**Achievements in the Time of COVID-19**

By Guy Grace and Deborah Grace

We expect the cause of the emergencies at our schools to be someone or something that is visible to the senses.  Through working in the field of school safety, we have always been amazed and proud to witness the response of schools to emergencies such as school shootings, bus accidents, and weather-related emergencies like tornados. We have seen staff and students in our community respond bravely countless times to the emergencies that have arisen over the years. We have seen students giving CPR to fallen classmates, staff administering first aid, and staff and students taking care of each other during and after a school shooting.

With the recent emergence of COVID-19, our schools now face an unseen challenge. That sense of pride is now even more pronounced as we are witnessing yet again the selfless responses of school communities across the country to help in this unprecedented emergency.

As volunteers of the Partner Alliance of Safer School’s advisory committee, our role is to research and evaluate best practices for school safety. During this emergency, we have been working with our own districts while also keeping an eye on what other districts are doing in their response to COVID-19. The tireless efforts of so many school districts are evident in the great strides that they are making to support their students, families, and communities. With that in mind, we are shining a light on some of the good things and best practices happening right now involving the responses of our nation’s schools to this worldwide emergency.

**The feeding of 30 million students who rely on free and reduced-price meal programs**

The school lunch program in the U.S. feeds 30 million students who count on for free or reduced-cost breakfast, snacks, lunches, and in some programs, dinners. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential childcare institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free meals to children each school day.  It is well known that without this program many students would go hungry.  When school buildings are closed, and these meals are not being provided, we know that many of these children do not have access to food.  What is truly amazing, as is referenced by Civil Eats, is that [some districts are feeding more people than food banks](https://civileats.com/2020/04/07/with-schools-closed-some-districts-are-feeding-more-people-than-food-banks/). Many districts across the country have come up with solutions to feed students in these weeks and possible months of crisis. Employees of these programs have volunteered to manage and work these programs, potentially placing them at a greater risk of exposure to COVID-19.

A key example is the Grab and Go meal programs. Many districts are selecting school sites to provide Grab and Go meals in a box or paper sack.  The grab and go meals include lunch as well as breakfast for the next day.  These boxes and sacks contain fresh milk, sandwiches, and items such as chips, juice boxes, fruit/fruit cups, and granola bars. Typically, the Grab and Go meal programs are run out of neighborhood schools.  The pickup points are in front of the school at curbside and staffed by at least two food service employees who are outfitted in appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). Cones or other barriers can be deployed to direct recipients to the pick -up locations.  If you are doing a walk-in and drive-up combination, then recipients should be directed away from each other to the distribution point for safety. The distribution point should be placed under adequate camera coverage, and all staff provided a means of communication such as a radio and or cell phone to call for help if needed. All meal distribution should take place at curbside or in an outdoor predesignated area.

Great efforts have also been made to support students and families who are unable to get to school sites, such as using school buses to deliver Grab and Go meals directly to families. A specific example of these efforts is highlighted in this article by the *Chicago Tribune* ([Reaching Students in Chicago During a Shutdown](https://nam03.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.chicagotribune.com%2Fcoronavirus%2Fct-coronavirus-school-family-wellness-checks-20200401-qglay5fahvcsxjayb3krcx2rtm-story.html&data=02%7C01%7CALustig%40nsba.org%7C44045738354640f86dca08d7dbef6c7b%7C00932d080ddd44afb700c3c0549e4e68%7C0%7C1%7C637219693691742511&sdata=t5eF7I9MPvlH%2BvDj4uLUHj%2BhwzOUX%2BIr2Prz%2BIe2dV8%3D&reserved=0)).   Many districts that are doing this are setting up routes that brings the food into the areas of town across the district. Typically, a school district will assign two food service staff members to a school bus manned by one driver.  Many districts will deploy multiple buses on multiple routes.  Each bus will drive to predetermined stop locations for a window of 10-15 minutes before heading to the next stop. At each stop, Grab and Go meals will be distributed by the foodservice employees to the recipients.  The foodservice workers and the bus drivers will be dressed in appropriate PPE to serve the recipients.  Food delivery will take place outside of the bus and at curbside.  The bus will be cleaned and sanitized after each route.

Safety, security, and emergency preparedness responsibilities of the school sites and the buses do not change in this pandemic emergency.  It is still the responsibility of the district to ensure that everyone is protected in these endeavors.   Leadership and coordination at the district level are where this will start.  Communication needs to take place in as many ways as possible to serve the community.

