

Principals' Approaches and Perceptions Toward Teacher Evaluation in a Virtual Setting During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced school leaders to balance health needs and learning needs in unprecedented ways. Promoting student health needs required schools to shift to virtual instruction. Promoting student learning needs required daunting efforts and adjustments by students, families, teachers, and school leaders. The purpose of this study is to understand the approaches, perceptions, and experiences of school principals toward this end – focusing primarily on teacher evaluation and instructional leadership (particularly through the evaluation process) – when faced with such challenging and unfamiliar circumstances and settings. In this mixed-methods study, the survey responses of 120 principals, and the interview responses of 16 principals, yielded six emergent themes: Principals showed grace in the evaluation process; principals felt they and their teachers were underprepared for the abrupt shift to virtual instruction; evaluation approaches were fluid, and varied greatly from school to school; the focus of evaluations shifted even more toward teachers' engagement of and connection with students; teachers willing to adapt instructional approaches fared better than teachers who clung to old approaches; principals did not feel like effective instructional leaders. Results suggest that principals need support, from the district level and state level, to evaluate teachers fairly and formatively in a virtual setting. Results also suggest that virtual instruction provides principals with an opportunity to empower teachers as leaders within their school.

Keywords: teacher evaluation, instructional leadership, virtual instruction, COVID-19 pandemic

Among the many challenges and hardships posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, schools throughout the world had to abruptly shift course in an effort to balance the learning needs of students and the health needs of students and all others associated with schools – families, teachers, staff, and administrators. In the United States, nearly all K-12 schools shut down in-person instruction in March 2020. This precipitated a shift to virtual instruction, where: instruction is delivered on a remote basis; class discussions and direct teacher-student interactions are facilitated through a web conferencing platform, chat/discussion boards, etc.; lesson delivery is provided through web conferencing, videos (developed and recorded by the teacher or another source), etc.; and assignments, assessments, and activities are completed and submitted outside of an in-person classroom setting.

This study gathers quantitative and qualitative insights from K-12 school principals to examine their approaches and perceptions to evaluating teacher performance during this time in this unfamiliar format, and to promoting instructional leadership (particularly through the evaluation process) and student learning during this time.

Teacher evaluation has the power to improve instructional practices and ultimately benefit students, but only if done with a formative and fair approach (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Otherwise, the evaluation process can be fraught with concerns. Some of the most pressing concerns relate to the validity and reliability of student achievement/growth measures used to assess teacher performance (Amrein-Beardsley & Holloway, 2019), overburdened principals rushing through the evaluation process (Derrington & Martinez, 2019), and ratings inflation egregious enough (particularly in older evaluation systems, with nearly all teachers receiving the highest possible rating) to render the entire evaluation meaningless (Forman & Markson, 2015). These concerns have been both the cause and the effect of significant changes in K-12 evaluation

systems, where teachers have more tangible positive and negative consequences linked to their evaluation ratings (Herlihy et al., 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic, and the associated abrupt shift to an unfamiliar virtual teaching and learning format, brings renewed scrutiny to the K-12 teacher evaluation process and principals' instructional leadership in improving teacher practices through evaluation. This serves, to great extent, as the impetus for this study.

Literature Review

Previous research has explored instructional practices in K-12 virtual settings (Czerkawski & Lyman, 2016), but not the teacher evaluation process in such settings. Previous research has explored the benefits and drawbacks of virtual instruction (Paechter & Maier, 2010; Xu & Jaggars, 2013), but these studies focused on higher education rather than K-12 settings. More recent studies have focused on challenges and perceptions of higher education students and faculty toward virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic (Elfirdoussi et al., 2020; Jaggars et al., 2020), but not on the approaches and perceptions of K-12 principals during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study addresses gaps in research, giving attention to: K-12 principals, the teacher evaluation process, virtual instruction, and navigating the COVID-19 pandemic.

The topics of this study have high importance and relevance, and the timing of this study is key in adding further value. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most principals did not facilitate or evaluate virtual instruction. Because nearly all schools shifted to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, and because virtual instruction is likely to become more ingrained in the educational process forever (for reasons related and unrelated to public health), these topics now apply to all principals – leading not only to increased relevance and importance of a related study, but also leading to improved quality of data for such a study, with more principals having insights and experiences to share. Furthermore, there are sure to be countless retrospective

studies conducted, on a wide range of topics related to education and the COVID-19 pandemic, after schools reintroduce in-person instruction (by fall 2021, an estimated 96% of schools had returned to full in-person learning) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). This study, which gathers data during the 2020-2021 school year (when 50% or more students were attending school on a fully virtual or hybrid format) (Ohio Department of Education, 2021), provides fresh and unique perspectives from the midst of the pandemic that will be difficult to capture at a later time.

