

A Comparison of Distance Learning in Indiana's Three Largest Public School Districts

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

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December 2020

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2022

Abstract

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic created an urgent need for schools to adapt and accommodate in order to continue providing instruction. For many, distance learning has been the solution. This paper examines how the three largest public-school districts in Indiana each implemented distance learning in their communities. Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS), Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation (EVSC), and Fort Wayne Community Schools (FWCS) each faced similar issues this school year but took different approaches. Through news stories and pre-COVID-19 research, a story is told of how distance learning and/or blended learning is going in practice. The categories of findings from each district include staffing concerns, technology support options, supporting learners who need special services, and creating equitable learning for students at school and at home. After conducting a thorough analysis of distance learning in each of these school districts, I find some extremely valuable new ideas in the time of distance learning. I find that FWCS has created an effective method of technology support by providing one-on-one meeting days, EVSC has provided special learners with online adapted instruction, and IPS has created learning pods to ensure distance learners can be supported regardless of the support they receive at home. I also find that FWCS quickly learned that the hybrid model is ineffective for elementary students, IPS has been largely unwilling to accommodate for their online special learners who need additional support, and that staffing can be an unfortunate consequence of distance learning. These results show that there is no one solution to effectively implementing distance learning requiring flexibility and support to be key.

Acknowledgments

In my life there has always been one person who has pushed me and supported me even when I felt like I couldn't do anything right. This has always been my mom. Without even realizing it, she has inspired me to be not only a teacher, but a life-long learner. I also would not be writing this without the constant love and support from the rest of my family. They have each played a significant role in shaping who I have become. Through this writing process Sarah Moher and Melanie Gradeless, my wonderful roommates, have listened to me change my thesis approximately four times without ever complaining and have turned on my favorite tv shows when I have gotten overwhelmed. Without them, I truly would be a mess this year. I would also like to thank my advisor Dr. Bartlett for putting up with my countless emails. I never would have thought I could have been capable of completing this before my senior year, but here you are reading this, so I guess it worked out. There are far more people I should thank than I can think of presently, but if you are reading this then you should know I appreciate you and value you in my life.

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Process Analysis Statement

I took HONR 189 during the spring semester of 2020 with Dr. Bartlett. The capstone assignment for that course is a research paper on a topic of inequality that you are interested in. I wrote my essay on inequalities in preschool education. At the time, I was heavily considering transferring my knowledge from this paper and advancing it into a thesis eventually. When I met with Dr. Bartlett during his office hours to talk about that idea, he suggested the HONR 499 class. I had seen the announcements in the weekly honors newsletter about the class version of this course, but I just dismissed them because they are meant to be for seniors.

I am the type of person who thrives on deadlines, structure, and support. Knowing this, the idea of writing my thesis virtually alone while doing my student teaching sounded terrifying. I do not think it would have been beneficial for me to have written my thesis during my student teaching. For education majors, I definitely would recommend taking the class version of HONR 499. I do not want to generalize about the people in my major, but we are likely to benefit from teacher instruction because that's likely what landed us in the teachers college ourselves. In addition to this, student teaching is a full-time job. It is not recommended to take courses at the same time as student teaching, so to me, thesis writing should not be any different.

Initially, I thought I wanted to conduct research and have this thesis center around general inequalities in education. This idea attracted me because I hoped to broaden my knowledge of inequalities to inform my future instruction. My original idea was way too broad of a concept to dig into. I also started to hear rumors in the education community that teachers were not being allowed by their administrators to speak out about what is happening in their schools. Knowing this, I figured it was best to shift my methods and narrow my search. I selected the three largest school districts in Indiana because due to their similar size and student

population demographics. I wanted to investigate school districts in Indiana because I plan to remain and teach in the state after graduation.

While writing this thesis, I did face some challenges keeping up with the latest information from each district. It often felt like after each draft I submitted to Dr. Bartlett, there was a significant event that needed to be added to my thesis. Another challenge I faced was the absence of long-term data on the effectiveness of distance learning. Instead, I used current news articles to tell the story of this semester. I learned from my research and experience writing this thesis that the dedication of the teachers and school community members, who have sought to make this school year as beneficial for their students as possible, should not be overlooked. Along with this, I learned that parents have become a part of their child's learning in ways that they never were before. I have learned that distance learning has its challenges, but with what I have learned from my research for this thesis, it is not going away any time soon. I have learned that distance learning is an effective way to keep students learning, and I now feel more prepared to implement it in my future classroom if need be.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn increased attention to some of the underlying inequalities in our society. In education, the pandemic has deepened technological inequalities. Across the country, school districts have sought out ways to adapt to the unique requirements the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought while still making learning fair and equitable for students. In many cases this has meant remote learning. Teachers have had to rethink every lesson, craft, and icebreaker that have become traditions over the years. Kindergarteners, who may have never stepped foot in a classroom before, have met some of the classmates via video chat that they will walk across the stage with at graduation. Even though distance learning is necessary as our society seeks to reduce the spread of the virus, there are some known drawbacks of distance learning, such as losing the aspects of unstructured peer interaction and interaction between students and teachers. Despite this, there has been a paradigm shift unlike anything education has seen before, leading to unprecedented advances in technology access and distance learning.

