The "Unite the Right" Rally and Charlottesville City Schools: The Transformation of a Crisis

Sara Lourdes Epperly
Salem City (Virginia) Public Schools

Jay Paredes Scribner
Old Dominion University

Karen L. Sanzo
Old Dominion University

Educational leaders at all levels must be prepared to address crises and their aftermaths. The conventional wisdom on crises and their management suggests that while crisis can originate from myriad sources, they largely proceed according to predictable stages. Our study draws from traditional and more critical literature on crisis and crisis management to understand the case the 2017 Unite the Right rally and its impact on Charlottesville City Schools. Specifically, we unpack the unfolding nature of the crisis and the district superintendent's leadership through each phase of the crisis. We use the notion of paracrisis and crisis of challenge to understand how an acute and traumatic experience for the school community evolved into a crisis that challenged the legitimacy of the school district for its history of policy and practices that sustained institutionally racist practices for decades. Our findings illustrate how the process of crisis transformation occurred, and more importantly, how the superintendent's approach to leadership also changed to meet the new demands of the evolving crisis. These findings raise important questions and implications for how educational leaders might think about the crises they face, and the crisis management plans that guide that work.

Keywords: Crisis, Crisis management, Crisis transformation, School district leadership

From natural disasters to terrorist attacks, corporate scandals to product defects, crises are an ever-present reality facing society and organizations, including institutions of public education (Bhaduri, 2019; Bowers et al., 2017; Grissom & Conden, 2021; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Wang, 2008). Globalization and the complexity of modern society amplify the frequency, intensity, scale, and diversity of crises (e.g., Lalonde, 2007; Mitroff, 2002; Mouline, 2018; Perrow, 1999; Wang & Kuo, 2017). Yet, while experts acknowledge the intensifying impact of natural and social crises, our understanding of *crisis* as phenomenon and how to lead through crisis has remained largely unchanged for decades. Instead, the linear conceptualizations of crisis manifestation and crisis management leave leaders under-equipped to successfully guide organizations through the actual complexity that crises present (Coombs & Halladay, 2012; Ren, 2000). Nowhere are these shortcomings more critical than in our service-oriented institutions, particularly public education. For example, crises of school violence, community upheaval in response to acts of racial violence, immigration raids that affect family units, and recently the COVID-19 pandemic have not only challenged children and families, but also, the educators that serve them.

This case study focused on one superintendent and her leadership through crisis. Our purpose was to explore the relationship between one crisis—the White supremacist "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, VA—and the superintendent's leadership during that time. The following questions guided the study: 1) how and in what ways did the "Unite the Right" rally create crisis conditions for the school district? And 2) how and in what ways did the superintendent lead and manage throughout the crisis? In our discussion, we explore lessons drawn from the study about 1) the multi-dimensionality of crises and 2) the leadership skills, behaviors, and dispositions required to lead a district through a complex crisis.

Conceptual Frame: The Crisis Phenomenon and its Management

Our case analysis is aided by organizational literature addressing how crises are defined conceptually, how organizations manage crises, and what post-crisis outcomes are possible and why. We also address the limitations and sometimes oversimplifications inherent in the crisis literature that can create pitfalls for policy makers and leaders—particularly educational leaders.

Crisis Defined

Scholars generally agree that crises are phenomena that impact organizations, locales, and regions unexpectedly and with a degree of consequence that makes functioning and carrying out missions challenging or impossible (Fink, 1986; Mitroff, 2002, 2005; Peason & Clair, 1992). The threat to an organization's survival depends on whether the events' level of disruption "occurs at a rate and magnitude beyond the ability of the normal social process to rectify" (Ren, 2000, p. 14). Crisis scholars note that crises may originate internally as the result of, e.g., gross mismanagement, or externally from natural disasters, economic declines, or other external calamities. Regardless of severity or origin, crises demand action by the organization to survive and adapt or risk failure. The question then remains, what courses of action might be taken?

Crisis Management as (Linear) Process

That crises demand organizational action has led to the development of processes intended to make sense of, navigate, and ultimately adapt and survive them. These process models play an important role in giving structure to a phenomenon that while inevitable, is unpredictable. Crisis management stage models have existed for decades; yet their evolution has been limited. These linear process models share common stages: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis (Fink, 1986; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Coombs, 2012). More contemporary models depict a feedback loop of organizational learning to survive and adapt to crises.

Scholars contend that the pre-crisis, or prodromol stage, is a time when early warning signals are present (Fink, 1986). In pre-crisis mode, organizations demonstrate a varied capacity to detect and respond to crisis signals quickly to mitigate impact. Crisis theorists found that successful companies and organizations were proactive in these early stages by focusing on signal detection (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Pearson and Mitroff (1993) argued that by scanning one's internal and external environments, organizations were better positioned to distinguish baseline feedback indicators from aberrant telltales of an impending crisis. But early detection presumes organizations have in place a way to gather relevant internal and environmental data that feedback into the decision-making apparatus of the organization (Bechler, 1995; Fink, 1986, Liou, 2015; Veil, 2011).

