Educational Leadership in Crisis
Reflections From a Pandemic

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About the California Collaborative on District Reform

The California Collaborative on District Reform was formed in 2006 to join researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders in ongoing, evidence-based dialogue to improve instruction and student learning for all students in California's urban school systems.

Introduction

As soon as the SARS-CoV-2 virus made its presence widely known in early 2020, the surging pandemic became the immediate focus of public sector leaders—and those who would judge them—across the United States. In the nearly 2 years since then, more than 850,000 Americans have died, and elections have literally been won or lost on candidates' positions and actions in response to COVID-19.

Nowhere have the tensions and leadership demands been more visible than in the school systems that serve elementary and secondary school children, their parents, and communities. In this brief, we explore how some California district leaders have responded to the initial and continuing COVID-19 crisis, using the reflections of superintendents in the California Collaborative on District Reform to reveal patterns, themes, and lessons. We also consider the impact that the pandemic and school closures have had on the leaders themselves and the implications of that impact for the future. Finally, we apply the principles of high reliability organizations to suggest how local districts and their leaders might capitalize on the work to date to not only navigate the continuing challenges of the current pandemic and recovery but also prepare for the inevitable crises of the future.

As educators and authors, we approach this task from distinct perspectives and experiential backgrounds. Dale Marsden served as a district superintendent for 12 years and has led his districts through multiple crises, including a terrorist attack during a local holiday party and a fatal school shooting. Jennifer O'Day is a researcher on systems change and has chaired the California Collaborative on District Reform for the past 15 years. We have drawn on both research and practice on leadership, including focus groups and interviews with system leaders across the state.[1]

Leadership Above and Below the Green Line

In March 2020, McKinsey & Company produced a five-part series advising leaders across multiple spheres on how they should approach their role during the COVID-19 crisis; one of these parts pointed to the importance of practicing "deliberate calm" and "bounded optimism," an admonition that resonated with district leaders in many of the largest and most complex school systems in the country. A leader who is deliberately calm, the McKinsey authors argued, "keeps energy levels high and positive even in a crisis environment. . . . When a leader is hopeful and calm, the group can face challenges more creatively." Realistic confidence also is critical:

> In a complex situation like the coronavirus pandemic, familiar answers might not work and could even be counterproductive. Early on, leaders can lose credibility by displaying excessive confidence or by providing simple answers to difficult problems in spite of obviously difficult conditions. It is essential to project confidence that the organization will find its way through the crisis but also show that you recognize its severity.[2]

We can all think of leaders who failed to achieve the critical balance highlighted in this advice.

Leadership demeanor, of course, is never sufficient, for any crisis also requires concrete actions to address the interruptions to normal life and meet specific challenges that threaten the well-being of people and their organizations. A few months after McKinsey released their advice to leaders, researchers at the Economic Policy Institute noted the practical limitations with which educational leaders had to contend.
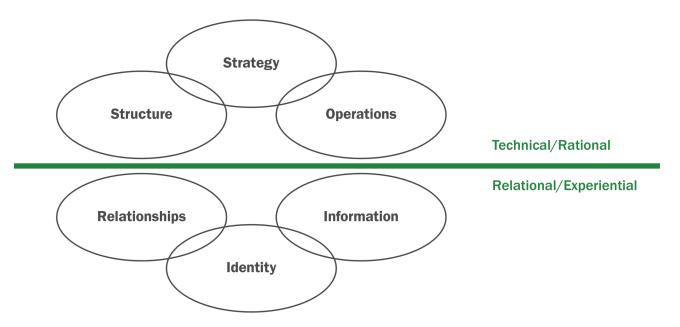
Our public education system was not built, nor is it prepared, to cope with a situation like this. We lack the structures to sustain effective teaching and learning [in distance mode] and [we are] unable to provide the safety-net supports that many children receive in school.[3]

Taken together, the observations from these two organizations point to the need for leaders to focus both "above and below the green line," a popular concept derived from Margaret Wheatley's "Six Circle Model," which outlines six interacting but distinct areas of focus in leading successful and sustainable organizational change.[4] Three areas—structure, operations, and strategies—relate to the technical infrastructure of an organization, commonly depicted above an imaginary green line (see Exhibit 1). In schools, this technical infrastructure includes everything from human resource procedures and policies to curriculum selection, school-feeder patterns, and accountability systems. During the pandemic, ensuring access to instructional technology and food distribution became immediate problems that required technical solutions.

In contrast, the other three areas for leadership attention pertain to the underlying culture of the organization and are thus depicted below the green line. They include organizational identity, relationships, and information flow. Sometimes referred to as the "human infrastructure," these elements have a more experiential and emotional basis and encompass the beliefs, mindsets, communication patterns, and levels of trust that can determine the success and spread of any particular technical solution.

