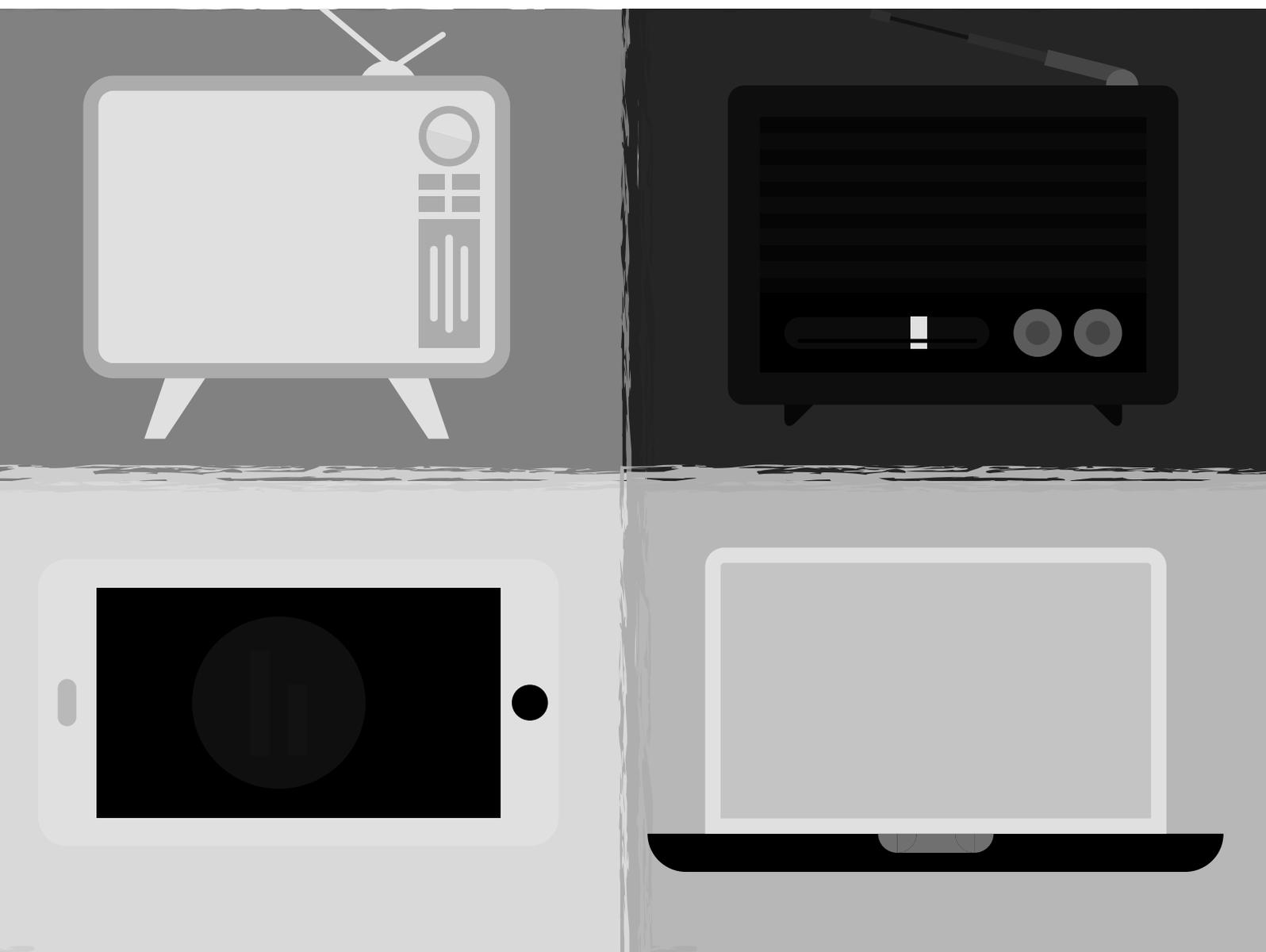


United States: George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academies (PLA)

Earl Martin Phalen and Fernando Reimers



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Type of intervention: non-governmental

Website: <https://www.phalenacademies.org/GVPLA>

General description

The George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academies (“PLA”) is a non-profit organisation, founded in 2013. PLA started as a network of charter schools but evolved to include public schools in a turnaround model (school improvement model). In its short 7-year history as an organisation, PLA has transformed seven schools rated as “failing” by local accountability standards into “excellent” schools; the network has grown to 22 schools across five diverse states – Indiana, Michigan, Florida, Ohio and Texas – serving nearly 10 000 children and is the fastest growing Black-led school turnaround network. Ninety-three percent (93%) of students (called “scholars”) are Black or Latino, and 89% of them are living in poverty. More information on PLA is available as an annex.

The school leadership team followed scientists’ advice closely in order to anticipate future scenarios. They concluded from learning about the various models predicting the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic that schools would most likely be closed for the remainder of the school year, the summer months, and possibly would not open next fall. Recognising the severity of the crisis early on enabled them to focus wholeheartedly on a plan that would maximise learning opportunities for children through alternative delivery methods.

