

# EMERGING ANEW AFTER COVID



## HOW ONE TOP PERFORMER IS REDEFINING EDUCATION WHILE REOPENING

By Robert Rothman



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The global coronavirus pandemic has disrupted education systems throughout the world. But for one district in a top-performing jurisdiction, at least, the crisis represents an opportunity to transform to even higher levels of performance.

The Surrey School District in British Columbia, Canada—the largest district in one of the top-performing provinces in a top-performing nation—abruptly closed all schools in March, as the pandemic swept through the nation. After two months of all-online instruction, the province called for partially reopening for a month in June, allowing students to return to class part-time on a voluntary basis.

But as the district planned for the 2020-21 school year, educators agreed that they would not go back to the way things were before the pandemic. They would create something new—something that builds on what they learned during the shutdown that supports learning and development for all students.

And, said the superintendent, Jordan Tinney, that is what parents want. “What is clear is that there is an appetite for something different, not just a return to your neighborhood school, not homeschooling, not distributed learning from some central authority, but something different,” he wrote in an [August 29 blog](#). “There is a loud ask to transform our system to provide something that allows people to be connected to their neighborhood (or current) school, that gives some flexibility of face-to-face time and time at home, and includes being supported by online tools and learning structures.”

“Most importantly,” he added, “that ask is coming from all sides, including those who would normally do well in our system.”

What will the new system look like? Significantly, Tinney is not mandating change from the top down. Rather, like leaders in many top-performing jurisdictions, Tinney and school principals are providing a guiding structure and giving teachers the autonomy and the time to develop and test their own solutions. Many ideas are emerging, from co-teaching to hybrid models that include both synchronous and asynchronous lessons. But whatever form they take, teachers are eager to take the lead and work together to improve instruction and learning for all students.

“In amongst all the tragedy, there may be an opportunity for transformation to something truly unique and powerful,” Tinney wrote. “I look forward to seeing what people create and what is possible.”

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## **‘An Entirely New World’**

In March, the province of British Columbia closed schools with limited exceptions because of the pandemic. At that time, schools were in Stage 4, which meant they were closed to in-person instruction, except for children of essential workers and students with disabilities and others who needed additional supports. Districts had to come up with a plan for online classes. Surrey, with 75,000 students, had two weeks to shift to all-online instruction. British Columbia had mandated that instruction begin again on March 30.

“When we closed, it was the middle of spring break,” Tinney said in an interview. “People left for spring break not knowing this would occur. They had no lesson plans done, no materials.”

The district provided guidance to schools and helped them develop plans to communicate with parents and to provide online instruction. Then teachers had to implement the plans. While many teachers had had experience with technology, for others, it was a difficult learning experience, Tinney said.

“For many teachers, it was easy,” he said. “But for many others, it was extremely hard. Like a lot of districts, we have a lot of lighthouses, innovations, and excellence. But we were all thrust [into this] at once. Holy cow. It’s an entirely new world.”

The district also arranged to provide 4,500 devices and internet access to students who needed them, and provided meals to low-income students. In some cases, parents could pick up meals at schools, but in others, the district arranged to drop the meals off at students’ homes. That proved to be beneficial, because it enabled educators to meet with parents to see how the online instruction was working for their students.

In June, the province shifted to Stage 3, which meant districts had to come up with a plan for partially reopening for the last month of the school year. Under Surrey’s plan, parents could volunteer to send their children to class in primary schools one day a week, and in secondary schools, two days a week. But the public did not have confidence in the plan, and very few students showed up. On some days, there were more adults than children in schools, and the students who did attend the classes tended to be from low-income families, where parents could not stay home from work.

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“People freaked right out,” Tinney said. “If you go months and months telling people ‘don’t go outside, shops are closed, you can’t get a haircut,’ and then say, ‘OK, but schools are open,’ that’s hard.”

### **‘Leading from Behind’**

In the summer the province announced plans to reopen schools in September for in-person instruction. Surrey surveyed parents for their reactions, and found that many parents were anxious about sending their children back to school. “Almost 50 percent said they wish there were another alternative to face-to-face,” Tinney said. “They certainly connect to school, but they are just nervous.”

