Article

Leading in Times of Crisis

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SSAGE

Abstract

In educational organizations, any situation that disrupts the education process and makes it inoperable is defined as a crisis. This teaching case study is relevant to practicing and prospective principals and administrators because it raises issues related to leading in times of crisis. Specifically, this scenario addresses the role school culture plays in lifting teachers' and students' morale while also enhancing student learning. This scenario takes place during the COVID-19 pandemic at a time when schools were suddenly mandated to deliver instruction remotely. In this case study, the author provides a framework designed to create intentionally inviting school cultures. Creating inviting school cultures should always be the goal of leaders, but it is even more crucial in times of crisis.

Introduction

Defining what a crisis is can be challenging because the definition may vary based on information such as who the person defining it is and the context in which this person resides or learns. Educators and community members may argue that their educational organizations have always been in crisis depending on where their schools are located, their schools' resources, and their students' learning outcomes and well-being. Thus, for these communities, it may be difficult to pinpoint how and when a crisis hits.

In this case study, the author defines crisis as, any situation that disrupts the education and training process and makes it inoperable is defined as a crisis (Mutch, 2015). The importance of being prepared for a crisis in schools cannot be understated (Brock,

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2002). The question is not whether a crisis will occur, but rather when the crisis will hit, how serious it will be, and what the response should be. Principals influence their school's culture (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Purkey & Novak, 1988). The culture of an organization determines the way people are treated, how places are maintained, and how programs and policies are elaborated and implemented. School culture dictates the way things are done. In educational organizations, the culture influences student learning as well as teacher retention and well-being (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2019; Hess, 2013; Purkey & Novak, 1988; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). If educational leaders understand how to create and maintain inviting school cultures during times of crisis, then learning, teaching, and well-being could be less negatively impacted. This teaching case study takes place during the COVID-19 pandemic at a time when schools were suddenly mandated to deliver instruction remotely. The first section of this teaching case study presents relevant background information. Subsequent sections focus on the case itself and the teaching notes findings. The last part provides some reflective activities.

Background Information

In this section, the author presents some contextual information about the community, school, and principal. To describe the community, the school district, and the school itself, the author used pseudonyms. This teaching case study is based on a combination of facts and hypotheticals.

The Community

Cornerville is a suburban city located in the Midwest of the United States. More than 25,000 people reside in Cornerville. The community prides itself for being welcoming, safe, clean, and for providing good amenities such as parks, recreational centers, and sports facilities. The residents are proud of their community. They actively participate in town hall meetings, school board meetings, and often volunteer to help the city schools. The heart of the city features a selection of boutiques, restaurants, and businesses in a historic setting. Cornerville has the largest collection of early stone houses in the state. Many are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The demographics is 93% White, 5% African American, and 2% Asian. The median income for a household in the city is $55,000 per year.

Cornerville School District

The mission of Cornerville City Schools is to provide diverse educational opportunities that develop the skills, attitudes, knowledge, and ethics needed to reach individual potential and create a foundation for lifelong learning. Cornerville School District (CSD) serves 8,400 students. The district operates 15 school buildings: two preschools, eight elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school. CSD also has an additional school called "the school of possibilities" (SOP). The mission of the SOP is

to provide students with a positive and appropriate learning environment that leads to success with credit-deficient students who may struggle in a traditional educational environment. The ultimate goal of SOP is for students to gain a high school diploma and to formulate goals for career and college readiness. The focus is to assist each student in the areas of academic skill development, positive classroom attendance, attitudinal development, and personal responsibility.

CSD emphasizes quality and focuses on student accomplishments in academics, athletics, and fine arts, stressing the value of a well-rounded education. As an example of this quality, CSD offers French, German, and Spanish in middle school and has more than 3,200 students in grades 6 to 12 enrolled in foreign language classes. The district is proud of its academic and athletic results, its strong relationships with stakeholders, and its robust and regular communication system. Schools are mandated to send monthly newsletter, text, and voicemail using an automated system. Every quarter, the superintendent also sends out a document outlining the performances, awards, and stories of students.

