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District response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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District response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Abstract

Districts providing strong centralized Covid-19 responses approached the crisis from a top-down leadership and guidance model which constrained school flexibility to act outside of the district's direction.

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



District Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic provided school and district leaders with an unwanted stress test of their ability to rapidly respond to the physical, socio-emotional and instructional needs of students, teachers and families. In this brief we use data from interviews with school leaders in 33 districts across 19 states to paint a picture of district responses to the pandemic. The interviews represent a geographically and socioeconomically diverse cross section of urban, suburban and rural districts. Coming from the perspective of principals, the data reflect how school leaders perceived their district's efforts to meet their local community's needs. Our analyses show that district responses ranged from highly responsive to well-intentioned but fundamentally counterproductive. We found that districts which had a reserve of resources and capacity to draw upon were better able to respond to the crisis. We continue with a discussion of district responses relative to what research on crisis management suggests, an analysis of equity issues that the district responses raised, and the importance of preparation for effective crisis response. We conclude with a set of takeaways for district leaders to consider as they reflect on their system's responses and how they might adjust to respond more fruitfully to future unexpected challenges.

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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.



Categorizing District Responses

School district responses to the COVID-19 pandemic can be categorized in four ways, based on our analysis of principal descriptions. First, many districts responded by centralizing their efforts and thereby constraining schools' autonomy to act independently. Second, another set of districts encouraged schools to act autonomously and viewed their role as one of supporting schools' responses. A third district approach was to seek a balance between central office guidance and local autonomy. Finally, there were a few cases where schools responded autonomously due to a lack of district leadership.

Strong Centralized Response

Districts providing strong centralized COVID-19 responses approached the crisis from a top-down leadership and guidance model which constrained school flexibility to act outside of the district's direction. In these cases, central office leadership frequently convened school level leaders either in preparation for the district's shut down, or immediately following the closure, in order to communicate a district-wide plan for communication, operations, instructional support, and other needed actions. School leaders were provided guidance regarding district expectations and the ways district guidance should be implemented in schools and from schools to parents and students. Subsequent communications were either sent directly from the district to students and families or with coordinated instructions for how schools should share them with their local communities.

Districts that were more successful operating with strong central guidance tended to have preexisting infrastructure in place that allowed for a more streamlined crisis response. Several of the districts using this approach had existing emergency response and cross-district leadership teams, on-line learning management systems, and technology support. These districts created regularly scheduled district meetings to disseminate decisions to principals.

Strong centralized district responses were not always beneficial for schools and families. In some cases, district guidance was slow to develop, overly broad, or vaguely communicated. In some instances, districts assumed schools would be shut down for only 2-3 weeks and were therefore slow to organize a longer-term response. School leaders characterized these slow responses as a way for the district to buy time for a more coherent district-wide response, but they expressed frustration that they were discouraged from responding to obvious needs while they awaited district guidance. Delays of action caused tensions in districts where building leaders were left waiting on directions and support, resulting in outdated communications to school staff and families. Regardless of the degree to which centralized district responses were effective, school leaders navigated the COVID-19 crisis largely in-line with district prerogatives.

Strong School Autonomy Encouraged by the District

Another set of districts approached the COVID-19 crisis by encouraging school leaders to take the initiative. These cases were characterized by strong district support for building-level decision making. These districts often supplied principals with standard information or guidance that set the tone and delineated the things that were important to the district, yet encouraged building leaders to exercise broad discretion and autonomy to individualize their crisis response in a way that best fit their school's community and context. Principals were responsible for identifying students' technology needs, empowering building-level leadership teams to respond to a variety of issues and deciding the most effective way to communicate with families and students.

In this set of districts, centralized support often came in the form of organizing food delivery, supporting technology distribution, and arranging professional development opportunities for instructional staff who were less technologically adept and needed help. These districts often provided basic curriculum guidelines or a general framework for on-line instruction but encouraged school leaders to interpret and adjust the guidance to craft a response that fit their school's circumstances. Principals were responsible for communicating district guidance to leadership teams and faculty as well as notifying families of available district resources.