The second stage recognizes that impactful events are unfolding at speeds with little potential for reversal (Fink, 1984; Ren, 2000). More recent considerations of acute crisis responses focus on identifying and addressing organizational weaknesses, while also training for and implementing emergency responses. Many organizations, including schools and districts, focus most of their efforts on managing crises at the acute stage (Cornell & Sheras, 1998; Hess & Lowery, 2020). However, while leaders may succeed at averting some crisis impacts, other negative impacts often break through (Schlafer, 2009). In the context of educational institutions, this stage manifests in crisis planning and training (Liou, 2015).

The final stage of crisis management—organizational adaptation and recovery—suggests that the difference between organizational success or failure hinges on organizational learning (Wang, 2008; Veil, 2011). Organizational learning is the process of individual and collective knowledge-building from past events to address present situations, ultimately becoming more prepared for future crises (Larsson, 2010). Put differently, learning occurs when an organization critically examines actions (not) taken and environmental conditions leading up to the crisis (Argyris & Schon, 1996). However, stage literature does little to account for variety associated with crises—their types, origins, severity, and complexity.

Critical Considerations of Crisis as Phenomenon

The views described above form the bedrock of our understanding about crises. But we argue that educational leaders and policy makers need to consider elements of crisis management given less attention. Crisis origins—be they natural, social, political, or economic—can make a difference in how they impact societies and organizations and how that impact plays out (Coombs, 2012). One crisis might manifest differently over time as it morphs and evolves, or it can spawn new crises. Crises can affect organizations physically, culturally, and economically with each of these avenues potentially threating organizations' reputations and legitimacy.

Second, it is essential that leaders consider the paths through which organizations succeed or fail to adapt to crisis and, thus, learn. These responses sit along a continuum from threat rigidity to organizational learning (Nathan, 2000; Bundy et al. 2017). Organizations that respond to crises as threats typically engage in numerous practices detrimental to their survival (Bundy et al, 2017; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Lagadec, 1997; Veil, 2011). For example, threat-reactive organizational members often fail to see beyond their own experiences. A history of success or a compulsion to "fit in" especially blind in this way (Langer, 1983; Perrow, 1999; Tompkins, 2005). In many cases, organizations prefer to focus on communications and public relations, rather than engaging the root problems themselves (Bowers et al., 2017; Coombs, 2012). Again, though there is opportunity for growth and improvement through crisis management, requisite learning seldom takes place (Wang, 2008).

On the other hand, organizations that leverage crises as an opportunity to adapt often flourish post-crisis (Barnett & Pratt, 2000; Coombs, 2012; Mitroff, 2005; Nathan, 2000). Bundy et al. and others argued that these organizations tended to engage in certain types of mitigating activities. For example, learning organizations often established task forces to review an organization's crisis performance. The most effective task forces invited constructive feedback from internal and external stakeholders to triangulate feedback (Lagadec, 1997; Lalonde, 2007; Robert & Lajtha, 2002). Frandsen and Johansen (2017) described adaptable organizations facing crises as those that sought not to simply resolve problems, but to understand and treat the causal conditions that gave rise to them. Finally, organizational capacity to leverage crises for gain occurs when key stakeholders become experts on their industries' own history with past crises (Coombs, 2012; Larsson, 2010). These adaptive strategies point to organizational learning through formal processes aimed at proactive activities and less toward one-off emergency responses.

However, effective crisis management frameworks still fail to consider the complexity of crises. For service-oriented organizations, crises can impact in myriad ways. While natural, economic, and social crises garner more attention, Coombs and Holladay (2012) introduced the *crisis of challenge* when "stakeholders claim an organization is acting in an irresponsible or unethical manner." (p. 408, see also Lerbinger, 1997). Further, they described social media's role in turning what once may have served as a precursor to potential crisis— i.e., "early public challenges"—into a phenomenon that mimics early stages of crisis (p. 409). They referred to this potential crisis as the *paracrisis*—a time when external stakeholder's *challenge*, via social media, an organization's reputation and capacity to meet its mission. In this manner, these motivated stakeholders can create conditions for a full-blown crisis using social media as the accelerant (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). In these contexts, organizations must manage by assessing the power, legitimacy, and urgency of the paracrisis threat (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Further, crisis definitions and management models fail to consider how crises may impact organizations and communities in unexpected ways. For example, linked crises—that is one crisis leading into a second and even a third—are a common result of crisis events, yet they remain underexplored. These linked crises can occur within the same space as one crisis triggers another (Ren, 2000). Or a crisis event in one space or region can trigger events sequentially in neighboring, or for that matter, far-flung regions. Finally, Ren argued that unpredictable and layered crises can affect "social operations beyond the general notion of damage" creating "unique vulnerabilities" that the layered crisis may exploit (Ren, 2000, p. 16).

Design and Methods

This case study focuses on Dr. Rosa Atkins', Superintendent of Charlottesville City Schools (CCS), during her tenure through the evolving crisis precipitated by the "Unite the Right Rally" in August 2017. According to Yin (2014), case study design involves in-depth empirical inquiry into a contemporary phenomenon and its real-world situation. Stake (2010) argued that case studies are circumstances that, by their distinctive nature, establish boundaries that delimit the case. Yin (2014) also noted that a case is both distinct from, yet embedded in, its environment. This case meets each of these criteria as we examine how the district responded to the initial, acute crisis and then the chronic sociopolitical crisis that came after.

