

An Interview with Kirsten Searer

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

Produced by:

The University of Nevada Las Vegas
The Lincy Institute
2024

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The following interview was a part of the “Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada” research project. The recorded interview and transcript were made possible through the generosity of The Lincy Institute at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The goal of the project was to understand and document how Nevada organizations and leaders responded to the myriad challenges that the pandemic engendered. The interviewees thank The Lincy Institute and their supporters for the opportunity to reflect on their roles throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers also acknowledge the following individuals who contributed to the conceptualization, data collection, and analysis of the project: Dr. John Hudak, Dr. Makada Henry-Nickie, Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio, Taylor Cummings, Peter Grema, Kristian Thymianos, Saha Salahi, Madison Frazee, and Katie Lim.

Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Kirsten Searer, President of Nevada Public Education Foundation, and was conducted on 10/17/22 by Magdalena Martinez and Taylor Cummings. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

**Interview with Kirsten Searer
(Public Employee Foundation)**

Date: 10-17-2022

SPEAKERS: Magdalena Martinez, Taylor Cummings, Kirsten Searer

Magdalena Martinez [00:03]

All right. We are here, October 17th, 2022, with Kristen from the Public Education Foundation. We are interviewing her. And just to confirm, you are okay with participating in this study, recording this conversation, and attributing any quotes to you.

Kirsten Searer [00:20]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [00:22]

Yes, all right. Thank you so much. All right, Taylor, I will give you the floor.

Taylor Cummings [00:26]

All right. So, for our first question, would you be able to describe your role throughout the pandemic and the role of the Public Education Foundation?

Kirsten Searer [00:59]

What we are? Okay, yeah, sure. So we are a nonprofit that works closely with the school district to improve student outcomes. We partner with the community to solve some of the immediate problems in the school district. So our major programs include a scholarships program. Last year, we provided \$5,000,000 in college scholarships. We have a Teacher Superstore that provides very low-cost supplies to teachers. The average teacher spends more than \$700 of their own money on school supplies every year. And that is a program not only to support our teachers but also to work on teacher retention, which obviously, we have a teacher shortage right now that is a crisis.

And speaking of the teacher crisis, this year we have launched a new program called "Teacher Pathway." We are mentoring 100 CCSD support professionals, who are interested in becoming teachers and have not been able to achieve that for a variety of reasons, largely because they haven't had financial access to higher education, or they have struggled with the PRAXIS test, which is the test that's required to become a teacher. More than 70 of them are identified as coming from a diverse background. We know that we need to diversify our teacher workforce. It's really critical. And these are people who are invested in our system, they know our kids. So we think that they are an excellent pool of local candidates to become future teachers.

We also do a fair amount of family engagement work with the Clark County School District, working to find ways to better engage families. We can talk about that more – during the pandemic, we did quite a bit to help, especially Spanish-speaking families, support their students while they were learning from home.

Taylor Cummings [02:48]

Thank you. So are the rest of the ones okay, Dr. Martinez? Okay. Would you be able to walk me through a timeline, as you remember it? So, what happened? What did you do? And were there any pivotal moments that shaped your response, or leadership – or the organization's response or leadership during the pandemic?

Kirsten Searer [03:04]

So schools closed in March, right? It was about St. Patrick's Day. And obviously, it was an incredibly difficult time for everyone. There was not a lot of pre-planning that went into online learning. So, as I mentioned, we had a family learning program, where we were engaged with largely Spanish-speaking parents. The purpose of the program is a multi-generation approach to solving poverty. And so, we would work with families to help them support their child's education. Understand how to effectively engage at school. How to talk to the parents, how to check on their kid's attendance and grades. Especially for our parents who are immigrants, they often don't know how to connect within the school system and advocate for their children. So we helped them do that, and then we would also provide them with resources such as financial literacy, and English classes at CSN. Sometimes connections to Workforce Connections or their job training programs, to support them in stabilizing their own financial resources at home. So that's what I mean when I say it's a two-generation approach to solving poverty, and it's based on some national research models.

