

# Vanguard

School Administrators Association of New York State

FALL  
2021

Exploring  
Educational  
Leadership



## THRIVING IN A COVID WORLD

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SURVIVING TO THRIVING  
with **DOMINIQUE SMITH**  
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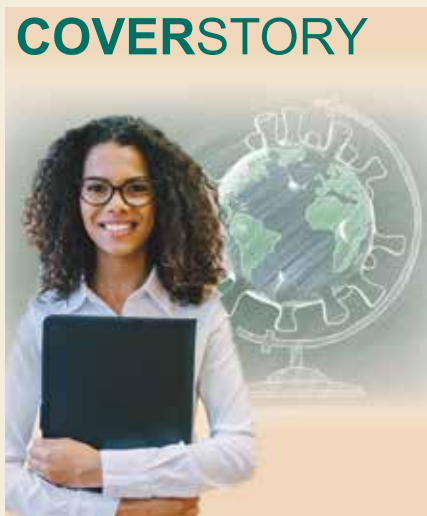


Skills



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FALL  
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A message from

**Betty A. Rosa**

New York State Commissioner of Education

## Cherishing Our Human Connections

The school year is well underway. Your hallways and classrooms are once again buzzing with the familiar sights and sounds of students and teachers learning, laughing, and working together. This is welcome news in many ways, but mostly because human connections are so important to children's growth and development.

The pandemic is still with us, of course, but you have learned to adapt and innovate brilliantly. You have never forgotten that children are at the very core of our work and have continued to find creative and engaging ways to keep them there. On behalf of the board of regents and my colleagues at the state education department, I must thank you again for your tireless efforts to restore order from the chaos.

As school leaders, you are the stewards of New York's education enterprise. You are situated at the transition point where policy gets transformed into daily practice. You bridge the gap between state and district policy makers, on the one hand, and teachers, students, and their families, on the other. You provide the human connections that make it possible for our schools — and the people in them — to thrive. As a former principal and assistant principal, I know there is no job more demanding or rewarding.

The challenges presented by COVID are more numerous, complicated, and consequential than anything we have ever faced professionally. In addition to the obvious health and safety concerns that come with running a school in the midst of a pandemic, you must also address students' learning loss and their very real social and emotional needs.

The vast majority of our schools have finally returned to full-time, in-person instruction for the first time in more than a year. Again, this is welcome news because we know how important human connections are to

learning and emotional wellness. At the same time, many teachers, students, and families are understandably fearful about this transition back to the classroom.

As school leaders, it is your difficult task to help ease the transition back to school. As education commissioner, it is my job to support you in all you do to run your schools; that was true before the pandemic and it will be true when the pandemic is finally, fully behind us. To do that, the education department must fundamentally change the way we approach our mission and our work.

Specifically, the department must function more like a customer service agency and less like a regulatory agency; it is a change in thinking away from compliance and towards support of local initiative and innovation. Simply put, the state education department must do more to support you and your schools as you continue to educate New York's students within state policy parameters.

This work is already underway. At the education department we continue to examine the policies and practices currently in place to support educators and how we can make these practices more effective, efficient, and user-friendly.

Through this process, we have discovered that we must do a better job of creating and fostering stronger connections, both internally at the department and with you in the field. This means we must consistently communicate with one another, share information, and cultivate the bonds that will make us a stronger, more unified education community.

I urge you to continue to foster the human connections that are so vital to our shared mission. Together, we will work through these challenging times. And you will always have my deepest appreciation, gratitude, and respect.





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**MOVING FROM**

# Surviving to Thriving

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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.

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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

**"One trick that I do is to try not to schedule back-to-back meetings on a computer screen."**

**– Dr. Romie**

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

**"I'm asking that they get to know students; students aren't going to learn from you if you don't know them."  
— 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-

**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.**

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.

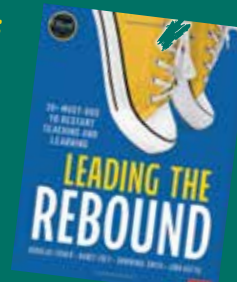
## BOOKS BY DOMINIQUE SMITH



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

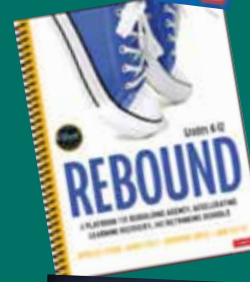
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## MENTORING AND NETWORKS —

# Sustaining the Profession and the Professional

By Pat Fontana

### TRUST. CONFIDENTIALITY. SUPPORT.

These are not only critical aspects of mentorship but are also integral to an education professional's personal and professional development, in every stage of their career. As the usual responsibilities and challenges of an administrative position have continued to be complicated by pandemic uncertainties, having someone to talk to is even more vital.

In essence, mentoring comes in many forms but always has the same basic goal — offering both new and seasoned leaders the support network they need to continue to grow professionally — to not only survive, but thrive.

## MEETING TODAY'S CHALLENGES

Across the country, school leaders now face the challenges of the pandemic, in addition to the usual stress of a very demanding job. In New York, many educational leaders are also dealing with continuing uncertainties around the new experiences of mask mandates, remote learning, vaccine requirements, and COVID tests.

Burnout among all school leaders is increasing for these and many other reasons. Principals particularly bear the brunt of the frustration and even danger of current trends, such as TikTok challenges among students and heated board of education policies and meetings.

Lisa Meade, Granville Jr/Sr High School principal and past NYS Principal of the Year, points out the high rate of turnover in the profession. Meade emphasizes that, as school leaders, “we want to be connected.” When individuals do not feel connected or supported, they tend to move on.

When a school administrator is struggling with what to do and how to do it, where do they turn? Whether the administrator is new to the leadership role or has been in the position for years, access to a mentor, formally or informally, can make a huge difference.

## SAANYS MENTORING

While in-district mentoring can be helpful, offering insight into the culture, history, and routines and procedures of a district, many leaders need and seek out the confidentiality, trust, and objectivity that an experienced external mentor can provide.

The SAANYS Mentor Coaching Service features one-on-one and group mentoring that provides a mentee with a focus on overall professional growth by advancing a mentee's ability to think through challenges and strengthen his or her leadership skills using impactful questioning, active listening, and reflection.

