—iStock/Getty Images

K-12 Decision-Making

EDITOR'S NOTE

School leaders must make informed decisions to address the challenges facing K-12 education. This Spotlight will help you learn how teachers can help drive systemic change in schools; evaluate school progress on driving equity; assess how to revise transportation plans amid bus driver shortages; understand how to navigate challenging binary thinking in schools; explore lessons on emergency readiness learned from district leaders; and more.

Teachers Are Ready for Systemic Change. Are Schools?

By Madeline Will

So many people in education—from teachers to U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona—have called this moment, as schools emerge from the darkest shadow of the coronavirus pandemic, our chance for a "reset in education."

It's a sentiment that repeatedly comes up in my interviews with teachers. They wonder if the pandemic's disruption of schools was a once-in-a-generation chance to transform the education system, which is riddled with inequities and pedagogical practices that date back decades.

Some educators also wonder if we're on the verge of squandering such a chance. That may be; in the rush to get students back on track, we're at risk for overlooking many of the lessons learned from the last couple years.

"I hoped that we would take the time during the pandemic to reimagine and rethink how we do school for students," said Tamika Walker Kelly, the president of the North Carolina Association of Educators. "I feel like the window for possibility is closing because once we start going back to the old systemic processes and practices that we have normalized at school, then it's harder to change those things."

Kelly knows there's a desire to return to normal. But she also knows that "normal" wasn't working for some kids, particularly students of color. And even before the coronavirus disrupted schools, teachers didn't always have the tools they needed to create learning conditions for all students to thrive.

To be clear, when schools abruptly shut down at the start of the pandemic, teachers and students suffered. There were real challenges for making sure students were safe, fed, and learning. But Kelly said she also saw some positives during those initial school closures, like a renewed focus on relationships and an emphasis on student-centered learning. She wants those elements to stick around, although she's worried they won't.

"There's a huge emphasis on testing to get students caught up—quote, unquote—to where they're supposed to be at this time," she said. Instead, "we have to figure out how to maintain the things that work for students."

But, too often, teachers feel as if they aren't consulted as districts plan new initiatives

—Adolfo Valle for Education Week

that they will be asked to put into practice: "The teachers know what works," Kelly said. "We need more people to not only listen to teachers, but we also need them to implement the things that teachers say."

The EdWeek Research Center asked a nationally representative sample of nearly 1,900 teachers, principals, and district leaders what the pandemic impact they would most like to see in their school or district a decade from now. The two most common answers were more attention given to student mental health (21 percent) and less focus on standardized testing (20 percent).

Smaller numbers of educators also named more attention to staff mental health, more wraparound services for student well-being, and the added flexibility of moving some meetings online.

Educators expect disruptions to have some silver linings

Unsurprisingly, 92 percent of educators said the overall impact of the pandemic on the state of K-12 education in their school or district has been negative. Just 3 percent said the pandemic had a positive impact, according to the same survey.

More than a million people in the United States have died from COVID-19, leaving more than 200,000 children grieving the loss of a parent or caregiver. Doctors have sounded the alarm for a youth mental health crisis exacerbated by the pandemic. Students—especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities—have lost academic ground during the turmoil of the last two years. And teacher stress levels have risen as they have worked to meet students' growing academic and social-emotional needs, despite persistent staff shortages.

Educators say these challenges could persist long after COVID-19 case counts dwindle—whenever that may be. When asked for the survey what they expected the lasting negative impacts of the pandemic on education to be a decade from now, a majority of educators pointed to a decline in teacher retention, an increase in student behavioral challenges, a decline in educator mental health, and too much screen time for students.

And yet, educators still think there will be some lasting positive effects from the pandemic, too. A majority said they expected to continue to see added flexibility for moving some meetings online, more attention to

> 66
>
> Where do you want to land after the pandemic? What instructional changes are you really hoping to make that we can start working on now?"
>
> **JOY PATTON**
> Teacher,
> Tennessee

student mental health, better integration of technology, and the ability to offer remote learning when necessary, such as during inclement weather.

For example, Melinda Caudill, a kindergarten teacher at Liberty Elementary in Lexington, Ky., has continued offering families the choice to attend parent-teacher conferences virtually or in person. She said more families have been able to participate now that there's a virtual option, something educators elsewhere have noticed as well. Students whose parents are more involved in their education are more likely to have higher grades and test scores, better attendance, and better classroom behavior, research shows.

"I have a lot of parents who are single moms, working the night shift, and they would attend from their car while on a break," Caudill said. "Or they had little kids in the background. Those are parents I might not be able to reach [otherwise]."

It's also been more convenient for her—a stress-reliever at a time when teachers have more on their plates than ever. "I can do it from home if it's a later conference," Caudill said. "I wouldn't be stuck at school."

Transformational change isn't easy

Of course, making lasting change on a systemwide level is hard enough when conditions are good—and for a lot of the past two years, school and district leaders were in crisis mode, making real transformation even more difficult.

Joy Patton, a teacher-leader in Tennessee, remembers asking her principal in January 2021, "Where do you want to land after the pandemic? What instructional changes are you really hoping to make that we can start working on now?"

"The principal looked at me and said, 'That's a really good question. I'll have to think about that,'" Patton recalled, adding that she walked away with the impression that he had no idea what transformation he wanted to see.

The principal was in survival mode, she noted. He was dealing with quarantine logistics, contact tracing, staffing shortages, and parent complaints: "You don't have time to come up from the fray to really think about where do we really need to go?"

But Patton also wonders if the lack of innovative thinking is part of a systemic challenge. School leaders are so focused on operational logistics and test scores, they can miss the big picture of how schools can move forward instead of just maintaining the status quo, she said. And district leaders can be reluctant to scale innovative work that's happening in classrooms, Patton said, citing project-based learning and standards-based grading as examples.

After all, most administrators aren't trained for transformative change, wrote Renee Owen, an assistant professor of education leadership at Southern Oregon University, in an Education Week Opinion essay earlier this year.

"In schools, there is a constant striving for *improvement*, but improvement—getting better at what we already do within the systems we already have—will never fundamentally change who we are or how we think," Owen wrote. "We will continue to get the same results unless we are able to see education in a completely new way."

'Necessity is the father of transformation'

Christopher Dede, a senior research fellow at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has studied educational transformation for decades. At the start of the pandemic, he wrote in a blog post that the crisis was an opportunity for schools to transition away from a "one-size-fits-all" model of lecture-style instruction. Instead, schools could create—and, he hoped, sustain—a "'new normal' of universal, blended, personalized, lifelong learning."

He saw pockets of that innovation happening in individual classrooms and even some schools during the early stages of the pandemic.

"But the rush of people who try to go back to the old model, and who say that online education is defective, ... is very disturbing," he said in an interview. "As is typical with education, the rest of society has picked up on the benefits of hybrid [models]. But education just has dismissed it."

Here's the good news: Teachers may have more power than they realize to drive systemic change—especially at a time when school leaders are desperate to hire and keep good teachers. Teachers can "vote with their feet" and leave a school district that refuses to innovate, Dede said: "If many talented teachers start to do that, that will put pressure on the system ... so they can try to hang on to people who don't want to be mired down in the old model."

As Dede has written, "Necessity is the father of transformation"—and educators say something needs to be done. Students are disengaged, teachers have one foot out the door, and the inequities exacerbated by the pandemic are becoming hard to ignore.

"Because innovation is an out-working of problem-solving, we just might be at a place where the problems are so bad that we realize we must innovate in order to survive," said Patton, the Tennessee teacher. "At this point, the problems are so big and so undeniable that we just might be willing to try something new." ■

Published September 6, 2022

The Key to More Equitable Schools? Deep Commitment

By Ileana Najarro

What do we mean when we talk about making schools more diverse, equitable, and inclusive? Generally speaking, we're talking about making sure all students—especially those who've been historically underserved by public schools—receive an education that will help them reach their full potential.

So, how do we achieve this?

Over the last few years, researchers and practitioners have increasingly turned to diversity, equity, and inclusion—or DEI—work, meaning designing and implementing policies, programs, and initiatives at the district or school level to resolve inequities. Educators might, for example, buy more classroom books with stories that better reflect students' racial diversity. Or leaders might mandate anti-bias training to prevent stereotyping that can threaten student progress, such as setting lower expectations for students of color.

