



# Leadership in the Time of COVID: Connecting Community Resources to Meet the Needs of North Carolina Students

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The purpose of this brief research report is to share what we learned conducting an exploratory pilot study on how school leaders in North Carolina responded to changes wrought by the onset of the novel Coronavirus in early 2020. In many ways, North Carolina is a distinctive case because it exists in what is commonly referred to as the Urban/Rural Divide; but, it is also similar to other cases in that educators must be adaptable and flexible in a situation that is constantly in flux. Some early findings confirmed our hunches about how educators were faring in this new world we face. Other discoveries, however, were truly that: discoveries, leading us to two new areas of future research: 1) examining more deeply the weighty connections between past political decisions around public infrastructure (e.g., broadband) and many of the current crises facing school leaders; and 2) continuing to expand our collection of cases that illustrate ways a broad collection of community stakeholders can emerge as educational leaders.

**Keywords:** educational leadership, COVID-19, technology, online learning, community partnerships, teacher leadership, shared leadership

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## INTRODUCTION

From the onset of the novel Coronavirus, K-12 school districts across the state of North Carolina were obliged to consider fresh ways to approach educating students. The novelty of the impact of the virus came not from the virus itself, but rather in the dynamic differences in which districts addressed challenges to provide educational services, adequately support students, and successfully collaborate with community entities.

North Carolina exists in what is commonly referred to as the “Urban/Rural Divide.” Of 100 counties in North Carolina, 64 of them are classified as “rural” counties, while the remaining 36 counties are classified as “urban” (NC Gov, 2018). To further demonstrate, the North Carolina K-12 landscape includes 115 school districts, comprised of 100 districts for each county and 15 “city-schools” which are smaller school systems within a larger school district. Additionally, there are almost 200 charter schools that are distinct from the district in which they reside.

Because of the vast differences in county-outlay that exists, each district and its leaders had to think contextually to adequately address basic community needs as quickly as possible. For some districts, this meant placing food and nutrition services as the top priority, while other districts honed in on swiftly implementing 1:1 computers or other technology (e.g., Chromebooks) so students may access educational resources at home. Further, many districts had to contend with the issue of internet access in some capacity: For example, some district leaders were challenged by the varying

percentages of students without internet access due to non-adoption at home, while other districts lacked access in entirety due to lack of fiber for broadband in the region. Thus, obstacles vary across state contexts due to very different causes such as overall economic well-being of families or state policy and contractual decisions that impact entire regions. Before continuing our report, we first share how we approached this iterative research.

## METHOD

Since the purpose of this paper is to share what we learned conducting a pilot study that was exploratory in nature, the discussion of our methods are limited to the first steps of two policy studies to be developed and completed at a later date. As Yanow (2000) pointed out, the first concern of a researcher interested in understanding how policy is interpreted and enacted is to find a way to “enter the field” (p. 27). The second concern is for the researcher to figure out what data needs to be collected and how. As Yanow explained, many policy researchers are already “in the field” which is true of us, the authors.<sup>1</sup> Thus, entrée was not a major concern for us, at least at this stage of our research processes. Rather, accessing local knowledge via identifying interpretive communities and sources of data was our point of departure, which is described next.

### Document Analysis

Written sources were (and continue to be) very important for the purposes of this exploration, as they provided background on the issues and helped us identify “policy-relevant actors” (Yanow, 2000, p. 37) including formal agencies and informal community groups. Written sources included government documents in the form of Gubernatorial Executive Orders, legislative policy documents, and agency memos as well as reports from news sources (print and television). One publication that was especially helpful was EdNC (For additional information, please, visit: <https://www.ednc.org>).

These sources of data not only helped us gain a clearer understanding of political decision making, but is also helping us construct a timeline of events that include details of how local education agencies (LEAs) are expected to respond to, or pivot from, past, present, and projected circumstances. In addition, to mapping out the policy terrain, we have discovered key actors with whom we might speak to as our future research plans emerge, depending on our purposes and foci. For example, Governor Roy Cooper is an obvious key player in leadership in the time of COVID. But, as of this writing, we do not know if he will be one of the stakeholders with whom we speak.

