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## Principal Leadership in K-12 Public Virtual Schools: More Than a Response to COVID-19

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# Principal Leadership in K-12 Public Virtual Schools: More Than a Response to COVID-19

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore Tennessee's virtual public school K-12 principals' a) instructional leadership and b) development of a social presence. In this qualitative study, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with virtual school principals in Tennessee. Findings suggest that they are intrapreneurs adept at developing a social presence with students, teachers, and parents. The researchers conclude that principals in virtual schools have a degree of autonomy in instructional leadership responsibilities, including curriculum selection and staffing. In addition, virtual school principals are both flexible in their strategies to meet students' needs and technologically competent. Further studies might focus on teacher evaluation practices in virtual schools compared to traditional brick-and mortar schools. Additional research is also needed on principals' preparation to lead and manage virtual public schools.

## Keywords

principal leadership; virtual schools; supervision

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## **Introduction**

Virtual schools are increasing in numbers, offering many parents and students an attractive alternative to traditional brick-and-mortar schools (Bennett & Bennett III, 2019). A virtual school is a public school which uses technology to deliver a significant portion of instruction to its students via the Internet in a virtual or remote setting. Increasing numbers of students and their parents have discovered that the virtual learning environment offers flexibility, personalization, and increased time with family (Chang-Bacon, 2021; Gewertz, 2021; Klien, 2021). In addition, this alternative to traditional schools is a welcomed option for students who experience bullying or peer pressure (Derrington & Partin, 2022). Recent research shows that virtual learning environments will endure in some form (Stephenson et al., 2021). Technology experts agree that the digital evolution will continue transforming the way students learn.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, full-time online learning enrollment increased in many states as an alternative to the uncertainties of in-person instruction (Gewertz, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2020; Richards, 2020). The pandemic introduced many teachers and students to schooling beyond brick-and-mortar schools. However, this response seemed to be more than temporary because it unexpectedly increased. For example, in Tennessee, the state explored in this study, the Department of Public Virtual Schools' application approvals increased from 17 in 2019 to 61 in 2023. Thus, there has been a trend toward virtual schools as a permanent school-choice option. A survey of Tennessee's virtual school principals found that 91.67 % of the respondents expected their enrollment to increase for the 2022-2023 post-pandemic school year (Derrington & Partin, 2022).

While school choice state-supported options might not be indicative of all states, Tennessee does support school choice. The virtual schools studied in this article are public school districts' options funded by the state. A public virtual school, as defined by the Tennessee Code (T.C.A. 2020), uses technology to deliver a significant portion of instruction to its students via the Internet in a virtual or remote setting. To ensure consistency, Tennessee public virtual schools are required to be operated and overseen by a school district. Furthermore, in Tennessee, public virtual school students are measured by the same academic standards as students in traditional public school settings.

With virtual schools' expansion, the demand for effective school leaders of those schools has also increased (Bennett & Bennett III, 2019). Recognizing a growing interest in virtual schools, Richardson et al. (2015) began building the knowledge base on virtual school leadership. In this study, we continue exploring virtual school leadership. We sought to understand Tennessee-approved virtual public school principals' perceptions of effective instructional leadership and the role of social presence in the virtual context. Through interviews we explored components of instructional leadership—e.g., curriculum development and the initiation of a social presence with teachers, students, and parents in a virtual environment. Our research question was the following: How do public virtual school principals in Tennessee perceive effective instructional leadership and the role of social presence in the virtual context?

## **Background and Literature Review**

Virtual public school principals are responsible for implementing the accepted leadership standards described by National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP); Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL); and in Tennessee, the Tennessee Instructional Leadership Standards (TILS). However, implementation may be different for those principals because of the context. For example, virtual school principals, while not completely autonomous, do have more freedom to select curricula. Those principals are charting new territory and exhibiting a combination of innovative leadership, skillful administration, and organizational ability (Bennett & Bennett III, 2019). Richardson et al. (2016) described four areas of virtual school leadership that are enacted differently from brick-and-mortar school leadership: a) interacting with students, b) supervising teachers, c) providing professional development, and d) managing daily operations.