Strong school autonomy tended to occur in districts where there were existing infrastructure and technological resources already in place. Perhaps because of this baseline capacity, central office leaders viewed the district leadership role as one that was responsive to the expressed needs of building leaders. The circumstances of this division of labor varied across districts—ranging from those that took an extra week of spring break to plan but then deliberately moved forward with principals taking the lead, to those that encouraged strong school autonomy from the start. It is important to note that school responses in this category did not always go smoothly. Principals expressed that their plans were at times curtailed by shifting district guidance, which caused them to redirect their energy towards issues other than those they had been working on. Regardless, school leaders were encouraged to distribute leadership by tapping into the strengths of their school leadership teams, to identify specialists to take the lead in their areas of expertise, and to provide greater opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles within their schools.

Balanced District Guidance and Local Autonomy

Another set of districts in our sample worked from a framework that balanced district guidance with providing flexibility for school leaders to respond to their school communities. District guidance in these cases was characterized as having options from which principals could choose to best meet their school needs. For example, after closing for about a month, an urban western district allowed schools to reopen choosing amongst either fully in-person instruction, fully on-line instruction, or a hybrid model – in each case the district would support the school's choice. Districts taking a balanced approach tended to view the situation as requiring a division of labor, in which they extended general oversight and communications direction, oversaw the planning of food distribution, coordinated technology, and took responsibility for negotiating with the teachers' unions; while leaving daily decisions to schools.

Principals in districts with a balanced guidance and autonomy structure took the lead in crafting messages to their students and families, planned their instructional approaches, and identified and responded to families' needs. Principals stated that their autonomy stemmed from the district's including school leaders in the central office's COVID-19 crisis response planning and district leaders being willing to provide feedback and assistance as school leaders moved forward with their localized crisis response plans. One way these districts differed from districts in the other categories was in their conceptualizing a distributed leadership model that placed districts in charge of contractual and legal matters, schools in charge of curricular and professional development matters, and teachers in charge of instructional decisions.

Strong School Autonomy with Minimal District Support

Finally, in a few cases, school leaders took the initiative to respond to the crisis due to little district guidance or support from their district. Principals in these districts noted a general sense of panic and/or disorganization, with little direction from central administration. In these districts, superintendents were mostly interim or early career, and the districts had little capacity upon which to draw. In a few cases, denial was the first district response to the COVID-19 crisis, with district leaders asserting their district would not shut down, even in the face of the wave of closures enveloping the nation. Initial leaders' responses in these districts assumed everything would be back to normal within a couple weeks after the initial shut down. These districts were consistently behind the curve and struggled to regain control. Principals in districts in this category noted that early responses to families and staff originated from the district, but thereafter principals were responsible for determining how to best move forward.

Most districts in this category simply did not have the existing infrastructure in place to respond to a crisis of this magnitude, which forced them to develop district responses from scratch and necessitated that principals step up and take the lead. Principals responded to the lack of district leadership and response by developing school-level plans based on existing school resources. It is important to note that these circumstances did not necessarily produce less effective service to students and families, but that they were more dependent on school capacity and effort, rather than direction and resources from the district.



Factors that Influenced District Responses

The strategies of district leaders, as well as the extent of district infrastructure, contributed to their system's readiness to respond to the pandemic. Here we focus on the existing district resources that contributed to their capacity to respond. We organize our analysis by the presence or absence of three types of resources: physical capital, human capital, and social capital. Physical capital refers to the material resources available to the district and schools, including technology, learning management systems, food preparation services, and other tangible resources they had on hand. Human capital refers to the personnel and their knowledge and skills that the district could access to support school leaders and their faculties to meet the needs of students and families and pivot to on-line instruction. Social capital refers to the existing relationships and networks that could be used to share information and spread important knowledge to help schools respond to the crisis.

Physical Capital

Physical capital was essential. It was most evident in the availability of technology. Districts that had ample computers, learning management systems and 1-to-1 technology currently in place when the crisis hit were better equipped to respond quickly to support students.¹ Most technologically prepared districts had schools with Chromebooks for all students and were quick to organize their distribution. One Florida principal explained that he felt very fortunate because 98% of students in his school had laptops as well as internet access.