On the micro level, these initiatives can open educators' eyes to just how inequitable schools can be and bring into focus how to start resolving inequities.

Here's the catch: DEI work is just one step toward reaching the macro goal of making public education more diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

You can do all the right training, buy all the right books, change all the right policies, and you'll still be working within a system that wasn't designed to be diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

Sometimes, schools call themselves a success because their students of color excel academically—yet, their courses are structured around a white, Eurocentric perspective that deprives them and their peers of opportunities to explore more cultural backgrounds.

Reaching that macro goal hinges on effectively carrying out DEI work at the micro level.

Now that more districts have committed to this work, even in the face of legislative hurdles, we've learned a thing or two about DEI best practices and pitfalls to avoid.

Before we get to those, though, let's take a closer look at DEI work across the nation's schools.

—Adolfo Valle for Education Week

Taking stock of the diffuse DEI landscape

We don't know the exact number of districts that are investing in DEI efforts because what districts actually call those initiatives vary so widely. But we do know they have made investments well before 2020, according to researchers.

We also know that in the summer of 2020, driven by the murder of George Floyd and the historic national outcry for a racial reckoning in public institutions, district leaders and teachers' unions increasingly spoke of their commitment to DEI.

Today, there's more anti-racist education literature of varying quality on district leaders' bookshelves than ever before. More districts are looking inward to build out their own initiatives with local community support and rejecting third-party DEI consultants peddling quick fixes.

And district leaders are taking a closer look at internal data to determine the best course of action to manage disparities—such as whether students of color are being disproportionately harmed by discipline policies, said Decoteau Irby, an associate professor of educational policy studies and qualitative researcher at the University of Illinois, Chicago.

Even educators have a strong sense that this work is coming along.

In a nationally representative EdWeek Research Center June survey of 1,897 educators, 78 percent agreed that in the past two years, their district or school has made progress toward diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.

But there are caveats.

Between August 2020 and June 2022, the EdWeek Research Center found that educator respondents who felt comfortable running and/or prepared to run an anti-racist classroom, school, or district dropped by 10 percentage points.

That is a concern. Tremendous pushback against all things DEI began just under two years ago. Starting in January 2021, 42 states introduced bills or took other steps to limit classroom conversations and staff training on racism and sexism. And between July 2021 and March of this year, book bans—specifically books with LGBTQ characters, people of color, and those that address race and racism—were instituted in 86 school districts across the country, affecting 2 million students, according to PEN America.

Researchers and practitioners alike recognize how destructive this opposition can be toward meeting DEI goals. But they also believe it sends an urgent message to forge ahead.

"The acceleration, the increased effort, the increased interest and time and commitment into anti-racism and racial-justice work result-

ed in a [public and legislative] pushback," Irby said. "The pushback is, in and of itself, a sign that we were on the verge of, and, in some cases, were making substantial progress in terms of addressing these issues."

In spite of this opposition, if districts want to work to make schools more diverse, equitable, and inclusive, what exactly must they do?

Local data, in-house expertise

Daniel Bullock has led equity efforts for Durham public schools in North Carolina since 2017. He has found that mandatory districtwide workshops and professional-development sessions during which administrators and classroom teachers analyze district data produce concrete results. The educators become better equipped to identify disparities, which then opens up conversations on how to address disparity.

For example, the district's student survey data presented at one of these sessions revealed that English-learners and special education students experienced lower levels of self-efficacy than any other student group. Teachers were then able to discuss whether those labels are what led students to feel less capable, because they imply a deficit. Or perhaps they contribute to lower expectations educators set for these students.

"Let's understand how inequity is manifesting in the system and how we modify the system to be more equitable," Bullock said of the data-driven DEI approach. "It brings people's defenses down and serves as a starting point."

He's also been intentional about hearing from local community leaders, getting another look at students and families' experiences with the school district, good and bad.

That sort of in-house, local approach as opposed to an over reliance on third-party outsiders is an effective way to strengthen DEI work and shield it from naysayers, the researchers said.

Bullock, who was recently promoted to executive director for equity and professional development for the entire district, said he received support from his district's top leaders throughout his work.

And that's critical. To engage in DEI work effectively at the micro level, the organizational resources and support need to be in place.

Real commitment requires real investment

Across the country, those who serve as equity officers or in similar roles are, anecdotally, experienced, credentialed people of color—in fact, they tend to be women of color. Despite their expertise, equity officers sometimes have their judg-

ment questioned by district leaders, and it's not uncommon for equity officers to face other forms of workplace hostility.

These leaders need continuous, intentional support from district leadership, said Zachary Casey, the chair of educational studies at Rhodes College in Tennessee.

Mentorship within and beyond the district, financial resources to support the initiatives, and the authority to launch innovative programs with specialized personnel, like data analysts, are all key to building a successful program, researchers say. Absent these guardrails, equity leaders can suffer burnout, and districts can fall prey to taking performative rather than substantive action.

At a school where he was hired to provide equity consulting, Casey's team found Black students were disproportionately disciplined for tardiness. His research prompted the team to suggest modifying the school's tardiness policy to account for students' home responsibilities, such as having to drop off or pick up younger siblings because of family work schedules. Changing the tardiness policy would be a substantive action to resolve the disparity in question.

But the school's principal didn't feel they had the capacity to take on a tardiness policy change themselves. Instead, the principal requested training on stereotype threat from Casey's team. Such training could be enlightening but in this instance is a misdiagnosis

that doesn't resolve the core problem.

Effective DEI work at the micro level requires substantive actions and organizational capacity, Irby said.

Designing with equity in mind

Now, let's say best practices are in place, and you're seeing results at the micro level: Black students are no longer disproportionately suspended compared with their peers. Or you've hired more teachers of color at your school. Or more students have access to high-quality tutoring programs.

The next step is for educators to then realize the larger systemic issue at play—how, even with these signs of progress, the very system they are trying to make equitable wasn't designed with equity in mind.

In their research, Irby and Casey have found that a growing number of educators doing DEI work have come to recognize more deeply the flawed policy legacy of overemphasizing standardized-test scores.

Test scores might show patterns of academic achievement, but they can't speak to students' aspirations, to their sense of self, to their sense of community. Relying on them too much can cause district leaders to neglect other elements that contribute to equity when they're budgeting—beautiful playgrounds, art and music classes, extracurriculars.

Instead, district policymaking should aim for a more holistic measure of success, such as

In the past two years, my district or school has made progress toward diversity, equity, and inclusion goals
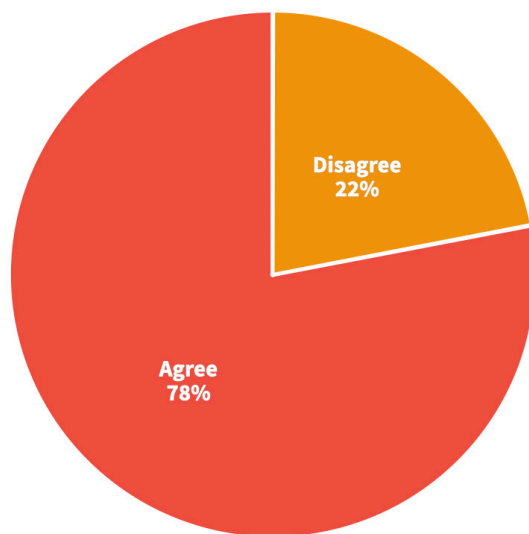
Disagree
22%

Agree
78%

*Results show responses from teachers, principals, and district leaders
SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, June 2022

how much students feel they belong in school and how well curriculum reflects students' cultural backgrounds, they said.

Let's put it all together with an example.

Say students of color are underrepresented in Advanced Placement classes. A micro-level DEI goal would be to remove systemic barriers these students face when trying to enroll in these classes, such as academic-course tracking and teacher recommendations. Remove such requirements, then ensure students get ample information and resources to enroll.

But a goal that gets at the macro question of how to make schools more diverse, equitable, and inclusive would be to make sure that regardless of whether students choose to take AP courses, they still have access to rich, rigorous coursework. That includes access to courses like ethnic studies where diverse cultural backgrounds are recognized as foundations of knowledge.

One way to measure how well you're doing on these micro and macro goals is to ask the students. They know.

Hannah Palmer, a recent high school graduate from Pittsburgh, started a social-justice club at her high school. There, she led professional-development training for teachers to better understand what it takes to support students of color and called on her district to provide more training on how to address conversations around race and racism in class. Her goal was to avoid what she experienced in 9th grade, when her white peers felt it was OK to use the N-word openly in class because the audio-book version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* they were listening to kept using it.

