

Whack-A-Mole: School Systems Respond to Disrupted Learning in 2021

Michael DeArmond, Paul Hill, Kate Destler, and Christine Campbell

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Overview

At the beginning of 2021, while many districts and charter schools were still operating remotely, we interviewed superintendents and other leaders in six school systems about their plans for when students would be back in school in the fall. The interviews were part of the American School District Panel (ASDP), a joint project between the Center on Reinventing Public Education, the RAND Corporation, Chiefs for Change, the Council of Great City Schools, and Kitamba, an educational consulting firm.

We reported the results of those interviews last May in *How Six Systems are Responding to Disrupted Schooling: Will it Be Enough?* In that report, we described the district leaders' ambitious plans to avoid remediation and instead focus on teaching all students at grade level while providing extra help for those who had missed out on key concepts or skills during the pandemic. The district leaders acknowledged that the pandemic had a major impact on the social and emotional lives of students and teachers. But most anticipated that returning to in-person instruction in the fall would help alleviate some of those concerns and allow them to put their energy into students' academic progress.

At the time, the systems' emphasis on grade-level instruction with extra support was a plausible strategy for dealing with pandemic-related disruption. But many questions remained unsettled at the conclusion of our last report. It wasn't clear how well schools could maintain a steady focus on grade-level instruction and provide just-in-time support for those who were catching up. The expected influx of federal funds would surely help, but it wasn't entirely clear how districts would use those funds or how teachers and principals would manage the opportunities and demands associated with them.

At the end of our last report, we promised an update on implementation successes and challenges the systems faced after they returned to school in the fall of 2021 (see *About this Project*, below). At the time, no one could have foreseen how the coming months would complicate the systems' work on academic learning: the surge from the Delta (and later Omicron) variant, political unrest in school board meetings and communities, staffing shortages, and burnout—all these factors meant that leading schools and school districts in the fall of 2021 was like playing a game of Whack-A-Mole. Just when leaders thought they had a handle on one problem, another one popped up. As one district leader said, "Opening again [in fall 2021] is the hardest ever... Not that education was ever a piece of cake, but it was never as complex and as unsettled as what we're going through now."

The challenges districts faced last fall were not the same as a year ago. Some were worse. Others were new. Together, they could have long-lasting implications for district leadership. Indeed, [only half of superintendents in our fall 2021 ASDP survey said they were likely to stay in their jobs over the long term](#), hinting at the possibility of continued instability long after other disruptions sparked by the pandemic have faded away.

About this Project

The American School District Panel's primary work is conducting a series of nationally representative surveys of school districts. For this report, we complement our survey research with in-depth interviews of leaders on the ground in five of the same school systems we studied for our May 2021 report. Three of the systems were traditional public school districts. Two were charter management organizations (CMOs). The sixth district we studied earlier dropped out of the study due to competing demands and leadership turnover.

Our goal with these interviews was to learn from system leaders about the academic needs of children as they return to school, how districts and charter schools are addressing those needs, and how the pandemic has affected schools. We interviewed between two and five leaders in each system in October and November 2021 (18 in total). The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and focused on student needs on the return to school, what the system was doing to support student learning (including strategies, resources, and implementation), and how continuation of the pandemic affected implementation of their plans to restore lost learning time. We recorded and transcribed all interviews and analyzed them with a combination of memos (in which we recorded hunches, hypotheses, and observations), thematic coding and categorizing, and team discussions.

Compared to the overall ASDP sample, these five systems covered in this report are larger, more urban, and serve more students from low-income households and more students of color. Still, the five systems varied in size (from 5,000 to almost 40,000 students), demographic characteristics, and social and economic circumstances. Although their experiences can't be generalized to the nation, they nevertheless offer a rich and varied picture of how district leaders are grappling with the year's disruptions and challenges, especially on the crucial issue of how to address the consequences of disrupted learning during the pandemic.

To learn more about the ASDP, visit www.americanschooldistrictpanel.org.

Key findings from fall 2021

All the systems we studied remained committed to teaching all students at grade level in the fall, rather than holding them back in lower-level coursework.¹ We found that making good on this commitment required central offices to work with schools in new ways. But unexpected circumstances and events made it difficult to deal with the pandemic's academic fallout and presented major challenges for district leaders.

Central offices had to find new ways to support instruction and learning.

To translate their commitment to grade-level teaching into practice, central office leaders found that they could not support acceleration in schools with a command-and-control approach or by leaving schools to their own devices. Instead, they needed to work with schools to help them collect and use real-time student data to understand where students were with their learning and decide how to intervene. The systems also needed to support tutoring and other instructional approaches in ways that combined central coordination and school-level flexibility. And, in some cases, they needed to push teachers to provide more cognitively demanding lessons than they were used to delivering during remote learning.

