School Leaders: Here's What the Science Tells Us About Crisis Decisionmaking

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Your values and your expert team can help you during the coronavirus pandemic

By Yinying Wang

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School leaders across the country are grappling with an array of decisions forced on them by the COVID-19 pandemic. If you have closed schools, when should schools reopen? If schools remain closed for a long period, how do you use your resources to protect children and keep education going? Once the overarching decisions are made, leaders, including those further down the command chain, will have a myriad of additional choices to make.

To understate the case, such choices are being made in less-than-ideal circumstances. But if you understand the difficulties and the opportunities, you give yourself a better chance to make a good decision.

Here are three truths for decisionmakers in the time of the coronavirus pandemic:

1. Fear and anxiety trap decisionmakers in tunnel vision. Our emotional reactions to the coronavirus pandemic are marked by fear and anxiety, the extreme form of which is panic. These emotions narrow the breadth of attention, trapping decisionmakers in tunnel vision. Fear and anxiety are so powerful that they divert the human brain's limited cognitive resources. Gripped by fear and anxiety, you tend to stick to an option about which you know more, rather than exploring additional options.

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More importantly, fear and anxiety, like all emotions, are contagious. We express fear and anxiety to people around us through the words spoken in conversations, body language, and facial expressions. When a

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cabinet of school leaders makes a decision as a group, fear and anxiety shared by the cabinet members can create an echo chamber, undermining the quality of the decisions.

Further, when data are presented differently, they evoke different emotional responses, which influence decisionmaking. Focusing on a coronavirus death rate calculated at, say, 3.4 percent, you feel fearful and anxious, and tend to make risk-averse decisions out of an abundance of caution. Focusing on the data that 80 percent of coronavirus patients have mild symptoms, you are likely to feel hopeful. Unlike fear and anxiety narrowing the breadth of attention, hope broadens the breadth of attention. In this case, hopeful school leaders tend to explore options in decisionmaking and be willing to take risks.

2. Uncertainty and risk are inherent in evidence-based decisionmaking. School leaders are trained to make data-informed, evidence-based decisions. Leaders sometimes talk about scientific evidence as providing 100 percent certainty. In fact, scientific research abounds with uncertainty. Margin of error, confidence intervals, and interquartile ranges wouldn't be needed in an ideal world of certainty.

> **"Fear and anxiety trap decisionmakers in tunnel vision."**

In an ideal world, superintendents, for instance, would have a good measurement of the disruption experienced by disadvantaged students and students with disabilities when schools are closed. Relevant data would be collected and used to calculate the benefit and risk of the options. In reality, each option has an unknown probability of success and unclear consequences.

To predict the probability of an occurrence in the future, scientists collect and analyze data about a past event. Yet the past imperfectly predicts the future. There is research about the effect of reactive compared with proactive school closure—that is, closing schools after someone at school is sick or before—during the 1918 influenza pandemic. The death rate in the cities where schools were closed proactively was only one-third as high as in the cities where schools were closed reactively. Such evidence can inform school leaders deciding whether to close schools. Yet the data were about the past pandemic, not the current one. Those who disagree with school closures can argue that there could be a different probability this time around.

Limited data add more uncertainty to school leaders' decisionmaking. If schools are closed to slow the spread of the infection, when should they reopen? Even an expert was confounded by that question. "Honestly, I don't know how much research has been done," said Nicholas Christakis, a social scientist and physician who is developing models to forecast epidemics. "I don't know the answer." We all have limited data.

3. Following your values and building a team of experts will help handle the uncertainty. Although uncertainty is inherent in evidence-based decisionmaking, uncertainty can be navigated. First, your values are the beacon that guides your decision, especially when uncertainties abound. If you believe in doing the right thing for the health and well-being of students and their families regardless of how difficult it is, then take into account the best evidence available to you and follow your heart. When time is of the essence, your values can help you press forward.

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Second, making decisions in groups can reduce uncertainty. Group members can bring in a variety of views and expertise. However, group decisionmaking can go wrong if group members don't have the expertise needed. A group decision is usually the option that wins the popular vote. As a leader, you need to be careful about whom you select to make a group decision. If you select only people who will vote for whatever you propose, there is no need to make a decision as a group. If you assign the same weight to the views from both experts and non-experts in a group, you fail to leverage the expertise.

Understanding decisionmaking in a crisis doesn't guarantee your decision will be easy or right. Data may not reduce uncertainty. Your values may clash with options that prioritize short-term benefits. Even getting and using help well isn't enough. But these three truths for decisionmakers should give you the confidence to go forward knowing that you are doing the best you humanly can.

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