

## **Straight Talk Texas 2036 Interview: A Conversation with Stefanie Sanford**

*The interview has been edited for clarity, brevity and key highlights.*

Join us as Texas 2036 President and CEO, Margaret Spellings, speaks with Stefanie Sanford, Chief of Global Policy and External Relations at The College Board. In this role, Stefanie leads advocacy initiatives for students with policymakers, public and private institutions, and organizations.

**Margaret Spellings: Lots of changes this spring. Speaking of resiliency, you adapted and innovated on a dime. Talk about that. Talk about how you went from testing millions of students in physical places to 100% online.**

**Stefanie Sanford:** It has been quite a spring for everyone, but particularly for us. We've toyed with notions of virtual AP and online assessment, but when COVID happened and we closed our offices and schools began to close, we surveyed students. We did a big student survey and it came back that 91% of the students said, "We want a test. We've been working hard all year. We want a chance to show what we can do. We want a chance to get college credit." We looked at the feasibility of what it would take to do that, and we got AP testing online in about eight weeks, and the scores are being released this week. We had about 2.5 million students take about 5 million exams, and it was really quite amazing. An overwhelming majority of those who signed up and registered in the fall came and took the exams. We had to make a lot of changes in the design of the exam, and we learned that when you do something that fast, innovation it's not perfect. There were some students who had technical problems. When you're talking about 2.5 million kids, even if it's only a percent or two, you're talking about thousands of kids who had problems. We learned a ton about how to do a large scale assessment, but also how to problem solve for students who are on their phones or on Chromebooks and things like that. Not only did we learn a lot about the bread and butter of moving AP online, we also learned a lot about technological innovation.

**Margaret Spellings: You've had the summer to refine your thinking as we head into fall and much of it, especially at the high school level and middle school level, is very likely to be online. What are you seeing from educators around the country? What are you seeing with students on their willingness and desire to take it up again? Just how are you looking at the fall?**

**Stefanie Sanford:** As hard as it was to deal with the uncertainty of closing down, figuring out how to open back up is even harder. We've learned a lot about doing online assessments, AP Live, and video lessons. As we look ahead, we need to take a step back and say, "Okay, what do we think that high school students need to stay on track?" That's what the College Board does. Long before all of this, we were about clearing a path to help young people get to and through college. One, they need high speed connectivity and devices to be able to continue learning. The second is they

need high quality coursework that can be done wherever they are. And third, they need guidance, and some simple steps to be able to stay on the path to college. That way, learning can happen regardless of whether you're in brick and mortar buildings, whether you're in and out of those buildings, whether you're fully remote.

**Margaret Spellings: What are you hearing from teachers?**

**Stefanie Sanford:** I think there's a bit of an age bias for some of our AP teachers. My sister is a 30 year math teacher, and she was daunted by having to create online work with only a day or two days' notice. Now in her district, they're having a choice between in person and online, and teachers are very anxious. That's why we've made it a priority to work with our AP community and provide these AP resources that will enable them. If an AP teacher needs to teach fully remotely, they can. If they need to be in and out, it'll be flexible enough to do that.

About a year ago, we created AP Classroom. Essentially, it's a much thicker set of through course guides, quizzes, sequencing, and all of that. AP teachers are an independent lot and some of them will use all of it or a little bit of it, but a bunch of them got comfortable with it last year. Now that's ready for this year. We're also creating a set of video lessons to augment that. Then if you're in school one day, but out of school the next, or you're on some other kind of block schedule, you can essentially flip the classroom by using video. Our hope is that as we look ahead with AP Daily, there will be through course resources for teachers and students. We'll have video lessons, and we've learned that shorter ones based on a lesson actually land better.

It's critical that our AP teachers feel safe, and if that means in some places, they need to do distance learning, they can. If they're going to be on a blended schedule or if they're going to be teaching fully remotely from home, they'll have the resources to do that.

**Margaret Spellings: You mentioned broadband a second ago. How much of an impediment has that been, in terms of the infrastructure, and also devices, hotspots, etc.?**

**Stefanie Sanford:** I had a fantastic conversation with Larry Irving last week, the guy who coined the phrase "digital divide," and he can't believe we're still talking about this 25 years later. From a College Board perspective, we just weren't sure. We had a partnership with T-Mobile around hotspots. Amazon donated some Chromebooks. We had a partnership with DonorsChoose for our teachers. A little bit like the innovation of moving all these assessments online, it forced us to problem solve in real time. We thought it was going to be all about the devices, but it was about connectivity. Reliable connectivity. So we shortened the AP exam to 45 minutes with that in mind, because the original AP exam is around three hours. From a College Board perspective, we're working to engage with broadband coalitions to get hard data on our population and

their ability to access the exam, complete the exam, and access AP Live video courses.

**Margaret Spellings: We're all watching the debate about going back to school versus not going back to school, but we really need to focus on the learning loss issue. We're seeing horrifying gaps that will be hard to recover from, especially our poor and minority students. Talk about what you saw last year to this year. What are you hearing about that?**

**Stefanie Sanford:** It's really tough. The irony or unintended consequence of learning loss is that by waiving assessments, you're doing away with the ability to assess exactly that. We're flying blind and in a lot of ways by not having some sort of diagnostic or large scale assessment to take a baseline check. One of the biggest problems is that we know there's learning loss, but now we don't have a mechanism for assessing it. We need an instrument to know where kids are after this massive disruption so we can get to the business of remedying it. If we care about equity, how can we get resources to remedy those learning losses if we just don't know?

**Margaret Spellings: As terrible as this is, there are some innovations, some Renaissance, some silver linings in these clouds. What are some things that you feel optimistic about, encouraged about?**

**Stefanie Sanford:** When everything shut down, our students and teachers in the AP community stepped up. We surveyed 18,000 students and they came back resoundingly wanting to keep working. Our teachers enthusiastically raised their hands to be video teachers. There's a predominant narrative of defeatism, but when you get down to real teachers and real kids, they're getting it done. It was inspiring. I'm grateful for our students. I don't think people want to quit. It's incumbent upon us to find ways and mechanisms to help keep them going.

**Margaret Spellings: Last question. With the understanding that all over this country, we're going to have resource constraints and lots of challenges, what advice do you have for policy makers as they prioritize these issues and think about first dollar investing and the needs of today?**

**Stefanie Sanford:** I think the question of connectivity and devices, it's concrete and addressable. We can help with that, and others can help with that. Whether that's stimulus money or subsidies. That's table stakes now. If you care about equity, you have to do that first because it enables everything else. With respect to learning continuity, how do you keep focused? What are the mechanisms? Get clear and simplify to the extent possible. What we find, in moments of anxiety and particularly with kids, is that the best thing to do is simplify. As we think about how to keep juniors and seniors on track to college, point them to the few high leverage things they've got to do. You need your list. You need to take your exam. Practice. Fill out the FAFSA. Keep it simple. The impulse is to want to do more because the problems feel so big.

My biggest advice is table stakes on broadband, and then simplify these other steps because there are so many other complexities of working from home, homeschooling, closing and opening, that we ought to try to simplify whenever we can.