

Transforming the Education Workforce and COVID-19: Leadership

COVID-19 and education leadership

During the COVID-19 crisis, school leaders have adapted and innovated alongside teachers to continue learning, often with little support or prior training to guide them. In addition to ensuring learning continues, school leaders are having to support teacher and student health and well-being in extremely challenging conditions. A recent [survey of over 1800 school leaders](#) across 12 countries by [Global School Leaders](#) found that leaders overwhelmingly believe it is their responsibility to ensure the well-being of their students during the crisis. As students start returning to school, leaders now also have to manage safe reopenings.

School leaders need to be supported and given clear and timely guidance to successfully meet the heightened needs of students and staff. While safety and logistical issues are a critical first step in ensuring learning continues during closures and reopening, they can take a large amount of time, meaning school leaders end up unable to support teachers to provide effective blended teaching and consider the most appropriate strategies for helping students catch up on lost learning.

The COVID crisis is an opportunity to reimagine the role of school leaders as true drivers of learning and change in their schools and communities. This requires refocusing leader roles on evidence-driven instructional and transformational leadership so they can support teachers and school-based learning teams (see the [Learning Teams](#) brief) to ensure quality education for all students.

Current evidence on leadership impact

International evidence suggests that improvement at school level rarely occurs in the absence of effective leadership, which accounts for up to 27% of variation in students' learning achievement, second only to classroom teaching.¹ A review of school leadership policies and practices by UNESCO concluded

¹ Leithwood, K. and D. Jantzi. 2006. "Linking leadership to student learning: the contribution of leader efficacy." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 44 (4): 496-528.



that effective school leadership that provides instructional guidance and fosters continuous improvement is the key to successful, large-scale, and sustainable education reform.² This happens most powerfully when leaders support a culture of teacher learning and motivation.³

Further research suggests that school leaders are most effective when they have sufficient autonomy and support in decision-making,⁴ dedicate time to *instructional leadership*, and create a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility.⁵ This can include transforming schools into sites of professional development through mentoring and coaching, facilitating peer learning, ensuring teachers work collaboratively to facilitate improvement in instructional practices,⁶ and encouraging a focus on shared goals.⁷

Studies from high-income contexts show that *district leadership* can also play a transformational role in inclusion and improving school, teaching, and learning quality.⁸ In many systems, districts already have a cadre of staff, or at least local institutions that could be strengthened to fulfill the districts' potential to impact schools. In practice, the workforce at the district level can lack role design, preparation, and management expertise to effectively improve teaching and learning and build a school improvement culture.⁹ By working more collaboratively, providing instructional leadership and specialist support, and using data for decision-making, districts could be a significant driver of improvement in education systems.

Evidence also shows that using high-performing professionals as *“system leaders”* – to share their experience and practice with other schools and foster school collaboration – is a cost-effective and powerful way to support peer learning and increase the professionalization of education leadership. Teachers are more likely to change their practices when they see colleagues they admire – not just official leaders – championing desired improvements.¹⁰ At all levels, professional development and support need to be in place to ensure leaders can be effective.

2 UNESCO. 2016. “Leading Better Learning: School leadership and quality in the Education 2030 agenda: Regional reviews of policies and practices.” Paris: UNESCO.

3 Leithwood, Kenneth, Christopher Day, Pam Sammons, Alma Harris and David Hopkins. 2008. “Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership.” *School Leadership and Management* 28 (1): 27-42.

4 Pont, Beatriz, Deborah Nusche, and Hunter Moorman. 2008. *Improving School Leadership: Vol 1 Policy and Practice*. Paris: OECD publishing.

5 Leithwood, Kenneth and Doris Jantzi 2008. “Linking Leadership to Student Learning: The Contributions of Leader Efficacy.” *Educational Administration Quarterly* 44(4): 496-528.

6 Marzano, R. J., T. Waters, and B.A. McNulty. 2005. “School leadership that works: From research to results.” Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

7 Chrispeels, Janet, Salvador Castillo, and Janet Brown. 2000. “School Leadership Teams: A Process Model of Team Development.” *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 11 (1): 20-56.

8 Leithwood, Kenneth. 2013. *Strong districts & their leadership*. Toronto: Ontario Institute of Education Leadership.

9 De Grauwe, Anton. 2009. “School monitoring systems and their impact on disparities.” Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009: *Overcoming Inequality: Why governance matters*. Paris: UNESCO.

