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Promising District Leadership Practices for Transformative Change in the Context of COVID-19

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JULY 31, 2020

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Supported by a grant from the Bill and Melinda
Gates Foundation



This policy brief synthesizes promising leadership practices from school districts across the Puget Sound region of Washington State in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by three leadership principles for high-quality, equitable schooling, we highlight policies and practices in district central offices that are coherent, transparent, asset-based, and aimed towards racial equity. Our goal is to provide models and resources anchored in high-quality instruction to support leaders across the region.

Importantly, many of the districts included in this brief are taking advantage of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to reimagine school systems toward the goal of dismantling white supremacy. In this vein, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal called for transformative change in the [Reopening Washington Schools 2020 District Planning Guide](#) released in June:

“There has never been a bigger moment to examine our education system and improve our practices to further close opportunity gaps. This is a moment to reconsider and shift past practices that have contributed to racial inequality and a lack of equitable opportunities for so many of our students. I trust your first priority will be to safely open schools, but I also know you are committed to using this moment to build more transformative systems for our students.”

As we move into a new school year, we must ask ourselves how to sustain new practices and continue to design a coherent system that values and nurtures Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) **Focus on “building on” not “learning loss”.** Value learning that happens at home and in communities, systemically seek out family needs and desires, and provide resources to build on the agency, power, and strength of children, families, and communities.
- 2) **Prioritize relationships.** Elevate conversations and questions about how to integrate building community and relationships with families and students. Attend to social-emotional learning in hybrid and online settings as an integral part of content-focused learning plans.
- 3) **Create anti-racist, systemic coherence.** Center the voices and experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in designing instructional policies and practices by establishing and using equity-focused processes and tools.

METHODS

We interviewed 13 central office leaders from seven districts in the Puget Sound who responded to our request to discuss how their districts responded to the instructional challenges posed by the pandemic. These interviews took place between April and June 2020 and explored initial school closures, short term instructional responses, strategies for continuous learning, and planning for the fall of 2020. We analyzed these data using codes from research literature about equitable and anti-racist family engagement, teaching and learning, and district-level decision-making. We recognize that our context is in constant flux: the pandemic continues, decisions about remote learning for the fall are currently on the forefront of district leaders' minds, our nation is facing a reckoning about racial injustice, and November's presidential election looms in our near future. These events highlight the need to focus on antiracist policies and practices in the core work of schools: instruction.

PROMISING PRACTICES & RELATED TENSIONS

PRINCIPLE 1: FAMILIES AS EQUAL PARTNERS IN LEARNING

School building closures helped some leaders shift away from traditional models of family engagement focused on informing parents toward recognizing families as the primary source for their children's learning. They are working towards the following equity-focused family engagement practices:

- 1) ***Two-way communication and participation in setting priorities.*** Districts took advantage of online platforms to facilitate family partnership. For instance, Issaquah found that far more parents were able to participate in digital School Board meetings than the previous in-person events. Similarly, senior leaders in Federal Way hold meetings over Zoom every two weeks attended by 300-600 parents. District leaders use digital tools including JotForm and ThoughtExchange to collect and organize questions, ideas, and feedback from families to inform decisions. To shift expectations from informing to reciprocal feedback, districts such as Highline asked principals to track two-way communication rather than outward communication from teachers or schools.
- 2) ***Use cultural brokers.*** Districts turned to cultural brokers (Ishimaru, et. al., 2016), or those who bridge the racial, cultural, linguistic, and power divides between home and school, to ensure that non-dominant¹ families' perspectives were included in decision-making. For instance, Northshore utilized family liaisons to gather information about families' support needs. Bilingual staff from across different district departments came together to reach out to linguistically diverse families in Edmonds. Highline's family engagement specialists engaged families in their home languages to ask about instructional priorities to direct the district's learning plans.

¹ We use the term "non-dominant" to refer to families who have been historically marginalized in education settings. Families of color, families whose primary language is not English, families experiencing poverty, and families from immigrant-origin communities, among others, have historically been denied access or silenced during educational decision-making processes.

- 3) ***View families through an asset-based lens.*** Districts took steps toward authentic partnerships by acknowledging families' contributions to their students' learning. In their instructional resources materials, Edmonds oriented social studies and science learning activities toward home and community learning, such as discussing the census. In Highline, district leaders modified report cards and provided guidance for teachers to include learning facilitated by families through home activities.

Related Tensions

- ***Expediency versus equity.*** As a leader in Issaquah stated, "You have a situation that calls for quick decision making...and [you need to have] equity in mind at all times." How might leaders weigh the need to make quick decisions against the value of including multiple stakeholders' perspectives, knowing that broader participation is more likely to lead to equitable action?
- ***Weighing access and voice.*** Families' voices should shape district policy and planning, and some districts are careful to weigh the parent voices they hear against those they may not. As a district leader in Highline stated, "Are we listening to this family and kid input because they have access, and they're willing to be the loudest? Whose voices are we not hearing? That's always got to be a question."

