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Webinar Transcript: Strategies to Support Remote Learning Along a Continuum of Internet Access

Regional Educational Laboratory Central

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Overview

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Transcript

DOUGLAS GAGNON: So, let's get started. Strategies to Support Remote Learning Along a Continuum of Internet Access. Welcome. We're thrilled to have so many people here. I'll start by providing a brief overview first, a little bit about REL Central. So, we are one of 10 Regional Education labs around the country that is funded by the US Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences. We conduct applied research and provide technical support to our region's central states. That includes the state of Wyoming, Colorado North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri, but today we're thrilled to be joined by people throughout the country.

So, our presenters today. My name is Douglas Gagnon. I'm a senior researcher at Marzano Research and that's where we host REL Central and I'm joined today by Morris Lyon. Welcome Morris. He's a superintendent at Hopkins Independent School District in Hawkins, Texas.

MORRIS LYON: Hi, everyone.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: And we're also joined by Andrew Moore who is the Chief Information Officer at Boulder Valley school district in Colorado.

ANDREW MOORE: Hi, everyone.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: So, if you'll permit me let me set the stage a little bit, you know, we'll be discussing strategies about connecting with students here in this age of school closures and a wide array of strategies is being employed by districts across the country. And this is due, at least in part, to the tremendous variability and access to high speed broadband in this country.

So, this map here shows the percentage of students in districts in the United States that are lacking broadband access. So, it's very evident that it ranges from no access to essentially complete access to every shade in between and also evident from this map is that rural places are much more likely to lack access, so it's. This map is really underscoring the very different starting points that districts have as they are implementing remote learning at scale right now.

So, obviously because of this, there's a range of strategies that are really falling across the spectrum from fully online to some combination of online and offline activities to purely offline activities and trying to engage students in remote learning right now.

Here we see a resource that REL Central is put together this is around what we consider kind of the four pillars of supporting remote learning infrastructure, instructional supports, students supports, and then parent, guardian engagement. And this is related to the poll question that we asked you to complete. What do you see as the biggest challenge? So, the results are being shared right now.

And it looks like it's a pretty even split about a third of you noted the infrastructure is probably the biggest challenge. But about a quarter noted instructional supports. It's like about a fifth for students supports and parent, guardian supports and I'm sure there's, there's about 10%, 8% in the other bucket. So sure, there are probably a lot of things that don't really fall in these categories.

So, this resource, here. We're linking it right now in the chat box. You can click on it and download it yourself. But also it will be shared with the recording of this webinar when it's made available. So hopefully this provides a brief sense of concise sense of what is going on there with landscape looks like.

Just note that this is by no means exhaustive and I'm sure there are many other things being employed by freedom educators around there, but hopefully it's a starting point and it's useful in some way. So, with that I think we can jump into our conversation here. So, Bridging the Digital Divide. Let's begin our Q and A, our quick chat process here with Morris and Andrew. So, we'll start by discussing infrastructure and I'll, I'll first point this question at Andrew.

Andrew, what is happening in Boulder Valley and what infrastructure are you using in your district to deliver robust learning?

Think you might be muted.

ANDREW MOORE: There we go. Can you hear me now?

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Yes.

ANDREW MOORE: All right great, thanks. First, let me just say for those who don't know about the school district in Boulder, Colorado. We serve about 30,000 students not only in the city of Boulder, but the suburbs, as well. And that includes the rural mountains, just to the west of us, so we have a little bit of diversity. And then we've got a pretty dense urban core around Boulder. But then we go out to the suburbs where it's would be a traditional suburb type

neighborhood. And then we go out up into the mountains where it becomes rural and conductivity becomes much more challenging.

So, for remote learning, we've been working diligently over the last three weeks to get those students connected that don't have internet for whatever reason. And we've been using primarily four different methods to do that Comcast Internet Essentials, which is their $9.95 for qualifying students. We actually signed a contract with Comcast so that the district could pick up the cost for those students that couldn't afford or the families of those students that couldn't afford internet. So that took on a portion of the connections. Second to that was hotspots. So we procured both T-Mobile and Verizon hotspots. And we were able to deploy those to students who are in their coverage areas. Although many of you may have already run into the same problem we did. Coverage is often poor in those areas where you need conductivity. And that's just the laws of supply and demand and the coverage areas of the cell phone providers have.