So the district provided parents with two options: full-time in-person learning, or a “transition program,” which includes online learning every day and in-person learning one afternoon a week, gradually increasing to three afternoons a week for elementary students. Secondary students will have options for a blended model that combines face-to-face and online instruction.

As in March, the district provided guidelines to schools and left it up to them to determine how they would carry them out. Like other top-performing jurisdictions, British Columbia relies on teacher expertise, rather than top-down mandates.

“It’s leading from behind,” said David A’Bear, the former principal of Woodward Hill School.<sup>1</sup> “You identify who are the strongest members (of the staff) who could possibly lead, asking them to lead their design team, and them stepping up.”

“You’re developing leaders in your building,” he added. “Whether they’re interested in leadership or not, they’re definitely moving in that direction.”

### **New Models**

The models the Surrey teachers developed varied. At École Salish, a secondary school, teachers came up with a plan for co-teaching so that teachers could integrate the students who opted for in-person schooling and those who opted for online instruction into a single “classroom” with two instructors, according to the principal, Sheila Hammond. They did so by doing a test run of

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<sup>1</sup> Principals’ quotations are from “Covid—A Conversation with Principals: Challenges and Opportunities During Reopening,” a video produced by Surrey Schools and the Asia Society.

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the blended model: some teachers stayed home and some went to school (socially distanced), knowing that students would be doing both under the transition program. They realized, Hammond said, that “if you’ve got one group of students in front of you and one group at home, if you’re co-teaching, you can have one teacher monitoring what’s going on at home while the other is doing the instructing.”

Other teachers explored the idea of mixing asynchronous and synchronous instruction. With asynchronous instruction, teachers could record videos that students could watch on their own time; they can also rewind and replay them if there was something they did not understand. But the asynchronous classes could go both ways: students could submit work on their own time.

That approach enables schools to take advantage of the fact that students were working at different times of day and at different places during the pandemic shutdown, said Hammond. “One thing that’s come out is how students were working in the evenings and that recognizes that learning can happen at any time and any place,” she said. “How are we going to support them if we go back to a more structured and traditional day? What can we be doing after hours to make sure our students have support?”

Similarly, a teacher at A’Bear’s school put assignments online early in the morning. That way, she could assess the work as the students handed it in, he said.

Allowing students to share their work on their own time can support equity, said Antonio Vendramin, district principal for Surrey Schools. “Pre-spring break, kids would show up, but we’d let them fade into the background because they know they can. Kids were falling off the radar,” he said. “Moving into a new paradigm, I hope that leads us to a place where we’re actually looking at how do we create more access points for all learners, not [just] ones that are traditionally successful in school, but the quiet ones, the ones we’re not giving the avenues to express what they know and what they can do.”

The online models can support teachers as well. At A’Bear’s school, a music teacher came up with a plan to enable teachers to have prep time every Wednesday, through virtual collaboration. “Why come up with a model that we’ve always used?” he said.

## **Challenges and Hope**

While these models appear promising, Tinney and other Surrey leaders acknowledge that the transition to a new form of education can be challenging. In addition to helping teachers with

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professional learning to support the use of technology, the district also has to support them emotionally, Tinney said. The shutdown revealed how stressed teachers can be.

“There’s an incredible need to focus on social-emotional learning and well-being, not just for students, but for the staff,” he said. “The change was thrust upon them so quickly, the instability was enormous. We need to focus on the well-being of staff and students.”

In addition, like many districts around the world, Surrey confronted inequalities in access to devices and the internet. While the district met that immediate need, the need will continue, Tinney said.

Still, he remained optimistic that the district can make the transition to a transformed system. “I think we’ve done pretty well,” he said. “We had one way on March 13, and a different way on March 30, a different way on June 1, and now a different way. That’s the third redesign of structures in six months. The model in June was unsustainable. The model in the fall will be for the full year. There cannot be a better time to research educational change.”



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