TIMES OF CRISIS CAN BRING OPPORTUNITIES: EDUCATIONAL PLANNING, FACILITIES MANAGEMENT, AND CARES FUNDING

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ABSTRACT

In March of 2020, the United States (U.S.), like many other countries around the world, faced an international pandemic unlike any other in recent times. Elected government officials recommended or mandated the closing of PK-12 public schools. These decisive actions led to unprecedented challenges, but also unique opportunities for public education. The researchers conducted a three-part research study focusing on school leadership during the pandemic. This article is based on the third part of the study focusing on the perceptions of school superintendents about their leadership during the pandemic in one state in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. This qualitative study is based on the naturalistic inquiry design that affords the researcher the opportunity to study an event in real-time as it naturally unfolds (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Interviews were conducted with Superintendents in February and March 2021. The researchers used a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of nine open ended inquiry-based questions. The purpose was to investigate how superintendents and school divisions were using "The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act" funding (U.S. Treasury, n.p.). Based on the data gathered from this study, it became abundantly clear how superintendents used their CARES funds and what that revealed about their priorities. Spending patterns revealed their unwavering support of students and staff and focused on safety and teaching and learning. Superintendents were strategic in their decision making to ensure the CARES funding was used for the greatest common good, both individually and collectively. Many long-term projects and facilities improvements were now possible because of this infusion of funds. Superintendents used this opportunity to effect change: change in instruction, change in instructional delivery, and change in facility disrepair.

INTRODUCTION

In March of 2020, the United States (U.S.), like many other countries around the world, faced an international pandemic unlike any other in recent times. U.S. federal and state government officials took definitive action to address the growing concerns over the spread of the coronavirus. Elected government officials recommended or mandated the closing of PK-12 public schools. These decisive actions led to unprecedented challenges, but also unique opportunities for public education. Educational planning during an international pandemic looks very different from the typical school district planning cycle.

Public school administrators were tasked with developing comprehensive plans for educating students remotely, some with limited or no broadband Internet access and many with sparse technological resources. School leaders had limited faculty capacity to implement these ever-changing and

expansive plans. As time went on during the pandemic, administrators found ways to bring students back into the school buildings, using complex mitigation strategies to ensure the health and safety of all members of the school community. Along with these challenges came some unique opportunities for addressing long-term needs that have plagued schools for years. This article focuses on the way educational planning has morphed with access to COVID-19 funding and spending opportunities.

The researchers conducted a three-part research study focusing on school leadership during the pandemic. The first part focused on leaders' initial reactions to the closing of schools in March 2020 (Cash et al., 2020). The second part focused on leadership and the reopening of schools during the pandemic September 2020 (Brinkmann et al., 2021). The third part focused on the perceptions of school superintendents about their leadership during the pandemic in one state in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S.

This article specifically focuses on themes and findings from the third phase of the study focused on perceived challenges and opportunities related to a variety of essential responsibilities of superintendents. One of the key questions in the study related to the use of Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) funds. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the CARES funding supported schools during the COVID-19 pandemic as reported by superintendents in one state in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S., and how superintendents capitalized on these opportunities to advance their planning process.

METHODOLOGY

According to Creswell (2014) and Merriam (2016), phenomenological research is constructed based on participants' knowledge as they make meaning of lived experiences. This qualitative study is based on the naturalistic inquiry design that affords the researcher the opportunity to study an event in real-time as it naturally unfolds (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Instrument

Interviews were conducted with Superintendents in February and March 2021. The researchers used a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of nine open ended inquiry-based questions. Questions included perceived challenges and opportunities during the pandemic related to personnel and instruction. Additional questions focused on relationships with the community and school board, the impact of politics, and the use of federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding. Researchers validated the interview questions using a multi-step review process, which included feedback on the initial draft of the questions reviewed by an expert panel of leadership professionals.

Sample Population

Requests for interviews were sent to 132 superintendents in the state in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. The researchers interviewed 23% (30) of the superintendents in the state. The participants ranged from small to large school districts in urban, suburban, rural, and remote location with a broad range of socio-economic levels.

Data Analysis

Researchers used Zoom audio recordings to generate transcript data. Researchers then utilized a multi-step process to systematically review the data. Data were analyzed and coded using Erickson's (1986) interpretative method of data analysis. While coding, theme emersion analysis (Patton 2015)

was employed to link assertions with participants' responses. Data findings were validated through inner-rater reliability measures.

BACKGROUND ON THE PANDEMIC

By December 2019, the first cases of a new virus were being seen in China. This began the birth and growth of the Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19). By February 2020, the COVID-19 had spread throughout Europe and had entered the United States. In March 2020, schools began to consider the impact this pandemic could have, and by the middle of March, state governors began to either recommend or mandate PK-12 school closures. By the end of March, all states had closed their PK-12 public schools, and with very few exceptions, the schools stayed closed through the end of the school year.