"I've talked to a lot of students about how they just don't feel safe voicing their opinion, being truly who they are, because the teacher isn't creating that conducive space for them," Palmer said.

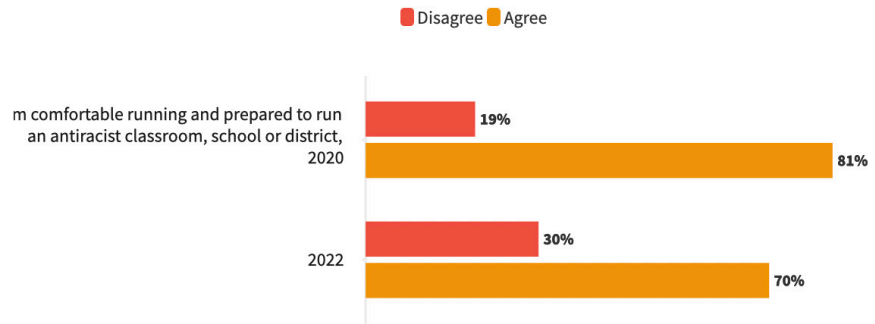It's one reason why she hopes to work in DEI leadership in K-12 schools in the future.

"I just want to diversify curriculum so that all students are heard and represented in school," Palmer said. "I believe that every student has the right to a quality education where they feel safe. So, that's kind of what's keeping me going."

As educators grapple with what it means to make schools diverse, equitable, and inclusive, they have to hold two truths in mind: Yes, DEI work at their local school or district is important. No, it's not automatically going to overhaul the public education system.

That overhaul involves a whole new mindset for what public education is supposed to offer students.

So let's get more educators, policymakers, and even researchers thinking about that macro-level goal and how to achieve it. ■

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Legend: ■ Disagree ■ Agree

m comfortable running and prepared to run an antiracist classroom, school or district, 2020
- Disagree: 19%
- Agree: 81%

2022
- Disagree: 30%
- Agree: 70%

*Results show responses from teachers, principals, and district leaders
SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, August 2020, June 2022

What Can Educators Do to Incite Lasting Change? Build Stronger Relationships

By Lauraine Langreo

The pandemic caused many people to pose existential questions about the United States' education system, and some predicted that the pandemic could launch the reimagination of the system.

But a large-scale transformation doesn't happen overnight, especially because educators are up against some of the biggest learning challenges the education field has faced: concerns over student mental health, staffing shortages, and a divisive political landscape, to name a few.

During an Education Week K-12 Essentials forum Sept. 15, educators and researchers talked about what can be done immediately and feasibly to incite lasting and productive change that will make a difference in the lives of students.

The recurring theme from panelists' answers centered around building better relationships with the whole school community: students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

Renee Owen, an assistant professor of education leadership at Southern Oregon University and an editor of The Holistic Education Review, said that one way the education system can be transformed is by turning it from an "industrial system" to a "living system."

Instead of a hierarchical system, where all the power and information flows from the top, the education system should have more of a feedback loop, where information can easily move from the bottom up or vice versa, Owen said during a panel titled "How Can We Break Down the Barriers Standing in the Way of K-12 Transformation?"

Let students lead

Even our traditional views of teaching are hierarchical, said Joy Patton, the behavior and restorative practices facilitator at LaVergne High School in Rutherford County Schools in Tennessee. She was a featured guest on a panel titled "How Can We Break Down the Barriers Standing in the Way of K-12 Transformation?"

"We as the teachers are the authority, we are content experts, and it's our job to disseminate information to students and develop their little minds, and we have all of the power," Patton said.

One practical way to transform that hierarchical system is by giving students more autonomy in the classroom, according to some of the panelists.

"It's really important to involve the students in making those decisions," Patton said. "I have to share authority with my students. We make up our classroom community and we decide how we're going to treat each other and what the standards are going to be in our classroom."

Andrea Kane, a featured guest on a panel titled "Why Can't We Talk to Each Other Anymore?," also talked about elevating student voices as one way to create an environment that is conducive to civil discussions about hot-button issues.

"We need to hear from our students and give students a platform where we are absolutely elevating their voices," said Kane, a professor of practice in educational leadership at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education and a former superintendent of the Queen Anne's County schools in Maryland. "Let them lead, because so often, adults get tied up in our ways of thinking that are sometimes stagnant and certainly not always open to ideas that are not like our own.

"If there are relationships that have been built in classrooms with students—with students and teachers, with students and administrators—kids know if they're in a safe place, and they're able to voice their own opinion in the way that feels right for them," Kane added.

Chris Dier, a history teacher at Benjamin Franklin High School in New Orleans and a featured guest on the forum, said that a more student-centered approach will engage students in ways that they wouldn't in a traditional learning environment and it "breaks down barriers in unimaginable ways."

Build community support

The education system also relies heavily on the rest of the school community. The panelists talked about the importance of building relationships not just with students, teachers, and administrators, but also with parents, businesses, and organizations based within the community where the school is located.

Patton, when planning how to fund student incentive programs at her school, said she knocked on businesses' doors asking for donations, but she has also looked to parents who might be able to provide funding.

"It's going to take time for me to build some relationships with some community partners," Patton said.

Change doesn't happen through a "Superman effect," said Patrick Harris, the author of the book, *The First Five: A Love Letter to Teachers*. Change "will require you to reach across the aisle and to build a coalition. Change in education will come from the ground up and inside out."

Don't lose sight of what's most important

And when it seems like there isn't a lot of community support, such as in areas where parents and educators have been pitted against each other, the panelists' advice is to not lose sight of what's most important.

"And what's most important is that we're serving children," said Kane. "Decisions need to be made that reflect that we as educators are working in the best interests of children. The community will see that by and large. They can disagree with you all day long, but when you are doing the right thing for children that speaks volumes."

Harris said the pandemic challenged parent-teacher relationships because there were no opportunities to interact "on a human-to-human level."

Panelists said now's the time to repair those relationships.

"For teachers, I would just say, keep trying, don't give up," Patton said. "And be careful what you assume about parents. I know I let a lot of my assumptions about what all parents were thinking keep me from communicating. And so I've just really challenged you to put those assumptions aside and keep trying and keep communicating and keep reaching out."

At the end of the day, "parents and teachers want the same things," Harris said. "We want for students to reach their highest potential. We want for students to be able to have autonomy over their thoughts. We want students to be able to be academically challenged." ∎

Published September 6, 2022

Why Can't We Talk to Each Other Anymore?

By Kevin Bushweller

Watching all this binary, dichotomous, either-or thinking play out in K-12 education over the past few years has been frustrating as a parent of four adult children, including a recent high school graduate who is now a college student; as a consumer of social and traditional media; and an education journalist. It has been one of the ugliest periods of factionalism in the United States I have witnessed in my 59 years.

And it got me thinking: Why do we do this? Why is it so bad now? And, most importantly, how do we move past this rigid way of thinking and behaving so it doesn't get in the way of meaningful and effective teaching and learning?

Turns out, the answer to the first question begins with how our brains work. For most of us, our tendency is to jump to conclusions with limited evidence. In other words, the first mistake our minds make is to move too quickly. This, in turn, denies us the opportunity to consider the nuances of a problem or issue. Some of us engage in this kind of thinking more than others—but we all do it.

Thinking, Fast and Slow, a book by Daniel Kahneman, a professor emeritus of psychology and public affairs at Princeton University and the winner of the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, offers a fascinating look into what drives this way of thinking.

"The confidence that individuals have in their beliefs depends mostly on the quality of the story they can tell about what they see, even if they see little," Kahneman writes in the book. "We often fail to allow for the possibility that evidence that should be critical to our judgment is missing—what we see is all there is."

Kahneman uses an illustration of three men walking down what looks like a narrow hallway to show how this thinking works. If you make a snap judgment about the three men, you confidently assume there is one tall man, one of medium height, and a third who is the shortest. But if you engage in "slow" thinking, pause for a moment, and take a ruler to measure how tall they are, you see that all three are the exact same height.

Based on his extensive research, Kahneman explains that "fast thinking" generates these kinds of faulty judgments all the time—and not just regarding optical illusions. People, then, lock in the belief (in this case, that the three men are different heights), and that belief gathers strength and emotion the more they argue in its favor. And, sometimes, that emotion rises to the level of anger and even violence.

