

The background of the cover is a photograph of a sunset or sunrise. The sky is filled with dark, heavy clouds at the top, which transition into a bright, glowing orange and yellow light near the horizon. The sun is partially obscured by clouds, creating a dramatic, high-contrast scene. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of a group of people are visible, sitting or standing on a hill or dune, looking out towards the horizon. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

A VOLUME IN
LEADERSHIP FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

LEVERAGING CRISIS FOR EQUITABLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES
FROM THE FIELD

EDITED BY
PATRICIA M. VIRELLA

Leveraging Crisis for Equitable School Improvement

**Leadership Strategies
From the Field**

A Volume in Leadership for School Improvement

Series Editor

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Texas State University

Leadership for School Improvement

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Leveraging Crisis for Equitable School Improvement

**Leadership Strategies
From the Field**

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INFORMATION AGE PUBLISHING, INC.
Charlotte, NC • www.infoagepub.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress
<http://www.loc.gov>

ISBN: 979-8-88730-871-5 (Paperback)

ISBN: 979-8-88730-872-2 (Hardback)

ISBN: 979-8-88730-873-9 (Ebook)

ISBN: 978-1-83708-567-5 (EPUB)

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Printed in the United States of America

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FOREWORD

Despite the ever-evolving landscape of education, the gap between research and practice remains a persistent challenge. A promising approach to helping bridge this divide is *improvement science*. Improvement science, as championed by notable scholars such as Anthony Bryk and others, offers a paradigm shift by centering research on problems in the field faced by practitioners. The traditional approach to research is in essence flipped on its head: instead of research being *done to or for* educators, systematic inquiry is designed and executed as a true joint venture between researchers and practitioners. Research of this type emphasizes learning in real time, embracing instant feedback loops in pursuit of transformative change.

This edited volume, *Leveraging Crisis for Equitable School Improvement: Leadership Strategies From the Field*, marks a significant contribution to the ongoing discourse on improvement science and its intersection with equity in education. The book emerges at a critical juncture when the world has faced successive and simultaneous crises in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic, intercultural conflicts like the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and alarming incidents of mass shootings have disrupted normalcy and forced societies to navigate uncharted territories. This unprecedented era has thrust school leaders into the forefront of crisis management, compelling them to navigate academic challenges and address the needs of diverse populations, including refugees fleeing war-torn regions.

Over the last decade, equity has become an integral aspect of the improvement science framework, particularly in the face of the multifaceted challenges posed by crises. This book provides a timely exploration

of how school leaders can effectively integrate crisis leadership, equity, and school improvement to enhance outcomes for students.

One of the distinctive features of this volume is its grounding in real-world examples and experiences. This practical foundation ensures that the strategies and tools presented in the book are theoretically grounded and rooted in the challenges and successes of educational leaders in the field. The book pioneers a path forward by focusing on the inherent inequities in crises and advocating for an equity-oriented approach to crisis leadership. It addresses the challenges of crisis leadership and management and provides a comprehensive framework that guides schools toward sustainable, equitable, and anti-racist change. Perhaps most importantly, the chapters in this volume provide actionable knowledge for educational leaders.

As we navigate the complex and unpredictable landscape of education in the 21st century, *Leveraging Crisis for Equitable School Improvement* stands as a beacon, guiding educators, researchers, and policymakers toward a more equitable and resilient future. The volume acknowledges the challenges posed by crises and presents strategies for leveraging these challenges as opportunities for positive change. This forward-thinking approach positions the book as a valuable resource for those committed to transforming education in the face of adversity.

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CHAPTER 1

THE IMPERATIVE FOR EQUITABLE CRISIS LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS

A Call to Action

Patricia M. Virella

The contemporary educational landscape is not immune to significant disruptions. From the unthinkable violence of school shootings to the widespread devastation of natural disasters, crises erupt with alarming frequency, shattering the fragile normalcy of the learning environment. A particularly stark illustration of this vulnerability is the United States' experience with school shootings. In 2019 alone, a staggering 45 incidents occurred, highlighting the chilling reality of violence entering the hallowed halls of education (DeSilver, 2020). Unfortunately, projections suggest a potential increase in these occurrences, further emphasizing the need for proactive leadership strategies.

Beyond these headline-grabbing events, a multitude of other crises, including fires, power outages, and even pandemics, disrupt the intricate web of education, leaving students, staff, and families reeling. The impact, however, is not equally distributed. Research consistently demonstrates that crises disproportionately burden marginalized populations within the school community. When climate disasters displace families or pandemics

*Leveraging Crisis for Equitable School Improvement:
Leadership Strategies From the Field*, pp. 1–4

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force school closures, it's often students from low-income backgrounds or with learning disabilities who face the steepest challenges (Ahn & Lopez, 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

In these moments of upheaval, the role of school leaders becomes paramount. They are thrust into the position of navigating the chaos, ensuring the safety and well-being of their students while simultaneously prioritizing equity and ensuring everyone has a fair shot at recovery and advancement. However, traditional leadership models often lack the flexibility and foresight needed to navigate rapidly evolving crisis situations (Heck & Hallinger, 2011). This underscores the necessity for a more comprehensive and collective approach to crisis leadership in schools.

