

# **Doing Schools Differently: Visionary Leadership in an Alabama School District**

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## **Abstract**

This case study describes how one school district in Alabama was able to sustain learning and effectively educate students using technology during the COVID-19 pandemic. Investigation of leadership practices found several established procedures that facilitated the education process differently and adapted to change abruptly. The case study findings identify five practices exhibited by the school district leader and how intertwining the practices resulted in educational stability during the pandemic. The leadership practices are: tools and training; technology readiness; emphasis of standards; forward-thinking habits; two-way communication. The conclusions from the case study outline applicable practices and technology integration for educational leaders.

*Keywords:* leadership, technology, distance learning, forward-thinking, educational planning

American's education system has been tested as traditional education teaching processes changed interaction with students during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Schools are being conducted differently, students are learning differently, teachers are supporting students indifferently; therefore, school administrators need to lead differently. With an abrupt shift to virtual learning and technology embedded instruction, some districts were prepared for the transition. Other districts not as well equipped to integrate instruction through the use of technology, have struggled to determine how to change instructional methods, distribute learning devices, and execute distance learning.

This paper describes how one school district leader's foresight facilitated the integration of technological instruction methods, which allowed educators to conduct school differently and rapidly adapt to change. Due to the technology processes already established by the school district leader, the school administrators, teachers, students, and parents continued educational processes. Five practices were identified to understand better technology applications and the broader scope of multimedia adoption by all stakeholders: (1) tools and training; (2) technology readiness; (3) emphasis of standards; (4) forward-thinking habits; (5) two-way communication. Intertwining the specific practices supported the success of the school district's educational methods during the pandemic and state of emergency.

### **Literature Review**

The concept of online learning has continued to grow because of technology changes, globalization, availability of the internet, personalized learning priorities, and concerns about traditional schools (Cavanaugh, 2004). Virtual schools, in the form of fully online or blended instruction, have the potential to dramatically expand the educational opportunities of American students, largely overcoming the geographic and demographic restrictions, with the promise to improve the quality of education (Lips, 2010).

The United States displayed steady growth in virtual schooling, as documented by the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, known as iNACOL (2011). It grew to serve a broader range of purposes, including early engagement in higher education, increased student choice of courses, credit recovery, and flexibility in student schedules (Davis, 2011; Miron, G., Shank, C. & Davidson, 2018). Watson, Murrin, Vashaw, Gemin, and Rapp (2014) indicated that online education enrollment grew significantly in several decades and the number continued to increase each year. The Evergreen Education Group (2014) reported a total of 45 states and the District of Columbia had a virtual state school through an online initiative, full-time online schools, or both. Many states even mandated the creation of a hybrid or online learning program in every district in their state (Cowan, 2011). The support for virtual schooling increased rather quickly, and the nature of what was offered became more comprehensive (Cavanaugh, 2004; Cavanaugh & DiPietro, 2011).

As virtual schools continued to grow, Rice (2006) emphasized the importance of modifying instructional strategies to incorporate more technology-based learner-centered practices. Educational programs need committed leaders who understood the new types of instruction and were prepared to improve educational outcomes for students (Darling-Hammon, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, 2007). School leaders were vital to sustainable education reform and could be the

change agents to move schools from what worked in the past to what was needed in the future (Mercer, 2016).

Researchers documented the importance of school leaders to have viable practices such as having vision with a plan and strategy of direction, managing the learning program, understanding and developing relationships, and lastly, creating conducive working conditions for growth in student performance (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Szczesiul & Huizenga, 2014). While studying virtual school leadership, Goodvin and Gibson (2008) found that virtual school administrators needed more preparation for the technology-rich environments they were embracing and required to possess some level of skills to accomplish tasks through technology. According to iNACOL (2011), the critical aspects of virtual leadership included: effective communication, being mission-driven, establishing relationships, being a risk-taker, and advocating for program needs. Additional leadership research by authors Wagner (2012) and Fullan (2002) indicate specific skills, such as adjusting to change and understanding adaptability, were critical in leading in a new workforce in the digital age.

Research completed by Davis and Robyler (2005) indicated that there was a need for school personnel who understood the unique benefits of the digital age and were prepared to meet its obligations and requirements. School leaders were one of the essential elements affecting change in a school and implementing strategies to help the process to improve the school community (Coryn, Schroter, & McCown, 2014). Cavanagh (2004) explained in an early work, *Development and Management of Virtual Schools*, that the implementation of virtual learning at elementary and secondary levels had unique aspects that warranted more focus to adequately prepare those assuming the leadership roles within a new educational environment.

By identifying the critical practices for virtual school management and technology-based instruction, school leaders could be better prepared as they advance in education. Furthermore, school leaders could better understand the progressions of extensive technology integration and the phenomenon of virtual school administration. With the global COVID-19 pandemic and a rush to lead schools virtually, the topic deserved further investigation.