Research Questions

This study explores the following research questions:

1. What approaches do principals use for teacher evaluation and instructional leadership (particularly through the evaluation process) in a virtual setting during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do principals perceive and experience the teacher evaluation and instructional leadership process in a virtual setting during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This study focuses on teacher evaluation and instructional leadership (particularly through the evaluation process) in a virtual setting during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is not intended to compare various evaluation processes from state to state, or compare various public safety protocols and philosophies toward COVID-19 from state to state, etc. With this in mind, this study focuses on one state (Ohio).

For background about the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES), OTES derives teacher evaluation ratings 50% from qualitative feedback (Teacher Performance ratings) and 50% from quantitative achievement data (Student Growth Measures). Teachers' Student Growth Measures ratings are derived differently based on the grade level and subject area they teach

(Ohio Department of Education, 2014). Teachers ultimately receive one of four overall ratings: Accomplished, Skilled, Developing, or Ineffective.

Methodology

This section details the methods used for this mixed-methods study. After IRB approval, a recruitment letter was sent to approximately 1700 principals - all principals in an Ohio school as of fall 2020, whose contact information was readily available on the Ohio Department of Education website. The letter invited these principals to participate in an anonymous survey. The first page of the survey included an informed consent form. The survey remained open through spring 2021. The response rate for the quantitative survey was approximately 7.1%, and participants included 120 individuals who identified as a principal (any grades K-12) in an Ohio school that provided virtual instruction to students at any time during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Demographic data for survey participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Data for Survey Participants

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|--------|------------------------|-------|
| Race | | |
| | White | 90.0% |
| | Black/African-American | 6.7% |
| | Latinx | 0.83% |
| | Multiracial | 0.83% |
| | Prefer Not to Answer | 0.83% |
| Gender | | |
| | Men | 51.7% |
| | Women | 48.3% |
| Age | | |
| | 31-40 Years Old | 15.0% |
| | 41-50 Years Old | 41.7% |
| | 51-60 Years Old | 34.2% |
| | 61+ Years Old | 9.2% |

As for participants' school setting, 38.3% were in elementary schools, 11.7% were in middle school/junior high, 31.7% were in high schools, and 18.3% were in various K-12

educational settings (i.e., K-8, P-8, 6-12, 5-12, etc.). The majority of participants (55.0%) had 10+ years of experience in their current school. Regarding socioeconomics, 27.5% of participants served in a school where less than 25% of students qualify for free/reduced-price meals, 30.8% served in a school where 25-50% of students qualify for free/reduced-price meals, 20.0% served in a school where 50-75% of students qualify for free/reduced-price meals, and 21.7% served in a school where 75% or more students qualify for free/reduced-price meals. The majority of participants (57.5%) served in a school whose population included less than 25% students of color. Regarding school description, 38.3% of participants served in a rural school, followed by 33.3% in an urban school, and 28.3% in a suburban school. Regarding school size, 30.0% of participants served in a school with 250 or fewer students, 44.2% served in a school with 251-500 students, 11.7% served in a school with 501-750 students, 9.2% served in a school with 751-1000 students, and 5.0% served in a school with 1001 or more students.

After the demographics portion of the survey, the main portion of the survey included eight multiple-choice and open-ended items. This brief survey, developed by the author, was designed to provide general overview insight relevant to the Research Questions. The survey was not piloted for reliability, however only basic descriptive data was collected from the survey (no inferential statistical analysis), as its purpose was to complement the more in-depth qualitative portion of the study. Responses to survey items #1-5 were analyzed for basic frequency data. Open-ended responses to survey items #6-8 were incorporated into the coding process described later in this section. References to survey responses can be found in the Results section within the applicable emergent theme. Table 2 lists the remaining items of the survey (and response choices where applicable).

