# PRINCIPAL
# LEADERSHIP

MAY 2022

## ADDRESSING THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON EDUCATORS
### Tap Into a Multi-Tiered School-Community Approach

**28**

# "I SENT A TEXT TO MY ADMIN TEAM WITHIN THE FIRST 20 MINUTES, I HAVE FOUND MY PEOPLE!! I HAVE A GROUP TO CONNECT WITH AND TALK."

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# PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

A wellness strategy that accentuates health-promoting environments requires deliberate ways to mitigate a diverse set of teacher-related stressors, many of which school leaders may be unable to easily discern.

DAVIDE BONAZZI/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

# PRINCIPAL
# LEADERSHIP

MAY 2022 • VOLUME 22, NUMBER 9

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A PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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# CELEBRATING TRAILBLAZING LEADERSHIP

In this final issue of *Principal Leadership* for the 2021–22 school year, I want to celebrate the trailblazing leadership of school leaders everywhere. While you might not think of yourself as a "trailblazer," I'm here to tell you that is exactly what you are.

When you started as a school leader, you probably thought you knew what you were getting into. You would serve as an instructional leader, act as a role model, and partner with families and the larger community. But the pandemic, along with staff shortages and the tense political climate, seem to have changed your job so much in these last couple years that some days you hardly recognize it at all.

I see you, school leaders, adding more and more of the following duties to your already packed workloads: contact tracing, substitute teaching, filling in for bus drivers and custodial staff, enforcing school rules on mask wearing and quarantining, reassuring students and staff, calming anxious families, spending COVID-relief funding, and advocating for the significant investments still needed to strengthen schools and the educator workforce in this unprecedented time.

Because of you, students truly charted their own path. Students like Maya and Arjun Govindaraj, eighth-grade twins at The Honor Roll School in Sugar Land, TX, make us all proud. Their story of how they spent numerous hours volunteering throughout the pandemic is included in this issue.

Maya and Arjun, founders of their own nonprofit to help others, stocked shelves, sorted food, and delivered it to the long lines of families in cars waiting to pop their trunks to take the much-needed donations home. In the face of unprecedented challenges, disruptions in their learning, and tremendous uncertainty, students like Maya and Arjun prioritized service and convinced many of their peers to join them so they would all feel more useful and less alone.

Innovative young people have demonstrated a resilience and adaptability that has impressed educators across the country. Student leaders have navigated online classrooms and changing protocols. They've pioneered new service project ideas and virtual spirit rallies to keep our school communities connected. And they've shown us that if they choose to follow in our footsteps and become the principals and assistant principals of tomorrow—and I sincerely hope they do—the education of future generations will be in good hands. Why? Because these student leaders will have learned how to conduct themselves with grace and dignity as they teach and lead simply by having watched you.

Through it all, you have made possible the impossible, and I have seen what you have achieved. I hope you take time this summer to rest and reflect on your many accomplishments, and take pride in the trailblazing student leaders who saw what you did for them and their communities and were inspired to follow your lead.

Sincerely,

Ronn K. Nozoe
CEO, NASSP

# PINS AND POSTS



## SCHOOLS FALL SHORT IN ADDRESSING STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

A report released by the Hopeful Futures Campaign, a coalition of organizations promoting mental health supports in schools, shows that schools in every state are falling short in their efforts to address students' mental health needs. "America's School Mental Health Report Card" grades schools in areas such as teacher and staff training, mental health education, and the ratio of school mental health providers to students. According to the report, only Idaho and Washington, D.C., meet the nationally recommended ratio of one school psychologist for every 500 students. In Idaho, the average is one school psychologist for every 479 students. In D.C., it's one school psychologist for every 410 students. Read the full report at bit.ly/3HQ9Ayg.

## A TOUGH BUT NECESSARY PART OF THE JOB



The pandemic has forced many school leaders to be the bearers of bad news given that members of school communities, as well as students' family members, have died from COVID-19. Derrick Lawson, the principal of Indio High School in Indio, CA, has some advice for school leaders in handling this tough but necessary part of the job. Be prepared ahead of time with remarks in your authentic voice. Create opportunities for others to share, especially after a death. And on issues like school building closures and mask mandates, communicate in ways that anticipate pushback and allay concerns. Just as important, take care of yourself. "As school leaders, we must prioritize our own well-being," Lawson says. "We cannot fill everyone's emotional cup if ours has run dry."

## FEDERAL COVID FUNDS
# CAN HELP
## EASE STAFF
# SHORTAGES

A new report from the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) shows the extent of staff shortages brought on by the pandemic. The report, "Raising Pay in Public K–12 Schools Is Critical to Solving Staffing Shortages," suggests that policymakers address shortages in part by using the billions of dollars in federal COVID-relief funds. Health concerns related to the virus have led to shortages not only among teachers but also among bus drivers, custodians, and food service workers. EPI recommends that these federal funds be used "to raise pay for education staff, enact strong COVID protections, invest in teacher development programs, and experiment with ways to support part-time and part-year staff when school is not in session." Read the full report at bit.ly/35E13S7.

## WHY PRINCIPALS NEED
# A SAY IN
# FUNDING
# DECISIONS

According to a survey released by NASSP in December, only 27% of principals "strongly agree" that their district appropriately consulted them about how to use COVID-relief financial aid for their school. That's not the case at Winnacunnet High School in Hampton, NH. When the district received its first round of COVID funding, principal Bill McGowan and his administrative team reviewed student and staff needs to determine how to use the funds. The district listened to those recommendations (purchasing tents for outdoor classrooms and technology for remote learning, improving the HVAC system, and increasing counseling), and the budget process reflects that input. "School leaders and teachers are the ones who see students every single day," McGowan says. "My goal, including with the budget process, is to meet the needs of students and staff."

**We'd love some feedback!**
Write to editor@nassp.org to tell us what you'd like to see in *Principal Leadership*.

# ROLE CALL

## Now Is Not the Time for School Leaders to Give Up

SCOTT GENGLER **|** Principal

Every year, the Minnesota High School Principal of the Year speaks at the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals Winter Conference. As the 2021 winner, I recently had that honor.

Everyone there already knew firsthand that these have almost certainly been the three hardest years of our careers as school leaders. Let's face it: Being a principal is a difficult job, but I don't think any of us could have imagined what these last few years would be like. I know that many principals across the country are considering leaving the profession. But as I told my Minnesota colleagues at the conference, this is not the time to quit.

The well isn't deep enough for any of us to leave the profession early. I know these past three years have been extremely challenging, and there have been many among us who have either left the principalship or are questioning whether it's worth it to stay. Well, I say it *is* worth it—your school community needs leadership now more than ever, and if not you, well then, who? So, don't quit.

I offered my colleagues some advice for dealing with issues around equity, which has brought additional political and social challenges to many schools and districts over the past few years—and have made the job of school leader even more challenging. If anything, those stresses have only added to the temptation to retire or leave the profession early. My advice to my colleagues is to know your "why." I think when we find our why, it confirms why we became school leaders in the first place and why the work continues to be vital and fulfilling, despite all the obstacles.

### Finding My "Why"

It's different for everyone. For me, my "why" has always been aligned to my school's organizational purpose: "Each and every student will graduate prepared for postsecondary success regardless of race, class, gender, or ability." Another way of saying this is that you will not be able to predict students' postsecondary readiness based on those demographic indicators. So, my why is really about student experience. And it's my why that has helped me navigate tough issues and stay focused on what matters most.

From helping our school communities heal from the many civil and social injustices that have occurred, to leading a school community through a pandemic where new meaning has been given to the phrase, "Just follow the science," our work has never been more complex or politically influenced. And somewhere along the way, equity became more complex, too. I'll return to that thought later.

During the pandemic, when most schools in our area were moving to distance or hybrid models of learning, we took a different path at Wayzata High School that ultimately focused on student experience. Classes that needed to meet in person for practical purposes continued to meet in person. Students who needed more personalized support were invited to receive that support in the building. And classes that could meet more seamlessly if they were remote moved to a synchronous and virtual model of instruction.

A lot of these ideas weren't necessarily new. This wasn't the first time we considered online learning or differentiated instruction to

accommodate the needs of students, nor was it the first time we questioned the significance of a 900-square-foot classroom in our never-ending pursuit of developing highly effective pedagogical practices. Somewhere along the way, we allowed the social and political climate to change the complexity of our work, and that work suddenly became uncomfortable, stifling, and/or confusing to many school leaders.

When we had to help our students reacclimate to more normal routines for this school year, we learned just how quickly many forgot how to "do school." Add to this the staffing shortages, learning disruptions, COVID-19 variants, increased stress levels among teachers, and greater student dependency on cellphones, and it became even more evident and critically important to fall back on what should matter most: student experience.

## Equity and Student Experience

Equity is embedded in student experience, and it shouldn't be complex or political. It's actually rather simple and purposeful. We work purposefully and strategically to meet the needs of all students, individually, regardless of race, class, gender, or ability. We focus on their individual experience as it correlates to opportunities, expectations, and aspirations.

We don't teach theories to promote or achieve equity, and we avoid the equity traps, tropes, and language that prevent this work from moving forward or drawing a cynical counter-narrative. Equity is about evolving our practices and our processes to yield higher results and better the school experience for all students—not just students who have the resources or know how to do school well.

If these past three years have taught us anything, it's that it's difficult to predict what the future will look like in the next month, let alone the next year. Regardless of what comes our way, it's imperative for the success of all students that, as school leaders, we are preparing staff to do more than just work hard and care for the students in their classrooms. They need to work smart, care for all students unconditionally, and believe they can ultimately change the trajectory of every student's life by changing their practice when a student does not succeed.

Equity is about evolving our practices and our processes to yield higher results and better the school experience for all students—not just students who have the resources or know how to do school well.

Finally, we must be efficacious in our work. For example, when Harold is failing his classes because he's not doing his homework, we can't blame Harold. We must dig deeper into understanding why Harold is choosing not to do his homework and identify ways to help him understand the value of homework so that he begins to do it. Or, if Harold is failing because of significant personal, emotional, social, or other health-related concerns, we don't give up on him. We take responsibility for getting him the help and the support he needs until he's ready to perform at the level we know he's capable of performing. Or, if Harold is failing because he doesn't have a supportive structure at home, we provide those missing supports here at school to help him succeed. In other words, if Harold fails, then we as a school community are failing Harold.

When I think about students like Harold, and how much they depend on our school community, I know the last thing I want to do is leave the profession, especially as we start to emerge from a pandemic that has caused significant disruption to our students' overall educational experience. Student experience matters. Leadership matters, too. And good leadership will result in a good culture. You'll know you have a good school culture when you can no longer predict your students' academic success and/or your students' experiences based on race, class, gender, or ability.

That's what keeps me coming back every year, and I'm already looking forward to the fall—after some time off this summer, of course. And that's why I'll say it again: This is not the time to quit. We need good school leaders now more than ever.

*Scott Gengler is the principal of Wayzata High School in Plymouth, MN, and the 2021 Minnesota High School Principal of the Year.*

# STUDENT CENTERED

## Mission BE A Resource

MAYA GOVINDARAJ | Student
ARJUN GOVINDARAJ | Student

Mahatma Gandhi said, "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." As Asian American kids born to immigrant parents, we have seen poverty in the streets of India from a very young age during our trips to visit relatives. After the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami hit in 2004, we visited a children's orphanage that was full of kids who had lost their parents. We donated food and clothes. The children were so happy that they sang a song for us, which brought us to tears. From the time we were in pre-K, we have packed shoeboxes to send to kids around the world. We had no idea then that there was so much poverty, child abuse, and hunger in America, too.

### How We Started

Our parents are doctors. They work in a county hospital because they say it's very rewarding to take care of people in need. One time we heard them talk about a child likely suffering from abuse at home, and we were shocked to learn about child abuse, Child Protective Services (CPS), and foster care. We saw on TV the plight of underprivileged children and adults during COVID-19 and the "Texas freeze" last year—the long lines for food and water and how people died without any power to heat their homes. So, we decided to start a club called Mission BE A Resource (BEAR). We recruited our friends from school—most of whom are members of National Junior Honor Society (NJHS), a program of NASSP, at The Honor Roll School in Sugar Land, TX—and set out on a mission to support our community through donations and volunteering. There was a lot of support for our work from the community, so our mom helped us establish Mission BEAR as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit so that we could apply for grants and keep track of the donations we receive.

Unlike volunteering alone, doing so as a group is fun and a lot of work gets done! During COVID-19 when schools shut down, we still managed to get together with our friends and volunteer at many food banks. We worked for hours stocking shelves, sorting and bagging food, and delivering it to the long line of families in cars. It was hard work, but we enjoyed every minute of it, and we were proud to be of service. We saw how people depended on donations and how happy they were to receive help. Of course, we quickly learned about masking, hand washing, distancing, and temperature checks. Thankfully none of us got sick.

