

National Association of State Boards of Education

---

## ➔ Preparing School Leaders for Crises

By Pamela Davis-Vaught

**The school years touched by the pandemic tested the mettle of school leaders in unprecedented ways. While many had weathered crises of varying magnitudes before it, COVID-19 was the longest, most widespread test of school principals and administrators' skills in managing schools in crisis conditions.**

I am a member of the Virginia State Board of Education and was a school principal in a high-poverty community. When the governor shut down Virginia's public schools by executive order on March 13, 2020, a range of deep emotions consumed my faculty and staff. As they pivoted their mode of instruction, they also became more acutely aware of the dire situations of many of their students, many of whom were experiencing traumatic home environments, food insecurity, and a severe lack of resources for continued learning at home. It fell on me to help staff process their emotions as they tried to support students.

In normal times, principals make many consequential decisions during fast-paced days in which they deal with site management, faculty and staff leadership, academic and instructional guidance, and the mental, social, and physical needs of every individual in the school. To this list of many and varied skills, the pandemic added questions of how best to prepare principals to lead during crises and recovery. Researchers and state policy leaders alike will doubtless continue to explore the extent to which abilities to manage crises are key to effective leadership, as well as ways to help more school leaders develop these dispositions.

I am deeply interested in the answers. My principal preparation program had prepared

me to adapt to circumstances and make decisions based on qualitative and quantitative data. It required 990 hours of experience aligned to principal preparation standards. Further, I had conducted research as part of my program on teacher resilience, poverty, homelessness, and trauma response. Thus, my starting point during the crisis was to focus first on serving basic needs and then on educating students. I knew that flexibility and communication mattered for both. Still, I struggled to help staff deal with traumatic situations confronting the families and children they served.

At the outset of the crisis, I met with faculty and staff as a full group and then by grade levels and departments, both in person and socially distanced and on Zoom. I called, texted, and emailed regularly. I met with parents. I listened to their concerns as we developed plans and made decisions to support students' well-being.

Our faculty and staff were superheroes. I already knew their skills in the classroom, but during the pandemic they extended their reach beyond school doors to provide love, support, and resources to parents and families. Together, we delivered laptops, food, clothing, and toilet paper. We did uplifting drive-bys to our students' homes and celebrated online participation and academic benchmarks with pizza and ice cream for the whole family. When we learned students were in crisis, we took baby goats to visit or a dancing physical education teacher would ring the doorbell.

### RESEARCH ON EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Over the past several years, many states and districts have been seeking to align and integrate all the components that help identify, train, and develop effective school leaders throughout their careers. In a 2021 report

published by The Wallace Foundation, Paul Manna developed the idea of a healthy policy ecosystem for developing effective school leaders in which state policy is neither too rigid nor so general that it cannot meaningfully support the efforts of district leaders to develop robust principal pipelines.<sup>1</sup>

Manna identified questions state boards of education can ask to discern whether state policy is supporting principal pipelines across seven domains: leader standards, preservice preparation, hiring and placement, evaluation and support, principal supervisors, leader tracking systems, and systems of support.

For example, Manna suggested, policy leaders ought to assess how well their standards differentiate among the varied roles of different types of school leaders, align with other policies that affect the pipeline, and are flexible enough to allow district leaders to augment and adapt them. They also can ask whether degree programs to prepare school leaders are relevant to the work they will do in local districts, and the degree to which state leaders are creating incentives for the programs to partner with districts on admissions criteria, curricular content, and other preservice learning.

Regarding veteran principals, state leaders can ask whether professional learning identifies strengths and gaps in the development of principals' skills. In a report summarizing the research on what makes for effective principals, Linda Darling-Hammond and colleagues note that less than half of principals had an internship that enabled them to exercise leadership skills in a school setting, and very few had access to mentors or coaches.<sup>2</sup>

The pandemic underscored the extent to which crisis management requires specific skills and dispositions of school leaders, ones that should be nurtured through leader preparation, mentoring, and ongoing professional learning. Many seasoned leaders had experienced school crises before the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> "Issues around crisis leadership and management don't show up in prevailing

leadership standards,” said Vanderbilt University professor Jason Grissom at a NASBE conference session in 2021. Nor do pre-service programs or in-service professional learning routinely include related coursework and training.

Yet simply adding a layer of expectations onto the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders may not be the best approach, agreed panelists at the NASBE session. “Our current standards for school leaders define a superhuman,” Grissom said. In a climate where principals report heightened stress and burnout, “I do worry about just adding on more things to the existing set of standards.”

