BRIDGING THE EVIDENCE TO POLICY GAP: A LEARNING PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

School leadership has never been more complex or critical than it is today. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic struck and left over 1.5 billion children out of school, a range of factors, including globalization, new models of learning, and emerging science, led policymakers to identify school leadership as a key priority in tackling school quality and improvement challenges worldwide (Vaillant, 2015; Okoko, 2020; Robinson, 2008). Indeed, Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2019) suggest that school leadership has a significant effect on elements of school organization which positively impact teaching and learning, and thus is a crucial factor in the success of school improvement.

Nevertheless, significant gaps in knowledge on leadership persist, particularly in relation to the developing nations of the Global South where the worldwide learning crisis is most acute (Sampat et al., 2020). There, hundreds of millions of students remain years behind peers in developed nations in reading, math, and essential life skills, a disparity aggravated by the COVID-19 crisis (World Bank, 2018). The pandemic has shed more light on the deep inequities that permeate the world's education systems, and particularly the unequal access to quality education between children from wealthy versus poorer nations. The challenge to build back after the crisis is a crucial opportunity for investment in school leadership research and new thinking on the role of leadership in tackling the toughest educational challenges of reducing systemic inequities and bridging learning gaps.

GENERATING NEW EVIDENCE ON LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19

In Fall 2020, at the height of the pandemic, WISE, the Education Commission, and Education Development Trust came together with the aim of generating new evidence on effective leadership during COVID-19.

A learning partnership was developed with the Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB), which was already focused on improving the country's school leaders, to undertake rapid research on school and system leadership during COVID-19. The aim of the project was threefold: to shed light on the role that effective school and system leaders played during school closures and reopening in mitigating inequalities for the most vulnerable; to ascertain what essential leadership skills, competencies and behaviors leaders demonstrated to promote equity in delivery during and after the crisis; and to contribute to the emerging body of evidence of case studies in school leadership in the Global South. Research and data collection within the context of COVID-19 was valuable because it provided a unique look into a future global landscape where particular skills, competencies and behaviors will be required to successfully deliver education to children in a world of uncertainty.

As the first in a series of case studies, Rwanda was chosen because of its commitment to improving school leadership and management, and its work embedding collaborative structures to implement change.

A School Leadership and Management Unit (SLMU) was created within the Teacher Development and Management and Career Guidance and Counselling Department at Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB). A continuous professional development diploma course in effective school leadership was developed to help equip headteachers and deputy headteachers with competences to be successful (VVOB, 2018).

At the local level, a system of coaching and professional learning communities was established to complement in-service training and build a national and local cadre of leaders of learning who can support headteachers.

MORE THAN A RESEARCH PROJECT: THE LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

This research leveraged Education Development Trust's existing relationship with REB, established through the Building Learning Foundations Programme, to undertake an innovative 'learning partnership' approach to the research.

The learning partnership approach consists of three stages: Co-designing, data gathering and reflection, and influencing decision-making. Ideally, this approach is undertaken through several learning cycles in which these stages overlap and feed back into each other.

From the very beginning, REB engaged as a critical 'co-creation' partner in each phase of the process - from defining the research questions to designing the tools, analyzing the data, and interpreting the findings. This ensured that the key issues investigated were priorities for local education stakeholders and promoted an ongoing, dynamic dialogue that not only shaped the research, but ensured continuous reflection from those using the evidence to inform their work. A critical element of the learning partnership approach was immediate feedback and discussion of findings as they emerged at each stage of the research (survey, interviews, case study schools) to influence policy and decision-making so they could be acted on in real time and create live impact. REB worked with the research team to refine the research tools as we moved from one phase of the research to the next, creating an interactive and overlapping process of design, reflection and decision-making.

MORE THAN A RESEARCH PROJECT

Our learning partnership approach helped close the gap between research/ evidence and policy/ action

STAGES OF THE LEARNING PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

CO-DESIGNING THE RESEARCH

All partners worked together to shape the concept and scope of the project, collaboratively developing research questions, research tools and methodology, and case study selection criteria.

GATHERING AND REFLECTING ON THE DATA

All partners collaborated to gather and analyze the data and interpret the findings from both the surveys, and interviews and case studies. All partners discussed the policy implications through structured questioning and enquiry.

INFLUENCING DECISION-MAKING

Insights from the data and policy considerations were co-constructed with all partners and then developed into user-friendly formats to share widely with the international community.

