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How to prepare leaders for a crisis

LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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The COVID-19 pandemic found many K-12 school leaders unprepared to deal with the magnitude and duration of this emergency. Dealing with sustained crises is not sufficiently addressed in most K-12 leadership programs, nor in the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards (NPBEA, 2018). What can we do to better prepare leaders for similar situations in the future?

We interviewed over 50 school leaders in the 2020-21 school year to better understand their experiences during the pandemic. Their stories enabled us to identify distinct challenges they experienced — and felt ill-equipped to address — at three different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. The **immediate emergency** as schools closed in spring 2020, which necessitated quick decision-making;
2. The **continuing crisis** of the 2020-21 school year, which called for sustained solutions; and
3. The **long-term response to the crisis** as schools reopened in fall 2021 and planned for the future.

THE IMMEDIATE EMERGENCY

When the pandemic first hit and state governments mandated a sudden closure of school buildings, school leaders had only a few days to figure out what to do in an unprecedented situation that challenged their ability

to fulfill most of the fundamental functions of schools. Here were some of their key challenges.

Making quick decisions with incomplete information. School leaders had to make an extraordinary number of critical decisions very quickly and with limited information, including what services could be delivered and how (such as supports for students with disabilities or food usually provided in school); what teachers, students and families would be expected to do and be accountable for (such as whether new content would be covered or what students would be tested on); and how to deliver instruction remotely and in hybrid mode.

Managing effective communication. Leaders had to communicate those difficult decisions effectively, taking into account everyone's roles, needs, and concerns. One consideration was how to structure communication so that it was consistent and avoided confusion when conveyed through multiple channels.

Dealing with the most immediate needs first. Many school leaders felt torn between attending to the school's role of supporting learning versus other primary needs such as ensuring health and safety, dealing with trauma and emotional issues, and providing food to students who depend on school meals.

Many school leaders felt unprepared to address these initial challenges. The decision-making models usually taught in school leadership preparation programs assume leaders will have time to collect information, engage key stakeholders to make thoughtful decisions, and communicate back to them. The pandemic revealed a need to better prepare leaders for meeting the immediate and urgent needs caused by an emergency.

THE CONTINUING CRISIS

As it became clear that the pandemic was not going to be quickly resolved, school leaders had to make different kinds of plans to deal with this sustained crisis. For example, some schools had decided not to pursue any "new learning" for most of the remainder of the 2019-20 school year, yet such a decision could not be continued.

Leaders needed to develop new solutions that ensured access and learning opportunities for all students, especially those in unique and suboptimal circumstances. This involved even more difficult decisions than encountered in early 2020. Here are some of the challenges they faced.

Solving problems in a new context. School leaders found that old approaches to problems they had previously relied on did not work, and they needed to engage in innovative problem solving. Principals had to work collaboratively within collective bargaining groups to revise work roles, such as bus drivers delivering home learning materials and food to families, and main office receptionists instructing parents over the phone how to solve technology issues.

Leveraging technology. Leaders struggled with the breadth and depth of technology needed for delivering instruction remotely, maintaining school operations, communicating with staff, and more. Most school leaders did not know enough about possible technology solutions to use them effectively, let alone find solutions for training teachers, staff, students, and families to use them.

Attending to social and emotional needs of the school community. While many leaders recognized the importance of students' social and emotional needs before the pandemic,

they often considered it the role of school counselors and social workers to attend to those needs. The pandemic extended and exacerbated social and emotional needs not just for students but also their families, teachers, staff, and school leaders themselves. Addressing these needs became a new priority.

Addressing inequities exacerbated by the pandemic. It became clear that the pandemic affected some students more severely than others, such as students without reliable internet access, English learners, students with disabilities, and students whose families weren't able to support their learning at home.

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The pandemic made many leaders more aware of longstanding issues in their schools, including inequity, but they were not prepared to address them, especially in this new context. These gaps reveal there is more work to be done in leadership preparation and professional learning to ensure that leaders are ready to meet students' social and emotional needs and build equity in an ongoing way, not just during a crisis.

THE LONG-TERM RESPONSE

As the advent of new vaccines made the leaders we interviewed in spring 2021 hope for an "almost normal" return to school for the 2021-22 school year, they still identified a number of major challenges they expected to face given the many implications of a crisis of this magnitude. These challenges fell into two main categories: responding to the learning gaps due to the pandemic and sustaining the innovations made during this time.

