



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.



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COVID-19: A New Approach to Back to School | Sept. 7, 2020 | OAS Episode 105

Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This podcast is all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith.

“Probably most important when I think about a state lever is this digital gap. We’ve known for years that there’s not equal accessibility for both broadband and devices for kids, and this particular crisis has just exacerbated that.”

That was Dr. Carissa Moffat Miller, the executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, and one of the guests today on our podcast. Dr. Miller’s organization works with state education leaders around the nation and will offer a national perspective on how schools are reopening.

Today’s focus is on how K-12 schools can reopen safely, and what that might look like for the foreseeable future.

Our second guest is Dr. Kristi Wilson, president of the American Association of School Administrators, which is the organization of school superintendents around the nation. She is also the superintendent of the Buckeye Elementary School District just west of Phoenix and offers some perspective from the district superintendent level.

Let’s start with Dr. Miller. Welcome to the podcast.

Dr. M: Thank you. I’m so happy to be here with you.

Time Marker (TM): 01:35

Ed: To start, why don’t you tell us a little about CCSSO and the role that you and the organization play in working with state education policymakers.

Dr. M: Thanks for having me, and the Council of Chief State School Officers, or CCSSO, is an organization that represents and supports the state education leaders in every state, territory, the District of Columbia, the Bureau of Indian Education, and the Department of Defense.

So, we have a wide-ranging membership and varying views, much like our colleagues at NCSL, representing the diverse needs of states.

TM: 02:13

Ed: So, let's look at the big picture. As you mentioned, you work with schools in all the states and territories. How are schools reopening this fall and what does it look like from your perspective?

Dr. M: I would say, first of all, safely and carefully. Everyone is trying to think about: How do we do this in a way that takes into consideration what's going on around us with community spread or diseases, and how do we most meet the needs of students? So, that's a varying level of ways in which we're seeing that happen.

There is some in-person education going on where kids are back in school. There is also completely virtual. And then there is this modification; that looks a variety of ways. There could be some of the younger kids coming back in and using classrooms or kindergarten, 1st, 2nd graders; there are some modified schedules where students will come in on two days a week versus three, and do some of their work at home.

So, that's what we're seeing playing out all over the country. And it really is contextualized to the local needs of what's going on and how they're best able to do that.

TM: 03:23

Ed: For those of us not in the education world, it can be a little confusing in terms of who is in charge of reopening the schools. Can you talk a little about what the role of state superintendents is, and does the role vary from state to state?

Dr. M: It does vary from one state to another. The state chiefs or state superintendents, commissioners, leaders work closely with their local superintendents, so the people who run districts, and they try to coordinate as best as they can.

And depending on the situation for each area, states may have a statewide mandate that may have come from an executive order by a governor. There may be some authority by the state chief to have some metrics for districts to meet before they hit opening. And some, it's completely determined by a local school district or a school board, and that's what we're seeing play across.

TM: 04:16

Ed: What kinds of tools or guidance have you been able to provide states as they approach this new school year in trying to make these very difficult decisions?

Dr. M: We've been working extremely hard over the last six months and being very attuned to what we hear state chiefs telling us that they needed. If you go out to our website, which is ccsso.org/coronavirus, every resource that we have out there that we've provided for states is available to anybody and everyone who wants to use it.

Our goal was to put forward best practices and ideas. This has been the moment of contingency planning, planning for Plan A, Plan B, C and all the way out to Z. Right? So, we wanted to be able to put out things that people didn't have to start from ground zero, and also best practices of what we're seeing in some places that have figured things out.

The key things that we've put out include physical health safety protocols, and there is also a document called The Considerations for Teaching and Learning, which gets into the academic side of things. It was also meant for districts to be able to use as they think about templates for their schedules that I discussed earlier with multiple formats, staffing schedules, professional development plans – you name it; it's in that massive document.

And so, we have a ton of those resources out there that are available.

Ed: We'll be sure to link to that site from the NCSL website when this podcast is posted.

TM: 05:44

Ed: Most of our listeners, of course, are legislators, legislative staff and other policymakers. What can they do to help parents, students and educators navigate this situation?

Dr. M: Imagine many of your legislators, like me, are parents navigating this themselves. That is first and foremost to understand your local context, and then also take it up a step to understand how it's affecting everyone in the community.

The key piece for me is this communication engagement with all the players in your state. So, state health officials, your governor's office, your state chief, state legislators all play a really important role to make sure that how we give resources to schools to open, making sure that the protocols are clear, that all of those issues are open.

I think the other thing that we saw really importantly from state legislatures in the early days in March and April was this immense flexibility. So, we all have these state laws where forever we've said they're not something we can adjust or amend, and then in a moment of crisis, we decided maybe they weren't as important.

Some things will be important to put back in. But I think asking ourselves what laws that we put in place that we thought were important that now, in a new environment and a new way of doing business for education, are things we can revisit. And I guess I would encourage that to be a statewide conversation.

TM: 07:15

Ed: Dr. Miller, what are state leaders prioritizing as they figure out how to get schools back into gear?