STAGE 1:
Co-designing

STAGE 3:
Influencing
decision-making

STAGE 2:
Data gathering
and reflection
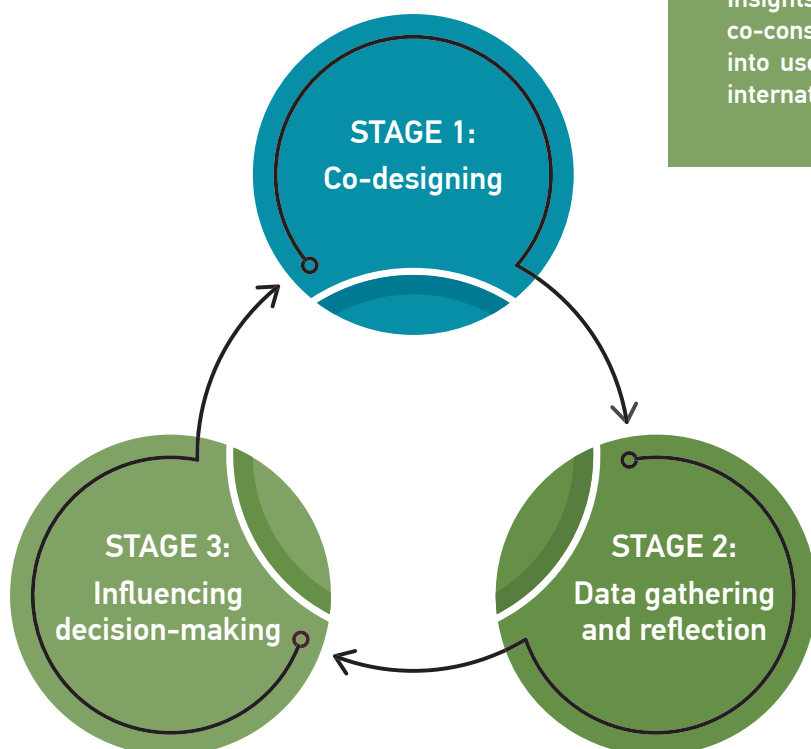
RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The research partners and REB set out to answer three co-constructed key questions:

1. What was/is the role of school and system leaders in mitigating the inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis during school closure and reopening?

2. What are the skills and competences that school and system leaders demonstrated that have promoted equity?

3. What is the role of collaborative structures such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or community networks in promoting equity?

A mixed methods approach for the research was used, and included:

1. A literature review identifying key challenges and promising practices for leaders during COVID-19;

2. Surveys and interviews of school leaders, parents, students as well as district and sector officials;

3. Deep dives into multiple case studies of schools identified as 'bright spots' for promising practices and unique strategies to reach the most vulnerable.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings suggest three overarching ways in which leaders were able to provide learning continuity and other support during closures and reopening, especially for the most marginalized. These are: 1) engagement with caregivers, communities and other sectors, 2) school leader and teacher collaboration and 3) tracking, sharing information, and providing targeted support for vulnerable learners. From the findings, we infer a set of skills, competencies, and behaviors that could be useful for policies aiming to support leadership now and in the future.

