

Leading Schools and Districts in Times of Crisis

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The COVID-19 school closures highlighted the importance of crisis management for school and district leaders. Crisis management, however, has not received sufficient attention from school leadership preparation programs or education leadership researchers. This article synthesizes research spanning schools and other organizations, including those in the private sector, to describe a framework for understanding crises and crisis management in schools and districts and the key competences this literature suggests for successful navigation of crisis situations. We use this framework to discuss leaders' responses to the COVID-19 school closures in spring 2020. We conclude with an argument for more consciously incorporating crisis management training into both preservice and in-service preparation and support for education leaders and for opening new lines of inquiry into crisis leadership at the school and district levels.

Keywords: leadership; observational research; organization theory/change; principals

The COVID-19 pandemic closed schools around the world, with spring 2020 closures affecting approximately 70% of students globally (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020). Across the United States, from March to May 2020, 48 states plus the District of Columbia ordered or recommended school closures for the remainder of the year (Education Week, 2020). Schools ceasing in-person instruction precipitated a massive, unexpected shift to remote learning in most school districts and left schools to figure out quickly how to furnish the health, nutrition, and other social services they often provide, especially to low-income students. Estimates suggested that the learning losses from the school closures could be profound, with students entering the 2020–2021 school year—many, again, remotely—with only 50% of their typical learning gains in math in some grades, and only 70% in reading (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020).

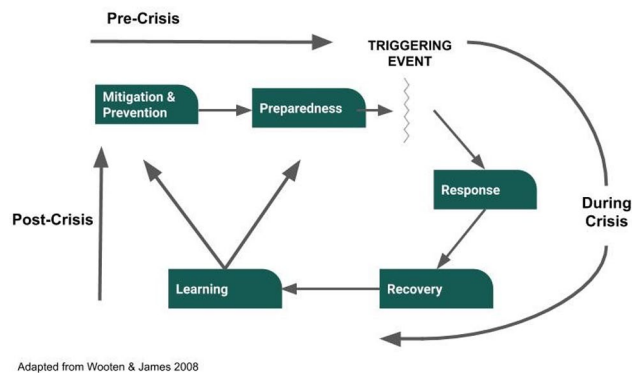
Definitionally, this *unexpected, fundamental disruption to school functioning with potentially high consequences for the organization, its stakeholders, and its reputation* makes COVID-19 a crisis—and, like most school crises, a crisis for school and district leaders to navigate and manage. *Crisis management* covers strategies for preparing organizations for crises—that is, making them “crisis ready”—and handling them when they arise in ways that minimize their damage to the organization and its stakeholders (Gainey, 2009). Presumably, leaders who were more ready and who implemented effective responses to the COVID-19 crisis have reduced the consequences of the closures for student

learning loss and other outcomes. But this presumption prompts the question: What do we know about crises in schools and how school and district leaders effectively respond to them?

In this review, we synthesize the research base on crisis leadership. In our literature search, we focused first on research on crisis leadership in schools. As open systems, schools constantly are affected by external forces that they must organize themselves to manage (Scott & Davis, 2007); crises can represent acute cases of such forces.¹ This research has investigated the crisis response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (Brickman et al., 2004; Ingenito, 2004; Weist et al., 2002); to hurricanes, including Hurricane Katrina (Elliott & Taylor, 2006; Howat et al., 2012; Simmons & Douglas, 2018); to other natural disasters, such as wildfires and tornadoes (Bishop et al., 2015; Kitamura, 2019); and to school shootings (Connolly-Wilson & Reeves, 2013; Kennedy-Paine et al., 2013; Zenere, 2013). These studies document that some school leaders approach crises in ways that mitigate their consequences and speed recovery. Yet given the relative thinness of this research base, we supplemented it with research on crisis leadership from the study of management more generally (e.g., Fener & Cevik, 2015; James & Wooten, 2005). Although schools and districts face contextual differences (e.g., public governance, constrained

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Adapted from Wooten & James 2008

FIGURE 1. *Crisis management life cycle in schools and districts.*
 Note. Adapted from Wooten and James (2008).

budgets) that create challenges in adapting conclusions or recommendations from research on private firms, we focused on identifying places where insights from that work most clearly applied to leadership of schools.