Responding to uneven learning due to the pandemic. One of the

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biggest concerns school leaders raised during our interviews was how to deal with the reality that students' learning had suffered from the disruptions experienced over a period of over 15 months.

Teachers could no longer assume the same starting point or baseline knowledge they expected of students in the past — a situation that will likely have a ripple effect on curriculum and testing for years. Furthermore, different students in the same class or school will likely begin the new school year with more varied skills than usual, due to the ways they and their families have experienced the pandemic.

Sustaining innovations made during the pandemic. The unique challenges of the pandemic have forced schools to institute new strategies and solutions that were inconceivable or unconsidered before. For example, several school leaders we interviewed were pleasantly surprised by the significant increase in parents' attendance to school meetings once they became virtual and the reduction in discipline problems when they changed school schedules.

They recognized that these new experiments have the potential to lead to major improvements if adopted for the long-term, yet some identified a new challenge of deciding what innovations to keep and how because they expected pressure to return to a pre-COVID status quo as a way to ensure normalcy.

The challenges identified in this phase point out the importance of preparing leaders to identify and address the potential long-term impacts a sustained crises may have. Equally important is helping leaders recognize the potential of crises to force innovations that may be valuable to continue even once the crisis is gone, along with what it takes to realize that potential. Indeed, the pandemic showed us the need to think differently and prepare leaders to foster innovation.

PREPARING FUTURE SCHOOL LEADERS

What can we do to better prepare future school leaders to face the challenges identified above? Addressing this question is important because crisis management mindsets and skills will serve school leaders well when dealing with other crises in the future.

As we examined our own school leadership preparation program at the Warner School of Education at the University of Rochester, we felt we had not done enough to prepare future leaders to deal with the diverse challenges of long-term crises, and we believe other programs are in the same situation.

The insights gained from the school leaders we interviewed suggest ways to strengthen leadership preparation programs and offer valuable learning opportunities to help K-12 school leaders manage crises better.

Pay explicit attention to the social and emotional needs of the school community and cultivate empathy. School leaders need to be better prepared to attend to the social and emotional needs of their stakeholders, especially during a crisis. Building empathy should become an important component of the preparation of school leaders, ideally using case studies, simulations, and role-plays.

It is also important for leaders to learn strategies that address social and emotional needs at times of crises. Some of these may be appropriate at all stages of a crisis, such as having times

and spaces for everyone within the organization (staff as well as students) to come together and share their experiences and feelings.

Other strategies may be more specific to a stage — for example, having protocols and tools in place for quick communication in an emergency. Several of the leaders we interviewed pointed out the value of having these structures already in place *before* a crisis happens. Learning how to establish these structures should become an expectation for all school leaders.

Prepare for a different kind of innovative problem-solving and decision-making during crises. Current and future school leaders need to recognize that different approaches to problem-solving and decision-making are needed in crisis situations at different stages and that crises can motivate innovation.

In an immediate emergency, leaders need to make decisions quickly and with limited information. In a sustained crisis, there is more time to gather input and information but still a high degree of uncertainty. Furthermore, the novelty of the situation will mean abandoning traditional solutions and looking for outside-of-the-box ones.

Sustained crises also provide powerful opportunities to experiment with new solutions, as resistance to change from stakeholders is naturally lowered in these situations. Recognizing these opportunities for innovation requires a special mindset as well as strategies to decide which innovations should be continued after the crisis and how to address the resistance that may ensue.

School leadership preparation programs have not historically focused on this kind of innovative thinking, but we can look to other fields that have. The field of entrepreneurship has a lot to offer about how to build the mindsets and skills needed to be successful in innovative problem-solving and decision-making.

Develop strategies for two-way communications and community-

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building during crises. School leaders should have sustainable ways of authentic communication with community members, including ways of soliciting input from families and the broader community. While this is especially critical in immediate emergencies and sustained crises, it is important and should be part of leaders' skill sets more generally.

Interestingly, several school leaders reported that developing better and more frequent two-way communications during the pandemic resulted in stronger community building and even allowed schools to use community resources that had not been accessible before — as, for example, when local companies offered to provide new services or resources.

