

# Resilient Leadership in Action

Michigan School Leaders' Response to Unprecedented Challenges

Spring 2021



In March 2020, the global pandemic upended our schools, homes, and workplaces, and laid bare deeply rooted inequities in our society. In the summer, an antiracist movement was rekindled when a Minneapolis police officer brutally took the life of George Floyd. The fall brought a presidential election that further divided our country along ideological lines.

Families have suffered losses yet unmourned, accommodated various conceptions of remote instruction, and made sacrifices they wouldn't have been able to imagine two years ago. Yet, in the face of these unprecedented challenges, school leaders and administrators have found ways to support and inspire their students, families, teachers, and staff.

In spring 2021, members of MiSELA held three focus groups with a total of 14 Michigan school leaders about ways they have demonstrated resilient leadership amidst the challenges of the last year. In this brief, we share themes from these conversations to highlight their resilient attitudes and actions.

## Thank you to the school leaders who shared their stories:

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**Noelle Collis**, Bloomfield Hills School District, Science Teacher Leader  
**Casey Conaton**, Troy School District, Baker Middle School Assistant Principal  
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**Michigan's Social and Emotional Learning Alliance (MiSELA)** is a group of representatives from several Universities and Colleges as well as members from the K-12 education system focused on elevating SEL statewide. MiSELA members who contributed to this brief:

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# Focusing on Students' Holistic Needs

Leaders focused on supporting students' social, emotional, and academic needs.

The fact that I could lead an entire school year and not focus on rigor and fidelity with programs was remarkable. Finally, I had the ability to say, "Put first things first - be there for kids, build relationships, and keep those at the forefront." Not surprising, but we're still seeing the academic growth that we would have otherwise seen had we spent our time looking at textbooks and teacher manuals; that's really taught us something.

I'm very keen on giving students voice... "What do you think? You guys can talk to what is it that you think. You guys are living through unprecedented times, how are you guys processing it?" and being able to ask some questions, just like that, and just sit back and let them talk.

How can we leverage support for these students [of color] *from people of color*? With me, growing up in this area when things happened to me, people would say, "I can't imagine what you're feeling right now. I can't imagine what you're going through." And I'm like, "Right, you really can't." And so that's what I think about these students that are having these issues right now. Basically we have ... zero teachers of color, we have zero administration of color, we have zero counselors of color. So how are they reaching the needs of our students?

My building leadership team, my MTSS team, school improvement, we all have been talking around, how do we develop a structure...to meet the needs of students?

Each week I pick out five different kids to send a personalized letter to and I mail it to them at home.

It's just being honest and open with the kids and letting them know that we're there for them. It's not about us, it's about them.

I feel like I'm at my best when it's boots on the ground, working with our people on the front lines... Supporting students holistically so whether that's helping people with anxiety or academic engagement.

I'm a person who, I haven't been to a physical church in over a year and I'm a person that maybe will miss church three, four times a year. And online is just not the same. So, if online church is not the same for me, what is online school for kids who take pride in going to the schoolhouse?

## Supporting Teachers through Learning with Grace

Leaders spoke about the challenges of supporting teachers in a rapidly changing environment. Leaders showed their teachers grace and helped them learn necessary new skills for the transitions.

Providing lots of tech support and optional drop-in sessions and optional learning opportunities. Giving teachers the ability to choose how they teach and then giving a lot of support for that.

They needed to be comfortable to not get the technology right the first time. When they went virtual, they needed to be comfortable to not understand what screen castify was, to still be trying to send out links to Google classrooms.

One thing that really has been powerful for us is teacher collective efficacy and that we're all in this together.

Teachers being able to identify themselves on this continuum and then figuring out ways through our PLC model and collaboration of how to heighten that. And that's directly connected to teachers being engaged in the work.

We had some highs and lows with our teaching staff this year of them believing that they could do it... Giving teachers permission to get off that hamster wheel, "It's okay. I don't have the answer for you, and you don't have the answer. We just need to try something, and we also need to continue moving forward. Let's not get stuck."

My biggest challenge was the social emotional health of the staff. The staff has been at max anxiety level almost the entire year. ... dealing with the extraordinary amount of anxiety that they have.

Change is hard and it's only sustainable if you continue to push and grow that skill set, that comfort level, that support. Staff need to feel that success and that fire to say, "I can do this, and this is how I am going to do it."

