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Contents

A Day in the
Life of a | 5
School Leader:
“Every Day Is Just
Survival Right Now”
by Kim M. Smithgall



SAANYS Survey - | 11
The Impact of COVID
on School Administrators



School Leaders – | 23
Can You Name That Tune?
by Donna McGuire

Gratitude for | 27
Pandemic Principals
by Carin L. Reeve

A Day in the Life of a Principal | 29
Right Now
by Greg Moffitt

A Principal’s Assessment | 31
“We’re Not OK”
by Lisa Meade

COLUMNS

President’s Message | 3
Harry Leonardatos
SAANYS President

FYI | 17
Trade Talk | 36

Vanguard Practices

WINTER 2022 from practitioners

This magazine is published
three times a year by the
**School Administrators Association
of New York State**
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A message from
Harry Leonardatos

SAANYS President
2021-2022

Pressure Cooker Leadership

During the winter months, I use a pressure cooker to make soups and stews. However, if the top is removed at full pressure, there will be a big mess. Over the past few years, schools have become pressure cookers sometimes without a lid, often leaving messes behind for school administrators to clean.

An article I recently read about a middle school principal exemplifies the current pressure cooker situation we are facing. He listed the ingredients that are stewing: staffing shortages, increased incidences of bullying and altercations between students, negative social media posts, contact tracing, threats to schools, Tik Tok challenges, parents questioning COVID protocols and masking requirements, opposing sides on DEI and critical race theory, and department of health updates that are at times contradictory, with little time allowed for implementation in schools. This principal's message to his staff in January after the break was to take each day one at a time and survive it.

As administrators and leaders, we have all learned about different types of leadership, e.g. instructional, transactional, transformational, servant, distributive, and situational. The pandemic has added another type of leadership for which administrators are not fully prepared: "pressure cooker" leadership. School leaders are facing a once in a lifetime challenge with this pandemic.

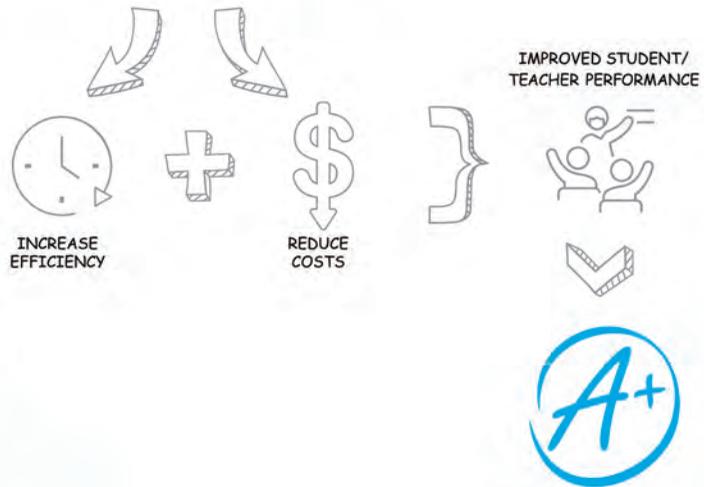
Absent any preparation for pandemic management, how do we lead schools during a global crisis? The answer contains a double-edged sword. In all my Zoom

meetings with principals around this state, I know that school leaders use their expertise, good judgment, and dedication to the profession to survive under pressure. School leaders know how to maneuver staff to cover classrooms. Like you, there were many times when I substituted in classrooms. School leaders know when and how to advocate for resources to help teachers and students. During the start of the pandemic, I distributed cellular hot spots to students so that they can access remote instruction. As leaders, we also listen to the understandable frustrations of their staff members, students, and parents since this pandemic has not been easy on anyone.

Leading under pressure, however, also has a downside. The past few years have taken a real toll among school leaders, and there is only so much that we can absorb. We have sacrificed weekends and family time to make calls telling students and staff that they have been exposed and must quarantine. Summer provided no relief either, since we cut our earned vacation time to help develop reopening plans that adhere to health and safety guidelines. It is no surprise that school leaders are considering retirement at an alarming rate.

My friends in the private sector ask me how administrators are managing during the pandemic. I respond that we kept schools operating during remote, hybrid, and in-person learning. As professionals, we sacrificed personal time and energy for the greater good of the school community. Ultimately, we kept the lid on the pressure cooker without the ingredients spilling all over the place.

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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 backed-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 Voxer group,” she said, explaining that Voxer 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 Voxer 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.

**SAANYS SURVEY –**

The Impact of COVID on School Administrators

“My family hasn’t seen me much in two years.”

So sums up the life of a school administrator during what has been an unprecedented time for students and the professionals responsible for far more than their education, but their social, emotional, and physical well-being as well.

There have been numerous studies on the impact of the pandemic on students, teachers, and many other professionals, but how are our school leaders faring? To find out, SAANYS recently conducted a survey of its members – school principals, assistant principals, directors, supervisors, and the various titles within the membership. Given the considerable number of responses returned (676) between January 31 and February 9, it was clear that members had a lot on their minds, sharing not only data but hundreds of comments and reflections.

TEAM INNOVARE WISHES ALL EDUCATION LEADERS A WONDERFUL HOLIDAY SEASON AND WINTER BREAK

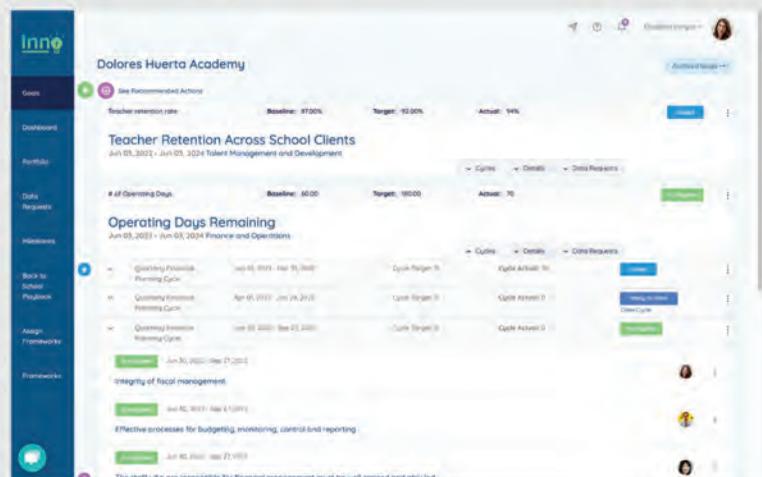


"I think other K-12 administrators should work with Innovare because you know you are working with people who have the same values...they care about students, they care about outcomes, and they value the leader and the leader's time."

