

Digital Equity Community Response Report

Fridley Preschool
6085 7th Street NE
Fridley, MN 55432

Submitted by: Karin Beckstrand, Fridley Preschool Coordinator

Digital equity. This is not a topic that was high on my list of things to think about when talking about Preschool. The truth is that when we are discussing Preschool, digital platforms are not high on the list of things you want 3 and 4-year-old children to engage with on a regular basis in their school day. Yet when you add a global pandemic and distance learning to the mix, we now are talking about digital equity in a whole new parameter.

When the move to full Distance Learning took place last March with the governor's executive stay at home order, Fridley Preschool had to move quickly to gain access for our youngest learners. As we moved into Distance Learning we started to utilize new platforms for delivery of content and as a means to communicate with our families. Over time we landed on the use of a Google Site, Flipgrid, and Bloomz as our primary tools. These three digital platforms are what I want to highlight as our success stories for our Preschool.

When our teachers started to come back to the building in the late summer and the plans started to take shape for what our fall programming was going to look like, the teachers immediately brought up the three digital platforms we used in the late spring. While we faced many of the same obstacles as other schools when we are speaking of technology and digital equity, we also knew what our "wins" were in the spring and we wanted to continue to grow and nurture those points. Our struggles were and continued to be:

- Lack of devices for families
- Lack of internet for families
- Language barriers
- Lack of understanding about what school even was for Preschool students
- And more...

Yet our pillars of strength in digital equity continued to be:

- Google Site – our own site that housed all of our content, contact information, daily activities, support services for families during the pandemic, and basic resources
- Flipgrid – a means for families and teachers to interact, record videos, record stories, record and react to other videos, and more
- Bloomz – our main communication tool that allows parents to select on their end their home language with over 80 languages available for families to access

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These three tools allowed us to partner with our families as we began to prepare for the fall. Whether a parent was selecting our hybrid in-person or full distance learning option for their child, through our one-on-one orientation meetings in September, we were able to talk through these three key aspects of our programming. Over time and as we were able to add more devices for families who needed them, we are now almost at 100% participation with our families as we now operate in full distance learning for all. When we pull data from our Bloomz site, we can see over 700 messages, comments, and viewings in just the month of November from the parents of our 115 students enrolled. This continues to trend up as we move into December.

While distance learning is not the method of instruction any of the teachers and staff of the Fridley Preschool would ever want, we know that, for now, it is the safe and best option. Yet when we look ahead to bringing our students back into the building and even further down the road to next year, we are also very energized by having the digital equity that we have worked to achieve with our students and families. It has been enlightening to see how young students can learn how to mute and unmute, how they learn to share over a screen with six of their other classmates, and how they still feel connected and part of a class. What has helped this to be successful are the supports we started to cultivate last spring and continued to enrich this fall; our Google Site, Flipgrid, and Bloomz.

A global pandemic, distance learning, and so much more is not something I ever expected to have to be a part of in my thirty years in education. Yet it is our world right now. My hope is that when the storm passes and we come out on the other side, we have learned more about our students, our families, and ourselves and our educational system. When I ask myself “do I want my youngest learners to have to be on a device and learn through a digital platform?”, the answer is NO! Yet through this time I have also come to see how we can make things work and how we need to keep our lens of equity, relationships, and meeting families where they are at as our focal point.

In closing, I have to summarize by saying that through all of this, we found success with digital equity for our young learners through our research, trial and error, and continually communicating with our families about what they needed. We can still continue to grow, develop, and cultivate our resources and continue to refine what we do with digital equity yet I feel that we have started down the path with our heads held high and with more hope and spirit on the horizon. Thank you.