



Research and Evidence-Based Practice Advancing the Profession of Education Administration

Spring 2026, Volume 23 No.1

Table of Contents

Board of Editors	2
Sponsorship and Appreciation	3
Research Article	
Ignorance is Not Bliss; it is the Fastest Way to Litigation: What Principals Need to Know about Special Education	4
by Steven M. Baule, PhD and Jessica L. Cook, PhD	
Evidence-based Practice Article	
Fostering Trust Through Learning Labs and Discussion	18
by Sarah Day Dayon, MAT; Jenni Conrad, PhD; Timothy Patterson, PhD	
Evidence-based Practice Article	
Leveraging Learning Out of a Crisis: Focused Journaling as a Precursor to Debriefing	31
by Rod Uzat, PhD	
Mission and Scope, Copyright, Privacy, Ethics, Upcoming Themes, Author Guidelines & Publication Timeline	43

Editorial Review Board

AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice 2025-2026

Interim Editor

Kenneth Mitchell, *Manhattanville University*

Associate Editor

Barbara Dean, *AASA, The School Superintendents Association*

Editorial Review Board

Jessica Anspach, *Montclair State University*

Brandon Beck, *Ossining Public Schools*

Gina Cinotti, *Netcong Public Schools, New Jersey*

Michael Cohen, *Denver Public Schools*

Betty Cox, *University of Tennessee, Martin*

Vance Dalzin, *Carthage College, Kenosha, WI*

Mary Lynne Derrington, *University of Tennessee*

Ryan Fisk, *East Rockaway Public Schools, NY*

Denver J. Fowler, *California State University, Bakersfield*

Daniel Gutmore, *Seton Hall University*

Gregory Hauser, *Roosevelt University, Chicago*

Steve Hernon, *St. John's University*

Derrick Jordan, *North Carolina Department of Public Instruction*

Zach Kelehear, *Augusta University, GA*

Kevin Majewski, *Rutgers University*

Joanne Marien, *Manhattanville University*

Nelson Maylone, *Eastern Michigan University*

Robert S. McCord, *University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Emeritus*

Barbara McKeon, *Broome Street Academy Charter High School, New York, NY*

Margaret "Terry" Orr, *Fordham University*

David J. Parks, *Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University*

Joseph Phillips, *Westchester Community College*

Joseph Ricca, *White Plains City School District*

Thomas C. Valesky, *Florida Gulf Coast University, Emeritus*

Charles Wheaton, *Leadership Services, Granger, WA*

Available at www.aasa.org/jsp

ISSN 1931-6569

Sponsorship and Appreciation

The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* would like to thank AASA, The School Superintendents Association, and particularly AASA's Leadership Network and Valerie Truesdale, for their ongoing sponsorship of the *Journal*. AASA Leadership Network, the School Superintendents Association's professional learning arm, drives educational leaders' success, innovation and growth, focused on student-centered, equity-focused, future-driven education.

We also offer special thanks to interim editor Kenneth Mitchell, Manhattanville University, in selecting the articles that comprise this professional education journal.

The unique relationship between research and practice is appreciated, recognizing the mutual benefit to those educators who conduct the research and seek out evidence-based practice and those educators whose responsibility is to carry out the mission of school districts in the education of children.

Without the support of AASA and Kenneth Mitchell, the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* would not be possible.



Published by
AASA, The School Superintendents Association
1615 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 2231

Ignorance is Not Bliss; It Is the Fastest Way to Litigation: What Principals Need to Know about Special Education

Steven M. Baule, PhD
Associate Professor
Leadership Education
Winona State University
Winona, MN

Jessica L. Cook, PhD
Equitable Access Specialist
Special Education
Minnesota Department of Education
Minneapolis, MN

Abstract

This study investigated the foundational knowledge and skills new building leaders need to navigate special education aspects of their roles. A survey of 104 special education professionals in Minnesota ranked 18 topics related to special education on their importance for principal preparation programs. The top priorities were discipline issues involving students with disabilities, the principal's role in IEP meetings, integrating students with disabilities, and special education law. The findings recommend enhancing principal preparation curricula with comprehensive training on IEP processes, discipline protocols, inclusion strategies, and continuous professional development on special education law. Practicum experiences requiring special education processes are advocated to be included in preparation programs.

Key Words

principal preparation, special education, aspiring leaders, children with disabilities

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), during the 2021-22 school year approximately 15% of all students aged 3 to 21 received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Act. Some states and territories exceed the average with New York and Pennsylvania both reporting 20% of students requiring special education services. Puerto Rico identified over a third of its students as needing special education services (NCES, 2023).

A recent article in AASA's *School Administrator* spoke to "the troubling lack of special education know-how" among practicing principals on addressing special education issues in their buildings (Hughes, 2024). However, this is not new and has continued to be an ongoing concern.

Prior research reported that principals do not have the experience or knowledge to competently lead efforts to create learning environments where students with disabilities can be successful (Katsiyannis, Conderman, & Franks, 1996; Parker & Day, 1997). A 2003 study of principals identified information about and implementing special education as their area of greatest need (Di Paola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther, 2003). According to Di Paola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther (2003), many principals lack the necessary coursework and field experience to lead special education programs effectively.

Principals need a solid understanding of disabilities, special education laws (e.g., IDEA and NCLB), and more information on research-based instructional practices to support students with disabilities and special education teachers. A study by Praisner (2003) focused on elementary-level principals and similarly reported that special education issues were only considered within a small portion of the curricula within administrative preparation

programs. Sun & Xin (2019) found in their study of principals' preparedness to address special education issues that those principals surveyed "didn't have enough knowledge of special education and haven't been fully engaged in special education" (p. 110).

The Minnesota Administrators for Special Education (MASE) presented to the Minnesota Board of School Administrators (BOSA), the state organization responsible for licensing school administrators, in October 2021 to encourage BOSA to put more emphasis on the needs of children with special needs during the principal preparation process.

The MASE presentation identified several reasons for why principal preparation programs need more special education content including that many difficult decisions principals face are related to special education or Section 504 accommodations. (Klaber, et al., 2021). Horrocks, et al. (2008) seem to have raised a similar concern that special education is not included in preparation programs as it is not required.

The lack of preparation appears to not be limited to the United States. Garner and Forbes (2013) reported that professional development programs for school leaders do not include emphasis on inclusive education and that lack of preparation leads school leaders to avoid crucial special education decisions. Sider, et al., (2017) conclude that there was a lack of special education support in preparation programs via a small qualitative study of 15 principals and five other educational stakeholders including a parent and a student. Sider, et al. (2017) felt additional pre-licensure and ongoing professional development in dealing with students with special needs was needed by school administrators. One of the few outliers was Wakeman, et al., (2006), in their study of 362 members of the NASSP, they found that

principals reported being “well informed in fundamental [special education] issues” p. 153.

Background

In the past twenty years, there has been little scholarly review of the needs of aspiring principals regarding students with special needs. There is little in the literature specifically on point about what aspiring principals need to know about special education as they prepare for building leadership. Goor, Schwen, and Boyer (1997) wrote that principals should be able to address four areas of concern regarding special education students: classroom management and discipline, effective and frequent instructional feedback, use instructional materials with low error rates and high correct response rates, and allowing students some control over their learning environment.

They suggested including ten specific items within case studies for aspiring leaders including the specific needs of parents in IEP meetings, eligibility requirements for services, and concerns from general education student’s parents about service delivery in the classroom (Goor, Schwen, & Boyer, 1997). In 2002, *Principal* magazine included several articles about the need for the principalship to be reworked considering the changes being brought about due to No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Unfortunately, none of those articles addressed working with students with special needs (Kennedy, 2002; Quinn, 2002, Murphy, 2002).

Horrocks, et al., (2008) focused on the needs regarding principals and autistic students. However, their results appear to be generalizable to all students with disabilities. They emphasized the lack of special education related preparation for principals stating it is essential for principals when making placement decisions for children with special needs. They recommended revising certification programs

to require mandatory coursework and practicum experiences in special education particularly focusing on autism and other severe disabilities.

In 2008, *Principal* magazine produced a special issue with a focus on how principals can collaborate with special educators. It included articles on collaborating with special education administrators, working with students on the autism spectrum, and working with students with disabilities (Green, 2008; Reynolds, 2008; & Zirkel, 2008). The article subtitled, “Inclusion shouldn’t be seen as a threat to a school’s learning environment” (Reynolds, 2008) generally supported the need for regular and special education staff to work as a team.

There was an emphasis on the need for collaboration and a view that “organized special education services were an integral part of the school structure” (Green, 2008, p. 14) and not simply an appendage to core programming. While the articles did not provide specific processes to follow to better embrace children with special needs and their support staff, they were generally encouraging.

Cobb (2015) articulated the challenges of principals in special education and the necessity for professional development programs that prepare principals for their multifaceted roles in special education leadership. He raises concerns about outdated coursework, a lack of real-world applicability, and insufficient internships and mentoring related to special education within leadership preparation programs. According to De Matthews, Kotok, & Serafini (2019), many leadership programs lack a strong focus on special education and inclusive practices, leaving principals underprepared to lead inclusive schools effectively. As late as 2016, one new principal preparation program highlighted in literature as a “model for

developing an interdisciplinary program” didn’t even mention students with disabilities or special education issues (Smith & Somers, 2016).

Methodology

The research question then became: *What are the foundational knowledge and skills that new building leaders need to be able to navigate the special education facets of their instructional and managerial roles?* Wakeman, et al., (2006) used five common areas of special education principal knowledge, 1) professional practice, 2) “all teachers teaching all students” (p. 155) or inclusionary practices, 3) Characteristics of disabilities, 4) legislation, and 5) learning differences. These were based on materials primarily from the *Council for Exceptional Children*.

They additionally added current issues or the reaction to innovations in practice. Such a current example would have been the shift to remote learning which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a Minnesota-based researcher, it seemed practical to use the Minnesota BOSA competencies as a starting point for identifying core topics to ensure they were covered. Those topics were then shared with several collaborators with special education expertise including those connected

to MASE. A list of 18 topics was ultimately identified (See Table 2, page 11). Those topics were then included in a survey sent to all the members of MASE who had an active email address. Participants were asked to rate each topic from Vital (5) to Unimportant (1) on a five-point Likert scale. Additionally, the survey offered participants the chance to add additional topics they felt would be vital (5) or important (4). One final open-ended question asked for any other insights or feedback that would be helpful to revise principal preparation curricula.

Findings

One hundred and four respondents took the survey. The survey began with several demographic questions. The result of previous education experience as a classroom teacher or principal is presented in Table 1 (page 8). Most respondents were current special education directors or in similar roles (85%), eight percent were building principals or assistant principals, three were superintendents, one was an assistant superintendent and one a director of teaching and learning. Two worked for state agencies. The largest group of respondents had been in their role between four and ten years (46%), with 41% having served less than four years. Twelve percent had served more than ten years.