- Dr. Jackie Menoni,
Principal at Distinguished Chicago Public Schools



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IT'S BEEN A LOT

"I have become an honorary member of the health department. I have not focused on instruction or community building. I'm tired."

The survey asked the question, "Have your professional duties been sidelined to fulfill COVID-related work?" The message was very clear with 85 percent reporting "yes," their traditional school and educational roles indeed have taken a backseat."

"We have become more medical directors than instructional leaders. With DOH and state ed continuously changing protocols, we are constantly meeting and making adjustments. The ability to get into classrooms and complete other professional responsibilities has been compromised, leading to higher levels of stress and anxiousness."

"One area significantly impacted is the focus on teaching, learning, and instruction – fewer classroom visits and fewer instructionally based conversations."

Among the respondents, 75 percent hold the title of principal or assistant principal. And for these members, those in charge of all that it entails to run a school building and care for hundreds of students and staff – trying to keep up with it all simply means longer hours and very long days.

"Contact tracing took up so much time that the only way to stay somewhat afloat was to stay well past the end of the workday, bring work home, and come in on weekends. I even did work while I was out myself with COVID – Google Meets, emails, paperwork, things that had to get done." These reflections and comments were common and showed the hard work and sacrifices being made by those on the frontlines not in hospitals, but in schools – "I worked Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Year's Eve, New Year's Day, all through Christmas break, and spent a trip with my son in my hotel room working." Yes, school leaders are tired too.

TOP STRESSOR – STAFFING

"We play the shell game every morning."

One of those things consuming so much time and energy, and one of the top reported stressors, is staffing shortages. Commented one administrator, "I have been a second-grade teacher, fifth-grade teacher, kindergarten teacher, and a custodian...all in one week." He is not alone

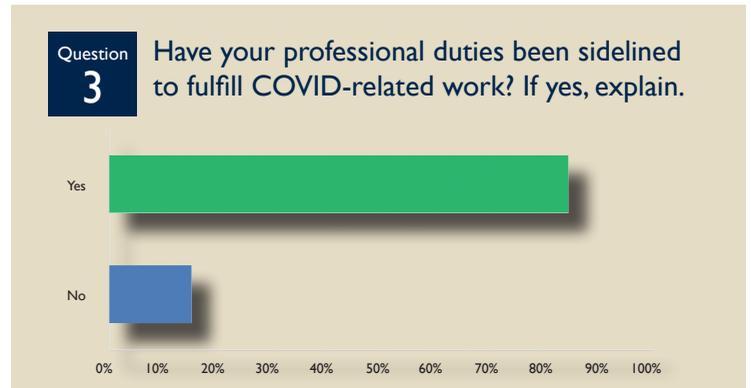
– 34 percent of respondents reported having to "often" or "very often" substitute in classrooms this school year due to staff shortages. As statewide infection numbers continue to decrease there is hope for some relief in this area. More than just hope, however, there were many comments from survey respondents suggesting expedited teacher preparation pathways as a way to get educators in classrooms sooner and shore up the teaching profession.

It is common knowledge that staffing shortages are not just in classrooms [see chart on page 14] and our transportation departments have been hit particularly hard. **Seventy-five percent of respondents reported significant staffing needs in the area of transportation,** higher than the 66 percent reporting teacher shortages. Said one member, "I work in transportation. I have office staff and mechanics driving daily."

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The other top stressor – the kids. Beyond being responsible for plugging staffing holes, contact tracing, mask patrolling, and the analyzing of the ever-popular Friday memos from the Department of Health, SAANYS members are educators. No matter what one's certification area, all are in the business of supporting students. That is why it is notable that 33 percent of respondents believe that certain populations of students under their supervision have experienced significant learning loss. Even more striking is that **28 percent believe that there has been significant learning loss across the general population.**

However, respondents seem overwhelmingly concerned that students



are struggling with far more than academics, noting the significant rise in students' social-emotional needs and behaviors. "The ability for our students to 'cope' and socialize with each other is noticeably different."

"We are seeing a developmental delay in all students across the board. They tend to be about one to two years behind in their development. We have six-year-olds acting like preschool children throwing tantrums. Middle school kids are acting like elementary kids, and high school kids seem immature and act like middle school kids. And students...are having mental health issues unlike those we've ever seen before."

These "delays" were a common sentiment in the survey comments and particularly speak to the importance of in-person learning versus remote. According to one respondent, "The students who selected remote, or who were on remote for a significant portion of the school year 2020-2021, are definitely immature, less resilient, and are displaying more at-risk behaviors (vaping, dress code/cell phone insubordination, etc.)."

In fact, a startling 86 percent of respondents reported an increase in student behavioral issues this year. "I think students have lost some academics but more have lost social and emotional learning that takes place within a school. I think students are struggling with values, morals, and what is appropriate in certain situations." A number of respondents expressed anecdotally that more and more of the general population are also exhibiting signs of substance abuse. "Vaping is out of control," observed one member.

Of course, subgroup populations are areas of increased concern for many:

- “[We have] students with significant disabilities who won’t wear masks with integrity or at all, are quarantined more frequently or longer, and can’t participate in remote learning/instruction, and lack of staffing keeps [these] students from getting proper required supports.”
- “Manifestation hearings are up 900 percent over last school year. (Yes, 900 percent).”
- “[There is] an increase in anxiety in higher achieving students.”

Reflecting on all of these issues, one respondent summed it up thoughtfully: “This is incredibly hard on all humans. It’s not behavior...it’s behavioral communication. Adults barely have the language to express the stressors of the current situation. Why should we expect students to be able to label it? We all just need to be patient, compassionate, and active listeners.”

