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An examination of challenges educators and families faced in the Aftermath of COVID-19

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An examination of challenges educators and families faced in the Aftermath of COVID-19

Abstract

As schools begin to fully or phase into re-opening, they should ensure that the 3 “I”s that have emerged during Covid-19 in education; infrastructure, interaction, and instruction (both in-person and online) are adequately addressed.

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



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

As schools begin to fully or phase into re-opening, they should ensure that the 3 “I”s that have emerged during COVID-19 in education; infrastructure, interaction, and instruction (both in-person and online) are adequately addressed.

INTRODUCTION

As the epidemiology of COVID-19 becomes increasingly apparent, an ongoing examination of practices of schooling has begun to take place. Even as some schools across the country have opened their doors, either physically or virtually, others are still weighing all the data and options surrounding their re-opening. Since this summer, 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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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.



even panic for students and families. Parents now thrust into the new role as teachers or teacher partners have highlighted the difficulty in managing multiple roles during this pandemic. Finally, the uncertainty of what is to come as it relates to schooling and COVID-19 has caused mismatched policy and practice decisions that have left many students behind. Depending on the district, plans have either been communicated effectively or have left people feeling unsure of the educational process moving forward.

New challenges will continue to come up as school leaders deal with the demands of responding to old problems in a new school year. How school leaders address these pressing issues will play a part in what the future of education will look like in the United States. Big questions around equity, diversity, resources, and learning outcomes are still left unanswered and are even more complicated given the current pandemic that is impacting education directly. The three “R”s in education typically apply to the three basic skills taught in schools: reading, [w]riting, and [a]rithmetic. As schools begin to fully or phase into re-opening, they should ensure that the 3 “I”s that have emerged during COVID-19 in education; infrastructure, interaction, and instruction (both in-person and online) are adequately addressed. In this brief, we expand on these three “I”s and discuss each in detail using nationally collected data from a sample of 34 school leaders from urban, suburban and rural districts from across the country as it relates to COVID-19 and their response to the ongoing crisis. We offer recommendations as they relate to each of the three areas and provide an overall response that could be useful for school leaders as they move forward in the coming months with re-opening their schools.

Infrastructure

Key Finding One: Increase Access to Technology

In the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders in districts without a coherent strategic approach to online learning and device distribution reported their school districts as being disorderly and “making it up as they went along.” On the other hand, leaders from districts that had more time to plan were able to approach the distribution of technology and online learning in an orderly but challenging matter. For example, finding the “right online educational platform” for some districts became an issue that limited their ability to provide rigorous instruction. Some leaders reported using up to five different online technology platforms during the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic, which confused and stressed their teaching and support staff, which ultimately challenged the rigor of online instruction. Leaders also reported that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated areas in their district’s learning and social infrastructures, such as students’ availability to stable internet connections and assistance to bilingual and disabled students and their families. Leaders reported placing a great deal of academic responsibility on teachers to “make do” or “be creative” when helping these families. Most leaders expressed concern with providing these families and students a rigorous experience through a technological platform.

Key Findings Two: Attend to the Provision of Basic Resources

Throughout our conversations, resource provision was a consistent concern for leaders, teachers, and students, particularly around how to support teachers and students with issues

of connectivity, food, and health insecurity. For example, depending on the school district leadership, device and food logistics were handled either by the superintendent or locally by building staff. In districts where principals and their leadership teams were responsible for the delivery and tracking of technology, leaders felt they had more control and information about who needed resources and, critically, command-and-control access to those resources. In cases where the superintendent's office handled the logistics of delivery, principals expressed frustration with delays and communication, with some principals ultimately using their private vehicles to deliver technology and supplies to students and families. However, many of the leaders expressed satisfaction with how their districts were able to scale their logistics after initial struggles. Leaders reported that their districts were able to mobilize support staff and district inventory (school buses and transportation infrastructure) to help families receive food and health needs and repair technology. However, the principals did feel the pandemic exacerbated many of the class and income problems their students face. Indeed, even after resolving the initial kinks, leaders struggled to communicate with working and low-income students and families because many low-income students got jobs or began working longer shifts during their school time and completed classwork at night after work. For leaders, this required them to structure asynchronous classes and communicate with students about how best to serve their educational needs.

