

Chapter 11

Striving for Equity in Pandemic Times: The Administrator's Role in the Shift to Online Education in K–12 and Higher Education Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the reality of educational administrators in U.S.-based institutions of education. Looking closely at 17 educational administrators from both K-12 systems and institutions of higher education, the authors come to a more comprehensive understanding of crisis leadership and its impact on equitable educational practices – both for students as well as for the administrators themselves. This chapter is based on a larger project the authors undertook to explore through narratives and photography the experiences of administrators during the global COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020. This chapter illustrates the ways that communication, support, and equitable solutions for the learning community are and are not well articulated by leaders. The authors close out this chapter with recommendations for educational leaders during times of crisis as well as for potential follow-up research.

INTRODUCTION

From January 10-12, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) published a comprehensive package of guidance documents for countries, covering topics related to the management of an outbreak of the novel coronavirus, including prevention and control, lab testing, national capacities review tool, risk

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communication and community engagement, disease commodity packages, travel advice, clinical management, and surveillance case definitions (World Health Organization, 2020b). At the same time, on January 11, 2020, the Chinese media reported the first death from the novel coronavirus (World Health Organization, 2020b). Then, on January 30, 2020, the Director-General of WHO “declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC), WHO’s highest level of alarm” (World Health Organization, 2020b). On February 11, 2020, in order to avoid inaccuracy or stigma to a certain geographic area, animal, or group of people, WHO announced that the disease caused by the novel coronavirus would be named COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2020b).

BACKGROUND

In the very near past, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020a) reported in mid-March, approximately 125,260 cases and 4,613 deaths worldwide from COVID-19. These numbers continue to exponentially grow, resulting in the U.S. having the most confirmed number of cases worldwide. This crisis impacts everyone across the globe. Previously, we never considered a pandemic affecting our every facet of life. Our social, health, economic, and political spheres are forever changed. In education, changes were made swiftly, if not overnight. At the same time, educators found themselves drowning in the imperative need to move into the digital environment and provide an array of support to our students, families, and communities.

As Hong Kong returned to remote learning (Chor, 2020), the Los Angeles Unified School District, the second largest U.S. school district, and so many other U.S. K-12 school districts reported they will start the school year online (Hubler & Goldstein, 2020). Simultaneously, major international universities transitioned to mostly online learning, as well. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. government continues an aggressive campaign to force educators and students back into the classroom. It is clear that the politicization of the COVID crisis prioritizes the economy and partisan re-elections as more important than the health and safety of this country’s students and educators.

After these announcements, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released new resources and schools to support opening schools for in-person instruction. These resources and tools supported how to open schools safely by “promoting behaviors that prevent spread, altering how a school and school day is structured, and outlining how to keep the school environment healthy through cleaning, proper ventilation, and other practices” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020a). In addition, the CDC (2020b) followed up with indicators for dynamic school decision making.

The CDC suggested decision-makers use at least one of the core measures of community burden in addition to the self-assessed measure of school implementation of key mitigation strategies. The recommended measures of community burden are the number of new cases per 100,000 persons within the last 14 days and/or the percentage of COVID-19 tests that are positive during the last 14 days (CDC, 2020b). These measures were coupled with the school’s ability to implement to the largest extent possible and adhere to the following key mitigation strategies: (1) consistent and correct use of masks; (2) social distancing to the extent possible; (3) hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette; (4) cleaning and disinfection; and (5) contact tracing in collaboration with local health department (CDC, 2020b). These indicators and measures were introduced to reduce the risk of introduction and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 within schools and in the larger community.

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