### What We Have Achieved

So far, we have collected money from family and friends and donated supplies to the Rainbow Room—where CPS workers can go and get supplies for children who have experienced abuse and neglect—in Fort Bend County, TX. We have purchased Christmas gifts for foster children, volunteered at many charity events, started back-to-school collection drives, and run Christmas toy drives. We have helped sort books and make meals for kids. We have made cards of kindness and volunteered at multiple food banks. And we have made snack bags for abused kids who come for therapy, so they feel loved. When the arctic weather hit Texas last year and affected all our lives, we realized how important it is to help each other and share what we have. When a stranger thanked us and said, "God bless you" for loading food into his car, we were all moved. It is such a pleasure to be able to help someone.

For Global Youth Service Day last April, we received the Hershey Heartwarming Project grant from Youth Service America to hold a school supply drive to

Mission BEAR volunteers distributing meals at the Fort Bend Women's Center for Christmas 2021.



Snapshots of Mission BEAR service projects.

benefit students in the Fort Bend Independent School District. We raised $1,000 worth of school supplies! In addition, we even held free online arts and crafts classes for kids last summer. We have received grants from Karma for Cara Foundation, Random Acts, and America's Promise Alliance to make snack/meal bags and care packages for low-income communities in our neighborhood and people experiencing home-lessness. We are so thankful to these organizations for helping us spread kindness in our community and making us realize the value of service. We are also grateful to our parents, teachers, and NJHS advisers who motivated, encouraged, and guided us from a very young age to do good things and showed us how important it is to give back to others.

Five of us in our NJHS chapter have received the President's Volunteer Service Award for the time we have spent doing community service. Although we are proud of the certificates, it is the thank yous, blessings, and smiles of the kids and adults we serve that will stay in our hearts and minds forever.

### Our Hopes for the Future

Through volunteering, we have found a way to bond with our community, meet new people, collaborate, learn leadership skills, develop compassion for others, and have fun. We want to promote volunteerism among tweens and show

> Through volunteering, we have found a way to bond with our community, meet new people, collaborate, learn leadership skills, develop compassion for others, and have fun.

others that no matter your age, there is always a way to help someone. Every small act of service can bring happiness, and it is important to help others so we can create a better world. Both NASSP and Ashoka, an organization devoted to helping young people make positive changes, have taught us the power of stories. We look forward to doing more community service projects in the future and hope our story will inspire others to give back to their communities, so they can appreciate the true meaning of "rewarding."

*Maya* and *Arjun Govindaraj* *are twins in eighth grade at The Honor Roll School in Sugar Land, TX. They are president and vice president of the 501(c)(3) nonprofit Mission Be A Resource (BEAR), and members of their school's NJHS chapter. This article first appeared in the Spring 2022 issue of NASSP's* Advise *magazine.*

# ADVOCACY AGENDA

## How Afterschool and Summer Enrichment Support Student Success

JODI GRANT | Afterschool Alliance
ERIK PETERSON | Afterschool Alliance

Parents of school-age kids consistently tell us that they are longing for more joy, fun, socialization, and engagement in their children's lives. Schools have done a remarkable job of managing unprecedented challenges and making the best of a bad situation these last couple of pandemic years, and we all want kids to catch up and do well academically. But we also know that too many kids have missed out on afterschool programs that offer stimulating learning opportunities in such areas as rocketry, cooking, mentoring, and civic engagement, and they've missed out on summer camps that expose them to new environments and provide team-building with peers.

Just as schools have stepped up, afterschool and summer programs have done all they can to sustain these opportunities outside the school day during the pandemic. But there's much more to do. So now, as we approach the third summer amidst COVID-19, the gradual return to normalcy must be accompanied by a push to help students get back on track academically as well as socially. According to "Covid-19 and Education: The Lingering Effects of Unfinished Learning," an analysis by McKinsey & Company, "The impact of the pandemic on K–12 student learning was significant, leaving students on average five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading by the end of the school year. The pandemic widened preexisting opportunity and achievement gaps, hitting historically disadvantaged students hardest." There is no question that the challenge we face is daunting.

The good news is that in districts across the nation, the work of helping students recover lost ground, academically and socially, is well underway. Working in partnership with innovative and dedicated school leaders and teachers, the out-of-school-time (OST) community has learned important lessons about what works. To begin, it's important to acknowledge that there are no silver bullets to fast track success. Disrupted learning time is a very real problem. So, just as teachers are trying to compensate by squeezing every minute of learning time out of every hour in class that they've got, we need to use every opportunity we have to help kids learn—during the school day, to be sure, but also before school, after school, and during the summer.

### Partnerships Are Key

To make that happen, we need meaningful partnerships between schools and various community organizations positioned to help. Of course, it's important for principals to make careful decisions about potential partner organizations. But once that hurdle is cleared, it should be all-hands-on-deck for our kids. Smart partnerships are critical to the work that's ahead, and among the most critical partnerships that school leaders can forge are those with afterschool and summer learning programs. Research demonstrates that well-structured, well-attended OST programs can help students

progress academically and boost their social and emotional health.

For school leaders, the advantages of successful OST partnerships are clear:

- More expansive thinking about community partnerships **will increase the number of students served and enhance student interest and engagement.** Principals should consider reaching out to the broader range of youth-serving, community-based organizations, parks and recreation agencies, libraries, museums, arts and cultural groups, affordable housing organizations, colleges, and local employers. Such organizations all have reason and resolve to step up to help.
- By tapping partners' resources, facilities, and volunteers, **principals can provide active, hands-on learning experiences.**
- By taking advantage of the unique time and space opportunities that OST programs offer, principals can help **support student mastery.** Focused time on task gives students the practice they need to get exceptionally good at what they're doing.
- By engaging partners and students to help develop and design quality afterschool and summer programs, principals can **help students learn vital team-building skills and engage in their communities** while building relationships,

## Disrupted learning time is a very real problem.

learning to resolve differences, and encouraging youth ownership.
- With help from partners, principals can **encourage students to learn a variety of new skills,** discover a range of career fields, and consider a broader range of college options.

Partners can help fill gaps that many school districts are hard-pressed to fill on their own. They can provide facilities, engage a community-based youth-development workforce, provide a broad range of enrichment activities and, critically, provide transportation for students.

### The Role of COVID-Relief Funding

Helping facilitate this work is the American Rescue Plan Act—the pandemic relief bill that Congress passed and President Biden signed into law last year—which, among other things, provides funding to create and expand OST programs. As a part of the law, 20% of the funds given to school districts and 5% of education funds received at the state level are set aside to address learning loss through evidence-based interventions, such as summer learning or summer enrichment, extended day, comprehensive

afterschool programs, or extended school year programs.

Much of that funding has already made it to schools and OST programs. As a result, more districts and community partners are joining forces to give parents, students, and schools what they want and need: a safe place for students to accelerate their learning while socializing with peers, experiencing enrichment, gaining life skills, connecting with additional community resources, forming relationships with caring adults, and discovering and following their passions.

Appropriately, the specifics vary from community to community. Some cities, such as New Orleans, offer career exposure, paid work experience, and credentialing. Some districts have planned for full days of summer learning with teacher-led tutoring in the mornings and enrichment through community partnerships in the afternoon. Some districts have created brand new afterschool programs with federal funding, while others have expanded existing programs and partnerships. For example, a district in Delaware is using relief funds for a "coordinated response" by partnering with Boys & Girls Clubs, United Ways, and their Latin American Community Center, among others. Such efforts aren't rocket science, except when they are—the city of Boston used some of its relief funds to host a free summer rocketry program for girls.

As summer approaches, we can turn toward programs that offer in-person opportunities for learning, reengagement, social connectedness, and enrichment. In summer programs, students and OST providers can look forward to science through

The partnerships created or expanded because of the pandemic should absolutely live on.

animal husbandry, math through boating, English through SLAM poetry, and so much more. In short, a summer of learning that feels like fun.

## Looking to the Future

Even as they work to create or expand OST programs with American Rescue Plan funding, school leaders are well advised to contemplate how to sustain this essential programming when pandemic funding expires. One crucial step will be to gather hard data before and after participation in OST programs on children's academic progress, in-school behavior, attendance, and more, to lay the foundation for funding down the road—from local businesses and philanthropies or via local, state, or federal funding streams. In addition to quantitative data, individual success stories can powerfully illustrate how OST programs touch the lives of children and families, and they are well worth capturing for upcoming funding proposals.

Soon the COVID-relief funding will be exhausted. But the partnerships created or expanded because of the pandemic should absolutely live on. We must work together to ensure that they continue to serve children, families, and communities for years to come. ▰

*Jodi Grant is the executive director and Erik Peterson is the senor vice president of policy at the Afterschool Alliance. Learn more at afterschoolalliance.org.*

# VIEWPOINT

## Why Self-Care for School Leaders Is More Important Than Ever

KAREN RITTER **|** Principal

If I hadn't engaged in the self-care practices that I've been following for the last 15 years I've been a school leader, I wouldn't still be in the profession. To do the job and not completely stress out, I simply can't do without them.

I became principal of Niles West High School in Skokie, IL, during the 2019–20 school year, so I don't know what this job is like outside of the pandemic. But I do know that I've increased my focus on self-care and deepened my practice around a lot of things. Just as we start to think things are getting better, something major—like a new variant—comes along. There's this ebb and flow, like life is improving and then it's not. The uncertainty of everything just increases the stress.

For my school leader colleagues, I want to share some of the things I do to reduce stress and to feel better prepared to tackle the challenges of being a principal.

- Number one is meditation. I meditate every night before I go to bed, and then to supplement that, I do it in the morning, too. I use an app called Insight Timer, and I can see that I have a streak of 556 consecutive days of meditating right now.
- Proper breathing is also important to minimize stress. One thing I did at school was hire a breathing coach to do some staff development for our teachers so they could learn breathing strategies to reduce stress. Teachers can then teach this breath work to their students. I also

## The uncertainty of everything just increases the stress.

do yoga, which involves breathing exercises as well.
- Getting enough sleep is a must. Even though I often work into the evenings to catch up with everything, I make sure I go to bed early enough to get at least seven hours of sleep.
- Every morning, I write in my journal to clear my mind and to focus. I also keep a gratitude journal. Every night, I write three good things that happened that day.
- Limiting technology use also helps. As principals, many of us are responsible for what happens in a school, no matter when, and we are expected to be available 24/7. I have limited technology by removing social media apps from my phone, having set times to respond to emails, and scheduling time to read educational blogs or watch webinars. I have turned off all notifications on my phone besides calls and text messages so I can check my phone when I have time, instead of checking it every time there's a notification.
- For my family—my husband and my two kids—I schedule one weekend getaway per month. We do road trips within about a four-hour drive. It's been nice to see something new, drive with my family, play some games in the car, and spend time away with each other.

### Promoting Self-Care at School

Self-care is important for all the staff in our school, and I have promoted it in various ways. When we first pivoted to remote learning, I proposed that my staff take a page from French culture. In France, work email on weekends and evenings is limited by law so people can disengage and disconnect. When you're working from home, it can feel like you're working around the clock, and you're constantly at your computer. I wanted to change that and give everyone their time back.

I've always told my teachers that it's important to practice self-care, but what if they don't know what to do? I felt it was important to teach some of it in school and model it. If I just say "self-care," some may wonder "What does that even mean?"

One thing I learned from teachers is that they needed permission to be a little bit more flexible. I don't expect them to teach by the book and bell-to-bell like they used to. It's a different time, and we have different priorities. If that means not assigning homework every night or changing lessons so as not to bring home a ton of work, then that's OK. Some of them needed to hear that.

> **Part of self-care is being kind and compassionate to yourself.**

Of course, this year has been especially hard on students. When people don't feel safe because of the pandemic and they're worried and stressed out, they start to feel unsafe in other ways. We have a lot of kids saying they don't have a strong sense of belonging, partly because they didn't attend school in person last year. When we first returned to the building, we had some kids who were anxious. We've been focusing on their social and emotional learning and making sure they know we care. The priority now is to get to know them and build strong relationships, which hopefully will build a strong school culture.

I don't think anyone would disagree that this school year has been the hardest one we've ever experienced. Being a principal is always stressful, but these self-care practices have served me well, not just in stressful times but calm times as well. While I'm unsure what to expect for the next school year, I'm definitely optimistic and hopeful that it will be a calm one.

## Seeing the Bigger Picture

One thing we've realized is that our school systems need to change. Inequities and injustices have always existed in our schools, but they have been amplified during the pandemic. Now that we recognize that, what are we going to do about it? As leaders, it's natural that we want to solve problems, but many—like racism and vast economic inequality—aren't ones we can easily solve.

Self-care starts with self-awareness. With meditation, journaling, and the other practices I follow, I aim to try to remove emotion from how I think about a lot of things that impact schools. I want to have the perspective of an outsider looking in, because if you're too emotionally involved, it's hard to see the bigger picture and get a different perspective.

Sometimes, especially when I think of this past year, it's easy to worry about failure as a school leader. However, we all have small successes that we can celebrate, and it's important to remind yourself of that. It's about practicing gratitude, thinking positively, and then motivating others.

Part of self-care is being kind and compassionate to yourself, too. But I think that's something that many of us, and especially principals and assistant principals, neglect. We're so focused on taking care of others and showing them compassion that

**Inequities and injustices have always existed in our schools, but they have been amplified during the pandemic. Now that we recognize that, what are we going to do about it?**

we don't practice enough self-compassion and self-kindness.