Leadership attention to issues both above and below the green line is necessary in any context, but the imperative for this dual focus has been

Exhibit 1. The Six Circle Model

Note. Adapted from M. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science,* 1992.

especially evident in the compounded crises facing school systems during the past 22 months and will continue to be so as we proceed into and through the recovery period and beyond.

An Unprecedented Challenge

Crises in American schools are not a new phenomenon. Natural disasters, campus shootings, and racist attacks have been increasingly common topics of media coverage. All threaten the well-being of children and adults in our schools and communities, and all require focused and deliberate action on the part of leaders. But several aspects of the past 22 months make the current crisis and context unique for school leaders.

- **Duration.** First is the extended nature of the crisis (going on 2 years) in a situation that organizational scholars have labeled "VUCA" or "VUCA-T": volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous, and threatening.[5] With the Delta

variant still not fully controlled and the Omicron variant rapidly on the rise, uncertainty and danger continue to hang over education leaders and systems, even as we creep closer to recovery.[6]

- **Simultaneous, Multiple, and Interacting Crises.** The impact of COVID-19 and school closures has been compounded by a national racial reckoning, economic and political turmoil, and some of the worst natural disasters (e.g., fires) in the state's history.

- **The Widespread Nature of the Crises.** Rather than occurring within a defined geographical location or system, the COVID-19 pandemic is—by definition—worldwide, nationwide, and statewide, as are the concomitant challenges experienced by system leaders.

Leaders have responded to those challenges in varying ways, depending on the local political, social, and economic contexts; leaders' own frames of reference, beliefs, and values; and the variable

strength of local district organizations (both above and below the green line).

Yet, within this variation, certain commonalities emerge. Our review of the research, reflections on our own experience, and interviews with district superintendents across the state suggest many shared challenges and some common strategies and goals. We were particularly taken with one superintendent's delineation of three central messages that his district used to guide their actions. These messages resonated with the other district leaders with whom we spoke and seemed a useful set of themes to capture many of the more particular actions and goals across local contexts and leaders. We outline the three themes below including examples and quotes from leaders in varying contexts across the state, while also acknowledging the varying and sometimes elusive success of district leaders at addressing these challenges despite their intentions.

Common Leadership Themes: Superintendent Perspectives

Our colleague and friend Kent Bechler, former superintendent of Corona-Norco Unified School District, has often remarked, "Life is lived forward and understood backward." Looking back to learn ahead is wisdom gained and might be the best tool to carry ourselves from wherever we find ourselves to our next best state. Understanding themes and lessons from the earlier stages of our current ongoing crisis may help us build systems that can better withstand the pushes and pulls, the uncertainties and ambiguities, that are likely to increase in the future.

Theme 1. How people are treated matters.

The crisis will eventually end, but people will long remember how they were treated during it.*

The compounded crises with which district leaders have had to contend during the past 22 months have underscored the critical importance of attending to the foundations of organizational health and change that exist "below the green line." These are the things that shape people's perceptions and determine the success of any given strategy to address any specific problem. Some examples of leadership and system actions in this arena included the following.

Putting Safety and Well-Being First

We wanted to send a very clear message to our community and our team members that your safety comes first: there are lots of options here, there are lots of things we can do. Above all else, we want to make sure that you come out of this safely.

The primary manifestations of this health and safety priority were the **closures** of entire school systems across the state, the mitigation measures put in place for times when people were back in the buildings, and the willingness to extend or reinstate the closures and mitigation actions as needed to comply with health and safety guidelines. Although decisions to close or reopen schools became political footballs in many districts (and huge strains for anyone in a leadership position), there

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* The italicized quotations in this brief derive from in-depth conversations with leaders from 11 districts (urban, suburban, and small town) or counties across the major regions of California. The themes, however, are consistent with what we have heard from a much larger set of superintendents both in California and across the country. All quotes reflect themes voiced by multiple respondents. Where there are two such quotes together, they came from leaders in two different district contexts.

should be no doubt that those decisions stemmed from a desire to protect both adults and children.

Beyond safety, leaders immediately began to recognize the role that schools play in ensuring the ongoing health of the young people in their charge—more specifically, ensuring that children had access to at least one nourishing meal a day. **Food distribution** thus became a priority for many leaders throughout the school closures, some of whom even bucked federal rules that would feed students but leave their families hungry:

> The first priority of our closure was feeding the kids. And then a week—I want to say even within days—there was a concern about the families and the adults because, now, parents were staying home and losing their jobs. And so we very quickly pivoted to actually breaking the federal requirements and giving food to adults too. . . . It was a unanimous consent of the governance team that we'll just do it, and if we've got a big price, we will pay a price. We just need to do the right thing.