This book argues for a paradigm shift, advocating for a leadership style that fosters collaboration, prioritizes equity, and draws upon the valuable lessons gleaned from past experiences. By adopting such an approach, school leaders can transform themselves from crisis managers into effective stewards, guiding their communities through the eye of the storm and towards a more resilient and equitable future.

This call to action: Equipping school leaders with the necessary tools and strategies is imperative. This volume offers a critical first step. By delving into the experiences of successful leaders and utilizing the equity framework developed by Bowers et al. (2022), this book provides a roadmap for navigating crisis while ensuring no student is left behind. We urge educational leaders, policymakers, and researchers to embrace a collective responsibility for building a more crisis-resilient and equitable school system for all.

Below, I summarize the chapters shared in this volume:

- Part 1: The Impact of Crises on Educational Equity
 - o Chapter 1: Examines how principals in under-resourced schools championed fairness during COVID-19 using an equity-focused approach (Murata et al.).
 - o Chapter 2: Analyzes how past educational reforms in the U.S., like those following *Brown v. Board* and Sputnik, were influenced by crises, with a focus on achieving equity for diverse students (Pearson & Birringer-Haig).
 - o Chapter 3: Describes a study on how school leaders in a northeastern district adapted to remote learning during COVID-19, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities that arose (Lamb).
 - o Chapter 4: Investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and worsened existing educational inequities, particularly in urban schools. It references research by Milner and

Chavez and Moshtaghian on educational access disparities (Dowell et al.).

- Chapter 5: Explores how Texas superintendents used the COVID-19 pandemic and the Uvalde school shooting as opportunities to address inequities within their school districts (Campbell et al.).
- Part 2: Leading Through Crisis for All Students
 - Chapter 6: Argues that even small-scale challenges can be catalysts for positive change in schools, as long as the focus stays on equity. It emphasizes prioritizing an equitable learning environment for all students amidst any crisis (Ran).
 - Chapter 7: Details the experiences of a gay Latino teacher advocating for LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools and highlights the urgency for LGBTQ+ equity (Juárez).
 - Chapter 8: Argues that tracking disproportionately limits access to rigorous coursework for marginalized students. The chapter proposes detracking as a solution to ensure all students have the opportunity to succeed (Thornton & Holder).
- Part 3: Supporting Students Beyond the Classroom
 - Chapter 9: Discusses the importance of in-district aftercare programs in providing safe and supportive environments for children of working families. It outlines the limitations of out-of-district programs and the benefits of collaboration between aftercare staff and school personnel (Cipollini).

This volume delves into the experiences of school leaders who have successfully navigated crises. It utilizes the equity framework developed by [Bowers et al. \(2022\)](#) as a guiding structure, ensuring a clear connection between theory and practice. Each chapter explores a specific crisis scenario and the leadership strategies employed to not only restore normalcy but also to identify and address existing inequities within the school community. Through this exploration, the book offers practical guidance and real-world examples that educational leaders can leverage to infuse equity into both crisis recovery efforts and the broader school environment.

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CHAPTER 2

TOWARD LEADERSHIP FOR EQUITY

Unexpected Ways the COVID-19 Pandemic Helped Create Opportunities for Equitable Education

Aki Murata, Xueqin Lin, Quennie Dong, and Rebecca Cheung

We have witnessed an important historical time. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, almost all aspects of our lives have changed, and we have continued to reinvent ourselves in ways we never thought possible. Many such reinventions happened in schools when teachers reconfigured how to teach through computer screens, with students remotely logged on for lessons. School principals also navigated multitudes of challenges to maintain learning activities in their school communities (Netolicky, 2020). Many leadership qualities and skills were tested and refined as school principals paved their own paths of survival. Principals who serve marginalized and disadvantaged communities especially had to work more creatively to bridge the equity gap, while not all district- and state-mandated policies addressed the needs of their communities.

In this chapter, we explored how California school principals who serve socially disadvantaged communities employed an equitable improvement science approach in response to the pandemic crisis. In particular, we

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investigated how principals navigated some pandemic challenges, made sense of new situations and expectations for being effective pandemic leaders, and created more equitable schools. The findings of this study can provide leaders with strategies to continue to establish equity in their communities.

THE PANDEMIC SCHOOL LEADERSHIP = CRISIS LEADERSHIP + LEADERSHIP FOR EQUITY

The unprecedented challenges of COVID-19 resulted in the need for school leaders to adapt their leadership approaches in many ways. When all California schools shifted to remote teaching overnight, principals quickly had to set up virtual learning structures and schedules for teachers and students, communicate new expectations with parents, and make sure that all students were equipped with devices to attend school virtually. Traditional leadership became rather inadequate in the face of the pandemic's complexities and uncertainties (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). School leaders turned into novice problem-solvers in countless new situations. As teachers explored new remote teaching tools, principals were no longer instructional managers but became co-learners to figure out the best ways of virtual teaching and learning. School leaders also had to directly face educational inequity amplified by the pandemic, whereby students in affluent communities could readily engage with remote instruction with their computers and reliable Wi-Fi connections, while students in poorer communities were largely left disconnected.

