District
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Restarting Schools and Managing Through the Pandemic

Applying DMGroup Strategies

by John J-H Kim and Kathleen Choi

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Within a matter of weeks this past spring, virtually every school building in the country abruptly closed, sending students home with worksheets and/or laptops and leaving district staff working day and night to continue to provide not only instruction but meals and other critical supports to their students and families. By late spring, it became evident that for the majority of schools, a return to normal in the fall would be unlikely. Districts and schools began urgently making plans for the new school year amid tremendous uncertainty, conflicting information, shifting guidelines, and fluctuating local infection rates.

To support districts in planning for the fall, DMGroup quickly put forth a framework for organizing teams and approaching the work of successfully restarting schools. Critical to success in confronting any unfamiliar challenge on such a tight timeline is organizing teams and creating a process for effectively and efficiently

working together to innovate and to implement plans. DMGroup partnered closely with over 70 districts in the late spring and early summer of 2020, and these districts began by organizing themselves based on the DMGroup framework. Then, DMGroup combined a variety of our strategies and tools to support these districts in their planning process. We had districts incorporate a rapid-cycle, iterative approach to developing solutions; develop schedules for in-person, hybrid, and remote models using DMSchedules, our scheduling software; participate in a cohort model so that districts could share ideas and vet each other's plans; and apply many other aspects of our change management framework.

The resulting plans varied from region to region, sometimes from district to district, but the process and the strategies employed helped organize the work, create alignment, and better prepare these districts to restart school. These districts also feel better prepared to respond

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to pivots that may be necessary during the school year; they have done much scenario planning, and their teams are well organized and accustomed to functioning effectively together. We hope that by sharing the frameworks and strategies here, we can help more districts successfully navigate the challenging year ahead and provide the support and learning opportunities that students so desperately need.

COVID-19: Presenting Unprecedented Challenges

Planning to restart schools in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic has been tremendously challenging, requiring districts and schools to rethink the way almost everything is done, from instruction and intervention to transportation, facility management, and food service.

The confluence of the following factors related to the pandemic rendered planning and managing the needed changes particularly complex:

- **Public health challenge:** The lives of students, their families and communities, teachers, and staff are at stake.

- **Evolving understanding of COVID-19, with shifting guidelines:** Doctors and scientists knew very little about the virus during the spring and summer, and are still in the process of learning about COVID-19 — how it spreads, how it affects different patients, how it can be treated, how immunity works, how it might mutate, etc. The research has been continually evolving and the recommendations have changed as more is learned.

- **Shifting circumstances:** Because infection rates continue to fluctuate, schools need to be prepared to respond accordingly and to pivot among different plans depending on local infection rates and evolving research.

- **Lack of agreement/divergence of opinion:** There have been differences of opinion about how

to respond to the virus within almost every community. Positions have been growing increasingly polarized and politicized.

- **Compressed timeline:** Districts and schools had very little time to prepare for the fall. During this school year, districts and schools must be prepared to quickly pivot between remote, hybrid, and in-person models as needed or allowed.

- **Scrutiny:** Every decision is subject to tremendous scrutiny by experts, by students and their families, by the community, and by the court of public opinion. The polarization and politicization of the pandemic response heighten the scrutiny of district decisions even further.

The impact of the pandemic on education is almost unprecedented in its complexity, but the urgency with which changes are required has not allowed for the careful, linear planning process that districts generally employ. The sector is used to piloting or phasing-in changes and making sure large-scale changes are well thought through and well vetted. And rightly so, given the unique context in which schools operate: public schools are heavily regulated, use public funds, have multiple stake-holders, and are entrusted with the futures of our nation's youth. But in the face of this pandemic, the traditional approach and the "cover all your bases" mindset simply are not possible. Districts and schools need to adopt an entirely new approach and mindset toward change.

DMGroup's Framework for Restarting Schools

At District Management Group, we believed that *how* a district approached constructing a plan was critical and would make a significant difference in the quality of the plans produced.

In our preliminary discussions with superintendents across the country, we were hearing that in districts large and small, superintendents were getting involved in the minute details — doing everything from walking around classrooms with tape measures to drafting communications

to talking to teachers about instruction. With so much work to be done, having the superintendent involved at this level would not be sustainable, would not necessarily lead to the best outcomes, and would not be the best use of resources.