In a related study, Gustafson and Haque (2021) studied the challenges for virtual school principals and identified the following: a) intensive time requirements, b) over-or under-involved parents, c) finding and providing appropriate teachers' professional development, d) supporting students' social-emotional well-being, and e) additional responsibilities related to district programs. In a virtual school, principals are also required to build a virtual community and be experts in facilitating various uses of technology (Stephenson et al., 2021). These studies indicate that the responsibilities of a virtual school principal have a different emphasis from those of a traditional brick-and-mortar school leader.

Although virtual school principals have many of the same responsibilities as principals in brick-and-mortar schools—e.g, a dedication to serving children as their central purpose (Skrla et al., 2014), some responsibilities are distinctly different (Richardson et al., 2015). Based on limited but conclusive research, virtual school principals have a different leadership focus in this new environment (Stephenson et al., 2021). Leadership for effective and equitable virtual learning is a fairly new field of study. According to Derrington and Partin (2022), the relatively small knowledge base related to this topic indicates that leading a virtual school requires principals who:

- can build a virtual community;
- can support staff and work alongside teachers in piloting new technological tools and techniques;
- can protect student data with enhanced security tools and practices;
- are adaptive, receptive, and responsive to frequent change; and
- are flexible and nimble in resolving issues requiring a unique response.

In addition, similar to a traditional principal, the virtual school principal serves as the teachers' supervisor with the primary responsibility for teachers' professional development and evaluation (Stephenson et al., 2021).

## **Social Presence**

Understanding principals' social and interactive presence with teachers, students, and parents is essential for examining instructional leadership's effectiveness in virtual schools. Social presence is the foundation of a school's community of inquiry, a constructive collaboration for teaching and learning in an online learning environment (Garrison, 2017). Through social presence, students and teachers feel accessible to one another and technology is transparent to the learner (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010). This feeling of connectedness is demonstrated by a teacher presence, a sense of community, and the construction of knowledge through inquiry and collaboration. Collectively, these are the attributes of successful online learning platforms and effective remote classrooms (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Lehman & Conceicao, 2010; Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Creating a culture of collaboration and a sense of presence enables students to achieve academic success and belief in their abilities (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). On the other hand, a lack of perceived social presence in a virtual learning environment can result in low learning satisfaction and low achievement (Chang & Hsu, 2016; Scollins-Mantha, 2008). Consequently, social presence becomes part of the student's experience within the learning environment, empowering and enabling the learner to achieve a higher level of achievement and satisfaction.

Teachers' connections with students in an online environment is critical to the students' satisfaction with and motivation for learning (Jackson et al., 2010; Ladyshewsky, 2013). Teacher presence demonstrates support and enhances social and cognitive presence by managing instruction, building students' understanding of the subject matter, and directly instructing (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009). A teacher's responsibility to promote teacher presence and interaction between teachers and students begins in a course's design phase and is ongoing (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Closely connected with social presence is cognitive presence (Bangert, 2008). Knowledge is socially constructed through discovery and interactions with others, and learning occurs through direct and practical application in a community of practice (Larson & Lockee, 2019). In such a community, instructors can share "information and experiences within the group, where novice members can gradually learn and develop as a result of participating alongside experienced members" (Larson & Lockee, 2020, p. 143). Promoting cognitive presence requires practical communication tools to engage the online learner (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012).

## **Instructional Leadership: Importance of Context**

A search for principal instructional leadership generated millions of references making a filtering strategy a necessity. In this study of virtual K-12 public schools, a recent and less researched topic, current studies were important to identify. Thus, we focused on peer-reviewed instructional leadership articles published in the past ten years and that generated an unwieldy twenty thousand sources. We then limited our search to those recent articles conducted in the United States and focused on the conceptualization of instructional leadership useful in developing understanding of public virtual school principals' instructional leadership. That

uncovered two studies on which we focused instructional leadership concepts as a lens for understanding the emerging model of virtual school principal instructional leadership: a) the importance of context and b) entrepreneurial logic. We briefly overview the background of instructional leadership then delve more deeply into the identified concepts.

