

TEACHING INNOVATION

NEW SCHOOL STAFFING STRATEGIES INSPIRED BY THE PANDEMIC

BY LYNN OLSON

FEBRUARY 2021

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FOREWORD

The scramble to educate 50 million students without school buildings started nearly a year ago and, by nearly all accounts, it hasn't gone well. Millions of students have fallen behind academically and equity gaps have widened.

But some public-school leaders have responded boldly and imaginatively to the unprecedented instructional challenges posed by the pandemic. They have deployed teachers and rethought school schedules in innovative ways that play to teachers' strengths and better serve students' academic and social-emotional needs.

This report, a joint effort by FutureEd and EducationCounsel, explores these new staffing strategies, the conditions that enabled them, how educators have overcome barriers to the innovations, and what it would take to sustain and scale them post-pandemic.

The report was ably authored by FutureEd Senior Fellow Lynn Olson, and Molly Breen and Jackie Arthur provided valuable editorial support.

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TEACHING INNOVATION

The coronavirus pandemic forced 50 million students and more than 3 million teachers out of their classrooms almost overnight, requiring them to abandon in-person instruction for remote learning with virtually no warning and minimal preparation. A surge of COVID infections across the nation coupled with vaccination delays suggest this disruption will continue well into 2021.

Most school systems initially sought to replicate brick-and-mortar instruction online, to limited effect, especially for the nation's disadvantaged students. A report by McKinsey & Company found Black and Latino students are more likely than white students to be learning remotely, while having less access to devices, internet, and live contact with teachers. If these issues are left unaddressed, the report estimates that students of color could end this school year, on average, six to 12 months behind their typical benchmarks. White students could end the year, on average, four to eight months behind.¹

The pandemic has challenged school districts in profound ways: shifting health and safety guidelines, surging community infection rates, and absent federal leadership under the Trump administration have left schools scrambling to find effective new ways to meet their students' needs. State and local requirements regarding class size and instructional minutes, budgetary constraints, provisions in union contracts, and even America's archetypal vision of a teacher standing at the front of a classroom full of students further complicate the picture.

Yet some schools and school districts have responded to the COVID crisis with highly innovative staffing and scheduling strategies. They are extending the reach of great teachers, leveraging co-teaching models

and teacher teams in new ways, and creating more flexible student groupings and more student-centric classrooms—all with the goal of playing to teachers' strengths, better serving students, and providing more support for educators.

This report explores these new staffing strategies, the conditions that enabled them, how educators have overcome barriers to the innovations, and what it would take to sustain and scale them post-pandemic.

Extending the Reach of Great Teachers

Teacher policy experts have long sought to extend the reach of highly effective teachers beyond the four walls of their classrooms. The shift to remote learning during the pandemic has made it easier to realize this goal.

Last summer, in response to the pandemic, a group of former state and local education leaders and charter school founders launched the nonprofit Cadence Learning. Cadence contracts with local school systems and charter networks to expose more students nationally to high quality teaching.² The organization currently serves some 8,800 students in grades 3-8 in 11 states and the District of Columbia. On average, 72 percent of students in Cadence's partner schools, nearly all of them urban, qualify for free and reduced-price lunch.

Cadence employs a team of national “mentor teachers” who support online instruction in “partner schools” throughout the country. Each of the dozen or so mentor teachers delivers a lesson on the screen along with three to five students who discuss the lesson and ask questions. The teachers in the partner schools, known as “partner teachers,” can play the recorded lesson for their students or teach a live version of the lesson themselves, using virtual breakout rooms to work more closely with their own students, whom they know well.

“It’s like being able to sit in the back of the room of the best teacher in the building for weeks at a time and see his or her moves and adapt them and make them your own,” says Steven Wilson, a co-founder of Cadence and the founder and former chief executive of the Ascend charter school network in New York City. Cadence initially recruited mentors from existing high-performing charter networks and schools, asking them to refer their most outstanding educators. The mentors all had shown success in raising student achievement, and many had won awards or were well-known within their existing networks. Since then, mentors have also referred fellow teachers.

