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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Breakthrough Leadership* by Alan M. Blankstein and Marcus J. Newsome.

- *Traditional constraints are out the door.* Testing, instructional times, means of delivering instruction, and much more have become “negotiable.” This leads to great opportunities for organized and visionary leaders and professionals at large to work with community and family partners to shape their futures.
- *The political capital of our profession is at a record high.* As indicated earlier, families are now taking on homeschooling, and the general population at large is aware of the actions of heroic educators making home deliveries of computers, academic lessons, clothes and food, and even self-styled entertainment to cheer up home-bound children. How this political capital is focused and spent in coming months and years will determine a great deal regarding the future of our profession and the students we serve.

CASE STORY 2.3

New Alliances Are Tapped in Supporting Students and Ready for Their Return

Wraparound services at Brockton High School were many and were easier to use when students were coming to school. Though the school staff set up hotlines for families in need, they couldn't physically assist in delivering an array of services: “We have no cleaning supplies. Can you help?” “We don't have Tylenol, and our child is sick.” The school's security monitoring system flags emails that indicate the potential of high risk for a student, and the staff follow up immediately through crisis partners or directly. In this part of Massachusetts, COVID-19 is rampant, and some families think they will die anyway, so avoid the stigma of going to a doctor. It's easy to become hopeless here, as one student's note indicates: “Why should I do homework, when I probably won't survive this anyway?” On a follow-up call, the student's mother confirmed, “I'm more afraid for my child minus the structure of school, than I am of the virus.”

The staff enlisted support of scores of local agencies, police, and others to create the most comprehensive and rapid response plans possible. Likewise, they are compiling a list of grief-related and culturally sensitive resources and supporting agencies in their planning for students now and upon their return. “We need to help students with loss of their grandparents, for example, who haven't had a ceremony or funeral to mark their passing,” shared Sharon Wolder (personal communication, April 20, 2020), Brockton's

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chief officer of student support services. “Different cultures have differing ways to grieve, and we have one hundred languages spoken here that we have to consider as well.”

“When people do return to school,” Wolder added, “we will not have 4,500 children show up on day one! We will stagger this, and this will be the same for staff, who will have to return earlier than the students and also will need grief counseling. Everyone’s emotional well-being will come first, and there will be teams of people ready to address children’s abuse, neglect, and/or anxiety related to their time away from school.”

Breakthrough Leadership Already Underway

After a lecture at Indiana University, Cornel West (personal communication, February 5, 2004) once shared: “There have always been light-skinned brothers and sisters in the struggle with us . . . just not enough of you.” Similarly, when faced with the exigency of an urgent situation, some educators have always found breakthrough solutions.

The mobility rate at McCarver Elementary School in Tacoma, Washington, hit a high-water mark of 200 percent, disrupting schooling for everyone. A new level of leadership was called for that went beyond the school boundaries to engage the Tacoma Housing Authority and ultimately to collaborate with fifty families to ensure housing stability, counseling, and job-training support for those families in exchange for them sending their children consistently to McCarver. The children, in turn, received International Baccalaureate classes to deepen their engagement rather than a remedial curriculum. Three years after the program was piloted, forty-five families were still participating, the mobility rate of McCarver Elementary School dropped to 75 percent, and both the students within the program *and* their peers who were not suffering housing insecurity made academic gains (Blad, 2014). Breakthrough solutions often come from “reframing,” as seen in Case Story 2.4.

CASE STORY 2.4

Educators Become “Talent Scouts” to “Grow” *Emerging Scholars*

The Baltimore Emerging Scholars program has recently emerged as yet another breakthrough experiment and partnership—in this case between the Baltimore City Public Schools and the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented

Youth. It is designed to mine untapped potential in a school system where student test scores are nearly two grade levels below the national average.