In 1:1 Mentor Coaching, a mentee works with a seasoned professional individually, working collaboratively toward the achievement of mutually

defined goals to develop the mentee's skills, abilities, and thinking. This one-to-one program can benefit the leader who needs that confidential and individualized support that takes place over the course of ten months.

The SAANYS Group Mentor Coaching model provides the opportunity to learn from other mentees as well as the facilitating mentor. Ninety-minute group sessions over ten months are augmented by four one-on-one sessions, all designed to build leadership capacity by identifying strengths and delving into concrete day-to-day situations.

## LEARNING BENEFITS MENTEE AND MENTOR

Monticello Central School District mentor coach Maryellen Symer, who retired in July 2019 after 36 years in K-12 education in New York, started working with a mentee in September 2020. She went through the training for the SAANYS Mentor Coaching Service and says, “I don't know how to say enough good things about it.” Even with her extensive experience in the field and with a doctorate in educational leadership, she adds that she “still learned from the SAANYS training program.”

Joining in the midst of pandemic restrictions presented some challenges for her new endeavor into formal mentoring, since her sessions had to remain virtual. She says she and her mentee “had to build a relationship over the screen. It would have been nicer to have been in person.” However, the end result was rewarding for both individuals and the benefits of virtual and frequent connections outweighed the negatives.

When describing her role as a mentor coach, Symer says that “a coach is going to listen to your problems, try to get you to reflect, and develop leadership skills. A mentor teaches you things you didn't know.”

Throughout her years in education, Symer says, “I can pinpoint in my head the people who took me under their wings and supported me.”

“I ask you a question and you always throw that question back to me. You knew what I had to learn. You knew I had the answers in me. You guided me in finding them.”

It's incredibly helpful just to have someone who will listen, she explains.

## MENTEE CENTERED

The mentoring relationship benefits both participants Tom Mangano, mentor coach for Long Beach Schools and for Brentwood UFSD's group mentoring, says that mentoring “taught me a life lesson.” He further explains that “we are in education. We are always learning.” Mangano's “entire career has been dedicated to educational leadership.” Yet, he says, “I've gained more from my mentees than they have gained from me. It's tremendously enlightening.”

Although mentoring is “great for all persons concerned,” Mangano, who also serves as the director of student teaching and clinical field experience at Stony Brook University, emphasizes that the “whole idea of making this mentee centered is very important.” One of his one-to-one mentees was Lorie Beard, principal at Long Beach Middle School. Beard says that her sessions with Mangano gave her the opportunity to really “dig into what I'm doing.”

Beard emphasizes that “you don't always know how well you're doing or that what you're doing is the right thing.” It's important for leaders at all stages of their career to have a mentor, someone to “support your ideas and give you validation.” She says that Mangano cheered her on, giving her suggestions as she worked through her thoughts and ideas.

## SELF-DISCOVERY AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION

As for his part in the mentor-mentee relationship, Mangano says that his role is to provide others “with the opportunity to find their



own strengths.” Much of his work as a mentor coach, with an emphasis on mentoring, is providing mentees the opportunity for self-discovery and self-actualization. When asked about his success stories, he replies that “all of my mentees are my success story.”

Mangano relays that his mentees “will often tell me, ‘I ask you a question and you always throw that question back to me. You knew what I had to learn. You knew I had the answers in me. You guided me in finding them.’” He describes his approach as Socratic, when the mentee realizes they have the ability to find the answers within themselves.

As mentioned, mentoring sessions can be one-on-one or in a group setting. Often, Mangano adds, the mentees in a group meeting will learn from each other. In addition, “their comfort level goes up and their anxiety level goes down. In these challenging times, that’s exactly what we need.”

The group members typically will come up with likely alternatives for their challenges, not necessarily solutions. They refer to their situations

as challenges, rather than obstacles, so they are not characterized as negatives. Everyone in the group, Mangano says, realizes “they’re all in this very challenging situation and it’s not going to get easier.”

The importance of having others in similar positions to turn to cannot be overstated, particularly now. Mentees are reassured that they are not alone in their concerns, that they all have a great deal in common, no matter how long they have been in their leadership position. Again, the trust is integral. As Mangano explains, the “most important thing is to establish an atmosphere of trust.” It is that sense of mutual trust and support that makes the difference to each leader in the group.

Just as the mutual and candid sharing of ideas and concerns makes the difference in the group session, trust and confidentiality are also critical in one-on-one sessions. Mangano says that the key is that the “mentee has full confidence that everything is based on mutual trust. We can communicate with each other about specific concerns.”

## PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL NETWORKS

While a professional mentoring program is an ideal option, a PLN, which can mean a professional learning network or a personal learning network, can prove invaluable as well. Communication within the network is usually virtual and immediate, conducted via the messaging app Voxer and especially the social media platform Twitter.

Donald F. Gately, EdD, Jericho Middle School principal and member of the SAANYS board of directors, explains that the virtual connections provide some clarity, saying that “we would probably interrupt each other a lot in person.” He adds, “I can’t imagine doing this job if I didn’t have such a great PLN.”

Part of a PLN that includes people from all across the country, Gately points out that he can access them in minutes on the virtual platform. Messages recorded on Voxer and posted on Twitter bring more immediate responses than trying to

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arrange an in-person meeting at a coffee shop.

Gately uses the term “personal” to refer to his learning network, as he says it “captures more of the emotional support you get from people invested in your success.” His PLN consists of about 12 to 13 principals, most of whom he has met in person at various conferences. He listens and responds to messages on Voxer during his commute to and from work. He emphasizes that they have “become a really great community of people who support each other.”

Likewise, high school principal Lisa Meade says that a PLN can be a significant part of mental wellness for an educational leader. In particular, she points out the benefits of “being able to vent to someone not in my school.” The group is safe as each person can “process problems without being judged. There is a huge amount of trust that we take for granted in that group.”

Meade also uses her long commute time to review and respond to Voxer messages. Of her connections on Twitter, all of whom are education professionals, she says, “I literally have about eight people I could reach out to today and they would respond with a solution.”

### GETTING TOGETHER AGAIN

Dr. Don Gately also recommends participating in EdCamps whenever possible. The EdCamp, billed as an “unconference,” brings together teachers and school leaders who have insights to share and who want to learn from each other. An EdCamp does not have a structured schedule — the content is determined the morning of the event, by the people participating in it.

