Leading Schools From a Social Distance: Surveying South Texas School District Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This survey study sought to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted school leadership in K-12 schools in a South Texas region. School closures required many school districts to transition to online learning which for many schools, students, teachers, and parents, was a fast and furious move requiring proficiency and speed to avoid loss of instructional time. Results of the study have implications on multiple levels. Primarily, the results serve to inform education stakeholders and policy makers about the experiences of educational leaders in times of crisis and in managing school operations during the current pandemic. Findings indicate that school leaders were generally confident in their preparedness to best serve students, staff, and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic but felt a lack of resources and a preponderance of student inequities complicated the experience. Results provide evidence as to the support needed to continue effective school leadership under atypical circumstances.

Keywords: school leadership, remote instruction, COVID-19

In general, although there is global attention to the education system at large, research is limited pertinent to school leadership experiences during the COVID-19 virus pandemic. This survey study sought to understand how the pandemic impacted school leaders in K-12 schools in a South Texas region. This pandemic brought about many rapid changes to education in a short period of time, particularly some which have not been seen or experienced in the majority of the world's population. Teachers, students, and parents naturally looked to school leadership for guidance. In the absence of a precedent or a playbook, school leaders were faced with multiple challenges and very few answers. As educators often must do, even with very little time for planning, principals and superintendents had to put a plan into action quickly.

Literature Review

Leadership is a process requiring interaction, relationship, influence (Northouse, 2018) and *doing* rather than *being* (Netolicky, 2020). Thus, school leadership is accomplished through a complex process and a series of interactions related to policy development, interpretation, and implementation, partnership, motivation, and personnel and resource management (Miller, 2018). School leaders, namely superintendents and campus-level administrators, are tasked with various other responsibilities such as balancing the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of their students with their duty to personnel, parents, the community, and other education stakeholders. In fact, school leadership is found to be the second most influential component to affect increase in student learning, second only to effective classroom teaching (Leithwood & Day, 2008).

In times of crisis, each aspect of the school leadership role is magnified and just as easily scrutinized (Direen, 2017). This is primarily because "a school leader within a crisis still needs to make careful decisions about how to best serve his/her communities, foster trust and distribute power and agency, but the nature of the crisis necessitates leaders like the principals to step forward to the "front" to act as a trustworthy, credible voice for their community" (Netolicky, 2020, pp. 2-3).

Although research provides evidence to show that school closures have social, emotional, and economic impacts (Armitage & Nellums, 2020). Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic recommended the closures to mitigate the spread of the virus (Gostin & Wiley, 2020). The state of Texas serves over 5.1 million students across 1227 school districts (Texas Education Agency, 2019). In order to preserve duty to Texas school children despite school closures, educational leaders opted for remote instruction. With little to no training, teachers were thrust into a new world of teaching K-12 students online (Kaden, 2020; Ferdig et al., 2020). The swift transition to remote instruction left school leaders to wrestle with the decision to either provide continuous, standards-aligned curriculum via remote instruction for students or to provide online materials for review and enrichment with many choosing the latter (Reich, et al., 2020).

In a global study of school response and planning in anticipation of the 2020-2021 academic school year, a significant majority (60-90% of 330 respondents) cited that it was very challenging to ensure continued academic learning, provide supports for parents and students during remote instruction, define curricular priorities, and ensure the well-being of teachers and students (Reimers & Schliecher, 2020, p. 15). The Texas Education Agency (TEA; 2020) launched a series of instructional continuity plans affording school district leaders the opportunity to see what exemplar districts were implementing enabling local decisions about how to best proceed for their students. Still, in Texas, student progress in math dropped 18.3% from January 2020 to May 2020 (Opportunity Insights and Economic Tracker, 2020). Called the "COVID Slide," TEA (2020) issued caution to educators across the state that remote instruction going forward must be delivered as effectively as possible in order to prevent deeper regression and subsequent achievement gaps. The measures necessary to provide for the safest possible learning environment for students in the state of Texas will disrupt the education system for an extended period of time. Any neglect to the gravity of this thorough planning process will be detrimental to student learning (Reimers & Schliecher, 2020).