Methods

This study relied on data gathered through interviews and documents. The Superintendent of CSS, Dr. Atkins, was the primary participant and focus of the study. We also purposefully sampled stakeholders from CCS and the community. Interviews were semi-structured. Open-ended questions supported the dialectic process and co-construction of knowledge (Strauss & Corbin, 2014) to facilitate the collection of the multiple perspectives regarding the crisis situation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016).

We interviewed the superintendent on three occasions across approximately nine months. The final interview also served as a member check to clarify and examine emergent themes and interpretations. We also invited 27 other stakeholders to be interviewed. Fifteen consented to be interviewed. Specifically, we interviewed past and present members of the district's school board, central office leadership, building-level administration, teaching faculty, and support staff. Current parents and former students also participated. Five participants were male, and ten were female. Five participants were people of color.

The case study generated over 100 documents for analysis. Documents included articles from the local newspapers and circulars and national periodicals including, but not limited to, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. We initially organized documents according to the initial crisis (August 2017 through October 2018) and the subsequent crisis from approximately January 2019 through May 2020. These time frames captured periods of leadership in the wake of the crisis and then the aftermath of a *New York Times* investigative report. School district documents were also collected and analyzed. District documents included official statements, policies and practices, and social media feeds. The COVID-19 pandemic canceled any planned observations.

We borrowed analytic approaches from grounded theory's constant comparative method, especially the open and axial coding stages (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). We engaged with the data through a process of open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2014) that facilitated discovery and modeling of emergent relationships. These emergent findings guided the scope and direction of subsequent data collection. Our active collection and analysis ended as we achieved data saturation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 2014). To facilitate the organization and analysis of such a large data set we utilized NVIVO qualitative data analysis software.

Findings

Our findings are organized into two sections. The first section addresses the initial crisis and how it catalyzed a second crisis of challenge (Coombs & Holladay, 2012) for the school district and superintendent. And second, we explore the superintendent's distinct approaches to the crisis as it evolved from an acute traumatic crisis to a chronic and social crisis.

"Unite the Right" Rally: The Evolution of a Crisis

Charlottesville's White Supremacist rally was never an independent, stand-alone event. Rather, it was a reaction to a national reckoning and racial awakening. Specifically, the rally participants purported to protest Charlottesville's plans to remove a Confederate statue from a downtown park. The statue removal was part of a nation-wide movement joined by many localities following the racially targeted mass shooting in Charleston in 2015. The rally participants' attendance reflected another nation-wide development—the increase in White supremacist activism since 2015. Most protesters came to the rally from across many states and affiliations outside the Charlottesville community. A fact-check piece in the Washington Post (May 8, 2020) reported:

> The city's actions inspired a group of neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and related groups to schedule the "Unite the Right" rally for the weekend of Aug. 12, 2017, in Charlottesville. There is little dispute over the makeup of the groups associated with the rally. A well-known white nationalist, Richard Spencer, was involved; former Ku Klux Klan head David Duke was a scheduled speaker.

Interview data reflected the sentiment that Charlottesville became "ground zero" for both groups—those seeking racial justice, in part, through the removal of antebellum historical figures and white supremacists seeking to preserve them.

From Crisis to Collective Self-Reflection

After the initial days of the rally and ensuing demonstrations and violence, an organic process of community self-reflection began to take shape. This development of heightened stakeholder awareness took place in three stages. First, the broader external crisis heightened the general public's interest in and focus on racial inequities and dynamics as the events of Charlottesville made national news and across a variety of outlets. Second, local stakeholders then identified these same structural inequities and dynamics within their own community, including local educational institutions. Third, the voice of local community advocates became amplified as they found audience among the newly engaged global public. In short, the institutional racism baked into Charlottesville's public and private institutions, that for decades had so successfully resisted reform efforts, gradually became the focus of community stakeholders with newfound leverage to confront historical injustices in a post-rally context.

The local crisis in Charlottesville came to represent the national standoff between those seeking racial justice and those rankled by such calls. These global and local crises fused as major news outlets reported on the violence, demonstrations, and political accusations and recriminations. Media networks shared dramatic images from Charlottesville. Reporting

saturated the mainstream news cycle for weeks. In mainstream news and social media, President Trump's own response appeared to sympathize with the White supremacist movement and further emboldened both sides of the country's deepening sociopolitical divide. A search of Google Trends confirmed the worldwide impact of the Unite the Right rally. The terms "Charlottesville" and "White supremacy" exploded across the internet, not only in the fifty states but also in six continents. Affirming the global impact of the event one teacher reflected, "Charlottesville became a hashtag."

From Local Awareness to Demands for Accountability

Many community stakeholders experienced the initial crisis event and ensuing violence as a social trauma; one that was immediate. During the acute phase of the crisis the global narrative around racial injustice, and specifically what had occurred within Charlottesville, echoed throughout the community. Absorbing the global narrative and experiencing the acute crisis in real time, advocates within the community publicly demanded that public organizations be accountable to changing global dynamics and norms around race and racial equity. These community members and activists planted the seeds for a *paracrisis* and, ultimately, a *crisis of challenge.*

Using their prominent positions within local society, several established Charlottesville activists challenged the Charlottesville power structure for its history of systemic racism that was, by and large, left intact for decades. As recounted by a NYT investigative reporter, leveraging local and national media interest in the racial upheaval playing out in Charlottesville, these advocates pushed local institutions to take a public anti-racist stance. In the words of one council member, "We are not ready to heal yet."

