

Operating in a VUCA World

Managing tactically and adaptively in K-12 education when the pace of change outside our system is faster than the internal ability to adapt

BY RAYMOND J. MCNULTY

Since mid-March, our daily routines have been ruled by a public health crisis unlike anything most of us have seen. We feel frustrated, annoyed, overwhelmed, afraid, concerned and unsure of what to do next.

Welcome to the VUCA world, characterized by the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. The term originated with the U.S. Army War College to describe the state of the world after the Cold War. The concept has come to characterize the rapid pace of change in every sector of society and the new skills required to lead organizations effectively.



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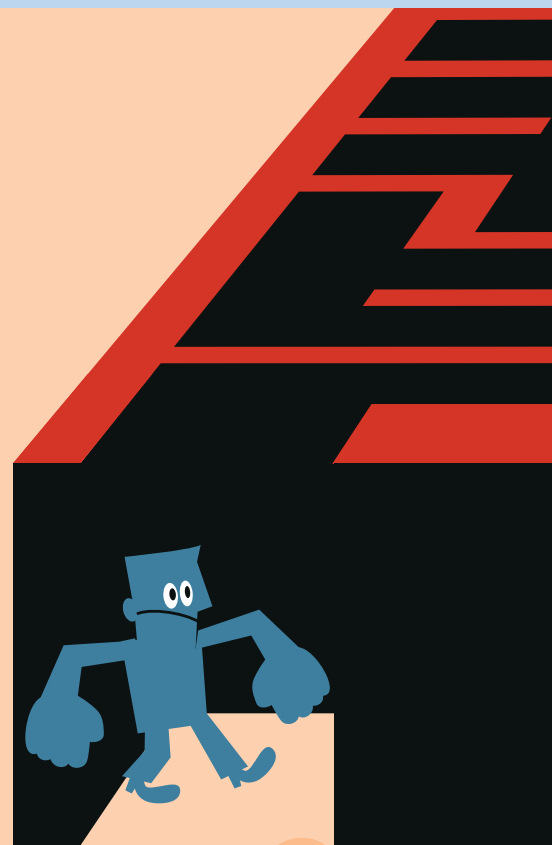
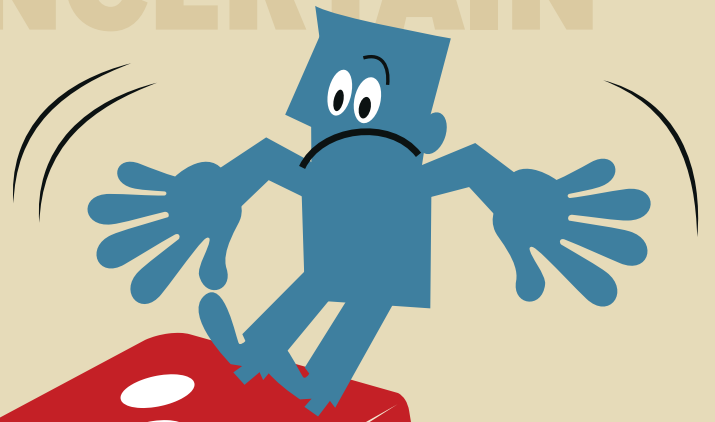


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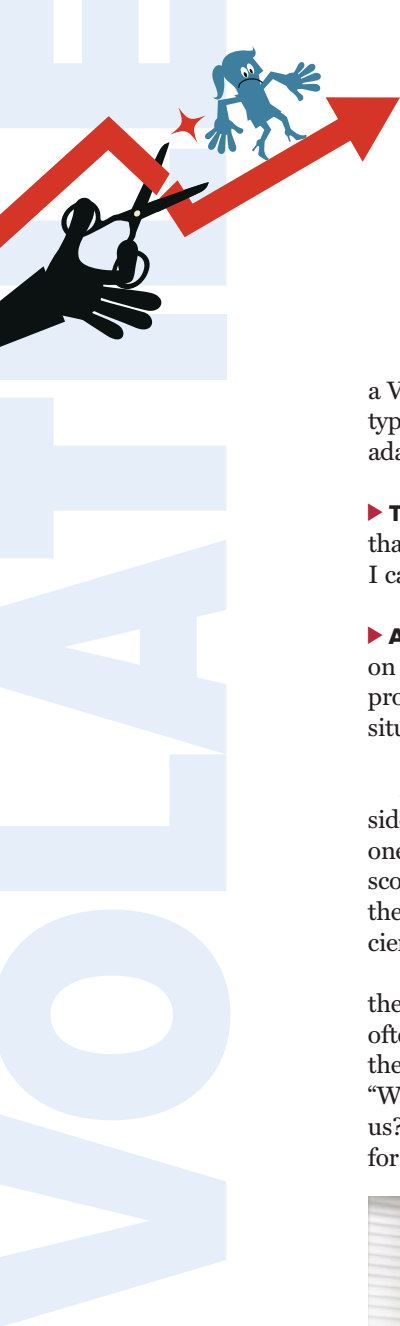


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In K-12 education, successful leadership in a VUCA world requires systems to manage two types of performance simultaneously: tactical and adaptive.

