

**MOVING FROM**

Surviving to Thriving

By Kim M. Smithgall

In September, three Arizona men — one of them carrying zip tie handcuffs — barged into the office of elementary school principal Diane Vargo, threatening to make a citizen’s arrest. The issue? The local health department required the son of one of the intruders to quarantine after possible exposure to COVID-19, meaning the student might miss a field trip.

Vargo was able to de-escalate the situation and call the police, but the incident was still shocking. Later, she received an email saying, “Hi. Next time it will be a barrel pointed at your Nazi face.”

Meanwhile, in many other districts across the country, yelling, cursing and even fistfights are becoming more common at board of education and other district meetings. The divisiveness and confrontations are not only related to pandemic protocols like masking, quarantining, and vaccines, but also the discussion of such topics as critical race theory in schools. This escalation of aggressive and other negative behaviors toward educators, together with the pandemic, is creating the backdrop for today's school administrators – likely making this the most stressful time in history to be leading a district or school.

This stress, in turn, has some school leaders rethinking their careers. In a survey from the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the Learning Policy Institute, more than 45 percent of principals indicated that pandemic conditions were prompting them to consider leaving their jobs earlier than they had originally planned. One principal commented, "The career I love has become overwhelming and exhausting." Another respondent said, "Everyone talks about supporting students and teachers, but principals and assistant principals are being overlooked. I've never felt so burned out and unappreciated."

The potential loss of so much experience and dedication would certainly exacerbate the many issues already facing education.

TURNING THE TIDE

SAANYS tapped two experts who were also keynotes at the recent SAANYS Annual Conference in Albany – Romila "Dr. Romie" Mushtaq and Dr. Dominique Smith – to get their advice on how school leaders can not only survive these challenging times, but also thrive.

Dr. Romie is a traditionally trained neurologist with additional board certifications in integrative medicine. She is also an expert in mindfulness, stress management, and workplace wellness who works with corporations, business leaders, associations, c-suite executives, high-performing athletes, and education leaders to improve brain

health. Dr. Romie is regularly featured as a national media analyst, sharing her expertise in brain health on CBS, NBC, ABC, and in *Inc.* and *SUCCESS* magazines.

Dr. Smith has been in the education field for more than 15 years and is well known for his research and practices related to creating positive school culture through restorative practices, growth mindset, and classroom management. He is a high school principal in California, a trainer for the International Institute for Restorative Practices, and the author of numerous books, including *Engagement by Design: Creating Learning Environments Where Students Thrive* (coauthored with Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, Russell J. Quaglia, and Lisa L. Lande). His latest books (also coauthored with Fisher and Frey, along with John Hattie) are *Leading the Rebound: 20+ Must-Dos to Restart Teaching and Learning* and *Rebound, Grades K-12: A Playbook for Rebuilding Agency, Accelerating Learning Recovery, and Rethinking Schools*.

Dr. Romie and Dr. Smith both spoke about the importance of using deliberate and purposeful leadership practices to help school administrators prioritize self-care, manage stressors in all areas of life, and nurture a strong and productive educational environment.

SHIFTING THE BRAIN

Dr. Romie underscored the need to consider your own health needs as a starting point – similar to outfitting yourself with an airplane's oxygen mask before helping others with theirs. She started off the conversation by distinguishing between "bouncing back" and moving into peak performance, indicating that the phrase "bounce back" can convey the message that someone had a setback or didn't do something right.

"Nothing is further from the truth. Instead, it's about saying you've just been put through the ultimate stress test in education," Dr. Romie said, adding, "I know that leaders in education are some of the most resilient individuals and that the pandemic has tested the resilience of leaders in education like no other industry."

"When I start with myself as a leader and I'm calm, I'm now creating a psychologically safe space for people I lead."

– Dr. Romie

SAANYS: In your ongoing work with school and district leaders, what are you hearing? What are their biggest stressors?

Dr. Romie: It's that there's no manual for how to deal with what we're going through; as quickly as they can lead and adjust, the situation changes. Also, not every district is going through the same problems or working with the same mandates or laws and so they don't necessarily have another colleague to lean on because what they're facing in their district may be completely different. It can be both challenging and isolating. This constant uncertainty is such a critical test on leaders because it's adding an additional layer of duties on the already very full schedules they have.

