Prepared for the Unknown:
Planning Ahead in Times of Crisis

An Interview with Clinton Page of Alexandria City Public Schools

Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS), situated just outside of Washington, DC, serves over 16,000 students speaking 119 languages. The district had an existing 1:1 Chromebook program in Grades 3-12, allowing for a relatively seamless transition to an online learning environment. ACPS closed schools on March 16, 2020, and the announcement was made a week later that schools would be closed for the remainder of the academic year.

Hanover Research sat down with ACPS' Chief Accountability Officer Mr. Clinton Page in mid-April to discuss the district's approach to planning for school closures and its plans for summer learning and the fall 2020-21 semester.

District Overview	
Number of Schools	18
Grades Served	PK-12
Number of Classroom Teachers	1,463
Total Budget	$310 M; $18,331 per pupil cost
Student Snapshot	
Enrollment	16,307
Percent Regularly Attending School	92.1%
Race/Ethnicity	American Indian/Alaskan Native - <1% Asian – 5.2% Pacific Islander – <1% Black – 25.7% Hispanic - 37.4% White - 28.2% Multi-racial – 3.0%
Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Meals	56%
English Language Learners	31.6%
Percent Meeting Reading Standards	69%
Percent Meeting Math Standards	61%
Percent Graduating in Four Years	80.6%

Planning Using "If-Then" Scenarios

Hanover: How did ACPS respond when school closures were imminent?

Mr. Page: I think our team did an excellent job prioritizing communication. Once it became clear that this was going to be a significant challenge both locally as well as nationally, our superintendent [Dr. Gregory C. Hutchings Jr.] organized daily senior leadership team meetings. We brainstormed plans for the initial COVID response, really focusing on three things: technology access, meal services, and instruction. How are we going to ensure that we are equitably providing technology to our students in advance of the closures? How will we get meals to students and families? What does instruction look like in terms of having to completely pivot, as a large organization, from face-to-face delivery to remote learning?

Hanover: How did you tackle such big issues?

Mr. Page: We thought about everything in phases and approached planning with "if-then" scenarios in mind. If we close beyond three weeks, what does that look like—up to and including closure for the remainder of the year? Closure through the end of the academic year was something we were actively talking about and planning for from the beginning, which meant that once announcements were made to close schools, we simply had to enact and mobilize the plans on which we were already working. That positioned us to be proactive instead of reactive, which I think has been a significant benefit to the division.

Hanover: How did your district proactively prepare for remote learning and the associated technology requirements?

Mr. Page: We knew right away that technology was, in essence, the lifeline that our students had to the outside world and therefore that it had to be prioritized during planning. We were coming from a strong place in that we already have one-to-one Chromebooks within the division down through third grade. We worked with our school-based technology integration specialists and Technology Services Department prior to school closures to ensure that we had a plan for all students to take their Chromebooks home.

Hanover: Even with devices, how did you ensure that all families could connect to the internet?

Mr. Page: By working with school-based staff, we were able to identify the families and households with potential internet access challenges and engage our technology team before demand for hotspots and similar connectivity solutions surged. We proactively secured remote internet access and worked with the local internet provider to offer flexibility and free service. We also did some GIS mapping, which allowed us to identify neighborhoods with connectivity issues, and we are planning to send vehicles that broadcast Wi-Fi to those areas.

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Hanover: Have you developed a way of tracking if students are logging in and engaging in online learning?

Mr. Page: We do, and we have a multitiered approach to supporting students who are not. For instance, school-level staff will personally contact the family of a student who's not engaging in some of the online sessions or not turning in materials to try to identify what the obstacles are and how we can help the family overcome them. We also have a high-level tracking mechanism through system logins that allows us to identify and provide support to any students who are continuing to have connectivity issues. I don't have the numbers off the top my head, but we began at around a 20% gap in terms of students with connectivity concerns at home, and I think we're probably under 10% currently. There's no one size fits all approach, so it's important to personalize the outreach and supports.

Understanding Community Needs

Hanover: Alexandria City is, of course, a very diverse community, and one of the challenges must be communicating with families in the languages they speak and in the times they're available. How are you doing this?