Superintendents in the state of Texas complete a preparation program consisting of curriculum rooted in learner-centered leadership and school district culture, values and ethics of

leadership, human resources leadership and management, policy and governance, communication and community relations, organizational and instructional leadership and management, and curriculum planning, and development (19 Tex. Adm. Code, Ch. 242, §242.15). Principals as instructional leaders complete preparation including curriculum on school culture, leading learning, human capital, executive leadership, strategic operations, and ethics, equity, and diversity (19 Tex. Adm. Code, Ch. 241, §241.15). Leithwood and Day (2008) contend that the effectiveness measure of good school leadership is demonstrated in responsiveness to context. The COVID-19 pandemic set that stage and all evidence points to additional challenges to come. Bailey and Schurz (2020) found that across the nation about 24% of school leaders and 18% of instructional personnel are in the vulnerable age range (over the age of 55) and thus statistically more susceptible to complications as a result of the COVID-19 virus (pp. 5-7). In Texas, 15% of the teacher workforce and 19% of the state's principals are in the vulnerable age range (Bailey & Schurz, 2020, p. 11). This adds to the delicacy of the decision-making process for how to plan for the next academic school year.

Methodology

This study implemented online survey research using a Likert scale and an open-ended questionnaire. School leaders were asked a series of 15 questions permitting data collection on school demographics and respondent experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on school leadership in response to school closures and subsequent transition to remote instruction. An email invitation for online survey participation was sent to school leaders in school districts located in a South Texas region.

Sample

For the best representation of perceptions from the targeted study group, a total of 152 principals and superintendents in the Coastal Bend region of Texas were invited to participate in the online survey study. This group comprised school leaders of a mix of school districts, from major urban to rural areas. Over the course of the study, a total of 30 participants responded generating an 18% response rate as the sample group.

Results

A total of 30 school leaders responded to the online survey. Of those, 25 (88%) were campus level principals 4 (13%) were school district superintendents. One additional respondent reported classification as a principal but specified an official title as Dean of Instruction. Results indicated that 67% of the respondents have been in their current role for 3-6 years or longer.

District demographics were also collected from the online survey. A majority of the school districts represented in the results of this study were classified as rural school districts (62%). Table 1 illustrates school district classification.

Table 1

TEA Classification System- Participating School District Classification

	Number	Percent of Total Respondents
Major Urban	4	14%
Major Suburban	1	3%
Independent Town	3	10%
Non-Metropolitan: Stable	3	10%
Rural	18	62%

As a means of better understanding the student populations served, data was also collected from participating school district leaders about the student populations served in their schools. Results indicated that 26 of the schools represented in this study have between 0%-25% of its students enrolled in special education services. Results further indicated that in 28 of the schools represented in this study, 50% of the students enrolled are limited-English proficient or English language learners. Participant data also reflected high percentages of economically disadvantaged students enrolled. In fact, data collected indicated that in 60% of survey respondent schools, there are between 75%-100% economically disadvantaged students. These descriptive statistics are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant School Student Enrollment Data

	0%-25%	25%-50%	50%-75%	100%
Special Education	26	3	1	0
Limited English Proficient	28	2	0	0
Economically Disadvantaged	0	4	8	18

Survey participants were asked to respond to a series of questions pertinent to their experiences during school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions asked school leaders to rate their level of confidence as leaders during school closures and the resulting move to remote instruction. Although there was indication of some uncertainty, a majority of the respondents (53%) indicated they felt confident in their preparation to support teachers upon learning of school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, 53% of school leader respondents indicated they felt confident in their preparedness to support all students, and 57% percent of respondents indicated they felt confident in their preparedness to support the parents and/or guardians of their students.