**Online Learning and Other Educational Supports**

The coronavirus has put over 1 billion students out of school around the world, as communities and whole countries try to contain its spread.  Schools across the United States are now implementing online delivery of instruction during the pandemic, and one can only imagine the impact on the internet as countries struggle to come up with alternative online education programs.  It is important to recognize that districts have had to plan and implement this measure in a very short period, and many are still struggling with these substantial challenges. However, there are a number of cases of resourcefulness being used to help address these new needs. For example, in Fullerton, California, strategies such as reacting early, training teachers, assessing student needs, and providing hot spots helped the district quickly adjust to this new environment ([Why distance learning is a success in one California district](https://www.times-standard.com/2020/04/27/coronavirus-why-distance-learning-is-a-success-in-one-california-district/)).

In many cases, districts have had to purchase equipment such as chrome books, tablets, laptops, and wireless hot spots to make this possible.

Areas such as Tampa, Florida, have repurposed school buses as mobile hot spots to provide support to students with limited internet access ([School Buses to Serve as Roaming Wifi Hotspots for Students](https://www.baynews9.com/fl/tampa/news/2020/04/01/school-buses-to-serve-as-roaming-wifi-hotspots-for-students)). This is an incredible endeavor that many districts have done in a very short time. Many of the employees that are making this possible are selflessly helping the schools and community regain a sense of connection and normalcy.

It is also important to recognize how businesses outside the schools have stepped up to help school districts in emergencies.  For example, about 14 percent of households with school-age children in our country do not have internet access at home. Many internet service providers are stepping up and responding to the Federal Communications Commission’s “Keep Americans Connected” pledge by waiving late fees for existing customers, increasing data caps for mobile hot spots and offering free or reduced-price internet service to students for access to online delivery of instruction ([These internet companies are stepping up to expand their WiFi, hotspot coverage for Americans](https://www.abc10.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/free-wifi-hotspots/103-8002bb36-b9f8-4c32-8801-7da31bfb8449)).

It is important to note that although there have been many successes in supporting our students’ remote learning needs, digital inequity and access to internet for all students have been ongoing concerns that have only been amplified by the current situation. As we work to find solutions to current problems, we must continue to find ways to meet the needs of every student and commit to continue this work once schools reopen.

**Mental Health Supports**

Just because school is online does not mean that students do not need mental health support. In fact, in many cases this need is increased for both existing mental health concerns along with responses to a global pandemic and increased isolation. Through this pandemic, our team has still been implementing suicide interventions and other processes.  We are still checking on students who need support around the clock. The school psychologist and others are still doing assessments and providing other services.  School administrators are still working on discipline and other issues.

Through tireless efforts, teachers and mental health administrators have been meeting often and as needed to ensure that students and their families are being checked in with regularly. Special education teams are still conducting planned evaluations and holding meetings with families to stay on schedule, as well as remotely providing all IEP services for education and social-emotional needs. School administrators have been available to consult either via phone or via teleconference, and ideas are routinely being shared for everyone to stay connected. One example is that parents have been organizing upcoming birthdays for kids by asking their friends to either set up a phone call, send a video, or drive by to wave and say happy birthday.

School districts, such as in Parma City, Ohio, are actively promoting access to counselors to their entire student body, and specifically to those students feeling alone or socially isolated during the pandemic ([Parma City School District counselors focus on coronavirus-related mental health concerns](https://www.cleveland.com/community/2020/04/parma-city-school-district-counselors-focusing-on-pandemic-related-mental-health-concerns.html)). As a result of having had staff and students die from COVID 19 and other events, some districts have set up virtual counseling and support groups. Mental health teams are committed to providing counseling and referring students to outside help when necessary.

In closing, as we respond to schools being closed and communities being impacted in ways we have not seen before, it is as important as ever to recognize that there are many positive things going on in K-12 education. School districts across the country should be proud that they are continuing to support their communities, and that continued effort will help us to get through this emergency together.

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**Deborah Grace** began her career in 1989 working at mental health facilities. She also worked on management and needs assessments at an emergency room that specialized in drug/alcohol abuse and suicidal inclinations. During that period, she obtained a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice and psychology. In 1996, Debbie became a Victim’s Advocate for the Denver District Attorney assigned to District Court. During this time, she volunteered to assist in debriefing and helping victims in Denver for the Oklahoma bombing trial and other events, and later volunteered to do follow up with victims’ families affected by the Columbine shooting, referring them to appropriate resources. In 2009 graduated with her Ed.S. in School Psychology and is certified through the National Association of School Psychologist, in her current career focusing on the mental health and behavioral needs of K-12 students in Colorado.

**The Partner Alliance for Safer Schools (PASS)** is a nonprofit organization that brings together expertise from the education, public safety, and industry communities to support implementation of a tiered approach to securing and enhancing the safety of K-12 environments, based on local needs, proven safety and security practices, and available resources.