LEADERS IN THE TUMULT:
Schooling Innovations and New Perspectives From a Year Interrupted

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Part 1 of 3 in the Leaders We Need Now series of research briefs that describe principals’ perspectives on the future of schooling
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Acknowledgments
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Introduction

Principal Anita Ramirez¹ had just finished morning announcements on an overcast Friday in March when her phone buzzed. The superintendent’s text message alerted her that her school of nearly 300 elementary school students would be closing at the end of the day for 2 weeks because of an uptick in COVID-19 cases.

From that moment on, work was nonstop. The 2-week school closure turned into months of online learning. Dr. Ramirez and her colleagues adapted curriculum and instruction, conducted contact tracing for COVID-19 cases, and made the school a hub for health information and frontline food distribution. As spring turned into summer, devastating videos of police violence brought a renewed reckoning with racial and social injustice, and principals found themselves again on the forefront of a national crisis. Dr. Ramirez and her colleagues continued to support students and families, even as the ground beneath them shifted. When her school reopened later that fall, students and teachers returned to the same brick building, but they experienced new approaches to teaching and learning. New approaches that, maybe, only a principal can notice.

Dr. Ramirez was not alone. Principals from 87,500 elementary schools in communities across the United States rapidly rearranged schooling to provide students continuity of care and learning through the shocking events of 2020–2021 (Box 1). As the country emerges from the pandemic, schools might revert to old routines, but through the social shocks, a “eureka” moment may happen, as people recognize innovative approaches or see persistent problems in a new light (Heifetz, 1994).

Box 1. 2020–2021: A Year Interrupted—By the Numbers

The country is still learning about the breadth and depth of changes that continue to occur in schools and society as the nation addresses the COVID-19 pandemic, social protests, natural disasters, and political discord. These disruptions provide a critical context for discussions with school principals.

- Forty-eight states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories ordered or recommended schools to close in March 2020, affecting more than 50 million public school students (Education Week, 2020a).
- Elementary schools in approximately half of the school districts in the United States returned to primarily in-person teaching in fall 2020. Months later, in winter 2021, that number grew to about two thirds. However, nearly 75% of large school districts remained primarily remote (Hodgman et al., 2021).
- Protests around Black Lives Matter spread to 2,000 cities and towns in all 50 states and the District of Columbia in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in late May 2020 (Burch et al., 2020).
- Anti-Asian hate crime reported to police in 15 of America’s largest cities and counties rose 169%, from 32 in the first quarter of 2020 to 86 in the first quarter of 2021, according to an analysis of official preliminary data by the Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism (Levin, 2021).
- Teacher morale plummeted during the pandemic in 2020. By April 2020, two thirds of teachers indicated that their morale was lower or much lower than it was before the pandemic. By August 2020, three quarters of teachers reported feeling this way (Education Week, 2020b).
- According to a survey of 675 educators in summer 2020, 1 in 4 reported that a member of their school community had died from COVID-19 (New York Life Insurance Company, 2020).
- District leaders estimated that an average of 4% of students in Grades 3–5 either left the district or never showed up to class in fall 2020 (Carminucci et al., 2021).
- Twenty-two weather-related disasters—including derechos, droughts, wildfires, hurricanes, and snowstorms—caused more than $1 billion in damages in the United States in 2020 (Smith, 2021).

¹ This is a pseudonym.
NAESP wanted to know, directly from principals, about the major changes to schooling that occurred during the tumult spanning from March 2020 to June 2021. Principals are the key people with whom to talk about changes in schools and communities, because they have a birds-eye view on schools and, typically, institutional histories that are necessary to discern substantial changes from temporary ones. Three questions drove the research study: What innovative practices and new perspectives emerged that they believed would be indelible, what learning emerged through the changes, and what challenges remain?

NAESP asked the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) to convene a geographically distributed group of principals, and AIR researchers conducted 36 focus groups with 188 elementary school principals from 43 states. The focus groups asked principals to talk about major changes in their work lives and schools occurring through 2020–2021 and explore which changes would be temporary and which ones they wanted to become permanent because they represented a new, better way of working. The research team recorded focus group conversations via video conference, transcribed them, and then analyzed the conversations for themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The Appendix presents more information about the methodology.

