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S3E1: How have Maine schools dealt with the pandemic?

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The Maine Question podcast transcript
S3E1: How have Maine schools dealt with the pandemic?

Music is playing in the background

00:04 Ron Lisnet

Hello and welcome.

Great to have you along as we kick off season three of *The Maine Question* podcast from UMaine. I'm your host Ron Lisnet. So many great stories in different directions that we could go in as the fall 2020 semester revs up. The Coronavirus pandemic is, of course, still with us and does have a huge impact on everyone's work and life. The effects of that phenomenon will no doubt be a significant part of the stories that we tell in Season 3.

00:29

But the mission and the work of UMaine, as the research institution of the state of Maine, continues on as well. And we'll dig into that wealth of material, the challenges and the breakthroughs, and the people who do all of that work throughout Season 3. For this first episode of the season, however, COVID-19 is the major character of this story as we look at how it affected the beginning of a school year unlike any other.

00:54

It is hard to forget the mad scramble that befell all of us in mid-March 2020. Literally overnight businesses and institutions closed their doors. While many folks had to transition to working from home.

01:12

Associate professor of educational leadership Catherine Biddle and Maria Franklin, a lecturer of educational leadership along with a team of student researchers, did thorough work on how schools handle this transition. They gathered correspondence and information from every school district in Maine and many in Pennsylvania. Their study, moving beyond crisis schooling.

01:35

Associate Professor of Educational Leadership Catherine Biddle; and Maria Franklin, a lecturer of Educational Leadership along with a team of student researchers, did thorough work on how schools handle this transition. They gathered correspondence and information from every school district in Maine and many in Pennsylvania. Their study, "Moving Beyond Crisis Schooling: What can we learn from the innovation of main districts to support remote student learning from March to June 2020?" looked at this seismic shift. How was this crisis handled and communicated? What innovations or common themes emerged from all of this? As the 2021 school year began earlier this fall we met remotely, as Catherine Ann Maria told us what they found.

Background music softens and continues until fading out.

02:21

Thank you both for taking the time to talk to us. We appreciate it. Everybody's life has been upended by the pandemic and everything going on in the year 2020 and I imagine that's definitely the case in the world of Education with how things ended in the spring and how school is beginning here in the fall.

So, talk about that sea change and the tectonic plates moving in the world of Education and how and why did it lead to this study that you did?

02:48 Catherine Biddle

Well, Maria, do you want to talk a little bit about what the experience was like on the grounds?

02:54 Maria Franklin

Sure, so we were working on a set of circumstances that were rapidly changing. Sometimes several times in one day, a decision would be made and have to be revised and revised again and revised again, particularly around the safety issues of bringing students and staff back to the school buildings. So, while decisions were being made at the local district level, broader pictures were being evaluated at the state level and then advice would come down from the state DOE to the school districts. And then the districts would have to communicate those decisions to families. And sometimes we were finding that two or three times a day a different decision was made around the same topics.

So, for example, you know, closing the school building. We left the school on a Friday thinking that we were going to be back on Monday and then we thought we'd be back on Tuesday or Wednesday, and then we thought, well, we're not coming back at all until further notice. And so, there were just some very rapid-fire changes in decision-making happening. And it certainly was challenging at every level from the district level down to the classroom level and to the family level.

04:07 Ron Lisnet

So, Catherine, how and why did that lead to this study that you put together?

04:11 Catherine Biddle

Well, I you know I had students—so I teach all practicing administrators and teachers and I had students coming to class and saying, 'This is the most challenging thing I've ever faced in my career. You know, I'm having to make all of these decisions. I don't have the information that I need to make the decisions.

And at the same time there are all of these news articles coming out about how schools were adapting to meeting students basic needs in the context of building closure, because there are so many services that students get at the school building and that are really facilitated by the school building being opened, that all of a sudden we're interrupted by this.

