



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: CRISIS MANAGEMENT

For K-12 Education Leaders

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GOVERNANCE

Q: What are some of the unexpected challenges facing superintendents during the crisis?

A: Superintendents across the country face a myriad of challenges as they deal with the short-term and lasting impacts of the crisis across the schools and communities they serve. Their most unexpected challenges to-date include:

- **Connectivity:** Districts are struggling to ensure their student populations have access to internet at home to support continuity of learning. In some cases, funding is available to address connectivity issues, but there are no available providers to meet the demand for hotspots. Some states, like Arizona, contact nonprofit and private sector partners as well as communities for help through Mobile Hotspot Donation Drives.
- **Technology:** Districts have varying levels of resources to provide students with devices, such as Chromebooks, if devices are not available at home. Even districts that can provide technology may only be able to provide devices to a limited number of students.
- **Nutrition:** Districts have largely been able to provide meals to students in their communities but are concerned about the long-term sustainability of current processes. As the needs of their communities rise, districts will need to address short-term food supply limitations as well as the safety of staff preparing and delivering meals.
- **Continuity of Learning:** Most districts had little, if any, time to prepare before states made the decision to close schools, forcing educators and students to learn new technologies and new methods of teaching/learning.
- **Special Education:** Supporting special education students' continuity of learning is one of the key challenges facing districts. Most districts are still identifying logistics and best practices to meet this challenge with often limited resources.
- **Staff Wellness:** Districts must consider both the health and mental well-being of school staff and teachers as they invest enormous time and effort to adapt and overcome new challenges resulting from the crisis.
- **Grading, Assessment, and Credit:** School and district leaders have had to quickly adopt remote teaching and learning; however, many districts are struggling to identify appropriate and equitable grading and credit-granting practices. This is particularly challenging as it relates to seniors and fulfilling high school graduation requirements.
- **Student Safety:** In the absence of daily visual and verbal interactions with students, districts struggle to identify signs of abuse or neglect despite increasing concern as students spend more time at home. State agencies who oversee child welfare and safety have seen a decline in the number of reports they receive since stay-at-home orders were issued, even though experts suspect that children are at greater risk during the crisis.

Q: How is school governance changing during this crisis?

A: School boards and superintendents recognize that schools and their communities are facing an unprecedented crisis. As such, district-level leadership demonstrate a higher level of understanding, flexibility, and collaboration. The following trends in school governance have surfaced:

- **Shift to Virtual Meetings:** Individuals' varying degrees of technological knowledge and capacity impact how districts work with boards of governance. Superintendents may now have additional responsibilities to ensure virtual meetings run successfully, such as setting up practice sessions and deciding which sessions will require password protection. District leaders recognize that they, like the communities they serve, must be able to function in a virtual setting.
- **Process Flexibility:** Standard operating procedures, such as committee approval before a board vote, may not be feasible in the current environment. As such, district processes must be more flexible and potentially include additional steps, such as a virtual executive session before a committee meeting.
- **Greater Public Participation:** Some states require meetings to be open to the public, and recent virtual meetings have attracted relatively greater public participation.
- **Meeting Cadence and Agendas:** The current trend is to limit the number of meetings and topics discussed unless there are items that require immediate attention.
- **Limited Meeting Attendees:** In some cases, school board member attendance will be limited at scheduled meetings.
- **Empowered Superintendents:** To effectively manage the crisis, superintendents may be empowered to make quick decisions as needed without prior approval from board members. Timely communication of these decisions to the board allows for board members' continued oversight and involvement without impeding the superintendent's work.

COMMUNICATIONS

Q: What mindset do district leaders encourage stakeholders to adopt?

A: Districts leaders communicate the need to stay positive and strong during the crisis, recognizing the reality of the situation while also calling on their communities to support one another. District leaders have a responsibility to keep students and their families well informed while also reinforcing the role of students, families, and staff in limiting the spread of the virus.

Q: Some parents express anxiety and frustration with school closures. How can districts best communicate with and support parents during the crisis?

