

October 21, 2020

Staff Spotlight: Phoenix Talent Schools IT Team

How do the four staff members who comprise the Phoenix Talent Schools (PTS) IT Dept. handle the challenges they have been presented in 2020: COVID-19, distance learning, wildfire, eventual return to in-person learning, and equipping a new high school that will open in December 2020?

Allan Quirós is the IT Manager leading the small, but mighty team of professionals who manage the technology needs of 285 staff and more than 2,200 students and their families in five schools. Quirós and his team are happy to take on the challenges. He also likes to keep his hands in the technical aspects of IT. “You surround yourself with an amazing team that has a can-do, service-oriented attitude,” says Quirós.

The team working alongside Allan includes:

- Isaac Stoutenburgh - Information Specialist/PowerSchool Support
- Suhaib Al-Tamimi - Google Studio Developer/Webmaster/Computer Support Specialist II
- Mark Morrison - Computer Support Specialist II



Left to Right: Mark Morrison, Isaac Stoutenburgh, Allan Quiros, and Suhaib Al-Tamimi

Their playbook was upended like everyone else when COVID-19 hit and forced Oregon schools to move to distance learning in March. All districts in Oregon scrambled to ensure students had devices and access to engage with their teachers. Phoenix Talent’s Teaching & Learning Dept., school leaders and the IT Dept. worked hand in hand to ensure students had enough devices and internet access.

Then the day before school was to start on Sept. 9, the devastating Alameda wildfire roared through the Phoenix Talent community. Close to 30% of the district's families lost their homes. PTS briefly hit pause for teaching and learning and went into full crisis management mode with the district's leadership team.

Once emergency services in the community were established, the following Wednesday, distance learning began for high school students. Schools worked tirelessly to reach out to every student they could find. An estimated 80% of the students engaged that first day. The following week, elementary and middle school students started distance learning. The IT team supported every school to ensure systems were working and there was enough tech inventory for students.

The IT Team became online and phone Tech Coaches for students and families who lost everything. They needed help with new computers, internet and routers. The team fielded an estimated 100+ calls in the first few days, providing assistance in Spanish if needed. According to Quirós, the team had to create a mental picture of what the issues were and consider all the unknowns for the families in their living situations. PTS Superintendent Brent Barry gives the team high praise for their hard work and service orientation. "The IT Team has been amazing and responsive," says Barry.

Learning Hubs were also set up in the Jackson County EXPO, White City, Medford and Ashland for students and their families who lost their homes. The IT Team set up each facility with heavy duty hot spots and devices. In White City, where many families had sought refuge, the Learning Hub was set up with 60 Chromebooks on two carts.

Governor Kate Brown has given three districts in Oregon, including Phoenix Talent Schools, a waiver to have in-person learning. The IT Team is ready to support schools and families in what that could look like in the coming weeks. Quirós says technology is in good shape to move back to in-person learning when it happens. "The biggest challenge was to use the technology remotely," he says.

In December, the new Phoenix High School which has been under construction for a couple of years, will open to serve 600 students. This has been a huge project for the IT Team to partner with school leaders and contractors to ensure technology infrastructure, devices, internet and teacher workstations are ready to go.

It is challenging work, but Quirós says he wouldn't trade the team he leads. "The opportunity to connect with the human side of this work, our staff, students and families, has been amazing," says Quirós. "We are used to working with the machines and back room stuff. It has been a way to reconnect with the people side."

They are ready for the next challenge, whatever comes, they can handle it.