The mentor and partner teachers collaborate online twice weekly with other teachers in the same grade and subject to think through the preparation needed for each lesson and to analyze student work. To Anne Barnes, who teaches English to 6th graders in a San Diego charter school, the recorded lessons and lesson plans from the mentor teachers were an instructional lifeboat early in the pandemic, as were the online collaborations. She had been working long hours to develop curricula and lesson plans for online classes. Now, she says, “I get to focus on being a teacher again. . . This program has really helped my students. It’s also given me back my work-life balance.” Barnes also appreciates seeing other teachers online in the classroom, something that’s harder to do at school. “I love watching other teachers teaching,” Barnes says. “You learn a lot from them.”

Cadence raised \$4 million from philanthropy to offer the program this past summer at little or no cost to school districts, charters, and community-based nonprofits.

This school year, Cadence offered the first semester for free. Going forward, it will charge \$50 per student per month.

Some mentors work for Cadence full time, while others do so part time while continuing to teach in their home schools. Cadence has made this possible by dividing the mentor job into three distinct roles: curriculum writers, professional developers, and mentors. Some mentors engage in all three activities, while others focus on just one. For example, a veteran 4th grade teacher might teach her usual course load as well as one extra period in a 4th grade Cadence classroom every day.

“It’s like being able to sit in the back of the room of the best teacher in the building for weeks at a time and see his or her moves and adapt them and make them your own.”

Steven Wilson
Co-founder, Cadence Learning

Cadence teachers are paid a fixed amount per semester based on the standard that a full-time mentor should earn about as much as a school principal. “This is in keeping with our belief that excellent teachers should be able to advance into prestigious and well-compensated roles without having to leave teaching,” says Wilson, who predicts the program could be useful long after the pandemic. “We see this as both a virtual offering and as a teacher-development model!”

Opportunity Culture, an initiative of Public Impact, a North Carolina-based LLC, offers another model for extending the reach of excellent teachers, with higher pay, to grow student learning and provide increased guidance and support for educators.³ More than 360 schools in more than 45 districts and charter management organizations across 10 states belong to the network. A cornerstone of the model is recruiting teachers with a record of high student-learning growth and leadership skills to serve as “multi-classroom leaders.”

These teachers teach part-time and also lead small, collaborative teams of two to eight teachers, paraprofessionals, and teacher residents in the same grade or subject. Their duties include clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each team member based on their strengths; leading the team in analyzing student data to target and adjust instruction; leading teacher development through lesson planning, co-teaching, modeling, and individual feedback; and providing input on principal evaluations of team members.

Multi-classroom leaders are accountable for the learning of all students on their team and, on average, earn 20 percent more than other teachers. Schools use their regular budgets to cover the higher salaries, typically drawing from unfilled vacancies, reducing the number of non-classroom specialists (excepting those in special education and English-language learning), or reallocating other costs within schools. A rigorous third-party evaluation by the National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, or CALDER, found students of teachers led by multi-classroom leaders had sizable, statistically significant reading and math gains.⁴

During the pandemic, Public Impact has been working with schools in its network to continue multi-classroom leadership when all students and teachers are learning fully or partially at home. It has designed school scheduling options that prioritize face-to-face video time within small groups, which motivates students and helps them connect emotionally with teachers. School days also include offline and online skills practice and projects completed independently or in small groups without a teacher, preserving time for teachers to plan and collaborate as teams.

A full-day option for elementary schools, for example, keeps the time slots for classes in the same order and of the same overall duration as when students are in school. Students spend concentrated time each class in small-group instruction with one of the teachers on the teaching team. During the rest of the class, they have time for independent and project work. A paraprofessional on each team is available for tutoring,

outreach, or to teach small groups by videoconference, with prior direction from the multi-classroom leader.

During the first part of the day, a teacher on the team might provide direct instruction to three small groups of students from the same class for 30 minutes each, followed by 42 minutes of one-on-one office hours, followed by a 55-minute block for teacher planning and collaboration, while students are at lunch and recess or participating in online specials, like art and music.

A similar pattern unfolds during the afternoon: a planning block, followed by another round of small-group instruction in the same subject for a different classroom of students, followed by another round of office hours.

A comparable half-day schedule compresses face-to-face time and most student-teacher interactions into a morning, with small-group instruction in 15-minute increments and more team planning time added in the afternoon. This option may make at-home supervision by parents more feasible by allowing them to concentrate on work and other matters in the afternoon. And younger students, in particular, can have more rest, physical activity, and time to complete assignments in the afternoon.

