



## Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #7 - Michael Cormack (Jackson Public Schools)

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Jessica Hamman: From Glean Education, this is Ed Leaders in Literacy, a podcast series that features educators and administrators who have made hard decisions about instruction, curriculum, intervention, school systems, and now remote learning, to close the achievement gap and build equity in their school districts.

Jessica Hamman: Today I'm really excited to chat with Dr. Michael Cormack, Chief of Staff of Jackson Public School in Jackson, Mississippi. Welcome.

Michael Cormack: Thank you.

Jessica Hamman: I'm really excited to have you here today. I discovered by way of research that we are alumni of the same university, Boston College, so it's always fun to see that

Michael Cormack: Exactly. Go Eagles.

Jessica Hamman: Go Eagles. In this podcast we mainly talk about literacy, but we're focusing on something slightly different that's going on in education right now, remote learning. I'd love to hear about your district and the state of the situation right now.

Michael Cormack: Great. Well, thanks so much for having me. I am the Chief of Staff for Jackson Public Schools, which is located in Mississippi and the Mississippi capital. We serve scholars, about 23,000 scholars, in the capital city, across 58 different schools and programs. And so we're one of the largest districts in our state, and the only urban district in the state of Mississippi.

Michael Cormack: We've, like everyone across the country, have had to really adapt our approach to providing instructions to our students during this period of this unprecedented health pandemic. And really trying to think about our approaches to instruction as parents are engaging in homeschooling. And really giving them the practical resources they need to try to arrest some of the achievement gap that we know is inevitable, given the length of the time that we anticipate being out.



Jessica Hamman: How long have you been out of school?

Michael Cormack: Like many Southern school districts, we take spring break pretty early in March. And so we were out the second full week in March for spring break. And it's really during that midweek in March where there was a heightened level of awareness about coronavirus and districts started to engage in conversations about closing schools.

Michael Cormack: So we've been out since March 6th, and we then closed schools over the spring break and have elongated our spring break. Now we've been out for a period of three full weeks, headed into a month, of being out of school.

Jessica Hamman: And did that time allow you to prepare in a way that school closure that happened on a Friday and reopened to remote learning on a Monday, didn't enable those schools to do?

Michael Cormack: Of course during the week of spring break, there was, as I said, a heightened awareness about coronavirus and the growth of the numbers, the rate of infections with coronavirus. And so many of our teachers and our central office departments that support learning, our Office of Teaching and Learning, we're starting to think about an anticipated closure, but we didn't formal only make



those decisions and determinations until that Friday of the week that we were due back.

Michael Cormack: We really needed to assemble our teams quickly to think about ways that we could begin resource sharing. We've been fortunate to be able to tap into a number of our networks to think about instructional packets and other kinds of things. It took us just a few days of really intensive work to get an introduction out, but we are also really tasked with this core challenge, I believe, of equity. Equity is one of our district's core values, and we define that as all, meaning all. And so really the challenge was how do we ensure a basic level of education for all of our scholars, particularly given some of the technological challenges and gaps that existed well before our closure.

Michael Cormack: And obviously we serve a number ... We are 100% Title One district, and so we already had many of the challenges that are associated with poverty and teaching low-income students. And so our challenge really is some of our surrounding districts have been able to really quickly leverage one-to-one programs in terms of devices, that's not our reality. And so we've really needed to build in some support structures and rethink the way that we approach remote learning so that we could really live into our core value of equity. So one of the things, just before-

Jessica Hamman: Yeah, I love that and I'm excited to hear more because you're hearing a lot about school districts that have the ability to do the one-to-one, and it's not even really going that smoothly for them.



There's challenges and difficulties and obstacles. But the truth is the access and the equity is a major issue that large urban districts and small rural districts are dealing with all across the country. So I'd love to hear more about how you approached it.

Michael Cormack: Yeah. We really needed to build the data set to support our at home access to internet and other resources. And so we have both a paper format survey and an electronic survey that's going out to parents to just assess what is the state of at home internet usage. Of course, we all had our hunches, but we really wanted any decisions that we made to be grounded in data. And that would drive an approach to thinking about what we could do in terms of the number of devices that we have access to.

