Hopeful Visions of Tomorrow: Learning from Leaders of Today's Virtual Schools

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Abstract: The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic affected many dimensions of our lives, including the world of education. Virtual education continues to be a viable solution not only during a pandemic lockdown, but also as a support to facilitate learning in a preferred, uniquely individualized setting. As one of the fastest growing educational options for students in the United States, many states now offer a wide range of full-time, part-time, and enrichment virtual options for students and families in search of an alternative to the traditional model of education. While many virtual school leaders face similar challenges to their brick-and-mortar counterparts, leading in a virtual environment appears to present some unique challenges. In spite of the increase in virtual program options and enrollment, limited research has been conducted on how virtual school principals lead their organizations. As the popularity of virtual options increase, there is a need to examine effective leadership practices in these innovative schools. The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges of virtual school principals and how they demonstrated effective leadership practices in the schools they lead. In particular, this study investigated how these personal and professional experiences influenced these principals and the overall quality of their schools.

Keywords: Online Learning, Virtual School, Leadership, Virtual School Principal, COVID-19

1. Introduction

The rise of virtual schools in the American educational system over the past 20 years is a well-documented phenomenon [1]. While virtual schools may share roots with the correspondence schools of the 1950s, virtual education is more accurately categorized as a method of distance education [2]. Virtual education includes digital learning, distributed learning, open learning, networked learning, web-based education, online learning, cyber education, net education, computer-based learning, distance learning, and blended learning. Virtual education allows students to go beyond the traditional limitations of time and space and access new and exciting educational opportunities.

Similarly, the role of a school principal has also evolved from being solely a manager of a school to becoming an instructional leader. As a manager, a principal may have been best described "an overseer of buses, boilers and books" (p. 6) [4]. While these tasks are critical to the operation of a school, they appear to have little influence on student achievement [5]. As an instructional leader, the principal's role is to communicate, motivate, encourage, and influence student success. Scholars note, principals as instructional leaders can provide support and guidance in cultivating high performing schools [6]. Nearly 30 years of research has established a clear statistical correlation between principal leadership and student achievement [7]. A 6-year-long study conducted by researchers at the Universities of Minnesota and Toronto found that principal leadership was second only to classroom instruction as the strongest influence on student achievement [4]. Unlike the past principals of the past, contemporary principals focus on collaborating and empowering others. These leaders engage in *high influence* behaviors. When a principal engages in high influence behaviors with the collective learning community, a principal exerts a higher degree of impact on student achievement and promotes high quality experiences for learners [7].

Though the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic impacted many dimensions of our lives, education was hit particularly hard. Virtual education continues to be a viable educational

model, not only during a pandemic lockdown, but also as a support to facilitate learning in a preferred, uniquely individualized setting. As virtual schools gain momentum as a viable educational option across the United States, there is a growing need for outstanding virtual school leaders who can effectively navigate the unique demands of this alternative educational environment [8]. However, few studies have focused on the leadership traits required for administrators leading schools in the digital age [9]. While virtual school principals experience some of the same challenges as their brick-and-mortar counterparts, they also face challenges that are unique to virtual schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the challenges of virtual school principals and how they have demonstrated effective leadership practices in the schools they lead. In particular, this study investigated how personal and professional experiences influenced the virtual school principals and the overall quality of their schools.

This study utilized a phenomenological research methodology with 20 public, charter/independent and private virtual school principals from across seven counties in California. The research was designed to answer these questions: 1. How do principals' experiences of managing virtual schools shape their approach to leadership? 2. What bridges and barriers do principals describe in their efforts to lead?

2. Methodology

To answer our research questions, we used a qualitative research design. Our rationale for choosing a qualitative approach was twofold. First, qualitative research methods allow researchers to explore research questions from the perspective of the participants, rather than that of the researcher [10]. This seemed to be relevant due to the lack of research on effective leadership practices in virtual K-12 schools. Second, qualitative methods are suited to answering open-ended, and specifically "how," questions [11]. Thus, a qualitative approach allowed us to systematically capture virtual school leaders' perspectives on the challenges they experienced and how they addressed them.