Dr. M: Lots of priorities for state leaders at this point, but when we thought about how to structure those, and these things were actually in a letter that our organization sent to Senator Alexander on his request about what it would take to reopen schools. As I mentioned, the physical health

of students and teachers; secondly, the mental health and wellbeing; the social/emotional needs of kids through this time; and probably important when I think about a state lever is this digital gap.

We've known for years that there is not equal accessibility for both broadband and devices for kids, and this particular crisis just exacerbated that. If we're able to deliver either a hybrid or a virtual environment, and even yet using resources to deliver even in person with devices and broadband, those are critical, critical things that districts and states need.

So, I've been really heartened to see state leaders take on statewide contracts for delivering broadband. They've been really creative in the way in which they go about doing that. But that's a short-term solution.

And so, there will need to be a long-term focus on how we keep access to broadband and get good contracts for delivery for broadband and devices for kids.

TM: 08:40

Ed: Before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners?

Dr. M: I think I would just say that we've seen incredible innovation and resiliency through this pandemic. It's heartening to see how much communities have come together, have tried to focus on how to get kids fed, using buses to put WiFi in communities, and just coming together to solve a problem. That's incredibly heartening to me.

And I hope that we don't lose that as we get into what is a more difficult conversation about how we recover from this and we get back to restarting some of the ways of doing business, and having to think about it in a new way. But first and foremost, we keep people safe and secure and think about it in new ways.

And I also just want to thank our folks on the ground: our teachers, our principals, our superintendents, who right now are opening schools and every day is a challenge, and so we're just really appreciative of all that they're doing.

Ed: Well, that is a great positive note to end on. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk today. Stay safe.

I'll be back after this with Dr. Kristi Wilson.

MUSIC and Gene VO:

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Ed: Dr. Wilson, welcome to the podcast.

Dr. W: Thank you very much for having me.

TM: 10:29

Ed: So, thanks for joining us today. Let's start by finding out more about your school district: where it's located, how large it is, and tell us a little bit about your students and the backgrounds they come from.

Dr. W: Buckeye Elementary School District is located about 20 miles west of the Phoenix metropolitan area, and we're a K-8 district. We have seven elementary schools and two preschools. Our district is 212 square miles. And we're getting ready to open another elementary school that's named after John S. McCain III. It's the first in the country to be named after the late senator.

We have 5,400 kindergarten through 8th grade students enrolled. Of those students, we have about 62% Hispanic/Latino, 24% white, and we have 7% African American. We employ about 700 staff and our free and reduced rate is hovering around 76/77%. So, that tells you a little bit about the Buckeye Elementary School District. And we are just eager to spend a little bit of time talking with you as we find ourselves amid the Covid pandemic.

TM: 11:49

Ed: I'm sure you get this question constantly: How is your district reopening this year? Is it going to be all remote, all in-person, or a hybrid?

Dr. W: Right now, the health metrics from the state and county still have us very much in the high-risk red zone as we open the year. But the metrics are improving, which is positive. In Arizona, individual school boards have been given the authority to reopen when they decide to do so.

But after much advocacy on our part, we have now been provided guidance from our state and county health departments, and we have been encouraged to use the guidance to help us with our decisions.

So, back on August 5th, we reopened our school district remote only and then, under our governor, Governor Doug Ducey, had an executive order in place which required school districts in Arizona to provide what we would call in-person opportunities for parents who needed childcare or a place essentially for children to go during the day.

What we have to do in Arizona, that guidance under the executive order, you have to follow that as of August 17th. So, our school district, and there are several school districts in Arizona, are still operating under remote learning, but we also have to provide a place for students to go if parents deem that necessary.

Now, you can do that one of two ways. You still can limit the numbers of kids that are coming into the building because of the safety metrics, the health metrics that are associated with those benchmarks.

All of our students from kindergarten through 8th grade are engaged in what we would call the virtual learning environment, and I am pleased to say that since we have opened this year,

feedback that we've been getting from the community has been really positive about the differences between, I would say, last spring and now. And several folks have commented that it's obvious the district and teachers really have spent a great deal of time preparing for this year.

So, we are just doing this as best as we can, providing the learning environment for staff and students. So, the transition to online learning has definitely been a learning experience, but one that I can say I'm proud to say we have taken advantage of.

TM: 14:24

Ed: So, I'm curious, how much demand have you had from parents for that arrangement where kids are actually physically there so they can go to work?

Dr. W: Well, there has been a little bit of a demand. What we did in each of our schools is we surveyed our parents to find out who really is in need of that. In each of our schools, we have about 30 to 40 students I would say; you ask parents, but students that are coming into the buildings that meet the definition of needing a place to go during the day.

If you can picture it this way, teachers are teaching online, students are primarily getting their education that way, but during the day if a child is dropped off, that child's experience during the day is: they still have a device; they access their learning opportunities through a device. But the challenge for a school district in Arizona is to provide the supervision, because the teachers are actually teaching online.