Cornerville Elementary School

Cornerville Elementary School (CES) serves 450 students and 15% of these students are enrolled in the free and reduce lunch program. Representative of the city's population, 95% of the students are White, 4% are African American, and 1% is Asian. The staff reflects this demographic as well. CES was considered a failing school 10 years ago. Since then, the school has had good grades on their report cards, has progressed in all academic areas, and has become a model school for the district and the region. The turnaround of the school has often been attributed to the principal, Mrs. Pating, a 57-year-old White woman. Mrs. Pating was a mathematics teacher for 15 years at CES before becoming the principal. She has known the teachers for a long time and is well respected by all veteran and novice educators.

The principal believes in collaboration and accountability. As a result, she frequently conducts walkthroughs and spends time with her teachers to formatively debrief these visits. In addition, Mrs. Pating is results driven. She implemented professional learning communities (PLCs) and managed to remove barriers that could hinder the time reserved for PLCs by sending emails for the "knot and bolts issues and the day to day operation of the school." Mrs. Pating is proud of the fact that the school achieves such good results without having an emphasis on technology. Teachers use technology for their instruction and students use it for their learning, but the school owns one device for every two students only. The school has never experienced a crisis.

The Case

Principal Pating received a call one Sunday afternoon from her superintendent. She knew the situation had to be serious because in her 10 years as a principal in the district, the superintendent had made a similar call once before for a situation that happened at the high school. She answered with a knot in her stomach knowing that what

the superintendent was about to say would not be good news. Within 1 hr, all leaders in the district were gathered and were discussing the urgent and mandated need to move to online learning due to the pandemic. The leaders agreed on a plan. This plan outlined the following: students would be coming to school the following Monday and Tuesday and then the district would use snow days to pause instruction until Spring break. During the break, leaders were to help the teachers prepare their online content and be ready to serve the children. Mrs. Pating's natural reaction was to set some goals for herself and her team. She sent an email to her teachers and staff that evening informing them of this sudden change and why the change needed to occur. Everyone was on board. Over the next 3 days, teachers and district leaders worked tirelessly with families and students alike.

Spring break came and went. All the educators in the district used the vacation time to set up their Google classroom and their activities. Families and students were also ready to resume school. As expected, the first week was chaotic, students were not logging in as scheduled. In addition, there were not enough devices in some homes for all children who needed one to complete their work. To make things worse, there were not enough devices in the school or the district to pass out the children who needed one. That was the first hurdle and it was never fully resolved despite Mrs. Pating's efforts to deliver devices every day during the first 2 weeks of the crisis. The second hurdle pertained to WIFI. Mrs. Pating realized that many families did not have access to WIFI. Food was the next issue for the students that the school was feeding. To solve these issues, the principal advised parents to go to parking lots of restaurants to access the WIFI and asked the district buses and staff to deliver meals. In the meantime, she drafted new policies related to compulsory attendance and truancy for the new online environment. The policies stated that students had to be online and finish their content by the due dates and that "instruction had to go on despite these challenging and unprecedented times."

During the crisis, teachers reported working more than they ever had. They were on the phone late each day to check in with their students and parents. They also had their own children to supervise and their families to take care of. Educators were frustrated with the amount of emails Mrs. Pating sent them, her new policies that they could not enforce, and her lack of personal communication. Teachers were not only physically tired, but they were also demoralized. It was not until the end of the second week of remote learning, that the teachers voiced their concerns when the principal inquired by email about students who were not attending their online class meetings. Mrs. Pating had asked the teachers to implement her new policies and had offered to step in if students were not logging in their respective classrooms and not doing their work. Based on the feedback she received, the principal gathered teachers online for their first staff meeting. The goal for the meeting was to explain the new policies and draft a plan for the students who were not engaged.

Mrs. Pating started the meeting by looking at her Excel sheet and naming students who were missing instruction. After 15 min of meeting, one of the teachers stopped the principal and said,

Mrs. Pating, please could we talk about something other than the new policies? I am sorry but we are the ones talking to the families and students. We also teach while trying to keep our families safe and our own children learning. I worry that we are too focused on programs and learning and not enough on these children. Personally, I think about my students differently in these dangerous times. I ask myself: Am I teaching Matthew, or I am teaching Math to Matthew?