Gately says the EdCamp has become a “kind of personal learning network.” He adds that he is able to “count on them for solutions to problems.” EdCamps are held both in person and virtually. The event participants become an informal mentoring group for professionals at all levels.

And thankfully, in-person conferences are also back! After a year or two of having only virtual connections,

school administrators missed, and perhaps even forgot the value of, professional gatherings and networking. SAANYS was back in person for its annual fall conference this past October and participants were notably gratified to be physically in the same room connecting and sharing once again. “The opportunity to network with fellow colleagues and meet new people in the field was much-needed interaction in a world that often feels isolating,” reflected one attendee.

### MODERN MENTORING — NOT JUST FOR NEWBIES

The mentoring relationship and other professional networks, whether between a new leader and a recently retired professional or among experienced administrators, can serve to guide everyone involved toward the solutions, comfort, and camaraderie needed in these unprecedented times.

Meade reinforces the idea that a supportive level of trust is critical at all stages of a person’s career. Now in her 29th year as an educator, she says about her PLN group of mentors and mentees, “I can’t imagine doing my job without them. I look really smart.”

PAT FONTANA is a business writer and communications trainer with a background in corporate training and community college instruction. Her business, WordsWorking, focuses on improving workplace communications, concentrating on the fundamentals of human interactions.

## PLN TIPS

Mentors and mentees who participate in PLNs agree that the level of trust and support of those in their group is unmatched. The convenience of communicating with someone virtually, through the app Voxer or the social media platform Twitter, gives participants immediate access to questions and answers. Some tips they shared include:

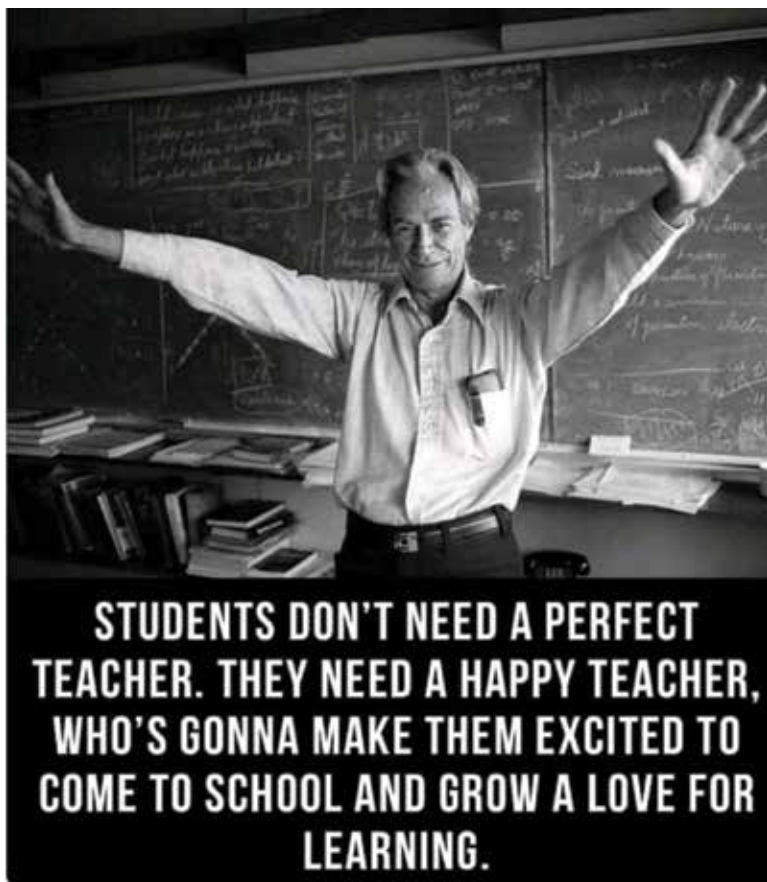
- You can start your own PLN
- Use the connections you’ve made through social media or by participating in conferences
- Invite only trusted connections to participate in the PLN
- Keep the group small, limiting participation to eight to 12 people
- Choose group members from different school districts
- Listen to Voxer messages on your morning and evening commutes
- Respond to messages promptly

Voxer is a walkie-talkie messaging app, which can be used as a type of voicemail system. Listeners can hear messages as they are being recorded or save them to review later.

Twitter can also be used to develop a PLN group. Lisa Meade says that, although she follows and is followed by many people on the social media platform, “Those I interact the most with I count as my PLN. There are about 15 people I would count on the most.”



# F Y I



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— Amanda Gorman



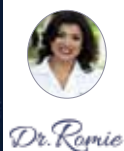
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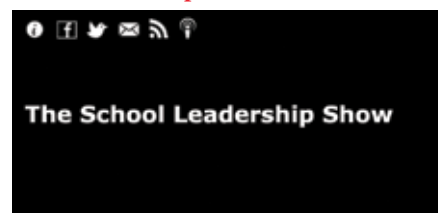


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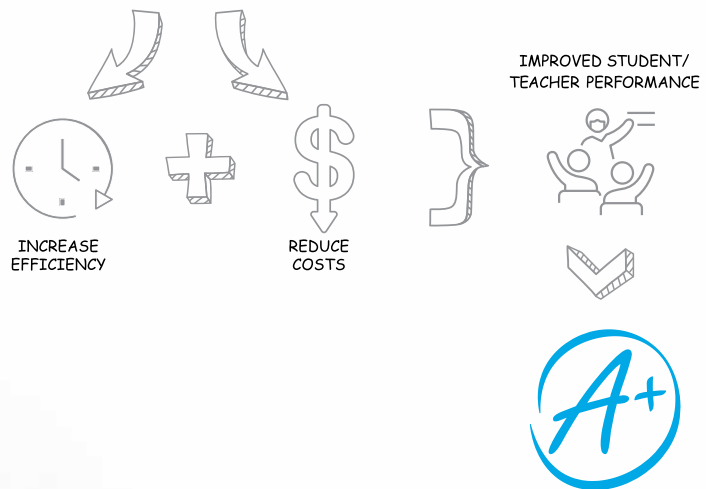


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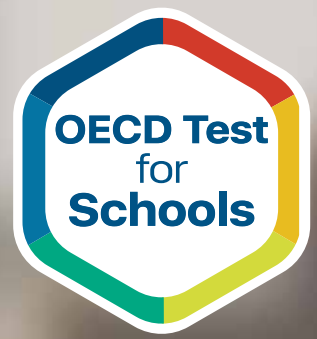


A photograph of a classroom scene. A female teacher with dark hair in a bun, wearing a light grey blazer and a white face mask, is leaning over a desk. She is pointing at a laptop screen. A young girl with long brown hair in a ponytail, wearing a light green t-shirt, glasses, and a white face mask, is sitting at the desk and looking at the laptop. The background shows other students at their desks, also wearing masks, in a brightly lit classroom with large windows.