So we were having our regular family engagement program happening when school buildings closed. And many of our parents immediately reached out to us and said they didn't know what to do for their kids. Initially, they were (laughs) – this feels so long ago now – initially, they were sending out packets to kids, right, any kid, whether they had a computer or not. They were sending out packets kids could complete. But then online instruction started, and obviously, a lot of our families didn't have access to computers or the internet, and a lot of our families were struggling with digital literacy.

And so we had families, we were helping them have their child call into school on their parent's phone, or on older computers. So we immediately started offering classes in English and in Spanish to our parents on Canvas and Infinite Campus, so, on these other online platforms that were being utilized to teach kids, and we tailored it to the questions that we were hearing from parents. And so we also set up a Facebook page, with all of the alumni that – we had invited all the alumni from our program and invited them to invite their friends to see kind of what the problems were. I mean, just the basics, like how do you call into a Zoom call?

I remember – (laughs) I don't know why this sticks out in my mind – how to help your kid with a screenshot. Kids and parents really struggled with that. I don't know why there were so many screenshots that were needed, but this was a big question that we got. Definitely, how to call into a Zoom. Then, how to call into Google Meet – because then the district stopped using Zoom and transferred to Google Meet because of some of the security issues. So it was a lot of basic digital literacy initially. And we would offer workshops. We were working with people one-on-one. We were, like I said, providing tips on that Facebook page. And then we started up a revised family engagement program that had all of that in kind of one piece. So it was some basic digital literacy, some ideas on social-emotional work. Obviously, then we started hearing from parents

that their kids were really struggling emotionally. So we teamed up with [??07:02] learning to provide some online resources for parents on how to talk to their kids about their emotions, about not being at school, and all of that.

So we started – we evolved that programming throughout the pandemic. But we started that almost immediately, in 2020, I would say probably, in April of 2020. I mean we started talking to parents immediately, but kind of offering the workshops and stuff, and the Facebook page, I would say, in April of 2020. And we continued those classes through, I would say probably, December, or January of 2021. And stop me, if I'm talking too much, by the way. Okay. (laughs)

So what we found in December and January of 2021 is, people then started getting a "Zoom burnout." I don't know if you've heard this. And there was a huge initial amount of interest in all these programs, and then, it really tapered off in November-December-January. And so we decided that we were going to put a pause on our family programming and focus on some family engagement strategies for educators instead of parents until we could figure out what the next steps would be for family engagement. And we're just getting to that point where we're figuring that out in a post-COVID world.

The other piece is – any questions about that?

Taylor Cummings [08:29]

Well, I think where we're about to go kind of touches on this, so I think this is good. But you can continue what you were saying.

Kirsten Searer [08:33]

Okay. Stop me if this is not what you want to hear about.

Taylor Cummings [08:36]

No, no, this is qualitative research.

Kirsten Searer [08:37]

Okay, yeah. (laughs) So the other piece then was around – I mean school starts in August, so, in late July of 2020, we were seeing all of these newspaper articles saying that they're starting the 2020–21 school year online. We have no idea when kids were going to go back to school, And we have no idea of how many kids have access to computers and the internet. And there was a group of us in the community that just was like, this is not okay, because we know it's mostly poor kids that aren't going to have access to computers and the internet. And education is a universal right, so how do we start school without kids having computers and the internet? That is just not okay.

And so I got in contact with some people and ended up having conversations with the governor's COVID-19 taskforce, which was chaired by Jim Murren and kind of got them riled up a bit. I mean they were riled up already but helps contribute to riling them up a bit. (laughs) And I think everybody just didn't know what to do. So what we decided to do – and I was Public Education Foundation, as well as communities and schools, and the Elaine Wynn & Family Foundation. The three organizations teamed up and started – and the COVID-19 taskforce – although they

were more just kind of supportive cheerleaders in the background, and "Let us know what you need."

