

Ep. 31 Continuity of Learning

FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

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Hello and welcome to the What's Up, APS podcast I'm your host Frank Bellavia a school community relations. All of us. Yes. Hope you're well and staying safe during this time that we're in. We definitely miss our students. We miss the laughter we miss the quiet the assemblies the field trips morning meetings lunchtime everything that's in between. And we hope you're enjoying this time with your children. But we also know that this can be a stressful time. So on this episode we are taking an in-depth look at our continuity of learning plan that was released on April 9th.

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We go the distance learning excuse me cannot replace our amazing classroom teachers, but our commitment is to engage students in learning activities that reinforce mastery of topics for the current school year. So joining me on this episode is interim Superintendent Cintia Johnson assistant superintendent of teaching and learning Bridget loft. Our new Chief Diversity Inclusion and Equity Officer Arron Gregory. And later on we'll be joined by first grade teacher Sydney Mann at Charles R. Drew Elementary School and Wakefield math teacher.

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Laurell Wiersma. We have a lot to cover. But before we dive into that I want to ask you to talk about her hopes for this learning plan. I listened to you. Thanks for taking some time to join us today.

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My pleasure and thank you for the time. Mean we absolutely do miss our students. So I want to again start by saying to our students and to our overall community and staff that I hope everyone continues to remain safe and healthy during these life changing times that we're all experiencing. So my hope at this time for my students staff and families is really that we are thinking about the academic and emotional needs of our students through our continuous learning plan.

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I do want to acknowledge feedback that we have received the school board is receiving feedback and staff is receiving feedback as well and share that we're going to reflect and make adjustments as needed. But we're going to move forward with implementing this new plan to ensure that we are meeting the needs of our students academically and emotionally as well.

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This plan does in fact align with our eight-year strategic plan to focus on the priorities we had for the 2019 20 school year. And if you'll recall that focus was around the academics as well as the relationship which is the social emotional component. So the well-being of our students has always been an integral part of our work. And important to the overall success of our students. Additionally, it reflects our core values and our effort in our plan is to try to ensure that we're keeping that in mind as well and that equity component becomes a critical piece.

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So while all the delivery must be different because of the pandemic we still want to maintain our focus and our plan helps us to do that. I do want to acknowledge the collaborative effort that went into doing this work and that is in the development of the plan and this included teachers department staff. And we did have an opportunity you also to get feedback from other stakeholders prior to that plan being finalized. I do also want to share just that at the state level I am involved as all superintendents across the state in meetings that occur twice a week and during those meetings we do in fact discuss all components associated with the pandemic Covid-19.

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So we continue to work and develop plans in response to entities ever changing needs that require us to think about student learning as well as other components. So I believe that the plan takes into consideration what we had brought to our attention.

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So there is an alignment there and I want to share that we are committed to working hard to ensure that our plan is in fact responsive to the diverse needs of our students and we are committed to reflecting on the feedback that we receive as we move forward.

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Thank you Cintia and I appreciate your leadership on this and during this challenging time we're facing. So I want to bring in Bridget loft our assistant superintendent of teaching and learning. Many of you know that she was also the principal of Swanson Middle School as well as Yorktown High School where she just came over from in January. So jumping right into the fire Bridget. So can you talk a little bit about how the learning plan was developed. Sure

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Sure. Thanks so much for this opportunity Frank. I really appreciate the chance to be able to speak to our continuous learning plans and to share with you they were developed. We started with her department of teaching and learning instructional supervisors and specialists worked with some teachers and some administrators in the development of the plan and really reference to guidance from the video about the introduction of new content and took a look at are the standards of learning that drive all of our curriculums as we present and think about instruction.

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So we really carefully considered the material that would be presented for the best interests of all of our students and I want to echo Cintia's as discussion about our commitment to equity and excellence. Once we had as sort of develop the plan we shared that the plans or drafts thereof with stakeholders that included parents and staff administrators we had our related services our student services staff the psychologists and counselors and social workers.

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We had a student participate on the secondary stakeholder feedback group and then representatives from various advisory committees said we really tried to capture the span of constituents to get feedback and once we had gotten that feedback we included it in the plans before we shared them with staff and students.