This paper examines the realities of distance learning as schools seek to implement the best practices in this relatively new form of instruction. To answer this question, I will consider what can be learned from Indiana's three largest districts as they have progressed through this school year with three different approaches. Drawing from numerous news articles with accounts from parents, students, and school staff, I find that distance learning can be an effective form of instruction if technological support, academic accommodations, and student and parental support are present. These findings raise new question about how students with disabilities are being supported during distance learning, and what school districts can do to make distance learning equitable as inequalities education could deepen.

Digital capability is the main issue relating to distance learning. Digital capability is defined as “the term we use to describe the skills and attitude that individuals and organisations need if they are to thrive in today’s world” (Jisc, n.d.). The issue goes beyond simply having access to a device due to technological limitations and online literacy. Among the issues shaping distance learning are: “physical access to home computers/internet; having the opportunity, time, suitable home space and other factors to realistically use home computers; having the required skills to use home computers; and finally acquiring a positive attitude towards technology use” (Talaee & Noroozi, 2019). There are “many households lacking enough screens and reliable internet connections, [and] parents also say they are overwhelmed, often juggling working from home and making sure children keep up on school assignments sent via email and various messaging platforms” (Stub, 2020). A study out of Australia has found that even if there is technology at home, there is “still an association between neighbourhood and how the young people in this study used IT (Information Technology)” meaning there is still a digital divide in knowledge on how to use the devices (Harris, Straker, & Pollock, 2017). These studies were all conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. With these pre-pandemic distance learning concerns in mind, this paper will look at how the digital capability issue is being solved in the three largest public-school districts in Indiana. One important finding in solving digital capability came from Fort Wayne Community Schools. They hosted technology days where distance learners could receive one-on-one technology support for as long as they needed. The other two districts did not do anything like this.

Another aspect that is analyzed in this paper is supporting learners whose needs go beyond that of a traditional student. This includes students with disabilities and English Language Learners. This has been a point of contention with distance learning, as many parents

in FWCS and IPS do not feel that their students legally binding IEPs are being fulfilled. I have found that these districts have stated that in order for these students to get special education services, they must return to the in-person classroom. EVSC has taken a different approach, as they have specific language in their 2020-2021 district learning plan outlining the importance of continuing services for these students regardless of their learning selection for the school year.

There is also a general analysis of how the plans put in place by IPS, FWCS, and EVSC, are functioning in practice. It is significant that each of these districts selected different routes this school considering they are similar size and demographics. At the beginning of the school year, IPS selected a phased in approach with students starting the year distance learning and ending it in-person. FWCS's approach included half-attendance hybrid instruction for the secondary level, and full-attendance hybrid instruction for elementary students. EVSC has a virtual academy for online or students could attend at full capacity in-person. EVSC has remained fairly steady on their learning plan all semester, but IPS and FWCS have had to make significant adaptations along the way. FWCS had to discontinue hybrid teaching in the elementary classroom, which led to mid-semester teacher and classroom switches. IPS had to adapt their phases, and the district ended the school being fully online.

The research and investigation to determine what can be learned from the choices of these districts, found there were significant issues with making learning equitable for students in-person and online, providing technology access and support, and supporting students whose learning needs go beyond the traditional learner. I found that there were widespread issues with distance learning and students who require special education and English learner services. A late in the semester issue that ended up being extremely significant was adequate access to the staffing that is essential to keep schools open. The findings can best be represented by two

words: instability and flexibility. Constant changes throughout the school year led to instability, but these changes, that required flexibility among families and staff, led to tremendous progress in distance learning.

This paper focuses on three school districts, instead of education as a whole in the United States because there has yet to be widespread data collection on what is going on. Even the United States Education Secretary Betsy DeVos stated, “I’m not sure there’s a role at the department to collect and compile that research” (2020). DeVos is a billionaire who has no real experience in schools or education in school administration. She “is a staunch proponent of privatizing the public school system, replacing our public schools with charter schools, as her wealthy family managed to do with great success in Michigan, [a state that] has been flooded with low-performing charter schools [with] very little oversight” (Richardson, 2020). DeVos has been one of the biggest supporters of fully reopening schools, despite the safety risk it poses. The federal government has given little to no guidance on how schools should be handling this school year. The responsibility also has not fallen on the individual states. Ultimately, school districts have had to make their own decisions based on recommendations from the CDC and their state’s Department of Health (DOH). There has been divergence in how this issue is being handled due to recommendations from each DOH. Certain school districts have decided to stay online for the whole first semester of this school year and then reassess the situation come second semester. Others have a plan with phases to eventually bring students back into the classroom. Other school districts have allowed parents to select in-person or online learning for their child or children. Another model being used is a hybrid schedule where half of the students switch off and on attendance days, meaning students alternate days in different groups. There are also school districts choosing a blend of all of these paths depending on the grade. Since there are so

many ways of handling pandemic schooling all across the United States, it seems most appropriate to look specifically at the state of Indiana and its three largest school districts.