Drawing on our synthesis of this research, we adapt a framework of school leadership crises and responses that we argue can be used to guide school and district leaders in preparing for and responding to crises.² Although for brevity we focus our discussion more on school-level leaders, this framework applies to leaders at both the school and district levels, with specifics adapted to fit their different positions within the district hierarchy. We describe five phases of a crisis management life cycle in schools: mitigation/prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and learning. We use this framework to highlight competencies and skills that crises like COVID-19 require, which can help school districts and leadership preparation programs focus preservice and in-service professional development for school leaders.

Indeed, school leaders need these development opportunities. Although the word “crisis” invokes a sense of infrequency, evidence suggests that crises are not a rarity. Outside education, leaders increasingly recognize the periodicity of crises; in one survey of business leaders, 80% of respondents reported having endured a crisis in the past 2 years (Deloitte, 2018). Similarly, in a small-scale survey of principals, 71% of principals had experienced a crisis in their schools (Daughtry, 2015). As Adams and Kritsonis (2006, p. 4) put it, “schools can no longer believe that crisis situations only happen to others or that disasters only happen in other parts of the country.” Yet scholars have highlighted repeatedly that principals and other educational leaders come to the job without formal preparation in crisis management (Kitamura, 2019; Lichtenstein et al., 1994; McCarty, 2012), a topic not called out in the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. COVID-19 underscores the need for a framework for organizing this preparation. The next section presents this framework.

Phases of Crisis Management

In contrast to early treatments that portrayed crisis management as activities taken to contain a crisis already occurring, more recent frameworks recognize crisis management as a broader,

ongoing activity within organizations (Weick, 1988). Across models in both business and education, crisis management is organized into multiple phases spanning the precrisis period, the crisis itself, and postcrisis (Deloitte, 2018; Robertson, 2017). While the terminology used to define each phase differs across studies, consistent themes arise in the goals and strategies associated with these phases, regardless of sector. We synthesize across models from business (e.g., Fener & Cevik, 2015; James & Wooten, 2005) and education (e.g., Robertson, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2008; Connolly-Wilson & Reeves, 2013; Adams & Kritsonis, 2006) to present a framework that incorporates insights from both.

Figure 1 represents our synthesis of the cycle of crisis management, adapted from a schema presented in Wooten and James (2008).³ In the precrisis period, crisis management requires mitigation and prevention strategies and preparedness strategies. A triggering event provokes a shift into the crisis response phase. Following the acute response, this phase transitions into recovery from the crisis and learning to inform the next crisis. Aside from the triggering event that demarcates the beginning of crisis response, transitions among the other phases may be gradual, and the phases themselves may not be clearly delineated. For purposes of exposition, however, we treat the phases as distinct.

Before turning to this discussion, it is helpful to clarify a distinction scholars draw between sudden and smoldering crises (e.g., James & Wooten, 2005). *Sudden crises*, such as natural disasters or the COVID-19 school closures, are unexpected, often with an external locus, and beyond the control of organizational leadership (and perceived as so). In contrast, *smoldering crises* grow into crisis status from smaller problems within the organization due to managerial inattention (which stakeholders often perceive), as when loose fiscal oversight in a school precipitates an investigation into staff embezzlement. Although the phases we describe fit both types of crises, emphases of the phases, especially in the precrisis period, differ. In particular, smoldering crises are more subject to mitigation and prevention strategies, while for sudden crises, leaders necessarily place more attention on preparedness.

Mitigation and Prevention

Mitigation and prevention include all activities that pertain to predicting and minimizing the likelihood of different types of crises that could occur. During this time, leaders conduct or manage safety assessments, analyze and identify potential hazards and risks (referred to as “signal detection”), and then take steps to minimize the likelihood these risks are realized (Gainey, 2010; Robertson, 2017). In this phase, school and district leaders ask, broadly:

- What are the looming threats to our organization and its effective functioning, both internal and external? What do our data, stakeholder feedback, and scan of the environment tell us about our vulnerabilities? Where are our blind spots?
- How might our existing systems, processes, and policies contribute to turning threats into crises?

- What steps should my school or district be taking to minimize the risks we identify? What changes to organizational processes should we make? What resources or assets do we have or can we obtain to make realization of a crisis less likely?

