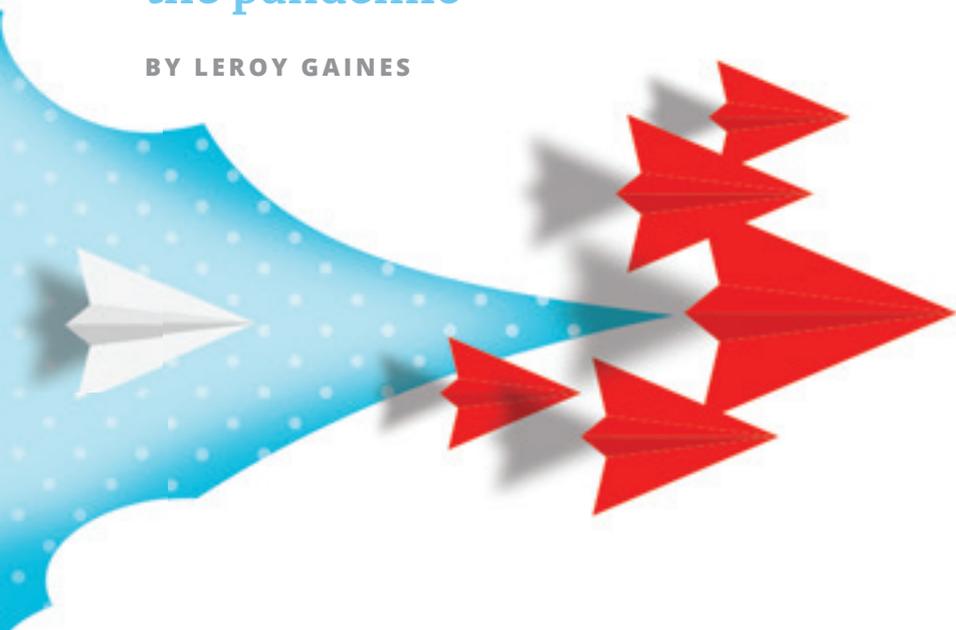# Lead Through
Together

Crisis

Distributed leadership can help schools excel beyond the pandemic

BY LEROY GAINES

"You're not going to believe this," a principal in Oakland told me early last fall. "You remember that mom I was telling you about? The one who declined all of the services our team has suggested for her son every year since I became principal? She just called and asked for help."

This was a breakthrough. This particular transformation occurred after—you might say was made possible by—the closure of schools during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The remote learning it required has dramatically changed the way parents and caregivers engage with and understand their children's educational requirements and academic needs—and that's a good thing.

At the same time, distance and hybrid learning have presented innumerable challenges. Teachers who are scrambling to adjust their lessons using new technologies often lack clear information on best practices. Parents are managing careers while trying to ensure that their children continue to engage with their education. The youngest learners are trying to sit in front of a computer for hours when they would learn best through play. Staff are working around the clock to ensure that children and families have what they need to get by, from having food on the table to putting a rent check in the mail.

It's an impossible situation. Yet the breakthrough I described above illustrates what many of us in education know to be true: On the other side of some of the most intractable challenges facing our schools and society lie important opportunities.

A former elementary school principal myself, I know firsthand how critical it is to find, create, and capitalize on these opportunities. I also know that principals can't do it alone. As a leadership coach with New Leaders, my advice to principals is that now is the best time to bring more people into (or back into) leadership and decision-making—even (or especially) when the territory feels uncertain.
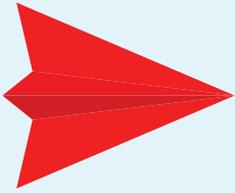
THE PROMISE OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Sharing or "distributing" leadership and cultivating more effective, empowered teams of teachers is a critical strategy for addressing the needs of schools today. As a leader, it's neither practical nor strategic to try to figure everything out yourself. You need the collective expertise, strength, and passion of your entire school community to come up with solutions that work for your unique circumstances.

Distributed approaches can help school communities use the tumult of the past year to reimagine education for the future. Persistent achievement gaps reflect persistent opportunity gaps in schools and society at large. What we did before COVID was not working for Black, brown, indigenous, and other students of color. It wasn't working for children from low-income backgrounds. It wasn't working for English learners. It wasn't working for LGBTQ youth. It wasn't working for students with disabilities.

Working together, school communities can identify which new strategies being tested right now are worth keeping in the next school year and beyond. Sharing the load can also make the complex, often lonely job of school principal more enjoyable and sustainable. It's a win-win.

With the abrupt shift to remote learning, the uncertainty around what a school reopening looks like, and a stressful back-to-school season, many principals took on additional responsibilities. There were so many new demands, it was important to not ask the community to do more than the essential in navigating the new reality. This isn't sustainable for principals, nor is it an effective way to run a school that helps teachers and students grow and thrive.

A FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In 2019, New Leaders conducted an extensive review of the research on distributed leadership. After combing through more than 70 major studies on the topic and engaging in dozens of stakeholder conversations, we developed a definition to bring coherence to the many different models that exist in schools across the country.

