



**Brain
POP**



Education Leadership Brief: Examining the Evolving Digital Responsibilities of School Principals

Findings and Insights from the Speak Up Research Project

*“Learning does not stop; it just looks different now.”
-K-8 School Principal in Cleveland, Ohio*

Education Leadership Brief: Examining the Evolving Digital Responsibilities of School Principals *Findings and Insights from the Speak Up Research Project*

Introduction

The impact of the pandemic and resulting sudden shift to remote learning in spring 2020 on students, parents and teachers has been well-documented over the past year. In a matter of days, the delivery of education was changed for most students nationwide, moving from face-to-face instruction in a physical classroom to a fully virtual classroom enabled by a mobile device and Internet connection. Parents found themselves suddenly in the new role of co-teacher or instructional aide for their child’s learning at the kitchen table, a responsibility that many were not prepared for, and often conflicted with their own remote work-at-home realities. Teachers valiantly re-engineered classroom lessons and activities to work in an online environment while also at the same time trying to elevate their own technology skills and experiment with new ways to engage their students, now through a screen. The efforts have been nothing short of heroic. Now, as many physical school buildings re-open with hybrid or fully face-to-face instruction, a new conversation is emerging about what has been learned through this experience and what it means for the future of education. Project Tomorrow’s® recent national report, *Digital Learning during the Pandemic: Emerging Evidence of an Education Transformation*, provides insights from the Speak Up Research Project to inform those new discussions.ⁱ

The emergence of new learning models and the increasing importance of technology in empowering those new virtual learning experiences has left indelible marks on K-12 education, some of which are just starting to emerge. One of those indelible marks is the changed role of the school principal. In addition to their longstanding responsibilities as the instructional leader for their school, many principals are now also serving as the morale cheerleader for their staff, public relations manager for health and safety to the parent community, logistics and scheduling manager for new school formats, and the digital learning director at their school pushing the envelope in terms of the use of online resources and new learning modalities. Principals are on the front lines of an emerging transformation in education, and at the same time, living through a historic redesign of their own job position and responsibilities relative to the needs of their school community.

District administrators have long identified the fundamental role that school site principals play in addressing the educational needs of students. Many district or central offices have increasingly identified the enhanced effectiveness of school principals as a powerful tool in closing the achievement gap. Most recently, 41% of district leaders emphasized the importance of effective school leadership as a strategic district goal, up from 33% ten years ago.ⁱⁱ It is therefore critical that in the new discussions about the future of education, post-COVID, the changing roles and responsibilities of school principals are acknowledged and appreciated.

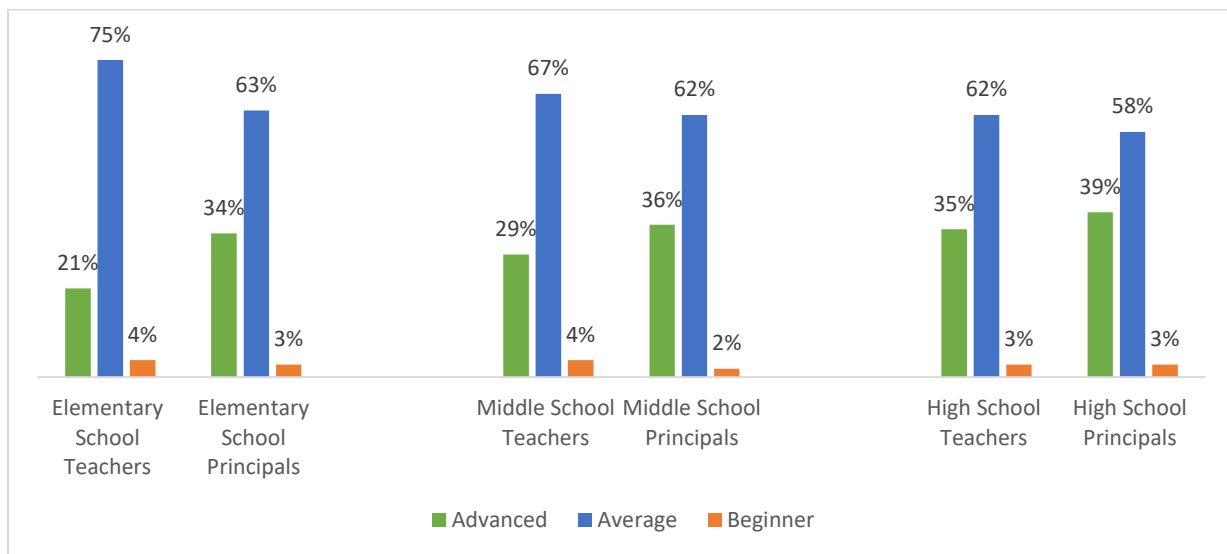
To that end, Project Tomorrow and BrainPOP has collaborated on the development of this new ***Education Leadership Brief: Examining the Evolving Digital Responsibilities of School Principals*** to examine specifically the evolving digital responsibilities of the school principal today resulting from the sudden shift to digital learning. This examination includes an evaluation of timely Speak Up Research Project data findings and the first-hand insights of principals collected through a series of interviews in February 2021. Principals interviewed included administrators from the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (OH), Little Lake City School District (CA) and New York City Department of Education (NY). Within the Education Leadership Brief, we discuss four key findings from our research. Each finding includes foundational Speak Up data, front-line perspectives of school principals, and a thought-provoking question for district leadership to consider as they plan for the future. It is our hope that the data and insights shared through this Brief will enlighten and inform new local discussions on how to best support our school principals as they lead a new digital transformation of education at their schools.