SAANYS: What are the differences between the stress experienced by education leaders compared with the stress felt by others – for example, athletes or corporate/business leaders? Also, are there any similarities?

Dr. Romie: The distinct difference is that the pandemic has negatively impacted children and when you're a school leader, the decisions you're making are affecting children. That's an additional stressor that the corporate world doesn't have. It's an awesome responsibility to care for our next generation through an incredibly difficult time.

The common theme between the settings [schools and the corporate or other settings] revolves around that fact that wellness is not something you do outside of work. As a leader, it is something I need to think about for myself so I can be responsible and think about wellness for my employees, and associates.

SAANYS: What are the trickle-down effects if leaders ignore their own wellness?

Dr. Romie: Consciously and subconsciously, a leader sets the tone and the attitude for the entire team, and the team in this case includes teachers, students, their parents and guardians, and the community as a whole. A leader might be feeling like they are a duck – trying to appear that they’re floating and calm, but they’re furiously paddling underwater. I could ask how they’re feeling and they say, “I’m fine,” but their jaw is clenched and their shoulders are tight. Well, that attitude spreads to everybody – the appearance of being calm, but underneath the still waters, they’re frantically paddling and just telling everybody they’re fine. That’s not healthy for anybody.

SAANYS: Can you describe your brainSHIFT program and how it could be helpful in reducing stress?

Dr. Romie: The program comes from the guiding principle that you can’t get the state of your relationships or business straight until you first get your brain health straight.

You start by taking an assessment to see where your brain is. [See the accompanying sidebar article on the quick “busy brain” assessment that attendees at the recent SAANYS conference accessed.] The assessment lets you start with a level of self-awareness.

The idea is this: If you came to me as an individual and stress was negatively impacting your health or your performance, what would I, as a doctor, do for you individually – because no two people are alike, right? So, brainSHIFT is an individualized stress management program that meets you where you are. The focus is on little micro-habits – the smallest action you can take to create the biggest impact for your health.

SAANYS: Could you expand on that?

Dr. Romie: I’ll break it down further: The “S” in brainSHIFT stands for sleep, so we would address sleep issues in the program. The “H” is hormones, “I” is your inflammatory markers, the “F” is food and fuel, and the “T” is the role of technology. So, depending on the individual, we might be looking at micro-habits related to sleep and how to optimize your

hormones and address inflammatory markers.

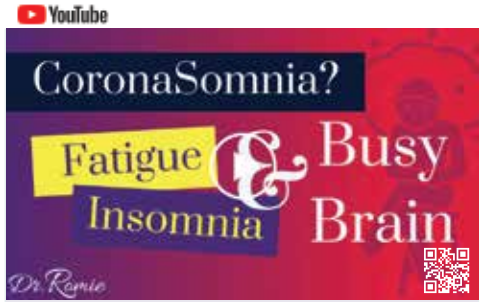
The program is eight weeks and people start to see measurable results in seven to 14 days; they’re sleeping through the night and waking up feeling restored. Leaders also say that no matter what the day brings them – all the uncertainties – they are staying more focused and calm. They don’t feel like that duck furiously paddling underwater with gritting teeth and hunching shoulders. Also, about 80 percent of the participants are dropping their pandemic pounds and most are reporting that their relationships are improving because they’re less irritable. It’s been transformative.

SAANYS: What is the relationship between a healthy mind and a healthy body?

Dr. Romie: With mind-body medicine, we know that the brain is connected to the body. There’s a certain part of the brain known as the temporal lobe; I call it the airport traffic control center. And through the autonomic nervous system, that part of the brain is connected to the rest of your brain and the rest of your body, including every organ. That temporal lobe, or airport traffic control center, is where your mood and your memory get processed. So, if we’re in a constant state of stress or a negative mood, it raises our stress hormone levels and it triggers the autonomic nervous system or the pathways for the rest of the body to be in stress. And that’s when physical illness starts to come into play.

SAANYS: What’s the best way to get started with shifting the brain and improving brain health?

Dr. Romie: I always think self-awareness is the first step, otherwise, we get information overload, don’t we? You can log on to Google or social media or talk to your colleagues or friends and everybody has an opinion on what to do for wellness. And then self-care can become like a buffet table in Las Vegas. The restaurants mean well, but you go in and you’re not sure what you want and you overeat and feel sick or you just stick to what you know.



