

Educational Leadership and COVID-19

Lessons from Kern County

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Counties, districts, and schools have had to respond to ever-shifting issues related to COVID-19. This brief describes the complex challenges that district superintendents faced, which often required expertise in areas beyond traditional expectations for the role, particularly in public health. The brief gives examples of crisis management structures from one county office of education (COE)—Kern County Superintendent of Schools (KCSOS)—that helped to mitigate these challenges for local education agencies (LEAs) in its county. The strategies detailed in this brief provide a replicable model for how the state and COEs can better support districts and schools during times of crisis and improve preparedness of the education system as a whole.

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Starting with the first statewide stay-at-home order in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has produced a steady stream of challenges for all California communities. Emerging research is beginning to paint a picture of the impact of the pandemic on students, families, and educators.¹ However, less is known about the experiences of district superintendents. Responsible for implementing the school board’s vision and making day-to-day decisions related to supporting students and meeting district goals, district superintendents have found themselves in a particular bind because they have been asked to make many contentious decisions—including in public health where few, if any, have qualifications—while maintaining the support of their school boards. In this, the third academic year disrupted by the pandemic, schools continue to face uncertainty regarding COVID-19, and we know this will not be the last crisis to affect California communities and schools; other disasters like wildfires, the next big earthquake, or perhaps another pandemic will send schools, regions, or even the whole state into crisis mode again. Examining the challenges that superintendents and other school and district leaders face across the state and identifying replicable strategies to improve systems’ preparedness are critical to ensuring that the experiences of the last year are not repeated, either during this year or in the future.

To that end, this brief first describes the initial pandemic crisis from superintendents’ perspectives, enumerating the challenges that combined to form a “perfect storm” for local leaders. The brief focuses on the work of one county office of education (COE)—Kern County Superintendent of Schools (KCSOS)—that was consistently named as a COE that seemed to mitigate some of the greatest challenges facing district superintendents and site leaders. While many people and organizations stepped in to provide crisis leadership during the pandemic, we highlight the COE role given the importance of COEs within California’s Statewide System of Supports.² Although KCSOS is not the only COE that provided useful supports to districts throughout the pandemic, such supports were not widely experienced by the district superintendents interviewed by PACE for this study. Describing the work of one COE is intended to elucidate strategies for supporting districts and schools, thereby providing a road map for navigating future crises.

The Challenges of Superintendency Amid a Pandemic

The importance of the role of the superintendent at both the county and district level is magnified in a time of crisis as students, families, and communities seek clarity and a sense of stability in the face of unpredictability and turbulence. However, during the pandemic superintendents have been forced to navigate a myriad of issues they were not trained for or well positioned to handle. Superintendents at the county and district level shared the three primary challenges they faced while leading their districts through the COVID-19 crisis.

High Stakes Decision-Making in Complex Political Conditions

Directing the pandemic response forced superintendents into an intensely politicized space. Superintendents play a critical role in communicating to students, families, and staff about their districts' policies, but their lack of specialized health knowledge left their decisions open to criticism from all sides. Major policy decisions required making trade-offs between, on the one hand, the risks of spreading the virus via in-person schooling and, on the other hand, the potential detriment to families' economic well-being and to students' academic and emotional well-being from staying home—questions with no straightforward “right” answers. These decisions were deeply emotional because the consequences could be life changing and varied across individuals and communities. To further complicate matters, pandemic responses were heavily politicized due to elections. Current and former superintendents described school boards under intense pressure in an election year with some campaigns turning on politics around schools reopening; as a result, superintendents struggled to chart the best path to serve children and their families as well as maintain the support of their boards.

Managing a Crisis Beyond Their Expertise Without Clear Guidance

In California, schools are governed under local control. Although the legislature sets policy direction, the state is intended to have a subsidiary function—that is, “performing only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level.”³ However, one superintendent explained:

What does state leadership mean during times of a crisis and emergency? ... In California, we've had ... since the inception of LCFF [Local Control Funding Formula], a very decentralized, local-control-is-best philosophy around governance. ... During times of a crisis, I don't know how helpful that is. ... Everyone is having to figure out certain agreements with labor. Everyone is having to figure out devices and internet. ... And so what's happening now is everybody is figuring them out separately. ... A leader has to spend time thinking about burn rates for PPE:⁴ Do I order the face shield? Do I order the mask? What's the right ratio? Literally, this is what people are spending their time on.

While superintendents across the state were occupied with making high-stakes decisions regarding the safety of their staff and students, they did not have time to support staff in learning how to best deliver instruction in distance or hybrid models. The concerns that dominated superintendents' time were largely about whether and how they could reopen schools safely and under what conditions (e.g., with what PPE, with which student groupings, etc.). The result was a wider variation in learning conditions for students across the state than the actual experiences of the pandemic can explain.⁵ Superintendents additionally named health and safety, technology provisioning, and social-emotional support for students and adults as areas where guidance would have been greatly beneficial.

