INTENTIONAL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

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Abstract

In this study of elementary and secondary school administrators, interviews were conducted to determine effective strategies before, during, and after online learning during the pandemic. California public schools began whole school online learning during March 2020 and most schools returned to in person learning one year later in 2021. Challenges during online learning included providing sufficient technology to all students, the online learning platform, and academic rigor. When students returned to school one year later many students suffered academically and socially. School leaders were required to refocus and plan accordingly. Administrators shared their strategies and philosophy for success in times of continued uncertainty.

Keywords: Administrators, pandemic, California, online learning, strategies.

1. Introduction

During the 2021-2022 school year and in the past two previous school years, education has changed drastically. The COVID-19 pandemic caused elementary and secondary school closures and online learning became the norm. Schools were forced pivot and provide virtual education for all students without warning or preparation. The daily operation of the schools experienced a paradigm shift. Students, parents, teachers, and administrators were forced to learn and operate in a different world. Schools and districts attempted to provide students with computer devices, internet connections, online lessons, and parental support.

The surge of the COVID-19 pandemic caused students to have high levels of attendance issues, discipline problems, technology needs and loss of learning. Educational administrators around the globe agree that kindness, honesty, positivity, and relationships are key to overcoming the challenges of the worldwide pandemic (Woo, 2021). California educational leaders also stressed the importance of community partnerships, diversity, equity, inclusion, and the agency of human decency. During remote learning, many students reported stress-related health issues that included loneliness, lack of technology, and other problems (Torres, 2021). Thus, a shift to an urgency of becoming more intentional on building human connections became necessary.

COVID-19 has caused more trauma to inner-city school students. Elementary and secondary school students are more likely to experience adverse childhood experiences (ACE's) or trauma as a result COVID-19 (Washington-Brown, McKinney, Fair, White, & Washington, 2021). Examples of trauma may include abuse, neglect, violence, mental health issues or death of family members. The pandemic challenges included family illness, death, lack of finances and other family stressors that affected school children. Additionally, it is crucial that administrators create safe and stable environments to help all children succeed (Washington-Brown et al., 2021).

Educational administrators must become leaders who lead with intention. Because the environment is constantly changing, school administrators must learn to control their behavior and actions without allowing the environment to take control. Leaders who lead with intention connect people and concepts, help others find direction and achieve goals (Sanfelippo, 2022).

Levenson (2022) identifies three shifts to assist students who are of the COVID generation. He suggests utilizing best practices to support students, social-emotional learning (SEL), and intension in staff hiring. Best practices include scaffolding and interventions for all students. SEL includes empathy, compassion, and self-awareness. Several California districts have shifted their hiring practices to include the goal of hiring teachers who have a diversity, inclusion, and equity mindset.

2. Design

The design of this qualitative study was to collect the leadership strategies of school leaders before, during and after online learning in the elementary and secondary school levels in urban California school districts. The research questions were:

1. How was being a school administrator different **before** the school closures in the spring of 2020?
2. How did the job of a school administrator change **during** the total online learning phase after schools were shut down during spring 2020?
3. How has school administration evolved **now** that the students have been back on most campuses in person for one school year (2021-2022)?

An online survey and follow up phone interviews/questions were used to collect the data. The researcher had experience as a school principal and administrative coach to elementary and secondary administrators. This experience assisted her in the collection of the data.

3. Objectives

This qualitative study objectives were to survey school administrators who served in schools before, during, and after school closures due to the pandemic. The findings of this study were to provide school administrators with strategies and practices to assist other administrators during a time of crisis and beyond.

4. Methods

The researcher emailed eight different southern California urban school districts with a request for interested and willing administrators to respond to the research questions. Ten administrators from four different districts responded. The researcher utilized districts that included administrators that were familiar with the work of the researcher through educational administration programs. The data was collected and coded to deductively determine themes with supportive evidence (Creswell, 2014).

5. Data collection and discussion

Before school closures, elementary and secondary school administrators mentioned that interpersonal interactions were natural and that emotional and social cues were present. Collaborative projects including project-based learning was also possible. Schools worked as a family and teacher morale was positive. Parents were actively involved in the schools. Site principals were able to spend more time observing classrooms and teacher effectiveness.

After the schools closed for in-person learning and learning became totally on-line, according to the respondents, the roles of the administrators and/or principals changed drastically. Principals were no longer able to observe teachers in their classrooms. Several teachers lacked the skills to teach remotely. The principal spent endless hours making parent phone calls, texting, and emailing parents to monitor student attendance and their use of virtual learning. Home visits were made to encourage students to join the online learning platform. Many students were just not online at all. When there were teacher substitutes, many had problems with the online learning platforms and procedures. Principals spent hours supporting substitute teachers and regular teachers with technology needs and computer training. The job of the administrator became less personal. The role of principals became that of essential workers as they distributed electronic devices, and Wi-Fi hotspots.

