

Healing-Centered Leadership

The challenge of balancing the collective trauma communities have experienced with the responsibility of teaching and learning at high levels

BY JENNIFER P. CHEATHAM

When Sonja Santelises started her job as CEO of the Baltimore City Schools in 2016, she could see that the young people in her community were in pain. The city was still reeling from the arrest and death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray and subsequent city-wide protests against racial injustice. Black youth were justifiably angry about the murder of a Black man in police custody, and their hurt manifested in school walkouts and sit-ins and confrontations with police.

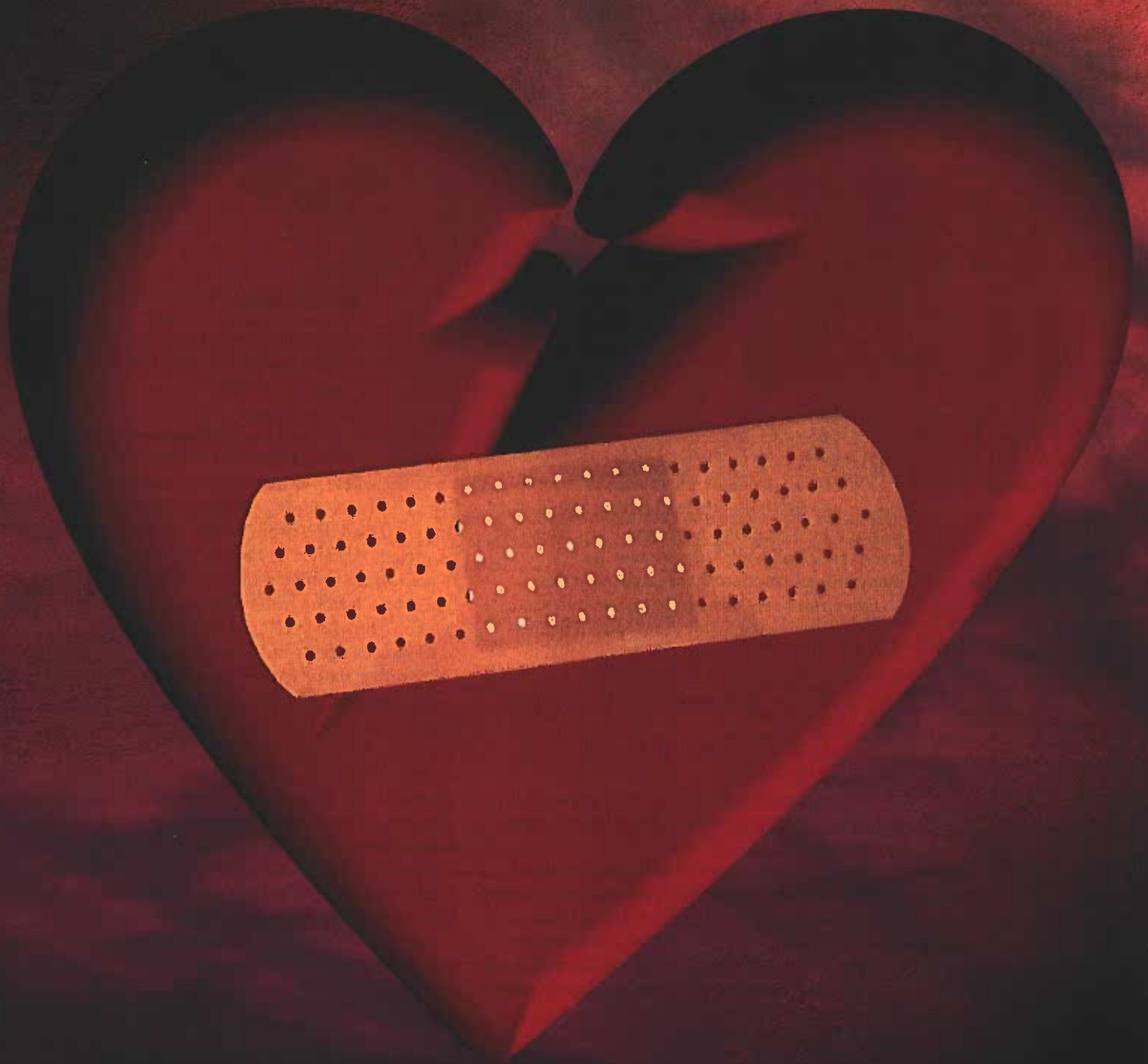
Santelises would have to address her students' need for healing head-on.

