LESSON #1: Don’t Go It Alone

New School Year Collaborations

EDITOR’S NOTE
The new school year is fast approaching, now is the time for educators to begin collaborating. In this Spotlight, learn where principals and teachers differ on what's important; gain insights on collaborative learning methods used by other educators; see how strong collaborations between educators can empower students to thrive; and evaluate how other leaders engage parents.

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New School Year Collaborations

Flexible Seating: Collaboration Catalyst or Classroom Disaster?

By Alyson Klein

Peek into the buildings in Pascack Valley Regional High School District and you’ll see diner-like booths to help with collaboration in one classroom, stadium seating in another, and in others, soft seating, including couches and bean bag chairs. The hallways are lined with bistro tables, and teachers are encouraged to take classes outside.

The northern New Jersey district, which includes two high schools, is on the leading edge of a nationwide trend that’s hard to miss if you’re an educator on Instagram or Pinterest: flexible seating.

Teachers are using their own money and scouring thrift shops for rocking chairs and mats, in order to give students a cozy alternative to desks in rows. Districts are pouring tens of thousands of dollars into revamping classrooms to get away from the traditional seating arrangements. A district in Colorado has even designed a professional-development course that helps educators make the most of their classroom spaces.

The idea behind the trend, which was partly inspired by efforts to make workplace seating more flexible for adults: to make students feel more comfortable, to create more opportunities for them to collaborate with peers, and perhaps, to get them more involved in their learning.

“It’s important for students, when they are spending hours in school, to be not just sitting behind a laptop, not just sitting in rows of desks, but getting up, moving, to increase engagement,” said Erik Gundersen, the superintendent of the Pascack Valley district. He’s such a believer in the idea that he’s spent up to $12,000 a year for the past five years helping three to four teachers annually remake their classrooms. He even conducted his doctoral dissertation research on the topic.

But other educators say the approach has led to classroom-management disasters. And some experts are skeptical that the approach is backed up by any meaningful research.

Changes to a physical environment could have an impact on students and teachers, said Dan Willingham, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. But it’s really hard to document just how much of an effect it has on student achievement or even on things like collaboration and communication, he added. That’s because there are so many factors that are likely to be more important, including the educator and his or her teaching style.

His advice to districts: Don’t shell out tens of thousands of dollars to consultants who say they can help change learning environments, which, in turn, will improve achievement.

Upsides and Downsides

Andy Calkins, the director of Next Generation Learning Challenges, which offers districts competitive grants to revamp their schools, had a similar take.

“Is there solid research that shows a direct link between different kinds of classroom set-ups and test scores,” Calkins asked. “There might be, but I couldn’t name one for you.” Instead, he said, the new types of design may be more likely to affect factors beyond traditional academics, such as student engagement.

That’s been the case for Tina Marchiano, an English teacher at Pascack Valley High School. She was among the first to take the district up on its opportunity to redo her classroom, replacing traditional desks with café tables that have white boards on top, so students can write on them. She added a couch and about 10 big, plush rolling chairs, perfect for curling up with a book. And she ditched her own desk, so that she could be “more of a woman of the people,” circulating throughout the room during lessons, she said.

She’s been teaching in this new environment for several years. And while she can’t say for sure if it’s had an impact on student achievement, it’s definitely added to a sense of classroom community.

“Kids come in and feel a sense of comfort and belonging in there,” she said. “They own the room a little bit more because it is something different.”

The biggest downside: The close quarters may be great for collaboration and classwork, but they are less optimal when it’s time to take a big, summative assessment. Marchiano said she reserves the library on test day, so her students aren’t tempted to peek at their neighbor’s paper.

Another hiccup: It can get complicated—and expensive—to get replacement parts for...
this specially-selected classroom furniture. It’s also been a challenge for teachers who may have to share a classroom. What works for one might not work for the other, Gundersen, the superintendent, said.

But Gundersen is convinced that those struggles are worth it. In fact, for his dissertation, he explored the question of whether this type of arrangement helped bolster what he calls the four Cs: collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity.

What he found after interviewing more than a dozen teachers in a suburban district outside New York City that also employs the flexible seating: The different arrangement did indeed seem to have a positive impact on communication and collaboration. But improvements to critical thinking and creativity need to be accompanied by bigger changes to curriculum and instruction.

‘Fun Environments’

Teachers of younger students are also exploring the strategy.

Michael Dunlea, who teaches a 3rd grade inclusion class in southern New Jersey’s Tabernacle Township school district, let his students design their own classroom last year. He brought in some special furniture—a rocking chair, bean bag chairs, and a couch—and let his students vote on what went where. The district provided a rug.

“My goal is to get the kids to love coming into the room,” he said. “The more you make it look like a fun environment to be, the easier it is to get them to come and be ready to learn and be less stressed because they are coming in the door with so much stress and anxiety.”

The St. Vrain Valley district, not far from Boulder, Colo., took a more formal approach: It offered teachers a course in what the district terms “neurologically sound practices and research,” including sensory integration and universal design for learning, which entails creating lessons and classroom materials that are flexible enough to accommodate different learning styles. The main purpose of the experience was to help educators rethink their use of space.

“Some kids like to stand, some kids like to sit on the floor, and giving up that control is hard sometimes for teachers,” said Emily Scott, the district’s special education coordinator, who has a deep background in occupational therapy and led the course. “You have 30 positions [for students in a classroom], you don’t necessarily have 30 seats.” Last school year, the district was able to find money in the budget—about $8,000 to $10,000—to help each participating teacher buy new furniture, including café tables, tall tables, and floor cushions. (A second cohort determined its classroom needs and then developed plans based on them.)

She spent more than $500 of her own money on recliners, a couch, a few rocking chairs, a coffee table, bean bag chairs, and a rug. “I’ll be honest, I did it because the Instagram world made me feel like it was going to make me a better teacher,” said Morris, who at the time taught language arts at Coffee Middle School in Douglas, Ga.

The students took to the new furniture right away. “I was the coolest teacher on the hallway right out the gate,” she said.

But that actually turned out to be a bad thing. Students used the looser structure to cheat. Some fell asleep on the couch during class. Students in special education who joined the class through inclusion had trouble adjusting to the lack of routine.

And then, the day before the holiday break started, a student stepped through the coffee table. “That was the last straw,” Morris said. She and her husband spent the break getting rid of the comfy seating and putting the desks in her classroom back into traditional rows.

“The rest of the year was fantastic,” she said.

Some experts say educators trying this new approach should expect it to be a bumpy ride at first.