Somehow distance learning has become politicized. People like Betsy DeVos, who have been against distance learning, aren't really against it because it is ineffective. DeVos and her supporters have "used the pandemic as reason to promote school choice, including charter schools" (Mays, 2020). By turning people against their local public school systems that have chosen distance learning as its method of instruction this year, people have looked at other options. DeVos has pushed the concept of school choice consistently during her time as Secretary of Education. DeVos and her supporters push the rhetoric that school choice is essential for students to escape their bad public schools. Research has indicated that "private schools, like charter schools, can actually hurt the academic progress of the students who choose them" (Kamenetz & Turner, 2017). School choice is also a deliberate effort by lawmakers to take funding away from public schools. When a child moves from a public school to a private or charter school, the money allocated for him/her transfers to the new school. In this process, already struggling schools see the necessary funding leave that could have been used to improve the school, and their distance learning practices, in first place.

Existing Research on Distance Learning

There is very little research into how distance learning is working currently due to how recent it is. No one knows when, or if, schools will be fully shut down again. Despite this, the idea of distance learning and its effectiveness is not a new concept. Back in January 2012, the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Educational Technology looked into how distance learning could realistically be implemented in a way that is equitable and beneficial for all students. The purpose of this study about online learning, over eight years ago, was how it

could impact productivity. The study found that “underserved, at-risk students and students with special needs deserve special attention... [and] there is emerging evidence that prevalent online learning models do not meet the needs of all students” (Office of Educational Technology, 2012). Even back then, it was widely known that this model could be harmful for students whose needs go beyond the needs of a traditional learner. Overall, this study found that online learning can be effective if necessary supports are given. Looking at this now, it is clear that online learning has been an absolutely essential part of continuing learning during this pandemic. This does not mean that it cannot be looked at from an investigative lens.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Zimmerman (2020) wrote about the importance of using this time of widespread distance learning to learn about how to do this effectively. Even though Zimmerman wrote this article from the perspective of someone studying higher education, the basic premises are still relevant for distance learning for K-12 (kindergarten through twelfth grade) students. In his article, Zimmerman highlights how important online learning can be, but there is far more to learn. Louisiana State University (LSU) began online learning in 1993, and Zimmerman explains that it was not immediately accepted as an effective form of teaching and learning. Writers for the LSU student newspaper, *The Daily Reveille*, wrote in that year that they believed ““a university is a place where the knowledge of one generation is passed on to the next, and this cannot be done by machine,'...'Information can be found in a computer, but only by the human touch is the knowledge of generations transmitted”” (Zimmerman, 2020). Even though this statement was made before some current teachers were even born, we don’t know much more about online learning than we did then. I believe this is because we simply didn’t have to. Now the United States is in a position where we need to know

what works and what doesn't. We need to know this as soon as possible, or else we will lose students academically in the process.

Unfortunately, there are some students who have been lost this school year. School districts across the United States have seen enrollment rates drop dramatically this school year. A 60 Minutes investigation found that out of the 78 largest school districts in the United States "at least 240,000 students were unaccounted for" at the beginning of the school year (Alfonsi, 2020). These statistics reflect the large amount of students who have been left behind and when they return to school, they will be significantly behind their peers. It is important to acknowledge there are likely to be students affected in this paper that are unaccounted for because "no one is keeping track of how many kids nationwide are not in school because of the pandemic" (Alfonsi, 2020).

This paper will add to the current body of research in education because there are very few studies that have been able to look at distance learning as extensively as I have here. Since matters in this area of research change on a daily basis, most articles have only focused on a few aspects of distance learning across the entire United States. By doing this, other writers have given notice to many widespread issues that have arisen since March 2020, but they have not looked at specific areas in the United States. In addition to this, most of what we have learned about distance learning has come from news reports and countless quotes from parents and school officials that relate to specific events. For example, when IPS experienced a widespread outage, all the news articles focused on that specific event. This event was not put into the context of IPS's methods of distance learning and the dependency on technology that it relates to. By combing through each article, a story emerges that illustrates how all members of the

school community have been impacted. This tells far more than any test score on a standardized test ever could.

The Method

To answer this question of investigating how distance learning is going in practice, I conducted an in-depth investigation of how Indiana's top three school districts have sought to make learning this year fair and equitable, but each district has taken a different route to do this. In the state of Indiana, the top three biggest school districts are Fort Wayne Community Schools, Indianapolis Public Schools, and Evansville Vanderburg School Corporation (Niche, 2020). Each district has taken their own unique routes that they have felt kept their students safe and learning in the midst of the pandemic. Since they are all located within the state of Indiana, they have all been subject to the guidelines put forth by the state of Indiana. Each of these three school districts interpreted this document differently, and they have all chosen different methods of instruction this school year.

Since my research question for this thesis relates to what can be learned from the distance learning experiences and outcomes from the three largest school districts in Indiana, and what these districts have done similarly and differently, it is important to know the student populations they serve. It is also important to analyze what method have chosen to educate their students amidst the pandemic. By having an understanding of the paths they have chosen, I will be able to look for news articles and other journalistic pieces that detail how these methods of instruction are going now that they have been put into practice. I am able to analyze in depth what has been working and what has not as key takeaways that explain this time in education. The analysis will look how the factors from the Talae & Noroozi (2019) article, physical access to technology, parental involvement, home environment, skill capability to use technology, and family and

student attitudes towards distance learning, are playing a role in these school systems. The analysis will be context specific to the three districts in this paper and the purpose will be to determine how distance learning can be accomplished most effectively.