► **Tactical performance** refers to proven practices that we already know work in our system — what I call *best practices*.

► **Adaptive performance** builds for a future based on emerging educational strategies that show promise in meeting the needs of learners in new situations. I call them *next practices*.

Most educational systems focus on the tactical side. Leaders look at the test results at the end of one year and determine how to improve student scores the next. However, tactical adjustments to the system usually are incremental and insufficient for adapting to rapidly changing conditions.

School systems that are future-focused see the need to build processes that look ahead more often than they look back. District leaders ask themselves, “What is the future of learning?” and “Why is understanding the future important to us?” They understand they are educating students for the VUCA world.

When the COVID-19 crisis is over, will education leaders retreat to our old factory model of education that’s based on time and a 180-day school year? Or will they adapt to keep pace with the change outside the system? Today’s leaders need skills to lead, not just react. They must, in fact, create new ways of preparing students for the world in which they will work and live. This is a significant leadership challenge, but there is hope.

For the past two years, I have worked with cohorts of superintendents and their leadership teams from across the country as part of AASA’s Future-Focused Collaborative. By connecting with critical friends from other systems, these leaders have opportunities to learn together and support one another in navigating and understanding the VUCA world, and translating that understanding into action.

Forces of VUCA

Let’s examine how we’ve taken the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous world described by the military and business sectors and translated it into action in our education world. Welcome to VUCA 2.0, where four primary forces are at work.



Randy Fillpot, superintendent in Newman, Calif., focused on fortifying relationships when schools closed in March.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NEWMAN-CROWS LANDING UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEWMAN, CALIF.



NO. 1. VOLATILITY MANAGED BY VISION: Leaders are clear about where the system is going and what it's about.

Long before the COVID-19 crisis, Jeff Dillon, superintendent in Wilder, Idaho, set a vision to prepare students for their future in the VUCA world. "This required me to leave the comfort of the traditions in our classrooms and take on an unknown, unfamiliar and often unfriendly world of personalized competency-based learning," he explains.

The Wilder schools eliminated passing bells and grade levels and shifted the culture from a teacher-centered model to a student-centered model. The work focused on empowering Wilder students with skills to own and manage their own learning. There was no shortcut to accomplish this work. Powerful professional development aligned to the vision helped make the initiative a success.

When the 518-student district received the state's pandemic notice to close the schools but not the learning, teachers and students took their computer devices home and the virtual learning began. Everyone, including the parents, understood the need for student-centered learning. Dillon says the driver to success was not the technology but the infusion of the life-changing mindset that students own and manage their own learning.

NO. 2. UNCERTAINTY MANAGED BY UNDERSTANDING: Organizations use vision to understand the system's strengths and capabilities and to design strategies to maximize those strengths.

"We have focused on the physical and emotional health of our students over academic rigor during this time of remote learning. Our students may not remember all the academic content they learned, but they will surely remember for years to come how they were treated as valued members of this system," says Randy Fillpot, superintendent of the Newman-Crows Landing Unified School District in Newman, Calif.

Having a vision is important; understanding the strengths of the system helps guide strategy when uncertainty suddenly emerges. Just three weeks into the forced COVID-19 closing of school facilities and the start of remote learning, the district reached out to the teachers, parents and students with a survey asking for feedback — and district leaders learned quite a bit.

Students shared how they learned many things on their own, but when they needed help, their teachers responded quickly and supported them fully. Parents expressed satisfaction in listening to their students talk about the experience of remote learning at home and how engaged teachers were with their children. Many teachers shared how much better the remote learning model was for some of their students and what great conversations they were having privately with some of their most challenging students.

Fillpot's efforts to launch a future-focused strategy may have started out as a small movement focused on relationships, but the lesson here is that once a focused and integrated improvement process is launched successfully, the growth is exponential.