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ENGAGING WITH CAREGIVERS, COMMUNITIES, AND OTHER SECTORS

> "The school leader set up a family visit group to encourage caregivers to give their children time and attention to distance learning and not to forget their own children."
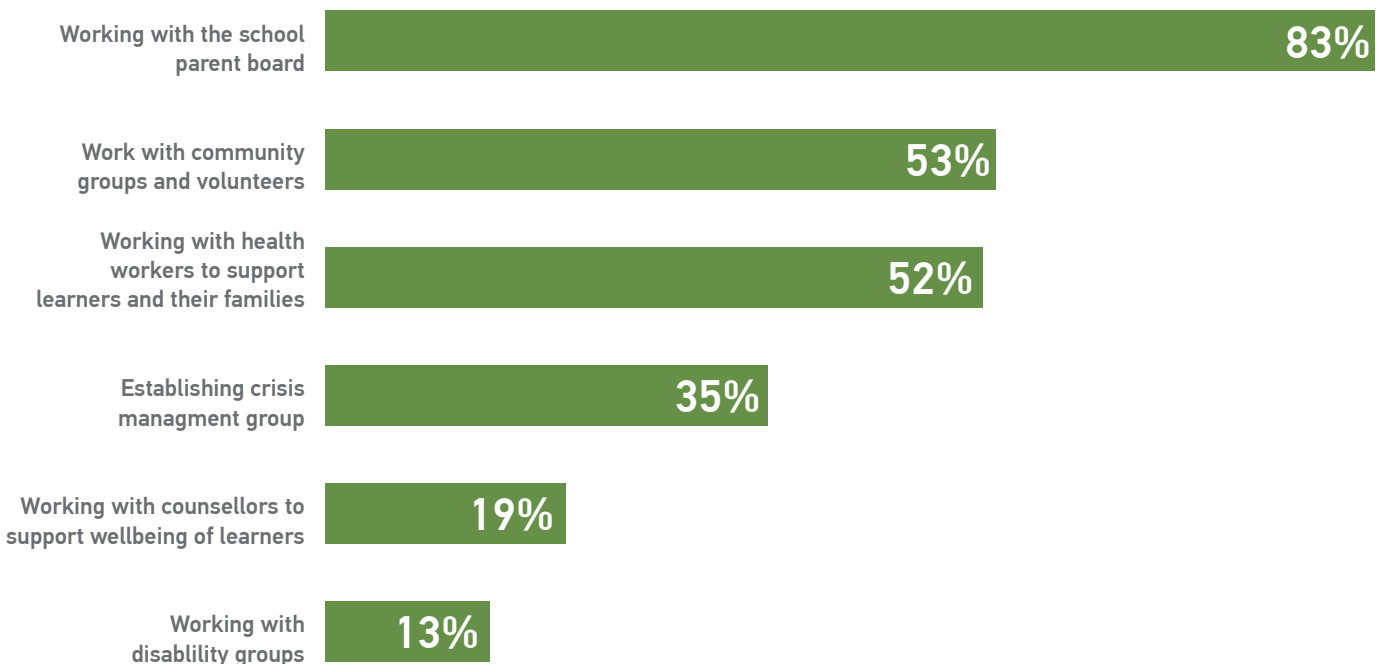>
> **TEACHER**

We found school leaders going to great lengths to reach out and support caregivers in the community – 83 percent of school leaders surveyed said they worked with parents to help provide continuity of learning for students during school closures. Some school leaders created geographic 'zones' of learners and divided teachers into groups, each assigned to a different community to help reach students more efficiently. Almost all of the leaders surveyed used engagement with community leaders as the number one way to minimize dropout (85 percent). And more than half of all school leaders engaged with community groups, including a disability group and reading campaigners, and most schools collaborated with health workers to reach out to vulnerable learners during closures and coordinate reopening plans.

Q. SCHOOL LEADERS:
How did you utilize community expertise by working with any of the following groups or individuals during school closures?
(Please select all that apply, N=100)

Category	Percentage
Working with the school parent board	83%
Work with community groups and volunteers	53%
Working with health workers to support learners and their families	52%
Establishing crisis managment group	35%
Working with counsellors to support wellbeing of learners	19%
Working with disablility groups	13%

CASE STUDY: HARNESSING COMMUNITY LEADERS AND LOCAL GROUPS

One case study school worked with a local disability group to identify other support available for children with disabilities from their school. They worked with this group when reaching out to families. Another school coordinated with 'reading campaigners' and parent committee members to visit schools to encourage learners to read and to ensure they had resources to learn.

Schools reported working with local community leaders and local education authorities to coordinate back to school campaigns for students. Multiple schools reported working with local community leaders to help 'spread the word' about school reopening. This typically included making announcements during community meetings and radio programs or through other community forums.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

These findings suggest that clarifying and defining the role of caregivers in student learning and wellbeing, including caregivers of vulnerable children, is key to continued learning in a crisis. The role of leaders and teachers must also be clearly outlined and communicated so they can effectively guide caregivers to support their children's learning. More specifically, strengthening school leaders' role as facilitators of engagement with caregivers and the community, and establishing collaborative mechanisms (such as working groups) at the local administrative level, could help meet the full range of needs of vulnerable children in a holistic way. Formalizing accessible communication and engagement structures, or drawing on existing ones (such as focal points, community groups and parent committees), can enable leaders and teachers to more efficiently reach out and engage with caregivers and the community, especially during school closures. Another consideration, based on findings from the literature review, could be to develop a database of all stakeholders and focal points at each level of the system to facilitate swifter responses in emergency situations (UNESCO, 2020). Finally, the existing policy and procedures for school leaders to connect with local health officials should be maintained and relationships further strengthened as this will be critical in the ongoing response to the crisis as well as post-COVID-19.