Mrs. Pating was taken aback and embarrassed. For the past 3 weeks, she had spent countless hours on her Excel sheet, had drafted and refined new policies as if a global pandemic had not happened. Not knowing what to say or if she should say anything the principal responded: "I agree about teaching Matthew rather than Math to Matthew but you already know Matthew because you had the whole year with him until just recently so it is time to focus on Matthew's and everyone's academics."

The frustration among teachers grew exponentially after the principal's last comment. A veteran teacher felt empowered to respond,

Yes, we know Matthew, Jeff, Lucy and all the other students in our classrooms, but do we know if they have suffered losses due to COVID-19? Do we know if they are safe at home? Do we know the stress their parents are under and if they have lost a job, or an income? Do we know if these children have food every day and in sufficient quantities? In these very hot temperatures, do we know if the families have air condition and if the children live in appropriate conditions? I know we are better than policies and that our school culture is inviting when we are teaching face-to-face. I just do not feel that we are creating an inviting school culture right now because we more focused on academics than on our students. These are extraordinary and challenging times where students do not see their friends, their favorite adult, and they are confined indoors.

Once again, the principal was baffled. She could hear and see that her teachers were exhausted, overwhelmed, and overworked in both their personal and their professional lives. She also realized that she had not been in their classrooms enough, had not engaged and encouraged the students and their families, and had not communicated sufficiently with stakeholders. Above all, she had not emphasized what truly mattered most: the students. Mrs. Pating had not realized the amount of anxiety teachers were feeling. That evening, Mrs. Pating reflected on the teachers' comments and her actions. She realized that by fear of being a failing school again, she had been unintentionally disinviting. She focused on attendance and results when teachers and families wanted and needed genuine care, emotional support, and optimism.

The next day she contacted the teachers by email and asked them for input and suggestions on the following questions: What kind of leader would you like me to be? What can I do for you, your family, your students, and their families? To her surprise, her team understood her behaviors and actions. The team also offered many ideas of how the principal could be present for all stakeholders. Mrs. Pating thanked her teachers and made a video in which she said,

I thank you. I have been focusing on the wrong things lately and I apologize. Along the way, I lost my compassion and positive and inviting attitude, and I am sorry. I am grateful

for your honesty, patience, and understanding. I have focused on content where I should have focused on the people and places in these times of crisis. Policies are important but not as much as people. I am going to press the reset button and communicate more, support all of you more, and encourage you to be innovative and to instruct in ways that fit the students' new realities. I am committed to re-imagine and re-build the intentionally inviting school culture we always have had when we were in our building.

Mrs. Pating and her teachers learned valuable lessons during this unusual semester. The principal has an opportunity to improve and to prepare for the upcoming academic year. According to the district's new crisis plan, families will be able to choose between online learning or hybrid, knowing that at any time instruction could return to remote learning only if the corona virus cannot be contained. The next section provides information about leading in times of crisis and on creating intentionally inviting school cultures.

Teaching Notes

These teaching notes are organized by themes. The first theme addresses typologies that help categorize the broad types of crisis. The second theme presents a succinct overview on best leadership practices in schools during crisis times.

Types of Crisis

Several scholars have written about the various types of crisis (Pepper et al., 2010; Smith & Riley, 2012). Smith and Riley (2012) contend that there are five types of crisis. They are as follows: (a) short-term crises that are sudden in arrival and swift in conclusion; (b) cathartic crises that are slow in the build-up, reach a critical point, and then can be swiftly resolved; (c) long-term crises that develop slowly and then bubble along for a very long time without any clear resolution; (d) one-off crises that are unique and would not be expected to reoccur; and (e) infectious crises that occur and are seemingly resolved quickly, but leave behind significant other issues to be addressed, some of which may subsequently develop into their own crises. Based on this taxonomy, COVID-19 would be considered infectious and long term because of the deleterious economic, social, psychological, emotional, and global impact of the virus. Pepper et al. (2010) employed a different typology to categorize types of crisis. According to these authors, the four groupings of crisis include the following: (a) External-Unpredictable, (b) Internal-Unpredictable, (c) Internal-Predictable, and (d) External-Predictable. Under this classification, COVID-19 would be external and unpredictable because it was external to schools and not anticipated by school leaders.