Table 2*Survey Items (after Demographics Section)*

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1. How much of the instruction in your school was conducted virtually before the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - None
 - 1-10%
 - 10-50%
 - 50-90%
 - 90-100%
 2. What medium does/did your school use to facilitate virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 3. Has your school provided professional development to teachers in delivering virtual instruction?
 - No professional development provided
 - Professional development provided, using approaches developed primarily within the school/district
 - Professional development provided, using approaches mainly by an outside source/vendor (briefly name the approach/source/vendor)
 4. Did you observe, or visit via virtual walkthrough, teachers delivering virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - No observations or walkthroughs
 - Observed and/or visited at least once, but not part of a formal evaluation process
 - Observed and/or visited at least once, as part of a formal evaluation process
 5. Do you believe the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES) process/rubric is conducive to virtual instruction?
 - Yes, the OTES evaluation process/rubric is just as conducive to virtual instruction as it is to traditional classroom instruction
 - Generally yes, but there are minor elements of the OTES process/rubric that are not as conducive to virtual instruction (indicate below)
 - No, there are major elements of the OTES process/rubric that are not as conducive to virtual instruction (indicate most significant concerns below)
 6. What are some of the specific best practices you have observed by your teachers when delivering virtual instruction?
 7. Based on your observations/walkthroughs, what are the key areas/practices you believe teachers need the most improvement or additional training in delivering virtual instruction?
 8. What advice would you give to fellow evaluators/observers in conducting the evaluation/observation process in an effective way as it relates to virtual instruction?
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After the survey period was closed, principals were recruited to participate in a qualitative interview during the summer or fall of 2021. From among all principals, a random

number generator was used to identify those who would be invited to participate. Sixteen principals agreed to participate in a one-time interview of approximately 45-60 minutes, via web conferencing or phone call. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Table 3 lists the interview questions.

Table 3

Interview Questions

1. Describe the various steps your school took in shifting to schoolwide virtual instruction in spring 2020
 2. Describe your overall approaches to evaluating teachers delivering virtual instruction
 3. What type of preparation/professional development did you provide to teachers related to virtual instruction?
 4. What are some of the specific best practices you have observed by your teachers when delivering virtual instruction?
 5. Share examples of instances when students, teachers, or lessons were not as successful in a virtual setting, compared to a traditional setting
 6. Based on your observations/walkthroughs, what are the key areas/practices you believe teachers need the most improvement or additional training in delivering virtual instruction?
 7. Do you believe the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES) process/rubric is conducive to virtual instruction?
 8. Which of the OTES domains do you believe were most affected by the shift to virtual instruction? Least affected?
 9. Describe how you conducted evaluation (pre- and post-) conferences
 10. Share examples of specific feedback you provided to teachers to improve their instruction in a virtual setting
 11. What was some of the best advice you gave? Did you give any advice that proved to be unhelpful/misguided?
 12. Share examples of instances where you did not feel as effective as an instructional leader in developing teachers' practice in a virtual setting
 13. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in what new/unique ways did you provide support to students, families, and teachers?
 14. How did you assess student learning in a virtual setting?
 15. What school/classroom practices from the COVID-19 pandemic, will you continue to use even after transitioning back to in-person instruction?
 16. What past experiences/roles of yours do you believe best prepared you to facilitate the transition to virtual instruction as a school leader?
 17. What would you do differently as an instructional leader if you had to prepare again for schoolwide virtual instruction?
 18. What advice would you give to fellow evaluators/observers in conducting the evaluation/observation process in an effective way as it relates to virtual instruction?
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Transcripts were first analyzed by the author with structural coding methods through a round of line-by-line open-coding (Saldaña, 2009). Responses were then grouped by open codes in categories to determine axial codes.

Transcripts were then reexamined by the author through axial coding with the defined axial codes. The axial coding process was conducive to identifying evidence to support the axial codes and ways this evidence may contribute to answering the research questions in this study. Finally, the author reviewed the evidence from axial coding to determine emergent themes and identify exemplary excerpts to support the codes and themes. The identified emergent themes are discussed in the following section.

Results

Based primarily on data collected from qualitative interviews, and partially on quantitative data from the remaining items of the survey, six major themes emerged regarding principals' perceptions and approaches to teacher evaluation of virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic: Principals showed grace in the evaluation process; principals felt they and their teachers were underprepared for the abrupt shift to virtual instruction; evaluation approaches were fluid, and varied greatly from school to school; the focus of evaluations shifted even more toward teachers' engagement of and connection with students; teachers willing to adapt instructional approaches fared better than teachers who clung to old approaches; principals did not feel like effective instructional leaders.