This brief is the first of three briefs emerging from our conversations with members of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP). This brief presents the principals’ perspectives on the changes that their schools experienced and on the innovations that they led in their schools during 2020–2021. The second brief provides principals’ perspectives on changes to their work, priorities, and profession; and the third brief provides principals’ perspectives on policies that can advance student learning and heal schools and communities.
New Perspectives on Schooling: Pivot, Resilience, and Grace

Sitting alone in their offices or homes across the United States, principals spoke in focus groups through Zoom about major changes occurring in schools in 2020–2021. Although principals shared different experiences, three words were frequently mentioned to describe principals’ new perspectives on school life: pivot, resilience, and grace.

Pivot

For nearly all of the 188 elementary school principals in the focus groups, school life was disrupted in 2020–2021, and the disruptions prompted pivots or abrupt changes. Principals told us that major school pivots were both physical (e.g., from in-person to online learning) and perceptual (e.g., schools’ roles in perpetuating inequities and meaningfully addressing racism).

One California principal said, “You know, the word that we’ve used is ‘pivot.’ We’ve pivoted so much [in 2020–2021] that it was like a ballerina performance every day.”

A Rhode Island principal commented, “You’ve got to be able to pivot and that’s the only way you survive the school year. You’ve just got to have multiple planes ready to go at any time.”

A principal in New York said, “We worked through what we call Plan A through Plan G with our virtual kids, and then we planned it all again.”

Pivot also became a perspective on schooling that several principals believed would continue for years to come. One principal shared a sentiment held by many principals in the study, “I think we will be pivoting for a long time. It might be a permanent condition. Of course, there’s always change in schools, but now we [educators], parents, and kids are used to rolling with new approaches quickly. We’re more willing to change on a dime if routines aren’t working because we’ve done it [in 2020–2021].”

Resilience

Although schools pivoted rapidly, most of the principals spoke about a new perspective and appreciation for schools’ resilience. As one principal from Michigan said, “[Community members] trust us to be incredibly strong and resilient for their kids. . . . We had to find a way to continue relationships, learning, and support to kids. We had to make sure that they [the kids] were all right.” This principal and other principals noted that schools bounced back from the shock of 2020–2021 and that schooling looked dramatically different from how it looked before the COVID-19 pandemic. But despite this period of great hardship for families and communities, the principals said that one thing was consistent: Educators’ aim to provide safe and welcoming learning environments for students.

Nearly all principals shared stories of educator resilience, which was visible through school changes and educator stress.

One principal said, “I know teachers in my building put their own retirement on hold and made personal sacrifices to be here for the school during this time. They are under stress, but they are still here for the school.”
Although principals expressed newfound appreciation for educator resilience, nearly all principals spoke about their own and colleagues’ exhaustion and low morale. They were concerned that, at a point, educator resilience would reach a breaking point. Principals were searching for solutions to alleviate exhaustion and improve morale.

**Grace**

The principals shared stories about rifts occurring through 2021 in their schools, among staff members, and in their communities. The principals emphasized the need for grace and healing. In the interviews, principals often invoked the word *grace* and other similar terms describing the forgiveness, goodwill, and reprieve they either sought from or gave to members of their school community.

A principal in Maryland commented, “We need to respect this disease [COVID-19], and I need [community members] to understand the liabilities that school systems are taking on to try and get kids in-person. In-person is great. That’s why we designed it that way. But in a pandemic, we need a little bit of grace. We are trying to find the right way.”

A Montana principal said, “We have to show ourselves a little grace as well. I’ve had to tell my staff that it is okay to do some self-care during this year, because of the stress.”

A Mississippi principal commented, “Through parts of the past year, community members showed us support and forgiveness like never before. Because parents were home with kids, they understood the value of our work and how hard it is. For a while it was, ‘we are all in this together.’”

Several principals hoped grace would continue to be shown to schools and that schooling would proceed with a sense of forgiveness and healing. However, many principals acknowledged that schools and communities have more work to do to maintain a sense of grace and civility. One principal said, “We need to work on civility, and recognize—with respect—that we have different ideas and that we can find a place in the middle that is good for our kids.”

