

# Lessons Learned



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This has been a year like no other for public schools in New York State. School leaders have had to make massive changes to the ways that they and their faculties function. In our ongoing study, “Teaching and learning in an environment impacted by Covid-19,” we asked school leaders in three small city school districts in the greater Capital Region what lessons they have learned as they prepared for and delivered education during a pandemic.

What is striking is that the responses to our questions were not new revelations. Instead, they were a solidification and deepening of current skills, priorities, and understandings. The changes and challenges were overwhelming and unpredictable for students, teachers, and administrators. Leaders were forced to strengthen their abilities in areas where they were previously able to “get by.”

According to Bolman and Deal’s four frames of leadership, successful leaders view their work through four frames. In the structural frame, they consider tasks and procedures. The political frame focuses on consensus building among various groups. The human resources lens considers people’s emotions and needs, while the symbolic frame addresses sense of purpose, meaning, and motivation (2017).

In the fall of 2020, the changes necessary in New York State public schools were massive; scheduling, transportation, space utilization, and safety measures were all impacted. Implementation of educational technology created issues of access and teacher training. As overwhelming as these were, they were mostly logistical. Leaders worked within the four frames, but were largely able to use skills they already possessed, particularly in the structural and political frames so often necessary in public education. They focused on safety procedures and communication, and on building consensus on their mandatory reopening plans.

As the year progressed, all of the districts we spoke to dealt with Covid diagnoses of faculty and students, fear of infection by parents and staff, students who were disengaged, failing, and sometimes actually unable to be found. Teachers expressed feelings of frustration and failure. Each of the districts in our study had to move to and from virtual instruction at least once.

The leaders we spoke to reported that a large part of their success depended on understanding and navigating the emotions of those they led in a world of constant change and uncertainty. They reported that the

business of running schools became emotionally charged as educators faced situations in which they felt a lack of control, autonomy, and certainty. Teachers felt ineffective and unable to meet their responsibilities to students.

This emotion and stress required leaders to more skillfully use all four of Bolman and Deal’s frames to examine and navigate their world. Leaders deepened their ability to operate in the human resources and symbolic frames. They worked harder at understanding the reasons why teachers and students were struggling. They became more patient and forgiving. They were more attentive to modeling what they expected and to providing gestures of encouragement and support.

Specifically, school leaders reported that they became better at:

### **COMMUNICATING AND COLLABORATING**

As education moved into a virtual environment, leaders had to find new ways to communicate with staff and families. They increased the frequency of messages home and decreased the number of emails they sent to overwhelmed teachers. They used videos and social media to create a sense of personal connection.

School leaders also became better at listening. As one principal stated, “It’s about presence. It’s about being available. It’s about listening. That’s the thing I’ve had to learn over the years, is ask those questions and then step back and listen.” Others agreed that they needed to listen more actively in every situation so that they understood the needs of both in-person and virtual learners.

Across the districts we studied, leaders noted that the complexity of the Covid learning environment demands a higher level of collaboration. They have forged stronger partnerships with families and community members to create effective virtual learning, whether to ensure access to technology or to find solutions for disengaged and discouraged students. They have formed teams and learning communities of teachers, and frequently check in to see what those teachers need to be

effective. They meet more frequently with their colleagues in other districts to learn from each other and develop regional solutions. None of the leaders we spoke to were able to work in isolation from others.

### **LOOKING PAST ASSUMPTIONS**

School leaders had many assumptions when they returned to school in the fall of 2020 – about which teachers and students would be successful, about how students would respond to safety requirements, about whether students could learn in a virtual environment. Resoundingly, those we interviewed spoke of having their assumptions contradicted.

School leaders stated that students learning in person were thrilled to be in school and that they complied willingly with Covid protocols. They reported fewer discipline referrals by far than in previous years. They shared that some teachers and students who typically struggle have excelled in the virtual environment. They have been pleasantly surprised at the resilience and adaptability of students.

Leaders are recognizing the limitations of their incorrect assumptions. As one stated, “I think the biggest thing that I’ve learned this year, and it sounds very simplistic, is that when somebody is not performing, it’s often that people start making assumptions that they just don’t want to do it.” Another principal agreed, “I think that when we reframe the way in which we approach something with the assumption that they do want to be a better parent and they want to be a great student and the teacher wants to be the best teacher that they could possibly be, I feel like the conversations are more fruitful.”

### **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND HONORING THE NEEDS OF FACULTY AND STUDENTS**

The physical isolation caused by Covid-related restrictions (e.g., social distancing requirements, the ban on large gatherings) has taken a toll on school leaders’ abilities to develop and sustain meaningful relationships with their employees, colleagues, and students. Educators have long felt as if

they work in silos, and this year those feelings have intensified. Relationships have been strained by uncertainty and constantly changing requirements.

The school leaders we spoke with stressed the importance of being empathetic to the needs of faculty and students to help build these relationships. Administrators realized in the fall that students and staff members were simultaneously dealing with significant difficulties in and out of school. Districts were facing unprecedented stress caused by family illness, death, and unemployment.

Traditionally, educators are expected to “check our baggage at the door.” Now, school leaders are finding themselves becoming more flexible and understanding. They acknowledge that everyone is doing the best they can with what they have. One assistant superintendent said, “I think that I’m learning how to give everybody the benefit of the doubt.”

Based on this deeper understanding of people’s needs, leaders have become committed to finding the solutions necessary to guide their employees. One leader shared, “I think you really need to take a look at what supports we can give to people so that they can, in turn, move forward with what they need to do, but do so in a way that’s right for them. And in turn, that’s right for the kids.”

### **PRACTICING BALANCE AND SELF-CARE**

Before Covid-19, the job of a school administrator could appear daunting and overwhelming at times. Under the stress and anxiety of a global pandemic, the pressure to create and enact a safe and equitable reopening plan, and the many uncertainties posed by a return to in-person learning, the job seemed impossible. Administrators had to manage their own professional work ethic against the imminent danger of burnout.

The school leaders we spoke with came to the realization that they needed to focus on their own learning and self-care more so than ever before in order to lead effectively. Asking for help from colleagues to better balance their professional responsibilities and

allowing themselves to “turn off” at home were the two most common practices school leaders have utilized to create and sustain a healthy work-life balance this year.

The leaders participating in our study believe that schools will be impacted long-term by what they have experienced this year. Once the immediate crisis passes, leaders will need to guide their schools toward more and deeper changes as the impact of technology, learning inequities, mental health struggles, and budget constraints plays out. In other words, school administrators will be coping with uncertainty and change for a long time moving forward.

This year, administrators have been forced to operate skillfully in all four of Bolman and Deal’s frames in order to successfully navigate a tsunami of change and the accompanying stress and emotion. The skills, perspectives, and beliefs that they have learned will be critical to helping them lead into the future once this crisis has passed.

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### **REFERENCE**

Bolman, L., and Deal, T. (2017). *Reframing Organizations*, 6th Edition. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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