In service of health and safety, schools were eventually called on to do more than they ever had before, including **distributing vaccines to inhibit the spread of COVID-19**. Across the state in spring 2021, district leaders responded to the call to get vaccines out quickly to their communities and staffs by organizing vaccination clinics at district sites, staffed in part by volunteers from the districts themselves—including the superintendents. This was an unprecedented action on a large scale— one that challenged many district leaders to step far outside their comfort zone to help ensure the safety of their personnel, students, and communities and set the stage for the eventual reopening of schools:

> There was pressure to get the vaccinations to our sites [because the surrounding communities had vaccines and we didn't]. So they asked that

Photo courtesy of Sacramento City Unified School District.

the school district get involved. And I remember being in this meeting and thinking, "This is not my space. I'm not a politician. I don't want to be here!" But seeing the passion, the anxiety in our community's faces—and community leaders— I knew that I had to be there. It was a lot of pressure because that's not my comfort area, but I found it very easy to voice my concern because so many of our employees and our students were being impacted.

Communicating and Listening

> We are trying to pay attention to this practice of empathy, both from a public health venue as well as an equity right, and how we created those safe conditions and discussions internally and externally became very important.

The importance of communication, which receives attention throughout the literature on leadership, was a core lesson and strategy for all the leaders with whom we spoke. Typical of the comments was the following:

> We started grounding ourselves back "below the green line," and the communication piece for me became more frequent and targeted, if I

was talking to our employees or the community. I did a lot more video type of communications, where they can see me and hear me, versus sometimes the tone and the letter when you're trying to calm the waters—"everything's gonna be okay; we're going to get through this"— especially at the beginning of the pandemic. So just frequent communication (Zoom or Google meet) even if it was just a 15-minute update so that they felt informed.

The more frequent communication in the districts took multiple forms, but leaders stressed that it was not just a matter of messaging the staff and community; it also was a chance to listen and understand their concerns and needs.

We instituted a "compassionate check-in system" with all the key stakeholder groups. We had office hours, we had Partner Connect, we built a lot of structures and systems to just say we want you to understand that we're going to listen to you. We know we're not going to always give you what you want, but we are going to listen to you. . . . And I think that gave people an impression or a feeling that we cared about what was happening to them.

Centering Relationships

Nearly every superintendent spoke of the importance of relationships in managing the crisis. Some already had established strong relationships with community, labor partners, and staff up and down the system. As described by the following district leaders, these relationships saw their systems through the most difficult times.

I think with that communication, just going with those relationships, making sure that those relationships [were strong]. We leaned on those a lot and on what we fortunately were able to build before.

We were able to do [this work] because of the investment we had made in relationships, and we've confirmed that that is the right work. . . . We've had to lean on those relationships dramatically, and, I would say, we burned some of that capital because we've had to ask people to trust us as we go through this next piece. . . . And now, as we're coming out of this thing, we're really in a mode of getting back into reinvestment and a recommitment to developing those relationships again. It's going to take investment because we've been taking capital out of them.

By contrast, where the base of collaborative relationships and trust had not been built before the pandemic hit, leaders often found themselves in constant—and frequently unproductive— negotiations with their unions or in pitched battles with some segments of their communities.

Theme 2. Keep true to the mission but flexible in strategies and structures.

Our mission stays the same, but approaches to accomplishing it will have to change.

Across the board, each district leader talked about the need to keep the mission of teaching and learning and their commitment to students central as they responded to changes and uncertainty in the external environment. One expressed this commitment in terms of their district's identity:

[One lesson was the importance of] our identity—you know, really sticking to who we are as an organization, and in decision making always putting first what's going to be best for our kids—especially when it came around the decision to open because we were one of the

first districts in our county to actually bring kids back.

Shifting Decision-Making Structures

Of course, the mission could not be accomplished in the same ways as before—that is, before the danger of COVID-19 and the constant uncertainty about what to do. County, state, and national public health systems were not prepared for such a large-scale event, and local school leaders quickly realized there was no cavalry coming to their rescue. In fact, conflicting information and guidance from the multiple and varying agencies involved contributed to incredible tensions, which were then exacerbated by unparalleled social and racial unrest. There were just no clear ground rules, nor good answers coming from anywhere. Local leaders were largely left "holding the bill," while trying to make sense of these historically impactful events.