## **Methodology**

The study was conducted to explore the use of crucial competencies perceived as ideal when leading a school or district comprised of extensive technology-based instruction. Case study methodology enabled educational researchers to examine school processes to identify factors that influence school functioning (Merriam, 1988). Case study research typically uses several data collection techniques, including interviews, observations, and document analysis. For this study, the researchers used interview and observation data to investigate and define the leader competencies perceived as essential to lead online education during a state of crisis successfully.

According to Coryn, Schroter, and McCown, (2014), one of the most critical lessons that emerged from research on effective schooling was the importance of the school leader. The conceptual framework used in case study research illustrated the connection between virtual learning programs and the leadership practices needed by school district leaders in the COVID-19 pandemic. The merging of two phenomena, virtual learning and administrative practices, invited exploration to determine the leadership strands deemed necessary for school leaders in providing educational formats to meet student needs. Given the abrupt need to transfer from traditional education paradigms to distance learning in K-12 schools, technology was perceived by national

and state leaders as essential to the learning process; thus, it became crucial to explore what abilities school leaders needed to lead the process to reshape online and virtual education.

The public-school district was selected due to its location in a rapidly growing Alabama community and because of the compliments the school district received from its stakeholders related to the smooth transition to distance learning. The gender and race demographics of the student population reflected 51.26% male and 48.74% female with 54.84% African American, 9.25% American Indian, 1.36% Asian, 32.53% Caucasian, 12.5% Hispanic, and 1.64% Other. Over 67% of the students was eligible for free or reduced lunch reflecting a low socioeconomic population within the district. The data for the case study were collected over three months from February to April 2020. All the data were qualitative and were collected to provide insight into a successful transfer from traditional school education to virtual and distance learning.

The researchers used convenience sampling to include participants accessible based on the researchers' professional network of colleagues during a period when public quarantines are taking place, schools are not in session due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and face-to-face access for interviews are not appropriate. Convenience sampling, a form of purposeful sampling, permitted access to participants through virtual meetings, which are strategic to ascertaining leadership practices within the school district. The participants were all educators who had knowledge of the topic under study and were current educators in the district. The participants included the superintendent, technology director, board member, 4 teachers, 2 building administrators, 1 gifted specialist, 20 parents, 2 public works employees, and an elected city official.

The interviews were conducted in an open-ended question format. Interviews were expected to be "a conversation between two people in which one person tries to direct the conversation to obtain information for a specific purpose" (Gordan, 1992, p. 2). Questions guided the interview to keep the discussion directed and on topic essential to identifying the practices perceived important during the transition to distance learning. The conversation focused on specific points of information to be collected and allowed the participants to expand on each question. Following the interviews, the notes were transcribed to prepare for data analysis. The use of the interview transcripts for coding allowed the researcher to summarize and condense the data (Saldana, 2009).

The findings resulted in the identification of the five leadership practices central to the school district leader's progress with the implementation of distance learning and the sustained educational process for the teachers, students, and parents. The practices included (1) tools and training; (2) technology readiness; (3) emphasis of standards; (4) forward-thinking habits; (5) two-way communication with all stakeholders.

## **School Leadership Practices**

### **Tools and Training**

School leaders understand hundreds of educational tools are available for instructing online, and the purposes are endless (Google Classroom, Class Dojo, Edmodo, Scholastic Learn, IXL, Kahoot, etc.) Some tools are designed for student autonomy, others for teacher planning, and even some are simply for progress monitoring. For this school district, the leader outlined specific methods for selecting the online tools designed to provide collaboration between the teacher and the student. Only a few digital tools were chosen to use within the district for simplicity and structured implementation (Bates, 2019). The intent was purposeful to facilitate teacher access and

familiarity of use to maximize instruction and promote student performance, rather than allowing too many tools to be used, which might have inhibited understanding and application. Tools selected included:

- Google Classroom: a platform where teachers can easily create, grade, and provide feedback on assignments.
- Class Dojo: a free application that provides an open line of communication to parents as a whole or individually. This provided a second line of communication aside from the telephone.
- Scholastic Learn at Home: a fun and engaging article with suggested games, projects, or activities.
- IXL: math, science, or English/Grammar lessons for all grade levels K-12. The lessons are directly linked and divided into standards.

The district leader emphasized how the faculty remained the most influential part of online education and were essential in applying the technology to their instruction. The district leader committed resources and time to provide professional development for teachers and school leaders to use digital tools as well as to integrate technology into teaching.

