



Preston County Schools Address Challenges Head on with SEL Content from Newsela and a Willingness to Adapt

DISTRICT PROFILE

District Name

PRESTON COUNTY

Location

PRESTON COUNTY, WEST VIRGINIA

Student Population

3,900

Back to school challenge

Rolling out a new Health program while facing pandemic challenges



THE CHALLENGE

A crisis amplifies existing needs

“Here, there and everywhere in between.”

According to Stephen Wotring, superintendent of Preston County School District, that’s where he saw challenges with engaging students after schools in his state closed in the spring of 2020.

As spring turned to summer, the district began planning for their fall reopening. Mandates from the state were shifting fast, and administrators had few constants to rely on when envisioning how to bring kids back to school for the fall. One thing they were certain about was that prioritizing students’ wellbeing was paramount.



While the district was used to placing student wellbeing at the forefront, district Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Michelle Berry, noted that the challenges of 2020 school closures amplified the district’s existing priorities of equity, access, and social-emotional wellness.

“We have kids living in trauma, without a caring adult at home. At school they were safe and they were fed, and when they left that environment, we could no longer be that safe place for them. We’ve always put the physical and emotional wellbeing first,” Michelle said.

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As the district makes plans on how to continue instruction and promote student wellbeing during uncertain plans, they also must contend with hurdles around access. Many students live in rural areas, so a significant portion of the student population does not have Internet at home. Some parts of the county lack the infrastructure for high-speed Internet to even be a possibility at this time.

Additionally, there is a large wealth gap amongst families in the county, and some communities are now “completely jobless,” according to Stephen, after the economic shutdown of 2020.

After schools shut down on March 13, Stephen notes, there were families that never responded to the district’s attempts to deliver distance learning or get in contact at all.

“Those are the kids we needed to connect with, but we couldn’t,” he said. “We’re working to provide a valuable education to all kids in our district, during the craziest time in my life in education,” Stephen observed.



THE SOLUTION

Teachers add relevance to rigor for a well-rounded health program

Prior to COVID-19, Preston County was using Newsela for ELA and social studies, as it worked to develop a blended learning model. After schools closed in the spring, a new group of teachers began using Newsela content that had not used it before.

“I got comments from our high school English teachers, who found that the engagement level was much higher when they used Newsela as opposed to when they used other resources,” Stephen said.



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SUPERINTENDENT OF PRESTON
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“We began with ELA and Social Studies, and it’s taken off from there,” Michelle said. Preston County was able to build on Newsela’s reputation as a trusted resource for ELA and SS and use it for the Health program, too.

Michelle noted that teachers were considering another SEL resource for their Health program, however high-quality content led them to ultimately choose Newsela.

“When teachers saw how customized the [Health and Wellness] collection was built from the ground up with the input of West Virginia teachers, there was a lot of buy-in,” Michelle noted.

Stephen believed that finding an SEL resource that allowed for students to explore relevant topics was a top priority as the district planned to roll out the new Health curriculum in the context of COVID-19.

“A teacher can work with rigor, but a piece we’re often missing is relevance. That’s really where Newsela plays a major role for us,” Stephen said.

Michelle elaborated on the importance of relevant content by highlighting an example with a previous Health curriculum resource.

“In our old curriculum, one source said vaping was a safe alternative to smoking. Now we know that’s not the case,” Michelle said.

“Having a curriculum that evolves with more information, more research, and what we know about kids is important,” Michelle said. “When we ask kids to read things that are relevant to their lives, that’s where the real learning happens.”

THE IMPLEMENTATION

As district needs align with buying cycles, an ideal solution emerges

While comparing options for the district’s new Health program, Michelle noted how Newsela SEL content was a fit for the district because it was flexible, current, and allowed teachers to easily differentiate instruction. With its new Health program, which fully rolls out in the fall of 2020, Preston County now has what Stephen called a “clear scope and sequence,” for their K - 8 curriculum. With embedded SEL content, their Newsela West Virginia Health Collection aligns directly to the West Virginia Health and Wellness standards and will serve as an important focus from grades 2 through 12.

Each elementary school in Preston County schools has one or two Wellness teachers, depending on the grade-level and size of the school. Those teachers will be able to use the Newsela West Virginia Health collection as part of their curriculum as well as prepare students to continue their learning with the collection extending into high school.



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Michelle Berry
DIRECTOR OF CURRICULUM
AND INSTRUCTION

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According to Stephen and Michelle, this means the teachers will be able to easily see how the content, themes, and learning activities in their Health program “spiral from one grade level to the next.”

Additionally, Michelle shared that even the district’s high school Wellness teachers are excited for the implementation because they can now count on their students having experienced a high-quality, shared SEL experience through their elementary years in the district.

As the district prepares to roll out the new collection during a time when access, equity, and addressing a loss of classroom time are all major concerns, Stephen and Michelle noted that Newsela’s features pair well with the district’s own access and equity efforts.

“The ability to download content and use it offline is very valuable for our teachers.” This coincides well with Preston County’s work to get an Internet-connected device to every student, and a grant they are writing to get WiFi hotspots to students without Internet access.

“This situation has provided the greatest opportunity we ever could have had to reform education,” Stephen said, reflecting on the past few months. “We can either squander this opportunity, or we can meet it head on. I’m hopeful that change will come.”

With a positive attitude and a solid strategy, it’s hard to bet against Stephen, Michelle and Preston County Schools.



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