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Principal as caregiver of all: responding to needs of others and self

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Principal as caregiver of all: responding to needs of others and self

Abstract

When the school buildings closed in the spring, educators and families faced unknown challenges of supporting students remotely and continuing to provide the necessary resources for student learning and well-being. Principals responded with advocacy and compassion.

This is one of a series of briefs that focused on a 'critical incident' surrounding school closure and offers pragmatic suggestions to educational leaders as they continue to grapple with the disruptions of the pandemic.

Disciplines

Education

RESEARCH BRIEF



Principal as Caregiver of All: Responding to Needs of Others and Self

When the school buildings closed in the spring, educators and families faced unknown challenges of supporting students remotely and continuing to provide the necessary resources for student learning and well-being. Principals responded with advocacy and compassion.

INTRODUCTION

In light of stress-related factors induced by COVID-19, this brief aims to center the reflections of school leaders across the nation as they attempted to navigate the overwhelming chaos of closing and reopening schools during a global pandemic. Specifically, we examined how leaders, living amidst the stressors of a global phenomenon, were able to look after their own wellbeing while attending to the wellbeing of their students, staff, and community members.

We reviewed a representative sample of 30 interviews, which included elementary, middle, and high school principals in rural, suburban, and urban communities. Our conversations with school leaders surfaced a number of common themes. The overall motif for the brief is principal as caretaker for all. During the spring of 2020, school principals were responsible for the well-being of all stakeholders, including care of students and community

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

Leading in Crisis documents school and district experiences following school closures in March 2020 due to COVID-19.

From April to August 2020, researchers conducted interviews with a diverse sample of 120 principals in 19 states, including elementary, middle and high school leaders from urban, suburban, and rural areas across the U.S. The interviews asked about the most pressing issues leaders faced; school and district responses; the inequities exposed by the pandemic; and strategies for care and well-being.

To write their brief, teams of 2-4 researchers analyzed a sub-sample of between 23-43 of the interviews (depending on the team size) to arrive at their conclusions and recommendations.

The full study is described at the back of this brief.



and care of teachers and staff, all of whom were grappling with an overwhelmed feeling brought on by fear of the unknown; a lack of clear guidance; the never-ending nature of the work; and the effects of isolation. These two themes will be discussed in relation to students and communities and teachers and staff, including principals' responses to the mental health of others. A third theme interviewees discussed was their care of self, particularly the toll of caretaking responsibilities placed upon the principals and how they maintained self-care. Following the explication of these three themes, we suggest the implications for practice and policy.

Care of Others: Students and Community

The principals in the COVID-19 study established themselves as caretakers of their students and communities. When the school buildings closed in the spring, educators and families faced unknown challenges of supporting students remotely and continuing to provide the necessary resources for student learning and well-being. Principals responded with advocacy and compassion. Principals advocated for technology and broadband resources so students could continue to learn, and they provided support to families with food and resources. Additionally, they maintained strong relationships with the community by focusing on the social-emotional needs of students, and they became the safe haven for their communities through virtual check-ins with students and helping families stay connected to the school community.

Advocacy

One of the inequities that was exacerbated during the pandemic was the lack of resources needed for students to continue learning at home. Students who live in low-income homes or who live in rural areas often lack technology resources such as computers and internet access. Principals across the U.S. spoke of the challenges of providing virtual learning for all students and discussed their advocacy for acquiring resources to support their students. A principal in Florida explained that he had many homeless students who lived in shelters without computers or internet access, and another principal in Tennessee spoke of her rural community and how there was limited internet access. The Tennessee principal explained: "Although many of my families could not afford internet access, most don't even have access. I don't even have it [the internet] in my home because there is no access to internet services." In response, many principals worked with community leaders to "negotiate cheap internet or provide free internet" for their students.

Principals also found ways to provide free computers for students. A principal in Texas spoke of working with a local computer company to acquire additional Chromebooks for students who did not have a home computer. Principals in rural areas without internet access, created home lesson packets for students and delivered them to their doors.

