

**Central Office Decision-Making About Virtual Learning:
A Scholarly Deliverable**

by
Audrey L. Ash

A Scholarly Delivery Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Degree Requirements for
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

West Texas A&M University
Canyon, Texas
Fall, 2022

Approved:

Dr. H.H. (Buddy) Hooper, Jr. _____ Date
Associate Professor of Educational Leadership
Chair, Scholarly Delivery Committee

Dr. Irma Harper _____ Date
Associate Professor of Educational Leadership
Member, Scholarly Delivery Committee

Dr. Minseok Yang _____ Date
Assistant Professor of Education
Methodologist, Scholarly Delivery Committee

*Qualified Signature	✓	Yes		No		Literature Review		Case Study	✓	Empirical Study
----------------------	---	-----	--	----	--	-------------------	--	------------	---	-----------------

*The qualified signature of the methodologist indicates agreement only with the scholarly deliverable(s) checked. The lack of one or more checked scholarly deliverables is not indicative of disagreement, but instead reflects a lack or absence of the methodologist's involvement with the unchecked scholarly deliverable(s).

Dr. Gary Bigham, EC-12 Director _____ Date
Department of Education

Dr. Betty Conway, Head _____ Date
Department of Education

Dr. Eddie Henderson, Dean _____ Date
College of Education and Social Sciences

Dr. Angela Spaulding, Dean _____ Date
Graduate School

Scholarly Delivery Abstract

The focus of this research and scholarly delivery is the decision-making of central office administrators regarding K-12 virtual learning. The first scholarly deliverable is a case study article meant for serving as a discussion piece or teaching tool for students in the educational leadership field wanting to obtain their master's or doctoral degree. This article is titled "Virtually Everything Changes: Remote Learning and Tough Decisions in River Road ISD". The case explores decision-making while implementing virtual learning amidst a global pandemic. The second scholarly deliverable is an empirical article titled "Central Office Decision-Making: K-12 Virtual Learning During COVID-19". The article focuses on the decision-making practices of superintendents and central office administrators as they implemented, improved upon, and discontinued virtual learning.

Keywords: Superintendent, central office, decision-making, virtual learning



**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN
SUBJECTS
Letter of Approval**

Dr. Hooper:

The West Texas A & M University Institutional Review Board is pleased to inform you that upon review, proposal #2022.06.008 for your study titled, “**Central Office Decision Making: K-12 Virtual Learning During COVID-19,**” meets the requirements of the WTAMU Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) No. 15.99.05.W1.01AR Institutional Review Board (Use of Human Subjects in Research). Approval is granted for one calendar year. This approval expires on **June 28, 2023.**

Principal investigators assume the following responsibilities:

1. **Continuing Review:** The protocol must be renewed on or before the expiration date if the research project requires more than one year for completion. A [Continuing Review form](#) along with required documents must be submitted on or before the stated deadline. Failure to do so will result in study termination and/or loss of funding.
2. **Completion Report:** At the conclusion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a [Close out form](#) must be submitted to AR-EHS.
3. **Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.13AR](#), unanticipated problems and serious adverse events must be reported to AR-EHS.
4. **Reports of Potential Non-Compliance:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.05AR](#), potential non-compliance, including deviations from the protocol and violations, must be reported to the IRB office immediately.
5. **Amendments:** Changes to the protocol must be requested by submitting an [Amendment form](#) to AR-EHS for review by the IRB. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented. Amendments do not extend time granted on the initial approval
6. **Consent Forms:** When using a consent form, only the IRB approved form is allowed.
7. **Audit:** Any proposal may be subject to audit by the IRB Administrator during the life of the study. Investigators are responsible for maintaining complete and accurate records for five years and making them available for inspection upon request.

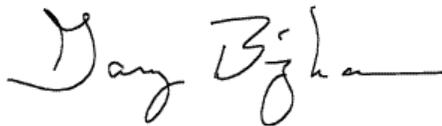
8. **Recruitment:** All recruitment materials must be approved by the IRB. Recruitment materials distributed to potential participants must use the approved text and include the study's IRB number, approval date, and expiration dates in the following format: WTAMU IRB##-##-## Approved: ##/##/#### Expiration Date: ##/##/####
9. **FERPA and PPRA:** Investigators conducting research with students must have appropriate approvals from the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

administrator at the institution where the research will be conducted in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) if applicable to the research being proposed. The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) protects the rights of parents in students ensuring that written parental consent is required for participation in surveys, analysis, or evaluation that ask questions falling into categories of protected information.

Sixty days prior to the expiration of this proposal, you will receive a notification of the approaching expiration date at which time you will need to submit an [Amendment/Continuation/Close out](#) form.



Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project. Sincerely,



Dr. Gary Bigham
Chair, WTAMU IRB
Compliance

Dr. Angela Spaulding
Vice President of Research and

Acknowledgments

I want to give a heartfelt thank you to many people that have supported me throughout my life and this educational journey. My family, my world, have believed in me and encouraged me when I just wanted to quit. Thank you to my wonderful husband, Jeff Ash (“7 Letters”), who has been a patient and loving supporter. To my amazing daughters, Carlie and Kendall, who inspire me to be my best, thank you for understanding when I needed to spend one more hour at the computer. To my dad and mom, Dennis and Debbie Smith, you taught me to have high expectations and to never settle for anything less than excellence. You both showed me how hard work and dedication can pay off and that has carried me through this process. I love you all more than words can express!

I give the utmost appreciation to my chair, Dr. H.H. Buddy Hooper, Jr.. You have encouraged me and picked me up when I was discouraged or worried. I am so blessed that I have gotten to know you and learn so much from you. Your impact on me will last a lifetime and I can’t thank you enough.

I am so honored to be a member of Cohort II in the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at West Texas A&M University. We have grown stronger through this process, and I couldn’t be prouder to stand alongside this talented group of people. A special thank you to Jessica Melendez-Carrillo and Callie Sims, two fellow students I couldn’t have made it without.

Finally, I want to give all honor and glory to God for providing me the opportunities throughout my career and educational journey to be a difference maker in the lives of others. I pray that I will leave a legacy of servant leadership, compassion, and love for others.

Table of Contents

Signature Page	ii
Scholarly Delivery Framework	iii
IRB Approval	iv
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Table of Contents	vii
Case Study Deliverable	1
Abstract	2
Case Narrative	3
Teaching Notes Embedded in Literature Review	13
Discussion Questions	17
References	18
Empirical Article	20
Abstract	21
Introduction	22
Review of Literature	26
Methodology	38
Findings	43
Discussion	50
References	56
Appendix A. Survey Questions	63
Appendix B. Interview Questions	65

**Virtually Everything Changes:
Remote Learning and Tough Decisions in River Road ISD**

by
Audrey L. Ash

A Scholarly Delivery Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Degree Requirements for
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

West Texas A&M University
Canyon, Texas
Fall, 2020

Author Note

Correspondence regarding this paper should be directed to Audrey L. Ash,
Department of Education, West Texas A&M University, Canyon, Texas 79016. E-mail:
alash1@buffs.wtamu.edu

Abstract

Superintendents are ultimately in charge of routinely making tough decisions, but not always during a global pandemic. This case explores decision-making and implementing sweeping changes, impacting both instruction and leadership. This case may be helpful to current and future school leaders as it shows the complexity and pressure often experienced when implementing change processes during an already stressful climate.

Keywords: Superintendent, decision-making, instructional change

Case Narrative

Pandemic Planning

As he prepared to walk into the administrative leaders' meeting, Dr. Don Chapman felt his smartphone buzz in his pocket. He stepped out in the late July, hot Texas sun to take the call. He gladly accepted an interview for Superintendent of Schools at Hill Country ISD, a larger district across the state, but closer to his family. As he wiped the sweat off his brow, Don walked into the building, took a deep breath, and entered the first River Road ISD administrative leadership meeting of the 2020-21 school year. The summer had been full of meeting with his executive leadership team, making plans, then throwing plans away. The team had to start over every time the Texas Education Agency gave new guidance about returning to school amidst a global pandemic. Don knew that he was asking his campus principals to stretch the limits like never before to provide student health and safety, digital learning, and face-to-face learning, all the while monitoring social distancing between staff and students. It felt like an uphill battle, to say the least.

“Welcome back everyone! Let’s start with some celebrations,” Superintendent Chapman said. The room was quiet and reserved, unlike the jovial mood of other administrative leaders’ meetings before. Don felt the heaviness in the room and knew his six principals, seven assistant principals, and four fellow central administrators could feel it too. Opening school in 2020 felt like a monumental task with more unanswered questions and uncertainty than ever before. “Well, Dr. Johnson, why don’t you pass out our River Road ISD Return to Learn Plan so we can get rolling!” Dr. Vickie Johnson, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, had spent countless hours

writing, editing, and laboring over the district’s plan to return to school during the COVID-19 crisis. “A big thanks to Dr. Johnson for the hard work and effort she put into this comprehensive plan.” Vickie had committed to staying with the district to finish out her final contracted year, even though the River Road School Board had non-renewed her contract just before COVID-19 shut the schools down in March 2020. She said:

I know this plan is overwhelming. I also know we won’t be able to answer all your

questions today, but we are in this together and I know for sure that our students need to

be back in school!

As the group poured over the plan, questions began to fire away. *What about social distancing in crowded classrooms? Will we require masks? What about lunchroom procedures? Do we allow visitors inside the buildings? What happens when a teacher must quarantine? How will digital instruction look different than in the Spring?*

Questions continued to swirl about digital learning and how it would have to be amped up from the efforts in the spring due to the requirements by the Texas Education Agency to closely monitor attendance and student engagement. “Dr. Gibson, please give us a report on what your digital instruction committee decided about the new learning management system (LMS) we will use this school year.” Dr. Chad Gibson, the River Road Technology Director, nervously said, “Well, sir, our committee decided against a new LMS. Instead, they would like to continue using Google Classroom like we did in the Spring. Superintendent Chapman was visibly rattled by this news but knew that addressing it in front of the group would be unprofessional. Dr. Johnson jumped in and

said, “Our curriculum department researched several LMS and narrowed it down to two – Canvas and SmartLearner.” She continued to present the pros and cons of each system. Don thanked Vicki for her research and information but noted that they would table this discussion until the next meeting on August 3rd to give everyone on the team time to look into the respective systems in comparison to Google Classroom. After the meeting adjourned, Don asked to speak with Chad in his office about the digital instruction committee and the LMS issue.