Generally, it can take roughly six months for teachers to get comfortable with new types of learning spaces, said Wesley Imms, an associate professor at the University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education in Australia. Imms has studied the impact of innovative classroom design on schools across Australia, which has experimented more in recent years with new types of learning spaces than schools in the United States.

Imms’ survey of 1,500 Australian educators has found that new types of learning spaces—which Down Under can mean everything from flexible walls to classrooms with outdoor seating, not just changes in furniture—can help students become more creative and collaborative. There is also emerging, but still limited research, that the new kinds of spaces boost outcomes in reading and math, he said.

But just making changes to a space isn’t enough.

“These spaces by themselves don’t necessarily guarantee a different type of teaching, a different type of learning. It has to come from an educational vision,” Imms said. “But we can’t expect the space to do all the work. Because it won’t. You can put a teacher in a brand-new innovative space, and that teacher may teach the way they’ve always taught, and therefore, the kids will probably learn much the way they’ve always learned.”

That inspired an ‘HGTV’-like redesign blitz, with teachers transforming their rooms to get rid of unused bookshelves and simplify what was on the walls. Before that, in some elementary classrooms, “it was very difficult to know what to pay attention to or to keep attention on any given task, given the visual noise that was present,” said Zac Chase, St. Vrain Valley’s secondary language arts curriculum coordinator.

Teachers made sure there was a quiet space in their classrooms, where students could relax, an atmosphere that is particularly important for children who may be anxious or are experiencing trauma at home, Chase said.

At this point, the district doesn’t have data to show that the changes have had an impact on student achievement because the overhaul is too new. But there’s anecdotal evidence that some students, and teachers, are more engaged in class, Scott said.

The approach doesn’t work for everyone.

Kayse Morris, a former 8th grade teacher who recently left the classroom to serve as a consultant and coach, was inspired by Instagram to try flexible seating. But it didn’t work out the way she had hoped.

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School district unlocks new horizons for literacy and lifetime achievement with Azure Immersive Reader

June 16, 2021

Eagle Mountain-Saginaw Independent School District in Fort Worth, Texas, serves a diverse group of more than 21,000 students. The district aims to meet the learning needs of every student, including those with disabilities. With Microsoft Azure Immersive Reader, part of Azure Applied AI Services, students gain access to a powerful suite of text management tools embedded within Canvas Learning Management System and popular Microsoft software like OneNote, Microsoft Edge, and Word. By implementing Immersive Reader, the district has empowered students to read and learn in the way that works best for them, without the need for frequent teacher interventions.

Hunter Clark is a typical ninth grader in many ways—he’s an enthusiastic learner who loves science and math. He also has a passion for gymnastics and looks forward to studying robotics in college and traveling around the world. His scholastic journey hasn’t always been a smooth one, however.

“When I started learning to read in kindergarten, I had some problems,” Hunter explains.
“Words would move around on the page, and sometimes they’d suddenly disappear and then reappear somewhere else. I would lose my place and end up reading the same exact sentence over and over. It was exhausting.”

Hunter’s parents took him to a specialist for testing and discovered that he has dyslexia. His mother, Sallee Clark, is an educator, and she began searching for ways to help Hunter read more easily. “He was clearly a smart kid—he could memorize just about anything—but there was a disconnect when it came to reading printed words,” says Sallee. “We tried plastic guides and colored overlays to help him focus on individual lines, but he still often needed a teacher’s help to fully comprehend what he was reading.”

Hunter received lots of support in elementary school, where learning typically happens in small groups. But when he first moved to middle school, he often needed to raise his hand for assistance, and that sometimes made him self-conscious. He found it difficult to make and keep friends when he couldn’t always communicate clearly, which led to feelings of isolation.

Fortunately, Hunter attends Eagle Mountain-Saginaw Independent School District (EMS ISD) in Fort Worth, Texas, where his mother works, and he has gained access to educational technology that has made the reading experience much easier and more fun for him.

Ensuring accessibility and inclusion
Sallee works with fellow Instructional Technologist Jeni Long, who understands the struggle because she has a daughter with dyslexia. “I’ve always sought ways to help her overcome that challenge and develop her learning skills,” says Jeni. “It really sparked an obsession on my part to empower teachers to help every child reach their full potential and to let them know that their brains are incredible. Dyslexia just means that they think differently. It doesn’t mean there’s something wrong with them.”

Jeni and Sallee, known collectively on YouTube as “Jenelle”, have found a wonderfully supportive administration at EMS ISD, which strives to foster a culture of excellence and lifetime learning for its more than 21,000 students. The district deems it essential to ensure accessibility and inclusion in its classrooms as part of achieving that goal, and it found a valuable learning asset in Microsoft Azure Immersive Reader, part of Azure Applied AI Services.

“Seeing how our own children’s education transformed after they started using Immersive Reader drives us to spread the word about it to teachers and students both in our district and across the world,” says Jeni.

Adds Sallee, “Using Immersive Reader really is life changing for students who have struggled with reading, so we’re passionate about sharing it with everyone we can.”

![Figure 1. Screen capture from Immersive Reader showing syllable breaks, color-coded parts of speech, and the picture dictionary.](image-url)
Empowering learners to do it themselves

Through Immersive Reader, students gain access to a variety of tools for reading assistance. Students can change the font size and line spacing, display syllable breaks in words, color code parts of speech, highlight the current line, and access a picture dictionary. They can also have Immersive Reader read text aloud to them or translate it into any of 110 languages.

“Using Immersive Reader, students with cognitive differences or visual disabilities can access course content just like anyone else,” says Sallee. “What’s great is that it isn’t stigmatizing—students can easily do everything themselves, without the need to keep calling on the teacher for assistance.”

Students can access Immersive Reader from within a range of products, including Microsoft OneNote, Microsoft Teams, Word, and Microsoft Edge along with third-party solutions. Importantly for EMS ISD, Immersive Reader is now available to all students who use Canvas Learning Management System (LMS), where it is embedded in the Pages section.

“Canvas is the primary learning platform for grades 6 through 12 in our district—that’s where students do most of their work,” says Sallee. “It’s wonderful to have Immersive Reader available directly within Canvas so students don’t need to copy and paste text into a screen-reading program or other accessibility tool.”

For Hunter, using Immersive Reader has empowered him to take control of his own education and work much more independently in the classroom and at home. “I love Immersive Reader’s line focus feature because it reads to me while I follow along, and I don’t lose my place—it’s amazing,” he says. “And once you set your preferences in Immersive Reader, they stay the same when you go back to it, so you don’t have to start all over again.”

