



## Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #6 - Three Demarest (New Jersey Ed Leaders)

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Jessica Hamman: From Glean Education, this is Ed Leaders In Literacy, a podcast series that features educators and administrators, who've made hard decisions about instruction, curriculum, intervention, school systems, and now remote learning to close the achievement gap and build equity by improving literacy. Today, we are going to be covering a topic that's at the top of everyone's minds, and that is the remote learning shift. We're speaking with three leaders from Demarest School District, Frank Mazzini, principal at County Road and Luther Lee Emerson schools, Jon Regan principal at Demarest Middle School and Michael Fox superintendent of Demarest school district in Demarest, New Jersey. Welcome to our

show today. So I've heard anecdotally from parents and teachers in your school district that your learning plan is going incredibly well.

Jessica Hamman: So I wanted to reach out and hear more. This is a time of real flux in our nation's education system. And I think it's really important to hear from school districts that are doing a good job and stepping out and, and being leaders in their field. So tell me a little bit about your school district before we launch into that. And then tell me a little about your remote learning plan and how it's going.

Michael Fox: Gentlemen, would you mind if I go first?

Jon Regan: Of course.

Michael Fox: So our district is made up of actually 700 students and population. With that, we're a three school system. So we're a pre-K one building. That's our primary grades. Then we have a two four building, which is Luther Lee Emerson school. And then we have a five, eight middle school. So we have two principals, Mr. Mazzini goes back and forth between the two elementary schools. So that's kind of our enrollment and our setup. Interestingly enough, the board of education has been tremendous over the years in preparing us with a great deal of technology. At the same time, we've been able to afford an immense amount of professional development for teachers to be successful in the implementation of technology within the classroom. So at this point we have been one to one for



many years at the middle school where the students five through eight bring the devices home, and those are max at the elementary school we just launched March 13th.

Michael Fox:

The first day we were told we weren't coming back, we launched grades 2, 3, 4, 1 to one. So the second grade has iPads. The third grade has Chromebooks and the fourth grade has Max. So we kind of lend itself in on the student device and probably greater than most districts, with that being said, that's new to that school because they never went home, so we started preparing two weeks prior to the March 13th date, where we were going to leave the buildings. So the administrative team literally worked tirelessly about creating a virtual learning platform that we felt would be successful, not only for students, but for staff, because it's a whole different comfort level when it comes to staff implementing learning via devices when they're not in the building. So we created with our supervisor of child study teams, supervisor of instruction, as well with the principals, we met numerous times to create a plan.

Michael Fox:

The plan was to, what we're calling is flexible e-learning. So our first plan was again, not to overwhelm staff. So we asked staff to move forward with implementing a five minute instructional video, and then having students to do work. It's very similar to the setup of a classroom when you have an anticipatory set and you're setting the mode for the lesson that particular day, and then having the student do work. And then the student would hand that work in.



Michael Fox: Currently, we're only required to teach for two hours, which is called the home schooling effect, home instruction. And with that, our staff is obviously way above the four hour day versus a two hour day of instruction. And we've been in touch with staff as we rolled it out. We had them included in the plan and throughout the first week of implementation, we've received many accolades from parents, and staff has been nothing short of amazing, in this implementation to be fair, something that's unprecedented nationwide, let alone [inaudible 00:05:21] and a great deal of credit goes to the principals that are here with you today.

Jessica Hamman: So it sounds like you guys really laid the groundwork in terms of device accessibility, comfort with technology and then professional development, which I'd love to hear a little more about that in the past years, what kind of technological professional development were you providing and how did that lay the groundwork?

Michael Fox: Mr. Regan, you want to address just the fact that we also have the North Valley curriculum center, how we operate.

Jon Regan: Yep. So I guess I just first wanted to say that this is a very challenging time for teachers all across America and to the teachers at my school, I'm so proud of the work they've been doing, but that work didn't begin just two weeks ago. It is work that has been going on for a very long time. First, I want to speak to the culture of our school. There's two elements to the culture of our instructional staff that I think are really important.



Jon Regan: The first is what I like to call the ethic of care. Our teachers care very deeply about children and about their educational outcomes and treating them as really valued human beings. The second part of our culture, that I think is very important is the idea that everyone learns every day, right? Just because you're a teacher, it doesn't mean that your learning stops and we really value professional learning. So within our school, we're part of a larger consortium of schools, because in New Jersey, there are more than 500 school districts.