Michael Cormack: And so that's really going to inform the practice around devices. We also know that not all devices are created equal. So many of our parents and families have smartphones, but trying to do complex work and to engage in coursework over an iPhone is very different than an iPad device, a desktop computer. And so there's just a whole range of devices that folks are using and leveraging.

Michael Cormack: And then also just the speed of internet, is it high speed internet? And so it's really caused us to think creatively, myself, our superintendent, Dr. Errick Greene, serve on the City of Jackson's Mayor's task force, really thinking about our coronavirus response. And we're partnering with the City to offer broadband hotspots to low-income housing units that can at least help to mitigate some of the challenges with speed. We're also just leveraging our district



website to make certain that we provide instructional packets to those scholars that have it.

Michael Cormack: And then we've done a feeding structure within 12 of our schools, which are geographically located around the city, but utilizing that as also a space to provide instructional packets and support to those that may have challenges with internet availability or printing at home. They can utilize one of our feeding centers, get an instructional packet, and then leverage our teacher office hours, where teachers are standing by on the phone to be able to help and provide support over the phone through conference call structures for parents that do have cell phone devices or a landline.

Michael Cormack: We just had to think across the board in terms of accessing instruction and really thinking about how do we ensure that they get to all of our scholars in the city.

Jessica Hamman: That's fantastic. And what did you find from those parent surveys? Were you surprised by anything that came back or validated what you had thought?

Michael Cormack: It validated many of our hunches. Of course, many have internet availability at home, but they would not classify it as high-speed. As I mentioned, there's a whole range of devices. And so there are many that have a cell phone or a smart device that's internet capable, but have multiple children and not multiple devices. And so just the presence of a cell phone that it has internet capable, doesn't really



then provide the access or the equity of access for multiple child families.

Michael Cormack: And so we're going to be able to utilize this data to think about how we address those gaps and challenges. In a targeted way, because we've actually asked for parents to submit the survey for each child. And so we know students who have devices and those without.

Jessica Hamman: That's very smart. It seems like you put systems in place to guarantee equity and access, or to support it because it's hard to guarantee it in these times.

Jessica Hamman: That's on the district level. And tell me a little bit more about the teacher approach. Did you have time to prepare in a way that supported teachers with the systems that they should be aware of for remote learning, and how is that going? Tell me a little more about that.

Michael Cormack: Yeah. So our teachers are incredibly creative, and before we were even able to set up the district supports. We're innovative, we're checking in on students. We're making certain that counseling sessions could continue to occur over the phone for scholars with specialized social-emotional supports. They were incredibly creative, and we saw a number of them going live on Facebook to provide instruction. And just thinking about outside the box ways to continue the instruction.



Michael Cormack: With the insertion of some district-related instructional resources, one of the things that we wanted to do is just to say and encourage by grade level and band, teachers to utilize those resources in a more consistent fashion. And then to create a structure around a consistent set of expectations about the office hours. And so of course, our teachers and staff members are continuing to be paid during the outage. So we're both closed, but they're still on the dole. And so we wanted to communicate that these are the expectations for that time, and they've been remarkably creative.

Michael Cormack: Teachers are also leveraging this as a great opportunity for their own professional development and learning. And so we've had a number of our existing professional development partners that have said, "We want to provide continuing educator credits. We want to make certain that you are licensed to the fullest extent possible." So it's a great time for continuing educator units and credits to keep that certification tight.

Michael Cormack: And then we've set up some structures. And so the approach, both to checking in on students and also growing their own knowledge and skillset, has been just really remarkable. The teachers group, there was a teacher group in South Jackson that even organized a student parade or teacher parade throughout a community through South Jackson.

Jessica Hamman: Oh, I think I saw that. Yeah.





Michael Cormack: It was just really exciting to see the ways that they were communicating, just the high level of care for our scholars during this time away.

Jessica Hamman: That's great. What challenges, if any, do you see with different grade levels? Are there any grade levels that you're seeing are harder to support remotely, versus others?

Michael Cormack: Yeah, so that's a really interesting question. Of course, all of our scholars are precious to us. We've had some acute challenges around our high school scholars that are nearing graduation, our seniors in particular are a group that we're concerned about. There's so many important rituals around your senior year, the prom. Graduation, a lot of folks who've had real concerns about how will we maintain and celebrate the work of those student at the end of their career in just such a shift and a-

Jessica Hamman: Unusual.