10 Jensen, Ben, Julie Sonnemann, Katie Roberts-Hull and Amélie Hunter. 2016. “Beyond PD: Teacher Professional Learning in High-Performing Systems.” Washington, DC: National Center on Education and the Economy.



Leadership responses to COVID-19

Guidance on maximizing the impact of leaders during closures and subsequent reopening suggests that school leaders should be provided with resources and diverse ways to reach out to families.¹¹ Emerging insights have also identified parents and communities (including CSOs) as a key resource for school leaders, providing additional expertise, knowledge, and local capacity. Forging stronger links with parents and community groups is now a necessity to deal with COVID-19 related impacts.¹² This section profiles a few examples of innovative leadership responses to the COVID-19 crisis.

Global School Leaders: Supporting school leaders remotely to adapt to the crisis

Global School Leaders (GSL), through local partners in Kenya (Dignitas), India (Alokit), Indonesia (Inspirasi), and Malaysia (Pemimpin), are currently working with leaders of nearly 500 schools that reach approximately 125,000 students. When COVID forced schools to close, GSL's training for school leaders shifted online. GSL found that school leaders responded favorably to being supported remotely, with leaders' attendance rates and ratings of online training sessions exceeding pre-COVID in-person sessions.

GSL's support has focused on supporting student well-being, remote teaching, and preparations for school reopening. GSL programs combine practice-oriented group training sessions via Zoom, one-to-one coaching calls, and Whatsapp-based professional learning communities for school leaders to share best practices. Supporting school leaders remotely has led to increased engagement with families and a focused effort on supporting student well-being and learning. For example, in India, GSL's partner Alokit found that their three-month program with 100 school leaders from April to June 2020 led to:

- the percentage of school leaders reporting they are in touch with more than half of their students increasing from 43% to 60%;
- distribution of rations to 4223 families during the three months;
- 97% of the school leaders reporting that they made a timetable of synchronous and asynchronous methods to engage students.

Supporting school leaders as they adapted to the COVID crisis has allowed them to also support students, parents, and communities. One school leader said, "My relationship with the parents of our students has become stronger and healthier after talking with them about their well-being and studies. Parents are showing more responsibility in their student's education. Relations between parents and teachers have become stronger."

¹¹ Global School Leaders, 2020; UNESCO & ILO, 2020

¹² Harris & Jones, 2020



GSL has published under Creative Commons Licensing public resources for non-profit and governmental organizations to customize and use to prepare school leaders for reopening, including content on using technology for learning and management, and emergency remote and blended teaching. These resources are being utilized by partners in Nigeria, Uganda, Philippines, and Vietnam and can be found on GSL's [Upya Leadership for Renewal page](#).

Dignitas: Leveraging community-based leaders of learning to reach the most marginalized

Since 2008, Dignitas, GSL's partner organization in Kenya, has used an innovative training and coaching approach to empower schools and educators in marginalized communities in Kenya to transform students' opportunities. They have partnered with 300 schools, 1500 educators, and impacted the learning of 87,000 children.

In Kenya's marginalized communities, at least 63% of families were unable to access public education before COVID-19, as a result of poverty and systemic exclusion. During COVID-19, Dignitas has leveraged digital tools and remote support to equip school leaders as community-based "Leaders of Learning" to keep children safe and learning in the most marginalized communities during school closures.

All Dignitas school leaders had previously benefited from Dignitas training and a coaching curriculum that covered mindsets, emotional intelligence, and leadership style as well as the critical levers of instructional leadership, learner engagement, and classroom culture. This laid an ideal foundation for leaders to be further equipped to be community-based leaders of learning as the COVID-19 crisis unfolded.

The selected Leaders of Learning, all former or current Dignitas fellows, went through initial orientation, including familiarization with the digital training and coaching tools. The Dignitas team designed training and coaching curriculum to develop new mindsets, knowledge, and competencies that school leaders would likely need to protect the learning and well-being of children at home. These included growth mindsets during crisis, engaging parents as key partners, socio-emotional well-being of learners, and distance learning strategies.

The Leaders of Learning program pivoted from in-person training and coaching to remote, largely digital training and coaching. It integrated a bespoke ChatBot to deliver mini professional development modules, online video conferencing for cohort workshops, and mobile apps for communities of practice. The Dignitas team curated new methods and measures of engagement, community building, trust building, training facilitation, and coaching support.