For help asking and answering these questions, leaders and their teams might make use of a formal risk or vulnerability assessment process to assess potential threats (see U.S. Department of Education, 2008, for guidance). Such assessments can be relatively generic—aimed at identifying hazards and risks broadly—or more specific, such as a protocol enacted to gather information and take preventative steps when a school suspects that a student may be a violence threat (see Fein et al., 2002).⁴

Risk assessment and mitigation is more effective with smoldering crises (because they emerge over time) than crises that are actually unpredictable (James & Wooten, 2005), though a goal in this phase is minimizing the number of crises that fall into this latter category. For example, a student's suicide may be unpredictable, but schools monitoring the environment and anticipating the potential for student suicides may implement strategies (e.g., mental health and wellness initiatives) to reduce their likelihood. As Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) argue, an uncertain environment requires an ongoing effort to define and monitor potentially weak signals of more serious threats so adaptive action can be taken. Effective mitigation and prevention require school and district leaders to familiarize themselves with their students, staff, and community. Deep understanding of the environment positions leaders better to assess the school's (or district's) full range of risks and vulnerabilities (Deloitte, 2018).

Preparedness

Mitigation and prevention efforts are about reducing the risk of crisis, but not all crises can be averted. For this reason, nearly every treatment of crisis leadership discusses the need for organizations to establish crisis management plans during the preparedness phase.⁵ Such plans draw from assessments of risks and vulnerabilities identified in the mitigation phase, which allow leaders to create and consciously walk through scenarios with their teams to create thorough, forward-looking plans for what the school or district will do in potential crises to increase capacity for response and recovery (Kennedy-Paine et al., 2013). For schools, these plans often are based on district crisis management plans or templates but require adaptation to the school's context (Robertson, 2017).

Crisis management plans include logistics and training procedures for crisis response as well as assigning roles and tasks to key personnel, depending on the scenario (Bishop et al., 2015; Fener & Cevik, 2015). Roles and tasks are assigned strategically to team members based on their abilities (Gainey, 2009). Responsibilities must be clearly defined and rehearsed through regular trainings, ensuring that each member of the school/district organization understands how to react in times of crisis (Jimerson et al., 2005; Lockwood, 2005; Weick, 1993). Plans must be readily accessible to the school/district community (Gainey, 2010). Relatedly, preparedness requires establishing or refining systems of communication for crisis response that can engage all stakeholders with clarity and transparency, which is

key to a “readiness mentality” and to positioning the community for an effective crisis response (Connolly-Wilson & Reeves, 2013; Howitt & Leonard, 2006; James & Wooten, 2005).

Response

A triggering event marks the onset of a crisis, which demands an acute response in which leaders take immediate action to minimize the negative impact of the crisis on the organization. Research in the private sector often labels this phase *containment* or *damage control*. A crisis management plan is put into action, and leaders continuously assess the crisis and the efficacy of the plan, adjusting as needed (Bishop et al., 2015). This monitoring requires gathering of continuous data and feedback from stakeholders, making high-functioning communication systems crucial (Boin et al., 2013). For example, in their chronicling of the immediate response to a series of hurricanes in schools in southern Louisiana, Howat et al. (2012) describe systems to assess damage and the need for repairs, to communicate between principals and central office, and to gather information about flooding in the community and other challenges that may threaten reopening or keep students out of school.

Crisis response often demands quick, decisive actions based on this information. Effective decisions require a broad scope of consideration, assessing both short- and long-term consequences of decisions to guard against reactivity and shortsightedness (Bishop et al., 2015). During this time, information is often piecemeal and perhaps conflicting, requiring leaders to engage in sensemaking in order to reduce confusion and effectively manage members of the school/district community (Weick, 1993). Communicating the crisis, its consequences, and the school's or district's response transparently—internally and externally—builds trust and promotes productive engagement with the response from the community (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Howat et al., 2012). An emphasis in this communication is “meaning making” for stakeholders, shaping a central narrative or message about the crisis, its causes, and its coming resolution that clarifies, encourages, and inspires (Kitamura, 2019). Failing to communicate a narrative can seed confusion or community backlash (see Cornell & Sheras, 1998, for a case example).

Recovery

The further the organization moves from the triggering event, the more leaders transition from an acute to a sustained response that promotes recovery. Recovery means a return to a routine for the organization and its community members (Coopman & Young, 2009), though balanced with continued recognition of and support for the ongoing “postcrisis” needs of the community (Stern, 2013).⁶ This balance requires leaders to assess the school or district's response while continuing to attend to both the needs of stakeholders and the contextual factors surrounding the school and local community (Weber & Glynn, 2006). Like the crisis response, effective recovery requires a recovery plan with critical activities for leaders to engage and metrics for evaluating the recovery (James & Wooten, 2005).