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You mentioned that the guidance that VDOE you provided. Can you talk a little bit about some of the guidance in that they sent to school divisions and how that does play into our fit into our our plan.

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So video we along with Arlington have really specific concerns about broadening existing opportunity gaps. So when we think about accessibility to the Internet to canvas to also family structures and different family needs there's a wide range of abilities of our students to be able to access new content and VDOE we really cautioned in school systems to consider how we might move forward in presenting new content.

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So we took that to heart.

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Given our commitment to equity and we opted to move forward in giving kids the opportunity to really solidify and master key learning concepts that they were presented in first and second and third quarter in some respects and this may seem sort of strange this closing of schools has given us the time to slow down a bit. Often the pace of school is such that we don't always have the opportunity to allow kids to truly focus on and master key learning.

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So that's been our focus. I think there's been perhaps some confusion about the new learning activities and so this opportunity also allows us to present these concepts in new ways to allow kids to practice application and analysis to extend their learning so that they truly have a strong foundation moving into the next school year.

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I can talk a bit though about how we're going to address these fourth quarter concepts that we've chosen to put a hold on if that's okay.

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Yeah I was going to be my follow up question on how schools and how DTL was going to make sure that students do to get those fourth quarter concepts so elementary students and secondary students who are enrolled in sequential classes.

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So I use as an example Spanish 1 and Spanish 2 are sequential to one another as an example will have the opportunity to be introduced to and to really work on essential key concepts from the fourth quarter in September of this upcoming school year. This will give also all of our teachers and students a chance to really sort of benchmark their learning and to ensure that they've been able to sort of chew on these key concepts and really develop some proficiency.

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And then in October through June we will be compacting the curriculum to focus on the essential standards that are presented normally through the year in a more compact way.

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One of the questions in clarification questions that we've been getting from families is of course surrounding introducing new content as part of the plan. You talk a little bit more about that. Are we introducing new content or new learning activities? How are we clarifying that for families?

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I think it's really important to differentiate the production of new content with the use of new learning activities. Teachers use new learning activities all the time. It's best practice to present a concept in a variety of ways because no two kids learn the same way. And so for example we may have students write about the New Deal. We may have them pretend they're Franklin Roosevelt talking about the New Deal.

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We may have them compare political policies between the New Deal and some conservative perspective of the times. So those are three examples three new learning activities about the same concept. So just as we have opted not to introduce this new content from the fourth quarter what we absolutely are committed to is ensuring that our students have opportunities to demonstrate that they've mastered the content that was presented in the first second and third quarter.

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And we do that through multiple modalities and that has to happen through new learning activities. We need to keep this fresh for our kids so that they are actively engaged in learning. I'd say as an aside to Frank that when we think about new learning activities for our pre-K to second graders who have the unique situation in that they were not assigned devices before schools were closed we were using a shared model so they didn't have their own devices.

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We engage in our pre-K through second grade students with using reading instruction via AETV. That's one modality with using printed copies of learning activity. That's another modality and that is supported by that interpersonal relationship and connection with teachers as they check in regularly with these kids to deliver direct instruction.

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So I think the key takeaway here is learning doesn't happen once we have to present it over and over again in different ways so that we can be ensured that our children are accessing it and demonstrating proficiency with the concepts like the old adage where the PR world where you often mentioned something a number of times before it actually sinks stating the consumer's mind and they may remember that when we're talking when you're talking about new activities teachers across grade levels have the ability to introduce new ways of teaching their kids to different ideas.

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Are they allowed to supplement new content.

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So no content sort of stands alone. So I'm a former history major so forgive me teacher for it. So forgive me for using another history example. But you know the civil rights example era did not emerge fully formed from nothing. There was an entirely legit inflation and socioeconomic factors and cultural factors that led to that. So by introducing or reinforcing concepts we're going to have to make reference to the

connections that exist between that concept and other concepts and that has to be reinforced in a variety of ways.

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You mentioned how reinforcing concepts learned up until we closed schools this year. How did how does this plan enforce some of those concepts.

