

AND HOW ARE THE CHILDREN?

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This title of this chapter is inspired by an African fable that describes the traditional greeting of the Masai warriors. The greeting "*Kasserianingera*," translates to "*And how are the children?*" This greeting exemplifies the high value that the Masai always place on their children's wellbeing. Even warriors with no children of their own would always give the traditional answer, "All the children are well," this meant that the priorities of protecting the children are still there, that peace and safety prevail and that the Masai society has not forgotten its 'why' and its responsibilities as a people. Having a greeting that simply asks "*And how are the children?*" keeps the wellbeing of our children as the priority, even if we are facing our hardest challenge or in a state of flux. As leaders, we have to keep the children first and always consider, "*And how are the children?*" in all that we do.

During the COVID-19 pandemic school principals became even more essential within the communities we serve. As we reacted and responded to the uncertain times, the needs of our students emerged. Needs that were not new, but exacerbated under even more dire conditions. In addition to COVID-19 the civil unrest that came out of the public lynching of George Floyd shed light on the systemic racism that exists in policing and US civic life more broadly. The national civil unrest around policing opened the door to the country coming together. As educators took to the streets, joining the uprising, we saw the responsibility to look within our own system of education and charging ourselves to name the anti-racist leadership practices that we would have to embody in order to dismantle our own system. In this state of flux, on behalf of the children, we examine how specific school contexts and individual school leaders' lived experience impacts their response. And we continue to ask, "*and how are the children?*"

To explore the lived realities of our colleagues, we set out to examine urban leaders and their ability to keep children first during these times of flux like COVID-19 and the national civil unrest that erupted after the public murder of George Floyd. Racism and injustice plague our country and every system within it. The education system is not exempt from this racism and it is our leaders' responsibility to enact anti-racist leadership practices that dismantle the systemic racism that create barriers for our children (Khalifa, 2018). We looked to leaders across the School District of Philadelphia, our leadership home, who serve high-needs populations to hear and learn from how they are leading through this crisis

We spoke with many School District of Philadelphia principals and asked how they have been keeping children's safety and wellbeing at the forefront of their consciousness when so much was happening around them. We began interviews by asking "*And how are the children?*" and then asked follow-up questions to find out what it would take for each leader to be able to answer "All of the children are well." Our goal in these shared inquiries was to explore what conditions need to be present to ensure that indeed *all of the children are well*. How are these leaders ensuring that the actions they take through this time of such flux in the world ensure the well-being of the children and keep them as the top priority. As we interviewed school leaders throughout Philadelphia, asking each one the question, "*And how are the children?*" responses varied, yet a number of powerful, generative themes emerged.

"And how are the children?"

Leaders provided commentary on their frustrations, describing equity issues that were not new but were intensified, "In some communities, not everyone has access" and "Everyone did not have access to healthy foods, technology and internet connections and for many parents working daily was essential to their livelihood" were emblematic responses. While COVID-19 presented a new set of challenges, the inequities that already existed were illuminated due to the sudden shutdown of schools. Students left school on Friday, March 13th, beginning a weekend, not knowing that they would not return to their school building for six months or more. Perhaps ever. Students were not sent home with books and other key learning materials. In the days following, it became clear that students needed access—to books, learning materials, and meals.

The District and City were commended for their rapid response of setting up food distribution centers throughout Philadelphia, ensuring that tens of thousands of students could pick up two meals daily. This effort puts in stark relief the fact that schools are not only places of learning, but serve other basic humanitarian needs. Schools and the adults in them are part of many students' support systems, and that requires seeing each other face to face. While the District quickly provided academic learning packets to students throughout the City, leaders began to ask about technology access for students, as it became clear that the rapid shift was going to become more long-term than originally thought. The District took on the challenge of ensuring every student had a laptop as it made plans to shift all learning online. As this undertaking occurred, leaders found it painfully

ironic—because it is—that the CEO of our City’s largest internet provider made a five million dollar personal donation to the District to help purchase laptops, yet many families with these new donated devices in hand still were not able to access online learning due to no or limited internet access in their own homes. A struggle of equity that continues. The lack of justice in education continues to perpetuate a cycle of societal inequities that stem from systematic racism and oppression.

Through March, April, and May we asked, “*And how are the children?*” and heard “*We don’t know, the children are not signing on.*”

Once laptops were distributed, there was an effort from the District to track and measure the number of students signing on each day to the learning platforms. When schools and individual teachers began to formally track participation, the powerful concept of student-teacher relationships was foregrounded. While there were barriers for many families to connect to the internet, for many students, a lack of motivation and connection kept them from signing on or putting cameras on for lack of privacy.

We continued to ask, “*And how are the children?*” Leaders shared stories about seeing children the same day they were interviewed, meaning that it was a regular occurrence. Leaders shared their connections to individual students and communities and how sustaining they were in powerful ways that showed their commitment and the power of their emotional and relational bonds with students and families. Countless leaders found a way to continue the strong connection they had with families throughout the pandemic—it is brave, really, the ways that these educators extended themselves in a time of profound fear and trauma for everyone, including themselves and their own families, to their students. They shared ways they supported their students and communities in ways that are nothing short of heroic. Through phone calls, texts, emails, and messages on newly created social media accounts, leaders found and created the touchpoints that so often easily and seamlessly occurred in-person. They made these a reality online and in person. This required incredible commitment and stamina.

A number of leaders choose to mask and glove up to visit families at home as well at the start of the pandemic, when they were concerned about students making the transition and then throughout the stay-at-home orders. While this was not endorsed by the District, it was simply what leaders felt called to do given a range of issues their students faced and struggles they knew they faced. “Oh, the children. I *think* they are OK...” Leaders reported that on the outside many students “looked okay, but do we *really* know?” One principal stated “It’s often overlooked and normalized and expected that children are resilient. While many of the District children looked and appeared to move about their respected communities the way they normally would, we had no true measure to know how they were *really* doing. In the midst of the tyranny of the urgent--distributing food and laptops--have we forgotten about the children...?”

After listening to the most influential leaders in the City, our school principals, we have a renewed hope. We, the system, the village, through purposeful collaboration, and by centering the needs of all students, including our most marginalized ones, can ensure a crucial answer. Our hope is that when this storm passes there will be a new horizon. And when we ask the question, “*How are the children?*” We will all first see the children, and we can ask **them** how they are doing. And we keep asking them. We know their names. We know their stories. We know their hopes and dreams. And, right now, we can confidently say *the children are much better*.

References:

Khalifa, M. (2018). *Culturally responsive school leadership*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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