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Q&A from a conversation with leaders at Vanke Meisha Academy

Vanke Meisha Academy (VMA) in Shenzhen, China learned that they would have to become an online school while students and staff were scattered during the lunar new year holiday. VMA is a boarding school serving high school age students. It is a highly academic college prep school. After a rocky two weeks a distance learning structure was created that maintains a strong academic program and emotionally supports both students and faculty. In order to share their learnings with others we conducted an interview with leaders from VMA.

We urge you to take the time to watch the full interview. The enthusiasm, caring, and talent of these leaders comes through in the video in a way that is just not captured by reading a transcript of the conversation.

Visit <https://youtu.be/OhIHIDkjRcY>

Vanke Meisha Academy Leaders Participating

Wang He, Principal

Maryann O'Brien, Academic Dean

Mogammad (Rifat) Zardad, Math Department Chair, Instructional Coach

Nicholas Tan, Associate Director of Educational Technology

Sabrina Waterfield, Director of Teaching and Learning Center, English Teacher

Interviewers

Jeanie Cash and George Manthey, Co-founders, Lead Learner Associates

QUESTION 1:

What was going through your minds as you learned your students and faculty would not be returning after the new year holiday?

ANSWERS:

Maryann: I was thinking we'd be prepared because our team was so good and we already had a pilot online course.

Sabrina: Because we are such a diverse group of people we have so many pieces that would really work. We were able to bring those experiences together.

Nick: I knew something was going on. I wasn't sure what. But Sabrina told me we had to do something now. I thought, "Can't we do this a little later?" I thought it would only be a week or two. I started to wonder if we should create a full-on plan. We weren't prepared for the connectivity issues. Suddenly one billion people in China would be online at the same time. We had to test it.

Sabrina: We needed a plan. We needed agreements. We had to protect the students so they would have a quality education. We had to protect the teachers so they were safe wherever they were. But also we needed to deliver exceptional lessons to all of our students. We were constantly in communication wherever we were in the world. We had to be flexible. Things came up. We had to have a backup to the backup. We used a platform called DingTalk for our communication. It's a platform just like messaging; it's a social networking work platform.

QUESTION 2:

We know that teachers have different skill levels when it comes to technology. How were you able to build the capacity of teachers so that all of them could be successful?

ANSWERS:

Nick: During the first week, we kicked off with our Cambridge Program and they were in a test mode for the first week. Anything we had to do, we tested it on them first. We had one week of every day training and trained them how to use the video conferencing mode, the live stream mode, how to use Power School and gather the documentation. We then rolled it out to all the other teachers. At the end of the first week, we knew what the problems would be that teachers would face and we provided 1:1 time. It's not that every teacher is great with technology; it's about familiarizing themselves with the technology available. It was a trial and error thing for them to know what to use.

Rifat: The key to our success is that Nick provided 1:1 training for all of us so that we would all be comfortable training our teachers. We held training sessions over and over so that all teachers were comfortable. That was definitely a key factor in our success. We had to make all teachers aware of the expectations and the expectations we had for students. Everyone was emailed these expectations after solid discussions and numerous meetings and on-line communication. Once we laid the foundations, everyone was on board and the anxiety simmered down. Everyone was aware of the rules and the consequences for not following the rules. I had teachers in my department who had never taught on line. They were very anxious, but after getting used to it, we saw the power in teaching on-line and how to integrate it. This integration will help as we move forward in both on-line and in-class teaching. It will uplift education to another level. The surveys that went out helped identify the problems. The problems, and we did have problems, were quickly identified and sorted out in no time. Communication, flexibility, adaptability and obviously training and the constant reassurance was the key. Nick and teachers who had experience were more than willing to give their help and support to those teachers with no experiences. I know it was a team effort and that was the key to our success at the end of the day.

QUESTION 3:

What were some of the expectations you had for teachers?