Mr. Page: A lot of that work starts in the Family and Community Engagement (FACE) office within our Office of School, Business, and Community Partnerships. In alignment with family engagement best practices, the staff quickly identified the need to provide outreach and communication through multiple methods resulting in a successful flow of information to families in this time of closure. We are providing phone call and text hotlines, emails, newsletters and social media updates to provide needed access to our Spanish, Arabic, Amharic, Farsi families. We continue to monitor this protocol/process in order to revise and improve as needed.

Hanover: It sounds like you sometimes need to think globally in order to support families individually.

Mr. Page: That's a key part of phase two. How do we know that what we're doing is working on a large scale? What are the perceptions in the community? A survey for parents, students, and staff focused on our district's priorities but also explores feelings of connection and satisfaction. Do students and parents feel connected to their teachers? Do they feel like the instructional activities are a good use of their time? Do they feel like they're able to manage their mental health and stress? If they're experiencing challenges, what are those changes? Asking questions is a bit like the proverbial check engine light; it helps us identify where we need to dig a little deeper and do some more problem-solving.

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Hanover: What do you think are the upcoming hurdles as you plan through to the end of this school year?

Mr. Page: We're currently in more of monitoring and refinement phase: we've developed the continuity of learning plans, outlined detailed staff expectations in terms of what their workweeks look like, what their hours should be, etc., so now we continually check-in on how things are going. We want to make sure that we have a level of measurement in place that allows us to be proactive and not reactive regarding emerging challenges.

The Power of Coming Together

Hanover: What are those emerging challenges?

Mr. Page: I would say we're most focused on instruction, technology access, student physical and mental health, and communication. Are students and families feeling connected? How are our teachers feeling about using various online platforms? Do teachers have professional learning needs?

Hanover: Are you considering extending related supports into the summer?

Mr. Page: Our superintendent has given us a mid-May deadline for the full plan for the summer, which includes plans to buffer against learning loss from the school closure. How do we develop summer learning in a way that it is able to reach as many of our students as possible in a meaningful way?

Hanover: What about looking to a slightly longer planning horizon. Have you begun planning for the fall?

Mr. Page: We learned early on the power of contingency and the power of coming together. Given the gift of time, we will be able to have conversations with our stakeholders in terms of their hopes and needs so that we can successfully emerge from this situation—hopefully in the fall. For students, I think the critical piece will be reconnecting, seeing their friends and teachers again, and therefore the beginning of the school year will need to look different. Seeking input and feedback across stakeholders and then developing contingencies will put us in a strong place in terms of what we ultimately implement come fall.

Hanover: Are you feeling hopeful as you look ahead to what comes next?

Mr. Page: This experience has been a reaffirmation of how truly amazing and dedicated our staff are. It is amazing to see the heart and the soul that goes into this work. This is work that people get into not just because they stumbled into it or because they saw a posting one day; this is very much a profession that is a calling. As Dr. Hutchings always says, great educators lead with vision, integrity and passion. Seeing people put this into practice in these trying times has been extremely inspiring.

Hanover: How do you think you'll look back on this experience?

Mr. Page: This experience, this shared experience, will serve as the anchor point or the case study for future discussions around innovation. When we're talking about innovation two years from now, we can point to this moment and say, "Look at what we did in the COVID-19 closure. If we were able to do that, I know we can do this."

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ABOUT Mr. Clinton Page

Clinton Page is the Chief Accountability Officer with Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS). After completing undergraduate and graduate studies in the field of educational psychology at James Madison University, Clinton moved back to his hometown of Alexandria, Virginia and began working for ACPS. The opportunity with ACPS fulfilled a lifelong dream of working in a capacity to improve outcomes for children within his hometown. As Chief Accountability Officer, Clinton drives organizational improvements through overseeing all program evaluation efforts; developing and monitoring the division's progress on the strategic plan; and the reporting of data across all facets of the organization to both internal and external stakeholders. Under Clinton's leadership, the Department of Accountability has instilled a culture of utilization-focused evaluations across the district to increase engagement in evaluation findings and drive continuous improvement throughout the organization. Clinton and his wife, Katie, live in Alexandria with their son, Conrad, and fourteen-year-old Yorkshire Terrier.