Academic progress wasn't the only or most pressing problem.

All the systems anticipated that students' progress in elementary reading and middle school math would need attention. But the ways in which school closures and other stressors disrupted students' social and emotional development hit harder than expected. Especially early in the fall, challenging student behaviors sometimes made it hard for schools to focus on instruction.

Other pressures created huge leadership challenges.

Even as the districts worked to keep their instructional core focused on grade-level content and worked to support students and address behavior problems, a host of forces disrupted their efforts, making it much harder for teachers and students to benefit from consistent, cumulative teaching and learning. Leading school districts in the fall involved managing a string of problems across different issues, making the pandemic's second school year, in some ways, more challenging than the first.

In the end, our interviews suggest that the problem that we easily described last spring—how to manage instruction to help students catch up as soon as possible—became much more complex in the fall of 2021. That's because it was connected to a host of other problems, from getting students and teachers to attend schools regularly and apply themselves with enough discipline so that instruction could be personalized and sequential to political pressures that took up senior leaders' time and effort. The districts found that they were unlikely to solve one problem without also working on the others.

¹ In our last report, district leaders referred to this approach as an "acceleration" strategy.

The Whack-A-Mole experience of leading during the pandemic raises questions not only about the systems' ability to help all students recover from the pandemic but also about whether and how the year's unprecedented pressure will affect system leaders and leadership going forward. Despite all the challenges described in this report, our rhetoric and future education research will need to highlight what knowledgeable and politically adept district leadership looks like in practice and how to support it in the wake of—or next phase of—the pandemic.

In Brief

- Education leaders across the country recognize that students are falling behind academically during the pandemic. Some districts are responding by emphasizing grade-level instruction and just-in-time supports rather than remediation. We interviewed top leaders in five school systems committed to this approach to learn more about its implementation.
- We found that implementing acceleration required school systems to work with schools in new ways, but the strategy was complicated by a host of factors that made getting to instruction difficult: challenging student behaviors, staffing shortages, and the politicization of health, safety, and education. All these pressures have made leading school districts in 2021–22 like playing a game of Whack-A-Mole.
- School districts across the country are working hard to catch students up. But the Whack-A-Mole experience of leading during the pandemic raises questions about how these pressures will affect system leaders and leadership and whether, in the future, schools alone will be able to do enough to help all students get the help they need to recover.

Central offices had to find new ways to support instruction and learning

Back in spring 2021, leaders in all six of the systems we studied told us they favored an “acceleration” strategy over remediation to address the pandemic’s academic impact.² This meant that instead of diverting students to special classes where they would catch up on missed material, the districts planned to focus on delivering grade-level content and closing any gaps with just-in-time teaching (e.g., via small-group instruction or tutoring).

Five months later, these systems remained committed to acceleration as classes began in the fall. But they also found that they had to develop new district supports and confront new challenges as they tried to help schools make day-to-day decisions about instruction envisioned by the strategy. Translating their commitment to grade-level teaching into practice, central office leaders found that they could not support acceleration in schools with either a command-and-control approach or by leaving schools to their own devices.

“We’re really expecting the investment in knowing where students are is at the school level”

All the sites were rethinking what schools needed to support acceleration. Obtaining data on student academic progress was, for many leaders, at the top of the list. That’s because district leaders said the system-level data on which they usually relied weren’t useful for schools in the fall.

“I think you have to take everything [regarding the state assessments] with a grain of salt,” said one superintendent, because many students didn’t take spring assessments or took them at home without any teacher supervision. When schools returned to in-person learning in the fall, most districts returned to standardized assessments. But the results from those assessments sometimes wouldn’t be available soon enough to be useful (one superintendent told us the state would provide her fall test results in February 2022). In at least one case, a district turned away from a well-known standardized assessment in the fall after concluding that its psychometric properties made it less useful as a guide to classroom instruction.

Instead of relying on state tests, the districts emphasized the importance of what one chief academic officer (CAO) called local data to support acceleration, such as weekly quizzes and formative assessments. Echoing a point made across the sites, a different CAO said, “We’re really expecting the investment in knowing where students are is at the school level.”

This emphasis on school-level, real-time data to support acceleration required central offices to rethink how they approached assessment and support for data use in schools. Above all, the central offices needed to build more practical and relevant resources for schools than they had in the past. A few examples suggest what this looked like in practice.

² The way leaders talked about the strategy this fall was sometimes confusing. Some leaders avoided the word remediation as a hallmark of what one leader called a “deficit mindset.” But at other times they used the word, referring to just-in-time “remediation.” Still others downplayed the word acceleration because it created its own confusion—did it mean speeding up? Skipping a grade? Social promotion? In the end, leaders were more likely to refer to “grade-appropriate” and “grade-level” learning in the fall than “acceleration.” Regardless of the term, the outlines of the approach remained the same.