Michael Cormack: ... unusual challenge-

Jessica Hamman: Yeah.



Michael Cormack: ... to them, as we think about just ways to structure those opportunities. Additionally, they were very pressed around wanting to know paths to ways to graduation.

Michael Cormack: Traditionally in Mississippi, we have a number of high school exit exams that students take. And so those subject area tests were of top-of-mind concern for those that were nearing graduation, that would have opportunities to assess ordinarily. But through this challenge and the cessation of testing for this year, we're really concerned about the mechanics of graduation and whatnot.

Michael Cormack: And so we've spent a lot of time just thinking about smartly. Of course, we celebrate the fact that the priority is on health and wellness and not testing. But still there were some questions to be ironed out in the details connected with our senior graduation and many of the rules connected with accountability and graduation. So we've tried to pay special attention to that group of students.

Michael Cormack: Additionally, on the opposite end of the spectrum, our youngest scholars, our pre-kindergarten students and kindergarten students, we have to be really hands-on and just thinking about the developmentally appropriateness of instructional packets. It's not the preferred delivery mechanism for younger scholars. And so we've also just really thought about how we leverage some of our existing assets that could help us expand equity, and one of those is our Instructional Television department.



Michael Cormack: We're fortunate to have a cable access unit and channel, and we do that in partnership with the City. And so for even some of our scholars that don't have high-speed internet, many of them did have cable. And so we've been able to use our Instructional Television unit and to have teachers conducting read alouds. Which we're able then to take from the cable channel into YouTube, into Facebook sessions, and to provide those read aloud opportunities.

Michael Cormack: We also leveraged Accelerated Reader, which generally we restrict students taking tests only in-building. And so we opened up that access so that now scholars through myON can have access to digital books. The ability to test for those scholars that do have a device, and then paired with read alouds and instruction offered through our Instructional Television. And so teachers have been really excited to share many lessons over that. We can edit those pretty quickly and then get them up. And then provide a schedule by grade level with grade level appropriate direct instruction through Instructional Television.

Jessica Hamman: That's amazing. That's exciting. And a great example of how you guys are thinking outside the box and making things work for your scholars and staff.

Jessica Hamman: I just want to also say that I love that you call your students scholars. I think that's amazing. I've been in education a long time and I've never heard that consistently used. It tells me a lot about



your school district and how you view your students and where you see them heading. And it's just inspiring, I think it's amazing.

Michael Cormack: Very much appreciate that. I think language is powerful and it conveys meaning. And so we want to view them with a sense that they can tackle any challenge. And that investment of when you see yourself as a scholar, you behave as a scholar.

Michael Cormack: And so what does that mean, that you become a reader, a writer, a problem solver. The approach is just very different. It's a language change and a shift, but then it also informs the way that we both behave and take ownership for their education.

Jessica Hamman: I love it, I love it. Well, I want to say thank you for taking time out of your very busy schedule to chat with us today, so that we could learn more about what you are personally doing and what your school district is doing in Jackson, Mississippi. Thank you so much.

Michael Cormack: Jessica, it's been a pleasure. And just so excited, just want to shout out, team JPS, it really is a team and a family concept. And want to salute the entirety of the team, both our teachers, principals, central office folks, our child nutrition team that's provided meals. Our nurses unit, that's been such an integral part. Every member of the team facilities and operations, just to name a few.



Jessica Hamman: And it's a huge team.

Michael Cormack: It really is a team concept.

Jessica Hamman: Yeah.

Michael Cormack: It is.

Jessica Hamman: Yeah.

Michael Cormack: And everyone has found a way to help and to support the work. And we've been just really blessed to have a talented team that really has put our scholars at the forefront and the supports that we could provide to those families.

Jessica Hamman: Excellent. Well, thank you. If you'd like to learn more about Dr. Michael Cormack and the great work they're doing at Jackson Public Schools to support their students during this time, you can visit their website at [jackson.k12.ms.us](http://jackson.k12.ms.us). Bye for now.



Jessica Hamman: Thank you for listening to our Ed Leaders in Literacy podcast. To find links to the articles and resources mentioned in this podcast, go to [gleaneducation.com/edleaders](http://gleaneducation.com/edleaders) podcast, and access them in the show notes. Bye for now.