As the principals and assistant principals busily scurried to their campuses to begin implementing the details of the Return to Learn Plan, Don and Chad made their way down the hall to begin their meeting. Once they were in Don’s office, the conversation got heated very quickly. “Tell me about the LMS you and your committee considered, Chad.” Uneasily, Chad replied, “Well, sir, the committee decided early on that they only wanted to use what they already knew – Google Classroom.”

Don’s face became red, and he said, “But, that’s NOT what I asked you to do! How many times did we discuss this? Our LMS needs to be different and much more capable of all that digital learning encompasses. Google Classroom doesn’t cut it!” Chad expressed concern about the quick timeline and how it would be impossible for his department to learn an entirely new system and provide training to teachers before the first day of school on August 17th. “Well, I’ll turn the task over to our capable curriculum department. They will get it done! YOU just make sure the network can handle it.”

Chad walked out in a huff and slammed the door a little too hard on his way out. Don sat at his desk, frustrated with himself that he didn’t touch base with Chad on the results of his committee meetings before the administrative leadership meeting. He took a

big cleansing breath and called his wife to share about his interview opportunity at Hill Country ISD.

Calming the Community and Stakeholders

Superintendent Chapman knew that the next step was to set up community and stakeholder meetings to review the protocols set forth in the Return to Learn Plan. He scheduled three Zoom meetings for the week of August 3rd. However, he had an interview to attend before those meetings started. Without informing anyone in the district, Don traveled to Hill Country ISD on Friday, July 31st for his first interview. He felt good about the interaction he had with the Hill Country School Board, but immediately turned his focus to carrying out the Community/Stakeholder Zoom meetings to build confidence in the River Road ISD plans to return to school. The first Zoom meeting went well and due to the comprehensive Return to Learn Plan, Don was able to answer most questions brought up during the Zoom meeting. Many of the teachers were apprehensive about what virtual learning would look like and how we would support all learners, whether face-to-face or virtual. Don assured everyone that they would have a solid LMS that would meet their needs. Right after the Zoom meeting, Don answered a call. “Yes, I loved our time together as well. I feel that we could do great things together in Hill Country ISD. I’d be happy to come to an interview on August 5th!” Don went home to share the good news with his wife.

The rest of the week was busy with two more community and stakeholder Zooms. Also, the administrative team met again and decided to use SmartLearner as the District’s LMS, much to the dissatisfaction of Chad, the Technology Director. Don again charged the group with ensuring digital learning was much more streamlined, student and parent

friendly, and organized than it had been in the Spring. “We want to be the premier district in North Texas! Our digital learning needs to be top-notch so we don’t lose our students to other districts or to homeschool.” Besides, he also knew that TEA would be more likely to approve the Return to Learn Plan with a robust system to track learning and engagement.

Changes Ahead

Don and his wife left on the morning of August 5th to head to Hill Country ISD for the second round of interviews. They drove around the town, looked at potential homes, and stopped in a local café for lunch. They were both brimming with excitement at the thought of being just an hour away from both of their daughters, who were in the first stages of marriage and family life. They talked about future grandchildren and how wonderful it would be to be close to them and get to go to soccer and t-ball games.

The interview with the Hill Country ISD Board went well again, and they enjoyed meeting Don’s wife. They left late that night and drove back to River Road so that Don could again jump back into the work of preparing to open school, which was just 18 days away. On Thursday, August 6th, Don, Vickie, and her Curriculum Department team met with SmartLearner representatives via Zoom to discuss the contract, pricing, and logistics of rolling out the new LMS for virtual learning in River Road ISD. Don took detailed notes that he would share with Chad and the Technology Department later that afternoon. He didn’t want Chad and his team bringing negativity to the first meeting with SmartLearner. The biggest shock of the meeting was the price for SmartLearner;

\$105,000 for all the licenses needed to roll out the LMS platform for the district. *Where would we find the money?*

Later that day, Don met with the technology department about the implementation plan for SmartLearner. They would need to ensure the network could handle and allow the platform and he charged the department with working with the company to iron out all technology logistics. Chad was quiet throughout the meeting, but his department stepped up and ensured Don that they would work hard to make it happen. One of the longest-employed techs suggested a streamlined help desk line and a dedicated e-mail address for parents and students to allow them immediate assistance with the virtual platform. Don loved that idea and left the meeting feeling confident in the rollout plan.

Just before Don was going to head home, he received yet another call from Hill Country ISD's Board President. Don stated:

Wow, I am so honored! Yes, I would be happy to come to the Board meeting on Tuesday evening to be named the lone finalist for the Superintendent of Schools in Hill Country ISD. I look forward to working with you and the Board! I am forever grateful for this opportunity!

Don immediately called Danny Smith, Board President of River Road ISD, and scheduled an impromptu meeting so he could share the news. Danny came to the office immediately and Don filled him in on the happenings of the last few weeks. Danny was of course disappointed but wished Don well. The conversation then took an unexpected turn. The board president stated:

Don, when the board non-renewed Vicki's contract, we all assumed the changes in the central administration would take place in January as she transitioned out.

However, now that you are leaving, I expect you to take care of this situation now before you leave. Her track record of belittling and treating our teachers in a condescending way must stop now. Do whatever you have to do but make the necessary changes before you leave us.

Don's heart sank. He knew Vicki had done the heavy lifting in both creating the Return to Learn Plan and also negotiating with SmartLearner. How would she take the news? Don asked Danny for a special called board meeting to have a closed session to allow them to approve the plan to shake up the central office. He agreed that the meeting could be held on Thursday, August 13th at 6:00 p.m.

More Changes Yet

On the way down to Hill Country ISD to accept the lone finalist recognition, Don reached out to his executive leadership team by text:

I didn't want you to find out this way, but I am being named the lone finalist for Superintendent of Schools at Hill Country ISD. I know it will be all over social Media tonight, and wanted you to hear it from me first. I will call you all later and we can discuss everything in person when I get back on Thursday.

The team was shocked, they all wished him congratulations, but wondered what this would mean for River Road ISD. What a horrible time for a transition like this. Starting school in a pandemic, a new superintendent, and all the changes that come with that. Even more unanswered questions would arise in the coming days.

Don got back and met with his executive leadership team on Thursday morning. He told them that more changes would be coming, but he was unsure of what that might be until after the board meeting closed session. "I'm sorry this is all happening so fast.

You are all a great team and can make it through anything.” The team left the meeting more shocked and stressed.

During the closed session of the River Road ISD Board meeting, the board president again charged Don with making the necessary changes to expedite the exit of Vicki from the district. Don suggested that Vicki transition to the Director of Grants and work from home. He would shift, Dr. Cindy Massey, current Special Education Director, to be the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction. Then, move the current Director of Grants, Claudia Taylor, to be the Director of Special Education. Don assured the Board that Dr. Cindy Massey could lead the department with a positive culture and implement the new LMS and the Return to Learn Plan. The Board agreed and they decided the changes would be announced the next day, Friday. Then, everyone would assume their new roles on Monday, August 17th. “We don’t have time to waste. School starts on August 24th. These changes must be implemented swiftly so our district can carry on with more positive leadership from the curriculum department,” stated Danny.

The next day, Don met with Vicki first. She was totally disappointed but said she would be supportive of Cindy during her transition to her new role in curriculum and instruction. Don thanked Vicki for all her efforts in planning for returning to school and for the courage to get a real LMS for the district. He then met with Cindy, who was shocked and became immediately stressed at the thought of rolling out all the new initiatives while learning an entirely new department. “I’ll do whatever it takes though, we are in this for the students.” Next, Don met with Claudia, and she was happy with the changes, as it would be a promotion for her in the district. Finally, Don sat down to write

an e-mail to the entire district sharing all the news that had transpired. How would he ever find the words?

Dear RRISD Staff,

First, let me commend you on all the preparation you have taken on to make The start of school this year smooth and seamless! I know your efforts will pay off in one week when we see our students and their faces, even though we will have masks on.

I have news to share that I know will be unexpected. I have been named the Lone finalist at Hill Country ISD for Superintendent of Schools. This move is very Bittersweet for me, as I have loved my time here in River Road. You have all helped me to grow as a leader and we have done great work together. The school board will begin the process very soon of hiring a new Superintendent, and I assure you they will seek out the best person for the job. Board President, Danny Smith, will keep you posted on the process and timeline along the way.

I do have more news to share. Dr. Vicki Johnson, who is planning her retirement for the end of the year, will transition to the Director of Grants and will work from home. Our new Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction will be Dr. Cindy Massey. I am certain that her leadership will be great for our Curriculum & Instruction Department, and they will continue with the Return to Learn Plan, which includes implementing SmartLearner, our new LMS. This means that Claudia Taylor will transition to the Director of Special Education. She has a wealth of experience in this area and can confidently lead this department.

I am aware that is a lot of change to process. However, the school board and I

felt that the Curriculum & Instruction Department needed consistency from the beginning of the year throughout the school year in order to effectively roll out the massive changes connected to teaching and learning that we are experiencing this year. We will have students both face-to-face and virtually. So, it is essential that the C&I team is consistent from the start as they will have a heavy lift all year.

I will still be here in River Road until September 4th. I look forward to getting school started and I wish you all a happy first day back in your classrooms. There has never been a time that our students have needed us more! Be the light for them!

Thank you for your support,

Dr. Don Chandler

Don read the message over three times, wondering how the news would be received. He took a deep breath, then hit send.

No Time to Waste

The next week was a whirlwind preparing for the first day of school. Ripples from the big e-mail announcement were sweeping through the district. Some had tears for the loss of department directors they had built relationships with. Others looked forward to new beginnings. There wasn't time to dwell on all the changes, because the first day of school was coming, ready or not!

The contract with SmartLearner was signed. Then, the curriculum and instruction department trained all the virtual teachers on the new LMS platform. Class rosters were built in the system, the course content was added, and communication was sent to the parents of virtual learners. It felt like the plane was being built as it flew high in the air. The stress levels were high across the district, but all were anticipating the students to be

back in our hallways and classrooms again. The last 5 months seemed to drag on forever without the sense of normalcy schools bring to the community.