Implications for Leaders

Many leaders reported their school district extended spring break or closed school for a week to shift to online learning. However, much of the command-and-control operation was scattered and depended on the decision making of the district office. Some districts invited principals into the district command-and-control planning, while other districts followed a top-down decision-making process. School building leaders preferred to be involved in the decision-making process because they felt their involvement helped them better communicate with their staff about district changes. Additionally, building leaders involved in their district planning created a process for teachers and support staff concerns to filter naturally up the chain of command. Teachers faced a unique challenge with the COVID-19 crisis, which required them to depend on their building's leadership team for critical knowledge. In districts without collaborative processes, much of the planning and decision making shifted to the school level and teachers, which limited the command-and-control of senior district leadership and produced inequitable instructional approaches across online learning experiences.

Recommendations/ Lessons Learned

- Take time before adversity hits to develop a unified emergency plan for approaching a crisis. Start conversations early, in cases like COVID-19, the earlier the district started planning, the smoother their transition went.
- Plan and brainstorm how district transportation infrastructure can be used to help students and families during a crisis. Some of the students or families were not able to drive to lunch and technology pickup sites, which required some districts to use their school buses to deliver meals and technology to students and families.

Interaction

School leaders described both new and intensified forms of interaction with colleagues, teachers, and families during the COVID-19 pandemic. On a technical level, leaders described challenges with getting a clear message out to families about instruction and services such as food provision and technology support. On a more relational level, leaders described providing increased emotional support for teachers and families as they struggled with online learning, lack of in-person interaction, and anxiety about the future.

Key Finding Three: Communication

For leaders, the most prominent challenges related to communication were lack of clarity from district administrators, devising new ways to meet with faculty, and difficulty contacting all families and particularly reaching hard-to-find families. The leaders with whom we spoke shared that their teachers struggled with a lack of district guidance. School leaders felt that teachers also struggled with managing communication within traditional working hours. For parents, the challenges primarily centered on frustration due to constantly changing plans.

Key Finding Four: Social-emotional Support

Several leaders talked about the need to reassure teachers that the work they were doing was adequate, as many teachers felt uncertain about how to engage in digital teaching. Teachers also missed their colleagues and students and struggled with supporting, from a distance, their students and colleagues who were experiencing new forms of trauma as a result of COVID-19. Leaders also felt the need to reassure teachers in light of the uncertainty of the plans for school re-opening in the fall. Similarly, leaders felt that they had to reassure parents that they, too, were doing well as new educators for their students and that plans for the future would be communicated when available. Students and families also expressed to leaders that they missed seeing their teachers and peers. Leaders worked with families who experienced job loss, housing and food insecurity, and the loss of family and friends from COVID-19.

Implications for Leaders

School leaders interacted with teachers, students, and families regularly as part of their typical duties. During the pandemic, however, leaders were stretched to interact in new ways. Many found that their primary source of interaction was not professional but personal. Leaders made themselves available via phone, technology, and in-person visits. While this personal interaction was essential to keeping schools on an even keel during the spring, there are profound implications for school re-opening. First, this work can be personally challenging. Leaders spoke of the need for self-care but many struggled to balance what felt like personal efforts in light of more systemic needs. The second is the importance of networks. Leaders spoke of finding inspiration, solace, and camaraderie in peers in the field. Creating virtual opportunities to continue these relationships will be essential as schools move forward.

Recommendations/ Lessons Learned

- Additional opportunities for leaders to network will help the spread of ideas and provide opportunities for leaders to feel less isolated. District administrators should encourage these opportunities.
- Leaders must streamline communication to all stakeholders. Common days and formats help clarify expectations for everyone involved.
- District leaders must streamline communication to schools and communities. Clear and easily accessible webpages as well as transparent lines of communication and staff roles will make it easier for everyone to be clear about what is expected of them.
- Routines and rituals matter for all learners and educators. For those learners and educators working in hybrid or remote contexts, preserving rituals such as faculty meetings, pep rallies, birthday celebrations, and graduations will support the emotional needs of everyone in the school community.