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So I'd certainly be interested in and hearing Laurel and Sidney sort of talk from the trenches about how they do that so I'll give the 30 thousand foot view and perhaps they can speak more specifically to the work that they're doing.

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So the standards of learning that are provided by VDOE we help guide. The AP s curriculum and the work that we do and so our teachers work with their content colleagues or their grade level colleagues.

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We call in groups that we call collaborative learning teams and this is a structure that has been in place for some time and APS and they work together to identify those really essential standards of learning for their particular content area or their grade level. And those are the that the power standards if you will that we focus this new learning activities on and that we build extension activities. So

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So I'll use as an example for her English. One of the power standards might be focusing on point of view and so the collaborative learning teams will develop learning activities to help kids really interact with point of view try a variety of different perspectives.

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There might be several different performance tasks that they engage in that speak to multiple learning styles and then teachers will assess where are you having to figure out have you have you mastered this. Do you need some additional help those students who need additional help. Then there are additional sort of

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activities that they can continue to engage in. So we call that spiraling we're always circling backwards to ensure that kids are accessing these concepts.

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As you mentioned we are joined by two teachers. Sydney Mann is a first grade teacher at Charles Drew Elementary School. She has taught for three years with Arlington public schools as a kindergarten and first grade teacher and she previously worked as an interventionist with grade levels K through 5 in both math and reading and also joining us is a math teacher. Laurell Wiersma Wakefield High School. She's been there since 1997 and has taught almost every high school math course from general math for all students to AP Calculus and she is currently the AP statistics and AP Computer Science Principles teacher and the math department chair at Wakefield.

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I want to thank you both for taking time out of your day to join us and talk a little bit about like Bridget mentioned how you guys are doing this with your students.

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Sure. I meet with my team my sales team as Bridget last mentioned earlier the collaborative learning team every week and we share things that we're doing in creative ways to make sure that our students are getting the this information and this this learning in different ways. So one of the things that I've been doing a lot of is I've been encouraging my students to use the many resources that we do have for online learning like dream box and reading you to see.

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And then I'm I'm monitoring their work and coming back and communicating with them through seesaw to make sure that they are getting things accurately and following up with other creative activities or found activities that way. And I use a lot of the scheduling and information that my team put together before school was closed to make sure that we are circling back to things that were covered and referring to lessons back then to make sure that I am extending a permanent learning as best I can for him.

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And to piggyback on what Sidney talked about in my case I spend a good bit of time working with math CLTS.

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We spend a lot of time reviewing work to make sure it's clear to make sure we're using language that's accessible to all of our students since we're not face to face with them and we can't clarify directions as easily. And then I'm spending a portion of the day monitoring their work on canvas and meeting with classes live to answer questions to explain topics or in the case of AP statistics to help teach many lessons to prepare them for the AP exam

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Before. Before we move on I want to bring in Arron Gregory.

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He is our Chief Diversity, inclusion and equity officer and in your entry plan you talked about meeting with the community during this time and going out and talking to various groups and of course this this shutdown has put a stop to all that. So this is kind of your first formal introduction to our to our community.

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So welcome aboard and welcome to the podcast and thanks for joining us. Can you talk real quick about the difference between online learning and district learning.

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I know that we both terms are thrown out there almost interchangeably but there is a difference between the two.

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Thanks Frank for the introduction. I appreciate it. Again this is my formal introduction to the public schools I want to thank you all for welcome me to the community. I feel a part of the community I'm very grateful to be here and I just want to say thank you.

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In terms of this learning and online learning there are some several differences. The key differences are probably broken into three different categories. There's a difference in interaction there's a difference in intention and there's also a difference in how we engage students through the differences of distance learning a little bit about the first one in terms of this learning in terms of location with online learning. Students can be together in the classroom with an instructor while working through their digital lessons and assessments.

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So within the classroom structure we have two teachers who will be able to engage our students through using an application such as Google Classroom but they're there face to face with students. So with this is learning student work our work are working primarily always online at home while the teacher assigns works and checks it digitally. So our Arlington process is really around distance learning. There's also a difference in interaction with online learning.