But we created this organization called "Connecting Kids," or a partnership called "Connecting Kids." And we started working with CCSD – all of the school districts in the state. We started working with the State Department of Education. And we've realized that the districts had the funds to purchase the computers. The problem was actually getting supply. And they didn't have a way to get internet to everybody. They had funds to purchase the low-cost internet for Cox, or whatever the Washoe equivalent is. I think it's – I'm sorry. I forget what their high-speed internet provider is. But the districts had the funds to purchase that for their students who were identified as low-income. But they hadn't come up with a mechanism to track who needed it and distribute it.

And so what we did is, we basically decided we were going to identify every kid in Nevada and make sure they all had computers and access to the internet. And so we sent out surveys to parents: "Do you have an internet and access to a computer?" Some people said yes. We crossed them off our list. And then we basically just went through and contacted every family until we knew that every family had access. We started a six-day-a-week helpline that Tammy from Communities & Schools ran. Where they would help them figure out a computer, and then connect them either to Cox or whatever the Northern Nevada provider was. Or if they were in a more rural area or an area without high-speed internet, we would give them MiFi.

And so, little by little, with many community partners, we eventually identified every kid and made sure every kid had access to a computer and internet by November of 2021. And I think we were one of the first states that did that.

Taylor Cummings [11:58]

Very helpful. Our next question was actually about students or people that you think were hardest hit by the pandemic. So I heard you mention a lot of technological limitations, or even cultural or language barriers.

Kirsten Searer [12:11]

Mm-hmm.

Taylor Cummings [12:12]

Would you say those were the hardest hit? And if so – and if not, how did you work with or observe those groups who were hardest hit?

Kirsten Searer [12:19]

Yeah, for sure. The pandemic has exacerbated every marginalized group and made them more marginalized. I would say that our families who don't speak English as a first language suffered quite a bit.

Taylor Cummings [12:44]

Okay. Yeah, I think - [cross talking]

Kirsten Searer [12:47]

Yeah, yeah. All of what I said before. (laughs)

Taylor Cummings [12:49]

Yeah, I think those were identified – [cross talking]

Kirsten Searer [12:55]

I don't think I talked a lot about it. But I would add in rural families as well. So we really struggled with connecting rural families with internet in many cases. And one thing that was surprising to me, since we were going down – drilling down to every family, Punam Mathur could probably talk about this more because she was over this. But are you talking to her (looks for a response from Taylor on screen) – Okay, good. Have you talked to her yet?

Taylor Cummings [13:18]

Yes.

Kirsten Searer [13:19]

Okay. Did she tell you about the – [cross talking] I'm sorry?

Taylor Cummings [13:22]

We weren't in that interview, but we are having her back for our podcast.

Kirsten Searer [13:25]

But she's amazing.

Taylor Cummings [13:26]

It's going to be great.

Kirsten Searer [13:28]

I don't know if she mentioned it, but there was this one mobile home park in North Las Vegas that didn't have a connection to high-speed internet through Cox. We couldn't even get a Verizon MiFi for them. We could not figure out how to get them connected. And so, eventually, we found another high-speed internet provider that basically had to figure out how to run lines to them. And so, it was an "all hands on deck" effort, for sure. But because we drilled down to the individual family level, we were able to identify those pockets where they needed additional help.

Taylor Cummings [14:02]

Cool. And I do have a clarifying question. When you speak of immigrant families, are you also including undocumented families, or do they play a role? Or is that something that's even separate or different?

Kirsten Searer [14:16]

I don't think that they're different because we didn't look at immigration and – oh, well, excuse me. Let me back off from that. You're bringing back so many memories. So Tammy from Communities & Schools could talk about this the most because she ran the center. But we had a

lot of issues – so the district was paying for that high-speed internet through Cox. And Cox generously said if families had less than – Tammy would know this off the top of her head – but I think it was less than \$500 in outstanding bills, then they would still let them qualify. But we had a lot of issues with people who had outstanding bills, and they were nervous about reconnecting with Cox.

