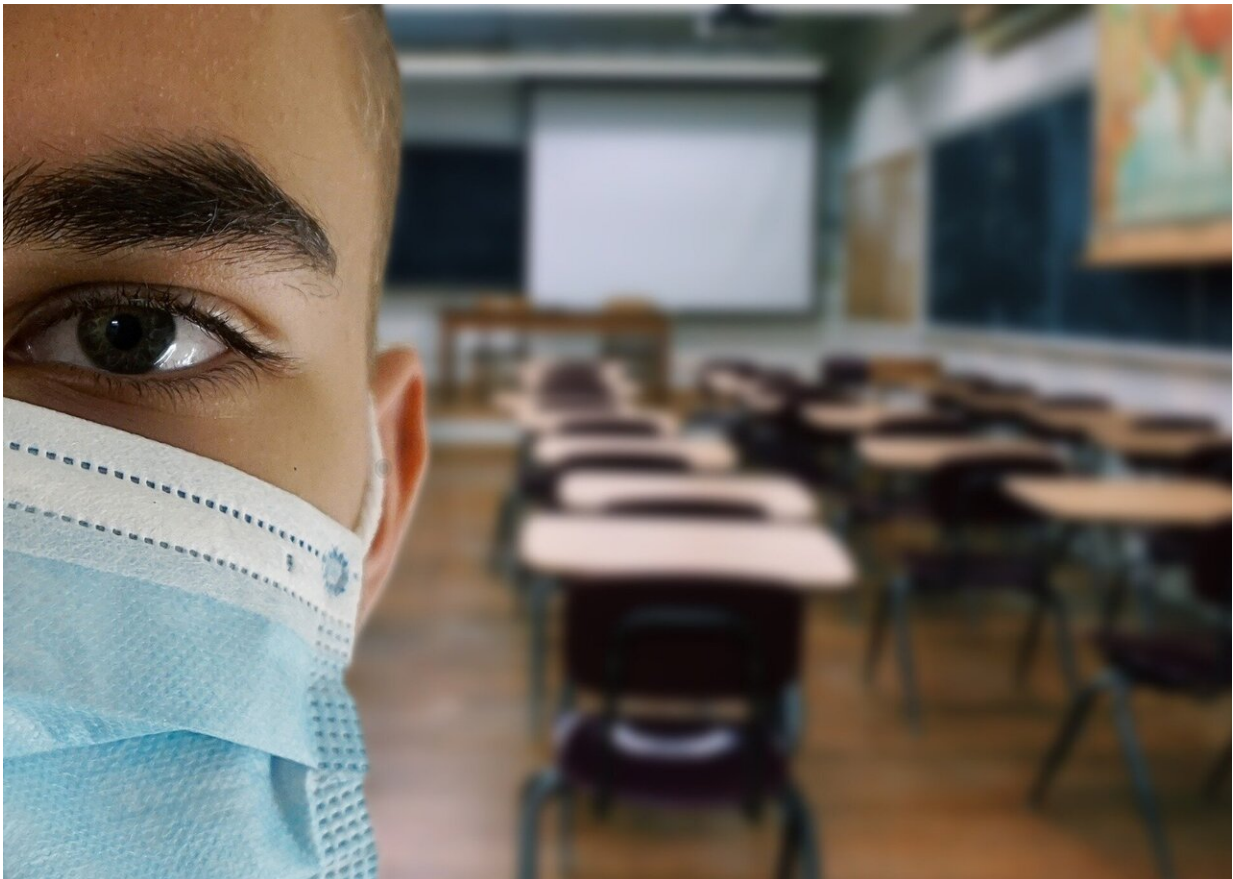# Professor examines school principal responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

March 15 2021, by Jessica Henderson

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The beginning of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic presented significant challenges for educators and families as communities across

the country adjusted to school closures and transitioned to online learning environments.

As the primary educational leaders of their schools, principals were often responsible for leading communities through the crisis. How did principals respond, and what can we learn from this experience?

Bryan VanGronigen, assistant professor in the University of Delaware School of Education, and his co-authors at the University of Pennsylvania and the City University of New York answer this question in "Calm During Crisis: School Principal Approaches to Crisis Management during the COVID-19 Pandemic," a research brief published by the University of Pennsylvania's Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

After an 18-member research team conducted interviews with 120 school principals across 19 states, VanGronigen and his co-authors identified four common themes among interview responses: a priority on basic physical and psychological safety, technological needs to access teaching and learning, the need for consistent, multimodal forms of communication, and a focus on social-emotional learning.

In an interview with UDaily, VanGronigen shares highlights from the team's interviews with principals, many of whom went above and beyond to ensure the wellbeing of their school communities.

Q: Why did you and the larger research team feel that it was important to capture principal responses to the pandemic?

