An interview reflecting on the transition to home-based learning

In this written interview with Dr. Angela Patterson, Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, East Asia, she reflects upon how things have gone transitioning their large school system of six schools from classroom-based to home-based learning. T Shuman, Regional Director for International School, ACSI Global. March 2020.
(Highlights after the interview include: a section on Home-based Relationship Building and a section on Child-Safety & Home-based Learning.)

When did traditional classroom instruction end? How many weeks has it been so far? Do you have any idea when you will be able to return to classroom instruction? Did you start from nothing or did you already have some plans in place?

Traditional classroom instruction began before the Chinese New Year holiday (25 January 2020). We were made aware of the changing situation and leadership notified teachers during the break to prepare for Home-based Learning (HBL) rather than returning to campuses. We have been instructing in our HBL setting for 6 weeks, though we did give a week of break at Week 5 for students and teachers to catch up on work.

At this time, the return to classroom instruction is unknown and based on the permission of the local Education Bureau's assessment of safety readiness.

Though most of our schools had some digital communication tools and learning managements systems in place, not all schools or divisions within the schools were on equal footing in their use of those tools.

How fast were you able to launch elearning? What have you learned from the startup phase? What were any technological challenges to overcome? Did all households have necessary equipment to join in?

We were able to have systems ready within in a few days to launch elearning. We recommended that each of our schools start with the tools that teachers, parents, and students were most familiar with and course correct as needed.

Because we are working in a district-like model, we were able to leverage our internal Rocket.Chat and have teachers connect with their colleagues of the same age-level or course. Additionally, we established a 30-minute daily check-in meeting for all divisional principals during the first week. At that meeting, we checked in with a fist-to-5 of capacity and load of how each person was doing and what "blockers" were hindering HBL. From this meeting, the superintendents and services team were able to follow trends and resource needs. From this meeting model, principals were able to use the same structure with their staff. (Weeks 2-4, the check-in was held M/W/F, and by Week 6 only T/F.) We also were able to get the IT Directors on the call the first week to source solutions for some of the blockers.

Our major technology challenge was video hosting – having a large enough server and location to hold video lessons from teachers.

Many of our teachers, students, and families either had to leave suddenly or were unable to return to their homes from their holiday. They did not have all the digital devices or curricular materials in

order to do HBL well. Some were in countries with limited electricity or bandwidth, while others had only a smart phone to attempt their work. We have had to establish a very flexible policy for participation, attendance, and assessment.

What platforms did you utilize first? Have you made any changes since the startup? What adjustments had to be made? What are some things you wish you had thought of sooner for a better start? How have the very youngest learners done during this transition?

We are fortunate to have systemwide Zoom accounts that our teachers are quite familiar with – we were at least prepared with video conferencing tools.

Each school initially utilized its on-hand resources, and most have made minor adjustments. I would recommend identifying a common LMS early on. We've had the best luck with Canvas and Moodle for our secondary students and SeeSaw for our elementary. Class Dojo has also been utilized for elementary programs with mixed results; it is good for communication, but wasn't built as a LMS. Two schools tried using WeChat group chats for their instruction, but quickly realized that an LMS was essential for content delivery.

Our youngest learners do best when utilizing a distance education model with a class check-in each morning and each afternoon. They also do best with a consistent schedule and the ability to interact with their classmates. Instruction is delivered via prerecorded videos during the day because our student population is spread out throughout the world.

What does the teaching and learning look like now…is it video based, chat based, all of the above? Did you use a product/provider?

Our teachers provide one-on-one, small group and whole class instruction through Zoom. Some lessons are prerecorded in a "flipped classroom-style" for students to watch, practice, and then meet with the teacher to demonstrate skills.

How do you foster Christian community in this phase? How does the second-grade teacher or the high school teacher care for her students? How do you keep your staff and faculty feeling connected and united?

Staff are meeting weekly via Zoom for devotions. High School teachers have used "Advisory" class to have the students in the same Zoom room, and then exits after the lesson, but allow the students to continue to connect. One teacher has mentioned that they are seeing their students become more reflective in this time – seeing a different side to students because they are having to submit work in a different way.

Another one of our teachers, while quarantined in a California Air Force Base after being evacuated from East Asia wrote an article entitled, "Home-based Relationship Building" for our team. See it below*.

With some teachers scattered abroad, are there any time zone issues to work through?

Yes, but by adopting a very flexible approach, we've found work-arounds. Everyone is keen to be reunited!

How does the Guidance Counselor fulfill their duty during this time? ESL? Tutors? Support?

Our Guidance team has met together and provided support for parents and students in this uncertain time. They have been able to source trauma resources and provide those to teachers for classroom discussions. ESL and SPED Teachers have met with students one-on-one for additional

pull-out instruction, and they have also set up additional daily check-ins with students… once every two hours or for specific classes.

What kind of concerns should leaders anticipate now from the home community?

Parents don't always want to "be the teacher" or feel confident in instruction (especially in a foreign language). It is good to prepare parents for setting up a home learning environment and providing a sample schedule for their child.

Are there any child-safety issues that you have had to consider as you launched elearning?