And then there was also a requirement where we ran into, at first, where you had to give Cox your Social Security number in order to sign up for that high-speed internet, even if you weren't paying for it. And so we had a lot of undocumented families that didn't have a Social Security number. So Tammy worked with Cox, and they ended up allowing them to use a different number. But that was a huge hurdle for undocumented families.

Taylor Cummings [15:21]

Thank you. Our next question is, is there anything you wished the government, at any level, did differently or could do differently now, in response to the pandemic and economic downturn?

Kirsten Searer [15:33]

(laughs) Well, that's a big question. What could they have done differently? I think communication is always something that can be improved on. I think that in our case, sometimes schools were giving different messages than we were. It was nobody's fault, but it wasn't always as coordinated as it could be.

I think we always have a need for additional – we did okay with Spanish-speaking parents because the district actually gave us folks to work in the call center. So we had a fair number of Spanish-speaking parents. But even when I was at CCSD, this was an ongoing problem for people who spoke other languages. And so we would try to connect – the Asian Chamber was ready to – Tagalog – other languages that we see a lot of in our community. But that's always a struggle for us.

I mean, for once in my life as of public service, money was not the biggest obstacle. It was coordination. And the nice thing was we saw people step up, and we saw organizations working with each other. I mean we had weekly calls with all of the school districts, and the State Department of Ed, and the governor's COVID-19 taskforce. And everybody was chipping in and problem-solving, which was really wonderful.

On the flip side, I wish that we could continue that even more. I mean that's a big part of what PEF does and what gets me up every day. But I think some of these problems are so insurmountable that we can't do it unless we collaborate together. And so I wish we would continue some of that collaborative nature beyond the pandemic.

Magdalena Martinez [17:40]

All right. Let me transition in, and we will talk a little bit more about that, but I want to stay on some of the government interventions. And you said that this was the first time that money was not the biggest obstacle, but rather, coordination. In thinking about the different types of federal interventions, are there any that really stick out in terms of – that were really game changers?

Kirsten Searer [18:02]

Well, having enough money to buy computers for every student was a game changer. Obviously, the supply chain was the issue. I think having the money – I mean I think the district has done some really great work on mental health for students. And Punam actually helped them launch that program too, so I would defer to her. But I think that they did some really excellent work there.

Yeah, I mean I think that that's – I'm trying to think of what else. Just having – to me, at this point, having a computer and internet is as basic as having a textbook for every kid. And so the fact that we are, theoretically now, on a one-to-one scale in Clark County and throughout the State of Nevada, is a huge step forward.

Magdalena Martinez [19:01]

Mm-hmm.

Kirsten Searer [19:03]

Now, whether we can continue to buy those Chromebooks as they age out and replenish them is a whole other question. But emerging from the pandemic as a one-to-one device state is an incredible advantage for our kids.

Magdalena Martinez [19:22]

And so, you talked about specific interventions. And I'm assuming that all of these were possible because of the federal economic support, right?

Kirsten Searer [19:32]

Mm-hmm.

Magdalena Martinez [19:33]

And for K-12, was it ARPA? Was it CARES?

Kirsten Searer [19:37]

Yeah, mm-hmm.

Magdalena Martinez [19:38]

It was ARPA, right – okay. And then you started to touch on some of these innovative ways that you worked with multiple organizations to deal with the challenges of the pandemic. Do you want to talk a little bit more about, maybe, a specific collaboration program that really sticks out? So for instance, you talked about the weekly meetings that were – what was that called?

Kirsten Searer [20:01]

With Connecting Kids, yeah.

Magdalena Martinez [20:02]

Connecting Kids. Are there any others like that, that you thought this collaboration's really making a difference? How do we extend that beyond what we-

Kirsten Searer [20:15]

Yeah, we have one with UNLV. (laughs)

Magdalena Martinez [20:18]

Oh, okay.