With the end of the school year approaching, I'm looking forward to some time off. Our administration team spent last summer planning for how we were going to return to school in a time of COVID-19, with masks and social distancing. And even our teachers, who have most of the summer off, have had to face something different and uncertain at the beginning of the last two school years as far as how they teach. I'm hoping that next school year they can come back and feel a greater sense of control.

I'm looking forward to real time away and disconnecting from work this summer. I didn't have a chance to do that last year. When we all return to school, I hope that we can practice more kindness, positivity, and care for ourselves. The more we do, the less stressed we will be. ◢

*Karen Ritter, EdD, is the principal of Niles West High School in Skokie, IL.*

# FIT TO LEAD

## Network Offers Support in the Wake of Gun Violence at School

DAN GURSKY | Writer

It's the club no one wants to belong to. But for those who have become part of the Principal Recovery Network (PRN) following a shooting at their school, the group has provided invaluable support and resources during a time of stress and trauma that only school leaders who have experienced it can understand.

Since it was launched in 2019, the PRN has primarily focused on reaching out to principals whose schools are torn apart by gun violence. The network offers them support and guidance based on members' experiences. While the group, which currently numbers about two dozen active members, has met virtually during the pandemic, it was finally able to meet in person in Washington, D.C., in March in conjunction with the NASSP Advocacy Conference. Even though PRN members gathered to conduct business—primarily working on "The Guide to Recovery," a concise resource document for other leaders who experience gun violence in their schools—it's clear they share a strong bond that others can't fully understand, including their own family members.

"It's even hard to explain to my wife why the group is so helpful," says Greg Johnson, the principal of West Liberty-Salem High School in Salem, OH. "It's almost cathartic to me to sit with all these people and to be able to share my story and see heads nodding. Not like, 'Oh, that's interesting,' but to see people say, 'Yeah, I know what you're talking about, I've been there.'"

### Nothing Is Normal Afterward

Elizabeth Brown, the principal of Forest High School in Ocala, FL, recalls that she was "absolutely floundering" after taking over as principal shortly after a shooting there. "It seemed like every step that I would take, half the people would be pleased and half of them would be displeased. There was just a lot of drama. I joined the group to learn from others. When I called Greg, I said 'I don't really belong in this group,' but I desperately needed to hear from others because I felt like I wasn't serving my students well in that moment. And he said, 'Of course you belong in this group.'" Johnson and Brown are now friends and the network's co-facilitators.

Neither Johnson's nor Brown's school had fatalities in their shootings, but it's become clear that survivors share the same trauma, and the aftermath is similar. "Tragedy is tragedy, and we're all dealing with this," says Frank DeAngelis, former principal of Columbine High School in Littleton, CO. DeAngelis was principal there during the mass shooting in 1999, and he's still active in the PRN in retirement. "That's where our help comes, in the aftermath of it. Because you're not going to wake up some morning and everything's going to be back to normal. That's why we reach out."

In the chaos immediately following a shooting, many people try to contact the principal, and not all have good intentions. As a result, a voicemail from a PRN member might go unreturned. DeAngelis has wide name recognition so he's sometimes able to make contact and put the principal of a school where a shooting has occurred in touch with someone who might not have all the answers but has experienced something similar. Or a few days later, the principal might read an email that includes a copy of "The Guide to Recovery" and pick up some much-needed advice.

"One principal I talked to said the guide is the most useful tool she received," says Brown. "She has it in a folder on her desk, and she pretty much picks it up daily to look at and think, 'What did they all do in this situation, what did they do in that situation?' It also has all of our contact information in it. I know the attitude of this group is: Call me night or day. We've got time to talk to you. We get it."

### Helping Educators Find the Help They Need

Even though the term is not widely loved, "self-care" is something the group spends considerable time discussing. Johnson uses an analogy from law enforcement. "If an officer is involved in a shooting, they're required to go through debriefing and counseling. That doesn't happen in education. It doesn't happen to the administrators. It doesn't happen to the teachers. You're just told to be ready. Kids are coming back tomorrow or two days later or in a month or a year, but eventually kids are coming back. I think it's very easy for the adults to say, 'I'm going to worry about me later, I'm going to worry about kids now.'"

Kathleen Gombos, who took over at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, CT, after the principal was murdered along with students and staff in the 2012 shooting, says that's a common initial reaction to questions about how educators are taking care of themselves: Staff say there's not enough time in the day to think about anything but their class full of kids. "The minute I got to Sandy Hook, my first thought was the kids, and getting the school back on track. But once I got there I realized, 'Wow! This is going to be as much about adults as it is about children for a very long time.' It turned out that admitting they couldn't come back after the tragedy was probably the most courageous thing some teachers did."

So naturally, self-care advice is included in "The Guide to Recovery." A collection of practical thoughts in about five bulleted pages, the guide provides concise information to help school leaders in the immediate aftermath, and the next day, and the day after that, simply get through the crisis, Brown says. She adds that the group has been working on the guide, which will continue to be revised, since their first meeting in 2019 through a series of very raw and open discussions.

Johnson recalls that after there was a suicide in his building earlier this school year, someone sent him a 40-page guide for how to deal with such a tragedy. "I read it for five minutes. That was too overwhelming. We're trying to make sure our guide is not overwhelming. It's short enough, but it hits some of the major things, and it gets some wheels turning."

### Advocating for What Students Need

In addition to hands-on support for principals, the PRN advocates in a nonpartisan manner for ways to prevent future incidents, such as expanded mental health and counseling services in schools. "It seems like we naturally spend a lot of time on the reactive side of the conversation," Johnson says, "but we recognize that the much more powerful arm of it is to be proactive and to meet with legislators. Because of what we've been through, we are heard. It gets us in the door, and we do have a voice."

In the 23 years since Columbine, DeAngelis believes a lot has changed related to school safety, and that many things that the PRN and others have advocated for have indeed prevented more tragedies. "We can't become helpless and hopeless," he says. "I think that's what this group represents."

None of the PRN members expect an end to school shootings anytime soon. But they remain optimistic about helping principals and schools cope if something does happen. "A school shooting impacts the community and has more ripples than people realize," Johnson says. "I pray that no community will experience that, but if they do, whether it's the Principal Recovery Network or another avenue, I hope that principals in the future don't feel like they're alone in dealing with it. That was the feeling I had. And it was overwhelming."

*Dan Gursky is a freelance education writer and editor based in Washington, D.C.*

# ROUNDTABLE:
# COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Finding shared ownership in schools

Jessica Beattie, assistant principal, Holliston Middle School

Jen Halter, principal, Clay High School

Amy Skirvin, principal, Waldport Middle and High School

**T**eamwork. Cooperation. Joint effort. We know these are important concepts in education, but in the wake of the pandemic that has forced us apart, what concrete steps can we take to engage in collaborative leadership to improve our schools? To find out, we contacted Jessica Beattie, the 2021 Massachusetts Assistant Principal of the Year and assistant principal of Holliston Middle School in Holliston, MA; Jen Halter, the 2021 Florida Principal of the Year who leads Clay High School in Clay County, FL; and Amy Skirvin, the 2021 Oregon Principal of the Year who leads Waldport Middle and High School in Waldport, OR. *Principal Leadership* senior editor Christine Savicky moderated the discussion.

# COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP



**What does "collaborative leadership within education" mean to you?**

**Skirvin:** Collaborative leadership within education means that the school culture involves all stakeholders when necessary to make decisions that directly affect students. This could be academics, school culture, community, social-emotional well-being, past traditions, new things you're starting, any change—it's really getting the input from all your stakeholders so that you can make a collaborative decision and go from there.

**Halter:** I feel like all voices of stakeholders need to be heard, especially in major decisions that affect the school, and that's how I approach things. It's making sure I have a parent volunteer organization, that I've made a student advisory council here at the school. I make sure that I meet with my leadership team, with my teachers; I give surveys a lot, so using the survey data

when I'm looking at making different decisions for the school and the community. Unless it's an immediate safety concern, school leaders don't really make decisions on their own.

**Beattie:** I think that including all stakeholders—community members, parents, families, students, and staff—is vital to running a school. Oftentimes, we have certain people that we might lean on more than others, so I've really tried hard in my leadership role to get some of either our new staff or our younger staff to use their voice because I think that is equally as powerful in driving the mission and the philosophy and protocols through the building.

**How does a collaborative leadership model benefit teachers and students?**

**Halter:** A collaborative leadership model benefits teachers and students in that they have a voice and a choice in what's going on at school. They're just

as important as the leader of the school. It helps them not only to share their view of what's going on, but also to listen to the views of others, and to listen to what the students are thinking. And they also feel like a choice or decision is not being done *to* them—they are part of the decision-making process. I remember being a teacher and wanting to be part of the decision-making. I wanted to just be in the room to understand what decisions were being made for the school and why they were being made. I wanted to voice my concerns from a teacher's standpoint. As a school leader, I love having students tell me what they're thinking; it's a different lens. We don't see our students' day-to-day lives unless we're walking in their shoes, so it's important to understand where they are coming from while we're making decisions.

**Beattie:** One of the things we often talk about in our building is collective efficacy and really getting our

staff and our students to know that they need to be part of making the school great. I believe we all are in this profession for very similar reasons and that collaborative leadership—involving teachers in that process and giving them a voice—allows me to know what's happening on the front line. I tell my teachers and our paraprofessionals, "You're the front line. You're in it." I can't be everywhere, so getting the faculty's input is paramount to the school's success. And then when we add that student voice in, it helps me create the whole picture.

**Skirvin:** I would add that collaborative leadership also builds ownership and trust. We talk a lot about how we're a family here, and having that buy-in. I think of simple things. For example, this year we dispensed of the bell system. We thought it was a good idea, but the students started talking about how they wanted bells, so they wrote letters. The teachers then talked about it, and I took it over to our PBIS Tier 1 committee. They had ownership of the whole process. We have also had some issues with vandalizing the bathrooms. So, the teachers met together about having escorts to go to the bathrooms. When a decision is made and someone feels that they have been a part of that

"Collaborative leadership during the pandemic has allowed us to feel connected to each other and to help share what the school community's needs are."
—Jen Halter

decision-making, that they have a say, then they work together to make the change and make it successful.

**How have you, as a school leader, collaborated with teachers and students to create instructional models that engage and empower students?**

**Beattie:** What came to mind when I thought about this question was pre-pandemic—which feels so long ago. Our staff, students, and administration team came up with "Personal. Local. Global."—PLG—for our school. It was something that we could easily remember and helped guide our mission of where we wanted our building to go. We wanted kids to feel like they were connected to the things they were learning, both personally and then on a local level, and then what we can do globally to help the world. That was something we came up with collaboratively. Then, we embedded project-based learning into that as something we really thought was beneficial for kids to keep them

engaged in learning. It really knocked the doors off our building. We did lots of amazing things and a lot of team-building and problem-solving together. We created activities for the community. Engaging all stakeholders to come up with this motto has really taken us in a great direction.

Shifting to where we are now, students have recently voiced concerns around biases and social justice and topics of that nature. Like Amy was talking about, vandalism in the bathrooms, we thought, "How do we address this on a larger scale?" If we look at it through our PLG lens, how can we connect with it personally and in our community? Our school leaders and faculty have worked really hard to create lessons that are viewed through the lens of students first to see what they think and then all of our staff. We stop what we are doing in the individual classrooms and our whole staff implements those lessons. Every child gets that lesson in the same ways around racism or antisemitism, empathy, those types of things. It has worked really well.

# COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP



**Skirvin:** I think about the instructional model that we've been working on since last January. It's based on findings and protocols from the Center for Educational Leadership from the University of Washington. All the administrators at Lincoln County School District have been going through this training around instructional practices and strategies and how to help teachers evolve their own practices. We started with observing ourselves teach online. I'd have teachers record their Zoom sessions and then reflect. That evolved into small groups of two or three teachers watching each other and giving feedback. Then, this year, when we came back full time in person, my

assistant principal and I went with each teacher to observe two or three other teachers and then identified different strategies being used in the classroom. They could be behavioral strategies; it could be academic; it could be strategies that pertained directly to whatever it was that they wanted to focus on for their own instruction.

We've also moved from a teacher-directed classroom to two-way communication between teacher and students. Students are feeling empowered to have communications with our teachers based on these reflections and feedback that the teachers are giving each other. Now we're seeing the transition to

student-to-student [communication], so it's more student-driven instruction and learning versus teacher-directed instruction. Our next step now is to create, as a staff—again, that collaborative leadership piece—a student vision so that we have a model. What is our students' vision for learning? How do students learn?

In addition to that, one of my teachers has taken on proficiency-based teaching and learning on her own, and now she's teaching the other faculty members how to do that. So, now I have this buy-in from teachers who understand that it's about what the students know, not when they know it, but how you're going to help them

get there. One of my teachers said it best: "I always knew who was an A kid or a B kid or a C kid, but I couldn't really tell you why they were considered an A, B, or C other than their scores on tests. But now I can actually tell you what standards they've met, what they're proficient at, and what they need help with." It's really changed our process and our thoughts regarding the education of our students.