The first day of school arrived and there were many hiccups, mostly technology related. The Wi-Fi had struggles handling all the devices. Zoom didn't work right for the virtual students. There were log-in issues, glitches in the new LMS with class rosters, and the list of struggles went on and on. Even with the multiple hurdles, River Road continued to forge on in an effort to simultaneously provide both face-to-face and virtual learning for the students.

Teaching Notes Embedded in Literature Review

Teaching Notes

Superintendents have a unique role in implementing instructional change that positively impacts student learning. Abrego and Pankake (2011) studied the implementation of sweeping change and their findings were “consistent with the literature which indicates that there is a growing body of research concerning the role of central office staff in developing capacity in order to implement and sustain school reforms” (p. 17). When successfully transforming learning in a school district, “the superintendent must be a highly visible entity in the process of change and must be decidedly engaged in the majority of visioning and mission setting activities” (Horton & Martin, 2013, p. 68).

Don Chandler was distracted by his impending career move, which created a disconnect in the process of selecting the new LMS, a huge part of the River Road ISD Return to Learn Plan. This caused the committee to choose a direction that was not in line with Don's vision for how virtual learning would be rolled out, putting the district on a

quick timeline to find and implement a true LMS to support virtual learners. He had to speed up the process to ensure “members of the organization [were] moved from an existing and deficient situation to a new situation that transcends the status quo” (Sullivan & Shulman, 2005, p. 139). In order for superintendents to be the main change agents for a school system, they have to direct the instructional implementation for all students, especially underserved students (Sherman, 2008). Don wanted the new LMS to serve all students and provide equity for virtual learners amidst the global pandemic.

Stop and Think

What could Don have done differently when guiding the process to select the LMS, especially with Chad, the Technology Director?

Communicating Decisions for Instructional Change

After the Return to Learn Plan and the new LMS were solidified, Don took time to hold multiple Zoom conferences with stakeholders to communicate the instructional changes about to take place. Don knew from research that he “must be proactive in communicating with the larger school community regarding the focus and intent” (Filippi & Hackmann, 2019, p. 146) of the necessary changes involved in the Return to Learn Plan. School would look different for both face-to-face and virtual students and this proved to be a scary thought for many. Danna and Spatt (2013) cited Bridges (2009) stating that “communicating clearly what is occurring, giving people roles to play during the planning and implementation, and honoring and sympathizing with people for their losses” helps with the change process (p.183).

Kowalski et al. (2010) discovered that the role of the communicator as a superintendent was the most important role for effective educational reform. Throughout the communication process, stakeholders should always be made aware of “the importance of decisions made through the lens of how those decisions will impact students and meet their needs” (Decman et al., 2017, p. 1009). Through the zoom meetings, Don was able to offer collaborative discussions among stakeholders which is in line with research that “equity-minded district leaders who communicate more than present policy expectations” (Trujillo, 2012, p. 553) can more effectively facilitate equitable instructional policies and change to occur.

Stop and Think

How do you think holding the stakeholder Zoom meetings impacted the implementation of the Return to Learn Plan and the new LMS, SmartLearner?

Organizational Decisions for Implementation of Change

As Don met with the Board about his impending departure from the district, he became aware that they wanted him to restructure the organization of his executive leadership in order to set the stage for a positive implementation of the Return to Learn plan and the new LMS. Don struggled with this but knew the board was right. So, he made “the best and most just decision” to result in “the greatest benefit for the most people” (Strike et al., 2005, p. 17). He knew that the implementation of such a sweeping change would require that staff trusted the leaders, which meant that Vickie had to go and that Cindy needed to lead the changes ahead while creating a positive culture. Don knew that “districts need to change at all times, both administratively and instructionally”

(Palandra, 2010, p. 232) in order to “maintain serenity and harmony in the district to ensure that all efforts are directed towards the enhancement of teaching and learning” (Palandra, 2010, p. 232). He also knew that shifting the roles of central office leaders would contribute to a more hands-on support role rather than just monitoring and management, which is found to facilitate changes moving forward (Honig, 2012). As Don made those district-level changes and communicated them to the district, he was careful to honor all staff members and present clear reasoning for why the leadership changes were occurring.

Don also had to shift the management of the LMS from the technology department to the curriculum and instruction department because they would be able to communicate with all staff more effectively and positively impact the roll-out of the new LMS. Don saw the technology department as unmovable and remembered that “traditional schools [or departments] are notorious for being isolated, inflexible, and reluctant to change” (Williams, et al., 2008, p. 294) and that a “lack of professional dialogue among educators remains a significant barrier to successful school improvement” (Williams, et al., 2008, p. 294). He knew the curriculum & instruction department would be more supportive through constant communication with the teachers, students, and parents. Even though the leadership shake up left many with questions, Don had to look at the bigger picture, the mandates from the Board, and the strengths of his executive leadership team to effectively make the best decisions to ensure success going forward.

Stop and Think

What are your thoughts on Don making the leadership changes right before school started and just before his exiting the district to start his new role in Hill Country ISD?

Discussion Questions

This narrative combined with the teaching notes grounded in theory are meant to guide practicing superintendents, central office administrators, and educational leadership scholars to consider issues surrounding decision-making when implementing instructional changes. The discussion questions below can help lead discussions about River Road ISD and the bumpy road that led to implementing the Return to Learn Plan and new LMS for the district.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think Don was visible enough in the decision-making process to choose an LMS for the implementation of virtual learning for River Road ISD?
2. Why do you think Don didn't want to go with the "status quo" and just utilize Google Classroom like the district had done in the Spring when the pandemic first hit? Do you think he communicated this to his team effectively? Why or why not?
3. Could Don have handled the central office leadership change differently? If so, what would you change about that process?
4. What do you predict might happen next with the Technology Department and the curriculum and instruction department?
5. What should the priority be for the new River Road ISD Superintendent upon assuming the role?

References

- Abrego, C., & Pankake, A. (2011). The district-wide sustainability of a professional Learning community during leadership changes at the superintendency level. *Administrative Issues Journal: Education, Practice, and Research*, 1(1), 11–21. <https://doi.org/10.5929/2011.1.1.2>
- Bridges, W. (2009). *Managing transitions: Making the most of change* (3rd Ed.). Da Capo Press. Danna, S., & Spatt, I. (2013). The impact of superintendent support for curriculum mapping on principals' efficacious use of maps. *Journal of School Leadership*, 23(1), 178–210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684613023000107>
- Decman, J.M., Badgett, K., Shaughnessy, B., Randall, A., Nixon, L., & Lemley, B. (2017). Organizational leadership through management: Superintendent perceptions. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 46(6), 997–1013. <http://doi.org/10.1177/174114321771425>
- Filippi, J.R., & Hackman, D.G. (2019). Leading common core state standards implementation: Lessons from one successful superintendent. *Leadership Policy in Schools*, 18(1), 138–153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2017.1398334>
- Honig, M.I. (2012). District central office leadership as teaching: How central office administrators support principals' development as instructional leaders. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(4), 733–774. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X12443258>
- Horton, J., & Martin, B.N. (2013). The role of the district administration within professional learning communities. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 16(1), 55–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2012.671366>

- Kowalski, T.J., McCord, R.S., Peterson, G.J., Young, I.P., & Ellerson, N.M. (2011).
Superintendents; The American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study.
Education Week, 30(17), 5.
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A247974229/OVIC?u=txshracd2629&sid=OVIC&xid=2145c7d0>
- Palandra, M. (2010). The role of instructional supervision in district-wide reform.
International Journal of Leadership in Education, 13(2), 221–234.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603120903144459>
- Sherman, W.H. (2008). No child left behind: A legislative catalyst for superintendent action to eliminate test-score gaps?. *Educational Policy*, 22(5), 675–704.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904807307063>
- Strike, K.A., Haller, E.J., & Soltis, J.F. (2005). *The ethics of school administration* (3rd Ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Sullivan, S., & Shulman, V. (2005). Managing change: The superintendent as line director of instruction. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 8(2), 123–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01446190500041784>
- Trujillo, T.M. (2012). The politics of district instructional policy formation: Compromising equity and rigor. *Educational Policy*, 27(3), 531–559.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904812454000>
- Williams, L.A., Atkinson, L.C., Cate, J.M., & O’Hair, M.J. (2008). Mutual support between learning community development and technology integration: Impact on school practices and student achievement. *Theory Into Practice*, 47(4), 294–302.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00405840802329219>

**Central Office Decision-Making:
K-12 Virtual Learning During COVID-19**

by
Audrey L. Ash

A Scholarly Delivery Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Degree Requirements for
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

West Texas A&M University
Canyon, Texas
Fall, 2022

Author Note

Correspondence regarding this paper should be directed to Audrey L. Ash,
Department of Education, West Texas A&M University, Canyon, Texas 79016. E-mail:
alash1@buffs.wtamu.edu

Abstract

Purpose: The decision-making of K-12 central office administrators has been widely studied to glean information about the educational leadership decision-making process. Since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there have been unprecedented problems for K-12 education resulting in many decisions regarding virtual learning. This study sought to determine what decision-making practices were utilized when implementing, improving upon, and discontinuing virtual learning. **Research Methods:** This non-experimental study focused on superintendents and central office administrators in small and middle-sized school districts and their decision-making regarding virtual learning. Fifteen central office decision-makers responded to the survey sent out to thirty-seven small and middle-sized districts in northern Texas. Data were collected from surveys and four follow-up interviews were conducted to gain insight into decisions made concerning virtual learning at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and during the following 2020-21 school year. **Findings:** Through the survey and interview, common themes influencing decision-making emerged, which were clustered into three categories; teacher-related factors, student-related factors, and administrative-related factors. **Conclusion:** Experiencing a global pandemic and continuing to educate K-12 students presented many opportunities for decisions to be made.

Studying the decision-making process regarding K-12 virtual education could help in future situations that require short- or long-term virtual learning for students.

Keywords: decision-making, superintendents, central office administrators, virtual learning

Introduction

A large body of research focuses on decision-making by central office administrators in the K-12 setting with leaders reporting that an average of 46 decisions are made daily (Kichington, 2020). The research includes data-driven, research-based, and collaborative decision-making, just to name a few (Farley-Ripple, 2012; Honig, 2006; Owen, 2015). There is also some research on administrative decision-making in crisis situations, specifically about K-12 virtual learning (Hyder et al., 2021; Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021). Beard (2012) and Huguet et al. (2021) recognized the complexity of central office decision-making due to the diverse, sometimes opposing, perspectives of the various stakeholders impacted by the decisions. District leaders must navigate the varying perspectives of stakeholders, regulatory school policies, and balance those with the situational practical reality (Huguet et al., 2021). With all the complexity surrounding decisions, Beard (2012) pointed out that decisions should be value-based and focused on both equity and academic excellence to positively impact all students.