A Connecticut principal explained that, although her school did not have 1-to-1 devices, they were a "Google district" which enabled them to get Google Voice immediately. Google Voice is a voicemail service from Google that enables users to send free text messages. Because there was nobody in the school to answer the phones, Google Voice became a valuable communication tool across the district. This school also benefited from having ClassDojo in a lot of their classrooms. This classroom communication tool allowed teachers to communicate with parents through an app and share information about their child's class. These kinds of technology tools provided school leaders with the physical resources they needed to immediately communicate with students and parents and provide instruction to keep students on track. The lack of time for planning made the presence of existing physical capital, such as technology, increasingly important. For the schools that did not have abundant technology, school leaders struggled to get the devices they needed and the training available for everyone.

Scarce technology was sometimes exacerbated by an inflexible distribution process. A Minnesota principal from a district with strong central control explained how the lack of technology, coupled with the district-led process to distribute what technology they had, led to delayed district response: "The district came up with a system of giving kids devices, but it was way too slow, so our kids lost a lot of learning. We had two weeks of planning and then spring break, and then they still didn't have devices. They just lost so much..." The principal went on to explain that the district finally let the school deliver laptops to their students, but that the district's need for a centralized response caused anxiety and frustration.

1 1-to-1 refers to a school or district policy where every student gets a technology device, usually an ipad or a laptop computer.

Low physical capital was not always in the control of districts, but rather often represented the socio-economic status of the community. For example, non-working parents and guardians often did not have cell phones. Principals could not have anticipated this would be a widespread barrier to communication, which left them struggling to connect with students at home. Wi-Fi was another barrier. A principal from Delaware explained they were unprepared because “students [didn’t] have Wi-Fi; it’s something I know some of our legislators have fought for, and it’s just not happened. There’s no Wi-Fi county-wide.” This principal needed to create hot spots at his school and at the local library because, without the immediate availability of internet access, instruction would be delayed. Similarly, an Ohio principal reported that only about half his students had internet access at home. And even when there was a computer and internet in the home, a device was not always available for the students to use because their parents were also working from home. The Ohio principal lamented that the district had not invested in technology long before the COVID-19 crisis, noting: “I could have, years ago, been spending money differently to make sure we had technology access, [but] I didn’t know that there would be a time where some students would literally have to depend on writing a paper on their cell phone.” A school in a Pennsylvania district reported that their local internet provider provided free access during the pandemic, but if parents had outstanding bills, they had to settle their accounts before they could regain access.

Human Capital

Another important mediating factor affecting principals’ ability to lead change in this time of crisis was the human capital available in their school and district. Clearly no one had experienced an event such as the pandemic before, but the accrued skills, knowledge and dispositions of people within the district influenced what school leaders were able to do. The amount and depth of human capital for schools to respond to the crisis depended primarily on two factors: first, the level of support principals received to address COVID-19 related issues; and second, the support for teachers to use technology and deliver remote lessons.

When principals received support and mentoring from their district, they were better prepared to solve problems and develop communication and instructional strategies. Enhancing principal capacity often came from district support. Some district offices were very proactive in offering their expertise on instruction for different grade levels and subjects. One California district, for example, organized a district response team that started to meet several weeks before school closed because they saw what was happening in other parts of the country. The team met daily to work out plans for transitioning to on-line learning. A Texas district provided training and preparation for teachers to teach on-line, helping teachers to pivot more quickly to on-line instruction.

In a Minnesota district with a strong centralized response, district leaders organized an emergency response team that convened daily about two weeks before school closed. A principal who was on the response team noted that “we started but didn’t realize how quickly things would change.” Once schools closed, the district’s elementary curriculum coordinator developed and held training webinars for teachers in both the mornings and afternoons in the early weeks of the pandemic. The district also held daily meetings to disseminate decisions, which were relayed by district personnel, who held daily meetings with principals to relay the district messages.

When districts were unable to provide human capital, schools struggled. In the case of another Minnesota district, the principal explained that the district had no infrastructure. The district was slow to provide services, so the school took over. “The district tried the best they could,” she said, “but we just didn’t have the people to make it work.” Principals also explained how their teacher capacity was extremely important in shaping what they were able to do. In a Florida district, a principal expressed frustration that they were short staffed and with a hiring freeze they were not able to respond as they would have preferred. A Minnesota principal noted that many teachers on her staff did not know how to deliver instruction on-line because they did not have experience with technology and the school had to figure out how to support themselves. An astute California principal addressed this by pairing tech savvy teachers with less knowledgeable teachers by grade level to use existing technology and training.

