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How West Central Served a School District During COVID-19 *The Small Town with a Big Heart, Proves It*

by Karli Rizzo

On March 13, 2020, West Central found itself in a unique situation, hundreds of local families were stuck at home and in need of adequate school connection, resources and access to information. Facing many challenges, community educators quickly pivoted from in-class instruction to a new distance learning model, while strategically gathering and delivering resources to West Central students and families.

Dan Zylstra, West Central Superintendent, made a vital decision overnight. The choice was easy, families and students come first. From the outside, West Central has the disadvantage of being in a rural county far from a major city, but for area residents it's easy to see the advantages of a smaller school district. With a more spread out community, school administrators were able to aptly support nearly all of its families with participation from educators, staff and community members.

"The number of community members working hard to make distance learning as effective as we can, is astounding. And the way that West Central's people have rallied together to offer flexible and creative solutions for families, is truly amazing," said Kris Arschbrenner, West Central District Technology Director.

Initially, schools were handing out paper packets to students but due to concerns about the transmission of COVID-19, teachers and staff shifted to digital communication, with help from the district's student information system (SIS), Alma. When Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb, issued school closures and stay-at-home orders West Central admin teams quickly adjusted, creating a plan to connect with all 715 students and strategically deliver school lessons, food and resources. Alma SIS is used to track, collect and report student data in cooperation with Indiana state guidelines. Alma also

provides the messaging service schools use to communicate with students and parents daily.

"At this time, parents can't call a school and talk to a teacher or admin. So we rely heavily on Alma to interact with school staff and families. Our teachers have really stepped up to keep kids active and engaged with schoolwork. Parents and teachers are so much happier with direct communication," says Zylstra, West Central Superintendent.

West Central staff was tasked with measuring students' and families' needs and then delivering specially tailored resources where possible. West Central discovered an efficient way to distribute daily school lunches to students across the entire district. "We know our student data is updated and accurate, with Alma. This means, in an emergency we can deploy resources quickly and easily. Thankfully, Alma also has the ability to email all West Central parents at once, which is crucial at this time," added Arschbrenner.

At the start of COVID-19 lockdown, some West Central families had inadequate WiFi, unable to stream videos or actively participate in Google Classrooms. Connectivity is spotty in the county, and West Central worked with

Luckily, West Central teachers were ready. "I realized all parents know how to watch a video on their phone. So, I made video tutorials of school lessons and sent them to my class. I read books to students over the phone. I held e-learning tutorials with parents so they were empowered to teach their kids. We found lots of silent ways to help district students and families," adds Schlatter. Many West Central teachers took to their devices to creatively support our students and families.

"The heart and soul behind supporting West Central students was already in place. Alma meets districts, schools and educators where they are at and takes them where they are going," says Andrew Herman, CEO and Co-founder of Alma. "In West Central, Alma provides more intuitive, but also more flexible and powerful technology, which helps paint a more complete picture of what's happening within each school. Alma is really proud to provide the West Central School District with the tools and framework that empowers educators to foster better student outcomes, especially during this challenging time."

West Central teachers are very hands-on, making sure students are interacting with Google Classrooms regularly. Thankfully Alma seamlessly syncs with every K12 class roster. Using the platform's intuitive features and single sign-on, teachers don't have to worry, if a student is enrolled in Alma they are enrolled in Google Classroom.

"Going into COVID-19, we had a good sense of the students' needs. We have a strategic plan in place and a strong foundation. Of course, there are always areas for progress," said Zylstra. "We are so grateful for our powerful community partners who have been both generous and flexible with funding. Our district is lucky we are able to keep working towards the continuity of a learning plan that is recognized district-wide."

Want to learn more about Alma? Click [here](#).