



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A SCHOOL LEADER:

“Every Day Is Just Survival Right Now”

By Kim M. Smithgall

If you stop by school on any given morning, it's likely you'll see the school principal near the front entrance greeting students as they disembark from the big yellow buses and dash or saunter toward class. There might be a few footshakes, high fives, and elbow bumps among the energetic greetings of “Good morning!” and “Have a fantastic day!”

Behind the scenes, though, the voices of today's school leaders sometimes sound a little different:

“I remember just sobbing at the sheer pressure of making sure the staff and the students who were in school felt safe and supported.”

“We have to be available 24/7, which means you’re checking your phone all the time, you’re checking your text messages. I’m having a hard time figuring out how to balance that so I can step away from my job – at least sometimes – to focus on taking care of myself. It’s a major struggle.”

“I just worry. I worry about students making it. I know that I’m part of a team that’s accountable for all of these students – to make sure they do well in school. I worry about their grades. I’m looking at their grades all the time and their progress reports, calling home, meeting with students. But I worry about gaps. I worry about motivation. I worry about mental health.”

“I don’t know if I’ve had a day without someone just yelling at me on the phone. You know, I understand their concerns. I’m not saying they’re wrong, but it’s the continuous day-in/day-out of just getting someone who’s so upset that they raised their voice... It gets a bit too much after a while.”

“The most challenging day is when multiple students are in crisis behaviorally and so they’re angry and they’re acting out and you’re trying to de-escalate. And you have to take time to de-escalate kids, right? You can’t just say, ‘Oh, you know, don’t be mad.’ So, it takes a while and then you have another one who really needs you, too. That’s been my toughest days – just trying to manage and triage kids who are really hurting...and giving them the time and the ear that they deserve. Because when I don’t give them the time to talk, it’s when it escalates even more.”

“The bottom line is that every day is just survival right now – that’s what it is.”

These are emotions and feelings that educational leaders didn’t find easy to share. In fact, most quickly back-pedaled after sharing their thoughts, worried about being perceived as whiners in a time when everyone is likely feeling depleted.

“I don’t want people to feel like administrators are a bunch of complainers or that our lives are harder

than anybody else’s,” one school leader said. “We know that people all over the world have all kinds of stressors and anxiety. But the one thing is, when you’re working with kids – anybody who is trying to help kids become better people – under normal circumstances, it stays with us. And for most of us, we think about those kids 24/7. So, now, the stress level of worrying about them now during COVID might make our jobs a little more unique than some other types of jobs.”

“I don’t know if I’ve had a day without someone just yelling at me on the phone. You know, I understand their concerns. I’m not saying they’re wrong, but it’s the continuous day-in/day-out of just getting someone who’s so upset that they raised their voice... It gets a bit too much after a while.”

While school leaders and educators might want to shrug off the stresses, there’s value in hearing the stories and understanding that colleagues often share those same challenging experiences. And there’s value in others – those outside the schoolhouse doors – hearing the stories, as well. The shared understanding and empathy will provide a foundation to move forward, heal, and grow.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Until recently, a day in the life of principals and other educational leaders often started with contact tracing – an activity that could consume anywhere from a half hour to four or more hours each day as staff worked to find out who should be quarantined.

“In trying to find the cases, you would have to literally watch the video from the school buses,” recalled Charles Smilinich, principal of Dodge Elementary School in the Williamsville Central School District. “Just because there’s a seating chart doesn’t mean the student is sitting there. The student may get up and switch a seat, then another kid may switch a seat. You just can’t follow simple seating

charts and think that they reflect actual facts because then you could be quarantining a child who doesn’t need to be quarantined.”

Similarly, school leaders could spend hours during the school day reviewing video footage from their cafeterias to see who was sitting within three feet (or six feet) of a COVID-positive or COVID-exposed student and then calculating how long students had their masks off. (Was it nine minutes and 55 seconds or maybe they hit the 10-minute maskless mark?)

For Kevin Hulbert, executive principal of athletics, pre-K education, and curriculum at AuSable Valley Central School District, there has been another layer added into the mix. Along with ensuring pre-K students are safe, happy, and learning, Hulbert is also coordinating all of the athletic events for 200 to 300 students each sports season.

“On a typical day, I would go in around 9 a.m. because almost every night, I’m working until 9 or 10 p.m. for athletic events. First, I find out who is on the remote learning list and cross-reference that with our sports teams and then see if there are any games I have to reschedule. And then I’m looking at my email and phone messages to see if other schools need to reschedule games – something that’s become kind of routine,” he said. His pandemic workdays have also been consumed with continually checking who is academically eligible to play or practice and communicating with teachers, athletes, and parents about this – communication that often turns into long, detailed, and sometimes exasperating explanations about the ever-changing health department guidelines.

