"A Change Is Gonna Come:"
How K-12 Principals Supported Their Teachers
in the COVID Transition and Return to In-Person Instruction

Michael Schwanenberger, Mary Dereshiwsky, and Laura Sujo-Montes

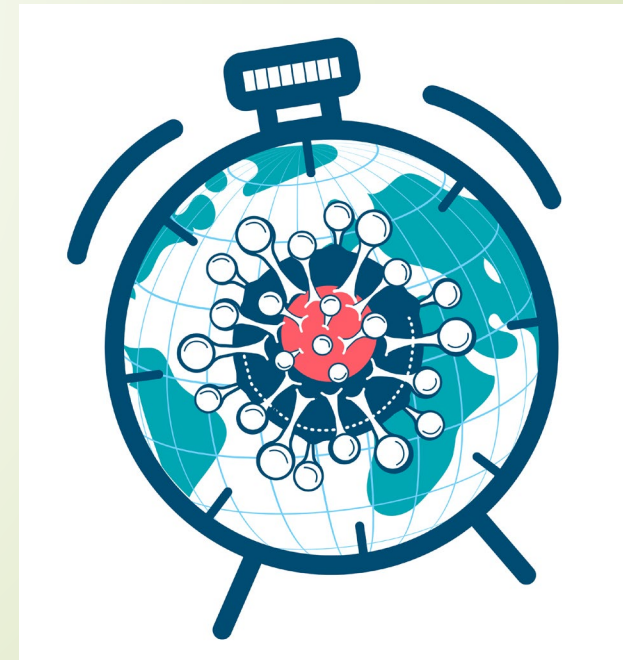Presented to the Teaching, Colleges, and Community 2022 Conference:

"Making Waves – Innovations in Learning
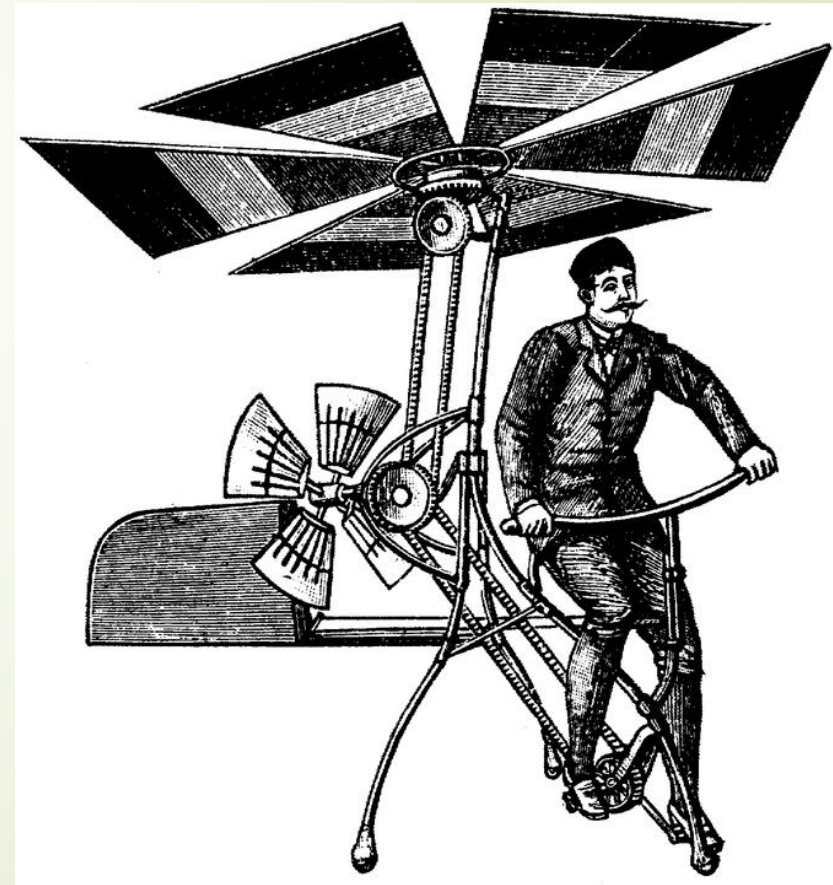
April 12-14, 2022

Goals of Our Study

- What were the challenges of the sudden transition to online learning during the pandemic?