EMS ISD students in kindergarten through grade 5 use Microsoft Teams as their main learning platform, which means that all the district’s students have access to Immersive Reader. For some students and teachers, discovering the power of Immersive Reader can be an emotional experience. “We’ve seen tears after demonstrating the translation capabilities, which open up a world of learning and communication for students and teachers who were frustrated by language differences,” says Jeni.

Cindy Tucker, Director of Instructional Technology at Eagle Mountain-Saginaw Independent School District, recalls an assistant principal who was near tears in a meeting after seeing Immersive Reader demonstrated. “He had dyslexia, and we didn’t know it,” Cindy says. “It turned out he was very insecure about sending emails to his staff for fear of making mistakes, but he adopted Immersive Reader and tools like dictation and boosted his writing confidence.”

Developing with accessibility in mind from the very beginning

Instructure, the makers of Canvas LMS, keeps accessibility as a cornerstone of all the company’s work. “When we develop new products, we always start with how to make them accessible for everyone,” says Jennifer Mitchell, Senior Director of Product Marketing at Instructure. “We want everyone who uses Canvas—from emerging readers to grad students—to have a positive and inclusive experience.”

Instructure is a member of the Microsoft Partner Network and considered Immersive Reader a perfect fit. In 2020, Instructure launched an initial testing program that made Canvas one of the first learning management systems to give students access to Immersive Reader. Then in February 2021, the company made it publicly available to all students who use Canvas. Instructure immediately saw returns from the company’s work to implement Immersive Reader into Canvas LMS as institutions quickly adopted the enhancement, and the response has been terrific.
“We’ve been getting extremely positive feedback from our online community of more than a million users,” says Jennifer. “Educators are sharing stories about Immersive Reader with their peers and encouraging them to use it. That excitement is really our best measure of success.”

Instructure is researching how to expand its use of Immersive Reader beyond Canvas Pages. The company has also embarked on a strategic initiative to improve learning for students in kindergarten through grade 5, launching a new Canvas for Elementary setting in June 2021.

“We want to adapt our tools to meet the needs of those students—whether they’re learning in person, remotely, or in a hybrid scenario,” explains Jennifer. “Offering tools like Immersive Reader right in the digital hub where students learn sets them up to achieve. We want the technology to be easy to use so they can focus on learning the subject matter, not the tools.”

Going above and beyond to help students
Like many around the world, EMS ISD schools transitioned to remote learning for a time in response to COVID-19 and found Immersive Reader to be an even more valuable tool for their students and educators. “During COVID-19, a lot of the content we shared with our students was text heavy,” says Sallee. “A solid page of text can look overwhelming and scary to a child, so having access to Immersive Reader was a real lifesaver.”

EMS ISD prides itself on the dedication of its instructors, whether teaching in the classroom or managing remote learning, and its staff’s willingness to go above and beyond to meet every student where they are educationally and developmentally. With Immersive Reader, that job is significantly easier.

“Our teachers always seek to empower students and make sure that all individuals have the same learning opportunities as their peers,” says Sallee. "It's about building relationships of mutual respect and trust. With the powerful text tools in Immersive Reader, teachers show that they understand students' challenges and care about their success."

Sallee has seen Hunter make wonderful strides since he adopted Immersive Reader, and the new approach to learning is now part of everything he does. "Using Immersive Reader makes learning more efficient and easier and just more enjoyable, and that's a big deal," she says. "We love how Immersive Reader is very flexible and can help every student learn in the way that suits them best. It really sets them up for success for the rest of their lives, which is our ultimate goal."

View the story online at:

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Creating bridges among teachers may help keep high school students from slipping through the cracks.

That’s one takeaway from a new evaluation validating Building Assets, Reducing Risks, a program intended to ease students’ transition to high school. The American Institutes of Research found the program, which couples intense teacher collaboration with student social-emotional supports, significantly improved 9th graders’ academic progress and connection to school.

Under BARR, incoming freshmen are grouped into cohorts of about 30 students who take the same reading, math, and science classes together. They also receive a 30-minute lesson each week on social-emotional skills, taught on a rotating basis in a core class. Teachers meet every week for a check-in on every student in their cohort, evaluating weekly progress on both academic and social-emotional goals.

AIR randomly assigned more than 4,000 students at 11 high schools in five states to either BARR or the normal freshman class assignment. It found students who participated in the Building Assets, Reducing Risks program had higher grade point averages than students in the control group—2.58 out of 4.0 versus 2.48—and BARR students were also significantly less likely to fail a course in 9th grade:

Outside of BARR, students of color were 20 percentage points more likely than white students to fail at least one course in 9th grade, while in BARR, the gap was only 11 percentage points. There were no differences in NWEA reading or math test scores in the current study, though prior studies had found the BARR students performed slightly better than students in the control group.

Students in BARR also were more likely than those in the control group to say they had supportive relationships with teachers at their school, and they believed their teachers had higher expectations for them.

Johannes Bos, a senior vice president at AIR who led the BARR evaluation, suggested the gains were being driven by teachers working together more closely. “Looking at the implementation of BARR, it seems like the most critical distinguishing factor is the improved collaboration among teachers. “That’s where it starts,” he said, “and then from that you get better relationships between teachers and students.”

**Stronger Teacher Collaboration**

Most elementary teachers see their charges all day, making it easier to spot small problems accumulating for students. But high school teachers may see a student only once a day, or a few times a week, making sharing information critical to spotting patterns.

“High schools have just been overly departmentalized, especially these really large high schools. And as a result, you can lose the partnership element between departments,” Bos said. The study found 57 percent of BARR teachers favored working with their colleagues, compared to only 45 percent of teachers who were not in the program.

Angela Jerabek, a former 9th grade guidance counselor who founded BARR, said the program has had to add more detailed professional development for teachers after schools moved beyond basic implementation. While early training in the program focused mainly on understanding student data and the structure of team meetings, the schools that use the program have since developed a network to share problems and ideas.

“It’s really exciting to have so many different schools in so many different environments that I don’t think typically would be in the same room together, to be actively in dialogue and learning from each other,” Jerabek said.

There were no significant benefits for BARR students in chronic absenteeism, suspensions, or persistence in high school, though students in the program reported higher engagement. While the study found schools of all sizes showed improvement from implementing the program, the benefits were stronger in larger and more urban schools. Bos suggested that small schools may be more likely to have close teacher collaboration already, without the training.

AIR will look at more long-term effects of the program in an ongoing scale-up study expected in 2021.
How Kids Benefit When Principals Get a Say in Spending Federal COVID-19 Aid

By Denisa R. Superville

In the Shamong Township school district in southern New Jersey, about 30 miles from Philadelphia, a select group of elementary school students will spend part of the summer honing their reading and social-emotional skills under a white, 10 x 20 outdoor tent, not far from their homes.