Principals showed grace in the evaluation process

When principals were asked about their approach to teacher evaluation in a virtual setting during the COVID-19 pandemic (particularly how their approach differed from normal circumstances), principals frequently cited grace, in some cases explicitly. Principal 7: "More

than anything else, this was a time for grace. I needed students, teachers, and families to be patient with me and show me grace, and so I was more than willing to show grace to my teachers during evaluation.” Principal 15: “Grace, grace, grace. (Teachers) were so stressed out, confused, scared enough already. There was no benefit to stressing them out more about evaluation.” Principal 4: “To be candid, I didn’t have a good game plan for how I was going to handle evaluation, so I sort of kicked that can down the road. But teachers saw that as me showing grace, and that was fine by me.”

Several principals implied the notion of grace in their approach to teacher evaluation. They did so by adjusting evaluation ratings based on the trying circumstances of the pandemic. Principals rationalized their approach in similar ways – usually that they were acting in fairness to teachers and/or trying to maintain high morale among teachers. Principal 14: “I told my teachers right off the bat I would still be visiting their Zoom classrooms and evaluating them, but that no one would be rated Ineffective. That seemed to lower the stress level quite a bit.” Principal 11: “There wasn’t a whole lot of learning going on in those virtual classrooms, particularly early in the shutdown. But it wasn’t the teacher’s fault. It wasn’t anybody’s fault. So I didn’t dock them on the evaluation.” Principal 13: “Normally of course I would evaluate based on the effectiveness of the delivery. But in virtual, I looked for whether the teacher was making a good-faith effort. That’s what I based my rating on.” Principal 8: “When I conferenced with individual teachers about their evaluations, it wasn’t a ‘you did this well, you need to improve that.’ It was a ‘thank you from the bottom of my heart for all that you do’.”

Principals felt they and their teachers were underprepared for the abrupt shift to virtual instruction

The teacher evaluation process was complicated further because of the sudden and drastic shift in instructional format. On the quantitative survey, participants were asked what percentage of their school's instruction was delivered virtually before the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of participants (60.0%) indicated that no instruction was delivered virtually, 22.5% of participants indicated that approximately 1-10% of instruction was delivered virtually, 6.7% of participants indicated that 10-50% of instruction was delivered virtually, 3.3% of participants indicated that 50-90% of instruction was delivered virtually, and 7.5% of participants indicated that 90-100% of instruction was delivered virtually. After shifting to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, 48.3% of participants indicated they did so via Google Classroom, 35.8% via Zoom, 5.8% via Microsoft Teams, 4.2% via Seesaw, 0.83% via Loom, 0.83% via Flipgrid, and 0.83% via Clever.

Schools tried to strengthen virtual instruction through professional development, but 78.3% of principals indicated their PD was created in-house, on short notice. Only 17.5% of principals indicated their PD was pre-developed by a specialized outside source (including SimpleK12, Schoology, Seesaw, Integrated Schoolhouse, Corwin, Google Training, Bioxi, and Renaissance Education). Some schools offered no PD at all for delivering virtual instruction, as indicated by 4.2% of principals.

Principal 3: "My teachers were trying to learn Schoology from me, but I was trying to learn Schoology myself on the fly! There was no way I could hold (teachers) accountable for it on an evaluation." Principal 16: "Students were doing a lot of independent learning, especially early on during the spring of 2020. Teaching sessions were more like office hours. How do you

evaluate that?” Principal 4: “At first, we thought the shutdown was going to be short – a few weeks at the most. We didn’t see a need to overhaul our evaluation timeline. Then, once we knew the shutdown was going to be a lot longer, there really wasn’t enough time to complete evaluations.”

Evaluation approaches were fluid, and varied greatly from school to school

The survey addressed principals’ approaches and views toward observation/evaluation. In a virtual setting during the COVID-19 pandemic, 31.7% of participants conducted observations as part of a formal evaluation process, 42.5% of participants conducted observations/walkthroughs but not as part of a formal evaluation process, and 25.8% did not conduct any observations/walkthroughs. Regarding whether the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System rubric is conducive to virtual instruction, 18.3% of participants indicated Yes, 45.8% indicated Yes but with minor concerns, and 35.8% indicated No because of major concerns.

