



# EMPATHY IN EQUITY

BY BEN MARKLEY

The 2020-21 school year has been an extremely challenging year for traditional in-person educational institutions as they were met with the expectation to educate students in a non-traditional setting. Many schools started the year in an online learning environment and transitioned to a hybrid or some version of in-person and/or online model. These changes have pushed K-12 education to be flexible in their values and expectations, and empathetic to student and family needs. And while we know one day we will return to traditional learning models, there are many lessons we have learned that should not be lost or forgotten in our angst to return to a normal instructional setting. Should the new normal be the old normal?

## SOCIAL EXPERIENCES

One of the biggest losses in an online learning model are the natural and non-scripted social experiences for students. It is important that we appreciate and foster the social and emotional side of students whether in-person or online. The use of Breakout Rooms to form small group discussions certainly helped in this process, but many students struggled to build true relationships with their colleagues, especially those new to a school or district. Friends are typically made on the playground, during lunch, or in conversations with your elbow partner, but yet today many students still don't have a classmate they would call a friend. As an educational community we need to be creative and proactive in building social experiences and opportunities for students in all learning models.

## DIGITAL DIVIDE

Through this pandemic the public has become increasingly aware of the Digital Divide that has brought longstanding concern, and has been a point of advocacy for the K-12 Information Technology space. Through the work of the FCC's Erate program, we have had the opportunity to maximize our funds to build robust on-campus networks. Many of these networks are the largest and most advanced in the community and on any given day can support tens of thousands of students and staff with safe high quality internet connectivity. However, Erate program restrictions limit the impact of this program as we are unable to extend support to student's homes, community areas, or anywhere outside of the school campus. Schools used one-time funds to overcome many of these challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. Now is the time to advocate like never before for long-term funding, support, and solutions in overcoming the Digital Divide through local, state, and federal programs.

## THROUGH THE CAMERA LENSE

One of the most important insights we've gained were from the moments students turned on those cameras and microphones. Teachers and staff were opened to the world that many of our students experience every day in their homes. We were exposed to living rooms, kitchen tables, posters on their wall, siblings, and even their pets. While many homes had what we may consider a supportive home,

we also found many students live in homes where the environment was not conducive to learning. To have a glimpse of a student's home life has been a gift and an opportunity for us to expand in our empathy and act on the needs and circumstances of our students to bring about equitable outcomes for our students.



*Ben plans, organizes, directs, and leads Hemet Unified School District's Educational Technology and Information Technology teams using*

*strategic leadership to positively impact student achievement. The department is responsible for supporting the district's technology and data needs to all 22,000 students, 28 school sites and numerous departments throughout the district. This includes student devices, servers, staff and student computers, network infrastructure, and educational and information technology implementation and planning. Ben and the team also manage the district data systems which include the student information system, CALPADS state reporting, and various federal reporting. In addition to Hemet, Ben's professional experiences include Valley Center-Pauma USD (CTO), Perris Union High SD (Student Information Systems Supervisor), Lake Elsinore USD (PC Technician and Contracted Computer Consultant). His formal education includes a Bachelor's of Science in Business Management, Associates of Science in Computer Information Systems, and several professional certifications, including CITE Certified CTO (2015) and Leading Edge Administrator Certification (2014). Mr. Markley was also recognized as San Diego County's 2018 Technology Administrator of the Year.*