While remote learning has many drawbacks, notes Bryan C. Hassel, co-president of Public Impact, having students spend more time working independently and having multi-classroom leaders observe other teachers online has added additional flexibility for these leaders to be able to watch other teachers, co-teach, model, and give feedback, while also continuing to teach in their own classrooms. Students benefit from more direct instruction in small groups through the use of paraprofessionals and other team members. “If you’re set up as a team, you can use that to your advantage,” he says.

Empowering teachers to determine the specifics of Opportunity Culture in each school is a critical part of the model. School-level design teams made up mostly of teachers determine how multi-classroom leaders will be used and what types of reallocations will pay for the roles. In some districts, such as Indianapolis, the teacher leadership roles and pay supplements are explicitly

included in the collective bargaining agreement. In other districts, the union contract permits but does not mention the roles and supplements.

The Gentry School District in Arkansas assigned some of its educators as multi-classroom teachers last March, just as physical buildings closed. The district has created a career ladder that provides the teachers with stipends of up to \$15,500, using federal Title I money, with the stipends varying based on the number of teachers and classrooms the teacher leaders oversee. The district turned to the multi-classroom leaders to identify priority standards and content for each grade for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year, help with school reopening plans this past fall, and serve as liaisons between the administration and the teaching staff. Assistant Superintendent Christie Toland said the model could have long-term benefits beyond the pandemic. “We see this as growing our own, not just teacher leaders, but potential administrators.”

“COVID has highlighted the level of guidance and support teachers need to help all students learn,” argues Hassel. “That need pre-dated COVID and will outlast it.” In particular, he hopes that post-pandemic, schools will increase the use of small-group instruction, which has been a necessity to make remote, live instruction feasible and to strengthen teacher-student relationships. He also urges schools to tap teacher leaders’ expertise in ways that benefit more than their own teams, such as creating lesson plans and instructional videos to use districtwide.

The pandemic has also highlighted the utility of virtual meetings and observations to increase the breadth of teacher-leader roles by allowing multi-classroom leaders to have teams that span more than one school, Hassel notes. And it has pointed to the importance of schools and school systems being better prepared to handle situations in which individual students or teachers, small cohorts, or even whole schools need to close temporarily because of illness or quarantine.

New-Generation Co-Teaching Models

Co-teaching and team teaching, in various forms, have been around a long time. They can make teaching more rewarding, collaborative, and sustainable and play to the strengths of individual teachers on a team. But some schools and charter networks have created new iterations of traditional co-teaching models during the pandemic, both to maintain student engagement and to reduce the work load on individual teachers.

The Achievement First network of 37 urban public charter schools in New York, Connecticut and Rhode Island used co-teaching teams prior to the pandemic, particularly to serve special education students in general education classrooms, and it has amplified their use under remote instruction.⁵ This school year, most teachers co-teach remotely with one or two other teachers to make the job more manageable. An English Language Arts or math classroom, for example, might have one teacher leading the online lesson, with a second teacher focused on keeping students engaged, and a third teacher working with a small group that needs extra help, such as students with special needs.

In addition to enabling more support for students, says Michael Roszkamm, a regional superintendent for Achievement First in Brooklyn, New York, the approach has been a boon for teachers. “Teachers have way fewer social interactions and connections, so just the social-emotional support and feelings of comradery and collaboration have been incredibly important. The schools that have done that better have found that teachers feel good about their professional experience, even if they don’t feel good about their personal situation right now.” To provide enough co-teaching teams, Achievement First leveraged its use of teachers-in-residence and other support personnel and increased class sizes modestly in some schools.

Achievement First, like many schools and school districts, also reallocated staff time and responsibilities during the pandemic to emphasize strong teacher-student relationships, which have proven pivotal to

maintaining student participation in remote instruction. Achievement First schools now start every day with a 15- to 20-minute advisory session that focuses on students' well-being; such sessions had not been occurring consistently from school to school prior to the pandemic. "We came into this year saying our kids need to feel loved and that they belong to this community," says Rosskamm. "That is something we'll probably continue" once students return to buildings full-time, by trimming minutes from other blocks of time in the schedule.