EASING THE PAIN, A BIT

In an effort to do more than just tell the story of what administrators and schools have been going through during the past couple of years, this survey asked for feedback on what can be done now to move forward in a positive way. The question asked, “**What legislative or policy action (state or local) would be most supportive to you at this time?**”

Not surprisingly, there were some common threads among the top issues brought up among the 510 open comment-style responses to this question, and most of those were related to COVID regulations and policies placed on schools. “The day-in and day-out changes without any prior notice were the most damning. By the time that we finally had a grasp on the ‘rules,’ they

changed the next day.” And then there are the masks. “We need protection from the absolutely insane public that are attacking schools for doing what we’re being told to do by the governor.” In fact, masking came up frequently in survey comments, with over 80 respondents expressing support of loosening requirements for masks, eliminating the mask mandate, and/or creating an “off ramp” for masking policies. Some comments were also telling about how the masking debate is draining school administrators in both a personal and professional way:

- “Legal threats and online harassment are exhausting, and we have no leverage to make it end.”
- “We are all being obliterated in BOE meetings from parents about masking.”
- “Abolish masking, abolish TTS, abolish contact tracing, and stop making the schools the battleground for these politics.”
- “End the mask mandate and distancing guidelines. Have a statewide end game. Do NOT leave decisions to local schools to deal with the brunt of the anger.”

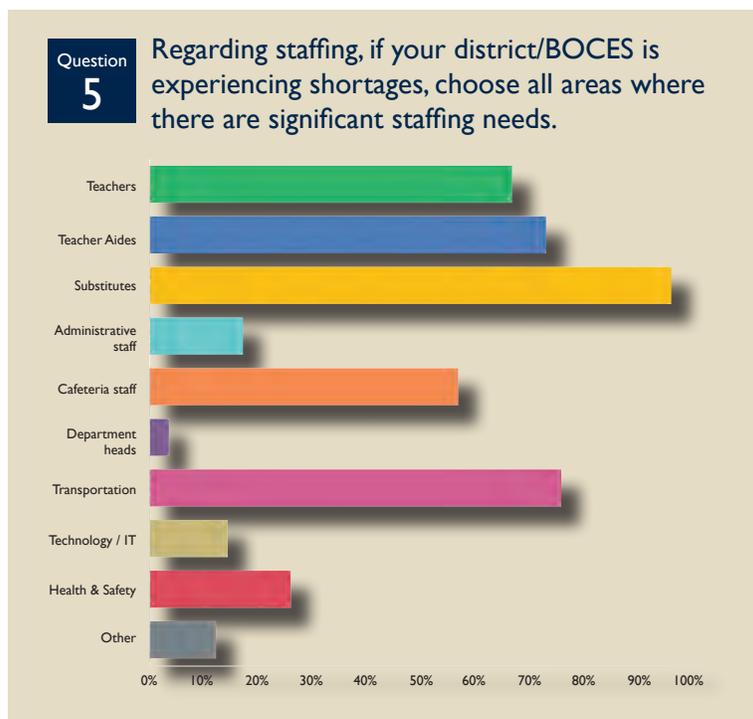
Social distancing requirements hit a nerve as well among those surveyed.

“Remove social distancing requirements – we have lost so much instructional space... We cannot continue to sustain this current model with current COVID requirements – staff and administration are going to crack.”

Again, concern for students’ social and emotional well-being was prevalent in these open-ended comments. “Cancellation of the New York State Regents examinations would send a message that the policymakers in Albany truly care about the social and emotional well-being of young people. Without this decision, we will be doing irreparable damage to students.” Concurred another colleague, “Remove assessments for students throughout the end of the year. There is much disruption to the learning process. We are holding them to the exact same standards and providing interrupted learning. Fewer teachers mean more subs, quarantines, and illnesses.”

Along the same line of regulations and mandates, there were many comments about again suspending the teacher and principal evaluations for the 2021-2022 school year. Explained one respondent:

“**The concept that APPR and accountability are still being held over our heads is unfathomable.** This year has been significantly more of a drain than last year. Last year due to COVID restrictions we had fewer students in school on a daily basis. Yes, we had to navigate remote and in-person learning but the day-to-day tasks of managing a building were reduced since the number of students physically in the building were reduced. This year, there isn’t a remote option, so most students are present every day and those students have social and emotional issues that result in daily planning and support. Due to quarantine and isolation requirements, keeping on top of attendance has been time consuming and supporting family needs has been paramount.”



STATE OF THE PROFESSION

"We need incentives to stay in our positions, or...honestly...the whole thing is about to collapse. I don't know a single administrator who isn't thinking about balling it up and calling it a career."

In fact, 33 percent of respondents indicated that their retirement plans have been accelerated because of the pandemic. Further, the data shows that 36 percent of all responding members plan on retiring within the next five years.

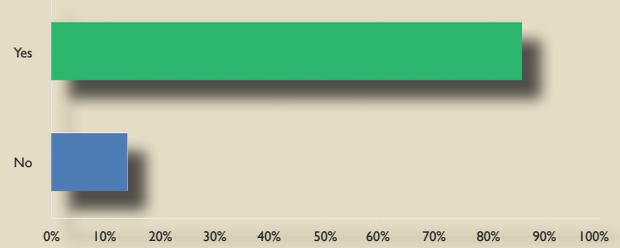
Perhaps in relation to plans of early retirement is the support that administrators are or are not getting from their district offices and supervisors. "We essentially were told we should be available 24/7. I've fielded calls, conducted contact tracing, and closed classes (contacted families, transportation, staff, etc.) all during nights and weekends." Reports of two years of evening and weekend work were common among respondents; yet, when asked, "Have these additional work

hours for administrators such as yourself been addressed in negotiations / collective bargaining / COVID stipend pay or comp pay?" – a resounding 85 percent reported "no," the consistent extra work has not been compensated for. Commented one respondent, "We attempted to get a stipend last year but our district denied it, which felt like a huge slap in the face."

THE BOTTOM LINE

This survey of the SAANYS membership was telling. Our members are tired, overworked, and stressed about so much. Student mental health and well-being, academic supports, staffing shortages and morale, keeping up with ever-changing COVID rules and regulations, and the sheer time and energy it continues to take for school administrators to manage it

Question 13 Have you noticed an increase in student behavioral issues this year, now that most students are back in school buildings?



all weigh heavily. "My own well-being is at the bottom of the list of things that get addressed," said one administrator. "This includes the most basic of needs – eating right, sleeping right, managing stress often on my own." The survey shows that school administrators are most definitely "under pressure" and need support from all levels, especially now, so that they in turn can support the many needs of their school communities. One respondent summed it up: "I would like to get back to the job of education, both with staff and students."