Instruction

The majority of schools undertook some form of online learning; however, in communities where WIFI access and technology were unavailable, instruction was offered through packets of work curated for each grade and topic. In some rare cases, in-person learning resumed in the spring. Grading and participation also varied. In some districts, remote learning grades were not counted towards the course grade at all; in other cases, the grades were not counted if the grade declined. This crisis remote learning scenario led to instructional challenges for leaders, teachers, and families. The two major areas identified by the principals were maintaining continuity of learning and meeting individual student needs.

Key Finding Five: Continuity of Instruction

Maintaining continuity of instruction was difficult for schools. One principal spoke of the “COVID-related achievement gap” that schools would be facing this fall. Leaders were required to create a schedule that would work for teachers, who in many cases, were also parents balancing the demands of their job and supporting their children’s learning. In some districts, this schedule also had to meet teacher union contract demands. After determining the format and schedule, leaders worked with teachers to ensure online pedagogy aligned with student learning needs and curriculum. The continuity of learning was even more pressing for teachers who were figuring out “how to transform into a digital teacher.” In the beginning, many teachers struggled to adapt in-person learning to online learning. They faced the challenge of quickly learning new digital platforms while also figuring out the appropriate level of work to assign, especially for asynchronous learning. To ensure continuity of learning, parents and families needed to take a more active role in supervising and supporting learning. However, not every family was able to supervise learning in the same way. Some parents were essential workers and had to leave the home; others struggled with technology or academic content. For those families who were working from home and able to assist, they faced disruptions to their productivity at work. Students were being asked to keep their instructional schedule, and parents needed help motivating kids to do the work.

Key Finding Six: Individual Student Needs

There were many student groups who faced greater challenges with online learning. Special education students had a range of learning needs that could sometimes be difficult to support remotely. Leaders had to ensure compliance with federal special education law and Individualized Education Plans (IEPS), while teachers struggled to offer the accommodations those IEPs required for students. Other students had learning needs that were difficult to support in a remote learning environment. Many English Language Learners, including newcomers to the United States, struggled in a remote environment. One middle school in a suburban district in New York had 10% of students who spoke a language other than English at home, making it challenging to translate learning materials for students and families. Furthermore, students who were homeless or housing insecure were not able to regularly access remote learning, requiring the use of packets or other learning strategies. Finally, many students who struggled in the classroom also struggled remotely, but it was harder for the teacher to provide the differentiated support usually offered in the classroom.

Implications for Leaders

Although everyone was working long hours to make the transition to remote learning successful, leaders reported that many in the school community felt the interruption to learning brought on by the pandemic transformed how they would approach instruction, time, and staff emotional care in the future. According to a principal, “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 has been a lot for them for time management. So, I have a staff that is completely exhausted.” Interruptions due to COVID-19 are likely to continue in the 2020-21 school year and possibly longer. In order to ensure continuity in learning and to meet the learning needs of each student, school leaders need to focus on preparing teachers to plan for instruction that may be in-person, remote, hybrid, or may shift between these formats.

Recommendation/Lessons Learned

- Schools and districts should provide additional training for teachers on online instructional design and online learning platforms and resources will be essential.
- Schools and districts should focus on professional learning needs on planning for the various formats and for quickly integrating those formats.
- Schools and districts should plan and account for teachers with children and family members at home. When creating the academic day, remember to factor in some teachers are also parents.
- Leaders must provide additional resources or in-person learning opportunities for all students with individual learning needs to achieve greater equity.
- Innovations to learning should be fostered as teachers and leaders look to engage students and reduce screen time.

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Bodunrin O. Banwo has spent over 13 plus years working in youth and community development. He just completed his Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota in Education Policy and Leadership. His research focus is on the liberatory effects of communitarian programming on schooling and student development. Before beginning his Ph.D., Dr. Banwo served as a food access manager for the City of Baltimore, where he worked to improve the city's food supply chain and the economic viability of selling healthy food in Baltimore City. Throughout his career, Dr. Banwo has served as a public school teacher in Camden, NJ; Peace Corps Volunteer in Paraguay, South America; Food System Manager for the Philadelphia based nonprofit, The Food Trust and as an Arizona public advocate and lobbyist for a Washington DC-based nonprofit, Project Vote.