Achievement First was rapidly able to shift gears, in part, because it is a charter network that is free from many existing regulations regarding educator working conditions. But some district-run schools have also expanded their use of team teaching and planning during the pandemic through creative scheduling and memoranda of understanding with their teachers' unions.

"I think the biggest advantage is the opportunity for teachers to plan and reflect in those short cycles and to be able to do that together. We have to be so flexible with all the changes that we've been thrown."

Felecia Evans
Principal, Landon Elementary School

Landon Elementary School in Mayfield Heights, Ohio, a suburb just outside of Cleveland, is a Title I school serving some 505 low-income students in kindergarten to 5th grade. About 75 percent of its students currently attend school in person, while the rest participate in regular classes via Zoom. Last year, the school used co-teaching pairs in grades 4 and 5, who are responsible for about 45 students each. This school year, the school expanded the model to grade 3, so that a brand-new teacher with no experience could work alongside a strong, 3rd grade educator and a special education teacher in the same space. "It's like another year of student teaching, almost, with job-embedded professional growth," says Principal Felecia Evans.

Teachers start each class with a 10- to 15-minute mini-lesson with all students and then break them into small groups that include both students learning in person and on Zoom.

And the school went further, restructuring its school day to support grade-level team planning. Students in each grade now take all their special subjects—such as art, music, and physical education—on the same day, so that teachers in that grade have a full day for team planning every six days. During that time, they review what went well and what didn't during the past six days—including reviewing student data from Lexia Learning, a K-5 digital literacy program, and DreamBox, a K-8 digital math program—to plan for the next cycle of instruction.

Each professional learning community is led by a teacher leader. Evans meets with each grade-level professional learning community every sixth day and with the teacher leaders across grades about twice a month. Teacher leaders receive a salary supplement so they are able to meet with Evans outside the school day. Memoranda of understanding with the local teacher union make possible both the revised school schedule and the teacher leadership positions, which were in place prior to COVID. The school is already exploring how to keep the six-day cycle of professional learning communities next calendar year.

"I think the biggest advantage is the opportunity for teachers to plan and reflect in those short cycles and to be able to do that together," says Evans. "We have to be so flexible with all the changes that we've been thrown." Evans, who has been in her position for seven years, says she probably would not have been able to make such changes without having built trust with teachers and the community. "If this was my second year as the principal here, I don't think I would have been able to get people to move where we needed to move as quickly. It helped to have those established relationships."

Abandoning Uniform Class Sizes, Time Blocks

Other schools are moving away from uniform class sizes and time blocks to more flexible models based on student needs.

Pre-pandemic, Dream Charter Schools, a network of four schools serving 1,050 students in East Harlem and the South Bronx, organized its classrooms much the same from PreK through grade 12, with two teachers co-teaching a classroom of students in most grades or subjects.⁶

But school leaders soon realized that remote instruction posed different challenges for students at different grade spans. So, it designed its online staffing structure based on students' developmental needs, from elementary school through high school.

The earliest grades focus on live instruction in small groups and limit screen time. Elementary students spend 3.5 hours a day in online classes of 14 students and two teachers. Each teacher works a 7-hour day and is responsible for two groups of students during that time. "We felt that some level of personalized, smaller group instruction was going to be necessary," for younger students, explains Chief Education Officer Eve Colavito. By reducing students' online screen time while maximizing teacher time, "It allowed us to maximize the co-teaching model."

In middle school, each teacher had been teaching their subject (such as math or English Language Arts) across all grades in the school prior to the pandemic. But when schools went remote, Dream reconfigured teachers into teams of four (an ELA-social studies pair and a math-science pair) who are responsible for an entire grade's worth of students, including differentiating instruction for students on their team. "We were really investing in relationships and the need for a sense of belonging that middle schoolers have," Colavito told me. "The benefit of this is that the teachers get to know a small group of students very well academically in multiple courses and can leverage their strong relationships with students."

She attributes the 97 percent online-attendance rate among middle schoolers to the relationships built on these teams.

In high school, Dream has focused on developing students' independence in preparation for college. During remote instruction, students attend larger lectures or seminars a few times a week, then spend the rest of their time focused on completing projects, with small-group workshops to provide targeted help as needed. The model uses the same number of teachers as previously but deploys them differently, so that one co-teacher focuses on introducing new material in a lecture or seminar and one co-teacher focuses on supporting students with completing course tasks and assignments.