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2 Reich and Mehta (2021) asked similar questions of 200 teachers and approximately 4,000 students, concluding that both teachers and students sought healing for their schools and communities.
Innovations in Schools

Most aspects of school life changed in 2020–2021, from cleaning protocols to instructional pacing. The research team asked principals to identify school innovations that held potential for improving the work of schools and being sustained in the longer term. Principals highlighted several major changes:

♦ Scaling technology to deliver and manage instruction,
♦ Using new staffing practices to meet the needs of educators and students,
♦ Reengineering student flow (i.e., student movement into, through, and out the school building), and
♦ Creating new partnerships with community and government agencies to better serve communities.

The principals also talked about the ripple effect of making changes in schools in terms of new challenges and new learning.

Scaling Technology to Deliver and Manage Instruction

Beginning in March 2020, school systems across the country moved to fully online or hybrid learning to comply with state guidelines on the pandemic response. As a result, schools relied heavily on online platforms to deliver instruction, stay connected with community members, manage schools, and support student engagement (e.g., attendance data, grading, access to materials). Principals told us that few schools used technology at the scale necessitated by the changes to the learning environment. Although some technology uses might have dissipated as schools reopened, most of the principals believed that the use of new technology would be an indelible change to instructional management.

Principals considered the pivot to online learning and management systems imperative for providing some continuity in student learning and for maintaining relationships with students, which they viewed as essential.

A Missouri principal commented, “When you have to social distance, you lose the natural connections that happen between students and teachers, and we know that connections and trust are the basis for best practices in education. So we had to use technology.”

A principal in Illinois said, “It was just constant Zoom meetings. Everything was virtual. We edited videos. All this to try to stay engaged and keep people interacting and a part of the school.”

Many principals told us that distributing technology and ensuring broadband internet access was a first step in scaling instructional technology. The principals knew that the digital divide existed and created inequities, but the pandemic showed them the depth of the divide. Many schools moved to one-to-one student-to-device ratios by quickly purchasing, distributing, and supporting new technology.

A Kentucky principal related, “Our district just did a huge iPad adoption, which was awesome. If we go out again, we can send those devices home.”

A California principal said, “This forced our district to do one-on-one computers for kids with CARES3 money, because this is what we had to do [so kids could access learning]. Previously, it was basically every school for themselves.”

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3 The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, passed on March 27, 2020, provided $13.5 billion to the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, which provided some resources to help school pivot to online learning.
Several of the principals also worked with local internet providers to improve student connectivity.

Although schools’ efforts improved access to technology, inequitable access persisted, and schools responded creatively. To meet the challenge of internet access, the principals said that some schools distributed print or electronic materials manually, by car or bus.

A Utah principal said, “Our problem is that almost 50 percent of our families either have inadequate or no internet. Some of them don’t have strong cell service either. So as far as equity, we have to provide packets and things and also thumb drives of some of these lessons.”

A principal in Tennessee related, “We don’t have strong broadband connections in the county, but we do near the school. We opened access to the public. You’d see parents and kids in cars, working.”

Schools invested in professional development for teachers, students, and families as a second step in scaling technology. Many teachers, for example, learned how to use instructional technology effectively for their content areas and with young students.

An Ohio principal related, “We provided tons of professional development, from apps for early childhood learning to Chromebook™ camp for teachers. We also provided connections with teachers and staff because they had to learn so many new things. Before, we all thought we were so tech savvy, until we discovered [that] we weren’t.”

A principal in Pennsylvania said, “I know my kindergarten team. They would never have pushed themselves to give students a chance to express themselves in modern technology. My hope is that will not go away, and we will continue to use some of these technologies as an avenue for learning and teaching that we didn’t think were appropriate for the age or we were too afraid to dive into.”

A few principals told us that schools launched educator learning communities to share techniques and work together to solve problems around learning.

Although all of the principals preferred in-person schooling, most believed that scaled use of instructional technology would continue. The principals identified a few ways that technology could be used in the future:

- **Advisories**: Several principals said that their schools opened regular, online advisory meetings with teachers, where students could drop in and receive emotional, technology, and content support.

- **Enrichment**: A few principals said that teachers were using technology to enrich coursework by encouraging students to go deeper into content by reading, watching videos, or exploring online resources and spaces.

- **Remediation**: Principals noted online learning could support instructional enrichment and extensions for some students and remediation (e.g., summer school, tutoring) for other students.

