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Press Release

HKU study finds Building a Culture of Trust, Collaboration, and Openness to Innovation through Multi-level School Leadership is the Key to Online Learning and Teaching Preparedness during the New Normal

A team of researchers led by Professor Nancy Law, Deputy Director of the Centre of Information Technology in Education, and Dr Tan Cheng Yong, Associate Professor, Academic Unit of Social Contexts and Policies of Education of the Faculty of Education, the University of Hong Kong (HKU), released their 4th report for the eCitizen Education 360 study today (19 January). The latest research results focus on how specific school leadership practices impact teachers' preparedness for and effectiveness in online teaching and learning. The findings demonstrate the pivotal role of multi-level school leadership in fostering a culture of trust, collaboration and openness for pedagogical innovation, an indispensable quality of effective schools under the New Normal.

Key research findings
School leaders, including 120 senior school leaders, 302 academic middle managers and 114 non-academic middle managers, were surveyed on their perception about the state of their schools' situation regarding general leadership, e-learning leadership, school culture and climate, and forward planning for the 2020-21 school year. The survey was conducted from mid-June to mid-July 2020, and over 500 valid returns were collected.

1. **Campus-wide culture of collaboration, mutual trust, and openness to innovation are key conditions for online teaching and learning preparedness during the New Normal**
   In their 3rd bulletin released in November 2020, the research team reported three key factors influencing teachers' online teaching preparedness: peer sharing and collaboration on online pedagogy, on general online teaching and learning arrangements and their own self-efficacy regarding online teaching. Using a statistical method called Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), they found that the single most important predictor from the school leaders' responses was how far there was a campus-wide culture of collaboration, mutual trust, and a culture of creativity and innovation. The analysis shows that a high level of online teaching and learning (T&L) preparedness is predicted if the school leaders report that (1) during school suspension, the teachers exhibited a high level of positive energy, collaboration and trust, as well as a strong sense of mission to minimise the negative impact on students' learning, and (2) before school suspension, their teachers were keen to try new teaching methods, digital technologies for T&L, and to participate in innovation projects involving school-based collaboration.

   Another positive leadership predictor for online L&T preparedness is the extent to which the school leaders report that it is a priority for the school to provide their teachers with professional development opportunities, especially through engaging their teachers in school-based and/or joint-school T&L innovation projects. Online T&L preparedness is negatively predicted by the extent to which school leaders reported encountering obstacles in e-learning implementation before school suspension.

2. **Leaders' overall school development priorities and strategies are the strongest predictors of positive school culture and forward planning for online T&L in 2020-21**
   Using SEM, the research team modelled the relationship between school leaders' perceptions of their schools' situation before, during and after the first period of school suspension in 2020. The results show that the strongest predictors for a school climate of positive energy, trust and collaboration during school suspension were the following *overall school leadership priorities and practices before school suspension*:

(1) the extent to which the school had in place strategies for providing a school environment and support for student-centred learning;
(2) the importance of various kinds of teacher professional development provisions as perceived by school leaders; and
(3) the extent to which specific organisational strategies and routines were adopted to achieve the school goals.

E-learning specific strategies and practices before school suspension had a minor influence on the positive school climate. However, obstacles encountered in e-learning implementation before school suspension is a strong predictor of negative teacher sentiments during school suspension. These sentiments include anxiety about effectiveness of online T&L, feeling overburdened and lack of social and professional support.

3. **Senior leaders and middle-level non-academic leaders are more optimistic and confident in the face of challenges, and often see failure as "room for improvement"**
Given the rapid social, economic and technological changes in Hong Kong and elsewhere, leading a school to ensure that students are provided with optimal opportunities amidst predictable and unpredicatable changes is very complex, and requires the concerted efforts of a large team of professionals rather than a few senior leaders.

