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Introduction

In Spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a sudden rupture in the normal day-to-day of schooling. Predictable structures and ways of doing school came to a halt as leaders and communities moved to rethink possibilities and procedures for the remainder of the 2020–2021 school year and the years to come. Since that time, while many parents and educators have called for the “return to normal,” some education scholars and leaders have called for a broader reimagining of schooling and the pursuit of a “new normal” that breaks from the longstanding patterns of inequities that have only been exacerbated by the current health and political context.¹ As many educators, parents, and families celebrated the return to some version of in-person schooling in 2021–2022, some school leaders pursued opportunities to extend and expand lessons, learnings, and innovations from distance learning. While much of schooling looked the same, notable shifts offered opportunities for greater equity and sustainable change. Promising avenues emerged for future research.

In this brief, we highlight four innovations from the practices of educational leaders as areas for further research: **rethinking technology, schooling for the whole child, maintaining deeper family connections,** and **considering schools within a larger network.** We draw from semi-structured interviews with three California K-12 education leaders to illuminate the innovations leaders co-created, witnessed, or hoped for in their district in the pursuit of equitable systems change. We recruited leaders through the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) and selected a cross-section according to their different leadership positions within school sites and districts. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and then coded with flexible coding.² Following coding, we condensed the codes into areas of innovation and selected the four areas most aligned with the purposes of this brief. For each of the innovations below, we highlight perspectives from school leaders. Following, we offer questions corresponding to each innovation for scholars to consider as areas for further research.

¹(Ladson-Billings, 2021)
²(Detering & Waters, 2018)

“Now that we’ve got a year of ‘here’s what it looks like back in person’ under our belt, now we can...take the lessons of the past three years and build something new and better.” —*Teacher Leader*

Innovation 1: *Rethinking Technology*

Practitioners noted the quick move to roll out one-to-one devices in the early stages of the pandemic so that all students would have access to remote instruction during distance learning. However, with the return to in-person schooling, leaders grappled with how and if to incorporate the variety of technologies and technology literacies students developed over this time. Some schools or classrooms moved toward a clean break from technology and strove to remove virtual distractions from the classroom environment by centering face-to-face discussion strategies and pencil-to-paper engagement formats. One teacher-leader explained that since returning to the classroom, teachers have realized the need for a renewed emphasis on writing activities that use fine motor skills instead of technology. One teacher-leader described this decision, noting “we realized students have not really had a lot of writing practice” and avoiding technology for writing activities in the classroom would support the development of their fine motor skills with the return to the classroom. Other leaders emphasized the importance of fostering face-to-face interaction and active, iterative engagement in learning again.

At the same time, technological tools provided many benefits to routines and practices of teaching and learning, and over the last year, leaders faced decisions around which virtual platforms to keep. Some purchased virtual programs and software at a discounted price or received them for free during the first year of virtual learning. However, as discounts dropped away, this led a leader to ask: Do we continue to use or adapt this technology since teachers created classroom activities and lessons? Or do we drop these subscriptions given that they now require more room in the budget? Multiple leaders described how teachers used online resources in innovative ways and worked “so hard to make videos and turn worksheets into games on different platforms” during the first year of COVID 19. And now, schools face decisions around what platforms to keep as the learning format, structures, and budgets change.

Innovation 2: *Schooling for the Whole Child*

Another area primed for future research involves efforts to focus—or refocus—schooling on the whole child physically, socially, and emotionally with a social justice lens. Leaders talked about the coordinated and intentional work to provide universal free meals during the early stages of the pandemic and the desire to continue this practice with the return to in-person schooling. Additionally, leaders spoke to a new or renewed focus on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) for all children, including

providing training for teachers, creating space for SEL within the curriculum, and resisting a singular deficit framing of “learning loss.” In some communities, this expanded approach to content and curriculum included intentional race-conscious work to attend to racial violence and reckoning, such as diversifying texts and centering the perspectives of students, particularly students of color. Leaders spoke of the interwoven effects of the shock of COVID-19 and the era of racial reckoning in this shift. As one district leader noted, “Summer 2020 really helped...particularly white adults look at equity within the school system and [see] how we might make things more accessible for students of color or have school represent them in a more inclusive way.”

However, both site and district level leaders noted the challenges in working towards schooling for the whole child because adequately supporting physical, mental, and social well-being requires sustained funding and support. As leaders broaden professional development for educators, some professional development sessions fill up too quickly, limiting who can participate. And sometimes professional development opportunities are beyond the capacity of teachers who express interest but already feel maxed out. One leader explained, “Teachers were really, really overwhelmed at the beginning of the year...and have more recently started to want to do more professional development...[for many] they feel like their head is just peeking above water at this point, but are still challenged.” Furthermore, as standardized testing returns, teachers may get mixed messages around multiple priorities. One teacher-leader noted, “While, yes, there are resources [around SEL] and it’s encouraged, there’s another stream of messaging that is focused on data and testing and closing learning gaps. And it does feel a little stressful on the teachers’ end to figure out how we address the needs of both when we have limited time and capacity.” In other districts, SEL-focused support for educators faded after the first few months.

