

Examining the Influences of Contextual Factors on Principals’ Experiences and Leadership During Times of Crisis

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Background:

Schools experience innumerable crises on a day-to-day basis. On one hand, school level situations such as a leaking pipeline, animal infestation, and health emergencies might disrupt the general operations of schools. On a larger scale, schools are impacted by natural disasters, school shootings, and health disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. School leaders play critical roles in mediating the impact of these crises on their constituencies. Yet, limited research have examined how contextual factors influence school leaders’ crisis leadership. Research is therefore needed to understand how best to support and prepare school leaders for the challenges and complexities associated with crisis leadership.

Objective:

The purpose of the project was to qualitatively explore the experiences of school leaders navigating different types of crisis situations to provide answers to the research question:

How do school leaders’ contextual factors (principal background, school context, crisis specifics) frame their experiences and leadership during different types of crises?

Significance:

Examining school leaders’ experiences and navigation of a range of different crises is critical for understanding the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for leadership across different types of crises, which offers significant implications for leadership preparation programs.

An understanding of contextual factors impact schools’ experiences with different crises could allow district and state leaders to better support school leadership during these disruptions, thereby reducing the impact of these on school operations and constituents.

Next Steps:

- Present findings from this project at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting in Los Angeles in 2026 (submitted)
- Submit manuscript for publications (in progress)
- Apply to the National Science Foundation Faculty Early Career Development Program (CAREER) to expand this line of research.

Preliminary Findings		
Crisis	Key Themes	Representative Quotes
Health Crises	Safety protocols, balancing confidentiality with care, staff flexibility, emotional toll.	“Just being able to, within myself, not lose my mind, and seek professional help because of the burden of getting that information and learning about death almost on a weekly basis.”
Natural Disasters	Preparedness drills, accountability systems, communication, logistical challenges	“The major challenge actually was...because we practice every month, that it becomes, ‘Well, this is just a drill, this is not serious.’”
On-Campus Emergencies	Crisis response protocols, role clarity, communication channels	“When the fire alarm goes off...my first respond teams, we all know is to build a channel two...During a crisis like that or during a fire drill, we go to channel two so that...the general public and other staff members don’t have access to the conversations.”
Death of Students or Staff	Transparency, confidentiality, emotional leadership.	We did have crisis counselors on campus...I gave them a space...that they can meet with staff members or anyone else who just needed to talk about what was going on.”
School Shootings / Threats of Violence	Community engagement, law enforcement partnership, trauma	“They let off some blanks. You heard, ‘Pow! Pow! Pow!’ Nobody moved...Even though you’re in a drill, you just learned what you were supposed to do when it happens, and you don’t do it.”