Add in the contact tracing and health department paperwork. “For a while, on the weekends, that’s all we were doing. We could spend an entire Sunday just calling families, filling in the forms, and sending the information to the health department. In any given week, I might spend eight to 10 hours a week on that type of work,” Hulbert commented. “But for the principals in my district and the COVID coordinator, you could probably double that time.”

By mid-morning or mid-afternoon, Hulbert is more often than not turning to the task of filling in for ill staff members. “Lately, on a typical day, I’ll get a call from buildings and grounds department to say there aren’t any custodial workers or other staff available to set up the gym for a basketball game, for example. So, I’ll put it in my schedule to go and do that setup,” he said.

PLUGGING THE HOLES

For building principals, plugging the staffing holes is likely taking place much earlier.

“The first few hours of a typical workday? They start around 8 or 9 p.m. the night before when we find out how many teachers and staff we are short,” Smilinich said. “Here in Erie County, COVID is prevalent right now, so we could be seven to 15 people short throughout the building. Just after the winter holidays, we had a massive number of people out, including 14 teachers... A lot of people are getting COVID for the second time...We’ve had to scramble to cover everything. We have principals in the district covering classrooms.”

In the Riverhead Central School District, Roanoke Elementary School principal Thomas Payton has been forced to reassign staff to make sure classes are covered. “Whether it’s lunch monitors, teachers or teaching assistants, staff shortages present some of the biggest challenges,” he said. “We’ve had to go to our reading teachers and say, ‘You’ve got to cover this classroom.’ That’s a difficult thing — telling a professional that they’re not going to do their contracted job that day... We’re moving people around because, quite honestly, there aren’t any subs. Our district pays more for a substitute teacher than most districts around us, so it’s not a case of the pay. It’s a lack of teachers who want to sub.”

Payton then moves on to filling the gaps in other areas of the building, which can mean he is stepping in himself. “I’ve covered more lunch duties than I can count. I swear, I think my title is ‘principal/lunch monitor,’”

he mused.

It’s a similar scene across the state and nation. For Harry Leonardatos, principal of Clarkstown High School North (Clarkstown Central School District), up to 25 percent or more of his staff have been out sick on some days. “That includes all areas, between clerical staff, school counselors, teachers, and teaching assistants,” Leonardatos said. “We try our best to fill the classes with substitutes, but that’s not always possible and we end up putting classes together in the auditorium. And here’s another trick: we have to be careful not to exceed certain capacities in that space because those capacities have been modified for COVID requirements.”

COMMUNICATING AND SUPPORTING

At some point in these chaotic days, school leaders must also find the time (and the mental energy) to communicate with families, as well as provide support for students and staff members.

The changing health guidelines have been especially challenging when it comes to working in partnership with families. Consider the recent whirlwind of changes: from six feet to three feet for social distancing, from 10 days to five days for quarantining, from masking to nonmasking, and back again...and everything in between. Smilinich described encounters with parents he has built tremendous relationships with over the last five years — encounters that would never have happened if not for the pain and stress of the pandemic.

“Some families’ frustrations are coming out to the school nurses. In years past, this never would have happened; they would have completely understood that if a child is sick, we send them home. But now, it’s far different because we’re sending them home and parents are saying, ‘My kid has the sniffles, why is he going home?’ And we have to say that we’re just following the rules.”



Granville Jr./Sr. High School principal Lisa Meade has experienced the same frustrations from parents — and completely understands. “I totally get why they’re mad. The CDC can say something that New York State doesn’t agree with and then we’ve got another problem when I have to follow the Washington County Public Health guidelines — and families are stuck in the middle. In the absence of clear information, people get frustrated, and rightly so.”

For Eva Williams, principal of Van Duyn Elementary School in Syracuse, there’s also a lot of fear accompanying the frustration. “I probably spend at least 10 minutes with each family I call. I have to take the time to calm the anxiety and help them process the next step in the health piece that they’re dealing with and then to process what is next for schooling. It’s a whole cycle that I go through to help them calm down because for some families, the information is a blow to them and I need to build a relationship first,” Williams explained. “This may be the first real conversation with them one-on-one because I haven’t had the opportunities to meet and greet all of the families like I have in the past. I had one mom whose daughter has asthma and the child was exposed to COVID. The woman was in tears. I told her I wished I was there to hold her. She’s young — a mother in her 20s and I’m a grandmother. There’s a big difference in how I’m processing this information and how she’s processing her kindergartner being exposed. I gave her my cellphone number and told her I would call her that evening to see how she was doing. And I called her for three days in a row to check on her. It takes time and it takes a lot of emotional energy...but that’s okay because I have an empathetic heart and sometimes just asking those two or three extra questions about the needs of the family is exactly what’s needed to support that family.”