**Halter:** I love the professional learning community (PLC) model of looking at what kids know and what they need to know. How do we know if they know it? What do we do if they don't? We use PLCs here, where the teachers collaborate. They meet weekly and look at common assessments, how students are doing, and share best practices. Administrators are all included in those meetings. An administrator works with each group of teachers.

The other thing we do is that we collaborate with the students on their own success. When they get a test back, what is it telling them? What do they need to keep working on? What did they do well? So, we do goal setting here. Teachers do goal setting for themselves and their students, and

> "I think it's good as administrators and teachers that you're showing the kids that it's OK to fail, and you learn from that, and you keep going."
> —Amy Skirvin

students set their own goals. Each quarter, the teachers meet with their students to reflect. They ask them questions: How are you doing? How are your grades? What do you need to do? Are you working toward your goals? Did you accomplish them? Do you need to make new goals? It's really important that we model that goal setting for our kids, along with talking to them and collaborating with them. Was the goal too high? Was it too low? What do we need to do? So, we conduct a lot of data chats and counseling with students.

We also do social-emotional learning time at our school. It's dedicated every day, and once a week they fill out a survey that goes to their guidance counselor and school counselor. This check-in allows the adults to know how the students are doing, if they need some supports, if our school counselors need to meet with the

students, and if they need some help whether it's academic or social-emotional help. *(Editor's note: For more on goal setting, see the article on page 48 of this issue.)*

**What's a piece of advice that you would give another school leader regarding collaborative leadership?**

**Skirvin:** "Be vulnerable." It's OK to admit fault and that you don't know. You want your staff and students to feel that you haven't already made a decision, that you're actually seeking their input, and you value their input. And then you have to support the decision that they make. Even if you don't necessarily agree with it, they have to be able to trust you. And it's OK to fail. I think it's good as administrators and teachers that you're showing the kids that it's OK to fail, and you learn from that, and you keep going.

# COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

**Halter:** Along the same lines of what Amy said, your idea may not be the best one. Listen to other people. We have lots of great ideas when we're just by ourselves, but then you must listen to each other because you'll come up with something better as a group.

**Beattie:** I've never been that proponent of top-down management and believe I have always been a true team player. We don't necessarily have the best ideas; we're not out there in every classroom and knowing exactly what the best move is. So, let's use our collaborative teams to help drive those decisions. And if they don't work, they don't work, and we change our course. That's something I always say to staff: Take the risk. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work, but I would never fault anyone for trying something that's best for the kids.

How has collaborative leadership helped during the pandemic?

**Halter:** Collaborative leadership during the pandemic has allowed us to feel connected to each other and to help share what the school community's needs are. It helps, especially when you involve parents. They feel heard, and

"During the pandemic, collaborative leadership helped because the entire school community trusted us because we have always been such an open and collaborative team, whether that's just in our building or with our families."
—Jessica Beattie

they feel supported because the needs of one group may not be the needs of another. It's helped to see what we need to work on as a group and really helped widen the lens of serving the whole community and where all of our kids and families are.

**Beattie:** During the pandemic, collaborative leadership helped because the entire school community trusted us because we have always been such an open and collaborative team, whether that's just in our building or with our families. We've been pretty transparent, and that's the leadership team that we run. They trusted us, so every time we had to pivot or change or say, "We've got this, we promise you …" they trusted us, and they did. Our staff trusted that we knew they were working their tails off and doing the best for kids, always.

**Skirvin:** I would definitely agree with Jessica—having that trust already made things a lot smoother. Running the school through the pandemic was still rocky, but, as I've said, I hope as educators that we take what we have learned from the pandemic and use it to enhance our learning and instruction and not just go back to the way it was pre-pandemic. We have all learned a lot through this process, as Jen said, with connecting with each other, and that trust is huge.

I led a fireside chat with parents based off the *Distance Learning Playbook for Parents* by Rosalind Wiseman, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and John Hattie. I did a book study with the teachers, and then I did a book study with parents. I sat in front of my fireplace at home and had Zoom on. What's funny about it is, we're from a really small town. People would talk

about the fireside chat at the supermarket even if they never even attended, but they knew it was happening, and they knew they could join us if they wanted to. So, just having that two-way communication is huge. Parents just want to know what's going on, and they want to trust you. And if they do, it's much easier to communicate.

**Is there anyone left to collaborate with, or has everyone become so focused on their own agenda that they aren't necessarily willing to work for the common good?**

**Beattie:** We're in an interesting place in education where people are tired and frustrated, and they just want to get back to where we were. I continue to have open conversations with staff and meet them where they are. Certainly, I think I tend to lean on some of our more veteran teachers to be the leaders and collaborators, and the pandemic has forced us all to really open up and include more voices, and include different types of staff, students, and families so that we do have new, fresh ideas. Sometimes we just get to a place where we think, "I have nothing else to give." But we're all in this for a very

similar reason, and when we all put our heads together, we all want to make good change. We all want to see kids be successful. So, I do feel like while people are tired, there's still opportunity for new ideas and new growth through collaborative leadership, which is what we're looking for.

**Skirvin:** I have to give a shout-out to my teaching staff and my support staff here at Waldport Middle and High School. I truly believe I have the best. They completely support each other and then ultimately support the students. The district office has been really good about understanding our social-emotional needs. We're still moving forward—don't get me wrong—with education and what we call "pushing the rock up the hill." We're still doing that, but they understand that it's different times now, and they've allowed that grace, which has been huge.

I think the group we're having trouble collaborating with is our state Department of Education. We need to really understand what's really happening in the buildings, and not just listen to the loudest cries out there. We invite them to come in and collaborate with our building administrators, meet our kids,

and see what's happening. That is the piece that I feel that I don't have. I don't have that collaboration at the state level, and that would be something I would like to see.

**Halter:** I just came back from advocating at the state level for the last couple days. I feel like, even though people have agendas, that it is focused on all levels, including the state level, that we want our students to be successful and we're trying to find ways to—even though we are still in a pandemic—move forward. Our state department has been very open with us coming together, voicing our concerns, and sharing what's going on in the schools. We have seen our state department in the schools, too. They do a lot of visits. They have also reached out and said, "Come sit on this panel. Come do this work, come write these standards. What's going on? What do our kids need?" And I really value that. I believe that maybe we do have our own agendas but that we're all focused on the same thing—it's just sometimes we go about it in different ways. As long as we reach out to each other and continue to collaborate, collectively we'll move in the right direction.

# ADDRESSING
# THE EFFECTS
## OF THE
# PANDEMIC
## ON EDUCATORS

## Tap into a multi-tiered school-community approach

OLGA ACOSTA PRICE | Associate Professor
BETH TUCKWILLER | Associate Professor
JENNIFER CLAYTON | Associate Professor
HARRIET FOX | Visiting Faculty
RACHEL SADLON | Associate Director
SHRUTHI SHREE NAGARAJAN | Graduate Research Assistant

The enduring pandemic has put a spotlight on the interdependence between physical and mental health and learning. Although we are rightfully alarmed about the detrimental effects of COVID-19 on student and family outcomes, as well as the disproportionate impact of this public health crisis on communities of color, the pandemic's physical and emotional toll on teachers and school leaders has recently become a focus of discussion. Concentrating on the "whole educator" is justified given the longstanding difficulties with teacher retention, workforce diversity, and the breadth of preprofessional training that existed pre-pandemic and has been exacerbated since. Palpable stressors related to increased COVID-19 exposure, demands around intermittent remote learning, and adjusting to ever-changing school health mandates have caused heightened worry and frustration among many education leaders.

Despite many competing priorities to maintain school health and safety, a 2022–23 return-to-school plan will be incomplete without specific provisions to amplify teacher well-being. "Teacher well-being" is a nebulous term, but a review of the literature, as well as our own research with K–12 educators, indicates that a diverse group of factors affect teacher well-being: an interaction between an individual's sense of meaning/purpose, efficacy, resilience, and school-level contextual factors including cultures of care, responsive and supportive leadership, and respect for teachers as autonomous professionals.

Common approaches to supporting teacher well-being have concentrated on changes to teacher knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors around self-care practices and preventing burnout. Yet, a singular focus on individual change underestimates the role that social and environmental factors play in driving individual behaviors. It also places the responsibility squarely on the teacher to reduce stress and manage contributing factors existing outside of their control. Alternatively, school leaders can leverage systemic organizational practices to encourage positive individual choices and bolster their effects.

In "Sustaining a Sense of Success: The Protective Role of Teacher Working Conditions During the COVID-19 Pandemic," a study involving 7,841 teachers across 206 schools and nine states, researchers report that strong communication, targeted training, meaningful collaboration, fair expectations, and authentic recognition were essential to teachers' definitions of supportive working conditions. Unfortunately, guidance on how to create this sense of support and promote a comprehensive teacher wellness strategy is scant, increasing the probability of an ineffective piecemeal approach.

A wellness strategy that accentuates health-promoting environments requires deliberate ways to mitigate a diverse set of teacher-related stressors, many of which school leaders may be unable to easily discern. Using a common organizational framework to address the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of students, much like a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS)

framework, can make ambitious goals for comprehensive teacher well-being achievable.
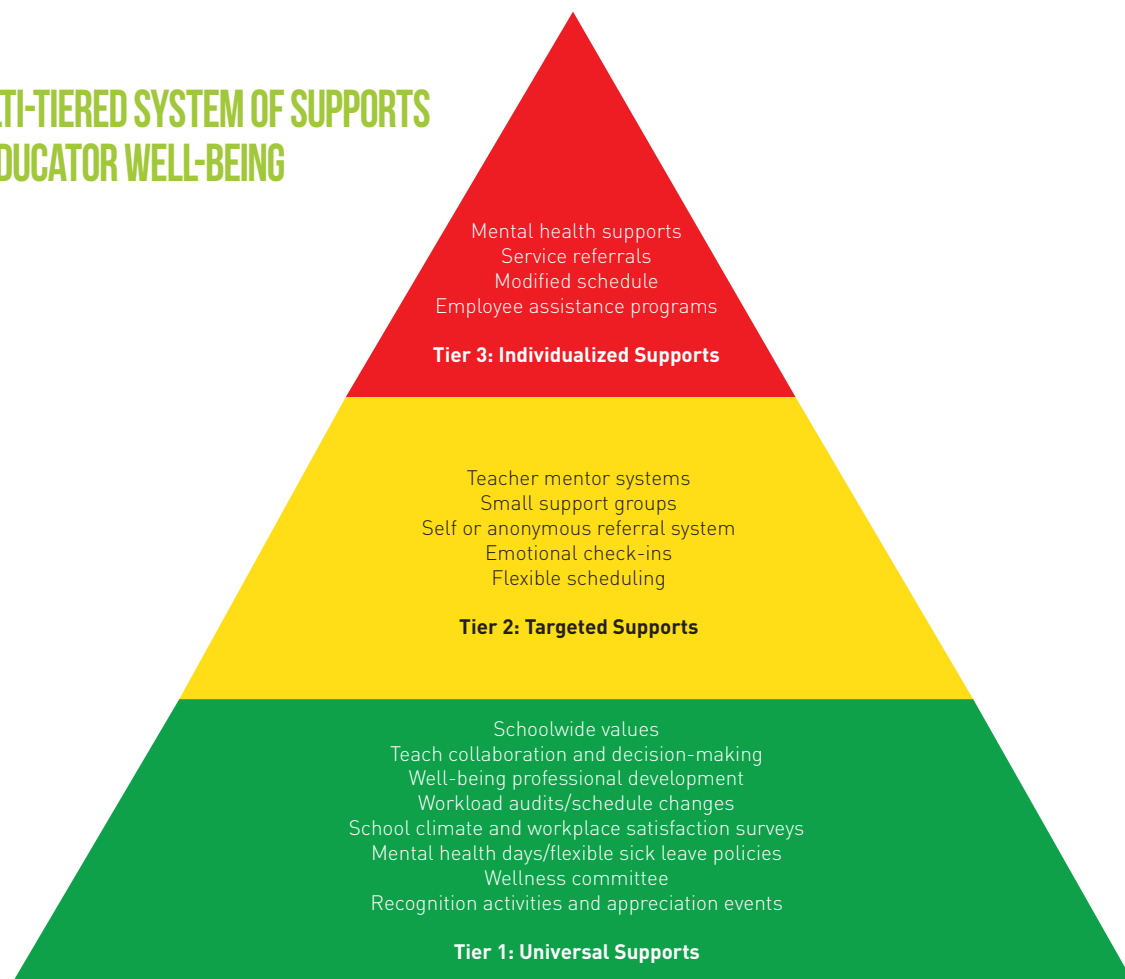
Providing a continuum of supports reflects teachers' varied needs throughout the different phases of the pandemic. For example, in our study conducted during the fall and winter of the 2020–21 school year, some teachers indicated a low need for supplemental assistance. Some stated, "I do think [during the COVID-19 pandemic] that our staff has really excelled at working together, being resourceful, helping each other, and dividing and sharing the workload." Others reported being highly stressed and overwhelmed, signaling the need for more aid from their leaders and school community with statements such as, "Since COVID-19, I am exhausted, angry, and wishing I had chosen a different profession," and "It is demoralizing when educators feel the weight of endless demands and feel unsupported by those they ought to be able to rely on."