I let everybody know that we see them, and we see what they're struggling with.... because I've seen people do amazing things and they're so adaptable, where they weren't before. ... I want to let the people I work with know that it's appreciated, and we see it, and the students see it.

# The Importance of Social-Emotional Learning

Leaders commented on how staff worked to incorporate social and emotional learning strategies.

We've actually implemented our social emotional curriculum into our PLC and using that as a way to do staff wellness ... modeling as well as then having those organic conversations with staff in that safe environment of those PLCs has really allowed staff to then continue that into their classroom ... Some staff were uncomfortable with some of those discussions or unsure how to facilitate those discussions and now are feeling more confident in that.

There are a lot of teachers, although we have this isolated 20 minutes a day for social emotional learning, their comfort level isn't there with the material and with the content, so I think the next phase that I hope we can launch into is equipping our staff so that their comfort level and their confidence is at a place where they can really execute the material and connect with students.

We leveraged support from our occupational therapist who conducted an after school professional learning session for our paraprofessionals about calming strategies. Together, we learned how to help students self-manage their feelings of frustration, how we can support therapeutic rapport, and find ways to tap into students' sensory diets for calming strategies and problem-solving.

Social emotional learning is not natural for some folks. They can teach reading and writing, math, too, but how could we offer resources? How do we as building leaders really incorporate that in a strategic way in our buildings? ... It's not an easy, comfortable spot for our teachers to really feel like we're being effective in social emotional learning.

I brought in the social worker just to give the kids relaxation tips on how to handle the stress. We all practice, we take time every day ... our daily check-ins, how we're feeling.

I want the SEL to be a focus but ...I really want us to have tools that the teachers can use to try to address things, but I also want this to be an interwoven part of the classroom so it's not something extra, it's not something that some teachers do and other teachers don't. I want that fidelity piece of it being integral to the classroom without mandating exactly how they do it.

## Shared Decision-Making

Leaders recognized their own limitations... and the benefits of sharing responsibilities with others.

I realized that my role as a leader had changed. And I took a little comfort and a little solace in relinquishing what would otherwise be power as a “sole decision maker” and relying on the input from the committee, from the team, from the teachers, from the community, from the parents, etc. because this was not a moment for one person to be at the helm, making these decisions that impact everyone without the input of everyone.

Given the pandemic, given all of the changes, given all of the needs, not just with students, but my staff members, or the district, when I was able to find the pulse of my students, find the pulse of my staff and my community, I felt better equipped to do the job.

I know that we think that we run around with a cape on under our shirts every day, but we don't know the answers to these questions and we're not the ones doing the work. We have great teachers that are also great leaders and great communicators and so instead of us flubbing it up let's just have them do it if they're willing to do it.

Decision-making can not fall on one person's shoulders; it's really about the systems we create and how we use them. Our school has an SEL committee with subsets that specialize in specific ways we promote self-care. One subcommittee looks at exercise, one focuses on nutrition, others focus on wellness and so on. Those groups are made up of teachers and counselors.

I look for the places where I can leverage, where I can support, because I don't make all the decisions.

One of the things that I really learned this summer was the value of getting other voices and asking people to help. Once the state issued the roadmap to going back to school, we formed committees in our school and all of the different staff members chose the areas that they wanted to work on.



## Increased Awareness and Attention to Inequities

Leaders spoke about how the pandemic and racial justice movements of 2020 surfaced both feelings of frustration and optimism.

I do think the pandemic expedited us in ways that had it not happened, we would still be where we were. But I feel like we gotta hit the throttle, it's time to really fly because the framework of traditional school does not meet everyone's needs..... The pandemic has exposed a lot of our vulnerabilities and things that have not been working in education. But I feel like there's a level of reluctance to turn the system upside down and reconstruct it. I keep waiting for that moment to happen.

They say, "Don't grow weary in well-doing," but it's quite difficult. ...How do you shift the mindset of a grown person? Who was raised in it, for whatever reason. So, that continues to be difficult. Ultimately, where we want to get for the sake of kids - Black, Brown, and white children - we got to get to a place where the policies in which we ordain our organizations, or we run our organizations are our best fit for all. The way to do that is to address the behaviors of adults.

After the death of George Floyd we had a Black Lives Matter rally ... And from that the curriculum director reached out to me...And we continued to meet over a period of time and in November we formed an Equity Task Force. ...