Social Capital

Another important attribute of district response was the extent to which they had developed strong relational connections for leaders across the district to share information and ideas. Social capital came in a variety of forms, but generally created conduits for principals to access knowledge and suggestions when they had questions or needed advice. In some cases, the network resources were amongst principals in the district. In these instances, principals were able to take advantage of an already established network of principals. An Ohio high school principal, for example, told us that he had a strong network of colleagues that he could call and ask questions of as they arose. This principal felt he was more knowledgeable and had help “at my fingertips” due to his network of experienced peers. In a large California district, principal cluster groups were organized by the district which helped provide principal support. One principal explained that COVID-19 really demanded that they “think differently about instruction” so her cluster group banded together to solve problems. Because this principal had established a close relationship with a few of the individuals within her cluster group, they knew the needs of her school really well and were able to provide the support she needed.

Another district capability that helped school leaders to gain information were vertical networks where principals could access district level networks. For example, a principal from Connecticut told us that he benefited from the connections he made in a superintendents’ training program. This group of educators were able to provide him with access to resources and reading materials. He was also “paired with a visionary superintendent as a mentor” who he frequently contacted to discuss the challenges he faced during the COVID-19 outbreak. As another example, a Colorado principal explained that principals were encouraged to reach out to their instructional superintendents for advice whenever “questions came up or boundaries needed to be pushed.”

District Responses in Light of Crisis Management Knowledge and Distributive Justice

The patterns of district responses to the pandemic crisis generally align with conventional theories of how leaders in organizations respond to crises. This approach, which we can think of as a technical/rational approach, emphasizes an orderly response. This highlights the application of a clear contingency planning process that spells out procedures, roles and responsibilities and a systematic approach to fact finding, implementation planning, clear communications and decisive action². Districts with strong centralized responses and balanced guidance seem to be working off this playbook in the way they organized their responses to the pandemic.

However, an overly rational conception of crisis management assumes two important things which did not hold up to scrutiny in the 20 districts in 13 states that we examined. First, a technical/rational response assumes that the district system has laid the groundwork for such a methodical approach. In systems where the immediate response relied on a detailed and synchronized response, such preplanning was crucial. As we saw in many of the centralized districts responses, there were no existing plans to draw upon which resulted in delays in providing service to schools, families and students and exposed the inadequate pre-planning for the crisis. Thus, the pre-event planning that was supposed to have happened in technical/rational models of crisis response did not happen. As a consequence, the crisis response in most of the districts we examined compressed both the pre-planning and enactment of the plans into the same window, causing important delays in their responses.

Second, a technical/rational approach underestimates the all too human emotional response to crisis³. Emotional responses are natural and spontaneous reactions we all have during overwhelming circumstances and events. While emotional responses manifest themselves differently, leaders' responses in such circumstances commonly induce stressful and defense behaviors that can be contagious across the system⁴. In the categories of district response where there was an overly centralized district response or an abrogation of district leadership, these leaders seem to have been either motivated by a need to control the situation or responded to a situation seemingly out of their control, which in either case results in a defensive reaction of fight or flight. In some of these cases these responses harmed school leaders' attempts to respond to visible needs of their constituents and led to the alienation of important and needed partners in the response efforts.

The pandemic also forced districts to make decisions to provide supports, resources, and services either immediately or equitably. In almost all the districts we examined, the urgency of the crisis and school leaders natural desire to respond as quickly as possible, confronted district leaders with the dilemma of whether they should allow immediate responses, which would result in some schools, families, and students receiving resources and services before others, or telling school leaders to withhold services, which delayed responses in those communities. Districts quite naturally responded to the most basic levels of the hierarchy of need and prioritized food and mental health supports, while delaying instructional resources until they could be provided equitably. Consequently, in some districts this resulted in principals actually being told not

2 Mayer, B.W., Moss, J. & Dale, K. (2008). Disaster and preparedness: Lessons from Hurricane Rita. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 16, 1: 14-23

3 Ekman, P. (Ed.). (2003). *Emotions inside out: 130 years after Darwin's The expression of the emotions in man and animals* (Vol. 1000). New York Academy of Sciences.