So, part of the challenge is to limit that group size, if you will, because of the adults where you just don't have the staffing. And, of course, the other challenge is the space. You want to make sure that you're not bringing in too many students at a time because of the virus. So, we've got about 30 to a maximum of 40 kids in a building at any given time.

TM: 16:03

Ed: Well, let me ask you this because I think the people in your position have just one of the toughest jobs in America right now. What is it that keeps you up at night? What is your biggest concern about your school district?

Dr. W: I think, obviously, we're very concerned about safety. Everything else really can be dealt with in time and we'll get through it. But in the end, we can make up for all kinds of disruptions. But what we can't make up for is the critical mistake because we took an unnecessary risk with a child's life or a teacher's life.

And some people may look at the death toll from Covid and decide that there's an acceptable number, but for us, we cannot readily accept a single loss of life that could have been prevented by following the science, listening to the experts, and always putting the wellbeing of the staff and the students first.

With that comes the hope that lawmakers share the sentiment and that they do what they can, and some of them have done from the beginning, advocating for understanding and flexibility, providing us with the resources we need to get through these unprecedented times.

The safety issues and the sickness keep me up at night; it worries me. It's really not the time for ideology or to press alternative agendas around education. Public education has already been stretched to the limits in terms of resources, both human and capital, and we really need to be supportive in many forms.

The safety is what keeps me up at night.

TM: 17:43

Ed: You mentioned resources and certainly there have been lots of news stories for those of us not in the education world who have read about whether or not there are enough resources for schools. So how about in your district – do your principals, your teachers and your students, do they have the resources they need?

Dr. W: I would say both yes and no. In some ways, we've done remarkably well rallying the people and the resources needed. We have rapidly trained, reallocated materials and support, generally mobilized in unprecedented ways in order to meet this challenge.

Emergency funding such as the CARES act, that has proven absolutely critical and without it, we would not be in the position we're in. With a lot of creativity and some metaphorical band-aids, we've been able to do some amazing things. But that said, we're still in need of more funding if we're going to deliver the kind of experience and stability our students need.

I think this crisis has only further highlighted the dramatic divide between the social and economic classes. Quite simply, some students and families are far better able to absorb this sort of crisis than others. And we have kids in families that are working multiple jobs; they only have one computer at home and often no computer at home, or are homeless, and there is very little cushion for some of our families, and this just highlights all of that.

I'm sure you're very familiar, as some of our listeners are, that digital divide itself is not solely just a quantitative issue. We've distributed thousands of loaner laptops to our community. But the learning curve for a family that potentially does not engage in this digital economy and workforce for their own career can be incapacitating.

Quite simply, our students rely on us for not only just that quality education, but sometimes also for two of their daily meals, emotional support, and a host of all other needs.

I think Covid-19 has taxed and stressed our system to a level we've never seen. And although we're proud to deliver in many of these areas, our communities need so much more support, particularly in the areas of social and emotional health, digital infrastructure and devices.

And one thing that clearly has to change, and this crisis has exposed it, is we have to treat quality broadband Internet access for all as a universal utility that all students can access. And I truly hope that emerges as a permanent priority for policymakers.

TM: 20:22

Ed: So, speaking about legislators and other state policymakers, those are our audience, and I'd like to know what you'd say to them about how they could best support school superintendents during this period, and frankly after this period is over.

Dr. W: I think we need guidance driven by health professionals. We need flexibility and resource support. Covid is another crisis in a string of lots of crises that education has faced over the years. I just really would close on this question by making a loud plea that legislators listen to educators and that educators be at the table for any conversations and decisions, particularly those that involve implementation at the school level.

We oftentimes receive guidance that suggests, in spite of best intentions, that authors haven't visited schools since their own graduation, that their memories of even the test place are still pretty hazy. And superintendents, principals and most importantly teachers, we all must be at the table in meaningful ways. They cannot be just window dressings for decisions that have already been made.

We're not medical experts and we're not medical doctors in any means and we trust those who are, but we are experts in the implementation and education and our voices must consistently be heard in order to merge I would say all of the represented expertise into a coherent plan.

I really appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today. It's important that your listeners understand I'm not speaking for superintendents, principals or even teachers. I'm speaking for the students. This is and has been an epic crisis that will forever be embedded in the memories of our children. I truly believe it's an earthshaking and long-term moment and our children and all of us are experiencing trauma.

That said, I see an opportunity on the horizon and I hope that we can take the lessons learned to reframe conversations around education more seriously and the value of public education supported appropriately, and elevate the work of the dedicated professionals who work with our children each and every day. Thank you so much for having me.

Ed: Well, Dr. Wilson, thanks so much for being on, and I wish you the very best of luck in dealing with this just critical and awfully challenging task that you have before you. You take care of yourself and stay safe.

And that concludes this edition of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our episodes on iTunes, Google Play or Spotify. You may also go to Google Play, iTunes or Spotify to have these episodes downloaded directly to your mobile device when a new episode is ready. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, this is Ed Smith. Thanks for listening and being part of "Our American States."

MUSIC