### Abstract

As a result of the COVID19 pandemic, many school districts have moved from brickandmortar instruction to remote instruction with little planning time and limited resources. Rural localities, already facing barriers and hardships, attempted to provide special education and related services in accordance with rapidly changing state and federal guidelines. Despite funding difficulties and challenges with serving students eligible for special education during a pandemic, there are districts that leveraged the strengths of rural communities to meet student and family needs. Commerce Independent School District is one exemplar. The purpose of this article is to highlight successes and lessons learned to offer guidance to districts as we continue to navigate challenges associated with the COVID19 pandemic.

### Keywords

COVID19, remote education, rural special education, online education

In 1918, influenza created a global pandemic, taking the lives of millions of people. Nearly every person knew a victim (Morens & Taubenberger, 2018; Viboud & Lessler, 2018). However, out of the 1918 pandemic, numerous improvements to public health and safety were made. We learned the importance of handwashing and sanitation, the merits of isolation to avoid spreading the virus, and the significance of educating the public about the virus to decelerate the spread of the pandemic (Martini et al., 2019). Until the COVID19 pandemic this year, it would have been difficult to imagine such dire circumstances in todays mobile economy (Morens & Taubenberger, 2018). Over 100 years later, much of the knowledge about pandemic spread that we gained in 1918 was useful during the COVID19 pandemic of 2020.

For many schools, the transition from facetoface instruction to remote learning during the COVID19 pandemic was not their finest hour, particularly for underresourced, underserved rural schools. Gross and Opalka (2020) surveyed a nationwide sample of 477 school systems. Of those surveyed, a mere 27% of rural schools reported expectations of teachers to provide instruction to students, compared with more than 50% of urban schools. Prior to COVID19, Showalter et al. (2019) completed an evaluation of the state of rural education in the United States. Findings indicate that although overall National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) performance is on par with the national average, rural schools in impoverished areas score significantly lower than their more adequately resourced peers. Texas is currently working to improve special education identification procedures and services provided through a corrective action plan (CAP) initiated by the U.S. Department of Education (Texas Education Agency, 2019). Despite funding difficulties and challenges with serving students eligible for special education during a pandemic, there are districts that leveraged the strengths of rural communities to meet student and family needs. Commerce Independent School District is one exemplar. The purpose of this article is to highlight successes and lessons learned to offer guidance to districts as we continue to navigate challenges associated with the COVID19 pandemic. includes eight other neighboring districts. Tri County SSA has provided leadership and special education supports to districts in Delta, Hopkins, and Hunt counties since 1975. According to their website [(http://www.commerceisd.org/](http://www.commerceisd.org/page/Tri_County) [page/Tri\_County),](http://www.commerceisd.org/page/Tri_County) the mission of the cooperative is to assist district educators and administrators in providing a quality education with appropriate special education services to students with special needs to help each student successfully reach their full potential (p. 1). Under the leadership of the Director of Special Education, the SSA provides assessment and related services to area districts. These services include speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and counseling. Other related services are provided by contract. CISD has a dedicated centerbased program for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

CISD district is located on the eastern edge of north Texas in rural Hunt County. The district is the second largest district in the Tri County SSA. CISD includes four schools: two elementary schools, Commerce Elementary School and A.C. Williams; one middle school, Commerce Middle School; and one high school, Commerce High School.

## District Personnel

District personnel include 113 teachers, nine schoolbased administrators, and seven central office administrators. A dedicated Caregiver and Family Coordinator and Technology Coordinator support student needs. Each school also has a dedicated counselor and a medical clinic that assists with ensuring students have access to vaccines and medical care. Afterschool programming is provided through the Boys and Girls Club and the grantfunded Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE) program. Each school has at least two special education teachers and a dedicated Dyslexia Specialist. The CISD Board of Trustees includes six members with experience in business, agriculture, education, and public service.