Several studies have attempted to understand how principals led schools and navigated challenges during the pandemic (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Netolicky 2020), and they agreed that pandemic leadership is an integration of crisis leadership and equity leadership. Crisis leadership is defined as how school leaders manage to navigate in the face of an unexpected crisis, which requires high levels of analysis, communication, flexibility and adaptability, trusting relationships, and emotional intelligence (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Grissom & Condon, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, required more than crisis management because of its prolonged and uneven impacts on individuals and communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has lasted over 3 years, and, at its height, it affected individuals and communities differently, depending on how much social and cultural capital they had.

This, in turn, created the need to re-address inequity in education. It is important to note that the educational inequity amplified by the pandemic emerged from disparities in student outcomes and access to educational opportunities (Bowers et al., 2022) that had existed before

the pandemic. Disparities in student outcomes are expanded in domains such as kindergarten readiness, K–12 learning and engagement, and educational attainment (Bowers et al., 2022). Compared to student outcomes, disparities in access to educational opportunities during the pandemic were even more pronounced and noticeable in terms of the extent of racial, ethnic, and economic segregation, equitable access to high-quality early learning programs as well as curricula and instruction, and equitable access to supportive school and classroom environments (Bowers et al., 2022).

In the face of expanded disparities created by the pandemic, there was an increasing need for equity-oriented leadership in schools, larger communities, and political contexts (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Leaders must move away from measurement excellence and focus more on equity work for their pure survival (Netolicky, 2020). Harris and Jones (2020) explained that equity has finally caught up with excellence in the minds and priorities of educational policymakers when faced with disparity between the haves and the have-nots in the pandemic. Rigby and colleagues (2020) proposed three equity-oriented approaches for pandemic school leadership, including equal partners in learning with families, provision of high-quality learning opportunities, and coordinated and inclusive decision-making. From these perspectives, pandemic leadership requires more than crisis leadership to carry on school functions and support students to receive adequate instruction, creating new opportunities to focus on equity leadership. Thus, it is important to explore how school leaders integrate crisis leadership and equity leadership to lead their schools through the pandemic crisis that provides equitable resources and supports the well-being of their school community.

IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE FOR EQUITY

Improvement science has been widely adopted by school districts and leaders to address equity issues in education (Bush-Mecenas, 2022; Lewis, 2015). As a problem-solving-oriented approach, improvement science focuses on educators' continuous inquiry and learning by testing ideas in cycles to obtain efficient feedback that informs system improvements (Institute of Education Sciences, 2015). Bryk (2020) explained six principles of the improvement paradigm, including being problem-focused and user-focused, attending to the variability, seeing the system, embracing measurement, learning through disciplined inquiry, and organizing as networks. When applying these principles to managing the pandemic crisis, leaders need, first, to identify the equitable problems they are attempting to solve, explore what works for whom and under

what set of circumstances, and obtain a full understanding of the systems contributing to the existing outcomes. School leaders then use measures to track changes and improve quickly through engaging cycles of Plan-Do-Study-Act that include four iterative stages of problem-solving for process improvement. Lastly, leaders establish network communities to accelerate the improvement. The improvement framework was reported to be effective in addressing the pandemic crisis by identifying the needs of educators and parents, designing measurable aim statements, and addressing those needs to achieve aim statements (Elkana & Lopez, 2021). However, more empirical studies are needed to demonstrate the application and challenges of improvement science to address equity during the pandemic and to guide principals' leadership in the post-pandemic era.

THE PRESENT STUDY

This chapter illustrated the shifting leadership process using some tools of improvement science during the pandemic. Using empirical data, we identified critical changes during the pandemic which created a potential for more-equitable post-pandemic schools. We intended to understand how leaders used the equitable improvement science approach in response to myriad crises. In particular, we asked the two following research questions: (a) How do school leaders shift their leadership priorities and practices in response to the pandemic that addresses equity issues within their communities? And (b) What critical changes occurred during the pandemic that can continue to support equity-oriented leadership in post-pandemic schools?

METHOD

Participants and Settings

Participants were school leaders (principals and district-level leaders) who were part of the Community of Practice (CoP) professional learning offered in early 2021 through the 21st Century School Leadership Academy (21CSLA), which provides professional learning for educational leaders in California. The focus of the CoP was *Reopening Better Schools*, which consisted of eight 1.5-hour weekly virtual meetings via Zoom platform between January and March 2021 (12 hours total). Twenty-nine school leaders signed up for the CoP. Due to the changing school-reopening expectations and increasing demand to prepare for a partial school reopening, 16 school leaders dropped out of the program in March. Thus, a total