Results also indicated that a much stronger majority (80%) of the respondents felt confident in their preparedness to lead teachers effectively in the move to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversely, when respondents were asked whether their campus/district was prepared with the appropriate resources needed to continue high quality instruction remotely, only 37% agreed. Table 3 provides a illustrate version of the data collected

for these survey questions.

Table 3

School Leader Confidence in Preparedness Survey Questions Results

Survey Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I felt confident in my preparedness to support teachers on my campus/in my school district upon learning of school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic	3 10%	13 43%	5 17%	7 23%	2 2%
I felt confident in my preparedness to support all students on my campus/in my school district upon learning of school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.	1 3%	15 50%	6 20%	7 23%	1 3%
I felt confident in my preparedness to support the parents or guardians of all students on my campus/in my school district upon learning of school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.	2 7%	15 50%	7 23%	5 17%	1 3%
I felt confident in my preparedness to lead teachers on my campus/in my school district to effectively move instruction to an online delivery system during the COVID-19 pandemic.	5 16%	19 63%	2 7%	3 10%	1 3%
When closures occurred in the Spring of 2020, my campus/school district was prepared with the appropriate resources needed to continue high quality instruction remotely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.	0 0%	11 37%	10 33%	7 23%	2 7%

The next series of questions asked school leaders to consider the future of K-12 education as the COVID-19 still looms over and as it is expected that remote instruction will likely persist in the school system. Of the 30 respondents to the survey overall, only 9 chose to provide responses to these two questions. Of those 9 respondents, 44% agreed that their campus/school district was prepared with the appropriate resources needed to continue high quality instruction

remotely as a continued result of the COVID-19 pandemic for the upcoming year. To that end, 22% did not agree that their campus/school district is prepared to continue remote instruction. Results indicated that 77% of this group of 9 respondents felt prepared to effectively lead high quality remote instruction for the incoming school year. Table 4 provides an illustrated version of the data collected for these survey questions.

Table 4

School Leader Future Preparedness Survey Questions Results

Survey Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Anticipating reopening in Fall of 2020, my campus/school district is prepared with the appropriate resources needed to continue high quality instruction remotely as a continued result of the COVID-19 pandemic.	0 0%	4 44%	3 33%	1 11%	1 11%
I am prepared to effectively lead high quality remote instruction at my campus/district for the incoming school year.	1 11%	6 66%	1 11%	0 0%	1 11%

The final question of the online survey asked respondents to indicate the level of agreement with the following statement: The COVID-19 pandemic will change how I lead my campus/school district in the future. All 30 participants provided an answer to this question, and nearly all respondents (97%) indicated they either agree or strongly agree. Table 5 provides an illustrated version of the data collected for these survey questions.

Table 5

School Leader Change Leadership Survey Question Results

Survey Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The COVID-19 pandemic will change how I lead my campus/school district in the future.	14 47%	15 50%	1 3%	0 0%	0 0%

Survey participants were provided with an opportunity to answer an open-ended question to provide additional comments about their experiences and perceptions going forward. A total

of 11 participations added additional comments. The most prominently mentioned terms in participant comments were planning, success, working, teachers, students, communication, online learning, time, parents, and staff.

Respondents indicated trepidation for students' academic success via remote instruction citing social interaction as a loss in the process and the complexities of equitably serving all students where inequities are magnified during school closures. They stated,

- I am concerned about the academic success of our students due to non-face to face instruction. Virtual interaction may be successful to some degree but the relationships that are built between the teacher and the students are being sacrificed. Although I fully agree with the safety measures of our children and staff there a part in my heart that will miss the social connection and need of our children.
- One size does not fit all. Some schools need more resources than others. Low socio eco schools need the ability to give students electronic devices and Wi-Fi access.
- The biggest problem we faced was to support our students without the technological capabilities at home. The paper format was a poor replacement for instruction.
- The level of preparedness was based on availability of technology and/or ability to obtain devices for our students. Our district did an amazing job obtaining devices in record time. However, not being a 1-1 district impeded our progress and thus I could not answer "strongly agree" on several preparedness questions. We also realized our students do not posses "appropriate" technological skills
- I think it was difficult to serve those in most need and early childhood students.