<sup>1</sup>Taken together, the authors have over 50 years' experience teaching and leading in K-12 settings. The first author is a long-time North Carolina teacher with strong connections to state law makers, school boards and Superintendents, as well as parents and other community members. The second author is currently a professor in North Carolina with training and expertise in policy analysis methods, currently mentoring the first author in a policy research apprenticeship. Both authors are parents of children and/or young adults who attend public schools and/or universities. Taken together, our lived experiences inform this work.

## Conversational Interviews

Oral sources of data, as alluded to above, will be very important to our future work. We regularly update our list of policy stakeholders as we examine additional written sources of material. For the purposes of this pilot study, we took advantage of our personal and professional connections to chat informally with key people to access local knowledge as Yanow advises (p. 37).

For example, Dr Lory Morrow, the former district superintendent of Lincoln County, was a critical source who was able to provide not only first-hand knowledge of the district in which she served, but she also could provide direct insight to both the personal thought process and the internal nuances of what was considered before implementing the exterior Wi-Fi offering for Lincoln County Schools.<sup>2</sup>

## Observation

A third important data source for us is observation. To date, COVID-19 has limited us to observing online recordings of school board meetings. However, future collection will most likely take advantage of recorded legislative sessions coupled with continued examination of meeting agendas, notes, and reports. We agree with Yanow (2000, p. 39) that observation is an excellent way to access local knowledge, especially in terms of nonverbal language, uses of objects, and interactions between different communities of meaning. However, our decision to attend state Senate meetings in person, for example, will obviously depend on not only our individual research purposes, but the current conditions and manifestations of the novel Coronavirus in our personal and professional contexts.

In conclusion, at this stage of the research process, conducting document analysis, reading policy artifacts, and speaking informally with key people helped us achieve our goal of having an overall understanding of how the state of North Carolina has responded/is responding to COVID-19 thus far, the focus of this short research report. Next, we narrate the story, presented in three sub-sections: Early Policy Context and Timeline, Three Leadership Exemplars, and Time Marches On. We conclude with a Discussion section that briefly outlines future research plans.

## RESULTS

### Early Policy Context and Timeline

On Friday, March 14, 2020 Governor Roy Cooper made the announcement that closed down all schools beginning on Monday, March 16th, in an attempt to halt the spread of the novel Coronavirus (Executive Order No. 117, 2020). As time went

<sup>2</sup>Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article in accordance with (local/national guidelines and/or IRB committee decision). That is, documents are publicly available and only public figures were contacted for comment; thus, this exploratory study is considered by our university IRB as exempt.

on, the Governor was pressed to make continuous extensions of school closures, first by one month and then ultimately for the remainder of the 2019–2020 school year. Moving into summer, Governor Cooper and other statewide leaders implemented a three-tier plan for school districts to consider before making any official order. These plans were known as Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C. Plan A involved in-person learning in the traditional sense, though still abiding by CDC guidelines for social distancing and face coverings. Plan B was a hybrid model that included a combination of both in-person and remote learning. Plan C was restricted to remote learning from home.

In each scenario, districts were allowed the flexibility to create the blueprint for execution for each plan model, as long as they still adhered to CDC restrictions and North Carolina Department of Human and Health Services (NCDHHS) guidance. However, while districts were given autonomy to create blueprints, the Governor would ultimately decide how schools should proceed throughout the 2020–2021 school year. As the summer progressed, and the Coronavirus began a second influx with higher numbers of positive cases and deaths in North Carolina [North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS), 2020], Governor Roy Cooper, with input from Dr Mandy Cohen, head of NCDHHS announced on July 14 that schools must implement Plan B hybrid, but could opt into Plan C (fully remote) if they felt the need (Granados, 2020). In addition to the Executive Order, the North Carolina State Legislature created their own legislative bill as a part of the Federal CARES Act (U.S. Senate, Finance, 2020), which mandated that all schools in North Carolina must have a start date no later than August 17. Within the months' time span, a total of 72 out of the 115 traditional districts opted to move into a version of Plan C, with the remaining in a version of Plan B [North Carolina School Boards Association (NCSBA), 2020]. Additionally, many of the districts created their own Virtual Academy<sup>3</sup>, housed and run by the district themselves, so that students could opt into remote learning regardless of what plans the district executed for the quarter or semester.

