



The Pr



Principal's New Gig

Seasoned administrators share strategies to cope with the pandemic's new management demands

BY M. DIANE McCORMICK

Good principals manage their buildings. They deftly handle flu outbreaks. They deal calmly with anxious parents.

But they didn't train to be health managers. They weren't prepared to divert time away from the pursuit of educational excellence and toward assuaging the overwhelming concerns of students, families, and staff. Thank the COVID-19 pandemic for an upheaval that makes the job of principal feel new.

"Could you possibly have predicted the last—what are we up to now—two years?" says Todd Brist, principal of Watertown Middle School in Watertown, South Dakota. "I'm not as focused on instructional leadership. I'm not as focused on coaching and evaluating, and I do worry about some of the long-term effects. All of those things that really keep a school on top are on the back burner, or even sometimes in the warmer."

Now is the time to revisit coping strategies. Experienced principals shared their tips and techniques for managing their "new" jobs while remaining rooted in old-job values. Here is wisdom from Brist; Edward Cosentino, principal of Clemens Crossing Elementary School in Columbia, Maryland; James Frye, principal of Claremont Elementary School in Claremont, North Carolina; Courtney Goodman, principal of Field Elementary School in Elmhurst, Illinois; Lisa Higa, principal of Nānākuli Elementary School in Wai'anae, Hawaii; and Veronica Kaypaghian, early childhood and elementary school principal of InterAmerican Academy in Guayaquil, Ecuador.

WHAT'S NEW WITH YOU?

NAESP's *Leaders We Need Now* Brief No. 2, "Evolution of the Principalship: Leaders Explain How the Profession Is Changing Through a Most Difficult Year," focus-grouped 188 principals nationwide about the seismic shifts brought on by the pandemic. As a group, they described a "layering" effect of new duties piled on traditional responsibilities, compounded by a lack of supports that would help them regain control.

Participants said they sense two new sets of duties, neither of which is fully represented in the 10 PSEL standards that frame the drive for excellence:

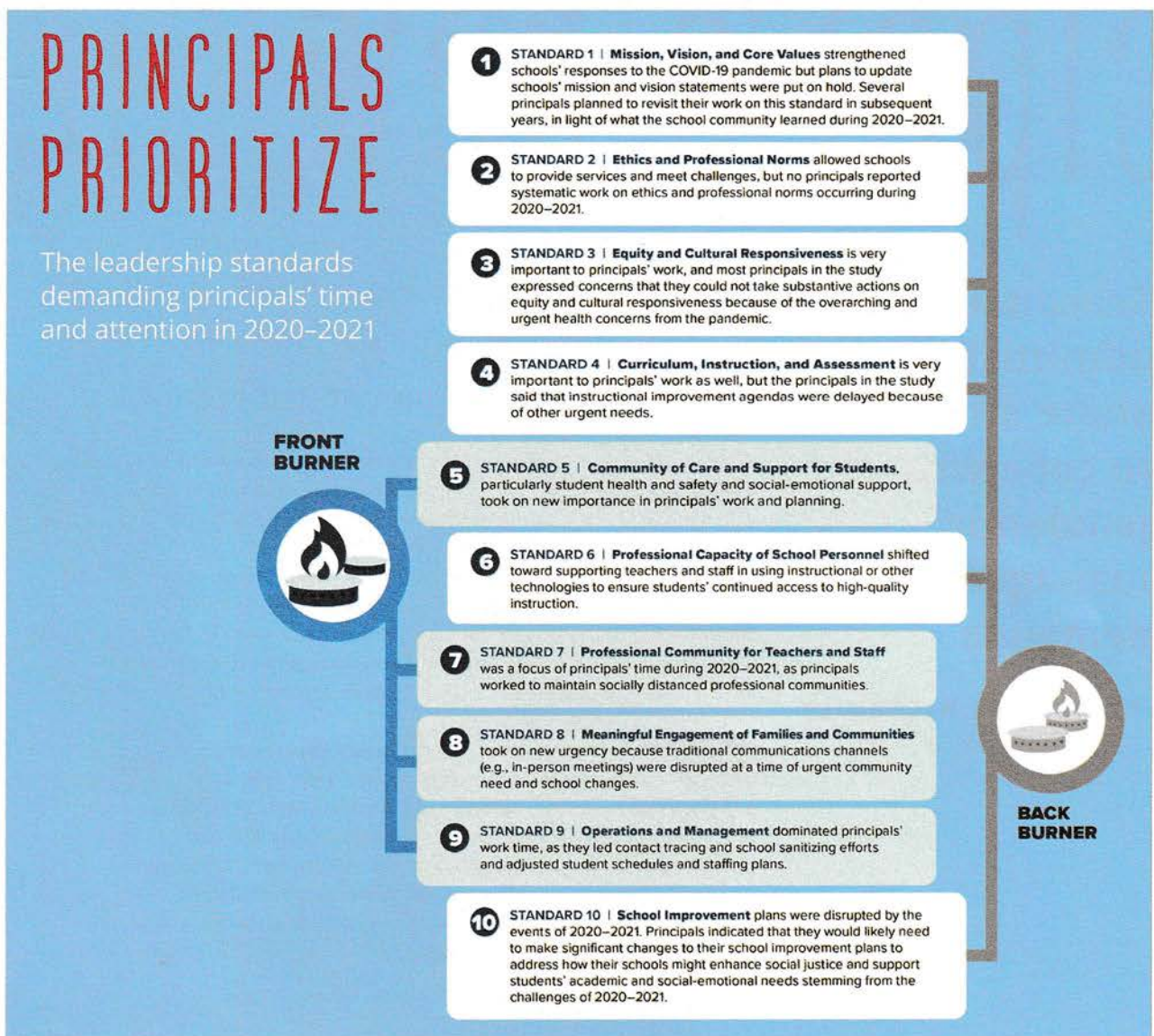
1. **Social media and communications management.** Effective principals have always prioritized communication, but the pandemic pushed this responsibility to the forefront while churning up a highly politicized environment.
2. **Crisis management.** The pandemic created a need to manage change through uncertain and frequently changing conditions, often on an emergency basis.