4 Strazdins, L. (2002). Emotional work and emotional contagion, in Neal Ashkanasy, Wilfred Zerbe and Charmine Hartel (Eds), (pp 232-250). *Emotions in the Workplace: Research, Theory and Practice*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books.

to deliver technology to students that they had readily available, or to provide only remediation, but to withhold new instruction, to students until all were ready to receive it.

Particularly in their instructional responses, the pandemic forced school and district leaders to confront the dilemma of urgency versus equity. In this case, equity can be seen in terms of distributive justice, which is defined as the fairness of how rewards and costs are shared by, or distributed across, group members. Thus, leaders at different levels of the system confronted different dilemmas. School leaders were less constrained by this dilemma, as they could respond urgently and relatively equitably to the families in their small community. However, district leaders, particularly those with more diverse socio-economic populations, prioritized equity over urgency when it came to instructional responses; they withheld services from those schools in the district that were ready to respond to their families until all families across the district could be provided with the same services and resources. In some dramatic circumstances, district leaders literally forbade schools from responding to their families until all families in the district could be similarly served and forbade district employed teachers from providing volunteer tutoring services through informal local networks. Interestingly, these strategies of ensuring distributive justice within-districts exacerbated inequalities across districts, as districts in adjacent areas were free to respond as they saw fit. Ironically, the net effect of district policies of distributive justice in the decentralized and locally controlled American education system likely exacerbated inequities across districts and within states.

Important Takeaways

Based on our analysis of district responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, we offer four takeaways for district and school leaders.

Takeaway One: You Can't Plan a Crisis Response in the Moment

You can't plan a crisis response in the moment. An effective response to unpredictable events takes planning. Those districts which were most able to respond to the sudden closing of schools had an idea of what they were going to do if schools had to close before the outbreak hit. Even though they faced tons of uncertainty, they had some basic plans for how to respond.

Takeaway Two: Collaboration Between District and School Essential

Systems that balanced centralized actions and local autonomy were more flexible in their responses. Districts and schools that utilized the strengths of both ends of the spectrum had more effective responses to the crisis. They recognized which services were more effectively planned and delivered centrally and those that needed more nuanced and individualized attention and took advantage of both of these system strengths. This required district leaders to recognize their advantages and let go and trust principals to respond with care to their school communities.

Takeaway Three: Investing in Human, Physical and Social Capital Pays Off During a Crisis

Investing in human, physical and/or social capital pays off during a crisis. Having knowledgeable staff, technological resources, and interconnected networks of people were big advantages to districts in the moment of crisis. These resources really helped districts to organize and carry out more effective responses amidst great uncertainty. Importantly, these different types of resources were not only available to affluent districts. In particular, developing skillful people and strong interconnectedness are as attributable to strong leadership as they are to financial resources.

Takeaway Four: Know Your Community and It's Needs

Know your community and its needs. School leaders emphasized how the pandemic taught them so much about their faculty, students, families, and community. This deepened understanding strengthened their relationships with community members and enabled them to make decisions that more directly responded to their needs. This lesson can be extended to district leaders who often operate at the system level, and thus are even more removed from those they serve and therefore less informed as to what actions could best support school leaders and communities.

Takeaway Five: Other Crises will Challenge Education

The COVID-19 pandemic is a dry run for future disruptions in education. So called “events that happen once every thousand years” seem to be happening with increasing regularity. Even though we are unlikely to encounter another unknown virus in the near future, environmental and social changes are likely to more regularly influence education. So, while history rarely repeats itself, future events are sure to bear resemblance to recent history. This expectation should motivate all districts to do an ‘after action review’ to see what they might learn about their response (for better and worse) to prepare for the next curveball that life will throw at us.

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Professor Lea Hubbard joined the School of Leadership and Education Sciences faculty in 2002. She earned her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California San Diego with a concentration in the Sociology of Education. She has written and co-authored numerous books and articles on educational leadership, school reform, as well as the academic achievement of minority students. Dr. Hubbard's primary research focus is on educational inequities as they exist across race, class and gender. Her recent book, *Reform As Learning: When School Reform Collided With School Culture And Community Politics in San Diego* (2006), illustrates the social and political construction of district-led educational reform. It offers a refined social theory combining socio-cultural theories of learning with organizational life and policy adaptation. Her other books include *Extending Educational Reform: From One School To Many* (2002), and *Constructing School Success: The Consequences of Untracking Low-Achieving Students* (1996).