Initially, activists challenged city government and city council on several social issues including 1) removing additional statues honoring White Supremacists and 2) increasing affordable housing for Charlottesville's African American population. One longtime local activist, Nikuyah Walker, became the first African American female to serve as mayor in November 2017. As a post-crisis political leader Walker was characterized by the local establishment as "disruptive." One NYT print journalist stated, "She seems more focused on publicizing the city's sins than its successes." He continued, "Instead of squeezing a few dozen affordable housing units out of developers, she wanted to add thousands. Instead of merely providing 'implicit bias' training for police officers, she wanted an end to 'stop and frisk.'" These references in local media coverage illustrate how, on the one hand, local advocates saw an opportunity to intensify their messages of systemic racism, while on the other hand, the resistance from the community establishment maintained and even intensified.

But community stakeholders continued to challenge the political establishment from multiple angles. Advocates intensified challenges to city government and private organizations regarding locations of confederate statues and the displaying of confederate flags. Black Lives Matter and Hate Free Schools movements made their voices heard around equity-related issues. University and K-12 faculty were increasingly quoted in local media, shining a light on the history of *de facto* segregation in the public schools. High school student activists played an important role in this process. According to the NYT report, one high school student, Zyanah Bryant, raised concerns with local media regarding the school district's racist practices. Her efforts made an impact on the public consciousness through petitions, walk-outs, and a lecture series around local

manifestations of racial injustice. In an interview with *Teaching Tolerance* published on the first anniversary of Unite the Right Charlottesville, Bryant stated, "There are a lot of very deep problems that aren't evident on the surface when looking at Charlottesville, and that has been my goal, to continue to uncover and unmask those illusions."

Our data suggested that two high school students also began to leverage the current climate to highlight and challenge the school system's inequitable practices. Our analysis suggested that these two students, while not solely responsible, played a critical role in taking a diffuse discussion of racial inequity and focusing it directly onto CCS. Interview data from three educational leaders suggested that they believed these students caught the attention of the New York Times, which ultimately led to the exposé on CCS. With a political context that emboldened voices traditionally oppressed, events were about to unfold that would solidify the crisis of challenge for the CSS.

From Paracrisis to Crisis of Challenge

While this crisis evolved from acute crisis to paracrisis over approximately one year, the transformation from paracrisis to crisis of challenge for the district—a direct challenge to its reputation and legitimacy—transpired seemingly overnight. However, our analysis shows how the context was set for this crisis evolution months before it erupted. Interviews and document analysis support that local activists managed to sustain the spotlight on Charlottesville—transferring a national debate on racial injustice and turning it inward on Charlottesville's K-12 public schools. Ultimately, the power of social and traditional media sources maintained focus on the community's misgivings, discomfort, and anger about social injustices until the district was amidst a crisis of challenge. Suddenly, the practices that sustained systemic racism in CCS were on full display in local and national media outlets such as The Washington Post, Forbes magazine, CNN, BET, among many others.

The New York Times' exposé on the district's history of institutional racism propelled the district into the crisis of challenge. The investigation was replete with examples of inequitable practices such as zoning and attendance practices intended to maintain intra-district segregation. At this point in the crisis' trajectory, both local and external advocates and actors pushed to hold the district accountable for its socio-political shortcomings. Beyond the NYT's report, local advocates began to highlight historical records, district policies and practices, and district demographic, programmatic, and achievement data as evidence of institutional values that contradicted the district's espoused values of equity and social justice.

Historical record as the foundation of a Crisis of Challenge. As interviewees recounted, Charlottesville's conditions of racism and disparity reached back to the time of Jefferson and his conflicted embrace of both freedom and slavery. Moreover, interviewees and documentary evidence supported that fact that Charlottesville's major educational institutions—the University of Virginia and the public school system—played significant roles in institutionalizing and protecting inequity through policy and practice.

For example, one interviewee explained how, historically, the University of Virginia's hiring practices effectively organized the town-gown community into castes—a well-resourced White intellectual class and an under-resourced Black servant population. This leader remarked, "It's pretty typical of a university town where there are some very wealthy, very academic, very

educated students who attend the schools. And then there are also [K-12] students who live in considerable poverty. And you don't often see a lot in between." The socioeconomic and cultural divide between the two groups reached such an extreme that White Charlottesville engaged in massive resistance to school integration throughout the 1950s. In the 1960s, the city's urban renewal plan approved and carried out the razing of Charlottesville's successful African American business and residential community, Vinegar Hill (CLIHC, 2020). The national debate over Confederate statues reintroduced the Vinegar Hill destruction into the community consciousness through publications such as the NYT and Slate magazine.