SCHOOL LEADER AND TEACHER COLLABORATION

> "I spoke to the Principal and the accountant and the course manager. [O]ften due to the fact that we have a common WhatsApp website we talked about classes, school life, COVID-19 and school buildings. In the exchange of information, we were updated and involved."
>
> **TEACHER**

Most teachers surveyed had regular check-ins with their school leaders during closures, and some collaborated closely with their school leaders. There were great examples of leaders collaborating with and supporting teachers through one-on-one conversations, providing guidance and support (including on COVID-19 protocols and how to support learners and reach the most vulnerable), and checking on their wellbeing. Head teachers also mentioned delegating more to teachers as a result of the school closures, with teachers needing to take initiative in their local areas to support continuity of learning. Nineteen percent of school leaders said they were comfortable with delegation as a skill, and 54 percent said they delegated to teachers during school closures.

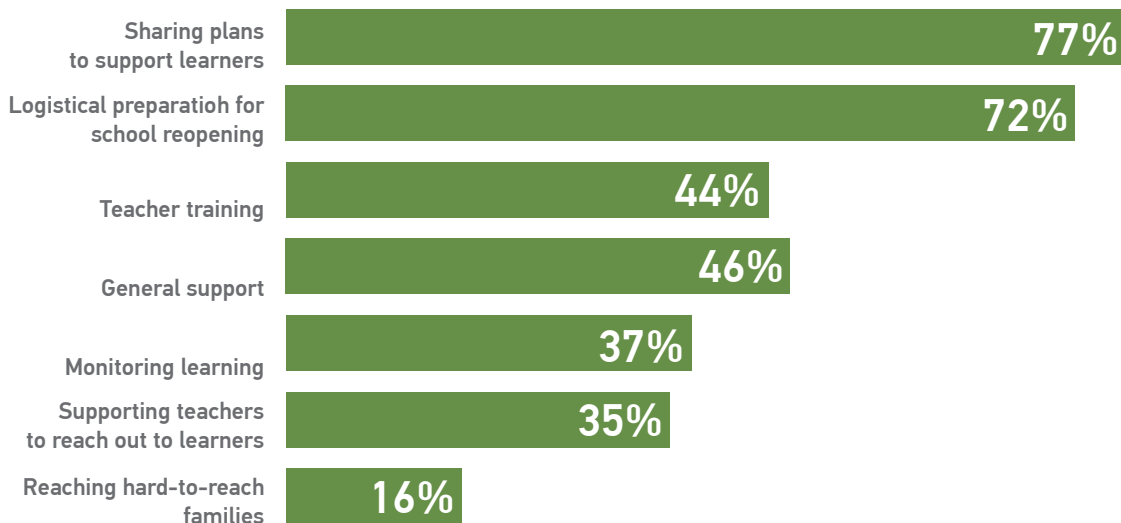We heard about teachers supporting one another, especially through professional learning communities (communities of practice) established prior to the crisis to share resources and plan for reopening. One school created a formal online space to facilitate teacher collaboration while others used informal platforms such as WhatsApp.

School leaders also relied heavily on one another as a resource. The majority of school leaders surveyed engaged with a school leader organization or network during school closures (90 percent) and after reopening (93 percent), where they primarily shared plans to support learners and logistical preparation for school reopening.

Q. SCHOOL LEADERS:
What did your engagement with headteacher organizations involve?
(Please select all that apply, N=100)

Category	Percent
Sharing plans to support learners	77%
Logistical preparatioh for school reopening	72%
Teacher training	44%
General support	46%
Monitoring learning	37%
Supporting teachers to reach out to learners	35%
Reaching hard-to-reach families	16%

CASE STUDY: CONTINUOUS COMMUNICATION WITH TEACHERS

One school leader established continuous communications with teachers throughout school closures. In addition to regularly checking in with teachers via WhatsApp and SMS, the school leader encouraged teachers to share the highs and lows of their remote teaching support to learners on a weekly basis. The school leader also encouraged teachers to support one another, such as with advice on overcoming challenges.