# **P**actices

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Thriving in a COVID World | FALL 2021



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# Leading During Difficult Times



COMMUNICATION  
& CONNECTION



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By Michelle Osterhoudt

The most challenging time of my educational career was most definitely leading during a pandemic. Needless to say, we were devastated when we, along with every school across New York — and the nation — had to close. What we thought would be a couple weeks turned into 18 months that taught me about myself as a leader and my school community. If I were to narrow it down to the three things that proved to be crucial in getting through the last 18 months or any difficult time as a leader, it would be communication, having a strong network, and being a present, empathetic leader.

The irony of citing communication as a key factor of getting through the pandemic is palpable. As a leader, it became very clear early on that the communication from our national and state leadership was inconsistent at best. This, along with mixed messages from the CDC, our own state education department, and our local department of health, made managing procedures and protocols during the pandemic frustrating. I struggled with the unknown. Initially it felt nearly impossible to come up with a plan for opening. But as guidance began to roll out, we used the models of schools that had begun before us to help create our plans. Our biggest goal was to get kids back in person. And we were able to do that. Fortunately, amongst my teaching staff the opportunity to have instruction in person was greater than the fear of COVID. But I won't say that didn't take a lot of effort and communication from the school leadership team. One thing that I can assert was instrumental in our success moving forward was the ability to meet with everyone consistently through video conferencing. According to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, "effective communications during a crisis requires utilizing multiple platforms and constantly thinking about new and creative ways to stay connected virtually." Being able to meet online allowed flexibility for teachers and staff who were home with their own families. Additionally, once we were meeting in person for the 2020-2021 school year, we met almost weekly or I gave frequent updates via email. Faculty meeting agendas had a running list of resources for staff that included the department of health website, and NYSED guidelines, along with our own reopening plan. All of the information that staff needed was in one place easily accessible with a link to a Google document. If a staff member had a question about protocol or procedure, it was relatively easy to find. There were times when questions came up and rather than send an email to staff if we couldn't have a Zoom meeting, I would create videos to relay

information to them. Additionally, I sent frequent videos to the school community as a whole. Staff granted me much grace as I believe they knew that I was doing the best I could under the circumstances. Despite the challenges of operating a school during the pandemic, many teachers said it was one of the best years of teaching they could recall. While they felt stifled by lack of movement and teaching in cohorts, they also appreciated small class sizes and were able to develop strong relationships with students and families due to working so closely together every day. Indeed we were fortunate to be in person all day, all year, with no closures.



Trying to navigate the unknown world of teaching and leading during a pandemic is difficult. And leadership can be very lonely. This is why it is so important to have a network to turn to, connect with, and learn with. Bianca Miller Cole explains, "When networks have been created, it fosters a trade of ideas to sustain long-term relationships and mutual trust. When you are receiving ideas, it helps both in your place of work and out, in addition to instilling best practices that soothe your career." At the height of the pandemic, as a nation, we were faced with a political division that added to the stress and weight of being a leader. As the vice president of our local chapter of the NAACP, I was well aware of the turmoil locally and nationally as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement, demonstrations, and riots. These events were followed by the presidential election and insurrection at the Capitol. These incidents affected our communities — including schools. To deal with how to cope during the

pandemic, I found weekly principal meetings in my professional network to be helpful. I never thought I'd like video conferencing so much! Thank goodness for Zoom! I was able to connect with local principals and other leaders. Being able to hear their experiences dealing with the pandemic was helpful and necessary. As a social justice leader of color in an upstate rural area, I felt the division in our country. Indeed I felt it as a person of color trying to navigate the world of biases that occur toward and around me daily. I've been called out publicly for having an "agenda" by including in my email signature line "Vice President of the NAACP" (of our local chapter). My agenda is none other than social justice. The division amongst people has created the comfort of attacking anyone who has beliefs different from one's own. The bigotry in this country runs deep. To cope with this, I joined the Black Principals Network. Through a series of meetings I was able to connect with other school leaders of color. According to Dr. Waajida Small, 2021, such a network helps people of color like myself...create a sense of community in (organizations) where one may be demographically underrepresented. It was helpful to share our stories and attend workshops that helped deal with the unfolding of events that resulted from the murder of George Floyd. It is so hard to feel intense despair when no one else around you understands the struggle of being a person of color, watching live as phone video captured around the country showcases for all to see the less than human treatment of our brothers and sisters. By being a part of these various network groups, I was able to connect with other leaders who shared stories and experiences — helping me navigate the craziness and at times feelings of despair of the world around me.

Lastly, I made a concerted effort to be present in classrooms. By consistently connecting with teachers and students, I felt more effective as a leader than I had in my previous years. I needed to connect with students. They looked forward to my visits as much



as I needed and looked forward to their excitement to see me. From casually observing lessons and reading books to impromptu dance parties, I enjoyed being in classrooms. If a day would go by where I didn't get to a wing of my building, the kids were concerned; "Where were you yesterday, Mrs. Osterhoudt?" they asked. Being present shows students and staff that you are available and that you care. Present leaders are empathetic leaders. According to the Center for Creative Leadership, "empathetic leadership means having the ability to understand the needs of others, and being aware of their feelings and thoughts" (2020). Additionally, empathetic leadership is linked to positive job performance. This makes sense. If you are an empathetic leader, you show compassion, listen with an open heart, and desire to genuinely help your employees. All of these traits in a leader will foster trust and show that relationships are valued — so the obvious outcome is improved outcomes on the job.