Table 1

Previous Educator Experience

	Served as a PK-12 Teacher	Served as a Building Principal
Yes	79	32
No	23	69

The 18 topics were ranked by the respondents on a five-point Likert Scale ranging from Vital (5) through Important (4), Useful, but not immediately necessary (3), nice to know (2), to Unimportant (1). The topics were generally ranked towards importance with a range from 4.48 to 2.48 with a standard deviation of $SD = .499$.

Among the topics, *Discipline issues for children with special needs & Manifestation Determination* was considered the most important topic with 82% of the respondents identifying it as a vital (5) topic and all others identifying it as important (4). It had a Likert score of 4.48 out of a possible 5.0. It was the highest rated item by those who had served as a principal (4.17) or those who served as a classroom teacher (4.38). It was the only topic scored overall as two standard deviations about the mean. It was the only item rated 4 or higher by all respondents. The second most important topic was identified as the *Principal's role in the IEP process. How to integrate students with typically developing peers* and *Special education law* completed the top four topics among all respondents as well as those who had

previous experience as a classroom teacher and or as a principal. These four topics were ranked more than one standard deviation about the mean by all respondents as well as those with classroom teaching experience. They were the four highest rated topics by those with principal experience as well.

The most important topic elicited 25 comments. Many included the terms “crucial,” “very important,” or “vital” within their response. The key issues included the need to work around the ten-day suspension rule, the need to fully understand the concept of manifest determination relating to their disability, and the need to work collaboratively with special education staff. One person wrote that it was important to remember that “discipline is a consequence and not a punishment.” Several comments throughout the survey, and not simply related to this topic, commented on the need for principals to specifically understand the needs of students with emotionally and behaviorally disturbed (EBD) students and that their behaviors were due to medical or emotional issues and not a simple desire to act out.

The topic of the *Principal's role in the IEP process* saw 29 comments from participants. Those comments can be summarized in the following: Principals play a crucial role in the IEP process by understanding IEP components, legal requirements, and their responsibilities as district representatives. They need to support and advocate for students with disabilities, ensuring that general education teachers follow IEPs and provide necessary accommodations. Effective collaboration with special education staff and active participation in meetings are essential for creating tailored plans for student success. Understanding financial resources, such as funding and Medicaid billing, and how these influence special education services is vital. Ultimately, principals must create an inclusive environment, valuing teamwork and parent engagement while maintaining awareness of due process and timelines.

How to integrate students with typically developing peers received 24 comments. Overwhelmingly, they focused on the need for principals to understand the concept of “least restrictive environment: and having the ability and desire to support such placements. One respondent wrote “Advocating and supporting special education teachers is integral to upholding Least Restrictive Environment standards. Having ideas to support this is very helpful.” Others wrote that principals need to support the benefits of inclusion and integration of students with special needs into regular programming. One response was “[principals] Don't need to know all the specifics of how but need to create a culture that doesn't tolerate ableism.”

Special education staffing elicited 33 comments. The comments were grouped under five themes. The first was the need for principals to understand what constitutes a high-quality special educator; they also need to fully understand how licensing works within

special education. Caseloads and staffing models were another issue specifically mentioned. Particularly how low-incidence disabilities can impact caseloads. A fourth issue was collaborating with district administrators to effectively utilize staff and other resources was another theme mentioned regarding staffing. Under additional topics to cover, several comments were made that spoke specifically for the need for principals to understand effective ways of using paraprofessionals and when they were appropriate to be provided within the scope of effective practice. One comment read “Paras are over utilized and a tremendous drain on resources in most traditional school buildings. Other than to support medical needs or assist level 3 or higher students to mainstream, paras waste district resources.”

The topic of *Special education law* attracted a wide range of comments. The related topic, *Current legal issues and litigation regarding special education*, ranked 10th overall. Overall, 25 special comments were left regarding *Special education law*. Twenty-six addressed current litigation. One respondent wrote that “Ignorance is not bliss; it is the fastest way to litigation.” Understanding that the law constantly changes and the need to rely on directors of special education to keep principals informed was a common thread. The need for regular updates for principals on changes in special education law and regulations was articulated in several places throughout the survey. Several comments specifically addressed the concepts of direct service minutes, compensatory services, and extended school year (ESY) services.

The relationship between 504 plans and IEPs, *Curriculum modifications and adaptations*, *Continuum of alternative placement*, and *Transition services* filled out places six, seven, eight, and nine in the overall ranking of topics. These topics received 15, 18,

17, and 23 comments respectively. The comments regarding 504 plans and IEPs focused on the fact that principals need a broad understanding of 504 plans, recognizing them as legally binding documents akin to IEPs. They should understand the differences and similarities between 504 plans and IEPs, supporting their implementation and ensuring compliance. Further comments suggest relying on the expertise of school counselors and special education teams is crucial. The need for principals to be cognizant of changing laws and qualification requirements was reinforced as well.

Relating to the modification, placement, and transition topics, respondents commented that principals must understand and enforce the implementation of accommodations and modifications by regular education teachers. Holding regular education teachers accountable while fostering a supportive culture for diverse learners was a primary concern. As instructional leaders, they should guide teachers through differentiated instruction and collaborate closely with curriculum and special education departments to ensure effective practices. Principals also need a solid grasp of the process and requirements for moving students to more restrictive settings, ensuring decisions are data-driven and support-focused and are not emotional or based upon staff or parent pressures. They repeated the desire for collaboration with special education experts and leadership. Several mentioned that transition was only a topic needed for high school principals.

The item ranked as 11 was *Understanding the grief cycle some parents of children with special needs experience*. This seems low considering it was a key point of the MASE presentation to BOSA in October 2021 (MASE, 2021). The 14 comments related to this topic were somewhat bifurcated. Overall, 50% of the respondents identified this topic as

important (4), while 16% found it vital (5) and 13% identified it as nice to know (2). The majority of comments emphasized the importance and benefits of understanding the grief cycle particularly as it related to building positive relationships with parents. Some comments felt that a basic understanding of empathy and social skills would serve principals just as well. One special education director wrote “I’ve been in the field of special ed for 38 yrs. I’m not sure I understand the grief cycle, it’s so different for each individual.” Another comment was that they felt this was a more important issue for early childhood administrators who are dealing with parents who may still be adjusting to their child’s issues.

Types of disabilities under the law and Related services (OT, PT, SLP, etc.) were ranked as 12 & 13. *Types of disabilities* only generated nine comments among the respondents. *Related services* gathered 21 comments. The comments under *Types of disabilities* were summed up by this comment, “Need exposure to the frequently identified categories and a broad understanding of qualification.” *Related services* comments generally identified that principals could rely on special educators to support these services but that they should understand the basics of the types of services offered. As most such providers are itinerant, moving between multiple buildings, it was mentioned that principals need to make these service providers feel welcome and part of the staff.

The topics ranked as least important overall were *Understanding and being able to calculate maintenance of effort needs*, *Assistive technology services*, *Understanding special education funding*, *Engaging with external resources for parents and families*, and *Sources of funding, federal, state, and local*. Those with principal experience rated understanding *Assistive technology services* several places

higher than all respondents or those with classroom experience. With the current explosion of generative AI-based tools, it seems like assistive technologies should be on the radar of aspiring principals as well as all educators. Another place where those with principal and classroom experience differed was in rating Transition services.

Overall, *Transition services* was rated as the 9th most important item, but those with principal or classroom experience both ranked it lower at 12th. The low ranking of the finance items is, in the researcher's opinion, as principals rarely make most of the related financial decisions. It should not be assumed that the low values assigned to those topics are

due to financial abundance in special education programming. Pulkkinen & Jahnukainen (2016) identified that 78% of principals in their survey said that special education needs were much greater or somewhat greater than available resources. Lieberman's article in a 2023 issue of *Education Week* found that the federal government is having difficulty meeting its mandatory 40% of funding for special education programming due to the increase of students identified as having special needs. Lengreo (2022) found that the special education funding system is "fundamentally broken." Leaving administrative preparation programs to make sure aspiring principals understand how to work within the current financial system.

Table 2

Rankings of Topics by Respondent Groups

<u>Topic</u>	<u>All</u>	Rank by				
		Rank	Those who	those who	Those	Rank by those
			served as	served as	who	
		<u>All</u>	<u>Principals</u>	<u>Principal</u>	<u>Taught</u>	<u>who Taught</u>
Discipline issues for children with special needs & Manifestation Determination	4.4	1	4.17	1	4.38	1
Principal's role in the IEP process	4.1	2	3.81	4	4.05	2
How to integrate students with typically developing peers	4.1	3	3.89	2	4.01	4

Special Education Law	4.0	4	3.83	3	4.02	3
	7					
Special Education Staffing	3.7	5	3.56	6	3.74	5
	8					
The relationship between 504 plans and IEPs	3.6	6	3.61	5	3.55	6
	2					
Curriculum modifications and adapions	3.5	7	3.42	8	3.51	7
	9					
Continuum of alternative placements	3.4	8	3.50	7	3.46	8
	9					
Transition services	3.3	9	3.11	12	3.24	12
	4					
Current legal issues and litigation regarding special education	3.3	10	3.33	9	3.28	9
	1					
Understanding the grief cycle some parents of children with special needs experience.	3.3	11	3.31	10	3.27	10
	0					
Types of disabilities under the law	3.2	12	3.19	11	3.24	11
	6					

Related services (OT, PT, SLP, etc.)	3.2	13	2.97	15	3.12	13
	2					
Sources of funding: federal, state, and local	3.1	14	2.97	16	3.02	14
	4					
Engaging with external resources for parents and families	3.0	15	2.83	17	2.98	16
	1					
Understanding special education funding	3.0	16	3.00	14	3.01	15
	0					
Assistive technology services	2.9	17	3.03	13	2.88	17
	4					
Understanding and being able to calculate maintenance of effort needs	2.4	18	2.53	18	2.39	18
	8					

Open-ended Results for Additional Vital Issues

Thirty-six respondents responded to the question *Other topics you feel would be “5-vital”* for new principals. Those responses could be grouped into eight categories, building alliances and collaboration, understanding disabilities and student behavior, policies and practices, roles and responsibilities including the use of paraprofessionals and parent and family engagement. Most of these issues were

generally restatements of the articulated topics.

Under the general heading of roles, one special education director commented that principals need to understand, “What THEIR roles are versus what the special ed director's role is (how to stay in their lane and what's IN their lane to know about).” That was supported by comments elsewhere about the need for principals to collaborate with special education administrators.

Another more positive spin on the concept was represented by “The importance of building a strong alliance with their special education coordinator or director. These partnerships protect not only students/families but also the school district.” The need to further understand the role of paraprofessionals came through with a representative comment being “Paraprofessionals. More is not better. Supervision pieces—how to address personnel issues and support staff. ESPECIALLY for special education.”

When asked for additional “important” topics, 18 respondents provided additional topics for consideration. They were more varied with 14 categories among the 18 responses. Those that were not represented among the “vital” topics included billing and transportation issues along with how students qualify for extended school year services (ESY), the importance of progress reporting and relating those to the IEP process, and early childhood education. That response stated, “many principals lack understanding of Early Childhood Special Education, which is typically not covered in administrative licensure programs.”