They’ll read books geared toward building resiliency, and each book will be paired with an activity, including yoga focusing on balance and self-care, nature exploration, and a field trip to a local farm.

The program, which will be paid for by a part of the district’s share of the $129 billion that K-12 schools are receiving from the American Rescue Plan to help their recovery from the pandemic, is an example of what can emerge when district and school-level administrators collaborate—which is not always the case with federal funds and policies even when it’s required by law.

“We know what the needs of our teachers and students are much more than someone from the central office,” said Nicole Moore, the principal of Indian Mills School, who worked with Kerry Haines, the response-to-intervention teacher, to develop the outdoor summer outreach reading program.

“I may be the face that you see,” she said, “but I have consulted with each of the individual teachers [by asking] ‘What do you think will make this program better?’”

While Shamong’s principals had a huge role in their district’s spending decisions for the pandemic relief money, that’s different from how federal money typically gets spent by districts around the country. And the national organizations that represent principals have long argued that school leaders, who are closest to students, parents, and communities, are in the best position to inform spending and policy decisions.

Indeed, a survey from the National Association of Elementary School Principals shows that while about three-quarters of those who responded were “somewhat familiar,” “very familiar,” or “extremely familiar” with their district’s plans for the latest round of federal money, about 26 percent had not been consulted at all in the planning process.

And 60 percent said it was “extremely important” for districts to consult principals in the process, according to the survey.

Danny Carlson, the associate executive director for policy and advocacy at the NAESP, said while principals reported “decent” experiences, it was still troubling that only about a quarter said they were consulted a “great deal” or “a lot.”

“I think this question on consultation gets to the core of our concerns: If principals aren’t being consulted, district plans won’t sufficiently reflect the needs of principals and their schools,” he said.

Ronn Nozoe, the chief executive officer of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, shared a similar concern about bypassing principals.

“They know the day-to-day needs of their staff and students, they can give their states and districts detailed information about that it takes to return to the in-person environment in the fall,” Nozoe said.

Nozoe, a former principal and superintendent, doesn’t think that districts and states are deliberately sideling principals. And plans from North Dakota and Tennessee submitted to the federal Education Department show that many are listening to their school leaders, he said. But the rush to comply with deadlines can mean that principals sometimes get overlooked, he said.

That’s a deep worry for principals, according to the NAESP survey. About 65 percent told the NAESP that they worried about a one-size-fits-all approach if districts didn’t get input from school leaders.

Elizabeth Garden, principal of the Leroy E. Mayo School, a K-5 school with 500 students in Holden, Mass., about 60 miles west of Boston, worries about whether her voice would count in the end.

The district asked principals to let the central office know what their needs were, but school leaders were also told that the district would have the final say, Garden said.

Garden’s priorities include programs to address students’ social-emotional needs, mental health, and unfinished learning.

Nicole Moore, principal of Indian Mills School, in Shamong, N.J., worked with a teacher and the district superintendent to start a summer program using federal aid for COVID-19 relief.
Those programs will require additional staff—instructional coaches to work with teachers, interventionists for students, or a guidance counselor, she said.

“We are going to need more people,” she said.

For its part, the NASSP said local principals can best speak about their needs. But Nozoe said that a significant portion of the relief funds should go toward addressing social-emotional learning programs for both staff and students, equity gaps, and problems that existed before the pandemic, including teacher-shortages and shoring up the principal pipeline.

“This is a call to action for us,” Nozoe said.

“The pandemic has highlighted huge gaps in delivery and systems, in coordination, in alignment—everything. ...If there is a silver lining, this might be one of the silver linings.”

Moore knew how much her school was going to receive and the parameters for the funds.

She used that information to target specific challenges that emerged during the year.

### Addressing SEL and unfinished learning

Indian Mills will offer full-day kindergarten to current kindergarten students this summer because the program was cut to two half-days instead of five full days. About 70 percent of parents with eligible kindergartners enrolled their children in the summer program, Moore said.

“We feel like they took a hit during the pandemic because they got half of what they normally would,” Moore said.

The district also will pay for low-income students to attend summer camp at the local YMCA—something many of those students would not have had the opportunity to do.

“It’s not specifically SEL—it’s an opportunity for them to go out, and play, and enjoy nature,” while also engaging in activities like physical fitness, Moore said.

While Moore will spend the summer focusing on the youngest learners, some funds will also be used for remediation for older students during the next academic year.

The goal was to meet students in their neighborhoods, and offer them a chance to strengthen their reading and social-emotional skills in a nontraditional setting, Moore said. (About 5 percent of the school’s the 358 students qualify for free and reduced-price meals.)

The students, who were selected for the SEL-literacy program based on income, teacher recommendations, and their reading scores, live in a mobile housing community in the township.

Haines provides students a bag of grade-level-appropriate books every Tuesday, which students exchange for another bag of books on a weekly basis. (Students in the program range from incoming kindergarten to outgoing 4th grade.) And students will receive healthy snacks, including fresh fruits, while they’re in the program.

“We are hoping to level the playing field for all of our students and give these students an opportunity for some SEL and literacy-based activities that are not pencil-and-paper type activities,” she said.

Moore and her counterpart at the middle school were part of the administrative team that worked with Superintendent Christine Vespe and others in central office on how to prioritize the federal funds.

The middle school, for example, will open its library (which has been closed all year) and its maker space to students, parents, and the community during the summer.

“I always include the entire administrative team as it pertains to them, especially our principals,” Vespe said. “I feel they know the children and the needs of the children and the needs of the teachers the best.”

Moore knows that kind of collaboration between school and district administrators is not always the norm in school districts, especially in larger systems with layers of bureaucracy.

For Andre Hauser, the principal of Waterford High School in Waterford, Conn., for eight years, the process started with meetings with central office administrative team to discuss the rules and parameters for the federal funds and how the district wanted to spend the money. It continued through online collaboration, with building leaders posting their needs on shared Google Docs, Hauser said.

“IT really became a question of, of the things we were looking for, what are the things we are going to be able to afford? What can we prioritize?” Hauser said.

“I was happy with the degree of building-level administration input and the degree to which the building practitioners were being asked what we needed,” he said.

The final decisions address many of Hauser’s concerns. The district is using some of the funding to become a fully 1-to-1 computer district in the fall—to take care of a need that became glaringly apparent during the pandemic.

At the district level, school staff will be increased at the middle and high school, in part through a consultant partnership with a community health clinic that will provide physical and behavioral health services on a referral basis to the middle and high school. The federal funds will cover the start-up cost, and the district hopes the program will become self-sustaining over time, Hauser said.