She also knew these protests were symptoms of a larger problem stemming from a long history of planned disinvestment in Baltimore's Black communities. The history of redlining had left whole neighborhoods cut off from essential resources, dramatically affecting the quality of life and making it much more challenging for

residents to attain the well-rounded support their young people needed to excel in and out of school. It was no wonder deep distrust festered between the community and its institutions, including the school district, going back generations. The community needed healing, too.

So, Santelises worked with her community to design the "Blueprint for Success," a strategy that better matched its needs and desires. The strategy would focus on supporting students academically, as well as on their wholeness and wellness as human beings, emphasizing the shared leadership to carry out the plan with the support of teachers and other caring adults.

From their focus on teaching local history to their expansion of youth leadership opportunities to their commitment to bringing community leaders into classrooms, the approach would center on the collective healing essential for a generation of students to thrive as learners.





Jason Kamras, superintendent in Richmond, Va., cultivates healing through a curriculum he helped to launch about the city's history that includes attention to its brutal past as the nation's capital of the slave trade.

Collective Trauma

Today, school districts across the country are grappling with the collective trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many schoolchildren were home for 18 months without the stability and human connection needed to learn. They lost loved ones. And while they are now back in school, many are not emotionally or physically OK.

Even in schools with supportive cultures, students are struggling, exhibiting signs of depression and anxiety, bursting into uncontrollable tears or acting out. And in schools whose cultures were not strong, those issues are more frequent and intensified.

For school system leaders, the challenge is balancing the collective trauma their communities have experienced with the real responsibilities of schools: to teach and help students learn at high levels.

The situation calls for the kind of healing-centered leadership we've seen in communities facing crisis. But what does it mean to lead for healing? Looking to superintendents like Santelises, who have taken a healing-centered approach to organizational change, may provide clues to help superintendents in every community do more than mitigate the pandemic's harm but find their way to a better future.

Addressing Harm

Shawn Ginwright, a professor of education and Africana studies at San Francisco State who frequently works with superintendents and other

education leaders on youth development, emphasizes that our work to address trauma must be about more than addressing individual harm.

In his article in *Moment* magazine titled "The Future of Healing: Shifting from Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement," Ginwright explains: "A healing-centered approach to addressing trauma requires a different question that moves beyond 'what happened to you?' to 'what's right with you?' and views those exposed to trauma as agents in the creation of their well-being rather than victims of traumatic events."

Students today undoubtedly need counseling and mental health support to address individual and acute harm caused during the pandemic. But to heal collectively in a way that promotes learning, which is a process, they need community. They need a positive sense of self and agency to make change. They need exposure to new possibilities. And they need their wellness to be prioritized without fail, which means they also need the adults who serve and support them to be well.

Here are a few examples demonstrating what it might mean for superintendents to lead for healing now.

Teaching Local History

One way to cultivate healing and collective well-being is to identify spaces and places that promote healthy identity development and a more profound sense of belonging.

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Beyond Trauma-Gazing: Healing Through Hope and Enriched Learning

BY SONJA BROOKINS SANTELISES

I worry that a dangerous narrative has emerged as we have gone about our work in the wake of a global pandemic that shuttered schools and rocked communities. It's a narrative all about trauma and victimhood and brokenness. It's a narrative that is leaving too many confused about our role as educators and what our young people in K-12 education need from us right now.

It's not that trauma isn't real or that we as superintendents don't have a responsibility to ensure that our students get the support they need in academics and otherwise. The pandemic only deepened that need. It's why, in my school district of Baltimore City, we have invested in having clinical social workers in all of our schools and why we have forged partnerships with high-quality mental health providers to ensure that students who need support get it.

Yes, healing can be found in therapy, in mindfulness practices and in all of the wellness programming school and district leaders have worked to ensure our students can access through partners specializing in those areas.

Rich Learning

But we educators must not lose sight of our primary charge: to create caring learning environments and provide students with the tools, skills, knowledge and rich opportunities that will help them envision and manifest the futures and lives they desire. Because deep and rich learning, too, is a powerful form of healing.

The way to heal trauma is not to singularly focus on it. The way we heal is by building back enriched, caring learning environments where young people can be more than what has happened to them.