BUSY BRAIN TEST

Dr. Romie offers the “Busy Brain Test” on her website at <https://drromie.com/test/>.

This very quick mini-assessment helps determine the level of stress in your brain. High scores on the test may indicate negative effects on mental health, memory, sleep, weight, digestion, and hormones. After completing the assessment, you receive access to tips for lowering stress levels and turning down the busy brain, such as the “3/30 brainBREAK,” which involves three minutes away from technology devices to reset the brain, as well as a 30-minute bedtime routine that includes meditation, writing prompts for a brain dump, and a digital detox.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



<https://drromie.com/latest-articles/>



That's where assessment and self-awareness come in – in other words, where am I right now in my health journey and what is the next step I need to take?

SAANYS: For school administrators, how does making these shifts for themselves as individuals affect the bigger picture – for example, for the larger school community?

Dr. Romie: When I start with myself as a leader and I'm calm, I'm now creating a psychologically safe space for the people I lead. So, if a teacher is having a bad day and comes to you as a leader, they feel safe to vent knowing that as a leader, you're not going to yell back at them or dismiss them. They'll know you're going to remain calm and focused and let them be heard and, if needed, help them find a solution. And as a leader, you are there to help diffuse the stress of other people or guide them where they need to go. All of a sudden, the entire team's stress levels reduce because there's an acknowledgment that there are challenging things going on, but now we have a psychologically safe place to come that's being led by someone who isn't faking being in control and calm; the leader truly is calm and focused.

SAANYS: Do you have some quick and simple tips that a busy education leader could use right now?

Dr. Romie: The one thing that I am a big proponent of brings brain science and mindfulness together and that's to take scheduled brain breaks during the day – even if it's just five minutes. In that five minutes, step away from the computer screens, mobile phones, or any digital device; it changes the scenery of your brain. In a perfect world, you can go outside and change everything your senses are experiencing. But in our imperfect world, I know it's not possible to go outside. But at the very least, step away from the digital devices and refocus on what you're looking at, what you're hearing, what you're touching, what you're tasting, and what you're smelling. It's called the sensory reset meditation. When you do that, you alter your brain chemistry and the pathways to the temporal lobe – that air traffic control tower that I mentioned earlier,

which relies on our five senses. If you just reset your senses, you're calming the brain down.

One trick that I do is to try not to schedule back-to-back meetings on a computer screen. We're all human and sometimes we have those days; but when I can get up for at least five minutes, I'll go in my backyard and sit by this large oak tree, touch the bark, smell the natural world, and listen to the sounds. And when I need something different, I eat a piece of chocolate – we all have to have a human moment, right?

OFFERING THE OXYGEN MASK TO OTHERS

Dominique Smith agrees with the need for self-care. And while most of his colleagues have pushed through the unprecedented stressors during the last two years, the effects of that stress are similar to those documented in students, teachers, and other education staff members.

"We're seeing increased anxiety, frustrations, and trauma, which, in turn, cause lower identity and agency. They've had to pretend they were good. While I personally don't think I've seen a lot of leaders leave, I've seen a lot who are hurting and close to burnout," he commented. "Leaders need to be able to take that moment and work on their social-emotional development; they need to be able to pause and have a moment to think, 'I'm still making an impact.' They need to be able to celebrate the small wins that they've had for themselves and their schools."

In other words, once education leaders take the vital step of taking care of themselves and reflecting on their impact, they will be in the best possible position to offer the proverbial oxygen mask to others in their school community.

SAANYS: What are you doing as a school leader to build a strong community with your teachers and other staff members – strategies that might be helpful for other education leaders to try?

Dr. Smith: I think it's different state to state and where you are. I'm in California and I didn't have content

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teachers on site for 18 months. I had some interventionists on site and others like that, but no one saw each other. No one got to laugh and cry and share their thinking or talk about a lesson plan face-to-face. It was all through Zoom...and we all have Zoom fatigue.

So, I think the first thing is re-creating collaboration and collaborative spaces for adults to talk to each other again and have some real conversations. For example, this past Friday, we had professional development and during that time, we answered some statements together as a team. We said, "Right now, I'm frustrated because..." and we filled in the blank. Then we said, "Therefore, I think we should do..." and, again, we filled in the blank.