School leaders' additional comments also reflected a commitment to remain positive about the situation as an opportunity for learning and growth. Comments further pointed to a recognized need to revamp instructional approaches to best meet student needs via remote instruction. They said,

- Closure caused us to evolve quickly. We are in the process of providing staff time to plan and prepare lessons for possible remote learning this coming year
- While disruptive in many ways, COVID-19 has forced me to rethink instructional delivery modalities. Online learning is no longer the exception. I have started working with staff to ensure we are ready to transition to 100% online learning should another round of school closures is necessary. Planning for the worst, but hoping for the best! #thenewnormal
- These are new times in education, in the world. We are making history.
- This Covid19 was an unprecedented event that caught us all off guard and had immensely affected everything that we haven't prepared ourselves for. We manage and we are still working on it now the best we can to support everyone.

In summation, additional comments provided by survey respondents reflected a general commitment to their role even in the face of the challenges presented. School leaders believed that, "Planning a virtual and face to face graduation kept all administrators extremely busy to ensure that our students received the best educational experience possible. It takes clear, timely communication to move the work during times of adversity."

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the commitment of school leaders to one another, to their faculty and staff, to schoolchildren, and to parents and education stakeholders at large, but highlight the difficulty in fulfilling that commitment due to a lack of resources. School leaders reported confidence in their preparedness to lead instruction, and to support teachers, all students, and parents during remote instruction as a result of COVID-19 pandemic related school closures. In fact, 79% of school leader respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were prepared to lead high quality instruction delivered virtually. To do this effectively, teachers need training and support, and schools and schoolchildren need appropriate technological resources. Where in every other instance, a majority of respondents reported high levels of confidence and preparedness, the question of resource availability is where the data flipped. The results indicated that 63% of school leader respondents believed their campus/district was not prepared with the appropriate resources needed to continue high quality instruction remotely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such is the crux of the education system: dedication, passion, intention, and commitment, but not enough money to make it happen.

Schools are equalizers. Teachers and administrators work hard to create safe spaces for learning in their classrooms, and to reduce if not eliminate student inequities at least for the duration of the school day. The COVID-19 pandemic has proven that school closures interrupt those efforts and bring them to a screeching halt. Despite the evidenced confidence in preparedness to continue providing some semblance of that educational experience for students, inequity supersedes. What's more is the concern for how much longer schools may need to remain closed. A significant majority of the schools included in this study are beginning the 2020-2021 academic year online with plans to continue for as long as needed given the persistent spread of COVID-19. To that end, 77% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt confident in their preparedness to continue leading high quality instruction in an online environment for the incoming school year, but 54% reported that their schools were still not prepared with the appropriate resources.

As should be the case, studies on student inequities during school closures, many with a focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, are already flooding the scholarly pool of literature. There is value in also studying the impact on school leaders who are faced with a myriad of new and significantly more complex challenges in how to effectively lead schools. More than the detrimental impact of a health crisis, studies purport a significant impact on society should school remain closed thereby exasperating student inequities (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). In light of those inequities, and how they complicate the ability of educators to overcome and provide in a virtual learning environment, the findings of this study beg the need for a more deliberate and intentional focus of policy makers to close the gaps. School leaders recognize the consequence of continued school closures and assert will to educate by any means necessary. Granted, the COVID-19 is novel and the world it created unchartered. The inequities across the school system is however neither. To effectively support school leaders to meet established goals and to appropriately serve all students, governmental structures and education policy makers must work collaboratively to narrow the divide, to level the field. Pandemic or not, K-12 education will never be the same. What this health crisis has further proven is that it is no longer acceptable to maintain the status quo. The results of this study indicate that school leaders are

clearly ready and committed to do the work. In order to sustain that confidence and commitment, school leaders must have the promise of equal assurance from the establishment.

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