It's the healing and sense of belonging students feel in lunchtime chess and drama clubs and in after-school robotics and debate teams.

It's the healing found when students engage with a curriculum in which they can see their reflections, their histories,



Sonja Brookins Santelises (right), CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools in Maryland, sees deep learning by students as a powerful form of healing in a school community.

strength and contributions to the collective community and world around them.

It's the healing found in the new confidence and sense of self that students experience when they master truly challenging content, when they discover a gift in the arts or science, technology or athletics.

It's the healing found when students sit alongside their counselors and chart out their postsecondary paths.

It's the healing found in classrooms where our young people can be more than their injuries or pain, their experiences or their circumstances, where they can wrestle with big ideas, discover their gifts and imagine what they can do with them.

Optimal Antidote

The critical role of hope in healing is whispered throughout history, from the observance of the Sabbath in the most harrowing of concentration camps, to

songs of praise echoing from Black churches in the time of Jim Crow and movements to preserve and honor native language in schools in border towns and on reservations. It is that fight to rebuild and preserve community and the re-affirmation of collective strength, worthiness, hope and belonging that has always been the antidote.

What our students need from us in the wake of pandemic closures is exactly what they needed before, in a double dose: enriched learning communities built on genuine relationships where they are seen and heard, valued and invested in, and believed in deeply. That is where healing and growth happens. That is — and has always been — our charge as educators and the core responsibility of schools.

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For Jason Kamras, superintendent in Richmond, Va., one way to do so is to teach a holistic history of one's local community. Kamras emphasizes that Richmond has "a tortured history when it comes to race ... that casts a long and dark shadow today. These issues are still real and raw." Developing and preserving a positive sense of identity requires an authentic exploration of the place in which one lives.

Designed in collaboration with community members, clergy and historians and launched as an elective pilot in the 2020-21 school year, the district's "REAL Richmond" curriculum (REAL stands for Relevant, Engaging, Active and Living) doesn't skirt the brutal realities — including the fact that Richmond was, for a time, the country's leading capital of the slave trade. But it also doesn't leave out the history of strength and progress. Students explore in thematic units Richmond's economy, its arts, its education system and more, all culminating in a capstone project for the course.

When students continually see and experience disparities that fall along racial lines and don't understand their historical roots, there is a real possibility they may internalize oppression or superiority, depending on their racial backgrounds, exacerbating the trauma of having to experience those disparities. Likewise, when students get to explore the many strengths of their communities, including untold accounts, it

can help those of every racial background form a more positive sense of identity, possibility and belonging in relation to place.

In Baltimore, Santelises considers teaching a well-rounded local history an essential strategy for promoting a healthy identity, as evidenced by Baltimore's BmoreMe curriculum. Teaching the rich history of one's community can give students protection, she says. Through deep study, students are "inoculated" from internalizing negative narratives about their communities and buoyed by examples of strength, success and perseverance that she believes offer a "counter to hopelessness."

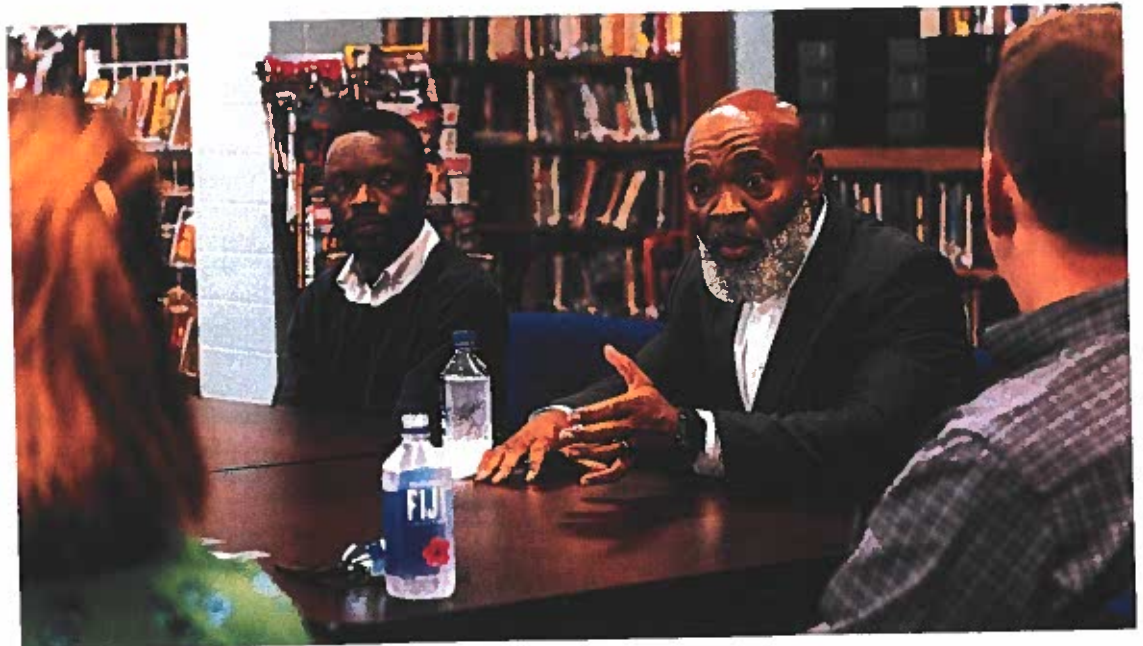
This exploration is never about telling students what to think, but about giving students the chance to make sense of this history for themselves. In it, there is healing.