Recommendations

Administrative preparation programs should emphasize the importance of managing discipline issues and understanding legal frameworks, as these were highly valued across all groups. Given the significance placed on the principal's role in the IEP process, preparation programs should provide comprehensive training on this topic to ensure principals are well-equipped to handle these responsibilities.

Including requirements for practicum students to engage in IEPs seems like a reasonable requirement to ensure aspiring principals are prepared to lead IEP meetings once they secure a leadership position. Training on effective inclusion of students with

disabilities into general education settings should be prioritized as principals learn to understand the full continuum of placement alternatives. Principals need to understand that they are charged with being responsible for all children within their school including all the diverse needs that students bring each day. That needs to be emphasized throughout the licensure process.

The need to collaborate with special education administrators and utilize them as resources needs to be repeatedly pointed out throughout their coursework and practicum experiences. Principals should be required to spend some portion of their practicum working with special education administrators to better understand their roles and responsibilities.

Principals need to understand the role of paraprofessionals and their scope of practice in instruction and other ways of supporting students. Many preparation programs focus on ensuring principals can supervise certified staff, but in many cases, working with clerical, custodial, and paraprofessional staff members is not addressed. Another issue that should be covered is ensuring that principals are prepared to train paraprofessionals, as well as to train regular education and special education teachers to work with paraprofessionals and how to co-teach.

Though only mentioned twice in the survey comments, indeed, most programs do not include exposure to early childhood programming, yet many elementary principals will work in buildings that include some type of early childhood program. Within the practicum experience, aspiring administrators should receive some formal exposure to early childhood and preschool programming.

Continuous professional development on special education law and current legal issues must be provided to keep educators and

administrators updated on the latest developments. Due to the fluid nature of case law and the constant addition of new statutes and regulations, both pre-service institutions and employing districts must emphasize the need to continuously keep up to date with

special education law and regulations. By addressing these topics, preparation programs can better equip administrators to meet the needs of students with disabilities and ensure effective and compliant special education practices.

Author Biographies

Steve Baule directs the doctoral program in education at Winona State University. Prior to joining WSU, Baule served as a K-12 superintendent and high school principal. He holds doctorates in instructional technology and educational leadership and policy studies. E-mail: sbaule@winona.edu

Jessica Cook serves as equitable access specialist in special education for the Minnesota Department of Education. She consults with early career school administrators to help with understanding inclusive practices and differentiation within the school setting. She earned her doctorate in inclusion and differentiated instruction. E-mail: jessica.cook@winona.edu

References

- Cobb, C. (2015) Principals play many parts: a review of the research on school principals as special education leaders 2001–2011, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19(3), 213-234, DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2014.916354
- DiPaola M. F., Tschannen-Moran M., & Walther-Thomas C. (2004). School principals and special education: Creating the context for academic success. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 37(1), 1-10.
- DiPaola M. F. & Walther-Thomas C. (2003). *Principals and special education: The critical role of school leaders*. Arlington, VA: National Clearing House for Professions in Special Education.
- Garner, P. & Forces, F. (2013). School leadership and special education: Challenges, dilemmas and opportunities from an Australian context. *School Leadership*, 28(4), 154-161.
- Goor, M. B., Schwenn, J. O., & Boyer, L. (1997). Preparing principals for leadership in special education: *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 32(3), 133-141.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/105345129703200303>.
- Green, J. A. (2008, November/December). Collaborating with special education administrators. *Principal*, 88(2), 12-15.
- Horrocks, J. L., White, G., & Roberts, L. (2008). Principals' attitudes regarding inclusion of children with autism in Pennsylvania public schools. *Journal of Autism and Development Disorders*, 38(8), 1462-1473.
- Hughes, T. (2024, April). The troubling lack of special education know-how, *School Administrator*, 81(4), 11.
- Katsiyannis, A., Conderman, G., & Franks, D. (1996). Students with disabilities: Inclusionary programming and the school principal. *NASSP Bulletin*, 80(578), 81-86.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/019263659608057811>.
- Kennedy, C. (2002, September/October). The principalship: Too much for one person? *Principal*, p. 28-31.
- Klaber, J., Skarvold, J., Hagen, D., & Schaller, M. (2021, October 25). MASE perspectives: Principal & special education director preparation programs. Presented to the Board of School Administrators (MN). [unpublished manuscript].
- Langreo, L. (2002, December 9). Special education funding is 'fundamentally broken' researchers say. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/special-education-funding-is-fundamentally-broken-researcher-says/2022/12>.

- Liberman, M. (2023, April 27). How special education funding actually works. *Education Week*.
<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-special-education-funding-actually-works/2023/04>.
- Murphy, J. (2002, September/October). How the ISLLC Standards are reshaping the principalship. *Principal*, p.22-26.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2023, May). Students with disabilities.
<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg/students-with-disabilities>.
- Parker, S. A., & Day, V. P. (1997). Promoting inclusion through instructional leadership: The Roles of the secondary school principal. *NASSP Bulletin*, 81(587), 83-89.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/019263659708158712>.
- Pulkkinen, J. & Jahnukainen, M. (2016), Finnish reform of the funding and provision of special education: The view of principals and municipal education administrators. *Educational Review*, 68(2), p. 171-188.
- Praisner, C.L. (2003). Attitudes of elementary school principals toward the inclusion of students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 69(20), 135-144.
- Quinn, T. (2002, September/October). Redefining leadership in the Standards Era. *Principal*, p. 16-21.
- Reynolds, B. H. (2008). Are Principals Ready to Welcome Children with Disabilities? *Principal*, 88(2), 16–19.
- Sider, S., Maich, K., & Morvan, J. (2017). School principals and students with special education needs: Leading inclusive schools. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 40(2), 1-31.
- Smith, R. A., & Somers, J. (2016). MBA in education leadership: A model for developing an interdisciplinary principal preparation program. *Planning & Changing*, 47(1/2), 3–20.
- Sun, A. Q., & Xin, J. F. (2019). School principals' opinions about special education services. *Preventing school failure: Alternative education for children and youth*, 64(2), 106–115.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2019.1681354>.
- Wakeman, S. Y., Browder, D. M., Flowers, C., & Ahlgrim-Delzell, L. (2006). Principals' knowledge of fundamental and current Issues in special education. *NASSP Bulletin*, 90(2), 153-174.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636506288858>.
- Zirkel, P. A. (2008, November/December). Autism spectrum disorders. *Principal*, 88(2), 58-61

Fostering Trust Through Learning Labs and Discussions

Sarah Day Dayon, MAT
PhD Candidate
Marsal Family School of Education
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI

Jenni Conrad, PhD
Assistant Professor
College of Education
Oregon State University, Cascades
Bend, OR

Timothy Patterson, PhD
Associate Professor
College of Education and Human Development
Temple University
Philadelphia, PA

Abstract

This article is an evidence-based practice piece that proposes *Learning Labs* as a useful approach to teachers' professional learning about how to foster discussions. We share examples from two research projects involving different iterations of *Learning Labs for Social Studies* that supported teachers in promoting student learning through talk. We argue that *Learning Labs* can offer school leaders and practitioners a helpful approach to supporting teachers as they develop their professional practice and promote a shared culture of discourse.

Key Words

discussion, discussion facilitation, professional development, teacher learning, social studies, civics, learning labs

Introduction

Discussions represent a hallmark method for social studies instruction (Cuenca, 2021; NCSS, 2013), offering strong potential for practicing and sustaining democracy in schools. When done effectively, such discussions support the development of civic reasoning (Conklin et al., 2021) and skills, knowledge, and dispositions for democratic citizenship and civic engagement (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Parker, 2010). We argue that schools can promote more valuable discussion while strengthening instruction and professional development (referred to as PD)—powerful 3-for-1 payoff. By discussion, we mean dialogue that centers students' voices in response to open-ended questions, where students build on each other's ideas. We see this as distinct from teacher-centered talk that can be evaluative or emphasize "correct" responses.

Student-centered discussions remain rare, particularly in low-income elementary and secondary schools. Many teachers avoid discussions in social studies, citing concerns about classroom management, students' emotional safety when discussing controversial issues, and the amount of time needed to prepare (Ho et al., 2017). In some states, simply talking about social and political issues is risky. Education scholar Rich Milner (2017) points out that such avoidance teaches anti-democratic lessons, keeping schools and educators complicit in ongoing harms.

Part of this avoidance may stem from a frequent challenge: fostering a culture of trust. Without trust there can be little meaningful talk. Teachers committed to discussion often work in isolation, and students without opportunities to discuss important topics risk apathy towards social studies content. This absence of discussion in social studies does little to alleviate broader societal polarization and democratic disengagement. Just as conversation is shared, so too must discussions

be a school-wide practice. Teachers need support navigating their roles and decisions during the incredible pace of student-centered discussion facilitation. To sustain democratic dialogue in schools requires educational leaders and teachers to cultivate the will, trust, and models best suited to their context.

Thus, we argue that educational leaders play a key role in strengthening and building schoolwide cultures of discussion. One promising path forward is bringing teachers together into classrooms to collectively work on discussion facilitation with students. *Learning Labs*—originally developed at the University of Washington in the context of elementary mathematics (Kazemi et al., 2024; Kazemi et al., 2018)—offer one approach. *Learning Labs* involve cycles of collaboration amongst educators where they can learn new content, co-plan, co-teach, and reflect together on student learning. Like discussions, *Learning Labs* require both talk and trust among participants. Below, we present two practical examples of *Learning Labs* supporting teachers' successes in sustaining classroom discussions and building broader cultures of trust.

Why Discussions?

Learning in democratic societies depends on transforming habits of talk. Moving from top-down models of knowledge transmission—in professional development or K-12 instruction—requires shifts towards collaborative leadership and participation practices.

Student-centered discussions support this shift in both content and form, positioning students and teachers as democratic participants, and not as distanced commentators (NCSS, 2013). Formats such as deliberation, debate, town meeting, and mock trial allow students to experience procedures and forms of

policy deliberation and consensus-building. With careful facilitation, explicit norms, and roles for participation, students authentically grapple with open issues and contemporary controversies. They can also bridge their experiential knowledge with enduring political themes. By centering student voices, discussions allow for more inclusive and public patterns of knowledge construction. They can encourage students to talk through the challenges that come with living together in pluralistic societies and schools.

With practice, and critical teacher and group reflection, such discussions also strengthen skills and dispositions for democratic citizenship (Hess & McAvoy, 2014). Students learn to transcend polarization to build shared understanding of key issues and evidence. Teachers and students can individually and collectively reflect on participation patterns, and which voices were amplified or ignored. Structures that support equity (e.g., turn-taking and participation norms) position all students as key participants—especially those from marginalized communities, whose experiences of democratic dysfunction and resilience are necessary for collectively seeking justice.

Why *Learning Labs*?