The work of psychologists David Dunning and Justin Kruger shows how this "cognitive bias" sets us up for creating all kinds of problems. They published a paper way back in 1999 titled "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments." Their resulting theory was later dubbed the Dunning-Kruger effect. Encyclopedia Britannica online defines the effect as "a cognitive bias whereby people with limited knowledge or competence in a given intellectual or social domain greatly overestimate their own knowledge or competence in that domain relative to objective criteria or to the performance of their peers or of people in general."

In other words, if you have read it on Twitter or watched it on TikTok, you anoint yourself expert status with all the rights and privileges to promote your expertise on social media with scant evidence to back up your claims.

That sets in motion a big cognitive problem. Once we get locked on to a certain point of view, it becomes very, very difficult to get our brains to consider other perspectives. Instead of looking for information that challenges our point of view, we mostly seek out sources that will further confirm our opinion, a process called "confirmation bias." We become so enamored with our own beliefs that we are literally incapable of considering others'. And the social media, political, and TV news bubbles we lean into further cement our own biases.

That's when binary thinking brings out the worst in all of us—a process that is playing out in unfortunate ways in K-12 education that could have serious repercussions for developing the kind of open-minded, critically thinking students who represent our democracy's future.

An Illinois high school teacher who responded to a recent survey from the EdWeek Research Center told us how this kind of thinking is playing out in K-12 education: "The political climate has absolutely ruined the fun of teaching. Parents have become so polarized without actually knowing what we do that they storm board meetings and threaten our superintendent with bodily harm over [critical race theory]—which we don't even teach. It's sad."

In that survey, 58 percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders said elected officials are now embracing rigid, binary thinking more than they did three years ago (Think, U.S. Congress); and 56 percent said the same of parents and guardians. Interestingly, a much smaller share—34 percent—said students are engaging more in binary thinking; and 41 percent said the same of themselves.

Are young people more open-minded, reflective thinkers than adults? Could adults

—Adolfo Valle for Education Week

learn some important lessons from them about productive dialogue?

Chris Dier thinks the answer to both questions is yes. The 2020 Louisiana Teacher of the Year is a history teacher at Benjamin Franklin High School in New Orleans. He is also a historian on the side who wrote a book titled *The 1868 St. Bernard Parish Massacre: Blood in the Cane Fields.*

Dier, who is white, grew up and taught in St. Bernard Parish in Louisiana. He uncovered historical records about a reconstruction-era massacre orchestrated by white residents against Black people in that community in 1868, fueled by whites' fears that Blacks had gained the right to vote.

In a recent phone conversation, Dier told me he brought this research to his classroom. He had white and Black students in his classes, and a few of them were the descendants of the perpetrators of the massacre or the descendants of victims. The students discussed the painful findings in a civil manner, and things never got ugly, Dier recalls, because the kids seemed very curious about what actually happened and why. In other words, they wanted to know the truth. (Now, the teacher records TikTok lectures about U.S. history, which are watched by people all over the world.)

Then, in the spring of 2021, a bill was introduced in the Louisiana legislature that would prohibit teachers from teaching content that suggested there was systemic racism and sexism in our country's past. Dier and other teachers across the state saw this as extreme binary thinking and spoke out in opposition to the bill. He self-published an opinion piece that made, among other points, this one:

"Teaching students the truth of the foundation of our country, highlighting the systems that perpetuated slavery, genocide, and sexism, and creating space for students to address their lingering impacts are components of true patriotism. Unlike blind nationalism, true patriotism seeks to actually improve the lives of those who inhabit this land."

In a Republican-controlled legislature, the bill never made it out of the House education committee. Dier chalks up the bill's failure to educators speaking up publicly.

"Students are much more open to have these discussions," Dier told me. "They are more willing to engage in difficult conversations."

Yet, it is not just the adults and legislators on the far right of the political spectrum who are making these conversations difficult to have. John McWhorter, a Columbia University associate professor of English and comparative literature who is Black, cites a "prosecutorial mood on

What impacts—if any—does rigid, either/or thinking have on schools?
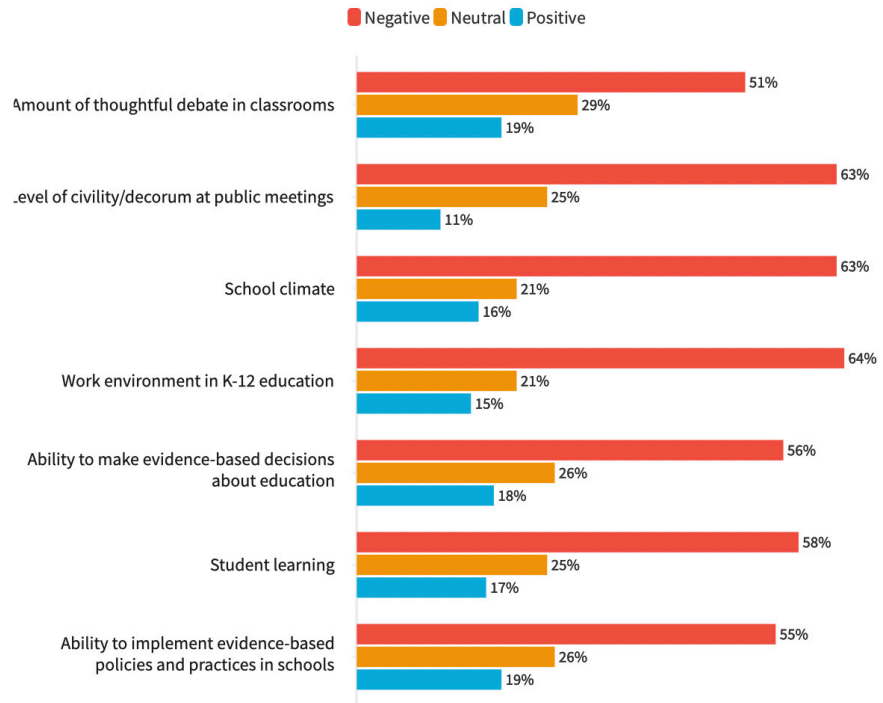
*Results show responses from teachers, school leaders, and district leaders • Percentages do not add to 100 percent due to rounding.
SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, June 2022

the left" in his book *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America.* White people, he says, are branded as racists and sometimes lose their jobs or have their reputations tarnished simply because they ask honest questions about the value of certain policies or practices, such as anti-racism curricula or diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

That environment, McWhorter and others suggest, has silenced many of the more moderate voices on the left and right in K-12 schools, on college campuses, and in the public square, leaving the far right and far left to battle it out with insults, threats, and vitriol on social media. And it "makes people left of center wonder just when and why they started being classified as backward," he writes in the book, "and leaves millions of innocent people scared to pieces of winding up in the sights of a zealous brand of inquisition that seems to hover over almost any statement, ambition, or achievement in modern society."

That leads us to a concept in social psychology called "fundamental attribution error." It is why people mistakenly assign the root cause of an observed behavior to the person's character or personality, rather than some-
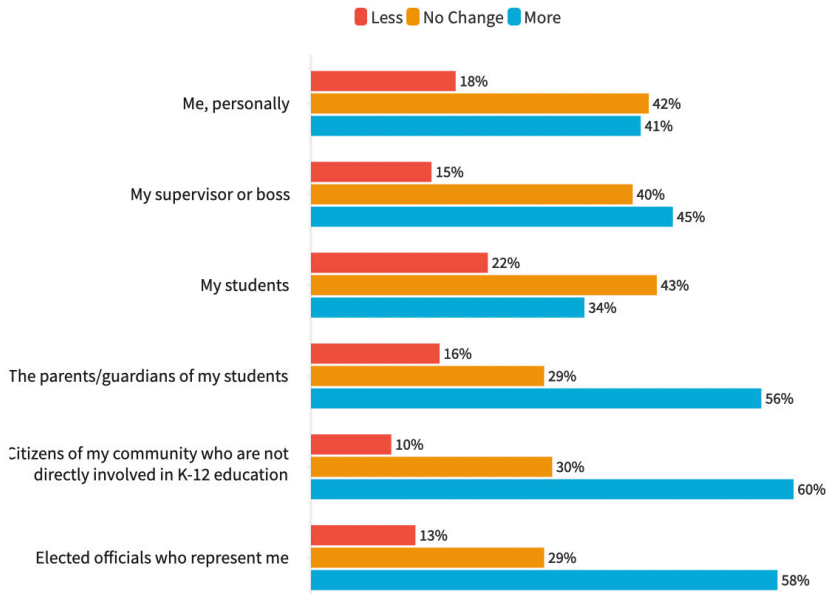
thing about their circumstances or a mix of their personality and circumstances. That explains the widespread use of personal attacks by extremists on social media or why people of opposing viewpoints can't debate an issue without flinging personal insults at each other.