In twenty-one schools across the city, the program introduces second-, third-, and fourth-grade students to above-grade-level lessons in architecture, engineering, and astronomy. Most of these schools rank in the bottom quartile in the state of Maryland, and even the schools' principals had to be convinced that they had any "gifted" students with "talent." The dialogue has since changed as the "talent scouts" shared new ways of looking at students, based on their strengths and potential.

The Center for Talented Youth sought out the partnership with the city schools because certain students—mainly Black and low-income—had largely been shut out of its programs, which benefit academically talented students in all fifty states and more than ninety countries.

Leaders there decided the key to finding a more diverse pool of students was not testing more children or lowering the bar for participation; it was finding another way to identify them. "Our focus is on those kids who have the strength in academics that we just have to try and uncover," said Amy Shelton, the center's interim executive director (Mitchell, 2019).

The leadership in Case Stories 2.3 and 2.4 was founded on breakthrough realizations that include the following:

1. All students have talents and can succeed at high levels.
2. Conditions can be altered to facilitate that success.
3. It is the job of the adults, not the children, to alter those conditions and disrupt the past stigmas, broken relationships, and backward thinking that has impeded these children.
4. New alliances and resources that include but are not limited to schools often need to be tapped to create these conditions for student success.
5. It is incumbent upon leadership at all levels to obtain and deploy resources necessary to accommodate all students' needs.
6. A primary resource for students' success is adults around them who see themselves as talent scouts, not gatekeepers, for those young people.

Resources will indeed be front and center in fiscal year 2020 and beyond in the United States if not in many countries worldwide. Yet, as underscored in a recent piece by Daarel Burnette, titled "Devastated Budgets and Widening Inequities: How the Coronavirus Collapse Will Impact Schools," the unique system of funding American education will exacerbate the problem for half

of the nation's schools. Meanwhile, the other half will be left in far better financial stead. If left to chance, or its "natural" conclusion, this will be disastrous for a nation that already pales in international tests and other health indicators next to other major industrialized countries due to exactly this type of inequity. According to Burnette (2020),

Almost half of the nation's 13,000 school districts may be forced to make the deepest cuts to education spending in a generation—slashing programs and laying off hundreds of thousands of administrators, teachers and other staff—to fend off financial collapse brought on by the coronavirus.

But while the economic impact on schools will be historic, it will not be random.

The districts most at risk share demographic profiles—student populations that are heavily black, Latino and low-income—and one crucial trait of their budgets: They get more than half their revenue from state aid.

In Case Story 2.5, we see how one such district beat the odds in coming back from the financial abyss. The breakthrough leadership in response to a profound crisis depended heavily on purposeful collaboration with state- and local-level bipartisan political officials as well as other community stakeholders. Students participated in the district's fundraising effort by gaining practice in grant writing. Like so many children in our educational system, these students required more in the way of resources to realize the district's promise of equity. While this is extremely inspiring and instructive at this juncture, we also have an even larger question to squarely face as numerous districts and schools must work with shrinking budgets in the coming year: Do we want to continue to disrupt our underlying systems, policies, and practices that keep our students from becoming their best selves? The end of this chapter addresses that question with nine breakthrough leadership strategies.

CASE STORY 2.5

Petersburg Rising: Out of Economic Ashes

Petersburg, located in central Virginia on the Appomattox River, is a city of thirty thousand residents who share a proud history. It had struggled for decades, however, by the time I (Marcus) had arrived as the new superintendent. Financially, things were about to get worse.

In an April 2016 *Progress Index* article titled "'Higher Powers' May Be Called On to Fix School System," Michael Buettner explained the saga of

Petersburg, its schools of 4,300 students, and the challenges facing the new school leadership team. The Petersburg challenges are similar to those in many other cities and states—West Virginia; Detroit, Michigan; Gary, Indiana; Camden, New Jersey—that have suffered departing industries and a declining tax base.