In recovery, two main priorities are monitoring community needs and continuously communicating the school's ongoing

response to those needs. In Kennedy-Paine et al.'s (2013) discussion of a schools' response to school shooting, for example, leaders kept their attention on students' response to the trauma so they could provide and communicate supports (e.g., additional counselors, academic accommodations). At the same time, leaders can promote recovery by communicating a positive perspective on a "new normal" as community members recover from the crisis event (Ginsberg & Multon, 2011). Returning to a routine and regular activities can give community members a sense of comfort; consulting with mental health professionals can help leaders find the right mix of routine and accommodation (Kennedy-Paine et al., 2013). Transparent, authentic communication about both short-term and long-term recovery decisions and efforts reassures stakeholders and encourages organizational stability (Fener & Cevik 2015; James & Wooten, 2005).

Learning

The last phase of effective crisis management is intentional learning from the crisis and the organization's crisis experience. Data and feedback gathered during each phase provide leaders the means to understand the factors that caused or exacerbated the crisis, what strategies the organization might have taken to mitigate or prevent it, the effectiveness of the crisis management plan, and success of actions taken to respond to and recover from the crisis (Fener & Cevik, 2015; Howat et al., 2012). Careful analysis of this information by the leadership team in the school or district—or perhaps a work group tasked with close consideration of the organization's crisis response—can identify changes that need to be made to organizational systems and procedures with the goal of more effective future mitigation/prevention and preparedness (Coopman & Young, 2009). For example, in their case of hurricane recovery, Howat et al. (2012) describe how participants learned numerous lessons from the storms that they could apply when later ones hit, from how critical it is to maintain inventory records for requesting federal assistance to the need for multiple backups for essential digital student records, to the importance of having students and staff take home personal items in advance of a coming storm to make their loss less likely. A potential model for systematically gathering and analyzing data to promote organizational learning that schools and districts can use is the U.S. Army's "After Action Reviews," which assess what was supposed to happen, what happened, and what accounts for the differences (Fullan, 2006).

Learning requires leaders' intentional, critical reflection and sensemaking not only on the efficacy of the precrisis efforts and crisis management plans but on the leader's own decision-making and communication practices (Gainey, 2010; Weick, 1993). Demonstrating this learning has both symbolic value to the community, who expect leaders to communicate what will be done in the future (Boin et al., 2013), and material value, as learning makes leaders more prepared for the next crisis.

Crisis Leadership Competencies

Successful navigation of the phases of a crisis requires a diverse set of skills. Our review of crisis management literature identified three sets of competencies that cut across these phases:

analysis, sensemaking, and judgment; communication; and emotional intelligence. Although not an exhaustive set, we argue that school leaders need to build strength in each of these areas for effective crisis management.

Analysis, Sensemaking, and Judgment

Before, during, and after a crisis, effective leaders continuously gather information as inputs to mitigation, preparation, response, and recovery strategies. To make this information useful, however, leaders must be able to analyze and make sense of it. Prior to a triggering event, leaders need the ability to forecast and assess risk as well as the scope and likelihood of different crisis events (Bishop et al., 2015). They also must analyze the potential efficacy of different crisis management plans under diverse potential circumstances, at least as best they can, given limits on capacity to anticipate how crises may unfold (Simon, 1957). Developing a sense of organizational capacities and relational dynamics allows leaders to ensure that team members are prepared for potential crises (Weber & Glynn, 2006; Weick, 1993). As a crisis emerges, leaders need to be able to detect it and understand its consequences and potential scope (Boin et al., 2013). Once it has emerged, leaders often are flooded with information—including inaccurate and incomplete information—that must be processed and evaluated, under time pressure and stress, to inform their crisis response actions (Mumford et al., 2007; Weick, 1993). Postcrisis, leaders must analyze what happened and their decisions, collaborating with others in the organization to make sense of events retrospectively and construct a narrative to give direction for revising future mitigation strategies and crisis management plans (Weick, 1995).⁷ Effective analysis requires leaders' willingness to maintain a stance of inquiry (Schein, 2013), ask questions, and integrate different forms of knowledge from different sources while maintaining a perspective on different facets of the crisis and both short- and long-term outcomes (Mitroff, 2005; Raisor, 2011).

