

Testing Sustainability: How Strong School Cultures Meet (And Beat) Disaster

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We are a K–12 school principal (Michelle) and a long-time education researcher (Michael) who've teamed up to work on school reform several times over the past years. Together, we have seen how successful high-poverty schools build specific forms of collaboration.

Besides striving for continuous innovation and improvement in curriculum and pedagogy, these schools focus on developing teams and related teacher agency—much as Datnow & Park (2018) found in their study of high-poverty schools. Strong, focused school cultures respond quickly and effectively to external threats, including ones that are as disruptive and prolonged as the COVID-19 pandemic. (Conversely, individualistic cultures are less effective in normal times, and are especially vulnerable in times of crisis.)

Michelle works as principal at Heritage Elementary in Garden Grove, California. When she started leading in 2016, she oversaw a [two-year turnaround effort to improve the school's culture and performance](#) alongside 525 students (91 percent on free or reduced lunch) and 20 teachers. Michelle focused on a team-based culture across the school to build instructional capacity, teacher agency, goal setting linked to benchmarks, and mutually supportive accountability. Michael and Michelle monitored the changes Michelle made, testing the hypothesis that fostering strong collaboration, support, and leadership among teachers could improve a school's culture and student achievement in a relatively short period of time.

Teachers began to work together more collaboratively and mutually support one another, teacher leadership became widespread, and both culture and achievement improved, with no teacher turnover.

But what happens when a strong culture faces a serious and prolonged threat? Theory tells us that effective organizations *adapt to their environments*. What might such adaptation look like up close?

How Heritage Faced the Pandemic

In our 2018 *Educational Leadership* article, we hypothesized that [collaborative school cultures are built to cope, treating external threats as simply a phenomenon to tackle](#). They would respond to a big change quickly, possibly turning the crisis to their advantage. Little did we know that a change as radical as the pandemic would come along. So, we decided to examine whether Heritage's response to the pandemic and accompanying changes supported our belief in the resiliency of strong school cultures.

For Heritage, as for many other schools, what was initially expected to be two weeks of building closure turned into more than a year of remote instruction. Over the previous five years, the school staff had prioritized increasing each student's achievement and social well-being. There was no discussion that the goal might not be achievable under the new circumstances.

Since teacher leadership was already well-distributed, many teachers stepped forward to help decide what actions should be taken. The first full staff meeting after building closure was held on March 16, and staff formulated a distribution plan to get needed learning materials and tech devices to students and develop hot spots for families without internet. They also started to have conversations about what learning would look like.

Setting Schedules and Guiding Kids to Work Remotely

Teachers worked remotely in teams to set daily schedules for students' learning in Zoom-based classes. SEL lessons—particularly around self-regulatory and scholarly habits—were delivered daily by grade-level teachers, followed by an open office hour from 1:30-2:30. Specific students were scheduled to meet with teachers during office hours or lunch to touch base, while others were encouraged to attend. All grade levels followed this schedule until March 2021, when the school began to offer both hybrid and distance learning.

Teacher teams continually identified students' academic and social needs and developed interventions, such as virtual home visits, ongoing distribution of learning materials (and food when necessary), tech support, and additional check in and checkout systems for at-risk students. Teachers were assigned to small groups of students to check in with at the beginning of the day. Each student set daily goals based on teacher feedback.

At the end of each day, the student "checked out" with the teacher to talk about whether they met their goal, and teachers used a check list for the daily goals that they shared with parents. Students were rewarded at the end of each week for a given amount of check marks. Teachers also set and communicated Zoom protocols and good practices for working independently.

Strategizing Together More Frequently

Teachers established schedules for more frequent collaboration to ensure they had important conversations together. Prior to COVID-19, Heritage's teachers met once per week for 50 minutes with their grade-level teams and vertical teams (with one teacher from each grade level present). During the closure, these teams met daily for 30 minutes. This allowed teachers to together review student needs and monitor progress, develop new learning for students, share instructional practices, reflect and redesign, and celebrate successes. Students were only required to be on Zoom for certain periods of the day, so teachers had time to meet while students were completing asynchronous work. Heritage has six leadership teams who continued to meet twice a week around priorities such as computer science, AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination, and PBIS (Positive Behaviour Intervention System). Each team leader maintained protocols—or developed new ones—to keep the team progressing forward.

For example, the PBIS team developed new expectations for at-home learning and helped teachers implement the expectations by providing coaching. The team also monitored the progress of particular students based on teacher referrals and feedback. The PBIS team encouraged teachers to use open office hours and SEL lessons to address the needs of each student and family; teachers sometimes scheduled specific times to meet with students' families to discuss progress. School administrators did outside, masked home visits with the most at-risk families.

How the Crisis Deepened Heritage's Work

Our examination of how Heritage faced the pandemic convinces us that schools with a strong culture of collaboration tend to thrive when challenges arise. Parents and staff were surveyed multiple times throughout the year about how they were feeling. These data were used to make ongoing decisions about schedules, instructional content, re-opening, safety, and procedures. The school's attendance stayed strong throughout the pandemic, in part because administrators worked to make sure families had access to wraparound services, including medical care, food, shelter, counselling, and COVID testing. As a result, 89 percent of students returned to in-person instruction when it resumed. More generally, new leaders emerged, and the school and its community united to stay connected and become even more cohesive. The deliberate development of a collaborative, supportive school culture places schools at the forefront of the fundamental transformation all public schools need to undergo.

References

Datnow, A. & Spark, V. (2018). *Professional collaboration with purpose*. New York: Routledge.

Fullan, M. & Pinchot, M. (2018) [Fast track to sustainable turnaround](#). *Educational Leadership*, 75(6), pp.48–54.

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