In our experience, *Learning Labs* have been a

supportive structure for fostering a trusting environment where discussion can happen amongst students and educators. *Learning Labs* are site-embedded professional learning experiences where teachers and PD facilitators collectively come together to co-plan a lesson, enact this plan through co-teaching, debrief student learning, and reflect on takeaways for their teaching (Ghousseini et al., 2022; Kazemi et al., 2024; Kazemi et al., 2018; Kavanagh et al., 2022).

This iterative learning cycle engages teachers in public deliberation before, during, and after instruction, allowing them to engage in their own inquiry alongside students. Below, we share a graphic of the teacher learning cycle embedded in *Learning Labs for Social Studies* (Figure 1). Unlike lesson study, which also includes collaborative planning and debriefing, *Learning Labs* involve shared lesson facilitation amongst teachers and flexible planning done in a short timeframe (30-45 minutes). This flexibility is key because it creates space for teachers to experiment and make modifications while teaching the lesson. *Learning Labs* have been used to support teachers and students throughout K-12 across different subject areas including math, ELA, and social studies (Caasi et al., 2023; Gibbons et al., 2017; Kazemi et al., 2021; Monte-Sano, et al., 2023).

Figure 1

Teacher Learning Cycle on a Learning Lab for Social Studies Professional Development (PD) Day



The Learning Labs Cycle graphic was adapted by Chauncey Monte-Sano and the *Read.Inquire.Write.* team at the University of Michigan. The original version was created by Elham Kazemi and the *Teacher Education by Design* team at the University of Washington. The originals are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License by the *Read.Inquire.Write.* team at the University of Michigan, 2025. We use these materials with permission.

Through *Learning Labs*, teachers can engage in discussions as a routine practice to support inquiry, ongoing collaboration with other teachers, and a school culture that supports discussion and collaboration. Such regular opportunities to collaborate, understand and apply theory and practice with inquiry have strengthened teachers' enactment of open-ended and critical social studies discussions. Here, we share two different iterations of

Learning Labs that achieve these goals, one example embedded across one school year in one district, and the second is an adaptation of *Learning Labs* for a summer learning institute.

School Year, District-based Learning Labs for Social Studies

Learning Labs for Social Studies (LLSS), adapted from the original approach (Kazemi,

2018), supports social studies teachers with inquiry and equity-oriented teaching and learning (Monte-Sano, et al., 2023). Sarah Day Dayon worked on a research team, led by Chauncey Monte-Sano and Mary Schleppegrell, that partnered with 18 middle school social studies teachers. These teachers worked within a large Midwestern school district where approximately half of the students in the district qualified for English language support services at the time of the study.

We used the *Read.Inquire.Write.* (RIW) curriculum to establish a shared framework and language for inquiry teaching and to have a common, supportive anchor for *Learning Lab* PD days. Through one year of collective work with a shared purpose to support students' learning via inquiry teaching, we observed teachers increasingly center students' talk as they tried new ways to facilitate discussion with each other's support.

The examples we highlight below focus on data collected from one district-wide LLSS PD day, when teachers worked in cross-district, grade-level groups in 6-8th grade host teachers' classrooms (see Figure 1 for Schedule).

Throughout the PD, teachers worked in grade-level groups to co-plan lessons that they

then co-taught in a 6th, 7th, or 8th grade classroom. Sarah Day, a former high school history teacher and graduate research assistant, video recorded and transcribed the 6th grade group's conversation and co-teaching. The 6th-grade host teacher at Elm Middle School, Ben, oriented the group to where the class was in an inquiry unit about water inequality in and around Mexico City.

Based on this information, the teachers, district staff, and facilitators refined the lesson and decided in advance who would teach which segments of the lesson. They also identified opportunities for *Teacher Time Outs* (Gibbons et al., 2025), or moments to pause, think out loud about what they're noticing in students' thinking, or confer together about next steps during the co-teaching.

Teachers co-taught the same lesson twice to two different classes, then debriefed while analyzing student work.

We ended the day with a whole group reflection and future planning for social studies teaching in the district.

Focusing on student talk and student thinking was woven throughout this PD, and facilitators' questions reflected this common goal.

Table 1

Learning Lab for Social Studies PD Day Schedule

<i>Hour</i>	<i>Activity</i>
1	Learn new content: Centering student thinking; Develop a structure for co-teaching and “Teacher Time Outs” to discuss student thinking and instructional decisions Co-plan the lesson in grade level groups (6th-grade)
2	Co-teach the lesson to Ben’s 2nd Hour Class of 6th-graders
3	Analyze student thinking (discussion and student work) and debrief co-teaching Co-plan the lesson based on what we learned
4	Lunch Break
5	Co-teach the lesson to Ben’s 5th Hour Class of 6th-graders
6 & 7	Analyze student thinking (discussion and student work) and debrief co-teaching Debrief experience across grade level groups and identify next steps for teachers’ inquiry and student learning

At the end of PD day, teachers named the importance of co-teaching, collective learning, and supporting and looking for student talk and student learning as key parts of LLSS. In the first hour, some of the 6th grade teachers expressed hesitation, worried that there were going to be a lot of adults in the room during co-teaching. For example, Badia shared she was excited but it also “might be overwhelming” for teachers and students.

Reflecting at the end of the day after two rounds of co-teaching, she shared: “This is such a supportive and cordial space, usually in

another situation, maybe I’d be a bit nervous, something about it, the norms you set up, just made me feel very much at ease.” The norms facilitators set up before co-teaching included: 1) press for meaning and not just surface level talk, 2) counter tendencies to label themselves or students as being low-skilled or not competent, and 3) create safe spaces where people can engage with content, teaching, and learning.

Other teachers echoed the value of engaging in discussion with diverse groups of students, having a collaborative environment to

learn with other teachers, and having that learning situated within their colleagues' actual classrooms.

Teachers deepened their trust of each other, and strengthened student discourse with the debrief following the first round of co-teaching and using *Teacher Time Outs* during the second round. During the first debrief, teachers examined the student work they had collected from the first class.

Teachers noticed that students made connections to what they had learned in a previous class. They also identified places where they wanted to provide additional support to students in their next co-teaching hour by modeling how to read and analyze a map. Teachers asked small groups of students prompting questions about the maps to support students' understanding.

During the second iteration of co-teaching, one teacher named Hassnah, asked the host teacher, Ben, if she could ask students some additional questions during a discussion of one of the sources they were reading about water inequality in Mexico City. When he obliged, she asked students "Making connections to what just happened this past summer to our city. What happened? What failed in our city?"

Several students responded by discussing the flood in their city, which was caused by clogged sewers and pipes. Students further shared the impact of this flood on their school and homes. Her question moved the talk away from right-answer questions and into more expansive reasoning, allowing students to share personal experiences of a local water crisis, when their streets and basements flooded. Ben's openness to this pause demonstrated vulnerability and a building of trust with fellow co-teachers. Here, educators' actions supported a climate of trust and

reciprocity, while strengthening their approach to student talk. Through modeling, public deliberation, and feedback, teachers engaged with each other and students in a collective learning process.

Developing a culture of trust amongst teachers, school-wide and district-wide, was essential for cultivating collaboration. Teachers' debrief emphasized the value of positioning each other as experts, in contrast to PDs where teachers cannot witness or implement new approaches in practice. The facilitator reiterated, "I don't think this PD model will work if that isn't true... climate and trust."

The invitation to publicly make mistakes or be unsure of what steps to take next as a teacher also enabled collective learning. As Hassnah explained, "Thank you for not being critical or judgmental. It's okay if we make mistakes, and there's room for growth as professionals." Teachers' real time feedback and willingness to experiment with new instructional approaches underscored the benefits of discussion. It also made the teachers shared learning process visible to the students in the classroom. The students could see their teachers learning collaboratively from one another and having discussions parallel to the inquiry that students were engaging in.

One of the final activities of the day was a post-it note reflection where facilitators asked teachers what was supportive and not supportive of the day. Twenty-three post-its were placed on the "supportive" wall that mostly spoke to: the values of collaborating together in-person with other social studies teachers, co-teaching and reflecting on the co-teaching, and supporting student thinking and talk. Only nine post-its were on the "not supportive" wall, and those comments reflected wanting more district-wide, in-person PDs like this earlier in the school year. They also

thought it would be useful to have opportunities throughout the day to learn across grade-level groups.

Teachers' professional learning was also supported by the presence and active involvement of school and district leadership. The district social studies coordinator, Barbara, supported the logistics for planning the *Learning Lab* PD day and was present and engaged throughout the sessions. Barbara facilitated the final session of the day, which focused on curriculum mapping and a professional learning plan for the following year.

When asked to identify their top three priorities for future professional learning, every group of teachers from all three grade levels spoke about wanting to continue co-teaching via *Learning Labs*, and cross-district collaboration. We saw this eagerness from the teachers and the district to continue engaging in *Learning Labs*, even beyond our university partnership, as indicative of the possibilities of supporting a greater culture of classroom discussions.

In our *Learning Labs for Social Studies* PD Day, there was space for teachers to not just talk about supporting student discussions hypothetically. They could witness and actively engage in a process of centering student talk in the classroom alongside other educators. *Learning Labs* can provide useful opportunities for educators to work on their professional practice as discussion-facilitators and encourage discussions as a routine practice.

Given teachers' enactment of and reflections about *Learning Labs*, we saw increased potential for a district-wide culture of teacher collaboration, and more specifically, teacher collaboration that supports student-centered discussion.

Summertime, Cross-District Learning Labs: DISCUSS

DISCUSS is a multi-year research project housed in two university-based teacher education programs, aiming to promote and sustain discussion facilitation practices of social studies teachers. Timothy Patterson leads the DISCUSS project with Abby Reisman, and Jenni Conrad, A.J. Schiera, Andrew del Calvo are part of its team of scholars from various institutions. For two summers, we brought together new teachers (in their 1st-3rd years) from nearby districts with roughly 100 high school youths for week-long *Learning Labs* on a college campus. Since our *Learning Labs* were during the summer, inviting youth was essential for supporting teacher learning about discussion.

In our first *Learning Lab*, participants were grouped by subject (e.g. U.S. history, world history, etc.) and tasked with developing a unit of instruction to teach in the coming school year. The participants rehearsed discussions with a group of youth, received feedback from them, and iterated their plans based on youth feedback. We aimed for activities that centered participants' agency and triggered exploration of their identities as teachers.

Given the challenging nature of discussion facilitation and vulnerability our participants would likely feel, it was crucial we create a safe environment in which they could explore (Kaplan et al., 2014). We accomplished this by positioning students as experts and inviting their feedback. This framing of student expertise required participants to trust and support each other in developing and iterating their units of instruction. Likewise, students had to feel trusted that their ideas were taken seriously by the participants and us as teacher educators.

The second *Learning Lab* took a different approach, explicitly positioning the teachers as researchers of a dilemma they faced when facilitating discussions. First, the group discussed and revised draft norms for working together based on Free Minds, Free People's guidelines, including “we are all teachers and learners,” the need to “be aware of power and voice in the room,” and together “ensure this is a safe and respectful space.”