SUPPORTING STUDENTS

Williams and her fellow principals in schools across the state are also acutely aware of students’ needs, especially in the emotional and mental

health realms.

“The children feel the anxiety that the grown-ups do, whether it’s in school or out of school,” Williams said.

Thomas Payton would concur; he’s witnessing a pervasive sense of fear among many of the kindergarten through fourth-grade pupils in his school. “When kids were home, all they heard about was the pandemic,” he said. “And when their parents weren’t speaking about it, it was on the news... And to top it all off, many businesses closed early in the pandemic and a lot of parents lost their jobs. When that happens in a family, the stress bleeds right down to the children because they feel the angst and tension of their parents. Of course, it then carries over to the schools. We’ve seen a lot more crises with students over the last year and a half than ever before.”

School leaders are embracing a full spectrum of approaches to counteract students’ fear and anxiety. “At Van Duyn, we talk about grounding everything in love. Our hashtag at the school is ‘fun in learning.’ And so we try to help the children know that there is always going to be something fun happening here,” Williams said. “We’ve started having two-minute dance parties. We go on the PA system like you would for a fire drill, except it’s my voice saying, ‘Hey guys, everything is better when you’re dancing’ and we throw on the music and the kids go out in the hallway and dance and we all laugh; it’s a lot of fun.”

Kevin Hulbert is also taking a lighthearted approach with his AuSable Valley coaches. “I’ve been reminding the coaches to do something fun with the athletes every single practice — not just drilling and preparing for games. I really feel like the kids need an outlet, even if it’s just a three-minute thing that just gets them laughing,” he said. “I’ve been kind of amazed with some of the things that our coaches are able to do — just simple things. One varsity basketball coach has a dollar bill and at the end of practice, all the kids shoot half-court shots, which is the opposite of anything you ever would

ANTIDOTES FOR PANDEMIC STRESS

Even among the unprecedented stress caused by the pandemic, school leaders are finding ways to persevere. A common thread among their strategies? Drawing on relationships, strengthening current connections, and creating new ones. Shared experiences are vital...and a little laughter and joy also need to be part of the mix.

As an elementary school principal in western New York, Charles Smilinich finds strength within a circle of three other principals in his district. “These are people I’ve grown close to over the years and we talk at least twice a day,” he said. “The four of us together are like an executive team. We discuss the problems that come up and bounce ideas off each other. We listen and support each other and know where we’re all coming from.”

Eva Williams similarly depends on her colleagues in Syracuse. “We have a little team that communicates back and forth via texts,” she said. **“You need that support from colleagues who understand what you’re going through and won’t lay judgment.”**

Thomas Payton, an elementary school principal in the Riverhead Central School District, also depends on his relationships — starting with his family. “I have a great family support system. I have three kids — all teenagers — who understand the situation. And my wife is a teacher in another building in the district, so she gets it, too. We really lean on each other,” he commented. “Another thing that has been helpful is that I’m very involved with SAANYs and also very involved with the board of directors for the National Association of Elementary School Principals. These experiences have given me incredible contacts with principals throughout the state and throughout the country — principals who are going through the same things I am.”

Technology plays a role in relationships that Granville Jr./Sr. High School principal Lisa Meade is building. “In addition to really trying to forge solid relationships with the other principals in my district, I’m also part of a principal Voxel group,” she said, explaining that Voxel is a walkie-talkie

app that allows users to talk in real time or to save messages.

The app has a number of advantages, including the ability to hear someone’s tone of voice (which can be lost in emails or texts), as well as being able to listen back to messages at any time.

“I can get in my car and listen to a bunch of sound messages and then can respond by clicking a button. It’s like the best therapy ever. We have around 10 principals in the group and they’re from all across the United States — Wisconsin, Minnesota, Kansas City, and some in New York. We share our concerns and help each other,” Meade said. “Between the in-school principal group and the Voxel principal group, I have some great people to lean on.”

Meade also finds it useful to focus on a few small tasks each day. “I make a list of three or four must-do actions for the day,” she said. “In that way, I know I’ll find some success or capture some small wins, even knowing that they’re among the very big things we have to do.”

Smilinich would agree. “To really keep myself sane, it’s all about focusing on what’s in front of me and taking one day at a time,” he commented. **“And I never take anything personally — even when people are angry or upset, it’s not about me.”**

For Williams, surviving as a school leader in the pandemic also means making sure that each day contains laughter and joy.