The quality of leaders' decisions during the crisis response affects the long-term recovery of the organization (Kennedy-Paine et al., 2013). Yet while analysis informs these decisions, they often must be made quickly with incomplete information that does not yield clear direction (Kapucu, 2008). Thus, leaders require good judgment that allows them to think deliberately and carefully but respond quickly (Fullan, 2007). Leaders with good judgment listen effectively to discern meaning, drawing on their own experiences and knowledge to anticipate and consider the broad scope of outcomes of each potential decision (Likierman, 2020). Good judgment produces clarity and confidence, which builds trust in the school community (Bishop et al., 2015; Raisor, 2011). Building professional judgment occurs through processes of self-reflection prior to conflict or crisis events occurring, which helps build the capacity to act when there is "no right answer" (Lizzio & Wilson, 2007, p. 277).

Communication

A pivotal component of effective crisis management is communication, a key topic in studies of crisis responses in education

and other sectors. For effective crisis communication, both *systems* and *content* matter. In research on private firms, both systems and content often are viewed from a public relations perspective, with firms in crisis using multiple modes of communication to reach different stakeholders with messages aimed at minimizing damage to the organization by reassuring, restoring calm, and positioning the problem or firm in favorable terms (Wooten & James, 2008).

For schools and districts, even if positive public relations are not the main goal of a crisis management plan, many principles from this research apply. Systems of communication must be established in advance of a triggering event and employ a mix of strategies to reach different constituencies, especially during response and recovery (Gainey, 2009). Such strategies might include listservs or mass phone/text systems to reach employees or parents, supplemented with informational web sites and a social media presence for communicating more broadly with the public. Communication systems are necessary for getting information *out* to stakeholders, but must also create mechanisms for two-way communication to gather information from those stakeholders for making good decisions (Howat et al., 2012). Moreover, in turbulent situations, systems for dialogue—even asynchronous dialogue—with stakeholders are important means for leaders to navigate potential tensions among schools or districts, faculty, students, parents, and communities (Gross, 2020).

The content that is communicated will be specific to the crisis, but effective content has some common elements. One is transparency. Transparent, honest communication builds trust and buy-in; leaders must be willing to admit mistakes to stakeholders and describe adjustments throughout the response and recovery phases (Bishop et al., 2015). Another is frequency of contact. Leaders must communicate with stakeholders often to reinforce information, promote engagement, and ensure that community members know what is expected of them—but not so often that the message is tuned out (Field, 2020). A third is consistency of message, meaning that the organization is making sense of the situation for stakeholders in consistent ways (Duhé, 2005). Notably, what is communicated often varies across stakeholders as messages are tailored to make them meaningful for different target audiences (Wooten & James, 2008). What is important is that stakeholders see consistent messages, that the school or district is speaking with “one voice.” Promoting consistency may mean having a single spokesperson (e.g., principal, superintendent) or ensuring that multiple team members can deliver variations on the same central message, which may increase credibility with diverse constituencies (Gainey, 2010). Consistency of a central message across stakeholders is especially important in an age of decentralized media in which information can become widely circulated in a short time (Hart et al., 2001).

Effective communication is key to a school’s or district’s management of a crisis vis-à-vis its immediate stakeholders (e.g., employees, families). It also fosters collaboration with external groups. Case studies of education crises from student deaths to natural disasters to the 9/11 aftermath show that collaboration with other local organizations (e.g., first responders, media, philanthropy) often is essential to an effective response and recovery (e.g., Coopman & Young, 2009; Garran, 2013; Howitt &

Leonard, 2006; Low, 2008; Weist et al., 2002). Transparent, consistent communication regarding the crisis, the needs it produces, and how partners can assist can mobilize these external resources.

Emotional Intelligence

Crises demand emotional intelligence from leaders. Emotional intelligence covers recognition, regulation, and management of emotion in self and others (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), and may be key to how well a leader handles a crisis. As Fernandez and Shaw (2020, p. 42) put it, “in a crisis, perhaps the most important of all is emotional intelligence and emotional stability that will allow the academic leader to place the interests of others above their own.”