On the open-ended portion of the survey, principals discussed different approaches to conducting evaluations in a virtual setting, including: encourage experimentation and mistake-making, seeking out student feedback, having teachers record lessons and office hours for review later, varying times/days for observations, being growth-based, look for what is right instead of what is wrong, use two screens (one to watch, one to take notes), and have one area of focus for that particular observation.

In interviews, the extensiveness of evaluation processes varied greatly among principals, including those who did little to no evaluating. Principal 9: “Under these circumstances, an Ineffective rating never would have held up under appeal, so evaluation became an afterthought.” Principal 12: “We’re already facing a teacher shortage, and it’s only going to get worse, so I’m not trying to push anyone out the door with a low rating.” These principals seemed

to regard the evaluation process (under any circumstances) as a summative/punitive exercise, and therefore not worthwhile under circumstances where they would not be able to hold teachers accountable in a punitive way.

Even those principals who might regard the evaluation process as a formative process for growth, found themselves struggling to navigate the Student Growth Measures component of the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System. Principal 15: “The state (of Ohio) said fall-to-winter MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) test could be used (instead of fall-to-spring) if teachers agreed. But kindergarten doesn’t have MAP – they have SLOs (self-created Student Learning Objectives tests) instead, and they weren’t able to give their end-of-year test.” Principal 10: “If you were in a tested area (a teacher whose growth measures are derived from standardized tests, often in subjects such as reading and math), there was no way to do value-added for the evaluation.”

The number of evaluations principals had to conduct during the 2020-2021 school year also varied greatly, and not just because of differences in school size. Principal 11: “We were transitioning to OTES 2.0 – this was a decision that was made before the pandemic. I only had to complete 3-4 full-cycle evaluations that next year. It ended up being a great year to transition, because so much was already out of the ordinary anyway.” Principal 15: “Every teacher had to be evaluated in ’20-’21. Eighty-plus teachers. We were in express mode.”

The focus of evaluations shifted even more toward teachers’ engagement of and connection with students

On an open-ended survey item, principals entered a best practice they observed in virtual instruction. Many of the entries related to student engagement/connection, including “Building a sense of community with students,” “Lots of individual attention (one-on-one office hours),” “Finding ways to promote student engagement,” and “Student motivation.”

Interview responses reinforced this focus. Principal 12: “Lesson Delivery is usually one of my biggest areas on the (Ohio Teacher Evaluation System) rubric. It’s still important, but in a virtual-type classroom I prioritized Knowledge of Students more than ever before. And I told teachers I would be. I was challenging them to be very intentional about getting to know their students over Teams.” Principal 16 noticed teachers deploying this type of approach: “Teachers who used Zoom for small-group instruction, even one-on-one, made some good connections.” Principal 3 came to see a major difference in effectiveness, based on how teachers tried to connect with students: “If you’re really trying to connect with students in a virtual setting, small-group or one-on-one is the only way to do it. If you really think you’re going to make meaningful connections with students in a whole-class setting online, you’re fighting a losing battle. You can still do the whole-group thing from time to time, but do it for a social, class-bonding reason. Don’t do it if you are trying to teach content.”

Other principals fostered, or attempted to foster, this type of teacher/student connection through explicit guidelines and efforts. Principal 10: “Once we came back to a hybrid model, we gave teachers one or two periods a day to catch up with the students who were virtual.” Principal 4: “With our student population, it was going to be so easy to lose students in the shuffle when we went virtual. If a student wasn’t logging in, we were going out on home visits to check on them so we didn’t lose them. We kept it safe and made sure to social-distance.” Principal 1 also understood the importance of maintaining a connection, but was at a loss for doing so in the toughest cases: “In the past, we have suspended students with severe attendance problems. We all see how ironic that is, and it doesn’t work in most cases, but there would at least be one or two students where it worked as a deterrent. During the pandemic, they’re already home! What good is suspending them going to do?”