Policies and Procedures. Additional artifacts surfaced within the community that implicated the district role in maintaining inequitable practices, such as tracking and schedule manipulation to, again, preserve *de facto* racial segregation and exacerbate opportunity gaps between students of different races. For example, practices around gifted education came under intense scrutiny. As one district leader stated, "many White students were being pulled out, and not just gifted students" as they reflected on the lack of gifted education opportunities for many students of color. The increased attention on gifted education led to the discovery by district personnel of archival evidence supporting the use of the program to maintain segregation during the 1950s. Dr. Atkins reflected in one interview, "Many school districts start this in kindergarten… And it is so ingrained and so institutionalized in our schooling process that it is almost invisible."

Master scheduling procedures proved to be another threat to the district's legitimacy during the crisis of challenge. Charlottesville's schedules had allowed students to be placed in below grade-level classes or grouped homogeneously by reading ability, according to Dr. Atkins. Tracked scheduling meant many minority students were unable to access the school's fine arts, engineering, and foreign language courses. Since administrators have pursued "de-leveling" and the removal of such structural barriers post-October 2018, these diverse students have flocked to the once restricted courses, according to the superintendent.

Finally, the NYT investigation highlighted the district's achievement data and persistent disparity of academic opportunities and outcomes based on race. As the report underscored, White students tended to outperform Black students on most subjects and by at least two grade levels. While Dr. Atkins challenged these data as too narrow to reflect student experiences and growth more broadly, the NYT's exposé had successfully leveraged district data to make the case that the district's efforts at social justice have fallen short. The reporters drew upon socioeconomic data, state performance data, and federal civil rights data to establish Charlottesville's over-representation of African American students in school discipline and under-representation in Advanced Placement and enrichment courses. From the article:

> Today, white students make up 40 percent of Charlottesville's enrollment, and African American students about a third. But White children are about four times as likely to be in Charlottesville's gifted program, while Black students are more than four times as likely to be held back a grade and almost five times as likely to be suspended from school.

Finally, the NYT's report further fueled the crisis of challenge by giving weight to the voices and experiences of heretofore ignored local advocates. Student activists sat at the center of its reporting. Through their narratives, these activists came to represent the experience of other minoritized students.

In short, this case illustrates how a global crisis can reverberate through the system creating new crises—in this case a crisis of challenge. Activists' calls for justice around structural

racism in the schools had gone unheeded for decades. Yet, a global crisis of reckoning around race, coupled with a timely national report "moved the needle" compelling educational leaders and stakeholders to confront decades of injustice.

Leadership Actions: Trauma versus Learning Responses

As our data above illustrated, crises can often create new, different, and unexpected crises. The initial crisis of trauma and subsequent crisis of challenge facing CPS demanded myriad leadership skill sets and knowledge. This section presents our analysis of Dr. Atkins' differing approaches during each of these phases. We discuss her focus on addressing immediate needs and effective communication during the initial crisis, and then we discuss the shift to strategies focusing on acknowledgement, community self-reflection, and discovery during the crisis of challenge.

Acute Crisis of Trauma and a Leader's Response

The rally of August 2017 was an abrupt and destabilizing trauma to the community, including the school district community. The event's shock shifted the beginning of the academic year's focus from education to safety, security, and healing. In short, the crisis was perceived as an external threat—something to survive and overcome. Our data show that at this early crisis point the superintendent focused specifically on 1) issues related to the district community's physical safety, 2) staff and students' emotional and mental health support, and 3) communication that clarified district values to internal and external communities.

Prioritizing Safety. Superintendent Atkins made several decisions regarding the safety of stakeholders in the immediate aftermath of the August demonstrations. She indicated the importance of attempting to maintain some normal routines for students, while also prioritizing safety and security. For example, freshman orientation proceeded on Monday, August 14th. The district leadership team was anxious to start the school year to pull students away from street demonstrations. As one district level interviewee stated, "[District personnel] were trying to take care of their night crew. They had freshmen coming in. And they had students who were actually participating in the protests...." In another decision aimed at maximizing safety, Atkins moved a family welcome event from the downtown amphitheater to a more remote location. Dr. Atkins also increased security at each school, even arranging additional security at night to protect custodial staff.

She also made less obvious security decisions. For example, Atkins rejected repeated requests by political groups and media sources to use the school facilities as their bases of operation, isolating the school district from emerging partisan politics. "She didn't want to allow our schools to be used by anyone… to help protect teachers and not get political," recalled one leader. According to district stakeholders we interviewed, the superintendent's prioritization of their physical safety was a significant aspect of her crisis response early on. As one district leader mentioned, "It goes without saying that people would think of safety first… But with everything that went down in August of 2017 [Dr. Atkins] always took student and faculty safety as paramount."

Focus on Stakeholder Support. Data suggest that an immediate focus on safety through district wide gatherings had a supportive effect on teachers. The superintendent's openness and

vulnerability instilled a "we're all in this together" trust with her staff. One teacher recalled how she felt at the convocation:

> I remember the way it felt, and it was goosebumpy. And I remember that people were there supporting each other, and it was 'we will not be defined by this moment.' But we also need to heal.

