CHRISTENSEN INSTITUTE

SUCCESSFUL DECISION-MAKING DURING UNCERTAINTY:

Four pathways for school system leaders

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INTRODUCTION

These are unprecedented times for K–12 schools. With a global pandemic, an economic recession, calls for racial justice, natural disasters, divisive politics, and the already demanding work of educating students on their plates, school system leaders face a set of crises unlike anything most have ever experienced.

To help leaders through these challenging times, this brief offers four research-based pathways for navigating the tough decisions before them. Understanding these decision pathways, and the trade-offs each entails, can help leaders steer through their present storms with a greater likelihood of success. Below we outline the research behind these pathways and the insights they have to offer leaders for this moment.

The backstory

Last year, our team set out to understand how school district leaders in the US make curriculum selection decisions. We interviewed leaders using our Jobs to Be Done methodology and uncovered four "jobs," or pathways, that explain why and how districts buy curriculum. Our plan was to publish these findings last March, but as our release date approached, COVID-19 closed schools across the country.

We initially pushed pause on sharing this research as we wondered how a study on curriculum selection would have any relevance until the world reached a post-pandemic state of normal. However, our conversations with education leaders over the last few months reveal an interesting pattern: The four Jobs to Be Done we uncovered in our curriculum research—Overhaul, Build Consensus, Update, and Influence—have striking similarities with how leaders have confronted their present challenges. With this brief, we aim to apply the insights learned from our curriculum research to support anyone struggling to lead a school system in today's world.

Job 1: Overhaul

Help us transform instruction to tackle a major challenge

Job 2: Build Consensus

Help us manage a decision process and get to consensus

Job 3: Update

Help us refresh our resources to address a problem

Job 4: Influence

Help us shape the field

USING THEORY TO NAVIGATE AN UNPRECEDENTED FUTURE

By translating decision-making insights from curriculum to the 2020 context, we illustrate the value of theory as a tool for guiding decision-making under uncertainty. In the data-saturated world in which we live, data is often privileged over theory. Leaders today increasingly demand data as an assurance that their outcomes will mirror the outcomes of similar decisions studied in the past. But in unprecedented times like these, making decisions with data alone is like driving by looking in the rearview mirror. Data from the past can't help you anticipate curves in the road ahead.

When data falls short, often the only way forward is to rely on theory. Theory helps us categorize, explain, and predict outcomes for situations we have never encountered by illuminating the principles and mechanisms that shape outcomes across a wide range of contexts. Clayton Christensen's work on the Theory of Disruptive Innovation illustrates this point.[1] He developed the theory through a close examination of the disk drive industry. He then noticed that the theory explained phenomena in a host of other fields: steel, education, transportation, even global terrorism. As he applied the theory in new contexts, anomalies required refinement of the original theory. Nonetheless, as the theory evolved, leaders in disparate fields benefited from being able to look through the lens of the theory to better understand their industries, assess problems on the horizon, and guide their organizations to future success.

The research we present in this paper similarly offers an emerging theory about how K–12 leaders make important decisions. This theory will undoubtedly need refinement as we apply it to new contexts and discover anomalies. But we hope it can shine a light into the haze of 2020 and help leaders navigate these times with more predictable success.

Job 1: Overhaul

Leaders find themselves in a job we call **Overhaul** when a sense of crisis hands them a mandate to urgently make changes. For curriculum decisions, the crisis was often an urgent demand from the district's board, executive cabinet, and other key stakeholders to fix persistently low student

achievement. In the current context, the crisis often comes from district leaders' drive to keep students on track with learning in spite of closed buildings, restrictive health guidelines, and looming budget cuts.

In an Overhaul job, leaders look for progress through bold and decisive moves. In our curriculum selection interviews, leaders described revamping their districts' entire instructional philosophy and strategy—and new curricula was just one facet of that work. In the context of COVID-19, the Overhaul job pushes leaders to find creative new ways to deliver instruction—such as partnering with community organizations to set up learning hubs, or assigning the most engaging teachers to deliver lessons to large groups of students via video while their colleagues take on roles coaching, tutoring, and mentoring smaller cohorts of students.[2]

Given the ubiquitous crises in K–12 education right now, one might assume all school leaders find themselves in an Overhaul job. But our observations about the other jobs reveal that this is not the case in many schools.

Job 2: Build Consensus

The **Build Consensus** job usually arises in times that do not call for drastic change. Instead, leaders find themselves in this job when circumstances call for steady, incremental progress while maintaining compliance and collective buy-in.

When it came to curriculum decisions, leaders with this job decided to change their curriculum in order to stay on track with state or district adoption timelines, and they paid close attention to following the processes for selection dictated by policy, tradition, and collective bargaining agreements. Success in fulfilling this job meant facilitating democratic, well-established, consensus-oriented processes—such as convening curriculum committees and soliciting stakeholder feedback—in order to arrive at a solution that all stakeholders would support (or at least live with).