“With the office staff, we keep each other laughing. That laughter is so important,” she said. “My other tip is to focus on finding joy every single day. And oftentimes, that joy is not in your office and it’s not at your desk. That joy might come from talking with children or visiting a classroom. It could mean planning something fun for yourself, enjoying a good meal, reading a book. Sometimes it’s in school and sometimes it’s not. You must remember that every day, there is joy and every day, there is good in the world. You just have to keep your eyes open to it. And if you can’t see it, you have to be it.”

normally teach kids because you don't want them doing that. But, just for fun, they shoot half-court shots and the first one who makes it signs their name on the dollar bill. And then when the end of the week comes, whoever has signed it the most gets to keep the dollar bill. It's just a dollar bill and you think nobody should care about that, but it has become this really fun tradition now. It's neat, too, because there are some kids who might not get to play a lot, but they're nailing the half-court shot and the whole team is jumping on them and celebrating. It's the kind of thing that coaches never did until we said we've got to do something different here to mix things up and do something about the depression and anxiety that we're seeing. I've been happy with that and over the long term, that's a positive thing that will come out of COVID that we'll keep."

Of course, administrators are also mixing in some more serious approaches, as well. For the high school students under his purview, Harry Leonardatos and his staff members have implemented extra help during lunch periods. "We have teachers in the core subject areas offering additional support to students," he said. "We extend that to after-school hours, too. We're also expanding one of our alternative education programs. Right now, that's just for a year and we're using the COVID relief funds to cover the costs, but hopefully we can have it for longer. We also have Mindful Mondays – a time to reflect on certain themes, like gratitude. For January, our theme was 'new beginnings.' Since we're in the middle of the Omicron variant, we can't do indoor activities, but we're planning for spring activities for the students – social events that they can do outdoors."

For Lisa Meade, it's important to check in with students who are struggling – a practice that extends to her teachers. "I have an amazing team of people who I work with in Granville, but we still worry about the kids' mental health and we're constantly brainstorming ideas to help them. I had a teacher email recently about the students she's concerned about, saying that she's never had this many kids on her worry list before. I completely

understand that feeling," she said. "To help with that, I've been trying to capture some small wins among all the big things we have to do. So, each day I have a 'must-do' list of a few things that I have to accomplish. Today's list was checking in with three kids that I'm trying to take under my wing. And I did that and it felt good."

A HEAVY LOAD GETS HEAVIER

Even with the small accomplishments, the load is heavy, as principals are also trying to support the educators and support staff in their schools. They all laud the superhuman efforts of their teachers, nurses, teaching assistants, clerical staff, cafeteria workers, and counselors. At the same time, though, they're continually looking for even more support mechanisms, both big and small.

"You have to be there for everybody, be a listener, be situationally aware, be there for people, talk to people, understand when they have to be out for their family," Smilinich advised. "If an employee's children have to quarantine, check on them, text them, be there for everybody and be as supportive as possible. Be visible throughout the school all the time. Talk to the kids. If a teacher is out, ask them what they need. What can you do to support them? It's constantly talking to people and not using COVID as an excuse but using it as something to intrinsically motivate you more as a human being to help your faculty and staff out because they're tired – and rightfully so."

Smilinich also suggests giving people the gift of time when possible. "I tell my staff, 'If you're going to be at school and you're only a six, be the best damned six you can be. But if you're a four, stay home and take care of yourself. That's the most important thing. But if you're ready to be an eight, be the best damned eight you can be. Or, be a 10 and be a rock star,'" he said. "But if you're not up to it, we're a team and we've got your back."

"It's constantly talking to people and not using COVID as an excuse but using it as something to intrinsically motivate you more as a human being to help your faculty and staff out because they're tired – and rightfully so."

– Charles Smilinich

This gift of time is a precious commodity that many school leaders are sharing. "For my staff, if we don't need to meet and we could do it through email or virtually, then we don't meet," Leonardatos said. "The best thing I could give my staff is time. I think they appreciate that the most."

Meade mirrored the sentiments. "When it's meeting time and I don't need to stand and deliver – for example, if there's information that staff members can just read – I give them back that time because I know that time is such a luxury right now. I trust them to use that time as they see fit rather than just listening to me read a bunch of announcements," she said.

A little time, empathy, and understanding goes a long way. And when that isn't enough, there are other small, meaningful gestures that are helpful.

"My staff is amazing. We try to keep each other laughing because we're processing a lot together. And along with the jokes, there are lots of treats and – yes, a lot of donuts," Williams said. "We all function from a place of support and love."