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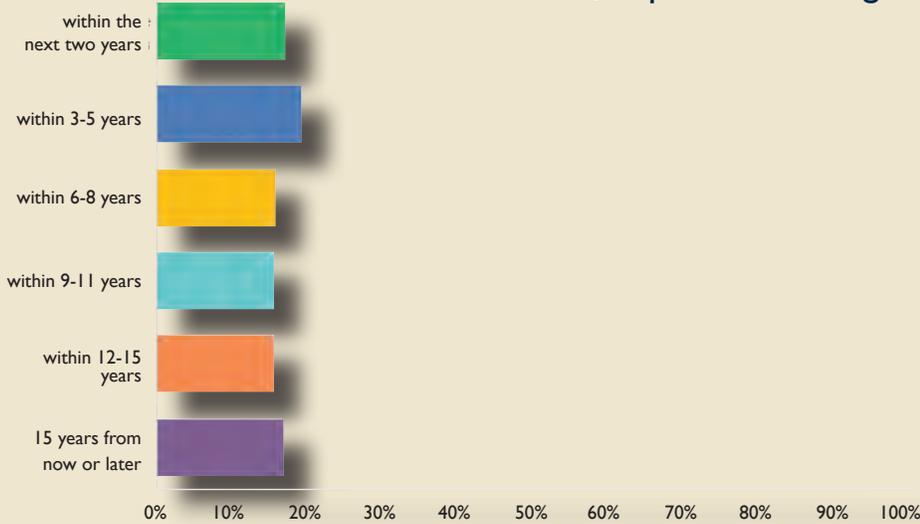
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F Y I

The future of school leadership as reflected in the recent SAANYS Membership Survey

Q: I plan on retiring ...



33% report that their retirement plans have been accelerated because of the pandemic.

36% report that they plan on retiring within the next 5 years.

“I know these past two years have been difficult, and there have been many among us that have either left the principalship or are questioning whether it’s worth it to stay. Well, I say it is worth it — your school community needs leadership now more than ever, and if not you, well then, who?... This is not the time to quit. We need good leaders now more than ever.”

— Scott Gengler
2021 Minnesota High School Principal of the Year



OPINIONS

If You Can't Fly Then Run.
If You Can't Run Then Walk.
If You Can't Walk Then Crawl.
But Whatever You Do, You Have
TO KEEP MOVING

Forward

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.



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19th News...



Principals are expected to be the “rock” of schools, but they’re stressed out



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Why Self-Care for School Leaders Is More Important Than Ever



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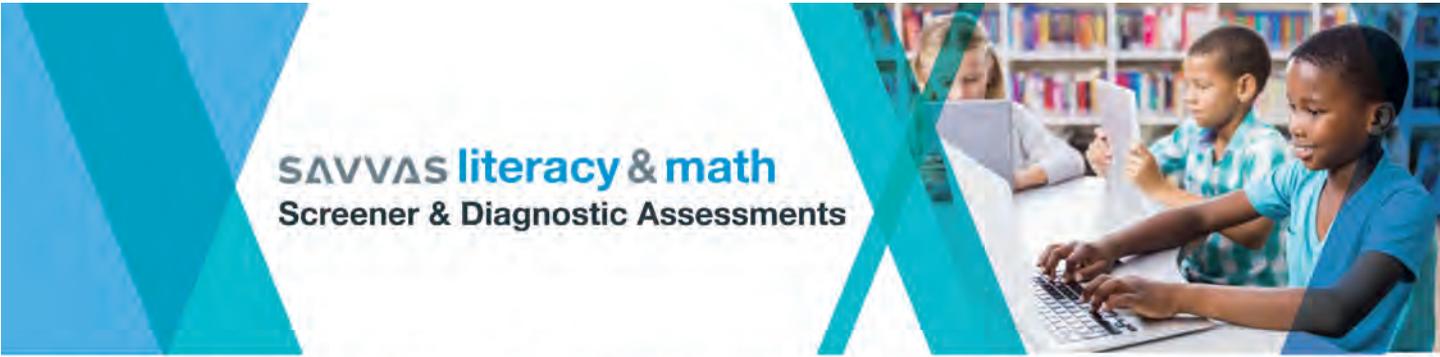
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1 in 5 kids in New York is food insecure.

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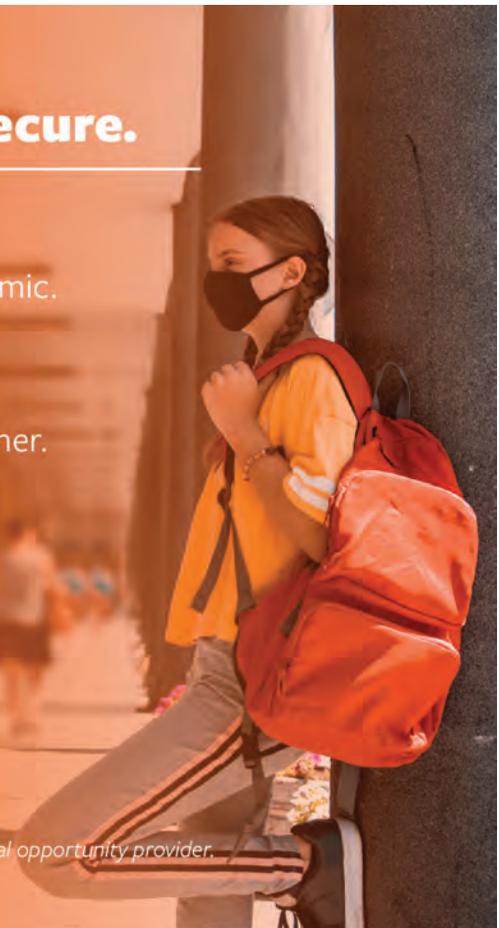
- Make school meals free for all—even beyond the pandemic.
- Connect eligible families to SNAP and collect fewer F/RP applications.
- Serve meals in afterschool programs and over the summer.
- Spread the word to families about WIC.

