

**Transcript of Video Podcast Interview**  
**New Mexico SRCL and CLSD Team – “Virtual Open House”**

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**Interviewer:** Jobi Lawrence, SRCL and CLSD TA Liaison

**Participants:**

Kim King: New Mexico Public Education Department

Cheryl Coyle: Vado Elementary School

Nereida Gamon: Parent of 2 Students at Vado Elementary School

Jobi: Welcome, and thank you, for being with us today. I'm Jobi Lawrence with the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy TA Team, and in this podcast, I'll be joined by Kim King from the New Mexico Public Education Department, and Cheryl Coyle, and Nereida Gamon from Vado Elementary School. And today we're going to be discussing family engagement, and specifically virtual open houses. And before we get started, I wanted to just remind everyone that this presentation contains examples and resource materials that are provided for the user's convenience. The inclusion of any material is not intended to reflect its importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services. These materials may contain the views and recommendations of the presenters, as well as hypertext links, contact addresses and website's to information created and maintained by other public and private organizations. The opinions expressed in any of these materials do not necessarily reflect the positions or the policies of the US Department of Education. And the US Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials. Mentions of specific programs or products in these examples are designed to provide clearer understanding and are not meant as endorsements.

Kim, Cheryl and Nereida, let's go ahead and turn it to you. Could you please start by introducing yourselves and explaining your role?

**Kim:** Hi, I'm Kim King with the New Mexico Public Education Department, and I am the SRCL Project Coordinator. The SRCL grant has been in this state for three years, and today with me is Ms. Coyle and Ms. Gamon from Gadsden Independent School District. They'll be sharing their district wide implementation of virtual open houses.

**Jobi:** Excellent, thanks so much.

**Cheryl:** Hi, I'm Cheryl Coyle, I'm the School Principal at Vado Elementary, within the Gadsden Independent School District.

**Nereida:** Hello, my name is Nereida Gamon, and I'm the District Literacy Specialist for kinder through sixth grade. And I'm also the parent of two students at Vado Elementary.

**Jobi:** Wonderful, welcome everyone, thanks for being here today. So, Kim, would you please give us a brief overview of your Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy grant?

**Kim:** Absolutely, we're in the third and final year of our grant. Our grant, for this state, we primarily chose to, through a competitive process, make awards to our LEAs. We made 11 awards when this grant was released, and Gadsden was one of the sub-grantees. We've seen great strides in our state. Especially, innovative practices as we've gone through this challenge of COVID. We're really happy to be able to share this, this new endeavor of virtual open house.

**Jobi:** Excellent, thank you so very much. So I understand that today, this is for Ms. Coyle, you're here to talk to us about family engagement, and very specifically about your approach to virtual open houses. Would you just please describe the strategy and, and how you've been implementing the virtual open house at Vado Elementary?

**Cheryl:** Absolutely. As a school district, we realized pretty quickly that we needed a way of introducing our teachers to our students for this new school year, that was very different than from previous school years. And so, we decided, okay, we needed to do a virtual open house. And so, what we did is, after speaking with my staff about what that'll look like at Vado, we decided that we were going to do it on, on a Friday afternoon, later in the afternoon, and have multiple sessions so that parents could go to their different teachers. And so, that was the big focus, that was the big idea. And then the teachers would then have a chance to sort of talk about, you know, the expectations, the routines, the schedules, procedures within their classroom, with both the students and the parents through the open house process. And it was, it was very effective, and that's what we're here to share.

**Jobi:** Excellent, thank you, so much. So Ms. Gamon, from your perspective, how did this look in terms of boots-on-the-ground from a family's perspective?

**Nereida:** So, as a parent, I feel that the school did a great job trying to reach out to us in different ways, to communicate with us, so that we could be present for the virtual open house. It was very exciting to try something different than the regular open house. And so, when the teachers first reached out to us, it was interesting to hear that we were going to be doing this virtually. They shared with us, like Ms. Coyle mentioned, they already had the link set up for us. All we had to do was join the meeting at that time. And both of my kids were present during the time, so that was really exciting for them to get to see who their teacher was going to be. On the parent's side, I feel like us being able to see that there was actually a plan already in place was very helpful. And it was...it eased our nerves a little. Because, we were, we were just nervous to see what the year was going to be like. And so, just for them to, to actually think about providing this kind of like meeting for parents was very, very helpful.

**Jobi:** So how did this strategy get selected for implementation? Did it grow out of another plan? Did it morph from something you're already doing? So maybe tell us a little more about how this came to be.

