

# Recovering from COVID

## The Toll of Crisis Management on School District Leadership Teams

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The COVID crisis transformed the responsibilities of district leaders overnight with little warning or preparation. As the global health crisis created by COVID-19 unfolded, it changed the precarious balance that existed between a district's responsibility for academic performance and student well-being, as well as its relationship to families and the local community. Heading into the summer, district leaders are grappling with defining and delivering a new normal for their school districts. They will need an unprecedented level of investment, assistance, and time.

This article speaks specifically to the priority of investing stimulus funding at the district level to build or reinforce the capacity of leadership teams to operate in a "new normal" and to ensure the stability of district leaders and staff. It is common knowledge that district environments have become high-stress and involve complex politics with state and local leaders and stakeholder organizations. There is now a high level of senior staff turnover, which contributes to instability in school districts. The responsibilities that were thrust upon district staff during the COVID-19 crisis further exacerbate an already tenuous balance in many school districts.

During the COVID crisis, school districts provided extraordinary leadership and support to schools as they were faced with an unimaginable and extended disruption. District leaders confronted a constantly changing environment as they developed COVID response plans and then re-engineered those plans multiple times. They grappled with balancing Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and local guidelines and assessing resources to support their plans, all while balancing the needs of their school community. Operating in a state of constant crisis had an enormous impact on district leaders, not to mention the responsibility for creating a process to return to a "new normal". Instead of applauding, thanking, and rewarding district leaders for their commitment, parents, students and other stakeholders pivoted and began demanding that schools reopen, end mask policies, and explain how their children will be supported in this new environment.

There are countless conversations unfolding across school districts that redefine summer programs for students, address learning loss, continue food distribution programs, and pay heightened attention to student mental health and overall well-being. Attention is also being given to identifying support for teachers and principals who have been overwhelmed by the demands of educating students in virtual and hybrid environments or in-person while staff and students were unvaccinated. While much attention has been focused on responding to these new demands and supporting front line workers in our schools -- teachers, principals, technology, janitorial and food distribution staff -- less attention has been paid to those who labored behind the scenes: district leadership and staff.

"So many things got turned upside down. In Oregon, we had staff in the building one day last March, and within 24 hours we had to transition 40,000 students to remote learning. There were a lot of things we had to look at and say, 'All right, how do we move very, very quickly?' COVID challenged the way we think because we didn't have that time. Weeks became days, days became minutes for us, just like all of you. So we had to move very quickly."

[How two districts keep pivoting as COVID evolves](#)

*the authors suggest, support the notion that those who seek to improve schools should focus not just on teachers but also on principals and **administrators**."*

Significant and effective change does not happen overnight. **District leadership teams will be more effective in managing the dynamics of the return to the classrooms if they are equipped with the data, skills, and resources they need to navigate through unexpected and unanticipated circumstances.** We know something will happen to disrupt the applecart; we just do not know what will happen. As communities consider how to invest their Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, an important conversation that needs elevation is how to support district leaders who are recovering from decision fatigue, loss of staff and family from COVID, and personal stress from taking care of their children and family members.

A recently released memo by our friends at Education Counsel clarifies that state education agencies (SEAs) can provide more time to districts to develop plans for how they will use their stimulus funding. Instead of overextending district staff who are already charged with operating summer programs and planning for the launch of a dramatically different school year, states have the ability to allow districts to focus on funding interventions that will support the wide-ranging needs of students who will be returning to school in the fall. Once districts have maneuvered through the summer and start of the school year, leaders and staff will be in a better position to assess their long-term needs and develop credible and more effective plans for investing their remaining stimulus funding.

[Education Counsel Memo](#)

## Put the Oxygen Mask on the Pilot First

If you were on a plane that was experiencing a mechanical crisis, wouldn't you want to make sure that the pilot was the first person to put on an oxygen mask to be able to manage the crisis?

The multiple streams of stimulus funding are like oxygen for the school systems in our country. "Congress has included more than \$192 billion for K-12 schools -- roughly six times the amount of the fiscal year 2021 base federal funding -- in the three big Covid relief bills passed since last March." [Schools: What districts can do with their Covid stimulus money - CNNPolitics](#) That is an incredible amount of funding available to meet the needs of school staff, students and their families -- and to support planning for recovery.

It is equally important that school district leaders evaluate their own needs and their leadership teams to prioritize strategies that invest in the well-being and professional development of district staff. **This article asks federal, state, and local education leaders, parents, and community members to consider how ESSER funds can, and should, be invested to build the capacity of, and provide support to, district leadership teams** so that they can, first and foremost, provide the best possible services and structures in the "new normal" for students. In addition, they must also be working to develop smart sustainable plans that leverage the overall ESSER funds. It's time to face forward and look towards reimagining and rebuilding, which includes facilitating opportunities for district staff to acknowledge where they have been, the cost of being at the front-line siege, and honoring what they need to move forward in a new landscape.