We heard strong support from superintendents for greater clarity and a belief that more specific and timely guidance would have facilitated more efficient crisis management. Although the state provided guidance around some issues, as one superintendent described it, “You [could] drive a truck through most of the guidelines.” Superintendents expressed a need for clear, consistent communication structures and processes with state agencies for both receiving and informing guidance as they learned what did and did not work on the ground as the crisis evolved. Initial communication structures were greatly appreciated, but once communication pathways with state policy makers broke down, superintendents were forced to be reactive. One superintendent reflected on this breakdown in communication:

The state ... did a nice job of bringing the county superintendents in early to kind of preview that there was something happening, and potentially that it would impact all the districts. ... That funnel quickly broke down, though, and that was part of the issue ... the state wasn't getting the full story and a good understanding of how some of the policies that they were planning on putting into place, how it would play out in real time on the ground.

When guidance was released, local leaders reported that they often had no advance notice, giving them little time to prepare for the questions and concerns that inevitably arose in local communities. One county office leader explained:

I was finding things out [during meetings] watching the governor's press release. ... I got no new information before, I had no way to prepare our staff, prepare our district superintendents. We were getting [information] at the same time our parents were hearing it, the same time our teachers were hearing it, and so that was a problem for us.

Superintendents described a sense of something akin to whiplash as press releases generated information that required an overhaul of previous decisions—some in progress and others that had already been widely publicized—and cycles of general chaos.

Competition, Inefficiency, and Inequality Associated With Local Independence

When guidelines were nonexistent or vague, superintendents relied on their personal networks to figure out how others were handling a given issue and to strategize about how to make decisions that supported students and families while managing inevitable public backlash. Another superintendent explained the result:

[W]hat you ended up seeing is it just depended on how strategic and Machiavellian [the actors were] and the [strength of] individual relationships. Some people were able to get more than others, I think, around the conditions for learning.

Without clear guidelines to fall back on, the local political climate played an outsized role in determining the nature of education that students could access in each district. In districts where the community felt politically empowered (typically higher wealth districts) or was generally opposed to COVID-related restrictions, parents pressured districts to provide more in-person instruction. Variation in community engagement thus led to systemic inequities in access to in-person schooling that persisted through spring 2021, as evidenced by fewer in-person learning opportunities in districts that serve higher numbers of students in poverty or with larger populations of Black and Latinx students.⁶ Superintendents also reported that they faced sharp public criticism if their approaches differed from those in nearby districts.

County Leadership Can Support Improved Local-Level Crisis Response

California has put in place a Statewide System of Support “to help local educational agencies (LEAs) and their schools meet the needs of each student they serve, with a focus on building local capacity to sustain improvement and to effectively address disparities in opportunities and outcomes.”⁷ This support is delivered primarily via COEs.

COEs across the state have supported districts in various ways throughout the pandemic. LEA leaders across multiple levels of the Statewide System of Support named KCSOS as a COE that was successfully lessening some of the burdens facing district superintendents and site leaders. The actions taken by KCSOS leveraged capacities and relationships it had developed through previous collaborative work with its districts and regional education partners to support equitable crisis response at scale, fulfilling the needs of districts in its jurisdiction as imagined in the System of Support. Conversations with county, district, and school leaders in Kern County revealed that KCSOS provided pandemic response for districts by acting as (a) chief communicator, (b) policy interpreter, and (c) resource broker. By assuming these three roles, KCSOS helped to mitigate for their local superintendents the three primary challenges previously discussed that were common among superintendents across the state.

KCSOS acted as a hub for collaboration by leveraging two existing structures to coordinate pandemic responses and provide knowledge and resources to districts. The first is the Kern Pledge Governance Council, which brings together key education stakeholders: leaders of the county’s largest districts, some smaller rural districts, school boards, and higher education institutions as well as county office staff. The second group maintains coherence across the 47 districts under KCSOS by sharing policy shifts coming from the state with district leaders, identifying common issues, and developing solutions across the county. Both groups met weekly before emergency school closures in March 2020 and had built collaborative relationships developing countywide initiatives.⁸

To meet the needs voiced in these meetings, KCSOS established task forces that effectively removed thorny issues from district leaders' plates, allowing them to focus on the unique problems facing their communities while knowing that resources were being developed to address common challenges. Task forces, composed of staff from the 47 districts and other Governance Council members, focused on four issue areas: (a) access to meals, (b) information and guidance on health and safety for school reopenings, (c) access to technology and the internet for distance learning, and (d) development of distance learning curricula and lessons. Each task force was led by a county representative and staffed with constituent personnel who were already working on particular issues (e.g., curriculum departments with existing distance learning materials). The efficacy of the support structures provided by KCSOS led to many district superintendents and principals modeling their own crisis-response structures after those implemented at the county level.