VanGronigen: Many schools and district offices were closed for a few weeks as educational leaders and others took stock and devised some

kind of plan for a return to teaching and learning. At the same time, a small group of colleagues in my field led by Dr. Jonathan Supovitz (University of Pennsylvania) started to discuss how we might document the experiences of educational leaders working to bring "school" back.

An old adage is that crises can bring out the best (or worst) in leaders, and one of our goals was to capture as much as we could about what our nation's educational leaders were doing in the early months of the pandemic. Moreover, it can be lonely at the top when you're an educational leader. A second goal was to share what we learned with our participants in order to highlight that these leaders—despite being from 19 different states—were not alone and were contending with many of the same issues.

Q: Did any of the four themes highlighted in this research brief surprise you?

VanGronigen: Our brief focused on principals' initial responses to the pandemic, which allowed us to examine what principals prioritized when the chips were down. Principals sought first to check the "pulse" of their school community: Were people safe? Did people have food and shelter? Who needed what, and how could they get it? These kinds of questions targeted students," teachers," and families' basic needs—and many principals were there to lead and assist. From New York City to Southern California to rural Montana, principals often described going door-to-door to drop off food, toiletries, diapers, and even cash support for rent and utilities.

The theme on technological needs didn't necessarily surprise me, but it did seem to surprise a few principals. These principals highlighted conversations with their teachers who were, themselves, surprised that so many students didn't have their own Internet-ready device, much less

access to the Internet. Other principals reported that the very technological infrastructure of their communities, particularly those in rural and remote areas, was not well-suited for full remote learning. Some schools had to wait days, if not weeks, for shipments of mobile Internet hotspots, while others invited students and families with cars to park near school buildings to access free Wi-Fi. These stories, to me, highlight just one of many considerable inequities in our current education system.

Q: Earlier, you noted that crises sometimes bring out the best in our educational leaders. What aspects of this project heartened you?

VanGronigen: The principals that we interviewed were dealing with a lot, both professionally and personally, as they attempted to lead without clear policy guidance, help families experiencing food and housing insecurity, coordinate their own children's remote learning, or assume caregiver responsibilities. Despite all of this work, one of my favorite parts of our interview protocol asked principals to reflect upon how education might change for the better because of the pandemic. So many principals expressed optimism about the future of education, which was heartwarming.

For example, some principals noted how the pandemic prompted their schools to re-think their curricula so that social-emotional learning—how we learn to contend with our emotions, set goals, and create positive, empathetic relationships with others—was placed front and center. One Minnesota principal, for instance, shared that their school had committed to engaging in "a 10-minute connection with every child, every family, every day." It was more than content standards—it was the whole child and family.

Q: How do you hope this work will help principals, assistant principals, and other educational leaders?

VanGronigen: I hope this work makes principals and other educational leaders feel like they're not alone in feeling overwhelmed, feeling like so many burdens of teaching and learning are placed on their shoulders, and feeling like they just need to manage the present before feeling able to plan for the future. Moreover, I also hope this work shines a light on just how multifaceted and complex the work of being an educational leader is. It's so much more than administrative work, but, to me, so much of a principal's time is consumed by that [administrative work](#) instead of the enjoyable, but rigorous work of leading people and organizations.

Principals want to be in classrooms observing teachers. Principals want to be kneeling down next to kids asking them to share about what they're learning. Principals want to be in their communities to ask business owners about internship opportunities for their students. Principals want to create a safe, rigorous and equitable learning community for everyone. I hope this work prompts some reflection by others, particularly policymakers and the general public, about the expectations we have for [principals](#) and educators—and if we put them in the best position to actually succeed in their jobs.

Q: What recommendations do you have for educational leaders who may be struggling to meet the challenges of the pandemic?

VanGronigen: While I know many educators are exhausted from a year of toggling between remote, hybrid, and in-person learning, our brief highlights the importance of relationships and communication. I'd recommend that [educational leaders](#), teachers and staff members jointly conduct an audit of their school's organizational and communication

structures, norms and practices. Principals in our study had an easier time contending with the early stages of the pandemic—if that's even possible to say—if they had strong existing structures alongside a school culture that fostered trust, care, and openness among staff, students, and the wider community.

A second recommendation is to examine the social and emotional well-being of students and staff in the school and what can be done to better attend to it. School accountability policies and policymakers want to see good test scores in English language arts and mathematics. But, that narrow focus often comes at great expense of what education can (and should) be. I admit that giving attention to social and emotional well-being is adding more to the already-overflowing plates of educators. But, I hope that by focusing on school community members as people, our leaders, teachers, and students will be in better positions to engage in meaningful learning that empowers and prepares our future generations for the challenges and joys of the coming years.

More information: Calm during crisis: school principal approaches to crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic. repository.upenn.edu/cpre_policybriefs/89/

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