



## Superintendents Share:

### FEEDING FAMILIES, DISTRIBUTING CHROMEBOOKS, THINKING AHEAD TO FUTURE SOLUTIONS

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.

Brotschul explained, “It is really our role to be the social hub for our community. We have to put children and families in a position to be safe.”

All three superintendents are leading massive food distribution programs for the families in their districts and said that learning is not possible until students and families feel safe and secure.

While working to provide families with food, social work and counseling services, they are also gearing up to help teachers prepare for delivering online learning.

In San Antonio, the school district is distributing 30,000 Chromebooks to students.

“We have 48,600 students in one of the poorest communities in the country where 70 percent have no connectivity,” Martinez said, explaining that the district purchased 30,000 Chromebooks last week to supplement the existing supply of devices already owned to be shared with students.

“The logistics of this is just amazing,” Martinez said, noting that the distribution of the Chromebooks to all students was originally developed as a five-year plan that is now being carried out in two weeks.

Similar things are happening in Watertown and Delran, where teachers are being taught to lead online instruction. All three superintendents confirmed that the school day is starting to look differently. Principals have been conducting virtual planning meetings and deploying virtual training.

“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.

#### ECOSYSTEMS IN ACTION DURING THE PANDEMIC

Is your ecosystem doing something that others should hear about to help during the pandemic?

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*For instance, the Watertown Schools, members of the WNY STEM Ecosystem, are using their 12 3-D printers to manufacture protective visors for medical professionals.*

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.

#### ECOSYSTEMS IN ACTION DURING THE PANDEMIC

Has this pandemic called your ecosystem to address long-standing issues within your community?

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*For instance, San Antonio is attempting to eliminate the digital divide and issues with access to devices in the home.*

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.”