**Cheryl:** Okay, so, generally, what we happen is on a traditional open house at the beginning of the school year. Everyone meets in the cafeteria. We have a big giant meeting, with me talking to the parents, and, you know, welcoming them back to Vado Elementary and, basically, going over some rules and procedures, and things like that. And then, at that point, the parents get to know who their child's teacher is, and they go back to the classrooms, and get to see the classroom environment, and get to meet the teacher. But, of course, that wasn't going to be able to occur this school year. And so, we had to figure out a way of getting a chance for the teachers to meet the families. And so, so that's what we started with was this virtual open house. And so, what we really did is, the advertising piece was a big piece of it, is making sure we had the robocall that goes out. We used School Messenger to inform all of our families of the open house, and let them know that to on Friday to check the website, and they'll find all the links to the open houses on the website. And then the teachers called all of their families, and personally invited them to the open house. So they sort of, you know, they reached out to the families, introduced themselves, and invited them. The teachers also personally sent links to the open houses to the parents. And so, it was just trying to, we were trying to make it as easy for families as possible. And so, and at the same time, we also provided technology support. My computer lab teacher, she made herself available all day to help families either through call-in basis, or through a Google Meet, the technology support to help the families make sure that they understood how, how their son or child could even login to the Chromebook.

**Jobi:** Excellent, thank you, so much. You've described a few of what you would probably say are the critical elements or critical components that made this strategy or approach so successful. Is there anything else you think that you want to mention in terms of just from the school's perspective? What made this work so well?

**Cheryl:** Well, it was the dedication from the teachers, and from, well, the whole staff pulling together. One of the big things is, with Google Meets, is the link would disappear. And so, we had to learn how to do a recurring event to keep the Google Meet link open, so that it would be there. Because what happened is, the teachers would create the meeting on Monday, and they'd send me the link, and I'd put it in a flyer, in the, in the form for the website. But on Wednesday it wasn't working, you know? And so, we had to go back and like, okay, this is, you know, step-by-step how to create a recurring Google Meet link. And that was one of the critical things. Because I was really wanting to make sure that, you know, all links had to be working. And that was very critical.

**Jobi:** Of course, of course, thank you, so much. From a parent's perspective, Ms. Gamon, what are some of the critical elements that you felt made this so successful?

**Nereida:** I think, like Ms. Coyle mentioned, the fact that the teachers reached out to us prior to open house, calling us, making sure that we knew how to connect, and just ensuring that, that they really wanted us to be present, to see everything. I think that was very, that was very important for us too, as parents, to see that teachers actually spent a lot of effort into contacting us, and reaching out to us. And so, I think that was one of the most important things,

as well as the organizational part. I think I already mentioned it, but just how organized it was. I mean, it was very simple for us. The organization is critical. Like Ms. Coyle mentioned, the way we were able to access it through the website, teacher sent the link, and then there was like different, again, different means of communication. And so, that, those are critical components as a parent to be reminded, as well, that you're going to have an open house, you have to come, be present and, and that they want you there. They made us feel like they really wanted us to be part of that open house too, to see what our students, or what our children were going to be doing for the, for the remainder of the school year. Or, at least, for now.

**Jobi:** Absolutely, thank you, so much. So what challenges did you encounter along the way? You mentioned one with the links potentially not being, the way they were originally set up. But what other challenges did you encounter along the way, and what did you learn from these challenges?

**Cheryl:** Well, the big learning point was that this can be successful and the ultimate goal was a positive experience. We wanted a positive experience for the students, for the families, and for the teachers. We wanted the students to look forward to starting the school year. We wanted them to know that, you know, we're ready for them, we're ready to go, we can't wait for you to come back. You know, we want to hear, if you can't be here in person, we want to hear your voice on your Google Meet. And so that was, that was a big push, was making sure that the kids felt invited, the kids felt like, you know, we wanted them here, we were excited for the school year to start. And then the other challenges really, were just the, the organizational side of it, making sure that we were ready. Making sure that we had somebody in place to help with the technology side, for the families who were struggling, who was able to, you know, walk families through either on the phone, or through Google Meet, of the different pieces.

**Jobi:** Fabulous. So what about from the family's perspective, what were some of the challenges maybe that you encountered?

**Nereida:** You know, I feel like the, one of the challenges would be for those parents that are not very tech savvy, being able to login to a Google Meet, if they don't know how to do that. I feel like they had to rely a lot either on their children, who have actually gone through that. But the fact that, like Ms. Coyle mentioned, there was a technology person, or there was a person, the point of contact for parents, I think alleviated a lot of that, those challenges. If they had a question, they could call the technology teacher, and she would be helping them along the way. And so, I think, again, because, of the times where we are, the technology piece, ensuring that there's internet and that you're able to connect, I think is also one of the challenges that, that might have encountered.

**Jobi:** And also, I know, being a school that implements dual-language programming, language can always be a barrier for families who don't speak English as their home language. How did you meet that challenge head on?

**Cheryl:** Yeah, we are a dual-language school, and about two thirds of the students at Vado Elementary are in the dual-language program. And so, those teachers, we have a really strong partnership between our teachers, and so, the teachers held their open house together. And so, there was definitely somebody who spoke Spanish at each meeting. And that way we can, we can make sure that it was accessible for all families.