The school leader tried to maintain weekly evaluation of student learning activities by assigning teacher household visits to check on learners and evaluate their progress. The school leader did not use a standard approach to assess learning but asked teachers to make judgements and provide feedback on identified progress.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

These findings suggest that strengthening school leaders' role as facilitators of teacher leadership could help to leverage existing teacher collaboration. Promoting existing communities of practice (COPs) and giving teachers more ownership of them could also ensure maximum relevance of these groups in addressing challenges and opportunities at the local level. Evidence from the literature review suggests that embedding peer feedback into teacher appraisal approaches could help strengthen informal teacher collaboration, undertaken through communities of practice (Shirley, Hargreaves and Washington, 2020). Given that teachers and school leaders in this research used low-tech options to successfully collaborate, policymakers could consider leveraging existing widespread low-tech solutions to enhance opportunities for informal teacher collaboration while improving access and use of higher-tech solutions.

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TRACKING, SHARING INFORMATION, AND PROVIDING TARGETED SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE LEARNERS

> **"They have been going to find them at home of their caregivers and work with local authorities... there was a so-called back to school campaign."**
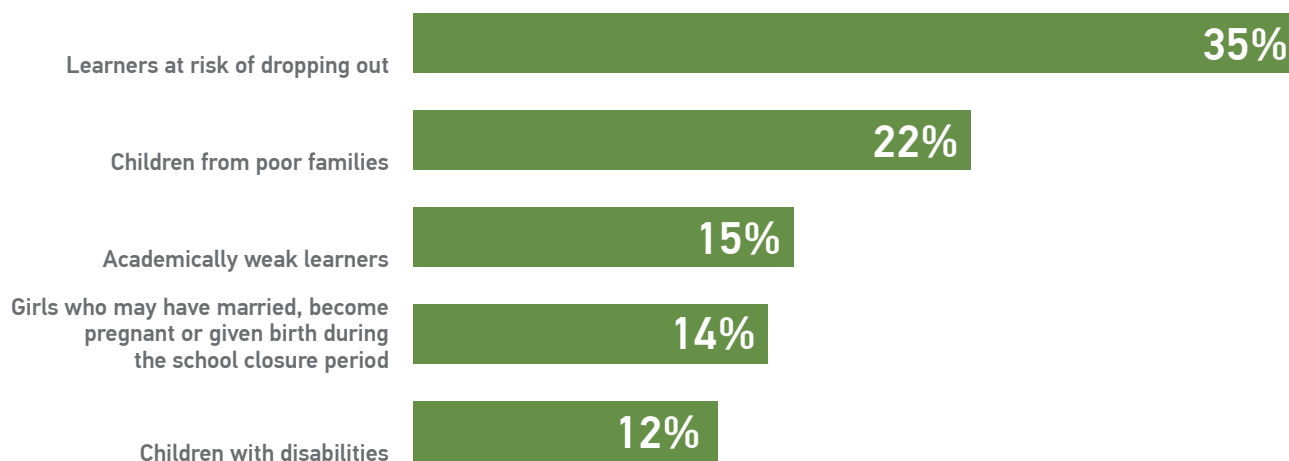>
> **TEACHER**

Some of the school leaders surveyed targeted support for specific groups of vulnerable learners: 35 percent focused on those at risk of dropping out, while 22 percent focused on those from poor families, and 15 percent on girls who may have remarried, become pregnant or given birth during closures.

Some schools mapped the location of the most vulnerable learners during closures, and teachers living in nearby communities provided targeted support. This included provision of written materials and reproductive health support for girls. In preparation for school reopening, teachers and other school staff visited households to encourage learners to return to school. Some school leaders shared information with local authorities to facilitate follow up for learners who did not report to school when they reopened. After reopening, all schools reported having assessed learners to ascertain learning levels and guide the need for extra support. All schools reported planning for remediation teaching to mitigate learning loss

(such as starting one hour earlier). Some schools also created forums for the psychosocial support of learners.