The district leader established expectations for district professionals (teachers, instructional support, and administrators) to both model and use the instructional technology tools. While resources were implemented, tracking of use and effectiveness was calculated (Grant & Zachariah, 2017; Hew & Lo, 2018). One participant explained, “When the administrators also go through the technology training, it delivers a message that we are in this together.” There was an emphasis on professional development to promote technology skillsets, crucial to ensuring school personnel were prepared to use virtual 21st-century technologies for teaching and learning.

## **Technology Readiness**

The term *technology readiness* refers to the beliefs related to the willingness to adopt new technologies to work effectively and reach set goals. Parasuraman (2000) defines technology readiness as one’s willingness to leverage new technologies in performing tasks. To promote a virtual school model, school leaders needed to understand technology infrastructure planning and development, define the integration of technology and curriculum, and anticipate changes in operational and education needs precipitated by technological innovations. The district leader expected transformation of learning to include technology use across multiple stakeholders (Taylor, Grant, Hamdy, Marei, & Venkatramana, 2020).

School leaders who received technology training and personally used technology were better at encouraging and incorporating technology use in their schools (Brown & Jacobson, 2016). The International Association for K-12 Online Learning, iNACOL, (2011) outlined how administrators played a pivotal role in determining how well technology was used in schools and emphasized how virtual school leaders should support a digital age learning culture, excellence in professional practice, systemic improvements, and digital citizenship. Goodvin’s and Gibson’s (2008) study on preparing school leaders for technology-rich environments highlighted the need for school-based leaders to possess some level of skill in accomplishing technology tasks. Study participants stated, “Leaders have to model to show teachers that it [is]okay to try new things” demonstrating as K12 leaders that they are competent technology users.

When schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020, the state required each local education agency to establish a continuous learning plan, which defined the strategies and processes to provide district learning. The case study district leader was able to report the use of technology applications swiftly since these practices and technology readiness had been embedded within existing school plans.

The district leader's expectations and requirements had previously been established for all school administrators to complete Google training and remain knowledgeable of the products teachers and students were expected to use. This development allowed a quick transition to meet students' learning needs. Established district practices made conversations easier when communicating state expectations regarding implementation practices and technical challenges. School leaders were able to serve as additional technical support for teachers and students during the transition from traditional educational teaching to distance learning.

### **Emphasis of Standards**

Case study findings reflected district stakeholders reporting that virtual learning was not a new concept for their local education agency. The district leader initiated a vision for technology use in 2015 when each local education agency was prompted by the state to create a Virtual School Plan (U.S. Office of Educational Technology, 2017; Birnbaum, Weiler & Westbrook, 2020). The guidelines and framework for virtual learning expanded with the state's adoption of the International Society of Technology Education, ISTE, Standards in 2016. Once the State Department task force recommended new learning objectives in 2017, districts were encouraged to incorporate digital learner standards for grades K-12 in the 2018-2019 school years. The ISTE Standards defined minimum requirements; in interviews, stakeholders in the case study reported district-wide implementation went beyond minimum requirements and served to keep them focused on what was important.

Teachers working in the case study district were expected to use Google Suite in all K-12 classrooms to implement suggested state technology standards with students. Students were gradually granted access to more types of technology as they advanced throughout their school careers. The goals were designed to expose students to the proper use of technology slowly and to produce proficiency when using Google Suite products. With the systematic approach to incorporate the standards, Google Suite, and the devices, the administrators, teachers, students and parents were technologically prepared to navigate online classes. Additionally, teachers in the case study district were Google certified by 2018, thus making the transition to distance learning less stressful and seamless.

In the case study district, due to the prescience and preparedness of administrators, teachers, and parents, the students in all grades were less anxious about moving to distance learning because they did not have to learn how to use devices or programs (Grant, 2015). Students were familiar with technology since it had been in use daily in instruction and school assignments. Teachers reported that parents acknowledged how grateful they were that the students were able to maneuver through the coursework with little assistance or guidance.

Teachers and school leaders reported that students embraced the virtual format quickly and showed high levels of technology engagement. As far as academic instruction, one participant explained, "We are consistently reminded to incorporate the technology standards in our lesson

plans and assess the progress annually to prepare for the next year. I do not feel pressured with this idea since I have been educated on the importance of the standards.”

### **Forward-Thinking Habits**

In the 2017 report from the U.S. Office of Educational Technology, *Reimagining the Role of Technology in Education: the 2017 National Educational Technology Plan*, the editors reported the need to:

Develop clear communities of practice for education leaders at all levels that act as a hub for setting a vision, understanding research, and sharing practices. Building on the model of the education innovation clusters, state, district, university, and community organization leaders should establish cohesive communities of practice—in person and online—to create virtuous cycles for sharing the most recent research and effective practices in the use of educational technology (p. 53)

The school district leader worked with stakeholders to develop a detailed technology plan in 2015 with strategic steps to enhance the district’s technology by the year 2020. “A successful leader should be looking at what is coming next, has to be visionary, and determine how to make things happen. We are very fortunate that we were prepared for this change,” one participant explained.