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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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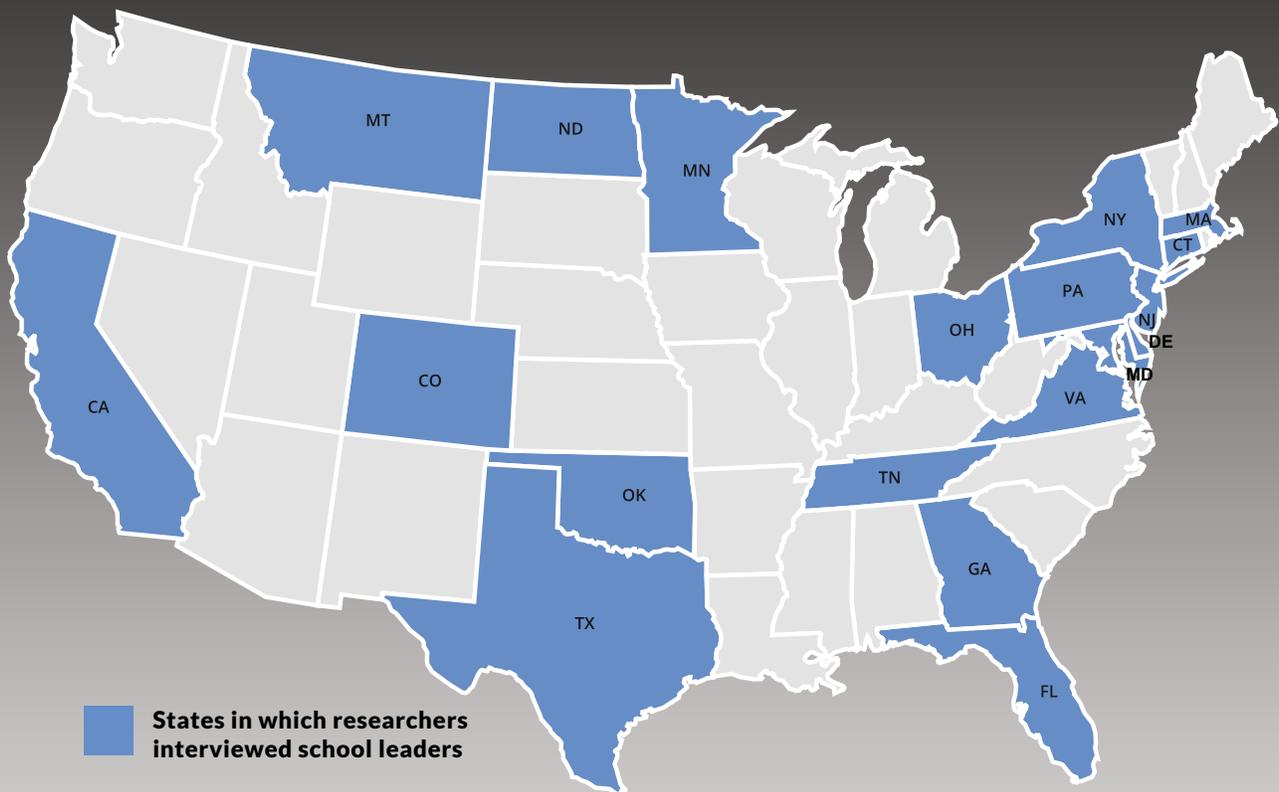
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Corrie Stone-Johnson is an Associate Professor of Educational Administration at University at Buffalo and the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Educational Change* published by Springer. Her research in educational change and leadership examines the social and cultural aspects of change, highlighting the ways in which people interact to foster or impede reform in a context of accountability. She is particularly concerned with understanding the social contexts and organizational cultures within which teachers, leaders, and school support staff experience change. She is the author of the book *Generational Identity, Educational Change, and School Leadership* published in 2016 by Routledge. She holds degrees from Boston College Lynch School and Teachers College, Columbia University.





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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Click below to read more briefs from this series.

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RESEARCH BRIEF



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RESEARCH BRIEF



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