DMGroup believed the planning process needed to be strategically divided into pieces, and tackled by separate working groups composed of individuals who have a granular understanding of the particular topic area being addressed. Superintendents needed to embrace distributed leadership and empower those intimately familiar with the details of the work to develop detailed plans and to execute them. And superintendents needed to keep their focus on the coherence of the plans developed by the working groups, and on equity and health issues. As leaders, they also needed to spend time building support for the plan.

DMGroup therefore put together a framework for restarting schools (*Exhibit 1*). This framework drew upon principles embedded in our change management framework (*Exhibit 2*), which complements process management with strategies to help bring along the people involved — with leaders serving as role models to help evolve the culture of the district. Our change management framework is adapted from John Kotter's well-known and highly practiced "8-Step Process for Leading Change," and incorporates ideas from Jeanie Duck's *The Change Monster* and Kurt

Lewin's Three Stage Model of Change, as well as from the Center for Creative Leadership, *Harvard Business Review*, McKinsey & Company, and others.[1] We adapted and synthesized these frameworks based on our own experience working with and within school districts across the country.
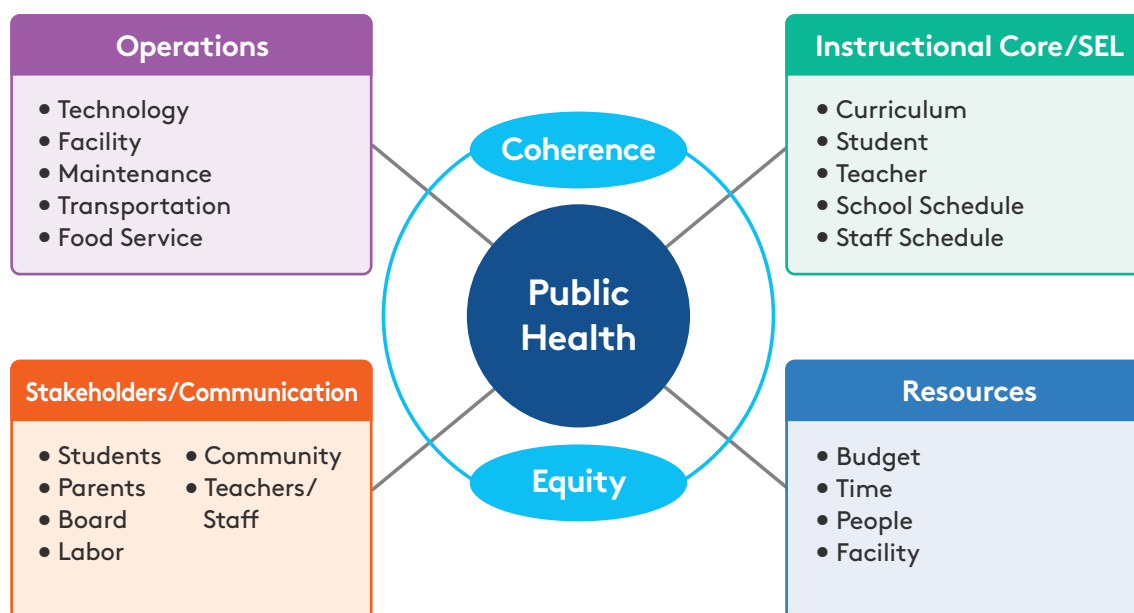
To tackle the enormous challenges at hand, we began by recommending the creation of four working groups, as outlined in our framework for restarting schools, to access deep, detailed knowledge. We then recommended forming a steering committee charged with bringing these workstreams together and keeping health and equity issues front and center. The working groups are essentially equivalent to what in our change management framework we call the "volunteer army," following Kotter's coinage, while the steering committee is equivalent to Kotter's and our "guiding coalition" (see *Exhibit 2*).[2]

Four Working Groups

The following four working groups were created to cover critical areas of concern:

- **Instructional core/SEL working group** was responsible for addressing the academic and social-emotional needs of all students in each mode of instruction (in-person, remote, and hybrid learning).

Exhibit 1 **DMGROUP'S FRAMEWORK FOR RESTARTING SCHOOLS, FALL 2020**

Operations
- Technology
- Facility
- Maintenance
- Transportation
- Food Service

Instructional Core/SEL
- Curriculum
- Student
- Teacher
- School Schedule
- Staff Schedule

Stakeholders/Communication
- Students
- Parents
- Board
- Labor
- Community
- Teachers/ Staff

Resources
- Budget
- Time
- People
- Facility

Coherence

Public Health

Equity

Source: DMGroup.