Q. SCHOOL LEADERS:
Did you provide guidance or support to teachers in the following areas?
(Please select all that apply, N=96)

Learners at risk of dropping out	**35%**
Children from poor families	**22%**
Academically weak learners	**15%**
Girls who may have married, become pregnant or given birth during the school closure period	**14%**
Children with disabilities	**12%**

CASE STUDY: MAPPING VULNERABLE LEARNERS

In one case study school, the school leader responded to school closures quickly by mapping the households of teachers and students using available data on home addresses and parent contact details. The aim of this exercise was to ensure that as many students as possible could be provided with some level of teacher support, however minor. Teachers were assigned to visit a number of students periodically who lived in their local areas. Household visits included checking to ensure children were ok, sharing information about radio lessons, and providing resources where available. All visits adhered to Rwanda's COVID-19 social distancing safety protocols.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

These findings suggest that considering the varying needs of different groups of vulnerable learners, establishing guidance and processes to meet them, and closely monitoring and tracking vulnerable learners can support continued learning during closures and reduction of dropout during reopening. Evidence from the literature review supports considering incentives for the most vulnerable learners. These incentives worked well in encouraging attendance and retention of learners during the West African Ebola crisis (UNESCO, 2020). They established clear procedures for follow up with vulnerable learners as soon as data demonstrated the need to reach specific individuals or groups (Carvalho, Rossiter, Angrist, Hares and Silverman, 2020); and they provided planning for teacher and school leader professional development on the use of assessment data to inform support for learners at their level (United Nations, 2020). In a workshop analysis of the findings, REB suggested capturing information about all students in a 'Comprehensive Assessment Management Information System (CAMIS)' integrated with the School Data Management Information System (SDMIS) at the Ministry to improve capacity to identify and reach vulnerable students at all times.
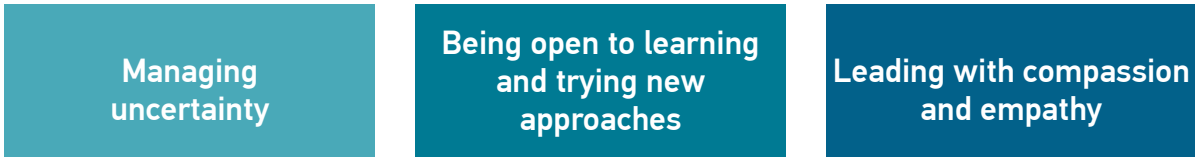

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SKILLS, COMPETENCIES AND BEHAVIORS FOR LEADERSHIP NOW AND THE FUTURE

The survey results and interviews illuminated specific skills, competencies, and behaviors that we believe will be important for leadership now and in the future to support more resilient education systems.

These included three overarching skills with associated behaviors and practices: Managing uncertainty, being open to trying and learning new approaches and leading with compassion and empathy.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS, COMPETENCES AND BEHAVIORS IDENTIFIED FROM THE FINDINGS

SKILLS

Managing uncertainty	Being open to learning and trying new approaches	Leading with compassion and empathy

BEHAVIORS AND COMPETENCES

Making decisions quickly and efficiently using all available data	Comfortable with using technology	Behaving with empathy and compassion towards caregivers and teachers
Providing clear advice and guidance	Making decisions collaboratively with a range of stakeholders	Supporting colleagues through regular check ins
Willing to be flexible and change direction		

