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UMaine Today



New report looks at lessons school leaders can take away from first full year of teaching and learning under COVID-19

September 1, 2021

Schools across the country are embarking on another year with COVID-19 weighing heavily on nearly every decision.

Already some schools have seen outbreaks as the easily transmissible delta variant causes cases to rise, and superintendents and school boards have been inundated with citizen comments about mask mandates and other mitigation efforts since before the first students arrived in classrooms.

A new report from the University of Maine [Beyond Crisis Schooling](#) project examines the unprecedented challenge of “re-designing schools” undertaken by educators for the 2020–21 school year. Led by associate professor of educational leadership Catharine Biddle and lecturer in educational leadership Maria Frankland, the report, “[Re-opening Schools in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons for Leaders from the 2020-2021 School Year.](#)” aims to inform the practices of school leaders for the current school year.

Part of the challenge, the report points out, is that fear of COVID-19 transmission undermined staff, parent and school board confidence in schools’ ability to educate children and keep both students and staff safe, and there were no one-size-fits-all solutions.

“What inspired confidence in one district undermined it in another, depending on a variety of contextual factors,” the report states. “Additionally, districts were working with vastly different arrays of local resources, including community organizations, public health infrastructure, community internet access, and political beliefs.”

Since April 2020, the Beyond Crisis Schooling project has examined the COVID-19 response by schools in Maine and Pennsylvania, two states with very different infection rates and local infrastructure. The research team’s [first report](#), released in August 2020, examined district practices that supported remote student learning from March to June of 2020. For the new report, the researchers collected approximately 7,000 documents from 674 school districts and conducted 52 interviews with superintendents (24 in Maine and 28 in Pennsylvania), analyzing them for lessons that school leaders can use to build public confidence in district decisions.

According to the superintendents interviewed by the researchers, three factors were most critical in determining stakeholder confidence in schools reopening: Size and urbanicity; regional decision-making; and partisanship.

The report offers several recommended leadership strategies for superintendents to build public confidence in schools’ COVID-19 response. Those include:

- Focus on the district mission.
- Maximize flexibility.
- Be transparent about how equitable student learning is being defined.
- Invest similar energy, time, and resources into all learning modalities being offered.
- Continue to build trust with stakeholders and repair damaged relationships.

In addition, the researchers recommend measures that can be taken by state agencies and other policymakers to support school leaders:

- Mandate mitigation measures that have scientific evidence to support them as policy.
- Continue to support and deepen role alike groups for school leaders.
- Support innovation diffusion through COVID-19 Best Practice libraries.

“Similarly, large districts with robust central offices should be encouraged to share resources with smaller districts with smaller central offices to prevent reinventing the wheel on every COVID-19 related communication or policy,” the report says. “For example, in Maine, a staff handbook was developed by two superintendents in Southern Maine for reopening that districts were able to then adapt for their own faculties.”

The new Beyond Crisis Schooling report is available for download on the project website, umaine.edu/beyond-crisis-schooling. The project is made possible in part by a grant from the Spencer Foundation.

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