In the Fall of 2020, schools began to reopen, and in the state on which this study is based, most opened virtually. Only a few school districts opened schools for face-to-face instruction. Most school districts that did have face-to-face classes had them on a staggered schedule, in a blended (hybrid) learning environment that also incorporated virtual instruction. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advised that all school employees, parents and students abide by social distancing guidelines including wearing masks, staying 6 feet apart which impacted room capacity restrictions among other requirements. Because of these restrictions, many school districts offered a fully virtual instructional option, and in most cases, the majority of students began the school year fully online. As the school year continued, schools started returning more students to a face-to-face learning environment, with all schools offering that option by March 2021. Many school districts still plan to continue to offer virtual learning option for students in the future.

BACKGROUND ON THE CARES ACT FUNDING

According to the U.S. Treasury, "The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2021 provide fast and direct economic assistance for American workers, families, and small businesses, and preserve jobs for American industries" (n.p.). These funds were distributed to federal, state, and local governments and agencies.

As described in the Federal Register,

> The CARES Act provides that payments from the Fund may only be used to cover costs that: 1. are necessary expenditures incurred due to the public health emergency with respect to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID–19); 2. were not accounted for in the budget most recently approved as of March 27, 2020 (the date of enactment of the CARES Act) for the State or government; and 3. were incurred during the period that begins on March 1, 2020, and ends on December 31, 2021. (p. 4183)

In the Federal Register, a list of nonexclusive examples was shared. A review of that list provided several reasonable opportunities for school districts to access these funds. Those examples included disinfection and other mitigation expenses, food delivery expenses to vulnerable populations, distance learning-related technological improvements, medical leave related expenses, payroll support, and "any other COVID-19-related expenses reasonably necessary to the function of

government" (Federal Register, 2021, p. 4184) within the criteria. Costs related to personnel who were tasked with expanding online learning capacity and instructional effectiveness were also noted as eligible expenditures.

Finally, in the Federal Register, possible questions and associated answers were shared as part of the guidance. In that guidance it was shared that the Treasury, if the state decided to use the presumption, would not require documentation for specific use of funds up to $500 per K-12 student in a school or school district that could be used for broadband capacity, curriculum, digital devices, ventilation and air filtering equipment, transportation and meal costs (Federal Register, 2021 p. 4192). While this option had some advantages, there were also related limitations.

Use of CARES funds
So how did the superintendents spend their CARES funds? The key uses identified by superintendents fell into the following categories: mitigation and signage, technology devices and access, instructional and student supports, and capital improvements and furnishings. These themes are expanded in the following sections.

Mitigation and Signage
When schools began to reopen in Fall 2020, superintendents' priorities were health and safety. Having the funds to supply masks, face shields, Plexiglas partitions, and other personal protective equipment (PPE) was important to allay fears as employees and students returned to school. Those measures were accompanied by hand washing stations and hand sanitizers as well.

While the personal protections were important, so was the need for new protocols for cleaning and disinfecting areas. This required both training and additional supplies for custodial and maintenance personnel. In some cases, superintendents acknowledged that contracting cleaning services became the best option for their district to further support the efforts of current custodial staff. Since "transmission of COVID-19 occurs primarily through respiratory droplets, which can spread the virus and can cause infection in others," (https://www.webmd.com/coronavirus), air purifiers were also needed to fight against its spread. Superintendents spent CARES funds on bipolar ionization air purification or other air purification equipment for the classrooms and other areas of the schools.

With the Center for Disease Control (CDC) providing guidance regarding social distancing and protective face coverings, signage became a priority. Not only was it important to require those health and safety measures, it was important to remind the occupants of those requirements. Thus, there was a need for signage about mask wearing, about social distancing, and about other measures necessary in each school to ensure the safety of students and staff, such as posting of one-way hallways with directional signage. Superintendents often linked signage to other mitigation processes, when discussing its need.

Technology devices and access
Many school districts acknowledged that their long-range plans included moving to one-to-one devices for their students. Many were moving in that direction prior to the pandemic, with devices at one or more grade levels, and a few had completed the distribution of one-to-one to all of their students. One superintendent said, "You know, three years ago, most of our teachers didn't have a laptop and none of our students had a school issued device." The CARES funding allowed them to move up their plans and complete, in a very short timeframe, the distribution of one-to-one devices to all students. They were also able to offer new or replacement devices to their teachers and other staff members too. Since so much work was being done remotely, employees that previously didn't

need devices became recipients. Those employee groups included bus drivers and teacher aides, who had now become online small group instruction facilitators.