Background

Fort Wayne Community Schools (FWCS) is the first largest school district in the state of Indiana. For the 2019-2020 school year, they served 29,486 students total in their 48 schools. According to the Indiana Department of Education, 63.2% of their students are economically disadvantaged, 10.8% are English learners, and 16.1% of students have a disability (Indiana Department of Education, 2019). Their racially diverse student population reflects the demographics of the areas of Fort Wayne that they serve. This school year the district is following the “Return to Learn” COVID-19 plan put in place by their first-year superintendent and approved by the school board. Families with students in Kindergarten through grade 12 had the option to send their child to school in-person or have them stay home and learn remotely. Middle school and high school students attend classes according to a hybrid schedule. Group A attends classes at school on Mondays and Thursdays, and group B goes to school on Tuesdays and Fridays. In the month of September, Wednesdays were converted into teacher training days. For the remainder of the semester, the secondary students were instructed to attend school on a two-hour delay schedule.

The district chose to have the hybrid model be put in place for middle and high school but not elementary. The decision was based upon, in part, because “middle and high school students are able to be more independent and learn remotely” and “elementary students are not able to stay home by themselves on days they are not in school” (Fort Wayne Community Schools, 2020). This plan did change on November 23, 2020 as high school switched to fully

online learning. Elementary students in FWCS either attend fully in-person Monday through Friday or fully online. This change did not last long. In the afternoon on November 23, 2020, FWCS announced that all of its students would “begin learning at home due to a shortage of transportation department staff” (Crandall, 2020). This sudden change was effective immediately. Even though this only truly impacted three days of school with Thanksgiving Break, it definitely shows how important staffing is in these times. For high school students, online learning has been extended up until January 2021. Luckily, the district ramped up their technology access this year and has provided hotspots and low-cost internet options to low-income families.

The second largest school district in Indiana is Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS). This district had 25,611 students for the 2019-2020 school year. Its racial demographics are very similar to that of FWCS. Of its entire student population, 17.1% have a disability, 66.0% are economically disadvantaged, and 21.9% are English learners (Indiana Department of Education, 2019). After delaying their start date by two weeks, IPS students started the school year with “100% remote learning for all” (Indianapolis Public Schools, 2020). Starting October 5, IPS students began to return to in-person learning through a multi-phased plan. The option to remain a distance learner will remain throughout the semester. In the first phase, IPS students in pre-K to third grade began going to school Monday through Friday in-person. The rest of IPS students remained at home full-time learning remotely through video chats and online learning modules. In the next phase, grades 4 through 6 began going to school in-person on October, while grades 7-12 (and some in grade 6) followed a hybrid schedule like FWCS has opted to do. Starting on November 23, the district moved all of their students over to 100% distance learning. This transition took place just one day before FWCS. IPS parents from all of the district’s 59 schools

have had the option to have their child do distance learning no matter the phase the district was in (Indianapolis Public Schools, 2020).

The third of Indiana's three largest districts is Evansville Vanderburg School Corporation (EVSC). The total enrollment for this is definitely comparable to the other two districts discussed in this paper at 22,822 students, but the racial demographics include a far higher population of white students. Of the 22,822 students in the 2019-2020 school year, 56.5% were economically disadvantaged, 3.2% were English Learners, which is far lower than FWCS and IPS, and 16.5% were students with disabilities. This district has 38 schools in all (Indiana Department of Education, 2019) which is lower than the amount of schools in the other two districts. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this school district chose a unique route that not very many Indiana school districts did. Parents had the option to send their students of any grade in-person to school with proper PPE, personal protection equipment, or attend the district's virtual academy. While the "Virtual Academy has been in place for ten years, providing online education taught and led by EVSC teachers," the enrollment has been significantly higher than it has been in the past (Witry, 2020).

These school districts have been chosen for this comparison because they all serve over 20,000 students and are all located in largely urban areas. They also represent the three largest cities in the state of Indiana. The comparisons made in this paper are an important to make because each of these districts picked a different method of distance learning or in-person learning this school year. Given a very similar amount of students to serve and the same guidelines from the state, they each picked a different route. The districts have each been successful in their own ways, and also unsuccessful.

Findings and Analysis

Throughout this school year, there has been widespread news reporting on how the reopening, or lack thereof, of schools is going. People of all walks of life have read news articles in each of these cities, and likely, have all taken something different away from them. It is easy to just look at the school district that affects you directly, but the following comparisons are important because they tell a more well-rounded story of what has been a success or a failure. Without these journalists and news stations to tell these stories, many of us would have little to no knowledge of what this school year has been like thus far. Through organizing and collecting these numerous articles, I learned that the bulk of these articles focus on how the school district's plans are going in practice, how districts are working to eliminate technology concerns, and how different learning needs are being accommodated. By going through each of these categories, we will learn what the most and least important takeaways have been from this school year thus far.

In-person vs. Online Instruction in Practice

Each of these three school districts tell a story of how instruction has been going online or in-person this year. Out of these districts, most of them were able to stick to the plans they had for the year, but they have had to make adjustments, switch some things around, and adapt certain aspects. Despite these alterations, more changes are likely on their way. It is possible another school shutdown could be quickly approaching “as medical experts warn that the outbreak is worsening across the country and could lead to a devastating winter” (Feuer, 2020). If, and most likely when, schools shut down in the near future, many schools will have to shift their in-person students online, but others who have remained online will not have to deal with that. In this section, we will look at current occurrences with input from superintendents, parents,

and students. It will paint a picture of what adjustments have been necessary and how this year's changes are impacting the most important factor of this situation, the students.