Another district stakeholder reflected that because the year began this way, with vulnerability and a supportive community, teachers were able to express their stress and exhaustion as the difficult year continued. The overall sentiment in our data reflected appreciation and approval of the superintendent and her support at that stage as one teacher said, "It was her finest hour."

Having addressed the emotional needs of faculty, she turned her attention toward students. At her direction, the district compiled and shared resources with families. Teams of counselors, both school counselors and clinical professionals, established open clinics in the first days of school. Leadership encouraged teachers to talk with students, especially secondary students, about their experiences. One student remarked, "I remember first day of school on the morning announcements, maybe like the first thing was that counselors and teachers and people will be in the library during lunch, or any time and we encourage you to come talk to us…. We knew those resources were available."

Values Communication. Finally, throughout the early crisis stage, Atkins communicated the organization's values and expectations in response to the crisis event. Her initial crisis communication came on Sunday immediately following the Unite the Right Rally. The superintendent sent a letter to the broader community including faculty and staff, parents, and local media. The letter was a collaboration with a Superintendent from an adjacent school district. The superintendents wrote of their sadness and mourning, and they denounced racism and hatred. They pledged their organizations' ongoing commitment to "establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity." The letter represented an early and unified voice against racism and was shared directly with faculty, staff, and parents.

However, while the letter no doubt reflected the superintendents' personal beliefs and leadership stances, it also foreshadowed a grand irony inherent in the district's history. That is, while the communication effectively positioned the district in opposition to the White Supremacist movement, it could not erase the district's own history of institutional racism that would entangle it as the crisis evolved.

On Monday, August 14th, one day later, Atkins used the district-wide convocation to share her response to the event. A clear example of calculated intervention, Atkins chose to change the focus and format of the event. She recounted that in the morning's leadership team meeting, her colleagues advised her to diverge from the new school year celebration. They reoriented the event toward addressing the collective stress of a grieving community. Later that day the event was delivered in a subdued manner to suit the meeting's new purpose. In an interview, the superintendent shared that she chose to dress casually, yet respectfully, and she addressed the district community without a podium.

Her message expressed her own grief and feelings of shock and resolve. She told the stakeholders, "Our organization would stand for love, and anyone unprepared to embrace diversity had no role to play in [the district]." One district teacher leader's comment reflected the general sentiment in our interview data:

> She made some very direct statements that if you were racist, if you are anti-certain religions, if you were anti-people who speak certain languages, if you are against LGBTQ, then you were not welcome in our school system. Because that's not who we are. And I remember her saying that very directly and I thought, well good for her….We can't be the educators in our school system if we aren't united on that front.

The superintendent's early actions reflect the responses one would expect from an external threat that, in this case, was not only politically and socially troubling, but also violent. The actions taken reflect an adherence to well considered and rehearsed crisis management plans, but also speak to the leadership acumen of Dr. Atkins. Students had access to counselors. The buildings transformed into safe havens. Faculty felt unified and motivated to pursue their work, trusting the intentions of administration.

But, as with any complex undertaking, stakeholders identified opportunity for improvement. For example, one district leader stated the superintendent might have delivered her values messaging more directly to students. Another mentioned how more support staff might have participated in the convocation event. But as stakeholders reflected on Atkins' leadership in the aftermath of the "Unite the Right" rally, they did find it successful. One leader mentioned, "I'm sure there were some mistakes, but I can't imagine us doing it any other way."

For all the positive actions taken, and the limited areas for improvement, this case study stands out for how the crisis evolved over a year's time causing the superintendent to draw on a completely different crisis skill set—one not laid out in any crisis management plan. Anti-racist proclamations could not deflect the incriminating evidence of the district's complicity in the institutional racism that the demonstrators sought to maintain.

Secondary Crisis: Organizational Learning

As we detailed earlier, the crisis facing CCS morphed from one of acute trauma to a crisis of challenge focused squarely on district practices promoting racial inequality. This secondary crisis called on leadership less focused on stabilizing and recovery, and more on learning and transformation. Below, we present examples of Dr. Atkins' approach to this crisis of challenge.

Democratic Processes. First, democratic processes allowed Atkins to collect and consolidate the swell of critical sentiment that surfaced with the NYT exposé. These inclusive practices gave voice to minoritized and traditionally marginalized stakeholders and signaled her commitment to organizational change. Specifically, Atkins set up a formal structure for soliciting ideas, thoughts, and opinions about the inequities inherent in the CPS system. Through these structures the district hosted forums, convened committees, and embraced student advocacy.

District leadership completed a series of 15 public forums over three months held at community centers across the district. One school administrator commented on Dr. Atkins' approach to these sometimes-contentious meetings:

> How do you work a room of several hundred people who are all pissed off at you? How do you navigate that conversation week after week with people coming to school board meetings and hollering at you about how everything's working? And I think Dr. Atkins does it with a steady hand, with a calm hand… She was able to put her armor on and go take care of business.

Atkins also directed these democratic activities toward students. Students were invited to attend forums. And when student groups developed lists of demands and submitted petitions, or when they organized walkouts, the Superintendent allowed these demonstrations and included their demands into conversations about district transformation.