## Parents and Families

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Commerce is home to 2,931 families. About 17% of residents are younger than the age of 18 years. Almost 40% of families live in poverty with a median household income of US$24,640. Texas A&MCommerce, an R2 university, is the main employer in the area. About 65% of Commerce residents rent with a median rental cost of US$799 per month. Despite economic conditions, almost 78% of families have a computer and 68% of households have access to broadband internet (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

## Students

CISD serves 1,603 students from diverse backgrounds. About 48% of students identify as White, 22% as Black, and 21% as Hispanic. Approximately 64% of students qualify for the free and reduced lunch program, one method of determining socioeconomic status and economic disadvantage. State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) testing results, an endofcourse stateadministered test for Grades 3 to 12, suggest that CISD students are performing below state averages. The percentage of students receiving special education services and from economically disadvantaged backgrounds exceeds the state average (Special Education: CISD = 12.50%, Texas = 9.60%; Economically Disadvantaged: CISD = 65.8%, Texas = 60.60%). The percentage of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds continues to grow with over 72% of Commerce Elementary and A.C. Williams Elementary students classified as being from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The mobility rate, a measure that includes students transferring in and out of district, is also above the state average (CISD = 16.10%, Texas = 15.40%; Texas Education Agency, 2019). See Table 1 for demographic information by school.

# CISDs Response to COVID19

The authors have worked together on several projects through school university partnerships, and CISD gave generously their time to share lessons learned from their work during COVID19. The authors met in May 2020 by Zoom to discuss the successes, lessons learned, and plans for future directions as CISD navigated ramifications from COVID19. Several themes from the meeting with Dr. Patricia Tremmel, Assistant Superintendent, and Ms. Rachel Myers, Tri County SSA Director of Special Education emerged. These themes included (a) effective communication, (b) collaboration, (c) professional development and resource distribution, (d) compliance, and (e) effective translation of state and federal guidelines. The themes align with identified strengths and resilience of rural special education programs (Berry et al., 2011; Curtin et al., 2016; Fleming et al., 2018).

## Communication

Open lines of communication, especially in times of crisis, can mitigate feelings of uncertainty and anxiety (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). At the onset of the COVID19 closures, administrative teams met, including central office, special education, school, and community leaders. Dr. Tremmel, Assistant Superintendent, worked with principals and communicated directly with teachers through a series of memos. See Figure 1 for an exemplar. The Board of Trustees continued to meet and worked handinhand with school administration to ensure clear communication with families and the community

To further facilitate communication, CISD implemented the use of ClassDojo, a free communication platform, to get in touch with families. ClassDojo facilitates easy communication with parents by allowing teachers to replace lengthier correspondence (e.g., email and newsletters) with succinct updates and reminders, including the use of pictures in Class Story, to keep families updated with important information. While mass communication platforms may not reach every family due to access issues and internet availability, ClassDojo, available on laptop and mobile devices, allowed everyone caregivers, students, and teachers to be informed simultaneously. Communication with caregivers and students was thoughtful and forward looking. CISD created logs to document teacher contacts with caregivers as well as for related service providers, especially speech pathologists who focused on caregiver training and support to assist students with maintaining skills and to document contacts with caregivers during the COVID19 closures. These logs created records of communication frequency and method to ensure information to families was timely and purposeful. Understanding that caregivers may be overwhelmed with sudden changes to daily routines, teachers initially contacted caregivers to gauge caregiver need and address initial concerns and questions. See Figure 2 for an exemplar.

In the following weeks, regular communication, adjusted for individual caregiver preference, was in place to give updates, provide resources, and answer questions. In some cases, students were provided with individualized materials such as visual schedules, based on student daily schedules at school, to help maintain the skill of time management and support home routines.

## Community Partnerships

As a rural school district, CISD formed numerous partnerships with community members and community organizations. These collaborative efforts ensured public safety by adhering to state safety guidelines and provided essentials, including food and connections to mental health services to the community. The districts health services collaborated with district food service to facilitate food distribution to students. School employees, including paraprofessionals, and school community members, including school board members, volunteered to help distribute food. Social media posts on Facebook and online garage sale websites facilitated news and information, greatly increasing food distribution efforts while creating the ability to reach more students and families.

Community organizations, such as Boys and Girls Club and ACE afterschool program staff, created weekly videos that were posted on social media to inform families about local resources and to facilitate homework assistance for students. For example, CISD ACE program staff read books aloud daily that were assigned by teachers so that more students had access. Other community leadership organizations, including funeral home directors, the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club, and Kiwanis Club, worked with community churches and their congregations in the effort to distribute food. These partnerships supported caregivers and students, and food distribution was a successful effort. Caregivers shared during food pickups, emails, and phone calls that they appreciated the collaboration of the school and the community and benefited from the districts efforts to provide food. Important to note is that the school and food distribution became a touchstone for the community. Food distribution facilitated partnerships with outside agencies in the community and allowed the schools to collaborate and build a working knowledge of community resources. As another point of outreach to the community, schools in CISD were able to connect families with other resources, besides those the schools could provide, to assist families in the community fill outstanding additional needs. CISD was able to successfully contact every student and their family within the first 2 weeks of the transition from brickandmortar instruction to remote learning.