Exhibit 2 DMGROUP'S CHANGE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

Adapted from John Kotter's "8-Step Process for Leading Change," with additional material from the Center for Creative Leadership, *Harvard Business Review*, McKinsey & Company, *The Change Monster* by Jeanie Duck, and Lewin's 3-Stage Model of Change

- **Operations working group** was charged with developing schedules for the various scenarios; developing plans for facility use, facility maintenance, and student and staff hygiene; planning details for food service, transportation, and COVID cleaning requirements; addressing academic technology needs; and much more.

- **Stakeholders/Communications working group** was tasked with addressing everything from ensuring that the district has contact information for all students to developing strategies for engaging stakeholders and building support. This group had to determine which channels of communication would be most effective, what the communications would look like, and how to build support among stakeholders.

- **Resources working group** was charged with developing plans for multiple financial scenarios and addressing how all resources would be used, including not only funding, but staff time, instruction time, facilities, etc. For example, facilities are part of operations, but they are also a key resource.

Steering Committee

Led by the superintendent, the steering committee was responsible for ensuring coherence and equity for all students throughout the entire plan, all while keeping public health concerns at the forefront. In addition to making sure the reopening plan was viable, the steering committee was also charged with keeping an eye on the long-term strategic goals of the district. When selecting members of the committee, the superintendent needed

to consider each person's clout, skills, and ability to build support for the plan.

Applying Key Steps of DMGroup's Change Management Framework

District Management Group's change management framework was designed for implementing a large-scale change effort under normal circumstances. In working on reopening plans with districts this summer, we leveraged several of the steps from the framework. As mentioned above, the steering committee and working groups structure recommended by the framework for restarting schools align with Step 2: Building a Guiding Coalition and Step 4: Enlist a Volunteer Army, respectively.

Another key piece of work done this summer was related to Step 3: Form a Strategic Vision and Initiatives. For this step, DMGroup worked with each of the districts to articulate both a Vision of Success and Guiding Principles to guide them through the fall reopening and the likely tumultuous year ahead.

Establishing a Vision of Success

It is easy to skip over the step of establishing a vision of success and assume that everyone knows the task at hand: figure out how to restart school! But, in one district, for example, we asked 10 people on the Instructional Core/SEL working group to write down their vision of success, and we received widely varying responses. One team member emphasized keeping students healthy and safe; another emphasized ensuring that academic achievement standards were not compromised during periods of remote and hybrid learning. These two people would potentially be working toward quite different visions. It is therefore a critically important step to articulate a clear, concise vision of success for the effort as whole. Only then can you be assured that everyone is working toward the same goal.

Guiding Principles

Given that so many decisions had to be made in so short a time, we also recommended articulating Guiding Principles at the outset. The guiding principles needed to encapsulate the district's values and be specific enough to guide important and difficult tradeoffs that would have to be made.
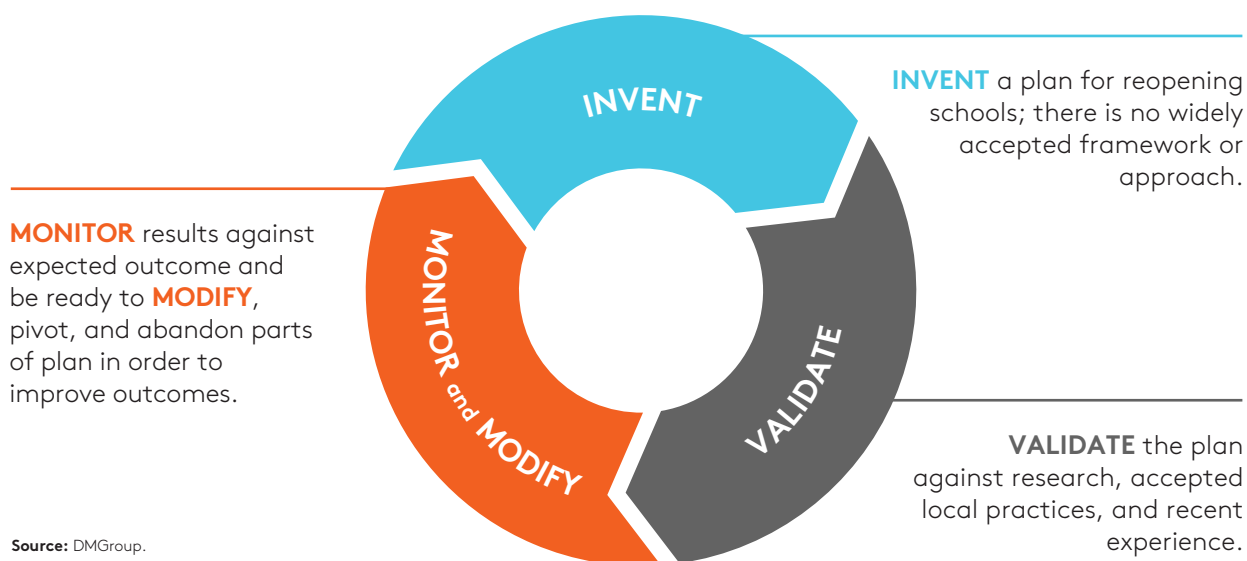
The following are some examples of guiding principles; as you will see, these have very different implications for managing tradeoffs:

- We will prioritize serving our younger students in person in the event of limited classroom space.

- We will prioritize students in transition; freshmen and seniors will be prioritized for in-person learning.

- We will prioritize serving students with special needs and our most vulnerable populations.

- We will provide parents the opportunity to choose the mode of instruction that best meets the needs of their children.

Being clear about the guiding principles at the outset made it easier to make tradeoffs and decisions about how to restart school. These guiding principles will continue to help districts as they navigate the school year, which is likely to require making many more tradeoffs and decisions about how best to support students.

Incorporating an Agile Approach

To put together the complex plans needed for restarting schools in the fall, the four working groups and steering committee needed to shift from a "cover all your bases" approach to an agile, innovative, "Don't let the perfect be

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INVENT

MONITOR and MODIFY

VALIDATE

INVENT a plan for reopening schools; there is no widely accepted framework or approach.

MONITOR results against expected outcome and be ready to **MODIFY**, pivot, and abandon parts of plan in order to improve outcomes.

VALIDATE the plan against research, accepted local practices, and recent experience.

Source: DMGroup.

the enemy of the good" approach. Do you remember the days of Windows95 and Windows98? After years of careful development and testing, Microsoft used to release these new versions with fanfare, like the release of a vintage wine. As we all know, the tech world no longer operates like that. They use an Agile approach in which new software in the form of apps are pushed out quickly and updates are provided frequently based on testing, feedback, and actual use.[3]

The working groups and steering committees were encouraged to adopt this agile approach based on rapid, iterative development cycles (*Exhibit 3*). Each week, the four working groups were urged to come up with ideas, envision the details of how these ideas would work in practice, present them to the steering committee, and then iterate further on the idea or jettison it if necessary. In these unprecedented times, there was no "right" plan, no off-the-shelf, well-vetted plan to turn to. District and school leaders, teachers, and staff needed to think creatively and explore innovations. They could then validate their ideas against research, local practices, their peer districts in the cohort, and lessons learned from the spring.

This concept of rapid-cycle, iterative development is one DMGroup applies as part of its DMBreakthroughTeams approach. In this approach, small teams work for a short period of time (usually 10 weeks) to achieve a performance goal. Each week, the team works together to

generate ideas, test them, measure the impact, and then iterate or pivot until they achieve their goal. It is a way of learning leadership skills and teamwork skills, all while achieving measurable results. DMGroup leveraged this technique in the school reopening work: each week, the working group teams had to come up with new ideas, test them out through scenario planning, and iterate until they achieved a workable plan.

Creating Cohorts: Together We Are Stronger

Our restarting schools framework helped districts organize themselves and their approach to the challenge. But DMGroup believed that districts would also greatly benefit from coming together to share ideas and support each other.

DMGroup has always firmly believed in the power of having district leaders come together to share ideas, challenge and vet each other's ideas, and support each other intellectually and emotionally through the many challenges of district leadership; this has been a foundational principle of our organization since our founding in 2004.

Therefore, in addition to DMGroup's working directly with each of these 70 districts, we organized the districts by state into cohorts. Each cohort met online on a regular basis at the steering committee level and the working

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group level to share ideas, share drafts of plans, discuss and debate features of plans, and support each other as they navigated shifting health guidelines, evolving research about COVID-19, and updates on infection rates, all amid a national atmosphere of polarized and politicized opinions about the reopening of schools.

Coordinating with other districts by state provided the opportunity to tap the collective intelligence and wisdom of the group. Collaborating with peers brought energy and provided support to staff, helped ensure that the best ideas got surfaced, and helped to vet and validate the approaches pursued.

Creating Schedules for Multiple Scenarios Using DMSchedules

To support the 70 districts in developing their plans, we encouraged the participating districts to use DMSchedules, DMGroup's scheduling software. District working group teams were able to quickly and easily explore multiple scenarios for remote, hybrid, and in-person schedules. For example, they could experiment with building different hybrid models and see exactly how each one would look.