Angela Duckworth, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of the popular book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, shared an unpublished manuscript with me in which she outlines how fundamental attribution error can play out in education. (Duckworth is also the author of an opinion blog hosted on edweek.org.)

A few years ago, a large urban school district asked for her advice in designing a program to help students build personal grit and invited her to observe classrooms. During one visit, a 6th grade teacher rolled in a cart of laptops, and students picked theirs off the cart and returned to their desks. Most students were working on the assigned activity during the observation. But two boys were just sitting at their desks, doing nothing, their laptops unopened.

Duckworth points out that if she had walked in just a moment later than she did and was asked to assess the willingness of these two students

Compared to three years ago, how much are the following people embracing rigid, either/or thinking about K-12 education or learning-related issues?

Less   No Change   More

Me, personally
Less 18%
No Change 42%
More 41%

My supervisor or boss
Less 15%
No Change 40%
More 45%

My students
Less 22%
No Change 43%
More 34%

The parents/guardians of my students
Less 16%
No Change 29%
More 56%

Citizens of my community who are not directly involved in K-12 education
Less 10%
No Change 30%
More 60%

Elected officials who represent me
Less 13%
No Change 29%
More 58%

*Results show responses from teachers, school leaders, and district leaders • Percentages do not add to 100 percent due to rounding.
SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, June 2022

EdW RC

to work on challenging tasks, she might have concluded that they lacked work ethic. In fact, they simply (and unknowingly) chose laptops that were not working. They did not lack grit, she points out—they were just unlucky in their choice, unlucky to attend a school that couldn't afford enough working laptops, and unlucky to have a teacher who didn't think to ask students to pair up and share laptops.

It was not their personalities or character traits that were barriers to their engagement—it was their "situation," Duckworth emphasizes.

Herein lies the problem: When we engage in fundamental attribution error that focuses too heavily on a person's character or personality—without engaging in "slow" thinking to consider their situations or circumstances—it is much easier to get frustrated and angry with that person. And that's when the pointless name-calling starts at school board meetings and on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media.

That's a big reason why Chris Wejr—the principal of Shortreed Elementary School in British Columbia, Canada—scaled back his personal use of Twitter after being a heavy user for years. It's simply become too binary and too mean, he says.

He recalls how COVID masking quickly devolved into a divisive, nasty issue in Canada during the height of the pandemic, much like it did in the United States. That ugliness played out on social media. "There was no room for real discussions," he recalls. Wejr said it divided families, ruined friendships, and created divisions among educators. Fortunately, he said, his school was spared the ugliness.

What is interesting is that Wejr kind of foreshadowed the rise of this dichotomous thinking and behaving before the pandemic even started. In January 2018, he wrote a blog item titled "Avoid Binary Thinking. Go to the Grey."

It begins: "Much of what we do in education falls into grey areas. Yet, many of the conversations we have regarding education seem to use black and white statements and fall into the category of binary, or dichotomous, thinking. Binary thinking leads us to look at ideas in education as right or wrong and good or bad. It can create an 'us vs. them' mentality—'You are either with us or you are not!' It can also prevent engagement in the conversations we need to have."

Back then, he was talking about debates over things like lecturing vs. guided instruction, homework vs. no homework, grading vs. no grading, and even desks in rows vs. collaborative seating. (In this country, you could imagine adding school start times to that mix.) Wejr observed that educators and

parents in both Canada and the United States would make assumptions without evidence to support them about what was best, dig their heels in, and pick sides.

In the United States, once the pandemic started, that attention shifted to issues around remote learning; COVID masking; vaccinations; and, following the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent public protests, teaching about racism. It was a volatile mix that fueled frustration, fear, and anger, further cementing educational factionalism across the country.

For me and most of the people I interviewed for this piece, it feels like binary or dichotomous thinking and behaving is only going to get worse before it gets better. So, that raises the question: How do we turn the tide in a more open-minded, collaborative direction?

For starters, we need to listen more and talk less. It is that simple. I am a talker by nature so that can be a challenge for me and people I am in contact with. But two years ago, I made a vow to listen more to family, friends, and work colleagues, even people I hardly know. It is more empowering and refreshing than you can imagine. And I am getting far fewer complaints from my wife that I am interrupting her.

Third, give kids opportunities to challenge their own beliefs. One of the most fascinating and powerful examples I witnessed came about as the result of the youngest of my three sons' participation in his high school debate team. On several occasions, he was handed a debate position to argue that he was at odds with personally. The opportunity to challenge his own beliefs opened his eyes to new ways of thinking, and he continued down that intellectual path on his college debate team. As a result, he entered the workforce a far more analytical, creative, and open-minded thinker than he would have been otherwise.

"The pathway out of this is for us to realize a lot of these [polarized] debates being had are not improving the conditions in schools for kids," said Jonathan Collins, an assistant professor of political science, public policy, and education at Brown University. He cites lack of clean drinking water, educational technology in disrepair, students trailing one or two grades academically, teacher shortages, and declining college-admittance rates as evidence. "We are pulling energy and resources away from things that really matter," he told me.

It's time to resist the worst impulses of our brains and dedicate ourselves to full-spectrum thinking. If we want students to embrace a wide array of ideas and complex thinking, we owe it to them to lead the way. ∎

—Rogelio V. Solis/AP

Published September 2, 2022

Emergency Readiness Lessons From a District's Water Crisis

By Evie Blad

After two years of pandemic-related interruptions, students in Jackson, Miss., schools have once again returned to remote learning, but this time it was a failure of the aging local water system—not COVID-19—that forced the capital city into crisis mode.

The school system is one of many across the country that have started the school year with emergencies like failures of power grids, heat waves, and flooding that have tested the resolve of leaders and students who crave a return to normalcy.

That's once again put a spotlight on emergency preparedness on everything from remote schooling plans and data security to protecting the social and emotional needs of students and staff.

In Jackson, the crisis came after heavy rainfall flooded the Pearl River and overwhelmed the city's water treatment plant, causing water pressure to plunge in homes and businesses.

During some previous water emergencies, district administrators have managed to keep school buildings open, even parking fire department tanker trucks outside the most heavily affected schools so staff could fill buckets to manually flush toilets, Superintendent Errick L. Greene said.

But by Aug. 29, it became clear that such Band-Aid solutions would be unsustainable this time. Aware of the limitations of online learning, Greene made the tough choice to direct Jackson's 20,000 students to stay home and learn online.

"We heard very loudly and clearly during the pandemic that, while there were some scholars who appreciated the opportunity to learn virtually, the majority struggled," he said. "As this week unfolded, I recalled that message from parents. There are certainly a range of emotions."

The school district quickly stood up a remote learning plan it had developed during the pandemic, dispatching staff members to stay after hours and distribute computers to students who needed them. And Greene recorded a video message for families, acknowledging the strain of the moment.

"The water treatment system is super fragile and it only takes a feather—methaphorically speaking—to fail," Greene told Education Week. "It's years of underinvestment. At some point, you've got to pay for that."

Schools face crises related to weather, infrastructure

Even as the 2022-23 school year is just starting in most districts, administrators around the country have already faced various crises related to weather, facilities, and environmental concerns. The situations have forced them to exercise the muscle memory they developed during the pandemic to adjust their operations.

Climate scientists have suggested such interruptions will become more frequent as climate change spurs new weather extremes.

In California, schools have moved recess inside in recent weeks to cope with triple-digit temperatures. The state's education department is prepared to provide schools with attendance waivers should the prolonged heat wave lead to power failures that force them to close, an agency spokesperson said.

Philadelphia announced early dismissals at more than 100 schools Aug. 31 when air conditioning couldn't keep up with the heat. Such closures have frustrated parents in cities around the country, who say COVID-19 relief aid should be used to address such facilities concerns.