"We were really investing in relationships and the need for a sense of belonging that middle schoolers have."

Eve Colavito
Chief Education Officer
Dream Charter Schools

This requires tight coordination and collaboration between the two teachers to ensure that students receive a seamless experience. "When schools closed, it was hard to get high school kids to do the work at home and just be engaged," says Colavito. "We realized they hadn't developed the level of independence that allowed them to switch to remote seamlessly." She anticipates that Dream will maintain some version of the high school model once it shifts back into brick-and-mortar buildings.

In other places, systems have allowed teachers to self-select or opt-in to new roles, such as teaching full time in a virtual learning academy; teaching outside their traditional area of expertise; or serving as a family liaison or a technology coordinator. Individual teams of teachers also have changed scheduling or the division of job responsibilities at their own initiative.

Nafeesah Muhammad teaches English in a small, project-based learning academy within Patrick Henry High School in Minneapolis, a traditional comprehensive public high school. When the academy switched to distance learning last spring, students said it was overwhelming to take multiple classes from different teachers every day. In response, Muhammad and her colleagues shifted to a new model that concentrates instruction in each subject in a single day.

Muhammad now spends one day a week teaching English to high school juniors. She provides direct instruction in the morning, followed by a lunch break, and then on-demand hours when students can come to her for one-on-one support. Students have the remainder of the week to complete their English assignments. Students follow a similar routine in other subjects with other teachers.

All of the academy's teachers are on Google Meet together from 1:55 to 3:30 each day so students can pop in for extra help or just to connect and branch off into breakout rooms. On Wednesdays, time is set aside for small-group advisories. "Students have expressed to us that they are grateful for the schedule because they don't have to manage so much," says Muhammad.

The seven academy teachers worked out the new schedule and piloted it last spring. An assistant principal comes to the team's weekly meetings to make sure their ideas don't run afoul of state and local rules and regulations. Because the decisions were arrived at by teachers, Muhammad said, there have not been any union issues.

A New Instructional Cycle

Perhaps the most radical approach to staffing to emerge during the pandemic comes from Kairos Academies, a new St. Louis charter middle school that emphasizes personalized and student-directed learning.⁷ The charter school operates on a seven-week cycle: Students attend school for five weeks and are off for two; staff have one week off and another for professional development and planning. Kairos adopted the model pre-pandemic to

spread school and vacation more evenly throughout the year and prevent student learning loss associated with extended school breaks. The model also provides a regular cycle for staff to analyze and reflect on data, set goals, and adjust instruction. "With the cycle model, we operate in sprints, much like the technology industry," says Gavin Schiffres, the school's founder and CEO. "In a traditional calendar, you have kids in the building for such long stretches that as soon as there's a break, everyone just wants to crash."

Prior to COVID, Kairos assigned one teacher to a classroom of students on the assumption that students required adult supervision at all times. But virtual learning has thrown out physical and scheduling constraints. Now, educators analyze data from the prior five weeks—such as exit tickets, quizzes, and projects—to ask such questions as "Who needs extra help with this concept?" and then schedule students for live, small-group tutoring. The question "Who is reading well above grade level?" leads to assignments for independent, non-supervised book studies; and "Who is accelerating in a topic?" leads to enrichment, such as student-directed activities or projects. Students struggling with attendance might have their independent work supervised by a teacher in an online "study hall."

To adjust student schedules, staff use a Google Sheet that everyone can edit to make suggestions based on student needs. The school uses Google Calendar to schedule classes; Google Groups to organize students in scheduling groups; and Zapier to automate moving students between the Google Groups. Students can pop on to Google Classrooms to see their classes for the day, then click the Google Meet link to join. With remote instruction, students don't need adjustment time for changes to physical routines, student groupings are no longer limited by physical space, and internet resources—such as pre-recorded videos and online lectures—can be leveraged for peer and independent work. These changes have enabled teachers to focus their time on students in need.

"Moving remote allowed us to make time variable and mastery constant," says Schiffres. "By just changing a

couple of Google Calendar events, we can triage teacher energy to give the most support to the highest needs students; we can move kids fluidly between remedial or advanced activities; and we can more deeply personalize each child's education, whether that means a one-off independent study we wouldn't normally be able to staff or letting kids complete their classes at irregular hours required by their home environment."

