

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.**

### INTRODUCTION

In addition to suspending in-person instruction across the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a moratorium to many of the external measures and mechanisms used to hold teachers and schools accountable in recent years for enhancing student learning outcomes. In state after state, standardized high stakes testing and teacher evaluations were cancelled for the year. For some, this hiatus was a respite. Since their inception, accountability policies have been met with detractors who argue standardized tests and increased inspection of teachers' practice has done little to enhance students' educational experiences and much to de-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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### 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.**



So, who's right? Are these accountability measures necessary? Or could it be that educators would work as hard, or perhaps even harder, without them, as we learned from analyzing the interviews of a representative sample of 23 principals from across the United States during the late spring of 2020 about their and their teachers', students', and families' experiences regarding COVID-19. We wanted to understand how, and in what ways, accountability operated in these schools, even as formal external measures of accountability were officially cancelled. 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, their responsiveness to families. Instead, educators worked harder than ever to meet the evolving and substantive needs of their students and families and held themselves and each other accountable towards giving their all. This type of "internal" or "collective" accountability was created through infrastructures for collaboration couched in meaningful relationships and promoted innovation and change when they were needed most.

## Educators Went Above and Beyond

According to a close analysis of 23 interviews with principals from the full sample, the absence of external accountability measures and the accompanying power to sanction or reward teachers based on performance, had little effect on teachers' efforts during this time. Staff members not only met daily expectations, but often went above and beyond their formal duties to, among other things, ensure students' well being, maintain strong relationships with students, communicate with families, and support their colleagues. Whether self-initiated or in response to a specific directive from the principal to carry out school functions, teachers engaged in numerous additional tasks that served the school community and, in some cases, put themselves in harm's way. For example, without additional compensation or care to the work being outside their formal duties, teachers engaged in practical activities to facilitate the transition to remote learning including the acquisition, delivery, and support of technology (computers, Internet, and online troubleshooting) as well as in the creation of materials to support student learning. In other instances where sustaining relationships became an integral part of the school closing, principals described the extent to which staff members reached out to students and families during this time. In some cases, this meant doing home visits to simply wave to a child through a window or provide counseling or conducting occupational therapy outside the student's home.

## Teachers and Leaders Attended to Instruction

As already mentioned, all of the states in which principals worked suspended formal teacher evaluations for the year. Additionally, there were a few states in which union agreements precluded administrators from even informally observing teachers' practice via on-line learning. Nonetheless, principals witnessed the rapidity and willingness with which teachers embraced the sometimes intimidating expectation to teach online. Additionally, some teachers—who had previously never or only minimally used technology in their classrooms—actively pursued new learning from sources both formal (district coaches) and informal (colleagues) to ensure they provided their students with the best possible instructional resources and experiences possible.

As teachers became acquainted with these new technologies and ways of engaging students remotely, principals pushed teachers for greater rigor and relevance in their classrooms. In doing so, principals focused on students and their needs. Principals repeatedly expressed this need to begin with students at the center (i.e., a vision) and then continually push greater rigor regarding the instruction being provided to students. They were also clear that teachers were heeding these calls and innovating in ways that supported students

in new and highly relevant ways. In some cases, this push put principals at odds with what they perceived as inappropriately low district or state expectations regarding instruction.

### Students Were Expected to Perform

In the absence of external accountability measures like standardized tests, we might assume teachers and principals would lower their expectations for student learning during the school closures. However, principals in our sample conveyed that they remained in constant dialogue with their staff about how to support student learning, ensure participation and attendance, and how to respond to students who struggled to meet expectations. In some cases, schools' efforts to support student participation was preemptive in that they devised plans to effectively communicate to parents' expectations for student attendance. In other cases, schools' efforts to support student attendance was responsive to patterns of participation. Some principals described the extent to which they relied on existing school routines to collectively identify, plan for, and support students who were absent from online learning. We also found that principals articulated expectations for how to grade students in the new context of remote learning.