A participant suggested the importance of the leader’s ability to “help all of us see the end goal, and for many of our students, their end goal was just to graduate, but our district leader understood that students must earn a diploma before they can do anything else.” Even during a time of crisis, teachers were appreciative of how the district leader continued encouraging the stakeholders to keep moving forward and to remain focused on the vision. According to the U.S. Office of Educational Technology (2017), “Taking full advantage of technology to transform learning requires strong leadership capable of creating a shared vision of which all members of the community feel a part.” (p. 42).

Kouzes and Posner (2007) described leadership as gazing onto the horizon, communicating what is seen, and taking note of what is around the corner. Virtual education was over the horizon and needed leadership to promote educating students through many forms, formats, and formulas. Education leaders were to serve as facilitators for the implementation of strategies and the process for change (Coryn et al., 2014).

### **Two-Way Communication with All Stakeholders**

Canavaugh (2004) emphasized how communication, especially in a state of crisis, was key to keeping teachers, parents, and students connected and crucial to student success. Because of the distance between school leaders and the staff in a virtual setting, communication was critically important and the ability to communicate with school administrators, teachers, and stakeholders was needed internally and externally (DeRosa, 2010, Edmonson, 2020). Communication tools (email, instant messaging, group conversation tools, management systems, and the telephone) were used by the district leader to connect with stakeholders. They were essential to the productivity of all educational participants (Robbins & Judge, 2018). Operative communication strategies, programs, and devices offered an avenue for the district leader in conveying thoughts, ideas, and plans. Because of the various means of communication accessible during the transition, stress was

reduced, rumors were eliminated, and the focus of leadership remained on the educational needs within the district.

Communication was vital and certainly expected during times of uncertainty. The case study district leader continued to give detailed directions, offer explanations, eliminate fears, and address concerns. He was also willing to listen to the interests of teachers, parents, students, and community members to further serve their needs. Although the U.S. Department of Education encouraged parents, educators, and administrators to collaborate creatively to continue to meet the needs of students during the pandemic (2020), the use of technology was a customary practice in the district. Established collaboration and communication practices made it possible for the information to be published through social media and news outlets related to food distribution, community resources, academic support, and even the installation of complimentary internet for 60 days. Communicating and working together with all stakeholders, community officials, and school building leaders made education more accessible for the students in the district.

### **Implications for School Leaders**

The case study was concurrent with the review of literature and was supported by previous research associated with distance learning. While investigating best approaches for distance learning administrators, Morgan (2020) defined guidelines parallel to the five practices of the case study district leader. The research-based strategies developed from data analysis at MIT established three specific recommendations for effective distance learning leadership and were common practices for the case study district (Reich, 2020). Findings from the case study and previous research reflected the following implications for school leaders regarding visionary leadership for distance learning and serving in a time of abrupt change:

- i. School leaders need to establish specific technology tools, devices, and training to be used in the district and explain the purpose of the selections.
- ii. School leaders should model technology readiness to engage in the use of devices and software actively.
- iii. School leaders need to stay current in adopting and applying the standards while emphasizing the importance of the standards to teachers, students, parents, and stakeholders.
- iv. School leaders should develop forward-thinking habits to ensure progress and innovation in planning for the future of the district.
- v. School leaders need to understand the benefits of practicing two-way communication through various devices to ensure information is delivered but new ideas are shared.

### **Conclusion**

Participants in the case study described the district leader as ambitious for the success of students as well as connected to the needs of the teachers to meet the needs of students. They explained how he was committed to the mission and vision of the district, set long-term goals, and supported learning for all students, even before the pandemic. The case study findings revealed the district leader's emphasis on the five practices (tools and training; technology readiness; emphasis of standards; forward-thinking habits; and two-way communication with all stakeholders)



contributed to a seamless transition to distance learning and continued education even in a time of crisis.

School leaders need to understand that technology requires leaders at all levels to look forward with a willingness to try new things with vision and a sense of direction. Technology in schools may have been a struggle for some and a hindrance for others, but digital tools allowed students in this district to continue learning.

Virtual, distance school programs became an educational requirement during the pandemic. Examining practices of visionary leaders warranted investigation into the constructs that were demonstrated by a district leader. With the expansion of the virtual school and online learning programs throughout the world, the demand for prescient school leaders was needed. Insight for school leadership candidates needs to include foresight about the non-traditional education paradigms. With close to 800,000 students in Alabama being taught online during the pandemic, embracing distance learning and reviewing leadership success is essential. School leaders need to work together to evaluate the critical aspects of success, examine the education possibilities, envision the district's approach to learning, and execute a plan for the new normal.

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