For the purpose of this paper, there will be a distinction made in the type of remote learning that the State engaged with throughout the time of Covid-19. For the spring, this will be denoted as Emergency Remote Learning (ERL), as districts had less than one week to pivot from the traditional classroom to online. Additionally, students, parents, teachers, and leaders were also working on an assumption of return before the end of the school year during this time, which ultimately did not occur as the virus' impact grew. For the fall, this will be denoted as Structured Remote Learning (SRL). However, it should be noted in the offset that neither scenario is a true version of remote learning. Pedagogically speaking, neither version was implemented with

the intent to build or scaffold student learning, but instead was meant to fill the gap of providing a basic education for students.<sup>4</sup> School is a constitutional right and is also the law for K-12 students in North Carolina (Article 26, n.d.) and so it must be provided in some fashion. Future research will probe the interpretation and enactment of state law around students' rights in addition to different types of remote learning.

In the onslaught of COVID-19, and as the State progressed into its ERL instruction, there arose an abundance of various needs across the State that demanded immediate responses from educational leaders. As alluded to prior, the urban/rural divide within North Carolina underscored the intense need for nuance from district to district. As it stood, the most pressing concerns that were publicized included: feeding students, all-encompassing technology needs, social and emotional concerns, curriculum and pedagogical delivery, and school calendar needs and flexibility. Additional concerns, while ancillary to the execution of school, were just as important to address. These matters included planning for both short and long term curriculum execution in the spring as well as the fluctuating expectations of families/educators toward educators/families.

It is also of note that in March, two weeks before students were required to learn remotely from home, the North Carolina state primary elections were held wherein voters made clear that the current State Superintendent, Mark Johnson would not be the ticket favorite to run for Lieutenant Governor. Not only did he forfeit his seat in order to run for Lieutenant Governor: Johnson also lost the bid to run for his party as the candidate of choice for the 2020 November election. This is important because these events seriously impacted the level and commitment of leadership presented by the State Superintendent during this crisis, as many districts sought for direct leadership to be presented from the State department. The State Superintendent's voice was noticeably absent from many State Board meetings, emergency meetings, and other necessary meetings that would have proven prudent for the State educational leader to be present and accounted for. This left many districts and educational associations scrambling to create their own plans of execution, and to determine what was best for their own diverse districts embedded within the context of the state as a whole. While there seemed to be an absence of leadership from some political entities, publicly-accessible media highlighted cases where local actors stepped in to fill that void which is described next.

### Three Leadership Exemplars Teachers as Leaders

One of the most prominent issues that arose during ERL was the issue of curriculum execution. When the initial announcement was made that schools would be working from home for a two-week period, districts were informed that they could only execute review material only, rather than move forward with new

<sup>3</sup>These Virtual Academies (and separate from the state's 3 statewide virtual academy options) were created by some school districts across the State as a means to allow families to commit fully to being enrolled in online learning, regardless of what decisions would be made during the Fall and Winter months of the 2020/2021 school year. An example of this is Durham County's IGNITE Academy: <https://ignite.dpsnc.net/>

<sup>4</sup>It is beyond the scope of this short report to go into details about specific pedagogies. However, the reader is advised to consult the work of Melanie Kitchen, one educator who is providing excellent support to K-12 teachers: <https://sites.google.com/view/curatorofcreativity/blended-learning>

teaching content. There were a number of reasons behind this decision. The primary driver was that state leadership preferred to pause to perceive if the shutdown would be extended beyond the initial two-weeks. It seemed logical to many that if students returned after the two-week shutdown, then they should be able to engage with new content then. The secondary driver concerned access to technology and broadband. The initial decision to pause curriculum advancement allowed districts to take stock of the scope of their equity needs in terms of technology and broadband, and to determine what would be needed should the stay-at-home orders remain beyond the initial two-week period.

Meanwhile, teachers across the state were beginning to grow more concerned over the social/emotional aspect for students, as they were entering into uncharted territory relating to the pandemic. Too many unknowns existed at the offset, and teachers began to immediately notice their “students (were) nervous and picking up on the stresses of their families and communities” (Morris, 2020a).