***Students Were Expected to Perform.*** With the close of physical school buildings in Spring 2020 and the moratorium on external accountability, it seems plausible that schools would be less attentive to parent needs and demands. And yet, we found that schools worked hard to attend to parents' requests and desires regarding their children's educational experiences during this time. Principals repeatedly reported engaging in far more and different types of communication with families during closures. This included using social media, phone calls, and emails to send messages of support and encouragement and teachers sending families daily emails with their child's schedule and learning needs. Principals were also attentive to parent requests and comments whether they pertained to the curriculum, the timing of courses, or assignments and grading; frequently shifting the what, when, and how of virtual learning to best attend to parental needs and requests. Additionally, many principals, and particularly those leading middle and high schools, said they spent much of their time on various rites of passage associated with school, including graduations, theatrical events, sports, and a variety of other school-based activities that parents and their children desired.

### Internal Mechanisms

Finding that external accountability did not discourage teachers and principals from working hard, and attend to instruction, student accountability, and families, we wondered about the mechanisms that served to create and sustain the internal accountability we witnessed. We found that staff members leaned heavily into relationships and care—for each other, for families, and for students. In fact, principals described the degree to which relationships with their students was critical, and the strength of those relationships became apparent during this time. Principals also described the strong degree of empathy that they witnessed among their staff, either for colleagues new to incorporating technology into their instruction or for the varied circumstances families encountered during the onset of the pandemic. Furthermore, principals discussed how infrastructure for collaboration – such as grade-level meetings, curriculum planning meetings, and staff discussions on school policies – enabled a shared sense of responsibility to effective instruction, to student engagement, and to their overall well-being. This infrastructure, perhaps present before the school closures, emerged as a critical feature of support, resource sharing, decision-making and kept teachers working hard and focused on serving students and their families even when no one else was watching.

## Implications

External accountability measures including standardized tests and teacher evaluations have been long held as vital mechanisms to grow instructional capacity and advance student learning. Our study explored how the absence of these measures impacted educators' sense of accountability when schools closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. First, our findings revealed that teachers went above and beyond to fulfill their professional responsibilities and continued to attend to instruction via remote learning. Second, we found educators held students accountable for participation and engagement in meaningful ways. Educators were also responsive to families' requests regarding their children's learning experience. Third, schools maintained accountability for teaching, learning, and parent requests through internal mechanisms that maintained relationships, provided empathy, and facilitated staff collaboration. These findings suggest that hasty moves to reinstate accountability measures may be unwarranted and potentially detrimental as educators work to chart a new path forward. Before school districts return to external forms of accountability, states and local districts may benefit from shifting from the current emphasis on external accountability measures to instead support schools and their leaders in developing and sustaining internal forms of accountability to advance teaching and learning.

### SUGGESTED CITATION

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Chantal Francois is an Assistant Professor who teaches in the Department of Instructional Leadership and Professional Development at Towson University's College of Education. Before coming to Towson, Chantal worked in New York City public schools as an English teacher and school leader. The school where she most recently worked was awarded an American Prize from the Library of Congress. Through qualitative inquiry, Chantal's research portrays counternarratives to the backdrop of adolescent literacy in schools, focusing especially on the experiences of Black and Latinx youth. She also works as a research and teaching consultant for schools across the country. Her work is featured in Harvard Educational Review, Teachers College Record, and Education and Urban Society. Her book, *Catching Up on Conventions: Grammar Lessons for Middle School Writers*, co-authored with Elisa Zonana, provides teachers with instructional strategies to support students' development of grammar and conventions.