And, like Jackson, some districts face prolonged catastrophes.

In eastern Kentucky, more than 7,600 students remained out of school Friday after late July flooding caused massive property damage and 39 confirmed deaths.

"The photographs and videos people have seen do not do justice to the level of damage in your communities," Kentucky Education Commissioner Jason Glass told affected superintendents at a virtual meeting Sept. 1 after he toured some of the damage. "In every community we saw, the amount of progress that we've seen toward restoring school services has also been extraordinary."

Some districts were still working to locate students during a visit by state officials. Some have opened by combining students from multiple severely damaged schools into single buildings, the state education agency reported in a news release. And some districts don't plan to open until late September.

The state's legislature has provided $40 million in emergency funding for school clean-up and emergency supports.

Schools navigate ongoing uncertainty

In Jackson, where residents waited in long lines for bottled water this week, students also face continuing uncertainty, said Greene, the superintendent.

District administrators will monitor conditions over Labor Day weekend and plan an in-person return to school as soon as it's possible, he said.

"I'm still hopeful that we will get fairly quickly beyond this and we will be able to string together some solid days of learning soon," Greene said.

In the meantime, Greene and superintendents facing school closures in other parts of the country say pandemic conditions gave their schools some tools and strategies that are helpful now.

Jackson built up a districtwide 1-to-1 computing strategy, for example, purchasing devices like Chromebooks and online materials' licenses that will allow teachers to carry out virtual learning during the water crisis.

On a smaller scale, districts around the country have said similar strategies will allow them to avoid class interruptions during snow days, when students can't safely make their way to schools.

Jackson's school nutrition staff also shifted back to pandemic mode this week, offering grab-and-go meals at school sites throughout the city.

Advice from leaders who've been there

Here's some advice from Greene and other district leaders about preparing for and coping with crises that threaten school operations.

Rely on neighboring school systems: Greene said he's had a steady stream of messages from administrators in nearby districts, offering support. Jackson plans to borrow some of their facilities so that teams can relocate athletic events and maintain their season schedules.

Keep an eye on everyone's social and emotional needs: School leaders said it's important to acknowledge and respond to the stress and emotions of students, families, and staff.

Jackson has a "warmline," a telephone number staffed by trained volunteers who take calls from parents and staff who may feel isolated during remote learning or need a referral for services.

Recognize schools' roles as community conveners: Kentucky school leaders told Glass they are eager to welcome displaced students back because, even if those students don't have a permanent home, educators can help connect them to needed community resources.

Similarly, school leaders in states such as Colorado and Florida, prone to disasters like wildfires and hurricanes, have said it's important to regularly update facilities and volunteer plans in advance and be ready to offer school buildings as shelter if necessary.

Back up key data: Some Kentucky schools lost student data and learning materials in the floods, leaders told NBC News. Some said they'd backed up data on physical hard drives, rather than in the cloud. They had anticipated a possible cyberattack, but they did not expect to lose that equipment in a natural disaster.

The Houston Independent School District, which has coped with multiple bouts of flooding and hurricanes in recent years, backs up key software and data to the cloud, Chief Information Officer Lenny Schad told Education Week in 2017. That includes student data and learning software, as well as administrative information necessary to continue cutting checks and paying employees, even if buildings are inaccessible.

Secure crucial documents: It's important for district leaders to locate and secure copies maps and facilities plans before a disaster, district leaders said. That can help administrators file insurance claims and quickly shift contingency plans if some buildings cannot re-open quickly.

Communicate, communicate, communicate: Whether it's a few days of heat-related closures or rebuilding an entire school following a historic disaster, families need consistent, transparent information about how and why school leaders are making decisions, administrators said.

For Greene, that means regular updates on the district's website and in video messages to parents. And it means explaining the logistical challenges that make it difficult to operate schools, even as households in some Jackson neighborhoods regain water pressure.

"Unfortunately, but thankfully, we have [developed] a bit of muscle for this," Greene said. ■

Keeping schools connected during Covid-19 and beyond

How one organization's embrace of the cloud led to short and long-term solutions in education.

When schools throughout the country transitioned to online learning in March 2020, they had to quickly address two challenges. First, they had to rapidly provision devices to students, teachers, and staff and make sure the entire school population was connected to the internet. After deploying these devices, they needed to ensure employees had access to the school's network so they could access files and applications and continue to collaborate with one another from home.

The South Central Regional Information Center (SCRIC) had to address both of these challenges on an extremely large scale. SCRIC provides technology to 50 school districts across three Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) in the south-central region of New York State. Twenty-seven of those school districts are supported by a Managed Information Technology Support (MITS) model in which SCRIC collaborates with one of the BOCES, Broome-Tioga (BT) BOCES, to handle all Information Technology (IT) administration and management decisions, allowing district

leaders to focus on their primary task: educating students.

To support this network of students, teachers, and administrators, SCRIC and the SCRIC/BT BOCES teams needed to immediately provide desktop access for remote work. One of their priorities was getting all administrative employees access to the network as soon as possible. At the start of

the pandemic, network access was particularly important for finance staff.

"It just so happened that COVID-19 lined up with the end of our fiscal year," says Philip Sage, manager of project design and development for SCRIC. "April is a busy time of year for our business office. They needed access to our financial systems to issue purchase orders and do billing. Getting them onto our machines was really important."

SCRIC had used other network solutions, including virtual private network (VPN) accounts, when dealing with desktop access on a smaller scale in the past.

"Typically, there were a few users in each district who needed remote access," Sage says. "It might have been an operations person who needed to get on the network to look into an HVAC system, or a superintendent who needed to go in and get some files."

However, VPN accounts would not work for the unique situation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It takes time to set up hundreds of VPN accounts, and

"We seek to adopt the native, cloud way of doing things, rather than pushing everything we already have on premises here, as it is, into the cloud. For every project we do, we first consider how we can do it more effectively in the cloud.

Philip Sage, Manager of Project Design and Development, SCRIC

there is more risk involved by setting up a VPN from a home machine into our network," says Sage.

SCRIC also didn't want a solution that would require extra hardware, which would take time to procure. With pressure mounting to quickly solve this issue of network access, SCRIC needed a turnkey solution.

Turning to the cloud

SCRIC decided to turn to a cloud-based solution, Amazon WorkSpaces, to provide staff with desktop access. Amazon WorkSpaces is a desktop-as-a-service (DaaS) solution that provides users with virtual desktops, or WorkSpaces, they can access from any supported device — anywhere, anytime.

Amazon WorkSpaces was the ideal choice for SCRIC because it fit into the organization's cloud-first approach to education.

"We seek to adopt the native, cloud way of doing things, rather than pushing everything we already have on premises here, as it is, into the cloud," says Sage. "For every project we do we first consider how we can do it more effectively in the cloud."

Security was also a key factor in SCRIC's decision. Unlike VPN accounts, Amazon WorkSpaces allowed SCRIC to control the access that administrators had to the network, removing the risk of setting up hundreds of VPN accounts on home devices. Amazon WorkSpaces gives employees a true in-office experience from home, complete with the security and the capabilities they would find in the office.

Without the need to purchase and install hardware or deploy complex virtual desktop infrastructure, SCRIC could install DaaS solutions quickly, which was critical during the rapid transition to working from home in March. SCRIC/BT BOCES deployed 270 Amazon WorkSpaces in a single weekend, providing 10 Amazon WorkSpaces for each of the 27 school districts in their MITS model. SCRIC had a total capacity of 530 Amazon WorkSpaces — 10 for each of the 50 districts.

"The ability to just flick a switch and have all that in place to support staff was really great," says Sage.

Amazon WorkSpaces has helped SCRIC and its partner districts in both the short and long term.

"Amazon WorkSpaces ended up being a really good stopgap to help us get something out really fast, something that could be really useful," says Sage. "It gave the organization time to understand who would be working from home for the long

term, who would be coming back into the office, and what kind of long-term supports they would need to put in place."

From a tweet to a partnership

Another benefit of turning to Amazon WorkSpaces was the responsive and thorough support from Amazon Web Services (AWS) during rapid deployment. The SCRIC/BT BOCES team recalls a moment early in the deployment of Amazon WorkSpaces when they wanted to increase the limit on the number of their virtual desktops. Needing a fast response, they turned to social media to contact AWS.

"We worried that we weren't going to get approval for the limit increase on time. But we jumped on Twitter and reached out to AWS. Sure enough, we had a couple people respond right away," Sage says.