The district is also adding literacy tutors in every grade, who will work with students who’ve been identified as falling behind on literacy skills. And it’s adding a math teacher for more targeted math intervention in the high school.

That will alleviate a big concern for Hauser was that the position was in danger of being eliminated. Rather than losing the position, the district will fund it with federal money until 2023.

“We really are targeting those areas that were in need of shoring up due to the pandemic,” Hauser said. “It’s purpose-focused spending.”

While some of Hauser’s priorities made the final cut, “there’s always something more that you can do for kids,” he said, adding he would have liked more counseling staff. “But I was very happy with what made it into the final version.”

Hauser cites the district’s small size as the reason for the deep school-based engagement.

“You don’t have a great deal of layers and a great deal of central office staff,” he said. “Everyone knows what everyone’s expertise is; so you’re always incorporating the building-level people in decisionmaking.”

And while size may help, “it’s got to be intentional,” Hauser said.

“The idea of a school system being a collaborative place is just part of the culture of this community,” he said.
Driving Academic Improvement by Empowering Parents

By Arianna Prothero

Central to turning around public education in Detroit—a city that has suffered from crushing debt, contracting student enrollment, and cratering student achievement—is reengaging the parents who had been largely cut out of district decision-making.

That’s the bet that Superintendent Nikolai Vitti and Assistant Superintendent of Family and Community Engagement Sharlonda Buckman have made. For Vitti and Buckman, a focus on parents is both practical and personal.

On a practical level, efforts to drive up student achievement will likely be stunted without parents, grandparents, and guardians who are engaged and working in tandem with the district toward that goal.

On the level, both Vitti and Buckman were raised in the Detroit area by mothers who struggled to make ends meet and support their children’s schooling. They are intimately familiar with what it feels like to have a school system dismiss one’s family.

“We always say that parents are partners, not the problem,” said Buckman. “We get more done and we get more right when we are working in partnership with our parents.”

Their initiatives have focused on bringing families back into the district fold by giving them a voice in how the school system goes about improving education and the resources to support their children’s schooling.

‘People could only watch from the outside’

The fortunes of Detroit’s schools have followed those of the city’s, which has been slowly hallowed out over the past half century by the collapse of the local auto industry.

Detroit’s public schools have been under some form of state control for most of the past two decades—run more recently by a frequently changing cast of emergency managers—to try to turn around the district’s finances. Even so, debt continued to balloon as enrollment fell. Student outcomes were regularly among the worst in the nation. Buildings were falling into disrepair. Teachers were leaving in droves. And an audit in 2018 found the curriculum the district was using was outdated, bloated, and unaligned to the state’s standards.

The schools were in such a poor state in 2016 that they were “irreparably damaging children’s futures,” to quote a lawsuit filed that year alleging that state officials had failed to provide Detroit school children with one of the most basic skills—the ability to read.

By Arianna Prothero

Lessons From the Leaders

- Trust Parents: Barring mental health and substance abuse issues, parents want the best for their children.
- Collaboration is Key: Our work is stronger, and our thinking is refined when we work with parents as partners.
- Be Authentic: Being authentic matters. Parents know when you are checking a box versus valuing them and their children whom they entrust to us to educate.

People had always wanted to be involved, but we had not created the platforms for people to be engaged,” said Buckman. “People could only watch from the outside when things were not going as they should.”

In 2017, the district was placed back under the control of an elected school board, although its budget remained under state oversight until last October. Vitti and Buckman also joined the district in 2017 and set to work creating avenues for parents to be engaged and weigh-in on school and district policies.

They reinstated Parent Teacher Associations in every school, which were disbanded while the district was under emergency management. Bringing PTAs back, said Vitti, gave parents an important, traditional avenue to be involved in their children’s schools.

The district also started regularly surveying families to use their feedback to shape policy. Most recently, parent surveys were instrumental in the decision to offer an in-person schooling option through most of the pandemic. The district also recruited a dozen parents this school year to serve on a special parent task force that advises district leadership on online learning.

But empowering parents is more than giving them opportunities to talk to school and district leadership, Buckman and Vitti said. It’s also helping develop parents’ abilities to support and advocate for their children’s learning—from knowing what skills their preschoolers should enter kindergarten with to what to ask during parent-teacher conferences.

To help parents develop these skills, the district has established the Parent Academy, where parents can take free classes on a range of topics, not just on supporting their children’s education, but also on parenting, more generally, and professional development.

With classes on conflict resolution in the home, monitoring social media, building credit, and learning English, the goal is to develop the whole parent, said Vitti.

“The Parent Academy has been a vehicle to empower parents and for the district and school to meet parents in a space where we are not talking about their kids in a negative or positive way,” said Vitti. “I think a lot of districts struggle with not having that space.”

TaMara Williams, who has three kids in the district, has taken classes on résumé writing, preparing her youngest for kindergarten, and even a family painting class.

“It helped me engage my high schooler with my elementary children,” she said of the painting class. “I thought that was a good program … to have a little bonding time. Those extracurriculars are good.”

Williams plans to start teaching a parent support class this spring. Like regular classes, the Parent Academy has gone online during the pandemic, with the option for participants to call into the sessions if they can’t log in.

While it’s important that the district invites parents in, whether it’s through PTAs, the Parent Academy, or other initiatives, Vitti and Buckman believe it’s equally important to take the lessons to parents. The district has invested heavily in teacher home visits during Vitti’s
and Buckman’s tenure, even expanding them during the pandemic.

“I hate the idea that parents have to come into the school and that there is a divide between school buildings and home,” said Vitti. “I think we have to do a better job of going to parents. I think that’s a sign of respect, and it limits and reduces the barriers around degrees, and language, and words.”

Sixty percent of the district’s schools are now conducting home visits, and systemwide more than 15,000 such visits were completed in the past three years.

This multipronged approach to engaging parents as part of the larger goal of improving student academic achievement is what Sonya Mays, a school board member, said she most appreciates about Vitti’s approach to his job as superintendent.

“There are a couple of approaches to problem-solving: You can get in there and fix one-off problems, or look for a systemic solution,” she said. “He is oriented around that second approach. He has really connected some of the barriers around student achievement to parent involvement.”

Personal experience informs their work

The driving force behind both Vitti’s and Buckman’s focus on families is their relationships with their own mothers—neither of whom finished high school. Both had children at a young age. They felt, at worst, judged by the school system and, at best, out of place.

Vitti, whose undiagnosed dyslexia made his early education difficult, said he remembers being appalled as a young teacher in New York overhearing his coworkers disparaging the parents of struggling students. He wondered if his teachers had talked about his mother, a single parent and hairdresser, the same way.