Generally, the types of challenges caused by COVID-19 force district leaders away from this job and into one of the others. Yet when this job has long been the modus operandi, leaders can easily default into responding to all challenges with the decision-making patterns characteristic of this job. For example, they cautiously and carefully wait for direction for federal and state leaders before developing their distance learning plans. They send out surveys to their communities with a hope that the wisdom of crowds will point out the path they should follow. They look for ways to replicate conventional instruction through video calls because adhering as closely as possible to the status quo seems like the response least likely to elicit pushback. Or they push pause on instruction altogether because they can't see a straightforward way to meet their public mandate that also satisfies the varied stakeholders within their district.

> The Overhaul job pushes leaders to find creative ways to deliver instruction.

Job 3: Update

The **Update** job sits between the two jobs already mentioned. Similar to the Overhaul job, leaders find themselves in this job when a problem arises that calls for action. Yet unlike with the Overhaul job, district leaders in this job do not believe that solving their problem requires drastic organizational changes. Instead, they believe their problem can be solved by simply updating their resources. Once they specify their required updates, they make their decision following the same compliance- and consensus-oriented approach used by those with a Build Consensus job.

We saw this job lead to new curriculum purchases when districts faced low student achievement and determined that their problem stemmed

from old curriculum that was not aligned with the latest state standards or the districts' current pedagogical philosophy. Districts with this job made curriculum alignment the first vetting criteria as they surveyed their curricular options. But once the options on the table checked this box, their curriculum selection processes exactly mirror those of districts with a Build Consensus job.

During COVID-19, this job seems to surface in districts that respond primarily by deploying resources—such as delivering devices to their students, deploying school buses as Wi-Fi hotspots, providing accounts and training on Zoom and Google Classroom for their teachers, or setting up hand sanitation stations and stocks of face masks throughout their school buildings. While they make noteworthy strides to address these resource issues, they tend to make few changes to how they organize and deliver instruction. For example, they have students attend back-to-back sessions of conventional direct instruction over Zoom rather than developing new models that utilize their staff and instructional time in new ways. When faced with fires on multiple fronts, leaders who have activated this job hone in on closing critical resource and infrastructure gaps.

Job 4: Influence

The last job that surfaced in our research is **Influence.** District leaders find themselves in this job when they perceive themselves as being ahead of their peers and seek to leverage that position to have broader impact on the field. In our curriculum selection examples, these were districts that typically had higher student achievement than comparable districts in their states or regions and were receiving positive recognition for their success. In the COVID-19 context, these are districts like Miami-Dade, which stood out for responding effectively to COVID-19 because it had online learning resources and a crisis-response plan already in place.[3]

On the surface, the processes these districts follow mirror those of Build Consensus and Update districts: they feel beholden to follow policies and protocols and to make sure they have buy-in from all their major stakeholders. Yet behind the scenes, district leaders work to shape the outcome of the decision-making process. They want to continue to build their districts' reputation for progress and innovation, and they look for ways to leverage that reputation to influence others. For example, districts negotiated deals with publishers that put them in a position to shape future editions of those publishers' curricula.[4] In the COVID-19 context, we see districts with this job seeking attention from researchers and journalists.

Given the strong role leaders play in shaping decisions when this job arises, one might wonder why these leaders do not follow the path characteristic of an Overhaul job. The reason has to do with the differences of their circumstances: (1) they don't face the kind of crisis that leads stakeholders to cede to them broader executive power in order to address the crisis; and (2) they are cautious about making drastic changes that could undermine the sources of their current success.

District leaders with an Influence job seek to leverage leadership toward impact in the field.

INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Generally, we think of Jobs to Be Done as defined by context: people have a given job when certain circumstances arise in their lives. But in reality, the jobs that people experience are the product of both objective circumstances *and* their attitudes toward those circumstances. For example, a school district's low student achievement results are an objective reality. Yet leaders and other stakeholders can choose to see those results as a crisis needing urgent fixing, as a fact of life beyond their control, or as a persistent problem that they just need to chip away at year after year. The framing they adopt therefore determines, in part, which job they will seek to fulfill.

In illuminating the possible jobs that shape how school leaders make decisions, we hope that the insights in this brief empower them to make decisions that most align with their school- or district-specific circumstances, in turn providing the best chance at successfully reaching their goals. As leaders think about steering their organizations toward different Jobs to Be Done, they should be mindful, however, that different jobs elicit different responses, which in turn lead to different outcomes.

For example, leaders who find themselves in an Overhaul job tend to take more drastic and wide-sweeping actions than those in the other jobs. When crises necessitate bold and wide-sweeping action, the pathway of actions that this job steers them toward may be an optimal response. But bold and decisive actions can also provoke anxiety and pushback from stakeholders when they run counter to a school's or district's established way of doing things. And if the frictions caused by a leader's bold and decisive actions do not lead—in short order—to clear wins for the school or district, they could catapult the system into an even greater sense of crisis. Leaders contemplating whether to frame a problem as a crisis to precipitate an Overhaul job should consider carefully whether their circumstances truly constitute a crisis and whether bold actions have a good chance at actually addressing the crisis. If a positive outcome seems unlikely to follow from an Overhaul job, a leader might consider instead framing current circumstances not as a crisis but as an addressable problem once the right resources are in place—thereby moving into an Update response.