Participants were identified using purposive sampling. Through this process, we identified individuals who had rich experience, insight, and information about the central issue being studied. The 20 participants in this study were virtual school leaders from across California. Participants were from the counties of Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, Orange, Santa Clara, and Placer. Participants led schools in public-school districts, charter schools, or private/independent schools. Each of the schools represented in this study offered full-time enrollment to students. Some of the schools also offered part-time and supplemental enrollment opportunities, such as Advanced Placement courses, electives, and enrichment. Overall enrollments for the schools ranged from 55 to approximately 6,300 students. To be included in the study, participants had to have served as a principal for at least three years and, at the time of this study, be assigned in their district as the principal of a virtual school. In addition, all participants were from an accredited, state-recognized K-12 or 6-12 virtual school.

The 20 participants in this study were individually interviewed, and their responses were recorded and transcribed. Data analysis began with a review of the interview transcripts. Our first step was to check the accuracy of the transcribed texts by listening to the audio recording of each interview. The next stage of analysis involved the search for patterns and themes [12]. Each interview was compared to every interview to ensure that the data were examined in many divergent ways. From this comparison of cases, several themes and patterns emerged. These patterns and themes were coded to summarize the data into a smaller number of overarching themes or constructs [13]. We improved the reliability and validity of our research by having both researchers independently review the analysis as a triangulation technique.

3. Findings

The study findings revealed five predominant themes. The areas of challenge were time management, stakeholder partnerships, professional development, and student well-being.

3.1. Time Management

The observation data revealed that time management was the most significant challenge for virtual school leaders. One leader shared, "There's just never enough time in the day." He went on to joke, "I've managed to adjust my calendar. I know have a 48-hour work day and a 10-day work week." Another participant shared, "I got good people and good teams. That's my secret to getting through most of my day. But there's times when something doesn't happen and I knew we needed to do it, I feel really bad. It's not impossible, but it's just so hard sometimes to prioritize."

Other participants shared their experiences with the challenge of finding the time to respond to email communication from students, families, staff, and other stakeholders. One participant remarked, "Managing my time in this job is unlike any other job I've ever had to do. I have to approach things differently." She commented further, "It's hard to prioritize when I'm reading and responding to emails constantly." Another leader explained, "I feel like I'm really kind of stretched thin. I'm working so hard to try and build an amazing online program for the district, but I'm not sure I can do it."

Another participant had the challenge of not only running multiple programs, but also running them on the other side of the district boundaries. He shared, "I am the only guy... a one-man show. I'm just spread thin with additional responsibilities outside of leading this school." Participants expressed that working long hours meant less time with their own families. As one participant put it, "my ex-wife understood the time commitment of this job… for a while."

3.2. Stakeholder Partnerships

When discussing the challenges of partnerships with parents, families, and stakeholders, some of the participants identified an apparent lack of parental/family participation as a significant issue for them:

We struggle with engaging our families in the process. Families are the core of what we do – they (families) play an important role in all of this, but it seems like no matter how hard we try to include them, they rather have us do it all. It's got to be more of a partnership – if they want their student to succeed.

Another participant shared, "*we have some buy in at the beginning. WE need to be better about encouraging families to come along for the whole ride.*"

Stakeholders becoming "over involved" was a perspective shared by other leaders. As one participant explained,

We serve a wide range of students—from Advanced Placement to socially awkward to students with Asperger's. Parents come to us with so many different kinds of requests. Whatever the kid's needs are, we are here and try to serve them all. But there are challenges with that.

Another leader shared, "you can do your best to show you have their child's best interest at heart, but sometimes we just have to deal with an upset Mama Bear."

Other participants indicated one of the challenges with stakeholder involvement was the misconception of virtual education. One participant explained,

A lot of our students' families, I'll be honest with you, are looking for something different than a comprehensive site. Parents tend to sometimes think it's easier over here. So there's a little bit of misconception with that. In reality, they just want something different for their kid.

Another participant shared that some stakeholders, "come to us thinking that this place [virtual school] is going to solve it all. My student is good at video games, so they must be a good online learner."