- **Continuity during future school closures**: Several principals said that their schools would incorporate online learning guidelines into their emergency response plans, as a way to pivot quickly when snow days or longer term emergencies closed schools.

- **Online professional learning**: Principals, teachers, and staff engaged in experts and each other through online professional development during 2020–2021. Principals viewed online environments as being more convenient and cost-effective for some professional learning activities.
According to principals, scaling technology efforts raised new challenges and supported new learning

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<th>New challenges</th>
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<td><strong>Adequately serving early childhood students:</strong> Principals raised concerns</td>
<td><strong>Another way for students to shine:</strong> Principals said that, for some students, technology</td>
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<td>that online learning—as it was provided during 2020–2021—may not work well</td>
<td>offered a better way to engage with content and provided a better social space for learning, but</td>
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<td>for academic achievement and social development, especially among K–3</td>
<td>principals tended to believe in-person learning was better for most students.</td>
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<td>students.**</td>
<td><strong>Streamlined student records management:</strong> Since all teachers began to use online classroom</td>
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<td><strong>Adequately supporting students with special needs:</strong> Most principals felt</td>
<td>and student management systems, student records became more centralized and accessible to staff.</td>
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<td>that hybrid or online learning models did not serve well students with</td>
<td><strong>Fewer in-person meetings:</strong> Schools shifted educator meetings and parent meetings to an online</td>
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<td>individualized education plans. Although the learning environments brought on</td>
<td>format. Several principals reported that meeting attendance and focus improved when meetings</td>
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<td>by the pandemic were necessary for student health, online learning offered</td>
<td>occurred online, and online meetings gave more parents more flexibility to schedule and attend</td>
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<td>few avenues to work with students.</td>
<td>meetings.</td>
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<td><strong>Realizing new inequities:</strong> Online and hybrid learning brought a new focus</td>
<td><strong>Bringing educators together:</strong> The overall need to move learning online provided a common</td>
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<td>to the digital divide—that is, an internet and technology gap experienced</td>
<td>purpose to school staff, which helped to build professional community at a time of tumultuous</td>
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<td>by many students, families, and communities.</td>
<td>disruptions and division.</td>
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<td><strong>Dual school management:</strong> Many elementary principals managed dual schools—</td>
<td><strong>Schoolwide communication:</strong> With their staff in many locations and changes occurring daily,</td>
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<td>that is, an in-person school and a virtual school—simultaneously, particularly</td>
<td>schools adopted instant messaging platforms (e.g., Slack®) to permit file sharing and communication</td>
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<td>in hybrid learning environments. Educators had to manage both schools’</td>
<td>among staff. Several principals pointed out that messaging platforms improved communications</td>
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<td>instruction, learning environments, and staffing and the transition of students</td>
<td>among educators.</td>
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<td>between both environments. Dual schools meant teachers, administrators, and</td>
<td><strong>More insight into the homelife of students:</strong> Online teaching provided a glimpse into students’</td>
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<td>counselors worked double time to support both environments.</td>
<td>homes, helping principals and teachers better understand the inequities their students face.</td>
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<td><strong>Lack of technology specialists:</strong> Although they foresee technology being a</td>
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<td>bigger part of school in the long term, principals—particularly those in</td>
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<td>rural schools—did not have ready access to technology specialists who can</td>
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<td>support educators, students, and even families’ use of technology.</td>
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Using New Staffing Practices to Meet the Needs of Educators and Students

Nearly all of the principals pursued new staffing practices in 2020–2021, seeking to provide flexibility to schools when delivering services. Every principal shared stories about trauma and stress among educators and challenges with childcare and health, all of which were related to COVID-19 and other national crises. These stories often involved temporary staff absences or permanent losses, which further challenged schools as they continually sought to effectively meet the needs of students.

A South Carolina principal said, “We are struggling with staffing. Teachers aren’t comfortable coming back [to in-person instruction]. Teachers have resigned because they have young children at home, and there’s no one else to stay home with them.”

Some teachers left the teaching profession because they could not continue teaching online, as one principal said, “I had a teacher resign the day before school started, saying she couldn’t teach virtually. And then I had another teacher resign about midway, first semester . . . . Online teaching just isn’t what many of the teachers signed up for, and many feel ineffective.”