Teachers willing to adapt instructional approaches fared better than teachers who clung to old approaches

On an open-ended survey item, principals indicated the biggest area for improvement are “Aptitude in online tools” and “Alternative assessments (understanding that standard assessments don’t translate well to virtual format).” During interviews, principals cited the struggles of some teachers in adapting to new approaches. Principal 14: “I had teachers literally crying about the tech stuff. That was a bad sign.” Principal 6: “Some of my teachers, especially in (spring 2020), were too dead-set on keeping their assignments and due dates the same. By fall, almost everybody had figured out we needed to be more flexible.” Principal 1: “We all kind of knew that students would cheat if given the opportunity, so I was surprised that some teachers still relied so heavily on traditional tests. The most frustrating thing was when teachers turned in office referrals for students cheating on tests, after we repeatedly talked about the importance of authentic assessments. You can bet this became a topic of conversation during evaluation time.” Principal 10 had a few teachers who were perhaps too eager to shift their instructional approach: “Some teachers were – I’ll put it nicely - very good at finding online resources and videos related to course content. I eventually had to make it a requirement that at least some of the videos they showed were recordings of *themselves*.”

Even though it was a challenge for some teachers to adjust their approaches, especially in the beginning, most principals expressed that most/all of their teachers did their best to adjust. Principal 15: “I can honestly say, 100% of my teachers gave a good-faith effort to be good teachers during the pandemic. Nobody took advantage of the situation. I mean it. That goes for all my teachers, including a few who I thought would try to take advantage of the situation.”

On the positive side, on a separate open-ended item on the survey, principals indicated some simple and somewhat-to-very fresh approaches as best practices they observed in a virtual setting, including: “Collaboration within teacher teams to develop virtual lessons,” “Gradual release model,” “Using tools such as EdPuzzle to ensure students are watching/completing questions with video instruction,” “Instructional games,” “Using chat,” “Using document camera, whiteboard, sharing screen to demonstrate/model,” “Using breakout rooms effectively,” and “Flipped instructional model.”

During interviews, principals were excited to share some of the strong new practices seen in their schools in a virtual or hybrid setting. Principal 11: “I think (the shift to virtual instruction) forced us to focus on critical thinking exercises. Math started doing Desmos, and English had some outstanding writing prompts... The flipped classroom worked really well, and parents loved it.” Principal 10: “My teachers – I can’t take any credit for this – got creative with the way they took attendance. They turned it into a community-building exercise, asking a question of the day like what they like to do, their favorite food, things like that.” Principal 6: “My departments collaborated more than ever before. Sharing responsibilities on recording lessons, things like that. And from the student side, having captioning and the ability to pause videos was very helpful to them.” Principal 8: “Google forms were big for us. Teachers didn’t use it as a quiz, instead they used it for target feedback. This is something we’re going to continue using, even when everything is back to normal.”

Some principals noticed a different effect the pandemic had on certain teachers – particularly young teachers. Principal 16: “(One of my teachers), in her fourth year I think, has always struggled with classroom management. She thrived in the virtual setting because classroom management was a whole different ballgame. She recognized this too, and asked me if

there is a way for her to continue teaching with Zoom when we're back to in-person. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing haha." Principal 8: "Obviously I wish COVID never happened, but if there is one bright spot, it's that some of our younger teachers really shined. They stepped up and saved the day by helping our seasoned teachers with some of the technology stuff. Everything from little technical stuff to the big-picture stuff like instructional practices online. I gave one of my newer teachers her first Accomplished rating because of it. Well, I didn't give it to her. She earned it."

Principals did not feel like effective instructional leaders

Unfortunately, many principals did not believe they provided strong instructional leadership during this time, in most cases for reasons outside their control. Principal 4: "I became much less of an instructional leader, and much more of a let's-just-get-through-this-year manager." Principal 2: "I got much better (in 2020-2021), but (during spring 2020) I didn't get into any of the Google classrooms to see what was going on. I have plenty of excuses for that, but they're still just excuses. I'm embarrassed by that." Principal 10: "This was humbling to say the least. Before all this started, I used to love going into classrooms, and I was confident that I could provide some insight to help make teachers better. Now, though? For most of the time I felt like dead weight when I was observing. There was even one observation where the teacher had to hold up the class to try to help me join the Zoom. That was a low feeling." Principal 6: "I don't put any stock into the evaluation ratings I gave for (2020-2021)." Principal 7: "I wish (the Ohio Department of Education) would have just scrapped the whole evaluation process during the pandemic. That way I could have focused on the teachers who really needed support, instead of playing the paperwork game." Principal 15: "(In 2020-2021), we don't know from one day to the next whether we are in-person, virtual, hybrid. We're changing schedules by the day. I

maintain high expectations for my teachers to plan and be prepared for anything, but when it comes down to OTEs time, I just can't give them anything less than a Skilled rating. It wouldn't be fair." Principal 5: "I was very close to dismissing a teacher when the pandemic hit. I had all my documentation in order. But the pandemic made it a lot more difficult to get the evaluations needed to follow through on that. I have a feeling there were other principals in the same dilemma about whether to go through with dismissing a teacher."