In one district, a central office built a new series of supports to help schools aggressively track student learning, using what one leader called “mini data points,” such as individual student quiz results. In the past, as in many districts, the central office had conducted quarterly data meetings with schools. But last fall, central office leaders started organizing weekly data meetings across schools. In the meetings, teachers and leaders examined the results of weekly quizzes in math and reading to identify students who needed extra help and how they should get it. These data meetings involved “every teacher in the grade [across the district] coming together to talk about their assessments, student misconceptions, and what the reteach is,” the CAO explained.

Describing the approach further, the CAO offered this example: “On [math] problem number five, [teachers are] going to go through the data and look to see, ‘Hey, [this student] got it. Check my clipboard. [That student] didn’t get it. Now I know who to work with tomorrow when I pull a small group.’” For some teachers, the micro-assessment approach was new. Indeed, the systematic tracking of student misconceptions was “a muscle that is inconsistent in its strength across our district,” the CAO noted. So besides providing a bank of curriculum-aligned quizzes, the district also created new training for teachers on how to spot and diagnose student misunderstanding.

The same emphasis on practical assessment and intervention showed up in another district. Again, central office leaders said the most important support for acceleration was the use of “common formative assessments in the courses where we have them, so we can see where kids are learning in real time and intervene with kids in real time.” Going a step further, this district developed intervention modules in two subjects the CAO identified as gatekeepers for student success: early reading and Algebra 1.

As with the cross-district teacher meetings described earlier, the district convened principals across schools to discuss their reading and math results. When it came to reading, the CAO explained,

The principal gets on a call with the rest of the principals in the district and district staff. They have a conversation about foundational literacy. Where are the kids? What are they doing? What support do you need? What interventions are you going to provide?

This district leader saw principals as a key to moving forward. “I have really put my foot down to say, ‘Principals have to be a part of the process,’ the CAO said. After assessing student needs, principals and their schools could then use a district-designed cycle of phonics instruction (10–13 days) to fill gaps; the district was building a similar set of supports for Algebra 1.

Many students will need more than acceleration to catch up and stay engaged

Even if the systems could get the acceleration strategy working in most classrooms, each of the leaders we interviewed noted that making up for lost time would, for some students, require extra support. From almost the beginning of the pandemic, researchers and advocates have

recommended tutoring (specifically “high-dose” tutoring) as an evidence-based strategy for catching students up from the impact of school closures and other disruptions. In all but one system we studied,³ leaders agreed that many students would need extra help not only to catch up but also to stay engaged in schools. So besides offering acceleration-style classroom teaching, many districts were providing extra tutoring and, in one case, extra enrichment activities for students.

As with acceleration, these supplemental services required central offices to work with schools in new ways. Our interviews suggested that implementing tutoring required more back and forth between schools and central offices than one might imagine. A negative and a positive example illustrate what this interplay looked like in practice.

One CMO discovered the perils of offering tutoring with a one-size-fits-all approach. Its CAO told us that the network had initially invested in tutoring for all students in the hour after school ended. The assumption was that “all the kids need tutoring.” But as the fall progressed and data on student achievement remained hard to get, the CMO paused its after-school tutoring program because it wasn’t clear that all students actually needed it. Besides, the CAO said, she feared that the tutoring-for-all approach sent a bad message to some teachers, noting,

I’ve found that instead of working hard in the day to make sure the kids have mastered content, with the comfort of knowing that there are tutors waiting in the magical land of closing-all-gaps between 3:30 and 4:30, people will leave certain kids to the wayside because ‘they’ll get it after school.’ I wanted to avoid that.

By contrast, another CMO showed what a more strategic and responsive approach to tutoring could look like. Rather than offering tutoring to everyone after school, this CMO sent a central office administrator to meet with each school to describe the features of effective tutoring (based on the work of the [National Student Support Accelerator](#)) and find a best-fit solution for the school. This meant running a ‘design studio’ that surfaced each school’s academic needs and possible tutoring solutions. In the design studio, the central office administrator asked school leaders to use data to identify subject and grade-specific needs and consider the kind of tutoring partner with which they wanted to work from a list of approved partners.

This CMO’s central office worked to educate schools about the logic of quality tutoring and helped schools identify an approach that would work for them. Because the network already had a built-in intervention block during the school day, schools had a ready-made opportunity to provide in-school tutoring if they wanted to use it.