Principals not only advocated for technology resources for students, they also found ways to provide food for students on free and reduced lunch. Many of the principals discussed coordinating with the district to provide groceries or meals for families and create food distribution centers. A principal in Tennessee commented, "We focused on the basic needs of kids, primarily food. We set up grocery pick-up Monday-Friday with extra groceries on Friday for the weekend. When parents couldn't get to us for lack of transportation, we delivered food." Providing food for students and families was echoed by every principal in the study. All of them found ways to distribute food and ensure that their students would not go hungry.

Support for Overwhelmed and Isolated Families and Students

As community leaders, principals place a high value on getting to know each child individually and on establishing and maintaining interpersonal communications with parents¹. In discussing his own reactions to supporting families during the COVID-19 pandemic, a principal in Texas commented, “As a principal, you are hardwired to care. I think [in a crisis situation] it’s kind of hard to worry about anything other than the people in your charge. You have to look at the emergency and assess what people need and then react. Another principal in California commented, “I think things that the kids and parents were struggling with was the fear of thinking that I’m not enough. I’m not good enough or smart enough to move onto the next level.” Other principals commented that parents and students were expressing fear of the unknown--not knowing what is going to happen next or when schools would reopen. Principals took action to support families and students by showing empathy and compassion.

Numerous principals suggested that the socialization aspect of school is equally as important as the academic aspect because children learn how to develop socially through interactions with other children. A principal from Minnesota explained, “Kids want to be together. Younger children learn how to get along with one another through touch and play--it is an important thing for their social development.” Another principal from Connecticut added, “Kids need one-to-one support, motivation and encouragement, but if they are in a virtual environment, they don’t have the emotional support they need.”

Because schools are a salient avenue through which social and emotional competence among children and adolescents is developed², principals worried that children being physically isolated from one another would cause anxiety and stress. In response, principals took the lead to reduce student isolation as much as possible by establishing virtual schools and engaging students in “fun and play.” Principals found ways to make home visits and stand on the curb to talk to children and parents. A principal in California created parent packets complete with social-emotional resources to support their children, and a principal in Georgia created a virtual network for parents to have “virtual playdates for their [elementary-aged] kids.” In some cases, students and families needed even more intense socio-emotional support, including responding to suicidal students.

Finally, principals struggled with the disappointment of families and students at the cancellation of sports and end of year activities. Many of the principals spoke of the increased stress of having to cancel all spring semester sports and end of the year activities, such as prom, graduations, and parties. In many cases these rituals, which bring communities together, were at the top of families concerns and principals led efforts to create virtual end of the year celebrations.

1 Rodriguez, M.A., Murakami-Ramalho, E., & Ruff, W.G. (2009). Leading with heart: Urban elementary principals as advocates for students. *Educational Considerations*, 36(2), 8-13.

2 Collie, R.J. (2020). The development of social and emotional competence at school: An integrated model. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 44(1), 76-87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025419851864>

Maintaining Connections to Students and Parents

Principals were determined to maintain a school connection with parents and students. A principal from Minnesota asserted, “I think the two things that are really, really key are those collaborative team planning meetings with everybody involved, and the 10-minute connection with every child, family, every day. But the biggest piece is the individual connection to students every day.” Principals discussed the school as the “hub of the community” and how important schools are to the community. In this unprecedented time of crisis, principals realized the importance of maintaining a positive relationship with families. A principal from Connecticut commented, “With the building closed, it would be easy to just move on and worry about students in the fall, but the kids still needed us. Parents still needed us, so I ensured that every teacher made contact with students either by phone or video three times a week.” By increasing communication and creating systems of check-ins with students, principals maintained a connection between home and school.

Summary of Care of Others: Students and Community



Principals established themselves as community caretakers during the COVID-19 crisis, and they mentioned the socio-emotional well-being of their students as their number one priority. Principals felt responsible for monitoring and supporting the students and their families in their schools and providing them with resources to help them continue learning at home and maintain a connection with the school. Through advocacy, empathy, and compassion, principals supported their students and families through the difficult spring months.

