

American International School of Monrovia, Liberia



How a school in Liberia is looking to lessons learned during Ebola school closures when planning for life after COVID-19

The American International School of Monrovia (AISM) sits about a mile from the sandy beaches of Liberia's capital city on the western coast of Africa. It's one of 195 US-accredited schools that receive funding from the US State Department. The mission of these schools is to serve the students of American diplomats, the American business community, and other foreign and local students interested in a US-accredited program.

Jeff Trudeau has acted as head of school of AISM since 2012, including when it closed during the Ebola outbreak in 2014. He led the planning for students to return in early 2015, so he's a good person to ask about what we can expect after coronavirus. "There are going to be a lot of schools looking for support when COVID-19 closures end," Jeff says. "Everyone's going to be overloading them with 'the answer.' The answer is whatever is the best match for the community."

Relying on what's known

Starting classes back up after the Ebola crisis was not easy. But when it came to understanding where students were academically after months of uneven online instruction, Jeff knew he could turn to a resource he already used: MAP® Growth™. "It is our most important tool when it is used as a diagnostic assessment. It helps us reach 95% of students where they are," he says.

Ebola spread to Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea in August 2014, and AISM was mandated to stay closed for six months. When classes resumed in February 2015, that loss of learning—tacked on to summer learning loss from the months before the outbreak—presented a tremendous challenge. Jeff knew that some students had had the means

and family support to stay on track with learning, while others had simply had to drop schooling entirely. He and his staff prepared for all possible outcomes.

Emotional health first and academics second

The school's first priority when it reopened was social-emotional learning. Staff set up a Facebook group to talk to parents and students about returning to school. That helped everyone reconnect, share concerns, and rest assured that they were part of a community working together.

Staff then zeroed in on academics and understanding where students were. "Within three days of students returning, we set up MAP Growth testing and we crunched the data right away," Jeff says.

The school was faced with a student body that had shrunk from 150 to 38, partly because some families didn't feel ready to send their kids back to school. The team decided to implement a multi-age, mastery-based flexible grouping system. In simpler terms, that means they stopped relying on traditional age-based grade levels and built clusters of students based on their prior learning achievement.

Kids were placed into groups for above norms, at norms, and below norms for math and English. MAP Growth data was the primary tool used in making those placement decisions. It also proved the grouping was incredibly effective, so the school is still following that model. Students take MAP Growth three times a year: a week after starting school in the fall, a second time in November, and a third time in March. Teachers continue to rely on data for placement, and they look to it to differentiate instruction for each group as well.

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Preparing when little is certain

When students return to school after COVID-19 closures, Jeff warns, the transition will be slow and uneven across the globe. Some families may not be ready to send their kids back, beset by worries about safety or uncertain economic situations. It could take several months for students and parents to get back into the rhythm of school life.

Jeff’s approach for returning from closures will be very gradual. He plans for two days of registration, three days of MAP Growth testing, and half-days of school for the first week or two. Instruction will start with core subjects. Foreign languages and arts will be added later, and the school will wait until the last phase of the transition to include P.E. and athletics again.

Assessment results for children unable to do online learning during school closures are almost guaranteed to drop dramatically. But that’s to be expected—and can be addressed. Despite the dramatic drop in results for AISM students in those first weeks back after the Ebola crisis, teachers found that students were hungry to learn again. They took cues from their more confident peers who dove back into the work. Jeff recommends encouraging that sense of positive collaboration, with a focus on learning.

He also suggests clustering students within individual grade-level classes, since grouping them across grades might not be possible. “Beg for a teaching assistant so they can work with different groups, so you don’t just teach to the middle,” he advises teachers. Otherwise, educators risk losing kids who kept the fastest pace during the break as well as those who fell far behind.

Cautious optimism

With AISM once again closed as a public health measure, Jeff can anticipate what it will be like when coronavirus is less of a threat and it is deemed safe and appropriate for students to physically return to the campus. While he knows nothing will be easy about tens of millions of students returning to school in the United States this fall, he believes administrators, teachers, and parents can work together to mitigate the impact and get kids at every level of learning back on track.



School snapshot

MONROVIA, LIBERIA



STUDENTS

122

PRODUCT USE

IMPLEMENTED MAP GROWTH IN

2012

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