Coronavirus School Dismissal:
Lessons Learned by a Deaf Day School

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It is safe to say that the coronavirus pandemic of the 2019-2020 school year was a challenge that schools, especially Deaf schools, could not have predicted they would face. Schools were closed, schedules altered, and instruction moved to an online format. One such Deaf school impacted was the Jean Massieu School of the Deaf (JMS) in Salt Lake City, Utah, a day school campus of the Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind (USDB). JMS uses an ASL/English communication philosophy and, at the time of the coronavirus events, had 23 teachers, 14 para-educators, and 115 students, from preschool (age 3) through high school.

As the first cases of coronavirus were confirmed in Utah, there began to be a great deal of speculation about the potential for school closure and the impact on students, with JMS faculty joining this discussion. On Thursday, March 12, 2020, the governor of Utah recommended bans of groups of more than 100 (State of Utah, 2020). At the time, schools were specifically exempt from the 100 person limit and state officials made it clear that schools were not to close without the recommendation of their respective health department. This, of course, led to more discussion about how to approach remote learning for students. Despite assurance that schools would stay open, the next day, the Governor and State Superintendent introduced a two-week school "dismissal," which was intended to be a "soft closure" of public schools where students transition from live instruction to remote learning at home through a combination of online and packet-based instructional practice (Utah State Board of Education, 2020). Schools were given a two-day period of time, which counted as instructional days, to allow for preparation by teachers to start remote learning. Thus, JMS and educators around Utah found themselves in the unique position of having two days to transition from a traditional, brick-and-mortar school to online experiences.

Moving to virtual learning, JMS had some unique foresight in preparing for the transition and successes during online learning in addition to the fair share of challenges that teachers had to overcome. This paper will expand on the state of the school before the pandemic, the transition to online learning, and teachers' reflections concluding with the lessons learned. The table in the appendix (page 56) shows teachers' perspectives on the efficacy of the digital tools used for teaching and learning during this pandemic.

The State of JMS Prior to Coronavirus

For several years prior to the coronavirus events, all USDB campuses had been transitioning towards competency-based education (CBE). These approaches heavily emphasized integrating digital teaching and learning as a vital tool for the success of deaf/hard-of-hearing (D/HH) students. CBE has been increasingly implemented in both in campus programs (like JMS) and in statewide outreach efforts.

The move to CBE was foundational in preparing for the unforeseen coronavirus impacts. Levine and Patrick (2019) explain how traditional grading, forced time spent on a skill/concept in a classroom, and the one-size-fits-all approach are ineffective. The authors propose that a move towards a focus on mastering standards and objectives, with assignments focusing on learning and mastery, not just busy-work or behavior-training will allow students more opportunities to have greater voice and choice in their own learning. USDB policy allows teachers to focus on mastery and grants class credit based on students' demonstration of skill, rather than being beholden to seat time. This mindset gave our teachers the freedom to focus on essentials during the school dismissal.

Thus, before coronavirus became an issue for education, USDB had already begun moving towards digital teaching and learning, which is the idea that technology should be used to improve, innovate, and enhance both teaching and learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). This move meant investment in a wide variety of free and licensed apps, software, and digital tools for teachers to use (see appendix). The JMS secondary teachers heavily utilized Canvas as a learning management system and preschool/elementary teachers began using SeeSaw as a student and parent engagement platform. Prior to this year, the notion of being a one-on-one technology school was extended so that every student in elementary and preschool had access to an iPad for home use; secondary students each received a Chromebook and were expected to use it in all their classes daily. Having one-on-one technology before the school dismissal was vital to the successful transition to remote learning. The degree that teachers had utilized this technology

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both in and out of the classroom before the dismissal also played in a role in how comfortable teachers felt with the abrupt transition.

In the recent past, a major barrier to digital learning for D/HH students in Utah was the lack of fully accessible online learning opportunities (Lago & Acedo, 2017; Pappas et al., 2018). Therefore, in the 2019-2020 school year, USDB introduced USD Online, a new school division, to create online courses accessible in ASL, starting with a handful of classes. This program moved along the role of online and hybrid learning for students, with several JMS secondary students participating in online classes.

With these factors coming in to play at USDB and, specifically, JMS, one more event helped prepare the way for the eventual school dismissal. On February 3, 2020, a rare snow day was called across much of the state of Utah. That day, the USDB administration questioned why a snow day could not be transitioned to an online day to minimize the difficulties associated with snow days (see Digital Promise, 2015). After this time, teachers were asked to prepare a simple plan for how online learning could be used in place of a snow day or other unplanned school closure in the future, which turned out to be a prophetic request.