Tune in to equity. Inequity is an urgent problem in schools, and crises are likely to exacerbate inequities for students who are already marginalized, both during the crises and after. School leadership programs must prepare leaders to be alert to and proactive in addressing inequities, not only when responding to a crisis but in persistent problems like achievement gaps and inequitable discipline.

Be able to evaluate the potential of technology to provide new solutions. As demonstrated during the pandemic, technology has the potential to provide new solutions that may help address sustained crises. Yet this potential will be fully realized only if leaders are able to quickly recognize and seize possible applications when the need arises.

School leaders are ultimately

responsible for making decisions about whether and how new technology will be incorporated in instructional models, communications, and operations, so they need to be able to identify new technology solutions and evaluate their advantages and disadvantages.

We don't recommend adding a lot of technology training into school leadership preparation programs. Rather, we suggest that leadership courses incorporate effective uses of technology to model and develop appreciation. Leadership courses should also teach future leaders how to leverage outside resources as well as the technical knowledge of other people within the organization — as a form of distributed leadership — by learning what questions to ask and how to evaluate the received responses.

Appreciate the critical role of professional learning during crises and strategies to attend to it. During the shift to remote learning, school leaders we interviewed came to appreciate the value of dedicated staff professional learning time for learning new instructional models and tools and navigating other challenges. This is especially important during a sustained crisis. But leaders should prioritize professional learning at all times, not just during a crisis. Leadership preparation programs should play a role in building school leaders' commitment to and knowledge about high-quality professional learning.

We have already started revising our K-12 school leadership curriculum and instruction to ensure students have better preparation for emergencies and unprecedented events, and we will continue these changes during the 2021-22 academic year.

We have started adding discussion prompts for immediate decision-making and communication during crisis. We are developing case studies focusing on innovative problem-solving in response to achievement gaps and inequitable discipline. We will also be adding content and skills development

seek feedback about whether they are prioritizing coaching, using coaches for their unique skill (rather than administrative tasks), and honoring the importance of coaching relationships.

DO'S AND DON'TS

To create a healthy and strongly rooted instructional coaching culture that will yield positive results for teacher, student, and school growth, it's worth keeping in mind a few additional do's and don'ts.

- Do make the instructional coaching visible to all. Don't create a culture of uncertainty about instructional coaching.
- Do align the coaching with the students' and the teachers' unique needs. Don't communicate a one-size-fits-all message.
- Do focus the conversations on

student learning. Don't focus on arbitrary teacher practices determined without regard to specific student data.

- Do capitalize on momentum. Coaches working with small groups of teachers is an important step toward creating a schoolwide coaching culture. Start with the willing teachers and support organic growth.

Most importantly, nurture a coaching culture — don't demand it. If the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have taught us anything, it is that educators are resilient, patient, and willing to maintain a growth mindset. Much as a gardener patiently waits for seeds to sprout, we must be patient and open to the possibilities and outcomes provided through coaching.

The kind of growth that moves us

forward as educators doesn't happen overnight, but rather it grows over time and with the delicate and diligent care of a coach tending to the needs of the students through the needs of the teacher like a gardener patiently caring for seedlings.

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and role-plays focused on social and emotional learning, listening, and empathetic response.

We hope these recommendations will be useful for school leadership preparation programs as well as educators designing professional learning for current school leaders. Ultimately, we hope that some of these considerations will motivate and inform a revision of the NELP standards, which heavily influence content in school leadership preparation programs, to include more explicit attention to preparing school leaders to respond to both short-term and long-term crises in the future.

CRISIS CAN BE A CATALYST FOR INNOVATION

At the heart of all of the changes we have recommended is helping leaders develop a positive mindset of seeing crises as catalysts for innovation.

Crises bring along challenges, and sometimes terrible consequences, but it is important for future leaders to recognize that crises can also help explore innovations considered impossible before.

Several of the school leaders we interviewed recognized this potential. A disruption of this magnitude precluded people from relying on what they used to do and thus opened the consideration of new alternatives. Interestingly, though, while many of our interviewees expressed the desire to maintain some of the innovations tried during the pandemic, some also worried about resistance from staff and community members.

We will miss valuable opportunities for school improvement unless we help current and future school leaders see the potential of building on what was learned from this crisis to address unsolved problems in new ways.

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