Among other things, the CMO’s tutoring design studios revealed that schools wanted different types of tutoring. Some schools wanted all the tutoring they could get. But others targeted much smaller groups of students or said, “My kids don’t need this right now,” according to the district administrator. Other schools saw tutoring as a preemptive response to staffing shortages. As the district administrator explained,

³ Even in the district where leaders were skeptical about tutoring (they wondered if it was sustainable and let teachers off the hook too easily), they admitted that it may be necessary for “kids who have big gaps.”

A couple of schools are dealing with vacancies, so they know students are not getting the instruction they need. Another school has a ton of first-year teachers. They know they're not getting the instruction they need. So the approach [to tutoring] is, 'Where's the [potential] gap, let's try to fill it, get a caring adult in front of students who need a caring adult and good teachers.'

The administrator also thought the design studio helped get “principals to buy in and feel like [tutoring is] a value-add instead of another thing that [the CMO] is asking them to do.”

Tutoring may be the form of support that gets the most news coverage (and, in some cases, is mandated by state law), but it wasn't the only one we saw in the sites. In addition to tutoring, one district supplemented its “acceleration” strategy with new project-based learning opportunities to keep students engaged. These opportunities came both in the form of centrally designed project-based learning units that schools could use as well as a district-run competition for teacher-designed projects that could receive micro-grants from the central office.

For the district's superintendent, these learning opportunities were just as important (if not more so) than tutoring, acceleration, and summer school. Opportunities for deeper learning, he explained, help learners get at “tons of other things that if we don't pay attention [to] and we don't address, the academic part by itself is not going to be as fruitful as we would like it to be.” Putting the challenge more concretely, the CAO explained, “The gaps are tremendous, but if you say, ‘You don't know how to multiply, you don't know how to add, now I'm going to give you two times two,’ that doesn't work. And the kids never get ... the conceptual understanding that is so important for them to be able to do algebra and geometry.”

Concerns about teacher habits from remote learning

As central offices got more acquainted with the day-to-day requirements of acceleration in schools, some leaders found pockets of teachers who had picked up what one leader called “bad habits” after a year of remote teaching. The biggest problem is that teachers were giving students too much hand-holding and offering them low-level learning activities. The following comment from a CAO describes the problem:

[Teachers] are doing a lot of direct-teach and modeling ... The number one thing we have to fix is that teachers have to let children struggle ... Let them turn to a buddy, let them work in small groups, let them struggle and figure it out. I think in a way, teachers are trying to compensate.

People talk about lowering the rigor bar as they feel like that's the nice thing to do to kids. I think the way it's showing up in our classroom is ... the teachers model the kids and scaffold through it. Some of that is fine, but at the end of the day, the kids need to have as many at bats as humanly possible to build that muscle.

We're actually just asking our teachers [to] please release the kids more for practice and struggle, or it's like you continuing the model because at some point in May, you will not be modeling or taking their tests. They have to be the ones to get the at-bats. Our number-one priority right now is making sure teachers aren't overcompensating through over-modeling.

Another superintendent said she was worried that her teachers had lowered their expectations for student learning during the pandemic, saying, “I still have teachers on a regular basis say, ‘I need a set of books three grade levels lower because my kids can’t...’ There’s still the belief that kids can’t. And so, we still have more work to do.”

Similar observations surfaced in other systems. A different CAO worried that teachers were relying too much on the technology-based solutions they had used in remote learning the year before, saying,

I think one of the unintended consequences of this interruption is an overreliance on strategies that you may have had to do when you were learning this way [remote] that you no longer have to do. And so there’s a little bit of this strategic abandonment that we’re working through ... The math problem isn’t a COVID problem. The math problem is that we’re asking kids to listen and watch the adults do math, not doing the math themselves.

Another CAO said that too many teachers were over-relying on Chromebooks and technology, “even though kids are sitting there face to face.” Still another CAO worried that after a year of remote learning, teachers had become too reliant on the Internet for teaching materials. “What we have happening right now is teachers just going online and finding stuff. We’ve got standards-aligned, highly effective stuff in our unit planning guide, and teachers are making the choice and finding whatever else they think is going to work.”

The upshot is that in addition to district central offices shifting how they worked with schools in ways that are more responsive and focused on practice, some districts found they also needed school leaders to work on shifting teacher mindsets and habits to pursue the acceleration strategy.

One district, however, cast its efforts to redirect teacher practice in a more positive light. While schools were operating remotely, this district engaged teachers in what it called “targeted discussions” about curriculum and teaching that would promote “authentic student learning.” Through the summer and fall of 2021, the district followed up on these discussions by encouraging teachers to use new units of study designed for deeper learning. The district’s CAO explained,

It’s amazing to see the things that are already starting to come ... Teachers that were very reluctant to try these things are doing them, and they’re starting to incorporate new tools and new ways of engaging the students. And then they come and they ask, ‘Can we do this all the time?’ They’re asking to teach those things. And then it’s like, ‘Of course, it’s your class, they’re your kids, teach them with any kind of tool, with any resource that you have.’