Grissom and Lara Condon recently reviewed the scant research on how school leaders are prepared to understand and manage crises in schools and districts.<sup>4</sup> They outline five phases of a crisis management life cycle in schools: mitigation/prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and learning. Parsing crisis management into these phases should both enable school, district, and state leaders to draw lessons from how school leaders handled particular crises, including the pandemic. It should also focus future efforts on increasing the capacity of existing and aspiring school leaders to manage future crises, they concluded.

### STATE EFFORTS

State leaders’ attention to the health of the principal pipeline is needed now more than ever. Several states have already taken steps to strengthen their pipelines, align policies that affect the career lifecycle, and better support principals.

The **Utah State Board of Education** stood up a working group on school leadership in 2017 that produced several recommendations that spanned points along the principal pipeline, and the board approved them the following year. In its request for state funding for 2021–22, the board asked for funds to create a grant program for districts to improve the principal pipeline for rural and charter schools, provide meaningful job-embedded experiences to school leader candidates, provide three years of high-quality mentorship for every new school leader, and support principal supervisors. Through its Principal Leadership

Institute, **Colorado** in 2021–22 offered participants a year-long, job-embedded program of training and coaching by exemplary principals.

**North Carolina’s** Department of Public Instruction stood up an advisory committee of principals to advise the state board and state legislators on specific education legislation during the pandemic. State Superintendent Catherine Truitt then asked the group to provide input on an ongoing basis. For example, the committee is advising the state’s Professional Educator Preparation and Standards Commission and the state board on principal preparation and licensure, including requirements for principal internships.<sup>5</sup>

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Principals face staggering demands. It is not a job for the faint of heart, nor for those without a service mentality. Among these myriad demands is the necessity for building the capacity of their staff to face crises with resilience. These skills are important both for improving the capacity to serve students and for teacher retention. Leadership preparation programs, state leaders, and district leaders have roles in ensuring that more candidates develop these skills.

Preparation programs can prepare principals better for the profession’s changing dynamics, and state boards can encourage them to do so without changing any state licensure requirements. Because candidates’ own past adverse experiences may shape their ability to cope with stressors and develop professional resilience, their preparation programs can support them as they discover where they stand in dealing with stressors as adults.<sup>6</sup> Realization of personal resilience is invaluable to candidates, as it may indicate areas for personal growth and self-management.

Programs can also offer opportunities for candidates to engage current principals in candid conversations on the ever-evolving demands of the job and how they have responded. Job-embedded experiences for school leader candidates and mentorships, as Utah and Colorado have done, are another way to prepare school leaders better.

In the face of looming shortages of qualified school leaders, local districts should use

available funds to identify those interested in becoming principals and support these candidates along a career continuum—from teacher leader, coach, assistant principal, to principal. When making principal assignments, districts must take individual dispositions into account to ensure that candidates’ characteristics complement the communities in which they will serve.

State boards should encourage districts to celebrate the candidates they have identified and send them to trainings and conferences alongside principal mentors. Principal preparation programs are expensive and time consuming. To make the principalship more attainable and inclusive, state boards can advocate for funds to cover the costs for aspiring candidates who could not otherwise afford it.

Principals’ ability to lead during crises stems from resilient, flexible dispositions that enable them to keep serving students and families in difficult circumstances. When supported in gaining decision-making skills that can be honed with time, experience, and training, principals can continue to serve their students and communities and be a model for the educators they lead.

*Dr. Pamela L. Davis-Vaught is a member of the Virginia State Board of Education.*

### NOTES

1 Paul Manna, “How Can State Policy Support Local School Districts as They Develop Comprehensive and Aligned Principal Pipelines?” (New York: Wallace Foundation, October 2021). See also Paul Manna, “Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning: Considerations for State Policy” (New York: Wallace Foundation, 2015).

2 Linda Darling-Hammond et al., “Developing Effective Principals: What Kind of Learning Matters?” (Learning Policy Institute and The Wallace Foundation, 2022).

3 Patricia Daughtry, “Principals’ Preparedness for, and Experience of, Crisis Events at School,” dissertation (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2015).

4 Jason Grissom and Lara Condon, “Leading Schools and Districts in Times of Crisis,” *Educational Researcher* 50, no. 5 (June/July 2021): 315–24.

5 Rupen Fofaria, “To Navigate Pandemic’s Impact, Policymakers Turn to Principals,” *EdNC*, May 1, 2022.

6 One scale that organizations use for this purpose is the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale-25.