



Leveraging Challenge to Build Culture

Culture is the complex and broad set of relationships, values, attitudes and behaviors that bind a specific community consciously and unconsciously. Culture is dynamic, shaping and being shaped by those who occupy it.

- Carol Frieze, Carnegie Mellon University, PA

Your lives as district leaders have changed abruptly. The very context of schooling has been transformed in the blink of an eye. Moreover, these times require courageous and effective leadership, as we don't know when the world will return to normal. This resource provides support as you navigate through the COVID-19 outbreak and offers suggestions to strengthen your district's and school's culture through clear communication, care of all stakeholders, and collaborative problem-solving approaches. In the best of times, cultures are built and fortified through the everyday business of school life. In this time of uncertainty, it is the way you lead that both forms and reflects the culture.

There is no ironclad right way to deal with a crisis of this magnitude, but creating a checklist that builds on and strengthens your culture can help leaders avoid blind spots in a complex environment and generate a feeling of "we're in this together." Atul Gawande in his *New Yorker* article, "The Checklist¹," conveyed the power of a checklist with straight-forward advice. His work in many hospitals proved that a checklist helps establish a higher standard of expectations and performance. The following checklist of supportive suggestions may help you navigate the COVID-19 challenge and strengthen your existing culture.

Below is an initial checklist of tasks for you to consider. There are undoubtable additional tasks to add.

Culture-Building Checklist

- Ensure these four elements guide your handling of this crisis (from Finalsite.com)
 - Respond in a timely manner
 - Maintain regular ongoing communication
 - Be empathetic in all communications
 - Be transparent
- Be ahead of the curve in communicating – what have you communicated to date?
 - Share the status of initiatives put in place since staff and students left (what are custodians doing, who is available in the school by phone, etc.)
 - Communicate how you are conducting business right now – who in central office is doing what?
 - Even if you believe you have communicated enough, rinse and repeat. You cannot over communicate at this moment.
- Communicate that you care about everyone's well-being
 - Send a phone blast (alert---robo call) to all employees and families
 - Create a Facebook page to post important information
 - Create a blog for staff
 - Provide daily updates on your website with a FAQ section
 - Send a video message
 - Involve staff in ZOOM support sessions to share successes and challenges with distance learning
- Update school voicemail messages regularly



- Make sure you communicate the “why” for the decisions you are making
- Consider a district-wide press conference – how can the schools take the lead on this?
- Identify stakeholder groups who need to know what is happening and determine how to best communicate with them
- Consider using cable access to communicate messages to all on a regular basis
- Remember you can’t do this by yourself- utilize your support team and colleagues
- Develop a system for responding to emails from families – triage and distribute some of them to others to respond to in a timely manner
- Identify someone outside of education to serve as your sounding board- a community member, small business owner, CEO, etc.
- Utilize social media in new ways: create a private group on Facebook to communicate with your staff or with your colleagues
- Utilize your school crisis team and crisis management plan for suggestions on how to communicate with all and to cover all bases
- Communicate regularly with Town officials including the Health Department
- Have teachers do the following:
 - Conduct a read aloud in their own living room and send to students
 - Send an email or note to each of their students and families to reinforce how much they care
 - Utilize students to assist teachers with some of the technology challenges
 - Offer support to parents who are serving as their child’s teacher
- Collect quotes and comments from parents who are providing learning experiences for their children to share at a later date
- Be proactive and prepare for staff and students return to school – involve mental health professionals
- Upon return to school:
 - Meet with staff first so all are prepared
 - Help all feel safe--promote a sense of healing
 - Return to routines as soon as possible
 - Involve support staff to deal with individuals who may need extra assistance
 - Support your staff so they can be capable caregivers and educators
 - Provide classroom activities to transition students into the work
- Take care of your staff--be proactive in listening, acknowledge their anxiety and help them with the healing process

Additional Resources

- www.k12.wa.us “Talking to your kids about COVID-19 and school closures calmly and honestly”
- www.nysed.gov Covid-19 webpage for guidance and resources; OCR short webinar on online education and website accessibility
- www.cde.ca.gov Resources that support distance learning in all content areas (CA.)
- [District Administration.com](http://DistrictAdministration.com) “Corona Virus: Keeping all Stakeholders Informed”, March 17, 2020, Mark D. Benigni



Thoughts for reflection as a leadership team:

1. Are we remaining calm, being cautious, providing clarity and planning conscientiously?
2. How can we, as a district, respond to the needs of staff? Students? Families? Community?
3. What do we need from district leaders?
4. How can you as a school leader, respond to the needs of your staff? Your students? Your families? Your community?
5. What other members of our community do we need to involve in these conversations?
6. How can we mobilize our families to support each other? What do they need from us?
7. How do we ensure our schools are ready for a successful reconvening?
8. How do we take care of each other?

¹Gawande, A. (2007). The Checklist: If Something So Simple Can't Transform Intensive Care, What Else Can It Do? The New Yorker. Retrieved from: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/12/10/the-checklist>