IPS has chosen a phased plan to bring its students back in the classroom. What we have learned thus far is a glimpse into how the online component has been handled with students of diverse socioeconomic statuses. While the two other school districts mentioned in this have an awareness of technology access concerns, IPS has faced some unique circumstances and has come up with some unique methods regarding homelessness, low-socioeconomic status, and special education.

No one from IPS expected this school year to start without issues, but the online portion has exceeded expectations. According to Herron (2020), this semester's distance learning "is already a vast improvement from the spring" when IPS schools shut down unexpectedly in March. As of August 27, 2020, the district was still "working through and... tracking down a 'substantial number' of students who had not shown up to digital school 9 days into the year" (Herron, 2020). Although 9 days may not seem significant in the scheme of the school year which lasts 180 days, absenteeism can have a profound effect on student achievement. The Center for School and Student Progress has found that "students who are chronically absent not only have significantly lower achievement levels, but they are more likely to show behavioral issues throughout their school years, drop out of high school, and be unemployed after high school" (Jensen & King, 2019). Despite previous issues and concerns regarding online instruction from events of the previous school year, the method was still employed.

With the gradual phasing in of students explained in the background portion of this paper, the district has had to think through new issues to keep students safe. In order to make learning more equitable during this time, "the IPS dress code has been revised to eliminate barriers for

students attending school while providing families more cost-effective options for student attire” (Indianapolis Public Schools, 2020). Parents from this district were still concerned about the transition from fully online learning to in-person learning. This shows parental engagement in this process, and their support of the online learning their students were receiving. School leaders from the district held a Zoom meeting with parents to quell concerns before the start of the in-person learning phases. Many families “asked what the district is doing to make sure the experience is the same for virtual and in-person students” (Johnson, 2020). The district responded by this concern that the online students would zoom into the classroom and watch exactly what is going on in the in-person classroom. This choice differs from the path other districts have chosen with completely online or in-person classrooms. This does pose valid concern, as the parents in the Zoom meeting demonstrated, can a teacher effectively teach to both students present in-person and on Zoom at the same time? The other two districts looked at in this paper have faced the same issue and have some other solutions to this. The school district has stuck to this method thus far, but this is an additional burden to put on teachers who began teaching online for the first time back in March of 2020.

For teachers in FWCS, this school year brought their first experiences in online teaching as every family in FWCS was given the option to send their children in-person to school or keep them at home and have them do distance learning. FWCS lacked a unified online learning plan back in March 2020. The hybrid plan adopted by the middle schools and high schools has evolved throughout the year. The Wednesdays in this plan have rotated between being full-in online, fully in-person, or, starting on October 7, a 2-hour-delay schedule. For the elementary grades, there have been several significant changes to the classroom throughout this semester. Some students had to switch teachers mid-way through the semester because the district found

the blended model of virtual and traditional learning in one classroom to be ineffective. Both “parents and teachers [in FWCS] indicated that teaching the students together was too difficult for young students” (Salay, 2020). This “move[d] 125 teachers to fully remote positions and divide[d] up the around 4,000 remote learning elementary school students by grade” (Salay, 2020). Some online students were placed with classmates and teachers that were not from their neighborhood school. Also, some in-person students switched teachers and classrooms due to this change.

The frequent changes in FWCS have not been quite as prevalent in EVSC. In-person instruction has gone fairly smoothly thus far for EVSC other than teacher and other employee concerns regarding COVID-19 transparency. There have been very few changes this semester for this district. In a recent district board meeting, there was a heated debate and teachers where they explained that they “feel out of the loop when it comes to COVID-19 in schools” (Miller, 2020). After this meeting, the Indiana State Department of Health set up a COVID-19 dashboard to report cases in schools. This dashboard, which came out about a week after the board meeting, reported that “76 of its people tested positive for COVID, which includes 61 students, nine teachers, and six staff members” (Gorman, 2020). At this time, cases within EVSC made up about 12% of overall cases in Vanderburgh County, where EVSC is located (Gorman, 2020). EVSC parent Timothy Shepard was alarmed by these numbers because he thought the numbers were under twenty (Gorman, 2020).

EVSC, like IPS and FWCS, is also facing staffing problems because of these numbers. One EVSC school board member, Terry Gamblin, is worried that “teachers within the EVSC will look to an early retirement, or even resign, because of the demands of juggling a teaching job and the coronavirus pandemic” (Johnson, 2020). Demands for substitutes in this district are in

high demand, as this is key to keeping learning in-person. According to the president of the Evansville Teachers Association “when there are not enough substitute teachers, staff from other areas of the building, or even from other locations in the corporation can be pulled into that classroom to help,” thus increasing their exposure to this deadly virus (Johnson, 2020). This is a real concern as the teaching profession may lose some very valuable staff members.