In this context and the immediate aftermath of school closures, some district leaders took on an explicitly more authoritarian style to instill some order in the midst of chaos. One described it as follows:

> *It was a very clear shift. When this all started happening, it was happening so fast, like a natural disaster. . . . (I said to my team) the leadership style is going to change immediately. It's going to be more of an authoritative style. I'm going to be making tough decisions, and I need you to push and debate quickly.*

Many of those who took this initial authoritative stance, however, quickly realized that it could not hold in the long term, surrounded by such uncertainty with no end in sight. Said the same superintendent, "Once it was prolonged after three weeks, I started noticing that everyone was coming to me still . . . no one was making decisions anymore." This leader recognized the need to shift from an initial autocratic

approach during the first weeks of the pandemic to one in which he and his team worked to "rebuild our decision-making protocols." He and the other leaders we talked with came to a realization backed by years of research and practice on leadership under "VUCA" conditions: Leadership requires agility and adaptability. If you want chaos, stick with control. If you want order and results, shift quickly from control to involvement. Involving people in decisions that affect them is a fundamental human need and a critical leadership action.

This theme of collaborative leadership was echoed by leaders in other systems, like the following two superintendents, the first from a very large urban district and the other from a smaller more rural context:

> *[We made] a really intentional shift to an environment, across the senior team, of collaborative decision making. It's not how we existed before. So it's very new to people to be a part of the solution and to bringing potential solutions into the space of this senior team and having to voice things that made them feel vulnerable about their opinions. And it was not easy. It was a very different way of being, and it created, temporarily, probably more dysfunction than function. However, it's resulting in a spirit of more empowerment that's coupled with accountability.*

> *I know that in making the decisions, half are going to agree, half aren't. But I think the process—just really grounding that in the process we took to make the decisions—I could stand in front of that. So did we have the right stakeholders involved? Did we hear and listen to the voices that were going to be impacted by these decisions? Sometimes—in some decisions—we allowed ourselves to take a little bit longer to get to [the decision]. For*

some we obviously didn't, but if [we could], it gave us a little bit of time just to ensure that the process was something that I could stand in front of when describing to the board how we reached a decision.

Learning at a Distance

Of course, the most obvious shift in the approach to the mission was in the mode of instruction—the core technology through which the mission of schools is accomplished. The move to distance learning necessitated by the closure of schools in March 2020 revealed quickly that the needed systems—particularly those to enable effective virtual instruction—were not in place. Much of that spring was spent trying to lay the foundation to ensure that all students had access to instructional learning opportunities.

The critical leadership piece of this was grounding the changes in instructional modalities (above the green line) in the core values and mission of the district (below the green line). And for our district leaders, this meant first and foremost, promoting equitable access to effective instruction. If that instruction was to be virtual, this meant distributing devices and ensuring internet access for all students in the district, including those whose communities lacked internet providers and hardware. This task required not only resources but also perseverance for the inevitable challenges that emerged:

We tried to provide grace to teachers and families that were unable to have access to those resources. I remember visiting a school, and there'd be a line of parents out who were bringing back their laptops and hotspots because they—there are areas of this town that don't have Wi-Fi capacity. So we were switching them out for different service providers like Verizon versus AT&T, to see

Photo courtesy of Sacramento City Unified School District.

if that would work. That didn't work, so we got buses and parked vans out in those neighborhoods to see if that would work; that didn't work. So just those challenges of having to navigate that at the same time we're feeding families and trying to provide vaccines and plan for the next school year.

There were other examples of prioritizing equity in decisions about the instructional core—from setting up district-sponsored learning pods for the most vulnerable students so that they could interact with others and address their individual needs, to filming the most effective instructors so that all students could access high-quality virtual pedagogy, to instituting hold-harmless strategies for grading during initial school closures. In these examples, leaders worked with their staffs to try to find ways to maintain instructional integrity despite the shuttering of school facilities.[7]

This is not to say that these leaders and their districts were completely successful in protecting

and maintaining the instructional core throughout the pandemic. Not a single leader with whom we spoke was satisfied with what they had been able to do. Some constraints—such as the more limited time that students were able to productively engage in virtual (rather than in-person) learning—seemed almost baked into the technology. Others derived from educators' limited experience and capacity when it came to pedagogy in a virtual environment. And still others were related to the distractions, challenges, and constant uncertainty for both teachers and students because of the pandemic and closures. In the final section of this brief, we outline a set of organizational principles that could help systems anticipate and respond to crises in ways that both sustain and improve the core mission.

Theme 3. Crises can lead to opportunities for innovation and improvement.

No matter how long it lasts, we will emerge from the crisis better than we went into it.

"Don't let a good crisis go to waste." In the early months of the pandemic, we heard this admonition so often that it seemed a veritable mantra. Many leaders believed that they could use the disruption caused by the pandemic—as terrible as it was— to expose systemic problems, to innovate and create more effective solutions, and to finally make a real dent in the structural inequities and manifestations of systemic racism built into their organizations. In this respect, hopes were high.

While everything was so caught up in the air, it required all kinds of innovative thinking and ways of being. . . . It's terrible that the pandemic happened, but I am going to use every part of this to learn and to build my team.