Immediately following the announcement of the two week stay-at-home order, a team of educators from across the state collaborated to create an online resource that would house review materials to be accessed and implemented by teachers and parents across the state. In North Carolina, the Burroughs Welcome Fund - a national medical non-profit with a focus on STEM education and grant making - awards nine teachers from across the state as the Regional Teachers of the Year (RTOY) (NCDEP, 2015). From this group of nine, Mariah Morris was named North Carolina State Teacher of the Year (STOY), who was then nominated by the state for the National Teacher of the Year program.

Mariah Morris (2019 STOY) envisioned and led a collaboration comprised of the 2019 RTOY that designed and developed an online video resource for teachers and parents called, Teaching on Your Time (T.O.Y.T.).<sup>5</sup> With this resource, teachers created lessons that followed the guideline of being “review only” material, and also developed video lessons that would fall into two categories: elementary or secondary. In the beginning of this program, the 2019 State and Regional TOYs created the first round of video lessons that were delivered. The content ranged from hands-on science creation to read alouds with an art and ELA component to American civics (Morris, 2020b). After the first round of videos were delivered online, Mrs. Morris took her leadership and expanded her teacher outreach beyond the RTOY. Within the first week of the video lessons being executed, Mrs. Morris sent out an “all-call” to any teacher or individual who wanted to submit a lesson for consideration into the database. Additional teachers from across state contributed lessons that were rich in review content and challenged participants to engage in learning through differentiated instruction. As lessons were

submitted to Mrs. Morris, she introduced each lesson through her own video editing software, and loaded them onto a formal YouTube channel (2020), where the video lessons spanned from March 16, 2020–May 19, 2020 (Morris, 2020c).

For Mrs. Morris (2020), the drive behind the creation of (Lindenberg, 2020) T.O.Y.T. stemmed from a desire to have teachers “rally behind students” in a different way as educational systems had to think creatively in how to connect with students. But also, the motivation to create T.O.Y.T. was so that students could “create a connection with a classroom teacher” during the time of ERL and that students “could see a friendly, calm teacher during school closure” (Morris, 2020).

### District Office as Leaders

One of the most critical issues preeminent during the COVID-19 crisis is the issue of technology and broadband access. Some school district leaders were particularly challenged to meet this critical need. For example, referring back to the “urban/rural divide” at the onset of this article, North Carolinians’ equal access to broadband sits as one of the most critical barriers that brings the urban/rural divide to the fore. For rural North Carolinians, limited access to broadband adoption options (i.e., one provider in rural vs. three or more providers in urban areas (NCGICC, 2019)), as well as limited broadband speeds, known as megabits per second (mbps), highlighted the critical urgency that exists in many districts. The barrier was no longer framed around who had access to the internet; the barrier was now framed as who has access to their state constitutional right to an education (Hoke Cnty. Bd. of Educ. v. State, 2013). Many school districts took it upon themselves to discover creative solutions that would allow students and community members to obtain access needed for any version of online learning.

For example, Lincoln County, a district that sits Northwest of Mecklenburg County, is home to the metro-hub Charlotte. Lincoln County is not considered an urban county, nor is it considered rural (NC Rural Center, 2020), though parts of its geography may be considered as rural. In this district sits twenty-three traditional public schools, and not all of these schools are considered as one-to-one in regard to computer access. Central office personnel for Lincoln County, including the assistant superintendent, noticed that during the start of COVID, many staff members were spending time in the school parking lot to access the buildings Wi-Fi network. The most common reason for this was that those individuals lived in the areas of Lincoln County where internet access is unreliable. Moreover, Dr Lory Morrow, Lincoln County Superintendent, stated in a podcast interview that “internet access is a barrier for some (of our) families” (Jackson, 2020). But, for Dr Morrow and her team, it was not just access to course materials they worried about. Rather, providing internet access was about “creating opportunities for students to be in relationship with teachers and other students” (Rash, 2020).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), 79% of Lincoln County residents subscribe to broadband internet services. However, it is also important to note that this data is both outdated (adoption rates from 2014–2018), and the way in which the Bureau previously calculated adoption rates before

<sup>5</sup>It is important to note that the first author, as one of the nine regional “Teachers of the Year,” was part of Mariah’s TOY team that implemented her TOYT initiative. This first-hand experience and insider information was especially helpful in the time of COVID when other observation efforts were stymied.