**Jobi:** Fabulous, thank you, so much. So how has your strategy or approach changed over time?

**Cheryl:** Well, we are now doing Virtual Coffee with the Principal. I've learned how to do Google Sites. And so, on my Google Site for Virtual Coffee with the Principal, I make sure to have my presentation. I make sure to have my, my calendar, and agenda, and link. And then that way, and then I put the link to that from the school website to my Google Site. Because, it's much easier to go in and modify my Google Site than it is to modify my school website. And so, I'm just like learning little tricks, like, okay, if parents can come here, which will take them there, which will give them access to everything they need. And so, you know, putting things together in Google Sites and, and using Google Slides, and things like that, in order to... And then link everything that... So when I'm presenting something to the parents, for example, the Title I Engagement Policy, that there's a link from the presentation to that Title I Engagement Policy, so parents have access to it.

**Jobi:** Super, so after you found out that the virtual open house was so successful, you started figuring out additional ways to connect virtually with your families in an ongoing way.

**Cheryl:** Exactly.

**Jobi:** Fabulous, thank you, so much. How do you know that this approach to the virtual open houses, and now your virtual talking with the principal is working?

**Cheryl:** Well, I think attendance is about the same. And so, the attendance for the Coffee with the Principal was actually higher with the virtual than when I would do it in-person. So that was always, you know...Unless when I have a big presentation. When I get ballet recital to present, to dance for my parents, that's when I get my parents to come in, of course, for my Coffee with the Principal. But when I just generally have a general meeting, a lot of times it's hard getting the families engaged in that process. But they were there, they showed up, they wanted to hear what was going on, they wanted to know like what the plan is. And they also gave very positive feedback. They were very happy about how we're working. They're surprised at how much technology their children are learning, and that, and that they feel like, you know, that they're seeing a big difference from week three from week one, so that everything's kind of slowly coming together.

**Jobi:** Excellent, thank you, so much. So what about from a family or caregiver's perspective, how do you know this is working?

**Nereida:** You know, I think that, again, going back with when teachers were showing us their plan and their schedule. And then now seeing them actually implemented in their teaching and, and seeing my own kids learning the technology and them doing what was being said, that the plan that the teachers had, I know that, that this works. Because, again, they started with a plan and they, they continue with it, and they're making, they're adapting as we're going and we're learning. But, again, like the teaching, seeing the teacher dedication, like I know that it's working and I see it in my student, in my own children's work and, and what they're learning. And they're excited to be in school, so I know that whatever they're doing is working for them. And for our school, for the schools.

**Jobi:** Thanks, Ms. Gamon. If another grantee wanted to implement something like this, what would they need to do?

**Cheryl:** Well, the big thing, if they were going to use Google Meet, is making sure that everyone knew how to create a recurring event, so the link wouldn't disappear. And so, just really making sure that those, that everyone has easy access to the meetings, and that it's very well organized. Sorry, the bell. (chuckles) (bell sounds)

**Jobi:** Organization is key, and obviously making sure that whatever technology platform you're using, that you have all of the kinks worked out, right?

**Cheryl:** Right, exactly, all the kinks worked out. And it was a learning curve for the teachers. Some of them had to create, you know, two or three Google Meets. But they learned how to do it. And I knew they could, it was just like, "Oh, wait a minute here, you need to do it this way." And so they all figured it out, and it's something that we're all strong in right now.

**Jobi:** Excellent. As we wrap-up, if you could leave our listeners with one piece of advice about implementing this strategy or approach, what would it be? And we'll start with Kim from the state educational agency perspective. What would your advice be?

**Kim:** In looking at how successful this was, it started at the district level, and a district administration really seeing a need to reach out to families. And how intentional that reach out was, with robocalls, and teachers reaching out. And creating the sense of excitement for children to come back to school. And the teachers being able to be face-to-face and show their face, even though it wasn't in a classroom. Young children love to see their teachers and their principals. For them to be able to have that interaction after months without, I think was a great approach to create that connection. And also, having technology available for the teachers, as well as the families, to ensure there were no hiccups, and also to create that level of comfort in accessing this virtually.

**Jobi:** Thank you, so much. Ms. Coyle?

**Cheryl:** So basically it would be to, to realize that it's not going to go perfect, that there are going to be hiccups, but it can't keep you from going forward. You have to start, start

somewhere, and you have to say, "Okay, how do we do this?" And, yeah, it may, your plan on Friday may not look what you were planning on Monday, but it doesn't mean you don't go forward, and don't, don't keep trying.

**Jobi:** Excellent advice. Ms. Gamon?

**Nereida:** I think maintaining the communication with the teachers. I think a lot of times that, as parents, we feel like, if I ask this question, the teacher might feel like I'm not being supportive enough. So I think that asking questions, reaching out to the teachers if you have questions, if you have concerns. Making yourself visible and trying to learn the new platforms that our students are using, because it is a challenge when we're not familiar with the technology. And I think not being afraid of it, and asking questions is what I think, and being involved. Being as involved as possible. Knowing what the expectation of the school is. And if not, if you don't know, then asking, because, it's always just a matter of asking a question, and you will have an answer. There's always someone that will provide an answer for you, or will guide you to get that answer. So, as parents, we can't be afraid to ask. We have to really put ourselves out there and make ourselves visible. Just the same way that teachers are trying to reach out to us, we have to reach out to them, as well.

**Jobi:** Thanks, so much. And thank you all, so much, for being here with us today, and for giving us a look inside your virtual open house.