But as the pandemic went on and on and on, the difficulty of attaining this goal became all too apparent. Confronted with persistent uncertainty, conflicting messages, policy reversals, and a mutating virus, many leaders could not find the time and metaphorical space to move out of day-to-day crisis management to apply a more long-term perspective.

Despite the difficulties, we did hear examples of actions taken and changes made that have the *potential* for being sustained and deepened across time. In some cases, that potential had been deliberately cultivated, reflecting an approach that Education Resource Strategies has termed "Do Now, Build Towards." In others, it has emerged more organically. Many of the communication structures and processes, for example, grew out of the immediate need to get information out to staff and the community quickly and regularly, to ensure calm and to gain insights on particularly pressing decisions. Yet leaders expressed commitment to continuing as many of these communication strategies as possible, postpandemic, to further engage staff and stakeholders in future directions and decisions.

A pattern that we found particularly promising was the frequency with which the changes have been explicitly directed toward interrupting systemic racism and empowering communities and students who have been too long marginalized in our systems. In the words of one superintendent, "We've pushed a lot on equity this year, and we have made big progress using the crisis to move an equity agenda that's never been moved here before."

Both the disparities laid bare by the pandemic conditions and the broader movement for racial justice—catalyzed in part by the murder of George Floyd in May 2020—contributed to this attention. Many district leaders looked for ways to incorporate

the voices and perspectives of students who have been historically underserved—and their families—in district communications and decisions. Some leaders worked with community and staff to carry out "equity audits" of their curricula as a longer-term strategy to address structural racism. Some also pushed forward on efforts to monitor and respond to individual student needs and progress to ensure that all students have an opportunity to succeed despite disparities outside school. Attention to students' social and emotional well-being, instituting formative assessment of student learning, and strengthening multitiered systems of intervention and support were among the improvements during the pandemic that individual leaders linked directly to their commitment to advancing equity.

Beyond specific equity strategies was a broader and explicit commitment to changing the culture of their systems to be more inclusive of and responsive to the experiences of underserved youth and communities. In the words of two superintendents:

The second thing that I think's been really big for me is: "Say something!" So we have developed all kinds of new communication methods over the last year, including "Say something!" When something horrible happens, it's not okay to not say something. And that has come in the form of video messages, written messages. [When there was an anti-Pride event] on our beach, we spoke, we wrote to the community about that, as well as the hate against Asian Americans and civil unrest. So "say something" is part of how we express our values. . . . The result now is the values of the organization are shifting and being revealed in stronger ways.

Yes, you gotta speak up! When it happens, you can't stick your head in the ground and wait for things to pass. . . . We did plenty of communications [about the racial violence nationally], and we heard: "That is not your place, not your job. Stay out of that, stay out of that lane!" [But we wanted to] let our kids and our staff know that we see and hear what's going on, and in seeing and hearing what's going on, we see and hear them.

We won't know for some time whether and which of the strategies and cultural shifts will be sustained long term or lead to deeper improvements, but it is clear that the multiple crises of the past few years have created an opening for change, and some system leaders are working to take their districts through that doorway.

Leaders in Crisis

The approaches and actions reported by these leaders—some of which were successful and some less so—are not the whole story, of course. Other patterns emerged across our discussions.

In particular, nearly every superintendent with whom we spoke has described at one time or another the significant pressures and strains they experienced in the exercise of their leadership during this period. Hardly unique to superintendents, the stress of the pandemic seems to have been particularly intense for these individuals charged with ensuring the well-being and success of all the adults and students in local districts—and, by extension, in the communities in which those districts are located. According to *The New York Times, Washington Post,* and *Education Week* reports in spring 2021, those pressures have led to a marked increase in superintendent retirements and sudden departures, which the exiting superintendents themselves have attributed to the long hours and constant stress of leading a complex system under pandemic conditions.
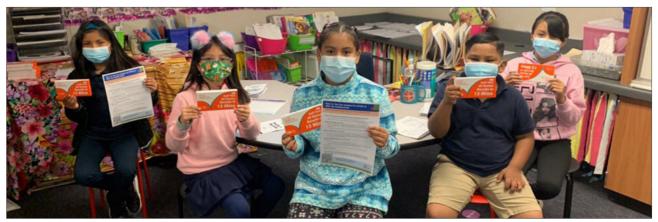
Photo courtesy of Santa Ana Unified School District.