A: The sudden and unprecedented closure of schools has left parents unsettled, as parents must quickly learn how to simultaneously meet the demands of their jobs and the demands of their children. Districts have helped parents meet these challenges by:

- **Regularly sending direct parent communication** to keep them informed of the district's plans for continuity of learning, available learning resources, available staff resources, and other relevant updates. Districts should streamline communications, however, to avoid overwhelming parents with multiple messages.
- **Leading all communications with health information** reminding families of their role in containing the virus.
- **Organizing all school communications in a single repository**, which helps parents who may miss individual emails or prefer to access messages in a central location.
- **Informing parents of available meal and childcare services**, especially for first responders.
- **Expanding online learning resources** to support continuity of learning at home.
- **Informing parents that teachers are available** remotely to answer questions.
- **Instilling a sense of community** by reminding parents that teachers and school staff are also facing similar challenges at home as a result of the crisis. To overcome these shared challenges, the community must keep spirits high and look to each other for support and understanding.

Q: How can districts learn more about how stakeholders are doing during school closures?

A: Districts have used various methods to gain insight into stakeholders' perceptions of current efforts to manage the crisis as well as gather input on how to strengthen and improve efforts moving forward. Common examples include online surveys and virtual focus groups. Districts also mention often learning lessons from staff based on their experiences interacting with students and parents. Such connections can highlight creative and effective approaches taken by individual teachers, for example, that districts can share with others and scale more broadly.

That said, some districts, particularly in urban areas with greater mobility, have noted difficulties keeping in touch with some students and families.

STUDENT SUPPORT

Q: What steps are districts taking to ensure they can continue to meet their students' needs?

A: When schools closed unexpectedly, districts considered maintaining food services to be their highest priority. Districts also endeavor to provide equitable continuity of learning to all student groups, which includes ensuring access to technology and the internet and consideration of family dynamics. Districts also strive to support the health and mental well-being of their students, families, and staff during the crisis.

Q: How are districts maintaining food services?

A: Districts, for the most part, have been able to maintain food services for the students in their communities. Even as schools closed, staff continued to prepare and provide meals, sometimes delivering meals to students in remote areas by bus. Some of the challenges schools face in providing meals to families during the crisis include:

- **Increased Demand:** The need for meals has risen and continues to rise in communities as a result of furloughs and layoffs. Some districts increased the number of meals served per day (from 2 to 3 meals a day) and number of days meals are served per week (from 5 to 6 days a week).
- **Reducing Risk:** As districts expand meal offerings, schools must work to protect meal preparation and delivery staff by limiting their risk of exposure. To provide much needed breaks, other school personnel (often volunteers) help assemble meals on a rotating basis.
- **Monitoring Distribution:** To meet increasing needs, some districts expand meal distribution options, such as by providing meals through multiple school sites. Because families may attempt to take more than their allotted number of meals, some schools using drive-through meal pick-up must mark the tires of families who receive food to ensure that schools will not run out.
- **Securing Supplies:** High market demand for shelf stable food has resulted in fewer shipments of food to some districts. Superintendents therefore partner with state leaders to ensure schools receive the food they need to feed students in their communities.

Q: How are districts maintaining essential health and school services?

A: Some districts have maintained phone and email access to health and school services staff during designated office hours.

Q: How can districts approach challenges within an equity framework?

A: From an equity perspective, the first challenge is connecting to all students outside of a traditional classroom setting. Limited internet availability, access to technology, and/or inconsistent support structures for continued learning at home need to be addressed before special populations can be supported.

Once reliable and consistent connections with students are made, ongoing collaboration between school leaders, teachers, families, and students can identify feasible supports for remote learning. Some supports, such as extended time, modified assignments, and text-to-speech software, can be easily applied to remote learning. Other supports, such as those provided by paraprofessionals or special service providers, require unique solutions. For example, remote speech therapy can continue through teletherapy sessions within the PresenceLearning platform.

Q: How can districts support the mental health and well-being of students?

A: Students experiencing a mental health crisis may still have access to mental health services, school counselors, and social workers through phone or email during regular school hours. Districts may also leverage local community services, as available.