District leaders rely on their knowledge and experience to find solutions that align with their core values (Huguet et al., 2021). Leithwood et al. (2020) suggested that school leaders should mainly be concerned with the question, “under these conditions, what should I do?” (p. 10). Communities across the nation held different values during the COVID-19 pandemic, which created division surrounding the decisions made about K-12 virtual learning and transitioning from virtual to face-to-face learning (Hyder et al., 2021). The varying beliefs about educational best practices and the health and safety of students made decision-making even more complex (Lochmiller, 2021).

The research on K-12 virtual learning decisions is limited because there hasn't been ample time to explore the topic as we are still entrenched in the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact it has had on student learning (Lochmiller, 2021). Central office administrators had to make decisions to adjust instruction practically overnight when schools were closed due to COVID-19 (Staar, 2020), and the initial decisions focused on the "immediate educational and nutritional needs of their schools" (Lochmiller, 2021, p. 2). Through surveys and interviews, data was collected and analyzed. Through qualitative data analysis, discoveries were made about decision-making practices regarding virtual learning from implementation to discontinuation. This research process and discoveries made will hopefully shed light on how and why decisions were made and help prepare administrators for future instances where rapid instructional change is necessary.

Problem Statement

The problem this study addressed is the lack of guidance on decision-making concerning K-12 education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Superintendents and central office administrators "faced inconsistent state and federal leadership" (Lochmiller, 2021, p. 2) as they navigated making decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. With no guidebook for educational-related decision-making during a pandemic, superintendents and central office leaders had to analyze every angle, consider community values, the health and safety of students, fluctuating state funding and attendance rules, and many more issues that often polarized the community (Lochmiller, 2021). School districts also had to pay special attention to data tracking of COVID-19 cases as they made decisions (Hyder et al., 2021). The decision-making practices utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic are important to learn from because they shifted the traditional superintendent

role to be more focused on health issues while balancing remote instruction in response to forced school closures (Lochmiller, 2021).

Purpose of Study

The goal of this study was to explore the decision-making practices of central office administration concerning virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, the whole world was turned upside down, and that impacted K-12 education in many ways (Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021). This study sought to determine what decision-making practices were important when implementing virtual learning, as well as explore the decisions behind discontinuing virtual learning in small and middle-sized school districts in Texas. This topic is important because we will probably experience another crisis in the future that necessitates short- or long-term school closures (Ahmed et al., 2020). As educational organizations, we need to be better prepared to switch to a virtual learning platform to ensure student success, whether they are learning face-to-face or virtually (Ahmed et al., 2020 & Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021).

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What decision-making practices were utilized when implementing K-12 virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What decision-making practices were utilized during virtual learning to improve the quality of virtual learning?
3. What decision-making practices were utilized when discontinuing K-12 virtual learning?

The decision-making practices this study focused on were collaborative, data-driven, research-based, and crisis decision-making specific to virtual learning due to COVID-19. The information regarding K-12 virtual learning decision-making was gathered from these sources:

- Superintendents of small and middle-sized school districts in Texas
- Other central office administrators involved in the decisions regarding virtual learning in small and middle-sized school districts in Texas

The survey and interview questions identified the decision-making practices used as districts implemented, improved upon, and discontinued virtual learning for K-12 students.

Definition of Terms

Collaborative decision-making – Collaborative decision-making values multiple perspectives within a group and leads to greater understanding based on varying viewpoints (Owen, 2015).

Data-driven decision-making – This practice utilizes data to support instructional decisions and improvement (Park & Datnow, 2009).

Research-based decision-making – This practice utilizes research to impact day-to-day instruction in the classroom through the implementation of best practices (Farley-Ripple, 2012).

Virtual/Distance learning – This type of learning occurs online and away from the physical school building and can be synchronous or asynchronous (Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021).

Review of Literature

Over the years, central office leaders have become more connected to instructional decision-making (Wong et al., 2020). Wong et al. (2020) stated that districts have “granted central office leaders a great deal of influence over instructional decision-making in areas where they had limited formal authority” (p. 404) in previous years. According to a case study of two districts, central office administrators utilized persuasive methods with school personnel to influence decisions. Even though persuasion was used to implement decisions related to legislation and policy, this left school-based staff feeling less autonomous than when they had more control over instructional decisions (Wong et al., 2020). District leaders should consider “practical and logistical constraints like time, resources, and whether deliberators were in a position to make a given decision” (Huguet et al., 2021, p. 725).

Superintendents and central office leaders should also take into consideration the values and priorities of the community when making decisions (Jenkins, 2007). A case study by Jenkins (2007) explored a rural superintendent who demonstrates “his leadership every day by integrating his personal values, his professional values and the values of the community into his decision-making” (p. 32). When keeping with the values of the community and oneself, considering instructional decisions should be grounded in the specific needs of the students served by the district (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Collaborative Decision-Making

Research on collaborative decision-making in the K-12 setting has grown over the years due to a society drowning in information from many sources. For districts to

navigate the sea of information, central office leaders should realize the “unyielding reality of the need to work collaboratively” (Bjork et al., 2014, p. 456). Collaborative decision-making values varying viewpoints and fosters groups “having a greater understanding than any individual in the group” (Owen, 2015, p. 44). This leads to multiple perspectives being considered in the decision-making process (Owen, 2015). District leaders are challenged to engage with a vast array of stakeholders in almost all aspects of decision-making due to both policies and legislative reforms (Honig, 2008).

Honig (2003) emphasized the need for central office administrators to know the practices of individual campuses to collaboratively make decisions. This idea is further emphasized by Hallinger and Heck (2010a) as they described collaborative culture as “a set of systemic relationships” (p. 107). When central office administrators demonstrate that they too are learning through collaboration, the organization is more apt to follow with meaningful collaboration as well (Honig, 2008). The superintendent should be involved and open to leading change through collaborative behaviors (Horton & Martin, 2013). It is important for the superintendent to be “highly visible, not only at the planning table but in the training sessions as well” (Horton & Martin, 2013, p. 69).

District leaders should act as drivers in the collaborative process to assist in pinpointing needs and developing practices to impact academic success across the district (Hallinger & Heck, 2010b). In fact, the “superintendent creates and supports the sense of urgency for change” (Horton & Martin, 2013, p. 68). When making decisions that drive instructional change, leaders that involve a cross-section of stakeholders in making collaborative decisions can often avoid some pushback regarding the changes. Superintendents should openly address that change can be uncomfortable and show

understanding throughout the change process (Decman et al., 2018). When superintendents “do work on the front end of change” by inviting stakeholders to share in “making collaborative decisions related to the direction of a district” (p. 1007) the change process is typically less contentious.

Collaborative decision-making can increase trust within an organization through shared power and improved communication (Abrego & Pankake, 2011). Implementing collaborative decision-making often necessitates the restructuring of district culture, which can be a large-scale undertaking (Bjork et al., 2014). When district leaders make efforts to involve teaching staff in the decision-making process “the quality of decisions rises” (Gurbuzer et al., 2017, p. 1072). Teachers want to contribute to decision-making (Gurbuzer et al., 2017) and technology tools like video conferencing and e-mail have even made collaboration more convenient and readily available (Williams et al., 2008). Most significantly, “superintendents should play the role of vision caster to ensure all represented groups remember the paramount importance of meeting student needs” (Decman et al., 2018, p. 1009) within the collaborative decision-making process.

Even with the increase in collaborative decision-making, district leaders face the reality that some decisions cannot be put through the collaborative process (Decman et al., 2018). Policy mandates, federal regulations, time limitations, and budget constraints can get in the way of all decisions being made collaboratively (Hallinger & Heck, 2010a). When decisions must be made urgently without collaboration, the superintendent should exercise “transparency, accessibility, and honest communication” (Decman et al., 2018, p. 1009) about why the decision was necessary to make. Even after non-collaborative

decisions, effective superintendents still communicate with the stakeholders involved so that they feel their voice is important (Decman et al., 2018).

Decman et al. (2018) found that district leaders recognized that financial constraints often prevent some collaborative decisions from being implemented. In fact, a study by Janke (1974) found that superintendents would choose the lowest-priced instructional program even if the higher-priced program yielded better academic results. Janke (1974) discovered that superintendents “considered the cost per pupil” (p. 324) to be of utmost importance. So, unfortunately, the almighty dollar can hinder both collaboration and purchases of programs that show evidenced student growth. Some superintendents even admit that finances are often the top priority over other considerations, even though they don’t want that to be the case (Decman et al., 2018).

Superintendents should also collaborate with the school board to implement their vision before implementing decisions made by campus or district-based collaborative teams (Decman et al., 2018). Horton and Martin (2013) recommended that school boards be trained and participate in learning before changes are rolled out to the rest of the staff in a district. School board members and their support of shared leadership with an emphasis on the district’s vision and values flow through the superintendent and central office administrators to principals and campus staff (Abrego & Pankake, 2011). Involving the board in collaboration and open conversation “can cultivate a relationship of trust between a school board and a district’s superintendent” (Decman et al., 2018, p. 1005), which is imperative for the district’s overall success. Even with the most willing district leaders, the collaborative process “hinges in part on the readiness of school and community leaders to participate in learning partnerships” (Honig, 2008, p. 655).

Collaborative decisions are ideal for increasing involvement and buy-in from the community, parents, staff, and other stakeholders. Effective use of collaboration by superintendents requires them to create and manage a culture conducive to collaboration rather than having “the culture manage them” (Bjork et al., 2014, p. 459). The use of collaborative leadership and decision-making “may offer a path towards more sustainable school improvement” (Hallinger & Heck, 2010, p. 107a) instead of just surface-level improvement. Most importantly, the superintendent should foster leadership capacity “where leadership is distributed and shared throughout the organization through teams of teachers” (Horton & Martin, 2013, p. 69) to positively impact student success.