## Applying an MTSS Framework

MTSS employs a proactive and data-driven approach for implementing interventions that foster the conditions for teaching and learning to occur. Although traditionally used to assist struggling students, this approach can also facilitate adult well-being and inform the array of interventions to serve all, some, or a few of the members of a school community. The three tiers of the MTSS framework and key questions that school leaders and teachers can jointly explore to tailor interventions to each school's unique context include:

**Tier 1,** also considered universal supports, involves activities designed to enable healthy development, resilience, and relationship-building across the school

# A MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS FOR EDUCATOR WELL-BEING

Mental health supports
Service referrals
Modified schedule
Employee assistance programs

**Tier 3: Individualized Supports**

Teacher mentor systems
Small support groups
Self or anonymous referral system
Emotional check-ins
Flexible scheduling

**Tier 2: Targeted Supports**

Schoolwide values
Teach collaboration and decision-making
Well-being professional development
Workload audits/schedule changes
School climate and workplace satisfaction surveys
Mental health days/flexible sick leave policies
Wellness committee
Recognition activities and appreciation events

**Tier 1: Universal Supports**

to build connectedness and positive coping, especially when the level of risk is unidentified. Questions to consider:

- What should be made available for all teachers as they navigate a stressful year, regardless of visible signs of stress or known challenges?
- What activities can we promote that reflect our schoolwide values for creating a safe, nurturing, and engaging environment as we transition to a new year?

**Tier 2,** targeted interventions sometimes delivered in small groups, are for those who have been reliably identified as having emerging challenges or mild to moderate symptoms that interfere with daily functioning. Questions to consider:

- What methods and channels are available to teachers to identify themselves or a colleague for whom they are concerned?
- What challenges are best addressed by bringing together those with similar struggles?

**Tier 3,** or intensive supports, are for educators with significant challenges who have not benefited sufficiently from Tier 1 or 2 supports and need more intensive, individualized interventions. The aim is to reduce the severity or frequency of their challenges and treat troubling symptoms. Questions to consider:

- What resources can be made available for teachers who manifest more severe challenges in their return to school or who are experiencing an acute crisis?
- How can intensive interventions be confidentially delivered and reliably accessed by those who need them?

## Strategically Reducing the Impact of the Pandemic

By drawing on the resources available in and out of the school, a successful post-pandemic recovery plan can be executed. The summer is an ideal time for school leaders to consider their four Ps: the people, programs, practices, and policies in their school community.

**People:** The people affiliated with school possess skills and expertise that can be used in the execution of a teacher well-being approach. Educators and administrators, health professionals, community partners, parents, volunteers, and students can all contribute to the development of a comprehensive teacher wellness strategy.

**Programs:** Schools offer programs that reinforce life skills, develop competence, promote healthy development, and teach positive coping. These programs that advance physical,

behavioral, and emotional health—and are typically directed to students and their families—can be adapted for teachers.

**Practices:** A school's culture is defined by the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes of the members of the school, along with the behaviors shaped by those values and beliefs. It is important to establish schoolwide expectations and norms about wellness. And these expectations should inform school protocols and plans.

**Policies:** Health and education-related policies articulate what can and should happen in schools and establish the structures to implement effective wellness-related programs and practices.

## Overlaying MTSS and the 4 Ps

Many people can help cultivate a restorative environment in a post-COVID educational setting. Examples of the people, programs, practices, and policies delivered across multiple intervention levels and available to all teachers in the school are outlined in the figure on page 31.

**Tier 1: Universal supports available to all teachers and staff**
- Explicitly state and continually promote school values about health and well-being, positive relationships, and collegial support.
- Recognize individual strengths and competencies among teachers and facilitate opportunities for them to showcase personal and professional assets.
- Develop a school wellness team/committee that incorporates discussion of teacher wellness activities and gaps.
- Conduct schoolwide mindfulness moments or one-minute breathing exercises.
- Regularly assess (e.g., through surveys, focus groups, individual check-ins, etc.) teacher needs and solicit input on desirable well-being strategies.

- Champion the inclusion of mental health days or flexible sick leave policies.

**Tier 2: Targeted supports for teachers and staff with emerging or less-intense needs**
- Institute a teacher buddy system, linking newer teachers with veteran teachers or those with mastery in one area (e.g., classroom management) with those seeking guidance in that area.
- Offer support groups directed by teachers' interests and needs, especially for those from marginalized groups, to safely discuss and address discriminatory practices or microaggressions experienced in the workplace.
- Conduct emotional check-ins at meetings to identify individual and/or group struggles.
- Create and disseminate protocols for referring oneself or a colleague when concerns arise.

**Tier 3: Intensive supports for teachers and staff with more acute or severe needs**
- Organize on-site therapeutic services for teachers.
- Communicate the importance of help-seeking and the value of reducing stigma around behavioral health treatment.
- Execute formal agreements with community partners to refer teachers experiencing mental illness symptoms.

The expectation is not that school leaders be solely responsible for the design, implementation, evaluation, refinement, and sustainability of a comprehensive teacher wellness strategy. Rather, school leaders can invite multi-disciplinary school-connected partners, and their respective networks and resources, to actively collaborate and jointly implement this goal.

## Unique Needs of BIPOC Educators

All teachers have operated under extraordinarily difficult circumstances, but the added stress of identifying as a Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) educator during the last two years is significant. The cumulative traumas associated with the pandemic, racialized violence, and other forms of systemic oppression and discrimination require a safe space for validating, processing, and problem-solving these experiences.

In their report, "If You Listen, We Will Stay: Why Teachers of Color Leave and How to Disrupt Teacher Turnover," Davis Dixon, Ashley Griffin, and Mark Teoh highlight the significant damage caused by workplace environments that leave teachers of color feeling invisible and devalued, and they outline steps that schools, districts, and state agencies can employ to successfully retain them. Similarly, researchers Deirdre Johnson Burel, Felicia Owo-Grant, and Michael Tapscott share firsthand perspectives of BIPOC education leaders in their article, "Real Talk: Teaching and Leading While BIPOC," and urge school and district leaders to take heed of BIPOC educators' needs while also recognizing the unique strengths of teachers and leaders of color in improving conditions for teaching and learning during times of adversity.

Teacher well-being is a critical component of any successful school-based health initiative, as school leaders help their schools navigate through the ongoing pandemic and into a future that is vulnerable to continued COVID-related challenges. A comprehensive strategy to support teacher wellness that accounts for the influence of both individual and school-level factors can create a safety net for all teachers.

The most successful comprehensive plans for teacher well-being will be those based on an MTSS approach. Such an approach

> The most successful comprehensive plans for teacher well-being will be those based on an MTSS approach.

enables school leaders to reinforce individual choices for self-care by institutionalizing system-level interventions and by collaborating with school-community partners to benefit all adults in the building.

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# Create a community of support right on your phone

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**W**e live in a deeply polarized time with conflicting information and even more conflicting perspectives on how to address crises, both real and manufactured. Schools, as microcosms of society, feel this pressure as much—or possibly even more than—other institutions charged with maintaining social balance. The most obvious case-in-point is the COVID-19 pandemic. K–12 school leaders have been responsible for making quick judgments about the safety of their school community and navigating the larger social and political consequences of each decision. As the expression goes, the weight of the crown is heavy, and in moments like these, the loneliness of school leadership becomes even more pronounced. Albeit a drastic example, COVID-19 is emblematic of unique, fast-moving issues that school leaders will continue to face. Their ability to make supportive, knowledgeable, and trust-based decisions at a moment's notice is not only critical but essential.

# TROUBLESHOOTING EMERGENT ISSUES

Making sound decisions when faced with acute difficulties or significant crises becomes more manageable with a support system to help generate coping strategies. Leadership support systems have historically existed in the form of trusted phone-a-friends, district and state meetings with colleagues, and professional conferences. However, the speed and consequences of many emerging issues—a byproduct of a technologically interconnected society—can create short timelines for developing and implementing workable solutions without the luxury of extended inquiry. For instance:

- A parent calls and demands to meet with the high school principal to talk about a video her son shared with her. The video shows a school bathroom being vandalized, which was prompted by a TikTok dare. Before the principal has a chance to schedule the meeting, another

parent sends an email with a similar video clip, and a custodian has just reported more destruction in another bathroom.

- Two parents show up in the office of an elementary school demanding to meet with the principal. They are upset about both of their sons being bullied for wearing masks during lunch. According to the parents, their children had their masks ripped off, were accused of being "liberal sissies," and coughed on.
- A middle school student takes a video of her math teacher talking with the class about how preferred pronouns are unnecessary and

confusing. And even though the principal has asked all faculty to be respectful, this teacher has no intention of trying to remember the preferred pronouns for her students. A parent has uploaded the video to a popular social media app and comments are blowing up before the principal even hears about it.

These examples touch on aspects of traditional school discipline—vandalism, bullying, inappropriate recording—and historically, school leaders would process these types of incidents by calling trusted colleagues or waiting to break down their decisions at a future professional gathering. However, the
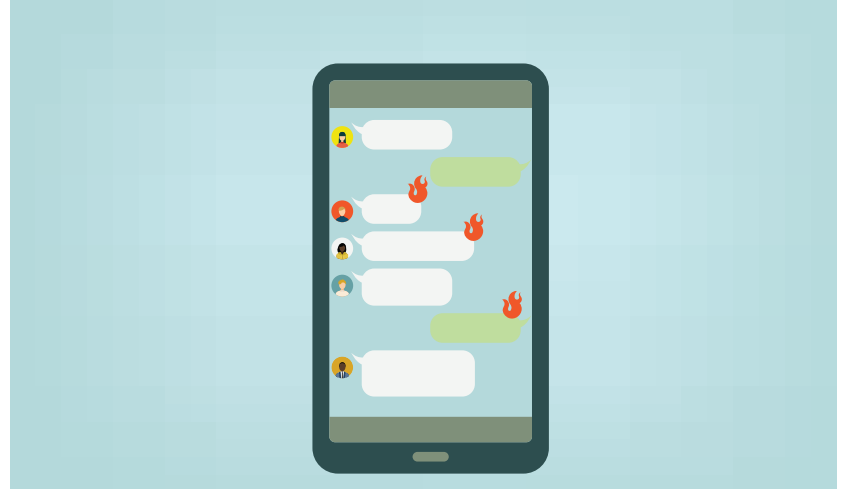
examples above also highlight the "new immediacy" of problems in a technologically interconnected society. Unlike in the past, families and community members may now go public with their displeasure on districtwide discussion forums; students can simply grab their phones and unleash a barrage of discontent on a handful of apps; or someone miles away with no association to the school can write one anonymous post affecting the entire community.

Such actions can leave even the most seasoned of school leaders feeling lost and frustrated; they underscore the need for school leaders to seek different levels of support and relevant resources for providing nimble, responsive, and targeted solutions in short order. The ability to quickly reach several trusted colleagues with diverse experiences and perspectives could make the difference between an astute resolution or full-blown crisis that can manifest in a matter of hours. Unsurprisingly, solutions to these decision-making quagmires may lie in the same fast-moving technologies that amplify such challenges in the first place.

Everyday instant messaging apps on one's phone or device can offer multiple practical solutions that meet the needs of the moment, address more than one issue at a time, allow for quick responses, and provide safety and trust where colleagues can speak openly.

Variations of online communities have been a part of the internet almost from its beginning but were initially reserved for those with the knowledge and capacity to create shared, topic-driven online forums like blogs and discussion groups, and who could sustain an active community over time. However, new user-friendly apps have opened and extended online communities to larger populations of potential users. Social media apps, web-based platforms, and texting are salient examples of users' abilities to engage peers with shared interests online anytime and anywhere. With this technology in mind, we outline a process for school leaders to establish communities of support through everyday instant messaging apps on their phone or device. We also provide a step-by-step guide to create and maintain these ongoing communities of practice to help school leaders handle fast-moving and unexpected issues in their schools.

## Creating Communities of Support for School Leaders

### Step 1: Find others with similar professional backgrounds.

The first step is to find school leaders with similar experiences and interests—a crucial aspect of community success since the earliest days of the internet. Connecting with other leaders at professional learning seminars and

from nearby school districts is a good place to begin. Invite others from similar districts and across elementary, middle, and high schools to create communities with a common understanding of emergent issues and to build solutions to vexing problems on the fly. Approaching colleagues to mobilize collectively can sow seeds for a productive online support community to discuss controversial topics affecting schools, such as mask mandates.

After an initial cohort is committed, these individuals should invite other trusted professionals who would be strong contributors to and beneficiaries of the community's shared knowledge base. Adding new members will allow the group to gain momentum as experiences are shared, and members benefit from being part of it. This first step toward creating a shared community of practice can inform immediate decision-making. Over time, members will take a more active role by sharing perspectives, solutions, and their own professional stressors, so they can ultimately find support from others in the field.

### Step 2: Find a secure app well-suited to meet the needs of community members.

Good news! There are plenty of apps to choose from. Ease of use and access are often more important—especially for those who are new to developing online communities of practice—than more

specific functionalities like member moderation, tracking user participation, and live chat. Through a simple search, leaders can find an app that provides a high-level of flexibility in communication. Due to the potential for discussing sensitive issues, school leaders should pay special attention to privacy and security offerings when choosing an app.