In addition to the possible stress and anxiety caused by nature of the crisis and the sudden change in routine, students may struggle with the lack of interaction and emotional connection that schools typically provide. Districts encourage teachers to regularly check-in with their students online to maintain personal connections, and some schools use online video platforms to allow for “face-to-face” classroom interactions.

STAFF SUPPORT

Q: What challenges do districts face as they work to support and meet the needs of their staff?

A: Just as for students, access to technology can be a barrier for staff. In addition to providing laptops to staff so they can work from home, districts are also expanding online technological resources (such as ordering video conferencing software licenses) and providing access to online training resources to help educators transition to a virtual learning environment.

Q: How are districts engaging classified staff?

A: Some state leaders assured classified staff that they will be able to maintain employment during the crisis; however, districts have found keeping this promise to be a challenge, particularly in the context of “shelter-in-place” and other restrictions. Furthermore, classified staff who are 60 years of age and older are considered high-risk for COVID-19, and accordingly, there are limits to the types of jobs this group can do during the pandemic. With these challenges in mind, districts may consider any of the following:

- **Operational Support:** Identify opportunities for classified staff at buildings that are still operational, such as those that provide childcare or meals.
- **Role Flexibility:** Current circumstances are unique and may require staff to share responsibilities, be flexible, and collaborate. In a California district, for example, classified staff were asked to manage and serve on a new online learning hotline for families. The hotline provides much needed lifeline for families who need help accessing online learning resources and virtual classrooms. Since launching the hotline, the district observed a significant growth in the number of students who are able to access lessons online.
- **Skill Development:** Encourage classified staff to acquire new skills or expand their capabilities to fill new needs.
- **Remote Work:** Utilize technology so that classified staff can work remotely, such as by providing connections for staff to answer calls from home or by providing tools for remote new-student registration.

Q: How are districts collaborating with unions?

A: Districts continue to work with unions to ensure equitable pay during school closures and to assess the impact of school closures on teacher evaluations. In some states, food service personnel are provided hazard pay for their work while schools are closed.

Q: How are districts maintaining social distancing during tasks that require in-person engagement, such as meal distribution or laptop provisioning?

A: Districts coordinate meal distribution at designated school sites such that families can drive-through to pick up meals, thereby allowing staff to maintain appropriate distance. Additionally, districts create rotating schedules of staff support so as to minimize any one individual’s exposure.

Q: How can districts support the mental health and well-being of staff?

A: Some districts have self-care initiatives, including breathing and meditation techniques, to help teachers and staff manage stress. Streamlined but consistent communication, minimal meetings, an appropriate degree of flexibility, and clear expectations also potentially mitigate the additional stress. As with students, districts recommend regularly connecting with staff to check on their well-being and show concern.

VIRTUAL LEARNING

Q: How are districts implementing virtual learning?

A: In general, districts first survey students, parents, and staff to gauge access to technology (e.g., laptops) and the Internet. This allows districts to identify potential challenges to virtual learning. Where possible, districts have sought to close technology gaps by distributing devices. Similarly, districts have attempted to support Internet connectivity by creating Wi-Fi “hotspots” and/or partnering with service providers (e.g., cable companies). Districts also need to have a suitable technological infrastructure in place, including platforms teachers and students can use to connect. Regarding delivery of virtual instruction, some districts approach online learning synchronously, with scheduled classes, while others use an asynchronous approach that does not require students to be at their devices at specific times. When access to technology and/or the Internet is limited or not possible, districts can provide students with hardcopy learning packets in addition to or instead of online learning options. A few districts have even partnered with local public television stations to broadcast lessons to students.

Q: What concerns and challenges do districts have with potential learning loss during school closures? How are districts working to address these challenges?