Principals also had to find staffing solutions to address bus drivers and substitute teachers who found other positions or stopped working temporarily. For example, one principal lamented, “How am I going to get [students] all on the bus [when] we don’t have enough bus drivers? I’m going to have to hold the bus for a half hour after school because [bus drivers are] going to run a route for second time.”

Although all schools pursued new staffing approaches, no single approach emerged during the focus groups with principals. The principals pursued multiple options, and a few talked about using multiple options simultaneously. The approaches did not involve increasing teacher pay or other monetary incentives, which is often outside the principals’ span of control. Principals identified the following staffing solutions:

- **Cross-staffing and substituting:** Nearly all principals reported that they taught classes for absent teachers in 2020–2021 or temporarily replaced absent teachers with other teachers.

- **Hybrid staffing:** Most principals used hybrid staffing with hybrid learning. Hybrid staffing typically involves a teacher and a paraprofessional or other staff member. For example, with hybrid staffing, a teacher could either (a) work online and teach synchronously both online students and students in a classroom who are being supported in-person by a paraprofessional or other staff member or (b) teach in-person to students in a classroom while a paraprofessional or other staff member synchronously supports online students.

- **Centralized online learning:** A few principals in larger school districts talked about centralized online learning, where staff from multiple schools teach full-time in centralized, virtual schools. This approach allowed each school to serve students online while distributing staffing loads across all schools.

- **External staffing solutions:** According to a few principals, high demand for specialized staff, like counselors and nurses, prompted some schools to contract with external agencies for specialized staffing solutions.

- **Flexible staffing solutions:** Nearly all of the principals are anticipating the continued need for flexible staffing solutions—or for creating new positions—in the next few years because of educator retirements and departures, more competitive job markets, and ongoing national public health issues.
According to principals, new staffing practices raised new challenges and supported new learning

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<td><strong>Exhausted current staff:</strong> Several principals expressed concerns that new staffing approaches exhausted educators, who moved daily to new content areas and learning platforms.</td>
<td><strong>Recentering staff on priorities:</strong> Many principals noted that new staffing approaches required them to think about prioritizing staff time and stretched educators thinly. For example, some principals noted the need for self-care and social-emotional support to help educators cope with primary or secondary trauma.</td>
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<td><strong>Recruiting the next generation of educators:</strong> For decades, teacher recruitment and retention has plagued many school districts. Most principals expressed concern that more teachers and administrators would opt to leave the profession after the 2020–2021 school year because of retirements, job stress, and better financial opportunities elsewhere. More creative staffing, hiring, and recruitment approaches may be needed to replace educators.</td>
<td><strong>Continuing with cross-staffing:</strong> Educators in elementary schools were able to place certified staff in different grade levels or subject areas to serve as substitute teachers. Several principals talked about encouraging teachers to get specialized certifications to improve staffing flexibility and support cross-staffing in the future.</td>
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<td><strong>Diversifying teacher and principal pipelines:</strong> Many principals expressed renewed concerns that the demographics of school staff did not reflect those of the community. The principals are seeking ways to hire, recruit, and retain more racially diverse staff.</td>
<td><strong>Deepening discourse on inclusivity:</strong> Schools launched discussion groups and new work teams to better address equity and inclusion, in response to national and local racial justice concerns. Principals viewed equity and inclusion as a long-term investment in educational improvement and staff development, and several principals sought to continue and expand discussion groups.</td>
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<td><strong>Hiring and retaining school nurses, counselors, and information technology (IT) specialists:</strong> Some principals recognized that healthcare and IT professionals are in high demand nationally. Principals expressed concerns that public schools cannot attract, hire, and retain school nurses, school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and IT specialists because pay may not be as competitive as pay for similar positions in the private sector.</td>
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Reengineering Student Flow

State and federal social distancing guidelines set the context for schools to reopen. When those guidelines changed, schools had to adjust (and often readjust) student flow (i.e., the way that students move and engage with teachers and staff in buildings and in online learning environments) and student management systems that trace student flow during the school day.

Schools using hybrid and in-person learning environments changed student flow in schools. Principals provided the following examples of such changes:

- Class rosters and students’ class schedules,
- School start and end times,
- Transportation to and from home,
- COVID-19 screening practices,
- Logistics of COVID-19 testing for students,
- Food service processes,
- Recess schedules,
- How morning announcements were made,
- Classroom seating and furniture arrangements,
- Athletics schedules, and
- School cleaning schedules.