Expanding Possibilities

To cultivate healing, however, students need to do more than learn how to make sense of the past. They ought to explore their possible futures.

Joe Davis, superintendent of the Ferguson-Florissant School District in Hazelwood, Mo., remembers how challenging it was to enter his district in the top leadership post in 2014, shortly after the death of 18-year-old Michael Brown, a graduate of a neighboring district. As part of Davis' entry process, he invited a transition team to develop recommendations.

In one significant move, instead of emphasizing remedial interventions, the transition team



Joe Davis (second from right), superintendent of Ferguson-Florissant School District in Hazelwood, Mo., grappled with the aftermath of the police shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown Jr. of Ferguson when he assumed his post.

Practicing Mindfulness as a Leader

About five years into my superintendency in Madison, Wis., I attended a mindfulness retreat and learned the importance of leading and healing. As a result, I began practicing mindfulness as a school system leader and applying what I learned during the retreat. Here are three takeaways.

► Lesson 1: Pay mindful attention.

It is easy to become lost in a swirl of thoughts, opportunities and problems to be solved in jobs such as the superintendency, especially now.

I learned that when I was present in both mind and body, it made all the difference. I was more compassionate and less defensive. I made fewer assumptions and, ultimately, I made better, more-informed decisions.

So I started to take a breath between meetings, preparing my mind for the next topic of discussion. I resisted the temptation to rush from one thing to the next because I knew the minute or two that I saved from the act of rushing only made me feel less present when I arrived. I began practicing how to welcome people into each meeting and to express my appreciation for their time and attention. Finally, I became more conscious of my wandering mind so I could practice how to bring it back into focus.

Like many leaders, I often struggled with

the need for more time. But I realized if I practiced being fully present in the time I was given, the time started to feel like enough.

► Lesson 2: Practice love and kindness to self.

I also learned I needed to be kind to myself.

In one mindfulness exercise, we were asked to think of someone who loves us without judgment and put ourselves back in a place and time with that person.

I imagined my best teacher friend, who I used to run with regularly years ago. I put myself back on one of our favorite trails. I was amazed at how clearly I could remember it — the long grass at the start of the trail, the roots we'd have to jump over, the climb up the hill. But mostly I remember the beauty of talking, and sometimes not talking at all, about triumphs and difficulties at work and in life.

While it was easy to remember the feeling, it hurt to feel it, too, mainly because I realized in that exercise I hadn't felt that human in a while. I realized if I was going to lead in a particular place, I would have to be able to live there, too. That meant exercising again. It meant telling my own life story so people knew more about me. Ultimately, it meant allowing myself to be me, every day — dropping my kid off at school more often, running my errands, sharing my truth and my vulnera-

bility, albeit selectively at first, which included my learning and my growth as a leader.

I needed to allow myself to be more human and trust that the community would treat me with the love and kindness we all deserve. If they didn't, then I had a choice, and I could walk away.

► Lesson 3: Extend love and kindness to others.

Finally, and most importantly, I learned how vital it is to practice love and kindness to others.

In one exercise, we were asked to send messages of love and kindness to those we love, those we know, those we don't know and those who we are in conflict with. It is important to understand that even those who challenge us still want the same things: to be cared for, to be safe, to be seen and to be appreciated.