So, we also went down a path of doing a public private partnership and I'll get into this a little bit more later but we have a program we've been piloting for two years, called connect me or connect my education and it's with a company called Live Wire. LiveWire provides over the air broadband services. They're a competitor to Century Link and Comcast in our area. The agreement that the Board of Education just signed this week was to expand it to district wide. And long story short, though they put their antennas on our schools and then they have about a two to three-mile radius of each school where they could provide broadband in the agreement with this company they're obligated to provide free internet to any qualifying students. So, during the pilot we had about 50 students hooked up, and we're now starting to roll out more students on their infrastructure. So that's been one of the, I think saviors for us.

And then I said, there are four ways for us to solve that problem up in the mountains where it's been a bigger challenge. There are literally some places that there is no internet. It simply does not exist at the homes. So we're installing external wireless access points on the two schools we have in the mountains and it'll be a place where those families can come in and drive in basically and get high speed internet. We're fortunate that we have our own fiber going from boulder up to 25 miles in the canyon up to where those schools are located. So there's fast internet at those schools.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Thanks, Andrew. And just a reminder to participants, if you do have a question to plug it into the QA box. Morris let turn the question to you. I know the context in Hawkins is a bit different. Share a bit about what your infrastructure looks like right now.

Morris Lyon: Yes, we're a small rural school in Texas. We have 750 students that's prek–12. So a little bit of contrast to what Andrew has but we are rural. So that like Andrew has a challenge, we also have a challenge in some of our areas, having the ability to get internet access – even to the point where cell signal is not usable either. So even if we could get hotspots, if we were able to, they weren't on back order, we still could not receive a signal from any of our kids.

So, we've have a local company in town that has set up a few mobile areas. We have that access here at school. But then throughout the community some other stations where they can mobile drive up and then have a mobile access there and sit in their cars and work on documents. So, we definitely have implemented the hybrid approach. So, we've kind of go through this whole continuum that's here on the screen.

Research says that the teacher has the greatest impact on student learning. So, we certainly are trying to get that to them through internet or we are using some zoom platforms with all the securities in place. And so that those students who can't get internet could call in on the phone. I think that it's very important, especially in this time that we're in that they that our students hear their teacher's voice. I think is so important that they have that normalcy and that connection that many of our teachers and students have. That they're able to hear their voice hear the lesson. So, you know, that's kind of, we do have bins at school where you know. We're mailing out packets. We're putting return address packets or envelopes in those packets. We also have the ability for people to drive up on campus and drop in a bin their work. So you know, all those things from the first thing on the spectrum to the last we're implementing in some measure because we want to make sure that all our kids have that access. So, it's kind of a robust way to approach it. But, but we're trying to do all we can even with bus routes, we've delivered some work. But we've moved that to more through the mail so that it limits exposure to and contacts, just for our students and staff safety.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: That's a challenge when you need to really play something strategies to make it work. Now is probably a good time for a question.

My colleague David Yanoski has been monitoring the QA box. David, could you find a question that'd be good to ask Andrew or Morris.

David Yanoski: Well, I think Andrew is actually addressing some of these. But one of the first questions that they came up on could if you could you tell us a little bit more about hotspots. We've heard a lot about those lately, but I'm not sure if everyone knows exactly how those work.