Principals in hybrid and in-person learning environments told us that their schools repurposed in-school time, because not all students could be in the school at the same time, or reduced student movement between classes. A few principals told us that the press to change student flow caused them to rethink how in-person learning occurs and how the building is used. Several principals told us that schools did the following:

- Lengthened class times to reduce the movement of students between classrooms;
- Organized students into smaller sections or learning pods within grade levels and placed a common set of teachers with those students throughout the day;
- Provided in-person learning for more performance-oriented (e.g., music, science) content and reserved online learning for other types of subjects; and
- Provided in-person learning for students who were not thriving online, such as kindergarten and first-grade students, while other students continued to learn online.
Each change had ramifications for the schedules of educators and maintenance staff, as well as families’ schedules.

A California principal commented on the myriad changes occurring with each new decision: “I think more than anything is all of the logistics that every district decision impacts the school, at the school level. [A district] can say, ‘All kindergartners are back on a certain date,’ but there’s transportation, communication with parents, classrooms, furniture, storage. There’s all these things that go into one single decision. There’s mental fatigue of thinking through so that you can have smooth operations. I don’t have time to broach curriculum. I’m just trying to keep everything operationally consistent and keeping people calm.”

A Georgia principal commented, “I spent a lot of my time switching students back and forth, teachers going remote, coming back from remote. And . . . [my school] picked up students from other schools that are doing remote [learning] . . . So my classrooms have gotten larger since the beginning of the year, and that’s not always the best for the staff morale.”

Principals also told us that student management systems (i.e., those that follow student attendance and other activities throughout the school day) became more important in 2020–2021 than in years past. In-person and online student attendance needed pinpoint accuracy, in case contact tracing for COVID-19 was necessary. “Following student attendance was essential,” said one principal, “because we didn’t always know who got sick, so we had to track students and follow up with them.” Many principals said that educators became more vigilant about following student attendance out of concern for infection rates and changes to mental health and family situations (e.g., students who took care of siblings).

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**According to principals, reengineering student flow raised new challenges and supported new learning**

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<td><strong>Tracking contacts and attendance:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student discipline improvement:</strong> Most principals noted that social distancing and reengineered student flow reduced conflicts among students and improved behavior, because students were not able to get close to each other.</td>
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<td>Many principals noted that schools used more staff time and resources for contact tracing and attendance.</td>
<td><strong>Reduced class sizes:</strong> To manage interactions among students, several principals mentioned that schools reduced class sizes by staggering student schedules and recess times. At recess, for example, some schools organized students into quadrants on playgrounds to reduce contact between students. Principals commented that the new approach is more efficient.</td>
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<td><strong>Managing space in schools:</strong> A majority of principals noted that student flow required more space in schools, which stressed maintenance and custodial staff. Classroom space had to be reconfigured frequently and cleaned daily. Several principals used outdoor spaces for learning, but safe outdoor spaces were not always available.</td>
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Creating New Partnerships With Community and Government Agencies to Better Serve Communities

Nearly all of the principals commented that their schools created new community and government partnerships or deepened partnerships during 2020–2021. New partnerships formed, principals said, because the schools were a part of communities’ comprehensive response to the COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice issues, and weather events that shaped the school year.

Many of the principals said that community and government partnerships would need to continue with the same urgency and depth as schools reopen and in subsequent years. The principals viewed partnerships as essential to healing schools and communities from the trauma of 2020–2021 because schools do not have access to enough mental health and other counselors.

Schools have historically engaged with families, community-based organizations, and other government agencies, but the principals talked about a new level of engagement and greater coordination with community-based organizations, health organizations, and cultural groups. For example, one principal said, “We have become an arm of the state health organization with all the contact tracing that we do.”

More frequent contact with health, community, and other organizations deepened and expanded school responsibilities for community support. The following comments were typical among principals in the focus groups:

- A Minnesota principal said, “With the protests and violence here in Minnesota, we [educators] just had to listen. We had questions: How are we contributing to this? What can be done? We needed to listen, not just get input from the usual suspects. So, we reached out to community-based organizations and convened online community meetings.”

- A principal in Montana said, “Like many places, our governor has lifted the state mask mandate, but the way Montana works is it’s left up to the local county authorities, the health departments, and others to make decisions about what’s best locally. We’re coordinating closely with these departments, more than ever.”