Preparation and Implementation of School Dismissal

There are a lot of barriers to successful online/distance learning for D/HH students (Donne & Rugg, 2015), although D/HH students can be successful when given the appropriate support (Burgstahler, 2015; Richardson, 2015; Wicks, 2010). These factors had to be considered and implemented in just two days. In reality, USDB teachers had been considering their plans and approaches for at least a week in preparation for what could happen. These plans were initially considered for online snow days, thus teachers had a small jump-start. It also helped that digital tools, such as Canvas or SeeSaw, were being used, with varying levels of fidelity, by teachers.

After two days of preparation, March, 18, 2020, began the first day of distance instruction, followed immediately by spring break. Over the next few weeks, the two-week dismissal became six weeks which then became the entire fourth quarter. Teachers experienced successes, struggles, changes, student motivation and apathy, and the unique challenges of teaching from home. Adding to the challenge of distance instruction was the fact that the students had wildly varying levels of familial support for home learning. In this section, different groups of teachers share their experiences,

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successes, and struggles with this school dismissal.

Preschool (Misty Sides)

Transitioning to an online platform in two days was easier than expected in a sense that the conceptual ideas were already in place for the school, while the implementation needed to be solidified. With the understanding that parents were working and tending to other children, a suggested flexible schedule was put into place for parents to pick and choose from live Zoom lessons, recorded Zoom lessons, and academic and linguistic resources. Families were already in the habit of using SeeSaw as a communication platform. However, as multiple people started posting, it became harder to read and shift through the information, thus we set up a Google Classroom. Multiple parents reported that they favored Google Classroom because everything was organized in one place. Providing an array of multiple resources allowed parents to choose what they were comfortable with, addressed multiple learning styles for parents and children, and reduced the boredom of students.

Elementary (Paige Huefner)

Moving to a distance/online teaching model overnight resulted in throwing students into a school model that was a struggle to navigate effectively. Despite the less than ideal circumstances, I was lucky to have students and parents who willingly jumped in and succeeded with multiple students showing progress on individual goals and skills. Even with the significant challenges presented by online learning, students showed remarkable resilience and capability in continuing to learn through the end of the year.

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Elementary students accessed Seesaw as a content delivery method, which was a good fit for my second grade class. Students submitted work assigned on a regular basis and teachers were able to provide feedback through comments, images, and emojis. Individual work sessions on Zoom were also highly effective for targeted instruction and practice. The biggest limitation during online teaching was providing group instruction and instruction on newer content without the opportunity for discussion. Students used iPads to connect and were limited to 9 participants in view at one time. Our class had 12 students and two teachers, so doing any activities in a more conventional format with everyone participating was a challenge. We had a daily social time during lunch that students enjoyed, even with a larger group. Lack of familiarity with digital tools ahead of time was another struggle. In spite of the challenges, students still showed academic progress.

Secondary (Coleen Jennings, Kayla Meese, Shari Solomon-Klebba, and Kristy Tolman)

Online instruction during coronavirus was less than ideal. Family dynamics, social distancing, Internet access, and the rapid nature of transferring classroom instruction to an online environment contributed to many school systems becoming overwhelmed. With our Deaf students, the difficulties were compounded by having to make everything accessible to ASL users plus the fact that many families have difficulty communicating with their children. The greatest struggle at the secondary level was not being able to support students who, in the classroom, relied heavily on the adults in the room to guide every activity. Independence and self-advocacy were difficult to reinforce from a distance. Students had trouble seeing distance learning as essential and asking them to complete work on their own at home was a barrier for many. However, to see these students begin to show growth in self-starting, independence and work completion also became the greatest success during this time.

We have overcome this challenge as a secondary team here in Utah due to USDB's innovative mindset. Luckily, we had the privilege of being ahead with various technological resources and having experimented with technology for several years before the COVID-19 pandemic. The students already had been exposed to various technology resources using iPads, Chromebooks, and Canvas, which allowed our students to be more prepared.

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Resource/Deaf with Disabilities (Jeanna Chiodo)

Consistency was the greatest strength for both teachers and students during this harrowing time. I scheduled a standing Zoom meeting at the same time daily with one core group of students. Some students did not miss a single call - they relied on the structure and safety of a consistent schedule. This meeting provided time for new instruction, concept review, screen sharing to help students navigate online tools, and offering follow-up opportunities for one-on-one support.

At the onset, the biggest struggle with some of my students was to establish the concept that school was still happening. It was important to help them overcome the mindset that despite the fact school looked and felt different, it was still school. Thankfully, with interventions that included countless calls and emails to parents, immense support from administration, personal home visits to offer technology support, the support of our school social worker, and more, I was ultimately able to interact with *all* of my

students. I was able to engage with them in an instructional manner that created the greatest benefit. These students learned that school is not defined by location; school can be fluid and learning can happen anywhere, especially when they are given the appropriate tools for success. Students came to accept and understand they could enjoy interacting and learning with teachers and peers through online learning. However, I am certain they are all still anxious to experience school again in the traditional sense.