The district leaders in the California Collaborative on District Reform have thus far chosen to continue in their posts,[8] but they, too, noted the strain, as revealed in the following typical comments:

> *As the second surge hit [in late fall 2020], it was probably the lowest point for me. . . . Then [the number of cases] started to get better, and the political winds started to shift. . . . The community and half the board was saying, "We need to open up now!". . . That created this amazing political friction that was difficult to navigate and that still exists today.*

> *I think all of us realize that we love the work, but there was so much stress and anxiety and pressure this year! . . . Everyone wanted to quit at some point . . . but we'll keep doing the good work as long as we can do it.*

> *What I think was the hardest was the anger— the anger in communities toward educators, which is what no one has ever dealt with before.*

Individual leaders found ways to manage the personal stress, including exercise routines, staying off social media, spending time with family, and, yes, even finding time to laugh.

> *I have a great team and we all support each other. Sometimes we have to just sit together and laugh at something that happened or something somebody said or the way that somebody perceived our message that was just way off.*

Although laughing and other coping strategies can help, several leaders we talked to pointed to fundamental organizational and governance problems that unnecessarily intensified the pressures and impeded efforts to support students and their families. Chief among these were a perceived lack of leadership on the part of the state and the stifling effect of local politics:[9]

> *This entire thing is exposing in a negative way the downsides of local control. And that's not in any way to suggest that we should go back to categoricals. . . . But I think there are times when a unified response is helpful, and it just wasn't available to us. And what it does is it pushes down the consternation and pushes down the anger, and the fights are all local— in 1,000 different school districts! . . . It feels like we are moving on in a system that isn't set up for us to succeed.*

> *Even without COVID, executive leadership is in crisis everywhere. We did the mindfulness leaders project about breathing and being present and that type of thing, and all it did*

was provide us with a way to deal with the insanity. But the insanity is still there. . . . This frenetic pace, this politics, is strangling education! We have to find a way through that to be able to do what's best for kids.

Beyond Crisis: Building a Healthy and Reliable Organization

One clear lesson from the past 2 years is the importance of leadership at all levels of the system, especially in times of crisis. Leadership, however, does not exist independent of context. Schools and districts that had sound systems or processes prior to the pandemic, and that had healthy people and cultures, have been able to respond in ways that allowed them to address the immediate needs of their students and staff while also making adjustments to improve the organization and its mission across time.

Our conclusion is that the recent crises—pandemic, racial reckoning, fires, and natural disasters—have not caused leadership and system breakdowns. Crises are events. Events test people and systems. If leaders have the tools, skills, experiences and support structures to lead well, they and their organizations will be able to weather both internal and external threats and breakdowns. Unfortunately, even in the best of times, leaders get bogged down in technical aspects of their work (email, meetings, fighting the inevitable bureaucratic fires) and distracted from the core mission of leadership: to build human and system capacity. Then when a crisis comes, the entire organization shifts into a reactive mode, often "flying by the seat of our pants." This is a recipe for failure. It cannot be sustained.

Peter Drucker reportedly said, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast," and in public education, we might similarly say, "Culture eats schools for lunch." Healthy organizational cultures are tuned to practice a productive response to failure and crisis (whether they are caused by people, systems, natural disasters, or disease). During a crisis, organizations with unhealthy or immature systems and culture seldom have the capacity to respond to breakdowns in a productive and thoughtful way. It's more likely that crisis events will further frustrate immature systems and leaders and may cause, in many cases, for school leaders to metaphorically "lose their lunch" when all hell breaks loose at the dais and the community's instruments tune for an all-night song and saga in the boardroom.

The question then becomes, how can we create whole systems with the cultures and structures necessary for consistency and endurance even when unforeseen threats and crises emerge? We suggest that the answers lie in part in the lessons from high reliability organizations.

Principles of High Reliability Organizations

The term "high reliability organizations" (HROs) was originally coined by Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliff in their seminal work *Managing the Unexpected* and serves to describe well-functioning organizations in potentially volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments where failure can be catastrophic.[10]

An abridged list of HROs might include nuclear power plants, wildland firefighting, national transportation and safety, naval aircraft carriers, and, yes, public education. These entities have something in common: Failure is not an option! Success in an HRO is defined as mission accomplished. A plane takes off and lands safely at its destination—every time. A nuclear power plant produces power and maintains "all systems go" cooling and production

standards. Wildland firefighters respond to a northern blaze, extinguish the fire, and 100% of their people go home safely.

Many people would not put schools in the same category as these organizations. But for those truly committed to all children succeeding, regardless of ZIP code, the endemic failure to accomplish this goal is not only a disaster for the school or district but for the nation as a whole.

In their research, Weick and Sutcliff identified five principles that characterize organizations that are so reliable in their operation that most internal breakdowns can be resolved before they become disastrous, and even crises originating outside the organization (e.g., a pandemic) can be handled without significantly undermining the organizational mission. We would note that each principle has implications for leadership both above and below the green line: that is, for attending to strategies, structures, and operations on the one hand (above the green line) and to organizational culture (relationships, information, and identity) on the other. We discuss each principle briefly below with examples of actions taken during the pandemic that either reflected or at least moved toward incorporation of these principles into district operations.