Financial Collapse

Petersburg was on the verge of financial collapse. Interim City Manager Dironna Moore Belton faced the City Council and a packed hall of angry residents to announce drastic cuts to city services, starting with schools, whose students were already among the lowest-performing in the state. Budget cuts would also include fire and police services in a city with an exceedingly high violent crime rate.

One month into the job, I learned the school district was unable to pay its bills; the city government was unable to make its funding transfers to schools. The contracted health insurance company refused to pay employee medical claims, the district was unable to make legally required employee retirement payments, utilities were delinquent, equipment and supplies were cut off, the contractor responsible for supplying school meals had threatened to discontinue deliveries, and the district was struggling to make payroll.

To make matters worse, just days before the opening of the new school year, the City Council cut the school district's budget by more than 30 percent of its approved allocations. This was how the school year began, much in the same way that the 2020–2021 school year will begin coast-to-coast for so many educators, children, and families.

Restoring Faith in the Leadership

The Petersburg City School Board was set to hire its ninth superintendent within fifteen years. When a school system is experiencing a superintendent turnover every two years or less, it does not have a superintendent problem; it has a school board problem. In an effort to stabilize the school system, state and local officials would take a different approach. They would make every effort to recruit, hire, and support an experienced leader with a solid track record.

Before going to Petersburg, I had a brief three-minute hallway conversation meeting with then Virginia governor elect, and 2016 Democratic vice-presidential nominee, Tim Kaine. That meeting led to my appointment as vice chair of Kaine's education policy transition team. Later I had opportunities to interact with Kaine's wife, Anne Holton. Holton would later become a pivotal influence in my transition to Petersburg.

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Those who have worked closely with me saw attributes that helped me build enduring relationships, necessary to earn substantial support for Petersburg. They knew I viewed education as a ministry to children and families, had a results-driven work ethic, and was an empathic listener willing to embrace and implement ideas of others without compromising core values.

The governor, the secretary of education, and members of the general assembly (both Democrats and Republicans) wanted Virginia schools to be the best in the nation. In order to achieve their ambitious goals, they would need to provide better support for the state's lowest-performing schools. They believed Petersburg schools could be a model for others. During a presentation I made before the Virginia Senate Education and Health Committee, Senator Tommy Norment said, "I have seen a lot of Petersburg superintendents come and go, but this is the first time I have been encouraged about the future of Petersburg schools." The first step was agreeing to a memorandum of understanding that addressed the school board role and a plan for district improvement (please see the resources available at <https://resources.corwin.com/BreakthroughLeadership>).

Addressing Financial Shortfalls

The financial crisis required both immediate and sustained interventions. These were the steps taken:

1. *Reach out to committed allies.* Having built credibility and connection with those who could intervene quickly, the first calls were placed to top-level allies committed to this work in Petersburg. During my introductory press conference, State Secretary of Education Holton promised me and Petersburg, "From the governor's office on down, we're going to roll up our sleeves and help you."

I placed a phone call to State Superintendent Steve Staples to inform him of the crisis and to seek assistance. Governor Terry McAuliffe invited state and local officials, to include members of his cabinet and staff, the Petersburg mayor, the city manager, the superintendent, the school board chair, and others, to brainstorm solutions. One solution was to modify the state lottery funding process to allow Petersburg schools to receive their allotment immediately in September as opposed to January of the following year, which is when the other 131 school districts in the state receive their funds.

Over the next few months, the governor's office scheduled several additional meetings with members to address other shortfalls. State officials played an important role in support of teacher recruitment and retention. The Virginia Department of Education worked collaboratively with the Virginia Retirement System to change its policies to allow retired teachers to return as full-time teachers, and receive a teacher salary and maintain their full retirement benefits. The governor

sent a letter to approximately five hundred recently retired teachers living within a twenty-mile radius of Petersburg, encouraging them to work in Petersburg schools.

