

Restructuring how schools work in the age of coronavirus



Randolph County Schools Superintendent Stephen Gainey walks the empty halls of Providence Grove High School after checking in on a technology pickup March 24, when Chromebooks were distributed to students via drive thru service. [PAUL CHURCH / THE COURIER-TRIBUNE]

A look back at how RCSS transformed its school model in the face of a quickly evolving landscape, and what the future hope is

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before Governor Roy Cooper declared that all schools across the state would be closing for two weeks, Randolph County School System (RCSS) staff were hard at work, devising a plan that would keep their students in school amid the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak.

Staff met at 8 a.m. on

Friday, March 13, determined to minimize risks to students, staff and parents, but also to find a way to keep children learning in classrooms.

Days before, on Tuesday, March 10, RCSS called off all out-of-state field trips. Before then, they'd sent a message to parents with safety tips.

Plans to go into effect at 11:59 p.m. on Friday included calling off any remaining trips, discontinuing attendance incentives, cancelling athletics at all schools and putting signs outside of schools to limit traffic. The signs would direct anyone

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visiting with symptoms of sickness to call instead of entering the school.

RCSS staff also decided they would cancel all assemblies and guest speakers, and limit, if not eliminate, lunch visits by parents. The plans they laid out that Friday morning were set to be in place until the end of April.

“What we were trying to do was to slow this thing down,” RCSS Superintendent Dr. Stephen Gainey said. “We have a crisis building in our community, in our state, in our nation.”

Even having to put the restrictions into place that they planned that morning was disappointing for Gainey.

“One of the best features of our school system is the support

we get from our parents and our communities,” Gainey said, so telling everyone they would have to stay away was “uncomfortable.”

“But I thought maybe that was our best chance of surviving this and keeping school going.”

Those plans they put into place at midnight on Friday were shattered when, at 4 p.m. the next day, Cooper announced that schools would be shutting down for two weeks, effective Monday.

“We’ve gone from phasing it in to all of a sudden, boom, we’ve stopped school.”

Taking care of the students

RCSS, suddenly faced with an unprecedented situation, was tasked with quickly restructuring all of the plans they had just organized.

There were two major concerns that needed

to be addressed immediately: How was RCSS going to provide meals to the students who relied on having breakfast and lunch at school each day? And how could RCSS continue educating while all of the students were at home?

“We had to get after it big time because our job is taking care of children,” Gainey said. “We’re charged with taking care of their safety when they’re with us. We’re charged with taking care of their learning and helping them have bright futures.”

On Monday, March 16, Gainey said staff worked tirelessly to develop a new plan of action. The group that had been working towards keeping students in school was suddenly trying to figure out what school would look like without any students in the classrooms.

“I really believe that the real leadership in

people comes out when situations like this occur. We see it every day in classrooms, we see it every day with principals and our central services people, but, wow, you surely can’t miss it now,” he said.

By Tuesday, two important steps were taken by RCSS:

— A technology survey, which allowed RCSS to know exactly which students had access to digital devices at home, was sent to and completed by parents.

— Meals were served to children, ages 0-18, at four feeding sites set up at schools across the county.

Randleman, Ramseur, Trinity and Southmont Elementary Schools — the schools used as feeding sites — are used as feeding sites for students over summer breaks as well. Breakfast, served from 8:15-9 a.m.,

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and lunch, served from 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m., were passed out on Tuesday. Just three days after RCSS learned students would no longer be in their schools, they had found a way to keep them fed.

But what about the families that couldn't make it to one of the feeding sites? On Wednesday, March 18, RCSS entered into its next phase of making sure children continued to be fed each day.

In addition to the four feeding sites, RCSS began delivering meals to students.

"We put a phone message out on the 17th, saying starting tomorrow, we were delivering meals to 15 key bus stops," Gaine said.

At those 15 stops, yellow buses drop off lunches each day for any children in Randolph County, ages 0-18. They don't have to be RCSS students to receive a meal.

In an effort to reach more children, RCSS opened five more feeding sites on Monday, March 23, at Archdale, Franklinville, Liberty, Seagrove and Tabernacle Elementary Schools.

"We've also gone from 15 to 17 bus stop where we're delivering meals," Gaine said.

As of Tuesday, March 24, more than 12,000 meals had been supplied to children across Randolph County.

Transitioning to at-home learning

Major steps have also been taken to keep students learning during the school closure.

Following the technology survey last Tuesday, on Thursday, March 19, there was a countywide academic material distribution event that lasted from 6:30 a.m.-7:30 p.m. at all RCSS schools.

"We had teachers prepare packets with three weeks' worth of work," Gaine said. "Every child had a packet."

Since then, RCSS has also taken steps to get Chromebooks to all of the students who indicated they did not have digital devices to use at home.

On Tuesday, March 24, technology distribution events took place at several high schools across the county. More will take place as RCSS works to get Chromebooks into the hands of all of the students who need them across Randolph County.

"Moving forward, once we get the Chromebooks out, we'll have some combination of online and hard copy printed materials," Gaine said. "We've continued to be a school system that didn't go completely online. That's going to help us through this."

The need for Chromebooks became even more apparent when, on Monday, March 23, Cooper announced that schools would remain closed until at least May 15, much longer than the initial two week closure.

Looking ahead

While Gaine admits there have been bumps in the road as they try to reinvent what school looks like for their students and staff, he's proud of how everyone has adapted.

"When you start looking at 31 schools without children in them, it's a pretty unusual feeling," he said. "It doesn't feel real good."

When students came to pick up instructional materials last week, Gaine said watching the children and teachers interact with smiling faces reinforced what he's always believed: That the relationship between kids and staff is unbelievably strong.

It's a relationship he doubts can be replicated anywhere other than the public school system arena.

He noted that it's been a stressful transition for students, but also for their parents.

"There's a lot of stress on parents, too, and we can't overlook that. They don't know what's next

anymore than we do," Gaine said. "We have relationships with our parents, too. We're going to miss the parents."

"This is a people business and we've taken two of those groups off of campuses overnight — the students and parents."

Until students are permitted back in schools, Gaine said that RCSS will continue to push forward, providing materials for students, whether it be digitally or in print form.

He's holding out hope that students will return to classrooms during the 2019-20 school year.

"My plan is that we're going to come back to school some time," he said. "Until someone tells me differently, I'm going to keep hoping that at some point, we can get back in school."

He said, at this point,

he'll continue to plan on attending graduation ceremonies on June 9.

Granted, Gaine knows there might be some decisions that he and RCSS can't control.