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BACK TO SCHOOL: HOW EDUCATORS PUSH THROUGH PANDEMIC NOISE

By Randy Barth & Gunn Marie Hansen

During the COVID-19 crisis, businesses throughout Orange County have pivoted with great success to address devastating profit loss and market turmoil.

Restaurants in Old Towne Orange converted Glassell Street into outdoor dining. The City National Grove of Anaheim produced a concert series in its parking lot. Knott's Berry Farm hosted a sold-out Taste of Calico food festival.

Yet, proposed solutions for schools in Orange County have largely been met with a wide range of opinions and mixed levels of support from parents, students, community leaders and business owners alike. In fact, some proposals have become pointedly controversial.

Our initiative is designed to address the diversity of thought around safety, the economy and the need to serve diverse students and the desire for school options. This model could prove to be the innovation our community needs in order to come together around education in the face of COVID-19.

The Orange Unified School District (OUSD), which serves 26,117 students in Orange, Anaheim and nearby cities, started online classes Aug. 19. We have ordered and received 14,398 Dynabooks, which will categorize OUSD as a one to one district. This shipment also allowed us to replace outdated student and staff devices that are more than 8 years old. Last week alone, over 1,400 laptops, tablets and hotspots were distributed to families in need.

The district's plan allows educators to pivot from 100% online to blended learning at the elementary school level to full day on-campus instruction as health guidelines permit.

Gov. Gavin Newsom last week took Orange County off the COVID-19 watch list after several weeks of improving metrics. The district is evaluating the best date for students to return to on-campus learning once state guidelines allow. Given the current data trends, it is possible that students could begin a phased-in return after Labor Day, starting with elementary students.

Since March, the OUSD has provided over 10,000 devices and 2,000 hotspots for families to support students in a distance learning environment.

The TLC Model

We at Think Together, a Santa Ana-based expanded learning program provider, and Orenda Education, Think Together's school improvement affiliate, believe the solution lies in empowering educators with a concrete framework and sufficient preparation to provide all students with a premium education in an uncertain environment.



Barth, Hansen

At the onset of the pandemic and to help support its community of students, families and school districts, Think Together and Orenda Education quickly pivoted to create TLC, a research-based, equity-grounded model to prepare local educators for school reentry in the COVID-19 world. The acronym stands for Teacher Workshops and Timely Talks, Learning Online and Counselor Workshop and Coaching.

The TLC model is suited to address the diverse interests of community members and educators in this ever-changing landscape. It addresses the three major aspects of school that impact students most directly: instruction, counseling and leadership.

The model comprises a well-researched, tiered framework to ensure the best educational outcomes for students. Each component of the TLC model can go from on campus to virtual or both at the same time (geographically neutral) and can switch among settings at a moment's notice.

The tiered design ensures that students get what they need when they need it, wherever their families choose to receive it (see chart).

Teacher and Counselor Workshops

The model emphasizes live small groups of no more than 15 students or 1 to 1 meetings. It provides differentiated support and guided practice.

It offers timely talks in individual or small group guidance sessions for students in need of immediate support.

The online learning can be independent or with a coach to unlock meaning for students. The content and lesson delivery anywhere can help students have digital success.

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Adult collaborators, i.e. paraprofessionals or tutors, provide complementary, structured academic strategies with small groups of students when not with the teacher.

OUSD Leading the Way

The Orange Unified School District is integrating principles of TLC within its instructional model called SLICE (Student Centered, Live Instruction, Innovative Learning, Culturally Inclusive, Equitable Choices).

The goal is to equip staff with the tools needed to provide an excellent education experience whether it be remote, in person or blended.

About 585 OUSD educators across 39 sites partnered with Think Together and Orenda Education to receive a minimum of 15 hours of TLC professional education training, with additional coaching support over five days and ongoing support planned throughout the school year. Approximately 60 administrators engaged in additional leadership work to prepare to launch and support quality implementation.

This program includes access to toolkits, templates, planning guides and tip sheets that address elements that directly impact an educator's ability to provide a true, right and just education for every student moving through these unprecedented times.

OUSD teachers, counselors, administrators and other staff can meet the uncertainty and fluidity that the pandemic poses when empowered by a strong framework and ample preparation.

We created the TLC framework from tried and true models from some of the leading experts in education. This model ultimately ensures our children receive the best possible education, no matter what curveballs are thrown our way.

The framework is available to any school or district.

Public-Private Solution

A trusting partnership between the district and support organizations can be a winning formula to providing the highest quality experience for students.

The TLC model is designed specifically to offer guidance to districts like OUSD that are committed to providing a premium education to every student. Think Together and Orenda are excited to support districts that are focused on providing all families, especially those with struggling students who have fallen further behind during COVID-19, with the opportunity to thrive no matter what the future holds.

With the help of federal relief grants, local district funds and private philanthropy, and a clear goal, implementation of the TLC model is a viable solution to support Orange County's students, families, educators, community members and policymakers.

It is time to come together as a community.

Let's focus on ensuring our children are well-educated and prepared to handle any challenge, COVID-19 or otherwise, that may come their way.

Editor's Note: Randy Barth is the founder and CEO of Think Together, California's largest nonprofit provider of afterschool and expanded learning programs. Barth founded Think Together in 1997 with a single afterschool learning center in Costa Mesa and since scaled the organization to serve nearly 250,000 students in more than 600 programs from San Diego to the Bay Area. Dr. Gunn Marie Hansen is the superintendent for the Orange Unified School District. Under her leadership, OUSD has seen improvement in all areas of the California School Dashboard and last year was accepted to the League of Innovative Schools.