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Students will be involved in person and interaction between the students and the teachers on a regular basis. That's the online learning piece along with a teaching strategy. With this is learning it's not in-person interaction between teachers and students. However we'll likely rely on digital forms of communication such as messaging apps video calls discussion boards and your learning management tools. So that's the final difference with the intention. So online learning is designed to be used in combination with a variety of other in-person teaching methods.

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And this is learning is a method for delivering instruction solely online again not as a variation to a teaching style.

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Thanks Aaron for that clarification on the two concepts and what we're using and we're talking to you now.

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Elaborate a little more on how our look kindly of learning plan fits in with our strategic plan and ties into that.

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Sure. I think we part a little bit about from Bridgette in terms of art teaching with our alignment but just to to clarify with our with our strategies. We want to highlight our principals right. So SA principals that Cynthia mentioned our equity of access and opportunity to all students with our distance learning allow students each grade level to experience a new approach instruction that focuses on key skills for success in the digital learning world. And those things that we have already have embedded within our strategic

plan include global global competencies critical thinking creative thinking collaboration communication and citizenship into the curriculum.

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All those things and all those different features we're taking into consideration as we've developed are learning plans. Also we kept in mind Arlington's mission to ensure all students learn and thrive in a safe healthy and supportive learning environment. I know from my numerous conversations with our superintendent that her goal and always our goal is is keeping in my student well-being. That's a top priority. So that strategy during this pandemic for us is to deliver curriculum through innovative and relevant instruction that is adaptable to the diverse needs of our student population and above all else students need to be creative collaborative as well as critical thinkers.

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And I know that I'm one of the things that we talk about as is is equity across the board and how our students are able to access the content discussed. Let's talk a little bit about that.

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Sure I think it's been touched on a little bit already by Cintia. But it turns out this is learning. We always have to keep in mind that we object to this to keep the learning going and that's what our objective is during this pandemic. Some

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Some of the things we have to consider is that not all students have access and all schools may have a device possibly. But you have to also be able to have that connectivity with those devices.

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So we keep in mind what works what our schools needs are. And that's as a as it is a complete division not just a singular student. So we want to always think about what those students have what their needs may be with the package. We want to make sure that we consider our disabilities and what those needs my means are what make sure that we consider our English language learners and what their needs are as well as our dig at the students as well. So with that in mind first use an equity lens to decide how to go about our learning plans and as Bridgette mentioned before that we engage community stakeholders we engage teachers we engage principals and administrators we engage the community we add parent groups are part of that process of looking through that equity lens and then we always want to think about.

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So who with our plans or what we're really doing what we're doing moving forward and does our policies and procedures.

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What does that impact. What does that impact and how do we mitigate that impact.

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So all those we're taking into consideration as we develop the learning plans for the public schools.

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Thanks Arron thanks for that explanation and how we include the equity lens into our into this learning plan. I

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I want to bring back Sidney and Laurell to talk a little bit about what their day looks like and how technology is incorporated into it into their day.

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I'll let you go first as the teacher of elementary teacher saw in an effort to keep my teaching and my students learning as normal as possible. I incorporated a morning meeting and a closing circle into my day I in order to make it a little more accessible to them and their schedules at home. I recorded video on seesaw and I post them both around those same times of day that we would have been hosting those meetings at school.

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I also posed to read aloud every day

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because that was one of those fun things that the students got to do together during normal school times. Outside of that for academics though I spend the day checking in on those other resources I mentioned before I like Dropbox and razkids. Students who are doing paper work post pictures of it on seesaw. I give them feedback recording comments or leaving comments and emojis.

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They love the emojis and just letting them know how great they're doing or giving them advice. I've created some flip grids for the students to contribute to it so they can see each other's faces. And I also do like conferences through Microsoft teams with kids individually throughout the week. They read me a little book. I encourage them or give them a little feedback and then I also use the time after that to visited with their parents check in on how their parents are doing.

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And then I also give their parents a little bit of a lesson because at the elementary level at least the K pre-K second first hour level the parents are doing a lot of this work as well and really monitoring. So I was joking with the parent this morning in a conference about how I feel like I'm t I'm teaching them what I learned in college to be a teacher in that in that short period of time and just giving them advice to really encourage their children to keep working and give them that thing time those things that are hard for teachers to really get the hang of as well.