“I think one of the reasons why [Sharlonda and I] connect is we are such staunch, uncompromising advocates for our parents,” said Vitti. “Even in a system that sometimes looks down on our parents and doesn’t recognize their value and what they offer, I think we always go back to our own experience and say, ‘Wait a minute, you’re actually talking about my mom right now.’ That pushes us to push the system.”

Buckman and Vitti said they believe it would have made a big difference if their mothers could have attended a parent academy, had teachers visit them in their homes, and had better advocates in the school system.

“My mom right now.’ That pushes us to push the system.”

Every parent I serve, I think about my mother,” said Buckman, whose mother was devoted to her children but wasn’t involved in their schools and would have benefited from more outreach from the district.

Buckman was expelled from her Detroit high school as a young teenager for a fight that left another student injured. That infraction left zero options for continuing her education.

“You are my daughter, and I love you,” Buckman said she remembers her mother telling her as the left the expulsion hearing.

But her mother didn’t know how to advocate for her during the expulsion process or find alternative schooling, Buckman said. Today, Buckman matches parent volunteers with parents who want extra support during, say, an expulsion hearing or Individualized Education Program meeting.

After Buckman was expelled, a former teacher tracked her down and connected her with a community organization, which paid for a full-time tutor to work with her until she finished high school, Buckman said. Her life trajectory would have been very different without the intervention of those community members, she said.

“That’s why I’m in this work,” she said. “To make sure that we are supporting every parent to support their kid.”

Family engagement works, if done right

Vitti said they’re seeing early returns on the investment in parents.

While there are still long-standing hurdles to overcome, and the pandemic has only compounded them, there have been some modest improvements: chronic student absenteeism had dipped down over the prior year, enrollment has stabilized, and student scores on state math and reading assessments have ticked up.

By many indicators, parents are also becoming more engaged. Well over 2,000 parents now participate in PTAs. Around 6,000 parents take classes through the Parent Academy each year. Mays, the school board member, said she has also noticed more parents attending school board meetings.

Those positive outcomes are in line with what research has shown are benefits of parent engagement.

Including families as partners in the education system has broad, positive effects, said Karen Mapp, a senior lecturer on education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and an expert on family engagement. It can raise test scores, attendance, and graduation rates, she said, in addition to a host of nonacademic dividends, such as improving parents’ civic engagement and their own educational attainment.

“You won’t get where you want in your school goals if you omit the family engagement variable,” Mapp said.

But how schools engage families—meaningfully and respectfully versus superficial-
The pandemic has further underscored the importance of strong relationships between schools and families, said Mapp, as schools have had to rely on parents to deliver instruction.

Vitti and Buckman have leaned into the relationships they’ve built with families as the district tries to meet new challenges that have emerged because of the coronavirus and remote learning.

Buckman activated the district’s parent volunteers to launch a massive effort to track down students who had dropped off the grid during the pandemic.

Stacey Johnson was one of the volunteers. She donned her mask and a blue shirt marking her as a school district volunteer and went door-to-door, checking in on families whose children had stopped logging into their lessons. She connected those parents and students with resources, such as tech support, school counselors, and mental health hotlines, to help get them back on track.

“When people don’t just say they have a heart for the community, but put arms and legs on that, and go out into the community and check, in these critical times, where our families are, that speaks volumes to me,” Johnson said of Buckman. “That is a true leader.”

Vitti and Buckman have continued to tap parents’ feedback to improve remote learning.

When the district launched a major initiative this summer to get devices to every student who needed one for remote learning—raising $20 million from the business community to purchase internet-enabled tablets—it soon heard from parents that devices weren’t enough. Families needed tech support to go along with the devices.

In response, the school system set up 13 hubs last fall where families could take broken devices for repairs or in-person tech support, in addition to the tech support hotline it already had running. Families can also pick up winter clothes at the hubs, get help with paying bills, visit with a nurse, participate in workshops on strengthening family relationships and take home a family game night pack.

Buckman and Vitti see these supports, from check-ins, to tablets, to game night packs, as the linchpin to the district’s education reform efforts to raise academic outcomes among students.

“I focus on deposits,” said Buckman. “Because when we do the tough stuff, people will remember the deposits.”

Education Week’s 2021 Leaders To Learn From

These cutting-edge district leaders drew on the foundations they laid and a wellspring of strong relationships to meet their students’ and staffs’ needs during the COVID-19 pandemic and other challenges of the school year.

Meet the 2021 Leaders

Published on May 4, 2021

Principals and Teachers Don’t Always See Eye to Eye. Can Getting In Sync Reduce Turnover?

By Denisa R. Superville

Why do teachers teach, and what can principals and superintendents do to keep them? Ask a principal, you’ll get one answer. Ask a teacher, you’ll get another.

As K-12 education evolves during the COVID-19 pandemic, it’s becoming increasingly clear that teachers and principals have very different views of how teaching has changed and what it takes to keep teachers in the classrooms, according to a survey by EdWeek Research Center.

School and district leaders say that positive school culture, love for students, and supportive administrators are among the top three factors that keep teachers in their roles.

The answers collected from teachers, however, revealed differences in how the two groups see each other. More than 40 percent of each group said love for students keeps teachers in the profession. But many teachers also pointed to retirement benefits and love for the subjects they teach as among the top three reasons they remain in the profession.

Only 11 percent of teachers cited supportive administrators as a factor in staying, compared to 35 percent of principals who said so.

When asked what actions district and school leaders can take to keep teachers from leaving, 57 percent of teachers said raise salaries; 43 percent said slash administrative burdens, like paperwork and meetings; and 31 percent said reduce class sizes.

The majority of school and district leaders similarly said increasing salaries was of the utmost importance. And 31 percent named reducing class sizes as important to retention, the same as teachers.

But in other ways their answers differed significantly. Just 27 percent of administrators said reducing administrative burdens would help keep teachers, while a much higher percentage of teachers said this. And 33 percent said they could provide more opportunities for teachers to collaborate with colleagues to improve retention, though only 13 percent of teachers said the same.

Deborah Wallace, an English and dual-credit college psychology teacher at Beebe High School in Arkansas, is not surprised that principals and teachers are not in sync.

“I teach college psychology, and one of the things I teach is self-serving bias,” she said. “We grade ourselves better than average.”
It’s no wonder, then, that principals have outsized confidence in the areas over which they wield the most influence.

“Principals are in charge of the school’s climate, and, of course, they’re like, ‘I’m doing a good job. I have a great school climate.’ Do teachers agree? No. They [i.e., principals] are rating themselves highly on what’s their primary responsibility. A school’s climate can be vastly different for the principal than for a teacher,” Wallace said.

