of-mind for all school leaders this fall. Partnerships can help school districts employ “adaptive planning” – a ready-to-implement Plan B – in the event of abrupt school closures due to a possible second wave of COVID-19. If added staffing for mental health, SEL or academic enrichment is not available or adequate from a school district, these partnerships can provide needed relief without a high price tag or professional development concerns. Since graduate students, like those at Clarkson, are learning cutting-edge techniques on a daily basis, their participation in these partnerships will likely provide a smoother transition for school leaders, educators and students should adaptive plans be put in place. In addition, since school funding will likely be scarce, many partnerships involve very little funding and/or staffing, so it behooves school district leaders to look for these partnerships to be more efficient and effective.

All in all, there are many unknowns in the future for K-12 education. What is known is that many New York school leaders are already “reimagining” education in their districts through innovative thinking about partnerships and educational technology, which can create mutually beneficial relationships that are low cost, replicable, feasible and support school communities no matter what the future holds.

## “Schools move at a glacier pace when we need the speed of light.”

– Michael P. Nagler, Ed.D., superintendent of Mineola Union Free School District

that despite issuing hot spots to families for connectivity, about 40 students still did not have connectivity to the Internet. For the district’s part, it provides 1:1 iPads for every student. The budgeting (see graphic previous page) happens over a five-year cycle and is relatively feasible for districts through their BOCES, he notes.

Blended learning is here to stay, he says, and notes that a new type of thinking is needed for school leaders post-pandemic to account for two assumptions regardless of CDC guidelines. One assumption is that parents want their kids back at school and the second assumption is that teachers will come back to school. Regardless of reopening plans in the fall and these two assumptions, continuity in the Mineola school district will be achieved via Webex, Zoom and Google Meet tools, he told NYSSBA. According to Nagler, “all of the tools we are currently using we will continue to use when we reopen - they will help with those students and adults who can’t/

speed of light,” he told NYSSBA.

Others take a more moderate approach to educational technology. Virtual learning should not replace face-to-face learning, according to Jennifer Cronk, director of information and technology for the Newburgh Enlarged City School District, another member of The League of Innovative Schools. Technology should amplify the school curriculum. Often, it is only a tack-on to a project, Cronk told NYSSBA. Instead of being icing on the cake of a school project, which technology often is, Cronk poses the question: “What if technology is part of the ingredients?” For example, instead of incorporating technology in education by just publishing electronic research for a group project, students could work on a joint research project and use technology to communicate with peers across the globe to inform their work and incorporate data gleaned from their global peers into the research. Whether the students choose to electronically publish