

## The Reopening of a School during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Administrative Lens

**James A. Martinez**

*University of Tennessee, USA*

**Lisa R. Amick**

*University of Kentucky, USA*

**Sydney McAbee**

*University of Tennessee, USA*

Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>In an effort to investigate school administrator self-efficacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, two public high school administrators from the same high school in a Southeastern U.S. state were interviewed virtually two times a week during the first six weeks of the 2020-2021 school year. Selection of participants was accomplished using convenience sampling, as both persons completed a principal preparation program where the lead researcher served as an instructor. The participants were surveyed before and after the study using questions from the Principal Self-Efficacy Survey (PSES) as well as researcher-developed questions specifically related to work life during the pandemic. The study revealed the degree that these administrators defined their work experiences during this period, based on four distinct perspectives, including: (a) structural, (b) symbolic, (c) political, and (d) human resources. Also, the study revealed administrator perceptions of equity and access among various constituents at their school, including teachers, support staff, students, parents, and members of the broader school community. Using open</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b>  <i>Received</i>                      March 11, 2021   <i>Accepted</i>                      June 14, 2021</p> <hr/> <p><b>Keywords:</b>  <i>Administration, Self-efficacy, Equity, Pandemic</i></p>

*systems theory as a theoretical perspective, the study revealed six emergent themes that related to their work while opening school during a world crisis: (a) technology access/instruction, (b) informational/procedural ambiguity, (c) resource dependency, (d) policy adaptability, (e) stakeholder disposition, and (f) methods of communication. Focused on a principal and assistant principal at a single high school, this case-study illuminates the personal and professional challenges faced by these administrators during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

---

**Cite as:**

Martinez, J. A., Amick, L. R., & McAbee, S. (2021). The Reopening of a School during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Administrative Lens. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership*, 6(2), 515-552. DOI: 10.30828/real/2021.2.5

## Introduction

The importance of school administrators to address issues that affect student health and learning in today's schools cannot be overstated. These issues were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting the manner in which schools served students, teachers and non-teaching staff, families and members of their local communities. Starting in the spring of 2020, school officials responded to the global pandemic in many ways, to ensure the health and welfare of all school stakeholders. For schools which continued in-person instruction, school administrators led the efforts to install health check procedures for all persons entering school grounds, mandate personal protective equipment (PPE), adopt procedures for contact tracing, and enforce strict limits to physical interaction for persons in their schools. For schools with some or all students learning remotely, school administrators worked with district office staff and community members to ensure equitable access to educational and computer resources, meeting demands that were



previously not considered. At the same time, these professionals assisted teachers and students as forms of instruction were modified to increase the use of computer-based teleconferencing platforms, learning management systems, and educational software.

School administrators spearheaded efforts to address the needs of instructional support staff who support students receiving specialized services (e.g. special education, English language learning, gifted and talented, economically disadvantaged). In addition to instructional support, school administrators continued their efforts with participation in co-curricular activities (e.g. sports, clubs) while adhering to health and safety standards. As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to affect the entire school communities, administrators were required to effectively communicate up-to-date information, using a variety of methods, about changes that affected the way that a variety of school stakeholders could engage in school-related activities. Additional professional obligations during the pandemic adversely affected the personal lives of school administrators, some of whom faced pandemic related health-related concerns themselves, as well as those experienced by their friends, colleagues and family members.

According to Bolman and Deal (2013), “life’s daily challenges rarely arrive clearly labeled or neatly packed” (p. 407). It is clear that issues related to the administration of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic are unprecedented in terms of complexity and scope. This research study aspires to illuminate the effects of this global pandemic on the lives of two U.S. high school administrators during the first six weeks of the 2020-2021 school year. Participant self-efficacy and perspective framing provide a basis for understanding

the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their personal and professional lives.

For the purposes of this study, the terms “school leaders” and school administrators are not used interchangeably. In general, all school administrators are considered school leaders, in their capacity to implement a school vision, enforce policies and procedures, serve as role models at their respective schools, and the like. However, not all school leaders are school administrators, as there are other members of the school community (e.g. board members, attendance clerks, sports coaches) who contribute to the leadership of the school, but are not appointed as formal administrators. That said, the terms “educational leaders” and “school leaders” are used interchangeably, omitting any references to administrators not serving in elementary and secondary school sites.

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate feelings of self-efficacy expressed by two school administrators in a Southeastern US state during the first six weeks of the 2020-2021 school year, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic. A secondary aim was to reveal the degree that these administrators defined their work experiences during this period, based on four distinct perspectives, or “frames” (Bolman & Deal, 2013) which include: (a) structural, (b) symbolic, (c) political, and (d) human resource. Thirdly, it was the intent of the authors to research the administrators’ perceptions of equity and access among various constituents at their school during the study, including teachers, support staff, students, parents, and members of the broader school community.



## **Theoretical Framework**

This research is guided by the theoretical perspective of schools as open systems, a subset of systems theory. In general, researchers use systems theory to understand interactions that occur in response to actions taken by participants within the system itself. Orren & Smith (2013) state that individuals in social systems “engage in input/output exchanges with their social environments” (p. 40). Schools can be viewed as social systems with interdependent elements (e.g. teachers depend on principals; students depend on teachers) (Ee & Gandara, 2020; Anderson & Carter, 1990; Parsons, 1959).

## **Related Literature**

School disasters are characterized by their large-scale disruption and sudden changes in normal routine to the school and community. In many instances of disaster, there are marked times of uncertainty, unexpectedness, and unpreparedness. Disasters stem from many causes: school shootings; natural disasters that include hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, flood, and/or fire; and biological disasters that include epidemics or pandemics that often require schools to close and considerably alter schools’ normal routines. As a result, in the time of disaster, school administrators in the affected school are faced with unique challenges in leadership that include supporting students, teachers, and the community; adopting new job duties; and establishing a plan of action. Moreover, school administrators are responsible for establishing protocols that will be implemented in a future disaster with similar circumstances, if it were to occur.