The conceptualization of principal instructional leadership has evolved since it first appeared in the literature in the 1970s. The central premise was, and still is, that the work of the instructional principal is focused on teaching and learning. Subsequently, standards for instructional leadership were developed and became the accepted norm with the advent of the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) widely used in principal preparation. These standards were articulated as behaviors including: facilitating a sense of vision, developing a school culture conducive to student learning, high expectations, and leading curricular development. However, while providing guidance, these standards did not describe sufficiently what the instructional leader does and how such leadership might vary by context (Neumerski, 2012; Rigby, 2014). Examining instructional leaders' interactions, Neumerski (2012) asserted that instructional leadership viewed with a context-neutral lens might lead to this list of behaviors as opposed to a way to understand and provide guidance for leaders in common contexts. Secondary schools or rural areas are examples of a common context among schools. In this viewpoint, contextual factors are not merely a background but an integral leadership consideration (Neumerski, 2012; Rigby, 2014).

Through an in-depth study of conceptions of principal instructional leadership, Rigby (2014) identified the prevailing logic as a twenty-first century concept predominating the field. While her extensive study reiterated the belief that the primary principal role is instructional leadership, she concluded that what it looks like in practice varies. A set of ideas or a logic she identified was the entrepreneurial approach to schooling which relied on innovations, beliefs, and mechanisms borrowed from the private sector. Fundamental to this logic is the belief that the marketplace will provide more efficient solutions to the complex problems of schools. Examples of schools in the entrepreneurial logic are charters, vouchers, and for-profit schools.

Delving deeper into an understanding of the concept of entrepreneurial schools and their leaders revealed that entrepreneurship is defined in the literature as developing a new venture *outside* an existing organization. In contrast intrapreneurship is the practice of developing a new venture *inside* of the organization that deviates from the status quo (Wennekers & De Jong, 2008). Intrapreneurial leaders characteristically pursue something that in some way is new or innovative (Ashal & Crowther, 2023). Moreover, it has been suggested that intrapreneurship through the strategy of trying something new or innovative becomes an effective means of encouraging an organization to revitalize, update, innovate (Chan et al., 2017; Parker, 2011).

## Method

Empirical research on principal leadership in virtual public schools is scant (Richardson et al., 2015). We explored how virtual school principals in Tennessee's virtual public schools implement instructional leadership and develop a social presence with teachers, students, and parents. This qualitative study was intended to further develop the knowledge base regarding

effective virtual school leadership in approved virtual public schools, which were not created as a temporary response to COVID-19, and explored the following research question:

How do public virtual school principals in Tennessee perceive effective instructional leadership and the role of social presence in the virtual context?

### **Participants**

This study's population included all of Tennessee's virtual school principals in 2021 (n=57). We first contacted Tennessee's Director of Choice and Director of Virtual Schools to discuss the study's features and how we might access virtual school principals. In the process, we obtained from a database a list of principals with their respective schools' enrollment, location, and grade level. Then we created an Excel spreadsheet listing virtual school principals by school district, grade level, name, and email address. After the study was IRB approved, principals were contacted via email describing the study and requesting their participation in a 60-minute Zoom interview. Following a low initial response rate, we discovered that some districts had a firewall blocking emails to multiple participants. To resolve this problem, we sent individual email requests to principals. Eight principals (14% of the original pool) – four males and four females – from various school levels and geographic regions in the state were in the final interview group (Table 1). Although we had planned to send another email and conduct additional interviews, a review of the data revealed that responses were becoming similar and that we had reached saturation with data no longer revealing new insights or themes (Charmaz, 2006).

**Table 1**

*Virtual School Principals' Demographics*

Principal	Gender	School Type	Enrollment/Type	Year Opened
A	Female	E, MS, HS	Statewide	2020
B	Male	HS	District	2021
C	Female	E, MS, HS	District	2012
D	Male	E, MS, HS	Statewide	2021
E	Female	E	District	2021
F	Male	E, MS, HS	Statewide	2021
G	Female	E, MS, HS	District	2021
H	Male	HS	Statewide	2012

School Type (E = elementary, MS = middle school or junior high, HS = high school)