PRINCIPLE 2: PROVIDE RICH LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Stay-at-home orders challenged leaders to support high-quality teaching and learning without the affordances of the classroom setting. Questions about how to support learning at a distance remain, but districts implemented the following promising approaches to promote rich learning from home:

- 1) ***Follow the family's lead.*** Teachers supported students by designing flexible learning opportunities that fit each family's strengths and needs. In Renton and Issaquah, Special Education teachers tailored services for students' Individualized Education Plans (IEP) for each family. A Renton leader said, "All of our teachers connected with families and asked, 'What do you want this to look like and how are we going to serve the IEP?'"
- 2) ***Work on critical thinking and conceptual understanding.*** Leaders in Federal Way and Highline maintained focus on rich learning by organizing instructional planning around critical standards, rather than particular activities. Federal Way distributed project-based learning materials to stimulate problem-solving. Edmonds, Renton, and Federal Way shifted assessment practices in the elementary schools away from grades toward an emphasis on feedback and growth. Issaquah leaders engaged staff in a series of discussions to develop a common definition of engagement, prompting reflection on quality student learning opportunities.
- 3) ***Embed learning within caring communities and cultural contexts.*** District leaders recognized that students learn when they are connected to others through caring relationships. With this in mind, Northshore provided professional development to prepare teachers to conduct respectful online student discussions and foster online community. Renton leaders designed an instructional planning process that integrated social-emotional learning into content instruction. Highline translated instructional materials into three languages and designed activities to tie into home and family environments.

Related Tensions

- **Gathering the right data.** Leaders should assess teaching and learning quality, not just quantity. For example, “engagement” cannot be measured just by the number of student log-ons, teacher uploads, or even “two-way” connections. How might leaders efficiently collect meaningful data for timely decision-making?
- **Union negotiations.** All teaching and learning decisions involve the working lives of teachers, and most are subject to collective bargaining. Contract bargaining can be slow and contentious. How can district and union leaders collaborate to move forward with creative solutions to emergent problems?

PRINCIPLE 3: COORDINATED, COHERENT, AND INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING

In the best of times, coordinating multiple central office divisions is challenging. As one district leader commented, COVID has highlighted the ways in which their district is both successful and fails at making coherent, inclusive decisions. Leaders used the following approaches to coordinate decisions across the complex district organizations, ensuring that families’ voices were included:

- 1) **Value-driven decision-making.** Rather than getting bogged down in the technical details of running schools, districts focused on core values to guide decision-making. In Federal Way, a senior leader said, “Our theory of action is our big driver. We will not do things that put us in direct opposition with our theory of action.” In Renton, leaders built planning processes around a shared vision of learning, then used this vision to guide online and in-person logistics and collective bargaining. One district leader stated, “If we don’t have a clear vision...we will not be able to bargain effectively to what we believe kids need.”
- 2) **Engage multiple stakeholders.** Several districts broadened participation in planning for teaching and learning. Northshore temporarily expanded cabinet meetings to include union representatives and principals and enlisted school-based coaches to get teacher feedback. Edmonds’ planning team included teachers with added representatives from Special Education, administrators, union leadership, district leadership, and a school board representative to make decisions about continuing education. Several others (Federal Way, Northshore, Issaquah, Highline) created online forums for parents and community members to ask questions and provide feedback.
- 3) **Use formal processes with equity-driven tools.** Several school districts engaged in formal decision-making processes to ensure broad access and transparency. Others employed tools to ensure equitable processes, including Highline ([Equity Lens](#)) and Edmonds (Equity Toolkit). Other districts kept questions about equity at the center by identifying which students would be advantaged by a particular policy and which would not.

Related Tensions

- **Central or local decision-making.** Centralized district-level decisions don’t allow for the flexibility that families and teachers need given health and financial unknowns, and new working conditions. Yet, decision-making at the school-level results in variability that is likely to lead to

inequities. What are the decision-rules that districts might use to decide where and where not to be flexible?

- **Smarter together.** District leaders recognized the importance of coordinating their approaches to difficult decisions with neighboring districts. Leaders acknowledged that communities in our region are connected and that services must reach beyond students, families, and teachers living and/or working in a particular boundary. How might leaders at multiple levels reach out and connect to other local districts?

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION: Renton Public Schools Re-envisions Learning for 2020 and Beyond

Renton Public Schools leaders initiated a process to re-envision the districts' teaching and learning plans amidst the uncertainty of the pandemic. Their work illustrates how district leaders put the principles described above into practice and how these principles work together towards the goal of transformative schooling in line with Superintendent Reykdal's call.

Renton's leaders used a transparent, formal process to engage a large number of stakeholders. Leaders selected 100 teacher participants from more than 300 who applied or were nominated. They organized participants into 16 workgroups tasked with synthesizing feedback from student and family focus groups and developing instructional recommendations. These recommendations passed through a steering committee of teachers, parents, administrators, and teachers' and paraprofessionals' union representatives before moving to cabinet and school board for approval and enactment. The process engaged participants to develop a shared vision for learning, rather than a focus on the technical details of schooling.