Every adult at Kairos also serves as an "education navigator" or coach for a "pod" of 10 students throughout their time at Kairos. (Members of the senior leadership team are responsible for three students each.) Navigators meet with each student in their pod several times per week and communicate with their families every week. Once a cycle, they hold a family meeting. Navigators are responsible for developing students to become self-directed, autonomous learners. They directly teach students such concrete skills as notetaking, managing a Google Calendar, keeping a to-do list, and setting up a quiet place to study. A big focus of each staff member's check-in with their managers is the performance of students in their pod. "We have strong attendance and strong connection with kids because of the coach," says Schiffres. Time for this intensive coaching is built into teachers' schedules.

In hiring, Kairos looks for teachers who are comfortable continually adjusting their practice. "Kairos is not for everyone, and that's fine," says Schiffres. "We tell people during hiring that if what you prize most is consistency, you should consider working elsewhere."

Unlike in some districts, Kairos staff members are not contractually required to work a certain number of instructional blocks with a certain number of students at certain times with certain breaks. "That's not because we're a charter district [and aren't beholden to a collective-bargaining contract]," Schiffres says. Rather, it's because Kairos "decided not to promise that level of detail in our [individual] employment contracts."

While the pandemic has upended in-person learning, says Sarah Rosskamm, founder of Hendy Avenue Consulting and the former talent leader at Achievement First, "What's exciting is there's an opportunity for

more student-centered staffing models. Traditionally, we've said, 'We have a teacher, now let's create a class around that teacher.' Now, it's like, 'Let's create teaching assignments based on what the kids need.' I'm hopeful there's going to be some innovation that persists and is ongoing because of that."

The Challenges Ahead

The pandemic may be pushing more districts to think about innovative staffing arrangements going forward. A recent survey of U.S. school districts by the RAND Corporation found that 91 percent of districts and charter management organizations surveyed anticipated revising work roles and job duties for teachers or other staff. About 2 in 10 said they have already adopted, plan to adopt, or are considering adopting virtual schools as part of their district portfolio even after the pandemic ends, in response to parent and student demands for continuing forms of online learning.⁸

But there are substantial barriers to scaling innovative staffing strategies. The rigidity of many labor contracts, school districts' adherence to traditional practices, and many unions' inflexibility have made it difficult for schools to innovate.

In Brevard County, Florida, for example, the teachers' union won an agreement last March to limit teachers' online instructional time to three hours a day. Los Angeles Unified School District initially agreed to limit instruction and student support time to four hours a day per teacher and to limit staff meetings to one hour a week. Live teaching via video was encouraged but not required. While there's a legitimate need not to overburden teachers, who have their own family demands and who often have stepped up in heroic ways to support student learning this past year, it's hard to argue that provisions such as those in Brevard and Los Angeles benefit students.

In late January, the Chicago Teachers Union voted against returning to in-person classes absent COVID-19 vaccinations. The decision came the day before the nation's third-largest school district was planning to bring

teachers and other staff members back into buildings, to prepare for welcoming students on February 1.

In Minneapolis, the union has encouraged teachers to post “away” messages after traditional school hours and not respond to student or parent e-mails as they cope with challenges at home. But such blanket restrictions are “a crazy thing to be pushing when all of our schedules are upended,” says Evan Stone, the co-founder and co-CEO of Educators for Excellence, an organization promoting teacher voice in education policy. “To me, it’s totally tone-deaf.”

When schools first went virtual last spring, Zone leaders recruited the best and brightest teachers in different content areas to develop asynchronous lessons that all students in the Zone could access remotely.

In contrast, so-called thin bargaining contracts leave many decisions about working conditions up to individual schools, providing them more room to maneuver. In 2010, Massachusetts passed a law enabling the state to intervene in low-performing districts. To avoid state receivership, the Springfield Public Schools entered into an agreement with its teachers’ union to create the Springfield Empowerment Zone, a network of 15 of the district’s lowest performing schools.⁹ A three-page agreement regarding “general working conditions” requires each school in the Zone to elect a “teacher leadership team” that works with the principal to create an annual plan outlining working conditions for staff in the building, ranging from scheduling to staff roles and responsibilities. Principals have significant budgetary autonomy to offer stipends to individual teachers to leverage their talents.