“[One] creative response: Our practitioners, principals, and teachers started conducting physically distanced home visits just to check in on the social and emotional health of our students.”—*District Leader*

Innovation 3: *Maintaining Deeper Family Connections*

The third theme we highlight involves the desire of educators to build on the intentional, creative, and deep connections made between schools and families over the past few years. Leaders shared that during remote instruction their schools organized socially distanced home visits and schools normalized the

practice of regularly calling home to connect with families, even if students weren't logging on to virtual schooling. As school returned to in-person, some schools built off those deepened connections—tapping into parent and community volunteers to support instruction in new ways. For example, one bilingual program worked with parent volunteers to ensure instruction in the target language when they lacked sufficient certified bilingual substitutes. Relatedly, one school coordinated with a dedicated group of parents on their Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee to support the development of culturally responsive enrichment activities each month. One leader described parents who went through testing and clearance to enter the school regularly to “support the work in the class and provide some of those extra enrichment opportunities” to support teachers who were stretched thin. Some of this work took hybrid formats, including Zoom forums for Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, and presentations on the local indigenous tribes. One leader described these endeavors as a way for the school community to be together “even if they can't be on campus, and we can't do big events altogether.”

Innovation 4: *Considering Schools within a Larger Network*

Finally, leaders spoke to these adaptations, innovations, and efforts within a broader network of public and private relations. All leaders noted the influx of federal and state funding at the start of the pandemic and the ways that this additional funding supported many of the quick and necessary adjustments that they pursued as well as corporate donations, particularly around technology needs. After what some called a transitional year of returning to in-person schooling, leaders now identified questions about what can be sustained and how to plan for the year(s) to come. One leader noted that many of their students did not have access to the internet at home at the start of the pandemic, and they worked quickly with city leaders and partner corporations that they “weren't used to partnering with” to ensure all students had access. Internet partnerships continued to be useful with homework and makeup work in the past school year as students returned to in-person schooling. However, as new and unexpected external partnerships supported the initial access and foundational infrastructure, ensuring continued access to wifi and updated technology will require ongoing support.

Similarly, leaders highlighted the relationship between higher education organizations and PK-12 schools. In the immediate context, one school district set up a partnership with a local community college to provide access to an advanced version of ethnic studies, offered to students after they completed an introductory level course within the high school. Thinking towards the future, one leader emphasized the importance of partnering with universities for teacher preparation, counselor certification, and nursing programs to inspire and connect young people with the multiple employment opportunities in schools. These examples speak to the relevance of the broader network and policy context regarding how, as one leader describes it, policies and networks “trickle down into our classroom in some really interesting ways.”

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In response to perspectives, experiences, and insights from these school leaders, we offer suggested questions for future research. If you're already doing work in this area, we'd love to hear about it. Please email us at 21csla-briefs@berkeley.edu to share your work with us.

Topic 1: Rethinking technology

- What skill sets and literacies have students developed over virtual and hybrid learning structures and how have schools and educators incorporated and built on these literacies with the return to in-person schooling? How do schools work to ensure literacies are recognized, developed, and taught in culturally responsive ways across all student populations?
- What tensions emerge with the incorporation or exclusion of these technologies in the classroom and how do educators and leaders work to balance these tensions?

Topic 2: Schooling for the whole child

- How have ideas about the purposes and possibilities of schooling expanded towards more holistic and just-ends amongst leaders, practitioners, and communities over the past few years? How do these stakeholders pursue more holistic and justice-oriented purposes while navigating and balancing standards and accountability-based evaluation systems?
- What kind of support and training do teachers need when the purpose of schooling expands toward the whole child and/or justice? What kind of training/professional development has been made available to teachers around schooling for the whole child and/or justice and what are the successes and areas for improvement?

Topic 3: Maintaining deeper family connections

- What practices, relationships, and orientations emerged within schools that were successful in deepening family connections during the COVID-19 pandemic? With which families and communities were these successful? What are the conditions in which these practices are being sustained and with whom?
- How do leaders and systems support teachers to build and sustain authentic family connections when teachers are stretched thin?

Topic 4: Consider schools within a larger network

- What creative partnerships (leveraging state and federal policy, universities/higher education, corporations) endured? What might be unforeseen or negative consequences of these partnerships? What schools/districts/states are more likely to form these partnerships and why?
- As schools partner with community-driven initiatives, what are the characteristics and nature of these relationships? What are the conditions that support relationships that break from dominant hierarchies of power within marginalized communities?

About 21CSLA

The original California School Leadership Academy was established by Senate Bill 813 in 1983 and administered by the California Department of Education until 2003. Senate Bill 75 re-authorized the 21st Century School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) in 2019. The grant is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. Headquartered at UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education, 21CSLA is led in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, the California Subject Matter Project, and seven Regional Academies across the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California that receive Title II funds. Programs are free to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve instruction and achievement outcomes for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, low-income students, and other historically marginalized students.

21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

21CSLA Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education, especially for educational leaders. These Research Briefs compile and present current research in a concise format. They also include reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. Companion Practice Briefs gather and lift the voices and the experiences of educational leaders for dissemination among researchers.

21CSLA also regularly produces Research-Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. For more information, visit <https://bit.ly/21csla-webinars>

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“School districts are known to not do a very good job of partnering with different community-based organizations...we and our community-based organizations were almost forced to partner together to really support students and families in a time of dire need....We weren't feeding our kids, for example, because they weren't coming to school for breakfast and lunch. So we partnered with many different organizations—on top of our [extra] state and federal funds—to continue to feed our children.”

—District Leader

References

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Recruitment

Are you an educational leader willing to share your experiences to be highlighted in a future 21CSLA Practice Brief? Visit <https://tinyurl.com/sharewith21CSLAPracticeBrief> to let us know!