04:50

And so, I started to wonder how that was—my lens always is thinking about 'what's the impact of this on rural schools?' And that's one of the reasons that I enjoy working in Maine so much is because, you know, we have so many rural school districts in varied circumstances. And so, I started to think, well, how? How is this different across urbanicity? How is this different for urban, suburban and rural schools in terms of how they're adapting to the needs of this moment? And so, um, in the midst of all of that. The Spencer Foundation put out a request for proposals for a rapid response research grant that would

get reviewed within 2 to 3 weeks and then the funds would be dispersed so that research could be done that would help schools think about what to do in the fall. We put in a proposal, Maria and I, to look at how schools were providing for students' basic needs and communicating with families in the context of these rapid changes and uncertain information.

05:50 Ron Lisnet

How is the study put together? How was it conducted and who was involved?

0:54 Catherine Biddle

It's a multi-phase study, so the way we constructed as there were some rapid response research questions that we were aiming to answer this summer to get timely information back out to districts. And that was I think one of the reasons that we were awarded the grant was because of the quick turnaround for some information getting back out to stakeholders.

That consisted of collecting district documentation from websites from every district in Maine and every district in Pennsylvania. And we chose those two states because they're geographically similar, but they had very, very different epidemiological risk at the time that we were collecting the data. Pennsylvania was in the top fifth of states with infections and Maine was in the bottom 5th of states with infections. And we were wondering if that affected how schools chose to meet students' needs.

So, that was—so we did this inventory over the summer, where we looked at this district documentation for every single district in Maine and then the second phase of the study that we haven't conducted yet is taking that information, using it to do interviews with district administrative teams to really understand the decision-making processes behind the timeline of their supports and the rollout of those to families.

07:14 Ron Lisnet

Maria, as you alluded to, the transition last March, was such a chaotic time. Things were changing, literally by the hour sometimes. Was that reflected in the thousands of documents and the feedback that you collected?

07:26 Maria Franklin

Yes, I think it was. Certainly, we found that districts tried to get information out to families in a timely manner. And sometimes that meant two or three times in one day. And so, we did see that iterative decision-making process play out in the way that districts were communicating with families to the point that sometimes there was an apology for the frequency of the communications, but it was apparent that it was important for families to have as accurate information as possible on a minute to minute basis.

07:59 Ron Lisnet

What, if any, common themes or issues, or just ways of dealing with this, emerged from what you found? Pick a couple of topic areas, environmental, the social emotional part of the education process, physical factors that any other findings that had some commonalities?

08:15 Catherine Biddle

One of the things I was surprised by in looking at the documentation is there is actually a lot less variation than I was expecting. I thought that there would be particularly around, for example, providing food, right? I would say that districts fell into kind of one of two categories, like every district, provided some kind of nutritional support for students, and often they did that within days of closing.

Either within one to maybe, I would say at the outer edge, seven days of closing, which if you think about the scale of that, is kind of amazing. You know they kind of fell into one of two categories, either re-purposing school buses to deliver meals to families homes or having—setting up different distribution stations within the community, either at the school or at community sites, um, for families to come and pick up. And I know that that was facilitated by the relaxation of guide—the guidelines from the USDA around food distribution, because that had been a big challenge for districts in first looking at this problem. I was really amazed by the ability of districts to adapt so, so, so, quickly in the face of sudden, an unplanned school closure.

09:26 Ron Lisnet

What was the balance that you found between protecting students and teachers in terms of health and safety, and staff, and continuing the educational process?

09:36 Catherine Biddle

I do think that there were efficiencies that districts found along the way. So one example of this in the food distribution realm Catherine Biddle is there were a lot of districts that initially had deliveries happening every day or pick-up sites happening every day and one of the things that happened in the context of shutdown was—or in the lockdown mandated by the governor—was districts reevaluating whether they needed to have those pick-up and delivery sites happening every day. And so they consolidated those times and distributed more meals less frequently. And that was one way to help protect the staff and limit their exposure.

10:16 Ron Lisnet

Now Maria, in addition to your duties at UMaine, you are in a school. You're at Narraguagus High School in Herrington, which is in Downeast Maine. Talk about what you saw on the ground there. In terms of that balance that education versus safety and health.