HRO Principle 1: Preoccupation With Failure.

HROs pay attention to the smallest failures. We are not talking here about the kind of preoccupation that characterized much of the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, in which failure to meet targets brought blame, shame, and negative consequences for schools and produced little system learning or improvement. Rather, in a healthy organization, breakdowns induce curiosity and analysis so that failure is not compounded or repeated. We ask questions of ourselves and our organization: How did this happen? What did

I do or not do that created the kind of culture or environment where this could happen?

Two conditions are central to this healthy response to failure. First is an organizational culture and mindset (below the green line) that approaches all failures as opportunities for learning. Second are the technical systems that allow actors in the organization to identify when and where breakdowns appear so that they can be productively addressed (above the green line). For example, the learning management systems that many districts instituted to monitor student attendance, participation, and grades during distance learning have alerted educators to inequities in engagement and outcomes. Multitiered systems of support then allow for differentiated intervention and support based on individual student need so as to better accomplish the school's mission for all students.

HRO Principle 2: Reluctance to Simplify.

HROs respectfully question everything. This means giving attention to "early heralds" in the system and iteratively digging below the surface to understand the complex factors that may be contributing to an identified problem. This is essentially the same idea as doing a "root-cause analysis," which has recently become a popular (if sometimes mechanical) step in continuous improvement efforts in California.

Consider the approach to assigning student grades during the pandemic. In spring 2020, concerns about penalizing students for school closures led to various "hold harmless" strategies, such as assigning pass/fail grades or giving students the grade they had earned prior to the closures.[11] Then, when the incidence of Ds and Fs rose sharply in the fall, with big disparities between privileged and underserved students, other strategies (such as giving extra time to make up assignments) sought to level the playing field in recognition of the

disparities in student learning environments and opportunities outside school. But as districts have dug further into the problem, some have come to the realization that traditional grading practices contain **inherent inequities** and simply need to be overhauled. This iterative process of investigating grade patterns and disparities is an example of the reluctance to take complex situations at face value and accept obvious answers as definitive.[12]

HRO Principle 3: Sensitivity to Operations.
Leaders need an accurate picture of what is actually happening in the organization. This occurs when bureaucrats (French translation "rulers of the desk") live among their people. Operational sensitivity is enabled by creating routine opportunities for transparent, candid feedback in safe environments, free from fear or retaliation, spanning from anonymous surveys to regularly facilitated convenings designed to surface real issues that affect the organization. The two-way communication processes and collaborative leadership structures established or expanded during the pandemic have allowed leaders to better understand how educators and stakeholders have experienced the crisis and to solicit a variety of on-the-ground perspectives to innovate more effective solutions.

In many ways, they represent a successful marriage of the technical and relational aspects of organizational change.

HRO Principle 4: Commitment to Resilience.
HROs expect failures but don't allow those failures to paralyze people or the system into fear. One superintendent we interviewed for this article said it best when he reported asking his exhausted cabinet for just a month-by-month commitment to stay with the district. This is a commitment to "work the problem." As retired Garden Grove Unified School District Superintendent Laura Schwalm once commented about the tough job of leadership, "That's why they call it work." Leaders who share a commitment to resilience apply these same principles when they make a commitment to being the best at getting better. Few people remember how we failed when they see our commitment to success. It's not the "at bats," foul balls, or strikes that baseball fans think of when they wear the jerseys of their home run champions. People will have more grace when they see your commitment to success.

HRO Principle 5: Deference to Expertise. HROs shift from a high control culture to a high engagement

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After Action Review

One of the most underutilized and perhaps more powerful tools for continuous improvement in crisis is the After Action Review (AAR). The tool is borrowed from the U.S. Army, where times of battle require a high level of sensitivity to operations and the ability to make sense quickly of highly complex activities to promote the reduction of failure during a crisis or prolonged events. Key to this approach is an understanding of the nonjudgmental nature of the activity. Imagine returning from a battle where this same team has lost a comrade in arms to their own friendly fire. It's not a time for blame and excuses; it's a time for deep understanding and commitment to getting better as a team while everything else may be going to hell in a handbasket. The AAR can be conducted in as few as 15 minutes or as long as necessary to exhaust answers to four key questions: **(a) What did we expect to happen in the situation we just experienced? (b) What actually occurred? (c) What did we learn through this experience about what we do and how we do it? (d) Given what we learned, how can we apply these insights to what we do next?** Answers to these questions are limited to facts—not opinion, not emotion. The process may require a facilitator and does not allow for personal attacks. Instead, the focus should be on learning and continuous improvement.

culture, empowering autonomy across the community and engaging people closest and most expert to the work. This is where leaders demonstrate their commitment to humility and accept that the organization's success is not ultimately about them. Leadership matters tremendously when leaders engage and involve people in the decisions that affect them. Those closest to the action need to be cherished as among the organization's experts, whether they are the district's painters, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, noon duty supervisors, parent leadership organizations, labor organizations, students, parents, and staff at all levels. Although technical expertise is, of course, crucial to effective instruction and improvement, those closest to the impact of a decision or a problem need to be an integral force in the organization's strategic action planning.