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At first when they're teaching and I'm just trying to keep an open line of communication with both students and parents I also host a weekly class meeting where the students get to come together and see each other and talk to each other and share what they've been doing. And then I had daily office hours for parents to reach out to me and share with each other what's been working for them and what they might need help with. And then I offer advice and it could be advice as simple as how to set up their own schooling or their home learning area to best mimic the environment of a school.

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Things are a little different on the high school but also very similar.

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The biggest difference of course is the shift in time posting lessons at the regular time with 819 is not working for a lot of high school students right now. So my morning is usually spent revealing what students have completed emailing students who may be less engaged emailing parents talking with my CLTs and mid-day early afternoon is when I'm offering office hours or opportunities for students to engage in live conversations about content.

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So there is a chance for them through Microsoft teams to see each other. I recently had a student who was trying to get in contact with one of his classmates and so we tried to use the office hours to get both of them to join in so they could talk to each other and then those midday live sessions and office hours. I really do spend the afternoon in the evening monitoring e-mail answering people's concerns. I have high schoolers who are baby sitting and working during the day. So the only time they can contact B is in the evening.

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So my email monitoring stretches later into the into the night than it did before when we were in school. This

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This is Bridgette and I just wanted to share an observation and listening to Sydney and Laurell. In addition just sort of the academic intellectual supports. I'm really struck by the work that they're doing to promote their students social emotional health. Both of them have themes of connectivity and differentiating based on what the students accessibility or ability is both of them talked about given feedback and focusing on the positive.

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They talked about the promotion of community and being available for parents and I think you know as we've always emphasized we've got sort of this dual rail where we have promoted exemplary educational excellence while at the same time promoting our students social emotional health. And I'm just very grateful to both of them that they are managing both so well.

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Yeah and you really touched on the next question I was going to ask and that is is about social emotional support and what that looks like. I think both Laurel and Sidney are showing good examples of how they're checking in and making sure that the social emotional well-being of their students is also taken into considering consideration during this time.

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What other supports are there for that Bridget pre-K to twelve our counsellors have been actively engaged in creating videos that are available for our students using some some of those counselling topics that are particularly germane to some of the distance learning experiences so sort of self-regulation managements of time dealing with emotions that are perfectly normal.

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When when your world is sort of you know rent asunder and so and counselors are also checking in regularly with their students and with parents are psychologists and our social workers often provide additional services to students via their IEP D and have continued that work and our social workers have been actively engaged with families who may be facing food scarcity or other issues as the economy really has taken a downturn.

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So our Student Services staff has really been on point two to reach kids and families where they are and provide that support.

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You don't mind I'd like to add onto that a little bit about some specific examples that I heard or that there has been an assistant principal who's called every single student with disabilities family in their classroom. You know in their school and ability you know another example I heard is that during spring break a principal has a call in and check in with all of his students and all of them got on line with them at one time just to check in during spring break. That to me shows a true commitment to equity and making sure that our student well-being is at the forefront of our thought process right now because that is in line with what they're doing every day educationally.

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That is education.

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All right. Thanks for sharing that Aaron. Bridget I want to. I want to switch gears a little bit go back to some of the instruction from the Department of teaching learning prepared packets for grades kindergarten through second to address English language arts and math standards. Talk a little bit about these packets and why we went with the packets route for those grades source before schools closed.

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We had a shared device model with our pre-K through second grade which means that they were not individually assigned a device they use the devices pretty minimally actually during their instruction and maybe Sydney can speak a little bit more to that

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shared model was really based on our understanding of neural development brain development of our young students and the impact that too much screen time can have. And it's also based on best instructional practices. So when schools closed on the 13th hour pre-K through second grade students did not have devices assigned to them. And so we really had to think about what the next steps would be. I personally and our early childhood staff felt uncomfortable thought it would be inappropriate to put devices in the hands of these children and their families who had not been habituated to using the devices didn't wouldn't have access to direct technical support that might be necessary.

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And so we opted to use instructional packets as one medium for delivering learning these packets are were pushed through a parent view. We'll have April packets and then we'll also have a separate learning packets for May. We've also had them available at the feeding sites for folks to pick up if they prefer to have a hard pack a hard copy and the packets really have some dynamic learning opportunities for kids.