The unpredictability of the virus, combined with the shortage of robust information and the lack of preparedness for such a virus, has impacted millions of individuals globally. Covid-19 has, however, disproportionally affected communities of color and those living in poverty (Gutiérrez & Grossman, 2020). In schools, these inequities were seen when institutions were not able to equitably serve students who did not have access to a mobile device, a computer, or had trouble securing a WIFI connection. In

addition, schools found it challenging to fully serve students with different abilities and English-language learners.

In educational organizations, any situation that disrupts the education and training process and makes it inoperable is defined as a crisis (Mutch, 2015). What makes a crisis in the education sector different from other crises and also makes it important is that the crisis at school includes children that the society is responsible for protecting. Crises in schools most often involve alcohol, drugs, weapons and violence, student discipline issues, student or staff deaths off campus, or inclement weather (Mutch, 2015). Often districts are challenged to be crisis-ready because they lack training, personnel, time, and financial resources to provide adequate crisis management trainings (Smith & Riley, 2012). As a long-term, unpredictable, and infectious crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly challenging for school districts because remote learning became the mandated mode of instruction with very little notice. School leaders played a key role in creating inviting school cultures within the sudden remote learning environment.

Leadership in Schools

In times of crisis, leaders "frame the meaning of a crisis event, expressing appropriate concern and support, overseeing mitigation, coordinating support and facilitating timely, open communication" (Seeger et al., 2003, p. 241). During crisis, educational leaders need to ensure that students feel safe and have a clear sense of belonging so that they can learn (Boudreau, 2020). In other words, leaders need to address Maslow (1943) before Bloom (1956). Maslow (1943) introduced his Hierarchy of Needs, which explain that besides our basic physiological needs such as food, water, and shelter, human beings need to feel safe to be happy, learn, and succeed. The third tier of Maslow's pyramid has to do with the need to be included and connected; our human need to be social. These first three needs are crucial to learning. Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) provides a systematic way of describing how a learner's performance grows in complexity when mastering academic tasks. The taxonomy includes six levels: (a) knowledge, (b) comprehension, (c) application, (d) analysis, (e) synthesis, and (f) evaluation. In times of crisis, leaders should be concerned with Maslow rather than Bloom because some families are challenged to provide the essentials to their children.

Smith and Riley (2012) affirmed that responding to a crisis involves five steps: (a) getting quality and reliable facts; (b) implementing the relevant contingency plan, or quickly adapt one to meet the crisis situation. The implementation of a rigorously pre-considered contingency plan means that key staff and other stakeholders immediately know what has to be done, and who has to do it; (c) making decision swiftly before the level of damage escalates; (d) showing genuine concern for the welfare of others; and (e) communicating clearly, openly, and regularly to limit confusion, rumors, and misinformation. In addition, Smith and Riley (2012) encouraged leaders to reflect post-crisis and ask questions such as: Could we have responded better? How? What contingency plans can we put in place to be better prepared?

Table 1. Invitational Education: The Four Quadrants.

Intentionally Inviting School	*Unintentionally Inviting* School
You are purposefully—on purpose—welcoming to children, families, and so on.	You aren't purposefully welcoming to families and students—you are unaware. You are, *just by accident*, inviting.
Intentionally Disinviting School	*Unintentionally Disinviting* School
You are purposefully disinviting to others.	You are unaware that you/the school is disinviting. You are, *just by accident*, disinviting. (Perhaps you have just not thought about it before, you have habits that are disinviting to others—your blind side).

Leadership in times of crisis is about dealing with events and emotions in ways that minimize personal and organizational harm. Smith and Riley (2012) identified key attributes that effective crisis educational leaders possess. These dispositions include having excellent communication skills, being able to make quick decisions, thinking creatively, showing empathy, and being flexible, intuitive, optimistic, and tenacious. Additional traits relate to the ability to synthesize information, and adequately use known information gained from previous crises.