Yes, we reevaluated our policy for online situations – see it below**.

Can you share with us some of the most creative instructional things you've seen done by your teachers?

I've seen 1st grade teachers with puppets. I've seen a physical education teacher's unit on balance using everyday objects in the home and challenging the whole family to be involved. I've seen kids have their whole extended family as part of their video learning. Families are spending more time together than they have in a very long time.

Comment on the level of stress that leadership has carried. How do you care for one another?

School leadership meets regularly and also checks-in with load and capacity updates. We encourage and enforce downtime within our teams.

What about the stress level on teachers? How do you support them?

Teacher stress level has varied. There are those who were evacuated and quarantined that have suffered more anxiety, but around half of the teachers are displaced and living in others homes with unusual working schedules. Each school has had weekly survey check-ins in the first few weeks to see how teachers were doing physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We have worked to emphasize taking time to "unstring the bow" (which has actually been really handy to refer back to Tim Shuman's talk at a conference in November. Look for article on the blog site).

What would you say to teachers who are about to be asked to move to online learning?

Embrace the opportunity! Students have an opportunity to show you a different side of themselves. Look to provide a way for students to remain connected to each other. Take the opportunity to be creative with your instruction… this process really focuses your instruction back to focusing on the most important learning standards.

What about your finance and your IT teams?

We have expected our IT and finance to be on-call throughout the HBL process.

It might be too early to tell, but is there anything that you might keep from this entire experience once school opens again?

We will certainly keep a shared LMS, as well as the momentum gained from standards-based instruction, assessment, and reporting. Teachers are having to reevaluate the assignments that they are creating and recognizing that they cannot confidently report on what students know when they are completing work in their homes. They have been forced to improve and refine their practice as they create videos for the learning... because bandwidth is valuable, they have been forced to really focus on the most essential ideas in the most concise way.

What is the silver lining in this entire process?

The extra busyness in our lives has been stripped away and we are forced to examine the essentials.

*Home-Based Relationship Building
By Karl Dawson

Home-Based Learning presents enormous challenges to every teacher in every subject, and daily we are all learning new ways to adapt our material and engage our students. I have yet to meet anyone who is comfortable in this environment, though I believe most of us are making the best of it. For me, the greatest challenge is not delivering content or complying with standards. I'm trying to figure out how to build and maintain relationships with students.

Student relationships are my calling card. It is the primary way I teach and the way I build influence in students' lives. Some of you attended a workshop I led at the November conference that was all about building relationships with students. So now, with my students scattered across the globe, how do I continue that work?

I'm still figuring it out, to be sure, but it begins with acknowledging the reality that it's going to be different. It's not only different because I can't just dye my hair pink and dance through the hall before school. Physical distance is one obstacle, but emotional distance is also a significant hurdle to overcome. This whole situation has been emotionally taxing for our students, especially in WYIS, and it can be hard to predict the way it will impact relationships with students.

All is not lost, though. We have many tools at our disposal, and there are even new opportunities to be opened that otherwise may not be available.

Journaling
Most of my classes have previously done some form of journaling, and my MS classes do it very consistently. Since HBL began, all of my students are required to write at least one weekly journal entry telling me about their week and how things are going. I use an online app called Seesaw, but you can use Canvas or any number of other tools. The key is to make it consistent. In our school, journaling lives in the Philosophy/Character Development department, but I strongly urge all schools to implement journaling for students. My students know that I am the only person who will read their entries, and they are free to express any thoughts to me they want. This is part of the social-emotional learning process and it is essential to help students process their experience.

The greatest aspect for me is that it gives me a window into how they are feeling, what they are thinking, and how I can help them. It's like a backstage pass to a teenager's brain. Just remember, when you open that door, you need to be prepared to let them vent a little. I've got a number of students trapped within Wuhan right now, and so I have to expect some of them to have some pretty unpleasant feelings. I want them to express themselves, and I don't want them to hold back because they are afraid of offending me. I want them to say what they are thinking, even if what they are thinking is difficult for me to read. That's how I build trust and influence.

Zoom Sessions
Class Zoom Calls are an important part of the relationship-building process. For some classes, it may not make sense to have a standing weekly call. I have standing calls for all of mine, because I find it to be useful for both content delivery and social-emotional engagement, although my focus is on the latter. For my Seniors, it is extremely important to give them a common space to process their feelings and express themselves. Imagine having this kind of interruption for your last year of high school. No basketball tournament. No Fine Arts Festival. MUN and Senior Departure Seminar are off

the calendar. It is a wholly unfair situation for them, and even though there's nothing we can do to change it, we can offer the chance to talk about it as a group.

Last week, after our Grade 8 Zoom Session ended, I signed off, but most of the students stayed on to catch up with each other and have some time to talk to their friends face-to-face. We have to remember that school is the primary social structure for our students. They aren't simply losing instruction time and daily routines. They are missing out on a giant piece of their lives, so it's helpful if we can provide space for interaction.