The coronavirus crisis led schools and universities to rapidly transition to a distance-learning mode, via the Internet, television or radio. This series documents some country initiatives that ensured education continuity for all using technology and provided support to teachers, students, and their families.



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The strategy for educational continuity during the period of physical distancing rests on four pillars: academic learning, nutrition, emotional support and staff's needs for support.

1. *Nutrition*: 93% of the PLA sites had up and running “grab and go” locations for families to get food within the first week of schools shutting down.
2. *Emotional support*: Each school in the network developed a plan to reach out to every student so that they remained connected to their teachers – even though few of the 10 000 students initially had devices and connectivity. Teachers hold virtual pizza parties, virtual “dance offs” and have simply gotten in touch with each of the scholars and their family through bi-weekly one-on-one calls, among other initiatives.
3. *Academic learning*: PLA developed a three-part plan to ensure that students continued to have high level, quality touchpoints with the content that they were learning before the crisis. The plan was rolled out in phases, which gave time to secure the necessary infrastructure and to gain more of an understanding of what the duration period of mandated social distancing would look like.
 - Phase I: All scholars were distributed three to four weeks' worth of paper-based, standards-aligned learning materials packets with the same “grab and go” method as for nutrition. Staff made home visits to families for the few remaining students who did not take their materials at school.
 - Phase II: Scholars have access to PLA's newly developed e-learning website. As scholars worked through Phase I, the PLA leadership team worked vigorously to ideate, create and launch an e-learning website that featured over 400 short video lessons. Each video comes with worksheets that students can download and work through while watching the videos. The e-learning site serves all students from kindergarten through 12th grade.
 - Phase III (within 2 months of school building closures): Scholars will be given one-to-one devices with connectivity, and academic instruction will be provided virtually by their teachers. Students will participate in real-time in virtual lessons; they will have access to instruction in small groups, and will submit assignments and receive feedback and grades virtually. Devices will be procured through the following: reallocation of Title I funds (a grant from the federal government to schools serving students from low-income families); financial donations from foundations, corporations and individuals; and donations of devices by corporate partners.
4. *Support to staff*: Staff were trained to teach online and were fully engaged in all the other aspects of the strategic plan. Staff participated in ten hours of professional development to support the transition to e-learning. On-going training is also available virtually. PLA also has an on-line training platform called PLA University. Training models are available for staff to access at any time. A help desk was set up to help families and students use the technology and lessen the burden on staff for some aspects of the e-learning journey.

Main problems addressed

The PLA strategy had to address several types of problems given the circumstances of the communities serviced by PLA include:

- *Limited personal devices*: Most of children do not have access to devices that could help deliver e-learning (iPads or Chromebooks).
- *Limited connectivity*: Most families do not have Internet connection in their homes.
- *Difficult studying conditions*: Most scholars do not have “a quiet place” to go to focus during e-learning instruction.
- *Limited teacher self-efficacy with online teaching*: Most teachers are not comfortable with delivering virtual instruction.

- Unfamiliarity with online teaching features: There is little capacity to provide wrap around support for all of the added technological features implemented.
- Family grievance support: Black and low-income communities are experiencing a disproportionate death toll in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis in the United States, so helping families who are grieving due to the loss of family members has also become a priority.
- Parental stress: Many parents are dealing with increased stress – many have lost their job early on in the crisis and are now thrown into the world of providing instructional support to their children. Many are uncomfortable in their role in a virtual learning environment.
- Support for younger students: Delivering e-learning to younger scholars (5- and 6-year-olds) is an added challenge especially as they typically do not have the support at home.
- Measuring success: Determining the right way to monitor progress and measure success in the new implemented model: what is the “right” and new measure of success?

Mobilising and developing resources

PLA relies on several existing resources to implement this alternative “education continuity” plan.

At the top of this list was a dedicated team that is deeply committed to caring for and supporting PLA children and families during the transition.

To ensure food security, PLA normally relies on a US federal nutrition programme designed to serve the children that PLA serves. This programme continued during the physical distancing period and eased some restrictions, because of a government decision that enabled PLA to care for families, not just the children who attend the school.

To provide social and emotional support to children and families, schools relied on the availability of mobile phones, which most of the students (of a certain age) in the schools have. Using this communication method, teachers were able to stay connected via text messages and FaceTime. The teachers themselves used google to call their students in order to maintain privacy on their personal phone numbers.

Fostering effective use of resources and learning

The very first step in the strategy of ensuring educational continuity was providing paper-based packets to the scholars. It was challenging but implemented successfully. And even though it is positive to give three to four weeks’ worth of learning packets to children, paper-based packets do not replace instruction. Some children do not engage with learning. Even those who do engage with learning will do so without opportunities for correction and feedback, so they may complete the work but do all of it wrong. This first step was necessary to buy time in order to address the challenge while ensuring students would continue to have learning opportunities in the meantime.

PLA uses an ‘assets based’ approach to serving children, looking for strengths in students and their communities, rather than shortfalls. This same philosophy guided the development of the strategy for educational continuity.