Emotional intelligence is central because crisis situations often lead to increased stress and potential trauma for members of school communities, including leaders themselves (Ingenito, 2004). Leaders must maintain emotional control in the face of this stress because stress impairs judgment and decision making (Boin et al., 2013). At the same time, the emotionally intelligent leader recognizes community stress and assumes that a positive, reassuring, courageous stance can promote community members’ coping (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). A positive outlook that translates problems into opportunities and promotes resiliency consistently relates to better school outcomes following a crisis (Bishop et al., 2015; Kennedy-Paine et al., 2013; Raisor, 2011). Empathy also matters. Leaders must understand the needs of students, families, and staff members to direct appropriate supports (Weist et al., 2002; Zenere, 2013).

Obviously, leaders must invest in skills like emotional control and empathy prior to a crisis. Leaders can build emotional intelligence through efforts to listen actively, accept criticism, and develop authentic relationships with students and faculty (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Long-term success of an organization is dependent on leaders’ ability to foster communities with strong relationships both within the school and with external community members who together work toward common goals (Fullan, 2007). Developing such relationships requires leaders to understand and respond to varying individual perspectives. Once developed, these meaningful relationships create space for leaders to promote stability and resiliency when crises arise (Elliott & Taylor, 2006).

Crisis Leadership and the COVID-19 School Closures

Although it will be some time before we can fully assess crisis leadership in schools and districts in the context of COVID-19, ongoing efforts from multiple research groups to document local responses to the pandemic show that how schools and districts handled the spring 2020 school closure crisis varied considerably. We draw on early results from those efforts to characterize COVID-19 crisis management in U.S. public schools. We include insights from the Tennessee Education Research Alliance’s work on the COVID-19 response in Tennessee, which is based on a statewide survey of teachers and leaders conducted

in April 2020 about their experiences in the early weeks of the school closures.⁸ The survey included a mix of open- and closed-ended items capturing educators' concerns and needs. Working with anonymized data obtained through Tennessee Education Research Alliance, we summarized responses to the closed-ended responses and read and synthesized open-ended responses that described facets of schools' crisis responses.

Preparedness

Local education leaders could not have prevented the COVID-19 school closures in spring 2020, but evidence suggests that few schools and districts were prepared for the move to teaching and providing other school services remotely. For example, a scan of large district web sites nationally in the early days of the closures showed that almost no districts in the sample had comprehensive distance learning plans in place (Lake, 2020), though many made progress on this front in the first month (Lake & Dusseault, 2020). Also, while most teachers in a national survey fielded by RAND around the first week of May reported recent training on how to use virtual learning management platforms—which already supplement instruction in many schools—only a third had received training on providing remote opportunities that were engaging or motivating to students, and even fewer on providing opportunities if a student lacked devices or internet access at home (Hamilton et al., 2020). Home technology and internet access appear across data collections as barriers to virtual learning for which many schools were unprepared. When Tennessee teachers were asked on the statewide survey to name their two greatest needs in supporting remote learning, “student access to home computers/devices” (57%) and “better internet access for students” (52%) were by far the most common answers, suggesting that many schools entered the closures without means to address student access to virtual instruction.

Response

Schools also varied in their responses to the closures when they occurred. An initial focus of schools and districts appeared to be addressing basic needs, such as student meals, on which many families rely. The response on this front was perhaps most consistent; almost all districts in one study of initial responses were implementing meal delivery plans (Lake, 2020). Responses to instructional needs were less consistent. The RAND survey found wide variation in the intensity of instruction and engagement with students that teachers reported (Hamilton et al., 2018). In Tennessee, 67% of teachers reported regularly emailing learning resources to families, but just 23% reported regularly holding virtual classes.⁹ This engagement appeared again to be in part a function of what students could access; Harris et al. (2020) found family broadband access to be among the best predictors of contact between teachers and students, and broadband access predicted whether teachers reported holding virtual classes in Tennessee as well. Some school districts moved quickly to address technology deficits during the closures by distributing devices to students or distributing mobile devices or “hot spots” to secure internet access (Lake, 2020), though these needs

remained unaddressed in many districts. As one Tennessee principal described in an open-ended survey response,

Our rural district does not have equitable internet access. This inequity is not always due to poverty as some areas in our community are simply not serviced by internet providers. Given equal access to internet, I feel like students could participate more in online learning and have a greater chance of preventing a learning slide.

Nationally, more than one third of low-income families do not have access to a computer and/or internet for distance learning (Key, 2020).