Kirsten Searer [20:20]

So, I mentioned the Teacher Pathway; that we're mentoring the 100 support professionals to become teachers. And so, ultimately, our goal is to get all of them admitted into the new UNLV paraprofessional program, which is funded through ARP funds. And UNLV has actually given us some of their ARP grant to mentor those paraprofessionals to enter into their program. And so, what we found, we took all of the folks who were on the cusp of being admitted into the PPP program in the spring, and we contacted them and said, "Let us help you get where you need to be for admittance." And so, we found the average one is missing five classes to achieve their associate degree, which is our prerequisite for the program, and a lot of them are struggling to pass PRAXIS. Nevada's the only state in the west that requires the PRAXIS at this point as a teacher preparation requirement. If you look it up, overwhelmingly, people of color struggle much more to pass the PRAXIS.

Magdalena Martinez [21:27]

Yeah.

Kirsten Searer [21:30]

Especially people for who English is not their first language. And there's little alignment – well, there's basically no research that indicates that passing the PRAXIS makes you a higher-quality instructional leader. And so, we see this as a barrier to entry, and we rarely advocate our policy issues, but this one we're advocating on. That we think that there are probably other ways to better determine who would be a quality teacher in the classroom for our kids. But I digress. So we're providing all of these folks with additional support on the PRAXIS. We've aligned with a group called *Study.com*, and they are providing them with support on taking the PRAXIS. And also, it costs about \$200 every time you take all of the sections. And so we've identified some funds to try to help them with the cost of taking the PRAXIS.

So, multiple partnerships going on there. We're working with UNLV, with CSN, so that they can finish up their associate degrees. And obviously, with CCSD and this organization called *Study.com*.

Magdalena Martinez [22:41]

And so the teacher pipeline was something that existed pre-pandemic.

Kirsten Searer [22:44]

Mn-hm, no. It's coming out of the pandemic, yeah.

Magdalena Martinez [22:48]

Oh, I meant the shortage.

Kirsten Searer [22:50]

Oh, the shortage. I'm sorry – yes. Oh, for sure, yeah.

Magdalena Martinez [22:53]

With the pandemic financial interventions, we were able to accelerate that with various partnerships around the region, maybe the state.

Kirsten Searer [23:04]

Mm-hmm.

Magdalena Martinez [23:07]

Okay. That's really interesting. I had not heard that before. And then the program at UNLV with the paraprofessionals, is that distinct? Or it's an extension of the program that you mentioned – I'm looking at my notes here – with your teacher pipeline initiative?

Kirsten Searer [23:25]

Oh, yeah. Well, really, they are distinct.

Magdalena Martinez [23:29]

Okay.

Kirsten Searer [23:31]

Really, we are supporting them to make sure that they have a constant flow of candidates who are qualified for their program, and who are diverse. I think that's important for both of us that we diversify the pipeline as well as providing quality candidates for our kids. So yeah. We've been thinking about doing a program similar to this before the pandemic. Because, as you said, this has been an issue for years. And you know, when I worked at CCSD, I saw us in constant recruitment mode, and I saw that we were largely – I mean, so Nevada turns out the four colleges and universities that graduate teachers, about 900 teachers a year if we're lucky, and we hire at least 2,500 teachers a year statewide. And so, we are importing teachers. We're largely importing white, young women who, if they don't find a community, leave, right? I mean, as anybody would.

And so we need to diversify our teacher workforce. We need to create more local teacher pipelines. And so we thought that folks are seen as paraprofessionals as one of what will hopefully be many local pipelines of teachers would be smart. But the funds from ARP have helped UNLV and now, us, accelerate that vision.

Magdalena Martinez [24:56]

Okay. Very helpful. And I have a niece who's going through one of those programs.

Kirsten Searer [24:59]

Oh, really? Awesome.

Magdalena Martinez [25:01]

There was a follow-up question that I wanted to ask you with regard to – oh, you said the

PRAXIS – we're one of the few states that use the PRAXIS in the west. What are other states using, and why are we still using the PRAXIS?

Kirsten Searer [25:22]

California has a test called the CBEST I think it's called. So it is similar. Other states have just suspended that for now, like New Mexico, and I think, Louisiana just recently suspended it.