- *Technology*: While many PLA children initially had no access to iPads and Chromebooks, most have a smart phone. Thus, the e-learning platform was designed to work on any device and to be Mifi enabled. Within two weeks, the leadership team raised funds to purchase 32% of the PLA technology needs and reallocated some of its funds towards technology. Funds were raised from dedicated PLA supporters and from key connections at some of the largest technology companies, such as Microsoft. PLA negotiated with local Internet providers so that eligible PLA families could access free services for 90 days – and worked with families who had a past balance in order to secure donations to help pay them off; in some cases past due fees were waived.

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- Academic learning: PLA's new e-learning site includes 12-minute videos of excellent PLA teachers from around the network delivering instruction. Over 400 direct instruction videos were developed: 30 videos for English Language Arts and 30 videos for maths for every grade. Older scholars also have access to virtual classes. The learning resources were all created in less than three weeks by the PLA academic team and teachers.
- Studying conditions: PLA provided headphones to all scholars to help them focus on their lesson and ignore distractions, such as noise from multiple siblings now that everyone is home together and/or very little available quiet space dedicated to learning.
- Student engagement through celebrity support: PLA engaged well-known stars and leaders, including Super Bowl Indianapolis Colt Marlin Jackson, Heisman Trophy winner Ricky Williams and Indianapolis Pacers basketball star Victor Oladipo. These celebrities and other leaders (i.e. Black and Latino judges, doctors, scientists, business leaders) deliver positive messages during homeroom, encouraging children to continue to work hard, expressing how proud they are of them, and encouraging them to focus on their education. This appears to be extremely motivating for the scholars.
- Enrichment. The e-learning site also includes numerous enrichment opportunities, which is highly appreciated by scholars and families: arts, physical education and virtual field trips. New fun enrichment clubs are being developed and offered daily.
- Teacher training. A suite of training videos was developed for PLA teachers to access at any time, and PLA's Academic Team provided real-time "in person" virtual training sessions for all staff. PLA developed a "mentoring" programme that supports peer-to-peer support in navigating this new delivery system. It also purchased the Blackboard platform, which is used in colleges and universities across the United States.
- Help Desk. PLA has set up a 40-person help desk team trained to support students and parents experiencing challenges with e-learning. The team has access to step-by-step guides to support them in addressing parents' concerns. This was made possible thanks to the full funding the schools continue to receive and the fact that some positions are no longer necessary, as students do not come to school.
- Paid teaching assistant role: The youngest scholars need the help of an adult to access and understand their assignments. To engage their parents, PLA offers a paid Virtual Teaching Assistant role to parents, allowing those who lost their job or are experiencing additional financial stress during the crisis to have some additional financial security while enabling them to focus on supporting their child.
- Family grievance support: PLA has partnered with several churches, social work agencies, family services agencies and counsellors to ensure that they appropriately support children, families and staff.

Monitoring success

The PLA team asked themselves: what is the "right" and new measure of success? Their answer was: "progress, not perfection" and "commitment to share challenges and setbacks honestly", so that they can address them and become stronger in their efforts to serve their scholars.

The first measure of success is the high percentage of families that have participated in the weekly "grab and go" meal programme. Since its inception, over 93% of PLA families have used this service. PLA has thus provided opportunities for students to continue receiving nutritious meals.

A second measure of success is that PLA children and families feel loved and maintain a sense of connectedness to PLA. This is evident by the number of touchpoints that teachers record having had with each of their students on a weekly basis: 83% of PLA scholars have spoken with their teachers at least twice a week, and 91% have connected with their teacher or administrator at least once a week.

Traffic to the new PLA e-learning platform has increased by 1 000% from the first week to the second week, and the percentage of student engagement has more than doubled. Some of the ways engagement is measured include daily logins, assignment completion rates, number of student questions, and content mastery.

Adaptability to new contexts

The essential elements of the strategy followed by PLA are transferable across certain contexts. They will work well in high-income countries for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and in some places in low- and middle-income countries. They require a context where IT infrastructure and devices are affordable to most, if not lower-income families. It will work best in situations where teaching staff and leadership are extremely competent and dedicated in normal time, and willing to continue to fulfil their mission during times of crisis.

Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

1. Build on your existing values and mission, and build your strategy and actions based on them.
2. Lead by example at all levels of staffing, with a highly involved and collaborative leadership that engages a team in a 'roll up your sleeves' attitude.
3. Design a strategic plan with a clear set of priorities and a sequence of several steps that allow flexibility to respond to additional information about the duration of the physical isolation.
4. Promote a mindset to think outside the box in looking for ways to build an alternative delivery chain to implement the plan's priorities.
5. Be able to communicate rapidly across all stakeholders in the organisation to quickly obtain feedback and use it to adjust implementation.
6. Establish solid partnership with federal programmes and local authorities to have the flexibility to create new mechanisms of delivery (for example, flexibility in the rules used to fund school meals in order to include families in addition to students).
7. Invite national and local celebrities to make learning more engaging for students, and provide social and emotional support.
8. Support families to help their children, including through monetary rewards.
9. Provide robust online training for the staff and set up a help desk for families and staff to support e-learning.

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Comment on the series is welcome, and should be sent to edu.contact@oecd.org.

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