Care of Others: Teachers and Staff

Teachers and staff had drastic disruptions to the expectations of their job, their schedule, and their presence in students’ lives. Principals addressed their mental health, increased responsibilities, and lack of social connectedness through individual outreach and community-building. When leaders were asked about the most important aspect of their job during the pandemic, many leaders mentioned the socio-emotional well-being of their staff and students as their number one priority. Teachers struggled with a generalized fear of the virus and its impact on themselves, their friends and families, and the school community. Principals saw assuaging those fears as essential to their role. In some cases, they were dealing directly with the illness of COVID-19. One principal talked of the “many layers of mental health” that needed to be addressed.

Support for Overwhelmed and Isolated Teachers and Staff

One major source of stress was the demanding schedule required to move to remote learning for the end of the year. As one principal from Colorado explained, “I’ve been working a lot with my staff and ensuring their mental health and social-emotional well-being... That’s top priority. My teachers are working 14 hours, they’re not turning off. Between the small group instruction, answering parent emails, being on Zoom calls, office hours, and then also planning a week ahead of lessons, that’s been a lot for them for time management. So, I have a staff that is completely exhausted.” Since people were overwhelmed, it was important to the leaders that they were communicating frequently and providing some calm and consistency during the disruption.

Principals felt responsible for monitoring and supporting the mental health of teachers, particularly those teachers who were socially isolated, who were responsible for supervising their own kids in remote learning, and who were expressing concern about their students’ needs during the pandemic. Many leaders spoke about how worried teachers’ were when they were unable to reach students at home or when they did not have high levels of engagement in online content and how they were supporting teachers in processing the loss of normal schooling. The interviewees spoke of the tears shed by teachers and leaders as they dealt with the reality that they would not see their students back in school during the 2019-20 school year.

Types of Caretaking Support: Individual Outreach and Community-Building.

Principals addressed the well-being of their staff in two primary ways—individual outreach and community-building. Individual outreach included calling teachers at home to check in with them and ask them questions like “What did you do for yourself today? and What are you gonna do so you’re not on the computer for 14 hours?” Some principals also mentioned that they sent gifts to teacher’s homes to show appreciation for the hard work and stress.

To build community, principals used morning meetings and professional development time for teacher appreciation, an open forum for raising concerns, and a space to process their feelings. Many leaders felt the need to encourage laughter and fun to help ease staff stress through celebrations, videos, or storytelling. Some leaders even hosted “happy hours” to provide space for staff to socialize and spend time together. One principal from Colorado shared, “During our weekly check-in meetings, it’s really mostly just checking in on them and seeing how they’re doing. We have a little giggle together. I think Teacher Appreciation Week, I collected pictures of all of them, and I created a video and it was to that new Alicia Keys song, like ‘You’re doing a good job,’ just to show them like that you’re really superheroes and you’re doing amazing things.”

Summary of Care of Others: Teachers and Staff

Principals did indeed carry the burden of caring for teachers and staff and ensuring their mental health and well-being. As the architects of school culture, they are asked to support teachers' well-being during normal school operations; however, this responsibility was amplified during remote learning. It is worth noting that in some interviews, school principals mentioned instances of district-led initiatives, both existing and new, that offered mental health services to the teachers and leaders, such as staff counseling or meditation sessions.

Care of Self

Because the principals carried the burden of caring for others throughout the spring months during the COVID-19 crisis, they faced heightened stress levels. We explored the toll that the increased stress had on these principals and how they managed this stress. We found that principals experienced stress not only from managing their schools during the quarantine but also had heightened stress from trying to work from home. Many of the principals discussed the difficulty of taking a break from work. We also found that principals were cognizant of their increased stress and found ways to manage the stress through self-care. In this section we elaborate on the toll the building closures had on principals and the coping strategies principals used to manage their stress.

