

Distance Learning in the Trumbull Public Schools: Questions & Answers

with Jonathan Budd, Ph.D., Assistant Superintendent

May 1, 2020

The following is pertinent information to help educate the community of the plans of Trumbull Public Schools. It is a paraphrase of the question & answer period of the May 1, 2020 Distance Learning in the Trumbull Public Schools presentation by Jonathan Budd, Ph.D., Assistant Superintendent, and Kim Hapken, Ed.D., Interim Director of Pupil Personnel Services. The full presentation may be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBugranfGPA&feature=youtu.be>.

Kim, because very few people might have actually met you before distance learning began, I am wondering if you can start by talking to us a little bit about your background and your experiences prior to coming to Trumbull?

I started my career as a Speech and Language Pathologist and I did work in a number of different kinds of facilities. I worked in private special education schools and the public schools. I had an opportunity to work at Waterbury Hospital in a clinical setting for more than seven years. I was the Director of Speech Pathology and Audiology there and had the opportunity to develop the department and really work closely with the doctors in a clinical setting. After working in public schools for a number of years as a Speech and Language Pathologist, I went on to become Supervisor of Special Services for the Bristol Public Schools for approximately seven years and then I was promoted to Director of Special Services for Bristol and continued there for another eleven years. After I left Bristol, I went on to Ridgefield Public Schools and I was Assistant Superintendent for Special Services. I worked there for a little over two years and then I retired. I have been retired for about two and a half years. In my retirement, I have been doing some consulting work. I worked for Ed Advance, which is a Regional Education Resource Center in the Northwest Corner, and helped them turn around one of their schools. This past summer, I had the pleasure of working with another retired Special Education Director and we put together a program for children K-5 who had significant special education challenges along with behavioral challenges.

To what extent should students with special needs be engaging in the distance learning work that's being provided by classroom teachers?

I've always taken the approach that every student comes to us as a general education student. Some students are more challenged with their learning styles than others are. Therefore it makes sense for all of our kids with special education needs to engage in general education activities just as their peers would be doing. For the most part, our job is to progress all of our students in general education at every grade level, and we certainly want our special needs kids to be able to learn with their peers the same content and material that their peers are learning. Certainly, one of the things we would need to be able to do is to modify some of that material so that it meets the learning style of the children who require additional special education supports and services.

Can you talk also about the process a parent/guardian should use if he/she has questions about his/her child's work during distance learning?

It's been a challenge, I think for everybody, trying to work remotely, trying to help educate children remotely, and for me anyways, to learn the lay of the land, since I never really had the opportunity to meet too many people. So, if parents have concerns about their child's work, if it's too much, if it's not challenging enough, if it's too challenging, the first thing they should be doing is reach out to the child's special education teacher, who can really assist with figuring out really the most essential work that that child should be doing. Another thing a parent could consider is reaching out to the classroom teacher. As you know, many of our kids are using Google Classroom with grades 3 on up, so their material should be in the student's Google Classroom. My hope would be that, if parents are having any real concerns, they should be reaching out to their school teams first. Certainly, I am always available and would be more than happy to answer questions. Right now, the best way to get a hold of me is through e-mail: khapken@trumbullps.org.

I think we have made some information available that PPTs are happening again soon. Can you talk a little bit about that process?

PPTs are beginning. Initially, when the pandemic started and schools were closed, we had guidance from the State Department of Education indicating that our main focus should be on figuring out distance learning, and to put the PPTs aside for a period of time. As we all know, the school closure has extended. So now, we are at a point where we launched Phase 1 of our Learning Plans and now Phase 2 is beginning, and part of Phase 2 is to conduct PPTs. PPTs will look very different than when face to face, but we are trying to help teams limit the scope of PPTs and figure out what it is we need to discuss. Right now, we are trying to catch up on Annual Reviews and the Triennial Reviews that were scheduled prior to the closures. School Teams are not implementing IEP's, but providing learning opportunities that align with the student's goals and objectives. So when we come to PPT meetings, we are going to have limited discussion on some of those goals and objectives, simply because we don't have data. Parents can expect to be doing PPTs in a digital video format or a phone conference and will be getting e-mail communications from their School Teams to schedule the meetings. We are still trying to do them at a time that's convenient for a parent, and certainly understand some parents don't want to have PPTs right now because of being faced with other stressors; we can agree to postpone those PPTs.