Jon Regan: So we could never accomplish on our own what we can do together with other schools. So within the context of the Northern Valley, there are seven townships and in regional high school, and we have what we call the office of curriculum and instruction. And so, beyond creating curriculum, also have a professional development school. So in a given year, teachers can attend a whole host of different professional learning opportunities. And so we usually have more than a 100 offerings. And the magic of it is that, they're taught by teachers themselves. So we reward expertise in teachers in providing that training to each other. And it's something that we invest in, both in terms of time and in financial resources, because everyone learns every day.

Jessica Hamman: And Mr. Mazzini what has been your approach in the lower grades, you're the principal of the K through five schools? Correct?



Frank Mazzini: Well, County Road is preschool through first, and Luther Emerson, the second through fourth.

Jessica Hamman: Okay.

Frank Mazzini: Same approach, as far as the rest of the district where our teachers receive professional development through the Northern curriculum center, also, we do a lot of in-house professional development.

Frank Mazzini: There's always someone who is more technologically savvy than others. So for the preschool through second grades, we're using CSO right now while the students are at home. And this is something that they used before, so that it creates a larger base for communication between home and school. So some of our teachers were more savvy. So they've been teaching their colleagues well before this ever happened. But once we went into this home instruction base that we're doing now, the past couple weeks, we really started working with them more one on one and small group instruction for the teachers.

Frank Mazzini: And just to, as Mr Regan says the students are not just the ones learning, we're always learning as well. And that goes up until this point. I was just on a call now with one of my teams, we're learning new online platforms to do live learning. That's something that I've been learning the past couple days and working with our technology teacher, as well as our supervisor curriculum



instruction. So I can then turn key to others on my own while they're of turn key for the entire staff, but we're trying to do small groups as well.

Frank Mazzini: Our third and fourth graders, they have laptops that they use in the classroom. We do a lot of work on the Google drive where teachers can conference with them virtually while they're sitting next to them. So a lot of them are very much on the independent level right now at home. Second graders, they use the iPads it's quite often in the classroom, so there's a lot more independence there, but we're working on that independence with the kindergarten first graders, which we know can be more challenging.

Jessica Hamman: And you mentioned communication early on and brings me to a question I have about how you're approaching communication with the students. How are you communicating with teachers and asking them to communicate, and then parents, as well.

Michael Fox: In my role as superintendent, I'm taking part of the larger scope of stakeholders, meaning community and parents. So we've been sending out some piece of information on the educational front, as far as students are concerned, it's been the parents there, definitely been more principal base. And staff has been a combination of both, trying to keep all parties in the loop of what we're doing, because as we start to move forward, what we put in place two weeks ago, you're going to start to see morphed a little bit of how we change our platform and how we start to move forward.



Michael Fox: Because our plan was, we planned for two weeks, for two weeks of instruction. So this is at the end of this week, it's the end of that. Obviously we're going to be in this a longer period of time. So now we're actually creating plans within this week and doing for their training to move to different platforms, but making sure at the same time, most importantly, for all of us is our staff being comfortable in order to implement those new platforms.

Jessica Hamman: It's really a process of innovation. That's scary, but also exciting because it's an opportunity that doesn't always come along. I've heard really good things about opening morning meetings. And I think it's ... is it Mr. Mazzini who's doing that for your whole school? Can you tell us a little bit more about what you're doing there?

Frank Mazzini: It's actually both Mr. Regan and I are doing it.

Jessica Hamman: Okay.

Frank Mazzini: What we do is we film a video of ourselves, good morning, we do the date and the weather. We wish happy birthday to anyone whose birthday may be that day. If it's a Monday and someone had a birthday over the weekend, then we'll give a shout out to them as well. We usually do a few things. We give a quote for the day. We'll give a joke for the day, which is quite corny, but we enjoy it and the parents seem to love it too. I think the adults enjoy it more than the





kids, but we also do a challenge for the day. So one of the common challenges that Mr Regan and I did last week, was for everyone to make a rainbow and to put an inspirational message on it and hang it up in a front window in their house.

Frank Mazzini: So when you drive through Demarest, there's rainbows hung up on so many houses, just to create a little uniformity. And just to bring everyone a little bit closer together, some people did it on their driveway. Some people did it on their front stoop, but it really was an awesome challenge that everyone loved. And the parents are sending both of us pictures of how the kids are meeting these challenges, whether it be to make a healthy snack and some kids are making smoothies or, to do a chore around the house or something like that.

Jessica Hamman: Fantastic. How are you seeing this play out in the middle school goal? Mr. Regan?

