Families in San Antonio are showing up to food distribution sites set up by the San Antonio Independent School District hungry, tired and scared.

Pedro Martinez, San Antonio superintendent, joined two other superintendents in a conversation March 24 hosted by the STEM Learning Ecosystems, to discuss what his district is doing to support families now.

“We have the perfect storm,” Martinez said. “At our food distribution sites, we have learned that we need to have social workers there because families are showing up with worries about so many things – baby formula, diapers, if they’re facing eviction.”

Martinez and the two other superintendents – Patti LaBarm of the Watertown School District in upstate New York, and Brian Brotschul of the Delran Township School District in New Jersey, said that meeting families’ immediate needs is their top priority now.

“Right now, we have 3,000 teachers getting training on online course delivery. It’s critical that we are flexible at this time and understand that the school day is going to look very different,” Martinez said. “The expectation for teachers is no longer an 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. school day.”

Lessons across districts are being recorded to provide flexibility for both teachers with families they are supporting at home, as well as for families working to provide homeschooling for their children. But all three acknowledged that the online instruction is no replacement for the face-to-face contact with classroom teachers.

“Technology was never meant to replace a thoughtful teacher. There is no replacement for live instruction by a teacher. Chromebooks are meant to supplement instruction – not to replace it,” Brotschul said.
Additionally, equity was mentioned as a central focus for all superintendents throughout the conversation.

“It’s about equity for our students at this time,” said LaBarm. “We are making sure we are meeting all students’ needs before we are able to move forward with advanced placement learning for some students and we are asking families to be understanding.”

The superintendents said their lives and daily schedules – like all living through this pandemic – are surreal.

THEY ACKNOWLEDGED TWO DYNAMICS OF THE CRISIS:

1) Trying to balance what is happening right now - educators have their own families, as well as supporting the families and students they serve in a new remote learning environment, with limited and inequitable resources; and

2) Learning from this situation and determining what we can do to be better prepared in the future, including community engagement efforts to meet basic needs, as well as our remote learning connections and platforms.

Superintendents said they are discovering many shortcomings now, including gaps in content and access, especially around families’ connection to Wifi and adequate devices to go online. They said they are eager to partner with community and business leaders to solve the issues.

The panel wondered how districts - months from now - will view some of their former practices, including testing systems, now that the gaps and shortcomings have become so apparent. They said they hope that the lessons from the pandemic will be considered when students come back to classrooms.

“The digital divide has been around forever, and shame on us if we don’t use this crisis as an opportunity to solve this problem,” said Martinez. “It has to be solved, and if this is what it takes for us to solve it, then let’s figure it out together.”