Text messaging software, such as WhatsApp or Apple's iMessage, offer opportunities to send messages, GIFs, voice notes, and pictures, as well as threaded comments in closed communities with advanced encryption technology. Applications that only allow new members to join if they are sent an invitation provide another layer of protection for honest, open discussion. It is important to note that accessibility from a school building due to firewalls should also be considered when selecting a suitable app.

**Step 3: Set guidelines for your community.**
Remember, you can have the best intentions and find the best

It is important to understand how simple problems can instantly become complex, and very public, in the information age.

technology, but in the end, the most important aspect of a well-functioning community is how participants treat each other and trust one another. Simply stated, the human component is critical. A single dust-up or miscommunication can damage a community irrevocably if left unresolved. Every community needs a set of guidelines to stay on track. For instance, moderators can establish rules and members should agree on overall expectations when engaging in difficult discussions.

It takes time and effort to align user-friendly apps with appropriate guidelines that help communities function at a high level. In our work, leaders have suggested that sending a text was their preferred mode of communication, rather than posting to a private forum. In these texting

groups, guidelines would only be known to the first participants unless reminders are sent, and moderation of individual comments is more unwieldy, but, as stated above, ease of use is key. Regardless of the app selected, maintenance of community standards relies on underlying respect, empathy, and trust. To that end, we suggest four basic principles to guide every member's online behavior:

1. Be clear in your responses.
2. Be respectful with word choice.
3. Be open to varied or diverse responses.
4. Be supportive of each other.

**Step 4: Share your own experiences and build upon the experiences of others.**
Once members are committed, an app has been selected, and guidelines

of participation have been established, you are ready to engage as a community of support. Individuals from varied backgrounds and school settings are now positioned to come together to share their experiences and learn from each other. As interactions begin, members will gradually feel secure enough to share their own concerns and solutions, and even be vulnerable enough to admit mistakes without judgment.

For example, one principal might be dealing in real time with the consequences of a TikTok dare. A second principal who never heard of TikTok offers a solution based on a similar situation involving another app, and a third principal warns that these issues might initially seem insignificant but can easily become more complicated. It is important to understand how simple problems can instantly become complex, and very public, in the information age. Finding alternative solutions by sharing knowledge and experience with the (few) people who understand their meaning in the context of a school day can be invaluable. These communities not only help in meeting immediate and future needs, but can be seen as emerging, shared social spaces. This sharing of information and shared problem solving can also be archived so that it is available to a wider population of school leaders around the country to learn from as well.

## Final Thoughts

Our work in this area suggests that seasoned school leaders are not yet comfortable with the full range of technology that exists to help them resolve emergent, controversial issues. Apps with more advanced functionalities do not appeal to many experienced leaders for a variety of reasons—accessibility, comfort with use, confidentiality—and given the sensitive nature of most issues, they prefer to process them in person or on the phone with trusted individuals. This is in stark contrast to younger, relatively inexperienced educators, who are more eager to use online apps but are not yet in a leadership position to implement such communities of practice in their schools.

Regardless of their views on technology as a means to build communities of support, school leaders believe trust, efficacy, and motivation can develop slowly and incrementally in an online community of practice and that all these aspects take time to establish. They understand that such a community will not emerge all at once and will require patience and targeted strategies for sustaining its intent. Through everyday instant messaging apps, communities of support lie at the heart of professional learning and can position school leaders as fast and agile responders to the ever-changing educational landscape.

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# RACHEL'S CHALLENGE

## How acts of kindness and self-awareness can promote an inclusive environment

PATRICK CONRAD | Dean of Students
ATTIE FREY | Friends of Rachel Club Mentor

D eveloping a positive school environment in the middle grades is definitely challenging. At Landisville Middle School (LMS) in Landisville, PA, we are committed to providing a positive school culture through student-led initiatives. We have developed a comprehensive program that is integrated around our four core values: being safe, responsible, respectful, and engaged. These values are intertwined with our SEL program, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and they are steeped in our friendly hallway team competitions with events such as food and clothing drives. In addition, we have incorporated the nationally recognized program Rachel's Challenge (rachelschallenge.org).

Created by Darrell Scott, the father of a student killed during the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, Rachel's Challenge seeks to make a positive impact on students' lives in honor of Rachel, Columbine's first victim. The program provides schools a centralized resource to develop a caring, positive environment. There are digital resources, videos, speaker presentations, literature, and lesson plans for various topics, such as informed decision-making and understanding empathy. The program promotes kindness, empathy, and—integrated with our SEL lessons and PBIS program—provides a clear and consistent message reiterating our four core values.

## Building Positivity

Like other schools, we have our daily challenges: student conflicts, bullying, and students not meeting our expectations. However, through Rachel's Challenge, we empower students to be involved in the process of developing a positive environment. While there are many great national programs that promote kindness, anti-bullying, compassion, and empathy, we chose Rachel's Challenge because we felt it brought a powerful message with substantial resources to help us deliver programming to the students. We continue to use it because the program relates directly to the outcomes that we are working toward, such as developing acts of kindness, self-awareness, and promoting an inclusive environment. It is not perfect. It is not a panacea for all school climate issues, but it does provide us with a centralized message that we have integrated into our other initiatives. It empowers students to take ownership of their school experience.

We believe that Rachel's Challenge enables our students to grow and develop within the framework of our core values, thus emboldening students

**Through Rachel's Challenge, we empower students to help us develop a positive environment.**

to take action throughout the school year through our Friends of Rachel Club (FOR Club). After our annual Rachel's Challenge assembly at the beginning of the school year, students jump at the opportunity to join this club. The assembly includes an emotional and heartfelt presentation that delivers an impactful message of kindness and compassion. As a result, each year, we have an average of around 50 FOR Club members with representation from each homeroom in our school, which enrolls a total of 520 students. Club members share the vision of promoting kindness and compassion surrounding the four core values.

From the beginning of the school year, FOR Club members are trained in various leadership skills by staff using resources from the organization and others that we have developed on our own. Once per six-day cycle, they meet during our end-of-day Flex period. The leadership skills they learn include executive function skills such as planning and organization, peer-mediation resources based on effective communication techniques and general habits of successful leaders. Using these skills, FOR Club members work on student-initiated projects that promote their common vision.

Again, there are other organizations and programs that serve as a platform to effectively promote a common message. You could even create your own platform around your school's specific values and desired message. However, we've found success combining our school's four core values (being safe, responsible, respectful,

and engaged) with the five tenets of Rachel's Challenge:

1. Speak with kindness.
2. Look for the best in others.
3. Seek positive influences.
4. Dream big.
5. Start a chain reaction of compassion and goodwill.

## How It Works

Led by a staff member, students organize into various committees, which come up with the ideas and projects as well as implement each of the following groups here at LMS:

- **Morning Message:** This group creates a weekly slide that appears on TVs throughout our hallways. The slide typically contains a picture and inspirational quote or message that corresponds with a short video from "Pass It On" from the Foundation for a Better Life. These can be found online and were a part of the original resources from Rachel's Challenge. The video plays just prior to our morning televised announcements and serves as a cue that the announcements are about to start.

  The committee also posts weekly general topics of discussion for teachers to use for building rapport with students. Themes, such as favorite sports teams or times when the students were most scared, allow everyone in the homeroom to relate on a more personal level. FOR Club members in each homeroom have been trained during the early leadership phase to help teachers lead these discussions. This provides student

leadership and engagement while also building relationships between staff and students.

- **Positive Messages:** This committee creates posters or one-line words of encouragement that are posted on students' lockers and in the hallways and restrooms. They also make cards or small crafts that are given to various members of the school community, including bus drivers, front office staff, counselors, teachers, cafeteria staff, and custodians to recognize their efforts. This committee's main goal is to promote a positive culture demonstrating gratitude and kindness toward everyone.

- **Student Lounge:** The students created this group on their own to make a social space for all students in our cafeteria lobby. They measured the space, researched information on engaging lounges, and presented their plan. They received approval from the administration and have applied for a grant through our local education foundation. More importantly, as middle school students, they have learned the process of researching, planning, and communicating to reach their goal. These are leadership lessons that will serve them well moving forward.

- **Social Media:** These students work behind the scenes to recognize all students with a positive message on our FOR Club Instagram account. They promote the posts

during morning announcements and with a slide on our hallway TVs. Members of FOR Club know who these students are, but for the most part, the rest of the student population does not until the recognition is posted. The other students see only a positive message about a student from the FOR Club account. A diverse array of students is honored across all friend groups and grades, and individual students are thrilled when they are mentioned. To minimize repeats, the committee is provided a list of student names so they can chart everyone they have mentioned on social media. Again, this serves as another method of promoting a positive culture for students.

- **Rachel's Closet:** We have devoted some space for a makeshift clothing exchange. The clothes and accessories are all donated by community members and free to students who want them. Over the years, we have acquired clothing racks, hangers, mannequins, and shelving units to display the items from various local department stores. Every day students can come to Rachel's Closet during their Flex period and browse for clothes. Students on this committee organize, sort, market, and oversee the closet. They also take charge of marketing and promoting its purpose.

- **Student FORum:** These students promote the actions of all the committees and the overall message of Rachel's Challenge, including our school's four core values, through a one-hour, school-wide assembly. They write out a script for the presenters, interview students and teachers, create short videos to explain Rachel's Challenge, and include other videos that promote the program's message. The group integrates technology, engages students, and feels empowered to deliver their compelling ideas and positivity. These students are also learning valuable lessons in leadership development. I view this committee as one of the strongest in helping students assume ownership of their school. It has been rewarding to see the students take pride in their work in presenting to the entire school and reinforcing our school's positive and hopeful message.

Landisville Middle School has taken a comprehensive approach to creating a positive school environment that incorporates many facets, including PBIS, SEL lessons, and Rachel's Challenge. Integrating them with our school's four core values (being safe, responsible, respectful, and engaged) has resulted in a positive culture for all. 

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# LEADING
## A DATA-DRIVEN
# SCHOOL

## Analyze your numbers with the ABC Success Metric Tool

MARCK ABRAHAM **|** MEA Consulting Services

'we collaborated with numerous school leaders around the country, and they all want the same thing: high student engagement, high student success, and high graduation rates. Additionally, I would say 99% of the schools that I have visited all struggle with the same thing: knowing their data. To me, as a leadership coach and former secondary school principal, this seems very counterintuitive—to have schools call me and know where they want to go but not where they have been or where they are now. The first step to increasing student performance is that school leaders must understand their data. This article examines the data sets and systems that school leaders should be examining over the summer to set their schools up for a successful 2022–23 school year.
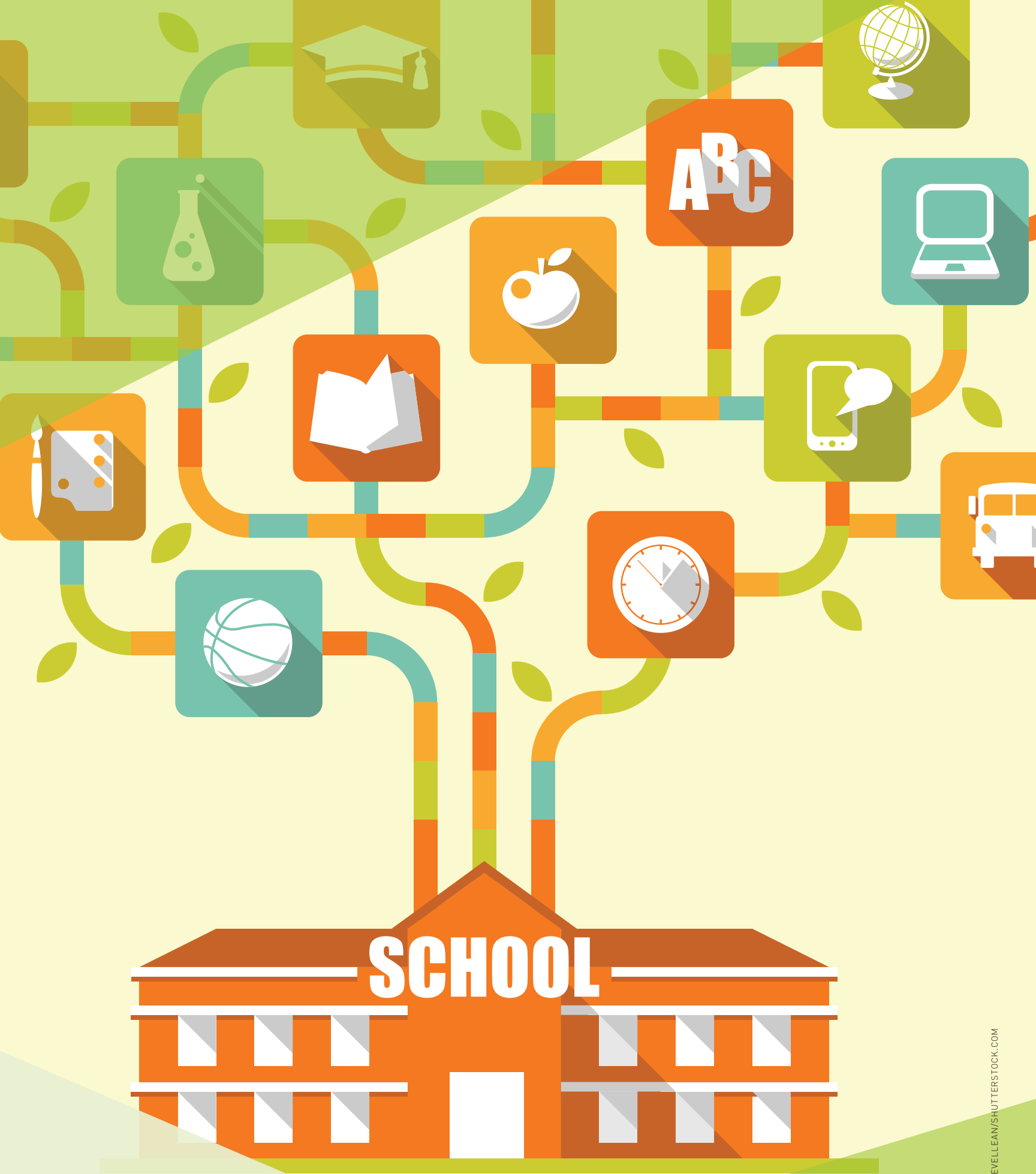
My first question when working with a new school is, "What's your data?" The answer is often, "This is my graduation rate." Most secondary school leaders can rattle off their most recent graduation rate data in a heartbeat. Then I ask:

- What about your 5-year, 6-year, or 7-year graduation rates?
- What is the graduation rate of subgroups broken down by race and gender?
- What is your course-passing data, test score data, attendance rate data, and behavior data?

