

The Pandemic Principal: An Opportunity to Transform

by Matt Pope, Chief Transformation Officer, E3 Alliance | March 2021

The work of a school principal has dramatically shifted since March 2020 when COVID-19 shut down our country and in-person schooling. School districts transitioned overnight to remote learning and opened up a whole new era in our field: no in-person schooling. The shift brought many challenging days, new frustrations and concerns to all. Educators had to provide schooling in a time when much of the guidance and decisions were out of their sphere of control.

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The last ten months have been extraordinary and the work of the principal has evolved and intensified. There is merit, however, in recognizing that much of the work remains the same. Because the work looks different than before March 2020, our nature is to focus entirely on the changes. Let's consider how recognizing the persistent components of school leadership work can strengthen our resolve and sharpen our practices.

In this article, I will highlight what work continues to be the same and acknowledge what's changed significantly. I will also provide some suggestions with how to lead during these incredible times.

What was important before is still important

It is all about perspective. But, when you reflect on what was pre-COVID and our new reality, you can start to understand that much of what is consuming the role of the principal has been part of their practice since before the pandemic.

Safety. School leaders have had to navigate, plan for and lead school

safety for as long as I can remember. There have been fire drills, lock down, lock-outs and shelter-in-place protocols that have to be implemented, monitored and rehearsed. Now, there are social distancing and disinfecting safety requirements added to the list!

Ensuring quality instruction. For some time now, it has been widely understood that the most important role the principal serves is that of Instructional Leader. Principals have been trained, coached and hired to be leaders that can monitor and support effective teaching. Teaching might have shifted modalities but good teaching is still good teaching...no matter if it is in-person or remote.

Building relationships and strengthening culture. The abrupt disconnection from in-person interactions changed the way we build relationships and culture. But the Principal's role in that work has not changed. The principal is the leader and protector of school culture. Schools that have navigated the challenging waters of the pandemic with the most success have done so with a foundation of strong relationships and maintaining a positive school culture. No matter the challenges or crises, these have and will always be important to the work of the principal.

Recognize the New Challenges

The work of a principal has gained new complexity, it's true. Acknowledging the specific things that have changed will help you focus your energies to ensure that the school can continue to serve its mission and achieve its vision. Some things that have most certainly changed through the pandemic:

Hybrid Schools. Literally two schools (remote and in-person) operating at the same time utilizing the same resources as before. Principals are having to navigate how to support staff, students and families in both modalities by ensuring safety, managing stress, navigating logistical operations and adjusting schedules all in an effort to ensure student well-being and learning. Adding to the difficulty is the emergence of a new language filled with new terms like synchronous, asynchronous and virtual, that, if used in leadership communication, must be defined clearly and consistently.

Whole-school attendance focus. Attendance, as we knew it before, was managed by a small team that typically might have included an attendance clerk, an assistant principal for students and a substitute coordinator for staff. Now, the definition of attendance has expanded and it can no longer be relegated to just a few individuals. It is all hands on deck for attendance. All staff are involved in outreach, connections, and coverage to ensure students are attendance, engagement and participation.

Visibility and Transparency. Never before have families been able to peek into the daily teaching practices of the teacher. As well, we have never been able to visibly see student engagement on this level. The principal must support teachers with ensuring the best quality teaching is being broadcasted while also addressing the challenge of student engagement.

Four Ways to Lead Now, Even Stronger than Before

Marathon, not a sprint. Each day take a deep breath and one step forward towards stabilization of your school community. As the entire world grapples with similar uncertainties, there is no reason our schools should be trying to change at warp speed. But, it is clear that we cannot continue as we were before. Committing to the long game and strategically making changes can allow Principals and their teams to ease anxieties and stress, allowing for enduring progress.

Alignment. All of the work that is happening must be connected. Otherwise, teachers and staff see a laundry list of compliance checks versus a coordinated effort to support student learning. Principals and their teams align work by monitoring, supporting and connecting safety, support and teaching systems to ensure they are all moving in the right direction.

Transparent communication. Communicate clearly, often and directly. This is not a time to mince words or dance around issues because people's lives are at stake and, quite frankly, our student's futures are on the line. Principals should have a system to communicate what information they know, what they don't know and what we can potentially

expect coming up. Communication provides clarity and clarity produces calmness.

Focused instructional model. For in-person, remote, or a hybrid school model with both, Principals and their teams must have a narrow, focused instructional model. This model should include the practices expected for all classrooms as well as any expectations for different grade-levels or subjects. The key is to be limited in the number of expectations. During these challenging times, we are going to make more progress as a cohesive learning community focused on doing a few things, really well, than an overtaxed group trying to do lots of things not very well at all.

It is no secret that, even when engaged in shared leadership practices, the principal is the most visible and accountable leader of a school. This is a very difficult and very important job. It has never been more important to do it well, with strategic leadership moves that allow you to keep your own balance. Sir Winston Churchill said that, “a pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.” Your students deserve a principal whose work is informed by such optimism and empowered by those things that have remained the same, leveraging both to meet the challenges of the new.

About Matt Pope



Matt is an award-winning school and community leader who has worked tirelessly to improve education for all students. Growing up as the son of a teacher, Matt always viewed education as a way to open doors and create opportunities for not only students but also for the community. In his current role as Chief Transformation Officer, Matt scales proven services to transform schools for tens of thousands of students in Texas schools at the nationally recognized nonprofit, E3 Alliance.

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