

Leading a school during lockdown

Professor Alma Harris

What's the idea?

Leading in difficult, challenging and unprecedented times – where there is no predictability, no certainty and potentially no end in sight - requires a different type of leadership, a different form of leadership practice.

In this global lockdown, education has been rebooted as a home-based, technology-enabled, remote activity with zero physical contact. What we know about good teaching has suddenly been redefined and repositioned into lessons online. Some schools have morphed into places where children and young people, of varying ages, now play, learn and work together side by side during long days. School leadership has also been radically re-modelled through lockdown.

What does the research say?

While the evidence base on school leadership practices within a pandemic is non-existent, drawing upon the general leadership literature and the evidence about effective online collaboration offers some pointers, some ideas, some reflections for those currently leading in schools and classrooms.

School leadership, of course, is not just confined to those in the leadership team. If leadership is influence, then teachers and teaching assistants exercise leadership every day. In times of crisis, leadership at all levels or distributed leadership, is needed to address the complexity of the challenges and to carry the burden of leading in uncertain times (Harris, 2013).

We know that the best school leaders develop other leaders and build positive cultures where the professional talent, capability and knowledge of all educators can be fully expressed, enhanced and extended (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020). Leading in a virtual world is not impossible but it will require extra effort to remain connected with others in meaningful ways that sustain relationships with colleagues and keep things moving forward.

How does this work in practice?

For those responsible for leading virtual schools and classrooms today, the education landscape is still emerging, and the leadership practice is still evolving. Yet, school leadership remains a critical and positive force in shaping the value-base of an education system that has shifted so far from its axis. At present, school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants, cleaners and caretakers are now the new front-line of leadership. Each person counts, each person is a leader and the collective work is now the most important catalyst for change and action.

Leading others at a distance requires establishing clear protocols of engagement around online communication and collaboration to ensure the experience is positive for all participants. This includes creating boundaries around online communication with colleagues and scheduling dedicated time slots for discussion. These boundaries need to be respected to give work colleagues the time and space to do other things and to meet other needs - family, friends, etc.

Not everyone is technologically confident or competent so, where possible, leaders should communicate with colleagues through one channel only so there is some predictability and pattern to the ongoing dialogue. This will lower stress levels for others and ensure that there are not multiple or competing channels of communication open.

Of course, there must be formal leadership guidance, direction, co-ordination and advice, to ensure we get through these times of global insecurity, panic and concern. There is no neat blueprint for leadership in such times, however, no pre-determined roadmap, no simple leadership checklist of things to tick off. There are only highly skilled, compassionate and dedicated education professionals trying to do the very best they can and to be the very best they can be.

Top tips

- Setting your leadership vision over the next weeks and months will be critical - establish what matters most and what is of marginal importance.
- Localised, contextualised leadership will be needed more than ever to respond to an unfolding and unpredictable set of situations.
- Connect with community expertise and support to harness the capacity to deal with complex issues; forging stronger links with parent/community groups to support families, young people and children is critical.
- Cross-agency and collaborative leadership practices are important as the issues that arise will be multi-faceted and require input from a range of specialists.
- Continuously focus conversations around learning and teaching; while technology can provide some ready-made technical solutions for learning, its pedagogical demands need careful thought and planning.
- Online learning also highlights sharp equity issues; not every child has access to the new tools of learning and teaching, so this is an ongoing leadership challenge and consideration.
- Every single person (including you) will be facing their own battles, both large and small, so kindness, gratitude and empathy will be the leadership currency to get things done
- Not everything on your list will get ticked off in the timeframe expected; make reasonable demands on staff and have patience for others and yourself
- These are highly fraught and stressful times, so monitoring emotional states - including your own - is important; there will sometimes be emotional responses to reasonable demands
- Self-care and consideration must be the central concern to ensure that you remain healthy and well enough to help others; self-care and good health is at the core of leadership in lockdown.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Harris A (2013) *Distributed leadership matters: Perspectives, practicalities, and potential*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Leithwood K, Harris A, & Hopkins, D (2020) Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management* 40(1): 5–22.
- Munby S (2019) *Imperfect Leadership: A book for leaders who know they don't know it all*. Bancyfelin: Crown House Publishing.
- Rees T (2020) Business as unusual for school trusts. *Trust – The Journal for Executive and Governance Leaders*.
- Smith L and Riley D (2012) School leadership in times of crisis. *School Leadership & Management* 32:1: 57–71.