
Navigating the New Normal: Leadership in a Time of Uncertainty

An Interview with Dr. Susan Enfield of Highline School District

Highline School District (Highline), a mid-sized school district serving the diverse communities just south of Seattle, Washington, was one of the first districts in the country to close as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their last day before closure was March 12, 2020, and since then, the district has distributed over 10,000 devices to support students and staff in distance learning. They are also regularly providing meals and childcare to families and first responders.

Hanover Research sat down with Highline Superintendent Dr. Susan Enfield in mid-April to discuss the district's response to the pandemic and the path forward for K12 institutions across the country.

District Overview	
Number of Schools	33
Grades Served	PK-12
Number of Classroom Teachers	1,129
Total Budget	\$308 M; \$13,743 per pupil expenditure
Student Snapshot	
Enrollment	19,381; 52% male and 48% female
Percent Regularly Attending School	76%
Race/Ethnicity	American Indian/Alaskan Native - 0.9% Asian - 14.6% Pacific Islander - 3.9% Black - 14.6% Hispanic - 38.9% White - 22.9% Multi-racial - 6.1%
Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Meals	69%
English Language Learners	29%
Percent Meeting ELA Standards	48%
Percent Meeting Math Standards	35%
Percent Graduating in Four Years	83%

COMMUNICATING DURING CRISES

Hanover: Highline was one of the first districts in the country to close because of the COVID-19 crisis. What steps did you take when you realized that school closures were likely, if not inevitable?

Dr. Enfield: I let my cabinet know that we should make sure that we had enough food and cleaning supplies to prepare for - at that time - what I thought would be a two-week closure. I also pushed my instructional team to start gathering materials for families who didn't have internet or devices.

Hanover: This must have been a very challenging message to deliver. How did you communicate with students and families about the closure?

Dr. Enfield: We knew before the governor made his announcement that we were going to close, but the day of his announcement became our last day with our students. We quickly got talking points and information out to our schools so that teachers could talk with children about what was going on before dismissal. I worried about the trauma and impact on our kids, especially those for whom school is a safe place with meaningful adult connections.

Our communications team has been running nonstop, both prior to closure, immediately after closure, and ever since. We put out a daily staff update, and a daily family update. We're in constant conversation with our union leadership to identify what this new way of working requires and how to address changes in working conditions in our collective bargaining agreements.

Hanover: How has communication with the community changed since school closures?

Dr. Enfield: We're trying to balance structure and predictability of instruction with flexibility and an understanding of the realities some of our families face. We distributed over 10,000 Chromebooks and are providing meals every day. When we return from spring break, we will be launching online instruction in earnest, which is a whole new approach to teaching and learning for us. That will be our reality for the coming months.

Hanover: One of the things that we've heard from so many superintendents across the country is that, despite their best efforts, state-level authorities are just too slow in offering practical guidance. When do you wait for guidance, and when do you just act?

Dr. Enfield: Part of leadership is going with what your gut tells you. For example, we're using our summer meal schedule to provide breakfast, lunch and snacks for all kids under 18. This summer meals program is approved by the government, but it requires that when a family comes to pick up the meals for their child or children, the children must be present for us to give them the food. We started hearing that there

were families who weren't coming to get the food because they couldn't leave their sick child at home, or they had a child with special needs who they couldn't get in the car. The minute that I heard that, I said, "The kids don't have to be present. Just give them the food." Now, because that became an issue for so many districts, that regulation was lifted. But I didn't wait for that. If someone wants to reprimand me for violating a regulation because I fed children, so be it.

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SHIFTING TO AN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Hanover: Like most districts, HSD has shifted to an online instructional environment. What have been the primary challenges with this shift?

Dr. Enfield: When closures first started happening in waves, districts were reluctant to offer distance learning or remote learning for all kids for fear that we wouldn't be able to meet the needs of our students with special needs and therefore would be violating the law. That became the narrative around why some leaders, myself included, were reluctant to just dive into remote learning right away, but I think that's a false narrative. Well, I'm sure some may have been concerned about potential legal action, but what bothered me was the fact that I knew I was excluding kids by using a distance learning model. And I'm not just talking about my children with special needs—I'm talking about my children and families for whom English is not a first language. I'm talking about my children who may not have adults at home to help them log on. I'm talking about children and families who don't have broadband access and therefore won't be able to log on even if they have the device.

Hanover: It sounds like equity has been a central issue for you and your district.

Dr. Enfield: The reasons why remote learning is a challenge from an equity and fairness perspective are many. And that is why some of us didn't just jump in to this wonderland of remote learning, that some of our critics think we should have been embracing months or years ago, because it's "just so easy." Online, you see pictures of families working from home in their pajamas with their kids, but that's just not reality for a lot of our families. We want to make sure that we are thoughtful in how we approach this, and we did everything we could to make online learning accessible for as many children as possible. We never said we weren't going to do anything because we couldn't do it for all.

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Hanover: That must be difficult at times, though.