SKILLS, COMPETENCIES AND BEHAVIORS FOR LEADERSHIP NOW AND THE FUTURE

The survey results discussed in previous sections highlight that school leaders were relatively adept at managing uncertainty.
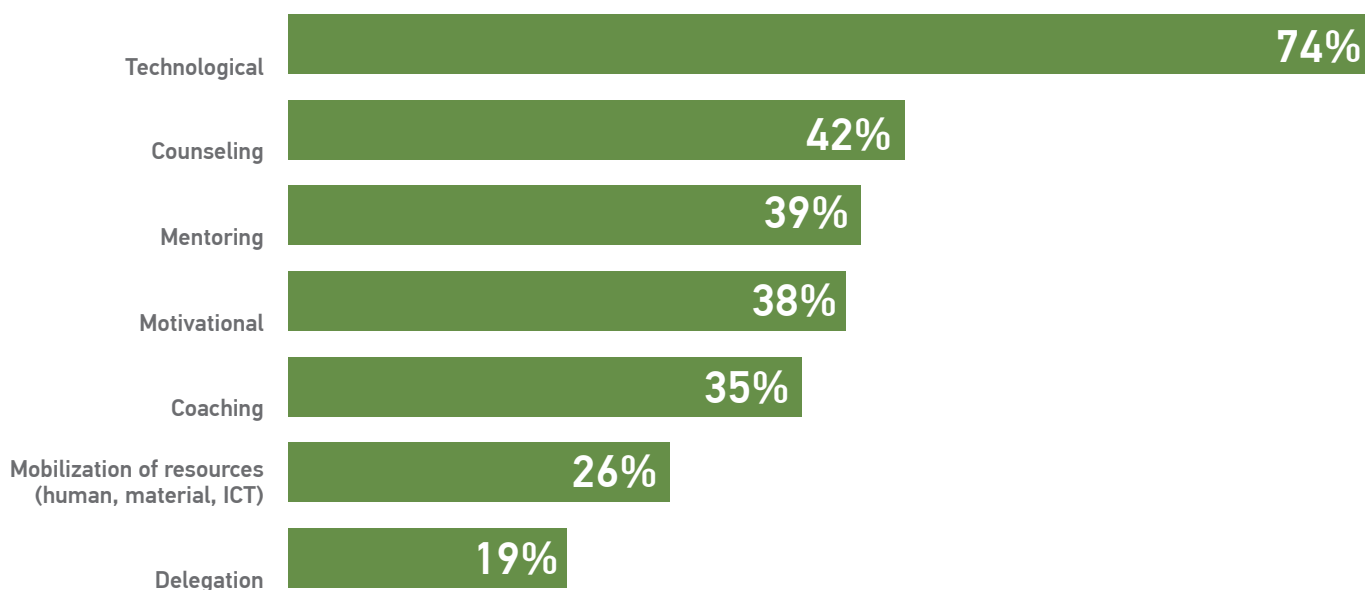
The majority made decisions using government guidance and data on students and provided guidance to teachers and families. Survey results and case studies also showed that many school leaders were open to expanding their knowledge and trying new approaches. Indeed, 73 percent felt comfortable using technology during school closures, and many made decisions collaboratively with a range of stakeholders. An official at the Ministry of Education stressed the importance of flexibility: 'When things change and you are not prepared, you stick to your traditional ways. Our ICT in education policy is very clear but because we are used to traditional teaching, it becomes difficult. So flexibility, and being proactive, is useful. And building resilience in the system.'

While many leaders supported the wellbeing of teachers and learners, less than half felt comfortable with practices such as counselling, mentoring and motivating, which could support leading with compassion and empathy.

Q. SCHOOL LEADERS:
Which skills did you feel comfortable using during school closures?
(Please select all that apply, N=97)

Skill	Percentage
Technological	74%
Counseling	42%
Mentoring	39%
Motivational	38%
Coaching	35%
Mobilization of resources (human, material, ICT)	26%
Delegation	19%

CONCLUSION
RESEARCH LEADING TO REAL-TIME IMPACT

The core strength of the learning partnership approach is that research and evidence immediately translates into real time impact. Throughout the project, REB engaged as a critical 'co-creation' partner, from the design to the data analysis and interpretation. This ensured that the key issues investigated were priorities for all project stakeholders, and that the evidence uncovered immediately informed work on the ground, including policy and decision-making at REB.

Upon completion of the data analysis, heads of departments and senior members of REB and the Ministry of Education met to discuss the findings and to consider their implications for policy. Leadership standards and continuous professional development plans are to be reviewed in light of the findings and potential follow up actions include clarifying leaders' responsibilities for the wellbeing of teachers and learners and formalizing the role of school leaders in relation to caregiver engagement in student learning and wellbeing.

The head of school leadership and management at REB emphasized that this research "helped set the vision for school leadership. The role needs to change, by supporting parents, supporting learners in difficult moments. This project gives us a new orientation, new content to train our school leaders."

An iterative research approach with a focus on learning, where data is discussed and interpreted among partners as it is generated, can provide insights that are highly pertinent to an education system, responding to current needs and windows of opportunity. This approach promotes an environment where practitioners can reflect on and adapt their practice, and decision-makers can easily digest and act on evidence in real time. This approach's identification of 'bright spots' can help leverage existing solutions for system wide change.

Working in this way takes time and a real dedication to collaboration. We are committed to delivering research that is of primary importance and relevance to the people it is meant to serve. To this end, Education Development Trust, the Education Commission, and WISE will continue to build on this experience and embed the learning partnership approach across our portfolio of research now and in future.

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