- How did principals support teachers, students, and parents during this time?

- What got easier as the pandemic and online instruction continued?

- How did principals plan for the return to in-person instruction?

- What were the lessons learned, looking back?

--Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 8 K-12 principals and one assistant principal in Arizona public schools during January and February of 2022

Challenges with Sudden Switch
to the Online Classroom

- Like "trying to fly while building the airplane"

- "Trial by fire"

- Having to train teachers on technology at lightning speed

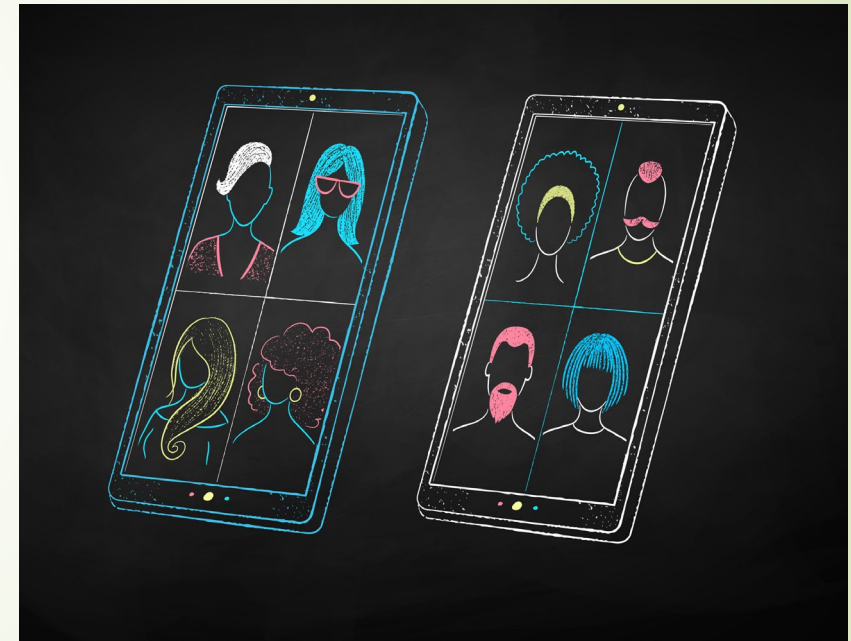- Concerns about Wi-Fi access for teachers and students

How Principals Prepared Teachers

- School district provided training

- Served as role models for technology use

- Sounding board for teacher frustrations

- Provided social workers for support

- Teachers worked collaboratively and helped each other

- "Teachers just moved right along with it"

How Principals Prepared Students

- Sent home "goody packets" of learning aids, worksheets, road maps for online learning

- Provided ChromeBooks for student use

- Provided staggered opening of school buildings so students could pick up books

- Provided hotspots for Wi-Fi access

- FaceTime sessions with students (especially primary grades) on how to use Zoom

- Students are "great at clicking around and exploring things on their own"

How Principals Prepared Parents

- Survey to determine readiness to use technology at home

- Arranged outreach from tech staff

- Screen shots to help with online learning at home

- Regular emails and calls to parents

- Text messages to parents

- Blogs for parents

- Asked teachers to do parent outreach

- Set up parents' "help desk"

- "Trying to maintain a sense of calm"

- Reinforced images of normal school day

- "I don't think anything could have prepared the parents"

Challenges for Teachers

- Student attendance
- Students not submitting assignments
- Students working on old technology
- Connectivity in rural areas
- Scheduling and planning lessons
- Disruptions of live sessions
- How to give feedback
- Meeting individual student needs
- Screen fatigue
- Learning the technology while online instruction was in progress

