

ONE DISTRICT'S SOLUTION: ONLINE TUTORING OFFERS 24/7 SUPPORT

The following is a transcript of Keystone Education Radio Host Annette Stevenson's discussion with Richland School District's Director of Educational Services, Brandon Bailey.

Annette Stevenson

We've been hearing the terms, achievement gap, learning loss, the COVID slide. A year of ever-changing combinations of virtual and in-person instruction has brought unmatched disruption to student learning, all but guaranteeing the widening of these gaps, if unaddressed. However, emerging research has shown that even the smallest amount of tutoring can bring about academic gains and help students get back on track.

In this episode, we're going to be talking with Richland School district's director of educational services, Brandon Bailey, about a new program the district has implemented to help ensure students' academic success. Welcome, Brandon; thank you so much for being with us.

Brandon Bailey

Thanks for having me, Annette.

Annette Stevenson

Absolutely. So like every other district in Pennsylvania, Richland School District has been impacted, I'm certain, by COVID-19 school closures and remote learning. Could you start by telling us a little bit about the district's instructional models throughout this academic year? What have those looked like?

Brandon Bailey

Sure. I mean, like everybody else, it's been a real roller coaster of a school year. A Rollercoaster since last March the 13th, when we were all sent home, but we've had various instructional modes to start out the school year. We actually here in Richland School District, our first 53 days were all on-site, full-time. So that was nice that we were able to get off to a good start to our year. Our area wasn't as impacted early on in that August, September, October timeframe as some of the other parts of the state. Those first 53 days, we were all on-site. About 90% of our students were coming to school, about 10% of our students selected to learn remotely, which certainly was a challenge for them and a challenge for our staff. But we wanted to support them and in what mode they wanted to learn.

Since then, we've been in a combination of all fully remote and hybrid. Currently, we're wrapping up a hybrid where all of our students K through 12 are attending two days per week and then learning from home the other three days per week. We're actually on February 1st scheduled to go back fully on-site once again. We're looking forward to having everybody here in school.

Annette Stevenson

When did you become aware, I mean, certainly tutoring is not a new program, but when did you become aware of the need to implement some sort of tutoring or supplemental learning system for your students in this present scenario?

Brandon Bailey

Yeah, I think it was as early as last March. Our administrative team recognized that this had the potential to be something that was going to really create a divide within the students here in our school and throughout the state and throughout the country. So, we knew that we were going to have to come up with resources and do things differently than we've ever done them before.

One of those resources was to create some type of a tutoring program, whether it's on-site, whether it's online. This is just one of the various things that we're doing to support those kids and also their families, which are all going through very difficult times.

Annette Stevenson

Is there a role that equity has played in the district seeking out these types of services?

Brandon Bailey

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we're fortunate first off that most of our students here come from a background where they're supported at home, but certainly like all schools, we have a segment of our population that that needs a little bit of extra help and assistance to make sure that there is equity there and that they do have the same opportunities as everybody else. That certainly is something that, again, going back to last March, making sure that everyone had internet access, making sure that everybody had access to Chromebooks and tools that they can make sure that they're learning online while they're home.

We are then making sure that they have the best possible home environment to keep up with everybody else. Within our school district—we're a K-6 and a 7-12—we have two buildings. In each of our buildings, we have taken one of our classroom teachers and pushed them into a remote learning specialist role where those teachers now are making sure that those students have the resources they need and are keeping up with everybody else.

Annette Stevenson

Okay. Can you tell us about the organization called Paper? What has been your experience working with this organization?

Brandon Bailey

Yeah, I mean, Paper was something that I just took a cold call from a sales rep in September, and it sounded like it was something that would be beneficial to kids. Set up some demonstrations, did our research. It's a product that is used in Texas and California, but not so much here in our state, in Pennsylvania. So we had the opportunity to collaborate with them, and they've been a great partner thus far, and we really feel that our students and families, and also teachers are benefiting from the program.

Annette Stevenson

So you've seen the impact, or you've seen the difference in student performance, do you feel?

Brandon Bailey

Yeah. I think that all of our students and all of our families know that there's 24/7 access. Our teachers aren't available. Our teachers are phenomenal here in Richland school district, but they're not available 24/7.