School leaders' support of households was complemented by the distribution of curriculum-aligned literacy and numeracy workbooks, designed to keep learning on track.

Preliminary findings from a program evaluation show positive impact of the Leaders of Learning program on school leaders, parents, and children during school closures:

- 98% of school leaders said they gained new competencies as a result of the training, coaching, and community of practice sessions;
- In April 2020, parents who felt unable to support learning at home stated barriers such as “know-how” (39%), time (14%), and access to learning resources (72%); by August, 99% of households in the Leaders of Learning program benefited from regular support and distribution of learning packets;
- 94% of households adopted a daily routine that promotes learning (up from 56% at baseline) and 97% of parents are now supporting learning at home;
- Analysis of student learning packets shows that scores in literacy and numeracy have remained steady, indicating that support from Leaders of Learning has prevented learning losses.

Varkey Foundation: Online communities of practice for teacher and principal leadership

The Varkey Foundation, in partnership with the Argentinian Ministry of Education, has been implementing the [*Leadership and Innovation program*](#) for more than four years in Latin America. This program aims to boost principals' and head teachers' capabilities through an immersive program of comprehensive professional development that teams leaders and teachers from different schools, levels, and geographies.

The program uses innovative approaches to develop leaders' capacity in teaching-learning processes, curriculum innovation, teacher professional development, information technology systems for schools, and family and community engagement. Participants analyze challenges in their schools and develop an innovative project to address them. The program was previously delivered through face-to-face sessions and has now shifted to a completely virtual environment, using different platforms that engage the participants and support them to collaborate effectively.

More than 10,000 principals and teachers have been part of the Varkey Foundation's training programs, reaching more than 500,000 students. A key result has been the creation of



communities of practice that connect teachers and principals from schools around the region. These communities, and the firm belief that sharing good practices is a way to transform lives through education, moved the Varkey Foundation to create an online community of practice called *Comunidad Atenea*. The community currently has more than 13,000 teachers enrolled who have shared more than 300 good teaching practices and counting.

With Comunidad Atenea, the Varkey Foundation also created Atenea Experience – a one-week professional development program intended to support teachers and principals during COVID and beyond. The Atenea Experience includes professional development on planning, assessment, collaboration, innovation, TikTok for education, wellbeing, social and emotional learning, peer-based learning, and more. Teachers engage and adapt the content to their own context, developing new strategies to help keep students learning during the pandemic. They connect, share, and work collaboratively through Zoom meetings, WhatsApp groups, and other platforms. As a result, they have the experience of being accompanied, understood, and motivated.

Leadership beyond COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis is forcing countries to strategize how to accelerate the transformation of education systems to be more resilient and flexible. Strong leaders are needed to drive this transformation. Countries should seize this opportunity as they plan for the reopening of schools and building more robust capacity post-COVID to support their leadership to focus on learning, especially through collaborating with teachers and families. The box below outlines some concrete actions policymakers can take to support leaders. For further evidence and recommendations on leadership, see the [*Transforming the Education Workforce*](#) report and the Save Our Future White Paper – [*Averting an Education Catastrophe for the World's Children*](#).



Concrete actions policymakers can take to support leaders

- **Immediately provide resources, evidence for decision-making, and clear and timely guidance** to school leaders so they can successfully navigate crisis responses and professional development that enables safe school reopening, remote and blended learning, and facilitates collaborative professional development. This should include guidance on promoting teacher and student well-being and socio-emotional learning.
- **Develop instructional leadership** by establishing structures, policies, and processes to enable school leaders to focus more on instructional leadership than administration. These can include training school leaders to undertake instructional leadership, including learning assessments and using student-level data for decision-making; providing the necessary tools; task-shifting administrative activities to technology or support staff where possible; and strengthening district capacity to provide coaching and support.
- **Drive data-driven improvement** by building the capacity of the district level leadership to provide data analysis to help school leaders identify performance and inclusion gaps to prioritize district-wide resources, and orienting supervision towards data-driven school improvement.
- **Develop school networks and harness system leaders** to enable schools and districts to exchange evidence and knowledge about effective instruction and management approaches. Policies should encourage schools to function as networks with roles such as system leaders and specialists working across schools.