

SYSTEMS OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FOR EDUCATORS IN CRISIS

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The shift to distance learning in response to the COVID-19 crisis was accompanied with various degrees of planning at the local, district, and school levels. The limited available preparation time was generally, and appropriately, dedicated to either logistical aspects such as identifying virtual online platforms and daily schedule or student support aspects such as continued availability of school lunch to families in need and addressing the emotional loss experienced by many students who were suddenly removed from their social networks and were looking at missing major events such as graduation.

What was less intentionally discussed and planned for were the emotional needs of educators within the school system. Like many adults, educators have expressed an increased feeling of anxiety and stress during this time. Those feelings have the potential to impact their ability to properly respond to both the academic and socioemotional needs of their students. As leaders ourselves, we set out to learn about the experiences of education practitioners in both the private and public schools with a focus on three main questions about their experiences as educators right now: (1) how has the pandemic crisis and shift to distance learning decreased, increased, or adjusted the emotional and time demands on educators, (2) how have school systems been supporting the emotional well-being of educators who are adapting to the rapidly changing demands of distance learning while balancing other aspects of their lives also in flux, and (3) how do educators feel about the impact of these supports, or lack thereof, on their well-being and ability meet the expectations of their roles. As one New England School Leader we interviewed shared,

One of the things I am grateful for, and it is still a work in progress, is that it became apparent very quickly that the mental and emotional toll of distance learning has impacted each of our constituencies differently. And as an admin team, this crisis is asking us to really lean into work we may never have even thought of doing.

Education in the US generally feels like it's in a permanent state of emergency and on the edge of catastrophe. This feeling of panic is internalized by educators at all levels who, in turn, work tirelessly to try to be all things to all people. Like other systems that were already under stress pre COVID-19, the crisis intensified the demands placed on educators in ways that were multidimensional and overwhelming for most. While the educators with whom we spoke generally reported that distance learning increased both the time and the emotional energy needed to perform their jobs, their response to questions about support varied based on the educators' expectations and supports offered by their organizations. This was especially true when those supports were offered by someone with direct influence over the educators' day-to-day responsibilities. This holds meaningful implications for education leaders to consider as we approach the new school year.

The overarching takeaway from our conversations is that it is critical to keep human well-being at the center of our work as leaders in education. True, the demands of education across the United States and the world changed dramatically overnight. We need to distribute computers! We have to buy computers to distribute! We have to find money to buy computers! What about the students who rely upon school lunches? The needs were significant, it was a tyranny of the urgent, and there was a surge of energy dedicated towards meeting them. Still, some organizations allowed the state of urgency that accompanied this pandemic to keep them from responding to the needs of people, including educators and parents, with presence and compassion. We must never underestimate the potential impact of asking someone how they are doing. Not in the casual way that is so often part of polite conversation. In the way that allows the person to feel seen, take a deep breath, and choose whether or not they want to respond. The importance of that supportive atmosphere and personal touch appeared again and again in our conversations and, importantly, affected the ability of educators to manage the various time and emotional demands that were thrust upon them during this crisis.

We asked educators to share their thoughts about the shift in time and emotional demands placed on them as a result of everything happening in the world. In this chapter, we present pieces of two stories, one administrator and one teacher, as well as larger themes that we took away from our interviews with all the educators we spoke with.

Socially Distanced Leadership - Miss A

Educators love to work with young people. They celebrate the success of their students and feel pain when they see their students in pain. One of the challenges for many was feeling removed from the work and students they love so much. Miss. A is a highly respected educator of color who has been in the field for over 20 years. She has worked in both public and private

settings as a teacher and administrator on both coasts of the United States.