Magdalena Martinez [25:33]

Mm-hmm.

Kirsten Searer [25:36]

There are a lot of states that are reexamining their admissions criteria for teachers, not only because of the crisis but because of data that shows that these barriers may not be equitable.

Magdalena Martinez [25:48]

Mm-hmm.

Kirsten Searer [25:50]

So there's a lot of discussion nationally about what is the best way to – and also, I would say, crisis, whether or not they're equitable. And then also, what is the tie to instructional quality because it's a general knowledge test? So, for example, we have an early childhood teacher that we're working with. She's an early – or Pre-K autism teacher. Amazing woman. Not a native English speaker. And she is unable to pass the math part of the PRAXIS, which is like 8th-grade algebra, and she teaches Early Childhood Autism.

Magdalena Martinez [26:22]

Mm-hmm.

Kirsten Searer [26:23]

So I don't really see a way that she's going need to master 8th-grade algebra for three and four-year-olds who aren't really even (laughs) – don't know their numbers yet let alone, doing algebra. So I personally am fine with her remaining in the classroom. But, up until July, she thought she was going to lose her license here because she couldn't pass. So she got a provisional license to start teaching before she passed her PRAXIS because you can do that for high-need areas. But until the state extended an emergency regulation, she thought she was going to lose her job this year, which to me, is insanity. Because she has positive evaluations from her principal, she's helping kids who need it the most, and she's having trouble passing a math portion of an exam that is not relevant to her current teaching.

So that's what we mean when we're saying, what could we look at? And some teachers are looking at – sorry – some states are looking at that. They'll look at, instead of doing some of these pretests, they'll figure out some evaluations in the first few years of teaching to see, actually, how they're doing as a teacher.

Magdalena Martinez [27:26]

Right.

Kirsten Searer [27:28]

Another option that Nevada actually used to have is, let's say that I can pass – because it's a general knowledge test, right? So it's English, math, that kind of stuff. Let's say I can't pass the English portion, then I could go to UNLV or CSN and pass a corresponding course. So those are some other alternatives. Either evaluation in the classroom or ensuring that they are passing coursework that is aligned with the test.

Magdalena Martinez [27:56]

Mm-hmm. And so, when you said that you saw them advocate for policy changes, is this a legislative change?

Kirsten Searer [28:06]

Yeah. So – well, (laughs) so NRS states that – I'm trying to think of the wording of it; I can send it to you all – but it basically states that there has to be an evaluation of teachers of some sort. Technically, they're supposed to have it before they enter into a teacher prep program, like UNLV's PPP program. So technically, they're supposed to have passed the PRAXIS before their junior year of college, which is typically when they're entering into their teacher prep programs, right? Like I said, there are some exceptions if you're in a high-need area, where you can get a provisional license for three years.

So, anyway, there's a COPS committee, which is Committee on Professional Standards, which writes the regulations aligned to the Nevada Revised Statute. And they have had some hearings on this, and we have advocated that they consider – we believe that there's room in the NRS that they could say, if you can't pass the PRAXIS, then you could pass an equivalent college course. There's disagreement on whether that's the right interpretation. I do anticipate this will probably end up in the legislature this year.

Magdalena Martinez [29:28]

Okay.

Kirsten Searer [29:30]

Because like I said, the state issued an emergency – I don't know, whatever, allowing the folks who haven't passed the PRAXIS to remain as teachers, if they are teachers, on a provisional license.

Magdalena Martinez [29:45]

Okay.

Kirsten Searer [29:46]

I'm sorry.

Magdalena Martinez [29:47]

No, no. You're fine. Go ahead.

Kirsten Searer [29:48]

It doesn't mean though, the people who are trying to become teachers, who can't pass the PRAXIS, that does nothing for them.

Magdalena Martinez [29:52]

I was just going to say, it's all coming back to me now that you mentioned CAPS. Because when I was on the English Mastery Council, we made quite a few presentations to them for changes related to English mastery stuff. (laughter)

Kirsten Searer [30:07]

Yes, I getcha.

