LEARN FROM (SIMULATED) EXPERIENCE

COMPUTER SIMULATIONS ARE A SAFE WAY
TO PRACTICE MAKING TOUGH DECISIONS

BY KEN SPERO

I magine you're a newly promoted principal, replacing a principal who left the job after only one year. Right before your first staff meeting, you're confronted with a challenge with which you have no experience: A teacher comes to you in great distress because she's being bullied by a fellow teacher. If you're uncertain how to proceed, you're not alone.

Finding a more efficient way to help current and aspiring K-12 leaders is crucial because there's a silent crisis undermining school reform. Low-achieving, high-poverty schools face twice the annual leadership turnover rates of other schools — and they generally fill positions with the least experienced leaders (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2011).

More than 60% of urban superintendents cannot recruit or retain qualified principals (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007), and more than 45% of superintendents themselves turn over every three years (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). The job is simply too complex, too poorly constructed, and too isolating. School leaders lack the ongoing support and development required to maintain and foster sustained commitment.

What makes the job so challenging is that it's rife with painful tradeoffs that make decisions difficult under the best of circumstances. What's more, leaders are faced with a group of stakeholders — students, teachers, parents, unions, communities, districts, local and state government — whose competing demands can make it impossible to satisfy the needs of one group without dramatically upsetting another. Therefore, leaders must be prepared for inevitable negative fallout from even the most thoughtfully made decisions.

WHY SIMULATIONS?

Computer simulations can provide essential practice at making a wide range of decisions facing education leaders, filling gaps in experience with focused, relevant, virtual on-the-job training.

Research has shown that computer-based simulation is one of the best vehicles for delivering consistent experience (Jeffries, 2015). It has been used for decades by the military, as well as in medicine, where doctors gain life-saving practice in emergency medicine techniques (Lateef, 2010).

Good simulations engage the power of storytelling and provide an experience that takes place in a recognizable context — for administrators, that might be a school building, classroom, or town hall meeting.

SAMPLE SIMULATIONS TO WATCH AND PLAY
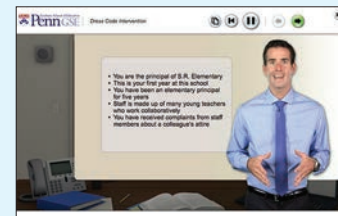
DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS:
DRESS CODE

http://edsimspd.com/
SIMDEMO/dresscode/Start.
html

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP:
DIGITAL READINESS

http://edsimspd.com/
SIMDEMO/FR_CP_1/

GIRLS' BASKETBALL COACH:
ANGRY PARENT

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ap=%2526fmt%3D22

Simulations can help administrators prepare for difficult conversations about students in crisis, racial tensions, teacher evaluations, and other sensitive topics. In each scenario, simulations help educators understand what other information is needed and who else might be affected by the decisions.

The simulation itself is similar to an immersive video game. The educator goes through a series of story-driven scenarios in which each decision leads to a set of consequences and more decisions to make.

A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

Here's how the decision-making practice in a simulation might go. You've been an elementary school principal for five years, but this is your first year as principal in this school. You've just received emails from four staff members complaining about another teacher's inappropriate dress. From what you gather from the emails, the complaints seem justified. The person in question is a 10-year tenured female teacher.

In the simulation, you must choose to do one of the following: Meet with the teacher, arrange for her to meet with the school counselor, or do nothing. But then an additional complication arises, as so often happens in real life.

The math supervisor, who has recently observed a lesson on equivalent fractions in that same teacher's classroom, has just contacted you to say that he questions her content knowledge, noting several errors she made in the course of the lesson — and that this isn't the first time he's called this matter to your attention.

Which issue should take precedence — the dress code or instruction? Should you ask the school counselor to meet with the teacher about the dress code and leave the instructional issue for a different discussion? Or should you meet with the teacher yourself and

address both issues at the same time?

If you're playing the simulation with a group of peers, this initial choice prompts conversation about the different actions you could take. In this way, participants confront challenges, make decisions, and experience consequences as they might in real life.

ADDING TO THE EXPERIENCE PORTFOLIO

When we confront challenging situations, we sift through our past experiences, searching for instances where we've seen this kind of thing before. From that, we pull together insights into the situation we're facing and take action. But what happens when our experience portfolio is empty? Schools and districts have neither the time nor the budget to enable their people to learn everything they need to know through the school of hard knocks.