While noting that the reforms were still at an early stage in implementation, the CAO concluded on an optimistic note, “The way teachers are talking about the curriculum and the way teachers are providing feedback on what they have learned and how they understand the curriculum, it’s amazing.” She credited this change to the district’s new approach to training, which, she suggested, was transformative to many veteran teachers. She concluded, “Many [teachers] said, ‘I’ve been teaching for 20 years, I’ve never had any professional development that came to this level of me really understanding what I need to do as a teacher and how to teach and why I’m teaching what I’m teaching in that particular way.’”

In short, the systems' experiences in the fall suggest that implementing an acceleration strategy requires long-term investments and coordinated action across schools and districts that balance top-down support for bottom-up problem solving, something that is challenging under any circumstances. As we note in the next section, these efforts were made all the more difficult because academic challenges were, in some ways, not the only or biggest problem districts faced last fall.

“They don’t even know how to function in a classroom”

Nationwide, the outlines of the pandemic's impact on student learning are clear. [Early predictions](#) and [later assessments](#) point to significant declines in achievement, especially in math, for the youngest students and for historically underserved students.

As they worked to support the acceleration strategy, leaders in the five systems we studied reported similar academic trends. In October, for example, a CMO leader said her teachers were “overwhelmed by how many kids are so far behind versus normal.” The biggest areas of concern generally mirrored the national picture: elementary reading and middle school math. One of the superintendents we interviewed reported a 30-percentage-point drop in Algebra I scores relative to her district's pre-pandemic average. A high school principal in still another system said, “Ninth graders should be ready for geometry ... [but when] the math department chair gave the most basic Algebra assessment, the number of kids who couldn't do it was shocking. This will have repercussions for years.”

These declines in academic progress weren't, however, a standalone problem. Our interviews made it clear that school closures in 2020 and beyond delivered a one-two punch to student learning, affecting both academic skills and students' emotional well-being.

The social impact of the pandemic was especially brutal in key transition grades. As one superintendent explained,

The grade level that's really hitting us in the face [now] is second grade, because these kids had [only] half a year of Kindergarten. We're also hearing about more needs with ninth graders and eighth graders who, again, didn't really get middle school.

As a consequence of missing in-person school, “the level of maturing and engagement [among students] is not there,” said a CAO. “It's not just a child who has lost ground in reading,” another superintendent observed, “it's that they don't even know how to function in a classroom with other kids.”

Considering over-age kindergarteners who had returned to school after a year away, one district leader reflected that, last year, these children

...were at home rolling on the floor with their iPad or whatever it was they were dealing with. So, when they're suddenly back in a structured environment, what do they want to do? They want to roll around on the floor, because that's what they've been doing for months and months at a time.

Conversely, some leaders described students who, having missed months of in-person school, lacked the energy to make it through the school day. As one superintendent explained, “Kids really want to be in school, but they lack the stamina for sitting all day long.”

If the youngest students lacked stamina or in some cases were rolling around on the floor, high schoolers presented a different set of challenges across the five systems. Not all the high school news was worrisome. In some cases, academic progress among high schoolers seemed to hold steady, especially compared to younger grades. One superintendent attributed this to the fact that

...high school kids know that on those tests, they have to pass them to graduate. They're content-based tests, not underlying foundational skills. Most of our high school kids, they have a baseline. We didn't see as big of a hit [academically].

Instead, the “hit” for this superintendent’s high schoolers affected their postsecondary plans. Graduates during the pandemic were less likely to enroll in a four-year college than those who came before them. According to the superintendent of the CMO, in a typical year, seven of every 10 students in the network would choose a four-year college after high school. But in 2021, fewer than half did (four in 10). In a different CMO, a high school principal reported similar shifts in students’ postgraduation plans. She saw a “universal hesitation both from kids and families to leave the city [where the school was located] and a real concern about taking out any form of significant loan, not knowing if they were going to be on [a college] campus this year.” She added, “For our juniors and seniors, the highs of high school have really been wiped out. And so, I think there was just kind of a feeling of ‘blah’ and ‘Why am I doing this?’”

Students who felt “unmotivated or checked out or lazy,” in the words of another superintendent, sometimes stopped attending school altogether last fall. The share of students with on-track attendance in one of the districts, for example, dropped by 20 to 30 percentage points (depending on the grade). That district’s superintendent explained the drop by pointing to physical and mental stress, social anxiety, fear of getting COVID, and students’ sense that “the system feels like everything’s getting back to normal but not accommodating their needs.”