Chief Communicator—Consolidating and Sharing Reliable Information With Districts

KCSOS leveraged existing communication structures to give districts and schools reliable, actionable information about key issues in responding to COVID-19. These structures facilitated multidirectional communication among the county, districts, and outside experts, who provided reliable information that was difficult for superintendents to gather on their own. As well as increasing the frequency of meetings with the Governance Council and district superintendents, KCSOS expanded outreach to districts rather than waiting for districts to ask for help. The county office used these touch points to disseminate resources developed by task forces. Superintendents shared that this outreach provided critical information that they felt they would not have otherwise received. Additionally, KCSOS used their communication structures to share expertise from partners when it did not exist in any of the LEAs in the county, including a KCSOS governmental affairs expert to anticipate policy changes coming from the state and a representative from the county department of public health to give updates on the virus and health and safety guidelines.

A key function of these conversations was preventing decisions made in one district from creating political pressure on others. One task force contributor shared how regular communication helped districts prepare for political pushback that could arise from the public comparing district responses to one another:

It doesn't mean that we're all doing the same thing—there might be a school district that is doing some face-to-face—but we all know what we're doing. And so when I get a question, "Well, so-and-so is having a face-to-face graduation and you're not." Well, I already knew that information and having that information ahead of time allows me to explain why our situation is different ... so I'm prepared for that.

District superintendents could share their reopening plans and rationale for the decisions they were making, giving one another the necessary information to explain to their constituents the differences among districts and thus their differing responses.⁹ Regular communication prevented districts from creating unintentional pressure on their colleagues as they all responded to similar concerns across the county.

Policy Interpreter—Providing Guidance for District Strategies in Response to State and Federal Policy Shifts

KCSOS interpreted recommendations and guidelines coming from the federal and state level and clarified them through memos and frameworks so that they were accessible to district and school officials. KCSOS staff wanted to chart a course for LEA leaders to navigate tricky issues: “We have a weekly meeting with all of our superintendents where we’ll report out on what we’re learning and report out on the task force groups and then from there we will put guidance documents together.” These guidance documents gave generalized suggestions for how to deal with issues, “so that then every district ... can take that guidance and then match it to best meet their needs to their particular district.”

KCSOS provided guidance to districts as they engaged in collective bargaining with unions in response to the pandemic. KCSOS gathered a representative group of district leaders to meet with the regional representatives from the major labor groups to discuss issues that they anticipated arising during collective bargaining at the local level. These conversations were used to codevelop templates and draft language for district leaders to use in the bargaining process. This process, established prior to the pandemic, allowed KCSOS to convene the necessary stakeholders to establish agreements that could be used to resolve emerging pandemic-response issues quickly. As a result, districts and local bargaining units were able to move from agreed-upon starting points to find the best path forward for supporting their communities. In PACE interviews, none of the district leaders in the county named labor negotiations as a barrier to responding to COVID-19, avoiding the protracted labor negotiations some districts experienced.¹⁰

KCSOS also gave district leaders memos that explained the implications of federal and state policies as they were released and included considerations for implementation. For example, KCSOS provided clear language around the state’s cohort model for bringing small select groups of students back on campus for in-person instruction, articulating what LEAs were able to do and suggesting which students to bring back first. LEA leaders also referenced using guidance materials that KCSOS created around reopening health and safety, social-emotional support for students and adults, and student learning, including consistent grading practices and learning loss mitigation.

Resource Broker—Facilitating the Sharing or Creation of Resources Districts Need Most

KCSOS managed the distribution of existing resources across LEAs and worked with partner organizations to streamline provisioning of new materials when necessary. KCSOS first moved to provide meals to all students and families who qualified for free and reduced lunch before providing instructional supports. KCSOS next coordinated with internet and technology companies to identify the technology and services that would best support distance learning needs and provide access to them. KCSOS coordinated with internet providers to map coverage areas for districts to determine where service was available, what technologies could support distance learning in those locations, and how many devices would need to be purchased. The COE negotiated internet and technology purchases so that districts had access to each if they could not procure them on their own, which proved helpful when state stockpiles did not meet district needs. KCSOS also coordinated the redistribution of surplus resources across the county. Where devices were insufficient, KCSOS worked with local municipal governments to develop internet access points, including outfitting buses with hot spots and creating “free internet zones.”