### **Interview Protocol**

The semi-structured interviews were recorded via Zoom and were transcribed verbatim using Zoom's recording function. Interview questions were designed to illuminate how virtual school principals' instructional leadership and social presence were implemented (Seidman, 2019). The researchers and a virtual school principal developed and tested the interview protocol for face validity (Edmondson & Irby, 2008).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Interview transcripts were generated by Zoom and were printed for coding and analysis. The transcript data were first coded to describe the various districts, schools, and grade levels. The two researchers coded the data manually and independently used a combination of open and *in vivo* coding strategies, and the codes were grouped to identify emerging themes (Creswell, 2018). Following independent coding, the two researchers met to determine themes and subthemes. This process assisted in developing connections and relationships among the data and in generating meaning. After several iterations of coding, themes and subthemes were identified. Quotations from the interviews provide evidence of the themes, reflecting the principals' collective perceptions (minor edits were made for clarity). These processes reflected Moustakas's (1994) various phenomenological analysis steps, including bracketing to help eliminate personal bias regarding virtual school leadership.

## **Reflexivity Statement**

A researcher is an integral part of research and must be aware of biases, values, and personal background (Creswell, 2014). Reflexivity is the process of reflecting judgmentally on the self as a researcher and conveying their background and how it informs interpretation of the information (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). A researcher is also the analyzer of data during the data analysis and needs to be aware of the potential for bias in their data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2005). Acknowledging that qualitative researchers must address potential bias, Researcher 1 had no experience with public virtual schools or knowledge of them before this study. Researcher 2 has had no experience with public virtual schools but has previous experience as a private virtual school principal.

## **Limitations**

This study examined a small number (n=8, 14%) of Tennessee's virtual school principals. In many instances, district approval was a problem. Some principals referred us to their district's research department website to complete a form in order to obtain approval from the district. In all but one of these cases, the district's approval process was more stringent than the University's IRB and required a large number of application materials and involved a long wait time. Consequently, we first interviewed the principals who volunteered and who were apparently unhampered by district policy. When we reached saturation in responses, we determined that pursuing additional schools was unnecessary. It might be useful for future researchers to determine if districts with an internal research-approval process have similar demographics.

## **Findings**

Our data analysis identified the following key themes based on principals' perceptions of their experiences in a virtual school: a) leaders are intrapreneurs, b) curriculum and staffing involve a variety of options, and c) leaders establish a pervasive social presence with teachers, students, and parents.



## **Leaders as Intrapreneurs**

Intrapreneurs take new ideas and implement innovative, functional changes within an organization as described previously in this article (Chan et al., 2017; Parker, 2011; Wennekers & De Jong, 2008). Leadership in a virtual school requires an intrapreneurial approach as principals create a new learning structure with few role models or examples and often with fewer resources and less district support than their traditional school counterparts receive. While discussing the new learning model, Principal H explained that teacher feedback is better online than in person: "It is more powerful. Rather than 30 people in a classroom, the teacher gives individual feedback and students respond individually. Learning becomes a dialogue."

The principals in this study had a vision regarding what they wanted the virtual school to represent, as reflected in Principal A's following comment: "We're building something that's the way of the future. Our motto is 'I'm a trailblazer.'" Principals were able to discuss a traditional school compared to a virtual school because all of them had previously been leaders in brick-and-mortar schools. Describing the difference between the two types of schools in terms of time allocation and focus, Principal G (a former Assistant Principal of the Year) stated, "The time not spent on discipline or scheduling I spend on evaluating courses, looking for educational technology, and meeting with vendors." Having served as a traditional school principal for 15 years, Principal C noted that the majority of her time now spent in virtual school leadership is dedicated to monitoring students' academic performance, in contrast to the time spent on behavior problems she encountered in the traditional school context. Principal H elaborated saying, "Online learning should be better than traditional because the principal doesn't have to deal with discipline, lunch, and busses."