Toll on Self: Heightened Stress

During the spring months, principals experienced heightened stress not only from caring for others within the school community but also from their own personal lives. Many principals across the US spoke of the increased stress from caring for their own children while working from home and concern for their elderly parents who may have contracted the virus. A principal from Tennessee discussed concern for her elderly parents who were aboard a cruise ship and contracted the virus. Both parents were placed in quarantine in Nebraska, and the principal expressed the struggle of trying to care for her school community while also trying to gather information about her parents and get them home. Another principal from Colorado discussed trying to care for her three sons at home while also trying to work from home. Similarly, a principal from Pennsylvania spoke of trying to manage her school and take care of her son diagnosed with autism:

A lot of the parents basically, like, decided to just check out because they just felt like it was too much, and I'm one of them, right? I had my son, who's a sixth grader with autism, I said, you know... I contacted his teacher. I said, "First of all, I'm on Google when you're on Google, so I can't even Google because I have to log out of my account." So I said, "You're not going to get him during

the day.” And it wasn’t, it was very hard to get him in front of a computer. It added a lot of stress to him and anxiety.

In sum, principals experienced heightened stress from trying to care for their families while working remotely from home to lead their schools during the COVID-19 crisis.

Many of the principals also discussed the difficulty to “break from work” while working from home and explained that they spent numerous hours at night and on the weekends in Zoom meetings and/or volunteering at food distributions for students. One of the principals from Georgia discussed the emotional toll it took on her by stating, “The pressure on principals is not always apparent--there is district pressure to work all hours of the night and day to get things done and stress from teachers and parents who want immediate information or complain about things outside of my control--there were days when I simply wanted to quit--it was too much.” Another principal from Minnesota also described the additional time and long hours required to lead during the building closures: “It was hard. I wanted to make sure everyone was okay and still functioning so I worked long hours and nights and weekends to make sure people had what they needed. I took care of others before I took care of myself.” Other principals discussed the stress of the unknown and uncertainty. A principal from Florida explained how inaccurate information or constantly changing information from their district offices contributed to their stress. “Not knowing what to expect from day to day and constantly getting changing information and directives from the central office stressed me the most. We would have a plan in place one day, and then the next morning, a new plan was sent out. I never knew from day to day what to tell teachers and parents.” Communication was important to principals and not having accurate information to communicate caused additional stress and anxiety for them.

Self-care

Although principals were overly stressed and experiencing burn-out, many of the principals discussed self-care helped manage their stress. Most of the principals spoke of coping with stress through exercise and other physical activities. Even though gyms were closed, principals found ways to exercise through home exercise videos, walking/jogging outside and hiking. A Minnesota principal explained, “I usually go to the gym, and the gyms were closed, right? So... I took walks and bike rides. Lots and lots of bike rides and walks, and long ones to make it through.” Another principal from Georgia mentioned that “walking every day allows me to clear my head and start anew.” A principal from Colorado mentioned she bought a Peloton bike to help her exercise at home.

Principals also discussed networking and how staying connected with other principals supported them in their self-care. A principal from Ohio stated, “I stayed connected with other principals and did weekly check-ins with other principals via calling or texting--just to unwind or get advice.” Another principal from Tennessee mentioned that her rural school network was a support for her and stated, “The other principals in similar communities, who understood the problems I was facing and offered advice, were supportive and helpful. It made me feel like I wasn’t in this alone.” Finally, principals said that their faith and positive thoughts also supported them with self-care. A principal from Florida stated, “I don’t sweat the small stuff, and I remain positive and hopeful. I pray daily and have faith in God that I am

doing his work.” Another principal from New York added, “I remain positive and thankful--thankful that I have a job that I love, thankful for an amazing staff--it helps me keep things in perspective.”

Summary of Care of Self

Principals faced an unprecedented crisis when school buildings closed in spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and when teaching and learning moved to a virtual environment. During these spring months, principals experienced heightened stress due to managing their schools in uncertainty and trying to balance home priorities with work priorities. Although principals experienced heightened stress, they were aware of it, and they found ways to engage in self-care in order to mitigate their stress levels. Through exercise, staying connected with other principals, and remaining optimistic and hopeful, principals not only took care of others, but they also took care of themselves.

