

Leading Distance Learning: Lessons from Virtual Principals and Research

School leadership matters, and though it can come from different sources and be distributed across the organization, we know that school administrators are essential for creating a school vision, supporting high-quality teaching and learning, developing educator capacity, fostering a strong culture, and driving improvement. Over the past few decades, thousands of articles and books have been written on the essential elements and practices of effective instructional leadership.

And, seemingly overnight, the context of all that research changed. The old reality of managing brick and mortar schools evaporated, perhaps for weeks. Perhaps for months. School leaders are now being asked to both guide their faculties and students to a new form of learning while also figuring out what it means to be a leader of distance or online learning.

Luckily, virtual schools have existed in the United States for three decades. Interviews with online and virtual school leaders and published scholarship suggest that much that we know about leadership in traditional school settings is relevant to our new world. In addition, distance learning presents unique opportunities and challenges as principals try to manage their “school.”

Below is a table that outlines some of the broad categories of leader work that current virtual principals and scholars identify. As you will notice, the categories are not mutually exclusive; they overlap in important ways. In addition to the categories, there are also ideas to consider and tools to try on.

CATEGORIES	KEY IDEAS	TOOLS, RESOURCES AND IDEAS
Communication and Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● You will not have physical proximity with your stakeholders—parents, students, faculty and staff. ● Throughout our interactions in the world, much is communicated non-verbally ● Written text can foster multiple, and sometimes wrong, interpretations, especially as they relate to tone. ● “How-to” and technical explanations without real-time feedback from the intended recipients make training complicated; being concise and precise will be critical. ● “Wholesale and retail” forms of communication are important--there are some communications that can be directed to entire groups (wholesale), but in your typical leadership, you know the power of individual touches (retail). ● Some of the most powerful communication is interactive and dynamic, and this is still possible from a physical distance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pre-recorded video messages that can be sent out via a link. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ YouTube ○ Zoom ● Robo-calls to supplement emails and other written communications. ● Occasional short notes to individual staff members to check-in and express care ● Virtual staff meetings and recordings for people who miss meetings ● Several online platforms allow for small group break-out sessions ● Phone or web-based office hours when people can reach you ● Consider secondary communication channels through community organizations and religious organizations to help you reach everyone ● Create direct communication channels to students--text messages, social media, mass email distribution lists





Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Outside of ensuring quality teaching and learning in classrooms, developing a strong, positive culture is the most powerful predictor of an effective school.● Leading for culture is more complicated than a traditional school setting, where the rituals and norms can be constantly modeled and reinforced, both formally and informally.● School administrators still need to support a sense of community for the school, building connections and helping adults and young people feel a part of something with purpose.● Culture was never so important as it is now, as students do not have the same connections with friends, extended family and other institutions that defined their lives before.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Design new rituals that bind people together● Organize an evening read-aloud activity before bedtime● Film a short video for students and staff to start their day--use it to promote your vision, calibrate expectations, and inspire● Send out a once-per-week video message to replace announcements or assemblies● Celebrate success--publicly honor students and adults who are working hard and having success.● Create other virtual rituals that connect the school community and reinforce school vision and mission● Engage the community in generating ideas for cultural rituals.
Student Discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Discipline issues do not disappear in an online environment● They sometimes take different forms<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Inappropriate posts, cyber-bullying, plagiarism, distracting other students -- all emerge in online or virtual forms of distance learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Create and communicate an initial articulation of distance learning expectations● Create discipline procedures for how to correct inappropriate behaviors in a positive and constructive manner● Revisit at regular intervals how the expectations and procedures are working● Expect that this will require revisiting and revision as we learn to do this better
Customer Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● There will be an increase in customer service-related requests and contacts.● In this new environment, many of these new requests are going to feel like emergencies and crises to those needing help.● Without the typical structure of the day, people may want/need support during most waking hours.● You need to manage your time so that this does not become a 24/7 job.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Build a daily schedule and block out time to respond to people● Calibrate expectations for how and when you will get back to people so they are not frustrated or confused when they don't hear from you instantaneously● Consider scheduling online and/or phone office hours at set days and times where people can talk through challenges that are less urgent



Attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Students are not learning if they don't show up to school, regardless of the form of schooling.● Measuring attendance and truancy in this new context is complicated and state/federal officials have not yet provided much guidance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● At the point when you have moved from optional supplemental learning activities to compulsory distance learning, track student attendance data relative to how your district/state comes to define attendance● Work with your data team to closely monitor patterns and trends● Develop outreach plans and use multiple tools to reach students and families (phone calls, Zoom calls, emails, texts, etc.)
Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Our society, unfortunately, has both haves and have nots. Disproportionately, the negative consequences of this dynamic land most heavily on people of color, students of poverty, and special education students.● Some students in our society are more dependent upon schools for academic learning and development.● Sudden disruptions to how we used to structure schooling run the risk of exacerbating these inequities.● Many students in your community have limited access to quality internet and consistently-operating devices.● Many of your students have experienced various forms of trauma born out of the disruptions of life--loss of parental income, housing insecurity, etc.● Some studies show that student success in an online environment is associated with the existence of support related to technology and adult engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Use your PLC and data team structures to identify the unique needs of individual students● Embed an equity lens in all conversations with faculty● Design everything with the end-user in mind and remember that families are struggling with new realities● Support teachers in carefully monitoring both engagement and learning for each child● Adjust your tiered supports to accommodate new forms of interaction with learners