There have also been serious concerns from the families of students who have been learning at home since the start of the school year. Students have faced challenges with EVSC’s virtual academy. Even though this program is not new this year, this year has presented new challenges. This school year “more than 1,700 students are enrolled in the EVSC Virtual Academy, a program that normally has between 75-100 students each year...[which is] an increase of at least 1,600% or as much as 2,167%” (Hopkins, 2020). Approximately 29 teachers have been added to the corporation this school year to reflect the increase in the Virtual Academy. Families in the district have expressed concerns with the way distance learning began at the beginning of the year. For the platforms required by the district for the students to use, Edgenuity for elementary and Apex for high school, there are log-in codes required to access the content. Unfortunately, many families in EVSC “didn't have a password for the first few weeks of the year to log onto Edgenuity” (Seibert, 2020). This caused confusion amongst families because they became familiar with Google Classroom as a replacement for Edgenuity. This confusion early on in the year and simply transitioning to online learning was a bit too overwhelming for some EVSC families. Other families complained that the Virtual Academy wasn’t academically rigorous enough for their children. As a result, over 300 families have left EVSC’s Virtual Academy since the start of the school year. Most of these families have transferred their children into fully in-person learning. This deadline to transition was September

4th, but the district is still letting families switch their children over to in-person learning (Seibert, 2020).

Technology Concerns

Technology is such an important part of distance learning, but the issues and methods of each district in solving technology access and support has differed. In this section, we will look at how these districts have accommodated technology needs and how they have or have not provided technology support for families. In addition, solutions to access issues will be analyzed with consideration of how charities have sought to level the playing field.

Since IPS starting the year with distance learning, the district has experienced more technology concerns than the other two districts. This alternative method of instruction put new demands on parents that they have not had before. Parents have faced employment related issues because their children require prompting and assistance that teachers cannot provide through a screen. As the Talae and Noroozi (2019) article explained, parental attitudes toward technology and distance learning as a whole can play a large role in student success. When parents have to stay home with children and are unable to make necessary income, it can be inferred that positive attitudes towards distance learning decrease. One parent of a kindergartener and third-grader in IPS explained to Herron (2020) that “I thought I was going to be able to work remotely,” she said. “There’s no way. You can’t work.” Even though most would think that today’s children are proficient enough in technology to navigate it on their own, this parent’s “tech-savvy kindergartener still needs a lot of assistance” (Herron, 2020).

After many successful weeks with connectivity, the district experienced a massive outage on September 22, 2020. The district had to cancel school “after an internet outage affected the district's online services and prevented many of its [nearly] 30,000 students from logging on to

learning platforms” (Herron, 2020). This incident occurred on a Tuesday. School was already scheduled to be cancelled on the Wednesday of that week for parent-teacher conferences, so the district resumed instruction on Thursday the 24th. The district mentioned that some students were able to log on during the outage, but the rest of the students who were unable to would have been left behind in the learning process. This incident took place before any of the district’s students started the phased in-person learning process, so it was a day of learning lost for every student in the district. Although school districts lose connectivity from time to time, this outage was particularly significant because there was no backup plan that teachers could resort to. With in-person learning, teachers typically are able to figure out another plan and some form of learning can resume.

IPS is not the only district trying to handle the increased demand for technology than ever before. Because FWCS did not offer organized distance learning last school year, this August was a brand-new start for many students and teachers with online learning. To prepare for the increased demand for technology this school year, the district was able to use “additional federal funding the district received to help during the pandemic” to implement a 1:1 technology plan (Solis, 2020). A 1:1 technology plan means that for every single student, there is one technology device that they have access to use. This plan was originally intended to reach completion by Fall 2021, but this was moved up to match the increased need for technology this school year. When FWCS assessed the need for internet last spring they found that “about one third of FWCS families” needed hot spots (Clydesdale, 2020). As a result, about 9,000 FWCS families received MiFi units, which are portable internet hot spots, to help with accessibility issues.

FWCS has also created a unique way for students and parents who have chosen online learning to receive technology support. With many students receiving school-issued devices for

the first time, the district had to create a way for students to get technology support. The district has created 'Tech on Duty' days at schools around the district where students can "get one on one attention with one a member of the district's technology department" (Cadet, 2020). These technology department employees helped families with troubleshooting issues that can often be difficult to explain over an email or phone call. A key component to distance learning success is technology support. As Talee and Noroozi (2019) explained, simply having a technology device in students' hands and internet access capabilities are not enough to bridge the digital divide. One-on-one technology support can help facilitate technological literacy in students who have never been taught about technology and do not have access to people in their households who have technological knowledge.

EVSC has remained with the plan they set forth since the beginning of the school year which has kept students learning in-person or through the virtual academy. Despite a rise in COVID-19 cases throughout Indiana (Crandall, 2020), EVSC's Superintendent Dr. David Smith has firmly stated that the district is "not planning on going to e-learning anytime soon" (14 News Staff, 2020). If the district did have to go fully virtual, most families are already equipped with internet access due to a grant from the Toyota USA Foundation. This organization donated "\$400,000 to Gibson and Vanderburgh County Schools for devices and internet access to help more than 27,000 students with distance learning" (Neukam, 2020).

Another concern presented through the increased demand of online learning is the demands on the families that chose to keep their children at home. Both Edgenuity and Apex, which are used at EVSC, are asynchronous. This means parents have to "work with the children on a regular day-to-day basis" (Seibert, 2020). As discussed in the Talee and Noroozi article, a key factor in virtual learning success is parental support. This could lead to further inequity in

education that was already evident before. For example, an economically privileged family where there is a stay-at-home parent is more likely going to be able to sit all day with their child and help them with these programs than a parent working full-time remotely; therefore, children with working parents are at a disadvantage in comparison to their non-working parent counterparts.