Perhaps most importantly, Dr. Atkins intentional structure for democratic inclusivity extended beyond initial information gathering to include permanent, long-term organizational structures. To wit, after months of public listening she convened a district-level equity committee to formally process the public feedback and issue recommendations. This group of 33 stakeholders produced a ranked list of recommendations that was incorporated into the district's strategic plan. Meanwhile, public outreach continued as part of the district's routine activities. Equity committees began to operate at each school, and concerns voiced within school communities had a formal structure to communicate with district leadership. One teacher commented on the new structure, "I think that is a big improvement where people feel like, not only can I have a voice, but there's a structure to carry that voice."

Historical Auditing. Finally, Dr. Atkins used the crisis of challenge as leverage to make changes and have discussions around race and the district's historical transgressions in the name of equity. In a process we label "historical auditing," Atkins compelled district personnel to surface the contradictions inherent in the organization's historical values (evidenced through policies and practices) versus the values represented in the post-crisis paradigm. We present just two examples that illustrate how the district reexamined and rewrote a more accurate history of the past to establish a more equity-oriented future.

First, Atkins confronted CCS historical narratives that hid injustice and ignored efforts to desegregate. For example, she challenged the district's social studies department to "change the narrative" by teaching local history around race and justice more accurately. With her encouragement, the district's social studies curriculum was revised to honestly consider stories of resistance to school integration alongside stories such as the first African American students to integrate CCS known as the Charlottesville 12. Through the social studies curriculum, social media, and ceremonies, Dr. Atkins led the effort to acknowledge these types of historical struggles in the district.

In another example, Dr. Atkins encouraged stakeholders to research the district's past policies and practices. During research on the district's gifted program Dr. Atkins and a teacher discovered a 1958 letter from a concerned citizen among school board records. The letter advocated using gifted identification protocols to maintain de facto racial segregation. The letter's discovery could not have been timelier, as the gifted program had been the focus of criticism for its lack of services for students of color. As Atkins stated, "For me reading that letter, it felt like and sounded like that was the genesis of the Gifted program that we had evolved in Charlottesville City Schools." In fact, she used this letter to connect the past to the present as she held formal conversations with colleagues, community stakeholders, and scholars about institutional racism in the district. Dr. Atkins explained, "I decided that I would not use it as a hammer, but as a tool for educating. And I decided in our community, in our school district, that I just could not rest until we dismantled this [gifted] program." Dr. Atkins referred to the letter directly when, in spring 2019, she put a moratorium on the pull-out delivery of gifted services. Her elevation of this historical artifact opened a new series of meetings and debate, evident in local press coverage. From the *Daily Progress* newspaper, "Atkins faced backlash for requesting

$620,000 from the city out of the normal budgeting cycle to hire eight gifted specialists to strengthen changes to the program." The emotional resistance to change from parents of some gifted students only stoked the superintendent's stronger conviction that all students deserved the academic enrichment opportunities gifted programming provides. Fully committed to district transformation, Atkins used historical auditing to advance organizational learning in a post-crisis context.

Discussion and Conclusions

Considered against the backdrop of the crisis literature presented earlier, our findings suggest important lessons for scholars studying crises and the districts and school leaders who live through them. Our case study illustrates and builds upon important critical crisis literature that underscores crises as complex, multi-faceted, and social phenomena (e.g., Coombs & Halladay, 2012). Specifically, the CCS case underscores that leaders should expect crises to be dynamic, complex, and multi-dimensional (Ren, 2000). These traits call into question the utility of crisis management plans that focus on 3-stage models of acute, and traditionally conceptualized crises (e.g., Fink, 1986). The CCS case illustrates complexity in multiple ways. We see how a crisis external to an organization can cause, in this instance, a school district to pivot temporarily away from its education mission to a focus on safety and healing. In this regard, the crisis' impact—whether originating externally or internally—was acute and relatively tangible. In short, these are the types of crises most management plans are designed to address.

But this case, more importantly builds on the crisis literature that focuses on complexity. While the external Unite the Right rally created an acute crisis for CCS, it also set the stage for, first, a paracrisis and, second, a crisis of challenge. Especially in today's hyper-connected world, educational leaders must be cognizant of social forces that, not too long ago, may never have materialized. Incorporating the concept of the paracrisis into crisis management plans will support consideration of socially manufactured crises propelled by social media and other means of communication that are digitally accelerated. Using the keystone concepts of paracrisis—power, legitimacy, and urgency—educational leaders will be better situated to assess potential crises.

Further, important lessons for educational leaders faced with growing onslaughts driven by social media, is how, and why, the CCS crisis continued to evolve from acute crisis, to paracrisis, and ultimately a crisis of challenge. As the superintendent was aware, a history of institutional racism was fertile ground for an evolving and changing crisis, especially given the genesis of the initial crisis. In this case study, the paracrisis pointing to the district's complicity in institutionally racist practices gained traction precisely because those accusations toward the district were 1) *powerful* and influential, 2) *legitimate* to stakeholders beyond those earlier initiators, and 3) *urgent* given the nature of the claims and evidence supporting them.