Data-Driven Decision-Making

With heightened federal accountability efforts directed toward K-12 public education, the focus on data-driven decision-making has increased over the years. Specifically, the shift in focus to student learning outcomes has forced district leaders to analyze student achievement data critically rather than ground practice in “lofty goal statements” (Bredson & Kose, 2007, p. 17). However, data utilization by educators for policy compliance is not as effective as intrinsically motivated data usage for true instructional improvement (Sutherland, 2004). In fact, until educators “shift their motivation orientations from extrinsic to intrinsic [so] that school reform benefits can be realized” meaningful instructional decisions will not be impactful to students (Sutherland, 2004, p.290).

Effective data-based decision-making is led by district central office leaders that are on the front lines participating in the work, rather than mandating data use in a top-down approach (Honig, 2006). School staff are more likely to use data for instructional

decision-making if district leaders set the example and model data use themselves (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). Cousins et al. (2006) found that school-level staff committed to the changes related to data-driven decisions when district leaders facilitated the process and gave “concrete examples” (p. 172) of effective data use and its impact in the classroom. Positive outcomes were more likely “when central office administrators not only demonstrated evidence-based practice but also explicitly articulated what they were doing and why” (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012, p. 215).

Productive data-based decisions also involve district leaders developing capacity and supporting campuses through the instructional improvement process (Park & Datnow, 2009). District-level support of individual campuses hinges on the willingness of school staff to participate in “critical conversations with central office staff” (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012, p. 216) to determine what to implement in response to the data. In addition to these more formal critical conversations, leaders should attend to “informal interactions that are often critical to understanding how work gets done in organizations” (Spillane, 2012, p. 137). When informal conversations are ignored, leaders can easily become disconnected from the progress of change implementation (Spillane, 2012). It is essential for district leaders not to let office-based administrative duties thwart the hands-on involvement needed to focus on “curriculum, instruction, and student learning outcomes” (Bredson & Kose, 2007, p. 17).

The data-driven instructional decision-making process can be difficult to implement in the K-12 setting. However, the heightened focus on student learning outcomes is not going away, and “the expectation to use data is likely to persist for years to come” (Marsh & Farrell, 2015, p. 283). Central office leadership will need to continue

the support and capacity building of campus-level staff and partner with staff in making data-based instructional decisions for the efforts to be sustainable (Park & Datnow, 2009). Merely implementing data-driven decision-making is not enough if schools want the practice to make a lasting change over time (Spillane, 2012). For data-driven decisions to be effective, leaders should aspire to be astute in “assisting teachers to select instructional responses to data” (Marsh & Farrell, 2015, p. 282).

District-level leaders who value continuous improvement have successfully “framed the use of data-driven decision-making in a manner that allowed room for principals and teachers to learn from their mistakes” (Park & Datnow, 2009, p. 483). Creating a culture that rewards risk-taking and transparency rather than an evaluative culture promotes “buy-in from different staff members” (Park & Datnow, 2009, p. 483). Increased buy-in improves even more once the staff members see the positive impact achieved from the decisions to adjust practice based on data (Cousins et al., 2006).

Research-Based Decision-Making

School districts often tout the use of research-based decision-making, especially for instructional practices. Although evidence shows districts may only be utilizing research at the surface level rather than implementing change based on research (Honig & Coburn, 2008). This common practice is problematic and can produce uninformed decisions that can negatively impact students (Farley-Ripple, 2012). In fact, sometimes “decision-makers find supporting evidence *after* the decision has been made” (Farley-Ripple, 2012, p. 801) because it saves time researching upfront ahead of the decision. Lack of time during the decision-making process is one of the biggest factors for district leaders not routinely utilizing research findings (Honig & Coburn, 2008). However,

district leaders spend a substantial amount of time attempting to find solutions (Farley-Ripple, 2012). If central office leaders and decision-makers neglect research use for student benefit, “an opportunity for meaningful change is passed over” (Farley-Ripple, 2012, p. 802).

Honig and Coburn (2008) and Farley-Ripple (2012) claimed that research-based decision-making is lacking due to overwhelming job responsibilities and administrators being stretched for time to complete their complex tasks and responsibilities within a school day. With this in mind, “it is no surprise that few decision-makers are able to search, read, and employ education research in their day-to-day work” (Farley-Ripple, 2012, p. 799). Just like with data-driven decision-making, it is essential for district-level leaders to model research-based decision-making if they expect principals and campus-level staff to do the same (Honig et al., 2017). Superintendents and central office administrators should engage with campuses as lead learners to help with “sustaining the learning of other staff” (Honig et al., 2017, p. 966).

Often success through research-based decision-making at one school site is not replicated at other campuses due to the defensiveness of school staff (Rusch, 2005). Defensive behaviors such as this “thwart organizational learning in school districts” (Rusch, 2005, p. 100). With these factors in mind, there are many limitations to research impacting educational learning in the field (Rusch, 2005). If the practice of underutilizing research for decision-making continues, educational leaders are “likely to reinvent the wheel each time they address a problem” (Farley-Ripple, 2012, p. 801). Hartman (2017) presented a possible solution to increase research use in school districts. She suggested that K-12 school districts partner with universities to work in collaboration on research to

positively impact student learning outcomes. With this approach, research is not something done to the K-12 educator, but something that is done with them. Educational leaders and classroom-level staff would need to be both willing and transparent for a process like this to be effective (Hartman, 2017).

When participating in research on their schools, administrators often share “politically guarded responses” (Datnow & Sutherland, 2002, p. 180) in comparison to the more genuine responses from teachers. Researchers, especially qualitative ones, also must navigate politics and gain the trust of the participants to generate accurate findings (Datnow & Sutherland, 2002). For research-based decision-making to truly impact outcomes for students, K-12 educators should participate openly in the research process and utilize research for decision-making in practice (Hartman, 2017). With communication as the key to meaningful research, administrators should leverage transparent discussions to produce “mutual understandings, mutual influence, negotiation, openness, credibility, and trust” (Kowalski, 2005, p. 108) to ensure team success in the research process.

District policy and funding allocated to both the research process at the district level and staff level professional development on research-based practices could also promote evidence use (Honig & Coburn, 2008). Additionally, central administration mentors that model “evidence use in daily practice” (Honig & Coburn, 2008, p. 602) could lead to true research-based practice in action. Superintendents that actively participate with their staff through research-based decision-making are far more effective than coaches from the outside asking staff to do the same. When district-level leaders act

as the lead learner other staff members realize the importance of the work (Honig et al., 2017).

Crisis Decision-Making and Decisions about COVID-19 Virtual Learning

While all the decision-making frameworks discussed so far are important for leaders to practice, the ability to use even one of the frameworks during a crisis is challenging (Kapucu & Garayev, 2011). COVID-19 and the need to switch to virtual learning presented many obstacles to education and decisions had to be made rapidly (Staar, 2020). “Unlike normal circumstances, a crisis situation involves urgency” (Naglewski, 2006, p. 47). Leaders did not have prior situations with the magnitude of a global pandemic to rely upon as they made decisions. Kinchington (2020) found that “decision-making in complex contexts, novel situations and related to critical incidents requires experience-informed confidence” (p.15). The ability to gain confidence based on data was not an option for school leaders. “Data-informed decision-making during pandemics and disasters can be challenging because of a lack of infrastructure to share and analyze data” (Hyder et al., 2021, p. 410). Situations like this emphasize the importance of the leader’s ability “to respond appropriately to the pressure of time and context whilst making decisions” (Kinchington, 2020, p. 15).

When school leaders are presented with ethical and complex decision-making scenarios, they often ground their decisions in thinking about the best interests of students (Stefkovich & Begley, 2007). Having to make decisions under pressure can be difficult, but it is a part of the daily life of school leaders. When under pressure, making decisions for students that is aligned with the vision of the school and making sure the vision is “clear and articulated” (Muijs et al., 2010, p. 156) is of utmost importance. Operating

under a clear vision can be helpful when involved in quick decision-making because the process “involves rapid strategic, operational, and tactical assessments and identification of numerous options” (Naglewski, 2006, p. 47). Then, after decisions are made, “having frank conversations about the various possibilities will help stakeholders accept the ultimate decision when it has to be made” (Starr, 2020, p. 60).

When dealing with a crisis, it is natural for leaders to feel “overwhelmed and unprepared” (McHenry-Sorber & Provinzano, 2017) while responding to rapid changes. Due to the quick-changing nature of crisis situations, district leaders may find themselves having to be more directive and less collaborative in pressurized decision-making scenarios (Hurt & Abebe, 2015). Decision-making amidst a crisis “alters the established, routine relationship among team members” (Hurt & Abebe, 2015, p. 350). So, going about the decision-making in different than normal ways is to be expected. With rapid decision-making, “it is crucial for organizations to have a fast though smooth and effective decision-making process” (Kapucu & Garayev, 2011, p. 367). Often, the focus is on avoiding negative impacts on the organization (Hurt & Abebe, 2015). During quickly evolving crisis situations, school district leaders can also find it difficult to call upon community networks to assist in school operations because they too are “maxed out” (McHenry-Sorber & Provinzano, 2017, p. 623).

Specifically, regarding COVID-19, school leaders were pivoting “to meet the immediate needs of students, families, teachers, and staff” (Staar, 2020, p. 60) while also planning for an unknown future due to school closures. Even though schools regularly practice what to do during emergency events, “not all schools were ready for such an immediate change and therefore found it difficult to adjust” (Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021,

p. 8) to virtual learning. During the pandemic, teachers shared concerns about student engagement and lack of communication as the main problems to overcome (Boltz et al., 2021). They were also extremely worried about “equity and access” (Boltz et al., 2021, p. 1387) due to families having “limited or no internet access” (Boltz et al., 2021, p. 1387). Both constraints were difficult for administrators to address on short notice, especially with limited available technology (Boltz et al., 2021). Ahmed et al. (2020) also found student engagement to be difficult to navigate during remote learning along with too much independent learning time. In fact, it is easy for “learners [to] be lost when there is too much emphasis on self-directed learning” (Ahmed et al., 2020, p. 8). However, regarding virtual teaching, Ahmed et al. (2020) discovered the “prominent downside [was] limited opportunities to make meaningful connections with students” (p. 4). Even with the various struggles of teaching virtually, teachers continued to think positively about the experience and shared that “they acquired new teaching methods and were introduced to a range of innovative technological tools” (Sharmi-Inbal & Blau, 2021, p. 8).