ANDREW MOORE: Yeah, so the hotspots are primarily provided by the cell phone providers. So, AT&T, Verizon, Sprint, T-Mobile. And they're a small device that hooks into this cell network and then creates a wireless network in your house. That uses that infrastructure to be able to serve the students. They work really well for one student for sure, two students if you're not streaming video. If you start to get more on one hotspot, the service tends to degregate pretty quickly. I think we hear a lot about 5G. Once 5G is finally deployed, that'll solve a lot of those challenges. You also hear about hotspots in another context. Some of you may know have Xfinity Wi Fi. It often will pop up on your home network when you're trying to hook a device in. And you may not be an Xfinity Comcast customer and wonder where that's coming from. It's coming from one of your neighbors' houses. What Comcast Xfinity does is when they procure a device in your home, they turn on a public hotspot or SS ID in that particular case, but it's locked

behind a paywall. So those customers or Comcast can get on. Now Comcast has opened those up. But only around businesses right now. So, during this crisis we're going through. If you're near an Xfinity WiFi. SS ID near a business, you can get on to it for free. I've been lobbying Comcast. Trying to get energy for them to open that up, especially in the suburbs where this problem does exist, and they've not been willing to open it up.

You know, in the suburbs, at this point, I'd encourage all of you to reach out, though, if you believe that might be a bridge opportunity. Reach out to them and ask the same questions that I've been providing or working with them on.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Thanks for that.

Now is probably a good time to move on to instructional supports and this time Morris up a picture to you first. What are some of the learning activities or resources that you're using to support students?

MORRIS LYON: Well, you know, the first thing we did when we started out as we said, a week for professional development for teachers to start getting our arms around this to try to figure out what to do. We've set up schedules, like many schools have with the way it looks for a week, a teacher would have a general assembly, top, top to introduce the work for the week. Then we have different progress monitoring pieces in place.

Our teachers have office hours where if a student is struggling or something that needs help, they can call in and get some additional help. And then the teacher would then have follow up Zoom's to try to spire it back into the lesson as we go forward. We didn't have, we use Google Classrooms in high school but we don't really have an LMS per se across the district. So, some of these things we are we having to build as we go. But I think the important thing to remember in this process is that quality instructional systems that you have in place are quality instructional systems. I think we don't need to forget that. We need to make sure that we continue to implement those good systems we have in place and just put a pivot on it to try to figure out the delivery. I think some people get bogged down into we've got to create a whole new process or a whole new instructional system. And I think that's not the case. We need to make sure we keep good instruction good instruction. I think another point that we've learned through this process we are actually in finishing our fourth week of online instruction. So we've kind of done some resets and some tweaks as we go along. But I think one thing we've got to understand is that we've got to focus on quality and not quantity. I think we've got to make sure that we don't overload with worksheets, or things like that, that we don't get into a worksheet packet mentality that that we make sure that we're taken opportunity to use those high yield instructional strategies and those things that we know are good practices and in incorporate that.

We, we also do, our administrators, we do instructional rounds which many people may be familiar with. And we try to get us in that mindset of normalcy and familiar being familiar with our processes, our administrative team did an instructional round with some of our recorded lessons that our teachers did. And that's not to be— it's just for us to get a hold of, okay, what's

working, what's not. How do we need to move this forward? What are things that we can do? But we again use pretty much that you're with instructional supports listed here pretty much the whole spectrum there were kind of an across the board hybrid on that. So, all aspects, whether it be audio, recorded lessons, all those things to try to reach as many kids, since we do have such a diverse landscape that we're trying to approach. So that's, that's basically in a nutshell what we're trying to do.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Fantastic. And just a reminder as folks are continuing to pump questions into the Q&A box, we probably won't be able to get to all them. We certainly won't be able to get to all of them right now, but we will afterwards curate list of FAQs that come from this and distribute it with the recorded webinar and the other resources that we link to. So, just encourage you to keep asking questions, because even if it's not answered now. That will hopefully be answered in due time.

So now let me turn the question to Andrew, what additional instructional supports are being provided in Boulder.

ANDREW MOORE: Yeah, great. I think Morris did a great job, you know, and the one thing I'll stress that he said is not doing too much right not being online for, you know, six hours a day, but making it quality.

We are using Google Meet for all of our student / teacher video interactions. And we know that's being used heavily to, you know, be able to engage the students. And I think there's a real need by the students to feel like there's a connection.

And in fact, our attendance has been higher in this virtual world than it had been, you know, on any given day, which shows that either kids are really starving for that connection or maybe they are sick and at home, and they're still able to participate where they wouldn't be in the brick and mortar world we've all come from.

