

WEBVTT

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Interviewer: Okay. And please state your name.

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Participant: _____.

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Interviewer: And during the Covid pandemic, what was your role in organization?

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Participant: I was the superintendent of schools in the Juneau school district.

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Interviewer: And can you describe some of your professional duties during the pandemic?

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Participant: I was, you know, basically the chief operating officer. So I was. I had certainly a team that I worked with, but I was ultimately responsible for all operations of the school district. Working with the school board to make decisions around all kinds of things. One of which was the style of operation of school. You know, remote versus hybrid versus in person. Budget decisions around the Covid Relief funds. you know, all kinds of decision making really pretty much all decision-making either rested in my hands or sorting it out with the School Board what might be in their hands, and then supporting them and making those decisions.

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Interviewer: and did that include things like determining what the contact tracing process would be for students within the schools.

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Participant: Communication with families, how we would track students who had covid what kind of protocol we would use. Once a student or a staff member had protocol had Covid. You know how long they would be out. Just all of yes, and and it's been a while, you know, you sort of like a bad dream. You kind of will help, because you know I don't. I try not to think about it every day anymore. And it was quite an experience. So your questions are good cause. It helps me kind of remember. the experience but yes, parent communication was another huge one as well as community, because while parents are a big stakeholder. We also live in a community

where obviously our school district. you know, has about 4,000 students, about 800 staff and so you're talking about 5,000 people in the community that then go home to families. So the ripple effect of the decisions that we were making really impacted our community at large and the health thereof. And so it was a a relatively unique time. Districts always are connected to their communities, but in this way it really tightened that connection. And so communicating with the community, what we were doing was also really important, making decisions around athletics. When they could participate when they couldn't if we were holding athletic events if we were traveling for activities. Those were all decisions that fell under my purview.

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Interviewer: And can you describe a little bit the decision making process for those types of decisions like, Did you have guidance from the Department of Health or any other outside public health.

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Participant: We we did, we I met weekly with our local city and borough leadership. So that was one thing I did. I set up meetings. For gosh! I don't even know what it ended up being now maybe a year and a half weekly meetings with myself. My board president, and the 2 leaders of the borough. The one was a assistant city manager, and the other was a person that they had put in kind of charge of covid protocols out of their normal duties. We met weekly, and we talked about what the city was considering in their levels of of caution. What we were seeing in schools, and and we collaborated with them. We also, of course, I met weekly with superintendents across the State and Dr. Zinc. who came and met with us routinely. I have a health team of nurses in the in the district. So our lead. Nurse and I worked very closely together so there were lots of tiers of of support for sure, and and coming up with those guidelines, cause we really were sort of making it up as we went, with as much information as we could, but at some point we had to draw lines in the sand when we would or wouldn't so a. Also I worked with my colleagues around the State around the region when it came to athletics, travel so as much as we could. We tried to be, even though our communities were vastly different in some cases as consistent as we could be in making some of those activities decisions so we could support each other in that.

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Interviewer: And can you describe any times where you came across covid misinformation in your professional role.

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Participant: You know, I've been thinking about that since I got your email. And I can't really recall a specific like, I heard this. And then it was the opposite of that, you know. There were certainly opinions about whether something was factual or not, and and I dealt with that a lot. but I don't really recall. And we didn't have. We had a sector of

our community here in Juneau. Juneau is relatively blue, politically, in a red state. Right? So there. What we discovered, I suppose, like many places in the country, is that we obviously have this population sector in our community who has very strong beliefs to the right end of the political scale. and they were pretty vocal, small again, contextually small in number. But they were banding. They were, you know, pretty assertive, I would say. I won't say aggressive, although they were at times very aggressive, assertive in their response to our decisions. But I don't recall ever really a. And again, some people would say it was misinformation, because they don't believe whatever the State Health Agency or the National Federal State health agencies were telling us. so, while some of that information in hindsight by experts may in, they may say, was not accurate. I never felt like I got completely misinformation. you know. And and again, the dilemma is that unless it's your person that died or your community that was deeply impacted, it's easy to say, whatever that decision was was an overreaction. But go back to the moment. The depth of responsibility is so significant. That you have to err on the side of caution, you know. And that's within our schools and within our community.

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Interviewer: And that small group of people. Do you remember? If that was primarily from parents.

