

# Success Story

## Cabarrus County Schools

### Managing Continual Change in the Age of COVID

#### Situation

As COVID-19 swept across the country, Cabarrus County Schools (NC), like most districts, grappled with making school closure decisions in the midst of a rapidly developing situation. The approach Cabarrus developed in spring 2020 provided a roadmap for planning 2020-2021 school re-openings and is a blueprint for handling complex, variable, critical district-wide issues which require ways to:

- involve the right people at the right time to ensure quality issue resolution and greater commitment to solutions
- identify and organize issues to get your arms around existing and emerging issues
- track the status of issues to ensure accountability, progress, and resolution of issues
- coordinate decision making to ensure consistency and compliance where necessary
- keep stakeholders informed so they get needed information and progress updates

#### Key Elements of Cabarrus' Approach

In considering how best to reopen schools for the new school year, Cabarrus did the following:

- 1) Organized work groups/teams with clear roles and responsibilities. This minimized duplication of efforts and ensured effective, efficient stakeholder involvement. Cabarrus utilized:
  - A) *Senior Leadership Teams*—a central body who met weekly to review input from other teams and serve as liaison to the board. They identified major focus areas for COVID re-entry (Athletics/Band, Transportation, Instructional Delivery, School Nutrition, Building Protocols, Whole Child Supports, HR protocols, Before/After care).
  - B) *Focus teams*—identified and addressed issues within each focus area. Each focus area was assigned:
    - A responsible “owner” (part of the senior leadership team)
    - A “champion” (liaison to members and owner) who managed work of the members in gathering, analyzing, and relaying information
    - Members who gathered and analyzed input from others
  - C) *Cross-cutting Representatives*—these people (Safety & Health, Risk managers, and Communications, and select administrators) handled needs that cut across all areas and teams. Representatives attended most other team meetings allowing big decisions to be made on the spot and communicated across teams thus ensuring continuity, consistency and accelerated decision making.
- 2) Developed a systematic way to track issues, communicate and monitor progress. Teams entered information and progress into spreadsheets accessible to others on Google Drive.

Optimization of this collaborative structure would not have been possible without some essential ingredients already in place:

- *Problem-solving process*—a shared, accepted, widely-recognized approach helped facilitate and support the work of teams and ensure quality solutions.
- *Collaborative culture and expectations*—a culture that valued peoples' input and supported their involvement.
- *Supportive Senior Leadership*—leaders who not only supported using a collaborative problem-solving process but expected it—and who provided the time and space to get it done.
- *Trained Facilitators*—respected district personnel who were skilled in facilitating others using TregoED's strategic problem-solving tools.

## Lessons Learned

Some lessons learned from Cabarrus are:

- Preparation and advance work in building capacity in using data, working together, and solving problems pays off during a crisis or other challenges.
- Involving people in meaningful ways lets them know that they matter, their opinion is valued, and their work is important. When they see the results, it is motivating and rewarding.
- There is increased confidence in the result—as Amy Lowder (Director of Safety and Well-being and in-district facilitator) put it: *“When something has been ‘Tregoe’d’ people know it's super-vetted. Especially in times of uncertainty, relying on an ‘old pal’ like TregoED tools, increases confidence.”*
- Organizing issues into buckets or focus areas helped make things manageable and provided a team structure for handling the issues.
- The structure provided by process and teams made it easier to accommodate changing information and guidelines.
- Weekly meetings and a spreadsheet tracking progress (accessible to all on Drive) provided increased accountability and meant priorities were less likely to languish or be forgotten.
- Smoother implementation and enhanced organizational learning through anticipating and preparing for what can go wrong—and applying lessons learned.

Decisions like “how best to close or reopen schools during a global pandemic” are ones you hope you only face once in a career—although you know there will be other “firsts.” Certainly, these issues are fraught with complications, unknowns, and tremendous conflict—and there is no existing playbook. But how well we handle these crises often correlates to the groundwork that's been laid ahead of time. No matter what lies ahead, Cabarrus has a recipe for success in tackling the toughest issues!



When you have capable, committed people—and you know they have what they need to succeed—you can trust them to get the job done—and to do it right."

Christopher Lowder, Ed.D., Superintendent, Cabarrus County Schools