I'll touch also on our learning management system. It seems like that has become a cornerstone to make sure that students know what they need to do, and that they can communicate effectively with their teachers. We use three different platforms in our district Schoolology primarily for the secondary levels.

When you get into middle school, you kind of see a shift down to Google Classroom. And Google Classroom then shifts also down the elementary. But for the youngest, we also use a product called Seesaw. And regardless of the name of the product, I think what's most important is that those learning management systems allow fluid exchange of information and that's such an important thing in the in the virtual world. We're also doing check ins on students that are not connected. You know there for whatever reason they're not participating and that is an ongoing everyday process that happens at the school level.

Just trying to figure out what's going on with that every single student, all 30,000 of them in our district, to make sure they're not missing something or they don't have other things going on in their lives that are preventing them from engaging.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Thanks for that. Thank you. David were you able to find a question to pose?

I think you muted.

DAVID YANOSKI: The new world for all of us. A question that's coming up a lot is the question about students with IEPS or English language learners and how we're able to provide the additional supports that are necessary for those particular students.

You know, I'll jump in here, and Morris will probably have a little bit more, here, but my wife also works in the school district and she's a physical therapist.

ANDREW MOORE: And so it has been amazing for me to watch her on video conference calls to provide what is normally a physical service to those kids that need physical therapy work and she's working directly with the students and the parents to coach them across the video and be able to handle that.

She also has an IEP meetings, of course, for the students that are on IEPs that are on her caseload and they have parents. They've got the principal. They've got the teachers, they've got any of the support personnel and we're using the same exact technology Google Meet in our case to be able to have those meetings real time, you know, as it plays out.

MORRIS LYON: Andrew, we have some commonalities there. My wife works in the special-ed world. But she works virtually. So, I have definitely tried to listen to her, and mine ideas from her as to how we could do this. And again, it goes back to what I was saying earlier, we've got to just pivot the way we do things and think about what it would look like, you know, as far as brick and mortar how we do it, and pivot to virtual.

What we've been doing is, you know, we try to implement everything to the level that we can, as you said, some of the therapists in occupational therapy and things like that are a bit of a challenge. Our state agency Texas Education Agency has done a great job of really supporting us with those things. They have a COVID-19 website they set up, and they have a lot of those guidance that they provided with us as far as meeting federal requirements and special-ed students. You know, we're still having arch through zoom and different platforms. We're meeting going forward with that. But as far as supports our special-ed teachers are, you know, reaching out to our special-ed students, and they are trying to help them meet the IEPS as listed to the best of our ability under this circumstance. And they're keeping those logs and documentation of doing that. It's just a challenging time, and we're trying to do everything we can to make sure their support and for our students during this time. But we're continuing as much as we can with normal activities as possible.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: All right. Why don't we move on a bit? The next question was going to be around student supports, but I'm keeping an eye on the clock and I think some of these were folded in very nicely did this instructional supports. So, I think we're going to move on to the next question. And I'll post Morris to kick it off. And that's how are you looping in parents and guardians and providing support with them during these times.

MORRIS LYON: Well that's, you know, it's always a challenge to make sure that we're communicating well but we we've stood up a website at the on our on our district page that has all of our COVID-19 resources in there. We are. That's, I think that's been helpful. So, as we go forth, we're trying to do informational videos, we do our kind of our robocalls, we call them, that we do the phone calls or as reminders. Mail-outs, personal phone calls, even to a point where we have different layers if we can't get through social media and all those platforms response we've even done some very limited amount of course using PPE and everything, going out and doing a home visit just to check in to see if there's a possibility that we can help. And my principal helped develop that, that web page on our site. And we've also put in a link if everybody if anyone needs a resource. She's built a model in Google Slides that someone can take and make a copy of and then use that right into your website. It's been a very, we've got a lot of compliments on it. It's been a very nice slide and easy to read and navigate through that to get those bullets in there. So, you know, in thinking about now we're even thinking about registration for next year. You know what we're going to do this summer? How we're going to do those things going forward? Graduation? A lot of those questions are coming up, and we're trying to answer those through that platform. Point everybody in that direction. And we developed our whole instructional program, we try to do a fun spin to it. We call it Camp Rock. Reaching Our Community and Kids. So on our webpage, we put a rock@Hawkinsst.org that parents can have that one, that one source to go to with questions. So that's been very helpful. Just, so just kind of, again, I guess we're a hybrid district. We're doing a little bit of everything to try to reach all platforms.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: That's wonderful. Andrew is there anything different in Boulder that's worth bringing out here.