Recommendations for Practice/Policy

1. School leaders need to create space for community-building and informal networking to support the mental health of their teachers and staff as well as themselves.
2. Districts need to provide mental health support directly to teachers and need to provide support for principals to address the well-being and mental health of their staff and teachers.
3. Districts and schools should create structures for mindfulness and community-building that can be maintained even after the pandemic.
4. District officials could create networks of support for principals. These networks could offer principals time and space to work together and exchange frustrations and new ideas.
5. University faculty should prepare leaders to support their stakeholders while also knowing how to maintain their own mental health.

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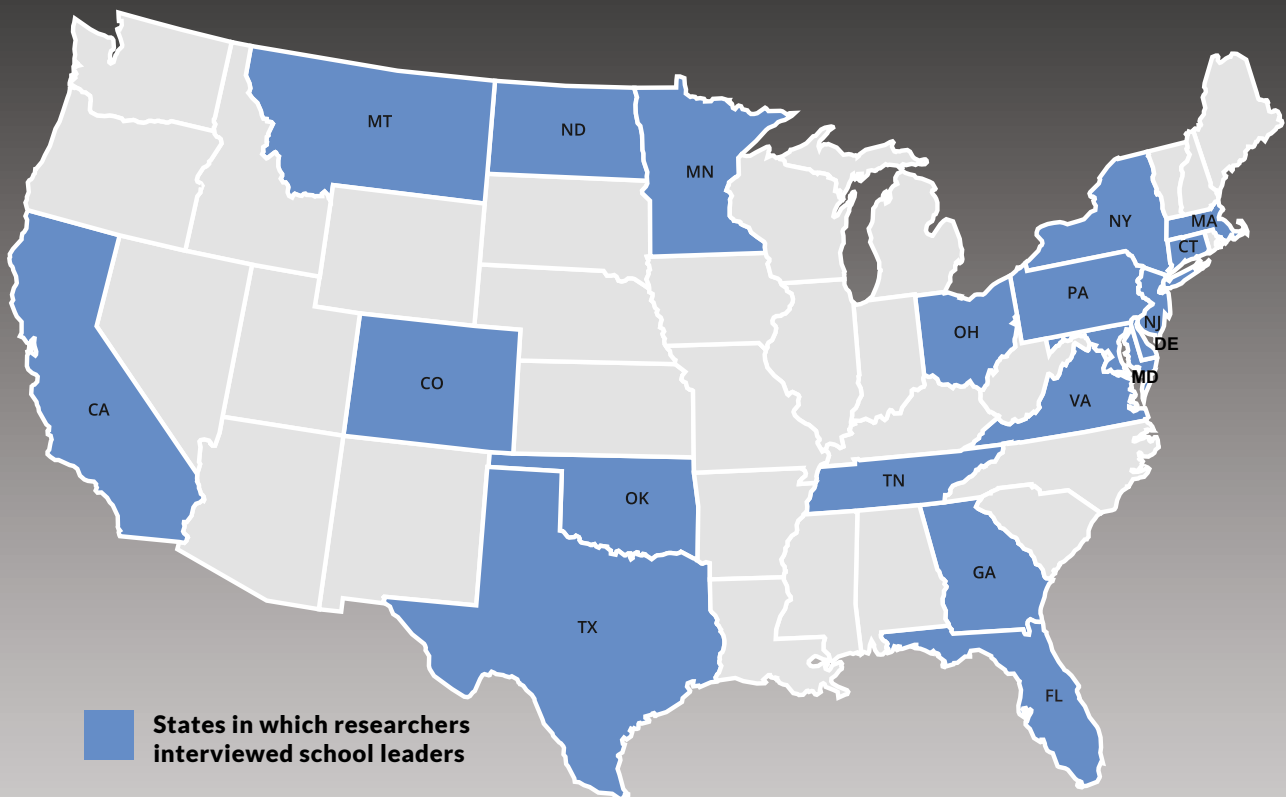
Erin Anderson (Ph.D., University of Virginia, Administration and Supervision)) is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver. Her research focuses on policy and standards for principal preparation as well as planning, leading, and implementing continuous school improvement. Anderson spent eight years in public education, mostly in New York City, and worked for five years as a research assistant and research associate for the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA). Currently, she is the PI of a state grant and program lead of the *Design Improvement Program*, a professional learning program working with leadership teams to implement design thinking and improvement science into school improvement work. She also spent four years as the co-editor and editor of the Learning and Teaching in Educational Leadership (LTEL-SIG) newsletter. Anderson's work has published in *Frontiers*, *Journal of Educational Administration*, *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, *Journal of School Leadership*, *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *Teacher's College Record*, and the *Handbook of Educational Supervision*. She is the author of the UCEA publication *A Policymaker's Guide: Research-Based Policy for Principal Preparation Program Approval and Licensure* (2015).