Pervasive virtual school leadership attributes revealed in the interviews are leader and staff flexibility and individualized student service. According to Principal B, "A student is in the driver's seat" in a virtual school. All secondary principals described the myriad of available options. For example, a student might take one course virtually and a full load at the traditional high school, thereby having room in a schedule for band, advanced coursework, and sports travel during the day or for a job. Secondary principals also noted the range of curricula inaccessible at a traditional school because of lack of teachers for the content or insufficient enrollment to fund the course. For example, Principal C observed that six languages are available in her virtual school, whereas in the district's traditional school only one is available. Although the virtual schools we studied are established, rather than a transitory pandemic response, COVID resulted in opening additional virtual schools. Principal B commented on a new understanding of meeting individual students' needs: "There is a population of our students that are served better, at least at some level, with virtual programming. COVID helped us see the need and that we had the capacity to do it."

Principals in this study had previous and sometimes extensive experience with technology. Enthusiastic about such experience, Principal D said, "I always loved using online resources. I had a Google classroom." Principals continue to embrace technology and gain most of their professional development through technology organizations. Many mentioned their membership in the Tennessee Educational Technology Association or attendance at a virtual conference in Florida.

## **Curriculum and Staffing Options**

In a virtual school environment, professional development and evaluations are part of promoting quality instruction and communication. Therefore, the virtual principal often chooses the type of instructional platform used in the virtual learning environment. When establishing a new virtual school, an important decision is whether to choose an online program management (OPM) provider, a principal-created curriculum, or a packaged curriculum. In contrast to a traditional school's principal, a virtual school's principal has more autonomy to choose the curriculum and act independently from other schools' choices. Significantly, the curriculum choice determines how much flexibility a principal has in hiring staff.

OPM providers are for-profit companies providing a school's curriculum, staff, and management. The interviewed principals believed that an OPM provider is useful when starting a new virtual school or working with teachers inexperienced with online learning platforms. Those who decided on OPM chose Pearson Online. Expressing the view that principals' time is protected when an OPM provider is hired, Principal A said, "They [OPM providers] operate throughout the United States, hire their own teachers, build the curriculum." She noted that OPM follows the state's standards and that the principal's role is to "accept students and then plug them into their classes." Comparing OPM to the traditional school model, she stated, "It is very different than having an in-person school with your own teachers because I can't connect directly with the teachers." Principal A chose OPM when she was required to open in a month and had no training. She commented that OPM "has been around so long that they [have] had time to work out kinks." Then as leaders' and staff's expertise grew, curriculum choices evolved. Principal A noted the following:

We've changed a lot of things over the last two years. We've added elementary grades and have our own teachers. So now we use OPM only for high school because it's too hard to get that many staff onboard.

On the other end of the spectrum, some principals decided to develop their own curriculum, hire staff, provide professional development, and evaluate the virtual classroom. For example, some schools hired only adjunct teachers whose primary job was in a traditional school. This approach brought time pressure challenges. Principal G commented about the lack of time to provide professional development before starting school:

I spent most of the early summer identifying the classes we would need and making sure I had teachers ready to teach those. But as far as demonstrating to them what I was looking for—that didn't happen until probably a couple of weeks before school started.

When asked to elaborate, she responded,

Teachers created content for the online courses and were paid a stipend. But it's a huge stressor for teachers because they're finding content, writing content, making videos. And I'm stressed because some have done it better than others. So, we learned we should have purchased content first. Then teachers would have seen what quality looks like. Another advantage of purchasing content is if someone quits, the new person can just step in.

The third option is a packaged virtual program that makes choices for the principal. Regardless of curriculum choice, all virtual schools have a counselor for students and an office assistant for management. Furthermore, depending on funding, district support, and the number of students served, those schools might have additional staff, such as a career and graduation coach, a video production studio manager, and tutors. Finally, with all these platform choices, principals believe they must be the virtual school's "face and presence" with staff and stakeholders.

### **Establishment of a Pervasive Social Presence**

Participant responses revealed the existence of social presence, indicated by a sense of being present with another person in a virtual environment. Under the theme of social presence, the principals' use of social presence was described by the following sub-themes of principals' presence with a) teachers, b) parents, and c) students.

#### ***Principals' Presence with Teachers***

To support social presence, principals in the virtual school environment expressed the need for communication with their teachers and staff. Such communication includes meeting in person and through emails.