Teachers then identified dilemmas of practice meaningful for them, which the organizers used to form groups. Groups developed a shared inquiry question to explore through various “activities co-investigating teaching” with youth, all supported by teacher educators, to help them explore their dilemmas with students. Organizers prepared the students for their role by watching a sample clip of teacher facilitation, discussing its strengths and limitations together, and ways of offering constructive feedback to teachers.

When teachers and students first came together, each group started by appreciating students, and their role in teacher learning: “you have expertise in teaching, even if you don’t know it!” For 12th grader Jacky, this experience involved youth from different schools “coming together to help improve and provide feedback to teachers so they can improve their teaching methods.”

Both *Learning Labs* were successful, but the second’s focus on discussion as a phenomenon, rather than delivering an effective lesson, allowed for deeper exploration of teacher practices and reflection. While both versions included icebreakers and team-building activities (e.g., bingo), the intentionality and time for norm-setting and teacher identification of shared goals and dilemmas in the second also seemed to foster deeper collaboration and trust.

Learning Labs typically take place across one department, while our participants worked in dozens of schools. However, the presence of local district leaders helped buoy teacher enthusiasm and align learning. Two social studies curriculum supervisors facilitated activities with the teachers and supported their reflections.

Two teachers, Maddie and Erica, worked in the same school and department and frequently collaborated. Both advanced their practice to the point where their students serve as discussion facilitators, with Maddie and Erica on the periphery of discussions. This signals the potentials of *Learning Labs* for sustaining teacher collaboration and trust with discussion facilitation. In an interview during her second year of teaching, Erica credited her and Maddie’s persistence in cultivating fully student-centered discourse by saying, “I don’t think we would have tried discussions without DISCUSS.”

Implementing Learning Labs: Key Ideas for Getting Started

Learning Labs can be logistically demanding, but many schools, from the most to least well-resourced, have found ways to implement them meaningfully. Several projects using *Learning Labs* have developed common principles for supporting teacher learning (Dutro et al., under review).

Teacher Education by Design (TEDD) offers free examples, a planning guide, norms protocol, and more at <https://tedd.org/learning-labs/>. RIW includes free *Learning Lab* resources for social studies at <https://readinginquirewrite.umich.edu/>. Some key planning elements include:

- **Provide subs and common planning time for teachers.** Support teachers’ full participation in *Learning Labs*.

- **Establish norms and create structures for support.** See the links above. LLs can support the shifts from teacher-dominated talk to more meaningful student-centered discourse.
- **Organize teachers in ways most supportive of their learning.** Grade-level teams, subject-specific groups across grade levels, within a single school building, or across a district can be used.
- **Coordinate opportunities over time with different learning environments and collaborations.** A *Learning Lab* is not something that should only be done once, and it will not fully address teacher learning needs. Rather, it is an approach that can be integrated and coordinated with other learning settings and experiences to support teachers to develop their practice in relation to their own students (Kazemi et al., 2024).

Conclusion

These examples speak to the possibilities that emerge when teachers are given the time, space, and support to work collaboratively to learn with one another and improve upon their discussion facilitation skills, through continued practice, in context, with students. *Learning Labs for Social Studies* (LLSS) provided a district and site-embedded example during the school year.

The teachers' debrief about the *Learning Lab* demonstrated a collective commitment to continued inquiry and working with colleagues in the context of their classrooms to foster greater discussion culture and teacher learning. While teachers shared initial hesitations and fears, we saw a shift in framing and an eagerness from the teachers and the district to continue engaging in *Learning Labs* on their own, even when the university partnership was coming to close. DISCUSS was a summer professional learning experience

for early career teachers and demonstrated the significance of having a PD focused on dilemmas of practice when facilitating discussion.

The project also emphasized the value of youth participation in summer professional learning. Both projects showed how teachers could work collaboratively to support discussion rather than avoiding the practice altogether or attempting to facilitate in isolation without support. They also highlighted the importance of having school/district leaders and curriculum supervisors engaged in professional development alongside classroom teachers.

The two cases shared from LLSS and DISCUSS are snapshots of larger empirical studies that examine inquiry and discussion in social studies classrooms and teacher learning. Here, we focus on teachers' and school/district leaders' involvement and reflections on the value of *Learning Labs* for building trust and sustaining discussion.

Elsewhere, we and our colleagues have offered more detailed examinations of these *Learning Labs* at work, with a particular emphasis on the role of youth in informing teachers' evolving ideas on student talk and civic discussions (e.g. Jay et al., 2022; Jennings et al., 2022; Monte-Sano et al., 2023; Monte-Sano et al., under review; Schiera & del Calvo, 2025).

Learning Labs offer one powerful way schools and districts can embed and sustain discussions and trust within their instructional cultures. The positive experiences of the teachers, school leaders, and students across both our projects suggest the promise of *Learning Labs* as an approach for supporting teachers' professional learning and building a larger culture of discussion. These insights provide practical examples that might be of

interest to teachers, schools, districts, teacher education programs, and educational researchers seeking to build stronger cultures of classroom-based discussions. Rather than putting the onus on individual teachers to facilitate discussions in isolation, this approach offers an integrative approach to teacher professional learning, improving instructional

practice, and engagement with inquiry and discussion. Knowing the limited presence and oftentimes absence of discussion in schools, we encourage school and district leaders to not shy away from discussion, but instead, work with teachers and create space for teachers to come together for collaborative learning.

Author Biographies

Sarah Day Dayon is a PhD candidate in educational studies at the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on teaching and teacher education, specifically teacher of color retention. E-mail: sdayon@umich.edu

Jenni Conrad is assistant professor of social studies and teacher education at Oregon State University, Cascades in Bend, OR. Her research focuses on teacher learning with justice-oriented dialogue and curricula and has been featured in the *American Educational Research Journal* and more. E-mail: conrajen@oregonstate.edu

Timothy Patterson is associate professor of social studies education at Temple University. His research on global and teacher education has been published in such journals as the *Teaching and Teacher Education*, the *Journal of Teacher Education*, and *Teachers College Record*. E-mail: tim.patterson@temple.edu

References

- Caasi, E., Yerkes, E., & Dutro, E. (2023). Movement between content and process in teachers' collective sensemaking about discussions of gender and sexuality in elementary classrooms. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 126, 104011. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.104011>
- Conklin, H.G., Lo, J., McAvoy, P., Monte-Sano, C.B., Howard, T., & Hess, D.E. (2021). Pedagogical practices and how teachers learn. In C. D. Lee, G. White, & D. Dong (Eds.), *Educating for civic reasoning and discourse* (pp. 354–396). National Academy of Education.
- Cuenca, A. (2021). Proposing core practices for social studies teacher education: A qualitative content analysis of inquiry-based lessons. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 72(3), 298–313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487120948046>
- Dutro, E., Gibbons, L., Ghouseini, H., Kavanagh, S., Kazemi, E., Monte-Sano, C., & Reisman, A. (under review). Six principles to reimagine teachers' collective learning in schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*.
- Ghouseini, H., Kavanagh, S. S., Dutro, E., & Kazemi, E. (2022). The fourth wall of professional learning and cultures of collaboration. *Educational Researcher*, 51(3), 216-222.
- Gibbons, L. K., Kazemi, E., & Hintz, A. (2025). Examining a professional learning routine to support educators to learn teaching with and from students. *Cognition and Instruction*, 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2025.2508458>
- Gibbons, L. K., Kazemi, E., & Lewis, R. M. (2017). Developing collective capacity to improve mathematics instruction: Coaching as a lever for school-wide improvement. *The Journal of Mathematical Behavior*, 46, 231–250. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmathb.2016.12.002>
- Hess, D. E., & McAvoy, P. (2014). *The political classroom: Evidence and ethics in democratic education*. Routledge.
- Ho, L.C., McAvoy, P., Hess, D., & Gibbs, B. (2017). Teaching and learning about controversial issues and topics in the social studies. In M.M. Manfra & C.M. Bolick (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of social studies research* (pp. 321-335). Wiley Blackwell.
- Jay, L., Conrad, J., Del Calvo, A., Schiera, A., Patterson, T., & Reisman, A. (2022). Bringing students into professional development. *Social Studies Journal*, 41(1), 30-38. <https://pcssonline.org/2021-2022-social-studies-journal/>
- Jennings, A., Monte-Sano, C., Schleppegrell, M., Estrada Rebull, M., & Sun, S. (2022, April 25). A mixed-methods case study exploring relationships among teachers' practices, thinking, and high-quality student discourse. *Proceedings of the 2022 AERA Annual Meeting*. 2022 AERA Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA. <https://doi.org/10.3102/1888246>

- Kaplan, A., Sinai, M., & Flum, H. (2014). Design-based interventions for promoting students' identity exploration within the school curriculum. In S.A. Karabenick & T.C. Urdan (Eds.), *Motivational Interventions* (pp. 243-292). Emerald.
- Kavanagh, S. S., Resnick, A. F., Ghouseini, H., Gotwalt, E. S., Cordero-Siy, E., Kazemi, E., & Dutro, E. (2022). Breaking the fourth wall: Reaching beyond observer/performer binaries in studies of teacher and researcher learning. *Cognition and instruction*, 40(1), 126-147.
- Kazemi, E., Calabrese, J., Lind, T., Lewis, B., Resnick, A. F., & Gibbons, L. K. (2024). *Learning together: Organizing schools for teacher and student learning*. Harvard Education Press.
- Kazemi, E., Ghouseini, H., Cordero-Siy, E., Prough, S., McVicar, E., & Resnick, A. F. (2021). Supporting teacher learning about argumentation through adaptive, school-based professional development. *ZDM – Mathematics Education*, 53(2), 435–448. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11858-021-01242-5>
- Kazemi, E., Gibbons, L.K., Lewis, R., Fox, A., Hintz, A., Kelley-Petersen, M., & Balf, R. (2018). Math labs: Teachers, teacher educators, and school leaders learning together with and from their own students. *Journal of Mathematics Education Leadership*, 19(1), 23–36.
- Kazemi, E., Granger, J.C., Lind, T., Resnick, A.F., Lewis, R., & Gibbons, L. (2024). *Learning together: Organizing schools for teacher and student learning*. Harvard Education Press.
- Monte-Sano, C., Jennings, A., & Schleppegrell, M.J. (2023). Reframing history and listening to students through Learning Labs professional development. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 18(2), 121–136.
- Monte-Sano, C., Jennings, A., Schleppegrell, M.J., Estrada Rebull, M., Sun, S. (under review). Widening the aperture on classroom discourse: The integrated role of teacher practice, knowledge, and dispositions in shaping student talk.
- National Council for the Social Studies (2013). *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for social studies state standards: Guidance for enhancing the rigor of K-12 civics, economics, geography, and history*. NCSS.
- Parker, W. (2010). Listening to strangers: Classroom discussion in democratic education. *Teachers College Record*, 112(11), 2815-2832.
- Schiera, A. J., & del Calvo, A.O. (2025). What youth want from discussions: Practice, participation, and democracy in social studies (teacher) education. *Theory & Research in Social Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2025.2517327>

Leveraging Learning Out of a Crisis: Focused Journaling as a Precursor to Debriefing

Rod Uzat, PhD

Assistant Professor

Department of Counseling, Bilingual Education and Educational Leadership

University of Texas, Permian Basin

Odessa, TX

Abstract

This paper proposes a process that can be applied before, during and after a crisis through the use of an organizational messaging app in order to make certain that a district's strategic governance team (senior district leadership and elected board members) assesses what has been learned and applies those learnings for the benefit of the team and the district as a whole. A model for how to broach the idea of a reflective and collaborative digital forum and consensually move it forward is presented. An example of one possible approach that includes specific folders for reflections, new ideas and personnel follows. The article then discusses research on human memory and what can be learned from public health research concerning administrative communication during a crisis. It follows with a preparatory activity using the model for a post crisis debrief with an eye towards takeaways and lessons learned that compel new actions or investigations. The paper concludes that the proposed model can help leaders recognize and understand organizational cultural shifts, get ahead of them and give leaders a different lens through which to understand what really drives the people on their teams as individuals and the thinking that fortifies their guiding principles.