Administration (Nathan Harrison & Michelle Tanner)

For administration, this was not a simple time. There were issues of student access, resources for teachers and students, driving materials to and from student homes, and organizing the increasingly complex schedules of students and staff. Meetings became much more frequent via calling or videoconferencing and Zoom fatigue (Degges-White, 2020; deHahn, 2020) became a very real strain on staff and students. For administration, there was an unpleasant disconnect from students; everything was filtered through teacher interactions rather than being able to visit students in the cafeteria or the classroom. Furthermore, students faced a steep learning curve in transitioning to fully online learning which was followed by a steep dive in their morale and motivation.

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One of the most unexpected challenges was a sense of passionate concern, sometimes verging on paranoia, that ran through the school community, including at a surprisingly high level among staff, which created unique and complex challenges - one example was the discussion of the use of face masks for those in the building. Some individuals advocated for the use of face masks for safety and others were against their usage, due to the loss of visual communication. Neither group seemed satisfied with the administrative response. With ever-shifting information, opinions, and needs, there was a messy complexity of ongoing changes and challenges that administration faced daily throughout the school dismissal.

Despite the challenges, there were many successes. Online, remote learning happened, and, for those that participated regularly, the learning was held to a high level. We implemented adapted grading scales to focus more on the learning happening during an unusual time rather than traditional grades. Staff adapted to new situations, teaching approaches, and digital tools with amazing success. Most of all, the staff and students demonstrated perseverance and flexibility in light of a very stressful and unusual time.

Lessons Learned and Moving Forward

The first lesson we want to share from this is that successful online and distance learning is possible with D/HH students of all ages, although it requires creativity and effort. Next, distance learning did not work as well for disadvantaged groups of D/HH students, such as those in poverty or with disabilities best served in a resource classroom. Some students were best served by bringing them to the school for one-on-one learning or having an assigned para-educator for Zoom meetings. Third, students were more capable of utilizing digital tools than most expected (see appendix). Fourth, Deaf schools can utilize online learning, but it cannot take the place of in-person interactions between students and adults. The final lesson we want to share is that bilingual ASL/English strategies can be implemented with success using digital tools when teachers are mindful of their use and application.

In conclusion, there was one secondary teacher, Jeanna, who put it clearly during this experience: many people and students see school as a "noun"and not as a "verb;" it is a place to go, not a thing to do and we have learned that school is truly the opposite. It is an action and a process, and the form does not always meet the traditional definition of "school." This paradigm shift is especially true for Deaf/Hard-of-hearing students, who need and deserve a creative approach to their learning, especially when a crisis happens.

Appendix

Coronavirus School Dismissal:
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Digital Tools Utilized and Their Efficacy for Remote Learning with Deaf Students

Digital Tool	Tool Type	Preschool	Elementary	Secondary	Resource
Content Management					
Canvas	Learning Management System		1	2	1.5
SeeSaw	Content Management	2	2		
Google Classroom	Learning Management System	2			
Google Suite for Education	Office Products		1	2	2
Video Conferencing and Recording					
Zoom	Video conferencing	1.5	2	2	2
Loom	Picture-in-picture recording software		2	2	2
Video Discussion and Posting					
FlipGrid	Video discussion board			2	1

GoReact	Video feedback and discussion			1.5	1
Multisubject Learning Tools					
EdPuzzle	Video and question program			2	0
Quizlet	Online "flashcards"		1	2	1
Wizer.me	Worksheet creator, sharing site, and integration tool			2	
Smart Tech	Teacher Created Online Learning Games	2			
Boom Cards	Teacher Created Interactive Learning Games	2			
Multisubject Content Provider					
Waterford Upstart	Preschool Content	1			
Mathematics					
ST Math	Math Skill Puzzles		1	1	2
Prodigy	Math RPG		2	1	

IXL	Math Skill Practice		1	1	2
English Literacy					
ReadTheory	Reading and assessments		1		
RAZKids	Reading and assessments		1	1	1
Epic! Books	Reading and assessments	1.5	1		
American Sign Language Literacy					
Sign Stories App	ASL Stories	2	2		
Online Sign Stories	ASL Stories	1.5	1	1	1
Non-Digital Remote Learning					
Packets	Paper-based learning delivered to homes	1.5	1	1	1.5

Note: 0=ineffective, 1=moderately effective, 2=highly effective