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Participant: It was both. It was parents. community members, and staff which is interesting. So again, while predominantly people were in alignment, like with our decisions, and again predominantly cause. There was always a difference of opinion, but predominantly we had staff that thought it was ridiculous that we were not in school, the fall of of 20 and they there were a few that were part of that pretty voice. full group so staff families, and community members. and you said that you met with superintendents from around the State? Was there a lot of variance among superintendents as far as the policies that they were putting in place there. Really, there was because it was very obviously community centric. So with the State of Alaska. Because we're a red state. We have some areas, and I hate to make it sound political. But it was. You know, we all know that it. There was just this political, social divide that happened which I would care to never experience again. Not just because of all the com complexities of a pandemic, but just that divide is, you know it. It really accentuated that but we have portions of our State that are very conservative, and so their policies example in Matt Sue school district were. A board is going to represent that community, and it was a a very different approach. So we had some a lot that were similar. But then we definitely had some areas that were were different. And because they had to be, or because their board was making. you know, different decisions. The other thing that was really interesting. I don't know if it's interesting to your study, but each school district was really left up to their own volition to figure out which decisions belong to who like which decisions the School Board made, which decisions a superintendent made. That was all different by district. There, there, you know, some policy guided that in some districts, but in often in most

districts there wasn't policy specific to some of the kinds of decisions we were making, because we didn't usually make those decisions. So it was also different where I would in my district, I would make a decision on the school opening protocols and in a neighboring district. That was fully a board decision. So you know, that made it really tricky to as colleagues as we were trying to work together.

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Interviewer: and can you describe any ways that you can think of that misinformation impacted your ability to do your job.

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Participant: I would say the time there again. It's hard, because, like you, you just don't think about it any longer, and it's such a traumatic experience. When you're living. I do think that. for instance, the masking decision. You know, we did get different information. Whether it was false information or not. Information changed. So I think that's one thing I would say is. I every ha! II am a eternal optimist. I believe everybody all the way up the chain was doing the absolute best they could with the information they had as a result. So I am not a conspiracy theorist like I'm the antithesis of that I think that because things change that made it hard for me to make decisions. So you know, masking is good. Masking is not helpful. The again. The you know how much Covid is too much covid like. When do you draw that line? That changed a lot, too. And So that made it difficult to make decisions. where I live. There was a lot of support for the vaccine, so we didn't really face too much up people over we we did not. I was very instrumental in the communities support of vaccine, so I helped. I worked really closely with the city who owns you know, who operates the hospital? And was I hate that problem that happened then. I talk with my hands all the time. And so that's an example where, you know, there's a lot of different opinions about whether the vaccine is necessary. It was a lifeline for us, because we would never have been able to get our teachers back if they could not get vaccinated. So agree or disagree with whether the vaccine is necessary. It was instrumental in us beginning to get back to school. and we did do mandatory testing. We did not do mandatory vaccine, but we did do mandatory testing. That was a board decision. It was my solution for the board, because some of them wanted to require vaccination and we went to a required test weekly testing for those not vaccinated for about a year. and that had its again. That same population was really unhappy with that decision. but it was one way to help assure us, you know, that we were keeping our schools as safe as possible. The lack of information, I think, about what what the virus could or would do inside of our unique environment of schools was hard like, do you need 6 feet. Do you need 3 feet? So that is another one that changed over time. So we do all this rigmarole, you know, based on how much distancing was needed. And then. as it changed, some people weren't ready for it to change that sort of thing.

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Interviewer: and the mandatory testing for those not vaccinated was for teachers in the school. And did you feel I guess. Kind of what was the what were the sources that were driving your decisions? Was it primarily, community input that would drive your decision. Was it public health recommendation? Kind of how did you balance those?

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Participant: Yeah, it was a sort of a combination for sure. We really wanted to be in sync with the city, so we didn't want to be seen as doing one thing and the city doing us different thing. So that was a big, important piece for us that the city and borough was in sync with the school district. The State wasn't as important to us, even though they're another, because we're in the capital. So the State office building and such, we paid attention to what they were doing, but it was less important to us than our actual city and borough and and the school district. And you know, we really relied heavily on the Cdc. Because it was something we could hang our hat on. So, right or wrong, you know. I'm sure they were doing all their learning at the same time, if it put us in a position. If Cdc. Said something, came out and said, XY. Or Z. For us to do, the opposite of that was would be really hard. So that was our big, biggest ticket item in terms of guidance. If we could always say we're using the guidance of the Cdc. Therefore. we felt like we were at least in the zone of being prudent.

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00:15:48.360 --> 00:16:03.829

Interviewer: and I know I'm I'm in Palmer, so I am in the Matsu Valley, and there was a lot of discord around what was going on in schools, and I know the school board meetings were very contentious at times. Did you have that same experience in Juneau?