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I know at Sydney have talked about our teachers are in the habits and now of reaching out to families at least a couple of times a week to provide some direct instruction for the activities included in the packets. And as I said well we will have reading lessons that really mirror the experience that the kid would have had in when school was in session. Those will be available via a TV shortly so the combined sort of modalities of paper.

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Some of that online support or support direct instruction by teachers and then video are the way that we thought we'd move forward.

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Great thanks for that explanation. Especially the part about putting the devices in the hands of students who may not have had time to use those. I know where I want to respect everybody's time.

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You've taken out of the day especially our teachers that have joined us and I know that one thing I just wanted to add is that the check in that you guys do it at a different grade levels have really been extremely beneficial for my kids. We love seeing our teacher through teams or or or whatever chats they're using and to see the faces of their classmates that they haven't been able to see for a few weeks now so it really really helps them out during the day and they love doing that.

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Like I said I do want to appreciate your time. So a couple more real quick questions before we wrap it up and Bridget I wanted to ask you where families can go for additional resources and to get some of their additional questions answered so I would absolutely suggest they start with their teacher.

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The teacher is sort of the font of knowledge and can speak directly to students needs because they know their kids if they have some additional questions. Their principal is absolutely a terrific resource so nothing has changed in that sort of guidance. We also have a wealth of resources on our continuity of learning web page on the AP s Web site. Certainly folks can go there and that includes access to a Frequently Asked Questions document that's pretty robust thanks to the feedback that we've received from folks so I would suggest that folks are still feeling like they don't have an answer to their questions they take a look at that FAA Q document because likely that they'll find an answer there.

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Thank you. And before we go I do I do want to bring sincere back in just too. Is there anything else that you want to add before before we wrap up this episode of the podcast that you want families to know and families to hear.

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Yes I appreciate all the comments that were shared and I really want to extend my appreciation to the staff members the teachers that have joined us today but also all the teachers in Arlington that are working really hard to meet this changing situation. I was struck as Bridget had pointed out by some of the information that was shared by the teachers and I think it serves as a model for what we want to be able to

see in terms of student learning and in an effort to meet the academic social and emotional needs of our students during this period of time.

00:37:42:26 - 00:38:20:08

And one of the things that I shared in my letter today that I just want to acknowledge there is no substitute for face to face time. We are all missing our students and we're missing all of the things that occur as was referenced today by having those face to face opportunities. But we're working hard to really do our best. So I want to again reiterate the importance of allowing time to implement the plan. If you do have questions or concerns pertaining to your student as Bridgette has alluded the first point of contact is actually the teacher would want to continue to try to maintain some of the practices that were in place prior to the corona virus.

00:38:20:10 - 00:39:00:02

So I want to mention that the work that people are doing is of tremendous value. The feedback is also invaluable so continue to provide that and we will again reflect on that feedback and continue to work towards ensuring that our students are in fact accessing learning in a very equitable fashion. We do want our students to continue to learn. We do want them to continue to receive the emotional support that they need. Their world has been rocked and we need to be able to ensure that we're supporting our students collect and we are in it together and we will get a better outcome by working together.

00:39:00:04 - 00:39:10:05

So I want to continue to encourage us to do that. APS is committed to all of our students and I thank you for the opportunity to share today.

00:39:10:07 - 00:39:45:22

Thank you for those words and sharing that with us and again for additional resources. Families can visit our Web sites specifically the continuity of learning page that Bridget mentioned there's an ethic you there. You can also continue to submit questions or engage@apsva.us email address. Again thank you for joining us at this episode of what's up apes podcast. And I hope that we were able to answer your questions about this continuity of learning plan. I want to thank Sydney Bridget Arron Laurell and Cintia for taking time out of their day to be on this podcast with us and answer your questions.

00:39:46:00 - 00:39:59:00

As everyone said we're all navigating this challenge a challenging time together and we want you to know that we are here for you. Please stay safe and healthy and we hope to see you soon. Thanks for listening to this episode of The what's up podcast. Have a great day.