Most of the time the answer to these questions is, "Why are these data sets so important?" If we do not know where we have been, it is very difficult to know where we are going. A case in point? The common practice of an employer asking to see the resumé of someone interviewing for a job. The past is a great indicator of the future.

As a leadership coach, I would be remiss if I did not mention my awareness of the current state of education. The last two academic years for school leaders have been brutal. According to NASSP's December 2021 nationally representative survey of principals, job satisfaction among school leaders is at an ultimate low, with almost 4 out of 10 principals (38%) expecting to leave the profession in the next three years.

I believe in the power of a great, well-informed school leader—and that if they are supported, they will keep serving their schools. My job is to help educators with the necessary skills to continue the work they are doing. By understanding your data, I guarantee your school will be better positioned for success next school year and for years to come.

## ABC Success Metric Tool

This summer, analyze your data by using the ABC Success Metric Tool. ABC stands for Attendance, Behavior, and Course-Passing Data. As you prepare for the new school year, it is imperative that you have a solid understanding in these three areas.

## Attendance

You must know your attendance data. Why? I liken it to understanding the basic concept of gravity. Sir Isaac Newton explained to us that "what goes up must come down." Although we may have a working knowledge of gravity, most of us cannot explain inertia or the law of motion that allows planes and helicopters to stay in the air. I say this because it is not enough to just have a working knowledge of our

data; we must *know* our data. We need to know our attendance data for every grade level broken down by month and week and by race and gender. Further, we should also know the attendance data of our administrative team, student support team, and faculty. Knowing the data helps us to identify trends of the school. Attendance data tell stories.

The easiest thing to do as a school leader when examining data—if it is negative—is to blame the students and teachers. The hardest thing to do is to look in the mirror and say, "What kind of culture am I creating so that students and teachers do not want to be here?" Attendance is a big indicator of a school's culture. People show up to school when they feel loved and welcomed.

As I work with school leaders across the country, I'm asked all the time, "Do you have an attendance program we can use? What is the secret for getting students to school?" My response is always the same, "Love your teachers; make them feel valued, appreciated, and that they are needed for the school, and students will, in turn, feel the same way." Why? School leaders have an impact on student achievement and increased student attendance. As leaders, if we take care of our teachers and students, success will follow. When school leaders do not examine their attendance data, it's because they either don't know how to do so, or the importance of it has never been explained to them.

## Behavior

As school leaders, we need to know everything about the behaviors in our building, both positive and negative. We need to know who our students are, whether they struggle following the school rules, or if they are the ones with the most room to grow behaviorally. When I speak to school leaders and work with them to improve their schools, I ask, "Who are your best-performing and best-behaved students within the building?" The second question is "What makes those students the best?" Most times, principals and their administrative teams can only name a handful of

their high-performing students. Then I ask specifically, "Who are the top 15 students in each grade level?" I can usually hear a pin drop because the room is so silent. On the contrary, when I ask about their students with the most room to grow behaviorally, they can give me a list a mile long. That signals that the school leaders focus more on negative behaviors than on positive ones.

Knowing the data gives the administration a balanced picture of the school. When schools are in crisis, the adults say things like "the school is out of control," or "these students' behaviors are horrendous." The words are quite sensationalized. Hearing these types of comments can throw a leader into a panic. But, when you are tracking the data, you can speak from a supportive, informed, and data-driven point of view. "No, the school is not actually out of control. Last month, we had seven nonviolent offenses that were all from boys playing around, and we had only four real fights in the last six months." As the leader of the building, you must have a pulse on what is taking place within the walls of your school.

School leaders must have strong systems and protocols for reporting and capturing behavior data. This system must be written and clearly articulated to all staff. After school leaders capture their behavior data, they must then be able to interpret it. To do so, they can use the ABC Success Metric Tool. This method is a system that assists school leaders with truly understanding the root cause of their behavior concerns and how to address them. As behavior data is captured, we disaggregate it by months and weeks, and the following questions are asked to provide clarity to the school leaders:

- How many write-ups were submitted this week?
- What areas had concerns?
- Who was the adult who generated the write-up?
- What was the gender and race of the student?
- What was the consequence?

Knowing this data allows you to understand the biggest issues within your building and can help to support initiatives that will move the school forward. If bullying does not show up in your data, then it's not a problem in your school. Follow the data.

## Course-Passing Data

Creating a system within your school to track how students are performing in real time will change your school for the better—forever. As a principal coach, I ask school leaders to collect course-passing data twice a semester, once at the 5-week marking period and once at the 10-week marking period. Course-passing data is broken up into several ranges: 0–54, 55–64, 65–74, 75–84, 85–94, and 95–100. Each teacher is responsible for identifying where students fall into each category by class period. They are asked to reflect on the grades and to create an action plan for how they are going to support their struggling students. In education, we always talk about students "owning" their learning. This same concept holds true for educators. We must empower our teachers to own their data within their classrooms.

To be clear, data should not just be isolated to how students are performing in their classes alone. Under the course-passing data level, other aspects of student achievement need to be examined: state assessments, district benchmark assessments, and formative/summative assessments. When examining course-passing data, all the data sets should be examined regularly with the leadership team. Doing so will give you a clearer picture of how your school is performing and which teachers need your support.

Knowing your data is important. The 2022–23 school year will be amazing for you, your teachers, and your students because you now know how to lead a data-driven school. The hardest part of creating a successful school is setting up systems and maintaining them, but the summer is a great time to brainstorm and plan out how you will implement those data-collecting systems. And when you do, your school will thrive. ◪

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# TRANSFORM YOUR SCHOOL'S CULTURE
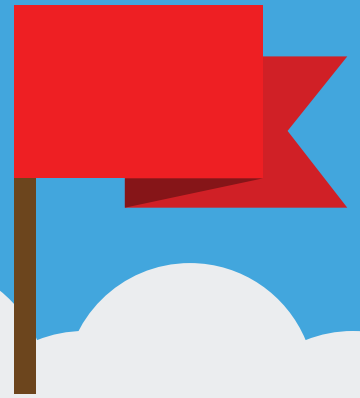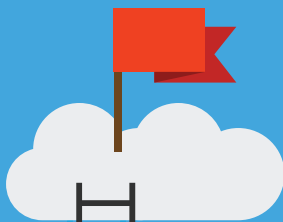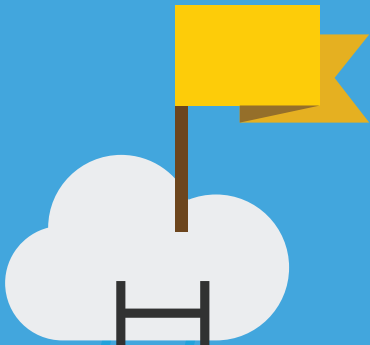
# Use student goal setting to create a new culture of learning

CHASE NORDENGREN **|** NWEA

**A**t the end of the school year when the data on student learning has been collected, it can be difficult to determine the instructional moments that lead to all those results. Inside a proficiency percentage lies the thousands of opportunities in each classroom to motivate students to grow and to provide them with the tools they need to reach their highest potential. Those moments ultimately add up to a school's culture. Giving students the chance to set learning goals that motivate them can be a powerful tool in shaping that culture.

My book, *Step Into Student Goal Setting: A Path to Growth, Motivation, and Agency*, describes how teachers can incorporate effective goal-setting practices into their existing instructional routines, using concrete examples drawn from research and from the lived experience of other educators. But teachers can't do it alone. Support from school leaders can take individual goal-setting practices and connect them to the larger academic culture where goals become a routine part of learning across grade levels. While one teacher's investment in goal setting provides for accelerated student learning in a given school year, an entire school's investment in goal setting can create lifelong habits that drive long-term gains in student achievement.

## Set Up a Goal-Setting Culture

Student goal setting—the process by which teachers and students work together to set short-term academic and social and emotional learning goals, track progress toward those goals, and continually adjust and set new goals for continued learning—is an opportunity to change the way students think about learning. When setting goals, students engage in metacognition: the process of thinking about thinking that is critical to other high-value practices such as cognitive task analysis, reflection, elaboration and organization, and evaluation and reflection. Goal setting can cultivate student interest in learning, alter students' perceptions of their own abilities, and clarify the relationship between success in academics and success in life.

As a school leader, your message about what learning is and why it's important matters greatly. Leaders that support goal setting celebrate growth in school assemblies, make time and space in the school day for students to reflect on their goals, and for school leaders to tell their own stories about how setting goals helped them achieve their ambitions. Just as important, school leaders understand the resources teachers need to enable proper goal-setting practices, and provide both the flexibility and instructional tools that teachers need to offer students individualized educational experiences. Remember, students setting individual goals won't make a difference if their teacher is still required to take each student through a one-size-fits-all daily scope and sequence.

## What Effective Goals Look Like

Effective learning goals have three main features: They are individual to the student, they are mastery-oriented, and they balance what is meaningful with what is attainable. First, effective learning goals are specific to the achievement, needs, and interests of each student. The best path from where students are to where we want them to be is inherently different for each student. That's why goals work best when students and teachers work together to set them. To do this effectively, teachers and students need access to detailed assessment information to understand where a student is and should engage in conversations about a student's motivations, interests, and available resources.

Second, effective learning goals focus on mastery rather than performance. Mastery goals call on a student to learn in order to improve at something, become a more well-rounded person, or better understand the world around them; they're intrinsic to the goal setter. On the other hand, performance goals are focused on the student appearing smarter, outperforming their peers, or pleasing an adult. Only mastery goals regularly and routinely improve student outcomes. Students focused on mastery are more likely to feel confident, take ownership of their own success, and believe they can overcome the inevitable challenges that come with difficult learning.

Finally, effective learning goals balance what is meaningful with what is attainable. Students want to achieve goals that will make a meaningful

difference in their lives—something that will help them take on a new challenge. At the same time, goals need to be attainable to prevent students from becoming discouraged and to provide a reasonable opportunity for students to succeed. These two ideas do not have to conflict with each other. If a student sets a big goal—reading a complex text or completing a large project—teachers can help connect shorter-term learning targets to the student's progress on that larger journey. These frequent connections promote the persistence students need to focus on the day-to-day activities of learning and see the value that connects those activities to what they want to achieve long term.

## Support Goal Setting Across Classrooms

As a school leader, your first responsibility to student goal-setters is making sure you communicate using mastery-oriented language and approach goals with a growth mindset. Many schools celebrate those students with top grades or those who score the highest on standardized tests. Doing so demoralizes lower-achieving students, who feel they may never make the mark, and cultivates complacency among the highest achievers, who are likely to be celebrated regardless of their effort.

Instead, consider opportunities to celebrate students who meet ambitious growth goals regardless of their starting place. Find opportunities for students to benchmark their performance against themselves, and reward students who make meaningful growth over a month or a quarter. Address deficit thinking head-on by using stories and examples that highlight how all types of

> While one teacher's investment in goal setting provides for accelerated student learning in a given school year, an entire school's investment in goal setting can create lifelong habits that drive long-term gains in student achievement.

students can and do learn. These kinds of messages help students correctly understand that their ability to learn can change and improve over time.

Second, school leaders can empower teachers by giving them the tools and the flexibility they need to apply goals to classroom instruction. Students can best set goals when their teachers provide ample opportunities for students to understand their abilities and what they know through frequent formative assessment. Goals are also more meaningful when teachers have the flexibility to differentiate instruction based on what individual students need to reach their goals. Goals flourish in environments that are rich in the kinds of curricular resources that allow teachers to provide different kinds of learning activities for students—activities they can engage in individually, in small groups, and as a whole class.