## **Educational Leadership in Response to Disasters**

Educational leaders are challenged under normal circumstances, but even more so during crisis/disaster scenarios. Visibility, accessibility, and engagement, are stressed by leaders in the midst of a school disaster, and these often involve creative leadership strategies (Bishop et al., 2015). School administrators become the link between the school and the community by sharing a vision and providing support at the community level (Gyang, 2020; Stone-Johnson and Weiner, 2016). The creativity needed in leading the community through a disaster involves providing the learning community important resources and involving stake-holders in the decision making process (Gyang, 2020). A case study by Tarrant (2011) highlighted the positive effect school administrators have in communicating with families after the school disaster and is supported by the evidence suggesting that community resilience stems from a school administrators' actions (Sherrieb et al., 2012). However, in unprecedented times such as a pandemic, school administrators lack useful information regarding changes to school procedures, and this creates uncertainty among the school population, parent population, and the community in general (Ahlström et al., 2020). School administrators in the future, though, can mitigate the level of uncertainty by encouraging participation in events that provide advance training on drills and protocols that will be needed in an emergency (Akbaba-Altun, 2005).

## **Supporting the School and the Community**

In times of disaster, the school should not lose emphasis placed on students and their wellbeing, as well as their academic success (Bishop et al., 2015; Imberman et al., 2009). School administrators are responsible for maintaining a positive atmosphere



so that students feel hopeful even when distressed (Akbaba-Altun, 2005). According to Fournier et al. (2020), actions related to inclusive leadership, where the school administrators hold the belief that all students have the ability to learn and value student input, are essential under dire circumstances. Sider (2020) suggests that, among the myriad of concerns that arise in a school disaster, equitable access to education for students was among the most significant. An educational leader's actions, on the other hand, can be limited as they address inequitable access to resources for particular students. Not all students have equal access to learning technology (smart phones, laptops, tablets) necessary for efficient remote learning (Pollock, 2020). Acknowledging that access is a high priority, it is recommended that school administrators pre-emptively assess the unique needs of students at their sites so they can implement strategies to improve student support (U.S. CDC, 2020).

Additionally, school administrators are responsible for the wellbeing of the teaching staff, as teachers require unique support during a school disaster (Fletcher and Nicholas, 2016). Inclusive leadership is beneficial to teachers as professional development is prioritized, collaboration is encouraged, and diversity of skills among the staff is celebrated (Fournier et al., 2020). Differing levels of support should be taken into consideration, especially during a school's transition from in-person to remote learning (Li et al., 2020). Finally, school administrators become the link between the school and the community by sharing a vision and providing support at the community level (Gyang, 2020; Stone-Johnson and Weiner, 2016). Visibility, accessibility, and engagement, are stressed by leaders in the midst of a school disaster, and these often involve creative leadership strategies (Bishop et al., 2015).

### **Adopting New Job Duties**

During past school disasters that have occurred internationally, increased workload and expanded job duties for school administrators was required in nearly all instances (Hauseman et al., 2020; Bishop et al., 2015; Mutch, 2015; Ozmen, 2006; Pollock, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges for the school administrators, and their responsibilities have increased in coordination with a heightened degree of accountability. With regard to a viral pandemic, school administrators are faced with legal challenges in reporting symptomatic students, maintaining a socially-distanced campus, and enforcing contact tracing and quarantines. Moreover, the role of school administrators during a pandemic requires regular collaboration with public health officials to protect the health of their communities (Pollock, 2020).

### **Establishing an Action Plan**

In addition to supporting the school and community as well as adopting new job duties, research studies focus on a school administrator's role of creating a plan of action for the school in the midst of a current disaster that develops strategies for opening or closing the school (Zhang, 2020; Ozmen, 2006). Bishop et al. (2015) contends that, in making decisions for a school in crisis, the preferred manner is to act quickly. In identifying actions that will prove to be most beneficial in planning the course of action for the school, a school administrator needs to seek advice, demonstrate empathy, communicate clearly, and envision the long-term goal (O'Connell and Clark, 2020). Fortunately, school administrators are able to learn not only from their own schools' past crisis events, but also from other school systems' mitigation strategies used during a disaster. By





understanding past experiences, the school administrators can begin planning for the future (Brown, 2018).

### **Preparing for Future Disaster**

One of the marked characteristics of a school disaster is the uncertainty that encompasses the school. This uncertainty can be reduced by pre-emptively establishing a plan, protocols, and/or strategies in preparation for future disasters. In preparation for a sudden change to remote learning, professional development and training of all school staff regarding issues related to technology, communication, and equity must be completed for a successful transition (Zhang, 2020; Ozmen, 2006). Moreover, school administrators should be in contact with other organizations in the community that play a role in disaster relief to determine the roles that will be carried out by these respective parties (Akbaba-Altun, 2005). Thoughtful and intentional planning by administrators is crucial to advance awareness in methods to decrease destructive effects related to a disaster (Stone-Johnson and Weiner, 2020; Ozmen, 2006).

To synthesize, the literature shows that regardless of the external factors and happenings, and even with added duties during a global pandemic, a school's focus should be kept on the wellbeing and academic success of the students. School administrators should continue to value students, fight for equitable instruction for all, provide sense of hope for everyone, and keep the wellbeing of the teaching staff of utmost importance. This study looks at the self-efficacy of two school administrators as they respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and how they define their work experiences based on four perspectives: structural, symbolic, political, and human resources.

## Method

A sequential, mixed methods research design (Teddie & Tashakkori, 2009) was used so that both quantitative survey and qualitative interview data could be investigated, both in isolation and in relation to one another. Participant responses to non-demographic survey questions collected prior to the first interview, coinciding with the start of the academic year, were compared to survey data collected after the interviews had concluded, a span of six weeks. Audio transcriptions from all interviews were completed and all members of the research team were either present during, or watched a recording of, all interviews. Although the interviews were administered remotely and transcriptions were comprised mostly of participant voiced responses to questions posed to them, field notes were recorded by the researchers to include important visual information (e.g. expressions, gestures).