In closing, there are traits that a leader should possess in order to lead

through challenging times. Communication via various means is imperative to ease the fear of the unknown. Even if the leader doesn't have all the answers, being upfront and honest and communicating that message is better than no communication at all. Having a network is also key. If you have a network of people you can connect with and bounce ideas off of, and who can share in your experiences, you'll feel less isolated and lonely. Finally, be present — by being visible, accessible, and empathetic. This is a foundation to building trust and confidence in your leadership. Fortunately, these qualities can be learned and don't have to be innate. We can reflect on these attributes and see ways we can support our staff and continue to become better leaders, allowing us to not just survive but thrive.

---

MICHELLE OSTERHOUDT is a principal at Perry Browne Intermediate School, NACASP President, and vice president at the Oneonta Area NAACP.

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# Thriving in a COVID World – Presence Matters



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By Christopher Adamek

Jessica was a veteran teacher that I could always count on. She was reliable, supported school and district initiatives, and reached out to parents regularly. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I never would have had to worry about her classes or stopping in to help solve problems. During the 2019-2020 school year, Jessica reached out because she was not feeling productive in reaching many of her students in the new remote environment. It started with simple questions that were directed to me at virtual team meetings, something that would never have happened prior.

Then there were the direct messages: “Chris, I really don’t know what to do for James, he’s in class every day but I’m not really sure if he is or not because he never has a camera on and never participates when we try to have collaborative work. Can you help?” Many times I never had the answer and yet Jessica and her colleagues continued to lean on me for advice and support. Our conversations quickly switched from the logistics of teaching and specifics of curriculum to true collaboration around student success. One strategy that has been the most helpful as a middle school administrator navigating this new environment has simply been being present. Presence matters for administrators on so many levels but with the ever-changing world of COVID, presence can allow us to thrive.

From the beginning of the pandemic as “pandemic teaching” took hold and on through the school year where we worked through hybrid instruction, leadership with presence made the difference. Initially staff was looking for support and although I could call them or have meetings with teams of teachers, the biggest impact came from me being a part of the online classrooms. In March 2020, as soon as we had online classes streaming, I made a point to be in one class, per scheduled period, every day. Seeing students smile, having them seeing me in my home, and my staff seeing that I was still fully present and engaged with our school environment even when we were not physically together helped us navigate this new world. This was not without its challenges, and students as well as staff were able to see me with a toddler on my lap or interrupted to help a kindergartner with his schoolwork. They became empathetic to my struggles just as I was being empathetic to theirs or asking staff to be empathetic to the students. My presence made a difference in our shared success.

Fast-forward to the 2020-2021 school year. Students in my building were a mix of full-time (grades 5 and 6) and hybrid (grade 7). These same students were also on a shortened school day schedule due to transportation re-

strictions. Stress was at an extremely high level and many folks were ready to accept less than the best results. I knew that this would not be acceptable and my presence again would make the difference. What were virtual class visits the year before translated into in-person visits with notes of support or feedback. None of this was evaluative but rather recognized the hard work staff was putting in and then slight pushes to aim higher.

In the hallways during the school day students saw that even though I could not give them the traditional high-five I always would have given in the past, I was there and an elbow bump became the norm. Again they noticed that Mr. Adamek was present for them in their school. Daily habits for me translated into more and more positive student and staff interactions, and as the year dragged on and things got tougher, people stood behind me to advance our school toward its goals.

Just before the holiday break we were forced due to staffing and transportation issues to again go back to remote instruction. The holidays can be an extremely rough time for some students and not seeing the students in person was difficult, but all knew that I would still be checking in on their online classes to “be present” with our school community. Our morning news broadcast the day prior to holiday break featured a “happy holidays” and “have a good break” video message from many staff, myself included, and the response was again overwhelmingly supportive of the fact that even though we were not in person, my presence as a leader made a difference. Students and staff emailed and reached out to say “happy holidays” to me and my family, and I was able to wish them the same back personally. It was a small touch that impacted our school community so that we could continue to thrive through the circumstances we were given.

Another example of presence making the difference was shown when I asked staff to put a big push on reaching our students who were struggling or at risk of not succeeding for the school year. This was late April and early May of 2021. So many people were beyond tired and the school year



had drained them. Each week we were looking at reports of students who were failing or at risk of failing and brainstorming what to do for each of them. I was present at as many of these meetings as possible. If I asked for a specific item to be addressed, I made sure I was involved when it was addressed. One student in particular comes to mind. Gregory had shifted from hybrid to fully virtual instruction by his own decision. He was not completing classwork, and often was not checking in to scheduled class meets. As we discussed Gregory at a team meeting, two interventions were suggested. Our social worker went on a home visit with one of the team teachers and I sent out personal notes, both email and handwritten, to Gregory. Within two weeks Gregory was showing increased attendance and had brought up two of his class grades. I cannot say we were 100 percent successful in all of the cases we discussed, but showing staff that I would be there with them to do the work, not just telling them they needed to do the work, increased our level of success so that we could thrive as a school.

This COVID journey has certainly not been an easy one and it is not yet over. What I can say from experience, however, is that simply being present in as much of my school community as possible has made it so that I can personally feel more accomplished and our school can be at its best. Thriving is a hard standard to achieve 100 percent of the time, but the more often I am present as a leader for my staff and students, the more often we come close to achieving that goal.

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CHRISTOPHER ADAMEK is the assistant principal at Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk Middle School.



Overcoming Polarization:  
Keeping Our Communities

# Together During Difficult Times



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By Paul M. Fanuele, EdD

Divisiveness, polarization, angry community members...we have all seen examples of this either through viral videos or up close and personal. It has even been portrayed on *Saturday Night Live*, with a sketch on parent comments at a board meeting. In trying times like these, being a leader is more challenging than ever. It is also more important than ever. We need to keep our communities together and avoid the trap of allowing differing opinions to tear us apart. We need to build relationships and our community's social capital by utilizing consistent communication, becoming more empathetic, and focusing on our intellectual humility.

As I was preparing an address to the graduating class of 2021, the importance of staying strong in order to lead others was never more apparent. What could I possibly say to a class and community that had been through what no other class has had to endure? Their last two years of schooling were interrupted by, hopefully, a once-in-a-lifetime event. Despite this, and with a few hiccups along the way, they were able to navigate the challenges the best they could with the support of a strong administration, staff, and united community.