Jon Regan: Yes. I also do the morning announcements every day and the intent is to mimic or imitate the experience of being in school. So it literally starts with like a school bell and we do it exactly as the morning announcements would actually sound and it includes the elements that Mr Mazzini mentioned. And one of my goals is I've started trying to bring in other voices of teachers. So I'll have a teacher do the joke of the day and then piece it together on iMovie, or I'm starting to have students do the quote of the day and what the goal really is, is to bring a sense of normalcy to this learning experience for kids, so that they're comfortable and they're



confident. And they know that their teachers are still here. Their teachers still love them and care about them. And kind of my joke about it is, I am a principal, but I've become like a YouTuber over the past couple of weeks.

Jessica Hamman: It's really good cred for middle school students. I have to say this could be really good. That's great. I'm curious if you guys have an approach for supporting your students in special education and what your methodology is for that, or if you're learning on the fly and have come up with any new things that are helping support your special ed teachers and your students with disabilities.

Frank Mazzini: I like one of a gentlemen answer.

Michael Fox: Okay. So we invest very heavily and believe very deeply in providing appropriate services to children who qualify for special education. So in that regard, we have seven special educators in a school for 330 students, which is a very high percentage of special educators. That in itself is an investment. And specifically during this distance learning experience, we have been using video conferencing tools. That is something that we have found to be most successful.

Jessica Hamman: Perfect. Which ones would you suggest to other districts that have been the most user friendly?



Michael Fox: So we have been using Google Hangouts. That's just something that's already built within the infrastructure of the Google Suite that we....

Jessica Hamman: Google classroom?

Michael Fox: .... For years and, for all students, we also use power school, I am not endorsing any particular learning management system. They're all pretty much the same, but that is the one that we use. And that's true for all students. And most recently, like many people in America, we learned about Zoom and have also been exploring with Zoom.

Jessica Hamman: Great. Anything else? Any other takeaways before we close up that I haven't asked you guys about, but that you've really been impressed with or learned about through this experience?

Michael Fox: I guess in my position, I've been astonished and, and proud of the work that's being done by the administrative team in our district and the teachers. We're really literally building a plane while it's in the air and it's a more difficult task than I think we even thought we would endure during a situation, as a pandemic, as we're facing.



Michael Fox: I think staff has been resilient. Staff has been working 12 to 15 hour days to be able to implement this to the highest degree. And students, I think have been wonderful. I sat in a Zoom class yesterday and just to kind of see their faces come to life and they need that, right. The social socialization piece of children, we can't lose sight of the importance of that. And right now that's a piece that we're trying to build back, but they're resilient as well. Students, I think have been great, but I've been most impressed with administration staff kind of coming together, collaboratively just as Mr. Mazzini has said, they're all helping each other, and that's really great to see from an administrative event and that teachers are, are willing to do that.

Frank Mazzini: Mr. Fox, if I could just add to that. I also want to add the parents. They're at home doing work as well for their jobs. As many of them, their offices are closed, they're working from home while they're working with their children on the educational aspect of their life.

Frank Mazzini: Just to mirror what Mr. Regan and Mr. Fox said, huge accolades to the staff. This has been a huge learning curve for them as it has for all of us involved. And they've been working so hard right now to make sure that they're getting the kids an equal love of education that they give them in the classrooms. But I'm getting a lot of communication from parents and that's just them sending pictures of what their kids are doing at home, but I know that they're putting a lot in as well. And, Demarest's a very tight knit community, educationally they're extreme supportive, and they're just as supportive right now. And we're very appreciative of that from the parents.



Jessica Hamman: Excellent.

Jon Regan: Yeah, I guess I would also say something very similar, which is that a school community is made up and supported by parents, teachers, administrators, and also the efforts of children. And my mind has been blown by the degree to which everyone has pitched in to make this a success.

Jessica Hamman: Well, I just want to thank you for your leadership and the impact that you're having on your teachers and students and parents during this time. And thank you for all you're doing and keep up the good work.

Frank Mazzini: Thank you Jessica.

Jon Regan: A great day, Jessica.

Jessica Hamman: Thank you so much. If you'd like to learn more about the work they're doing in Demarest, you can visit their website.



Jessica Hamman: Thank you for listening to our Ed leaders and literacy podcast, to find links to the articles and resources mentioned in this podcast, go to <https://www.gleaneducation.com/edleaders> podcast and access them in the show notes. Bye for now.