2019 brings concern to the reliability of the data itself (Horrigan, 2019).

The announcement by Governor Roy Cooper regarding the closing of schools was made on Friday, March 16th. In the weeks that followed, some of the central office staff, including Dr Morrow, Steve Hoyle (Director of Technology) and Heath Belcher (Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum), noted the usage of the Wi-Fi in the parking lot by both students and teachers. Within two and half weeks following the March 16th announcement, the team came together to develop an exterior Wi-Fi option at many Lincoln County schools, an option not previously available. Dr Morrow and her team in Lincoln County knew that deploying school buses into communities that were loaded with Wi-Fi as a traveling hotspot had already been accomplished across the nation. But Dr Morrow's team also recognized that the parameters of their setup would have to be different due to their county's topography: "think sports stadium" (Rash, 2020).

For this team, they had to consider where the funding for this allocation would come from. Exterior Wi-Fi, cable, and access points had to be installed for each building, running between \$350 and \$450 each, totaling \$8,050–\$10,350. In this case, the funding resource for this particular innovation came from federal E-rate reimbursement funds (L. Morrow, personal communication, September 28, 2020).

### Community Partners as Leaders

While many communities and districts were scrambling to ensure equitable access to broadband and other technologies, other school districts across North Carolina were searching for how to address a more basic student need: steady meals. Acknowledging Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (McLeod, 2020), districts were recognizing that for many of their students the physiological needs would have to be met before they could begin to consider how to address content and curriculum. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2020) 58.6% of North Carolina students enrolled as Free and Reduced Lunch during the 2018–19 school year. From this same organization (2020), the data from 2016 to 2018 shows that 21% of all North Carolina children were living in households that became food insecure at some point during the school year. That number has remained relatively constant, within three percentage points, since 2009 for the State (Kids Count Data Center, 2020).

For example, Duplin County sits just southeast of Raleigh, the State's capital, and directly north of Wilmington, in what is known as the Southeast Region. The counties within this region are also a part of what is known geographically as the Coastal Plain; more accurately, Duplin sits in what is noted as the Inner Coastal Plain, since it does not have a direct outlay to the Atlantic Ocean. Understanding the geography of Duplin County is necessary in understanding that COVID-19 is not the first emergency that this county has faced. As it sits close to the coastal waters, Duplin County and the surrounding coastal counties, deal often with the threat of (and sometimes the direct impact of) hurricanes. Flooding, debris, and other aspects of a typical hurricane have impacted this county before. Responding to an emergency situation when schools have been shut down is not a new situation. And yet, COVID-

19 was a new situation because it impacted more than just the schools.

In response to the need for regular meals for students, Jabe Largen, the pastor of Faison United Methodist Church, along with members of La Roca Church of the Nazarene, developed a ministry entitled the Abundance Program. This program has been around for several years, established to address food insecurity during the summer months when students would not be in school sessions. According to Pastor Largen in an interview with EdNC (Parker, 2020), "Students lose about 10 meals per week during the summer months" when school is not in session. The Abundance Program served as an immediate responder to students in the community when COVID-19 shut schools down. However, the huge influx of need impacted the realization of the program during the pandemic in two significant ways: the inability to purchase food in bulk and the necessity of additional volunteers. In the past, for situations like hurricanes, neither purchasing in bulk nor having adequate volunteerism was a problem. Whereas, during COVID-19, potential volunteers were essentially under lock-down and stores and other outlets could not keep up with community demand.

In order to address these issues, Pastor Largen reached out to the community at large for support. In response to this call, Pastor Largen was able to establish partnerships with local restaurants who each committed to keeping the Abundance Program alive during these unprecedented times. The solution: Local restaurants would take turns making meals each day of the week. In addition, several community organizations took ownership of paying the bill for the supplies and services involved with this effort. Thus, this combination of community effort was able to address the problem of buying in bulk and the need for more volunteers. As a result, students in the county would still partake in regular school meals despite the challenges wrought by the pandemic. Parker (2020) noted in her article coverage of this crisis response, "This is what it looks like to solve two fundamental problems during a pandemic. The Abundance Program, with the support of the community, is also doing its part by keeping these small businesses in business."