Finally, the role of leadership stands out in the CCS case study. The superintendent played a critical role in acknowledging the transformation of an acute crisis into what became a crisis of challenge, i.e., a challenge to the legitimacy of the school district and its capacity to carry out its mission. Where in the district's past, transformational change away from institutional racism and toward equity were met with strong resistance, Dr. Atkins was able to leverage the *crisis of*

challenge to make substantive changes regarding organizational policy, practice and ultimately culture.

In summary, this case study underscores the need to consider the complex nature of crises and their varied impacts on schools and districts. Crises come in many forms—natural, social, economic, etc. And initial crises can lead to successive crises across time and space. But, in addition, crises can lead create conditions for and instigate new, seemingly, different, and unrelated crises. The CCS case provides an example of how an acute crisis can lead to a relatively new source of crisis—the *paracrisis*. While district leaders may have experienced paracrises in practice, it is important to be informed about this source of potential crisis driven by media and social media in our hyperconnected world.

References

Argyris, C. & Schon, D. A. (1996). Organizational learning II: Theory, method, and practice. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Barnett, C., & Pratt, M. (2000). From threat-rigidity to flexibility: Toward a learning model of autogenic crisis on organizations. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *13*(1), 74-88.

Bechler, C. (1995). Looking beyond the immediate crisis response: Analyzing the organizational culture to understand the crisis. *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration*, *1*, 1–17.

Bhaduri, R. (2019). Leveraging culture and leadership in crisis management. *European Journal of Training & Development*, *43*(5), 554–569.

Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (2016). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (5th ed.). New York: Pearson.

Bowers, M., Hall, J., & Srinivasan, M. (2017). Organizational culture and leadership style: the missing combination for selecting the right leader for effective crisis management. *Business Horizons*, *60*(4), 551-563.

Bundy, J., Pfarrer, M. D., Short, C. E., Coombs, W. T. (2017). Crises and crisis management: Integration, interpretation, and research development. *Journal of Management 43*(6), 1661-1692.

Coombs, W. (2012). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA. Sage.

Coombs, W. & Holladay, J. (2012). The paracrisis: The challenges created by publicly managing crisis prevention. *Public Relations Review, 38*, 408-415.

Cornell, D. & Sheras, P. (1998). Common errors in school crisis response: Learning from our mistakes. *Psychology in the Schools*, *35*(3), 297-307.

Fink, S. (1986). *Crisis management: Planning for the inevitable*. New York, NY: American Management Association.

Frandsen, F. & Johansen, W. (2017). Organizational crisis communication. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Grissom, J. & Condon, L. (2021). Leading school and districts in times of crisis. *Educational Researcher, 50*(5), 315-324.

Hess, M. & Lowery, C. (2020). Crisis leadership and the impact of opioids on schools and students: Perspectives of school leaders in rural Appalachia. *Education Leadership Review 21*(1), 126-141.

Lagadec, P. (1997). Learning processes for crisis management in complex organizations. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, *5*(1), 24-31.

Lalonde, C. (2007). Crisis management and organizational development: Towards the conception of a learning model in crisis management. *Organizational Development Journal*, *25*(1), 17-26.

Langer, E. J. (1989). *Mindfulness*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus.

Larsson, L. (2010). Crisis and learning. In W. Coombs & S. Holladay (eds)., *The handbook of crisis communication*, 713-718. Boston: Wiley-Blackwell.

Lerbinger, O. (1997). The crisis manager: Facing risk and responsibility. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
Liou, Y. H. (2015). School crisis management: A model of dynamic responsiveness to crisis life cycle. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *51*(2), 247–289.
Mitroff, I. (2002). Crisis learning: The lessons of failure. *The Futurist*, *36*(5), 19-21.
Mitroff, I. (2005). *Why Some Companies Emerge Stronger and Better from a Crisis*. New York: AMACOM.
Mouline, I. 2018. Nine steps to improved critical event management. *Journal of Business Continuity & Emergency Planning*, *12*(3), 253-262.
Nathan, M. (2000). The paradoxical nature of crisis. *Review of Business*, *21*(3/4), 12-16.
Pearson, C., & Clair, J. (1998). Reframing crisis management. *The Academy of Management Review*, *23*(1), 59-76.
Pearson, C., & Mitroff, I. (1993). From crisis prone to crisis prepared: a framework for crisis management. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, *7*(1), 48-59.
Perrow, C. (1999). *Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies* (2nd ed.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Ren, C. (2000). Understanding and managing he dynamics of linked crisis events. *Disaster Prevention and Management, 9*(1), 12-17.
Robert, B., & Lajtha, C. (2002). A new approach to crisis management. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, *10*, 181-191.
Schlafer, D. (2009). Preparing for the unthinkable. *American School Board Journal*, *196*(12), 48-49.
Stake, R. (2010). *Qualitative research studying how things work*. New York: Guilford Press.
Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (2014). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
Tompkins, P. K. (2005). *Apollo, Challenger, Columbia. The decline of the space program*. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury.
Veil, S. (2011). Mindful learning in crisis management. *International Journal of Business Communication*, *48*(2), 116-147.
Wang, J. (2008). Developing organizational learning capacity in crisis management. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, *10*(3), 425-445.
Wang, C. & Kuo, M. 2017. Strategic styles and organizational capability in crisis response in local government. *Administration and Society*, *49*(6), 798-826.
Yin, R. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.