### Participants

Two administrators serving in the same secondary (high) school in a Southeastern US state were selected as participants for this study. Prior to them taking on administrative roles, assistant principal Rachel (a pseudonym) had served as a high school English teacher, while principal Steven (a pseudonym) had served as a high school science teacher and coach. The selection of these participants was purposeful, as both had completed their principal preparation program (PPP) two years prior to the study in the same university where the lead researcher served as an instructor. It was important to the study that participants had developed a level of trust and positive rapport with the lead researcher, so they would more likely respond



substantively to survey and interview questions. Demographic information from both participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1.

*Demographic Information for Study Participants*

Participant	Role	Sex	Age	Race	Highest Education	Years as Teacher	Years as Administrator
Rachel	Asst. Principal	Female	31	White	Ed. S.	6	3
Steven	Principal	Male	33	White	Ed. S.	7	3

*Note:* Neither participant recorded in their questionnaire that, aside from their administrative credential, they had been certified in instructional technology.

**Instruments**

*Survey.* Prior to, and immediately after, the interview portion of the study, participants were asked to complete a 19-question survey, requiring them to provide demographic information and rate (quantitative, Likert-scaled) statements that reflected their perceptions of: (a) professional self-efficacy, (b) work habits, (c) teacher competence, (d) estimations of professional support, (e) relationships with teachers, (f) equity and access of resources, and (g) organizational changes and professional concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In investigating options related to research design, Creswell (2012) emphasizes that quantitative research is more applicable when researchers relate known variables, rather than when they are not clearly defined at the outset (p. 13). Therefore, survey questions were taken from instruments developed in prior studies focused on measuring school administrator self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004; Martinez, Williams & Uy, 2020) and in the case of questions related to COVID-19, created expressly by the researchers for the purpose of this study. The survey

was first completed by the school administrators the week before the first student attendance day and the second administration of the survey was completed six weeks later, days after the final interview. Both surveys were provided to the participants via email, requiring them to print a paper copy, complete the survey by hand, scan the completed survey and attach it to an email message addressed to the lead researcher.

*Interviews.* Participants were interviewed for approximately one half-hour per session, twice a week for the first six weeks of the school year. Once a week (Mondays) both administrators were interviewed in the same virtual session. On Wednesdays, the assistant principal, Rachel served as the lone interviewee and the head principal, Steven, was the lone interviewee on Fridays. The timeline for the interviews, as well as significant events occurring during the study, is provided in Figure 1.

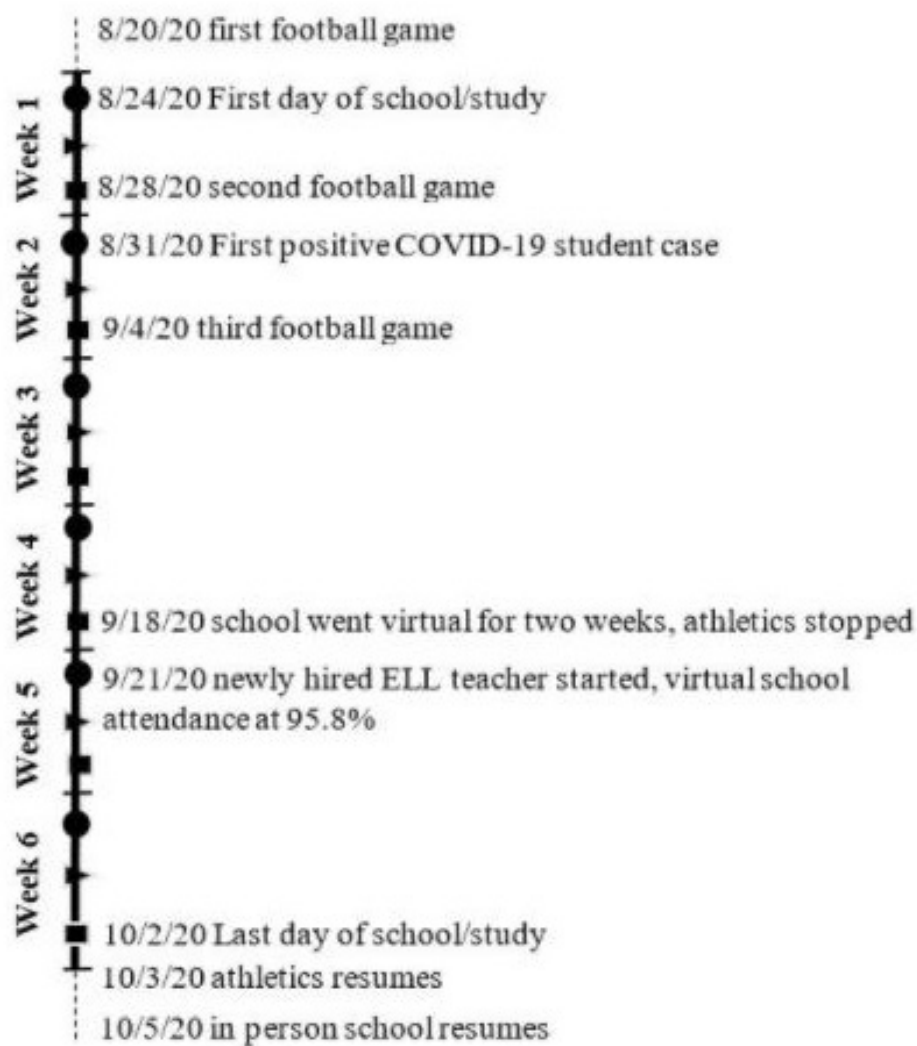


Figure 1.  
*Timeline of Study*

*Note.* ● Combined interview with Rachel and Steven (Mondays each week between 8/4/20 and 9/28/20, except for Monday 9/7/20 where the interview was moved to Tuesday, 9/8/20 due to Labor Day)

▲ Interviews with Rachel (Wednesdays between 8/26/20 and 9/30/20)

■ Interviews with Steven (Fridays between 8/28/20 and 10/2/20)

The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for participants to depart from commenting only on the questions posed, increasing the breadth and authenticity of their responses. The original plan was to interview the participants in person at their school, but due to safety concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were accomplished using the Zoom teleconferencing platform. Both audio and video content from the interviews was recorded in preparation for the qualitative coding process.