The analysis shows that school leaders playing different leadership roles within the same school do not necessarily share the same perceptions of the school's state of development. A prominent trend is observed across schools: senior school leaders (principals, vice principals, heads of academics/curriculum) generally have the most positive views of the situation within their schools and perceive the least obstacles.

Middle-level non-academic leaders (Moral and Civic Education coordinators, counselling and guidance coordinators, discipline masters/mistresses, life-wide learning and extra-curricular activities coordinators) generally hold a less optimistic view of their school's situation and perceive more e-learning implementation obstacles compared to senior leaders in their own school.

The third group of school leaders are the middle-level academic leaders (heads of subject panels, heads of Key Learning Areas, e-learning coordinators, STEM coordinators). Compared to the other two groups, they have the least optimistic perception regarding the effectiveness of their schools' overall and e-learning specific policies and strategies, and the highest level of perceived obstacles in e-learning implementation. This is possibly because middle-level academic leaders are the key personnel in schools to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate e-learning/online learning or any other kind of pedagogical innovations at the operational level. They are thus also more likely to encounter challenges or resistance in their day-to-day work of managing and supporting the implementation of any curriculum initiative, including converting face-to-face lessons to fully online ones.

Using the Latent Class Analysis (LCA) method, we can group school leaders according to their responses to the survey questions. **Based on the responses to the overall school development priorities and strategies items**, all school leaders' can be categorised into two classes: those who are
> *1) optimistic, firm and progressive*, and
> *2) pragmatic and risk averse*

Based on the leaders' perception about their schools' e-learning developments, they can be classified into three groups:
> *1) e-learning mature*
> *2) e-learning progressive,* and
> *3) elearning averse*

Over half of senior school leaders are both optimistic, firm and progressive as well as e-learning mature, and only 6% are e-learning averse. On the other hand, less than 40% of academic middle-level leaders are optimistic, firm and progressive, and 13% of them are pragmatic and risk averse as well as e-learning

averse. Compared to the academic middle leaders, non-academic middle leaders perceive greater emphasis by their school in making provisions for student-centred learning and for teacher professional development.

Recommendations
Based on the above research findings, the team recommends the following for schools under the New Normal:

1. Schools need to reach out for external support for teacher professional learning and leadership development to enhance their online T&L preparedness, rather than by "learning through failures" only. Participation in school-based projects that foster pedagogical innovations and promote active collaboration and mutual trust are most beneficial.

2. Engagement and support from both academic and non-academic leaders are equally important in ensuring quality learning outcomes from students' participation in online and other supporting learning experiences provided by the school under the New Normal. Participation in joint-school student-centered innovation projects that involve multiple school leadership roles will foster school-wide collaboration.

3. Senior leaders need to support middle-level leaders in solving actual problems encountered in the process of innovation. This can be achieved by ensuring that they have a realistic understanding of the actual T&L practices within their schools (including online T&L), strengthening communication and consensus building across senior and middle-level leaders.

About "eCitizen Education 360"
The prolonged period of fight against COVID-19 and school suspension has posed huge challenges to every member of the education community. The tremendous effort of schools in sustaining learning online has not only overcome limits presented by social distancing, but inspire a new chapter of educational transformation as schools resume. This project is a comprehensive 360-degree survey study with widespread support from academia, parents, professionals and community organisations. By gathering information about the experiences and needs of primary and secondary schools during the periods of school suspension and resumption, we aim to enhance our comprehensive capacities to act as a community to improve the education opportunities, digital competence and well-being of students. These would also enable them to cope with various aspects of life in the fast-changing world in which digital technology plays a pervasive role.

This issue is based on the data collected during school resumption from June to July 2020, in a study entitled **"eCitizen Education 360"**. The first three batches of research findings were released on July 20, August 25, and November 3, 2020 respectively.

For more details of the "eCitizen Education 360" Project and the report, please visit https://ecitizen.hk/360. To view the e-version of this press release, download related photos, presentation file and further reference materials, please visit http://web.edu.hku.hk/press.

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