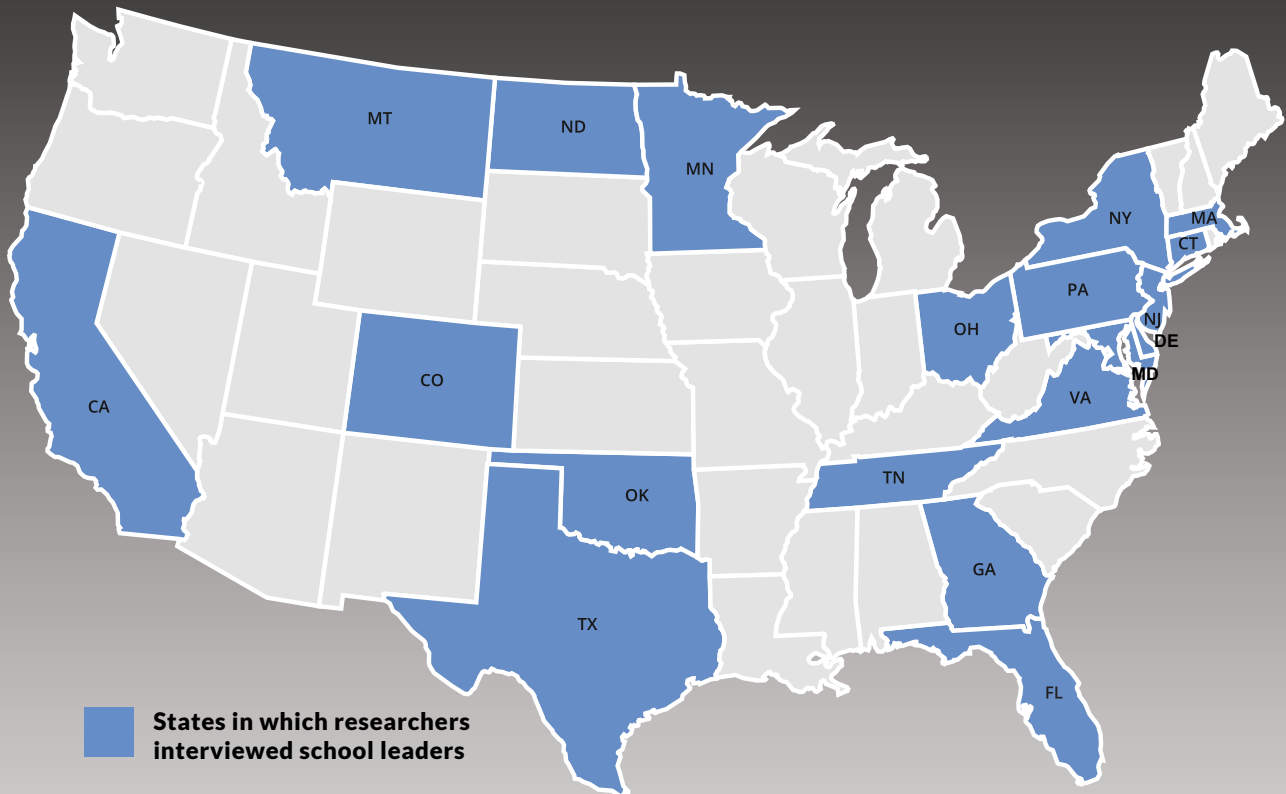
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The purpose of my scholarship is to re-frame educational leadership and change to make both more inclusive, equitable and oriented toward collective uplift and continuous improvement. Specifically, I focus on issues of educational leadership and organizational change particularly in chronically under-performing and under-resourced schools and districts. I am interested in gender and racial bias in educational leadership as well as issues of educational infrastructure at the local, district and state levels. Teaching is my passion.

Prior to coming to UConn, I worked for Rhode Island Department of Education on issues of school turnaround and capacity building. I was a senior research associate for the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) at the Milken Family Foundation. I hold a Master's in Education in Administration, Planning and Social Policy and a Doctorate of Education from Harvard Graduate School of Education.





## 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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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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In light of stress relief center the reflections of school leaders across the nation as they attempted to navigate the overwhelming chaos of closing and reopening schools during 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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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 edvisonary and rigor in their classrooms, or their responsiveness to families.


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In addition to suspending the COVID-19 pandemic measures and mechanisms in recent years for each state, standardized high-stakes testing and teacher evaluations were cancelled for the year. For some, this hiatus was a respite. Since their inception, accountability policies have been met with detractors who argue standardized tests and increased inspection of teachers' practice has done little to enhance student educational experiences and much to de-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**

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.


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The COVID-19 pandemic represented 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 analysis shows 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 responses. We conclude with a set of takeaways for district leaders to consider as they reflect on their systems' responses and how they might adjust to respond more fruitfully to future unexpected challenges.

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RESEARCH BRIEF



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

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

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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 to respond.

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 be 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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RESEARCH BRIEF



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

As schools begin to fully re-open, educators and families are adequately addressed.

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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 reopened 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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