ANDREW MOORE: Yeah, a couple things I'll mention we're doing a lot of the same communications, of course. From a technology perspective, we've started a service called IT Prime. And we're running two vans right now around the district swapping out broken Chromebooks. So, if a student has a broken Chromebook, there's a process for them to let us know. We'll go through a process over the phone with them, trying to get it re-established. If that doesn't work, then we're actually coming out and swapping devices real time. So, within 24 hours.

You know, we're taking a load off of a, let's just say the anxiety off parents when there's, when their children can't get connected.

And that also brings me to our service desk. We had to retool our service desk, which used to just take calls from teachers, from principles, from staff. And now we take calls from students, we take calls from parents. We'll help troubleshoot networking issues at home. We'll help them if they're struggling with getting a piece of software working. Until we pulled in our field techs, the ones that are typically at the schools, and we now put them on the phones, which had its own challenges, but for the most part, we've expanded that service just to be able to answer questions as quickly as possible.

MORRIS LYON: Douglas, a couple other things you know we we've called are.

You know, it may be a sibling or grandparent or whatever. So, we've called, we've called are people that are assisting our students learning coaches. So, we've tried to make sure that, again, we reached out to him, but we're sending out, you know, tips for our learning coaches about what are things to do. What are things, you know. You know, you don't have to, one of my neighbors talked about, you know, one thing that is important is you stress is that during the school day, we have brakes, and schedule changes, and recess. You know, we've got to make sure they understand that. Hey, you can take a break. If you get frustrated. Take a break.

You know, so I think they need tips. They need information. We're in week four, like I said, we're finishing up week four, fixing to start up week five. Our state agency has told us that, you know, if we're, if we're moving forward our expectation is we teach the standards. So, you know, we've got to make sure that we keep progress in our progress reports going out. We are doing grades our grading policies are on that side. I mentioned earlier, but, you know, we are trying to do grace. We're trying to give grace to our parents because we understand they're working long hours. But just making sure. And given that reassurance and let us know that we're all there. And, but we do have to set expectations and we still have to know that we are going back to school, and we are having school. So, I think that's the thing to stress. You know, but you've got to give some some tips, and some help, and some training to your parents, because it is very stressful. And give some tips about how they can go through this process and make it easier for everyone. I mean, get your kids up, have them take a shower, start the day, get dressed for school. I mean, that's a big start right there. I mean,

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Absolutely. We are we are running a little late. Hopefully folks and stay on for just a few more minutes. Wonderful. David, is there a. Is there a little question you could ask now?

DAVID YANOSKI: Yeah, I actually want to take it in a slightly different direction. We've had a number of questions about support for teachers and providing professional development for teachers to make them more comfortable in this online environment. So, wondered if you could address that question?

ANDREW MOORE: Yeah, we started a daily check in. So, we had professional development and tech type individuals that were basically available have a set period of time every day. And at its start there were lots of teachers calling into that and then it quickly dropped off. And so, we're no longer doing that on a daily basis. I think the kind of organic network start to form. Where the teachers start to know the other teachers that have really got this down and they start to reach out one on one. And so we're fortunate that we've got a good supportive staff, where we rely on each other.