On top of these pressures, spikes in COVID last fall were incredibly disruptive. Quarantine policies, in some cases, held students at all levels out of school for 10 days during the surge in cases from the Delta variant. “When we’re in a valley of COVID impact,” explained one CAO, “we’re trying to work as fast as we can to do this academic work because we know there’s likely going to be another [COVID] spike. So we’re trying really hard to move the needle in the valleys of those spikes.”

In short, as school districts began to take stock of how the pandemic had affected students’ academic progress last fall, they confronted a host of complex social needs. Indeed, when we asked leaders how the pandemic had affected students’ academic progress, they often reported being preoccupied with social and emotional issues. Still others noted that students were more likely to start fights, bully each other, and talk back to teachers. “Those [types of disruptive behaviors] are things that usually happen,” noted one CAO. “But instead of one time, it’s happening three or four times ... The quantity of behavior problems has impacted school leaders and kids.”

As a result, principals and teachers struggled to get students settled into the routines of in-person school last fall. As one district administrator said, educators had to

...get everyone to be better self-managers. That was something we didn't anticipate [still being an issue in] late September into October ... [Disruptive behavior] started to heat up much more dramatically as we got into the year.

These complex problems were not unique to our sites. The pandemic's social and emotional impact was also evident in the ASDP's national survey of superintendents in November 2021. In that survey, students' mental health was the top concern for superintendents among 11 widely reported problems. Nine out of 10 reported a "moderate" or "major" level of concern about students' mental health during the current school year. Concerns about student behavior also showed up on the national survey: six out of 10 superintendents surveyed reported a "moderate" or "major" level of concern about increased discipline issues at school. The urban superintendents in the survey—leaders like the ones we studied in the five systems described here—registered higher levels of concern about these issues than their counterparts in suburban and rural districts.

More pressures, more challenges

Even as the districts worked to keep their instructional core focused on grade-level content and gap-filling support, a host of forces disrupted their efforts and made it much harder for teachers and students to benefit from consistent, cumulative teaching and learning. Our interview data highlighted three key disruptions that created an ongoing series of challenges for leaders.

Ongoing public health crises

During the summer of 2021, the COVID virus itself took an unexpected turn. The Delta variant hit school systems that started up in August especially hard. One district leader whose schools opened up in August said, "People started getting sick ... We had on average 150 kid cases a week our first couple of weeks of school ... Delta hit with kids, and it hit with little kids because they [weren't] the ones who could be vaccinated."

Ongoing illness disrupted schooling for individual students and for entire schools in the fall. In some cases, these disruptions were exacerbated by other, non-health-related challenges that interfered with schools' capacity to operate. One superintendent explained that in addition to COVID quarantines, "We've had a number of heat days, which are atypical in our area. We had power outages."

Once school started, all the districts, including the charter networks, experienced periodic closures due to COVID spikes. These continued throughout the time we were interviewing, as the Delta variant and, near the end of our study window, Omicron caused infection rates to climb. Though none of the districts we studied had to shut all schools down simultaneously in the fall, each had to close some schools and classrooms as children and teachers were exposed to COVID, tested positive, or became ill.

One leader explained, “For the first two weeks, kids were still getting sick, staff were getting sick. They were still quarantining, and we closed a few classrooms here and there, and that’s definitely an impact.” Another administrator in the same system added, “Our first week, we almost didn’t open a couple of the schools because we had teachers in close contact to each other, and this was before kids even came in the building. It’s automatic 10 days off-site.”

Quarantine requirements, surging variants, and teacher and staff members’ proximity to one another meant that the possibility of localized outbreaks and closures was quite high.

Beyond the physical disruption, district leaders noted that the continued presence of COVID—and the disruptions the renewed health crisis brought on—carried a heavy emotional toll. One district leader said,

The emotional stress of seeing pre-K, Kindergartners, second graders getting COVID, psychologically that really wore on our staff ... And in the first two weeks of school, we had two children below third grade who ended up in the ICU from COVID. Both of them of course are fine now, which is such a blessing. But we had no children in the hospital for COVID last year.

By October, teachers were telling one superintendent, “I can’t do this. I thought I could, [but] I’m not mentally strong enough, emotionally strong enough right now ... to do this. It’s exhausting. I don’t want to do this.” The superintendent added, “Now you’ve got people who are done, and it is October. Our burnout is full on.”

A teacher workforce at the breaking point

Given the level of staff burnout, the sites, like schools nationwide, faced serious staffing challenges. Even as they worked to implement instructional strategies, the districts found it difficult to start the year fully staffed or to provide a teacher for every classroom every day. Some struggled to keep the teachers coming to school regularly. Most reported teacher burnout and low morale. In some cases, leaders reported that some teachers were struggling to make the transition back from remote learning to in-person learning.