10:30 Maria Franklin

I agree with Cat, that the response was very rapid for those basic needs. That there was a very quick understanding that there were some fundamental things that had to happen right away. And there was some frustration around waiting for guidance, like Cat was saying, from the USDA around what we could do, but there certainly was an immediate recognition of the need to do something. And so, we kind of settled into something that worked overtime. Once we got that guidance, I think, um, what I noticed in the documents we collected was kind of a shift as we realized how long this shutdown was going to occur. The priorities began to change from, you know, maintaining the rigor of the educational experience toward more of a social and emotional learning type of priority, where mental health and wellness became more foregrounded than it was in the beginning, as people realized the impact this was having on families on students on teachers, and that the shutdown was not going to be temporary, but potentially lasting through the end of the school year.

11:34 Ron Lisnet

Maria many schools struck up a partnership with the communities that they're in. Any examples there that that happened in your situation? And what kinds of benefits did those relationships yield?

11:46 Maria Franklin

We are very fortunate to have some pre-existing community partnerships that really stepped in to provide not only basic supports around food and Internet access, utilities, assistance with rent payments, those type of things. But also, we have some programs in our building, specifically through the Maine Seacoast Mission—there are several programs that are housed there—that stepped in to also support the educational and social-emotional needs of our students. So, we feel very fortunate down here in Downeast, Maine to have that partnership in place. And statewide, we notice that a lot of these partnerships really were foregrounded in the response to the crisis and new partnerships began to be developed as well. So, we think that's one of the strong points that were highlighted through the documents that we saw coming as a result of this project.

12:39 Ron Lisnet

Catherine, can you maybe talk about the College of Education and Human Development's role in doing research like this and making it available? Is this an example of playing a role in developing and improving education in the state of Maine?

12:51 Catherine Biddle

Well, as a land grant institution, um, I think it's our obligation to do applied research that benefits the state of Maine. I know that the way that I approach my work is through the lens of how this will bridge the kind of gap between educational research and actual practice in schools. And I think that this project is an is an example of the kind of research that folks are doing all over the College in trying to kind of bridge those two things.

13:20 Ron Lisnet

I know students were involved; some were undergrads involved in the research. What did they get out of the experience? Did they play a key role for you both?

13:28 Catherine Biddle

Oh my gosh, we couldn't have done this project without the students.

You know we have one graduate research assistant who's actually also an assistant principle who's in our EDD program in Educational Leadership. And then we had two fantastic undergraduate student researchers. They bore equal responsibility for the project. You know, we all worked on collecting the documents from websites we all worked on, inventorying the documents, we just split it up and—

So, they got experience doing the kind of long payoff, hard work that goes into a project like this. You know, we I, I remember talking to them at the beginning of summer about how research is often a lot about busting rocks before you can kind of get to the main findings. And so, I think they got that experience but also got to see the payoff.

14:17 Ron Lisnet

Short term pain for long term gain, right?

14:20 Catherine Biddle

Mmm-hmm [affirmation].

14:21 Ron Lisnet

Maria, how do you hope these findings get used?

14:24 Maria Franklin

I think one of the most exciting aspects of this is the ability to connect people who wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity to learn from one another and learn from their experiences. Because we did find a lot of commonalities throughout the state and so through our Beyond Crisis Schooling website and through the webinars that we've done throughout the summer, we've had the opportunity to bring different audiences together. And to provide real world examples of things that worked here in the state of Maine for districts. So, my hope is that it increases a sense of collaboration and provides resources for schools who might be looking for answers to specific questions.

15:02 Ron Lisnet

Now obviously schools have been planning since this took place to get ready for the fall—which we are now just seeing the school year start in a lot of places—so, that has allowed for some planning time for all these school districts to be ready for this. How has that planning and implementation of those plans been different from the spring when schools were forced to basically turn on a dime.?

15:28 Maria Franklin

One big difference is that we've been able to plan more intentionally for the return to school. You know, when we entered crisis schooling, we really were making snap decisions because the situation was changing so rapidly. And now, the potential for it to change rapidly is always in the back of everyone's mind but we have kind of settled into this notion of a hybrid learning system, a fully in-person system, or a fully-remote system, and trying to create a system that would allow students to transition seamlessly between those. So, I think the intentionality of the process has been greater now. And I think that the experience that we had with having to make decisions during the rapid shutdown and then the crisis schooling period of time, is informing how we approach learning and how we're going to move learning forward for students in this new paradigm of these three modalities that we're using this fall.