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Participant: We, of course, were doing it via zoom! For a long time there. We did not have the same as a a many districts in the in the country. Really. We had again, it's interesting just this small number. and they would type in via zoom routinely We had an incident. I don't know if this is relevant or not, but I'll just say a little snip synopsis. If you want to hear more, you can. But we did have a situation in the district where that small group got really revved up, I would say, both at the city and at the school district and created some. They were part of some bigger front across the country, and started generating paperwork, demanding that we stop that mandatory testing and and base. It was like legal paperwork, but it wasn't legal paperwork. I forget the name of it. But there's a name of this type of work that can be done. And it was basically saying, You know, directly to me, if you don't stop this. we're gonna start charging you, finding you \$25,000 a day. Type thing. It was a a threatening yeah, and it was hand delivered like. He wanted me to sign it. I said, well, I don't know who you are. Number one number 2. I'm not signing anything, so you can hand me anything you want, but I'm not signing but it did really escalate to the point where The city was very worried about my safety, and one of their individual safety, and to the point that they were worried worried about our safety

and had given. I had to talk to Jpd. Who gave me some advice and and told me what to do. If, because this group sort of the next level was a citizens arrest that they thought they might do you know. So that was it wasn't really that board meeting thing, but we did have a few layers that were, in my opinion, a little intense, since I was the target.

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Interviewer: And that goes into my next question did. And this is not exactly covid misinformation, but kind of along the same lines. Did misinformation have any impact on your mental health, either directly or indirectly?

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Participant: I think you know for me. I would say that I am II am super. Pra. Somebody just said this to me this week. You are. You were in the school district, she said. What I really miss about your leadership is that you were so pragmatic. practical like you just approach everything from this practical sense, and that is me. That's who I am. I don't like the hubbub. I like to solve problems. I like to do that efficiently. I don't like to admire problems. Well, here we have a problem that lasted like 2 years, right? And so I just kept trying to approach it most practically as we could, which was hard, because there was so much emotion tied to it in the school districts. Right? It was a unique experience inside a school district, compared to probably the hospitals as well. Medical and schools is, everybody had their experience around Covid. But in those 2 fields it was such an emotional experience, and and it was the longest crisis. I've done a lot of crisis response. But it was so long and everybody was experienced the crisis at the same time. And usually when you do crisis response, it's a pod of people that are impacted. This time it was everybody impacted. So the effect to me was different. And I definitely felt the wear and tear and I think it definitely impacted how long I chose to be a superintendent, I mean, II had a long career 39 years. So it's not like I cut my career short, but I did want to do a little more, but I just sort my tank was sort of empty and I felt like just in those 2 and a half, 3 years. I just gave so much of myself. in a in in that emotional, taxing way, like, as you mentioned like, it's different than just working hard. I always worked hard my whole life, but when you're working hard, and there is such an emotional toll and and responsibility. You know, it's it's it's not just about people's reaction to it. It's about the the ownership of what experience our children are having and the loss of their learning and loss of their experiences. And you know, it was just a lot to hold. And so that decision making piece just really did take some toll, I would say on my own personal capacity to stay the charge, you know, like, at some point. And we did. We had a lot of turnover, and II survived another, you know, year 2 years, but but I would have been able to go longer had I not had that experience, I think. and again, not politically it. You know that wasn't the cost for me it it was just really the toll of all the information, changing information and having to make zillions of decisions. I mean the calls on Sunday night, early on for months. My staff member just called me. This is what they you know. What do we do? And you know. So it it was just that whole thing.

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Interviewer: And then I I'm interested to hear more about the communication side of your job, like communicating. Why, you've made certain decisions or the

