



Research-Based Strategies for Re-Opening Schools in the Fall After the Emergency School Closure Period

School leaders have the ability to build organizational capacity to improve teaching and learning by creating conditions that engage teachers and foster a collaborative environment. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to threaten our communities, consider how the school will settle into the “new normal” and how you may go about re-establishing a focus on learning in this radically altered environment.

I. Consider how you frame the challenge

Research indicates that how a leader frames a situation when facing a challenge impacts those around them. There are two types of framing of challenges most often used – threat or opportunity. *Threat Framing* can be quite useful in an emergency situation, such as the sudden school closure period at the beginning of the pandemic. Threat framing generally produces immediate and efficient responses when time is of the essence. But constant threat framing leads to crisis fatigue and also stifles the creativity needed for effectively responding to a multitude of unknowns.

Opportunity Framing on the other hand is most often utilized when leaders desire “outside the box” thinking and the creation of innovative approaches to new or emerging challenges. These frames should not be understood as good and bad, or effective or non-effective. Rather there are times when each might be appropriate. Considering how and when to utilize each approach will impact your ability successfully engage your staff to meet your goals.

In the current school context, leaders have had some time to prepare re-entry plans for the fall. But leaders should also take time to support their staff’s understanding that the emergency closure period was very different than the re-entry period. School leaders may need to assist staff with a shift in mindset - from seeing the emergency period as a threat to seeing the current context as an opportunity. As a school leader, you set the tone for your school. Consider how you want your others to respond when crafting your messages to staff, students, and families.

II. Create conditions that support teacher self-efficacy

A recent study conducted by researchers at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University examined teachers’ experiences during the emergency closure period. They surveyed nearly 8,000 teachers from across the country – multiple times – to attempt to understand what facilitated or inhibited effective teaching during the initial crisis period. Teachers reported a range of challenges related to engaging students in remote learning and balancing their professional and personal responsibilities. Using data from surveys conducted during and after the spring semester, researchers found that the pandemic and the abrupt pivot to emergency remote teaching resulted in a sudden, large drop in teachers’ sense of success. However, they also found that leaders that created supportive working conditions played a critical role in helping teachers build and sustain self-efficacy

of teachers in the new remote environment. The specific conditions they found that supported teachers included:

- Strong Communication from the leadership regarding the on-going crisis and plans for continuing services;
- Targeted, just-in-time training for those that were unfamiliar with effective online learning and/or remote learning practice;
- Providing opportunities for meaningful collaboration with other teachers to share challenges and successes, and to learn from one another;
- Establishing and communicating “fair and transparent performance expectations” was another area that helped teachers reduce stress and focus on a clear set of priorities; and
- Leaders that took time to recognize teachers for their efforts went a long way toward supporting the social emotional needs of those on the front lines working with students and families.

Teacher survey responses that included indicated these conditions were present in their schools were significantly less likely to experience declines in their sense of self-efficacy and their ability to provide high-quality instruction in the remote learning environment.

III. Organize teams to maximize effort and impact

When teams face challenging circumstances that alter norms, routines, and procedures, traditional approaches understanding of roles and work break down. Therefore, it is crucial during uncertain times for school leaders to ensure teacher teams have the space and time to continue to meet and work on improving teaching and learning. Communicating the expectation that teachers continue to set agendas and meet to move the work forward is important, as is establishing new goals that reflect the current context.

Developing and improving school-wide contingent learning plans in response to the COVID crisis requires a higher degree of creativity and collaboration among educators, staff, and families, which in turn necessitates a different type of team structure. When organizations need to develop completely different processes and approaches for tackling a new challenge or opportunity, they need to organize what we call a “heavyweight team.” These may mean reconfiguring or adding to an existing team, or developing a completely different structure than your previous – the new team may draw members from a variety of different areas and have members may have newly defined roles and goals that are specific to the current context. For example, your heavyweight team may include:

- District or outside experts on remote or online learning;
- Classroom teachers who will be leading hybrid or virtual instruction for their students;
- IT staff members; and/or
- Those charged with developing various communications.

Leaders should also consider what supports and/or training team members may need to reach their goals in the new environment, and what teachers, students, and parents need to succeed.

IV. Innovate your way toward meeting your goals

During uncertain times with evolving circumstances, conventional planning just does not work because knowledge is scarce, and uncertainty is high. That does not mean that you need to adopt a “wait and see” approach or default to reactionary mode. What is needed is a different approach to planning/ The *Disruptive Innovation* approach was coined in the early 1990s by Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen and is applied in fields and industries where there is no precedent for how to proceed. Disruptive Innovations are not breakthroughs that make good products or services better, rather they create entirely new innovations that make products or

services more accessible and that meet needs that have not previously been addressed. The process does not necessarily require a radical elimination of all previous routines, but it does require leaders to establish new and different systems to address the new and unknown environment.

The approach involves processes similar to the steps in a *Cycles of Inquiry* approach, such as deeply exploring the current context without regard to how things were done in the past. The goal is to deeply understand what is needed right now and to develop responsive practices to address your most pressing needs. Innovations that effectively respond to this crisis can rapidly accelerate learning. Therefore, it is imperative schools identify and capitalize on what is working and develop new approaches for what is not. This disruption caused by the pandemic can serve as a catalyst for innovation. According to researchers from the Christensen Institute “In our research on why educators change their instructional practices, we’ve discovered that educators are far more likely to try new practices – such as student-centered learning -when a change in their teaching assignments make their tried-and-true practices less relevant. This year’s forced shift to remote teaching is just that type of change.”

V. Focus on building trusting relationships (attending to equity, SEL, and reciprocal communication)

To combat physical and emotional isolation that comes with the on-going pandemic, school leaders play a critical role in creating opportunities for the school community to engage with one another, even from a distance. Relationships with your staff, families, and students will be more important than ever this year, regardless of which learning model you are currently implementing. While it is a challenge to remain connected, the time you spend on relationship-building will be well worth the effort, as trusting relationships form the foundation for everything you are attempting to accomplish. In order to successfully harness the collective power of your school community and ensure all succeed, school leaders can attend to equity and building trusting relationships by:

- Ensuring that a diversity of perspectives are represented and considered in decision making.
- Identify who will be impacted most by a decision and consider any potential unintended consequences;
- Be transparent about your decision-making processes, considerations, and timeline;
- Bring empathy in your actions and communications:

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