



THOUGHT LEADERS

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The year 2020 has forced the alteration and cancellation of innumerable plans and procedures.

But it also has made the impossible happen.

“The joy on the students’ faces when they are in school has kept me going,” said Christopher Fulco, president of St. Joseph’s Collegiate Institute. “We call it here at St. Joe’s ‘The Brotherhood.’ They’re so happy to be in ‘The Brotherhood’ ... and out of their bedrooms and away from their kitchen tables.”

Fulco was one of four panelists to talk about education in the age of Covid-19 during a Thought Leaders presentation on Nov. 19. He was joined by Clarence Central School District Superintendent Geoff Hicks, Eden Central School District Superintendent Jeff Sortisio and Daemen College President Gary Olson. Hodgson Russ, which was represented by partner Ryan Everhart and senior associate Lindsay Menasco, hosted the event.

The group gathered virtually just hours after getting word that parts of the Buffalo region would shift into orange zone status, requiring schools to close for a period followed by mandatory testing before reopening could be considered. This year has taught participants how to pivot quickly, but the move from Gov. Andrew Cuomo brought about yet another change.

The challenges range from getting kindergartners to focus during a Zoom classroom session to boosting faculty morale and figuring out the logistics of who’s allowed to do what.

“I’ve got a boiler to run. I don’t know how to run a boiler,” said Sortisio, citing complications in figuring out who’s allowed in the building when remote learning is in place. “I’ve got to feed families, prepare food. I can’t send DoorDash to every single family that needs a meal.”

Many of those challenges involve the students most in need of educational assistance, such as special-needs students and English language learners. Sortisio said his district, for one, focused first on those students, some of whom need daily or nearly daily in-person learning to maximize their educations.

Such needs aren’t always being met, though, and it’s up to everyone involved in the process to



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COVID-19 AND EDUCATION

Local educators have worn out their pivot feet changing course during Covid-19, but they say keeping focus on the students has helped everyone get through the pandemic so far.

▲ HODGSON'S TAKE

“As an attorney overseeing these things, what’s impressed me the most is the communication between instructors and these students and these parents. Technology is obviously a primary factor. The use of technology is going to be a bigger part of how we are moving forward.”

RYAN EVERHART, partner, Hodgson Russ



WITH CHRISTOPHER FULCO, GEOFF HICKS, JEFF SORTISIO AND GARY OLSON



“Being fully remote is not what Daemen is and would not work for us. We’ve had to find a really good balance, not only because of the culture we have, but also as what we consider Western New York’s premier health sciences educator. Nursing, physical therapy, physician assistant – they literally can’t be fully online or their accreditors would be up in arms.”

GARY OLSON, president, Daemen College



“Our students are really nervous that snow days are going to go away. We’ve mastered how to teach students when they’re stuck at home. When there’s a snow day, they’ll still get a day off and go play in the snow. But those weeks where you get a blizzard and you’re out for several days, you can give them one day off, then get right back into general instruction.”

CHRISTOPHER FULCO, St. Joseph’s Collegiate Institute president



“These could be matters of life and death. We’re not usually used to dealing with medical concerns of that high of regard. ... We believe in getting kids in front of teachers, but a lack of support and knowledge on medical matters is one huge challenge. That requires a lot of training and staff.”

GEOFF HICKS, Clarence Central School District superintendent



“Yesterday when I woke up, everything was normal. Then by the end of the day, we were in the orange zone. We had a plan that is now on the back burner. Going from no designation to orange is huge. And the rules for being in an orange zone changed with a half hour.”

JEFF SORTISIO, Eden Central School District superintendent



“Unfortunately, the guidance is never as specific as you’d like. Maybe to a layperson it seems obvious, the term ‘in-person instruction,’ but inside the building what does that mean? Can I have instructors inside? Should I have custodial staff inside? Schools have done a fantastic job every day getting the word out.”

LINDSAY MENASCO, senior associate, Hodgson Russ

get there, panelists agreed. That involves offering more staff instruction and reinforcement, along with bringing in support tools to make sure students don’t fall behind.

“The creativity of the staff in trying to create learning environments that really help kids learn is great,” Hicks said. “I’ve done at least 25 observations this year. They work really hard to make sure students learn.”

Flexibility can be harder to enact than it is to talk about, panelists agree. They said over-informing everyone involved in the process has been a big help, even if that information expires within days.

“Everybody has always been in the loop,” said Olson, who credited his staff for having a plan in place that minimized the impact. “When everybody is in the loop to a real extent, it can relieve the anxiety of what’s happening.”

Other small things can mean a lot in terms of keeping employees as comfortable as possible. At Daemen, Olson said that’s meant not enacting any furloughs or layoffs. St. Joe’s faculty take part in Zoom retreats. In Eden, it’s meant simply reassuring teachers – particularly veteran ones – they’re not alone.

“A lot of these folks have been teaching for a long time. And they became first-year teachers overnight. You didn’t know anything, and if you thought you did, you were wrong,” Sortisio said.

But those teachers adapted, and panelists said the entire education sector will as well. Whether learning how to better moderate virtual classrooms, master asynchronous learning arrangements or collaborate toward better solutions, they agree that there will be room for growth when the pandemic ends.

“We’ve had to ask ourselves, ‘How do kids learn most effectively? What strategies are most effective at getting kids to learn new concepts and grow?’” Fulco said. “They’ve been able to appreciate the product we’ve been able to provide in person and online.”

► CLOSER LOOK AT THOUGHT LEADERS

Thought Leaders is an ongoing series of discussions with Western New York business leaders and attorneys at Hodgson Russ LLP.

Ten times a year, leaders in diverse industries meet for a roundtable discussion moderated by Business First journalists.

The conversations are usually held in the law firm’s Pearl Street offices in Buffalo, but have shifted to a virtual format during the Covid-19 crisis.