Different Learning Needs

Distance learning can be particularly difficult for students who have above average learning needs. The services that these students are guaranteed under law “are not always easily transferable to distance learning, or even in-person learning with social distancing” (Mitchell, 2020). For English Language Learners (ELLs), difficulty arose with parents being unable to assist in ways for distance learning to be successful. In this section, we will look at how each of these three districts have sought to make distance equitable for students this year. There will be an explanation of how these students are being accommodated or if they are not.

The solution of IPS to solve accessibility issues is one that I believe should be a national model for supporting students whose home environment may not be a place where they can successfully learn. IPS has instituted learning pods across their district. The district has “redirected funds for in-person instruction to small-group sites for homeless students and those with special needs” (Kreighbaum, 2020). With help from The Mind Trust, an Indianapolis non-profit centered around supporting the city’s K-12 students, the district was able to support the most at-risk students in the district (The Mind Trust, 2020). Parents were not burdened with having to take their children to these sites because “transportation is provided to the hubs and meals are provided.” In addition to this, IPS also made sure the hubs were “staffed with a nurse, social worker and support staff who follow personal protection practices” (De La Rosa, 2020).

Much of the concern surrounding online education is that without proper support, students who are high-risk may fall between the cracks. This model seeks to catch these students before they even get close to the cracks by providing the support which include concerns regarding technology, health, and mental well-being.

With IPS's new phases of gradual re-introduction to in-person learning, the learning hubs have closed. The hubs closed on Friday, October 2, which the district justifies due to "MiFi mobile hotspot devices [have been] a short-term solution to address internet access for students" (Indianapolis Public Schools, 2020). The students from the hubs and at-home learners with educational needs have the option to remain virtual, but the district has said they do not recommend this. The district's Chief Academics Officer Warren Morgan stated in a Zoom meeting with IPS parents, "We are recommending, particularly for our special needs students, that in-person is the best way to make sure they're getting all the services in the IEP (Individualized Education Plan) so if you chose remote, there may need to be accommodations made that require coming into the building more just because that's what the IEP calls for" (Johnson, 2020). There was no mention if transportation would be provided for students with IEPs to receive services at school after choosing the online option. This raises the question of equity in special education services. There are many students who qualify for special education services, but have underlying health conditions, like asthma, that make them more susceptible to having a severe reaction the COVID-19 virus than their peers. Students with autism spectrum disorder may also have issues with wearing a mask inside a school due to sensory issues. From the point of view of an educator, this is a major concern that the district has made it clear that their students' IEPs will be unfulfilled if parents do not bring their child inside the school.

Just like IPS, FWCS has struggled to come up with ways to make learning online and in-person fair and equitable in the context of this pandemic. Parents in FWCS who have chosen the online option for their children who have special needs have complained that the district is not doing enough to support their individual needs. Two parents from FWCS who have both reached out to the local Fort Wayne news stations, have expressed concerns with the support their children on the Autism spectrum are receiving. FWCS mom Katie Dallape chose for her son, who is on the Autism spectrum, to do online learning because he is high risk for COVID-19. She is concerned that his school is not doing all they can to support him during this new way of learning. She would like “the school to give her son more individualized learning such as more special education teachers and additional therapy” (VanCleave, 2020). Another FWCS parent of a child on the Autism Spectrum shares the same concerns about online learning. One aspect of distance learning with FWCS that has been difficult for Melissa Close’s children is the teacher changes throughout the semester. Four weeks into the year, she was notified her children would be changing teachers. This change in routine was difficult for her child on the Autism Spectrum, and there was a breakdown in communication. After the child switched teachers, “the district failed to provide the new teacher with copies of her son’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) before the first day of class” (Robinson, 2020). It is important for teachers to be informed of IEPs so that students can get their legally required accommodations that help them be successful learners. This specific situation with Close’s son got the attention of “INSOURCE, which is an advocacy group for parents and children who have special needs [which] told [Close] to file a complaint with the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE)” (Robinson, 2020). It is unclear if this complaint was filed with the IDOE.

Based upon their plan for this school year, EVSC has been more determined than IPS and FWCS to keep all students learning this school year, even if they need extra services. In the EVSC Reopening & Continuous Learning Plan for 2020-2021, the district outlined specifically how they were going to support students whose needs go beyond the needs of a traditional in-person or online learner. When explaining how they will support special education students, the district made it clear that special education teachers would meet the IEPs and general needs of students no matter if they were online or in-person. The district has deemed that it is the job of the special education teachers to “ensure students have access to the curriculum and will support students and families with virtual or remote instruction” (EVSC Reopening & Continuous Learning Plan, 2020). The students in this district who need therapeutic services have access to a website to “allow students to work on their speech, occupational and physical therapy goals virtually” (Hopkins, 2020). For English Language Learners, the plan explained that the “structure and schedule of services may look different from what the school typically offers, especially if remote learning is being instituted” (EVSC Reopening & Continuous Learning Plan, 2020). It is clear that the district has closely considered how to best support its learners who have unique needs, but the long-term effectiveness of distance learning for students requiring special services is widely unknown.