There was an incident - they call it the "slave trade" - where they take students and they actually put a price on them and trade them throughout Snapchat and those students were students of color from our area.

I also sit on an Antiracist Community BIPOC Task Force, and we sent four demands to the Board of Education. ... After the meeting they have stepped forward to create culturally responsive education school policies, with support from our local Antiracism Task Force.

[The district] does hold some responsibility because, at the end of the day, they're teaching our kids. But this happened off school grounds, and so I called on the community to take a look in the mirror because that's where the problem lies, the parenting and the communities.

...And so that's where I'm at right now. It's not a good place, but it is a good place because we're moving forward and we're taking the necessary steps to combat where we're at right now in our society.

## Increased Awareness and Attention to Inequities

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How do you get to the core of individuals in your organization and then, how do you design policies and systems in place that are student-centered? The goal is to deconstruct some of these layers of institutional racism. The pandemic forced us to stop and pay attention. When you have the trauma of what students have been privy to through the media and their own experiences, then the isolation of digital learning, how do we as leaders work to meet people where they are?

That's why there were the home visits and the phone calls because we wanted to eliminate any excuses. Whether it was paying a bill or whatever, a mortgage, it didn't matter, like we were doing whatever we had to do to make sure that our kids had an opportunity to learn.... For those [students] that were less engaged, 50% of the time there was a financial struggle, there was significant family issues present in the home that needed us to push in with other therapists, push in with our social workers, push in with our psychologists. And things of that nature.

I was a middle school principal in a lower socioeconomic school district and when I worked in that building, we talked about diversity and inclusion all the time ... it was part of our daily conversation in that school district. Then, when I moved to a more affluent district, it wasn't. It was like maybe an underlying conversation. Now having that be at the forefront, it's amazing work and it's great work and it's work that I'm surprised that a district that large hasn't been working on for longer.

Right now, as we're closing up the year, a great number of teachers want kids retained because they're not where they're supposed to be at. And it's like they seem to forget Covid, they seem to forget that a lot of these students did not work virtually well, did not have supportive parents, did not have any social emotional support when they were home, had family members that they lost due to Covid that they're like forgetting. They're so focused, sometimes on the teaching part they're forgetting everything else that these kids have been through and some of our kids have been through a lot this year.

## Working Together Across Contexts

The pandemic broke down the boundaries between home, school, and community. Leaders commented on the benefits of working together on behalf of students.

During this time, as students are learning from home, parents have been deputized as educators... the success of our kids is too daunting of a task for teachers to handle alone. ... Being able to have those conversations with parents, with other stakeholders ...everybody had to rely on, communicate with each other. That's something that was amplified during this time, and that I hope that will continue.

I think that our families and communities have been very flexible and very supportive. I know that our schedule has been a tad bit challenging, particularly for working parents.... [It] requires a lot of understanding from parents, a lot of flexibility and a lot of support.

The whole process around collaboration, we kind of took that to a different platform. Whether it was social media, whether it was surveys and things of that nature to our families constantly, to my staff making personal phone calls and dropping by homes each weekend. ... There just had to be a task team that would not allow any barriers to get in the way of what we needed to hear and what we needed to know about our community and our students' families, about the staff. Once some of that data was collected and you really found out what people were struggling with, which it was real for everybody, it made it a little easier.

The families have been unbelievable. The support, the pivoting. ...You always want families to understand what's going on at school and about the decisions that you make, and sometimes they don't understand that. In the past, they haven't but I feel like this year they've been very understanding about that.

Our community has been amazing - super supportive, they've rolled with all of the changes and it's been a remarkably positive year in so many ways.

One of the things that I've seen is that our community is an asset. There were so many things that were going on during the pandemic that teachers couldn't do. And I don't want to say the community stepped up, the community was already doing this stuff...  
We've done quite a bit of video podcasts for teachers and parents as well.



# Navigating Continued Challenges Takes its Toll

Leaders shared how challenges impacted their physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being.

I'm just tired, I am so exhausted, and I think spring break made that worse. I came back and I just felt like I'm not sure how many more reserves I have after keeping it together for so long and I find myself super impatient.

I felt stuck and there was nothing I could do about it. I just felt like I was not living up to my potential and I wasn't doing a good job and I was in tears, like all the time.

