

TRUMAN GROUP

Supporting the international school community during Covid: mental health, leadership and organizational decision making

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Over the course of the last ten years, the Truman Group has worked to increase awareness of the mental health needs in school communities worldwide. International schools, in particular, are disproportionately tasked with the responsibility of supporting community members' mental health; in many regions there are simply no local resources available when people require clinical care. We work in heterogeneous schools, ranging from well-known flagship institutions to schools with fewer than 200 students in locations well-off the beaten track. That work has given us a sense of the range of organizational response to the effects of Covid and has shaped our perspective of what we think is working well, and what is not in schools during this time. While our findings are relevant during the pandemic, we are convinced that the qualities we describe below lead to a healthy school culture beyond times of crisis.

Schools that recognize they are holistic organizations do better

Emotional disruption, family dysfunction and social difficulty are primary impediments to student learning. One of the most powerful effects of the pandemic has been to highlight the link between emotional disruption and disrupted learning. Moreover, there is increasing awareness that the effectiveness of a school *as a whole* depends upon the administration and the faculty response to the social and emotional needs of not just students, but faculty and administrators.

Institutional response to Covid has varied enormously, with some schools responding to the crisis using a reductionistic approach where resources are nearly entirely dedicated to the "core" mission of the school, which is understood to be academic achievement. These institutions are more narrowly focused and have directed efforts nearly



exclusively toward academic outcomes. At the other end of the continuum, administrators, counselors and teachers view emotional and social disruption as a primary impediment to learning, and as a consequence have made very different decisions about intervention, tactics and resource utilization. In our experience, schools that are highly focused on academic gains and pay little attention to social and emotional factors affecting students tend to have less student involvement, lower faculty morale, and greater mistrust of the school administration.

Involve school counselors in strategic decisions that affect community well-being

In the international school community, school counselors are tasked with providing mental health consultation and care to the school community as a whole. During periods of extraordinary stress, a capable, well supported school counselor is an invaluable asset to a school. As was noted above, there is a great deal of variability in the ways in which schools are responding to social and emotional disruption in the community. In some schools we have observed institutional rigidity, where administrators rely on a top-down approach of leadership to direct school response with little input from their counseling staff. In a striking number of schools, no school counselor is present at high level strategic discussions, nor are they involved in decisions regarding student mental health, social and emotional needs in the community, and faculty vulnerability.

One of the challenges for school administrators has been the speed of decision making (and the sheer volume of decisions) that they have been forced to make since the start of the pandemic. Heads of School and senior administrators have had to react to a dynamic environment requiring decisions about nearly everything – visa processes, quarantine logistics, staffing and scheduling for multiple modalities (remote/hybrid/in person), and safety requirements, to say nothing about social and emotional health, and (save us!) teaching. Each of these domains of decision-making have landed with very little lead time and, by necessity, require rapid response. As a result, decisions are made quickly, communication problems occur frequently, and collaboration becomes difficult to accomplish. When situations are volatile, uncertain and complex, school systems (like many other organizational systems) are more likely to become centralized, rigid, and "bottle necked." There is a tendency to cling to what is known and established, and people are wary of what is new and unknown. This, of course, reduces a school's ability to innovate and respond creatively to novel stressors which, given the current environment, is problematic. The demands of the pandemic call for new and creative solutions.

We suggest that decisions flow from a strong senior leadership team, and that the team should include a member skilled in (or at least informed and thoughtful about) the emotional and social implications of the decisions of the administration on the broader school community. Decisions might need to be arrived at quickly, but it is nearly always best to get good counsel, even if time is constrained.



Five qualities that lead to healthy, well-functioning organizations

Schools characterized by the following qualities are, in general, doing better as they cope with the challenges of the pandemic. Consider ways that you can use some or all of these processes and qualities in your school as you work toward the end of the school year.

1. Transparency

As a school leader, publicly define problems and explain how you came to a decision. Clearly state what you have decided, what you will do, and be overtly accountable. Do not sugar coat hard truths, be honest about the consequences of your decisions, including what will be both beneficial and what will be painful. It is nearly impossible to over-communicate.

2. Collaboration

Foster participation and inclusion, and make use of a senior team for important decisions. Include school counselors in decision making in domains such as school reopening plans, policies and procedures regarding student wellbeing, faculty morale, etc.

3. Get good data

Foster a culture where information reigns supreme. Be permeable to hard truths. Let people know that you have heard what they are saying, even if there is no clear course of action to take. When people are heard, they feel greater agency and self-worth and, as a result, morale improves. Strike a balance between focusing on pragmatic, actionable items and offering community members a way to express themselves.

4. Acknowledge that hard things are hard

Acknowledge difficulty. Articulating a problem will not increase the magnitude of a problem. It is helpful to overtly talk through the difficulty and complexity of an issue (especially if there is no clear “right” course of action); it creates an opportunity to share facts and respond to the emotional reaction that people have in the community.

5. Trust

Trust is a requirement for collaboration. Foster an open-door policy to make staff feel secure enough to share, ask for help or seek consultation. Emphasize the sense of shared purpose, work to create a positive atmosphere, practice gratitude and offer encouragement and praise often. Seize opportunities to support staff and show appreciation. Be flexible when possible and if not possible, offer staff an explanation, a sense of empathy and appreciation for their work and efforts.



The last ten months have been extraordinarily hard on Heads and on senior administrators. Our final missive is that you consider finding some time each week to get your senior people together to talk through the adversity of what you are dealing with, discuss ways that you are coping, and overtly work to find ways to support each other. The pandemic is going to come to an end, and by taking steps to build a stronger leadership culture now, you will be going a long way toward building a healthy organization that can face and deal with adversity beyond this global crisis.

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To hear more from Dr. Sean Truman, please [listen to his keynote address](#) that he delivered at the [ISCA Collaborative](#) in October 2020.

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