I also realized I needed to extend love and kindness more regularly, which I felt but didn't always express to the teachers and staff in my school district.

I believe to my core that as long as we stay faithful to our vision and goals and the vocation we have chosen, then each day what we do — as educators, as leaders, as parents, as partners, as people — has to be enough.

— JENNIFER CHEATHAM

pressed for new challenging programs in science and technology and gifted education as well as access to advanced coursework. Davis embraced the strategy. He wanted to show students what was possible instead of simply managing the adverse effects of inequality.

Today, in the district's two STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math) schools, one each at the middle school and high school levels, the majority African-American student body learns robotics, engineering, biomedical science and computer science. Building on this momentum, the district intends to open a new early-college program soon where students can graduate with a high school diploma and two-year college degree, an important launching pad for students who are first-generation college-goers.

Similarly, Santelises recognizes the importance of exposure. "Sometimes kids don't know what is even possible," she says, pointing to how a single summer robotics program in Baltimore exploded

into competitive and award-winning robotics after-school robotics clubs.

Whether it is the rapid expansion of robotics in Baltimore or STEAM in Ferguson, when leaders introduce these programs through a healing-centered framework, they are no longer just programs but a liberating expansion of possibilities that promotes students' collective healing.

Student Agency

Not only do students need to make sense of the past and look forward to possibilities, healing also occurs when students have the agency to make change.

When Santelises originally envisioned the leadership strategy embedded in Baltimore's Blueprint for Success, she focused rightly on the leadership of teachers and the other adults who support children. But over time, she realized student leadership was essential too. Students deserve opportunities to practice problem solving, critical thinking

and civic responsibility, but more importantly, they need to have the authority to make real change. In Baltimore, the building back of youth organizations with diverse representation from across the city has been vital.

In addition to providing feedback on the BmoreMe curriculum, Santelises herself receives feedback regularly from a 12-member Youth Leadership Advisory Council. This is the group that advised her on distance learning when the Baltimore schools went remote in March 2020 and eventually on the return to school more than a year later.

The district also engages students through focus groups when critical issues arise that affect youth directly. These opportunities do more, however, than garner much-needed feedback. They give young people space to make sense of their world. Santelises shares that in a student focus group, one young female student said, "I thought you just didn't care about us." For the student, the realization was eye-opening that the poor condition of her school building and the lack of public transportation in her neighborhood was not intentional but the result of a larger social system. These conversations alone can be healing.

The real power, however, is in following through on the most important issues for students, the ones that will have an immediate impact on their lives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became readily apparent how necessary it was for some students to be able to work while attending school to have supplemental income. Santelises views these as high-impact problems requiring aggressive action in partnership with students.

When students have a seat at the table and are granted agency to make change, it fosters their collective well-being.

Wellness of Adults

In every instance, Santelises, Davis and Kamras appear to be on a mission to prioritize wellness as a permanent way of working instead of a temporary strategy to address immediate harm. That includes the wellness of the adults who serve children.

By offering more unplanned prep time, they are supporting teachers to do what they need to do to be fully present. By establishing clear priorities, which requires limiting or even banning



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new programs and initiatives for now, leaders provide the stability and sense of control staff need to do their best work. They also are establishing new, permanent leadership and support positions focusing on mental, physical and emotional health with a recognition that teachers can't do it all.

Perhaps most importantly, district leaders are looking to schools with strong cultures, with healthy and trusting relationships between students and adults, for clues about what matters most in schools. Santelises is exploring how schools can use time differently with healing in mind. What does it look like to re-envision the school day and year with an

emphasis on student and teacher wellness?

Each of these district leaders understands that centering on wellness represents a necessary change in organizational culture that will take time.

Their Own Wellness

These leaders also have come to understand that their own wellness matters.

Santelises believes the pandemic has given her permission to "aggressively prioritize." This includes a monthly prayer circle with leaders from across the city that she never misses.

For Davis, wellness means time to work out every day. When asked what he does to stay well, Kamras laughs and says, "My wellness? Mindless Netflix or making a good dinner. I married my best friend 15 years ago, and we're in it together." For each of them, family, including protected time with their own children, has become paramount.

In all, these leaders understand that students, families and teachers in every community, no matter its demographics, always have needed a healing-centered approach to change to flourish, not reserved for times of crisis. When we all lead for healing, we lead for the change our students and teachers deserve. ■

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