

# How Frisco ISD Transitioned to Virtual Learning & Used Xello to Engage Students

Future readiness doesn't have to be put on hold just because school is not in session. Here's how one district made the switch to virtual learning & built the infrastructure for a virtual school counseling program that would support 63,000 students.

School districts across North America are working hard to keep students academically engaged while schools are closed to accommodate the need for social distancing. Minimizing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic while keeping the educational "lights on" requires innovation, ingenuity and technology. Despite the challenges, some districts are thriving.

We spoke to an educational leader who quickly adapted as everything changed. Learning, including college and career readiness, is in progress in this district. Here's their story.

## Frisco ISD Moves to Virtual Counseling

On Monday, March 9, 2020, Texas reported one of the first cases of coronavirus in the U.S. Dr. Stephanie Cook, Managing Director of Guidance and Counseling for Frisco Independent School District notes that the patient was in her school district. Students were on Spring Break, but she and other administrators were already acting fast to anticipate what would come next.

Within the next two days, they knew they would be closing the 73 campuses that serve 63,000 students in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. "We understood we had a lot of work ahead of us to keep our students learning," says Cook.

On Wednesday, March 11, Cook gave herself the day to "daydream" about what virtual learning would look like in the enormous Frisco ISD. She had reviewed a resource released by [ASCA providing advice on virtual school counseling](#) and considered the impact on teachers, counselors, and students.

“I thought about what virtual counseling would look like. For most counselors, advising students is a sacred space you share with another human being. You’re in the same room, reading body language and you can see what it means when someone says something and looks down. There are qualitative components to a conversation. How would that work in a virtual environment?” she says.

By Thursday, March 12, she’d wrapped her head around a plan. And for the next four days, she dug deep to figure out how to help everyone “completely change their mindset and paradigm about counseling, learn technology at a moment’s notice, and build the infrastructure for a virtual school counseling program that would support 63,000 students.”

The strategy was to break it down, make it simple enough to understand, yet comprehensive and sophisticated in its design. She used ASCA’s outline as a foundation and started with educating counselors on how to set up a virtual office. That included learning new technology, including [Google Voice](#) (since phone systems were not accessible remotely), [Zoom](#) and [Google Hangouts](#) (for video conferencing with colleagues and students), and [Google Classroom](#) to communicate with students.

***We learned quickly that we wanted students to know how to get hold of us. Counselors set up appointment links for parents and students and communicated through email.***

“By Monday, March 16, all parents had a link to reach counselors and they started getting appointment requests that night. Virtual visits with kids began Tuesday.”

The next step was making sure teachers had the resources they needed to conduct virtual learning. This included providing emotional support during a troubling time.

“Counselors were great about dividing up and making personal contact with each teacher to get infrastructure in place so that we could respond to needs,” says Cook.

All parents of Frisco ISD students receive an email newsletter each Sunday, sorted by grade level or content area. The email has links to the week’s lessons and a link to their counselor. Future readiness is part of the virtual curriculum, including guidance and psycho-educational lessons for each grade level.

“We only missed one day of instruction in Frisco,” confirms Cook.

To ensure equity for students, the district handed more than 4,000 devices, including Chromebooks, laptops, and tablets on which virtual learning can be conducted. Six internet service providers in the district are providing 360 days of free access—which correspond with the number of days left in the school year.

For students who still have barriers to connectivity, Wifi is available from school parking lots, so social distancing can be maintained as long as possible.

## Using Xello To Continue with Future Readiness

Frisco ISD is in year two of using Xello in their middle and high schools. In the 6th grade, students accessed it in a Tech Apps class and lessons were aligned with its learning objectives. In Grades 7-8, counselors introduced Xello to students in guidance lessons, encouraging them to take personality and learning quizzes and exploring their interest inventory and Matchmaker.

High school students use Xello to personalize their plans and create next-step goals.

In today's virtual learning environment, Xello continues to be an important resource. College and career readiness will be part of the guidance lessons included in students' weekly newsletter.

"Xello will be one of the two recommended guidance lessons," says Cook.

Students may revisit their profile in Xello, explore independently, or do grade-appropriate lessons.

"We haven't used all the resources in Xello yet, so this is a good time to do that. It helps that students are already familiar with the program.

"We know that having college and career lessons will help students think beyond right now. We'll be looking at how we can use Xello to reorient to what life will be like after coronavirus. It will help contextualize what students are experiencing. For high school students in particular, it's developmentally appropriate to stay focused on long-term goals," says Cook.

## Advice for Other Districts Working on Virtual Learning

What's the key to getting a successful virtual learning program up and running fast? According to Cook, the answer lies in trying to simplify it all.

"I speak with a lot of district leaders and not enough can be said for simplifying your process. The harm that a lot of educators run into is they think that content and volume somehow equal quality and I believe it's the opposite. The richness is in conversation and interaction. Accessibility and ease of implementation is about how simple you make the infrastructure. We nailed that part at least," says Cook.

She also recommends using the resources that already exist, including [ASCA's Planning for Virtual/Distance School Counseling During an Emergency Shutdown](#). Cook herself has also put together a [Virtual School Counseling](#) guide to help other districts move forward swiftly and thoughtfully.

Other tips include:

- Use known platforms, such as Zoom and Google Hangouts.
- Create a virtual learning plan piece by piece, not in one large chunk.

- Start with counselors and teachers and be sure they're comfortable with their virtual offices before moving forward. "Practitioners don't need to think about ASCA at first. Lead them forward by building capacity for the next thing and build it out step by step. Don't show all your cards at once or you'll overwhelm counselors and teachers."
- Remember to be sensitive to change management.

"You're taking your expert 'feelers' from your district (your counselors) and completely moving their cheese. You have to do it slow enough and cheerlead and support them," says Cook.

*Do you have a virtual learning story to share? Have you successfully implemented Xello for remote learning? Email us at [marketing@xello.world](mailto:marketing@xello.world) and we'd love to feature you!*

### **Further Resources for Virtual Learning**

[Making the Switch to Remote Learning: Your District's Guide to Preparing K-12 Students for Future Success](#)

[Free Resources for Schools, Educators & Parents During COVID-19](#)

[How to Use Xello for Remote Learning](#)

[5 Ways to Facilitate Remote Learning Successfully During Uncertain Times](#)



#### **ABOUT HEATHER**

Heather Hudson is a Toronto-based freelance writer and journalist. She specializes in content marketing, corporate storytelling and good old-fashioned journalism. You can read some of her work in The Toronto Star and learn more about her at [heatherhudson.ca](http://heatherhudson.ca).