A: Prior to these unprecedented school closures, learning gaps already existed in student populations. These learning gaps are expected to widen during school closures. To minimize learning gaps while schools remain closed, districts have implemented or considered the following:

- **Blended Learning:** Since connectivity and technology access are among the primary challenges for continuity of learning, many districts are offering a blended approach to learning. This blended approach combines a) online instruction and learning resources with b) technology independent resources such as hardcopy learning packets that are mailed to students weekly.
- **Standardized Learning:** Districts have been working to standardize instruction, set learning targets, and provide supplementary resources for the new online learning environment. Districts have trimmed down previous standards and instead identified key targets that are essential for each grade level. In some states, detailed plans for continuity of learning are required. Michigan, for example, require school leaders to provide a detailed plan so that schools can continue instruction from a distance using a combination of methods and resources. In developing standards for online learning, districts must also consider how they can maintain consistency across other districts within their state.
- **Assessment:** Schools are re-evaluating traditional assessments of learning gaps in an online learning environment. Grade-level grading standards and state-wide testing, which have been cancelled during the crisis, are typically based on state-provided guidelines. Districts determined that these traditional standards for evaluation, however, do not allow schools to grade equitably in an online learning environment because of ongoing challenges with reaching students.
- **Partnerships:** Districts are leveraging external partnerships to meet needs for continuity of learning. As noted above, local public television stations, like PBS, can help districts bridge gaps in learning. These public television stations expand much needed learning resources for students as a result of schools shutting down. Some universities, such as Ohio University, also provide support to districts by expanding learning resources that districts may otherwise be not able to provide.

Q: How are districts providing academic support to struggling students during school closures?

A: Districts recognize that limited preparation for the change to remote learning and limited resources make providing academic support to struggling students difficult. While the level of support may be dictated by law for certain populations, such as students with disabilities, districts still aim to provide support to all students by identifying trends and working with teachers to address needs.

When providing academic resources, districts remain mindful that students may not have access to the same level of support at home and that the home environment may be significantly different than the classroom environment. Consequently, districts are planning for remediation and revised curricula when students return to schools.

Q: How are grading standards changing in an online learning environment?

A: Most districts look for general guidance from their state as well as work with education partners, teacher unions, and fellow superintendents in considering grading standards in an online learning environment. Options considered include continuing to provide letter grades for students who can be reached, broadening grading standards to pass/fail or credit/no-credit, or offering feedback in lieu of grades.

Districts must consider the following in selecting a grading standard that will work for their student population:

- **Consistency:** There is a lot of pressure in each district to maintain consistent grading across the state. If one district implements grading standards that differ from others in the state, the district must be able to explain and defend differences in grading.
- **Equity:** Districts must consider how to provide equitable grading and credit-granting practices. Unlike a traditional classroom, the online learning environment is not a level playing field for grading since students have varying degrees of access to internet, technology, and academic support at home. Most districts believe that grading in the current online learning environment rewards affluence, connectivity, and privilege.

Q: How are districts preparing teachers to implement virtual learning?

A: Districts have provided teachers with professional development opportunities focused on both the design and the delivery of instruction in a virtual learning environment. This may include training on specific software or applications. Some districts have relied on “homegrown” modules, while other districts have used modules created by vendors. Districts also typically supply teachers with online resource repositories and links to high-quality free open educational resources.

Q: How are districts supporting parents in continuity of learning at home?

A: Districts consider parents as important partners in promoting continuity of learning at home. Since school closures, schools have regularly communicated with parents to keep them informed and manage expectations while school leaders work on the transition to an online learning environment. Early communications include information on available online learning resources and teacher-suggested activities that can keep students engaged in learning at home.

As schools fully transition into an online learning environment, districts continue to expand available supports to parents. Districts may provide parents with any of the following:

- **Virtual Meetings:** Some districts may engage parents through virtual meetings to discuss learning plans for the week or training on available online learning resources.
- **Recorded Trainings:** Training modules or recorded trainings for parents have been provided by districts to help them navigate learning resources such as LMS.
- **Weekly Learning Plans:** Districts may also offer parents with weekly lesson plans, such as a “Week at a Glance,” to help anticipate learning goals for the week.
- **Teacher Communications:** Teachers will also communicate to parents on a regular basis to ensure continuity of learning and address any access challenges.

- **Virtual Office Hours:** Teachers may also provide virtual office hours as an opportunity for students and their parents to reach out with any questions.
- **Parent Mentors:** Some districts have parents who also serve as mentors to other parents within the district. Districts consider these parent mentors as valuable partners in providing parent-to-parent support. These parent mentors serve to replicate instead of recreate success.

Q: How are districts measuring the efficacy of virtual learning?