When schools first went virtual last spring, Zone leaders recruited the best and brightest teachers in different content areas to develop asynchronous lessons that

all students in the Zone could access remotely. That enabled teachers in each school to focus on providing individual and small-group support for their students. While the recorded lessons were helpful in the short term, says Colleen Curran, co-executive director of the Zone, “asynchronous learning was not as impactful as synchronous instruction.” So, for a summer session, the Zone asked groups of teachers to either work as lesson developers or lesson implementers who would deliver live online lessons to students in schools. The teachers then worked together to revise the lessons based on what they observed. The online summer program almost tripled student attendance compared to the spring.

Because of the flexibility afforded by the union contract, principals and their teacher teams can also be creative about how they use talent within the building. Last summer, each school in the Zone completed an asset map of its staff to identify each teacher’s strengths and willingness to work outside their typical role. “We started talking to our leaders to say, yes, you have a certified math teacher but that teacher is also bilingual, that teacher has a background in special education,” says Curran. The asset mapping enabled principals to flex teachers’ job descriptions and to create co-teaching teams building off different teachers’ skills.

The shift also has empowered teachers more broadly. For example, one group of teacher leaders, calling themselves the Activist Collective, recently pressed Zone leaders to create a new staff position called a “chief equity influencer” in each school to address opportunity gaps that predated the pandemic but have been heightened by it.

Shifting decisions about working conditions to teachers at the site level, instead of across an entire district, has its challenges. For example, the Springfield Education Association has to navigate a more standard teacher contract for educators outside the Zone and a more site-based contract for Zone educators. “One of the challenges is that a union is built for a certain level of uniformity school to school,” says Matt Brunell, co-executive director of the Zone. “I give our local union leadership a lot of credit for being able to adapt to

this,” which has required a deep understanding of the dynamics within individual schools.

But there have been few such partnerships, particularly in large urban school districts.

Teacher union leaders like Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, say school district officials are largely to blame. “What I see, unfortunately, is a lot of management who were really resistant to dealing with staffing issues,” Weingarten told me. That’s in part, she says, because of limited resources and guidance and because “school districts are not used to having the entire district have to change on a dime. They’re used to a school or two trying innovation and seeing how it works; but this was everyone, everything, all at the same time.”

It’s true that few school districts have pressed to loosen labor contracts to enable innovative staffing. Nor have many taken advantage of potential flexibility in existing contracts. There may be opportunities, for example, to shift teachers into specialized roles such as tutoring, or to have them work with targeted student groups, such as those most at risk of dropping out. Launching innovations as pilot projects may give districts room to maneuver under collective-bargaining contracts.

But with rare exceptions like the Springfield Education Association, teacher unions haven’t sought innovative solutions to staffing challenges during the pandemic either.

Some union contracts permit what’s called impact bargaining, or a change in how management and union interact outside the scope of an existing contract based on changed circumstances. “That should have been used to negotiate innovative practices to solve problems,” Weingarten says.

Instead, an analysis by the National Center on Teaching Quality of COVID-related memoranda of understanding between labor and management in 35 large districts found none related to new staffing structures, although a few dedicated more time for staff planning. “We’ve

seen a focus on logistics [such as requirements for live instruction and health and safety] as opposed to innovative staffing structures,” says Shannon Holston, director of teacher policy for NCTQ.

State and district rules and regulations regarding mandatory class size, teacher licensing, bell schedules, required instructional minutes, and the length of the school day and year also can pose barriers to new teaching arrangements. For example, Cadence Learning’s mentor teachers are able to teach outside the state in which they are licensed only because the partner teacher remains the teacher of record.

“We’ve seen a focus on logistics as opposed to innovative staffing structures.”

Shannon Holston
Director of Teacher Policy
National Center on Teaching Quality

This also obviates the need to modify or waive local labor agreements regarding hiring and staffing. Teachers within the project-based learning academy at Patrick Henry High School have been careful to justify how their combination of online classes, office hours, and “power hours” for students meet local requirements regarding the “seat time” students need to earn high school credits. When the RAND survey asked districts about anticipated challenges to providing high-quality instruction and other supports to students during the pandemic, 31 percent identified addressing seat-time requirements as a “moderate” or “significant” challenge.