2. *Enlist partners and volunteers.* Our partnerships with local organizations grew from thirty-five to two hundred (see Case Story 9.4 in Chapter 9) and filled many financial and human resource holes, including the following:
 - Mega Mentors and Petersburg Promise volunteers read to students, support classroom instruction, help provide basics like food, and so on.
 - The YMCA provided a Power Scholars summer program, which reversed the “summer slide” effect for our students.
 - Virginia State University provided teacher internships and recruitment.
 - Churches and other agencies assisted in upgrading our school facilities.
 - United Way provided a coordinator for the umbrella Petersburg City and Schools Partnership, which in turn collectively helped ensure student success.
3. *Turn structural weaknesses into strengths.* Once the pride of this community, our Peabody Middle School was in poor condition and flooded regularly as well. We had access to a better building, and despite community opposition, we closed Peabody and opened, with the help of thousands of volunteer hours, a newer and better school. This sent a positive message of pride and improvement overall, and better served our students.
4. *Turn political support into financing.* The state legislature helped to finance Petersburg at multiple points in this journey. To his credit, Emmett Hanger, co-chair of the Finance Committee and representative of a rural, White, relatively impoverished district, understood that they had more in common with Petersburg than they had with wealthy suburban districts.
5. *Engage students and access grants.* Students helped write grants and launch GoFundMe campaigns for band uniforms and instruments, which we also received from those the military bands and prior alumni donated. We received many grants, including one for technology from the state legislature, and funds from many philanthropies.

From Fiscal Instability to Award-Winning Budgets

While the city’s financial stability improved, Petersburg was never able to fully restore funding cuts to schools. Yet staff were able to organize a “best practice” budgeting process and enforce a disciplined payment plan for debtors and monitored with surgical precision every expenditure. Three primary

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strategies were used to ensure efficient and effective best budget and operations practices: (1) Conduct an audit of the budget, finances, and human resources. The audit revealed misalignment of resources. (2) Reorganize staff to better align with the corrective action plan. (3) Develop a five-year budget aligned to the five-year strategic plan. (4) Freeze hiring of nonessential vacant positions. (5) Collaborate with debtors to create a long-term plan to pay bills.

Within eighteen months, every bill was brought up-to-date and paid on time, and employees were able to receive pay raises. In 2018 and again in 2019, the Association of School Business Officials International presented Petersburg City Public Schools with the Meritorious Budget Award for excellence in school budgeting and reporting. This would not have been possible without the support and collaboration among state and local officials.

The Petersburg case is part of an extraordinary story that has become an award-winning film, *Petersburg Rising*, about how this district and community and the state of Virginia pulled together to change the trajectory of these students' lives. The end of this chapter provides strategies for advancing breakthrough leadership creatively with individuals and to shift entire systems.

Potential Breakthrough Leadership Strategies Moving Forward

It shouldn't be wholly on schools to figure out food issues and who eats, or mental health issues. We as a society need to do a better job of tackling these systemic problems. Hopefully, the prior oversimplification and magical thinking that schools will somehow make up for all the inequities of society is now seen for what it is: untrue. (Paul Reville, personal communication, April 21, 2020)

We need to be honest: We cannot reform something this monstrous; we have to abolish it. (Bettina L. Love)

The following is a list of successfully utilized strategies for augmenting and advancing breakthrough thinking and equitable outcomes for our students, their families, and society as a whole. The “aha” moments are coming at a rapid pace now as evidenced by hundreds of thousands of citizens worldwide marching in the streets for justice and against blatant and violent racism. The alchemy between seeing the ravages of inequities exposed by

COVID-19 and the rampant and ruthless violence perpetrated against people of color by those who are hired and paid to protect those same citizens has become an explosive force that can lead to enlightened actions to route the underpinnings of inequity and oppression.

Here are nine strategies to advance this work. They begin with optimizing simple “aha” moments that an individual may have in an interpersonal interaction, and move on to transforming a society.