Superintendents and district leadership did not seem to focus as much on instructional practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, district-level leaders were required to “employ knowledge and skills that are distinctly different from those utilized in routine work” (Lochmiller, 2021, p. 12). Leaders became much more involved in decisions related to nursing, covering teacher absences, contact tracing, quarantine orders, and setting policies never before imagined related to masking and social distancing. The COVID-19 crisis also required superintendents to welcome many new individuals into their decision-making processes such as medical personnel, public health

officials, and governmental agencies (Lochmiller, 2021). This “involvement of several organizations from different sectors and jurisdictions may be problematic if they are not coordinated effectively” (Kapucu, & Garayev, 2011, p. 367). Overall, the pandemic completely changed leadership decisions and practices (Lochmiller, 2011, p. 12) for school district leaders. During a worldwide crisis like COVID-19, district-level school leaders and the people they collaborate with should continue to focus on addressing “the academic, social/emotional, and health needs of school-aged children” (Hyder et al., 2021, p. 411).

Methodology

The research method was qualitative in nature. A non-experimental survey was utilized with responses gathered through Qualtrics. A purposeful sampling, as discussed by Maxwell (2013), of superintendents and central office administrators in northern Texas was targeted for this study. Purposeful sampling was used to achieve an accurate representation of the participants surveyed. Of the 37 superintendents surveyed, 15 completed the survey or had another central office administrator complete the survey. The survey consisted of 13 open-ended questions and inquired about the types of decision-making used when central office administrators were planning for, implementing, and discontinuing virtual learning (see Appendix A). Survey respondents were also asked to participate in a more in-depth interview about their decision-making about virtual learning. Four survey participants opted into a follow-up interview and were asked a pre-determined set of open-ended questions presented with a structured approach. Maxwell (2013) recommended a structured interview approach when aiming to compare data from multiple respondents more effectively. The follow-up interview consisted of

eight open-ended questions (see Appendix B) which asked about decision-making practices when implementing and discontinuing virtual learning. During each interview, clarifying questions were asked when needed to gain a better understanding of the participants' responses.

The interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams at pre-arranged times convenient for each participant. The interviews were recorded and transcribed via Microsoft Teams. The interview transcripts were checked against the interview recordings for accuracy and were then uploaded into Atlas.ti. Open-ended survey responses were also uploaded to Atlas.ti. The transcripts and open-ended survey responses were analyzed through multiple rounds of coding utilizing Atlas.ti and 16 main codes were found through the initial analysis. The interview transcripts and survey responses were analyzed again, and common categories were identified by finding relationships between the codes, and three broader categories were discovered.

Rationale for Research Design

Decision-making regarding K-12 virtual learning has been brought to the forefront of educational administrators since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The decisions made by superintendents and central office leaders have had a direct impact on student health, safety, and academic learning. District leaders have widened their scope of stakeholders to include medical personnel, public health officials, and governmental agencies to make the most informed decisions for their students, staff, and community (Lochmiller, 2021). The knowledge gained through the research process could better prepare leaders to face similar crisis situations especially when there is no guidance or rule book for making educational decisions during a pandemic.

This qualitative research based on both a non-experimental survey and interview data provided insight into the decision-making processes while superintendents and central office administrators were faced with a multitude of problems associated with educating K-12 students virtually. Having open-ending questions on both the initial survey and the follow-up interviews gave opportunities for participants to expand upon their responses and allowed for greater insight into the decision-making processes. Utilizing a survey with Likert responses to questions would not have provided the same depth of understanding about virtual learning decision-making. The research discovered reasons for discontinuing virtual learning and the decisions involved in bringing students back face-to-face. Further exploration of decision reasoning to discontinue virtual learning could bring about reflection and help educational administrators become more prepared for future events that lead to school closures that necessitate virtual learning.

Participants

This study sought information from superintendents and central office staff in northern Texas that made instructional decisions regarding virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thirty-seven superintendents were asked to participate in the survey and were also asked to opt into a more in-depth interview about decision-making and virtual learning. This study focused on public schools, so private school administrators were excluded from participation. The superintendents were encouraged to ask other central office leaders that had a role in virtual learning decision-making to participate in the survey as well.

Participants were recruited by email invitation and through a presentation at the Red River Superintendent Association meeting in August 2022. After three rounds of

email invitations and the presentation, 19 superintendents and or central office administrators responded to the survey, as well as one principal. Since the principal was not in the targeted participant group for this survey, that survey was omitted from the results. Additionally, of the 19 superintendents, four of them did not answer all the survey questions. Those surveys were omitted from the results used for data analysis. Of the 15 participants with complete surveys, four of them opted into the follow-up interview, and those were conducted within three weeks of the survey closing. Of the 15 participants, seven individuals responded anonymously, and eight individuals provided their e-mail addresses, revealing their identity.

Table 1 details the interview participants’ demographics and the districts’ student enrollment organized from the smallest to the largest district. All interview participants were white males. The survey respondents were mostly white males as well, which was representative of the demographics of the Red River Superintendent Association members, which had 32 white males and five white females. However, the results of the survey could not be generalized to the greater educational environment across Texas due to this limitation.

Table 1

Interview Participant Demographics & District Student Enrollment Information

Participant Race	Participant Gender	Position	School District Enrollment
white	male	Superintendent	1,023 students
white	male	Superintendent	1,065 students
white	male	Curriculum Director	2,275 students
white	male	Superintendent	3,195 students

Data Collection Procedures

Information about the research study was shared at the Red River Superintendent Association meeting held at the Region 9 Education Service Center in early August of 2022. The attendees were both superintendents and central office staff from small and middle-sized K-12 school districts in northern Texas. The initial survey was sent out to all superintendents invited to the regional meeting and survey results were collected through Qualtrics. The respondents were asked about their district's implementation, improvement of, and discontinuation of virtual learning. They were also asked about barriers they had to overcome with their decisions about virtual learning. At the conclusion of the survey, respondents had the opportunity to opt into a follow-up interview which served as the second data point.

The structured interviews helped to go deeper into the reasoning behind why decisions were made regarding virtual learning. Four interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and varied in length with the shortest one being 12.5 minutes and the longest being 35 minutes long. Participants were asked for permission to record the interviews to allow for accurate transcribing of the responses. Participants were also informed that no specific school districts or educational administrators would be named in the final research results paper.

Data Analysis

The initial open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts were coded utilizing Atlas.ti to begin finding themes within the data. After each structured interview, memos were written which helped make connections and sparked thinking analytically about the responses while fresh on the researcher's mind, as supported by Maxwell

(2013). Multiple coding sessions with the interview data occurred to ensure thoroughness and make sure the codes found were representative of the respondents' ideas. Once initial codes were determined, the data sets were further analyzed to find common categories. The categorical results were placed into a table to continue developing the ideas and connect the themes to the original research questions, which is another method supported by Maxwell (2013). Interview participants were also assigned pseudonyms for both coding and reporting purposes. The pseudonyms were assigned using the letter S for superintendent and CD for curriculum director. A number was also assigned to further identify each interview participant. For example, the first superintendent was referred to as S1, the second superintendent was referred to as S2, and the third superintendent was named S3. Since only one curriculum director was interviewed, that participant was not assigned a number and was referred to as CD.

Findings

The findings of this research study showed decision-making about virtual learning was influenced by three main themes: student-related, teacher-related, and administrative-related factors, as referenced in Table 2. These three categories were determined by gathering initial themes by coding the open-ended survey responses and the interview transcripts. The transcripts and open-ended interview responses were then evaluated further through the lens of the 16 initial codes and the three main categories emerged through that analysis. Within these categories, decision-making practices were referenced, which helped to answer the research questions of this study related to decision-making for implementation of, improvement of, and discontinuation of virtual learning.

Table 2*Themes from Coding Interview Transcripts and Open-ended Survey Responses*

Main Themes from	Initial Codes	Supporting evidence individual responses
Student-Related Factors	Student Apathy	Students not completing work, lack of quality participation, not consistent in attendance
	Poor Student Performance	Virtual student failure rates, lack of success with self-monitoring, falling behind their peers
	Academic Fidelity	Students taking advantage, using Google on testing, negative impact on face-to-face students
	Social-emotional Concerns	Lack of interaction, teacher and peer relationships, isolation
	In-person Learning is Ideal	Learning barriers for virtual students, better monitoring of learning progress, the best way for students to learn
Teacher-Related Factors	Health Concerns	Quarantine disruptions, germ control, masking, risking life
	Teacher Workload	Extra workload, juggling both virtual and face-to-face students, time management, high learning curve
Administrator-Related Factors	Budget Concerns	Losing funding due to student absences, hurt the budget
	Logistical Decisions.	Staffing, virtual

	learning set-up and management, planning for back to school transition
Reactive Planning	Response to a pandemic, forced decision-making, hard to plan with unknown factors
Lack of Time	Planning time cut short, no way to test learning systems before systems before implementation, small preparation window
State Regulations	Executive orders, state going back and forth on decisions, attendance regulations and funding
Technology Barriers	Remote area internet access, technology program glitches, learning to navigate multiple tech resources (teachers, students, and parents)
Data-based Decisions	COVID infection rates, number of virtual students, student performance data
Collaborative Decisions	Administrative team, teacher and parent input, school board involvement, community feedback
Parent Communication	Unclear instructions, lack of communication from school, confusion about learning options

Student-Related Factors

Through analyzing the interview transcripts and open-ended survey response data, many themes emerged related to students and partially answered Research Question 3: What decision-making practices were utilized when discontinuing K-12 virtual learning? Two interview participants referenced looking at student performance data when deciding to discontinue virtual learning, which proves that data-based decision-making was used. CD explained that the main deciding factor for discontinuing virtual learning was “disproportionate failures for virtual learners compared to their peers.” CD further explained that students were called back to return to school as soon as they experienced failure and stated, “That was a huge decision and had a huge impact on keeping our students on track during that time.” Similarly, S3 reported that “the kids’ failing rate” was their main reason for discontinuing virtual learning and why they only supported virtual learning for nine weeks. In addition, 11 of the 15 survey respondents cited poor student performance data as a reason for discontinuing virtual learning.