Distributed leadership refers to a range of flexible approaches to school organization, management, and operations that expand traditional conceptions of leadership to include a variety of formal and informal leadership roles and activities. While the specifics vary, all models include a principal who fosters a trusting culture, promotes collaboration, and organizes, taps, and marshals school resources to build the leadership capacity of teachers, students, parents, and the entire school community. When these elements are in place, distributed leadership can yield improvements to school and student outcomes that might exceed the sum of individual contributions.

Distributed leadership advances several important school and student outcomes that can help principals preserve community, promote connection, and protect learning in virtual contexts. First, in schools where leadership is highly distributed, colleagues collaborate more often and in deeper ways, leading to instructional improvements. In these schools, teachers have ample opportunities to lead and shape school practices, they are happier with their jobs, and they contribute more readily to the school community outside their classroom spheres.

Second, distributed leadership can lead to measurable improvements in student learning and achievement. We found that academic gains occurred in schools with effective teacher teams, strong parent engagement, and robust student participation in decision-making. This finding is especially helpful for principals considering how to prioritize their time and energy in building or rebuilding more inclusive and expansive approaches to leadership in the current climate.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN THE VIRTUAL CONTEXT

The studies we reviewed are limited in one important way: They focus on school as it was, not as it is today. The way we employ distributed approaches must reflect the research while addressing new realities of remote or hybrid learning, as well as the prospect that in-person teaching might need to shift to virtual instruction abruptly. Here are three strategic shifts principals can begin making now to finish the school year strong and begin preparation for fall 2021 and beyond:

1. Reimagine the roles and responsibilities of teachers and teacher leaders. As a principal, it was my expectation that every teacher in our building would eventually serve as a teacher leader, lending their experience and expertise to support their colleagues. Virtual teaching requires a new approach and new strategies, and teachers need support from coaches whose backgrounds and skill sets address their needs today.

Principals can identify educators with this kind of expertise through staff surveys or informal information-gathering and tap those teachers for leadership roles. For example, many teachers need help adapting curricula and instruction for online use, becoming fluent with technology platforms, and building community with students and caregivers.

Principals can use and share resources to support teacher leaders in improving virtual coaching conversations. Teacher leaders can also play an important role in streamlining communication with families on behalf of grade-level teams, reducing the volume of messages students and parents receive. Principals can provide teacher leaders with flexible resources—parent surveys, email update templates, etc.—that they can adapt for use with their teams.

2. Build the capacity of parents and caregivers. To make virtual classrooms work, we need to invest in the adults who are overseeing learning at home. At my school, we did a lot of work to support families. Through a partnership with Springboard Collective, we brought parents into school every week to learn with their children. Teachers modeled literacy strategies for parents, who then practiced with their children and got in-the-moment feedback. It was powerful, and we saw significant academic improvements.

Without access to physical school buildings, principals can use technology to create more flexible opportunities to connect with families. The in-person sessions we hosted for parents at our school might be conducted via videoconference, with breakout rooms for each family to practice and get feedback, at times based on caregivers' availability. In addition to teaching, such sessions might expose the tech issues many families experience and help them get needed resources. While remote learning is challenging, it offers schools an entry point to bring families into their children's educational experience in richer, more meaningful ways.

3. Continuously seek input from students and families, and integrate their ideas. Strong pedagogy and effective schools require deep partnerships among educators, students, parents, and other caregivers. To understand whether virtual instruction is working, to identify pain points, and to live up to our values as a learning community, we have to make sure that students and families have regular opportunities to provide feedback, share ideas, and play an active role in shaping remote learning and whatever lies ahead.

PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE NOW

To make these changes happen, principals need to lean on the strategies and tools they have been using in new and innovative ways. Midway through this school year, now is an opportune time.

For example, principals might need to revisit school schedules to ensure that they provide an appropriate balance between live sessions and asynchronous learning, especially for the youngest learners. If it is not already in this year's schedule, teacher leaders might need an extra prep period to learn, plan, collaborate, coordinate, and execute their leadership responsibilities. Principals and teachers might need to advocate with district and union leaders to negotiate needed changes to collectively bargained agreements to make further innovations possible.

Principals must also continue to create and foster formal and informal outlets for community members to engage in problem-solving and decision-making in virtual spaces. Building on the greater technological fluency and comfort levels of staff, students, and families, principals can spearhead virtual office hours, peer or parent support groups, and communitywide town halls.

And as always but now virtually, principals must build trust through honesty, transparency, and strategic vulnerability. Being a leader doesn't mean having all the answers, but it does mean creating a space in which stakeholders feel comfortable and are actively encouraged to share feedback, insights, and ideas, so that together, communities can come up with solutions and take action to meet their needs. This is distributed leadership at its finest.

Principals need to take advantage of this opportunity to engage their entire communities in rethinking education. Through their leadership and the leadership they cultivate across their school communities, principals can transform schools and society for the better. ●

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Resources
To access resources designed specifically for leaders navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and a rapidly changing educational landscape, visit **newleaders.org.**