Participants shared that involvement from home can lead to success in a virtual environment. Finding creative ways to involve and engage families can be very difficult in a virtual setting; however, it is a worthy endeavor. As one participant commented,

The amount of parents that are actually involved at this particular school is pretty limited, but the ones that are involved, they've been a great resource. I definitely see that at the end, parents are very, very appreciative of us. They see that the attention and the relationships that are being built with the teachers and the students together.

3.3. Professional Development

Although some of the participants in the study indicated that professional development could actually be easier in a virtual school, many indicated that professional development on best practices in online teaching was actually very limited and, thus, a challenge for them. Many participants referenced local, regional, state, and international organizations that hosted conferences and other opportunities for professional development. One leader shared,

Professional development needs to be tailored to an online environment. That's because people are not practiced enough in navigating this virtual world. Our teacher credential program doesn't nearly go deep enough into this world.

Another leader explained, "'Here's a weakness that we see, we're going to give you some training and it's from a guy in Kansas.' They (teachers) absolutely love it. It connects them with others outside of our district and the county." Additional support identified by participants included local, school-district-led professional development as well as conferences sponsored by professional organizations. Regardless of the medium, one participant shared that "the most effective professional development comes from purposefully planned and regularly scheduled opportunities to meet, collaborate, and grow as a team."

3.4. Student Well-Being

When asked what other challenges virtual school principals face, participants in this study identified supporting their students' well-being – both academic and social-emotional - as a unique challenge. Participants shared that many of their students have "emotional baggage." They explained,

So many of these kids don't fit in at a traditional brick and mortar school. These kids have different needs than from what we've seen in the past. We know they need our help. It doesn't make it easy, but we know we have to do this for them.

Another participant shared, "These kids are truly suffering from things like social anxiety and other health issues. But they find opportunity here with us." According to another leader, "The students that we serve are the kids that suffer from issues outside of academic learning. They're a victim of trauma or bullying.… It's way different today than it was only a few years ago." Another participant shared a similar sentiment: "There's a lot of anxiety out there, a lot of concerns. The need to support a student (and their social-emotional wellness) is a lot more obvious than I have seen in the past." Supporting students' academic and social-emotional well-being can present a unique challenge, but one participant shared, "we're trying to be creative in getting kids help. We've opened up counseling and tutoring supports for our students and families that are struggling. It's not perfect, but they say it helps."

4. Discussion

Our research attempted to uncover some of the challenges that principals of virtual school face in their unique learning environment. More specifically, our investigation looked at how the experiences of these principals shaped their approach to leadership and what bridges and barriers existed as they led these innovative schools.

Throughout our interviews, participants shared that they often faced issues surrounding time management, stakeholder partnerships, professional development, and student well-being. While perhaps not completely different from their brick and mortar counterparts, virtual school leaders reported that they had to adjust their approach to leadership to overcome these challenges. They could not approach leading these schools like a traditional school.

Some of these challenges reportedly prevented leaders from getting "the job done." While participants cited examples specific to the identified themes, they as barriers, others described these challenges in a positive light - as a "unique opportunity." Because of these experiences and perspectives, principals reported that they were well prepared to adjust and adapt their approach to leadership as needed. As a result, participants reported that they felt, for the most part, well equipped to successful deal with situations as they came up – including the COVID-19 lockdown.

5. Implications

Virtual schools have had a significant impact on the American educational system, especially during the pandemic. For many students and families, virtual schools offer hope. As popularity of these program options increases, more research appears needed.

To realize the hopeful visions for the future of virtual schools shared by the principals in this study, there is a critical need to examine effective leadership practices in virtual education. To accomplish this, it is essential that researchers and practitioners work closely to explore, research, and scrutinize practices in virtual school leadership.

6. Conclusion

As researchers share the perspectives of the practitioners, positive impacts to practice will follow. From deepening our understanding of what is required to lead a school driven by high quality curriculum and instruction to developing meaningful professional development, the opportunity to expand our understanding exists now more than ever. To accomplish this, both practitioners and researchers must continue to uncover and monitor new challenges and be the driving force in support of this promising learning environment. As post-COVID virtual opportunities expand, it will be imperative that researchers keep a close eye on what new challenges surface and help support the efforts of the leaders of virtual schools.

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