Unmet staffing needs plagued every single district we studied. One leader noted, “We have about 60 vacancies still in our network right now. And we pretty much know at this point they won’t get filled, there’s no way. The pipelines are dry for teachers.” Another superintendent explained, “We have had ... three different schools, on three different days, that I had to close because I had too many call offs and not enough staff to replace them or substitutes to replace them.”

Staffing challenges were apparent as early as summer, when district leaders sensed a thinning labor pool. Said one, “It’s not that we necessarily lost more people than we would in the normal year, it’s because there were significantly fewer applicants in the workforce, or people who wanted to teach, [or] have never taught before and so didn’t quite understand what they were getting themselves into.”

One district leader feared that the teacher force would be thinned out further when vaccination mandates became official. She said,

We're going to lose more teachers, because not all of them are going to comply with the [vaccination] policy. So that definitely was impacting some of the operations and it made us wonder, do we need a remote option?

Even experienced teachers appeared overwhelmed by the socioemotional challenges their students faced and the ways in which those challenges had translated into more difficult work for the teachers. Explained one district leader,

We had our highest number of calls to CPS in August that we've ever had as a network ... Teachers who thought it was going to be magical coming back in September [turned into] the highest number of resignations of teachers in September that we've had.

“[Teacher] morale is a lot lower,” noted a leader in a different system. “I got people giving me that look like, ‘I’m exhausted.’ It’s shocking. People are tired and they’re expressing it. So that’s ... painful. We still have people resigning ... Everybody’s feeling stressed ... Corks are popping, the space and grace is evaporating.”

For some teachers, the job may no longer feel doable. A superintendent recalled a principal telling her that “she had a middle school teacher who basically said, ‘Here are my demands: I don’t want to run advisory because I don’t want to have to plan for it. And I don’t want to lesson plan.’ And [the principal] was like, ‘Okay, well, those are non-negotiable.’ And he [the teacher] said, ‘Okay, then. I’m going to go quit.’”

Though only a few reported teachers quitting at an unusually high rate, all reported difficulty hiring replacements for those who did quit. Every district leader also mentioned difficulty finding substitutes when teachers were out sick for illness. Some district leaders felt they were losing out in their regional labor markets, particularly to nearby districts that were using new federal funds to raise salaries and offer bonuses. One HR director explained,

When [a large nearby district] decides to use their ARPA [American Rescue Plan Act] money and give teachers \$4,000 more, we're just that much more behind, and we didn't put our ARPA money into salaries, because how are we going to maintain that when [the] ARPA money goes away? So we put our ARPA money into services, mental health facilitators, things that really help students ... Every time you turn around, the salary schedule in a neighboring school district has changed by a thousand or two.

Teachers who remained on the job sometimes had spotty attendance records. Though some teacher absenteeism was due to fear of COVID, one district leader perceived that some teachers were reluctant to give up the routine they had developed when school buildings were closed last year. She said, “I’m surprised by the number [of teachers] who think that they don’t have to be at work and perform and dress in real clothing. That’s something that’s really surprising and fundamentally I have to check myself.”

Political unrest

Finally, in two of the systems, leaders reported additional disruptions tied to adult conflicts about mask wearing, vaccines, and culture-war issues.

“One of the first things that took up attention at the start of the year,” explained a leader in one of these systems, “was dealing with all of the political debates around masks.” In her state, the governor and other state leaders had downplayed the risks associated with COVID last fall with a message that it “wasn’t going to be a big deal this school year.” But that meant that the state had few policies in place to guide schools—even heading into the second year of the pandemic. “All they had,” she explained, “was this executive order saying you can’t require masks.”

Parents also pushed back against mask wearing and vaccines in the fall, prompting leaders to navigate what became in many communities a highly political and emotional response to public health measures. Knowing that the school system wanted to encourage mask wearing as the Delta variant was surging, one superintendent emphasized that her system’s mask policy was “temporary” in her messaging to the school community. She said she avoided ever using the word “mandate” to diffuse some of the political pressure. “We’re not making a political statement,” she said. “We’re not trying to upset [this contingency of] parents who are vocal anti-mask, anti-vaccine. It’s just simply, we were trying to keep your kids safe.”