### Time Marches On (And So Do the Challenges)

As of this writing, the state of North Carolina is now out of ERL and into more of SRL, with some nuances. To begin, prior to opening in the fall, Governor Cooper allowed for school districts across the state to enter into one of two learning options: hybrid learning (Plan B) or fully remote learning (Plan C) (Burns, 2020). Districts were required to outline details on how they would address each plan before the Governor's official announcement. District leaders would also need to show adherence to NCDHHS guidelines if they opted for the hybrid option. Thereafter, all plans must be submitted to NCDPI for approval. Additionally, the North Carolina General Assembly mandated that schools needed to begin no later than August 17, 2020, to presumably allow districts the opportunity to compensate for lost instructional time. It is of special note that this start date was created at the

end of the Spring by the General Assembly (2020) before COVID-19 positive test and death rates soared in North Carolina, and before school districts were informed of which Plan they could enact starting in the fall. Traditionally, schools across the state have begun around the fourth Monday of the month of August (NCGA, 2020). More recently, Governor Cooper also announced that only K-5 schools would be permitted to open up at full class capacity, called Plan A, still with NCDHHS guidance, based on “North Carolinians having doubled down on our safety and prevention efforts and stabilized our (coronavirus case) numbers. The science of lower viral spread among younger children also backs up our decision” (Burns and Fain, 2020).

As schools began in Plan B and Plan C throughout the state, neither option eradicated the dire needs that many of students were still experiencing during ERL. Rather, the issues discussed in each leadership exemplar are still in effect during SRL. These stop-gap measures, while important to local actors and praised in written and visual media, did not become part of the larger conversation across the state. That is, political actors such as the Governor and General Assembly did not initiate a political agenda to remedy continued unmet needs of educational access and child hunger until significantly later into the COVID crisis, particularly in mid to late fall. None of the leadership that was analyzed above was meant to establish long-term solutions to deeper rooted issues that have remained for many years. Instead, they created short-term solutions to address an emergency situation. As we have moved into SRL the critical conditions still remain: Not every student has reliable or any access to broadband, and many families are still struggling with hunger and food insecurity.

The State Superintendent of Public Instruction Mark Johnson was consistently and vocally absent during much of the ERL. While Governor Roy Cooper had his place in creating Executive Orders that impacted the trajectory of schools, Superintendent Johnson had the elected responsibility to help lead the State's districts through a tumultuous time of transition. Instead, much of the transitional leadership came from the State Board of Education (SBE), a politically appointed board. It should be noted that the role of the Superintendent and the SBE is meant to be a theoretical balance of powers in the educational sector. Both are meant to work in harmony and complement each other in this space; but one is meant to be the face of education and lead the charge in times including crisis: that of the Superintendent.

This lack of leadership left districts scrambling, most especially in the onset of the virus and school closures moving into ERL. As the summer progressed and the eventual announcement of schools moving into SRL was made, Superintendent Johnson continued to remain silent in his elected space. At this point, many districts felt that they had a better handle on their local situations and knew what to expect based on their experiences in the spring, and the State Board of Education produced many guiding documents to assist districts as they prepared to move forward in the fall.

As the state moves forward with SRL and makes the eventual move into full time, face to face learning environments, the needs

exacerbated by the pandemic, and highlighted by the authentic leadership scenarios, are ever present. Dr Morrow and her team succinctly pinpointed the disparity that still remains in regard to access to broadband across the State. Digital equity is an extensive dilemma that is impacted by the geography and topography of the State. In a 2018 report conducted within the State, it was found that at 259,000 households did not have “adequate access to broadband,” while at least half of all households across the State have no access to broadband due to financial constraints (NCDIT, 8). To further highlight the former picture of the Urban/Rural divide, it is noted that the “state's rural areas are particularly affected by the lack of access with 95 percent of those without service in rural communities” (NCDIT, 8).