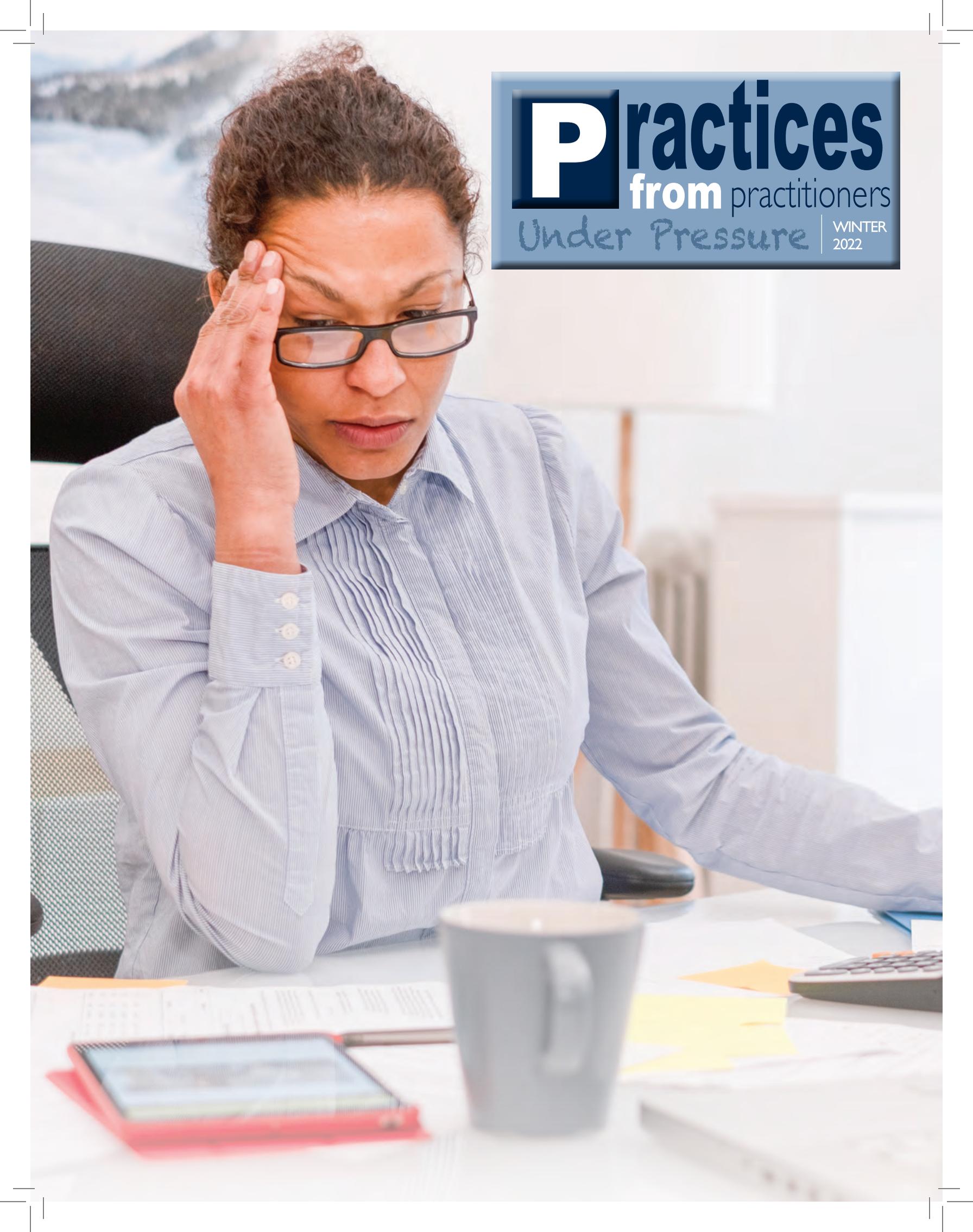
Hunger Solutions New York offers free resources and information. Visit HungerSolutionsNY.org or contact Jessica.PinoGoodspeed@HungerSolutionsNY.org



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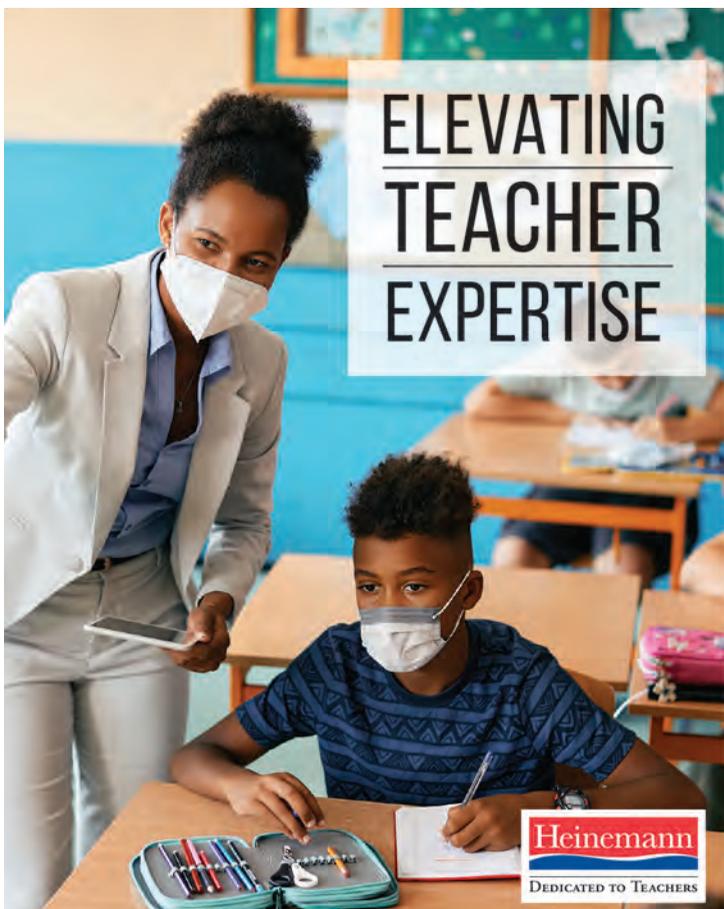
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School Leaders...

Can You Name That Tune?



By Donna McGuire

Every day that students and staff go to school it should be their happy place, where they learn, succeed, and thrive. As school administrators, we are responsible for creating and maintaining a safe and conducive learning environment, to ensure that the learning community enters their happy place. We need to work toward our desired outcome, and know it is our job to make things happen. In comparison, the songwriter will harmonize the musicians and sounds when writing songs, to achieve the desired sound.

As educational leaders, it is our role to keep the “music playing” in harmony, and support everyone so they can achieve their goals. The lyrics of the popular Queen song, “Under Pressure,” could easily describe our daily school routines, if we allow it. However, as leaders, we need to use this time as an opportunity to redefine systems and structures, develop ingenuity, and help return the school toward working to maximize everyone’s potential. What song best captures your school scenario? Can you name that tune?