Challenges for Students

- Attendance

- Not wanting to be on camera

- Distractions

- Connectivity issues

- Too much seat time

- Social/emotional deprivation

- Skill building such as reading for primary grade students
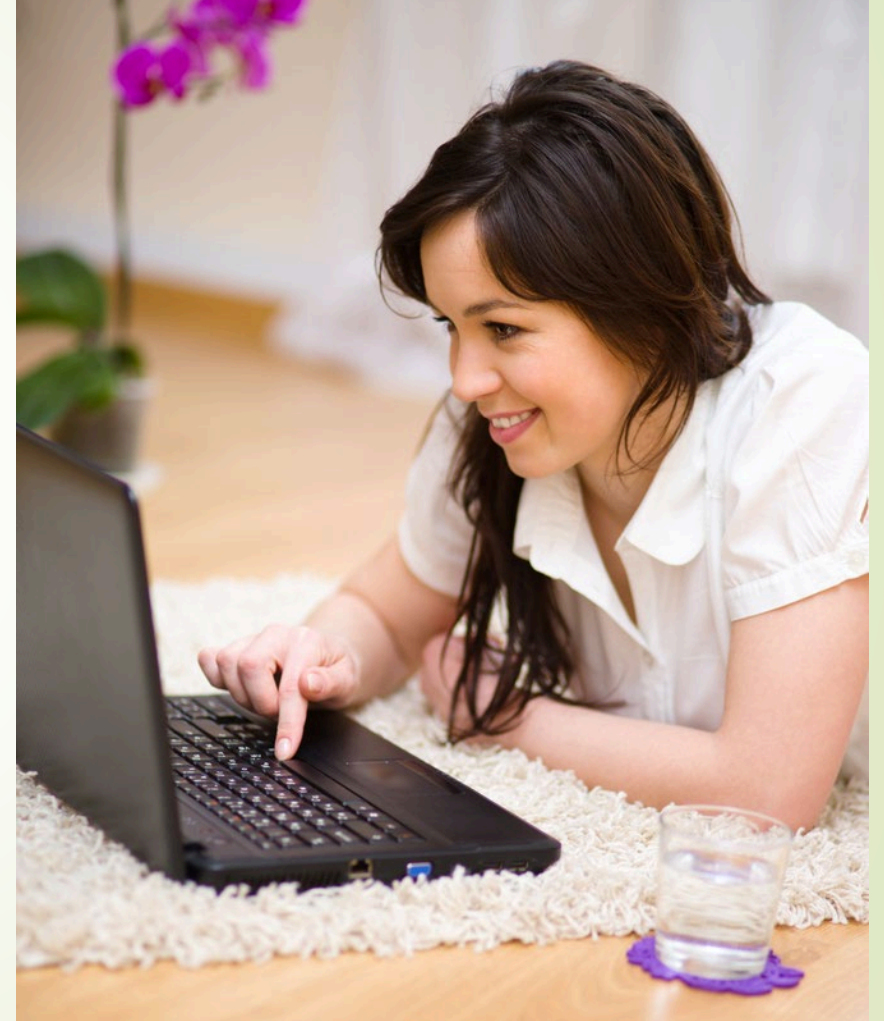
Challenges for Parents

- Child care; having to be at work

- Parents are not educators; now "having two jobs"

- Costs of continual connectivity to support online instruction

- Loss of social/emotional learning for their children

- "Frustrated with whole process"

- Didn't believe in the pandemic

What Got Better?