For example, if you've recently been promoted from teacher to an administrative role, you may not have many leadership experiences in your portfolio. In fact, what made for a good decision as a teacher could work against you in a leadership position.

In our dress code example, a newly promoted administrator may be inclined to deal with the more familiar instructional issue than with a possibly confrontational behavioral issue. He or she might decide to not act on the staff members' complaints at all, in hopes that the issue will resolve itself on its own — and then learn that the failure to act on communications from the staff may well have escalated the complaints among a wider group of staff members or the parent community.

This is where a simulation experience is most effective. Educators can play through typical and often difficult leadership experiences ahead of time, whether it's dealing with a parent

complaint about the girls' basketball coach or tackling a broader issue, while keeping all stakeholders, from teachers to students to parents to community partners, informed and happy in the process. (See a list of sample simulations available on p. 35.) Simulations like these enable educators to make relevant deposits into their experience portfolios, ones they can draw on in real life.

THE TEAM EXPERIENCE

The efficacy of a simulation approach is more apparent when simulations are played in groups or teams. When the participants face a decision, the group will need to come to some form of consensus. Invariably, there will be different opinions among the group that need to be worked through. Participants can share perspectives and even biases in a nonconfrontational way to determine which decision they will make.

For instance, in our dress code simulation, no mention is made of the simulated principal's gender. When playing in teams, especially mixed-gender teams, a gender-based discussion may ensue and biases may surface.

A male participant may feel that, although the best course of action might be to meet with the teacher directly, he may also have the valid concern that the conversation could go badly and might be perceived as harassment. He may decide to avoid confronting the teacher altogether.

In the group discussion that follows, participants explore possible alternatives to addressing this challenge because avoidance has consequences. Female participants may have a different perspective, and they may be more comfortable addressing this issue with the teacher.

By surfacing the issue and provoking participants to think about the situation and share their experiences, the simulation enables

participants to discuss the issue of gender in a meaningful way and in a specific context, establishing the potential for deeper engagement and learning.

In addition, many of the team members' perspectives are based on past experiences, which they may share with the team. The fact is that we are habit-forming creatures with a tendency to seek the most comfortable way to get things done and may stick with that one way even when it's not the best approach. Sharing experiences gives students the opportunity to see the benefits of other approaches and learn about the potential consequences of various choices in different contexts.

Human beings are also social creatures who crave contact with others. A study on principal churn (School Leaders Network, 2014) identified the feeling of isolation that administrators feel in the job as a key contributor to burnout. A recent study at the University of California, Irvine found that "feelings of social connection can strengthen our immune system, lengthen our life, and lower rates of anxiety and depression," helping to both reduce burnout-related turnover and make for better decision-making (Seppala & King, 2017).

WHAT USERS HAVE TO SAY

Recently, ALMA Advisory Group, a research and assessment organization, conducted an independent assessment with administrators from a variety of K-12 schools using this form of educational leadership simulation training. Five institutions were surveyed and about 120 people participated. The study found that simulations:

- Foster rich discussions and provide a "sandbox" for aspiring leaders to experiment with making decisions in a safe environment.
- Can improve school leaders'

ability to handle similar situations successfully.
- Help school leaders make better decisions by increasing their awareness of the potential negative results of certain decisions and modeling reflective decision-making.
- Can be readily aligned to various standards.
- Engage participants in the material and enable them to learn as much or more compared to other professional development approaches.

In speaking with a large school district in Florida that is using this form of simulation, a school administrator noted, "Every assistant principal in our district (and we have 140) has found these simulations invaluable for their growth as administrators, especially those who aspire to become principals. We now have directors and assistant superintendents attending our meetings as they want to see how the simulations work and the learning that's taking place as a result. By using these simulations, our assistant principals are able to see the cause and effect of their decisions in a risk-free, fail-forward environment."

A BETTER WAY TO PREPARE

Given the high rate of administrator turnover nationwide, finding ways to quickly provide administrators with the experience they need is paramount. Simulations give K-12 schools an approach that can offer almost-real-life experience to those who need it, helping leaders feel prepared for first-time challenges.

Simulations combine the strength of experience with the power of storytelling to achieve engaging professional development that leaders want to participate in. By using simulations, districts and schools can help leaders improve their decision-making in times of crisis, benefitting

both the school culture and, ultimately, student outcomes.

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