NC ACCESS
BEST PRACTICES

School Culture

Technology

A Culture of Access for All

Implementation Description

The Exploris School, focused on increasing the enrollment and success of their educationally disadvantaged (ED) students, utilizes a variety of teaching strategies to engage students in the learning process. Some of these require the use of technology which research shows has a direct link to student achievement and motivation.[1] "*Urban educators are particularly strong in their belief that technology has a positive impact on their students*."[2] Due to the correlation between technology and student achievement, teachers at Exploris are expected to maintain school websites and utilize on-line tools to engage with students and communicate with parents. Fortunately, the supplemental NC ACCESS grant funding opportunity made it possible to replace staff member's old, refurbished and donated computers with new laptops. Chromebooks and iPads were also purchased for student use ensuring that computers are available in each classroom. For teachers and students, the ease of having what you need when you need it impacts positive school culture.[3] Access to technology has also been shown to increase equity in school by ensuring that every student has access to learning outside the school building and by allowing students to access information at their own pace and in a way that suits their needs.[4] It also allows educators to use data more effectively to monitor student progress and academic challenges.

When the COVID pandemic required that teachers transition to a virtual learning model, access to reliable working laptops was critical to the successful delivery of virtual content to students. During this time, Exploris initially dispersed forty devices to families who, when surveyed, noted the need for a computer at home. However, school staff quickly realized that some students

About This School

The Exploris School

Exploris strives to create independent learners, creative and critical thinkers, and active and responsible participants in a global society. Interdisciplinary inquiry-based theme projects that focus on compelling and current issues like sustainable living, peace and conflict, world health, and human rights bring authenticity to the students' work. Authentic material and human resources replace textbooks as the primary learning tools allowing learning to be active and student-centered. Community partnerships and culminating theme projects are central to Exploris' adolescent-centered, globally-focused curriculum.

Year School Opened: 1997-98

Grant Awarded: 2019-20

Initial Grade Levels Served: K-8

2019-20 Student Demographics

- Hispanic 7%
- Other 7%
- Black 12%
- White 72%
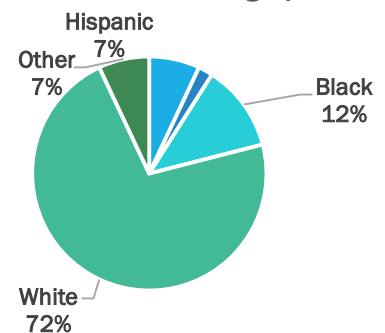
% ED Student Population: 25%

Urbanicity: Urban / Raleigh, NC

Persons in Poverty (Wake County)[5]: 8.4%

were not signing on and accessing their lessons. After inquiring to learn more, they discovered that many families were sharing home computers, thus limiting the time each student was able to spend engaged in online instruction. The school was able to disperse an additional eighty devices to families that needed them. This attention to student needs and a relationship of trust with these families allowed the school to ensure that all students had the technology tools necessary for success. Providing laptops to all students who needed them not only allowed academic growth to continue from home, it also provided an opportunity for school staff to check-in on students' well-being during a time of significant stress and uncertainty.

Results

- Having access to individual devices increased students' ability to participate in uninterrupted learning.

- Exploris had the necessary devices on hand, so they were able to transition to a new model of digital learning within 3 days of the March 14, 2019 school closures.

- Following the second disbursement of computers to students during the COVID pandemic, there was an increase in student attendance for the synchronous teaching sessions.

Challenges

The biggest challenge during the implementation of this strategy involved managing technology support for families at home. Exploris developed a system to address the issues that could be addressed virtually and arranged to swap computers that were broken for ones that were functional.

Future Modifications

The greatest challenge has been the transition to online classes without the necessary time to provide adequate training for teachers, students, and parents. Prior to the start of school in upcoming years, the school is committed to providing relevant professional development, which will include training on best practices in distance learning strategies.

Critical Components

Getting Started

- The availability of funding afforded by the NC ACCESS grant allowed the purchase of devices for teachers and students which was essential to the success of this strategy.

- It is important to establish the procedures associated with the distribution of devices. In the case of Exploris, the school identified a staff person who was responsible for managing the distribution process.

Ongoing Supports

- In future project years, Exploris will focus on teacher training to increase educator comfort and expertise with virtual instruction and learning.

Equity Connections

- Technology has become "the way of the world." The deeper implication is those who have access to technology have access to the world. Meanwhile, those who cannot afford the latest technology are left behind. To ignore the existing inequalities would be a disservice to underprivileged students. Schools must be intentional in their efforts to bridge the digital divide through equitable access to technology (Williamson, 2013).

- The US Census Bureau found notable discrepancies in home computer access in their 2016 report. Significant factors include: income level, race, English proficiency, and education level. For example, if the head of household reported an education level of at least a bachelor's degree, statistics found these homes were more than twice as likely to have a home computer than if the head of household was not a high school graduate. The disparity is also evident in the statistics related to race. Home computer ownership by race is as follows: 80.9% of non-hispanic white, 89% of Asians, 63.9% of blacks, and 67.5% of hispanics (Ryan, 2017). When schools proactively address technology access by providing students with devices, they are leveling the playing field for historically marginalized groups.

Research

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