Key Words

reflective model, organizational messaging, communication, collaboration, leadership practices

The nation's post-pandemic tense social climate and sharp political discord have left Americans not only with frayed nerves but in a deep conceptual divide that began through mask mandates and much like the virus, quickly spread to other polarizing issues. In the fall of 2022, Jochim et al. (2023) found 51 percent of school district leaders nationally identified conflict over COVID-19 related matters, critical race theory, LGBTQ+ questions, or a combination of these issues as impeding their district's capacity to educate students.

As of the fall of 2021, in 45 percent of these districts there were increases in Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests (Jochim et al., 2023). Appeals for book removals or instructional opt-outs for contentious topics particularly in low-poverty districts also have become more prominent (Jochim et al., 2023). Finally, written or voiced threats to educators when covering polarizing issues in class content was reported in 31 percent of districts and more likely to occur in either low-poverty districts or places where the political preference of the majority locally ran counter to the larger state preferences (Jochim et al., 2023).

A more polarized public has consequently led to more polarized representatives. Kitchens and Goldberg (2024) found that although school board elections generally feature candidates that do not affiliate themselves formally with a political party, the attitudes of many school board members reveal strong partisanship.

An analysis of board actions in the context of school reopenings in the fall of 2020 indicated that politics, teacher union power, and proximity to private school options were stronger predictors of the resumption of in-person instruction than the prevalence of the virus in a particular locality (Hartney & Finger, 2020).

These conflicts naturally have led to more contentious school board elections and ultimately more polarized boards. Research has found that a school district's culture is significantly impacted by the comportment of board members and the superintendent (Dennis, 2024). There is also evidence that when trust is an issue or there is a pattern of unprofessional behavior, student achievement can suffer (Dennis, 2024).

When dealing with frustrated and sometimes angry parents challenging library books, school resources, curriculum, restroom policies, and new initiatives, it is easy to see how a district's focus on instruction can suffer. The increasing nationalization of these issues is also undeniable (Hartney & Finger, 2020) and has impacted where some of these battles are coming from. Today, such challenges do not always start with a phone call or email placed to an individual with institutional authority – nor do they always originate with parents. A snapshot or video on social media shared with an activist group can set off a firestorm that suddenly demands and consumes the time and energy of school board members and district staff alike.

Beyond that, there are many other forms that a crisis can take in a school or school district -- from the sudden loss of a staff member to the emerging awareness of a past event that brings lingering negative attention to the organization, from a school where there is widespread and unremitting failure in student achievement to a community that is suffering the shock and heartbreaking devastation of a school shooting. Generally, when we think of the term "crisis" we assume that there's a certain level of imminence requiring swift attention to relieve the calamity -- but sometimes the immediacy is not seen and other times when it is, the appropriate response is not clear.

Defining Crisis

The definition of the term crisis as it would apply to an organization, includes, "... an emotionally significant event or radical change of status..." or, "...an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is pending..." particularly when it may have, "...the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Although most crises are relatively short-lived, some will extend for days or possibly weeks. When a crisis like the COVID pandemic extends far beyond weeks, the situation morphs from crisis to a new state of existence. Whatever the case may be, based on the definition offered, the key characteristics of crisis can be said to include high emotions, uncertainty, and concern or fear of an outcome. These are precisely the same dynamics that cause people in organizations to resist change (Hubbart, 2023).

Don't Let a Crisis Go to Waste

A crisis is an opportunity. It precipitates new circumstances and problems that demand considering different ways of doing things. Leaders have a responsibility to develop their organization's capacity to make sense of emerging circumstances, learn, and grow.

The refrain of, "Don't let a crisis go to waste," has been credited to both British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (Phillips, 2021) and former Obama Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel (Weidinger & Sprunt, 2022), both of whom understood crisis and how it creates a certain malleability in discourse when searching for solutions. For this context it refers to the organizational payback that can be netted from reflection in the aftermath of a crisis.

One form of reflection is debriefing. Research shows that quality debriefing is an "informative dialogue" and a "dynamic action"

that develops reflective, problem-solving skills and helps individuals understand their thought process and the thought processes of others with an eye to sharpening judgment and reasoning (Bradley et al., 2020).

However, the practical circumstances and behaviors that accompany the beginning and ending of a crisis often conspire against meaningful reflection. Just as quickly as a crisis hits, it abates – and with it the individuals who were charged with managing the situation move on, highly driven to catch up on work that has accumulated through the emergency. Given this challenging environment what strategies can be employed before, during, and after a crisis to make certain that a school or district leadership team assesses what has been learned and applies those learnings for the benefit of the team and the district as a whole?

The research of Nansubuga and Munene (2013) on adaptability to turbulent work environments through reflection can be foundational in the formulation of a practical answer to this question. The authors found two specific processes for developing an individual's capacity to examine the emerging conditions they face, draw conclusions and formulate responses tailored to those conditions. These processes are "adaptability to [the] work environment" and "reflection" where the latter serves as a key facilitator of learning new strategies for the former.

In their work with Ugandan public service leaders in district local government, the authors found adaptability consists of "environmental scanning" and "interpretation and planning". Nasubuga and Munene (2013) relied on Choo (2001) to define environmental scanning as "... obtain[ing] information about events, trends, and relationships from the organization's external environment and us[ing] that information to plan a course of action that will respond to the work

environmental changes” (p. 167). “Interpretation and planning” was based on efficiency and responsiveness and consisted of recognizing “changing community needs and program-related critical issues (social, political, and cultural),” as well as, “identifying beneficiaries’ strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats; and involvement of clients in setting of goals and measurable objectives that address the critical issues” (Nasubuga & Munene, 2013, p. 166).

With respect to measures of reflection, the research of Nasubuga and Munene (2013) found four variables: “proactive thinking, framing and reframing, action profiling and unlearn and relearn” (p. 166). The authors applied the definition of Parker, Bindl and Strauss (2010) for proactive thinking, which they described, “as an ability to take control and make things happen rather than watching things happen” (Nasubuga & Munene, 2013, p. 166).

“Proactive behavior” includes hands-on refinement and enhancement of approaches to work, preemptive problem solving, taking initiative, “making ideals and proactive feedback seeking...anticipating events and thinking ahead in terms of averting future challenges, as well as instituting plans for mitigating the anticipated challenges” (Nasubuga & Munene, 2013, p. 167). “Framing and reframing” consists of simplifying complicated issues through formative performance assessment which empowers individuals to set personal improvement and growth goals based on past accomplishments.

Throughout this process, an individual will seek meaningful conclusions through their observations to solve problems. “Action profiling” refers to individuals using the experience of their workplace interactions to “define knowledge and skills” of others for the purposes of constructive assessment that will

allow for precise feedback yielding improvement. “Unlearn and relearn” gauges an individual’s responses to problems and their methods for dealing with problems with an eye towards analyzing trends or patterns in their behavior that provides predictive insight to how they process adversity. (Nasubuga & Munene, 2013).

The Nasubuga and Munene (2013) study proved that the reflection process is strongly related to an individual’s adaptability to their work environment. More specifically, the study identified both the interrelated nature of “proactive thinking”, “framing and reframing” and “action profiling” to “environmental scanning” as well as the interconnectedness of “unlearn and relearn” to “interpretation and planning” (Nasubuga & Munene, 2013).

What follows is a proposal for a system of digital dialogue at a senior administrative level that structurally reflects the relationships at play between reflection and adaptability to make certain that a school or district leadership team assesses what has been learned and applies those learnings for the benefit of the team and the district as a whole.

Organizational Messaging

Organizational messaging apps like Microsoft Teams, Slack, and a host of others have become a regular part of the workplace environment. They provide quick messaging, easy collaboration tools and document storage. They also provide a vehicle through which individual reflection can be used as a powerful point of entry to a collaborative dialogue.

Before the Crisis

Broach the subject

At a district level, the Superintendent/CEO would be wise to open a conversation individually with members of the cabinet and

the Board chair regarding the launch of a digital forum for reflection and collaboration.

- Start the conversation by recalling a past crisis and the value of a structured and easy method for collecting one's thoughts.
- Discuss the idea of a digital framework within the organizational messaging app.
- Be clear about its purpose as an open and safe forum for reflection, dialogue, and collaboration to chart a way forward.
- Solicit opinions concerning what people believe would work and what would not.
- Apply those opinions to help develop any ground rules that may be necessary.

Put the digital forum on the agenda

After discussions have been held and feedback has been considered, develop a presentation demonstrating where exactly the forum will reside, what it will look like and how it will work. At this stage, the folders and files could be set up as part of the demonstration.

- Be clear about its purpose.
- Check if what people see matches their expectations. Gather feedback for further adjustments.
- Discuss an implementation date.
- Open the door to a non-crisis "test drive". This could be a low-profile, non-controversial issue that nonetheless requires some time, consideration, and a solution.

Open the dialogue and let the reflection begin

Once consensus has been reached, put the digital framework in place and start reflecting. The Superintendent/CEO should be attentive to the emerging content and follow up where

necessary, as necessary to refine the discussion, probe deeper or encourage the path to adaptive decisions. Miciak (2021) advocates for reflection as, "...a key competency for advancing evaluation practice because it helps us improve our responses to situations and contexts, both in the moment and afterwards" (p. 102). There is also evidence that the act of writing can lead to reflection and that this can help develop an individual's "autonomy, metacognition, critical evaluation, and self-awareness" (Boutet et al., 2017, p.11).

Reflection space could be designated for issues within the larger topic at hand where an individual could start their post or entry by naming the issue and following with their reflection. Conversation threads can be developed for each issue raised.