According to many principals, new responsibilities at schools opened new conversations between educators and families, as indicated by the comments below. Principals also reported intentionally convening meetings about race, politics, and the economy to share perspectives, adjust work, and be better advocates for families.

- A Maryland principal said, “I’ve had teachers come in saying, ‘You always tell us to connect with parents.’ When they are in those Zoom sessions with parents, they could see and listen and hear inside the family dynamic. We’ve had better conversations with parents about their kids, the community. It has been eye opening. Yes, we have been trained to do this, but Zoom opened us up and gave us an empathetic look at what people were experiencing as parents.”

Although schools deepened or expanded some partnerships in some communities, a few principals said that school–community relationships became more fraught, especially as the pandemic response became more politicized.

- A Massachusetts principal noted that educators’ affiliation with health agencies created conflicts with community members: “We are working with health organizations. . . . We needed to do that. And our visibility within the community increased for that [health], but we also became the beating stick for the parents [who] don’t want their kids out of school.”
A Connecticut principal explained, “Everybody’s a hero behind the screen with social media, but no one will come sit in the chair across from me and have a conversation about masks or no masks in schools. They want to yell in all caps. The lack of respect that you’re getting . . . is tremendous. We don’t want to have social distancing. It is not our preference either.”

### According to principals, new partnerships raised new challenges and supported new learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>New challenges</strong></th>
<th><strong>New learning</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Increasing communication takes time and focus away from instruction</strong>: Many principals expressed concerns that increased communication with families and community organizations required educators to shift their time and focus away from students and instruction. For example, several principals noted that social media monitoring and response is a key responsibility of school leaders, now more than ever, and the focus on communications detracts from other duties at school.</td>
<td><strong>More transparency and vulnerability:</strong> Many principals told us that schools increased communications with parents and were more transparent about decision-making, especially as schools adjusted and readjusted learning plans. Some principals noted that schools became more vulnerable to criticism as a result of such transparency.</td>
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<td><strong>Healing fractured communities:</strong> New partnerships between schools and communities created new awareness and openness, in some instances, but also created or raised awareness about deep divisions within communities. Several principals noted that national and state politics were pushed down to conflicts within schools. Schools will be challenged, principals said, to heal relationships and establish civil dialogue necessary for healing, while respecting the issues that created division.</td>
<td><strong>Moving to multimedia:</strong> Principals supported schools in expanding the number of multimedia channels (e.g., social media, robocalls, office hours) used by schools to reach parents and community members.</td>
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| **New awareness about the school community:** Schools increased communication and collaboration with parents and community members during a vulnerable time in their communities. Whether the interactions were positive or negative, many principals said that they and their colleagues learned a lot about community resources, values, and beliefs through the crises of 2020–2021. | }
Conclusion

Dr. Ramirez and all of the other NAESP principals that joined focus groups spoke about the enormous challenges that educators, students, and communities faced during 2020–2021. Schools responded by implementing innovations and major changes to keep students connected to schools and learning. Each change in technology, staffing, student flow, and community partnerships prompted educators to check their priorities and find a solution that fit available resources.

The changes put a great deal of stress on principals, teachers, staff, and students, but through it all, principals gained a new perspective on their schools’ capacities to adapt. A majority of principals noted how quickly their staff and students pivoted to new ways of working and how much new learning was gained as they found their way through the tumult. As principals spoke, however, it became clear that each change presented educators with new challenges and new ways of learning.

Which changes will last? Principals think that some changes are likely to endure:

- Scaled use of remote instructional technology to supplement and extend learning and provide learning continuity when schools close;
- Flexible staffing options to retain staff, particularly those with specialized skills in instructional technology, nursing, and social work;
- Reengineered student flow procedures to support student safety and learning; and
- School and community partnerships that work to support healthy and responsive schools.

Although several of these school changes have been observed by others and reported elsewhere, it is significant that these perspectives are coming from principals themselves, as they have a unique on-the-ground view of the needs of whole schools and the responsibility to sustain the innovations.

