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## 38. The Tsunami

Told by the former principal of an urban public high school

Going into my eighth year as principal, my colleagues and I took pride in our school's transformation from among the lowest 5 percent in the state to one of the best neighborhood high schools in the city. Through our hard work, our students' performance had improved dramatically. They knew that they had played a pivotal role in reclaiming their school by providing ideas for improvement, taking responsibility for the school, and their hard work. Our faculty had become deeply committed to a burgeoning professional culture marked by collaboration and by the development of caring, supportive relationships that promote *all* students' success in school. We began to be recognized for our work. We attracted money to provide students with scholarships for post-secondary education. We won a state soccer championship. Our state's department of education awarded us a "commendable school" designation. And the *US News & World Report* placed us in the top third of high schools in the state.

The 2019–2020 school year started like other recent years with a day-long senior leadership retreat. Our agenda included typical items like a mission-focused data review and some collaborative problem-solving. Looking back at the agenda now, our closing activity stands out as an omen of sorts. It was titled "Self-Care and Sustainable Leadership," and it focused on strategies for self-care and avoiding compassion fatigue. Our team felt that we all needed new tools for the year ahead—teachers, staff, and school leaders alike. We had no idea what was coming—a tsunami of crises that would bring our school community to its knees.

The first wave hit early in the fall with a car accident that killed two of our seniors—sisters. They were vibrant popular young women who had gone out with an older sister on a school night. The night ended in the crash that also caused serious injuries to the older sister, who was driving. Most of our students learned about their classmates' deaths via social media as they walked into school the next day before we had the opportunity to craft the message and organize support for our students and teachers.

The second wave hit two days after the funeral for one of these students—a district-wide teachers strike that was to be the longest in more than three decades. It lasted 15 days. This strike felt different from the 7-day strike several

years before. This one was especially disruptive. Our students were cut off from the crisis team and other supports that the school provided after the car accident. Instruction was cut off. Students who were eligible for free and reduced-price meals were left without food. And because of the timing of the strike, our athletes were not able to continue with fall sports. This was especially painful for our top-ranked boys soccer team that was favored to win another state championship.

The school community was still recovering from the accident and the strike when the next wave hit. During the third week of November, a former student, in his early 20s, was gang executed at a local convenience store. He had struggled academically as a student, but he was well-known within the school and the broader community. I had developed a friendship with his mother, who worked as a waitress in a nearby restaurant. We were all shocked when we heard the news, and we anticipated gang retribution. Two days later, a young man from the opposing gang, also a former student of ours, was executed, setting off 3 days of social media frenzy, fear, and additional neighborhood violence. Even though these events did not occur on school property and no current students were involved, it was all but impossible to convince many parents that it was safe to send their children to school. Despite the fact that we had worked so hard to create a safe, trusting, and supportive school environment for students, attendance dropped below 50 percent for several days.

It was a tough fall, and the tsunami kept coming the next spring. A wave hit in early March when another one of our students lost her struggle with cancer. Our students and staff made efforts to honor her spirit and life before and after she passed away. Hers was our fifth death in 6 months.

Then COVID hit, and we lost our ability to be together in person. We were notified on Friday, March 13, that the governor would close schools across the state for 3 weeks. In fact, schools remained closed until the end of the academic year. Like most schools, we were not prepared. But we worked hard to adapt and transition to remote learning. We did our best to ensure that learning continued and that key rituals like graduation took place.

And still another wave came. In May, like in so many other places, our city experienced racial tensions and community unrest following the murder of George Floyd. For some students and staff, it was an opportunity to take to the streets and express anger and frustration over police brutality and lack of accountability. The violence and looting directly affected some of our families and their businesses. Life in parts of our neighborhoods was severely disrupted, compounding the loss and uncertainty that had been building for months.

As these waves hit us, we struggled against a strong, compounding cross current. The 2019–2020 school year was the final year of my second four-year contract. I knew going into the year that renewal was far from guaranteed. The political winds had shifted as our school's community-based governing council was beginning to feel like it was time to make a change, despite how well the school was performing. The council's politics had turned toxic, and by mid-fall, I began looking quietly for new positions while also working with council members to counter efforts that might harm the school. I began to feel like I was coming under steady attack even as the faculty and I continued our work with our students while managing the crises that hit us.

I took solace in family and friends and was grateful to feel God's love. It was a leadership coach at the time who remarked that in moments like these sometimes God calms the storm while in other moments God calms those who are in the storm. I was in the middle of the storm. At the end of January, the council decided not to offer me a third contract, terminating my principalship at the end of the school year. I accepted the council's decision, thanked the community for the opportunity to serve its families and children, and committed to a peaceful transition to new school leadership.

In the months that followed, I began to provide new leadership opportunities for my assistant principal and to help our council see that she was an excellent person to succeed

me. She was highly skilled and respected by our faculty and staff, and she was our best hope to keep the school moving forward. I wanted to put her out front so that others could see her skills, her caring, and understand what a remarkable school leader she was. It worked. She applied for the job, and with some pressure from the staff and parents, the school council offered her a contract. I turned my attention to help her assume her new responsibilities. I felt assured that the school was going to be in good hands.

The 2019–2020 school year was a time of immense challenge for us and for our students and families. The year brought our school community to its knees. How did we make it through? In the end, we managed to come together around a vision rooted in a commitment to social justice and to being a caring and supportive community for all our students, teachers, and families. We had built a community that was bigger than any one of us and that would continue without me, with the leadership of the new school principal.

We grounded our school improvement work in student centeredness. We created a climate of access and opportunity for students, attending to social and structural barriers to student engagement and success. Importantly, as school leaders, we worked continually to help teachers form caring relationships with their students, to develop trust, and to provide social and emotional support. We helped teachers by adding professional staff who focused on behavioral and psychological health of students and by creating team structures to bring teachers together. It was the strength of this community of care and support that ultimately shifted our school to become more aligned to meet our students' needs and interests. We had become increasingly intentional in how we went about removing barriers and helping students feel like they belonged, were respected, and were supported. In the end, the school that we had built to be both challenging and caring would prevent us from drowning under these waves of crisis.