

Portage Area SD uses pandemic to launch 1:1 Initiative

Last spring when Governor Wolf closed school buildings to slow the spread of COVID-19, the Portage Area School District immediately began working on a continuity of education plan to provide students with learning opportunities the final nine-weeks of the school year. According to superintendent Eric Zelanko, teachers began learning how to transition from the traditional classroom to an on-line environment within days of the building closure. "This was an entirely new experience for the teachers" he said. While the school district had access to Microsoft Teams through its Microsoft licensing agreement, it was not something the district had provided teacher training. With the district not providing students with technology devices, Zelanko didn't see how the district could effectively use the software in traditional classrooms.

During the pandemic closure, the district relied on students providing their own technology devices or older laptops the district received through donations from the State. According to Zelanko, technology director Ryan Clouse did his best to upgrade the donated computers for student use. Zelanko praised Clouse, Tech Ed teacher Dennis Link, and retired librarian Jay Shuck for working diligently to prepare the donated laptops for student use. "These men upgraded memory and hard drives at a minimal cost and then loaded the software in record time," he said. While far from being great computers, over 30 students without a device benefitted from their efforts.

Each morning, Zelanko met with the entire staff via Microsoft Teams to discuss how on-line training was working. Very quickly, he discovered technology issues were hindering some students from learning. Zelanko said some teachers spent as much time trying to solve technology issues for their students as they did teaching. Students and staff used a wide variety of devices to access the on-line materials; from desktop computers to smart phones, everyone used what they had available. With no consistency, it was difficult for students and teachers to be able to know how to help each other with technology issues. Each different device came with its own challenges.

When grant money was announced for school districts to cover the increased costs associated with COVID-19, Zelanko saw an opportunity to put devices in each of the students' hands. "This is something we've wanted to do for years, but, has been cost prohibitive," he said. Zelanko sees providing students with devices as a huge benefit for students in both the traditional classroom and at home in the event closes are closed again because of the virus.

With every student having a device, Zelanko expects teachers will use Microsoft Teams as part of their daily routine regardless of the circumstances. He said, "we learned this is an extremely powerful teaching/learning tool last spring. Teachers and students had an opportunity to experiment to what worked and what didn't."

Of the many unknowns for the reopening of school in August, Zelanko's one concern is the arrival of the devices. While the order was placed as soon as grant funding was approved, he worries if the devices will be here for the opening of the school year. Zelanko noted that all kinds of technology are difficult to purchase as a result of the pandemic. Web cameras and computers of any sort are difficult to find in stock. "We're crossing our fingers and toes the devices arrive in time," he said.

In the meantime, Zelanko indicated the school district is working to update their acceptable use policies for the new 1:1 initiative. From Internet filtering at home to do's and don'ts in the classroom, students and parents should expect a new policy before receiving a device.