Finally, school leaders should be prepared to embrace a different model for what effective classrooms look and sound like. A classroom where all students are working toward their individual goals is one where students are working on all sorts of different activities at any one time. To a principal peeking in through the hallway door, this kind of classroom seems louder, messier, and a little

more chaotic than what they are used to. Nonetheless, these classrooms are ones where students take ownership of their learning and begin to build a different set of routines, habits, and attitudes about learning. Over time, these are the ingredients of long-term, sustainable cultural change.

## The Time to Start Is Now

Just as commitment to a learning goal requires long-term persistence and a willingness for your students to set their sights high, ensuring that goal setting is an enduring practice at your school requires similar commitment and effort from day one, and day one should be today. Use this summer to prepare for a schoolwide focus on goal setting. The potential benefits from that change are vast: Students who are more invested in their learning make more meaningful choices about how and what they learn and better understand how to get from where they are to where they want to go. These values underscore the spirit that drives all educators, and they can be made real through the implementation of a goal-setting practice. ◪

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# SYLLABUS

## LGBTQ YOUTH AND EDUCATION: POLICIES AND PRACTICES
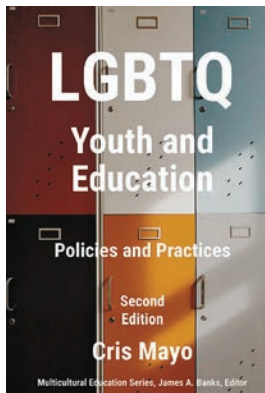
The second edition of *LGBTQ Youth and Education: Policies and Practices* (Teachers College Press) is a powerful tool for educators committed to developing the pedagogy, curriculum, and policies to improve school experiences for LGBTQ students and their allies. Author Cris Mayo, an education professor at the University of Vermont, begins his book by explaining what is at stake in terms of LGBTQ students' physical and mental health, safety, and academic outcomes. He examines how schools have long been sites for controversies over sexuality, a trend which continues today with the onslaught of anti-LGBTQ bills. Mayo also sheds light on the damaging effects of specific school-based policies, including zero-tolerance policies that have led to blanket punishment of LGBTQ students who have stood up for themselves in the wake of relentless harassment. He also documents how extracurricular clubs and programs, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), have made school safer for all students.

## FIVE PRACTICES FOR EQUITY-FOCUSED SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

*Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership* (ASCD) serves as a guide for school leaders seeking to implement the practices and policies necessary to diminish marginalization based on identity (race, language, gender, etc.) to create equitable school environments for all children. The text is written by four scholars who collaboratively process what it means to be an equity-focused leader in the light of pervasive educational inequality, a global pandemic, the 2020 presidential election, and the national reckoning on racism that followed the murder of George Floyd. Authors Sharon I. Radd, associate professor of organizational leadership at St. Catherine University; Gretchen Givens Generett, interim dean of the School of Education at Duquesne University; Mark Anthony Gooden, professor in education leadership at Teachers College, Columbia University; and George Theoharis, professor in educational leadership and inclusive elementary/early childhood education at Syracuse University, pull from their own academic research and their own diverse identities and experiences serving as school leaders and training new ones. They provide a thoughtful and accessible framework for "disruptive practices" to challenge the status quo and attain full access for all students. The book also helpfully includes a series of writing prompts for readers to reflect on previous practices and beliefs, audits and activities to assess and analyze current practices, strategies for engaging members of the school community and other stakeholders, and templates and suggestions for planning forward.

## CONFESSIONS OF A SCHOOL REFORMER

For the past six decades, Larry Cuban has been working to improve educational institutions in America—first as a teacher, then as a superintendent, and finally as a professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Education. In *Confessions of a School Reformer* (Harvard Education Press), he reflects on all that he has learned and considers how his ideas and beliefs have changed and grown over time. The book is divided into three sections based on what Cuban has identified as the dominant eras in education reform: the Progressive Era (1890–1940s), when reformers sought to remake schools as efficient places to prepare students for civic life and the workplace during industrialization, urbanization, and an influx in population; the Civil Rights Era (1950s–1970s) when civil rights legislation including Brown v. Board of Education was passed and schools were legally required to desegregate; and the Standards-Based Reform Movement (1970s–present) when there was a backlash to the prior era and society began trying to hold schools accountable for economic growth. Throughout the book, which is part memoir and part academic text, Cuban analyzes how each era shaped public schooling, and he provides insight into many of the challenges schools face today.

## "EDSURGE" PODCAST

A weekly podcast covering a wide range of issues in preK–higher education, "EdSurge" is hosted by managing editor Jeffrey R. Young, a former editor and writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. In each episode, Young engages education experts in frank conversations on unique topics—such as whether NFTs (non-fungible tokens) should play a role in education and what learning science says about improving teaching—and asks them to make informed predictions about the future of education. The experts include developmental psychologists, veteran educators, historians, and education tech creatives. Most episodes fall into one, or a combination of, the following three categories; 1) new technologies and how they shape education, such as the episode titled, "Educators Have Some Pointed Advice for Tech Companies Building the Metaverse," 2) improving systems and practices related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, like the episode titled, "Recruiting Black Men to Lead in the Classroom," and 3) revisiting the history of longtime educational practices and beliefs, such as the three-part series of episodes about talented and gifted programs titled, "The Surprising History of a Very American Idea." Unsurprisingly, many episodes explore virtual learning and COVID-19-related challenges, yet each looks ahead and considers how the past two years may shape the next era of school reform. "EdSurge" is a go-to resource for school leaders looking for nuanced analysis of what the future of schools and schooling may hold.

# LEGAL MATTERS

## Banning Library Books in Public Schools: A Legal Primer

SUZANNE E. ECKES | Professor
LAUREN K. ECKES | Student

Recent headlines report a renewed interest in the debate about what books students should have access to in school libraries and classrooms. Sometimes the books at issue include discussions about race, sexual orientation, sexual violence, or other "explicit" content. For example, take the recent governor's race in Virginia partly focused on banning certain books in schools. This debate originally stemmed from a parent in the state objecting to her son reading *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (a book that won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction) during his senior year in an AP literature course. More recently, *Maus*, a Pulitzer-Prize winning graphic novel by Art Spiegelman, was banned by a Tennessee school district due to inappropriate language and an illustration of a nude woman. Although the recent controversies encompass a wide span of topics, the Anti-Defamation League reported that in 2020, six out of the 10 most-challenged books focused on race and racism. This article highlights some of the legal issues related to banning books in public school libraries.

### What Has the U.S. Supreme Court Said About This Issue?

In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court examined a matter related to removing library books from a public school library. This case, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico, involved a school board in New York that directed the removal of certain books from the shelves of the junior high and high school libraries. The school board contended that the books at issue were "anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy." There were 11 books that were ultimately targeted, including *The Fixer* by Bernard Malamud and *Black Boy* by Richard Wright. Interestingly, the board was acting contrary

to the recommendations of a committee of parents and school staff that had examined these books. The lead plaintiff, who was acting on behalf of several other students in the school district, filed a lawsuit in a federal district court challenging the school board's plan to remove the 11 books. The school board won in the federal district court, but the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit reversed that decision. The case was then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

At the U.S. Supreme Court, the question examined was whether the board's decision to prohibit certain books from its school libraries, based on their content, violated the First Amendment's freedom of speech protections for students. In a 5–4 plurality opinion,[1] the Court decided that these books could not be banned, but it was not a clear-cut majority opinion. The Court determined that school boards do not have unlimited authority to remove books from library shelves. According to the Court, a school library is a place for students to engage in voluntary inquiry and a place where important information is disseminated. As a result, school officials are not permitted to restrict the availability of books in school libraries simply because certain officials disagree with a book's content. It is important to note that the decision in Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico was specifically focused on the school library and was not a case about classroom curricular issues.

It is also important to highlight that the Court did agree that school boards could remove books for sound educational reasons or legitimate purposes, like pervasive vulgarity or lack of educational suitability, but, in this case, the books did not fall under this category. Instead, they were removed because some school board members had simply disagreed

with the content. Although this case has been criticized for its lack of clear guidance given the various concurring opinions involved, the decision continues to be discussed as school boards are attempting to ban books from school library shelves in several areas of the country.

## What Influence Has Pico Had on Other Challenges Involving School Libraries?

Despite Pico being a narrow opinion, some lower courts have relied on it in subsequent decisions. In 1995, a federal district court ruled that a school board in Kansas violated the First Amendment rights of its students by ordering the removal of *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden from a school library in the district. This book had received numerous accolades and was chosen by the American Library Association as one of the Best of the Best books for young adults. The school district took issue with the lesbian characters in the book. Relying on the Pico case, the district court found that books may be removed for "pervasive vulgarity" or for a lack of "educational suitability," but that it is unconstitutional to remove books in order to deny students access to ideas with which school officials disagree.

Similarly, in 2003, a school library in Arkansas required parental permission to access books that related to witchcraft or encouraged disobedience. For example, students needed parental permission before reading the *Harry Potter* series. In a challenge to this policy, a federal district court found that students' First Amendment rights were violated when the school district restricted access to these books. The court reasoned that there was no evidence that would have led the board to reasonably believe that these books would have caused a disruption in school. Moreover, it was impermissible to restrict access to books based on the ideas expressed within them. Similar to the Pico decision, the court concluded that it was not within a school board's authority to prevent students from reading books that offended the personal taste of individual school board members.

Several current controversies involving this type of censorship around the country may result in more litigation. Within these debates, those who are challenging the banning of certain school library books often rely on the Pico decision.

## Key Takeaways

These decisions suggest that school boards may not remove books because of personal distaste. At the same time, a school board has the authority to remove books that are considered "pervasively vulgar" or those that "lack educational suitability." Of course, the interpretation of what may be considered pervasively vulgar, for instance, will vary; as indicated by the decisions referenced above, however, this standard may be higher than some school boards might realize. Books with content related to gay characters or slavery, for example, would not likely fall under this category. It would be helpful for school officials to have a better understanding of this area of law to avoid costly and time-consuming litigation.

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***Suzanne E. Eckes*** *is a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is also a co-author of* Principals Avoiding Lawsuits *and a past president of the Education Law Association.* ***Lauren K. Eckes*** *is a high school student in Ohio who is interested in the current national debate on book banning.*

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# FEATURE FACTS

## TROUBLESHOOTING EMERGENT ISSUES

As microcosms of society, schools are hardly immune to the pressures in a polarized world, and the pandemic has only made that fact more apparent. When challenges arise, school leaders must act quickly to ensure the health and safety of the school community and prevent the dissemination of misinformation. School leaders can do these things more easily and efficiently with a community supporting them. Here's how they can create such a community:

- Find others with similar professional backgrounds.
- Find a secure app well-suited to meet the needs of community members.
- Set guidelines for your community.
- Share your own experiences and build upon the experiences of others.

## LEADING A DATA-DRIVEN SCHOOL

Author Marck Abraham encourages all school leaders to not only know their data but understand and own their data. He suggests that they do so using his ABC Success Method, which stands for Attendance, Behavior, and Course-Passing data. "Knowing this data allows you to understand the biggest issues within your building and can help to support initiatives that will move the school forward," he writes. Abraham believes that taking time this summer to unpack this data will allow school leaders to focus on the needs of their schools and prepare for a successful new school year.
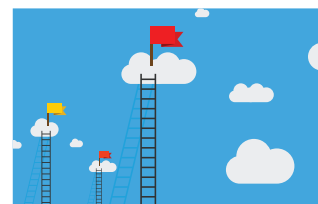
## RACHEL'S CHALLENGE

Strengthening middle school culture is no small task. That's why Landisville Middle School in Landisville, PA, uses the SEL program Rachel's Challenge to prioritize student-led initiatives. The program, created by Darrell Scott, the father of Rachel, the first student killed during the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, provides schools a centralized resource to developing a caring, positive environment and includes digital resources, videos, speaker presentations, literature, and lesson plans. Authors Patrick Conrad and Attie Frey describe the specific programs they have run thanks to Rachel's Challenge this year.

## CHANGE YOUR SCHOOL'S CULTURE

Ensuring that students have the opportunity to set learning goals that motivate them can help shape a school's culture. That's why it's important for not only teachers to help their students create goals, but for school leaders to support their teachers with goal setting. Author Chris Nordengren explains how to set up a goal-setting culture, what effective goals look like, and how to support goal setting across classrooms. "Students who are more invested in their learning make more meaningful choices about how and what they learn and better understand how to get from where they are to where they want to go."

# PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

SEPTEMBER 2021

OCTOBER 2021

NOVEMBER 2021
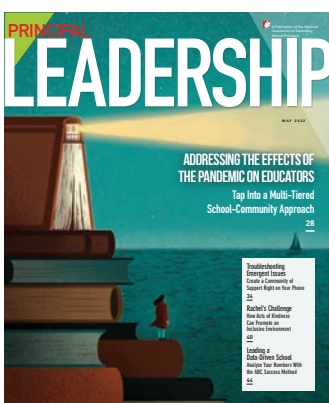
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