This allowed us to take a pulse from one of our biggest stakeholder groups and find out what's frustrating them. And maybe as leaders, we know if we're missing something or maybe there's a new idea that we haven't thought of or maybe there's just a better way to support our team.

So, the next step involved saying, "Okay, we've had some frustrations, but what is going really well?" And then people had an opportunity to celebrate themselves and celebrate having students back on the campus.

It was just such a great Friday in our school.

SAANYS: What were the frustrations voiced by staff members? And what were they eager to celebrate?

Dr. Smith: Technology is one frustration. Students have had to learn through technology for so long; they have their earbuds in because that's what we've taught them for 18 months. Now as we move back to the classrooms, we still need to be teaching them how to use technology in the best possible way rather than just being a punitive school and telling them to put

their cell phones away.

Engagement is a huge concern, too. So, we're having conversations about strategies to bring engagement into the classrooms. We have newer teachers who have never taught on a campus before, so they're not used to this, and we have teachers who had fabulous engagement before we went out. For both groups, getting students engaged has caused a little bit of stress.

The celebrations were related to seeing those "aha" moments again, seeing students learning in a classroom again, and just having the chatter of voices in front of you rather than on a screen. Our teachers love that students are here in person, talking and moving around. We could even celebrate discipline, where you get to have teachable moments with students.

I think that's the beauty of it — people think it's just so good to be home. And that was the language a lot of people used: good to be home.

SAANYS: It's admirable that your staff members consider the school to be their home versus the idea of being "stuck at home" teaching during the pandemic-related school closures. Are there other strategies that you're tapping into to further promote this idea and to ensure you're nurturing relationships among your teachers and students?

Dr. Smith: Yes — putting a lot of time aside for one-on-one conversations and being visible. It's so important for leaders right now to be even more intentional about being visible and not being locked into our offices, even though I know the days are busy. For me, that means having those one-on-one conversations and checking in with the staff I work with. And it's been really great because each person gets to share things about their personal life and their work life and also ask for help.

In that vein, we're stressing that it's a positive to ask for help; every time we see each other, we're asking, "Do you need anything?" So, now everybody in the building is asking for help and we're trying to transfer that idea to the students.

The visibility piece is also important for student connections with teach-

ers and other staff — making eye contact, eating lunch with students, laughing, handshakes, and just doing something interactive with them. Students haven't seen adults in school settings for a while; they don't know if adults even like them or want to be around them, so any space you have to be around them in an intentional way will help.

SAANYS: What else are you telling your teachers this year in terms of running their classrooms or just addressing student needs in general?

Dr. Smith: I'm asking that they get to know students; students aren't going to learn from you if you don't know them. So, we're doing interest surveys and regular social-emotional check-ins. Also, we're using "2 x 10" approaches for students who are struggling; that's taking two minutes a day for 10 days in a row to ask students about themselves because the research indicates this helps us be more connected.

SAANYS: What role does student voice play in helping to improve the culture of your school?

Dr. Smith: We've been holding small-group meetings with students to increase the sense of belonging in our school and to create a welcoming environment.

But we started the year making sure that all students were able to say in each classroom, "This is what learning looks like for me" and then write that down

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— Dr. Smith

and put those thoughts up around the classroom, showcasing them. This gave teachers the opportunity to understand what learning looks like for a student and the fact that it might be different than what they thought learning might look like. Then teachers could consider how to integrate that every day in the classroom.

We also know classroom manage-

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ment is always a consideration, but it would be a high need now. So, we made sure all students had voice in what the school rules and expectations are, especially the expectations for individual classrooms. We asked teachers if they could allow the students to have a little bit more of that control of what the environment should feel and look like because then they hold themselves and each other accountable.

SAANYS: So, are the expectations and rules different from classroom to classroom?

Dr. Smith: Yes, every classroom is different. We have a series of overall expectations for the school, but every classroom is its own community, right? Every community can be different and have different guidelines, but that doesn't mean you can go to another classroom and say, "Well, in this class, I'm allowed to do x, y, and z." And that's perfect because there will be different places in your life that you're allowed to do certain things and in other places, there are going to be different rules, expectations, and guidelines.

