



## HERE WE GO

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## LEADERSHIP SHINES A LIGHT IN DARK TIMES

**W**hen I told a colleague we were focusing our fall issue of *The Learning Professional* on how leaders can thrive in stressful times, she astutely asked, “When is working in schools *not* stressful?” Constant stress notwithstanding, she recognized what we all do: School and system leadership is especially challenging right now.

Even as we try to regain some semblance of normalcy, education leaders are finding themselves in situations unimaginable even a year ago. Many of last year’s challenges remain, but they are compounded by new ones.

Amid staffing shortages, principals and superintendents are substituting in classrooms and filling in for cafeteria workers and bus drivers. They are working to accelerate students’ learning while dealing with ongoing absences due to illness and quarantine. Many are also caught in heated debates over whether and how to implement COVID-19 mitigation measures. Meanwhile, fear, loss, and trauma are still very real.

As they always do, school and system leaders are rising to the challenges and steering their teams with creativity, commitment, and compassion. This issue is dedicated to sharing how principals, superintendents, coaches, and others are shining the light of leadership in these dark times.

In this issue, we highlight lessons about what’s working — and not working — and what kinds of support leaders need to keep going strong. The authors’ insights can be applied in whatever space and whatever role you work, whether at the classroom, school, district, state, province, or national level.

Leaders who succeed in stressful times approach complexity with clarity, the authors show. They step back and see the big picture, even while addressing the specific details and emergent needs of daily life in schools, to pave a clear path through tangled terrain. That starts with a coherent plan for professional learning.

Articles explain how a districtwide professional learning plan connects educators and initiatives across levels (p. 9), how leaders can create an ecosystem of learning (p. 62), how high-quality instructional materials can shape a systemwide plan (p. 58), and more.

Social and emotional support is also high on the list of leadership priorities. Authors help us all remember to keep extending the “grace and space” we heard so much about last year, both to our colleagues and ourselves. They explain why leaders should pay attention to teachers’ well-being, sense of purpose, and feelings of burnout (p. 48). They describe concrete strategies for supporting teachers and other staff with compassionate leadership (p. 26). And they explain how social support is a fundamental part of responding to crises, including racist incidents (p. 16).

Leaders need social and emotional support, too, especially in times like these. Authors recommend strategies for leaders to cultivate their own resilience (p. 48), hone their roles as learning leaders (p. 34), connect with peers through cross-district networks (p. 42), and keep growing as they keep going (p. 52).

School and system leaders have an undeniable impact on schools and students — and the pandemic is having an undeniable impact on leaders. For example, as we highlight in this issue’s At a Glance infographic (p. 89), national surveys show that 62% of principals reported lower morale in December 2020 than before the pandemic and 45% of U.S. principals reported that pandemic working conditions are accelerating their plans to leave the profession.

While we can’t change the stresses leaders and other educators are facing, we hope we can help you navigate them with thoughtful, practical, and diverse strategies so you can keep shining your light for schools and students. ■