Though the pandemic upheaval affected both teachers and principals, school leaders are further removed than teachers from the day-to-day challenges it wrought: the daily technology hiccups, the student learning remotely who is distracted while caring for a younger sibling, or the teacher who needs more training to manage the glut of online tools.

“I think principals have lost sight over the years,” said Howard Hill, an agriculture education teacher and coach at King William High School, just northeast of Richmond, Va.

Lack of understanding, support can fuel exodus

It’s important that principals get to the root of the perception gap. If they don’t, teachers can feel misunderstood, unsupported, and unappreciated. And that can morph into a larger problem: resignations and early retirements.

Cynthia Harber, a physical education, health, and wellness teacher at Astoria Middle School in Oregon, was among those who considered early retirement when pandemic hit.

Two of her colleagues recently left: One re- signed and another retired.

But it wasn’t stress that pushed Harber, a 30-year veteran, to consider leaving. It was feeling ignored.

When schools first shut down last spring, Harber was assigned to call parents, get groceries for families in need, and record online videos for students. As planning for fall reopening got underway, specialty teachers, like Harber, were overlooked, she said. When school started, she got a projector and laptop, and pretty much had to figure out how to teach physical education and wellness online, Harber said.

“It was like we were invisible,” she said. “We had no voice. We weren’t on any committees; we weren’t in on any planning. It was heartbreaking.”

Still, Harber persisted, making weekly themed videos for students—including on topics such as coordination and upper body strength—and teaching a healthy action that they could take that week, such as eating less sugar.

“The change has been so extreme,” she said. “You really have to have a lot of self-confidence to know what you are doing. You are going to be trying new stuff that may not work. And for people like me—I’ve been doing the same thing for 30 years—here’s something new, figure it out.”

Harber believes administrators want to support teachers, but, more often than not, “we get a lot of lip service,” rather than actions.

Case in point, she said: the lack of substantial training for teachers as the district moved to remote learning.

“We get a lot of encouragement, a lot of pep talks,” she said, but not a lot of meaningful support on how to adapt to the changes and new responsibilities.

“I love my district. I work really well with the administrator,” she said. “Maybe it wasn’t anything they could’ve helped because they haven’t been in this situation before.”

For Wallace and others, the job has changed in the last year as they toggled between in-person and virtual instruction—and sometimes doing both—based on the local coronavirus infection rates.

While the curriculum has stayed the same, the workload has increased, Wallace said.

“Although Wallace’s district has been holding in-person classes since the start of the 2020-21 school year, teachers are required to record and post lessons online for each class, in part because a large number of students have had to miss school to quarantine.

As a veteran teacher, with more than three decades on the job, Wallace worries about her younger colleagues.

“I don’t know how they are coping,” she said. “I just think if I were in the beginning of my career and not the end, I would be looking for an exit ramp.”

Despite the challenges this year, Wallace plans to stick to her plan and retire in three years.

At the 90-student St. Patrick’s Academy, a Catholic school in Providence, R.I., Principal Bruce Daigle has worked to ensure that he is responding to teachers’ needs, providing training, and showing appreciation in small, meaningful ways.

Daigle still makes time to walk the halls of the 9th to 12th grade school, where 94 percent of the students are Hispanic or Black and 20 percent are first-generation Americans. The small staff makes it easy for him to respond to concerns as they pop up, said Ashley Proulx, who took on additional responsibilities to become the school’s director of admissions during the pandemic, in addition to her job as the lead social studies teacher.

“I think the principal has done a great job trying to understand, and putting himself in the shoes of teachers, what they are dealing with, the stress level, and the new way of teaching,” Proulx said.

Teachers and staff were on the school’s reopening committee—giving them a consequential role in reopening decisions—and they got training in the new tech tools they’d be using during the year. While there were “glitches and bumps along the way,” Daigle’s approach of being “very responsive and open to constructive criticism and change,” was helpful, Proulx said.

Daigle expects St. Patrick’s staff turnover, which generally hovers around 15 percent annually, to stay in the same ballpark this year.

(About 49 percent of principals in the EdWeek survey said they saw no change in requests for medical leave, retirements or resignations this year.)

“There is nobody saying, ‘I’ve had enough of this; I am all done because of this pandemic,’” Daigle said.
Communication, collegiality, and incentives help

Here are five ways principals can bridge the perception gap with staff:

1. **Be visible**: Principals have to tend to their administrative duties, but it’s also crucial that teachers and students see them.

   At St. Patrick’s Academy, teachers often bump into Daigle, the principal, in the hallways, and he pops into Proulx’s classroom frequently. Proulx also thinks that principals should shadow a teacher at different levels—early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school—to get a deeper understanding and appreciation of what their teachers’ days are like.

   “None of us has ever done this—teaching face-to-face and online at the same time,” Proulx said. “It’s new to everybody.”

   Hill, the Virginia teacher, agrees that principals and teachers lose out when school leaders stay in their offices.

   “You don’t want your teachers to think that every time you come into their room is for an evaluation,” Hill said. “Just come in, sit down, see what the kids are learning.”

2. **Open up communication**: This is a two-way street. Teachers must be honest with their principals about how they are feeling. But principals must be willing to take frank feedback and constructive criticism—and then act on them.

   Many of the frustrations teachers felt this year boiled down to the absence of clear messages and direction from their districts and principals.

   “It’s got to be communication,” Wallace, the Arkansas teacher, said. “I think principals need to challenge every assumption they have with data. They need to talk to teachers; they need to survey teachers; talk in large groups; talk one on one. They need to know their teachers and they need to know their teachers’ burdens.”

3. **Show teachers they’re valued**: This can take many forms. Pay raises and bonuses are great. But so are catered meals, a food truck, gym passes, and efforts to bring levity to a year filled with challenges.

   Wallace, the Arkansas teacher, praised her district for showing that it valued its teachers.

   When Arkansas prioritized teachers on its COVID-19 vaccination schedule, the Beebe district cancelled in-person classes for a day and invited two pharmacies onto the campus to vaccinate teachers who wanted the shot.

   “I felt respected and valued that our district took the time and care to make sure ev-
eryone who wanted [the COVID-19 vaccine] could get it,” Wallace said.

In King and Queen County, Va., where Hill serves on the school board, the district cleared the schedule one Friday and catered a meal for teachers. It’s also hosted game shows and given out gift cards to Amazon and restaurants as prizes. And district officials write thank-you letters to teachers at regular intervals. Teachers also received a $500 check before the holiday break, and they got bonuses this year.