Funding and directives from the General Assembly throughout the years have also lacked in directly addressing the broadband gap, which further accentuates the “urban/rural” divide. However, since the incursion of COVID-19, and with the help of federally funded initiatives such as the HEROES Act, the Governor of North Carolina has committed to over \$12m in grants to eleven of the rural counties to obtain access to high-speed internet, known as the GREAT Grant (NC Governor Roy Cooper, 2020). Additionally, the General Assembly appropriated an additional \$10m to the same GREAT Grant (General Assembly of North Carolina (GANC), 2020b) labeled as “student connectivity,” as well as a \$2.5m grant for satellite-based internet service for those in areas with no internet access (General Assembly of North Carolina (GANC), 2020a).

## DISCUSSION

Our exploration into leadership in the time of COVID showed examples of a troubling lack of leadership by those elected to do just that: Lead North Carolina schools in times of crises. However, other formal leaders at the local level worked against serious constraints to try to meet the needs of their students and teachers. We chose to focus on three exemplars that focused on the ways that educators, both formal and informal, are able to develop their roles in meaningful ways to transform into leaders of the educational space. The central factor in each leaders' decision-making and thought processes was clear: Doing what is in the best interests of students.

Beyond forefronting student needs, we discern that each scenario was made possible by the strong, creative disposition of each emerging leader. We learned that each community stakeholder recognized what had already existed within their space, both locally and beyond, and understood that having a solutions-oriented approach would only come from a grounded ingenuity. Because of their resourcefulness and innovation, each of these educational leaders subsequently designed a blueprint for how other leaders and communities could proactively respond to the emergency of this crisis.

While these efforts are to be applauded, they still do not, nor cannot, ensure that every North Carolinian will have reliable access to broadband, at least for now. Efforts to create access and equality to student connectivity must be met with funding mechanisms that go beyond simple grants, or non-recurring

funding routes. While we were well-aware of North Carolina's context, including the Urban/Rural Divide, we were relatively ignorant of the long political history around the development of public infrastructure and particular communities contracting with certain companies. Indeed, as we continue to sift through the archives, we are finding troubling connections between past political decisions and the current crises facing communities and schools across the state. This theme has especially piqued the interest of the first author and is quickly becoming a springboard for future dissertation research that utilizes historical and critical policy analysis methods.

In addition, we are learning much about the work of local, state, and federal dollars and/or grants that have been designed to help combat hunger and food insecurity. And we were delighted to discover the many creative ways that teachers, community folks, and local school leaders were stepping in to fill the void left by some formal leaders at the state level. This is especially interesting to the second author who studies alternative conceptions of who "counts" as an educational leader, especially in terms of rethinking leadership from the margins. That is, the second author explores questions like, "What will it take to create an environment that ignites students, parents, and community members to use their voices and emerge as co-leaders of their schools?" And, "What does that informal leadership look like and what transformations can be wrought in the process?" This is another area ripe for future research. The hope is that a series of case studies that seek to identify how a variety of communities are responding to students' educational needs during a global pandemic would emerge.

In terms of case selection for our future work, our goal is to take a look at both rural and urban contexts to provide important insights to inform national, state, and local response efforts. In terms of participants, an important sampling strategy for us moving forward will be to identify knowledgeable "key informants" who can identify "action informants" who came forward to take on important leadership roles at the community and district levels. Finally, but not exhaustively, we have a better sense of some of the literature we will call upon to guide our

future agenda. For example, online resources from various organizations are plentiful, such as the international Center for Creative Leadership that advises people from different walks of life how to lead in times of crises (Center for Creative Leadership, 2020). Also, some scholars of educational leadership have spent much of their research lives investigating ways educational leaders can navigate change, challenge, and crises in schools (Shapiro and Gross, 2013; Gross, 2020).

Taken together, we invite others to join us in exploring these areas discussed more deeply in their particular contexts, whether in the United States or abroad, as leadership in the time of COVID is a global issue. We are hungry, as many of our United States colleagues are across the educational spectrum, to learn more from those across a variety of global contexts.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Written informed consent was not obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article in accordance with local/national guidelines and/or IRB committee decision. That is, documents are publicly available and only public figures were contacted for comment; thus, this exploratory study is considered by our university IRB as exempt.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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