### **SOCIAL CAPITAL**

I was pondering what helped our class of 2021, as well as our community as a whole, get through something that none of us have experienced before (thank goodness). I came across an article that discussed how some communities were able to handle challenges better than others. The author suggested that there is an important component in a community's fight through adversity; that component is social capital, or the strength of relationships within a community. According to a study, counties where people trust each other more, feel more connected, and care more for each other have lower infection rates from COVID-19 (Suttie, 2021). It seems that the more people within a community are kind and loving to one another, the better suited they are to fend off challenges.

Think about that for a minute. The more we take care of each other, the easier it is for us to collectively handle adversity. Many communities, including ours, exemplified this fact. Although there was no shortage of thoughts and opinions throughout the pandemic, it was clear to me that our community and others stayed together while some did not. One of the most important parts of a community's social capital is its collective efficacy, or its ability to come together for a common concern. A community with strong social capital can prevent and recover more easily from challenges (Suttie, 2021). The strength of relationships within a community was a main reason for what separated the communities that stayed together from

those that did not. Let's look at some ways to nurture a strong community by strengthening a community's social capital and the relationships within it.

### **CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION**

One of the best ways to keep a community together is through planned and consistent communication. We utilized a weekly newsletter that was sent religiously each Friday. It was a way for us to recap the week and pass along pertinent information. The sending of a newsletter each Friday created a routine for both the district and the community. The certainty of a planned communication helped us counteract the uncertainty of the pandemic. It also helped us create trust within our community.

The pandemic created an unease in all of us. It exacerbated the polarization we were already experiencing in society. The newsletter provided a systematic mechanism to build trust and keep our community together, and it honestly reported on COVID-19 numbers in the district and mitigation strategies we were using to keep us in school as much as possible. There were still differing points of view, but the constant communication filled the vacuum created by an ever-changing environment and made the community feel included in the discussion.

### **BUILDING EMPATHY**

Our community navigated the school year in an era when societal tensions are running high. Unfortunately, there is a polarization of points of view that have pitted people against one another. It reminds me of a quote I heard recently: "We are all navigating the same storm, but we are all on different boats." When people don't band together, it erodes their collective power. This is where kindness and, more importantly, empathy come into play. The more we listen to each other, even those with differing opinions, the more we start with empathy and a place of caring, the more we will stay together and meet challenges head on.

Empathy is defined by Merriam-Webster as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the

feelings, thoughts, and experience of another." In other words, it is trying to understand what another person is thinking or feeling. To recognize the humanity in another person's point of view is to let down your guard and be open to different perspectives. You might think you know everything you need to know about a topic, but you'd be surprised at how differently you would think about it if you were in someone else's shoes.

The best thing about empathy is that it is not a fixed trait. It can be grown and nurtured. Stanford University professor Carol Dweck (2006) has popularized the concept of a growth mindset. A growth mindset is one where you believe your talents are not set in stone. You are able to learn and grow your talents to become your best self. Empathy works the same way. You can become more empathetic to other people's needs, which in turn strengthens interpersonal ties and empowers a community to become its best self.

Personal phone calls are a way to build empathy and trust within a community. We tried to return emails, especially ones filled with emotion, with a personal phone call. These phone calls helped us to bond with the community and make genuine connections. These connections helped galvanize the community and enhance our ability to meet the challenges presented by the pandemic. Talking to individual members of our community definitely built up our empathy by having a back-and-forth dialogue. We became in tune with the needs of our community, often sharing similar stories from our own lives.

### **INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY**

Being empathetic allows us to listen to differing viewpoints and enhances our intellectual humility. Author Eric Dolan (2020) suggests that intellectual humility is a key element needed to survive the political polarization we are seeing on social media, news programs, and in society in general. People who possess intellectual humility are humble about what they know and willing to see others with differing perspectives as



equals. Taking differing viewpoints into consideration allows school districts to generate creative solutions to significant problems (Dolan, 2020). Well, this was basically our call to action the last year or so, and continues to be to this day. It also underscores the importance of building up our ability to be empathetic.

Building our empathy and practicing intellectual humility helps us understand others' points of view and see past differences. It will give us access to new ideas and the ability to find creative solutions. It will also help us to see others as individuals, not stereotypes. This is obviously good for others, but studies also show that building empathy benefits the person feeling it too (Ha, 2021)! The more empathy we feel, the more successful we will be at home, work, and in relationships. Our stress levels will lower and we will be happier. Now think about that for a minute. Lower stress, more understanding of others, more success in life. Sounds like a good deal.

#### CONCLUSION / LESSONS LEARNED

During a pandemic, conflict is in-

evitable. Just do a little reading about the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918-1919, right smack in the midst of World War I, and you'll see that people will always naturally push back against protocols like mask wearing. "Fines, prison sentences, and having your name printed in the paper" were among the punishments handed down at that time, resulting in one tragic incident in which a health official opened fire on "mask slackers" (Little, 2020). Anti-mask rallies attracted thousands. Then, as now, people just couldn't agree — though, arguably, the dissent is even greater nowadays thanks to the power of social media. Back then, parents in New York City, Chicago, and New Haven, Connecticut, protested that schools remained open, while most of the schools in the rest of the country were shut down (Markel, 2020). Then as now, forward-thinking school and health leaders believed that students were safer in schools. They stuck with their beliefs, while also taking the time to quell parent fears by providing on-site physicians and nurses for students



to protect them from illness. By actively implementing conflict resolution and showing true empathy to worried parents, these leaders rode out the pandemic. Staying focused and staying the course proved to be the right mix of leadership strategies to keep a community safe and intact.

The need to build a community's social capital continues today. We need to take care of each other just like a family often does during trying times. There are plenty of differing opinions in families (I am sure there is an SNL skit on that), but hopefully when a crisis emerges, they stay together and ride in the same boat.

PAUL M. FANUELE, EdD, is the superintendent at Spackenkill Union Free School District.