- Navigating the technology

- Adaptation to new routines

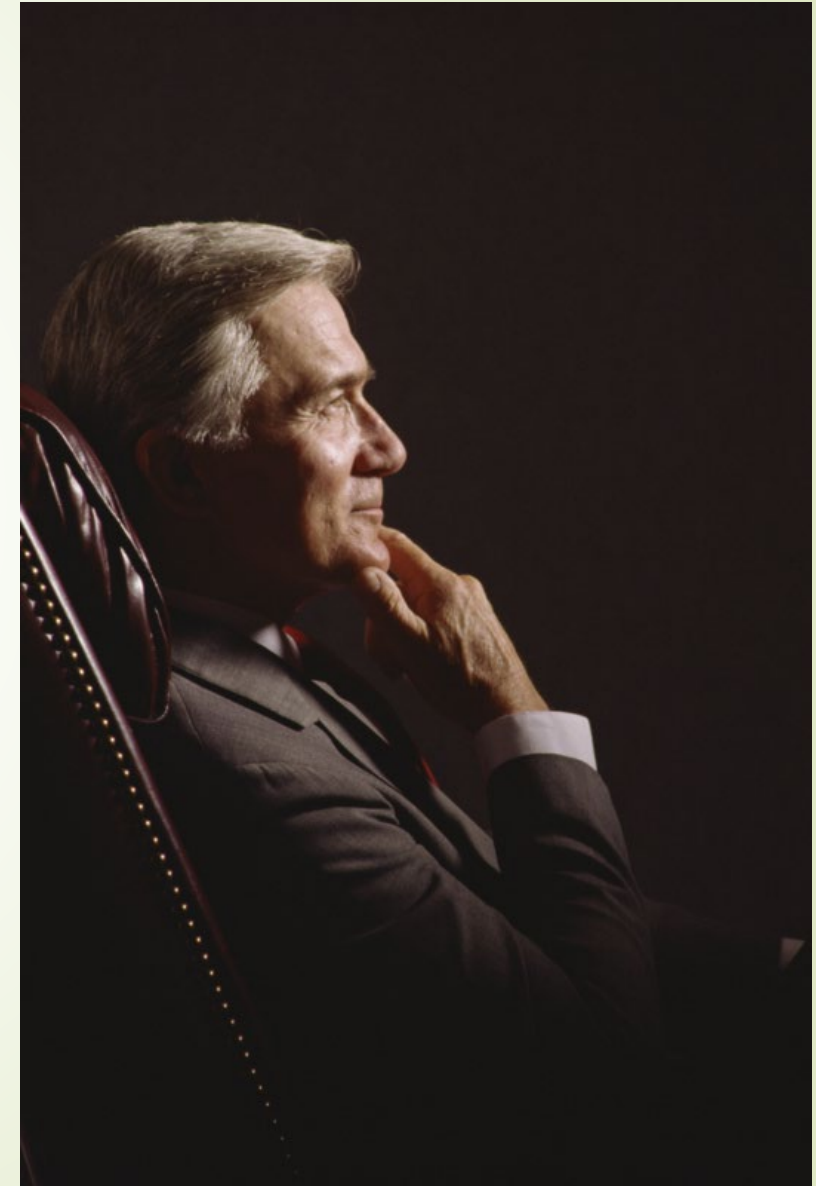- Teacher collaboration and support of peers

- Teacher perseverance

Return to In-Person Instruction

- Green dots on floor for 6 feet apart
- Stripes down hallway to walk in one direction
- Everyone facing forward in cafeteria
- New lunch schedule to prevent overcrowding
- Hand sanitizer at classroom doors
- Hand washing stations
- Extra masks on hand for students without one
- Revised and updated cleaning schedule for custodians
- Conducted teacher and parent forums to prepare for in-person learning return
- Incident command team to plan and supervise transition
- No shaking hands or sitting close to friends at lunch

Lessons Learned?

- Listen, listen, listen

- Repeat, repeat, repeat

- Help staff be flexible

- Need buy-in of staff

- "You won't have all the answers"

- "Crises will always be with us"

- Children are adaptable

- Concerns about social-emotional development of children

- Concerns about mental health of all key stakeholders

Our Takeaways…

- Caring trumps connectivity

- Teachers pull together

- Students adjust to change

- Social/emotional losses may linger

- Primary grade skills may lag behind

- "Follow the leader" as role models for change

In Closing...

- "A bend in the road is not the end of the road...
Unless you fail to make the turn."

  — Helen Keller