As for the PSEL standards, principals said they continue to emphasize all 10, but just four are now sizzling on the front burners: Community of Care and Support for Students, Professional Community for Teachers and Staff,

Meaningful Engagement of Families and Communities, and Operations and Management. The rest—Mission, Vision, and Core Values; and Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment—have been moved to the back burners.

CHANGING THE COMMUNICATIONS LENS

Veteran principals agree: When it's time for a hard conversation, a previous investment in trust and shared goals helps deliver a positive outcome. "I know a majority of the people in our school community," Cosentino says. "When you build



relationships where they trust you, the things that you say and the mistakes that you make are received with grace and understanding."

In pandemic conditions, hard conversations take on added urgency. More than ever, the troubles of a teacher or student could be rooted in struggles beyond the school walls, so it's best to start difficult dialogues by listening and showing empathy. Then be straightforward with expectations. "Being clear is being kind to anybody you have a hard conversation with," says Frye.

The hard conversations of the "new" job might also include talks with parents resistant to masking in school or virtual learning. In these cases, share the district or state policies behind the protocols. Don't embellish or politicize. "We just try to communicate with parents about the intentions of our educational plan or educational philosophy," Brist says.

During crisis, these tips can help establish dependability in communications:

- **Think from the perspective of parents, teachers, and staff.** What do they need to know, and when do they need to know it? In a new role she calls "communications director," Goodman has been known to issue five or six messages in a day informing homerooms and the entire building when a student has tested positive for COVID.
- **Establish expectations.** Issue regular communications—perhaps a weekly newsletter that delivers essential information—and don't veer from the schedule unless families and staff need to hear an urgent or time-sensitive message.
- **Avoid information overload.** Hone messages to targeted populations; for example, send fifth-grade news only to fifth-grade families. "What I'm hearing is the need to get down to brass tacks in terms of outreach, customizing the message, and customizing again," says Brist.
- **Reach people where they get their information.** Most will have a preference for messaging via email, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or print.

CUSTOMIZING CLASSES

Students returning to reopened school buildings arrive with new sets of expectations. Many have grown accustomed to lower levels of academic rigor. Others arrive with emotional scars from tensions at home. In the meantime, their parents learned to appreciate the convenience of a la carte education. Some parents take sides in the debate over pandemic protocols, asking to opt out.

Core Concepts: Starting Over



- Many school leaders have been forced to put PSEL standards on the back burner to attend to communications and crisis management.
- Communicating urgent information and having "difficult" conversations is rooted in trusting relationships.
- Variations in scheduling and comfort with in-person learning has led many families to request customized learning solutions.
- Proactive management of daily routines and shared leadership can help principals stay on top of new demands.

How can a principal best accommodate customized learning and parental demands?