Sometimes, demands from parents in the system bumped up against state politics. “At the start of the year when Delta was raging,” the superintendent explained, “primary parents were just keeping their kids at home. They’re like, ‘You don’t have a virtual option at the state level that you’re allowed to have. I don’t feel my kids are safe. I’m just keeping them home.’” But state leaders were insisting that schools only offer in-person learning. “If you offer virtual [school] before there’s legislation,” the superintendent said, the state wouldn’t fund it. By the time the state finally allowed schools to run a virtual option, parent demand for virtual schooling had decreased. According to the superintendent, the district was left with a tremendous amount of work to build a remote option for what ended up being a relatively small number of students.

In the second school district under political pressure, the superintendent said that “politics showed up closer to the [school] boardroom than they ever have in our nation’s history possibly, particularly since the late sixties. For sure. And I think that’s powerful.” The political pressure was intense. “At the time,” she recalled, “we were really just stretched beyond despair and really continuing to carry a community. But it’s like when you carry something on your shoulders, but now your shoulders are being pulled apart [by political conflict] ... it actually doesn’t make them stronger. It makes them really in pain.”

Over the course of the fall, the superintendent navigated these tricky political waters in part by constantly reminding stakeholders about their fundamental areas of prior agreement. She explained,

When we talk about polarizing topics entering the space of education and education elected officials, we go back to, how did [the school board] already define, as an elected body, what teachers teach and what kids learn? And how did you already define how we’re going to care about kids and their feeling of belonging and being safe? How do you currently hold

a superintendent accountable to that? How does policy currently show up in that and allow those things to come back to the surface, as opposed to fighting over what's at the surface?

In addition to situating debates in more fundamental agreements, this superintendent was also intentional about controlling the arenas where controversial issues surfaced. “What we didn’t do,” she explained, “is have our board vote on masks. What we didn’t do was have our board take up resolutions around CRT [critical race theory] or social and emotional learning. I made the decisions on masks, and therefore that’s not political, but I did not position our board to have to take a stance. And even if they wanted to disagree with me, I wasn’t really giving them a forum to do that in an organized way.”

Reflecting on what it has meant to lead a school district during the pandemic, the superintendent said, “This has been a whole thing about trust from March of 2020. And every day you have to evaluate, am I gaining trust? Am I losing trust? Or what do I have to do to move the needle on trust ... I know I’m not the right voice for every set of ears. So I’ve got to assemble voices for every set of ears.”

Conclusion

One thing is clear from our interviews: fully addressing the consequences of disrupted learning during the pandemic will require ongoing work and adaptation from school districts now and into the future. The lessons we were hoping to learn last fall about how districts support acceleration were obscured by other difficulties, from attendance and work discipline for both students and teachers, to spiking COVID cases, to political unrest. Some localities, likely rural areas and big urban systems that are not riven by conflicts about vaccinations and culture, might have stable enough environments to make progress possible in the next year or two. Others, particularly those where competing parent groups are mobilized and school boards are under attack, might not.

And so, what was once a problem easily described—how to manage instruction to help students catch up as soon as possible—has become much more complex. As one CAO put it last fall, “We’re still up and down with everything, with people, with emotions, with work, with even the supply chain—everything is disrupted.” Districts can’t address students’ academic needs without working on a host of other challenges. This raises questions about whether, at least for some students, school districts will be able to meet this moment alone. If attendance, work discipline, and stable political support do not quickly reappear, some students’ needs may have to be met outside the normal boundaries of school by other institutions entirely—e.g., tutoring centers, specially designed recovery programs, community colleges serving high school students, and industry-supported career tracks or possibly by the addition of extra years beyond grade 12. Some of the districts in our study have already taken this tack, contracting with external providers to provide teacher training and to run tutorial programs, among other tasks, though they express concern about whether such partnerships are financially sustainable.

As we noted in the introduction, all the challenges facing school districts today present a bleak picture. It's little wonder, then, that our ASDP survey from fall 2021 found that only half of superintendents said they were likely to stay in their jobs for the long term. But the experiences detailed in this report also suggest how, in times of crisis like a pandemic, district leaders are indispensable. Without skillful superintendents who know their communities, schools could be even more whipsawed by having to navigate divided opinions about pandemic safety measures as well as student learning.

In the face of this daunting work, it is essential for state and municipal leaders to provide sustained support and political cover for district leaders. We should value and protect district leaders so they can set a consistent strategy of improvement that builds over time and incorporates lessons learned. That's not easy, but policymakers can help by providing clear guidance on COVID regulations for schools to follow and absorbing some of the political heat (e.g., by resolving battles over curriculum). States need to help stabilize the environment so that system leaders are not stuck putting out fires and confronting strings of problems.

Now more than ever, in light of many challenges facing schools, public education needs leaders who are knowledgeable and politically adept. Researchers and policymakers need to learn what it takes to make the superintendency an attractive and doable job, what kinds of training and development system leaders need, and how to make sure the role doesn't decay into one that skilled educators avoid.

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