**Meeting in Person On-site.** One of the primary forms of communication is meeting teachers and staff in person at the school building. For example, Principal E meets in person weekly with staff groups by grade level to connect with them and listen to their concerns. Principal B commented, "I try to stop in classrooms. I try not to interrupt, if possible. I try to as frequently as possible stop by with Sonic drinks or Starbucks drinks." Principal A stated, "It's much easier because they're on site with me. We have a building, and so they have their own offices here." Some principals have office and support staff only on-site because packaged curriculum providers also hire teachers. Principal C said, "Support staff is what I have, a school counselor that works with me. It's completely different. It's difficult to adjust, especially when you've been doing it one way for a long time."

**Email Communication.** Principals indicated that emails are the primary means of communication with teachers and staff. Principal B commented about the need to communicate via email with part-time teachers while being aware of their limited responsibilities to the school: "I'm trying not to nag them too much because I know they have full-time jobs" outside of the virtual school.

#### ***Principals' Presence with Parents***

The principals interviewed discussed their virtual schools' application process, viewed as an opportunity to develop social presence with parents. The process varied based on the type of school and students served. Principal C, for example, seeks to understand if the family's and the virtual environment's goals are compatible. She stated, "I meet with every parent prior to enrollment to make sure this is a good fit because I tell them a lot of times the grass is greener on the other side." Some principals feel limited in the students they could serve because of the need

for daily parent support. Principal D stated, "It's sad because I want to help as many kids as possible; but when it comes down to it, there's got to be family support, there's got to be students that are driven who want to be successful." In the past, virtual schools were more selective in admitting students; but the state has imposed guidelines for enrollment in virtual schools. Principal F discussed this change: "The state has changed the rule. We can't impose criteria anymore if they're going to enroll with us. As long as they [students] live in our district, we have to accept them."

**Varied Modes of Communication with Parents.** Principals stated that communication with parents happens in various forms. For example, Principal C noted, "We have open house night; parent-teacher conferences; and then one time a month, I will send them a hot topic about virtual and educating them on how to be a better learning coach." Serving a smaller school, this principal discussed how she stays very connected with students' parents: "They call me. They have my cell phone number. They get very good customer service because it's a smaller number of kids that I'm serving." Principal F serves another small school and "knows parents by their first name." Principal A commented on how "the communication piece is huge." In a traditional classroom, the student is in close contact with the teacher and parents might receive information through the children. In virtual schools, email connections with parents must become more intentional and necessary. Principal A emphasized that "the communication with parents is five times greater than [in] a traditional school." The use of social media tools also promotes social presence with parents and families. Principal D commented, "We have a private Facebook group to talk to families."

**Parents as Learning Coaches.** Depending on the student's age, some virtual schools require parent coach contracts to help parents understand their roles as learning coaches. Principal G discussed the parent coach contract: "You have a parent coaching orientation in which we require you to sign a contract that you have a parent coach available or at home." Principal G explained the parent coach's responsibilities: "That means you have a parent that is going to monitor, is going to encourage, and is going to communicate back with the virtual school."

### ***Principals' Presence with Students***

Principals' communication with students can be more challenging in a virtual setting. Although principals communicate via email frequently, they must innovate beyond this communication method. For example, an elementary school principal (E) provides weekly video communication with her students to promote social presence and school spirit. She receives positive feedback from students and parents about the "witty" skits she and her staff use to promote various learning themes.

**In-person Activities.** Principals have developed unique opportunities, such as a food bank charity, for students to interact in person. Principal B described student involvement: "Our former superintendent's daughter started it, and it's still operational every Thursday. They load up all these food baskets and then take them to the appropriate places. It's really great." Other principals reflected on in-person activities to promote social and teacher presence. Principal G's school has a weekly reading and math lab. Principal G explained that a bus brings students in on

Thursdays for direct instruction. Principal B started a school CAFÉ for virtual students to encourage them “to leave their home ... [and] go somewhere to interact with other people.”

**Required Teacher-student Communication.** According to the principals interviewed, virtual schools require a different type of interaction between student and teacher than traditional schools do. Principal D said,

Living in virtual land is completely different than direct instruction where you meet up with the teacher every day. Now we require that every student meet on a team's [Microsoft] meeting with their teacher every day; however, you may meet in a group team meeting.

