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THE
DISTANCE
LEARNING
PLAYBOOK FOR
SCHOOL LEADERS

LEADING FOR ENGAGEMENT
& IMPACT IN ANY SETTING

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3 INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AT A DISTANCE

The experiences that teachers plan for students should ensure that learning occurs. There any number of "right" ways to teach. We do not believe in prescribing teaching methods. As we will explore further in the mindframes section of this book, we focus on learning. Having said that, there are ineffective ways to engage students that do not result in deep learning. As a leader, you have the potential to support teachers in the selection and implementation of effective approaches to ensure that learning occurs.

In this section:

- ☐ REVISIT SCHOOL GOALS IN LIGHT OF DISTANCE LEARNING
- ☐ ALIGN GOALS TO EXPECTATIONS
- ☐ CLARIFY TEACHER EXPECTATIONS
- ☐ ENSURE CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGIES
- ☐ USE A DISTANCE LEARNING INSTRUCTIONAL FRAMEWORK

- ☐ DEMONSTRATING IN DISTANCE LEARNING
- ☐ COLLABORATING IN DISTANCE LEARNING
- ☐ COACHING AND FACILITATING IN DISTANCE LEARNING
- ☐ PRACTICING IN DISTANCE LEARNING

School leaders can have a tremendous positive impact on the learning lives of students. Notice that we said *can*. Student learning is impacted both directly and indirectly by the efforts of school leaders as they coordinate the instructional efforts of the teaching staff, build a positive school climate, work with families, and enact the school's vision and mission.

The type of leadership employed matters. Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) examined the impact of two leadership styles—transformational and instructional—on student learning. Their reported results are interesting and nuanced. Their headline-grabbing finding is that instructional leadership has an effect size of 0.42, while transformational leadership has a much smaller impact on student learning, at 0.11. But their quantitative results should be interpreted with some thoughtful caveats. The constant is student learning, so it makes sense that instructional leadership would have a stronger impact. Therefore, transformational leadership, which has more of a focus on staff relations, would of course be less. Overall, they reported five dimensions of instructional leadership that had the highest degree of impact:

- *Establishing goals and expectations* to focus the efforts of teachers and students.

- *Resourcing strategically* to secure resources aligned to instructional efforts.

- *Planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching across the curriculum* that includes collegial conversations, observations, and formative feedback.

- *Promoting and participating in teacher learning and professional development,* rather than simply sponsoring it.

- *Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment* so that academic goals can be achieved.

The authors note that "the closer educational leaders get to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to have a positive impact on students' outcomes" (p. 664). They go on to point out that the context of the school matters in making decisions about where one's efforts should be placed. If the needs of the school are first and foremost about orderliness and civility, then one's efforts should be oriented there. Nor should there be a misinterpretation that an effective school leader must perform at high levels at all times in all five dimensions, which reinforces the "highly problematic heroic approach to school leadership" (p. 668).

Middle school principal Sandra Richardson is figuring out how to convert her instructional leadership practices in a distance learning environment. "When we have been in physical school, I block off two hours a day on my calendar to walk classrooms. Sometimes it's with another administrator, or with some of the teacher–leaders." However, she has struggled to find ways to do that virtually. "I've finally gotten a schedule together for myself to visit classrooms during live sessions. I use Symbaloo but others in our district use other options," she said. "I'm only there for a few minutes, but it is proving to be a good payoff in terms of knowing what's going on in the school. I can't just walk down the hall and get a sense. So I'm figuring out how to normalize my presence in virtual classrooms for the students and the staff." In doing so, Ms. Richardson is prioritizing her instructional leadership efforts.

DRAWING ON MY EXPERTISE

Think about the current context of your school during distance learning. Use the traffic light scale to reflect on your practices as a school leader. To what extent is each of these statements true?

	1. I convey the academic goals and expectations of our school to teachers and students.
	2. I seek out and distribute resources to enhance the school's instructional program.
	3. I am meaningfully involved in the planning, coordination, and evaluation of teaching at this school.
	4. I promote and participate in professional learning about instruction with teachers.
	5. I oversee practices that contribute to an orderly and supportive learning environment.

REVISIT SCHOOL GOALS IN LIGHT OF DISTANCE LEARNING

The academic goals of the school are at the heart of any school improvement plan. Much research has been conducted over the last few decades on the development of school goals. Because schools are relatively stable environments, goal planning, implementation, and monitoring tend to be articulated over multiple years. It's not uncommon to see school goals that include a three-year plan. But who talks about what you're supposed to do when everything changes?

It turns out that high-risk industries such as aviation and energy do. Accidents in these industries can be catastrophic, so most firms have Health, Safety, Security, and Environment (HSSE) plans. The purpose is to lead through the crisis and not just manage the response. McNulty and Marcus (2020), founders of the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: To what extent do the school goals we currently have reflect our needs in distance learning?

YOUR GOAL: Use a process to identify a starting point to jumpstart your collaboration with your instructional leadership team.

at Harvard, caution that a mistake is to overcentralize the response and try to control everything yourself. "The solution is to seek order rather than control," they advise.

The school's goals can be the rocket fuel that propels learning, or they can be the sand in the gears that brings everything to a halt. When instructional goals are viewed by the staff as being punitive, or when they have not had a role in developing them, their value is about as much as the paper they're printed on. In moving forward from pandemic teaching to a more coherent distance learning environment, you will probably need to revisit instructional goals.

But resist the temptation to rewrite goals without collaboration or to just ignore the existing ones altogether. Your instructional leadership team is even more valuable to you now than ever before. But they also need direction from you on how to get started. Your willingness to reexamine instructional goals in light of changing circumstances sends an important message of stability. In addition, it signals a return to the core mission of schooling: the education of young people.

MAKE IT ACTIONABLE

"I used the AC/DC plan to begin the conversation about refining our school's goals," said high school principal Mykal Chambers. "Add, Change, Delete, or Continue." Dr. Chambers and the administrative and teaching staff had developed instructional goals in 2019. "Then everything changed, and we had to look again at our plans." The principal said that the process gave them an opportunity to determine what they needed to prioritize. "We were actually pleasantly surprised that the majority of our goals still worked in distance learning." Use the Note to Self to take a preliminary inventory of your school's instructional goals. Extend this by using this as a tool to survey members of your instructional leadership team to gain their insights to identify where any revisions need to occur.

NOTE TO SELF

List up to five major instructional goals your school has. Consider those in the context of distance learning. Are there any that need to be changed, deleted, or continued as is?

	CHANGE?	DELETE?	CONTINUE?
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			

POSSIBLE GOALS TO ADD

LEADERSHIP