1. The Tech-Savvy Principal

The effectiveness of the school principal as the digital leader on their campus is increasingly dependent upon their own technology skills and knowledge.

In many cases, principals have sought to develop their own technology proficiencies specifically to be able to address the digital learning challenges in their school. Per our interviews, many principals said that they had to learn how to navigate the new platforms that were facilitating the online learning so that they could provide appropriate guidance and support to their teachers, and to the families of their students. This was a new role for many of the principals. The principals also noted that they gained a greater appreciation for the digital content tools that were available to support online instruction. They commented that their learning portfolio included by necessity the digital content used at all grade levels in their school, not just a few products by grade level or subject content area. For the most part, principals were facile with using technology to support administrative tasks prior to the pandemic. The difference here is the depth of knowledge they needed to acquire to understand online learning from a student, teacher, and parent perspective, and what constitutes effective implementation of digital tools, content and resources for learning. It therefore is understandable that a higher percentage of school principals consider their technology skills as advanced compared to their teachers. As illustrated in Chart A, **34% of elementary school principals nationwide rate their tech skills as advanced; only 21% of elementary school teachers hold the same view.** Teachers are more likely to see their skills as average.

Chart A: Self-assessment of technology skills – principals and teachers



© Project Tomorrow 2021

Leadership question: How are you helping your school principals develop their own personal technology skills they need today to be an effective digital instructional leader on their school campus?

2. The Principal as the Digital Instructional Leader

Being a digital instructional leader means that the principal must role-model appropriately the use of technology to support all aspects of the school experience for teachers, students and families.

Whereas many principals identified themselves as having strong technology skills, the new role as the digital instructional leader on campus required some new introspection on how to adapt to this new responsibility effectively. One principal commented that she felt like a first-year teacher all over again, just learning the ropes of the job and trying to always keep one step ahead. Several principals commented that learning the new platforms and tools side-by-side with their teachers was highly effective for building morale and an esprit de corps within their staff. In terms of role-modeling, three key areas emerged as critical for the principal as the new digital instructional leader: using technology for effective communications, making decisions based upon data, and researching new solutions to address new challenges. Additionally, the valuation that principals placed on the role of technology was also important to explicitly communicate to their staff, and to embody that position in their own professional tasks. Per longitudinal data from the Speak Up Research Project, principals have long valued the importance of effective technology use in school as supporting students’ preparation for future success in college and career. **However, because of the pandemic and the sudden shift to digital learning, the percentage of principals who now consider effective technology use *very important* for their students’ future success increased by over 20%** (table 1). Principals are finding that sharing their own views on the importance of technology as facilitating learning experiences that directly impact student success is a powerful strategy for helping their teachers embrace digital learning.

Table 1: Principals’ valuation on the importance of effective technology use in school: comparative view before and during school closures

Importance of effective technology use in school on students’ future success	% of school principals who agree	
	Before school closures	During school closures (spring 2020)
Very important	74%	89%
Somewhat important	25%	11%
Not important	1%	0%

© Project Tomorrow 2021

Leadership question: How are you supporting the efforts of your principals to help their teachers overcome their hesitancy or reluctance to embrace digital learning more fully, now and in the future?

3. Principals Are Building Teacher Capacity Using Digital Tools

Principals recognize that building teacher capacity for using digital tools today will ensure sustainability of these new practices, even when schools are back to full face-to-face instruction.

As discussed in the Speak Up national report, changes in educators' beliefs, values and views on digital learning can lead to a more sustainable transformation in the education process. Whereas not every aspect of the sudden shift to digital learning has been positive, many educators as well as parents are already discussing the aspects of digital learning that they would like to see sustained. According to the principals we interviewed, two key qualities of this experience are worth doubling-down on for the future: more effective and transparent school-to-home communications and how the effective use of digital tools, content and resources can support a more personalized learning experience for students. Personalization of learning to meet individual student needs has long been a promise of technology. Yet only 21% of classroom teachers say they are very comfortable personalizing learning for their students. To help their teachers develop competencies, confidence and comfort with personalized learning, principals believe that certain types of digital content may be the key to building that capacity. This makes sense as **51% of principals say an added benefit to digital content usage during remote learning is helping their teachers improve their overall technology skills.** It is their hope that as their teachers become more comfortable with the technology, these new practices will translate into the physical classroom as well. To support this process, principals are very carefully evaluating the digital content being used in both the remote and face-to-face classrooms for several key defining characteristics that can enable a more personalized learning experience for students.