4. **Find out what teachers are struggling with, and offer support:** Nearly a year into remote teaching and hybrid learning, some teachers still struggle with technology.

Teachers like Hill and Harber said their districts did not provide enough upfront training, and that left them frustrated.

In contrast, Beebe hosted “lots and lots” of technical training to get teachers up to speed, and there’s also Tech Tuesdays, when teachers host 30- to 60-minute PD sessions on online tools they’ve found useful.

At St. Patrick’s Academy, teachers were trained over the summer break. But a core team also got deeper training and was responsible for helping colleagues.

Teachers also need emotional support. Haber’s district boosted local schools’ budgets, with a set-aside for staff wellness. Some schools upgraded their faculty lounges, and the social-emotional learning committee on which Harber serves is also developing SEL tools and trauma training for teachers.

Before the pandemic shuttered many public facilities, teachers got discount passes to the local pool and yoga studios. Harber also helped teachers set up fitness areas in their classrooms and had one-on-one sessions with colleagues.

5. **Pare down paperwork:** “What’s necessary?” That’s a question principals and district leaders need to ask to stanch burnout and keep teachers in the profession.

“Administrators need to look critically, carefully at all the expectations that are made of teachers,” Wallace said. “We need to pare it down to what’s necessary. I just don’t think you can continue to ask more and more without ever pulling some responsibilities away.”

Hill, the Virginia educator, said this would be a good time for leaders to get rid of needless paperwork and administrative compliance tasks that just add more to teachers’ plates.

“I’ve always told people ... if I did not have to deal with administration and just have my students, I would stay in teaching for a lifetime,” Hill said.

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### Which three factors play the biggest role in keeping you in the teaching profession? Select three (top 10 responses from TEACHERS).

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<th>Factor</th>
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<td>Love for students</td>
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<td>Retirement benefits</td>
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<td>Love for the subjects taught</td>
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<td>Health benefits</td>
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<td>Reward of seeing former students succeed</td>
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<td>Faith/belief in students' potential</td>
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**SOURCE:** EdWeek Research Center, 2021
How do I use collaborative learning to engage students?

What are some new ways I can use group activities to help students learn?

According to the science of learning, students learn better from interactive activities where they talk, act, deliberate, and reflect compared with passive and (superficially) active behaviors, such as taking verbatim notes while listening to a lecture. Asking open-ended questions, peer teaching, and group problem-solving are some of the most effective ways to promote deep learning. Collaboration also helps students develop interpersonal and teamwork skills, which are key 21st century competencies.

Here are three ways to unleash the power of collaborative learning:

Transform assessments into learning opportunities. In an artificial intelligence course I teach, I use “power of two” quizzing. Immediately after submitting their individual quizzes, students complete the same quiz again, but this time working with a peer to provide a team response. Though this can lead to more grading, the ensuing discussions and deliberations are well worth the effort.

Employ online games to engage students. Remote collaborations can be effective when centered around well-designed group activities. For example, my colleagues and I conducted a virtual summer camp where students from across the country teamed up to play Physics Playground, a highly engaging learning game that leverages the power of play to boost students’ creative potential.

Use artificial intelligence (AI) to facilitate small groups. Teachers can’t be everywhere at once, so when it’s time for breakout groups, some students might struggle, go off task, or disengage. Looking into the future, our new NSF National AI institute for Student-AI Teaming is addressing this challenge by developing “AI partners”—intelligent systems that help teachers to facilitate collaborations with small groups of students in an ethical and equitable manner.

Don’t be afraid of the messiness that results from collaborative activities. Learning is a contact sport, and encouraging and supporting students to discuss, explain, reason, negotiate, and problem solve is challenging but immensely rewarding.

Sidney D’Mello is an associate professor at the Institute of Cognitive Science and the Department of Computer Science at the University of Colorado at Boulder.
New School Year Collaborations

How Do You Manage a District Through a Crisis? Together

This past year, leaders had to face looming public health threats, volatile public opinion, and mounting financial pressures

By Morcease Beasley

This past school year, I had to make difficult decisions in an environment that grew more contentious daily, as public opinion fluctuated and split. This was my fourth year as superintendent, and I felt the political pressure mounting.

Over the winter, I faced more pressure to reopen in a community fed up with the reality that our students had been engaged in virtual learning since March 16, 2020. But the district’s finances and the community’s anxiety about student and staff safety posed leadership challenges equally.

This February, while staring at $37 million in COVID-19-related expenses, I sucked in my breath when my staff presented me with an additional $4 million proposal for expensive HVAC systems with complex ionization and purification technologies to filter school and classroom air. These expenditures might readily be justified by the real threat of airborne particles and viruses. But I worried that the costs were exorbitant when there were still real questions about their efficacy.

About This Series <- this “about series” sentence may look better as a call-out

Over the coming weeks we will be rolling out 17 lessons from experienced district leaders who spent the last year leading from home. Learn more and see the full collection of lessons.

Would this equipment work? Did we really want to spend $4 million when some of the science indicated it could not guarantee a safe learning environment for in-person instruction? The science was unclear, but I needed to reassure parents and the public that students were in good hands. And I needed to ensure our buildings were safe whenever we reopened. This issue was keeping me awake at night.

Working at the kitchen table, I had an epiphany: My opinion is just one of many. I needed to find others to share the burden, so I turned to my nine-member board of education. What did they think about spending $4 million on air-filtration systems? I could lay out the pros and cons of various options, share my honest opinions with the board, and seek the members’ suggestions. I didn’t have to carry the full weight of the decision.

I didn’t have to wait long for comments. The chair immediately responded that she had seen reports in the press about this technology. Moreover, she said, parents were upset that a neighboring district had spent money on this particular product while we had yet to do so. A huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I no longer felt that the decision was my responsibility alone. With the board’s input, we ultimately did not purchase the systems.

As my community debated when to reopen our schools in person, I was able to look to my board for similar shared decisionmaking.

Not every challenge requires board input. Traditional leadership approaches—asking questions, discussing differences, and expecting collaboration—are perfectly appropriate in most situations. For big issues that involve the public, including significant expenditures and life-and-death questions about school safety, you don’t have to be the Lone Ranger. Indeed, you shouldn’t be. Find allies on the board and in the community to shoulder some of the heavy load you carry.

Morcease Beasley leads Clayton County Public Schools, located in the metro Atlanta area. The district enrolls approximately 52,000 students and is about 70 percent African American, 20 percent Hispanic, and 10 percent other racial groups. It is a community eligible district where all students receive free or reduced-price meals.

Leadership Lessons From The Kitchen Table: A Series

17 superintendents share insights from a year leading at home Click Here.

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