Leading schools through the Covid-19 crisis — Donnie Adams

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APRIL 7 — Throughout history, leadership during difficult times and moments of crisis has been admired and respected. Situations where leaders thrive in instances where others would fail, or at best merely survive, have been chronicled time and again. Books have been written and movies have been produced. Legends have been made. Much has been told and retold of our business, political, military, and sports leaders during difficult times.

Today’s school leaders are faced with more challenging circumstances than in any other time in our nation’s history. The COVID-19 pandemic is a health crisis. Many countries including Malaysia have (rightly) decided to close schools, colleges and universities. The severe disruption is felt by many families around the world; home schooling is not only a massive shock to parents, but also to children’s social life and learning.

Teaching is moving online, on an untested and unprecedented scale. Student assessments are also moving online, with a lot of trial and error and uncertainty for everyone. Many assessments have simply been cancelled. Importantly, these interruptions will not just be a short-term issue, but can also have long-term consequences for affected students such as children with special educational needs and are likely to increase inequality.

“I must tell you that zoom, Skype, google meet, none was ever installed by my teachers and students. They had not heard of these at all. The most they understand was VLE Frog and now google classroom, but it was not used widely at all” shared a principal.
No leadership course prepared school leaders for this crisis. No leadership development programme possibly prepared school leaders to deal with the current covid-19 pandemic. They are in uncharted territory. The impact of coronavirus means that school leaders are being required to make decisions with very little guidance to help them.

“There is ‘panic’ from my head department. This is something really new & unexpected” one principal said.

“As a principal, I’m lost! What do I do?” said another principal.

At times such as this I think school leaders have to do four things:

1. Setting directions

To ensure limited interruption to teaching and learning activities, school leaders need to ensure online teaching approaches are feasible for their students. Run a survey to know what devices are available to the students and parents at home. Keep in mind the number of children at home and the availability of the device for each child. It’s important to know if there are times these devices are unable due to usage by other family members, and if their parents are competent with the functionality of the device and familiar with applications such as Skype for Business, Zoom, Google Meet, Webex, Microsoft Teams. It’s important to check if the students have any access to a stable internet connection at home. Also, it’s worth investigating if internet connection is only accessible through mobile phones. This will hinder learning. The information from this survey will help leaders set directions for their teachers on how online learning and teaching should be conducted, what are the areas of strengths and weaknesses.

2. Understanding and developing teachers

Teachers who have never designed an online lesson or experienced online teaching may experience anxiety. School leaders need to identify teachers’ level of competence for online teaching and communicate their expectations of teachers according to their level of competence. Form professional learning communities (PLC) on IT and another on creating and monitoring assessments and exercises for students. For example, ask teachers to work in groups and share their resources. Novice teachers to online learning and teaching may be paired with teachers who are familiar with applications such as Skype for Business, Zoom, Google Meet, Webex, Microsoft Teams based on subject matter for coaching and sharing of ideas and knowledge. Ensure teachers themselves have the appropriate devices and internet connectivity to teach and run online classes. Careful planning on teaching schedule and availability is also needed as teachers have families of their own and will now need to balance their family’s needs with their work. Subsequently, brief parents on this applications and how online classes will be conducted.

3. Exercise instructional leadership

Successful school leaders address changes, particularly in relation to learning. This is reflected the term “Instructional Leadership”. Instructional leaders focus on curriculum and instruction. Encourage a high level of collaboration and a high team spirit among teachers. Constantly monitor and engage teachers toward achieving the school and learning goals. Remind teachers of each student’s socio-economic status and to use appropriate teaching tools for the children. Submission for homework online is best reserved for now. Constantly motivate your teachers so they know you’re with them and supporting them.

4. Redesign learning

Leaders will now need to redesign their school as learning is done at
their children’s learning process. Communicate expectations to parents. Tell them “this is going to be messy”, give parents and teachers permission to try and fail “and that is OK. A back-to-back schedule of activities can be overwhelming. Encourage parents to ask for help. Communicate in class what-app groups. Parents will need to know how they could play their roles in their child’s learning clearly. Inform parents teachers are working from home too and need support and a little flexibility in their teaching hours as some parents may expect their child to be glued in-front of the screen with their teacher.

I cannot think of anything that even comes close to requiring the amount of bravery and dedication that I am seeing now from teachers, from school leaders and from others in public service all over the country. Hold true to our values and make the best choices and decisions that we can, even if we sometimes may get it wrong. What matters most of all in these situations is that we are authentic and true. Leadership is a task with humanity and authenticity at its heart.

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