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Participant: facts behind your decision. How did that kind of play out in your role like deep all the way, all the way through every stage, because it was the initial decisions. But then it was how you eventually work your way back into school so initially as an example, the summer of the spring of 20 was relatively easy, because we did some front load work, cause we could see some of the writing. Nobody anticipate what happened, but we could see this little hint of like this isn't good. You know we might be looking at something a little different. So I pulled my T. All my department leads maintenance, custodial food service, it curriculum and instruction, nurse, lead, etc. Pull them all in a room together. This was like the end of February, and I said of 2020, and I said, I don't know what's coming, but we have to at least start talking about what if something happens? Cause again? None of us at that point could even comprehend what really happened. So we just took it, pod by pod, what would happen if we could not bring kids to school? What would happen it? What are we gonna do food service. What are we gonna do? etc. Then the next week we started getting I had a student, a preschool student who had been to Seattle for medical who came back, went to school for a day, had a cough and a fever school freaked out. What are we gonna do? So at that point I called my city leadership and my board, and I said, the best thing that I can think to do is to close for 2 days. I know it's unheard of, but we need to figure this out, and people are absolutely panicked. And I don't have enough information. Speaking of information at that point. I just don't have enough information. They were not happy about that decision, and but they finally gave in. and we close for 2 days. and that Friday night of the 2 days is when our governor came on and shut everything down, and then we ended up, and he did it for like a week, and then 2 weeks, and then we never came back that spring. But we were set up for success from that Friday to Monday we fed kids and we dispersed it equipment literally from a Friday close to a Monday. And because of that front work that we did again blind work, not even thinking we would even use the work. so then we had to make those decisions for fall. So in July I thought we were ago, I thought we were going to be able to go and then literally almost over a weekend. It was like, this is not. We're not gonna get their numbers skyrocketed nationally. Blah blah blah. So I made the decision with my board support that we were gonna go virtual learning when we started in August, so in July I got on a zoom. and I met with anybody in the community. There were over a thousand people on the Zoom, and I presented for about 30 min, I think. Why, what we're looking at, what our responsibility is, how we're going to do this, why, we made this decision. And then I answered, Open QA. For 90 min. Anything anybody had to ask they could. I did my best to respond. You know it was brutal. But that was the only way I knew how at that point, to really reach a lot of people and vulnerable. So I did that. I made video for staff cause again, we're just this zoom thing was not even a thing. Yet. I made a closing

year video for staff so they could see my face and hear my voice and And then the other thing that we did was for communication. Oh, in ramping up so first our first attempt was going to be kinders and first graders like, let's get our most vulnerable learners in the building we can spread about. Oh, my teachers lost their mind. So then I held this open staff zoom for all in the district, all K. One teachers, so that they could ask me questions, and I could talk to them. I mean, it was just like spiral cyclical things like that where people were really sc, and that was before vaccine. I get it, you know. But the kids are mass, you know. It was really challenging. But that's what we did with communication is I just kept wherever there was a need that I just tried to really make myself available. Same thing with principals like elementary principals, because we came back first with elementary. My elementary principals were white, they had nothing left, and I just met with them on Zoom. And I'm like we can do this. You know, you can do this, we have to do this. Here's how. So yeah, that. That was some. Those were some of the communication things we did. And then, of course, we communicated via email with our families a lot a lot more than normal and we would just, in fact, at 1 point I had on my whiteboard in my office, or especially in the first 3 to 6 months, I had a list of things that the Board needed to know, things that the staff needed to know parents and community, and I would just keep writing things down there, and some of it was the same, but some of it was unique, based on their role. And then we would just use that. And we would start creating the the emails.

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00:27:43.890 --> 00:27:44.880

Interviewer: Wow become, had both sides of the issue were upset at some point. For

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Participant: yeah, it could, because you literally it was the classic case of you can't make everybody happy like it was impossible. And some people understood that. And we're pretty graceful about it. Others just didn't, you know? And my own son is he's he. I have 2 sons, one of them. They both see things the world through different eyes. I don't know how this happened. But my one, that's a teacher is very conservative, and he and I he's 31. He and I have lots of good conversations. He loves to banter about it. I do not like to banter about it at all. But you know he was. He's all in like he, he and I get that, and I and I tell him often, Casey, you just have to remember that whatever you believe so strongly, I, right or wrong, doesn't matter. There is a line of people over here that disagree with you. And and that's okay. That that's just how the world works. It isn't black and white as much as you want it to be black and white, and I don't understand really, how some people don't have that. But a lot of people don't have that. It is just a singular vision that this is right, and this is wrong, and most I mean, there are certainly those things in the world that are wrong, but so much of what we experience through the pandemic. There just weren't rights and wrongs. And and so everybody was doing their best. you know, to make those decisions with the information we had, which again, II just don't. I don't feel like I got misinformation that I'm aware of what I what I got was. you know, information that changed along the way, and there were

times. Maybe we aired on too much of the side of caution. I don't know. But again, with the information we had and the responsibility we had. It's really tough to say, you know, I made a really hard decision about basketball that well, because they were headed to Wasilla, and you know, also decided to hold it in Wasilla, which at the time was the highest yeah infection place in the State. And of course my team went. Boys has to be boys, and it has to be the longest standing high school here. Jd. Qualify for state. I'm like, Are you kidding? And we'd already said, we will not travel all season. We will not travel to a Red Zone, and they put the State tournament in, so I had to say No, I mean II just I can't say, well, this is different. What's different about when you're talking potentially life and death? And it was, you know. Oh, my gosh! Talk about the crazies that came out for that one across, even across the State. Yes, State. I got voice mails, death threats from Hope, Alaska, I mean, I'm like. so II live with that because I care. You know a lot about kids and their experiences. But and I wish I could have made a different decision, but I don't know how I could have. Could they have gone and had no problems, maybe. But again, at that point in time. I just given the information I had. We made that decision.