The interview questions were created by the researchers to reinforce concepts in the study's survey, as well as draw on elements of self-efficacy as defined in current literature (Hoy & Hoy, 2020) and accepted models of perspective framing (Bolman & Deal, 2015). Overall, questions focused on the following concepts: (a) self-efficacy, (b) work-related resources, obstacles and accomplishments, (c) vulnerable populations, (d) equity/access, (e) perceptions of professional skills and knowledge, and (f) organizational perspectives (or "frames"). Interview questions used in this study are provided in Appendix A. Football games and athletics are included as significant events because large groups of students gathered and this could have contributed to when the school was forced to switch to virtual learning.



Finally, it should be noted that two years before the study took place, both participants received instruction in a principal preparation program class taught by the lead researcher which focused on the practice of “framing” to better categorize and diagnose work-related occurrences. According to authors Bolman and Deal (2015), the ability to use frames “requires an ability to think about situations in more than one way, which lets you develop alternative diagnoses and strategies” (p. 5). The final question in each interview required the participants to identify which of the four frames (structural, symbolic, political, and/or human resource) they most associated with recent events.

To increase the validity of the study, participants were given the opportunity to “member check” portions of the manuscript text that directly or indirectly referred to their responses. This member checking and use of pseudonyms were used to increase confidentiality and ensure anonymity. Although assistant principal Rachel was satisfied with all portions of the analysis which reflected her views, principal Steven asked for minor adjustments to ensure that anonymity was preserved (e.g. revision of a statement that expressed his familiarity with the school having been a student and teacher at the same site).

There were a number of limitations to the study that were out of the control of the researchers. The most significant of these are the changing conditions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including restrictions prohibiting the researchers from performing observations at the site. Also, limiting the study to a single school with defined characteristics (e.g. enrollment, percentage of students receiving free or reduced meals, ethnic makeup, teacher qualifications) does not allow for generalizability to other populations. Albeit allowing the

researchers to treat the school as a “case-site”, revealing as much or more about the school than the participants, the sample size for this study is insufficient for any meaningful quantitative statistical measurement.

Similarly, there were some delimitations in this study, based on choices the research team made. Since both participants had earned their educational specialist degrees from the same principal preparation program, were only three years out from having done so, and were serving in the same school, it is likely that many of their responses would not show a great deal of variability. Due to the inherent differences in professional roles (i.e. principal and assistant principal), one cannot directly compare results between the two participants, Steven and Rachel.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

Results of both quantitative (i.e. survey) and qualitative (i.e. interview) investigations illuminate study participant understandings during the first six weeks the 2020-2021 school year. Taken individually, each instrument provided unique understandings presented by each of the two school administrators. Collectively, the data show connections between initial thoughts, day-to-day perceptions and overall ideas that provide a comprehensive look at one school through the eyes of these two, public school administrators.

#### **Survey Results**

Quantitative data was collected by the participants as they completed pre- and post-surveys, gauging their feelings of self efficacy amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The pre- and post-survey





data were analyzed quantitatively using Microsoft Excel, as well as comparing scores between participants.

Researchers further analyzed the data to look at which numerical response was most common, which response was least common, and how many questions the participants scored with the same number, and which questions showed relative agreement or disagreement among the participants.

*COVID-Focused Section (31 questions).* Both participants, Rachel and Steven, completed the COVID-focused portion of the survey before and after the interviews. For these survey questions, participants were asked to rate each question on a Likert-scale between one (strongly disagree) and four (strongly agree). Comparing pre-survey to the post-survey results in this section revealed changes in participant attitudes about their own capacity to serve in their professional roles. Of the 31 pre-survey questions, Rachel responded six times with a “strongly agree” response (19%), nineteen times with an “agree” (61%), six times with a “disagree” (19%), and did not respond to any question with a “strongly disagree” (0%). Her overall pre-survey average was a 2.94. Rachel’s responses became even more positive from the pre- to the post survey. Instead of five “strongly agree” responses, she jumped to twelve (38.7%), her overall average was a 3.35 when her post-survey scores were averaged, and her average change from pre- to post-response was a positive 13.9%.

Steven’s pre-survey average was 0.1 less than Rachel’s. As was the case with Rachel, Steven’s post-survey average similarly increased compared to his pre-survey average, an increase of 13.4% to 3.22. However, some differences do exist in these data. Where Rachel’s scores were all twos, threes, and fours on the pre-survey,

Steven's spread the entire spectrum with ratings in all four of the categories. Out of the 31 questions, he responded seven times with a "strongly agree" response (22.5%), sixteen times with an "agree" (51.6%), four times with a "disagree" (13%), and responded "strongly disagree" four times (13%).

Overall, from pre- to post-survey, Rachel dropped her score on only one question (3%), rated the same on twenty questions (64.5%), increased her score by one point on eight questions (25.8%), and increased her score by two points on two questions (6.5%). Steven, from pre- to post-survey, dropped his score by two points on two questions (6.5%), kept the same score on seventeen questions (54.8%), increased his score by one point on ten questions (32%), and increased his score by two points on two questions (6.5%). The participants responded with the same score to 15 questions (48%), responded within one point to 13 questions (41.9%), and responded within two points to three questions (9.6%). On the post-survey questions, the participants responded with the same score to 16 questions (51.6%), responded within one to 14 questions (45%), and responded within two to one question (3%). Data analysis provided a means to understand differences in ratings by Steven and Rachel. There were four occurrences where one of the participants increased their ratings by two points from pre- to post-survey. All four of these occurrences occurred on questions focused on technology access and online instruction.