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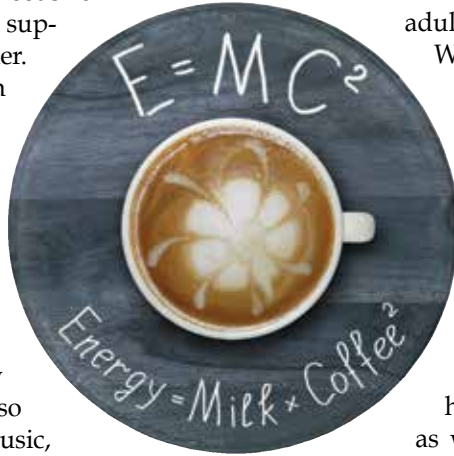


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By Whitney Smith, EdD

It started when we returned to the 2020-2021 school year and saw that our adults were struggling. The uncertainty of COVID-19, and the impact it would have, had people scared. The start of school was rough... Six feet, social distancing, masks, and quarantines. Getting used to a hybrid schedule, checking in with our remote learners, and coordinating the support that our students would need to be successful academically, as well as socially and emotionally. We couldn't forget the adults, though; if they were not healthy emotionally, they could not be fully present for our students.

The idea is simple, yet really effective... Bring people together, with coffee and light refreshments, to talk. But what it has become is our embedded SEL program for our faculty and staff. It has helped us to practice positivity, and build a strong community, as we grapple with the needs of our students while supporting each other. Every Friday, from 9:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m., we use the "iHub," a collaborative workspace in the high school, to have coffee, snacks, and some great conversation. Our school library media specialist also brings out some music, chess, adult coloring, magazines, puzzles, and more for teachers to engage with. Our support staff and administrators are present, and our



faculty and staff are supported. One of the highlights is our color by number poster. One sticker at a time, we cocreate a picture: a symbol of our togetherness, our work toward a common goal. Last year's picture, hanging up proudly, was a city skyline, and we await the next creation as our community of adults piece it together.

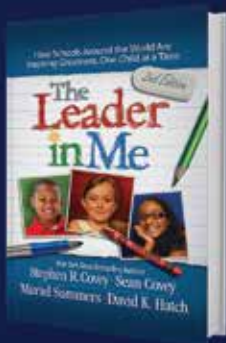
We have continued this practice into the new school year. Mark Brackett, director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, asserts, "We are living through a pandemic that most of us could never have imagined. And as we've shared, our educators are not in the best emotional shape. Today's teachers, counselors, and school leaders are experiencing greater anxiety, stress, and

burnout than ever before... If we want our educators to be successful — both personally and professionally — schools must be places that bring out the best in them" (<https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-04-07-teachers-are-anxious-and-overwhelmed-they-need-sel-now-more-than-ever>).

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WHITTNEY SMITH, EdD, is the principal at Mineola High School.

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Wellness and Equity: Embracing  
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# Important Work as Educational Leaders



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By Dianne M. Wynne, EdD

Vicarious trauma has long been recognized as having a significant impact on mental health professionals, doctors, and first responders who are exposed firsthand to the stories and experiences of trauma that others have experienced. As a previous practicing psychologist for many years in a school district where students and families experienced daily trauma, I understand all too well the impact that those experiences had on me as I tried to support and heal wounds, feeling that the care and assistance I provided was never enough. I took these stories home with me at night, where I continued to consider what else I could do to help.

As I transitioned to a school building administrator and then to my current position as a school district administrator, I have come to understand the similar impacts on educational leaders. I would argue that many school and district leaders should be included in the group of individuals who are widely recognized as experiencing vicarious trauma. There is a great deal of research on the impact of trauma on teachers, and we recognize the challenges and personal impacts that teachers face when meeting the needs of all of their students, including those who have experienced significant traumas. However, there is not nearly as much research or discussion about the impact that leading schools and districts during times of trauma and crisis can have on educational administrators.

Conversations with fellow educational leaders make it clear that the impacts of COVID-19, political unrest, and racial injustices have heightened the pressure on educational leaders and have often led to feelings of burnout and exhaustion. Never in my career have I heard so many strong, passionate, and extremely capable leaders share that they are exhausted and feel that so much more needs to be done. However, on a positive note, in addition to sharing the impact of these challenges, I have also heard many reports of hope by leaders and stories of inspiration that keep them going every day. Among these areas of hope are stories about the equity and inclusion efforts that are happening within schools and the pride that leaders feel in making a difference in this area.

I recently completed a dissertation on the ways in which school district leaders are implementing the New York State Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Framework to advance equity within their school districts. This study highlighted a range of ways in which school district leaders are showing commitment to this work, aligning much of their districts' efforts with the four principles identified in the CR-S Framework. However, an unanticipated finding from my study was that none of the participants talked about how

they are caring for themselves as they experience challenges, push-back, and resistance to equity efforts. Although this question was not specifically asked of study participants, it was surprising that all of them articulated very clearly the challenges with this work, but did not share the personal toll it is taking on them or how they are coping. This speaks to the ways in which educational leaders often keep "plowing forward" with what needs to be done, at times at the expense of their own well-being and self-care. I left these interviews in awe of their passion, but also hoping that they remember to care for themselves as well as they are showing care and concern for all of the individuals in their school districts during this incredibly complex time in our world.

The importance of mental health and wellness for everyone at all levels of an organization cannot be overstated. Too often, leaders discuss these issues in the context of their students, their teachers, and the families they work with, without considering also their importance to them personally as leaders.

As I reflect on the past 18 months and my work directing mental wellness and equity, several important points come to mind that I have continually reminded myself of. I offer these words for consideration to my fellow educational leaders who are battling with many of the same feelings and challenges:

**Being overworked and exhausted is not a "badge of honor."**

We all need to remind ourselves and each other that while there is extensive work that needs to be done in school districts, especially during these challenging times, it is not a "badge of honor" to work excessively long days, cut back on sleep, or resist efforts to take time away. Recent times have been

incredibly challenging for educational administrators, as they worked to prepare schools for students, keep up with ever-changing mandates related to COVID-19, and ensure all decisions were made with the safety and well-being of everyone in mind. We need to take time to reflect on this work and the impacts on our organizations. Taking time to decompress and recognize the positive outcomes of our efforts is essential to being able to continue to be effective leaders.

