



RoundPier's Tanya Manoj had the opportunity to interview Dr. Scott Cascone, Superintendent of Schools for the West Orange Public School District. The district serves Pre-K through 12th grades in Essex County, NJ with over 6,700+ students as of July 2019.

RP: What would you say have been three positive changes that already came about or a positive change that you foresee due to the virus outbreak in the education space?

Dr. Cascone: I've been in K-12 education for a long time, and have seen the tech transition throughout a few years. I think that there has been an inertia, a reluctance in implementing technology for education. By necessity, Covid made staff members take the plunge and start using technology. This change happened very quickly - with more change in a few months than there otherwise would have been in 15 years. Another benefit that I've seen is that this reinforced and emphasized professional collaboration, across school districts, across state lines, throughout the country. We really saw the education community come together and lean on each other over the past few months. If I had to pick a third, it is that while we've always strived to communicate with families, this situation ensured that education professionals communicate with families to a greater extent and shows us how

many households we weren't reaching. For example, which households don't have access to things like the internet and food security really came to life at this moment in time. This was something that was hard to understand at a household level prior to Covid.

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RP: What are some things that your district has done to mitigate inequalities including students not having access to a computer or ESL students not having language support at home? And how do you think these will translate to next year's learning environment, whatever that will look like?

Dr. Cascone: It was definitely hard to connect with ESL and economically disadvantaged families. Our district put surveys out to get responses, and we had a 75 percent response rate. We also conducted a call campaign where staff reached out to individual households who didn't respond to initial surveys. We worked with them to meet their needs, for example loaning out over 1000 chromebooks. For the language piece, we had spanish teachers and ESL staff reach out to households and it was a very individualized effort to reach out and meet their needs.

RP: A lot of high school students are in RoundPier's community. What advice do you have for high school students who are worried about academics or the college admissions process at this moment?

Dr. Cascone: I think that this really varies based on home life at this moment. For students with a relatively stable home life, they should use this time as an opportunity. Take the initiative to create learning communities for classmates, both in terms of support with schoolwork and how they can enrich learning on their own. Students with support often don't really need brick and mortar schools to thrive. For example, I often see students learning how to code independently. For many other students, it is harder. With Maslow's hierarchy of needs, students who aren't getting basic needs met should lean on resources that are available. I would tell them that there are many people who are willing to reach out a hand, including county governments and school districts. Coping mechanisms and building foundations for life skills when encountering difficulties are all things to keep in mind for students in any situation. They are building skills now that they will use when they encounter difficulties in the future.

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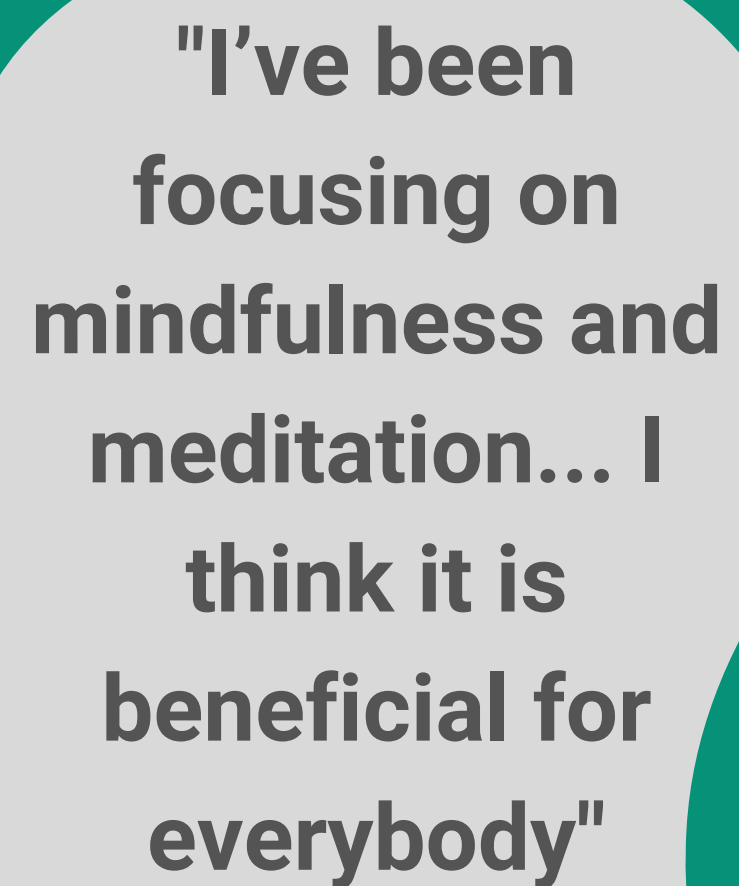
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RP: What are some great tools your staff is using that you want to let others know about? (technology, teaching materials)

Dr. Cascone: We are a google district. I think that video technology is crucial. I've also seen tools like screencastify, flipgrid, padlet, quizlet, kahoot being utilized. The most important thing isn't the tools but more how to establish consistency and close capacity gaps between teachers in technology. An interesting thing about this learning environment is that parents have a better window into students' academics now. They can compare the tools that different teachers are using and the level of synchronicity in different classrooms. This is very different from when students were at school and parents weren't able to look over their shoulders to the same extent.

RP: Lastly, what is your favorite quote, movie, book, or activity right now?

Dr. Cascone: Over quarantine I've been focusing on mindfulness and meditation, which is now a central part of my life. I wish I had discovered it sooner; I think it is beneficial for everybody. I also have been mountain biking much more, now that I don't have access to a gym.



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Thank you Dr. Cascone for your time; it has been a true pleasure! @Dr_ScottCascone

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