Encourage people to contribute in a variety of different ways including providing links to relevant reading materials, considering alternative approaches, drawing analogies to other matters within the organization that seem similar, delving into school culture, relevant decision-making processes, asking follow-up questions and anything else that sparks conversation. This would not displace the existing organizational decision-making structure but create a systemic means of opening conversations.

The posts can be as brief or as detailed and involved as the poster has time and thought for. They may be limited to a simple statement like, "I sense a growing apathy in our service responses to the community as a whole, which may have contributed to the emergence of our latest problem concerning Mrs. Smith's public statement at the Board Meeting." From there, the poster may return to expand on their thoughts after further reflection. In the meantime, others are free to respond to what they see or ask for clarification.

There are any number of ways to create reflective digital space within the organizational messaging framework based on what was learned from the research of Nasubuga and Munene (2013). Here are a few possibilities:

Taking initiative

One “folder” could be named “Taking Initiative”. Based on “proactive thinking” as defined by Nasubuga and Munene (2013), this folder could include next level folders on “Refinements,” “Ideals,” and “Feedback.” Within “Refinements” there could be three additional folders for “Policies,” “Procedures,” and “Practices.”

These would be spaces where members of the administrative team could raise questions or simply start conversations with respect to how, why or where improvements might be made in any of these areas. For example, during COVID-19, many district protocols required anyone who felt unwell with typical cold and flu symptoms to stay home from school initially. This could give rise to an idea to test whether extending similar practices in a non-pandemic environment would ultimately lead to less transmission of cold and flu illness and a net gain in overall attendance, particularly in the typical November to February stretch of cold and flu season.

Discussion around this topic would likely revolve around both the methodology of data collection through the student information system and what post-pandemic illness protocols should look like. Other factors like post-pandemic practices for non-attending students could also be part of the discussion.

For instance, if the entire school was now using a common organizational messaging system, students who were going to be away for a day or two could be expected to keep up

with assigned work in part because they could now be connected to the class synchronously.

“Ideals” is a direct response to Nasubuga and Munene’s (2013) assertion that “proactive thinking” included “making ideals.” Next level folders could consist of “Alignment” and “Challenges.” The “Alignment” folder could be used to discuss where policies, procedures and practices—or at a minimum the way something was being done needed to be more closely aligned with organizational ideals as expressed in its mission, vision, and strategic planning.

The “Challenges” folder could be a place for open discussion concerning whether an existing ideal or the way it was being defined operationally still was something that the organization wanted to continue to support. This could certainly be a dicey forum, but adaptability requires an ability to be critical and open to conversations that could lead to change. Nasubuga and Munene (2013) list “proactive feedback seeking” as a characteristic of “proactive thinking.”

The “Feedback” folder is a good way to send the message to the leadership team that listening is important and seeking feedback is encouraged. This is a situation where a lack of activity makes its own statement. If this folder were to stay empty for a long time, the Superintendent/CEO would certainly be justified in asking why. A simple prompt for this folder could be, “What do they think? How do they feel?” This ensures the conversation will include perspectives rooted in logic and reason as well as emotion and concern for others, both sides of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (NERIS Analytics Limited, 2024).

Problems

A second major folder could be labeled “Problems.” This folder has several

foundational influences from Nasubuga and Munene's (2013) work. "Proactive thinking," "framing and reframing," and "unlearn and relearn" all include indicators that are based on either problem solving, anticipation and avoidance (Nasubuga & Munene, 2013). Appropriately, next level folders in "Problems" could include "To Be Solved," "To Be Anticipated," and "To Be Avoided."

Helping people grow

A third major folder could be called "Helping People Grow." In Nasubuga and Munene's (2013) research indicators of "framing and reframing" include formative performance assessment for growth and goal setting, "action profiling" features constructive assessment culminating with precise feedback for improvement, and "unlearn and relearn" calls for behavior analysis for the purpose of predictive insight of how an individual processes adversity – all fundamental strategies for professional skill development.

Next level folders could include "Feedback" and "Personnel." Within the "Feedback" folder, there could be two additional folders "For Improvement" and "For Alignment" where the former would be used for discussing common skills and competencies that the administrative team would like to either develop greater staff capacities in or perhaps address an anticipated need for developing capacity due to a coming staff change. The "For Alignment" folder would be used to discuss practices aimed at creating greater consistency in constructive assessment practices. This might include streamlining assessment feedback terminology or sharing and broadening assessment feedback strategies within the administrative team.

Another folder that many organizations might find useful would be titled, "Personnel." The next level folders could be labeled "For Mentorship" and "For Mentoring."

The "For Mentorship" folder would include discussion concerning highly capable personnel who exhibit strong problem-solving skills, are efficient and responsive in their work product and interactions, capably manage their own professional development, set high standards for their performance and seek continued improvement (Nasubuga & Munene, 2013).

The "For Mentoring" folder would be for discussions in support of staff that have not yet reached the level of proficiency exhibited by the first group. The intent of this structure sets the table for mentorship pairing, which could consequently lead to a third folder identifying the pairs.

Any folder created for the discussion of personnel requires clear ground rules based on its specified purposes. In the post-pandemic period, matters of succession planning are at a premium, as organizational demands are outstripping the available talent pool for many districts.

There is clear evidence of a national teacher shortage which leads to administrative and other personnel shortages. A national study of the many factors that impact on the nation's teacher capacity estimated that as early as 2015-2016, the nation needed somewhere between 47,000 and 80,000 teachers to meet demands (Sutcher et al., 2019). Estimates for the teacher shortage in 2017- 2018 came in at 112,000 (Sutcher et al., 2019).

As well, school systems seem more agile in identifying different approaches to providing both direct education and indirect support services. Dallas ISD serves as one example of how school districts have used ESSER funds for innovative purposes (Education Resource Strategies, 2022). Crisis situations bring talent into view in ways that might otherwise not have shown themselves.

For these reasons, it is a good idea to have a forum for collecting and discussing what leadership team members learn about an employee's talents or capacity that may not otherwise be known. This is not the place for negativity or complaints about a particular individual. There are well-established channels for such issues and in a setting where one might be concerned about the possibility of this kind of discussion creating a forum for negative responses about staff, it would be prudent to review the processes in place for dealing with any individual staff performance matters with everyone involved in the reflective forum.

During the Crisis

Once a crisis is on, time becomes an even more scarce commodity than it is under normal conditions. School district and campus building administrative offices are high demand settings at the best of times. When an unexpected problem starts taking the oxygen out of the room, it is initially hard to see how there is a way to make time for reflection. However, as the mechanic from the old FRAM oil filter commercials would say, "You can pay me now or pay me later."

One recent study from the University of Toronto tested human memory capacity by asking subjects who had been exposed to a hospital audio tour to recall their experience. Two days after the tour, the average person recalled less than a quarter of what they had experienced (Diamond et al., 2020). Such work and what most of us know about our own memory capacity highlights the need for the Superintendent/CEO to find ways to keep what is collecting in the back of people's minds at the forefront of their thinking, especially throughout a crisis.

Taking the time to discuss, plan and create a digital structure to reflect on that which we experience makes an organizational statement, but doing the work to create routines

of mindfulness will be a critical point in establishing a culture of reflection amongst the strategic leadership team in the same way that the medical profession has cultivated the practice of deliberative reflection to increase a physicians' diagnostic performance (Mamede & Schmidt, 2022). It is also congruent with recent advice that has come out of public health administration recommending that communication in times of crisis needs to be effectual and based on clearly established communication guidelines (Remley et al., 2020).

The lessons learned from administrative communication during a crisis from public health suggests that routines should be leveraged to facilitate more broadly-based communication throughout the organization, using start and close of day "situational awareness briefings" between "preparedness staff" and emergency operations personnel to gather, organize and disseminate important information (Remley et al., 2020). This is good advice that educational leaders can use in their organizations as well.

The efficacy of a digital reflection forum at the strategic leadership level would be enhanced by making time for an awareness briefing to discuss postings either weekly or at a more immediate time when critical information comes to light. This will help to reinforce the commitment to reflection in leadership work. In the medical profession, where precision is at a premium, communication breakdowns account for 60-70 percent of significant patient mishaps. Not surprisingly, team situational awareness is seen as a vital prerequisite for optimal performance (Weller et al., 2024).

It is also true that often in a crisis, communication to the organization becomes limited or ceases entirely for a duration. This forum could well be helpful in regard to

assisting the leadership team in good communication with its stakeholders, a critical feature of leadership at all times but most particularly in difficult times.

No doubt, there are situations where not communicating may be necessary, but at other times communication stops when the high demands and pressures that senior leadership is subject to and the awareness that all communication in the time of a crisis is scrutinized conspire together to produce hesitancy. These circumstances cannot be an excuse for failing to communicate with timeliness and clarity.

Remley (2019) asserts six key principles to effective crisis communication that, in her experience, help develop trust, diffuse dissension, and build collaborative allies in the workplace. These principles, based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's manual and tools on "Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication (CERC)" which Remley (2019) identifies are: "(1) Be first, (2) Be right, (3) Express empathy, (4) Promote action, (5) Show respect, (6) Demonstrate transparency." (Remley, 2019, p. 208)

After the Crisis

Beyond the routine reflection check-ins that take place throughout the crisis, it is important to set aside an appropriate amount of time afterwards for a final debrief. The main function of this meeting is to give people the opportunity to voice any thoughts that they think are of value in the context of, "So what? Now what?"

A good preparatory activity for this meeting is to get everyone to review the forum discussions, comments and journals with an eye towards takeaways and lessons learned that compel new actions or investigations. Of course, the nature of the crisis the organization

has just been through, and the normal ebb and flow of work will help inform when such a reflection should take place and what amount of time to commit to it. With this, there is some flexibility. Our recent work on human memory does indicate that while we may only retain a fraction of what we experience in a relatively short period of time, what we do recall is on average over 90% accurate (Diamond et al., 2020).

Organizational cultures are about the realities we create through the interplay between the nature of the work done, the processes that support the work, and the prevailing ethos. In my more than 30 years in the education profession, I have witnessed the cultural shifts and individual struggles that come to challenge what people within an organization believe is true and real, clarify what they will put their trust in and reveal what will erode trust between individuals.

Using our digital messaging infrastructures to make dialogue and reflection an intuitive way of bringing people together can help leaders recognize and understand those cultural shifts and get ahead of them. It can also provide you as a leader with a different lens through which to understand what really drives the people on your team as individuals and the thinking that fortifies their guiding principles.

Creating a space within a school or school district's organizational messaging app to have a collaborative dialogue is simple. Forming the relationships and trust between individuals that will precipitate the authenticity that generates a better sense of the most recent crisis and moves the organization forward productively is far more complex.

Regardless of where a school or district's leadership team or even some individual members may be in terms of their

relationships with one another, a reflective writing forum can be a means to improve communication and understanding which can significantly increase your team's capacity to serve its stakeholders. Reflection can influence

how individuals act, evaluate and even how they experience. As such, it is the fulcrum through which personal change takes root and therefore worth pursuing.