## Resources and Professional Development

*Resources.* CISDs creative and judicious management of resources allowed them to support students including those who receive special education school families, and teachers during the COVID19 closures. Students continued to receive special education services through online instruction, learning packets, virtual meetings, teleservices, and counseling. In addition, CISD made sure that each student had the necessary equipment, materials, and resources to continue to make progress on IEP goals and objectives and made a concerted effort to support students receiving special education services who had BIPs to address behaviors and concerns while students were not in school. School administrators, in collaboration with district special services, created contact logs to record document concerns and connections to school and community resources to promptly address concerns. Counselors provided support to caregivers and students who were unsure about new COVID19 changes and the new reality presented by the pandemic.

While TEA provided learning packets directly to students during the first week of COVID19 closure, CISD

was committed to starting a distance learning model at the beginning of the second week of closure to provide the best learning model available on short notice. However, some students had limited or no access to the internet or technology at home. To combat this digital divide, CISD ordered mobile hotspots for student use at home. These hotspots were distributed to families who did not have internet at home. Because instruction was online instead of being in a traditional facetoface format, it was necessary for students to have reliable internet connectivity for instruction. Flexibility was key because first responders received hotspot priority. CISD continued with paper learning packets while hotspots were becoming available. In addition to hotspots, CISD distributed Chromebooks to students at a ratio of one Chromebook per family of two students. Families with one or two schoolaged children received one Chromebook and families with three or more children received two Chromebooks for their family to share. Recognizing families may still have needs beyond internet service and Chromebooks, CISD continued to reach out to families, facilitated by the district family services coordinator, in case families had additional needs that the district could help meet.

In a continuing effort to meet the needs of students and families, CISD was able to offer additional learning options in June 2020, including a jumpstart program, in facetoface format. The jumpstart program provided the opportunity to reacclimate students and families to school 2 weeks before the beginning of the academic year. However, due to the COVID19 pandemic, high school students are currently receiving remote instruction. Elementary and middle school students have options to attend school in a hybrid format.

*Professional development.* With students and families supported, CISD began to focus on supporting teachers. As the likelihood of extended COVID19 closures progressed beyond a few weeks, CISD provided all teachers with a 2day virtual professional development training focused on remote instruction. CISD realized the varied range of exposure and knowledge gap in technology of educators within the district. Given these disparities, every teacher received training to become comfortable with an online learning format, including learning how to navigate Google Classroom. Furthermore, Tri County SSA offered trainings and a Google Drive folder with a plethora of training opportunities and resources to support teachers.

In preparation for the upcoming school year, CISD is aware that some students have existing trauma not related to COVID19 closures and other students also may have trauma from the closure itself. Teachers will receive professional development that addresses trauma and the challenges for students returning to the structured school environment and how best to support these students as they transition back to the school and begin to reengage with peers in a structured environment.

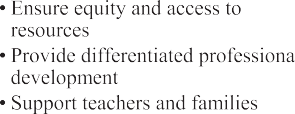
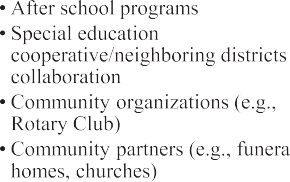
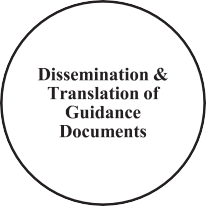
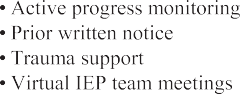
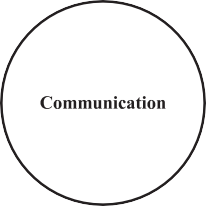
## Services and Compliance

Providing quality special education services and remaining compliant with numerous special education timelines can be daunting in the best of times. As COVID19 closures suddenly and abruptly changed service delivery for districts across the nation, it is important to note that CISD met annual admission, review, and dismissal (ARD) meeting timelines. While no evaluations were held in a traditional facetoface format, meetings were held virtually when possible. A few of the initial evaluations were unable to be completed because data were insufficient to make an eligibility decision. In these cases, CISD worked with families and provided written notice to caregivers of intent to complete the evaluation process when school resumed. Partial completion of initial evaluations was necessary as some of the required information for initial placement in special education services requires collaboration between multiple parties and must be completed when facetoface meetings are possible. If sufficient information was available to make eligibility decisions, CISD continued to complete those timelines and began serving students. Amendments to IEPs occurred through virtual meetings as needed. In addition, progress monitoring of students continued throughout the COVID19 closures.