The next two briefs in the Leaders We Need Now series discuss what these changes in schooling portend for the work of principals going forward, and what policymakers can do to meet the needs of schools. Several principals wondered aloud during the focus groups whether they would receive the support, resources, and grace to continue to change and innovate to meet the next challenges—even as they adjust to the new normal and hope for a better tomorrow.
References


Appendix: About Our Methods

The Joyce Foundation and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) Foundation provided financial support for staff at WestEd and the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) to conduct this research study. The Joyce Foundation and NAESP Foundation funded the project to explore how schools and principalship changed through the 2020–2021 school year because policies and professional learning may need to change as well. The goal of the research project was to listen to practitioners, identify common themes, and provide a narrative based on principals’ perspectives.

NAESP is a member organization that represents approximately 17,000 elementary school administrators in the United States. The research team sought to conduct focus groups with member principals of NAESP via a geographic distribution by state.

AIR researchers pursued a three-step process for convening the sample (Exhibit A.1):

1. The research team identified a sample pool of 5,452 current principals from among the approximately 17,000 members of NAESP. This sample was identified based on proportional geographic representation across states.

2. The research team invited the 5,452 identified principals to (a) respond to a brief online survey designed to collect demographic information that supplemented extant data from NAESP and (b) select a convenient date and time for the focus groups.

3. The research team convened 1-hour, online focus groups with 188 principals from NAESP. A total of 36 focus groups were conducted. Individuals completing focus groups received a $25 electronic gift card. Fifty-eight percent of survey completers also attended focus groups.

Exhibit A.2 presents the demographic information of the sample. State location is provided by NAESP’s member database, and the demographic data of principals are self-reported via the survey.

Findings should be understood to represent the ideas, experiences, and perspectives of only the principals included in the study. The sampling method, response rate, and self-selection of survey respondents and focus group participants place limited generalizability on the results of the research.

Furthermore, the reader should not consider findings applicable to secondary schools, because middle and high school principals are not represented in the data. Similarly, perspectives from assistant principals and teachers are not included in the data. Although focus group data are geographically distributed, not all states are represented, and the sample includes a higher percentage of rural principals than the national average.
Exhibit A.2. Focus group principal demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographic distribution: 43 states (not included: Delaware, Louisiana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, and South Carolina)</th>
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<p>| NAESP zones* representation: NAESP zones help to organize member services |</p>
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<tr>
<th>Zone 1</th>
<th>Zone 2</th>
<th>Zone 3</th>
<th>Zone 4</th>
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<th>Zone 7</th>
<th>Zone 8</th>
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<tr>
<td>9%</td>
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<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<td>8%</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urbanicity</th>
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<tr>
<td>City</td>
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<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<th>Principal self-reported race</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic/White</td>
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<td>84%</td>
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<tr>
<th>Principal self-reported gender</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63%</td>
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| Years of experience as principal in the current school |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0–3 years | 4–7 years | 8–12 years | 13–16 years | ≥ 17 years |
| 28% | 34% | 26% | 7% | 4% |

| Years of experience as principal, regardless of school |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0–3 years | 4–7 years | 8–12 years | 13–16 years | ≥ 17 years |
| 14% | 24% | 28% | 16% | 17% |

A total of 36 focus groups were convened. Focus groups were scheduled at various dates and times between March 2021 and May 2021. Focus group questions were prepared with input from NAESP and the Joyce Foundation. Three researchers led each focus group discussion. All focus group members participated in focus group discussions, but not all focus group members responded to each question.

Focus group discussions were transcribed and coded using Atlas.ti. Coding proceeded to build grounded themes through a comparative method. Themes were then categorized by school changes, changes to the principal profession, and policy recommendations. Quotes presented in each brief are associated with each theme, and the higher thematic categories are addressed by each of the three briefs.

Based on the demographic information of principals in the focus groups, the sample includes more female principals (63%) than the national average, more non-Hispanic White principals than the national average (Exhibit A.3), and more new principals (28% with less than 3 years of experience) than the national average.

Exhibit A.3. Demographics of principals in the focus groups

![Demographics of principals in the focus groups](image)
About the American Institutes for Research

Established in 1946, with headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance to solve some of the most urgent challenges in the U.S. and around the world. We advance evidence in the areas of education, health, the workforce, human services, and international development to create a better, more equitable world. The AIR family of organizations now includes IMPAQ, Maher & Maher, and Kimetrica. For more information, visit AIR.ORG.