Andrew Defoe, technical business development manager, end user computing for AWS, reached out to SCRIC on LinkedIn saying he heard they were looking for some support. According to Ben Kolb, network engineer at BT BOCES, Defoe's response was swift: "He said, 'I'm the right guy to talk to; let me put you in touch.' That morning they had worked everything out for us."

The result of this brief Twitter encounter was the development of a long-lasting, collaborative relationship between SCRIC and AWS. AWS works with various educational services agencies, and SCRIC has now joined the AWS Partner Network (APN), which helps companies successfully build AWS solutions through technical and business trainings, marketing support, and more.

As an APN Partner, SCRIC regularly collaborates with the AWS direct team and partner team to develop and deploy other cloud solutions to improve educational services for its partner districts.

"Going down the partner path with AWS has given us an opportunity to be a leader throughout New York state," Sage says. "We are on the leading edge in our educational community, which is exciting."

> *"Amazon WorkSpaces ended up being a really good stopgap to help us get something out really fast, something that could be really useful. It gave the organization time to understand who would be working from home for the long term, who would be coming back into the office, and what kind of long-term supports they would need to put in place.*

Philip Sage, Manager of Project Design and Development, SCRIC

Looking toward the future

As school districts look toward the fall and the start of a new school year, SCRIC is working with AWS to consider adopting cloud-based services that will support students, teachers, and staff in the long term, whether they are working from home, in a school, or in a hybrid setting.

When schools initially transitioned to online learning, students could not access certain applications on their Chromebooks. For example, south-central New York high school students supported by SCRIC have many science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) applications they use for their career and technical education (CTE) courses, including Adobe Creative Cloud, AutoDesk AutoCAD, Revit, Inventor, SOLIDWORKS, and Unity3D.

These applications, which include computer-aided design (CAD), mechanical engineering, and electrical engineering apps, are often only available to students in a computer lab on school property.

"You simply cannot run those applications on Chromebooks, nor are the devices powerful enough to properly support the apps," Kolb says.

SCRIC is considering an application streaming service like Amazon AppStream 2.0, which would allow students working from home to access needed applications from any device. This way, students can get the tools they need for these specialized classes, regardless of whether they are in the classroom or at home.

Leveraging Amazon AppStream 2.0 can also help SCRIC evolve the way it approaches education beyond the pandemic. By providing students access to these applications anytime, anywhere, from any device, schools can save physical spaces like computer labs for other purposes. They can also save money on hardware costs. Students who might need extra time to complete assignments (whether due to absences or 504 accommodations) will be able to do this work from home, without relying on school labs that are only open during specified hours.

"AppStream 2.0 is the perfect solution to solving some of these scenarios," says Kolb.

Enriching education

For SCRIC, an accelerated move to the cloud and cloud-based solutions has been one positive that has come out of the turmoil of the pandemic.

SCRIC sees a clear connection between its collaboration with AWS on various solutions and achieving its mission of empowering schools by delivering innovative technology solutions and exceptional support.

With standardized solutions across its school districts, SCRIC can also put more energy into providing an even better learning experience for students.

"We are here to help our learners learn and our teachers teach," Sage says. "And that has been the mission of everything we are doing with AWS. How do we improve the ability for the teachers to get access to their materials easier, share their materials easier, have faster and better infrastructure? Everything we're doing behind the scenes is trying to position technology to make their lives a little easier."

This piece was developed and written by the Center for Digital Education Content Studio, with information and input from AWS.

"Going down the partner path with AWS has given us an opportunity to be a leader throughout New York state. We are on the leading edge in our educational community, which is exciting.

Philip Sage, Manager of Project Design and Development, SCRIC

Produced by:

CENTER FOR
DIGITAL
EDUCATION

The Center for Digital Education is a national research and advisory institute specializing in K-12 and higher education technology trends, policy and funding. The Center provides education and industry leaders with decision support and actionable insight to help effectively incorporate new technologies in the 21st century. **www.centerdigitaled.com**

For:

aws

Amazon Web Services (AWS) Worldwide Public Sector helps government, education, and nonprofit customers deploy cloud services to reduce costs, drive efficiencies, and increase innovation. Health and Human Services (HHS) agencies across all levels of government are leveraging AWS for initiatives ranging from the optimization of everyday administrative tasks to delivering a more personalized digital experience for citizens. Whether your focus is on agency modernization, helping to build healthier communities, or transforming payment and care delivery models, AWS has dedicated teams to help you pave the way for innovation and, ultimately, make the world a better place through technology. Contact us to learn how AWS can help you with your biggest IT challenges. **https://pages.awscloud.com/Public-Sector-Contact-Us.html**

—Robert F. Bukaty/AP

Published August 19, 2022

Lacking Bus Drivers, Schools Make Tough Calls on Transportation

By Evie Blad

Short on bus drivers, school districts around the country have revised transportation plans in ways that have widely impacted families' daily lives.

In some districts, students who once rode to school will now have to walk. Others must board buses earlier so that drivers can complete two routes each morning.

In Lake Travis, Texas, students will have bus service on alternating weeks, leaving families to fend for themselves on off weeks. In Chicago, where leaders offered some families stipends to transport their children to school, some parents have complained about a lack of communication.

As the school year starts, the planning challenges that dominated the summer for district leaders have become communications challenges. Leaders must help parents understand the tough choices they've had to make alongside practical details families need to know—like information about relocated bus stops and complicated schedules.

"We do the best we can," said Brad Bailey assistant superintendent for operations at Lake Travis schools. "We help them understand we are doing everything we are able to do, but we just don't have the staff to do it."

Education Week spoke with three district leaders about how they have kept families in the loop on transportation changes. Here are a few key takeaways.

Why this year's driver shortages are so painful

Schools have struggled with hiring for a variety of roles—including cafeteria workers, substitute teachers, and support staff—throughout the pandemic. But district leaders say the unmet need for school bus drivers is a particularly sharp pain point this year. Families crave a "return to normal," but hiring remains challenging.

Eighty-six percent of respondents to a nationally representative survey of school and district administrators conducted by the EdWeek Research Center in July said they don't have enough candidates to fill open bus driver positions. Seventy-nine percent said they have fewer applicants for those positions than they did last year.

The difficulty in hiring drivers is in part a reflection of staffing challenges across industries, said David Glasner, the superintendent of the 4,500-student Shaker Heights, Ohio, school district.

People who may have taken bus routes in the past are now attracted to other driving jobs that are growing in demand, such as delivering for companies like Amazon or driving for services like Uber, he said. Some of those jobs have higher pay and more-flexible schedules, and some drivers don't want to take on the challenge of being responsible for students and managing their behavior, the superintendents said.

Shaker Heights had 50 bus drivers three school years ago, Glasner said, and that number dropped to about 35 last school year.

This year, the district has only been able to recruit or retain about 25 bus drivers after some of last year's staff chose not to return. That left leaders scrambling. School starts next week, and Glasner has spent this week considering limiting bus rides to students who live further from school than has been the practice in years past, when riders could live as close as a mile.

In the meantime, he's kept parents in the loop with updates, and he's given interviews in local media to explain the situation.

The district staffing has fallen well below "the bare minimum" of what it would take to operate at pre-pandemic levels, Glasner said.

In Lake Travis, Bailey has also turned to local media to explain the district's predicament.

The fast-growing community has added a lot of new homes in recent years, increasing the need for transportation, he said. At the same time, many would-be bus drivers have been priced out of the area due to a higher cost of living. Rather than spending the money to commute with high gas prices, they've taken jobs driving closer to home, Bailey said.

Pre-pandemic, the district had about 75 drivers. This year, they've only been able to recruit 36, even after raising starting pay to $23 an hour, holding job fairs with bouncy houses and kids' games, and offering free training to candidates.

"We've just tried to do everything we know possible," Bailey said. "We are just not getting the traffic."

Offering families specific, updated information

Lake Travis's new transportation plan means families' access to buses will change from week to week. That makes it even more essential for the district to provide as much specific information as possible so that it's not difficult for a parent to answer simple ques-

tions like whether to walk their child to the bus in the morning, Bailey said.

The district's drivers will each learn two routes, switching between them on alternating weeks. The school system has posted an updated route schedule in a prominent place on its website, and leaders hope to be able to expand service as they recruit more drivers, Bailey said.