I think that's the beauty of it — our students had the voice to help create [the environments]. Some students wanted to make sure that this class always had practice tests and this class always had music on Mondays or whatever it may be, but it was student-led and student voice that was used to build a safer place.

SAANYS: Can you talk about your *Leading the Rebound* book and some leadership practices in the book that might be helpful to other administrators?

Dr. Smith: We built the book with 22 modules that individuals can break down and decide what they want to work on. It's not necessarily focused on the pandemic, but rebounding from

anything — a good year, a bad year, or a year of breaks.

We created some modules around what I love to do, which is restorative practices. Here, we started to think about how we can look at our discipline approaches and make sure students are in school rather than out of school. And how do we build that back into our schools right now? Now is a great time to work on that.

We also wrote about stealing the conflict and making sure that administrators don't steal conflict from their teachers when teachers are struggling with a student. Before we take it, do they want that conflict because it allows them to rebuild a relationship with a student in a time of need?

In the book, we also talk about taking care of yourself. What are some strategies to take care of yourself, no matter what. That's a huge component of this work.

The 22 modules aren't deep reads — just a kind of kickstart and a dive into a little bit of the research to get your mind going. Then you can expand on that and go wherever you want to go as a leader.

SAANYS: The book talks about making the next normal a better normal. What does a better normal look like to you?

Dr. Smith: I'll use a football reference. When I played football, I thought I was okay, right? I played well. But when you watch game film, you start to realize there are things that you miss, things you've got to be better at. We had the biggest case study for ourselves in a long time and we started to see what works in education and what does not. We realized a couple of things: We have to define engagement. And when we get to define engagement and allow students to have a voice in engagement, we can create something better than what we had. We realize that collaboration is key.

We also realize technology is our friend, not an enemy. I think that was huge. And how do we, when a student is out, still allow them to come to school? Simultaneous teaching was fantastic when students could Zoom in and never miss out. So, if kids are out

or have to be away from school now, can they still get the learning?

I also think there are so many things that were the same in education for 100 years, and we are finally able to dissect that and say we're going to get rid of this or that. The thing that I see right now is we finally have the background—the research from our own eyes—to say inequities live in education. No matter where you were during the pandemic, you saw the inequities that came across for your students. And so, we could finally say we have to have a fight for equity. All of our work should have a lens of equity.

FINAL THOUGHTS

When asked if they had any final thoughts or tidbits of advice, Dominique Smith and Dr. Romie provided words of encouragement and hope.

Dr. Smith: I think the best advice is this: Don't forget about yourself. Yes, you signed up to be a leader and that already means a large part of your life is going to be in the office and doing things for your students and your team, but make sure you're not losing yourself.

For me, the big takeaway is to collaborate with other leaders. And that not only means building collaborative teams in my own community, but also with leaders outside my community. I hope to be sitting in leadership meetings with people who are different from me, from different states and different communities so I can hear what they're doing and have ears open to their ideas.

And the last thing for leaders is this: If you don't have an equity focus yet, it's a must.

Dr. Romie: I would reiterate what I said earlier: Your brain is not broken, your mind is not a mess, and I really want to highlight that leaders and teachers in education are truly some of the most resilient adults here in the United States. The only other people I also put alongside those people are our

brave doctors, nurses, healthcare workers, and first responders. I really want to highlight that because I think there are too many stress management or resilience talks that are talking down to leaders, saying that somehow you didn't do enough. I also want to thank them for everything that they have endured through three school year cycles and I want them to move forward with a sense of hope.

KIM M. SMITHGALL is an award-winning communications specialist and freelance writer, designer, and photographer.

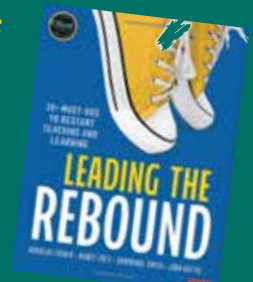
BOOKS BY
DOMINIQUE SMITH



The books coauthored by Dominique Smith are available through Corwin Publishing (see links below). Each book is accompanied by free resources.

Leading the Rebound: 20+ Must-Dos to Restart Teaching and Learning

<https://us.corwin.com/en-us/nam/leading-the-rebound/book278010>



Rebound, Grades K-12: A Playbook for Rebuilding Agency, Accelerating Learning Recovery, and Rethinking Schools

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