District planning for a comprehensive redesign should hit the pause button on decision making until after the start of the new year when school reopenings are stabilized, and district and school leaders have been able to reflect upon successes and best practices. [Washington's State Plan](#) with its three phases provides a good example. In June (Phase 1), the state asked LEAs to submit plans for summer programming and the return to school in the fall. While it is probably too ambitious to have plans for fall finalized while we are just emerging from COVID, we applaud their recognition that districts would need time to evaluate data from the fall reopening before they could develop more comprehensive plans. Phase 2 asked districts to begin examining data in November and it is in Phase 3 where the state asked districts to develop "long-term sustained strategies for the next school year and beyond."

"When members of the public decide to put their confidence in a school system, it is not the bricks and mortar that they have in mind. They are thinking of the individuals who are making the plans, setting processes in place, and making decisions. Public relations are relationships of a public nature. In the final analysis, the human element is the only element of significance."

[\(Hughes & Hooper, 2000\)](#)

Our Nation is emerging from a crisis that has taken a significant toll and district leaders are rebuilding and establishing new systems while they are also managing a recovery process. These new systems must now shift the balance of focus to expand resources beyond academic strategies for recovery. There is a tremendous need to increase investments in supports that address the impact from COVID on student and staff well-being, and this includes district staff. In addition, district leaders must also respond to the evolving conversations that unfolded in parallel to the COVID crisis regarding culture and equity.

## How SEAs and LEAs Can Invest in Supporting Leadership and Staff

Here are some important areas for states and districts to consider investing in leadership and staff:

### Understand the Needs in the New Normal

Stimulus funds provide a rare opportunity for school districts to invest in comprehensive needs assessments to better understand the needs of their stakeholders. This includes learning more about students and their families as well as the needs of school faculty and district staff, so the district can better prepare its leadership to meet needs at all levels. When schools reopen in the fall, teachers and leaders will be challenged with addressing the immediate needs of students in terms of their academic standing, as well as their health and mental health concerns. At the same time, it will take at least a year to resume a more normal educational process. Districts can use time in the upcoming school year to design and execute a comprehensive district needs assessment that can inform planning and aid in leveraging the multiple streams of stimulus funding.

- ▶ **Redesign Needs Assessment to Extend Beyond Academics.** Needs assessments can be redesigned to provide a more holistic perspective of concerns and challenges across the district. This means moving beyond academics to include the health and well-being of students and staff; the unique cultural perspectives and experiences of students, families and faculty; and challenges related to equitable access to resources. Having a broad set of data to review in a focused needs assessment process with an objective and experienced facilitator will help district staff better plan and prepare to meet those needs.
- ▶ **Gather Data from District Staff, Not Just Schools and Communities.** As part of this assessment, districts should create mechanisms to gather data from district staff to better understand how addressing the needs in the schools and community will impact the staff who will be charged with managing these new responsibilities in a new system.

## Invest in Developing Leadership Capacity

Teachers are often required to participate in professional development. However, district-level administrators cannot, or do not, always take the time to participate in capacity building activities. And when they do, they are often interrupted with an unexpected crisis that requires their involvement. It is more critical than ever for district leaders to invest in their own support and development. In addition to grappling with a global pandemic, our Nation also witnessed the evolution of a heightened awareness of social injustice that magnified the inequities associated with how the most vulnerable populations fared during the pandemic. Issues of diversity and inclusion should be prioritized and positioned at the forefront of planning for the 2021-2022 school year and beyond. Some recommendations include:

- ▶ **Offer professional development for district leaders focused on equity.** The most authentic and intentional efforts to reduce disparities are less than likely to succeed in absence of a culture of equity. To establish a culture of equity, leaders must first recognize that disparities exist within the organization and address inequality as an injustice. While fostering a culture of equity can be challenging, it has immeasurable benefits for the sustainability of an organization. Districts can invest in a series of professional development opportunities that help leaders identify implicit bias and microaggressions so that they can begin to infuse anti-racism strategies into all recovery initiatives.
- ▶ **Participate in professional learning communities** with other district leaders and education experts to explore ideas and innovations for establishing a new normal that equitably serves students and families. Professional learning communities offer an opportunity for district leaders to come together to share challenges and successes with others who are in similar roles. The [RemoteEdx](#) exchange in Ohio is one example of a statewide system planning to offer these types of learning communities. While we recommend district leaders be convened regionally, statewide, and nationally by education service providers and foundations to facilitate district sharing of innovative ideas, practices, and solutions, district leaders can take the initiative by tapping into their networks and beginning these conversations this summer. For districts eager to begin these conversations without a formal network of support, engaging a facilitator trained in diversity and inclusion can ensure that issues of culture and race are infused throughout these conversations and inform the strategies and solutions that emerge.
- ▶ **Build relationships with experts and innovators** through professional development, online learning, or consulting agreements to build capacity in needed areas such as culture and equity, technology-based interventions, security, provision of telehealth services, crisis management, and other needs identified among your team.
- ▶ **Focus on individual development.** Encourage each member of the district leadership team to create a learning and development path for themselves. This might include attending professional development to build specific competencies, joining networks or associations, working with a coach to hone specific skills, writing, or presenting on district accomplishments, or other activities associated with leadership development. These types of activities typically require a small amount of funds relative to their potential impact. One outcome of COVID is a proliferation of online training programs that range from leadership development to cultural competencies. Encouraging and supporting staff to participate in programs like these through the summer will better prepare district staff to support the reopening of schools in the fall.

