

School Leadership and Crisis Management During the COVID-19 Outbreak

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Abstract

COVID-19 required school leaders to make rapid decisions across health protection, learning continuity, staff work, family communication, resource allocation, and student welfare. This conceptual review argues that crisis leadership is not a sequence of announcements but a recurring cycle of sensemaking, prioritization, coordination, care, and learning. Evidence through 2021 is synthesized into a School Crisis Leadership Cycle designed for institutions with limited staff and incomplete information. The cycle begins with a verified situation picture, converts that picture into a small set of protected priorities, assigns decision rights and communication routes, monitors staff and learner burden, and records changes for the next cycle. The article distinguishes strategic decisions from routine reporting and proposes a minimum crisis register containing the issue, evidence, affected groups, owner, action, trigger, and review date. The framework is normative and testable; it does not evaluate a particular principal, school, or division.

Keywords: school leadership; crisis management; COVID-19; learning continuity; decision governance

Introduction

School leaders entered the outbreak with responsibility for people and systems they could no longer observe directly. Information changed quickly, health decisions affected educational access, and instructions from several levels had to be interpreted locally. Leaders also became communication hubs for staff, learners, parents, and community partners.

Research on early pandemic leadership emphasized communication, collaboration, care, rapid decision-making, and adaptive practice. Harris and Jones (2020) argued that school leadership during COVID-19 became increasingly distributed and context-dependent. Yet distribution without decision rights can produce confusion, while decisiveness without consultation can overlook access and welfare.

Purpose of the Article

This review asks what operating cycle can help school leaders make proportionate decisions under uncertainty, protect essential functions, and learn without creating an excessive reporting burden.

Conceptual Approach

Design and Source Base

The article integrates crisis-management concepts, early school-leadership research, and Philippine learning-continuity policy available through 2021. Evidence was mapped to recurring leadership functions rather than leadership personality: sensemaking, prioritization, coordination, care, and learning.

The unit of analysis is the school's crisis-management process. The framework does not assume that the school controls health policy, infrastructure, or household resources; it requires escalation when local authority is insufficient.

The School Crisis Leadership Cycle

Stage One: Build a Verified Situation Picture

Sensemaking begins with a small set of verified facts: current directives, health and safety conditions, learner reach, staff capacity, critical supplies, and unresolved welfare cases. Rumor, assumption, and confirmed evidence should be separated.

The situation picture must name uncertainty and its decision deadline. Leaders do not need complete information; they need to know what is material, who can verify it, and when waiting becomes more harmful than acting.

Stage Two: Protect a Small Set of Priorities

In crisis, every desirable activity cannot receive equal attention. Priorities usually include safety, connection with every learner, continuity of essential instruction, staff functioning, and welfare referral. Leaders should state what will be paused, simplified, or delegated.

A priority is credible only when time, personnel, communication, and materials are assigned. Adding a new requirement without removing another shifts the cost invisibly to teachers and families.

Stage Three: Coordinate Decisions and Communication

Each issue needs one accountable owner, participating roles, an escalation path, and a review date. Distributed leadership works when expertise is used close to the problem while decisions that alter safety, rights, or strategy remain appropriately authorized.

Communication should distinguish decision, rationale, action, effective date, affected groups, and help contact. Staff should not have to reconstruct policy from several chat threads.

Stage Four: Lead With Care and Boundaries

Care is operational. It includes realistic workload, psychological safety for reporting problems, access to leave or support, private handling of welfare concerns, and protection from continuous availability. Leaders cannot ask staff to sustain learner well-being while ignoring staff capacity.

Equity review belongs in every decision. A uniform online requirement can have unequal effects across connectivity, disability, language, work, and geography. Alternative routes should be designed before exclusion appears.

Stage Five: Learn and Renew

A brief review asks what was expected, what happened, why it differed, and which change will be completed by whom. The output is a corrected routine, not another narrative report. Repeated problems should be escalated when the school lacks resources or authority.

A crisis register provides institutional memory during staff turnover and rapid change. It also allows governing bodies to see why an action changed without

demanding a large planning office.

Table 1

Minimum school crisis register

Field	Leadership question	Required entry
Issue	What changed and why does it matter?	Verified fact and uncertainty
Priority	Which essential function is affected?	Priority and stop or simplify decision
Ownership	Who decides, acts, and escalates?	Owner, roles, and authority
Action	What happens, for whom, and by when?	Action, affected group, and date
Learning	What evidence will trigger revision?	Indicator, trigger, and review decision

Note. The table is an analytic tool proposed in this article; it does not report field measurements.

Discussion

The leadership cycle connects human care with decision discipline. Sensemaking without prioritization creates overload; priorities without coordination remain slogans; coordination without care exhausts staff; action without learning repeats failure.

Scope and Research Agenda

This conceptual review does not rank leadership styles or assess school outcomes. Early studies often captured visible leaders and exceptional practice during rapidly changing conditions. Future comparative and longitudinal research should examine decision quality, staff workload, learner reach, equity, and correction closure across different school contexts.

Conclusion

Effective crisis leadership is a repeatable institutional process, not heroic improvisation. A verified situation picture, a small set of protected priorities, clear decision rights, humane workload, and a concise learning record allow schools to act quickly without abandoning accountability or care.

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