**Overall mental wellness and demonstrating social-emotional competencies as educational leaders are equally as important as addressing mental wellness in our students and staff.**

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a major focus of many school districts, with resources and lessons focused on SEL expanding as the needs of students have grown. As leaders, we must recognize that SEL is not something that we will successfully instill in our students if we don't model it and prioritize it in ourselves. When considering the five CASEL competencies, it would serve us well to ask ourselves questions such as, "How am I modeling self-awareness?" and "What does responsible decision making look like as it pertains to me both as a leader and a human being?" These questions and reflections are imperative to ensure that the members of our district communities are not being asked to engage in SEL when their school and district administrators are not modeling it as a priority for themselves.

**Collaboration and connection with colleagues are key to surviving and thriving as educational leaders. COVID-19 has taught us all many lessons, one of which is the importance of connection with others.**

Educational administration has been described by many as sometimes a lonely experience due to being the only person in a school or district. Discussing and processing our experiences as leaders, especially





during such incredibly difficult times, is invaluable in feeling a sense of community with others who have similar experiences. Ways to connect and form collegial friendships and partnerships should be explored by all educational leaders as a tool to be heard, inspired, and validated in the experiences we share.

**Leading change efforts to advance equity and create welcoming and affirming environments for all of our students, families, and staff is the most important work we will ever do and requires us to be at our best.**

Consistent and dedicated efforts at advancing equity and inclusion require passion and commitment from leaders both at the district and school levels.

The impacts of this work are far-reaching and impact all other areas of education including engagement, achievement, and a sense of belonging and community. Taking care of ourselves as educational leaders is im-

perative to be able to continue to facilitate discussions and changes that are needed to advance equity within our schools.

Many years ago, as I was supporting a student during a crisis, he took a deep breath, stopped crying for a moment, and said to me, "It's too much... I'm not a superman." The feeling of being overwhelmed and being able to take a moment and admit that he could not take any additional stress was a lesson in role modeling self-awareness and vulnerability. I think back to that student often and the significance of those words through the lens of a second grader. None of us is Superman or Superwoman. We need to make taking care of ourselves as superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors, principals, assistant principals, and all other educational leaders a priority. Our students deserve for us to be the best leaders we can be and to stay the course to advocate for them and their

futures. Self-care and prioritizing our own wellness will be essential in this endeavor.

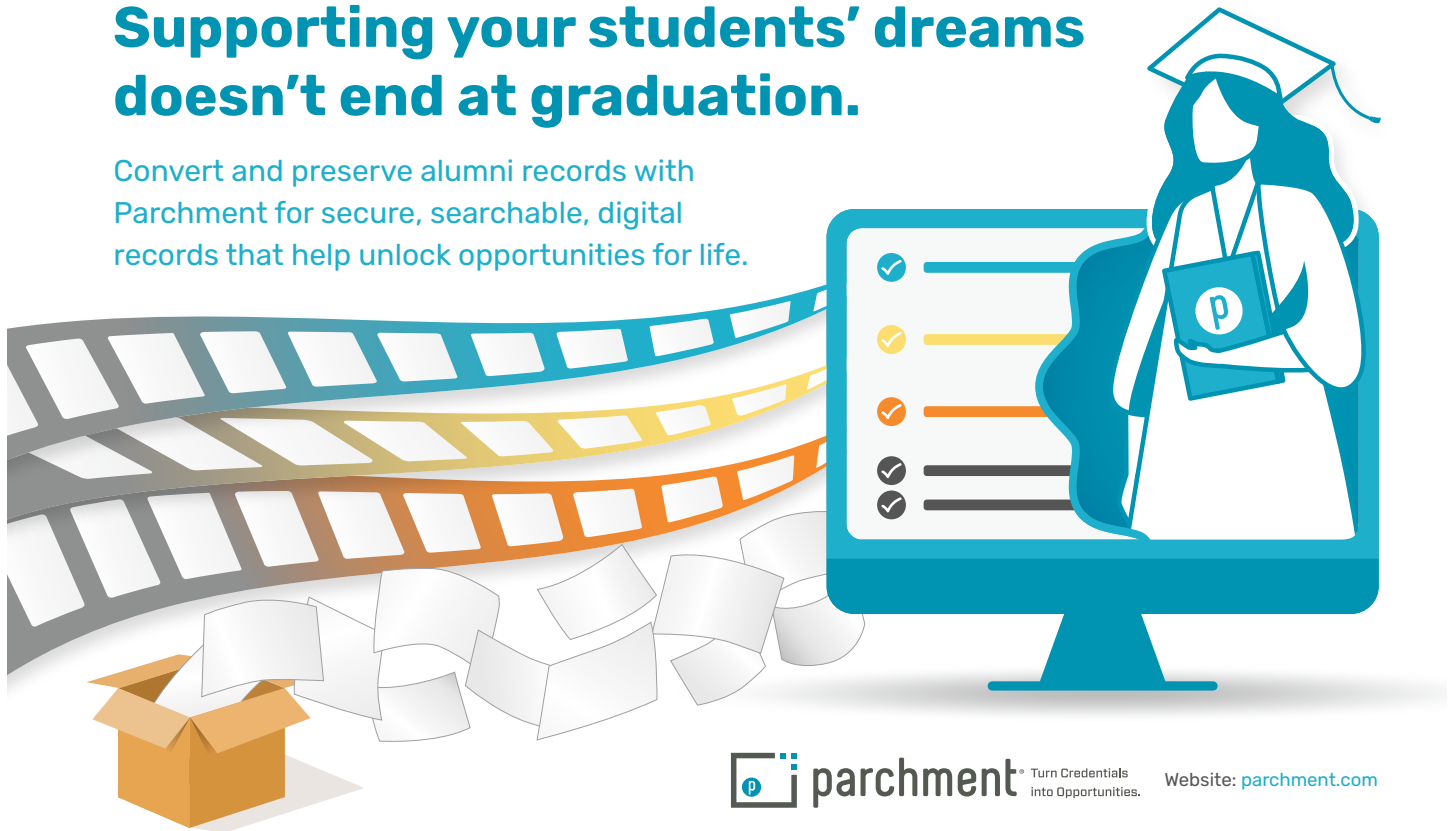
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Zaner-Bloser is an educational-solutions company that specializes in delivering explicit instruction and a solid academic foundation for pre-K-8 students in reading and language arts.

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