Renton's leadership team also created a planning template to ensure that workgroups' plans reflected the district's beliefs about students, families, and high-quality learning. According to a facilitator, "We took our core values as a district and we expanded on them." For example, the planning template highlighted families' central roles in learning. One Renton leader commented, "We talked about how engagement necessarily needs to be determined and measured by families and it does not need to be engagement with our school learning... We have to honor what families deem as important and as meaningful." The template also grounded learning in relationships and guided planners to integrate social-emotional learning (SEL). One leader commented, "SEL is foundational for any kind of learning that's happening in community, which is what classes are. Then it's also within individual learning tasks. It's including connection and belonging and care." Lastly, the template oriented participants toward rich conceptual learning. One leader articulated this aim, saying "We're trying to create opportunities for kids to be sense-makers, for kids to share ideas. We want feedback to kids to be on the development of ideas, like their growth, not on grades." Renton's leaders ensured that these important principles would not fall by the wayside in the urgency created by the pandemic by building them into planning tools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings about promising practices that districts are already implementing and the opportunities for transformative change, we suggest that district leadership take the following steps:

- 1) **Focus on “building on” not “learning loss”.** Value learning that happens at home and in communities, systemically seek out family needs and desires, and provide resources to build on the agency, power, and strength of children, families, and communities. District leaders noted that distance learning prompted many teachers, for the first time, to engage in prolonged and frequent conversations with parents about the learning children did at home. Close communication helped teachers cultivate asset-based lenses and develop more complete and nuanced understandings of their students. Rather than relying on standardized tests to identify what children “lost” during the time away from school and try to “fill the gaps”, this is an opportunity to design systems to understand and build on what children learned (and continue to learn) at home.
- 2) **Prioritize relationships.** Authentic relationships between students, teachers, leaders, and families will be more important than ever to support learning in the midst of the uncertainty and trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and recent racial reckoning. Educators should not lose sight of the importance of belonging to a learning community in their urgency to accelerate learning. Instead, elevate conversations about community-building and fostering relationships with families and students in fall planning. Social-emotional learning should be an integrated part of instruction across grade-levels and content-areas whether in hybrid, in-person, or online settings.
- 3) **Create anti-racist, systemic coherence.** Center the voices and experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to design instructional policies and practices by establishing and using equity-focused processes and tools. Several districts have existing equity-focused tools to guide decision-making processes. However, when in crisis-mode, it’s easy to prioritize efficiency rather than explicitly focusing on the voices and experiences of students and families furthest from educational justice. We encourage districts that do not have an explicit anti-racist policy, tool and/or process to adopt one (see Seattle, Edmonds, and Highline for examples), and every district leader to transparently communicate with district staff and the broader public about how these tools shape decisions and policy/practice design.

REFERENCES & RESOURCES

Family Engagement

Resources

Equitable Parent-School Collaboration. University of Washington, College of Education.
<https://www.education.uw.edu/epsc/>

Equity in Pandemic Schooling: An Action Guide for Families, Educators & Communities:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UcUOcbSqZIKFv8fl6ehU4RuKiUcjz_-O/view

Family Leadership Design Collaborative: <https://familydesigncollab.org/>

Recasting Families and Communities as Co-Designers of Education in Tumultuous Times:
<https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/family-leadership>

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Olivos, E. M. (2006). *The power of parents: A critical perspective of bicultural parent involvement in public schools* (Vol. 290). Peter Lang.

Teaching & Learning

Resources

Guide for Racial Justice & Abolitionist Social and Emotional Learning: <https://abolitionistteachingnetwork.org/guide>

The Mo(ve)ment to Prioritize Antiracist Mathematics: Planning for This and Every School Year:
<https://www.todos-math.org/assets/The%20Movement%20to%20Prioritize%20Antiracist%20Mathematics%20Ed%20by%20TODOS%20June%202020.edited.pdf>

Tools for Ambitious Science Teaching. University of Washington, College of Education.
<https://ambitiousscienceteaching.org/>

Teacher Education by Design. University of Washington, College of Education. <https://tedd.org/>

Indigenous Education Tools , ISTEAM 2020 Activity Materials: science activities for parents/ caretakers/ other adults to do with children “right outside your door” <http://indigenouseducationtools.org/tt/isteam-2020-activity-materials?fbclid=IwAR0lZmhCKjA9TKBK0-Osf1fFRvroEt8N34Hz-FOt1Ks7LVGnNS3RMIE2YI>

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Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (Eds.). (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.

District Decision-Making

Resources

Curry School of Education and Human Development, Equity Audit.

<https://curry.virginia.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/resourceLibrary/6.%20The%20Equity%20Audit-rev.%20%28Mitchell%20%26%20Eddy%20Spicer%29.pdf>

Highline School District's *Equity Lens*: <https://www.highlineschools.org/about/board-policies/policy-details/~board/board-policies/post/procedure-0010-p2-institutional-practices>

Seattle Public Schools' *Racial Equity Analysis Tool* (and other tools towards racial equity):

https://www.seattleschools.org/departments/departments_of_racial_equity_advancement_drea_/racial_equity_analysis_tool

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Rorrer, A. K., Skrla, L., & Scheurich, J. J. (2008). Districts as institutional actors in educational reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(3), 307-357.

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