In contrast to Overhaul, a Build Consensus job pushes leaders to focus on complying with established rules and policies while maintaining the tacit support of their stakeholders. Their goal is to avoid and mitigate organizational friction as much as possible, and the decisions that follow therefore tend to be marginal improvements on the status quo. Sometimes, however, marginal and incremental changes fall short in addressing major challenges that a school or district faces. In these cases, framing problems in a way that elicits a Build Consensus response will not lead to the changes that are truly needed. Eventually, such problems simmer to a level of crisis, and leaders will find themselves in an Overhaul job whether they like it or not.

The Update job can be a fruitful path to pursue when problems truly stem from inadequate or insufficient resources. Clearly, teachers will have a harder time teaching effectively without appropriate and up-to-date curriculum; and remote learning doesn't work well if students lack devices and internet access. This job becomes a wasteful distraction, however, when the underlying causes of a problem lie in broken practices, processes, or priorities, and not just needed resources. As a historical case in point, the Kansas City school district spent over a billion dollars in the late 1980s on amenities such as an Olympic-size swimming pool with an underwater viewing room, professional television and animation studios, a planetarium, and a model United Nations. The aim was to attract white families to a segregated system and reverse poor student outcomes. But a decade after

the initial influx of resources, the districts' results remained dismal.[5] The Update job can be alluring to leaders and their stakeholders because resources are the easiest aspect of an organization to change. But before leaders frame their problems as resource challenges, they need to be sure that resources alone are truly the issue.[6]

Leaders with an Influence job enjoy an enviable state. Instead of being perpetually occupied with problems, they have an opportunity to stand out in a positive light for the difference they are making for their students. Leaders with this job, however, need to be ever mindful that their general success doesn't lead them to minimize the challenges of struggling students on the margins. When average test scores are good, the top students are going to the best colleges, sports teams are winning championships, and parent-teacher associations are strong, it can be easy to overlook the recent immigrant who is struggling with English proficiency, the student with behavior issues stemming from undiagnosed special needs, or the homeless student for whom failing grades are the least of her concerns. When a general track record of success makes the Influence job an option, leaders need to be careful not to frame all their circumstances as Influence opportunities.

In sum, the Jobs to Be Done that leaders find themselves in come from both the circumstances leaders face and the ways in which they and others in their organizations frame those circumstances. Although leaders cannot completely control their circumstances, they can, nonetheless, influence how stakeholders frame the circumstances. This means leaders have some ability to choose the decision-making pathway they will follow. Yet when multiple pathways are possible, leaders need to be careful that the pathways they chose are those most likely to make the needed difference for their students and not merely those that are most familiar, manageable, or alluring.

NOTES

1. See Clayton M. Christensen, Rory McDonald, Elizabeth J. Altman, and Jonathan E. Palmer, "Disruptive Innovation: An Intellectual History and Directions for Future Research," Journal of Management Studies 55, no. 7 (November 2018), https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/joms.12349.

2. See examples in these two posts by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE): Travis Pillow, "Learning pods for all, the Hoosier way," The Lens (blog), CRPE, September 15, 2020, https://www.crpe.org/thelens/learning-pods-all-hoosier-way; and Steven Wilson, "Brave New World at Success Academy," The Lens (blog), CRPE, March 17, 2020, https://www.crpe.org/thelens/brave-new-world-success-academy.

3. Robin Lake, Bree Dusseault, and Travis Pillow, "What Can We Learn From Districts That Responded Early to the Coronavirus Pandemics? Here Are 5 Takeaways," The 74, May 9, 2020, https://www.the74million.org/article/analysis-what-can-we-learn-from-districts-that-responded-early-to-the-coronavirus-pandemics-here-are-5-takeways/.

4. During our curriculum research, we interviewed district leaders about major curriculum decisions to identify common struggles and circumstances that shape those decisions. The interviews provided the data we used to identify the four Jobs to Be Done described in this brief. For additional details on our research process, see Appendix B of Thomas Arnett and Bob Moesta's, "Solving the Curriculum Conundrum," Clayton Christensen Institute, March 2020, https://www.christenseninstitute.org/publications/curriculum/.

5. Paul Ciotti, "Kansas City Proves Money Isn't the Answer : Schools: The $1.6 billion spent hasn't reversed the downward trend because good teachers were not the priority," Los Angeles Times, March 27, 1996, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-03-27-me-51685-story.html.

6. For additional insights on the role of resources in changing school systems, see Chelsea Waite and Thomas Arnett, "Will schools change forever? Predicting how two pandemics could catalyze lasting innovation in public schools," Clayton Christensen Institute, October 2020, https://www.christenseninstitute.org/publications/school-change/.

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About the Institute

The Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to improving the world through Disruptive Innovation. Founded on the theories of Harvard professor Clayton M. Christensen, the Institute offers a unique framework for understanding many of society's most pressing problems. Its mission is ambitious but clear: work to shape and elevate the conversation surrounding these issues through rigorous research and public outreach.

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