Communication from school and district leaders in the early days of the response generally received high marks. Nationally, 80% of parents reported satisfaction with closure communication from their schools (Key, 2020). In Tennessee, 95% of administrators rated the communication from their district as *good* or *excellent*. Qualitative responses revealed that strong communication was not universal, however. As one principal stated,

Many components [of what is communicated] are confusing, unsure . . . We need CLEAR directions and expectations from the district administration. Oftentimes we get confusing information [from central office] or there are many questions left . . . which causes frustration.

In the absence of clear plans and directions from the district, nearly half of Tennessee teachers reported seeking out general online resources to help them implement remote learning.

Recovery and Learning

The timing of the school closures late in the school year and the protracted nature of the pandemic meant that recovery began with planning for an uncertain 2020–2021 school year in which schools would operate in a “new normal” while addressing student learning deficits from months of lost learning as well as many nonachievement needs. Still, early data suggested that this recovery opened space for learning. Underscoring the importance of crisis preparation that the COVID-19 closures has highlighted, 85% of respondents to the Hamilton et al. (2020) study responded that “planning for future school closures or other emergencies” was a *somewhat* or *much higher priority* as they looked forward to their school building reopening. As one Tennessee leader noted, “I feel we were not readily prepared for any pandemic. We will strive to be more prepared in the future.” Another underscored the need for learning from the closures to put new processes in place:

This closure is a brand-new experience, however, it looks like this could happen again in the future. We should have standards-based academic programming from the state to provide for students if we are caught in this position again . . . to prevent them from getting behind and missing work just because they are at home. This will be a huge undertaking but . . . if you make the protocol public and let teachers, students, and parents know that this is the way it will be when we are not in a crisis situation, then they are already prepared.

In other words, leaders already were assessing how systems can be adjusted to be more ready for future crises that produce time out of school on a large scale.

Moving Forward: Incorporating Crisis Leadership Into Preservice Preparation and In-Service Professional Learning

Just as successful crisis management requires learning for future prevention and preparation, as we transition into recovery from COVID-19, the field of educational leadership faces an important learning opportunity. Collectively, the field must recognize that crises in schools and districts are, unfortunately, not uncommon events and ensure that we create institutional supports for leaders to build capacity in order to lead in times of crisis. Currently, crisis management is not recognized as an explicit component of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, which articulate expectations for leaders nationwide.¹⁰ More clearly articulating crisis preparation and management as an expectation for leaders may provide principals and district leaders with necessary focus in this area.

Crisis management can also be more explicitly incorporated into leaders' preservice preparation experiences. Administrator preparation programs often do not emphasize the kinds of management skills that may be most useful in a crisis (Hess & Kelly, 2007), and school leaders report not feeling prepared to navigate school crises successfully (Daughtry, 2015; Kitamura, 2019). Preparation programs could offer courses in crisis management or fold crisis management skills into courses on school operations and management. On the practical side of leader training, they might also choose field placements or mentors strategically to construct opportunities for prospective leaders to learn from current leaders with crisis management experience.

Leaders can also learn crisis management skills via in-service professional learning opportunities. Taking a human resources development perspective to an analysis of crises encountered by large businesses, Wooten and James (2008) identified numerous development opportunities that firms could offer leaders to build crisis competencies, including communications and media training, scenario planning, and organizational structuring, that translate to the school district context. Recognizing that experience is likely the best preparation (Thach, 2012), districts could also create opportunities for hands-on learning in crisis management with action learning programs that feature realistic crisis scenarios, assigning leaders to crisis locations to assist, and incorporating crisis debriefs into principal meetings. To encourage leaders to build capacity in this area, districts could also consider adding crisis management competencies to their performance evaluations systems.

Of course, for districts, professional learning opportunities must be part of a broader proactive strategy that includes putting appropriate structures in place to help school-level leaders manage crises. For example, they can codify mitigation and prevention strategies for their schools, create templates for crisis management plans, and monitor schools' implementation in these areas. They can ensure that the district has systems for effective stakeholder communication that schools can utilize. And in times of crisis, they must model empathy and support as


they guide their principals and others through response, recovery, and learning.¹¹

Conclusions

COVID-19 has highlighted the need for attention to crisis leadership in K–12 schools. School leaders need both the skills and the structures in place to mitigate crises, prepare for them, respond to them, and recover and learn from them. Viewed separately, the skills required for crisis leadership are not wholly distinct from the skills successful school leadership demands more broadly (Grissom et al., 2021). Yet leaders need preparation and training to adapt those skills to the context of crises, which arise frequently in schools. They also need to connect those skills to structures they put in place to help them lead in each stage of a crisis. School-level leaders must, at a minimum, ensure that they have processes for regularly assessing risks in the school environment to develop or revise risk mitigation strategies, up-to-date crisis management plans, and high-functioning communication systems that can be accessed quickly should a crisis arise. School district leaders must not only have similar structures in place at the district level but also support and monitor schools' mitigation and preparedness strategies and take the lead in providing school leaders with requisite training opportunities to ensure crisis management readiness.