Rifat: For example, teachers were informed about how often they were to meet with their students. Everyone had one class/week. We started there, then they could do more. We also had homework expectations. We couldn't bombard students. We had to agree on how to accommodate students if they couldn't attend. We had to relax the ways we reinforced that. We had to agree how we would handle late assignments. We wouldn't have been as successful if we hadn't agreed to these little things. We made sure that the decisions we made were sound for teachers and students. That relaxed our anxiety because we knew the rules. Then it was a matter of correcting things.

QUESTION 4:

What was it like for you as principal while all this was happening?

Wang He: We get data every day. How do we ensure that students are safe? We had to communicate with students. We made it very clear and we held to expectations. We started from very small parts. We started from 80 minute expectations [of instruction per class per week]. Then we could move to 160. We started small. We had to communicate with parents. They didn't know what is going on. They only see their kids sitting in front of the computer and checking their phones all day long. We send lots of emails. We have "shout outs" for faculty, and we let people know what is going on. At first, I was panicked, but we had a tech office. We had a teacher and learning center. We had wonderful colleagues. We started to plan as if it was a one-month thing.

First, we asked every department chair to report every day. Then we moved to once a week. Students were giving us very positive feedback. We made small changes along the way. Not dramatic changes. Hold expectations. Start with small things. Then make it bigger.

QUESTION 5:

Tell us how you are measuring and tracking student progress?

Maryann: Dept chairs just completed reports for the month of March and it included our planned benchmark assessments. We continue to keep in place our bimonthly reports where teachers notify the dept chairs of any students who are at risk. They then notify me and I notify the Dean of Student Services. We have to be aware that this is a totally different learning platform for students. We track students who have not attended or turned in homework. We were ready for the AP exams. We are individually tracking to make sure everyone is on track. We kept to the same schedule so that students were staying on track and meeting the standards. The accountability piece still needed to be in place.

Sabrina: Class runs as normal. I have 160 minutes a week with my AP class and 80 minutes with my regular English class. Students have all kinds of activities. I have found ways to do group projects and collaborative activities. I had to learn how to monitor ten different chats at once. We traded essays for student reviewing from another class and students scored them on a rubric. Sometimes we record a lesson on a specific skill and drop it into the group chat. It's up to the students to watch that. With everything we are doing now to work on online we're building a curriculum that we can use later.

From the student side (my child is a student at VMA) and is at their computer is in pajamas. They get in their groups. They talk with their classmates and then report back to the full group. It's like a real class.

Rifat: There is definitely more prep time involved in on-line teaching to make sure you cover everything that needs to be covered in a shorter amount of time. Feedback from students is very important regarding whether or not you are meeting their needs. Constant checking with students about what they want to learn helps a lot and being consistent with homework is important as well. Monitor not just through homework, but monitoring them emotionally as well is important. Check in with them if they don't show up for class and make sure they are okay. Be inclusive.

QUESTION 6:

Give us one tip. One piece of wise counsel to an educational leader who is trying to get this going. What would you say?

Maryann: Look for the hidden talents in your staff and give the opportunity to share those talents and take on a leadership role.

Sabrina: Remember they are human and their mental health is important. Be flexible and understanding because they are in a time of uncertainty.

Nick: Start small and grow it big later. Everything with on-line learning is new. Test it and revise as needed.

Rifat: Training and support. Have a flexible and adaptable mindset. Be open and understanding.

Wang He: Work as a team. Support one another and communicate clearly about expectations. Come up with a plan and communicate it. Survey teachers, gather data and make needed changes.

QUESTION 7:

When you say your teachers are teaching online what are the platforms?

Nick: We have DingTalk. Students are used to that. Teachers find it a bit overwhelming at first. But as you build familiarity you get used to it. We also use Power School.

QUESTION 8:

Is there something we didn't ask that you'd like to share?

Maryann: We have now been at it so long that we are ready for mid-term exams. I'd tell leadership in America that it can be done. Start small. Then roll it out on a larger scale.