Other highlights from this section of the survey relate to one-point differences (twenty-one instances, seventeen increasing) between pre-and post-survey responses. In four instances, one-point differences were recorded by both administrators while responding to the same survey question (i.e. 10, 12, 24, and 26), two of which



revealed both parties increasing, while the other two questions revealed one administrator increasing and the other decreasing. Most significantly, between the pre-and post-surveys both study participants increased from “disagree” to “agree” on question 10 (“I have been effective in supporting measures related to equity for students and their families”) and from “agree” to “strongly agree” on question 26 (“I have adjusted my expectations for online effective teaching because of the COVID-19 pandemic”).

Owing to different professional experiences during the same time period, on question 24 (“I sometimes doubt my ability to evaluate teachers for online teaching) for example, Rachel decreased her rating from “strongly agree” to “agree”, while Steven increased his rating from “disagree” to “agree”. From these data, it can be surmised that, although coming to their post-survey conclusions from different directions, both administrators ultimately felt able to evaluate teachers in their online teaching. Overall, these data suggest that both administrators went into the academic year with high levels of self-efficacy and they grew higher over the six week study even amidst a global pandemic. These data also suggest that past professional experience as teachers and the administrator preparation program completed by the participants may have provided them with the knowledge and tools, and therefore the confidence, to handle a variety of situations, even those which are ill defined.

*Principal Self-Efficacy Survey (PSES) Section (18 questions).* A second part of the pre- and post-survey was not related specifically to the COVID-19 pandemic, but asked the participants to rate themselves on self-efficacy using the Principal Self-Efficacy Survey (PSES). For each of the survey’s questions, participants rated statements on a scale of one to nine, where 1 equates to “none at all”,

3 means “very little, 5 is “some degree”, 7 equates to “quite a bit”, and 9 means “a great deal”. The participants were able to designate even numbers as well, to fill in the scale. The results of the PSES section of the surveys are provided in Table 2.

Table 2.

*Quantitative Data - Researcher Created, COVID Focused Survey Portion (includes PSES)*

	Question	Rachel-pre	Rachel-post	Steven-pre	Steven-post
	In your current role as administrator, to what extent can you...				
1	facilitate student learning at your school?	7	7	7	7
2	generate enthusiasm for a shared vision for the school?	7	6	7	6
3	handle the time demands of the job?	7	8	7	8
4	manage change in your school?	8	7	6	6
5	promote school spirit amount a large majority of the student population?	6	6	6	6
6	create a positive learning environment in your school?	8	8	8	7
7	raise student achievement on standardized tests?	6	6	5	5
8	promote a positive image of your school with the media?	8	6	6	7
9	motivate teachers?	8	7	6	7



Table 2. (continued)

*Quantitative Data - Researcher Created, COVID Focused Survey Portion (includes PSES)*

Question	Rachel-pre	Rachel-post	Steven-pre	Steven-post
In your current role as administrator, to what extent can you...				
10 promote the prevailing values of the community in your school?	6	5	8	8
11 maintain control over your own daily schedule?	9	8	7	6
12 shape the operational policies and procedures that are necessary to manage your school?	9	8	8	7
13 handle effectively the discipline of students in your school?	7	6	8	9
14 promote acceptable behavior among students?	7	7	8	8
15 handle the paperwork required of the job?	7	8	7	8
16 promote ethical behavior among school personnel?	7	8	7	8
17 cope with the stress of the job?	8	8	5	5
18 prioritize among competing demands of the job?	8	9	7	7
Averages	7.39	7.11	6.83	6.94

*Note:* 1-none at all, 3-very little, 5-some degree, 7-quite a bit, 9-a great deal; Themes (a) technology access/information, (b) informational/procedural ambiguity, (c) resource dependency, (d) policy adaptability, (e) stakeholder disposition, (f) communication methods

Similar to results gathered in the COVID-19 focused portion of the survey, there was an overall sense of confidence reported by

both participants as evidenced by no scores being lower than a “5-some degree”. Rachel’s average score from all of the pre-survey questions was a 7.4. Those responses became slightly less positive from the pre- to the post survey, her overall post-survey average was 7.1 which depicts a change of negative 0.28. Relative to Rachel’s ratings on the PSES, Steven’s scores were slightly lower overall on both the pre- and post-surveys. His average score for the pre-survey was 6.8, three-tenths lower than Rachel’s average, and his post-survey average was 6.9, two-tenths lower than Rachel’s post-survey average. According to the PSES results, Steven rated highly in self-efficacy heading into the academic year and remained steady in those ratings.

Of the 18 statements provided in the PSES, there was only one two-point change from pre- to post-survey which was on statement 8, “In your current role as an administrator, to what extent can you promote a positive image of your school with the media?” Rachel recorded an 8 on her pre-survey and then dropped to a 6 on per post-survey. All other pre- to post- responses were within one point of each other. To further highlight important results, there were seven questions on the pre-survey and seven questions on the post-survey where both Rachel and Steven marked their abilities with the same score.

That said, there are two examples of where Steven expressed greater confidence in his abilities, relative to Rachel. For example, Rachel responded with a 6 on her pre-survey while Steven responded with an 8 in responding to question 10 asking, “In your current role as administrator, to what extent can you promote the prevailing values of the community in your school?”. Also, Rachel scored herself as a 6 while Steven scored himself a 9 on question 13, which asked the



participants about effectively handling discipline. Alternatively, Rachel reported an 8 and Steven reported a 5 on both pre- and post-survey to question 17, which inquired, “In your current role as administrator, to what extent can you cope with the stress of the job?”.

We can hypothesize that Steven’s higher confidence level could be contributed to the autonomy of his role as principal, or possibly due to research that shows that men are more comfortable with self-promotion than are women (Exley & Kessler, 2021).

### **Interview Results**

Throughout the sessions with the administrators, repetitive themes emerged from their answers to the questions asked that describe dilemmas, achievements, and unique situations faced by the community, students, teachers. The themes described highlight the changing circumstances of the school and included: (a) technology access/instruction, (b) informational/procedural ambiguity, (c) resource dependency, (d) policy adaptability, (e) stakeholder disposition, and (f) communication methods.