Beyond calling attention to the demands of crisis leadership in schools and districts, a secondary goal of this article is to spark research attention on this important topic. Studying crises rigorously is challenging. Crises often are isolated, context-dependent events about which systematic information may not be recorded or readily available. Their nature lends their study to be near-universally qualitative in approach. The widespread nature of the COVID-19 school closures, in contrast, offers an opportunity to understand crisis leadership in schools on a large scale. We suggest that education researchers seize upon this challenging time in the history of schooling to begin to build a more systematic understanding of the crisis responses of schools and districts. Possible questions for future research in this realm include what local structures and resources improved schools' management of the COVID-19 crisis, the extent to which crisis preparedness helped schools prevent losses to student learning and other outcomes, what factors influenced how school and district leaders responded to their communities' needs in the wake of school closures, and how leaders' learnings from their response to initial closures in the spring of 2020 informed their approach to continued management of the COVID-19 crisis during the 2020–2021 school year and, potentially, beyond.

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NOTES

¹Of course, crises facing schools can also arise from within the internal environment. For example, a smoldering problem with poor organizational climate or staff relationships could lead to mass turnover among teachers. Explicit studies of crisis management in schools, however, focus more often on crises arising externally.

²We recognize, of course, that other actors in the school, district, and surrounding community, beyond those in formal leadership positions, also engage in the crisis life cycle. We maintain a focus on leaders as their engagement often has outsized influence in how a school or a district navigates a crisis, though throughout we note interactions of formal leaders with other stakeholders in this navigation.

³Other scholars have described related schema. Preble (1997), for example, goes into more details on what we describe as the “precrisis” phase, viewing crisis management through a lens of steps required to formulate and create a crisis management plan. Pearson and Clair (1998) present a model that begins with executives’ perceptions about risk, followed by crisis management preparations, and, after a triggering event, planned and ad hoc responses. We adapt Wooten and James (2008) because their model provides, in our judgment, a sensible categorization of the phases of crisis management and because they represent the full crisis life cycle, including learning, which informs mitigation and preparation.

⁴As the widely circulated *Threat Assessment in Schools Guide* produced by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education underscores, threat assessment protocols are just one part of a broader school strategy to prevent student violence (Fein et al., 2002), building on steps such as addressing codes of silence among students, stopping student bullying, and ensuring that every student has a trusting relationship with at least one adult in a school.

⁵Model school crisis management plans often are available from state departments of education or other agencies. As one example, see Virginia Department of Education (2002).

⁶Although the acute crisis threat has passed at the recovery stage, meeting postcrisis needs may still include ongoing management of threats created by the triggering event. For example, damage from a hurricane may create dangers for a school/district community for an extended period after the storm, even as the organization has returned to a period of routines and relative stability.

⁷Although beyond the scope of this essay, see Weick (1995) on the philosophical and practical challenges of retrospective sensemaking in organizations. See also Combe and Carrington (2015), for a helpful review of leaders’ sensemaking in times of crisis.

⁸Survey information comes from a module of COVID-19-focused questions on the annual Tennessee Educator Survey. The response rate on this module was 40% for teachers and 44% for school leaders. More information is available in Patrick and Newsome (2020).

⁹Another 11% reported holding virtual tutoring sessions.

¹⁰Crisis leadership arguably falls under the operations and management standard (Standard 9), which emphasizes systems management, communication, and management of the internal and external political environment to achieve the school’s mission. It is not highlighted specifically, however.

¹¹Although traditional public schools and districts are the focus of this article, crisis leadership clearly is necessary for other types of schools (e.g., charter schools, private, or independent schools), and essentially all of our arguments about structures, competencies, preparation, and training required for school-level leaders apply. One difference is that such schools may not be governed by an umbrella entity that can provide them with additional support, in which case such schools must take on the roles ascribed to both schools and districts in the text.

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