What Works

Each of these school districts has provided helpful insight into how to make distance learning work in real school environments. Something not found from IPS and EVSC districts was technology support that extended further than a phone call or email. The in-person technology support for online learners by FWCS was a great way to get students on the right track before they could fall behind. As teachers, we cannot expect students to know everything

about technology. They need help and it is ultimately up to the school districts to provide this support. Many students, including English Language Learners (ELLs), may have more knowledge about technology than the adults in their home. Unless support is provided from the district, unassisted students struggle to excel academically when they are learning online.

EVSC's definitive answers in their academic learning plan about support for ELLs, special education students, and students with other learning needs exceeded expectations, especially after seeing the plans put out by the other two districts. This specific district have made a clear commitment that they will provide services for students whose families have opted for the distance learning option at their school. Even though their virtual academy is online and asynchronous, it can be comforting for parents to know that regardless of their decision this school year, their child will still receive the help they need.

Even though one of the best ideas to come out of distance learning has been shut down, IPS's learning pods are a model for online learning that should not be overlooked. By partnering with local organizations, they were able to impact the most high-risk students when they needed it most. The pandemic has weighed heavy on all of us, but those who already faced hardships prior to this have faced even more. It is easy for education to decrease in priority when you don't know where your next meal is going to come from. IPS recognized this and did what they could to help these families. I could see a model similar to this being put into place in the future during summer vacation. These valuable learning pods did more than educate students during the pandemic; they gave students the confidence that their schools cared about them and wanted to help them.

What Has Not Worked

FWCS has determined that teaching in-person and online at the same time in the elementary grades simply does not work. This district adapted and attempted to fix the problem. Even though this led to students switching teachers and a large amount of frustration, this was the right change to make. FWCS is not alone in thinking initially that teaching both of these simultaneously would be successful. According to Ali (2020), “while most K-12 schools have chosen to go either online or in person at one time, the double duty model is among the most labor-intensive, according to education experts.” Stress was already present with distance learning and adding the layer of teaching in-person is too much to manage. When teachers are under this much stress, it is important that school districts’ administrators and school board members recognize how the decisions made in their return to learning plans are really impacting the classrooms.

It was shocking to discover, while researching IPS, that they have made it clear that they are unable or unwilling to accommodate students with special needs who are learning from home. Many families from FWCS share the same concerns for their children. These students’ IEPs are legally binding contracts that the districts have to follow no matter what extenuating circumstances may arise. As previously explained, many special education students are high-risk for COVID-19, and therefore would be endangering their lives to come into the schools. IPS must work to accommodate these students because it will not only hurt the students themselves, but also the district in the future. If these students already qualify for special education, they are likely to be somewhat behind academically prior to the schools being shut down in March 2020. When these students inevitably return to school, they will be even further behind, which will reflect poorly on the district.

Staffing has been the tipping point for many school districts to have to close and switch to distance learning. As teachers have contracted this virus or have been instructed to quarantine, the demand for substitute teachers has grown significantly. For many substitute teachers, it has been hard to justify taking on jobs when their health is at risk. Another concern for these substitutes is that “in many districts, substitutes don’t receive health insurance or paid sick days” (Will, 2020). Often overlooked, bus drivers and cafeteria workers are essential to keep a school running. Unfortunately with the nature of this pandemic, these workers have had to quarantine to ensure their safety after being inevitably being exposed to other people in the school who have COVID-19. Many of these workers are paid hourly, so when schools have to shut down, their wages disappear. This is an unfortunate downside of distance learning that can impact many members of the school community.

Significance and Conclusion

This school year has truly been filled with so many teachable moments. Above all, these three districts have shown the importance of flexibility. This flexibility has been among students, parents, teachers, administrators, and any other school employees. Students have to look to their teachers as guidance during these uncertain times. There has not been a larger and dramatic shift in education than the current times. Future teachers are facing entering a field that may look completely different than when they attended school. This may seem like a scary realization, but it should be a comfort that, as these three school districts have shown, the ultimate goal of public education is to help kids. The plans put out by IPS, EVSC, and FWCS were created to help keep the students safe and to ensure the learning process is not impeded. There are districts that are better at this than others, but they ultimately want to help prepare children for the workforce they will eventually end up in. This workforce will be more technology centered than ever before, and

these children who have made it through online learning will be the most technology prepared generation in history.

Even though much of the decision making has fallen on the shoulders of individual school districts, the issue of handling of pandemic schooling has become largely a political issue. This is a grave mistake to make because keeping children and school communities safe is not a political issue. By doing this, it has seemed like, depending on the community's political affiliation, their COVID-19 responses have differed. This is certainly true in some situations, but these districts go against this idea. All of these districts are located in different parts of the state, and they have all handled the online learning component very similarly. When the students are at home and learning, they are doing it in similar ways. Teachers are working harder than ever before to make distance learning have a beneficial academic outcome. There is so much to learn from these districts, and teachers are ready and willing to do whatever it takes. It should be a comfort for people who are skeptical of distance learning to know that this is an ever-evolving process. Every single teacher in this nation plays a critical role in this process. Their valuable experiences and lessons during this time provide a road map for distance learning to journey on to the future.

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