Information collected during the transition from brickandmortar school to remote learning will be compared with academic standing at the beginning of the 2020 2021 school year. At that point, ways to mitigate any deficiencies caused by COVID19 closure (e.g., extended school year) will be addressed by the IEP team. Student IEP goals have been addressed (i.e., reinforced and updated as necessary) through goalspecific packets and phone or video conferences with caregivers and other IEP team members. In addition, CISD made sure assignments provided to students during the distance learning model were modified in accordance with student IEPs. Caregiver information about skills students were learning and mastering while at home was collected and used to help update IEP goals as needed. CISD also monitored students with BIPs and is cognizant of potential challenges in returning to school at the start of the next academic year.

## Dissemination and Translation of Guidance Documents

TEA and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) provided information to caregivers and schools regarding addressing COVID19 closures as related to special education. TEAs Instructional Continuity Plan, in four phases, included guidance for athome learning and providing



**Figure 3.** CISD COVID19 education themes.

*Note.* CISD = Commerce Independent School District; COVID = coronavirus disease; IEP = individualized education program.

monitoring and support for students during the school. AtHome Learning Phase 2 discussed resources for athome learning during the summer months [(https://tea.](https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/health-safety-discipline/covid/covid-19-support-instructional-continuity-framework) [texas.gov/texasschools/healthsafetydiscipline/covid/](https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/health-safety-discipline/covid/covid-19-support-instructional-continuity-framework) [covid19supportinstructionalcontinuityframework).](https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/health-safety-discipline/covid/covid-19-support-instructional-continuity-framework) Numerous resources, including Public Broadcast Service information, are included in this guidance. CISD monitored these guidance documents and adjusted educational plans accordingly with the goal of providing the best education for students, especially students with disabilities, during the unprecedented times.

# Lessons Learned

Many lessons can be learned from CISDs example. First and foremost, CISD leveraged the strengths of rural special education. A few of these strengths included (a) a longstanding history of strong relationships with students and families (Conroy, 2017, Nelson & Rogers, 1987; Thurston & Navarrete, 2017), (b) effective community partnerships (Curtin et al., 2016; Maheady et al., 2017), (c) family partnerships (Suppo & Floyd, 2017), (d) quality professional development (Erickson et al., 2012), (e) strong communication (Gosselin & Sundeen, 2019), (f) resource allocation and training (Berry et al., 2011), (g) effective dissemination practices (Cook et al., 2013), and (h) a commitment to procedural and substantive compliance (Hott et al., 2019).

Throughout the entire COVID19 closure, CISD collaborated with all stakeholders, internal and external, to meet the needs of the community. The COVID19 pandemic presented numerous problems for school districts across the country. This is understandable; a global pandemic, such as COVID19, has not occurred in over a century. Through CISDs efforts, community partners and school employees became part of the solution. Caregivers were enthusiastic and engaged partners with the district during this time of uncertainty and seemingly everchanging public health and safety guidelines. The districts creative ways of communication, including using Facebook and online garage sale sites, to inform the community were not characteristic of school districts nationwide. Efforts to support students with disabilities were documented and student IEP progress continued to be monitored. Teachers were supported through numerous forms of communication and professional development about technology, providing the tools necessary for teachers to educate students during a public health crisis. See Figure 3.

Although many rural localities face barriers, including poverty, geographic isolation, lack of access to specialists, and broadband connectivity challenges, they also have many unique strengths (see Rude & Miller, 2017). The entire CISD and Commerce community rallied to meet student needs during unprecedented times. CISDs flexibility, including several plans to address student needs such as continuing remote instruction, closing due to COVID19 exposure for an isolation period, and plans for reopening for the 2020 2021 school year were essential components that allowed Commerce and CISD to meet the various needs of their stakeholders. The effects of the leadership team, including teacher leaders, cannot be understated. Remote instruction has not replaced brickandmortar education and further inquiry is needed to determine the impact of online instruction when implemented during a crisis such as the COVID19 pandemic. However, strategies such as those implemented by CISD have the potential to ameliorate disparities between rural students with disabilities and students without disabilities. CISD continues to work diligently to provide quality special education services as COVID19 continues to impact the community. The latest updates are available on the CISD website (see [www.](http://www/) [https://www.](https://www.commerceisd.org/) [commerceisd.or](https://www.commerceisd.org/)g/).

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