*Technology access/instruction.* During the first week of interviews, the school’s principal, Steven, described the beginning of the school year as going “smoother than we all expected it to be” with the exception of virtual learning related technology issues. By the end of the first week, Steven stated that work to address technology difficulties was the school’s “biggest accomplishment.” The next time teachers’ comfortability with virtual instruction is mentioned by the principal, he observed that “teachers [had] developed a level of comfort.” The improvement continued throughout the sessions, including circumstances of school experiencing cycles of in-person and virtual instruction.

**Informational/procedural ambiguity.** Additionally, in the midst of returning the school routine to normal, the administrators expressed instances of ambiguity that caused normal routine to be challenging. The ambiguity in communication included direction from the school district office regarding COVID-19 policies that impacted teachers as they experienced the vagueness of contact tracing in the classroom and the uncertainty of the duration they will be teaching in the classroom or virtual setting. Overall, the uncertainty infiltrated the school holistically, and in each new issue of action to take regarding contact tracing, school athletics, quarantine, or social distancing, “[ambiguity] pops back up, and it’s not popping back up in the same like tidal wave it was before,” as said by Rachel in the sixth week.

**Resource dependence.** Throughout the interviews, dependency on resources, both material and human, appeared consistently as a theme. The technological resource in demand was an inadequacy of internet access for students who came from low socioeconomic status (SES) homes, highlighting a limitation the school faced in regards to being unable to ensure reliable internet access for all students. In the final individual interviews in the sixth week, both Steven and Rachel commented that technology and access to resources remained relevant issues.

Aside from technology resource deficiencies, the school exhibited a substantial need in human resources as well. The lack of resources in this category includes the need for teachers with technology support skills, substitute teachers, and specialized subjects teachers. Steven first indicated teachers’ skills were needed in the later part of the first week where he stated that “we don’t have a whole bunch of teachers that are qualified to do [on-site tech





resource], so the ones that are qualified right now are just overworked.” In the second week, Steven cited substitute teachers as a “major resource shortage” and stated in a later interview that the shortage could revert the school to closing. Additionally, specialized skills and staff availability were needed for English language learning (ELL) and special education students. Although the desire for an ELL teacher was persistently mentioned by both administrators, on the twelfth interview, Rachel mentioned that an ELL teacher was hired, but she remarked in the final interview that she was still concerned about the ELL students “because they were not served for so long, and we’re playing catch up now and it’s a group that already was playing catch up in a lot of ways because of the language barrier.”

*Policy adaptability.* The abnormal circumstances of the cycle of in-person and virtual instruction warranted novel school and school district policies, many of which were developed during the summer prior to the beginning of the school year and had never been tested in circumstances that change rapidly.

The most prominent included policy related to student attendance and athletics. The methods and personnel for monitoring and reporting student attendance were altered according to in-person or remote attendance. He remarked that he was concerned that “the first time we’re going to hear from some of these kids this school year is when they have to show up in court for truancy.” Fortunately, by the fifth week, virtual student attendance had improved to mirror the attendance rate of a typical school year. Finally, Steven stated in the twelfth interview session that policy regarding student athletics was a “looming question for our football coaches.” Students planning for state qualification in golf tournaments resulted in many families of golf players advocating for games to continue regardless of school

closure. Steven described the policy changes as “blanket sweeping guidelines” but there were many specific instances where an overarching policy was not the best fit.

**Stakeholder disposition.** The stakeholder disposition is used to describe the inherent characteristics that the students, teachers, administrators, and school community possessed throughout the duration of the interviews with the administrators.

Both Steven and Rachel stated early in the sessions that the students were compliant with mask and social distancing requirements but had “disconnected from the learning process completely” in the third week, according to Steven. Rachel described early on her disposition as an administrator as her ability “to acquire new knowledge in the service of someone else.” Steven attributed his “level of trust from the community” to previous work experience in the school. Teachers’ dispositions were described in terms of virtual and face-to-face pedagogical practices. Steven noted that the commitment to provide “high quality education” in the virtual setting had diminished by week five. Moreover, Steven stated that teachers who showed apathetic qualities in a normal school year exhibit the same qualities in the virtual setting. The teachers’ disposition mattered less about the setting of instruction but rather more about their practices and attitudes towards instruction in general.

**Communication methods.** The majority of the communication methods mentioned throughout included information disseminated from the district level. Rachel mentioned in the first session that she felt “good about the people we have in the building...it’s just the information that’s coming to us from on high.” Communication from the district level hindered the administrators’ ability to have a clear



vision of the policies being implemented, which ultimately impacted school functionality, such as the distribution of technology.

Additionally, communication between administrators and teachers, as well as between administrators and parents, embodied a unique therapeutic nature as described by Rachel. In two separate interviews during the fourth week, Rachel noted that her job duty reflected a “therapist” for teachers and parents in order to assist students adapting to online learning.

*Framing of Experiences.* The secondary aim of this study was to document how each study participant “framed” their experiences as expressed in the interviews during the six weeks of the study, based on four distinct perspectives (Bolman & Deal, 2013), namely: (a) structural, (b) symbolic, (c) political, and (d) human resource. These frames were presented to the participants, respectively, as items related to: (a) technical quality, (b) ambiguity and uncertainty, (c) conflict and scarce resources, and (d) commitment and motivation. During the interviews, the administrators were asked to indicate which of these characteristics was most dominant at that time.

In their twice weekly interviews, both administrators answered most frequently that “ambiguity and uncertainty” defined their job experiences (Steven 46% of the time and Rachel 50% of the time). Rachel described this frame as “trying to figure out again how to translate things and to piece together what different people hear from different sources.” Steven concluded in the final week that newly implemented contact tracing guidelines had left the school “with a lot of ambiguity and uncertainty when you get into the nitty gritty details.”