MEETING STUDENTS’ BASIC NEEDS

“(Just Like) Starting Over,”
John Lennon

The pandemic has placed the universe on tilt and in many ways; our schools have had to think about the basic needs of our students and families. John Lennon’s song, “(Just Like) Starting Over,” came to mind for many of us after March 2020. We used our social media and online communication tools to let families know where they could get help with daily food pickup and local food pantries, vaccine sites, and basic staples. Our school wrote grants so every child could receive a new winter coat and new sneakers. We kept seeking out partnerships, so that we could soften the impact the pandemic was having on our community. Schools need to continue to work together, to meet not only the social-emotional needs, but also the basic physiological needs, if learning is to happen.

PROVIDE A SAFE AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

“It’s the Same Old Song,” The Four Tops

If we think about how life has been for the past two years, The Four Tops song, “It’s the Same Old Song,” definitely does not depict it. As school leaders, we have all had to reintroduce the structures, systems, and routines that are working, review what needs to be reshaped, and collaborate on creating innovative approaches and practices that all work toward reversing the learning loss.

SUPPORT THE WELL-BEING OF EDUCATORS AND SCHOOL STAFF

“I’m a Believer,” The Monkees

As school leaders, we need to be cognizant of what everyone is going through because of the pandemic. A few songs may come to mind to describe our role in this aspect. We need to be inspirational and encouraging, and act as a coach to help motivate everyone through illness, loss, and depression, just to name a few.

“I Got You Babe,” Sonny & Cher

As a school, it is a good practice to share daily inspirational quotes, and continue to recognize birthdays and special moments. Everyone is special, so celebrate it! As educational leaders, model how positivity can be contagious.

ENSURE EQUITABLE ACCESS FOR REMOTE LEARNING

“Stayin’ Alive,” The Bee Gees

Our school is grateful for technology grants, as the much-needed devices arrived just days before the pandemic closed our doors in March 2020. We were able to have families make appointments at the school to pick up devices for children who did not have any technology at home. Fortunately, NYC arranged free access to Wi-Fi for all NYC students. As a result, our students were able to continue receiving instruction at the start of COVID-19.

USE DATA TO INFORM STUDENTS, PARENTS, AND EDUCATORS OF PROGRESS AND FOR SUPPORT

“ABC,” The Jackson Five

Fortunately, our school has been using educational software to support learning in the classrooms for several years now. The digital platforms that teachers have infused into instruction are exciting, and many have assessments and data analysis features for real-time results. The quick data collection is beneficial in providing student feedback and designing lesson plans. The educational software has a

parental login feature, so that families can find out the assignments, communicate with the teachers, and see the progress of their children. The teachers are able to assign tasks specific to skill mastery, and provide additional opportunities for students to retake or redo assignments, as a way to continue building their knowledge base.

ADDRESS RESOURCE INEQUITIES TO PROVIDE ACCESS TO A WELL-ROUNDED EDUCATION

“I Hear a Symphony,” The Supremes

As educators, we know that the pandemic had an impact on the amount of instruction and school time students have had, from both an educational and a social aspect. To this end, we have collaborated to find additional resources that can motivate students to participate and remain connected, with some in-person opportunities provided in the comfort of students’ own homes. The services continued, as did support services, and schedules were adhered to. We also offered Saturday tutorials, so that students could get extra help if they were struggling with topics or skills during the week. Students and families were pleased when they realized that even though our doors temporarily closed, we continued to connect with them. It is comforting and reassuring that our school staff will be here for our students and families, and that we are in this together!

CREATE A DIVERSE AND QUALIFIED EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

“We’ve Only Just Begun,”
The Carpenters

In order to build back better during the pandemic and support our students, staff, and school communities, we need to rethink and reshape education as we know it, and in real time. Our staff is attending workshops on implicit bias and sensitivity training, to name a couple. We continue to offer many professional development opportunities pertaining to social justice and ways to emphasize its importance in our daily instructional prac-

tice, regardless of grade.

We have seen the physical, emotional, social, and psychological effects the pandemic has had on students and their families. It has thrown a curve ball to our learning communities and now we need to work together to knock it out of our schools. It has not been easy, and compounded with other current-day topics, such as diversity, equity, inclusiveness, and critical race theory it may have created additional strain on schools. We are cognizant of the outside pressures and realize that in many ways, we've only just begun the important work needed to prepare our students and staff for a more diverse and qualified workforce.

BUILD YOURSELF, BUILD YOUR STAFF, AND BUILD YOUR COMMUNITY...

"Lean on Me," Bill Withers

School leaders need to build upon their networks. There are several organizations and associations where like-minded, innovative administrators can meet, serve as a critical friend, and perhaps share guidance or clarity when it matters. In addition, they can continue to develop the network with-

in the local area.

Are there local colleges that offer teacher preparation programs? If so, reach out. It is always helpful to pick up student teachers, and they may develop into substitute teachers or work on staff someday.

We had a team of teachers create a reopening plan, with ideas to help our staff learn COVID-19 protocols, find ways to engage and communicate with parents, and develop safeguards and structures that everyone can follow to minimize the risk of COVID-19 exposure.

Deal with issues head on...during professional development, coffee with the principal, and Instructional Leadership Team. Teach students to have a voice, and give them parameters and protocols for respectfully adding input and value to the conversation. Help the community understand each other, work through obstacles, and find solutions that will work for everyone. Of course, flexibility and patience are part of the process. Create a comfortable space so the participants are willing to share their viewpoints. Agree that there can be intellectual discourse, and we can respectfully disagree.

WHAT SONG WILL LEAD THE WAY FOR YOUR SCHOOL?