Since most schools in the state opened virtually, and all have continued to have a virtual option for their students, teachers have needed additional technology devices to successfully deliver online or blended instruction. Many teachers were asked to teach students face-to-face and online synchronously. The teachers were able to acquire additional degree cameras, microphones, smart boards, Promethean boards, and other technological supports to be effective in this new environment.

Both students and teachers in many school districts found that the expansion of online learning for students also required a more robust or at least a different learning management system. The learning platform not only had to be purchased, and that was accomplished through CARES funds, but it also had to be deployed. This meant there was a need for increased teacher support of this new platform they would be using for virtual instructional delivery.

Another challenge in regards to resources and access was for students to have devices for instruction when asked to learn from home. Devices are limited in their effectiveness when Internet access is diminished. In many parts of the state, the rural nature has led to little or no broadband, high speed, Internet access. Even in more populated areas, Internet access could be reflective of wealth or location. Superintendents were faced with equity issues that were ameliorated by the purchase of hot spots for both teachers and students. They also set up wireless hotspots in parking lots and other locations for the convenience of student access and the hotspots also helped their communities at large.

Instructional and Student Supports

Student supports ranged from the instructional to the social emotional and varied by district. An important direct result of the CARES funds was the ability to hire additional staff, on temporary basis, to support small group instruction, tutoring, and classroom management as classes were expanded to support more students with a single licensed teacher. Superintendents looked for ways to utilize current staff in these new capacities and hire additional staff through CARES funding to assist students who may have fallen behind academically or needed extra support. Those challenges were mentioned by several superintendents as a result of the school closings in spring 2020 and the inability to provide equitable access to educational resources for the remainder of the year.

The superintendents often mentioned how they used the spring 2020 and the summer to prepare teachers and schools for the return of some form of school in Fall 2020. They employed teachers over the summer to revamp curriculum and prepare effective lessons for online delivery. They provided professional development to teachers so that their instructional strategies would be effective in the virtual environment. One Superintendent, in thinking about time spent on effecting change said,

"There was never as much change as these teachers have had to overcome in a matter of a few short weeks, so I would say the professional development that we had to stand up was beyond belief." The professional development in support of instruction was considered a bonus during the pandemic because the superintendents saw it as well received by teachers who were hungry for the skills to do their *reimagined* jobs well.

Support for the teachers was important as they moved through this unique school year, but the concern for students was also heightened, and superintendents sought ways to address their social emotional needs through the use of CARES funds. More social workers and psychologists were

hired in several school districts, and in at least one district, those types of services were contracted to community agencies. The collaboration that occurred through necessity with other agencies was identified as another bonus that came as they addressed the challenges of the pandemic.

Capital improvements and furnishings

School districts are often faced with the dilemmas of choosing among a variety of building maintenance and renovation needs. Funds are rarely plentiful, but CARES funding provided an opportunity for school districts, as they were able to improve air quality through structural changes in facilities. They were able to use CARES funds for leaky roofs, old Heat, Ventilation, Air Conditioning (HVAC) systems, poorly sealed windows, and other structural defects that affected air quality. As noted earlier, they used the funds for air purification systems, including bionic polarization equipment, all of which will be supporting better air quality for many years to come. Many superintendents indicated that CARES funds have made a long-term difference in their facilities. One superintendent said, "Without that CARES money, that would not have been possible." Another shared that, "Financially, we weren't there, where we want to be in our strategic plan; the CARES money helped us get there."

Capital improvements did not stop at leaky roofs and windows, though. Since there was a need to socially distance, additional buses were purchased too. While those buses may not be needed to support social distancing when the pandemic ceases to impact daily lives, they can be used to replace older buses in the fleet. To further address the needs related to social distancing, districts were able to purchase additional classroom seating to replace tables that added to their challenges related to classroom capacity. Again, those new furnishings will continue to benefit schools beyond the pandemic.

SUMMARY

Based on the data gathered from this study, it became abundantly clear how superintendents used their CARES funds and what that revealed about their priorities. Spending patterns revealed their unwavering support of students and staff and focused on safety and teaching and learning. One superintendent shared that there was a "focus on instruction; everything we did was to ensure that we could create an environment that was safe for students to learn." Superintendents were strategic in their decision making to ensure the CARES funding was used for the greatest common good, both individually and collectively. Many long-term projects and facilities improvements were now possible because of this infusion of funds. Superintendents used this opportunity to effect change: change in instruction, change in instructional delivery, and change is facility disrepair. Superintendents' spending patterns revealed their ability to make "lemonade out of lemons" (making the best out of a difficult situation) and to "never waste a crisis" (always seeking new opportunities to learn, grow, and improve). These funds enabled superintendents to clearly demonstrate their crisis leadership capacity and unwavering commitment to providing the best educational opportunities for their students.

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