Discussion and Conclusions

Through a quantitative survey administered to 120 Ohio school principals, and qualitative interviews conducted with 16 Ohio school principals, six major themes emerged regarding principals' perceptions and approaches to teacher evaluation of virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic: Principals showed grace in the evaluation process; principals felt they and their teachers were underprepared for the abrupt shift to virtual instruction; evaluation approaches were fluid, and varied greatly from school to school; the focus of evaluations shifted even more toward teachers' engagement of and connection with students; teachers willing to adapt instructional approaches fared better than teachers who clung to old approaches; principals did not feel like effective instructional leaders.

In some ways, these findings take certain pre-pandemic concerns about teacher evaluation to a new level, including the fairness of certain student achievement measures (Amrein-Beardsley & Holloway, 2019), rushing through evaluations (Derrington & Martinez, 2019), and ratings inflation (Forman & Markson, 2015). These findings are also consistent with a study of higher education faculty and students (Elfirdoussi et al., 2020), in that K-12 principals did not believe virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic to be as effective as in-person

instruction under more normal societal circumstances. These findings also illuminate many unique concerns and perspectives for which little to no previous research exists.

These themes suggest certain implications for practice. Principals, who are entrusted to be instructional leaders under any instructional format, must strive to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to provide effective instruction. This is especially important when teachers are forced to deliver instruction in an unfamiliar way, as they were at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Principals can lead/contribute to the effort to provide high-quality professional development for teachers in this format. Principals must also be creative in the search for fresh and innovative instructional approaches to share with teachers, because relying/insisting on dated approaches can be troublesome in a new setting. This can include empowering the most tech-savvy (often younger) teachers to lead the school's effort to innovate. Principals should also be communicating regularly with the leaders of other schools. The most effective and actionable ideas for instructional/logistical/troubleshooting needs, might only be a phone call or email away to a fellow school leader facing similar challenges.

For teacher evaluation to be effective, principals/evaluators must continue to regard it as a formative process for growth, rather than a summative/punitive process (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Based on this study's findings, some principals took the sting out of evaluation by design – showing grace to alleviate teacher stress. However, other principals lowered their expectations/adherence associated with evaluation merely because they did not believe the evaluations could be used for a punitive purpose. No matter the motivation, forgoing evaluation responsibilities cannot be the best approach for instructional leaders.

Even in trying and unexpected circumstances, there must be a way to continue making the teacher evaluation process a worthwhile, formative process for growth while still showing

grace. Principals/evaluators can be supported in this effort by being afforded the time (most likely from a district level) to conduct meaningful walkthroughs and observations, and by being provided the guidance and reassurance (most likely from the state level) necessary to make meaningful interpretations and take meaningful action based on those walkthrough and observations.

Logistical planning and communication can be overwhelming during a pandemic, and the more that district-level leaders can shoulder this burden, the more time principals can focus on teacher evaluation and instructional leadership. Just as principals seek to enable teachers to focus on their student needs, district-level leaders should seek to enable principals to focus on their student and staff needs. State departments of education should provide clear guidance to principals on if/how teacher evaluations can be handled in a more effective way in a virtual setting. State departments of education should also reassure principals that they have the backing necessary to hold teachers to high expectations in the evaluation process. That is, in the unfortunate case where a teacher is consistently ineffective (despite the best efforts of school leaders to provide support, and a principal to evaluate based on the letter/spirit of state policy) in a virtual setting, a school will be able to act accordingly based on the evaluation ratings submitted by the principal.

It is worth noting that data for this study, whether from the survey or interviews, were collected in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. This might be regarded as a limitation or a feature of the study. Participants are not able to reflect on the duration of the pandemic as a whole, but that is not necessarily the spirit/purpose of the study anyway. The timing of data collection offers a certain urgency, uncertainty, freshness, and authenticity that could not as easily be captured by waiting until a later time to collect data.

Such timing – waiting until after the conclusion of the pandemic to collect data about principals’ reflections – will make for an interesting study in its own right. Future studies can also investigate data and trends from the pandemic related to instructional approaches, student achievement, teacher evaluation ratings/consequences, and teacher perceptions.

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