

# Building a Resilient School System for a Post-Pandemic World

By Ramont M. Roberts, Ph.D.

The onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 brought a myriad of unprecedented challenges that left educators dependent upon their innovations, passions, intuitions and abilities to adjust to rapid change. These skills proved to be essential to the success of students, as the pandemic also produced numerous challenges for them as well. Students had to adjust to abrupt changes in the structure of the school day and, most importantly, in the way instruction was delivered.

Students were forced to learn in environments where instruction was completely virtual, in classrooms where the teacher was teaching to a computer screen and students simultaneously, or in classroom environments that were distant and cold with shields on the desks and constant reminders of why they had to maintain a physical distance from their classmates.

Imagine trying to learn in an environment where everyone is wearing a mask, you can't get closer than six feet to another person, people are experiencing loss of life and serious health challenges in their own families, and attendance among staff and students is sporadic and unpredictable at best.



The uncertainty, instability and discomfort from the pandemic undoubtedly produced trauma, pain and confusion within our student population. We were suddenly living in times that required students to be extremely flexible, display emotional strength and control, and be intellectually nimble. And these abrupt changes to our educational system happened in a matter of weeks.

Among the effects of the pandemic, the impact of trauma became the most prominent and identifiable in our students. Mental health professionals consistently informed us—especially during the early stages of the pandemic—of the effects of trauma on brain development and normal functionality. These experts confirmed for us daily that trauma can impact several important functions of the brain and the emotional development of students, leading them to be unable to process and respond to situations normally.

During the pandemic, it became apparent that many of our students were experiencing high levels of trauma based on their behavior. Immediately, we noticed increased incidents of fear among students participating in activities that were resuming and high levels of irritability around sudden changes in protocols and abnormal schedules. In addition, we noticed sudden spikes in impulsivity among larger groups of students who didn't normally exhibit those behaviors.

With all the unprecedented challenges and unknowns that the pandemic presented, it became essential for our school systems to adapt in ways that were abrupt, intense and effective. We recognized, as other educators around the globe did, the urgency of the moment and the importance of the school system to once again be the anchor for students, providing some sense of direction and hope.

In our district, it was important for us as educators to utilize this crisis as the perfect opportunity to educate our students and build necessary skills. We formed a crisis team made up of every employee group in our school system. To gain the input of students and parents, we built in systematic survey mechanisms and portals on our website and social media pages for constant feedback. The crisis team was charged with restructuring our school system as best as we could to meet those challenges effectively.

The readjustment meant utilizing whatever research was available on trauma-informed education, soliciting guidance from mental health and public health professionals, rethinking the schedule and delivery of the curriculum, exploring ways to institute a consistent informational and educational pipeline for

parents, and determining how to use the afterschool and summer schedules effectively. The work of the crisis team yielded a school system that we felt was the most effective, relative to addressing the needs of our students in a pandemic, and ultimately guiding them to a post-pandemic world.

The restructuring of our school system included:

- Adding more than 60 interventionist positions that provided academic support for students at the Tier II level funded through the Emergency and Secondary Emergency Relief Fund. The interventionists also allowed for the student-to-adult ratio in the classroom to be reduced to 18 to 1.
- Adding a districtwide mental health professional with the assistance of Saginaw ISD and 31N funding.
- Hiring four additional social workers to provide social and emotional support to students.
- Purchasing an additional Chromebook for each student to have in the home, raising our ratio to two Chromebooks for every student.
- Extending our professional development training to all staff in the district to include support staff, paraprofessionals, security, secretaries, bus drivers and food service workers. These additional staff members received training in trauma-informed education, Verbal CSI and culturally responsive teaching along with our teachers, counselors, social workers, psychologists and administrators. Teachers, administrators and support staff received additional training in delivering the curriculum through a digital format, as a result of our transition to the digital aspect of our curriculum.
- Restructuring our summer program, adding to the length of the day, which included enrichment activities such as yoga, martial arts, sports programming, hip-hop dancing and vocal music classes.
- Forming a partnership with local churches to provide programming in the churches after the summer school hours that would allow students to be in a structured environment until 6:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday. We also provided a year-long training schedule for parents in trauma-informed practices.
- Offering a robust after-school tutoring program staffed by certified teachers for the entire school year.

To gauge the effectiveness of these changes, we will use the 2021-2022 school year as a baseline year for local and state assessment, attendance, discipline, mobility and graduation/dropout data. We hope we will begin to see significant improvements in the subsequent post-pandemic years as the restructuring continues to be implemented.

From our perspective, it was imperative to meet the challenges of the pandemic with a school system that was prepared for the student rather than the student needing to be prepared for the school system.



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