

# LEADERSHIP FOR VIRTUAL LEARNING

By Tim Matheney

For eight years (2004-2012), I served as principal in the high-touch leadership world of a large comprehensive high school. So much of my leadership presence involved walking the halls, peering into classrooms, and having impromptu conversations with teachers and department heads. But today throughout the world, principals are leading from home instead of walking the halls of their schools. As of March 17, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that half of the world's children and young adults – about 850 million – have to stay away from their schools and universities because of COVID-19.

So how does an instructional leader lead when she can't visit classrooms, facilitate grade-level meetings, or have those informal conversations with colleagues? In the few short weeks that has radically shifted K-12 education globally toward virtual learning, there are already some promising practices emerging from truly adaptable principals. From them, I have learned a few important lessons:

**Be accessible, but keep expectations clear.** Anthony Fitzpatrick, principal of Thomas A. Edison and Strawbridge Elementary Schools in Haddon Township, New Jersey, has shared his daily calendar routine with staff and parents. That way, teachers know when he's easily accessible, and parents know the times each day when he'll be working on responses to their concerns.

**Communicate, communicate, communicate.** And just when you think your message is clear, say it again in a different way. Understanding requires so much more than reading written communication. We rely on non-verbal cues, context and so much more to understand messages (and even then we still don't get it right). Leaders in virtual environments need to communicate the same message – with real clarity – multiple times in different ways. So if a principal is thinking about communicating something important to staff, she should think about doing it in writing (email, faculty newsletter or website post) and verbally (faculty meeting via teleconference, video, or podcast) to ensure staff truly understand what she's communicating.

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The [Spire Leadership Group](https://spireleadershipgroup.com) is an education-focused consulting firm based in Philadelphia. Spire Leadership is led by founder and president Tim Matheney, who previously served as a high school principal, the New Jersey Department of Education's Chief Intervention Officer, and the founding Executive Director of the Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders. Spire's team includes Consulting Associate April Gonzalez, a veteran principal, assistant principal, and curriculum supervisor. Together Tim and April have more than 60 years of experience as educators and leaders. For more information on Spire Leadership, please email Tim ([tim@spireleadershipgroup.com](mailto:tim@spireleadershipgroup.com)), call 732-309-2296 or visit [spireleadershipgroup.com](https://spireleadershipgroup.com).



The [Spire Leadership Group](https://spireleadershipgroup.com) is sharing COVID-19 bulletins for K-12 educators throughout the coronavirus pandemic. If this advisory was forwarded to you, and you wish to receive it in your inbox, **please email the word "SUBSCRIBE"** to [tim@spireleadershipgroup.com](mailto:tim@spireleadershipgroup.com).

This document is intended to provide resources to school, district, and charter network leaders regarding the COVID-19 outbreak. For authoritative information on COVID-19, consult information from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov), your state health department, and your school physician.

*"All of us need to . . . think in terms of our own inner strengths, our resilience and resourcefulness, our capacity to adapt and to rely upon ourselves and our families."*

*Attributed to*  
Steven Pressfield, author  
[@SPressfield](https://twitter.com/SPressfield)

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**Take time for (virtual) school culture.** While it's easy to get caught up in the complex logistics of transitioning to virtual learning, principals can't forget about school culture. Principal Fitzpatrick makes time on his daily calendar for morning announcements and read-alouds via Zoom and YouTube. As a result, his students get to see him every day providing a reassuring presence and stressing the continued importance of learning. The South Brunswick (NJ) School District took a fun approach to school culture: Staff and students participated in a Virtual Spirit Week during their first full week of remote learning. Monday, for example, was Pajama Day, and Friday was School Colors Day.

**The perfect is the enemy of the good.** So many principals I know are used to being able to influence systems and shape positive outcomes. During this transition period to virtual learning, there's a great deal still to be figured out. Many (Most?) districts, for example, are still working to figure out attendance expectations and systems for students, particularly for those in elementary grades. Principals need to keep in mind that perfection isn't realistic during these challenging times. Reassuring students, providing worthwhile learning activities, and taking diligent steps toward strong instruction is the goal right now.

As we move toward a "new normal" with the prevalence of virtual learning, I'm certain many more promising practices of virtual instructional leadership will emerge. What's working for you? Send your suggestions and ideas to [tim@spireleadershipgroup.com](mailto:tim@spireleadershipgroup.com).

## Virtual Learning: Some Key Questions

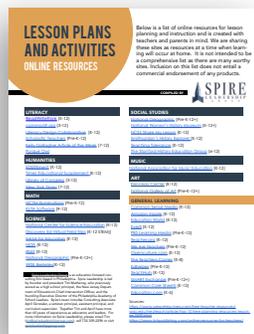
- What professional development do teachers need in order to get the most out of their students' virtual learning?
- Some families may have parents and multiple children who need computer devices for work and school. How will you accommodate families who need additional devices?
- What are your plans for supporting students with unique needs (e.g. students with 504 plans or IEPs)?
- How will you accommodate students without Internet access? Some companies are providing free Internet access for qualifying households for two months:
  - [Comcast's Internet Essentials](#)
  - [Altice USA through its Optimum and Suddenlink brands](#)
  - [Spectrum](#)

## SPIRE LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

The Spire Leadership Group is publishing free resources for parents, teachers and students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Follow the links to our first two resource documents:



**Resources for Online Learning:** This document lists a variety of websites with learning resources by content area (for example, reading, writing, math, coding, health and safety, etc.).



**Lesson Plans and Activities Online Resources:** This document provides a list of websites with learning activities and lesson plans that can be useful to teachers and parents.