The district also uses an automatic texting system to let parents know if their child's bus is running late, a potential issue at the beginning of the year as drivers learn additional new routes and deal with unpredictable traffic.

Two hundred miles away in Fort Worth, Texas, leaders also plan to offer families personalized information about school transportation, said Joseph Coburn, chief of district operations.

The district plans to purchase an app in the next week that will allow it to send targeted alerts to families by bus route. In the next few years, Coburn hopes to offer families the option to track their child's bus in real-time through a GPS system.

Last year, when bus routes were late to get students home, transportation dispatchers had to rush to contact families, Coburn said. And that was particularly challenging on days when dispatchers and mechanics volunteered to drive a route to fill staffing shortages.

Keeping school leaders in the know

Fort Worth, which has had about 300 drivers in the past, is down to about 200 this school year.

Last year, trying to operate full routes on a skeleton crew meant unreliable and late service for families, Coburn said.

"Even on our best day, with anybody who could drive a bus driving a bus, we had 30 to 40 uncovered routes every single day," he said. "We were providing service that was neither good nor reliable."

This year, the district cut about 60 of its 275 routes so that families wouldn't wake up in the morning to discover their child's bus wasn't there. Even after raising pay and offering referral and hiring bonuses, leaders weren't able to recruit enough drivers.

After seeking input from principals, Coburn started from scratch, combining and redrawing bus routes to make them as efficient as possible. That meant changes for families. Some students have to walk about a tenth of a mile further to get to the bus stop, and some buses run as early as 6 a.m., particularly those that crisscross town to take students to magnet programs far from their neighborhoods.

Bus Drivers

Is the number of applicants in your school or district this year sufficient to fill the positions you have open?

■ Sufficient to fill the gaps ■ Not enough

14%

86%
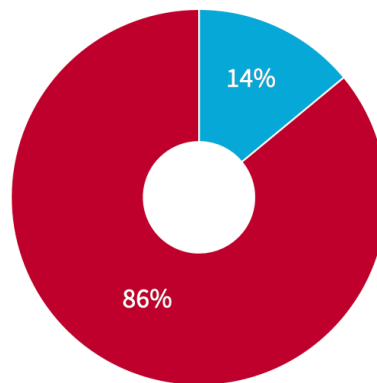
Results show responses from district leaders and principals.
SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, July 2022

Recognizing that people closer to families, like principals and bus drivers, would likely field the most questions about the changes, Coburn sought their input early. And he's given them internal updates so they can explain changes to parents.

"We did not work miracles here," Coburn said. "What we did is say that we have to work around the conditions that we have."

Schools keep hiring—and make it visible

Even after they cut corners to keep the buses running, district leaders say they plan to keep up urgent efforts to recruit new drivers in hopes that they can offer more service and have more breathing room in the coming months.

Some have put banners at school entrances to advertise pay and bonuses. Others have set up information tables at school open houses.

In Shaker Heights, Glasner has surveyed returning drivers about work preferences and competing job options in hopes of improving recruiting. He hopes a visible approach will help bring in more candidates and help families understand the headwinds.

"The shortage we are facing is real," Glasner said. "We are doing our best, and we will continue to do our best to meet the needs of all of our students and families." ■

OPINION

Published September 20, 2022

Advice for New Principals: The 4 Things to Focus on First

By Lebon "Trey" D. James III & David E. DeMatthews

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to high rates of teacher and principal turnover, intensive student-support needs, and significant disruptions in school districts and communities. Now more than ever, new principals will need to be proactive in cultivating the professional skills, expertise, and dispositions to lead, given the prevailing uncertainty in public education.

From our own experiences leading schools and preparing future school leaders, we believe new principals should proactively focus on four areas of learning: job, school, community, and district.

1. Learn your job. First-time principals likely have experience as assistant principals, but taking over a campus amid a pandemic comes with a significant learning curve. To shorten the curve, principals cannot wait for or even expect that their district will provide them with a high-quality mentor. Instead, principals should create a list of potential mentors who are knowledgeable about the day-to-day work of principals, understand the different elements of schools, and have a proven track record of success.

Early in the school year, principals should consider selecting a mentor who can provide regular, nonevaluative feedback and guidance. For instance, the mentor may schedule a yearlong planning session to discuss month-to-month action items that a new principal may not consider or the mentor may observe how the principal facilitates various types of meetings and provide targeted coaching on meeting facilitation.

In our experience, having an unbiased and supportive mentor can help a new principal recognize their talents and assets so they can be productive right away. A mentor can also help the principal identify their areas of growth, which can be cultivated over time or supplemented by other campus administrators or teacher leaders.

Mentors can also validate the principal's experiences with school leadership and offer support in implementing priorities. Mentors

—Vanessa Solis/Education Week and Canva

can be intentional questioners that provide guidance on how to navigate difficult situations, expand your professional network, and provide you with resources to develop your tool kit.

2. Learn your school. First-time principals will need to quickly learn the history, standard operating procedures, and strengths and areas of growth for their campus. To quickly learn, principals will need to prioritize one-on-one meetings and small-group discussions with all campus stakeholders, including custodians, secretarial staff, attendance clerks, teachers, and counselors.

Moreover, principals will need to gain insights about curriculum, assessment, instruction, and interventions from lead and veteran teachers as well as special education and bilingual education teachers. These insights will allow principals to respond to problems, identify and utilize talent where it is needed, and build capacity for individual teachers who are struggling.

For example, many teachers possess a wealth of institutional and instructional knowledge. Auditing staff expertise through one-on-one meetings and focus groups can allow the principal to gain insight into common

challenges and potential teacher-leader experts that can help build schoolwide capacity.

3. Learn your district. First-time principals may or may not be new to the district. Regardless, principals are more likely to thrive when they are knowledgeable about their central-office staff and have strong networks of support.

Research focused on novice principals often reveals that they spend too much time on mundane and unimportant tasks. They are also likely to worry extensively about various aspects of their campus community. New principals who proactively learn their district can improve their time management and lower their stress levels by reaching out to appropriate district contacts when they are in need.

For example, new principals can collaborate with district-level instructional specialists. These specialists can offer support coordinating professional development opportunities based on student data, instructional need, or teacher interest. The additional support from district personnel allows principals to focus on other priorities.

4. Learn your community. First-time principals are likely to find that their campus lacks adequate resources and capacity to

meet the diverse needs of all students, especially amid a pandemic and persistent racial and economic inequities. They would be wise to immediately work with school staff and parents to identify assets within the community that can provide support, resources, and essential insights into the lived experiences of students and families.

For example, the campus parent/teacher organizations are instrumental in promoting community involvement, fundraising to enhance student experiences, and facilitating parent/community partnerships with schools. Many local businesses partner with school PTOs to fundraise for student supplies, learning experiences, and beautification projects for schools.

Every new school year is an opportunity for all principals, veteran and new, to focus on their job, the campus and community they serve, and their district. Principals should proactively seek out and invest in mentorship to promote their development, develop greater awareness of stakeholder needs, leverage partnerships with district leadership, and work with their campus families and communities to develop a collective network of individuals working collaboratively to enhance student outcomes. ◼

Lebon "Trey" D. James III is a doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin and a public school elementary principal in San Antonio. David E. DeMatthews is an associate professor in the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin. Previously, he was a high school history and government teacher, a middle school administrator, and a district administrator.

SPOTLIGHT

Get the information and perspective you need on the education issues you care about most with Education Week Spotlights

The Achievement Gap • Algebra • Assessment • Autism • Bullying • Charter School Leadership • Classroom Management • Common Standards • **Data-Driven Decisionmaking** • Differentiated Instruction • Dropout Prevention • E-Learning • ELL Assessment and Teaching • ELLs in the Classroom • Flu and Schools • Getting The Most From Your IT Budget • Gifted Education • Homework • **Implementing Common Standards** • Inclusion and Assistive Technology • Math Instruction • Middle and High School Literacy • Motivation • No Child Left Behind • Pay for Performance • **Principals** • Parental Involvement • Race to the Top • Reading Instruction • Reinventing Professional Development • Response to Intervention • School Uniforms and Dress Codes • Special Education • STEM in Schools • **Teacher Evaluation** • Teacher Tips for the New Year • Technology in the Classroom • Tips for New Teachers

VIEW THE COMPLETE COLLECTION OF EDUCATION WEEK SPOTLIGHTS

www.edweek.org/go/spotlights