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00:31:11.260 --> 00:31:16.350

Interviewer: and they have a couple more questions this next question is kind of thinking about. I guess I've lessons learned from the situation. Of course there's a lot of things that you couldn't change about. The situation. Couldn't have expected. Is there anything that you can think of that could be put in place, or could have been different about the structure, or basically like a preparedness kind of tool that you can think of. That would have made the situation easier.

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Participant: Yeah, we had a crisis response plan, of course, as a district. And Mike, the gal that I always partnered with in the district for all crisis response. Whether it was a suicide or a death of a staff, may, or whatever it was. She and I, of course, were hip to hip during this whole experience, and we kind of joked. But it was true. We went through the 4 tiers of that crisis response plan in like 2 days. And then there was blank paper like we had to make it up, you know, educate, you know, informed. But we really did have to just start anew because we had used up all those response tiers and so and and, interestingly enough, way back in my career, when I was an elementary principal. The superintendent at that time was sort of bubbling around the surface, and he said, I don't know why he picked me, Bridget. I want you to work with our nurse and develop a response plan for okay. And I did that, of course, and it was hard, because even then you're just dealing with all these, and knows like there isn't a great way to response to a pandemic. But we wrote one up course never had to use it. And I just was, you know. And again, I wasn't in a superintendent role. So it was just funny that I was pegged to do that I don't know, probably 20 years ago, and then actually had to live through and lead through a pandemic so II think that with what we know I'm not sure we'll ever experience the same. You know, right that that the same frame of a pandemic, but I think there are. It would probably be really good to go back and sort of capture the nuggets

of response like, even if you looked at some key principles like communication decision making. health like, what did we learn about the health component? What did we learn about communication? What did we learn about decision making and having a little more delineated decision making policy, I think those would be things. And of course it's hard, because once it gets behind you A, there's new crises in front of you and B. You just kinda wanna forget that it ever happened and cross your fingers that you never have experience it again. So it's hard back. But that's what I would do if I just had time on my hands, and I was making recommendations. I would say there are some major. not a lot of them, but some major themes that I think could be really beneficial for people to think through strategically and practically and then and really, what are your values around that like if you're gonna pan, if you're going to communicate through a crisis? Can we articulate what our priorities are in that? In that communication? You know, identifying your stakeholders? Timely communication, relevant communication, you know. Transparent communication, you know. I think you could articulate some of those things inside of some of those themes.

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Interviewer: And then, is there anything else that you would like to add about your experience with Covid that we haven't talked about.

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Participant: I don't think so. Yeah, I can't think of anything. I probably talk too much. Probably. No, you gave me a lot of really great information, and this is the first time I've talked with somebody who was in the school district. There's a huge, huge, unique experience with Covid so really interesting for me to hear about it. Sounds like I don't. I don't blame you for not. And you do forget, like, literally, it's because you are in survival mode and I do think that I'm only about 6 months out of the position, and I'm working for the university. But it's and it's full time. But it's like way low stress compared to what I was doing. And you know, so it's it's full time compared to my other full time job. It's like working half time. practically but I do. I have. I really feel like I am still shedding the stress like it. It's and somebody said, me, it's it's gonna take you a year. I'm like, Well, okay, I'm I'm good. With that. It's been a year. I feel better. But there really is a physical toll to holding that much responsibility for such a sustained period of time. And I and I think that

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Interviewer: that is, that is something that is true, I think, for a lot of educational leaders and teachers. You know, their stress was different, but it is stressful. And they did have to change a lot of their practices and protocols and worry about their own health and the help of their families. And so anyway, it is, I am finding that it's a process to shed that sentiment across different sectors. Also that just that. especially the extended link of the pandemic, was yeah, very unique. To sustain that level of intensity.

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Participant: for that. I mean. It's just, you know, unheard of again. I've done lots of crisis. Response I and and handled some really unfortunate, awful things. And but this was really a different experience. Yeah, so

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Interviewer: well, thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you. And I will send a follow up email. Just quick. Thank you. Email with the gift card in it as well, and then I'll also be sending out my manuscripts hopefully some time in the summer to everyone who participated. So you can read about what everyone said. So that would be great. I'd appreciate that. Well, thank you again very much.