

How Families' and Teachers' Experiences During Current Times Inform School Priorities

Collective Leadership assumes that input from teachers and families matters to the running of schools. **Collective Leadership** means listening to what families and teachers have learned, and putting those learnings into practice. Here some things that families and teachers have been expressing as learnings that can be applied as we enter a new learning environment this fall.

Holistic Forms of Literacy Learning WORK:

Families and teachers who have watched more than their fair share of kid-created puppet shows and plays, seen younger siblings learn from reading with older siblings, and noticed typically disengaged readers and writers devouring graphic novels and creating their own series of comics—they all have valuable knowledge to add to the conversation of how literacy instruction can best unfold during school re-openings.

This knowledge may help leaders recognize that these homemade, holistic forms of literacy learning often inspire and motivate real growth: the reading of stories children choose and love, the making of simple books, the singing of songs, the study of the world around of us. Principals and literacy coaches can consider how to open up more spaces for engagement with these kinds of reading and writing activities infused with choice, meaning, and personal agency for children.

Literacy learning must be tailored to children's needs: Families quickly realized that the zillions of suggestions about homeschool schedules, the myriad online resources, and the methods for learning had to really be right for their family in order to work. A schedule that worked one day might not have worked the next because of how their children were feeling in the moment, due to frustration or just plain fatigue.

We may have found success in giving children options to choose from, allowing them to set their own pace, or even sometimes flatly giving up for the day and knowing that trying tomorrow was our best hope at actually getting them to learn. We also learned that when they could choose their own topics based on their interest and chart their own course, their learning was often more successful.

For us in schools, this means, again, that breaks are ok and often needed, and sometimes so is ditching the plan altogether if children are getting frustrated

and no learning is happening. It means planning activities full of choice that meet a wide range of interests. If, for example, all that is on the minds of children is the acts of racism that are in the forefront of everything they are experiencing right now, reading and writing about that subject can be the best thing we do to inspire and engage them.

We need more SEL: There's widespread acknowledgement that we must pay greater attention to the social-emotional needs of our children. During this time, children have likely begun to process the death of George Floyd and all the feelings this type of trauma may have on their identity and hope for the future. They may have experienced the loss of a loved one to illness, job loss in their family, or financial stress.

If children aren't given time to grieve and cope with these losses and changes and are just thrown back into the expectations of school, they will feel the effects afterward. We are experiencing a rare moment in our world in which mental health is being given the attention it deserves. People are intentionally checking in with one another more often, and recognizing how hard it is to cope when many of our coping mechanisms are unavailable to us. This needs to continue into the new school year. As a principal, you need to send a strong, clear message to your staff: we are going to prioritize the mental health of our children. Our actions and words will live up to that commitment.

Prioritize teachers' mental health: Just as we tend to children's mental health, we must do the same for teachers. As principal, you need to articulate how much you intend to value the mental health of your teachers. Ask someone to hold you accountable to that commitment.

A Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence survey of 5,000 teachers amid COVID asked them to describe the three most frequent emotions they felt each day. Anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed,

and sad were the top five responses. Anxiety, by far, was the most frequently mentioned emotion, according to the study. We know that when teachers feel this way, they can't do their best teaching—just like children who don't feel well can't do their best learning. Families, now that they have stepped into the roles of teachers at home, understand these emotions all too greatly.

Our hope is that a new compassion and understanding for the hard work of teaching can help to elevate teachers' role in our society, and that the profession of teaching is valued and honored in the way that it deserves to be.

As school leaders, we can both check in on a teacher's emotional health more regularly, ensure they feel supported and cared for, and communicate constantly to families about the hard and dedicated work that teachers do on a daily basis. We need to advocate for our teachers to families, in the same way that teachers advocate for their children.

Continuous professional learning is critical: In this experiment of distance learning, teachers and families were thrust into multiple new roles overnight—roles they mostly had little to no training for and had to learn in a “trial by fire” kind of way. They sought out their own development, online and in collaboration with peers, to help them to learn and cope. Some were lucky enough to have coaches who supported them as they learned and tried new methods for distance learning. What most teachers and families now know is how important it is to continually learn and grow. While funding for professional learning may be ominous in this new climate, as school leaders we must find a way to prioritize professional learning. When offered these opportunities, we feel valued and cared for.

Re-think accountability: Finland is ranked the most efficient and productive high school system in the world. Finland only tests its students once in their academic careers, allows teachers more autonomy, and gives students less homework, but has better reading and math test scores than the United States. We know that accounting for children's learning solely through test scores is bad practice, not to mention one which imposes tremendous undue pressures on everyone in the school community. Without testing, the pandemic has caused us to rethink accountability.

How can children really show us they are learning, and how do we measure that? One way we know children are learning is if they opt into it, if they are intrinsically motivated to do it. Another, for some, is that they will likely participate, or be eager to show and share their learning in some way. Others may want to write in order to demonstrate their understanding. There are many ways we can think about holding children accountable for their learning, even at the classroom level. While we cannot abolish standardized testing overnight, we can start small in our schools by recognizing together the many ways in which children demonstrate learning.

We're all responsible for each other: Our children have made a lot of sacrifices, missing important celebrations, their friends at school, and all their recreational activities, so that other people could live. They have witnessed mass gatherings in protest of racist acts. They see that unity matters more now than ever, and that collective action can lead to real change. It has never been more apparent that we are all connected to one another, that our actions matter to the health and wellbeing of others.

We have a tremendous opportunity to prioritize unity in our schools, to help children understand that we are all responsible for one another—and that's far from a burden, it's a gift. As principals, we can help to articulate this message of unity and the responsibility we have to each other, our school, and our world.