A: Because of differences in technological infrastructures, available data and information vary across districts. Some of the most common indicators used by districts include:

- **Engagement:** Engagement captures a) whether students connect to online learning systems and/or b) the duration of their activity. Engagement remains an imperfect indicator, however, as it cannot capture students with limited or no Internet connectivity (i.e., students who must rely on hardcopy packets or other instructional resources to learn).
- **Completion of Assignments:** Some districts monitor the share of students who complete various assignments (regardless of format).
- **LMS and/or SIS Data:** In addition to engagement and completion, a district's LMS and/or SIS typically provides an indicator of student performance or achievement.
- **Surveys:** Districts have periodically surveyed students, parents, and staff to understand the extent to which the current technological infrastructure (i.e., hardware, software) facilitates virtual teaching and learning. Surveys also enable stakeholders to indicate the types of learning activities students engage in at home, along with the ways in which teachers design and deliver instruction.
- **Anecdotal Evidence:** During check-ins with staff or internal meetings, districts hear of successful approaches used by individual teachers. Such conversations often reveal ongoing challenges as well.

MANAGING THE END OF 2019–2020

Q: How are districts handling graduation requirements and ceremonies?

A: While districts first look to general guidelines and graduation requirements provided by their states, they also collaborate with local districts directly. The goal is to identify agreed upon requirements across the state that also respect individual district autonomy. In recognition of the challenges faced by schools and students, several universities in California communicated that they will accept pass/fail grades on applicant transcripts without penalty.

While it will be difficult if not impossible to hold traditional graduation ceremonies during the crisis, districts are developing creative ways to celebrate. Some districts have hosted virtual graduation ceremonies. Other districts have scheduled “drive-up” graduation ceremonies in which students and parents can decorate their cars and drive up to the staging area separately. Each student can receive his or her diploma on stage and pose for a photograph.

Q: What are the implications for teacher evaluations?

A: While districts approach evaluation differently, some districts may be directed by legal counsel to use any evaluations that have already been completed and to complete all other evaluations when teachers return in the fall. Districts also work closely with teachers’ unions on this issue, as evaluations are part of teachers’ contracts.

Some states are not required to provide teacher evaluations as a result of the crisis. District leaders, may however, may provide feedback at their discretion. This has resulted in an unintended consequence where teachers teach without fear.

Q: What are districts anticipating with respect to summer school?

A: Districts expect to conduct summer school online. Some of the considerations districts face include:

- **Students:** Some states may mandate that all students participate in summer school. Thus, districts in those states likely will need to plan for enrichment and acceleration, in addition to remediation. For most districts, however, summer school will focus on mitigating learning loss, especially among the students who were struggling before school closures occurred. While summer school may aim to cover content missed during the 2019-2020 school year, districts need to keep expectations for student learning realistic.
- **Timing:** Engaging students and staff during the summer will pose a challenge to districts. Students and staff, who already show signs of “burning out,” will want to spend more time outdoors as the weather improves and stay-at-home orders in many parts of the country ease. Thus, districts should carefully consider the timing, as well as the length, of summer school. To give students a break and staff an opportunity for some additional training, for example, districts may decide to delay summer school a few weeks.
- **Funding:** Districts mention funding as a constraint. Some states have indicated that no additional funding will be provided for summer school. With the outlook for other revenue sources (e.g., property taxes) appearing increasingly uncertain, districts are wary of using federal emergency funds for this purpose.

PREPARING FOR 2020–2021

Q: How have districts approached the process of planning for the 2020-2021 school year?

A: Some districts have formed committees with representatives from key stakeholder groups—for example, students, parents, staff members, administrators, board members, and community members—to prepare for the start of the 2020-2021 school year. Some of these committees, in turn, may establish subcommittees to focus on specific areas, such as health and safety, curriculum and instruction, human resources, operations, and finance, among others.

Q: What are districts considering when developing plans for next school year?