Concluding Thoughts

The themes that emerged from our discussions with district leaders are quite consistent with the principles of HROs and suggest that these leaders and their districts may be moving in a direction that will put them in better stead to navigate not only the remainder of this crisis and the period of recovery but also be better prepared when the

next emergency comes along (and it will). Dale's experience as a superintendent illustrates this conclusion; we end with his words.

During my tenure with San Bernardino City Unified School District, we navigated at least one event a month that either had the potential to make CNN or did, at least, rocket through social media, blazing a trail for us to shift team focus to ensure a thoughtful response that fit our values and commitment to how we might best serve our community. Since we had had plenty of practice with smaller crises, the team had built their muscle over time to navigate the more pressing challenges brought about by the natural course of things in large complex communities. When we were hit with a national terrorist attack in our community, we were better after. When we were faced with a school shooting that took the precious lives of a student and teacher, we learned a deeper humility and level of vulnerable engagement with our community. These are hard lessons learned. They impact you personally. You deal with the reality that you only have control over how you lead, and this leadership must translate into building human capacity and improving system capacity to ensure the next time we are kinder and more successful at our aim.

ENDNOTES

1   We would like to express our sincerest gratitude to the leaders who generously shared their time and thoughtful insights with us in preparation for this publication. Your candor, clarity, and vulnerability were inspiring as well as informative.

2   D'Auria, G., & De Smet, A. (2020). *Leadership in a crisis: Responding to the coronavirus outbreak and future challenges.* McKinsey and Co. p. 4. https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/leadership-in-a-crisis-responding-to-the-coronavirus-outbreak-and-future-challenges?cid=soc-app

3   Garcia, E., & Weiss, E. (2020). *COVID-19 and student performance, equity, and U.S. education policy: Lessons from pre-pandemic research to inform relief, recovery, and rebuilding.* Economic Policy Institute, p. 3. https://files.epi.org/pdf/205622.pdf

4   Wheatley, M. (1992). *Leadership and the new science: Learning about organization from an orderly universe.* Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

5   For more detailed discussions of VUCA and practical examples, see Van Stralen, D., Byrun, S. L., & Inozu, B. (2017). *High reliability in a highly unreliable world: Preparing for code blue through daily operations in healthcare.* Create Space Independent Publishing Platform. See also Giles, S. (2018). *How VUCA is reshaping the business environment, and what it means for innovation.* Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/sunniegiles/2018/05/09/how-vuca-is-reshaping-the-business-environment-and-what-it-means-for-innovation/?sh=1261caa9eb8d.

6   At the time of this writing, omicron cases were still rising in California but were expected to peak within a few weeks. Districts were contending with significant staffing shortages in addition to other continuing challenges of COVID-19.

7   For more detailed examples of prioritizing instructional equity, see Choi, L., Handjojo, C., Knudson, J., & O'Day, J. (2021). *Reflecting back and looking forward: Educational equity in the era of COVID-19.* California Collaborative on District Reform. https://cacollaborative.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/CA_Collaborative_EquityDL.pdf

8   The exception to this pattern is a superintendent who had planned (before the pandemic) to retire in 2020 but extended his role for an additional year (to 2021) to provide stability during the crisis.

9   For a discussion of the state leadership void, see Hough, H. J., O'Day, J., Hahnel, C., Ramanathan, A., Edley, C., & Echaveste, M. (2020). *Lead with equity: What California's leaders must do next to advance student learning during COVID-19.* Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/lead-with-equity

10 Weick, K. E., & Sutcliffe, K. M. (2007). *Managing the unexpected.* Jossey Bass.

11 For an exploration of initial approaches to this problem, see Castro, M., Choi, L., Knudson, J., & O'Day, J. (2020). *Grading policy in the time of COVID-19: Considerations and implications for equity.* California Collaborative on District Reform. https://cacollaborative.org/sites/default/files/CA_Collaborative_COVID_Grading.pdf.

12 For updated developments, see Esquivel, P. (2021, November 8). Faced with soaring Ds and Fs, schools are ditching the old way of grading. *Los Angeles Times.* https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-11-08/as-ds-and-fs-soar-schools-ditch-inequitable-grade-systems.

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