- **Monitor parent groups.** Listen for common threads in your conversations and on social media. When concerns, questions, or gripes gain steam, get ahead of the issues by addressing them in your communications outlets.
- **Acknowledge discrepancies between goals and realities.** Are you telling parents that attendance matters while also emphasizing the importance of keeping sick kids at home? Be upfront: Recognize mixed messages and share the reasoning behind them.
- **Establish 504 plans.** Students dealing with pandemic-induced anxiety will need customized, community-based services for physical and mental health. "It's not just a one-sided school-parent thing anymore," says Brist.
- **Be available.** Parents, teachers, and students will reach out at all hours. "Listening to and collaborating with others allows us to make the best decisions together," says Kaypaghian. "I do work long hours and weekends, but I know I have the support of a strong team."

MANAGING CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Management. Crisis management. Is there a difference? Yes, say principals, but one clearly comes first. Sure-handed management of daily routines creates the foundation for "sticky" crisis management that can bend but not break when the winds get rough.

"We're trying to get all the same things done but not in the same time allotment," Cosentino says. "That flexibility is critical."

To be proactive in this atmosphere, strong managers:

- **Plan everything.** Want a crystal ball? Spend the summer planning everything foreseeable, down to the day and hour—PTA meetings, back-to-school nights, parent-

teacher conferences. Things will change, of course, but a pinned-down calendar provides a peek into the future and reduces the need to shoehorn events into the schedule.

- **Choose their battles.** Recognize when stressed teachers and families don't need another meeting to attend or form to fill out.
- **Double-dip.** Leverage overlap in processes and protocols. If the same personnel constitute two teams or PLCs, combine their agendas. Or ease up on professional development during staff meetings if teachers are getting equivalent enrichment from academic coaches.

With Management 101 under control, the key to successful crisis management—especially when it comes to public health—is to use the tools at hand:

- **Rely on the pros.** Build relationships with health experts in your school and at the district and municipal levels. They offer expert guidance for managing testing, protocols, contact tracing, and decisions about closing classes and buildings. For productive, efficient conversations, learn their terminology and what goes into decision-making procedures.
- **Just do it.** Health management is a learned skill, say veteran principals. "All the questions we've had to ask to figure out how to advise people about their health—I never would have thought that would be part of my job," says Frye. "Now it's second nature."
- **Make lists.** New responsibilities put demands on your time, but they "aren't mentally taxing," says Goodwin. Checklists help her establish routines.
- **Collaborate.** A team mentality taps everyone available to help corral the paperwork and organizational aspects of health management.
- **Automate contact tracing.** School districts can access automated contact tracing systems based on classroom and grade-level enrollment information.

SIMPLIFY PROBLEM-SOLVING

Streamlining the act of decision-making can aid in clearing the clutter to refresh brains beleaguered by new demands. Here's how:

- **Internalize a protocol.** Don't just reflect; drive your thoughts through a decision-making "machine." Frye triages daily decisions with the TregoED situation appraisal protocol, reviewing factors of seriousness, urgency, and the potential to grow worse. Sharing your protocol with staff builds understanding of your thought process and models it for them to deploy.
- **Flatten leadership.** Empower teams at the administrative and grade levels to make recommendations. Use data and drive toward school improvement goals. "If anybody tries to take the weight of these decisions on their own backs, it's exactly the opposite of decision-making mindfulness—and you'll crumble under the pressure," says Frye.

- **Reach out.** Keep restocking your toolbox of solutions with new ideas. Join networks. Talk to friends, colleagues, and mentors in the district and across the country. "Don't do everything yourself," Cosentino says. "Figure out better ways of doing things."
- **Rejuvenate.** Journal. Walk. Meditate. Socialize. Rest. Give yourself a little grace—self-care refreshes body and mind. "I write in my journal about the ongoing experiences that occur as a leader, some challenging and others rewarding," says Higa. "I network with positive and incredible people in my life to uplift me on days that confuse my thoughts."
- **Plan the plan, then work it.** Listen to families and develop plans that reflect their desires within the framework of mandates and protocols. Communicate the plan with clarity, and use it as your guiding star, even as the ground is shifting. Explain to parents that things have to change sometimes, but assure them that the plan remains intact.

Two years into the pandemic, the newest elements of the principal's role are becoming job expectations. And like the virus that pushed communications and crisis management to the forefront, those responsibilities are unlikely to go away completely. ●

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5 Essential Questions for Decision-Making Mindfulness

1. Why am I making the decision I'm making? (Hint: Kids first.)
2. Am I basing this decision in the values of my school and the well-being of students and staff?
3. Does my solution adhere to the plan for my school?
4. Did I explore all options? Who can provide a fresh perspective?
5. Am I too frazzled right now? Can an answer wait until I'm rested?