For Granville staff members, Meade leaves nice notes as welcome little surprises for teachers. And then there's chocolate.

"You'd be surprised how impactful a one-day hot cocoa bar can be," she mused. "You would have thought I gave everybody \$100. I didn't. I simply bought some cocoa, some whipped cream, and some sprinkles, but everybody was down here in the office happy about having hot cocoa," she mused. "I also try to make sure I'm walking around the building a couple of times each day just to say hi to teachers and check in with them."

LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR A POST-PANDEMIC FUTURE

This continuous outpouring of support to staff, students, and families is often draining for school leaders. But they understand that taking every opportunity to maintain (or improve) the culture of a school is also a worthy — and vital — investment for the future.

Williams sums it up nicely. “I love Friday nights, but I’m exhausted,” she said. “At the start of COVID, everyone was saying that educators are like heroes. And then we became ‘not

heroes.’ But the fact is, we are very much heroes in education. We are with families. We’ve had loss. We’ve shown up to calling hours. We’ve made sure families had food and toilet paper. But that’s the kind of school we’re trying to create.”

“To me, culture is everything and that’s part of how to maintain,” Payton said. “The culture I have in my building is to make sure we’re celebrating our successes, not only our students’ successes, but our teachers’ successes, too. And that’s where I try to perform, where I try to support my staff. They need that — the cheerleader

in the corner. In meetings, I do a lot more of what I’ll call ‘rah-rah stuff’ to fire them up and let them know I understand where they’re coming from. They all know I’m married to a teacher, so they know I get it. But I have to acknowledge that I get it and show them that I’ve got their back. We’re going to get through this. Our kids are going to get through this and we’re all going to be stronger at the end of this...whenever that might be.”

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

PANDEMIC WISH LIST

While educators are tackling the day-to-day dilemmas of operating schools while COVID-19 is still prevalent, they’re also looking ahead and reflecting on changes that need to be considered for the future.

Funding is one priority. “The additional funding schools received recently has been extremely helpful. We’ve been able to use it for some summer school and after-school programming to start getting kids caught up,” said AuSable Valley’s Kevin Hulbert. “But this is not going to be a one- or two-year fix. To overcome what students have gone through during the pandemic will take much longer. I really hope that we will continue to have that money. We will need it to build back and to help our kids academically, socially, and mentally for a very long time.”

Looking at standards, testing, and academic expectations should also be a priority. “I’m glad the Board of Regents canceled the Regents exams for January. That was helpful. And if they do the same in June, it would be appreciated,” said Harry Leonardatos, a high school principal in Clarkstown. “It would take some of the external stresses off of our faculty and staff... And then those exams need to be looked at and evaluated closely moving forward.”

“Take the high-stakes testing off the table. There’s a huge focus on being culturally responsive and on meeting students’ social-emotional needs in education today, and rightly so. But how are we going to do this in the midst of the pressures of high-stakes testing?” asked Eva Williams, an elementary school principal in Syracuse. “Our children are in crisis.”

Thomas Payton, a principal in Suffolk County, agreed. “We’ve all acknowledged that students are facing the biggest mental health crisis they’ve ever had and our focus needs to be ‘Maslow before Bloom.’ In other words, we need to work on those social-emotional

constructs before we can teach students,” he said. “At the same time, everyone also acknowledges that we have wider achievement gaps than ever before, but no one — particularly at the legislative level — has actually talked about what we are going to do about the end piece of it. We acknowledge these truths and the fact that it’s up to the educators to fix it, which is our job. However, I don’t know how we can still be held to the same standards as we were before the pandemic. You’re adding to our plate, but you haven’t changed the goalposts at the end. Something has to give.”

It’s a popular viewpoint. “It’s similar to a lesson plan, right?” said Leonardatos. “If you find out you only have six weeks left to teach the material, you make certain decisions on what to prioritize in the curriculum. I think it has to be the same thing here: What do we really want our students to know by the time they graduate — because we can’t fit everything in.”

WHISKING AWAY THE FEAR

In addition to changing the goalposts, Payton would also be happy with having just a little normalcy. “If I had a magic wand, I would also take away the fear. Let the school be a safe and secure place where parents want to send their children and the students want to come,” said Payton.

At the start of the 2021-2022 school year, many educators — parents and students, as well — thought that was a possibility. And there were a few small glimpses.

“On the first day of school this year, I remember sitting and listening to the kids play on the playground. I had to take a video of it because it had been so long since they all played together, rather than just with a few of their classmates. **Just that murmur of play and all the different discussions mixing in the air — I had to close my eyes, sit, listen, and take it all in. That’s where I want schools to get back to,**” Payton concluded.