Key characteristics of digital content that principals value as important for supporting personalized learning (as reported by principals in spring 2020):

- Content can adjust to multiple reading levels (88% of principals)
- Content provides professional learning for teachers to increase efficacy (82%)
- Content includes a rich data set about student performance (76%)
- Content is available in multiple languages (73%)
- Content enables individual students accounts (71%)

© Project Tomorrow 2021

Leadership question: What processes are in place within your district to help principals sustain the advances that teachers have made in using digital tools, content and resources to support personalized learning?

4. Principals Envision the Future for their Schools

Principals see how their changed roles and responsibilities will result in a positive future for their schools, especially relative to the use of technology.

The principals we interviewed all expressed a very positive outlook for their schools. The principals believe that personalization of the learning process will be accelerated now due to the effective use of technology. They are working closely with their teachers every day to support more effective usage of technology with students. The principals also noted how their administrative tasks have become more efficient due to the use of technology, notably their increased access to online lesson plans facilitated by the adoption of new digital platforms. This increased visibility provides new ways for the principals to not only supervise their teachers, but to mentor and coach them on the new digital instructional practices. And while they are concerned about how to manage all the new digital tools, content and resources at their disposal, they are also impressed by the growth of their teachers in terms of their own comfort with using these resources to support student learning. Principals want their teachers to continue to expand their skills with using technology within learning, whether they are teaching virtually or in their physical classroom. This increased focus on helping their teachers develop as digital teachers is a significant new responsibility. Correspondingly, principals nationwide are leveraging what they have learned through this experience to think about the type of technologies are that they would like to see in their ultimate school for today’s learners. As a result of the pandemic and the unexpected need to adopt virtual learning, principals have a clearer perspective than ever before on the role of technology within learning, and the types of tools that will best support their teachers’ new practices and support students’ needs for engaged, context-rich learning. As illustrated in Table 2, **90% of school principals now believe every child should be assigned a mobile learning device, 68% value online textbooks, curriculum and classes within their ultimate school, and 67% identify digital content as central to that new school experience.**

Table 2: Principals identify the top technologies for supporting student learning

Key technologies to include in the ultimate school for today’s learners	% of school principals who agree	
	Before school closures	During school closures
1:1 personally assigned digital learning device	74%	90%
Online textbooks/curriculum	58%	68%
Online classes	48%	68%
Digital content	60%	67%
Online videos and movies	44%	50%
Digital or online games	28%	39%

© Project Tomorrow 2021

Leadership question: As you plan for the future within your district, how are you engaging your front-line school principals to help develop that vision, especially as it pertains to their new roles and responsibilities as the digital instructional leader in the school?

Appendix

We would like to thank the school principals who participated in our interviews and provided their first-hand insights about the changing roles and responsibilities of school principals due to the pandemic.

Ms. Lorrie Brown, Principal, New York City Department of Education (NY)

Ms. Sonja Clark, Principal, Cleveland Metropolitan School District (OH)

Mr. James Green, Principal, Cleveland Metropolitan School District, (OH)

Ms. Ana I. Gutierrez, Principal, Little Lake City School District (CA)

About Project Tomorrow

Project Tomorrow's nonprofit mission is to support the effective implementation of research-based learning experiences for students in K-12 schools. Project Tomorrow is particularly interested in the role of digital tools, content and resources in supporting students' development of college and career ready skills. The organization's landmark research is the Speak Up Research Project which annually polls K-12 students, parents, educators and community members about the impact of technology resources on learning experiences both in school and out of school, and represents the largest collection of authentic, unfiltered stakeholder voice on digital learning. Since 2003, almost 6 million K-12 students, parents, teachers, librarians, principals, technology leaders, district administrators and members of the community have shared their views and ideas through the Speak Up Project. Learn more at www.tomorrow.org.

About BrainPOP

BrainPOP is an online educational solution that makes rigorous learning experiences accessible and engaging for all. Proven to raise academic achievement, it has been a trusted resource to more than six million educators and has engaged the hearts and challenged the minds of over 300 million learners worldwide. 70% of K-8 U.S. schools have turned to BrainPOP as a go-to resource for remote learning, and nine out of 10 educators would recommend it to a friend or colleague. BrainPOP provides endless opportunities for kids to take agency over their learning through playful, knowledge-building content and learner-driven projects that strengthen critical, computational, and creative thinking across the entire curriculum. The company is committed to empowering kids to succeed and thrive in the classroom and beyond. Learn more at www.brainpop.com.

ⁱ Speak Up National 2020 Report: <https://tomorrow.org/speakup/pdfs/2020%20Speak%20Up%20National%20Report.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Speak Up Research results 2011 – 2019: www.tomorrow.org/speakup