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KEY TAKE AWAYS FROM INTERVIEW WITH VMA ACADEMY LEADERSHIP TEAM

- ✓ Get a plan
- ✓ Have a backup plan
- ✓ Start small
- ✓ Ensure ongoing communication during planning and implementation
- ✓ Choose an on-line platform
- ✓ Clarify and communicate expectations
- ✓ Be flexible and adaptable
- ✓ Train until everyone is comfortable
- ✓ Pay attention to the mental health of teachers
- ✓ Monitor and support students emotionally, not just academically
- ✓ Reassure teachers, students and parents often
- ✓ Work as a team
- ✓ Model a growth mindset
- ✓ Agree on how to handle late or missing assignments
- ✓ Don't panic!
- ✓ Celebrate success!



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Frequently Asked Questions

We are creating a list of the questions you have for the Vanke Meisha Academy leaders, and their answers of course. If you don't see your question here please send it to info@leadlearner.org and we'll pass the question along and then add the question and answer to this list.

How do you manage groups and store information?

As we mentioned in the video, Dingtalk & Powerschool was our chosen method of communication & storage. We hit a few hiccups along the way as to where files could be stored for class work and video recordings, eventually we decided to use the Ding Drive (similar to G Drive) as the upload speed was the fastest due to the local servers). I think this was the simplest decision as teachers who are generally overwhelmed can input their files directly into the Group Chat and it saves the files for up to 6 months in the chat (which we can then get teachers to move to our long-term cloud drive after they finish their class). Another thing that we introduced around a month in was the status protocol as we know that some teachers were abroad and had different rest hours, we told our teachers to set an automatic response setting on their off-hours to let students know they were offline during their rest hours (all this was set on Dingtalk - it's like an instant messaging feature).

How did you build internal tech capacity?

We decided somewhere along week two-three to establish what we call a tech rep group. These are representatives from each subject area who were selected by their department heads to receive all trainings and support from our Edtech office to support their teams when it comes to any software or hardware related questions. We had trainings and sharings involving how to use iPads to connect onto Dingtalk/Zoom, how to set up online white boarding, how to use Socrative for assessments, etc. This took place once a week and generally I'd send the occasional message on some new uses of technology that comes my way and answer questions in that group.

We've heard that students hate DingTalk and tried to get it removed from the App Store. Why are you using it so widely?

It's true that students tried to give it a bad rating. But that was to get out of doing homework. If you look at the application on the App Store and read the reviews, you will find they gave 1 star but many actually have written a good review.

The DingTalk review of 1 star is a particularly funny one,

because there was a sudden transition onto this system on a national level (as the government decided that this was one of the official platforms that should be used by schools for communication). This meant that we have over 150 million primary - secondary students using it all of a sudden, and of course there were lots of connectivity issues which resulted in poor live sessions. I have to empathize and say hats down to the DingTalk team as they had less than a week from Chinese New Year to handle such a sharp increase in traffic (it was reported that over 200 million new users started using it on the first week of school, this also includes the corporate sector - which it was mostly designed for as an office automation and communication tool, similar to Slack in the US). It was mostly after the second week that we found that the connectivity was slightly more stable, but more importantly that norms were established by the teachers.

What's the key to picking technology platforms?

There is no one size fits all, and I generally won't say there's one technology that is the best, no matter DingTalk, Power School or whatever. It's how we use it and make sure everyone knows how to use it alongside our team that demonstrates the best of the technology. So make sure whoever is introducing the tech is following up with individuals to see where the flaws are and that this is addressed to the team (it's through the flaws that we know what the limitations are and we can find alternative solutions).

Aren't there some teachers that just can't be expected to use technology in this way?

Teachers will surprise you. The ones who were super anti-tech initially were the ones who really appreciated using tech during this period...while the ones who generally use tech in their classrooms were the ones who were actually critical of the tech and constantly look towards more alternative solutions. Go figure!