Another significant challenge to thinking innovatively and sustaining such innovations over time may be funding. The Opportunity Culture requires schools in its network to pay for multi-classroom teachers out of their existing budgets—and not through one-time grants or supplements—to avoid having those positions disappear as soon as funding ends. But faced with sharply declining

budgets, many system leaders may be hard-pressed to budget creatively. District leaders in the RAND survey identified inadequate funding to cover staffing needs as the most significant hindrance to high-quality instruction this school year. About 4 in 10 district leaders reported inadequate funding to be a major hindrance.

Karen Hawley-Miles, the CEO of the nonprofit consulting firm Education Resource Strategies, argues that districts' continued concerns about budgetary constraints may make it hard for them to rethink how they use people, time, and money without state and federal incentives to do so.

Incentives might range from technical assistance to money for district teams to plan new staffing and scheduling arrangements. Prior to COVID, for example, Texas launched an Additional Days to the School Year initiative in which the state pays half the cost for districts or charter schools to add 30 days to the elementary school year. This expansion, designed to prevent summer learning loss, may entail new roles for teachers. By paying half the bill, the state incentivized more than 20 districts and charters to participate in the first round of awards. Absent such incentives to innovate, "it's not going to happen" on a wide scale, Hawley-Miles cautions.

New teaching arrangements also confront a nostalgic American ideal of what it means to teach: namely, to remain ever present at the chalkboard, responsible for a roomful of children. To take the best advantage of the nation's most talented teachers and to truly make teaching more student-centered will require freeing up teachers' time to plan, to collaborate, and to advise and work with students individually, not just in large groups. Movement toward this goal is apparent in the advisory and coaching models, open office hours, and family and student outreach that have sprung up during the pandemic. At the same time, we need more evaluations like that of the Opportunity Culture initiative to determine whether such staffing innovations improve student outcomes.

Even in the fall, some students probably will still be learning remotely, masks and physical distancing will still be required, and school systems nationwide will still be struggling with how to provide acceleration and recovery for the millions of students impacted by school closures. The need for innovation will continue.

A SUMMARY OF INNOVATIVE STAFFING STRATEGIES

- Extending the reach of highly skilled teachers, both to provide high-quality instruction to more students and to provide continuing development and leadership for fellow teachers;
- Expanding co-teaching models and teaching teams to enable more small-group and individualized support for students, enable joint planning, ensure students are known well, and distribute teaching responsibilities based on teacher strengths;
- Using advisory and coaching models to provide social, emotional, and academic support for students and to build the relationships that research has shown are foundational to learning;
- Employing flexible scheduling to provide time for teacher planning and collaboration, including rapid inquiry cycles to adjust and target instruction based on data; and
- Using flexible scheduling to address student needs, including more time for small-group and individual work, individual and group projects and assignments, and coaching.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., and Viruleg, E. (Dec. 8, 2020). "COVID-19 and Learning Loss—Disparities Grow and Students Need Help." McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help#>
- ² For more information on Cadence Learning, go to <https://cadencelearn.org>
- ³ For more information on Opportunity Culture, go to <https://www.opportunityculture.org>
- ⁴ Backes, B. and Hansen, M. (2018). "Reaching Further and Learning More? Evaluating Public Impact's Opportunity Culture Initiative." CALDER Working Paper No. 181. <https://caldercenter.org/publications/reaching-further-and-learning-more-evaluating-public-impacts-opportunity-culture>
- ⁵ For more information on Achievement First, go to <https://www.achievementfirst.org>
- ⁶ For more information on Dream Charter Schools, go to <https://www.wearedream.org>
- ⁷ For more information on Kairos Academies, go to <https://www.kairosacademies.org>
- ⁸ Schwartz, H. L., Grant, D., Diliberti, M., Hunter, G.P., and Messan Setodji, C. (2020). "Remote Learning Is Here to Stay: Results from the First American School District Panel Survey" RAND Corporation. Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR956-1.html
- ⁹ For more information on the Springfield Empowerment Zone, go to <https://www.springfieldempowerment.org>



TEACHING INNOVATION

NEW SCHOOL STAFFING STRATEGIES,
INSPIRED BY THE PANDEMIC