Magdalena Martinez [30:09]

So, it's been a while. But I think, unless you're intimately engaged in that process, you don't realize just how many layers it is to really change one thing, right?

Kirsten Searer [30:20]

Mm-hmm.

Magdalena Martinez [30:22]

And it's a good thing that there are multiple layers because you want these decisions to be done thoughtfully and with as much deliberation as possible. But I'm glad to hear that there is some movement on that end. Because we've known for decades that PRAXIS is a real challenge for very capable individuals who want to be teachers.

Kirsten Searer [30:37]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [30:45]

So thank you for that. Thank you for putting it on our radar, and just unpacking it a little bit for us.

In terms of the COVID crisis, what can we learn, moving forward, for future crises? We know we'll have future crises, whether they're related to health, we don't know. But what are the main takeaways, two or three main takeaways of your experience or your perspective?

Kirsten Searer [31:10]

Collaboration and communication.

Magdalena Martinez [31:11]

Mm-hmm.

Kirsten Searer [31:13]

Oh, I forgot to tell you. Just FYI, real quick. We also did, at the very beginning, when they were just doing the packets, we collaborated with "Spread the Word Nevada," in communities and schools, and we created these tote bags of books and school supplies – books from "Spread the

Word Nevada," schools from our Teacher Superstore. And communities and schools helped us actually identify kids that were struggling the most because their folks were in contact with the kids. And so, we collaborated with local businesses to drop off these packets at student doorsteps. We collaborated with Three Square, and we started passing them out at their food distribution centers. So I have seen what we can do when we work together, and it's incredible.

Magdalena Martinez [31:57]

Mm-hmm. It's collaboration and communication.

Kirsten Searer [31:59]

Mm-hmm.

Magdalena Martinez [32:02]

What might that look like? I mean, say another crisis, where we're being more reactive. How can we think about it proactively? Is it like a standing meeting, or – not a standing meeting – but a standing type of work group? What does that look like from your perspective, or what might it look like?

Kirsten Searer [32:24]

Well, that's a little bit more of the role that we're hoping the PEF can play. We have a really strong relationship with the school district. We're in contact with the superintendent, the chief of staff, and their community engagement unit. We're constantly saying to them, "What are the biggest issues on your mind?" And then we're out in the community talking to people a lot, and we're trying to think about how we could pull people together to solve those issues. I mean, it can't all rest on us, obviously.

I think the Governor's COVID-19 Task Force was a great model for a future crisis too, because he brought together people who weren't necessarily going to do all the day-to-day work, but had the means to pull together the resources, the vision, and the strategy to make a change.

Magdalena Martinez [33:09]

Gotcha, yeah. And that's where this private business and industry come into play, right?

Kirsten Searer [33:14]

Mm-hmm.

Magdalena Martinez [33:17]

Because you need that kind of private-public collaboration. Because as you've identified, it's about resources. And we don't always get those interventions immediately from the federal-local level. And so we need stakeholders to be able to activate those networks, right?

Kirsten Searer [33:39]

And the leaders of that task force hold us – call me any time on my cell phone. I'll make a call to anybody that I have a connection with. And we did – we had organizations offering up private planes to fly Chromebooks back from China because they were stuck on ships in the middle of

the ocean. We had people willing to call these internet companies and say, "What can you do to help these kids?" Really high-ranking people whose phone calls mattered.

Magdalena Martinez [34:12]

Mm-hmm.

Kirsten Searer [34:14]

And that was an amazing resource to have.

Magdalena Martinez [34:17]

Yeah. What might it look like in lieu of those partners that are private businesses and industries? What might it look like from a government perspective?

Kirsten Searer [34:36]

I think it probably looks similar. You have to have your ear to the ground to – any organization, whether it's public-private, whether it's a government entity, you have to have your ear to the ground to hear what's going on with people, and where those pinpoints are. And then you've got to have that connection to the community to say, "Who could we bring in to help solve that?"