MORRIS LYON: We're doing, our principles are doing staff meetings via zoom. We're even going again going back to those good qual ITY systems we're even doing PLC through zoom. And talking about as we do our instructional rounds and we think we see things maybe then our principles are working and having our PLCs. And we're talking about going through our questions about, you know, in that realm of professional learning communities about what that means and and how this looks. And just trying to apply those same things to this virtual environment and trying to make sure that we're providing good instruction to our students in this platform. So again. And then again, emails support letting them know that we care about them, and we're here for them if they have things. And just checking in regularly with our teachers to ensure that-- because their stressed too. I mean, we've, we've had even power outages here lately. So that layered on top of everything else. So, you know, making sure our people are are emotional, supported emotionally and making sure that we know we care about them. I think it's very important during this time.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Right, so one last question. We thought we would end on a positive note by asking what you see as an opportunity that comes with this and I encourage

The audience to put their own silver lining hats on and type in the chat box. What you see is an opportunity coming out of this. And I will… Andrew, I'll ask you first. What do you see is an important opportunity that will come from this?

ANDREW MOORE: Yeah, I think we're reestablishing what normal is. I think, historically, there's been a lot of push-back in K-12 with remote learning. And now, this begs the question. As we all start to get more comfortable with it, could this be a more effective mechanism for some students. It could be because of medical needs. It could be because of emotional needs. It could be just because some students are remote and they have things they need to do. And could they plug into their class using some of these technologies.

I think the other thing is from a staff perspective, we're all learning how to communicate. I think more effectively using these video tools and we're getting comfortable with them.

And I think a lot of times it's more efficient in the conversations and the meetings that at least we're having. So, I think new norms are going to be established as we come out of this pandemic.

And some of these learnings I'm thinking will probably become part of our culture. The joke this morning was, 'will there ever be a snow day again.'

MORRIS LYON: I think that's so true. I think schools are definitely going to be transformed as we go forward. You know when I'm looking at some of the things in the chat. And I think we have to become more intentional about reaching out, and communicating, and listening at a deeper level.

Because we're not face to face. So that's requiring us to – relationships being built and Andrew said earlier, getting their resources together and their, their groups that they rely on. I think that's been huge. One of my colleagues, I was talking to the other day. We were talking about, you know, when we started this movement. And now that is like 20 years ago, about going into the 21st century learning, a lot of, especially in small schools, some people did better jobs and others, but we put technology in the classroom and said okay you know we're 21st century learning. We got computers in the classroom now. We did. And many of us didn't do a good job of training. And I had someone tell me their day. This is the best professional development we can ever have. Because our teachers are immersed in the learning and, they're immersed in using these technologies and things that we've not ever really taken the time to do before.

I had one teacher and I walked down the hall. I mean, I'm there. We do have some teachers come in because we're rural, and they can separate, and they could get in their classroom, they may not have internet at home. But so I walked by, I heard someone the other day and I looked in to the window and a teacher was in there just teaching his heart out recording has lesson and I spoke to him briefly and he said, "you know, this is in a small school. We have so many kids doing so many different things. We can just continue our lesson." I mean, this is we can proceed with the lesson those students that are out. We can have that recorded and our teachers are seeing that they're seeing the benefits of these things that are happening to, during this time about how they can apply it when they come back.

So, I think it's just really a we have to look at that silver lining. We have to look at the hope we have to look at how we can reach our students better. And like you said the flexibility, I saw in here and in chat that in high school how it affects having different, a flexible schedule.

Like I said earlier, staff meetings. We can do staff meetings. Now in a small school where somebody has duty and things like that. It could be recorded. They can get the message. I think there's just a lot of efficiencies that are going to be able to be used as we go back, and I'm excited about the future. I think it's going to be great.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: Well, I think both of you for finding the positives that are coming out of this very challenging time huge thanks to Morris and Andrew for joining us today.

MORRIS LYONS: You're welcome.

DOUGLAS GAGNON: And I have just a few things to share with everyone else on the line. This is a place to go for more COVID-19 related resources that are put out by the part of education and the rail network. This should be posted in the chat. It will also be included in the materials that are sent out afterwards. And you'll also have to. You don't have to, we're asking you to complete a survey, it should pop up when you exit the webinar. And so your comments and feedback here will inform future events. And we always love to get feedback from folks but it's particularly important. Now, given how quickly the landscape is changing and the new needs are emerging on a pretty constant basis. So that's it.

Thank you so much for everyone for joining us. Be well. Bye. Thank you.