Dr. Enfield: I can tell you, that any person in public education has a very hard time moving forward with any initiative or strategy or idea that by design excludes children, especially when those children are most vulnerable to begin with. And by virtue of the realities I mentioned, that's what we're struggling with right now. Not a fear of lawsuit. I really want to make that point clear.

Hanover: What do you see as the greatest obstacle to equal access to online learning?

Dr. Enfield: The challenge is that even with all of the free internet access, we still have kids who aren't connected. And even in cases where maybe kids are connected, families are in overwhelmed right now. What we're trying to figure out is the right balance between predictability for children, families, and staff so that we can establish a routine. We also want to embed flexibility so that people don't feel like they're tied to the computer at a certain point in time every day, when that's just not realistic, given the stresses that our families are under.

Hanover: Does that mean you're taking an asynchronous approach to online learning?

Dr. Enfield: We're not going to attempt synchronous. Now, that doesn't mean that some teachers won't try to schedule those things depending on the grade level, but that is not at the heart of what we're trying to do at scale.

Hanover: Without daily in-person interaction, how are you supporting students who are vulnerable in other ways—such as those kids who have mental-health issues or may be the victims of abuse?

Dr. Enfield: Our educators are mandated to report signs of abuse, and that goes for things they observe on video or even on the phone. I would say, though, that just connecting with some of our students is proving challenging. With the stay at home order, it's hard to send people out to do a wellness check at a house or just to check in with a student. We don't want to put the public or our staff to be at risk, but that means there are some real limitations to our ability to connect with students and support them in the way that we want.

Hanover: Is there anything you've tried that you think might help?

Dr. Enfield: We are providing resources for our families around not just where they can get food and essentials, but also domestic violence hotlines. And for our homeless students, we're providing other resources to support them. I mean, it's hard. It's hard. And it's only going to get harder as the economic impact of this closure starts hitting more and more families.

Hanover: How has your staff responded to meet the varied needs of your students and families?

Dr. Enfield: Everyone in our system is stepping up and doing things differently. We talk about first responders and healthcare workers who are definitely on the frontlines, but the fact that we still have people showing up to make meals and distribute those meals on a daily basis for kids, or show up and distribute laptops to families, or provide childcare to those first responders and healthcare workers—those folks are real heroes as well.

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PLANNING FOR THE NEXT SCHOOL YEAR

Hanover: It goes without saying that processes you've used in the past to plan for the next academic year will need to be adjusted. How are you thinking about planning for AY 2020-21?

Dr. Enfield: Despite our best efforts, and even on our best days, we know that how we are supporting and educating children and young people over the next several weeks or months will fall short for many of our kids. While we're talking about how to ensure that our seniors are on track to graduate, we are also quickly having to turn our attention to our current juniors. Next year is their critical year, and we need to ensure they don't start next year behind.

Depending on what happens, if there are social distancing things in place when schools start again in the fall, we might have to come back in shifts, which would avoid our schools being as packed as they would normally be. We're trying to plan for different scenarios and considering that distance learning may become perhaps more of a hybrid model: If we have to come back but in fewer numbers, we would need to have both distance and face-to-face learning. But again, it's a lot of unknowns.

Hanover: Are you anticipating any changes to curriculum in the fall?

Dr. Enfield: We've been trying to turn this crisis into an opportunity. We have been working toward standards-based instruction across the district for the last few years, and we're seeing this moment in time as a chance to really accelerate that work. We are currently identifying priority standards that we want our teachers to focus on with our kids by content and grade level, which sets us up to be more standards-based when we return in the fall.

Hanover: What types of supports do you think students will need when they come back to school?

Dr. Enfield: I'll be very honest with you: there will be a tremendous need for academic remediation, but there will also be a tremendous need for emotional and socialization remediation as well.

Hanover: One thing that we have found really uplifting in the last month is the stories of human compassion that have come out of the crisis. Is there anything notable you've seen in the district?

Dr. Enfield: Yes! Our administrative secretary for our nutrition services program is coordinating all of the meal distribution for our students. And she's out there handing out the meals and making sure that volunteers who come to help have the information they need. She has stepped up as a leader in ways that her job description never articulated, and she does it with a smile. And she does it willingly. In some ways, this crisis is bringing out the best in folks, and that is always hopeful.

What I keep telling my team and to everyone in the district is that we must keep bringing our best self every day—do the best we can. Some days we're going to fall short, but we need to fight the urge spiral into negativity because we really need to remain positive for ourselves, for one another, and for our families. I see adults across Highline, not just staff but families and our community partners, really stepping up and doing remarkable things. I feel very, very proud and very fortunate to be living and leading in this community at this moment in time. It's a real gift.

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ABOUT DR. SUSAN ENFIELD

*A former high school English, journalism and ELL teacher, **Dr. Susan Enfield** served as Chief Academic Officer and then as Interim Superintendent for Seattle Public Schools before coming to Highline in 2012. She previously held leadership positions in Evergreen Public Schools (Vancouver, WA), Portland Public Schools, and the Pennsylvania Department of Education.*

Susan is a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, and earned master's degrees from Stanford University and Harvard University. She also holds a doctoral degree in Administration, Planning, and Social Policy from Harvard's Urban Superintendents Program.