## Define a New Normal

Each district will determine its own path forward regarding how it will support and leverage the diversity of the community, utilize technology, meet students' non-academic needs, address learning loss, and transition to a new normal. To make this successful, district leaders should use time and resources to develop a plan that will work for the entire community, especially those who are under-represented and most in need of support. This includes:

- ▶ **Carve out Dedicated Planning Time:** Develop a schedule that supports planning activities not only for this summer and upcoming school year, but for the following year as well. Expect that larger transitions will take more time and build a planning team to create the 2-3 year roadmap. A cross-staff planning team is critical for larger changes and time to plan can be funded using ESSER funds.
- ▶ **Maintain Systems that Engage Staff and Community:** To retain staff and secure community buy-in, districts should maintain communications strategies that were considered temporary but proved successful during COVID. They should also continue to explore new ways to engage in collaborative decision making.
- ▶ **Redesign the System:** Identify, or develop, new structures and operating systems (such as multiple learning paths, staff continuing to work in remote settings, virtual access to community meetings, etc.) and seek to understand how this impacts district operations. Ask questions such as: What resources and support are needed to help staff adapt to these new environments? Will there be staffing changes, need for training, etc.? How will we know if they are working?

## Focus on Mental Health and Well Being

One of the greatest areas of need in the fall will be for district staff to have a deeper understanding of the complexities of identifying and supporting staff, students, and their families who are experiencing challenges to their mental health and well-being. The need for mental health support in the fall as schools reopen will not be confined to a subset of the population because COVID did not discriminate. Wrap around services tend to be prioritized for families who lack the resources to access these supports on their own. However, families with resources, who typically provide additional support for their children, could not access needed services because mental health professionals faced an unprecedented demand. Educating district staff about the nuances of mental health and the range of support strategies available, can empower district staff with the knowledge they need to develop effective programs and services for all members of the school community.

- ▶ **Invest in mental health training for District Staff.** District staff need to recognize mental health challenges in students, but also in school staff, so they can take preventative approaches and be better equipped to respond with cultural sensitivity to moments of crisis. For example, the Wilton School District in Connecticut benefited greatly during COVID from the investment they made years ago. The district offered [a three-day training program](#) to equip staff with the knowledge and skills they needed to take a proactive approach to addressing student emotions and stress. This training, delivered in 2017, provided district staff with a foundation that helped them manage the challenges they experienced during COVID. A relatively small investment that had a long-term impact.
- ▶ **Strengthen district-wide counseling and outreach services.** Increase investments in a diverse counseling staff to support district staff in managing the challenges they are confronting in their own lives as well as empower them to support the diverse needs of school staff, students, and families.
  - In the summer, district leaders or community partners can conduct outreach to district staff as well as families to better understand the mental health needs of the entire school system. This data will provide district staff with the insights needed to invest in counseling support for the upcoming school year.
  - In the upcoming school year, invest stimulus funds to expand counseling services for the entire school year. Train district and school staff to understand how to identify warning signs where individuals, staff or students, may be struggling so that preventative support can be provided before a crisis emerges. [Sandy Hook Promise](#) identified warning signs and created a short PSA to help identify when individuals may be in crisis or need help.
- ▶ **Increase collaboration between the school district and community organizations.** Use the summer to build bridges between the school district and community organizations. School staff will need a tremendous amount of support as students return to the classroom and collaborating with local community organizations can relieve some of the burden on district staff as they work to support students and families during the upcoming school year. For example, the local police can help educate staff and parents about the extent to which students engaged in social media during COVID and the dangers that exist; libraries can disseminate information on supports services that the schools are offering to families and students; and local YMCAs can offer a range of support services that school districts can leverage.

Historically, education systems have constantly struggled to invest limited resources where they can have the most impact because there simply was not sufficient funding to balance investments for immediate needs and long-term innovation and sustainability activities. In addition, the mindset that guided investments was to place resources closest to where students were located, leaving district staff with little to no resources to support their own development. The ESSER funds provide a brief moment in time that changes this dynamic. **We should not waste this opportunity.** The recommendations offered here include taking time to deeply understand the new needs, invest in leader development, improve systems, and focus on mental health to offer a way forward for district leadership teams where they are respected, valued, and well-supported.