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Leading in Crisis

Leading in Crisis is a series of briefs that document school and district experiences following school closures due to COVID-19.

Friday the 13th is always an ominous day. So perhaps it was not surprising that it was on or around March 13, 2020 when U.S. schools closed to ward off the novel coronavirus. Never before had a single calamity shuttered the doors of every school across the entire country.

Between mid-April and early August 2020, researchers conducted interviews with 120 principals in 19 states. The schools ran the gamut from the country's urban hubs like New York City (ground zero for the original COVID-19 outbreak), Minneapolis (both before and after the death of George Floyd), Denver, and San Diego; to the vast suburban swaths of South Florida, Atlanta, Houston, and Southern California; to small towns and rural areas including Native American reservations in Montana and North Dakota, as well as rural areas of southeastern Tennessee, and upstate New York.

SAMPLE

The full sample of principals included 120 interviews from across the nation

Twenty-two of the schools (18% of the sample) were located in four western states (CA, CO, MT, ND);

12 schools (10% of the sample) were from three central states (MN, OH, OK); 34 of the schools (28% of the sample) were from five southern states (VA, FL, GA, TN, and TX);

52 schools (43% of the sample) were from seven eastern states (CT, DE, MA, MD, NJ, NY, PA).

Interviews were organized to examine the most pressing issues faced by school leaders; including their instructional responses; challenges for students, families, and teachers; district crisis management and policy guidance; the inequities exposed by the pandemic; and strategies for self-care and attention to well-being of others.

Phase I: Critical Incidents

The ‘critical incidents’ during the two weeks surrounding school closure (roughly March 11 to 30). Interviews focused on the ‘critical incidents’ surrounding school closure; the most pressing issues leaders faced; and the extent of state and district guidance.

Phase II: The New Normal

The ‘settling in’ phase of how schools and districts transitioned to on-line schooling. Researchers investigated what school leaders experienced as the ‘new normal’ of schooling in the spring of 2020, how they organized for instruction; the experiences and challenges students, families, and teacher faced; and how leaders managed their stress and supported their own and community members’ well-being and mental health.

Phase III: What’s Next?

What principals were learning about what school would look like in the fall of 2020. Researchers asked leaders about what guidance they were getting about ‘what’s next.’ Each researcher was asked to interview between five to seven principals in their context, including two elementary, two middle, and two high school principals from diverse socio-economic contexts. Researchers relied on their existing relationships with principals to identify their sample, which meant that many of the respondents had likely participated in professional development from their local colleges and universities. The established relationships between researchers and principals ideally meant that the principals would be more candid in their recounting. The interviews were largely conducted virtually via Skype or Zoom, and the audio files were transcribed. In addition to the interview, participants also completed a brief on-line survey about their personal background.

Sample

The full sample of principals included 120 interviews from across the nation. To understand the composition of the schools, we pulled demographic information from the Common Core of Data from the National Center for Education Statistics. Of these, 67 (56%) had elementary grades (preK-5), 45 (38%) had middle school grades (6-8), and 30 (25%) had high school grades. Most of the schools in the sample came from cities and suburbs. Fifty-two of the 120 schools (43%) were classified by the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) as suburban; 47 of the schools (39%) were located in cities; 16 of the schools (13%) were rural; and 5 schools (4%) were located in towns. Schools in the sample were from all across the United States. Twenty-

PROJECT OVERVIEW

two of the schools (18% of the sample) were located in four western states (CA, CO, MT, ND); 12 schools (10% of the sample) were from three central states (MN, OH, OK); 34 of the schools (28% of the sample) were from five southern states (VA, FL, GA, TN, and TX); and the remaining 52 schools (43% of the sample) were from seven eastern states (CT, DE, MA, MD, NJ, NY, PA).

