

Putnam County, FL: A tradition of helping through adversity

DISTRICT PROFILE

Putnam County School District

PALATKA, FL

Student Population

10,500+ STUDENTS

Schools

21

Distance learning philosophy

Operate according to district's long standing mission of providing stability during times of uncertainty, with "grace, compassion, and patience"

Transition challenge

Much of the district's diverse, rural student population was without access to technology or wireless Internet



The Putnam County School District in northeastern Florida is no stranger to supporting students through challenging times. Located in a rural section of Florida, about halfway between Orlando and Jacksonville, all schools in Putnam County receive Title I funding.

The district, which educates over 10,500 students across 26 schools, has existed for more than 150 years. In fact, Putnam County schools began their history of educating and supporting students through crisis during the Civil War.



Guided by grace, compassion, and patience

While it's natural for instructional leaders to focus on instructional goals and learning objectives when planning a new approach to delivering education, Putnam Schools also held onto three student-centered principles to lead their plans for school closures. These were grace, compassion, and patience.

To plan for distance learning, the district quickly conducted a survey about students' needs. In response to the results, 7,200 devices were distributed to students and newly established community partnerships helped provide WiFi to kids throughout the district. Impressively, nearly 200,000 meals were delivered by bus to district families in April.

When preparation for school closures began in mid-March 2020, the district rolled out a phased plan for instruction. The Director of School Improvement and Director of Teaching and Learning worked with instructional coaches to create lesson plans for teachers during the early phases. This allowed teachers to get comfortable with distance learning tools, and encouraged students to engage with distance learning instruction. The subsequent phases, while still supported, promoted more instructional planning by teachers, with a continued utilization of digital tools like Newsela.

In terms of schedules for virtual learning, Putnam schools opted for a flexible approach. They encouraged asynchronous teaching, so students could do their assignments at the best time for them. Recalling the district's values of grace, compassion, and patience, this policy was also considerate of the many students in the district who are sharing devices with parents or siblings.

Newfound clarity helps teachers reach all learners

Leaders in the district knew that when teachers were not physically present to offer guidance, selecting quality materials was more important than ever. As Michelle Graham, Secondary Instructional Coach, said, the district needed content that was engaging, timely, and meaningful.

Newsela helps Putnam County schools achieve this by delivering instruction content at the right level for each student. Fortunately, many students in the district were already familiar with Newsela because many of the district's secondary classrooms were already using it to support their curriculum before the school closures.

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With real-time data to monitor their students' reading and engagement, teachers can communicate better with students by providing feedback and redirection when needed. These observations will also help teachers and district leaders understand students' needs to plan for next year.

Teachers will be able to reflect on the measurable results of Newsela assignments and use those insights to adjust instruction going forward. For example, Graham



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noted that teachers can examine how long students spent on reading assignments and use that metric to determine if a reading passage or assignment should be used again in the future.

Compassionate educators provide stability throughout a crisis

Like many schools navigating unexpected closures, defining success was challenging and will continue to be an area of focus into the summer and the new school year. But without a doubt, part of the district’s goal was to live up to its mission and culture of providing stability for students in challenging times, as it’s been doing for over a century.



The district wants to continue to ensure that students across all achievement levels receive core instruction that leads to progress, and it wants to provide an equitable education experience for the diverse student body in this rural county.

For Graham, the experience has also highlighted the compassion that her staff has for district students.

“Never underestimate the deep love educators have for students,” Graham said. “Though these times have been challenging, they’ve led to unprecedented collaboration amongst the staff in the district and they’ve worked hard to translate their approach to online instruction.” District leadership knows nothing is as valuable as face-to-face instruction, and the relationship between a student and a teacher, but the forced shift has paved the way for new ideas and problem-solving that the district can use to better support its students going forward.

Educators everywhere learn lessons for a lifetime

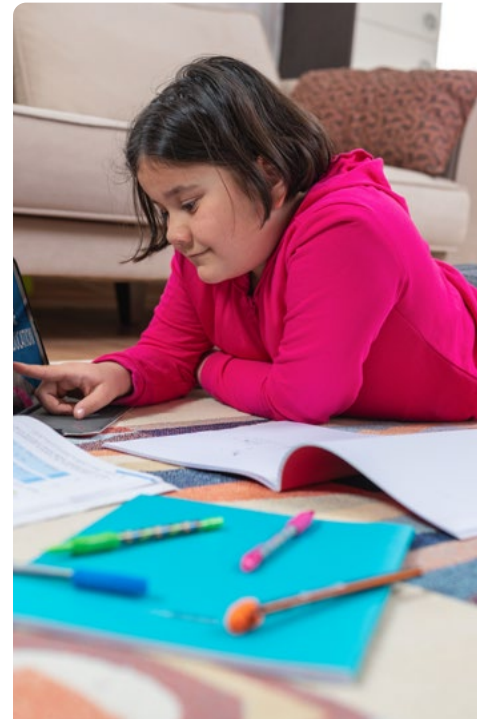
COVID-19 school closures brought with them questions that had never been asked before, let alone answered. Parents, students and teachers wondered if and how the school year would carry on. Teachers sought direction about instructional expectations while teaching remotely. And district leaders fought hard to maintain any normalcy during abnormal times.

While worrying about the well-being of students, staff and loved ones, the three district leaders profiled above continued to press forward, making thoughtful, innovative decisions. Throughout it all, these choices were driven by a desire to protect the well-being of students and provide an equitable education for all.

In each case, administrators acted quickly to make decisions and communicate expectations to their school communities. They gathered staff to collaborate and develop instructional plans, materials and strategies for distance learning. They rapidly assessed the needs of their student population and developed novel solutions to meet those needs. And they delivered instruction in a way that was empathetic to their student populations.

With a practical eye, district leaders and teachers explored how high-quality, flexible, digital content helped teachers meet the needs of all students, regardless of interest and ability levels. They were able to measure students' progress instantly. Qualitative and quantitative measures helped teachers and district leaders better understand the content and strategies that worked for their students. And teachers leveraged interesting, high-quality content to engage all kids, even those who don't typically consider "student" as part of their identity.

While there remain myriad questions and uncertainties about K-12 instruction in the months and even years ahead, through the thoughtful work these districts did to meet the needs of their students when COVID-19 school closures occurred, they learned lessons that will continue to be valuable far after the school buildings open once again.



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