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Hollie Mackey is an enrolled member of the Northern Cheyenne nation presently located in Southeastern Montana and Associate Professor of Education at North Dakota State University. Her scholarship empirically examines the effects of structural inequity in Indigenous and other marginalized populations in educational leadership and public policy using multiple critical frameworks and methodologies. As an experienced policy consultant, public speaker, program evaluator, and community educator, she seeks to bridge theory and practice as a means of addressing complex social issues from an interdisciplinary perspective. She is the recipient of the D. J. Willower Center for the Study of Leadership and Ethics Award for Excellence and the Jack A. Culbertson Award for outstanding accomplishments as a junior professor of educational leadership. She serves as the Associate Co-Director for the Barbara L. Jackson Scholars Network at the University Council for Educational Administration and Associate Director of the Consortium for the Study of Leadership and Ethics in Education. She earned her Bachelors and Masters of Science in Public Relations at Montana State University-Billings, Masters of Legal Studies in Indigenous People's Law at the University of Oklahoma, and Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the Pennsylvania State University.

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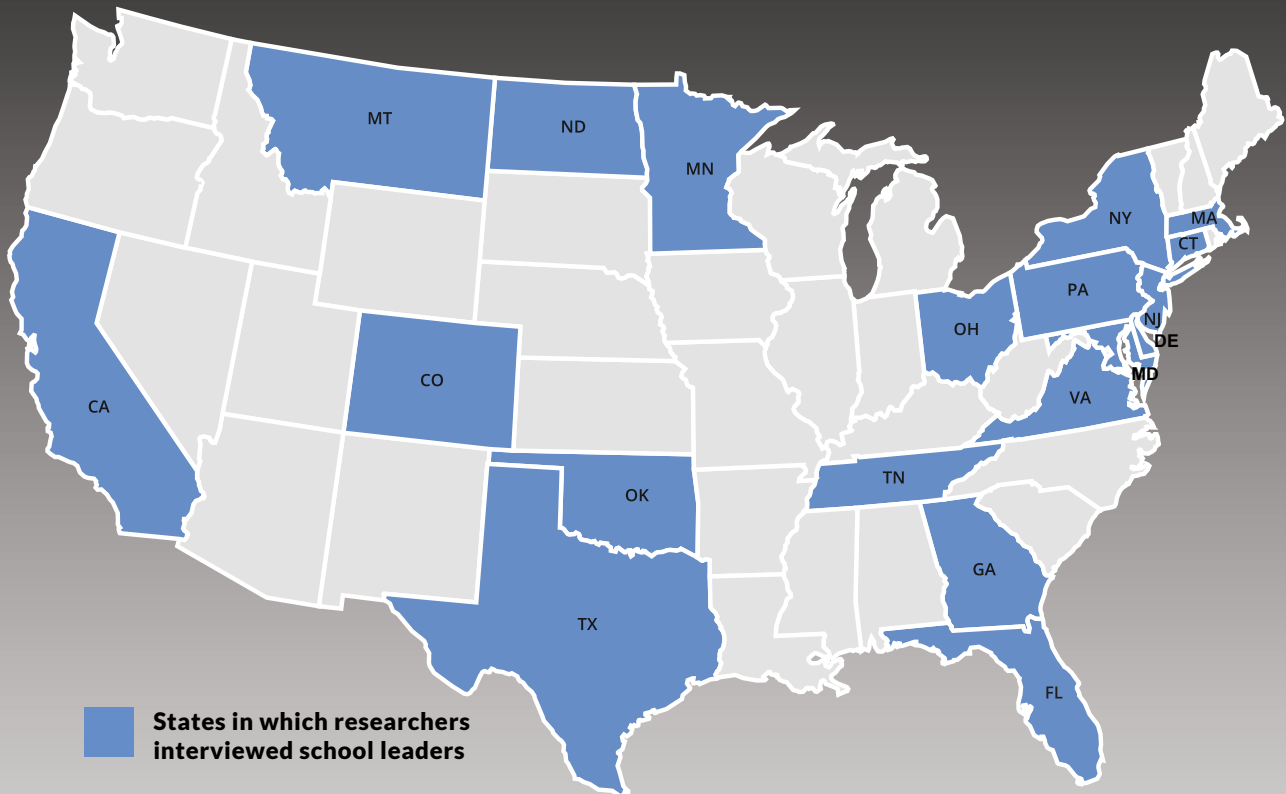
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Jonathan Supovitz conducts research on how education organizations use different forms of evidence to inquire about the quality and effect of their systems to support the improvement of teaching and learning in schools. Dr. Supovitz also leads the evidence-based leadership strand of Penn's mid-career leadership