Aside from their shared most frequent answer, Steven responded 23% of the time that “commitment and motivation”

(human resource frame) dominated his professional outlook, while Rachel responded with similarly eight percent of the time. Steven first commented in the third week that he worried that “the longer we progress through this...it’s going to have a negative effect on (teacher and staff) commitment and motivation.” Furthermore, Rachel focused on “conflict and scarce resources” 25% of the time, compared to 15% of Steven’s responses. This connection to the political frame was first mentioned by Rachel in the second week in regard to students lacking internet access.

### **Discussion**

Through surveys and interviews, two administrators from the same school shared feelings of professional self-efficacy and the manner in which they “framed” their COVID-19 pandemic experiences during the first six weeks of the 2020-2021 academic year. As school administrators, both participants were challenged to garner support for measures that were required in the first weeks of school because the pandemic. In the surveys and interviews, both administrators expressed a deep level of care for members of the school community, especially for the welfare of the teachers and students at their site. Since both Steven and Rachel had served at the school in the years prior to this study as teachers and administrators, they had established a level of trust with teachers, support staff, students and parents, in responding to the adverse circumstances related to the pandemic.

While serving as school administrators at the same site, it is clear that each had separate areas of influence. In general, principal Steven was focused on the policies and procedures needed to effectively govern activities at the school as a whole, communicating



to entire groups of constituents, including policies and procedures formulated specifically to address issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Assistant principal Rachel was focused on assisting individual teachers and students, serving in her words in a “therapist” role to allow these constituents to express their concerns. Regardless, the ability for each of these school administrators to be perceived as trustworthy was necessary for their relative success in their professional roles. Participant descriptions of the ways they supported members of the school community is well established in the literature (Bishop et al., 2015; Imberman et al., 2009; Akbaba-Altun, 2005).

The surveys provided evidence of the similarities and differences between the two administration timeframes, as well as between the two participants when surveyed during the same weeks. From the pre-survey to the post-survey, both Rachel and Steven expressed increased confidence in their ability to serve as administrators. Steven and Rachel's estimations of self-efficacy related specifically to aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic showed a greater relative increase than those attributed to the PSES between the start and end of the study.

Based on the results of the surveys, the interviews provided more authentic and fine-grained information on topics central to the study. Although Steven and Rachel regularly expressed their appreciation of students and teachers to adopt the use of technology tools related to online instruction, both administrators expressed that some teachers progressed more slowly with their application of basic skills than the students. When talking about technological resource access, Rachel and Steven expressed more concern with the lack of internet connectivity in student homes (to support student online

learning) than the lack of availability of hardware/software that was provided to students. Informational ambiguity was consistently mentioned prominently by both participants. Understanding the needs of constituent parties during a transition was also well founded in previously published literature (Zhang, 2020; Ozmen, 2006).

Although both administrators were concerned with the amount, timeliness and clarity of information related to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. contact tracing and when/if school was going to change from fully in-person instruction to fully remote instruction), principal Steven's concerns were focused on the of district office communications to the school, while assistant principal Rachel's concerns related to communications which were internal to the school. Evident in the review of literature (Pollock, 2020, U.S. CDC, 2020), discussions of equity were ever present in the interviews. Both participants specifically mentioned difficulties that low SES students were experiencing in obtaining access to the internet in their homes. The scarcity of resources was also evident during the interviews in participant choices of which "frame" (in this case, political) most dominated their professional outlook. That said, "ambiguity and uncertainty" (symbolic frame) and "commitment and motivation" (human resource frame) were even more prevalent.

Used as a theoretical framework for this study, open systems theory was used as a lens to better understand an individual's exchanges with their social environment (Orren & Smith, 2013). It is clear that the interactions between the study's participants and the numerous constituent parties in which they came into contact formed the basis from which professional decisions were made. Although mainly focused on different tasks with a common group of constituents for the first six weeks of the 2020-2021 school year,



principal Steven and assistant principal Rachel also interacted with each other, confirming the interdependent nature of open systems.

Motivated by the interactions and results of this study, the research team encourages future researchers to integrate data which reveals the perspectives of non-administrator school stakeholders (e.g. parents, teachers, non-instructional staff, students, community partners) when exploring the dynamics of learning environments impacted by large scale change. Also, inspections of administrative attitudes of self-efficacy (using the PSES and other validated instruments), “framing” and equity from a greater diversity of school contexts will serve to more generally describe reactions of a broader community of educational leaders. Finally, an examination of how a broader array of school administrators (i.e. type of professional preparation, years in the profession, age, sexual orientation, gender, specialized training, etc.) respond to large-scale change will allow for a broader understanding of a more generalized set of educational leaders.

### References

- Ahlström, B., Leo, U., Norqvist, L., & Isling, P. P. (2020). School leadership as (un)usual. insights from principals in Sweden during a pandemic. *International Studies in Educational Administration, 48*(2), 35–41.
- Akbaba-Altun, S. (2005). Turkish school principals’ earthquake experiences and reactions. *International Journal of Educational Management, 19*(4), 307–317.
- Anderson, R. E., & Carter, I. (1990). *Human behavior in the social environment: A social systems approach* (4th Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.

- Bolman, L. G. & Deal, T. E. (2013). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice and leadership* (5th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Bishop, W., Fifolt, M., Peters, G., Gurley, D., & Collins, L. (2015). Perceptions and experiences of K-12 educational leaders in response to the 27 April 2011 tornadoes. *School Leadership & Management*, 35(2), 215–235.
- Brown, C. (2018). The role of leadership in surviving a school shooting. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 21(2), 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555458917735357>
- Ee, J. & Gándara, P. (2020). The impact of immigration enforcement on the nation's schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 57(2), 840-871. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831219862998>
- Exley, C. & Kessler, J. (2021). The Gender Gap in Self-Promotion. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series, Revised May 2021. [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w26345/w26345.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w26345/w26345.pdf)
- Fletcher, J., & Nicholas, K. (2016). What can school principals do to support students and their learning during and after natural disasters? *Educational Review*, 68(3), 358–374. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2015.1114467>
- Fournier, E., Scott, S., & Scott, D. E. (2020). Inclusive Leadership During the COVID- 19 Pandemic: How to Respond Within an Inclusion Framework (Canada). *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 48(1), 17–23.
- Gyang, T. S. (2020). Educational Leadership Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis in Nigeria. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 48(3). 73-79.