"Yellow Submarine," The Beatles

"Happy," Pharrell Williams

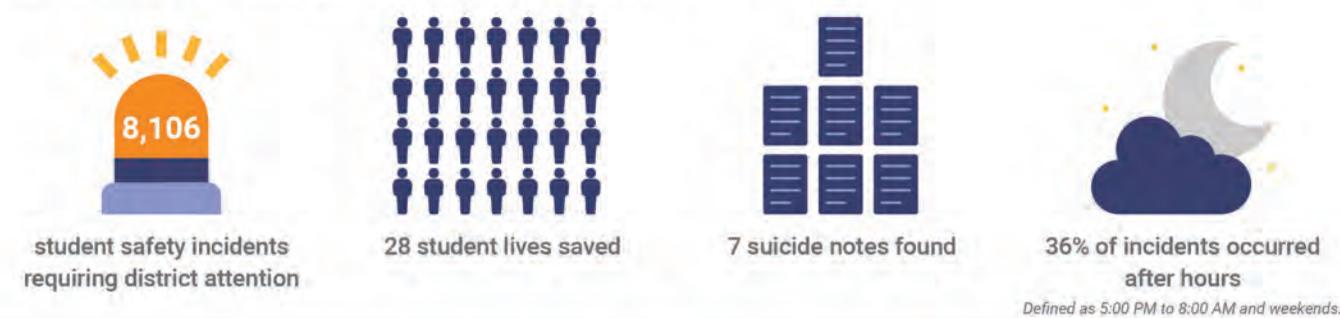
If you think about the lyrics of "Yellow Submarine," it really does depict the state of affairs within our schools today. We are in it together, and are moving toward dreams and goals. As leaders, we need to be strong, supportive, creative, and encouraging to the community so that we will get through it. You are not alone. Share the "Fight Song," by Rachel Platten with the team. Is there absence in school? Open up the next staff meeting with "I Will Survive," by Gloria Gaynor. Emphasize that as a team, you've got this! Express gratitude to the school community; encourage them with "What a Wonderful World," by Louis Armstrong. Saying "thank you" and giving acknowledgment go a long way. Do not lose sight of the school mission and vision. There is a place for everyone on this journey, as you go "Up, Up and Away," (The 5th Dimension) toward your goals, dreams, and happy place.

DONNA MCGUIRE is the assistant principal for PS/IS 18-Park Terrace School.

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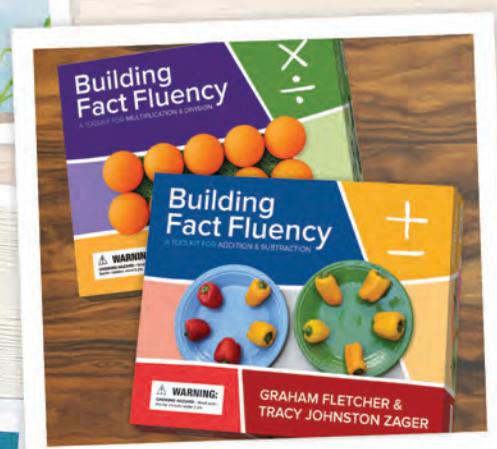


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Gratitude for Pandemic Principals



By Carin L. Reeve

Since March 2020, schools have been turned upside down and inside out to adhere to the safety guidelines of the COVID-19 pandemic. While there has been much said about the pressure that teachers, students, and families are under with all of these changes, school leaders have been expected to make everything work and keep everyone happy. But everyone is not happy. TikTok and other social media platforms are full of videos made by teachers who are unhappy with their school leaders and district policies. Parents have also joined in, using social media to complain about masking and quarantines and create divisiveness within communities.

PRACTICES: GRATITUDE

Education has become a political battleground and school leaders are trying to keep the peace during this conflict.

Being a pandemic principal can feel like juggling a chain saw, a bowling ball, and a flaming torch at the same time.

In all of the noise and politically charged arguing, school leaders are showing up every day to do what is best for our students, staff, and families. We are often the first ones in the building in the morning and the last ones to leave at night. We are trying to find sub coverage at 6 a.m., and are responding to emails from parents at 9 p.m. We know how many absences kids have, who has just learned to read, who is struggling at home, and who needs to hear that we are so glad they came to school today.

Haim Ginott says in his book *Teacher and Child: A Book for Teachers and Parents*:

“I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes

the weather. I possess tremendous power to make life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration, I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis is escalated or de-escalated, and a person is humanized or de-humanized. If we treat people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming.”

Ginott reminds us that as leaders, we are the decisive element; we make the weather in our school buildings every day. That is a tremendous responsibility, and one that requires high levels of emotional intelligence. We have to put our own fears and concerns aside in order to focus on being fully present for our students, staff, and families – even to hear them complain about mask mandates.

Several years ago, I read an article called “The Irreplaceables,” published by TNTP. The article talked about the retention crisis in urban schools and the cost of hiring, training, losing, re-hiring, and retraining staff. We are now

staring into a retention crisis that is reaching much further than our urban centers: rural and suburban schools are now starting to feel the pressure of staff turnover and the value of our irreplaceable teachers and leaders.

Now is the time for districts and communities to show genuine appreciation for teachers and leaders who have put everything that they have into educating our kids during this pandemic. It is time for listening to and supporting one another. It is time to consider how we will all move forward together in a more civil, respectful, and compassionate way.

If you are a pandemic principal, thank you. What you do is important and is making a difference in the lives of our children. Thank you.

CARIN L. REEVE is the director of school improvement at Peaceful Schools in Syracuse, NY. She has 27 years in education committed to improving outcomes for students and developing excellence in teachers. Reeve spent ten years in school leadership, including four years as a successful turnaround principal. As a part of the team at Peaceful Schools, Reeve shares her expertise with schools, districts, and leaders who are looking to build systems of social, emotional, and academic support for children.

A banner celebrating 25 years of Peaceful Schools. It features a large '25' logo on the left, the text 'Peaceful Schools® Celebrating 25 years!' in the center, and a starburst graphic on the right that says 'CHECK OUT OUR NEW ONLINE CATALOGUE'. Above the main text are the words 'S.T.A.R. Power® Resilience Forward Virtual Learning Professional Development Mediation School Improvement'. Below the main text are 'PeacefulSchools.com', 'Student Development Theatrical Tours Enrichment Community Schools SEL Restorative Practices', and a URL: 'https://www.flipsnack.com/peacefulschools/catalogue.html'.

An advertisement for Peaceful Schools Productions On Demand. It features a woman in a purple dress holding a bucket and a fan. Text includes 'Peaceful Schools Productions On Demand', 'Now streaming bullying-prevention productions to engage and entertain your students!', 'VIRTUAL PRODUCTIONS Available', 'WEIRD! The Musical', 'Have You Filled a Bucket Today? The Play', 'Contact US today!', and 'PeacefulSchoolsProductions.com'.

A Day in the Life of A Principal Right Now...



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– DR. JIM FITZGERALD



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Follow

By Greg Moffitt

What is a day in the life of a school principal like right now?