Are there any other ways which PPTs will look different because we are in a distance learning situation rather than in a school setting?

They will look different. We are asking our staff to do the best they can to join in a video conference, but right now, we are asking everyone to ensure that the space that they are conducting the PPT in is a private space (whether by phone or video). We do need to protect the privacy and confidentiality of all of our students, and what we are trying not to do is have other family members sitting in the room with anybody who is participating in a PPT meeting. It is also likely that the PPT members might not be as many as you are normally expecting, simply because we might not be discussing all the aspects of the IEP. If parents have any questions or concerns on how the meetings are run, they can either reach out to the case manager of their child or they can certainly reach out to me.

Some of our students receive specialized services, such as from a social worker, or a speech/language pathologist. Can you talk about how those services may or may not be provided during distance learning for those students?

There are a number of service providers providing different sorts of lessons for kids. The initial phase of our implementation was for staff to reach out to students and families to provide them with work that aligned with goals and objectives. Some might be doing phone check-ins, and a few are doing video conferencing (mostly for those who couldn't access the digital platform). Our speech pathologists, social workers, and psychologists are trying to support children in the background using the Google platform. Some of our staff have done recorded videos so that the students can see some of the work and some of the instruction. Of course, face-to-face instruction works better. So it is a challenge for everyone to try to make sure that the children are moving forward at a pace that we would hope they could do while they are at home. What we all know is that none of our students, general education or special education, are moving at the rate that we would have expected if we were face to face. So, we are all struggling, I think, in terms of ensuring that kids are getting what they need right now. From my perspective, what kids need is love and understanding because the kids are struggling, as well as the families, trying to make all of this work.

We also have kids supported in the general education classroom by a special education teacher. How would the special education teacher interact with a child like that during distance learning?

The special education teacher, for the most part, if they have been supporting a child in a general education classroom, becomes a part of the Google Classroom that the general education teacher has set up. That special education teacher can go into the Classroom and modify materials and lessons for the student so the student can access them at their functioning level. Some kids might be behind a little bit and require small tweaks in their lessons; other kids may require some alternative instruction or activities. We want all of our kids to be accessing our general curriculum, but if they are not, the special education support staff are there behind the scenes helping to modify and provide accommodations for the children. They are all working collaboratively, general

education and special education. They meet regularly in a Google Meeting with their school teams to really talk about how we are doing business. It is very different and very challenging for all as we try to reach all of our kids throughout this school closure.

Some of our students are in specialized programs, such as the Pre-Kindergarten program at TECEC, our REACH program, and our ELITE program for transition from high school. Whom would a parent/guardian contact with questions on those programs during distance learning?

If parents have children in TECEC, they can certainly contact Dr. Matt Wheeler, who is the coordinator of the program. He has been working very hard convening PPTs and meeting with parents and school teams bridging kids to the next level, so lots of work has been done at the Pre-K level. Matt can certainly help parents if they have any major concerns or questions.

For REACH, parents/guardians can contact Deb McGrath, since she is the Program Coordinator there. She is the Department Chair and is able to answer questions. All of her kids are accessing their education through the Google Classroom and in their general education platforms. What I am understanding now is that the kids are doing really well at that level.

For ELITE, if parents/guardians have questions, they can certainly contact Barbara Beaman, who is the Special Education Coordinator at the high school level.

As always, you can reach out to me, and if I don't have an answer, I will certainly find the answer for you.

Any final words you'd like to share with the Trumbull Community?

I'd like to say one thing: We are all in this together. I'd like to thank all the parents who are persevering through this challenging time trying to help their children. I'd like to thank the students who are really working hard to try to get their work done and sending it back in to teachers, and certainly all of our staff in the Trumbull Public Schools who have been working behind the scenes and trying to make sure that all of our kids are getting what they need to get in order to progress. I'd like parents and anyone listening to this broadcast to be assured that, when school does open and we are face-to-face again with our children, we are going to spend time to assess and determine what levels they are functioning at so that we can determine if some additional supports and services may be needed at that time. We recognize that kids are going to come back at a variety of different levels and we will be there to support them in whatever way they need. Again, if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to me. I am here, and happy to be the conduit of whatever needs to happen going forward.