Author Biography

Rod Uzat was a district-level and high school administrator for thirteen years specializing in organizational culture and change, crisis management, cost-benefit analysis, and TQM methods. He is an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of Texas Permian Basin. E-mail: uzat_r@utpb.edu

References

- Boutet, I., Vandette, M., & Valiquette-Tessier, S.C. (2017). Evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of reflection writing. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 8(1).
<https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2017.1.8>
- Bradley, C. S., Johnson, B. K., & Dreifuerst, K. T. (2020). Debriefing: A place for enthusiastic teaching and learning at a distance. *Clinical Simulation in Nursing*, 49, 16–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecns.2020.04.001>
- Choo, W. C. (2001). Environmental scanning as information seeking and organizational learning. *Information Research*, 7, 1–14.
- Dennis, J. M. (2024). *Implementation of interprofessional collaborative practice framework for navigating school board conflict and controversy* [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University]. Northeastern University Repository.
<https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/files/neu:4f24j665m/fulltext.pdf>
- Diamond, N. B., Armson, M. J., & Levine, B. (2020). The truth is out there: Accuracy in recall of verifiable real-world events. *Psychological Science*, 31(12), 1544–1556.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620954812>
- Education Resource Strategies. (2022, February 3). *Getting real about continuous improvement: Spotlight on Dallas ISD*.
https://www.erstrategies.org/tap/ESSER_strategy_continuous_improvement_dallas_isd
- Hartney, M. T., & Finger, L. K. (2020). *Politics, markets, and pandemics: Public education's response to COVID-19*. (EdWorkingPaper: 20-304). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/8ff8-3945>
- Hubbart, J. A. (2023). Organizational change: The challenge of change aversion" *Administrative Sciences* 13, 162. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci13070162>
- Jochim, A., Diliberti, M. K., Schwartz, H., Destler, K., & Hill, P. (2023). Navigating political tensions over schooling: Findings from the fall 2022 American School District Panel Survey (ED626297). ERIC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED626297.pdf>
- Kitchens, K., & Goldberg, M. (2024). Partisanship and professionalization: School board decision-making in the midst of a pandemic. *Urban Affairs Review*, 60(5), 1439-1475
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10780874241227792>
- Mamede, S., & Schmidt, H. G. (2023). Deliberate reflection and clinical reasoning: Founding ideas and empirical findings. *Medical Education*, 57(1), 76-85.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.14863>

- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Crisis. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved June 30, 2023, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis>
- Miciak, M., Barrington, G.V., & Lavoie, M.M. (2021). Reflective practice: Moving intention into action. *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 36(1), 95-105. doi: 10.3138/cjpe.69771
- Nansubuga, F., & Munene, J. C. (2013). Adaptability to the turbulent work environment through reflection. *The Psychologist-Manager Journal*, 16(3), 160–175. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0094959>
- NERIS Analytics Limited. (2024, September 14). *Nature: Thinking (T) vs. feeling (F)*. 16 Personalities. <https://www.16personalities.com/articles/nature-thinking-vs-feeling>
- Parker, S. K., Bindl, U. K., & Strauss, K. (2010). Making things happen: A model of proactive motivation. *Journal of Management*, 36, 633–662.
- Phillips, S. (2021). ‘Never let a good crisis go to waste’ – The 2020 Business Information Review Survey: Part I. *Business Information Review*, 38(1), 8-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266382121991997>
- Remley, K. (2019). Be first, be right, and be credible: Translating lessons from crisis communications. *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, 25(2), 208-209. DOI: 10.1097/PHH.0000000000000974
- Remley, K., Valdes Lupi, M., & Haskins, J. (2020). Supporting organizational workflow in times of crisis. *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, 26(4), 387-388. DOI:10.1097/PHH. 0000000000001198
- Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2019). Understanding teacher shortages: An analysis of teacher supply and demand in the United States. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 27(35). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.3696>
- Weidinger, M., & Sprunt, T. (2022, September 9). *The “Never let a serious crisis go to waste” crowd strikes again*. American Enterprise Institute. <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/the-never-let-a-serious-crisis-go-to-waste-crowd-strikes-again/>
- Weller, J. M., Mahajan, R., Fahey-Williams, K., & Webster, C. S. (2024). Teamwork matters: team situation awareness to build high-performing healthcare teams, a narrative review. *British Journal of Anaesthesia*, 132(4), 771-778. [https://www.bjanaesthesia.org/article/S0007-0912\(24\)00011-4/fulltext](https://www.bjanaesthesia.org/article/S0007-0912(24)00011-4/fulltext)

Mission and Scope, Copyright, Privacy, Ethics, Upcoming Themes, Author Guidelines, Submissions, Publication Rates & Publication Timeline

The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* is a refereed, blind-reviewed, quarterly journal with a focus on research and evidence-based practice that advances the profession of education administration.

Mission and Scope

The **mission** of the Journal is to provide peer-reviewed, user-friendly, and methodologically sound research that practicing school and district administrations can use to take action and that higher education faculty can use to prepare future school and district administrators. The Journal publishes accepted manuscripts in the following categories: (1) Evidence-based Practice, (2) Original Research, (3) Research-informed Commentary, and (4) Book Reviews.

The **scope** for submissions focuses on the intersection of five factors of school and district administration: (a) administrators, (b) teachers, (c) students, (d) subject matter, and (e) settings. The Journal encourages submissions that focus on the intersection of factors a-e. The Journal discourages submissions that focus only on personal reflections and opinions.

Copyright

Articles published electronically by AASA, The School Superintendents Association in the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* fall under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivs 3.0 license policy (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). Please refer to the policy for rules about republishing, distribution, etc. In most cases our readers can copy, post, and distribute articles that appear in the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, but the works must be attributed to the author(s) and the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*. Works can only be distributed for non-commercial/non-monetary purposes. Alteration to the appearance or content of any articles used is not allowed. Readers who are unsure whether their intended uses might violate the policy should get permission from the author or the editor of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*.

Authors please note: By submitting a manuscript the author/s acknowledge that the submitted manuscript is not under review by any other publisher or society, and the manuscript represents original work completed by the authors and not previously published as per professional ethics based on APA guidelines, most recent edition. By submitting a manuscript, authors agree to transfer without charge the following rights to AASA, its publications, and especially the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* upon acceptance of the manuscript. The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* is indexed by several services and is also a member of the Directory of Open Access Journals. This means there is worldwide access to all content. Authors must agree to first worldwide serial publication rights and the right for the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* and AASA to grant permissions for use of works as the editors judge appropriate for the redistribution, repackaging, and/or marketing of all works and any metadata associated with the works in professional indexing and reference services. Any revenues received by AASA and the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* from redistribution are used to support the continued marketing, publication, and distribution of articles.

Privacy

The names and e-mail addresses entered in this Journal site will be used exclusively for the stated purposes of this journal and will not be made available for any other purpose or to any other party. Please note that the Journal is available, via the Internet at no cost, to audiences around the world. Authors' names and e-mail addresses are posted for each article. Authors who agree to have their manuscripts published in the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* agree to have their names and e-mail addresses posted on their articles for public viewing.

Ethics

The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* uses a double-blind peer-review process to maintain scientific integrity of its published materials. Peer-reviewed articles are one hallmark of the scientific method, and the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* believes in the importance of maintaining the integrity of the scientific process in order to bring high quality literature to the education leadership community. We expect our authors to follow the same ethical guidelines. We refer readers to the latest edition of the APA Style Guide to review the ethical expectations for publication in a scholarly journal.

Themes and Topics of Interest

Below are themes and areas of interest for publication cycles.

1. Governance, Funding, and Control of Public Education
2. Federal Education Policy and the Future of Public Education
3. Federal, State, and Local Governmental Relationships
4. Teacher Quality (e.g. hiring, assessment, evaluation, development, and compensation of teachers)
5. School Administrator Quality (e.g. hiring, preparation, assessment, evaluation, development, and compensation of principals and other school administrators)
6. Data and Information Systems (for both summative and formative evaluative purposes)
7. Charter Schools and Other Alternatives to Public Schools
8. Turning Around Low-Performing Schools and Districts
9. Large Scale Assessment Policy and Programs
10. Curriculum and Instruction
11. School Reform Policies
12. Financial Issues

Submissions

Length of manuscripts should be as follows: Research and evidence-based practice articles between **2,800** and **4,800** words; commentaries between **1,600** and **3,800** words; book and media reviews between **400** and **800** words. Articles, commentaries, book and media reviews, citations and references are to follow the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, **latest edition**. Permission to use previously copyrighted materials is the responsibility of the author, not the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*.

Cover page checklist:

1. title of the article:
identify submission as original research, evidence-based practice, commentary, or book review
2. contributor name(s)
3. terminal degree
4. academic rank
5. department
6. college or university
7. city, state
8. telephone and fax numbers
9. e-mail address
10. 120-word abstract that conforms to APA style
11. six to eight key words that reflect the essence of the submission
12. 40-word biographical sketch

We are currently continuing to use Times New Roman, 12 font. Manuscripts should be sent to the editor by e-mail as an electronic attachment in **Microsoft Word**. Please do not submit page numbers in headers or footers. Rather than using footnotes outside the manuscript, it is preferred authors embed footnote content in the body of the manuscript. **Additionally, APA guidelines have changed so that one space is required after the period at the end of a sentence.** ‘

Acceptance Rates

The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* maintains a record of acceptance rates for each of the quarterly issues published annually. The percentage of acceptance rates since 2010 is as follows:

2012: 22%	2016: 19%	2021: 17%
2013: 15%	2017: 20%	2022: 17%
2014: 20%	2018: 19%	2023: 17%
2015: 22%	2019: 19%	2024: 16%
	2020: 18%	2025: 16%

Book Review Guidelines

Book review guidelines should adhere to the author guidelines as found above. The format of the book review is to include the following:

- Full title of book
- Author
- Publisher, city, state, year, # of pages, price
- Name and affiliation of reviewer
- Contact information for reviewer: address, city, state, zip code, e-mail address, telephone and fax
- Reviewer biography
- Date of submission

Publication Timeline

Issue	Deadline to Submit Articles	Notification to Authors of Editorial Review Board Decisions	To AASA for Formatting and Editing	Issue Available on AASA website
Spring	October 1	January 1	February 1	April 1
Summer	February 1	April 1	May 15	July 1
Fall	May 1	July 1	August 15	October 1
Winter	August 1	October 1	November 15	February 1

Additional Information

Contributors will be notified of editorial board decisions within eight weeks of receipt of papers at the editorial office. Articles to be returned must be accompanied by a postage-paid, self-addressed envelope.

The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* reserves the right to make minor editorial changes without seeking approval from contributors.

Materials published in the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* do not constitute endorsement of the content or conclusions presented.

The Journal is listed in Cabell's Directory of Publishing Opportunities. Articles are also archived in the ERIC collection. The Journal is available on the Internet and considered an open-access document.

Interim Editor

Kenneth Mitchell, EdD

AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice

Kenneth.Mitchell@mville.edu