Principal D explained how teachers use videos and go "a lot more in detail for the students ... to give them the most opportunity for success." Some principals commented that to promote teacher presence they require teachers to have office hours in order to help students and to make a weekly schedule. Principals also said that some of their teachers provide afternoon remediation at least twice weekly for students to get one-on-one help. Regarding the packaged curriculum option, Principal C commented on how teachers provide office hours to promote teacher presence and connection with the students. Capturing these collective comments, Principal B stated, "One of our mantras [is that] learning online shouldn't mean learning alone.”

## Discussion and Implications

Building on Richardson et al.'s research (2015, 2016), this study was designed to further develop the knowledge base regarding effective virtual school leadership within a public school system. Understanding the common context of virtual schools is integral for providing guidance and developing competencies for principals. Contextual factors are not merely a background but an integral leadership consideration (Neumerski, 2012; Rigby, 2014).

Elaborating on Bennett and Bennett III's (2019) study that described innovative leaders as intrapreneurs who manage change and innovations inside an organization, this study indicates that principals are innovative when selecting a curriculum and deciding how to best serve students' individual learning requirements. With rare exception, the virtual principals in our study were autonomous in selecting the curriculum and in deciding whether to develop it, purchase it, or hire an OPM provider. Likewise, the virtual school principals were more directly responsible for staffing decisions. The principal might hire a full-time brick-and-mortar teacher or a retired teacher to teach a single course. This autonomy combined with a trailblazer's zeal led to our branding principals as *intrapreneurs*, who innovate *within* the organization. Such leaders are flexible and nimble in problem solving as well as receptive and adaptive to change, implementing innovative, functional changes within an organization (Chan et al., 2017; Parker, 2011; Wenckers & De Jong, 2008). Leadership in a virtual school requires an intrapreneurial approach as principals create a new learning structure with few role models or examples and often with fewer resources and less district support than their traditional school counterparts receive. Similar characteristics of risk-taking and innovation have been identified (Gustafson & Haque, 2021); thus, a picture of the virtual school leader is evolving.

This study also expanded on examples of social presence and building a virtual community (Stephenson et al., 2021). While previous studies identified the importance of principals' interacting with students and parents, this study explored the nuances of social presence and the many ways leaders create opportunities to connect with students, teachers, and parents. Through social presence, students and teachers feel accessible to one another; consequently, communities of learners are created. As demonstrated in this study, social presence is interwoven throughout the on-going interactions of people connected to the school. This study reveals that a virtual public school requires principal instructional leadership that is not merely a means of offering a curriculum online. Thus, virtual learning does not mean learning alone.

Although virtual public schools are increasing in Tennessee, a supportive school choice state, understanding if this is the same trend in other states would be helpful. Additional studies of virtual schools in other states and countries would add to the scant research on virtual school principal leadership. Furthermore, studies related to teacher evaluation practices in virtual schools compared to traditional brick-and mortar school could further define the unique need of social presence in an online learning environment. Additional research is also needed on principals' preparation to lead and manage virtual public schools. Universities' principal preparation programs could benefit from this research and other such studies to provide virtual leader preparation that enhance principals' understanding of leadership in virtual schools. In addition, studying a virtual learning environment in these schools might develop an understanding of how brick-and-mortar schools could more effectively use technology and develop a social presence especially during a shut down in response to a crisis.

## **Conclusion**

One conclusion from our study is that public virtual schools appear to be an emerging school choice offering an option to the brick-and-mortar schools. Consequently, these schools will require instructional leaders who can simultaneously work within the school district's policies and at the same time be innovative and flexible in implementing learning and teaching strategies. Principal perceptions in this study indicate that they see themselves as technology innovators, creative in meeting student needs, and communicators who are adept at developing an online social presence. Public school virtual principals in this study described a greater sense of freedom to make decisions perhaps because in some districts they are viewed as an alternative choice to the status quo and thus not given significant attention. However, this invisibility may also lead to a perceived lack of status and neglect when resources are allocated compared to their brick-and-mortar school peers. While this one small study adds to the knowledge base, clearly additional studies are needed to understand the role of the virtual school leader within the system of public schools in the United States.

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