16:28 Ron Lisnet

Catherine, anything to add there or...

16:30 Catherine Biddle

There are a lot of administrators who are now experts on things that they didn't think that they were going to have to be experts on, right? Like, the rate at which HVAC systems move air through a particular space. Or, you know, the rationale behind a lot of the CDC guidelines, so that they can explain them to stakeholders in their communities. And that expertise had to be developed very quickly.

16:53 Ron Lisnet

Were there inequities that made themselves known? You talked about nutrition and distributing food. Internet connections. Did any of that come out of this study?

17:04 Catherine Biddle

Well, I don't think that our findings at this stage point to particular kinds of inequities. I do think that, as we get more into the analysis of the inventory that we did over the summer, we're going to start to see some inequities emerge, probably around the lines that you would expect. So, one of the things that we know from the spring is that broadband and Wi-Fi access has been just an enormous barrier to remote learning in rural communities and in low income communities.

One of the things that I have said in the past is that I think that the school closure has disproportionately affected our most disadvantaged students and continues to do so. While I don't know that new inequities are emerging, I think old inequities are emerging in new ways.

17:56 Ron Lisnet

So, of all the changes that have taken place, which ones might stick? Maria you mentioned the fact that schools and teachers need to be prepared for fully in-school, hybrid, or fully online, so you know the field is much wider. Will it be any good innovations? Do you think that might come out of this whole situation?

18:16 Maria Franklin

For me, one of the most important things to come out of this is the increased communication between district schools and families. Because families are our partners and they can only be our partners if we provide them with the information that they need in order to help our students learn well. So, I think the increased communication can do nothing but improve relationships between families and schools and districts.

18:24 Ron Lisnet

What advice would you both give to teachers, administrators, parents, students about how to handle all this uncertainty and the challenges ahead, resilience and patience, I guess, would be two words that come to mind, but what else?

18:56 Catherine Biddle

I think one of the things that I would certainly tell educators right now who are—and I've spoken with a lot of them over the last two weeks in the context of our classes and also some of my projects. I get the sense that there's just a lot of emotional stress right now about making this a success. And I think at the end of the day, you know, creating an environment where relationships are prioritized and care is at the forefront, you can't go wrong. And I don't think. I mean, I think most educators are aware of that, but within the figuring out new ways to do that in the context of these guidelines, in the context of physical spaces in our schools that look different and feel different is where our energies should be going before we think about things like, achievement and making progress on Maine Learning Results and that kind of thing.

19:42 Ron Lisnet

Maria?

19:43 Maria Franklin

Well, I would echo that and I would add that in order to successfully do that, we need to pay attention to self-care for the adults in the building, because it's stressful for everyone—students and families—and they'll be looking to the educators to provide kind of that steady transition and that, that “regulated self” that's going to allow students to come in and calm themselves and regulate themselves. So, the importance of self-care really just can't be stressed enough. I think. Do what makes you—you know, what recharges your own batteries—what calms your own spirit—and then you'll be better able to help others adapt to this new normal, as well.

20:22 Ron Lisnet

Now, this study is not over. Do you both plan on follow up? As far as this project goes?

20:28 Catherine Biddle

We will be releasing a report in the coming weeks that details some of the findings from the inventory that we did, so the last report that we released focused on providing resources to districts. This will be more evaluative in the sense of how did districts perform, you know, in providing these supports, and we'll be looking at that across a couple of different factors. And then, of course, we'll be looking at how districts made decisions around this and what was prioritized and tried to understand that process and the goal behind that is, you know, to inform future crisis planning [*Background music begins*] so that schools can be affective in the context of sudden interruptions like this.

21:09 Ron Lisnet

Well, this is important work and we're so glad that you took the time to share it with us. Thank you so much.

21:14 Maria Franklin

Thank you for having us.

Background music swells.

21:20 Ron Lisnet

Thanks for joining us. We hope you'll consider subscribing to our series. *The Maine Question* can be found on Apple and Google Podcast, SoundCloud, Stitcher, and Spotify. This is Ron. Lisnet. We'll catch you next time on *The Maine Question*.