program and teaches courses on how current and future leaders can develop an inquiry frame of thinking about continuous improvement and the skills necessary to compile, analyze, and act upon various forms of evidence. He has published findings from a number of educational studies, including multiple studies of programmatic effectiveness; examinations of the relationship between teacher professional development, teaching practice, and student achievement; studies of educational leadership; research on efforts to develop communities of instructional practice in schools; an examination of the equitability of different forms of student assessment; and the use of technology for evaluative data collection. His current work focuses on how districts develop a coherent vision of instructional improvement and devise systems to support instructional focus in schools, and how organizations build a culture of inquiry that supports sustained organizational learning and improvement.



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


Leading in Crisis is a series of briefs that document school and district experiences following school closures 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.

Click below to read more briefs from this series.

Leading in Crisis

RESEARCH BRIEF



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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 brief asks about the most pressing issues school and district leaders faced during the pandemic, including the inequities exposed by the pandemic and strategies for care and well-being.

To write this brief, teams of 2-4 researchers analyzed a sub-sample of between 22-42 of the interviews depending on the issue and to arrive at their conclusions and recommendations.

The full study is described at the back of this 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

Download

In light of stressors that 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 well-being 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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Leading in Crisis

RESEARCH BRIEF



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ABOUT THIS STUDY

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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.


Download

In addition to suspend the COVID-19 pandemic measures and methods in recent years for some states, standardized high stakes testing and teacher evaluations were cancelled for the year. For some, this hiatus was a respite. Since their inception, standardized tests and increased inspection of teachers' practice has done little to enhance student's educational experiences and much to do professionalize teaching and limit real learning. In contrast, supporters of external accountability measures argue they incentivize teachers to work harder, enhance their practice, and thus student learning, and make schools more responsive to families and their needs. These arguments are unlikely to abate as debates are just beginning to unfold regarding whether and how accountability measures will be utilized now and in the future as schools return to a "new normal."

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Leading in Crisis

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District Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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


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The COVID-19 pandemic suspended district-level socio-emotional and financial support for care and well-being across 19 states to palliate the needs of a socioeconomically diverse cross-section of urban, suburban and rural districts. Coming from the perspective of principals, the data reflect how school leaders perceived their district's efforts to meet their local community's needs. Our analyses show that district responses ranged from highly responsive to well-intentioned but fundamentally counterproductive. We found that districts which had a reserve of resources and capacity to draw upon were better able to respond to the crisis. We continue with a discussion of district responses relative to what research on crisis management suggests, an analysis of equity issues that the district response raised, and the importance of preparation for effective crisis response. We conclude with a set of takeaways for district leaders to consider as they reflect on their system's responses and how they might adjust to respond more fruitfully to future unexpected challenges.

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

Principals formulated hierarchy of needs that feel physically and psychologically safe in the classroom.

Download


The COVID-19 pandemic has presented an unprecedented crisis for schools around the world. Caught in the eye of this storm, school principals have been responsible for leading their schools through this crisis. This brief highlights the challenges that principals identified as most pressing in the early days of the pandemic and how they acted in response.

The story that emerges from our data is that principals formulated their responses to the pandemic in terms of a hierarchy of needs: they understood that their students and staff had to 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, ensuring technology access and establishing clear communication streams.

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Leading in Crisis

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

As schools begin to feel the "3 T's" that have surfaced in the aftermath of COVID-19, educators and families are adequately addressed.

Download

As the epidemiology of COVID-19 becomes increasingly apparent, an engaging 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 surfaced 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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