



Re-opening Schools in the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons for Leaders from the 2020-2021 School Year

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Introduction

In the summer of 2020, school leaders across the country undertook an unprecedented challenge that little had prepared them for: redesigning schools. The parameters of this redesign effort were a moving target – as our understanding of the dynamics of COVID-19 transmission evolved, so did the guidance for schools in mitigating its spread to students, staff and families.

Additionally, school leaders had just closed out a challenging end of school year in which they had to adapt to complete building closure starting in March 2020 in response to quarantine measures and find ways to meet the spectrum of student and family needs without one of their key assets: the school building itself.

Since April of 2020, our “Beyond Crisis Schooling” research project has worked to understand how school leaders understood and responded to the evolving landscape of the COVID crisis between March 2020 and June 2021, including what factors were most important in addressing both the unique and common challenges that their districts experienced through the analysis of over 7,000 district documents and interviews with 52 district leaders (See Appendix A for a report on the methods we used).

In doing so, we have sought to provide timely, relevant information to policymakers and school leaders regarding the ways in which support to districts needed to be structured and differentiated, as well as what leadership practices superintendents felt were most effective in responding to the crisis. Other reports from the project can be found [at our website](#).

As we look ahead to another year of COVID-19 mitigation efforts in the face of the rising cases of the Delta variant and the wait for a vaccine for children under 12, we wanted to highlight some of our findings that might be most useful to school leaders and policy-makers at this time.

COVID-19: A crisis of confidence in schools

One of the key challenges school leaders have had to overcome is the broad challenge to “the way we do things” -- or the legitimacy of schooling -- that COVID mitigation efforts have brought about (Coombs, 1998; Hemmer & Elliff, 2017; Smith & Riley, 2012). While the types of services and supports for students generally varies between districts -- due to the ethos of local control of schooling that we embrace in the United States -- as a society we generally expect schools to look a certain way and engage in certain teaching and learning practices: classrooms divided by age, in-person individual and small group instruction, appropriate differentiation for special needs, and attention to appropriate learning standards (Hubbard & Datnow, 2020). The disruption to these expected practices by fear of COVID-19 transmission undermined staff, parents’ and school boards’ confidence in schools’ ability to educate their children and keep students and staff safe.

As a result, educational leaders and their collaborators not only had to design new ways of providing schooling to students, but also to build confidence in their preferred solutions within

their communities. They had to do this within a context of rapidly changing guidelines from multiple educational and public health agencies. One size fits all solutions were not possible -- what inspired confidence in one district undermined it in another, depending on a variety of contextual factors. Additionally, districts were working with vastly different arrays of local resources, including community organizations, public health infrastructure, community internet access, and political beliefs.

Building public confidence in COVID-inspired school redesign

According to superintendents in Maine and Pennsylvania, two states with vastly different infection rates and local infrastructure, the following factors were most critical in determining stakeholder confidence in school efforts at re-opening:

- **Size and urbanicity** – Urbanicity and district size played a large role in how models could be staffed and what the district could support in terms of flexibility for switching between models as rates of COVID-19 transmission changed within the community. One of the key ways in which urbanicity played a role was in both local infrastructure (wifi, community organizations) but also relational and physical distance to public health decision-makers such as the CDC or Departments of Public Health;
- **Regional decision-making** – Decisions made by the other superintendents in a region generally affected confidence in a given district decision, particularly if that decision differed from regional trends; and
- **Partisanship** – The political division of a district had a profound effect on confidence in school re-opening efforts, particularly around mitigation efforts such as masking and social distancing. The more divided the district, the more difficult to build confidence in the school's efforts to re-open. Interestingly, this seemed to matter more to confidence building than local transmission rates, suggesting that perceived risk was a more critical factor than actual risk.

These findings were in keeping with many of the trends that we saw in Phase 1 of our study, in which we examined district-level communications with families during the Spring 2020 building closure period. For example, increasing rurality predicted a significantly lower likelihood of a district providing information around mental health resources during school building closure in the 2019-2020 school year. The potentially harmful effect of school closure on student mental health became a focus of national attention both within and outside of school districts. Fears of increased substance abuse, domestic violence, and suicide attempts were reported in the national media. School districts were optimally positioned to connect students and families with mental health services and at-home social-emotional learning strategies that may have lessened the risk of these negative outcomes. These connections may have been especially important in rural areas, where rates of suicide, substance abuse, and child abuse are generally higher. Our data show that increasing levels of rurality are associated with diminishing odds of districts providing connections with these potentially life-saving resources.