Distance Learning has absolutely been one of the most challenging things. I'm an educator. I'm for the kids and so not seeing the kids every day has been hard. You start to, you know, forget why you're there, or why you're working so hard. I am working so hard. However, you see the fruits of your labor when you have the opportunity to see and be with the kids. You see the kids, they stop by your office. They want to have lunch with you, they see you at recess duty, they see you at carpool, and they bring that rejuvenation of spirit and rejuvenation of energy and you're not getting it on zoom. When we were in person, I hosted a Friday "luncheon with Miss A" every week and one week we would play a game and the other week we tell jokes so that was a lot of fun. And then I was also popping into classes, because I have to still observe and evaluate my faculty. So I was seeing the kids in these very short spurts. But, you know, when you look at your calendar, it is daunting. I look at my calendar it's like zoom call after phone call after phone call and there's no kid interaction there. It's just, business, business, business, and that's really really hard, right, super hard and super challenging! I think another piece that's really challenging about this is that there's no end in sight. We've had other crises in the community, in California, there are fires. And so, that's a crisis where it's like a snow day on the East Coast, we have to shut down the school, however, there's an end in sight. So, this is definitely challenging, because we don't know how it's going to end or when it's going to end.

Teachers as Parents, Parents as Teachers - Ms. B

It was evident that educators were carrying the weight of worrying about the impact of this loss of in classroom time on student learning while also balancing the needs of their own children. Ms. B is a classroom teacher in an urban public school setting where she has worked for more than a dozen years. She is revered by her students for her commitment to them and sense of community that she creates in the classroom.

When I am at school, that is my only job. There can be a lot but that is it. At home with two kids, it becomes split between being a teacher, a mother, and the mother of a student with special needs, and making sure that everyone is getting all their work done. I have learned to relax a bit and take the position of what gets done, gets done. I keep thinking that every student, not just my students at school but my own kids and their classmates, is going to be so far behind. That allowed me to relax a bit because it meant that they were not at a disadvantage in the same way. Even so, I have cried. One of my students emailed me to ask if I still liked her because she struggled in class and hasn't been turning in the online assignments. Our school social worker has put out a Google meet for anyone and everyone, so even staff could come in and talk with her. That helped.

Although Miss. A and Ms. B were in different roles and vastly different settings, both vignettes tell a story of educators working in a system that is more focused on survival than thriving. While several of the educators we spoke with described feeling a strong sense of disconnect and helplessness, many also shared what helped them feel tethered and focused during this time of uncertainty. These stories provide lessons for educators to carry with them even once we can all return to physical school.

1. Educators who worked in schools with well-established school-family partnerships reported feeling more successful. This helped educators feel more connected to their work and students and helped reduce the fear of academic loss. Schools should take deliberate steps to re-establish meaningful relationships with their parent communities, which have too often been neglected. Ways to do so range from simple weekly emails that can be sent out to google classrooms to a system of checking in with families by phone one of more times during the week. The goal is to keep the human connection alive during a challenging time.
2. Educators who were already comfortable with technology reported feeling less stressed in the shift to distance learning and were less reliant on support from their organizations. Schools should develop comprehensive technology professional development plans geared towards helping teachers integrate technology into their daily practice in purposeful ways that are efficient.
3. Educators shared that they believe this crisis may be the ultimate motivation to finally abandon old fashioned ways of teaching and learning that have not worked for students in quite some time. Educators now know that they need to have a plan because part of the "new normal" means that they may be asked to shift to distance learning at any point in time. This can be anxiety inducing if leaders and schools are unwilling to abandon existing systems such as rigid grade calculations categories for participation and homework, or fail to lead the way in showing teachers how to utilize new and evolving tools to recreate the systems of collaboration and formative assessment that we know are good practice.

Our goal when we began this project was to provide an opportunity for leaders and teachers to share openly how educating in the crisis affected their work and their personal lives. While we found that educators did not have a monolithic experience, their feelings of detachment were fairly consistent as was the significant need for emotional support. As we identified at the start of this piece, it is imperative that human wellbeing stay in focus even when other interests compete (Baker, 2020). There is still no nationwide plan or consensus for what school will look like in the fall as we write this chapter. It is our hope that leaders keep these stories and takeaways in mind as we head into further uncertainty, to ensure that educators at all levels feel cared for and connected.

References:

Baker, A. (April 13, 2020). An activist-therapist's 15 affirmations for hope amidst COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://rb.gy/ndamgy>

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