Three interview participants referenced looking at student participation rate data and collaborating with a team when deciding to discontinue virtual learning. This further supported the data-based decision-making being utilized and demonstrated that the leaders exercised collaborative decision-making as well. S2 reported that after starting the year with 35% of their students learning virtually, “by the second semester we were maybe down to that 15-percentage point range and 85% of our kids came back face-to-face.” When making the decision to discontinue, S2 reported that the same committee collaborated, and they relied upon “a lot more teacher input” and “gathered parental and student input” through surveys. Like S2, S1 said the small number of kids participating

was the main reason virtual learning was discontinued and that the decision was made through collaboration with the administrative team and presenting the information to the school board. From the survey responses, 14 of 15 of the respondents mentioned using collaborative decision-making when discontinuing virtual learning.

All four interview participants agreed that face-to-face or in-person learning was the most ideal educational setting both for student achievement and social-emotional development. S2 stated that “while technology is great, it cannot ever take the place of human contact and human interaction.” S1 felt that the number one priority was for “kids to be in front of a professional teacher” because “it was in the best interest of the kids.” Participant S3 mentioned that in-person learning is superior to virtual learning because not all students are equipped to learn virtually. Coinciding with this idea, CD contributed that not all students can be successful with virtual learning because they are too young to have the “capacity to manage online learning” or the older students might not have the “strong initiative” to be successful. The importance of in-person learning was mentioned 19 times by both interview participants and survey respondents, as referenced in Table 3 detailing the frequency distribution of student-related factors.

Table 3

Student-Related Factors Frequency Distribution Results

Student-Related Factors	Frequency
Poor Student Performance	29
In-Person Learning is Ideal	19
Academic Fidelity	15
Student Apathy	10
Social Emotional Concerns	9

Teacher-Related Factors

Within the data accumulated through interviews and survey responses, some teacher-related themes became evident concerning virtual learning and decision-making while virtual learning was occurring. This data can contribute to answering Research Question 2: What decision-making practices were utilized during virtual learning to improve the quality of virtual learning? At the onset of virtual learning, S2 expressed concerns about quality because there was “ a lack of the staff’s ability to modify and do things on the spot and really get across the teaching they were doing with their students face-to-face.” So, in collaboration with the teachers, many of whom were concerned about time management and Zooming late at night with students, they decided to begin teaching face-to-face and virtual students simultaneously. S3 also shared that synchronous, or simultaneous instruction was the only option offered to their students to prevent teachers from working “till 8:00 or 9:00 o’clock at night” accommodating the virtual students. In a different approach, CD shared that their teachers were asked to record lessons using a program called Screencastify and upload them into Google Classroom so the lessons would be available for both in-person students to review and for virtual students to access anytime. According to the survey, 13 of 15 respondents used collaborative decision-making to improve upon virtual learning and 3 of the 15 specifically mentioned teacher workload in their open responses. Table 4 details the response frequency regarding teacher-related factors during virtual learning.

Table 4

Teacher-Related Factors Frequency Distribution Results

Teacher-Related Factors	Frequency
Teacher Workload	29
Health Concerns	19

Administration-Related Factors

Coding and analyzing the interview transcripts and survey data revealed multiple administration-related factors that impacted decision-making about virtual learning. One of the most frequent issues mentioned was the lack of time to make the best decisions for virtual learning implementation. However, all 18 times this was mentioned was by one interview participant, so it this was one perspective rather than a shared perspective.

Technology barriers were next in the frequency distribution and all four interview participants mentioned issues with technology. The problems ranged in severity from not having internet connections at all to minor tech glitches with programs. S1 shared that their technology rollout was very smooth and the only problem they had to fix was students not being able to hear the teachers as they instructed. So, they purchased microphones, and the audio quality became much better for the students.

A more severe issue was students not having internet access at all. S2 reported that they even drove buses equipped with wi-fi out to rural areas so that students could get to the bus and access the internet with their devices to complete online learning. Decisions like this were reactive in nature and could have been avoided with more time for implementation planning according to S2.

The sheer number of decisions really required a collaborative decision-making approach according to S3 who stated that their administrative team met weekly to address virtual learning concerns. At the onset of virtual learning implementation, decisions were rushed. But, as the year progressed, there was more opportunity for input from students, parents, and staff as reported by S2. Most reported team cohesiveness regarding virtual learning decisions. However, S3 reported that his team was split on the idea of discontinuing virtual learning after just 9 weeks. But, due to poor student performance data, they went with the discontinuation plan anyway. The frequency distribution chart about administrative issues related to virtual learning decision-making is detailed in Table 5.

Table 5

Administration--Related Factors Frequency Distribution Results

Administration-Related Factors	Frequency
Technology Barriers	19
Lack of Time	18
Collaborative Decisions	16
Logistical Decisions	14
Reactive Planning	10
Data-Based Decisions	10
State Regulations	7
Parent Communication	4
Budget Concerns	3

Discussion

This study explored the decision-making practices of superintendents and central administrators regarding virtual learning. The research questions aimed to determine

what types of decision-making practices were used when implementing and discontinuing virtual learning as well as what practices were utilized while virtual learning was occurring. Based on the coding of the open-ended survey responses and the interview transcripts, there was evidence of collaborative decision-making in all phases of virtual learning. In fact, all but one survey participant indicated that they relied on collaborative decision-making when implementing and discontinuing virtual learning, which supports the importance of the superintendent being visibly present throughout educational planning. This is supported by Horton and Martin (2013) when they emphasized the value of the superintendent being an active participant with planning processes. Additionally, all but two survey respondents referenced the use of collaborative decision-making during virtual learning.

The interview transcript data supported the survey results because all four interviewees gave specific examples of collaborative decision-making throughout the virtual learning process. They all convened an administrative team to make decisions about how virtual learning would be implemented and those collaborative decisions were influenced by multiple factors including technological barriers, time constraints, and making logistical decisions on how virtual learning would be structured. Other factors such as state regulations and budget constraints also impacted the collaborative decisions made. During virtual learning and when deciding to discontinue online learning, more individuals were brought into the collaborative process including staff, parents, and the school board. This discovery supports past research on the importance of collaborative decision-making when varying stakeholders are involved in school-based decisions (Owen, 2015).

In addition to collaborative decision-making, there was also evidence of data-driven decision-making. Data were utilized less in the virtual learning implementation phase to drive decision-making as only 10 of the 15 survey respondents stated that data were used. However, when it came to discontinuing virtual learning, all but one survey respondent mentioned the use of data-driven decision-making. Thirteen of the 15 survey participants specifically mentioned data related to poor student performance was one of the biggest reasons the decision to discontinue virtual learning was made. This approach demonstrated modeling by central office leaders on the front lines interacting with the data to show the importance of data-responsive decisions. Honig (2006) came to this same conclusion in his research about superintendents setting the example for data use throughout decision-making.

When examining the interview transcripts, lack of student progress or poor student performance was mentioned 22 times and was reported by 3 of the 4 interview participants. Another data point utilized was the declining number of students opting for virtual learning as the school year continued. S2 mentioned that even though 35% of their students started out as virtual for the 2020-21 school year, by the start of the second semester, that number had dropped, and 85% of the student population was back in school face-to-face.

When examining both the survey and interview data, the use of research-based decision-making was not clearly supported by evidence. Even though 8 of the 15 survey respondents indicated that research-based decision-making was used both during and when discontinuing virtual learning, there was a lack of concrete examples to back this up in the data. This is not surprising because prior research indicates that administrators

often get overwhelmed and pressed for time to make decisions based on research (Farley-Ripple, 2012).

The only respondent that mentioned a specific example of research-based decision-making was S2. He referenced that the district's own process of supporting virtual learning was "great research". However, research-based decision-making is traditionally making decisions based on prior empirical research that informs the decision-making process moving forward (Honig & Coburn, 2008). It is possible that respondents misunderstood the question regarding research-based decision-making or due to the small presence of research regarding pandemic-required K-12 virtual learning at the time. These possibilities are only assumptions and could be explored further in future research.

Limitations and Strengths

While there is an abundance of literature related to K-12 central administrative decision-making, there is little research on decision-making specific to implementing and discontinuing virtual learning (Kinchington, 2020). This study only included superintendents and central office administrators of small and middle-sized districts in northern Texas. Also, due to the narrow demographics of the participants being mostly white males, the results are likely not representative of statewide or nationwide school leaders.

Another limitation is the small number of participants in both the survey and the interviews. Out of the 37 superintendents and central office staff surveyed, there was a 59% response rate for the initial survey. Also, only 27% of the survey respondents opted to participate in a more in-depth interview. Even with the lower-than-ideal participation

rates, the interviews were recorded so the research was based on exact transcripts, a method suggested by Maxwell (2013), which protected the accuracy of the data. Within the survey and interview data, the research questions were addressed with common themes discovered through the coding process.

A strength of the research was that the results were not based on survey data alone. The researcher took the time to conduct four structured interviews with willing participants. The interviews gave the researcher an opportunity to explore the themes more in-depth so solid conclusions could be drawn.

Implications

This study contributed to the increasing research base about K-12 virtual learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of focusing on the results of virtual learning, this study explored the decision-making practices employed by district-level leaders when implementing, during, and when discontinuing virtual learning. As a central office leader, I experienced the decision-making process first-hand and felt the frustrations associated with virtual learning. Since many school districts were unprepared to adjust to virtual learning during COVID-19 (Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021), discovering the decision-making practices and the factors that contributed to those decisions could help administrators be more prepared if future situations arise that necessitate a rapid switch to virtual learning.

Recommendations for Future Study

Through this research, common themes were discovered, and many factors contributing to the decision-making process were revealed. Future research could explore these factors and reasons behind the decisions made to gain more insight into the

complex and multi-faceted scenarios brought about by virtual learning. Additionally, it would be interesting to investigate if there was direct correlation between decisions made and the effectiveness, or lack thereof, on virtual learning. Lastly, this study could be replicated with a broader sample of school districts more representative of the diversity across the state and nation. Expanding upon these topics could further advance the body of research about K-12 virtual learning as a whole and the complex decision-making practices of district-level administrators brought about by the global pandemic.