Effective leaders use the aforementioned dispositions to create positive and inviting school cultures. Culture overpowers strategy (Drucker, 1993). In educational organizations, culture influences student learning as well as teacher retention and well-being because culture determines the way people are treated, how places are maintained, and how programs and policies are elaborated and implemented (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Gruenert & Whitaker, 2019; Hess, 2013; Purkey & Novak, 1988; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

Invitational Education

According to Purkey and Novak (1988), creating an invitational education is key to student learning and students' and teachers' well-being. Although this model has never been applied in the context of crisis leadership, the author chose this framework based on a longitudinal study conducted with 30 school leaders during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. In this empirical study, principals talked about the importance of being inviting with people first. These leaders also emphasized the need to make the remote environment inviting to give students and teachers a sense of belonging (Author). An invitational education means that the school is intentionally inviting as opposed to being unintentionally inviting, inviting by chance, or disinviting (Table 1).

The authors theorized that four main areas need to be intentionally inviting in a school. The four Ps describe the four areas as People, Places, Programs, and Policies.

People

People-oriented schools are easy to identify. They are the schools where principals and teachers welcome students and each other, call students by name, and know about their

talents, likes, and dislikes. They are the schools where there is a general atmosphere of warmth and respect. In a remote learning environment, principals play a pivotal role in creating positive relationships with their teachers, students, and families.

Places

Places are visible, and as such can easily be made intentionally inviting. Purkey and Novak (1988) noted, "If hallways are littered, paint is peeling, restrooms are smelly, classrooms dusty, offices cluttered, and cafeteria grimy, one can assume that the school's policies, programs, and people are the same" (p. 21). Places are the most obvious element in any school and the easiest to change. They provide an opportunity for immediate improvement. For example, one can paint lockers or clean classrooms. In this teaching case study, the places were remote places.

Programs

Sometimes well-intentioned programs are harmful to individuals or groups because they focus on narrow goals and neglect the wider scope of human needs. For example, some school programs group youngsters and give them a label, and the label becomes a stigma, which negates the positive purposes for which these programs were originally created. The invitational model requires educators to monitor programs that could detract from the goals for which they were designed. Leaders need to ask themselves whether programs welcome everyone or just some students; who is included and who is not? Many school programs can use parents or other volunteers as resources. Volunteers can tutor, type, file, or chaperone. Most communities have volunteers available; they only need to be invited.

Policies

Schools operate based on many policies. Such policies include discipline, dress code, personnel selection, bus routes, snow days, attendance, and visitation procedures. These formal or informal policies communicate a strong message to people in the school and the community about how things are to be done and where each person fits in. They also communicate values such as equity, diversity, and inclusion. Although all 4Ps are critical to creating intentionally inviting school cultures, in times of crises the people dimension is paramount (Purkey & Novak, 1988). People develop best in inviting environments.

Conclusion

Creating an intentionally inviting school culture does not just happen; leaders must work on it daily. Inviting school cultures are foundational to students "and teachers" well-being at all times but is of utmost importance during times of crisis. This case study demonstrated the importance of school culture in remote learning environments.

In this scenario, Mrs. Pating focused on policies rather than her teachers. As a result, and without realizing it, the principal was being unintentionally disinviting. As a result, the principal alienated her staff because she did not foster an intentionally inviting school culture during COVID-19 and the sudden switch to online instruction. Next, you will have the opportunity to reflect on the case study and apply what you have learned. Using the teaching notes, please answer the questions and complete the activity. Put yourself in Mrs. Pating's place. What would you do?

Activities

1. In pairs discuss your understanding of the Four Quadrant and how you could use it in your role as a current or future leader?
2. Then, using the Four Quadrants and the 4Ps, create a matrix of ideas pertaining to what Mrs. Pating can do to create an intentionally inviting school culture in a remote learning environment. Use Table 2 to list your ideas. As part of your list of ideas, consider how Mrs. Pating could involve the community in making decisions related to the budget.
3. Using the same table, write example relating to Mrs. Pating being unintentionally inviting, intentionally disinviting, and unintentionally disinviting.

Table 2. Invitational Education: The Four Quadrants.

Intentionally Inviting School	*Unintentionally Inviting* School
People:	People:
Places:	Places:
Programs:	Programs:
Policies:	Policies:
Intentionally Disinviting School	*Unintentionally Disinviting* School
People:	People:
Places:	Places:
Programs:	Programs:
Policies:	Policies:

4. Some people argue that structural racism is an ongoing crisis in various schools and communities. As a leader and using the 4Ps to inform your work, how can you make the schools impacted by structural racism intentionally inviting?

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Places:

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Programs:

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Policies:

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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