Recommended leadership strategies for building public confidence in crisis schooling

Our data suggests that superintendents who engaged in the following practices reported greater confidence across staff, families and their school boards in their response to COVID-19 than in districts that struggled to build this confidence:

- **Focus on the district mission** – Superintendents reported that bringing each element of their plan back to the stated mission of the district was helpful in demonstrating the ways in which new structures continued to serve the district's organizational goals. Using previously agreed upon criteria to help to justify new approaches to meeting those goals fostered agreement across stakeholders and built staff investment in COVID adaptations.
- **Maximize flexibility** – While the flexibility districts were able to offer families and staff in choosing learning modalities and other supports that matched their level of perceived risk from COVID-19 was often mediated by district resources, districts that chose to use additional resources provided by the state and federal government to invest in more flexibility for parents and staff reaped the benefits in greater confidence in their approach to student learning.
- **Be transparent about how equitable student learning is being defined** – One of the challenges of the past year was that each district had to define and make an assessment of whose learning was most at risk in the process of COVID-19 redesign -- and our evidence shows that districts defined this very differently depending on who they served. Being clear with your community will help to ensure that this does not get lost in competing discourses about who and what is most important.
- **Invest similar energy, time, and resources into all learning modalities being offered** – It was important for district leaders to invest time and energy into building out successful structures for all of the learning modalities on offer (remote, hybrid, in-person with distancing). Districts in which this investment was uneven tended to struggle more as the year progressed as parents perceived their children as getting the “short end of the stick”.
- **Continue to build trust with stakeholders and repair damaged relationships** – Superintendents with high quality relationships with their school boards, union representatives, parent associations, local health organizations, and families reported the greatest success in building confidence in their crisis schooling response.

Recommended measures to support school leaders during crisis schooling

While district leaders are at the forefront of COVID-19 mitigation for their students, families and faculty, state agencies have an important role to play in supporting district leaders during this challenging time:

- **Mandate mitigation measures that have scientific evidence to support them as policy** – For example, the deep partisan divides in many local communities and politicization of masks specifically as a mitigation measure is creating insurmountable

challenges for school leaders in some districts to require masks in school. State governments need to provide district leaders political cover by requiring masks along with other COVID mitigation protocols until a vaccine is widely available for children.

- **Continue to support and deepen role alike groups for school leaders** – The most effective support structure for school leaders over the last 18 months has been role alike regional groups (in Maine, superintendent groups, in Pennsylvania, IU groups). These groups were the primary way in which innovation diffusion occurred in response to COVID-19 between schools. During weekly and sometimes daily meetings, superintendents shared challenges, borrowed resources, adapted policies that other districts had implemented. States should explore additional ways to leverage these groups as the challenges facing districts continue to evolve with the virus.
- **Support innovation diffusion through COVID-19 Best Practice libraries** – State departments of education should collect COVID innovations from other states and from districts across their state to be centralized in best practice libraries. These could exist as web-based resources or distributed through role-alike regional groups to districts. Similarly, large districts with robust central offices should be encouraged to share resources with smaller districts with smaller central offices to prevent reinventing the wheel on every COVID-19 related communication or policy. For example, in Maine, a staff handbook was developed by two superintendents in Southern Maine for reopening that districts were able to then adapt for their own faculties.

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Appendix A: Study Methods Overview

This mixed methods study used a sequential explanatory design to build theory about variation in district adaptations in the context of COVID-19 (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). Maine and Pennsylvania were selected in April 2020 for their similarity in geographic variation, but differing levels of epidemiological risk. In April 2020 when these selections were made, Maine was considered to be in the lowest risk category with just over 1,000 cases, while Pennsylvania was in the highest risk category with approximately 47,000 cases (Center for Disease Control, 2020).

Phase 1 – Inventorying and Analyzing District Practices/Partnerships

The first phase of the project drew on district communication with families collected from public district websites to conduct a census of practices districts engaged in during building closure in March – July 2020. In total, we collected 7,142 documents from 150 out of 179 Maine districts and 465 out of 500 Pennsylvania districts. We used content analysis to a) categorize and code district practices to create a two-state dataset and b) create a descriptive inventory of district practices. The two-state data set was combined with NCES Common Core Data, as well as county-level data on COVID-19 cases from the Center for Disease Control. The addition of this data allowed us to investigate the relationship between district level characteristics (the number of county-level cases of COVID-19, district enrollment, percent of students receiving free and

reduced price lunch, percent of English Language Learners, and district urbanicity) and the types of supports provided to families. Binary logistic regression was used to predict significant differences across urbanicity by support type.

Phase 2 – Interviews with Superintendents

This phase of the study, completed by March 2021, used data from Phase 1 to select 26 superintendents from each state to participate in 60-90 minute interviews (n=52). Based on our analysis of the Phase 1 data, we oversampled from rural districts by subcategory to capture differences in experiences between rural remote, distant and fringe districts. Interviews with superintendents were conducted using a cued interviewing technique called life history calendars (Axinn, Pearce & Ghimire, 1999). The cues consisted of a researcher-created timeline of communication between each district superintendent and their community using documents collected in Phase 1. We then used the framework analysis method to compare data across district characteristics in order to draw out the contextually responsive elements of superintendent responses to COVID-19 (Sristava & Thomson, 2009). Framework analysis involves five stages, and is most appropriate for applied studies with limited time frames that are designed to effect policy and feed knowledge back into the field. First, the principal investigator read through the data, open-coding to familiarize herself with the content of the interviews. The research team then selected the thematic characteristics based on our conceptual framework of conceptually responsive leadership in crisis (Bredeson et al., 2011; Smith & Riley, 2012) to compare data across participant interviews using analytic categories; in our case, this involved district urbanicity, community demographics, and superintendent experience level, among others. We then charted these responses to understand differences across these characteristics and finally, put these into dialogue with the data collected in Phase 1 of the project (Sristava & Thomson, 2009).

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