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Striving Towards Betterment

by Mark Simon,
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Driven by a keen sense of humanity, Ron Packard (selected by The CEO Publication as a Top 20 Dynamic CEO for Leadership During the Pandemic) is leading school management teams through a global pandemic by keeping student wellbeing close to heart.

Pansophic Learning is a global school management organization serving over 35,000 students in the United States, Europe, Middle East, and Africa. Since opening in 2014, the company has primarily worked in K-12 public and private education. The group additionally specializes in early childhood care and

partners with colleges and universities to offer online degree programs. “We are interested in quality education at every level wherever it is needed,” says Packard, who has built a company based on the belief that every child should be able to be anything they want to be in life, regardless of their birthplace and circumstances.

I meet with Ron one morning in early February via GoToMeeting. He is seated in his office and drinking his second cup of coffee. I can see a wall covered in sports memorabilia behind him, and a window overlooking treetops, a relief in the rapidly constructing landscape of Tysons Corner. He has just returned from Columbus,

Ohio where he met with officials to discuss public education during the pandemic. He is engaging, sharing anecdotes about his travels and the people he met along the way. I can tell he is the type of guy who is interested in everything. I begin my inquiry by asking what has changed for him and the company over the past year. His quick shift surprises me as he shares with gravitas what has stayed the same. “For us, our work is about the students. It has always been about students, and the past year was no different.”

During the initial outbreak of COVID-19, when governors suspended face-to-face learning and many parents were laid off or furloughed from work, keeping the focus on students meant supporting families with basic needs. About 80% of students enrolled in public charter schools managed by Pansophic Learning in the U.S. and U.K. are considered economically disadvantaged, qualifying for free breakfast and lunch service during the school day. Within 48 hours of closure orders, schools organized ongoing free meal pick-up for all children ages 18 years and younger in their communities. To support essential workers, childcare centers were kept open wherever governments permitted, and the company opened pandemic centers that reached capacity within the first day of operation.

While students enrolled in Pansophic Learning’s online schools and programs (at the time, about 30% of enrollment) avoided learning disruptions, instruction for most students shifted to the home environment—no small feat given the lack of reliable computer and Internet access in many homes. “We made our online learning platform available to any school that felt virtual was feasible for their families in the last few weeks of the school year,” says Packard, “otherwise, schools implemented paper learning packets to finish the year.” Meanwhile, the Pansophic Learning Shared Services Team geared up for reopening,

planning a school year like no other.

Packard goes on to talk about the challenges of working across multiple governments, ultimately summing “whatever flexibilities the state and county governments gave to schools, we chose to pass those flexibilities on to families, trusting that each parent would make the best decision for their child’s learning based on the particular needs of their household.” For K-12 education in most states, that meant reopening schools with three learning options: full-time in-person, full-time online, or hybrid (a mixed schedule). Despite the expected challenges and occasional surprises, most schools were able to reopen in August on-time and with multiple learning options for students.

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Response from families was incredibly supportive; in many communities, schools managed by Pansophic Learning were the only schools offering full-time in the building instruction. In August, 28% of students enrolled in the in-person learning option, and by February, the percentage had increased to 46%, signaling a growing comfort level with in-person learning, one that Packard attributes to “more consistent information about the virus and studies showing that schools are not sources for community spread.”

In a year where many organizations have scaled back, Pansophic Learning increased enrollment and opened, acquired, or partnered with 17 new schools. “We may not have everything perfect,” says Packard, “but we believe our schools are offering pandemic schooling better than any other system we have come across this year.” He attributes this achievement

to a workforce closely connected to the company’s mission and a company culture where employees “continually step up to do the right thing, even in difficult situations.”

Additional factors include adopting new protocols for safety and adapting work environments for remote teamwork using integrated technologies. Pansophic Learning coined the 3 C’s Framework for staff and students which reminds everyone on a campus to Create Space, Remain in Your Cohort, and Cover Your Face. The company also rolled out video conferencing software to staff at every level and shifted resources to quickly scale AMP, the ACCEL Management Platform, a centralized ecosystem of integrated technologies that allows schools to effectively facilitate online learning.

Looking ahead Packard’s immediate focus is on the safety and wellbeing of staff and students as the school year winds to a close. He is also impatiently awaiting the opportunity to reconnect with staff. Despite a reduction in travel by close to 75% since the outbreak, he managed to visit almost all schools this year, and has hosted virtual “fireside chats” and social hours with school and corporate staff. But for this appreciative leader, these efforts have not been enough. He plans to get back on the road with more frequency as soon as staff has had the opportunity for vaccination. He reflects on the greatest challenges of the past year—the uncertainties of how long the pandemic would last and how often local governments would change their guidance. He feels the organization has weathered both challenges. More than anything, he is proud of the company’s employees. He says the company is planning for additional growth in 2021 and will strive to continually get better.

In closing I ask him for his advice to future education leaders. “Keep the focus on the students, and you will attract the right employees and partners to deliver on your promises and hopefully change the world.”