With the pandemic, when our students are learning remotely or in a hybrid model, they need those supports and resources. They might be learning at different times. I think that's one thing that Paper has brought to the table is that they allow the student to get that extra help whenever it's best for them. A lot of our students that learn remotely, we'll see them go on at 11 pm, 12 am, 1 am, 2 am. Certainly, our teachers here at Richland aren't awake at those times.

Annette Stevenson

No, nor should they be. They need to rest up for the next day. I imagine. So the timing makes sense, 24/7. Are there certain subjects that are most sought after by the students that you're noticing?

Brandon Bailey

Yeah. This is relatively new to us at Richland, and as I said, we're the first school in Pennsylvania to partner with Paper, but for us thus far, we've found out that a lot of our students have been getting help in math, whether it's an elementary math level or it's AP calculus. We also have really been stressing to our ELA teachers to incorporate Paper. The neat thing about it is that any type of a writing assignment, you can get another set of eyes on your documents first, or teachers are able to have the kids work on that first draft and then get a set of eyes on it before it even gets turned in and catch some of those errors that might take some more time.

Brandon Bailey

ELA and math are certainly two of the top things, but I've seen foreign language, I've seen physics, I've seen general science, really a lot of different areas that they're able to help our students with.

Annette Stevenson

Since the teachers can see what their students are seeking help with, are there some examples of how teachers have used that information to either inform or modify the remote learning or any aspect of how they're teaching?

Brandon Bailey

Yeah. I think it's really allowed them to differentiate the instruction. As classroom teachers in a typical environment, in a classroom environment, I think it's challenging, but it's possible to differentiate in the classroom. When you're remote, it's a little bit more difficult to have that differentiation. I think that Paper and getting back those reports and saying that a student might be struggling in a certain topic or concept has allowed our teachers to differentiate their instruction and their expectations for different students.

Annette Stevenson

It's maybe that extra intuition that they might not have access to by not being in the same classroom with that little extra feedback almost?

Brandon Bailey

Yeah. I equate it to almost having an extra teacher or a classroom aide in their classroom because these students are able to go out and get that extra help. Then the teacher not only sees the benefit of the student understanding the concept, but they see what it is that their students are struggling with. They're getting that feedback from Paper.

Annette Stevenson

Would you foresee the benefits of it going forward when things normalize, hopefully in the future? Would you see the benefit of it still remaining?

Brandon Bailey

Yeah, we can definitely see that benefit like everything else, you have to make those decisions with what makes sense for your own individual district, but we're continuing to grow. I mean, this is something that we've only been doing now for a couple of months, and the great thing about it is our student that's going to be the valedictorian potentially at the end of the school year is getting a great benefit. They've gone in and have had lots of different interactions with Paper tutors. Our just average student that's going to be the 50th percentile is getting a benefit. Our students with IEPs that sometimes struggle in the classroom, they're also receiving a tremendous benefit. So, it's not often that programs go across all of your student population. That's what I really like about Paper is that every one of our students can receive that benefit.

Annette Stevenson

That's a really widespread benefit. I can see that would be awesome for any district really with a diverse student population, which is all of them. So as far as the implementation of the program, you said you're a couple of months in. How did you successfully get it off the ground and introduce it?

Brandon Bailey

Yeah, I mean, for us, the great part is the people at Paper have been phenomenal to work with. They've been alongside us every step of the way. Their tech team was making sure that our students all have their login information because basically anytime they just hop on our website, log in, and they have a tutor there within seconds. So the implementation was seamless in terms of getting everybody set up, get logged in, marketing of the program, pushing out emails to families, the students. We have a big social media presence here to make sure that we're sharing that information because every student they're not all using it at this point, but certainly, it's available for all of them.

That's where I think a growth area for us is to continue to push that information out, all the students to know how effective this can be, especially for our students that are learning remotely, that don't have the resources to be in the classroom right now.

Annette Stevenson

Yeah, absolutely. Well, thanks for highlighting this program for us. It sounds like it's working well for your district. I appreciate the insights you've shared about it. Any additional thoughts on if other districts are interested? You said that the Paper support staff has been good to work with, and so that's where they should connect?

Brandon Bailey

Yeah. I mean, just reach out to the staff at Paper, and if anybody has questions, I'd certainly be willing to share our experiences here at Richland. We're happy with it, and we're looking forward to continuing to grow the resource within our district.