- Hauseman, C., Darazsi, S., & Kent, S. (2020). Collaboration, Communication and Wellness: Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Manitoba (Canada) Schools. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 48(2), 70–77.
- Hoy, A. W., & Hoy, W. K. (2020). *Instructional leadership: A research-based guide to learning in schools (5th ed.)*. Pearson.
- Imberman, S., Kugler, A., & Sacerdote, B. (2009). Katrina’s children: Evidence on the structure of peer effects from hurricane evacuees.
- Li, A., Harries, M., & Ross, L. (2020). Reopening K-12 Schools in the Era of COVID-19: Review of State-level Guidance Addressing Equity Concerns. *The Journal of Pediatrics*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2020.08.069>.
- Martinez, J. A., Williams, C. & Uy, F. (2020). Effects of a collaborative, technology-based intervention involving school principals to retain early-career teachers: A scaled, quantitative research study. *Journal of Leadership, Equity and Research*. 7 (1). 1-28.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mutch, C. (2015). Leadership in times of crisis: Dispositional, relational and contextual factors influencing school principals’ actions. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 14, 186–194. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2015.06.005>

- O'Connell, A., & Clarke, S. (2020). A School in the Grip of COVID-19: Musings From the Principal's Office (Australia). *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 48(2), 4–11.
- Orren, D. & Smith, R. (2013). *Human Behavior and the Social Environment*. (7<sup>th</sup> ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Ozmen, F. (2006). The level of preparedness of the schools for disasters from the aspect of the school principals. *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal*, 15(3), 383–395. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09653560610669873>
- Parsons, T. (1959). The school class as a social system: Some of its functions in American society. *Harvard Educational Review*, 29(1), 297–318.
- Pepper, M. J., T. D. London, M. L. Dishman, and J. L. Lewis. 2010. *Leading Schools during Crisis: What School Administrators Must Know*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Pollock, K. (2020). School Leaders' Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Two-Pronged Approach (Canada). *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 48(3), 38–44.
- Sherrieb, K., Louis, C., Pfefferbaum, R., Betty Pfefferbaum, J., Diab, E., & Norris, F. (2012). Assessing community resilience on the US coast using school principals as key informants. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 2, 6–15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2012.06.001>
- Sider, S. R. (2020). School Principals and Students With Special Education Needs in a Pandemic: Emerging Insights From Ontario, Canada. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 48(2), 78–84.



- Stone-Johnson, C. and Miles Weiner, J. (2020), "Principal professionalism in the time of COVID-19", *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-05-2020-0020>
- Tarrant, R. (2011). Leadership through a school tragedy: A case study (Part 1 - The first week). *Australian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies*, 2011-3.
- Tarrant, R. (2011). Leadership through a school tragedy: a case study (Part 2-The Next Two Years). *Australasian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies.*, 2011(3), 77–87. <https://doi.org/info:doi/>
- Teddie, C. & Tashakkori, A. (2009). *Foundations of mixed methods research: Integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches in the social and behavioral sciences*. SAGE Publications.
- Tschannen-Moran, M. & Gareis, C. R. (2014). Principals' sense of efficacy: Assessing a promising construct. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 42(5). 573-585.
- U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Guidance for schools and child care: plan, prepare, and respond to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Accessed July 23, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/guidance-for-schools.html>
- Zhang, T. (2020). Learning from the emergency remote teaching-learning in China when primary and secondary schools were disrupted by COVID-19 pandemic. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-40889/v1>

### **About the authors**

**James A. Martinez** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies and the Assistant Director of the Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He has served as a classroom teacher, principal, and accreditation chair for the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC).

**Authorship credit details:** Conceptualization of the study, designer of methodology, formal analysis, investigation, allocator of resources, writing (original draft preparation and review and editing), and project administration

Email: [jmart176@utk.edu](mailto:jmart176@utk.edu)

**Lisa R. Amick** has ten years of middle level mathematics teaching experience, is now a Clinical Associate Professor at the University of Kentucky, and currently serves as Chair for both the undergraduate STEM PLUS (mathematics) program and the Middle Level Education program. Her research interests include teacher retention, early career teacher support, the National Board process for teachers, and inquiry based mathematics intervention.

**Authorship credit details:** Formal analysis, investigation, and writing (original draft preparation and review and editing)

Email: [lisa.amick@uky.edu](mailto:lisa.amick@uky.edu)

**Sydney McAbee** is currently a dental student at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center. She has worked as a research assistant alongside Dr. James Martinez at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Their research together has included administrative support of teachers, teacher retention, and administrative response to school disasters.



**Authorship credit details:** Formal analysis, investigation, and writing  
(review and editing)

Email: [smcabee1@vols.utk.edu](mailto:smcabee1@vols.utk.edu)

## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. How are you feeling about your ability to do your job?  
(researcher created)
2. What main obstacle(s) are deterring you from performing at your best? (researcher created)
3. What accomplishments can you celebrate? (researcher created)
4. Who are the neediest constituents right now and why?  
(researcher created)
5. How well do you feel you are attending to issues related to equity and access?
6. How difficult is the task at hand and what resources are available? (Hoy and Hoy, 2013, p. 164)
7. Given the situation, do you have the skills and knowledge (to adequately attend to the task)? (Hoy and Hoy, 2013, p. 164)
8. Are commitment and motivation essential to success (of what you are taking on)? (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 311) (human resource/symbolic frames)
9. Is the technical quality (of what you are taking on) important? (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 312) (structural frame)
10. Are ambiguity and uncertainty high (to adequately attend of what you are taking on)? (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 312) (political/symbolic frames)
11. Are conflict and scarce resources significant (to adequately attend to of what you are taking on)? (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 312) (political frame)