In addition, we have continued to have our weekly Youth Fellowship meetings on Zoom. It is especially important, since we have students under lock down in Wuhan, to make sure that they feel connected and cared for throughout this crisis. We have begun to run two separate Youth meetings; one for Asian time zones and one for N. American-based students. This allows us to keep in contact with everyone and provide a place for interaction, discussion, and relationship maintenance.

WeChat Groups

WeChat can be a bit of a sticky wicket for student-teacher communications, but if used properly, it can reap rewards. I'll explain how I use it, and you will note that my use is limited and specific. I have a large WeChat group that currently hosts about 2/3 of the students that I teach (grades 8-12). Our Secondary Principal is part of this group to ensure accountability. The purpose of this group is pretty simple: any time I update course work or information on Canvas, I drop a quick note in there so the students can be aware of it. From there, students in each class spread the word to their class WeChat groups. (I'll note here that at one point a student asked me if I wanted to be added to their class group and my answer was a resounding "No!" The last thing I want is to be accountable for what the students are saying privately to each other.)

Now, not only does this provide a quick way to notify students on a platform that they are already accustomed to using, but because students are students, it gives me the chance for some brief interaction. Students tend to post reactions or comments, and I engage and respond. This allows me, in the context of a safe group chat, to communicate and interact with students and provide support and encouragement.

Obviously, it's essential to use this form of communication in small doses, with another adult in the mix, and to keep it generally focused on school. That said, it opens one more avenue for lines of communication with students.

E-Mail

E-mail is my least favorite form of student communication because it is the one that they use least often, and they are less likely to check it frequently. Teachers who use e-mail as their primary communication avenue will discover that they have less student engagement and more difficulty keeping regular contact with everyone. E-mail is great for parents, but it's not ideal for students.

Having said that, I use e-mail in a specific way in HBL to get the most from it. All of my assignments are presented through Canvas. It is the clearinghouse for student communication. However, students will inevitably have questions, and that is where e-mail lives in my world.

When they have a question for me or need my assistance, I always tell them to e-mail me. This allows for a measure of private communication without risk, since school e-mail accounts are able to be monitored. What makes this especially great, as is perhaps one of the few advantages of HBL, is that it gives a voice to the quiet ones. Students who are unwilling to raise their hands and ask questions in class have the chance to ask whatever they want without the anxiety that the classroom holds for them.

Small Group Discussions

Over the next few weeks, as HBL continues, I plan to experiment with some smaller group discussions among my students. I'm not yet sure what form this will take, but I'm thinking 6-10 students at a time will meet with me to discuss a specific topic. We may structure it around HBL feedback, digital citizenship, or a current events discussion. My goal is to find every way possible to enhance communication and interactivity for students.

Final Thoughts
Nobody asked for HBL, and I am fairly certain that none of us are loving it. This situation is physically, emotionally, and spiritually draining for all of us. Given how we are feeling, imagine having to process those same emotions as a 14-year old. We don't have the ability to fix everything, but we do have the opportunity to make things a few degrees better.

When your students look back on this experience, you can be remembered as the source of encouragement and inspiration. You can be the light in their darkness and make this difficult time a little bit easier. HBL will end, and when it does, I pray that you will find your student relationships stronger than ever.

**Child Safety and HBL

For all staff:

In our current HBL context our Child Safety Policy and Code of Conduct still applies and we need to be conscious to continue to protect our students and ourselves in this context.

You are doing amazing work in unique circumstances, please have a read through these few prompts and examples for HBL to help remind us to keep Child Safety in mind in this unique season.

IT and Communication
- Any communication with students must always be open to public scrutiny – stick to the apps and platforms that have been approved by your HoS – e.g. school email, Powerschool, Moodle, Schoolology, Class Dojo, Zoom to name a few (NOT text messaging or WeChat)
- If you feel you have a special circumstance where a different platform is needed you must have specific permission from your supervisor and have approved strategies put in place to address relevant risks.
  - For example – where other platforms have not worked or not been accessible to students some staff have been able to put strategies in place to use WeChat groups for the specific purpose of HBL communication. You must get supervisors' approval, have 2 unrelated staff in the group (preferably a supervisor or Divisional Principal included), do not become personal contacts with the students - share a group QR code to create the group, for Elementary students communicate through the parents WeChat only.
- *When in doubt double check with your supervisor. If you have already used something not approved by your HoS talk to your supervisor about approval as soon as you can and make any adjustments needed to keep our school learning environment safe.*

Accountability - Keep the Two Adult Rules – they still apply online
- For example on Zoom calls to meet the guidelines you can:
  - Have calls with 3 or more students at a time (organize those meetings in group communications on approved platforms)
  - If needing to zoom to tutor a specific student or 2 the 2nd adult could be the child's parent/guardian or another staff member not related to you.

- ▪ Note: the parent on the call doesn't have to be face to face the whole call, they need to stay in the vicinity e.g be able to hear and see the call – the same way other staff or parents can see into our classrooms at school.
        - ▪ Some of our school counsellors have offered to be 2nd staff members on calls if needed, reach out to them.
    - o If you can't work out any of these your supervisor and CSP Director can work with you to find available staff or in unique circumstances come up with alternative arrangements that address the relevant risks for you and the student.