A: In planning for 2020-2021, districts are considering the following:

- **State and Local Guidance:** Medical conditions will dictate how districts can proceed. Thus, districts must look to state and local governments, in general, and public health officials, in particular, for guidance on when schools may re-open safely. Many states have developed or are in the process of developing phased re-opening plans aligned with key public health indicators, such as exposure rates, infection rates, rates of community spread, and hospital utilization rates. States may transition back-and-forth between phases, however, partially or fully re-closing if conditions deteriorate.
- **Contingency Plans:** As such, districts recognize the need to create comprehensive plans for scenarios ranging from a full return to in-person instruction to a hybrid model (i.e., combining in-person and online instruction) to an entirely virtual learning environment. Districts also must be prepared to shift approaches quickly as broader public health conditions change. Different plans may have consequences for district calendars and school schedules, as well as the ways in which teachers design and deliver instruction.
- **Health and Safety:** If schools re-open, districts will need to adjust operations to ensure a safe environment for students and staff. For example, social distancing guidelines and cleaning and disinfecting requirements will necessitate changes in transportation services, food services, classrooms, and other facilities. Districts will have to determine screening practices and develop protocols for managing students and staff who become ill.
- **Flexibility:** Districts understand they must present students and staff with options, if they prefer not to (or cannot) return to school. However, districts will need to determine how to reliably monitor student attendance and fairly assess student performance across different learning environments (e.g., a student learning in a face-to-face setting compared with a student learning at home).
- **Academic Effects:** Districts expect most students to have suffered some learning loss as a result of school closures. Some districts already have an indication of the extent to which students may be affected given data and information collected by their LMS and/or SIS. Other districts plan to universally screen students at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. Districts are working with state education agencies to define learning expectations for next year and then adjusting curriculum maps and pacing guides based on such guidance and reports from their own teachers regarding key content they could not cover. Given the likelihood that students will engage in at least some online learning next school year, districts also are examining ways to improve their capacity to design and deliver virtual instruction. To that end, some districts are planning additional professional development for teachers, as well as training opportunities and related resources for parents.

{Districts may want to start the 2020-2021 school year earlier to provide extended learning opportunities to students. However, such an adjustment may require prior approval not only from

the board, but also from the state education agency. Union contracts may need renegotiation to accommodate this as well.]

- **Social-Emotional Effects:** Districts anticipate students needing supports, not only to cope with COVID-19 related trauma, but also to address a loss of social-emotional skills due to having fewer opportunities to engage with their peers and other members of the school community.
- **Staffing:** Districts should consult with unions throughout the planning process, as different scenarios may necessitate changes in district calendars and/or school schedules.

Q: How are districts communicating with stakeholders regarding plans for the 2020-2021 school year?

A: Most districts have indicated to stakeholders that planning for next school year is underway. Some districts, however, have decided to refrain from discussing any details until that process concludes. District leaders do not want to confuse stakeholders or cause disruption in the event that plans need to change. Thus, instead of sharing preliminary proposals, they have communicated a date by which they expect to have finalized their plans.

LOOKING AHEAD

Q: How might the economic implications of the crisis impact district budgets in the future?

A: Districts across the country will likely face funding cuts given the economic implications of the crisis for federal and state budgets. Changes in enrollment may have implications for public funding as well. Some districts expect parents to choose not to re-enroll their children, a development that would directly result in reduced public funding. The situation becomes further complicated in states that fund students differently based on learning environment (e.g., with students in “alternative learning environments” funded at lower rates). Other revenue sources (e.g., property taxes) also may decline. Thus, districts will face difficult budgetary decisions in coming years. Districts will need to be conservative in their approach and prepare staff for what the economic outlook might mean for labor needs.

Q: How might lessons learned from the crisis strengthen how districts operate and teach students in the future?

A: The crisis and resulting school closures have rapidly forced changes in teaching, learning, and general school operations, and public education will likely be forever different. While the transition has been difficult, it may inspire technological and pedagogical innovations that teachers can apply to the traditional classroom setting. The crisis may also shift public perception and understanding of teachers and schools to better align with the central role they play in general community support and service.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

These FAQs are a summary from our Weekly Superintendents Leadership Council Q&A sessions. These sessions provide an opportunity for district leaders to share strategies and perspectives related to school closures, remote learning, and community support amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interested in joining the conversation? [Register here!](#)

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