LEADING ON THE ONSET OF THE PANDEMIC-
WHAT THE EVIDENCE TELLS US?

by:
Geraldine C. Flores, EdD
School Principal I, Palili Integrated School

Most educational systems are still adjusting to the significant effects of COVID-19 three years after the outbreak began. Some schools are open but operating at a bare minimum in others and mostly, operating in full face-to-face classes. Whatever way you look at it, COVID-19 is not going anywhere any time soon, which means that there will continue to be disruptions in young people's learning and education.

One thing is for certain: education has undergone a fundamental and drastic upheaval as a result of the globe seemingly turning on its axis. Technology is necessary for continuous learning because hybrid learning is so common. In many ways, this epidemic has redefined education as a process in which the close relationship between teachers and pupils is disrupted.

Despite the prevalent narrative on "learning loss," which is undeniably true and significant, it is also crucial to acknowledge that fresh learning occurred at the height of the pandemic. Both educators and students gained the ability to be adaptable, flexible, and resilient. Those in leadership positions learned how to communicate with their subordinates and stakeholders over distance, how to lead differently in a crisis, and most importantly, how to make sure that teaching and learning never stopped. Parents and other caregivers developed skills for fostering learning at home while juggling their many other duties.

13 October 2022

However, the pressures on school administrators and their personnel continue to be persistent and severe despite a return to normalcy. Every person who works in a school is still coping with the pandemic's effects on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis.

The pandemic's effect on those running schools is the continual interruption of instruction, learning, and assessment. In ways that were unimaginable more than two years ago, education has changed dramatically, and the computer, smartphone, or iPad is now at the center of both learning and teaching.

To effectively and efficiently disperse leadership, school leaders have to rely on online connections rather than in-person interactions to establish and sustain relationships with their personnel and stakeholders.

Although the international body of research on school leadership during the epidemic is still developing, it generally supports the idea that expectations of school leaders are still arbitrary and unrelenting. According to the findings, school leaders have suffered a major personal cost that has harmed their well-being and mental health. It also reminds us that school leaders remain crucially important in sustaining the continuity of learning, while this pandemic plays out.

What is revealed by the evidence? Seven key aspects related to school leadership in a pandemic have been highlighted by a recent analysis of the available evidence base3. These themes will each be briefly described. The first theme focuses on how leadership changed as a result of the pandemic and the increased responsibilities placed on school administrators. Due to the additional duties involved with school closures, reopening, and social distancing rules, the epidemic appears to have made principal burnout worse (DeMatthews et al. 2021). Hauseman, Darazsi, and Kent (2020) remark in their paper how school leaders are feeling increased pressure to carry out a significantly altered leadership function and position as a direct effect of the epidemic.

According to Pollock (2020), the pandemic caused the nature of school leaders' work to shift from leadership in predictable times to leadership in unpredictable times. School administrators and other education stakeholders are dealing with a variety of managerial and emotional challenges during the pandemic, according to Argyropoulou, Syka, and Papaioannou (2021). Overall, the evidence shows quite clearly how the difficulties associated with the epidemic continue to put unfair pressure on school administrators and the individuals they serve (Hylton-Fraser and Hylton 2021; Kafa and Pashiardis 2020).

The impact of rising strain on school leaders' physical, emotional, and mental health is the subject of the second theme (Harris and Jones 2020; Girelli, Bevilacqua, and Acquaro 2020; Kavrayc and Kesim 2021). The evidence unequivocally demonstrates how the pandemic has harmed the mental and emotional well-being of school administrators. Stasel (2020) describes the extreme pressure school administrators have been under as a result of the pandemic. The amount of stress that school administrators in various nations have observed is highlighted by Huber (2020), who also observes that administrators are still managing to get through this crisis. According to Argyropoulou, Syka, and Papaioannou (2021), school administrators are juggling several administrative demands brought on by the epidemic, and the greater sense of accountability that comes with it is negatively affecting their well-being.

The third theme examines how school administrators are changing their leadership styles. According to Fornaro et al. (2021), school administrators should provide their peers with help on four different levels, including academic, technological, operational, and interpersonal relationships. Additional evidence highlights how the emotional support required of school leaders has expanded significantly from the confines of their leadership function (Dewes 2020; Talsera 2020; Thornton 2021).

The fourth subject examines the character traits that school administrators are displaying to meet the enormous challenges of the pandemic. School administrators

displayed personal resiliency throughout this crisis, according to Burwell and Terry (2021). Ng (2021) emphasizes how school administrators have handled challenging situations while maintaining a composed demeanor. According to some authors, the school principal played a crucial role in uniting all parties involved in the pandemic for mutual support (Akinwumi and Itobore 2020; Gurr and Drysdale 2020; Hauseman, Darazsi, and Kent 2020; Stasel 2020).

The fifth theme describes how the pandemic has been accompanied by uneven learning. In their studies, Sahlberg (2021), Huber (2020), and Harris and Jones (2020) stress how COVID-19 has exacerbated socioeconomic gaps between students and extended the attainment gap. Therefore, addressing equity remains a top concern and a future issue for all school administrators (Ravitch 2020).

The sixth theme focuses on how school administrators involved community members (families and communities) in the education process during the pandemic. According to Pinar Ayyildiz and Baltaci (2000), parents and caregivers continue to be crucial educational partners and their collaboration with schools during the pandemic has had a substantial positive impact on ensuring good learning for many children. Balakrishnan (2020) emphasizes how a variety of neighborhood-based programs have aided individuals working in schools, especially school administrators, to meet the challenges of COVID-19.

To help school leaders, navigate the obstacles of the pandemic, many foreign experts emphasize the significance of community and family participation (Björn et al. 2020; Jopling and Harness 2021). To support schools, families, and the community, skilled care workers should be included, according to Fogarty (2020). The main takeaway for school leaders from this evidence is how crucial it is to interact with families and the community during the most trying times.

The last theme discusses how COVID-19 has altered leadership techniques. Many authors say that a new type of school leadership is decentralized, digital, networked, and reliant on technical infrastructure to have emerged during the pandemic. According to Harris (2020), distributed leadership is currently the go-to strategy for school administrators dealing with the pandemic's numerous demands and unpredictability.

Overall, the evidence indicates that school administrators have successfully modified their methods to handle the tremendous difficulties and unusual situations brought on by COVID-19. However, given the ongoing nature of the epidemic, Hauseman, Darazsi, and Kent (2020) argue that significant difficulties still lie ahead for school administrators. Consequently, more than ever, school leaders worldwide require additional assistance, resources, and practical support. The epidemic may have altered leadership strategies, but the research suggests that school leaders continue to put children first and are fully committed to ensuring that every child succeeds despite the odds and frequently at great personal cost.

References:

https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13632434.2022.2064626