KCSOS’s distance learning task force coordinated across multiple districts to develop distance learning curricula and lessons for grades K–12 and for supporting professional development for staff. One KCSOS staff member shared: “We worked as a conglomerate, both inside of [Kern] and with some other county offices to create instructional materials that are online so that no one district had to create all their own materials.”¹¹ These learning resources have been made publicly available by the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence.¹²

The KCSOS task forces drew on the resources of all 47 districts as well as higher education institutions in the county. For example, California State University, Bakersfield offered countywide training for the learning management system (LMS) Canvas because the university had adopted the platform prior to the pandemic. In addition to leveraging public education resources, this coordination with higher education institutions encouraged vertical alignment from K–12 to college. Most students who attend a university in Kern County will now have experience using the same LMS they will encounter in local colleges.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Superintendents faced enormous challenges this year as they adapted to online learning, made policy decisions based on changing public health information, and had their decisions scrutinized in a contentious political climate. Conversations with superintendents illuminated what strategies could be taken up at different levels of the system to improve the functionality of the levels nested underneath (e.g., districts under counties) and prepare for the next phase of crisis response. Examination of their experiences give five implications for policy and practice:

- **Adapt how “local control” is enacted in times of crisis.** Crises increase the number of novel decisions and shorten response timelines. When decisions need to be made in every district across the state that require knowledge outside of educators’ expertise (e.g., public health, internet infrastructure, rapid technology procurement), it is inefficient to rely on each locale to reinvent the wheel. There remains a need for the state under local control to ensure quality and equitable educational opportunities for all students when LEAs do not have access to adequate resources or capacities during crises.
- **Balance mandates with opportunities to benefit from economies of scale.** Mandates are a blunt policy tool because they can engender compliance-oriented responses and frequently come with burdensome reporting requirements, but they can also set a baseline standard that prevents the most egregious inequities. Instead of mandates, KCSOS took the approach of letting districts choose when to leverage economies of scale and facilitating collaboration. It appears the state did not similarly facilitate spaces for collaboration across COEs. In response, California County Superintendents Educational Services Association established weekly meetings for all 58 COE superintendents beginning in early 2021. In multiple instances, KCSOS made a decision or provided resources intended to produce reasonably consistent, high-quality outcomes (e.g., bulk ordering of devices, labor-bargaining guidance). This approach does not pull in 100 percent of LEAs and is not designed to do so, but it can promote better quality outcomes than many would arrive at individually and provides easier entry into high-quality practice for LEAs with limited capacity. Importantly, it allows organizations at lower levels of the governance hierarchy to focus their limited resources on areas where a different local solution is most impactful.
- **Find meaningful ways to build relationships during crisis and sustain them after.** It is important to be able to exchange information and work together on solutions, especially in times of hardship. The preexisting communication structures in KCSOS provided an avenue for rapidly ramping up a COVID response. The strength of these structures proved invaluable in the estimation of district superintendents in Kern County and stood in stark contrast to some who were left to rely mostly on their personal networks for advice.
- **Ensure that communication flows both ways.** Interviewees suggested that the state did not have productive avenues for understanding the challenges in communities across the state whereas KCSOS had a structure for consistent check-ins that ensured it received this valuable information. As a result, KCSOS was able to prioritize challenges and allocate resources in ways that positively addressed its districts’ most pressing needs.

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- **Create space for thoughtful reflection to leverage the disruption for longer term transformation.** Conversations with educators across the state revealed that many are so burned out that they struggle with long-term planning. Collaboration at scale enabled KCSOS leaders to make decisions that both addressed a short-term problem (e.g., the need for an LMS) and provided a long-term benefit (e.g., giving students experience with the same LMS used in local colleges). Additionally, the pandemic made obvious the inequities that persist across California’s educational system—inequities that education professionals have worked tirelessly to address during this time. The state and COEs can create the spaces necessary to ensure that the lessons learned that are implemented as schools return to a “new normal” incorporate solutions to address the inequities and inequalities that preceded the pandemic.¹³

Endnotes

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- ⁸ Initiatives such as the Kern Pledge Governance Council and the creation and launch of the Kern Integrated Data System (a longitudinal data system for students in KCSOS from preK through college).
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- ¹¹ Other resources that were named included Units of Study for Distance Learning by San Diego COE, Orange County Department of Education’s Supplemental Support Modules for TK–8, Professional Learning Modules from San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools, and professional learning network highlights for creating quality assessments and LCAP review in Fresno and Yolo County Offices of Education (ccee-ca.org/resources/all-resources).
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Related Publications

Myung, J., Krausen, K., Kimner, H., & Donahue, C. (2020, September). **Continuous Improvement in Schools in the COVID-19 Context** [Policy brief, report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Manansala, E., & Cottingham, B. (2019, December). **Leadership for Continuous Improvement: The Vision for County Offices of Education** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Humphrey, D. C., & O'Day, J. (2019, December). **The Early Implementation of California's System of Support: Counties, Differentiated Assistance, and the New School Dashboard** [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Hough, H. J., O'Day, J., Hahnel, C., Ramanathan, A., Edley, C., Jr., & Echaveste, M. (2020, July). **Lead with Equity: What California's Leaders Must Do Next to Advance Student Learning** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.



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