By the end of the summer, the majority of the participating districts had built schedules for all three scenarios and felt ready to pivot when needed. They also felt encouraged knowing that the schedule-sharing feature of DMSchedules would allow them to share the schedules with the click of a button with all teachers and staff.

Ready for the Year Ahead

The process the 70 districts went through not only helped them develop plans for the fall restart of school, but helped them feel prepared for the pivots among remote, hybrid, and in-person models that may be required in the year ahead. Having done much scenario planning and having worked closely as a team throughout the summer, these districts feel agile and ready to take on the challenges posed by COVID-19.

During the 2020-21 school year, the districts are keeping their working groups active and in place. The working groups have gelled and team members have become familiar with working together and innovating together, which should serve them well as they navigate the challenging year ahead.

We at DMGroup hope that the above-mentioned strategies and frameworks for developing school reopening plans might help other district leaders as they navigate the additional changes that likely will be needed during this academic year in response to the ongoing pandemic. ◆

NOTES

1 John Kotter, "8-Step Process [for Leading Change]," Kotter, accessed October 1, 2020, https://www.kotterinc.com/8-steps-process-for-leading-change/, and Jeanie Daniel Duck, *The Change Monster: The Human Forces That Fuel or Foil Corporate Transformation and Change* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001). For a summary of Lewin's model, see Mind Tools Comment Team, "Lewin's Change Management Model: Understanding the Three Stages of Change," MindTools.com, 2019, https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM_94.htm. Other sources consulted were DeAnne Aguirre and Micah Alpern, "10 Principles of Leading Change Management," *Strategy + Business* 75 (June 2014), https://www.strategy-business.com/article/00255; N. Anand and Jean-Louis Barsoux, "What Everyone Gets Wrong About Change Management," *Harvard Business Review* (November–December 2017), https://hbr.org/2017/11/what-everyone-gets-wrong-about-change-management?referral=03759&cm_vc=rr_item_page.bottom; Ron Ashkenas, "Change Management Needs to Change," *Harvard Business Review* (April 2013), https://hbr.org/2013/04/change-management-needs-to-cha; Amanda Athuraliya, "8 Vital Change Management Tools for Effectively Managing Change," *Creately* blog, January 29, 2019, https://creately.com/blog/diagrams/change-management-tools-list/; Ron Carucci, "Leading Change in a Company That's Historically Bad at It," *Harvard Business Review* (August 2019), https://hbr.org/2019/08/leading-change-in-a-company-thats-historically-bad-at-it; Jeanie Daniel Duck, "The Change Monster," BCG (Boston Consulting Group), April 15, 2001, https://www.bcg.com/en-us/publications/2001/change-monster-human-forces-fuel-foil-corporate-transformation-change.aspx; Jeanie Daniel Duck, "Lessons from Three Decades with the Change Monster," BCG, July 2008, https://www.bcg.com/publications/2008/lessons-from-three-decades-change-monster.aspx; David Jacquemont, Dana Maor, and Angelika Reich, "How to Beat the Transformation Odds," McKinsey & Company, April 1, 2015, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/how-to-beat-the-transformation-odds; John P. Kotter, "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail," *Harvard Business Review* (May–June 1995), https://hbr.org/1995/05/leading-change-why-transformation-efforts-fail-2; Shannon Muhly Bendixen, Michael Campbell, Corey Criswell, and Roland Smith, "Change-Capable Leadership: The Real Power Propelling Successful Change," Center for Creative Leadership, 2017, https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Change-Capable-Leadership.pdf; Greg Satell, "Change Management: 4 Tips for Managing Organizational Change," *Harvard Business Review* (August 2019), https://hbr.org/2019/08/4-tips-for-managing-organizational-change?referral=03759&cm_vc=rr_item_page.bottom, and Marcel van Assen, Gerben van den Berg, and Paul Pietersma, *Key Management Models: The 60+ Models Every Manager Needs to Know* (Harlow, UK: Financial Times/Prentice Hall, 2010). For an in-depth discussion of DMGroup's change management framework, see "Spotlight: Leading Change: A Framework for Forging Change That Lasts" in this issue.

2 Kotter, "8-Step Process."

3 For more on the Agile approach to software development, see Eric Ries, *The Lean Startup: How Today's Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses* (New York: Crown Business, 2011). See also "Agile Innovation at DMGroup," *District Management Journal* 21 (Spring 2017): 42–44.