When schools returned to in-person learning, administrators noted that the fragility of the students was obvious. The lack of social skills and social cues was evident. Some students were more self-conscious and were missing the necessary soft skills that include organizational skills and work habits. Administrators spent more time on student discipline and working with teachers to support social emotional learning. Attendance challenges continued when students returned due to many parents not feeling comfortable in the beginning when students returned. As the pandemic continued, on some days at least half of the faculty were out sick due to COVID-19 exposures or illness. This led to a shortage of substitute teachers. Administrators were responsible for COVID-19 protocols including cleaning, sanitizing, testing, and contact tracing. The role of the principal became more of a health practitioner. Educational leadership was not a priority. Administrators spent their entire day monitoring the positive cases, contact tracing, communicating with parents regarding outbreaks, and handling student issues related to discipline that may have been related to the lack of socialization over the past 13 months.

Students were also mandated to remain home for 10 days or more if they were symptomatic or exposed to positive cases. Parents, staff, and teachers avoided interactions due to the health protocols and distancing restrictions. Building staff capacity became a focus for principals as teachers were reluctant to participate in extracurricular activities. Leading with empathy become extremely important.

K-12 administrators offered similar supports to assist students who had suffered from learning loss due to the pandemic. Afterschool and Saturday intervention classes were made available for students on most campuses. Intervention counselors, tutoring, and wellness centers were created at several high schools. These centers were staffed by mental health counselors and support staff. Additional nurses were hired to help with COVID testing and assessment. Student Success Meetings which include parents, students, administrators, and teachers were developed and held to help individual students with academic and discipline problems. Attendance incentives were provided to students with weekly and/or monthly awards at all school grade levels. Increased parent and family engagement was stressed to support families in the reopening of the schools. Informational meetings were held at various times of the day to accommodate the parent schedules. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons became part of the curriculum and was integrated in other core academic disciplines. School Administrators became managers of the added personnel and programs to support learning.

Principals reported that culturally relevant pedagogy has also become a focus to help students relate to their own cultures and the cultures of others. This shift in instruction helps all students feel valued and included. District and school administrators are focusing on hiring teachers who value diversity, inclusion, and equity. In addition, several California school districts require administrators to conduct equity audits and to evaluate teacher lessons through the lens of diversity and equity. Equity audits provide a measurement of inequities in the school's physical integration, SEL engagement, opportunity to learn, instruction and student empowerment (Fisher & Frey, 2022).

Administrators of all school levels mentioned that due to the learning losses, schools have made changes in the instructional schedule. Schools are now focusing on longer instructional minutes for the core subject areas of mathematics and language arts. In the elementary grades, mathematics and English Language Arts time blocks have increased. There are extra teachers and college tutors to support learning. Blended learning is used to help teachers differentiate learning based on individual needs. Secondary administrators are working with peer tutors, college tutors and intervention teachers on special assignments to increase student achievement based on grades and other assessment data. Additionally, at the middle school, 60-minute class periods have been increased to 90-minute blocks with four periods per day.

6. Conclusions

After the interviews and surveys from school administrators were collected, four themes emerged from the data. Several administrators mentioned the challenges with attendance, the need for social emotional learning (SEL), parent and community engagement, and a commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity.

6.1. Attendance

Attendance at all schools suffered during and after online learning. Elementary and secondary school leaders emphasized the importance of students being present for academic success. In the Los Angeles Unified School district, the second largest district in the country, the chronic absentee rate was 19%. When students returned to school fully in person the percentage increased to 46%. Chronis absenteeism is defined as missing at least 9% of the school year (Esquivel, 2022). The chronic absence rate for Black students is about 57%, Latinos 49% and homeless students 68%. School leaders must find solutions to encourage students to attend school regularly.

6.2. Social emotional learning

Districts have required instruction in SEL for all students. Administrators observe and assess the teaching of SEL activities in the classroom. SEL activities are designed to help reduce the effects of trauma and promote positive relationships. The goal of SEL is to improve decision making, self-awareness and self-management (Jones & Jones, 2021).

6.3. Family and Community Engagement

Family and community engagement helps students succeed. Administrators supervise and work with community partners that include college tutors, nurses and mental health professionals that have joined the school staff to support students and parents during the pandemic era. Parent collaboration

maximize student outcomes (McLaren, 2022). Communicating with parents must be ongoing, differentiated, and deliberate. There is not a "one size fits all" when it comes to serving the parents of diverse student populations.

6.4. Diversity, equity and inclusion

District and site administrators are focused on hiring teachers and staff members that celebrate differences, support inclusion, and have high expectations for all students. School leadership must be intentional during a pandemic and beyond. Safir (2017) denotes that listening is a tool to build capacity and that school transformation requires moving schools to promote equity for all students. Leaders who utilize a listening approach understand emotional intelligence which includes empathy and relationship building.

7. Summary

During these uncertain times with continued waves of communicable viruses, hospitalizations, high mortality rates and a changing learning environment, it is imperative that school leaders shift their leadership style and become centered on the importance of human needs, mental health, and equity. Families need administrators who are visible, available, and willing to help with their children's individual needs. Maslow's theory of hierarchical motivation applies to the worldwide pandemic (Shoib et al., 2022). Educational leaders must be intentional in supporting the physiological needs, safety needs, and esteem needs of all stakeholders during any global, environmental change, or circumstances that are faced by our students.

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