An AASA Collaborative with a Firm Future Gaze

Superintendents and their leadership teams from 11 districts are engaged in the Future-Focused Collaborative, a yearlong commitment to study and action. The program is a partnership between AASA and the Successful Practices Network.

The participants are studying best practices, applying principles of innovation to their district-wide plans, and collaborating with like-minded leaders. Bill Daggett and Ray McNulty, both affiliated with the Successful Practices Network, along with AASA's Valerie Truesdale and Mort Sherman and other national thought leaders, are guiding each district team in developing district-specific plans for a blended teaching and learning model that includes face-to-face and virtual resources.

The current cohort is beginning this summer with rolling startups throughout the fall. Follow-up sessions are scheduled during AASA's national conference in New Orleans in February with a virtual gathering in summer 2021.

More details will be available in the Leadership Network section of the AASA website.





MR. EX COMPLEX



NO. 3. COMPLEXITY MANAGED BY COURAGE:

Courageous leaders make bold moves with vision and understanding.

Shari Camhi, superintendent of the Baldwin Union Free School District on New York's Long Island, has spent years taking risks on behalf of her students. She regularly consults with students about their views on programs and new opportunities to learn outside the traditional classroom structure. She courageously challenges state regulations and works to expand options for students to demonstrate their learning en route to earning a high school diploma while pushing aside the many traditions engrained in New York's educational system.

Camhi understands the importance of a focused districtwide agenda to equip all learners with the skills to navigate an uncertain and complex world because she has lived it, teaching violent and disruptive children in New York City earlier in her career. When COVID-19 closings became a reality, her students and teachers were ready for the transition because in Baldwin, learning happens all the time and in many places.

As superintendent in Baldwin, N.Y., Shari Camhi (right) has tried to prepare students for navigating an uncertain world.

Many districts invest in leadership training focused on improving the current system (tactical performance). Camhi understands the need to build on the future of learning (adaptive performance). Critical to the depth of her work was initiating future-focused training for a districtwide leadership team of teachers and administrators to lead experiments that challenge the status quo of learning. Her clear vision to drive the work and her deep understanding of the district's strengths allowed her to build a culture in which risk taking is supported and learning from failure is encouraged.

Her bold leadership efforts have led to significant results for black and Latino students, who now outperform their peers statewide, and lifted achievement for students overall. Recognition of the significant gains is not slowing down Baldwin's efforts to improve. Camhi understands the importance of bringing educators and the com-



munity into the thinking behind the big ideas to grow a powerful culture of support.

“Transformation is not easy work no matter what you do in advance, but early results spark energy for the next challenge that lies ahead,” she says.

NO. 4. AMBIGUITY MANAGED BY AGILITY: Leaders are flexible and move quickly. They have *learning agility*. They have an innovation policy, take risks, collaborate, reflect, and listen to differing opinions.

School district success in this VUCA world requires a future-focused culture and specific strategies allowing for *controlled innovation*. This is a design process using a model known as “polarity strategy” that balances continuity and



Raymond J. McNulty, president of the Successful Practices Network, believes school systems can learn to succeed in times of uncertainty.

change simultaneously. This balance is critical to successful transformation.

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, Michael Conner, superintendent of the 4,600-student Middletown, Conn., school district, was focused on creating a truly personalized learning system that supports each student in the diverse system he leads.

His emphasis has been on two important strategies: polarity management and professional learning. Polarity management requires agility to balance opposing forces that are dependent on one another. For example, some educators want to hold onto continuity and others advocate for change. In a successful system, these opposing forces are skillfully balanced to create maximum growth.

Conner’s second strategy was an investment in professional learning, which focused on personalized learning, including creating support systems to ensure implementation of this work with fidelity throughout the system.

This focus paid off quickly with the sudden closure of schools in mid-March. Middletown students and teachers were positioned to transition quickly to online teaching and hybrid learning. This systematic agility has not only supported the entire school community at a time of great volatility, but has positioned the district to continue to evolve the model.

District leaders are now creating a college-like model for students. Beginning sometime in 2021, students will have opportunities to choose their preferred learning delivery model: face to face, hybrid or online.

Crisis Reality

The work of AASA’s Future-Focused Collaborative has connected these and other district leaders from across the United States to learn from one another and build systems where controlled innovation principles create systems that thrive in this VUCA world. Moving through the realities of the crisis of COVID-19 has made this work and approach more critical than it has ever been.

Action by leaders matters more now than ever in education. Leaders of the future believe that just because the future is uncertain, it doesn’t mean we can’t influence it. ■

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