I feel like there are probably moments every day, where I feel I'm at my best, and then I have moments every day, where I really feel like I don't know what I'm doing.

Over the last three weeks I'm starting to feel it. Like I was jazzed. I was like, "We can do this, this will be great! We'll be from home..." since last March and literally in the last three weeks, I'm tired. I'm just tired. And I know I've got to finish strong but I'm just tired. ... It's hard. I don't want to start crying right now but, I mean not that I will, but it's just, I don't know how else to say it. It's tough.

I would say that I think that this whole experience has been very humbling. And humbling to the extent that as an educator you can feel helpless, you know, "What can I do?" And oftentimes, we feel like we got to do it ourselves. ...I think that oftentimes that can lead to burnout and it can also lead to resentment.

That mental piece, too, is a struggle, because it's hard to not get cynical, too and think like, "Oh it's just going to go back to the way it was." ... I get fatigued about that, like if I start to go in on that wheel, it's hard to have a positive outlook.

I also don't know if it registers in people's mind to check on us as leaders, as we checked on them. ... Many may think, "Well they're the leader, they have to have it all under control." Well, not really. There's a lot of anxiety we face as well. There's a lot of uncertainty that we face as well. There's a lot of, "Man, I hope I get this right," because what's at stake is bigger than you could ever imagine.

## Relying on Other School Leaders for Support

Leaders talked about the importance of mutual support and community.

I talked to friends of mine, I say, "Look, we experienced a few decades worth of change within a few months!" ... and so, myself and colleagues, educators and school leaders ... we made it a point to get on every week...getting at least an hour, we can talk to each other and talk to ideas and things like that.

I tap into my tribe as often as possible. As a building leader, you get so consumed with everything that's happening here, to the point of where you have nothing left to give. My work tribe includes two other administrators so since the weather has been pretty decent and mild here, we will walk for two miles in the middle of the day.

I actually find that I take better care of myself when I can connect with other leaders that are going through the same thing that I am. Being part of different forums and networks allows us to share ideas and information. I'm part of #MEMSPachat on Twitter and love that connection. I can't always respond, but I sure do connect with some amazing principals and teacher leaders who share some of the things that they're thinking and going through. It helps me feel more connected, because when you're in a leadership position like this, it can really feel like you're on an island where nobody really sees what we do.

I think that this time has forced us to kind of find our network and rely on our network of individuals for support in ways we may not have had to reach out to them previously. Out of necessity.

I'm fortunate to have eleven colleagues at the elementary level. ... We meet every Friday ... and we just talk and support each other. And it's been a game changer for me. Because before this time we were really eleven individual schools. And now we're a team that I could pick up a phone and call any one of those folks at any time for any issue and that wasn't the case before Covid. So that's helped me professionally.

Beginning of the school year, as an admin team, we met daily for a long time to kind of keep ourselves number one and in a way, that was mentally for us, to be able to bounce ideas off each other, check in on each other, and then we started planning for the upcoming school year.

# Taking Care of Themselves

Leaders shared their own strategies for relieving stress and staying focused.

Sitting is like the new smoking. So being mindful of, "I've been sitting in front of a computer for this many hours, so every hour I need to get up and do something." Because if you feel physically - if you're not in motion - it'll cause you to feel another kind of way, maybe mentally and emotionally. So really trying to balance the physical and emotional.

We don't have all the answers and it's okay to leave work and leave some unfinished things.... I've allowed myself to have that time to really have that weekend to unplug and figure out the other things. It will all get done.

I have been very intentional about, "Okay, this is my max for Zoom meetings for the day" because when I exceed that, then I am not at my best. I have three children... so my house is nuts. I have to be balanced or I can't be present for them in the evening, either, so I am very intentional about that.

The biggest thing that has helped me take care of myself is making time for spiritual growth and staying in tune with my personal beliefs. I think that that was what really helped me get through a lot of the struggles.

## Other Ideas Leaders mentioned:

- Weekend getaways
- Walks outside
- Exercise
- Reading
- Connecting with family
- Hydrating
- Never-ending Bubble Wrap
- Playing with pets
- Occasional days off

The silliest little text message that has an animated gif or meme can make a world of difference, especially when you're in a tense moment. The power of laughter and all of those endorphins that are released when we smile and laugh carry us through.