Magdalena Martinez [34:59]

Yeah.

Kirsten Searer [35:01]

Because, of course, sometimes it's money. Sometimes you just need money. And here's a case where we had a lot of money and resources at our disposal because of the federal funds. But we needed to talk to people to form relationships to build trust.

Magdalena Martinez [35:19]

Mm-hmm.

Kirsten Searer [35:23]

So it took all levels. I mean we had to have, in our support center, a lot of individual conversations with parents saying, "It's okay if you take home a Chromebook. You're not going to be held financially responsible if your kid drops it. It's okay if you sign up for this Cox service, even though you're really worried about bad credit. This is not going to go onto your credit, right?" So those are individual conversations you have to have with families to earn trust.

Magdalena Martinez [35:54]

Mm-hmm.

Kirsten Searer [35:55]

I mean there are a lot of families we contacted over, and over, and over again, and eventually, we had to knock on their door. And so this couldn't have happened without collaboration and commitment at every level.

Magdalena Martinez [36:08]

Mm-hmm, yeah. And sometimes there is no substitute for that one-to-one, knocking on doors, to build trust, right?

Kirsten Searer [36:16]

Mm-hmm.

Magdalena Martinez [36:18]

And time, right?

Kirsten Searer [36:21]

Mm-hmm.

Magdalena Martinez [36:23]

All right. Very helpful. In thinking about where we are now, where we've been, and where we might be. And also recognizing that we all operate in a larger macro context, right? I'm wondering, are you hopeful, as an organizational leader, and if so, what are you hopeful for?

Kirsten Searer [36:51]

I am hopeful because I think that the nonprofit community emerged from the pandemic or the worst parts of the pandemic. More collaborative. Less territorial. I think that the community was heartened to see this kind of collaboration. I hear that from leaders, from folks in different government entities, from donors. I've seen donors really like to see collaboration.

So I hope that we can continue this momentum of working together. I mentioned our family engagement program, that we need to go into what's the post-COVID version of that. And so, we just, on Thursday, had a call with 12 different community organizations, including the school district, about how we can collaborate to improve family engagement. We know a lot of our families are struggling to re-engage after COVID, and schools are struggling with how to engage them best. And so, how can we work together to look at new models of family engagement? Meaningful models of family engagement?

So I am hopeful in that sense. Obviously, there's a lot on our minds in education. This educator shortage is a crisis but has gotten much worse during COVID. What's on my mind is, we're talking about all this fiscal money, and we know there's going to be a cliff pretty soon.

Magdalena Martinez [38:34]

Mm-hmm.

Kirsten Searer [38:36]

But it does not appear that the need is dissipating, and so that is on my mind. Obviously, we're heading into rockier economic territory. So we are going to need to pull together over, and over, and over again, I believe. But we can do it.

Magdalena Martinez [38:58]

Yes, and we've proven that, right?

Kirsten Searer [38:59]

Yes.

Magdalena Martinez [39:01]

Mm-hmm. Taylor, do you have any closing questions or follow-ups?

Taylor Cummings [39:06]

No, no follow-ups. I think you've given a very detailed depiction of what you all have been doing, and how you've been working to serve the people that you are aiming to serve. So this is very helpful and informative. Thank you very much.

Kirsten Searer [39:18]

Thank you.

Magdalena Martinez [39:20]

Thank you so much, Kirsten. It was really good to see you. You look a little bit different than a few years ago.

Kirsten Searer [39:25]

Oh, my hair is longer and darker.

Magdalena Martinez [39:28]

It is! (laughter) I'm like, "I don't remember her being a brunette." But okay. (laughter) Yeah.

Kirsten Searer [39:35]

I tell everybody, it's funny. I finally went back to my natural color, and now I'm grey, so I still have to dye it. (laughs) So unfair. Take that out of the recording, sorry. I shouldn't have shared that. (laughs)

End of audio: 39:47