Well, it starts the night before when staff start texting/emailing that they'll be out. You hope they're okay and remind them to put the absence in the online management system in the hope that a sub will pick it up. You go to sleep.

The alarm goes off. There's no time to hit the snooze button so you jump up and make the coffee.

PRACTICES: PRESENCE

You check your email and then you check the online absence report – 10-20 staff will be out. It's been like this every day for a while so you make another cup of coffee and you start the three-dimensional puzzle of figuring out how to cover, how to make it work, and how to keep the school building open, safely.

And you start asking yourself...

What meetings will you cancel today so you can cover?

What intervention groups will get canceled – again – so you have another available adult to sub?

Which teachers will not have a paraeducator in their room?

Which teachers will go without another prep?

Who will be able to help cover recess, lunch, and dismissal?

You come up with a plan and leave for school – and by the time you get there, another staff member calls out.

A district-wide sub emergency is declared and the district office sends all the available program coordinators, directors, and assistant superintendents out to help.

The students start arriving and today you get to be the crossing guard, a student monitor, and the behavior assistant. You help serve lunch in the cafeteria and cover for a teacher who needs to go pick up their sick child.

And, in between, you administer as many rapid antigen tests as you can. So that kids can return to school. So that kids can stay in school. So that kids who are going home sick might be able to come back.

You wash your hands.

You change your mask.

All. Day. Long.

And in whatever "free" time that you do have, you try and update the safety plan and revise the accountability plan and document how you've spent your extended learning opportunity funds.

You listen to the phone message from the parent worried about their child and read the email from the teacher worried about their student and you try to respond. With empathy. With reassurance. With hope.

And you try to meet with the assistant principal, the school counselor,

and the intervention team who have been handling all the kids in crisis.

You try and get into classrooms. To see the kids. To see the teachers. To celebrate them. Appreciate them. But you can't. Not today. You'll try again tomorrow.

And before you go home, you prep the video morning announcements for the next day. You try to put on a brave face and smile. You try and figure out a way to let the kids know that we've got this when honestly don't know if you do.

And then the day repeats all over again.

And you realize you've been doing some form of this for 96 weeks. Everyone has. Everyone has been trying their best. In a pandemic. And it is a lot.

So, if you know an educator right now and you are thankful for something they've done, let them know. If you know ANY frontline worker and are thankful for something they've done, let them know.

GREG MOFFITT is the principal at Fairmont Charter Elementary School.

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A Principal's Assessment: 'We're not OK.'



By Lisa Meade

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January 12, 2022.
Education Week,
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On a day like any other this past December, I sat in a cold conference room with my fellow administrators when tears suddenly began to fill my eyes. Luckily, we were all masked and spaced apart. Likely few knew I was crying. Leaders aren't supposed to fall apart, and here I was doing just that. I couldn't help myself and so I just let the tears drop. Without realizing it, I did one of those ugly sniffles to keep my nose from running. My colleagues asked if I needed to talk. I mumbled something about being okay and quickly exited the room.





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By the time I was back in my office, I had figured out how to stuff the feelings back down to the pit of my stomach. I carried on with the work in front of me.

I've been suppressing those suffocating feelings of inadequacy since the school year began. Throughout my entire career, I have seen my work in education as a calling, more than just a job. I've always felt thankful to be an educator. However, this year is the most difficult I have faced in 29 years as an educator.

It turns out I am not alone. A recent poll by the National Association of Secondary School Principals and Learning Policy Institute found that "42 percent of principals across the country plan to leave the profession." That's too many of our school leaders feeling as if there is nowhere to turn but away!

What has happened within the last two years has created more damage to our schools than what COVID did on its own. Yes, COVID-19 forced us to adjust student and teacher schedules. Busing routes were expanded to allow for more spacing on buses. Wearing masks and standing six feet apart in line became routine. Delivering hand sanitizer and alcohol wipes to classrooms was standard practice. Contact tracing became a principal's side hus-

tle as every call from an equally overworked nurse about a possible exposure required a review of a student's schedule and every seating chart to determine who else might be considered a contact. In addition, schools held vaccine clinics and coordinated testing sites. That all took time, but those tasks eventually became manageable.

But here's what hasn't become feasible. We are not only in a COVID pandemic, but we are also struggling to survive in an emotionally harsh epidemic. Grace and forgiveness are scarce. The stresses and mental health of students, teachers, and leaders are high. We can't rely on routine as there isn't much of one left, and our hopes about finally returning to a typical school year this year have evaporated. Staff shortages are rampant in many fields, and schools are not alone in being unable to fill vacancies. Teachers are covering classes when substitutes can't be found and giving up prep time to do so. Students, who have not physically interacted day to day for the better part of 18 months, are now back in school trying to remember the social and academic organizational skills they once had. Understandable worry is pervasive as families deal with the trauma and fallout from the COVID pandemic. Students can't help but bear that hurt on their backs. Whatever our

students carry, our teachers, support staff, and even office staff feel it, too, and carry their equal weight. It's so much for everyone.

There are both academic and emotional losses to be overcome in our schools. Meanwhile, an equally significant loss is pending in our schools — loss of people. Teachers are tired, and so are their principals. Empathy and appreciation are missing. Grace, forgiveness, patience, stick-with-it-ness, and a willingness to work together will be what is needed to get all of us through this school year.

Should you have the chance to offer grace or support to an educator in your very own community, or better yet to a colleague, I hope you will. You may be surprised by how just a few words of encouragement will make a difference. And for my principal colleagues reading this post, know that you are seen and still believed in.

LISA MEADE is a principal in upstate New York. She has previously served as an assistant superintendent, pupil personnel services director, and special education teacher. Lisa was National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the School Administrators Association of New York State (SAANYS) 2015 Principal of the Year. A previous version of this essay appeared in Peter DeWitt's *Finding Common Ground* blog on Edweek.org.

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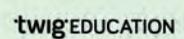
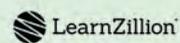
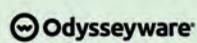
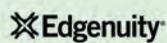


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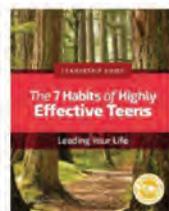
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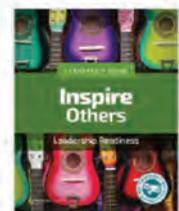
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