References

- Abrego, C., & Pankake, A. (2011). The district-wide sustainability of a professional learning community during leadership changes at the superintendency level. *Administrative Issues Journal: Education, Practice, and Research*, 1(1), 11–21. <http://doi.org/10.5929/2011.1.1.2>
- Ahmed, S.A., Hegazy, N.N., Malak, H.W.A., Kayser III, W.C., Elrafie, N.M., Hassanien, M., Al-Hayani, A.A., El Saadany, S.A., Al-Youbi, A.O., & Shehata, M.H. (2020). Model for utilizing distance learning post COVID-19 using (PACT) a cross sectional qualitative study. *BMC Medical Education*, 20(400), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-020-02311-1>
- Beard, K.S. (2012). Making the case for the outlier: Researcher reflections of an African-American female deputy superintendent who decided to close the achievement gap. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 25(1), 59–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2011.647724>
- Bjork, L.G., Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Kowalski, T.J. (2014). The superintendent and educational reform in the United States of America. *Leadership Policy in Schools*, 13(4), 444–465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2014.945656>
- Boltz, L.O., Yadav, A., Dillman, B., & Robertson, C. (2021). Transitioning to remote learning: Lessons from supporting K-12 teachers through a MOOC. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 52, 1377–1393. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13075>
- Bredeson, P.V., & Kose, B.W. (2007). Responding to the education reform agenda a study of school superintendents' instructional leadership. *Education Policy*

- Analysis Archives*, 15(5), 5–26. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v15n5.2007>
- Cousins, J.B., Swee, C.G., & Clark, S. (2006). Data use leads to data valuing: Evaluative inquiry for school decision making. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 5(2), 155–176. <https://doi.org/1080/15700760500365468>
- Datnow, A., & Sutherland, S. (2002). The politics of researching comprehensive school Reform efforts. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 77(4), 167–188. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1493222>
- Decman, J.M., Badgett, K., Shaughnessy, B., Randall, A., Nixon, L., & Lemley, B. (2018). Organizational leadership through management: Superintendent perspectives. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 46(6), 997–1013. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217714255>
- Farley-Ripple, E.N. (2012). Research use in school district central office decision making: A case study. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 40(6), 786–806. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143212456912>
- Gurbuzer, E., Altinay, F., Altinay, Z., & Gokmen, D. (2017). An evaluation of educational and administrative decision making processes in tolerance school context for job motivation. *Quality & Quantity*, 52, 1059–1076. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0557-9>
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R.H. (2010a). Collaborative leadership and school improvement: Understanding the impact on school capacity and student learning. *School Leadership and Management*, 30(2), 95–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632431003663214>
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R.H. (2010b). Leadership for learning: Does collaborative

leadership make a difference in school improvement?. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 38(6), 654–678.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143210379060>

Hartman, J.J. (2017). P-16 partnerships to improve students' postsecondary mathematics achievement. *NASSP Bulletin*, 101(1), 36–49.

<http://doi.org/10.117/0192636517695457>

Honig, M.I. (2003). Building policy from practice: District central office administrators' Roles and capacity for implementing collaborative education policy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39(3), 292–338.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X03253414>

Honig, M.I. (2008). District central offices as learning organizations: How sociocultural And organizational learning theories elaborate district central office administrators' participation in teaching and learning improvement efforts. *American Journal of Education*, 114(4), 627–664.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/589317>

Honig, M.I. (2006). Street-level bureaucracy revisited: Frontline district central-office administrators as boundary spanners in education policy implementation.

Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 28(4), 357–383.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4121790>

Honig, M.I., & Coburn, C. (2008). Evidence-based decision making in school district central offices: Toward a policy and research agenda. *Educational Policy*, 22(4),

578–608. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904807307067>

Honig, M.I., & Venkateswaran, N. (2012). School central office relationships in evidence

- use: Understanding use as a systems problem. *American Journal of Education*, 118(2), 199–222. <https://doi.org/10.1086/663282>
- Honig, M.I., Venkateswaran, N., & McNeil, P. (2017). Research use as learning: The case of fundamental change in school district central offices. *American Education Research Journal*, 54(5), 938–971. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831217712466>
- Horton, J., & Martin, B.N. (2013). The role of the district administration within professional learning communities. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 16(1), 55–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2012.671366>
- Huguet, A., Coburn, C.E., Farrell, C.C., Kim, D.H., & Allen, A.R. (2021). Constraints, values, and information: How leaders in one district justify their positions during instructional decision making. *American Educational Research Journal*, 58(4) 710–747. <http://doi.org/10.3102/0002831221993824>
- Hurt, K.J. & Abebe, M.A. (2015). The effect of conflict type and organizational crisis on perceived strategic decision effectiveness: An empirical investigation. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 22(3), 340–354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15480518155700038>
- Hyder, A., Trinh, A., Padmanabhan, P., Marschhausen, J. Wu, A., Evans, A., Iyer, R., & Jones, A. (2021). COVID-19 surveillance for local decision making: An academic, school district, and public health collaboration. *Public Health Reports*, 136(4), 403–412. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00333549211018203>
- Janke, R.W. (1974). A lexicographic combination model of decision making by superintendents among multiattribute instructional program alternatives. *Journal of School Psychology*, 12(4), 318–325.

[https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-4405\(74\)90052-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-4405(74)90052-1)

- Jenkins, C. (2007). Considering the community: How one rural superintendent perceives community values and their effect on decision-making. *The Rural Educator*, 28(3), 28–32. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v28i3.467>
- Kapucu, N., & Garayev, V. (2011). Collaborative decision-making in emergency and Disaster management. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 34(6), 366–375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2011.561477>
- Kinchington, F. (2020). Empowering the school leaders of tomorrow: What lessons can we learn from the decision-making of today's school leaders?. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1–17.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2020.1829713>
- Kowalski, T.J. (2005). Evolution of the school superintendent as communicator. *Communication Education*, 54(2), 101–117.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520500213322>
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful School leadership revisited. *School Leadership and Management*, 40(1), 5–22.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>
- Lochmiller, C.R. (2021). Rural superintendents' responses to COVID-19: Navigating local control during a public health crisis. *Frontiers in Education*, 6, 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.617058>
- Marsh, J.A., & Farrell, C.C. (2015). How leaders can support data-driven decision making: A framework for understanding capacity building. *Educational*

Management Administration & Leadership, 43(2), 269–289.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214537229>

Maxwell, J.A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. SAGE.

McHenry-Sorber, E., & Provinzano, K. (2017). Confronting rapid change: Exploring the practices of educational leaders in a rural boomtown. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 16(4), 602–628. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2016.1232833>

Muijs, D., Ainscow, M., Dyson, A., Raffo, C., Goldrick, S., Kerr, K., Lennie, C., & Miles, S. (2010). Leading under pressure: Leadership for social inclusion. *School Leadership and Management*, 30(2), 143–157.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13632431003663198>

Naglewski, K. (2006). Are you ready to make effective decisions when disaster strikes? Strategies for crisis decision-making. *The Journal of Private Equity*, 9(2), 45–51. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43503456>

Owen, D. (2015). Collaborative decision-making. *Decision Analysis*, 12(1), 29–45. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1287/deca.2014.0307>

Park, V., & Datnow, A. (2009). Co-constructing distributed leadership: District and school connections in data-driven decision-making. *School Leadership and Management*, 29(5), 477–494. <http://doi.org/10.1080/13632430903162541>

Rusch, E.A. (2005). Institutional barriers to organizational learning in school systems: The power of silence. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 41(1), 83–120. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X04269546>

Shamir-Inbal, T., & Blau, I. (2021). Facilitating emergency remote K-12 teaching in computing-enhanced virtual learning environments during COVID-19 pandemic –

- blessing or curse?. *Journal of Educational Computing*, 59(7), 1–29.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0735633121992781>
- Spillane, J.P. (2012). Data in practice: Conceptualizing the data-based decision-making phenomena. *American Journal of Education*, 118(2), 113–141.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/663283>
- Staar, J.P. (2020). On Leadership: Responding to COVID-19: Short- and long-term challenges. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 101(8), 60–61.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721720923796>
- Stefkovich, J., & Begley, P.T. (2007). Ethical school leadership: Defining the best interests of students. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 35(2), 205–224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143207075389>
- Sutherland, S. (2004). Creating a culture of data use for continuous improvement: A case study of an Edison project school. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 25(3), 277–293. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ameval.2004.05.009>
- Williams, L.A., Atkinson, L.C., Cate, J.M., & O’Hair, M.J. (2008). Mutual support between learning community development and technology integration: Impact on school practices and student achievement. *Theory Into Practice*, 47(4), 294–302.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00405840802329219>
- Wong, L., Coburn, C.E., & Kamel, A. (2020). How central office leaders influence school leaders’ decision-making: Unpacking power dynamics in two school-based decision-making systems. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 95(4), 392–407.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2020.1800175>

Appendix A

Superintendent/Central Office Leader Survey Questions

This survey is designed to assess decision-making practices related to the implementation, improvement of, and cancellation of virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions are open-ended and allow for free-response. Please answer each question honestly based on your experience.

1. Did your school district have barriers when implementing virtual learning? If so, what barriers were present? (ex: infrastructure, device availability, internet availability, etc.)
2. If there were barriers to virtual learning, what decisions were made to overcome those barriers for virtual learning implementation?
3. When implementing virtual learning, did you utilize collaborative decision-making?
4. When implementing virtual learning, did you utilize research-based decision-making?
5. When implementing virtual learning, did you utilize data-driven decision-making?
6. How long did your school district support virtual learning?
7. What decisions were made to improve virtual learning while it was occurring?
8. What factors went into deciding to cancel virtual learning?
9. What student interests were considered when canceling virtual learning?
10. What staff /teacher interests were considered when canceling virtual learning?
11. When canceling virtual learning, did you utilize collaborative decision-making?
12. When canceling virtual learning, did you utilize research-based decision-making?

13. When canceling virtual learning, did you utilize data-driven decision-making?
14. How long have you served in your current position as a Superintendent or Central Office administrator?
15. Would you be willing to participate in a short twenty-minute follow-up interview about decision-making regarding virtual learning? If answering yes, you will be contacted by email to set up an interview time convenient to your schedule.

Appendix B

Superintendent/Central Office Leader Interview Questions

What is your position with your school district?

How long have you served in that role?

What was the biggest barrier when implementing virtual learning? (device access, internet access, funding, etc.)

During virtual learning, were there staff concerns?

If so, what was the main concern?

During virtual learning, were there parent/student concerns?

If so, what was the main concern?

What was the main deciding factor in canceling virtual learning?

Who was involved in the decision to cancel virtual learning?

Looking back on virtual learning, would you have made any decisions differently?