The schools had an average size of 798 students, with a standard deviation of 505. The smallest school, with only 22 students, was on an Indian reservation in North Dakota; while the largest, a Florida high school, had more than 2,500 students. The racial breakdown of students in the schools of the study was very diverse. Fifty-seven of the study schools (48%) were majority white; 23 of the schools (19%) were majority Hispanic; 19 of the schools (16%) were majority Black, and three of the study schools were predominantly American Indian. On average, schools in the sample had 52% of their students on free/reduced lunch, but the range was broad, with a standard deviation of 31%.

Of the 120 principals we interviewed, 108 (90%) completed a brief survey about their backgrounds. From the survey, we found that the sample averaged just over 8 years of experience as a principal, which ranged from 1 to 19 years. All but five of the principals had teaching experience, with an average of 8.3 years in the classroom, with a standard deviation of 4.4 years. Of those who taught, a third were general education (elementary) teachers, 19% were English Language Arts teachers, 14% were social studies teachers, 11% were mathematics teachers, and 6% were science teachers. 19 of the principals taught in another area, including physical education, special education, and Spanish. Seventy-seven (71%) were white; 20 (18%) were Black; and 7 (6%) were American Indian. Sixty percent of the sample were women.

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Leading in Crisis


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From April to August 2020, researchers conducted interviews with a diverse sample of 120 principals in 19 states, including elementary, middle and high school leaders from urban, suburban, and rural areas across the U.S. The interviews asked about the most pressing issues leaders faced; school and district responses; the inequities exposed by the pandemic; and strategies for care and well-being.

Click below to read more briefs from this series.

Leading in Crisis

RESEARCH BRIEF



Principal as Caregiver of All: Responding to Needs of Others and Self

When the school buildings closed in the spring, educators and families faced unknown challenges of supporting students remotely and continuing to provide well-being. Principals

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This is one of a series of briefs that focused on the critical incidents surrounding school closure and offers pragmatic suggestions to educational leaders as they continue to grapple with the disruptions of the pandemic. The full study is described at the back of this brief.

Leading in Crisis

RESEARCH BRIEF



Accountability During School Closures: Moving From External to Internal


This inquiry found that the lack of external accountability pressures neither appeared to negatively impact teachers' efforts, commitment to relevancy and rigor in their classrooms, or their responsiveness to families.

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Leading in Crisis

RESEARCH BRIEF



District Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic


Strong school infrastructure tended to occur in districts where there were existing infrastructure and technological resources already in place.

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Leading in Crisis

RESEARCH BRIEF



Calm During Crisis: School Principal Approaches to Crisis Management during the COVID-19 Pandemic


Principals formulated a hierarchy of needs that they feel physically and psychologically safe before they would be successful in the classroom. Even after these basic needs were addressed, principals faced overwhelming logistical hurdles of ensuring technology access and establishing clear communication streams.

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Leading in Crisis

RESEARCH BRIEF



An Examination of Challenges Educators and Families Faced in the Aftermath of COVID-19

As schools begin to fully re-open, district and school administrators have worked to design plans and implement strategies that would result in sustainable learning environments for their students and staff. Leaders have been faced with addressing equity concerns that have exacerbated since the beginning of the pandemic. Students and their families, along with some of their staff, have been without adequate internet and technology options, learning materials, and access to other services that would make their remote learning environments less difficult. The rapid changes to different modes of learning have caused confusion, concern, and

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This is one of a series of briefs that focused on the critical incidents surrounding school closure and offers pragmatic suggestions to educational leaders as they continue to grapple with the disruptions of the pandemic. The full study is described at the back of this brief.