1. *Use crisis as an opportunity to channel student energies.* Teachers have long taken advantage of “teachable moments” in which there is a student “aha” that can be leveraged to change behavior. Such moments have also been used to spark movements led by students such as Emma González and other Parkland, Florida, student activists; environmental activist Greta Thunberg; and Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, to name a few.

To demonstrate how to facilitate turning crisis into opportunity thinking, consider this as one of many possible strategies:

While working with Rudy Espinoza, a gang interventionist in the Humboldt Park section of Chicago, Alan met a thirteen-year-old new Deuces gang inductee named Angie. When asked why she’d joined the gang, Angie replied: “Everyone is in the gang; my uncle, my friends, and my boyfriend.” She nodded her head toward a young man standing a half-block away. A few minutes after we left, a Latin Kings posse drove by and took her boyfriend’s life. When Rudy saw her at the funeral, he used the crisis to get her out of the gang: “I’m sorry about your boyfriend. I was close with him too. But this is what you signed up for. It will be you one day, unless you quit the gang. Here’s how we can get you out together.” She took Rudy up on the opportunity he offered, shortly after the crisis became clear.

The combination of seeing the stark reality clearly and taking a better alternative forward can be used with individuals, as well as groups, in processing both what the realities are and what the options for moving forward could be.

2. *Leverage the moral high ground.* There is perhaps no other time in recent history when the population at large valued educators more than it does now. Collectively, educators have saved millions of lives since March 2020. It behooves professionals to leverage this attending goodwill toward ensuring positive changes and necessary resources to support all of our children and those who educate and care for them. Being rooted in a noble mission for the greater good of children allows professionals a strong foundation for vociferous advocacy for resources commensurate with the job at hand.

3. *Tap into enlightened self-interests.* The *Petersburg Rising* case demonstrates that rural White legislators voted to fund this city's schools, which were 99 percent African American, because they understood they had more in common with that locality than they did with wealthy suburbs. When business and policy leaders can see how their interests are connected to others who may not look like them, we will have fewer meatpacking plants closing due to an impoverished workforce, and fewer schools fighting *alone* for survival as well.
4. *Take the legal route.* An April 23, 2020, ruling by the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit in Cincinnati "was a real breakthrough," stated Michael A. Rebell, professor at Columbia Teachers College. "This is the first time in more than four decades that there may really be an opening for some kind of broad-based federal right to education." The suit was brought by a handful of Detroit schoolchildren against the state of Michigan due to the horrendous conditions in which they were forced to learn (Walsh, 2020). What is the lesson for other breakthrough leaders?
5. *Refuse to pay for services not rendered.* At the moment this book is being written, there is a reassessment around paying for police protection by many who feel instead *threatened* by those services. There is a "defunding" movement taking place in cities, and nationally, while at the same time school districts facing tight budgets and seeking peaceful campuses have begun canceling their contracts with police departments (Beckett, 2020). Boycotts, similarly, have been a powerful and successful strategy to advance breakthrough thinking throughout the world for centuries. This is a very helpful strategy to consider alongside budgeting.
6. *Clarify the inexorable alternatives.* When Nelson Mandela was first offered his freedom after twenty-seven years of imprisonment, he declined. He knew that the alternatives for the ruling party weren't attractive: a growing and restless Black population, economic sanctions by an increasing number of nations, and potentially explosive civil unrest and violence were all predictable. The terms and conditions for accepting his own freedom were his: a fair and free election where the majority candidate rules. What should be our collective terms for shoring up the health of our children, and what will naturally occur if we stay on our current trajectory?
7. *Pass legislation that has financial impact.* The prison population began to climb exponentially in the United States following the passage of legislation in 1980 (Blumstein & Beck, 1999) allowing prisons to operate for profit (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019; Stevenson,

2015). The outrage around the killing of George Floyd and others is being harnessed locally to defund police contracts with schools and city police departments, as well as advance legislation around protocols for policing nationally.

8. *Focus on high-leverage items.* Housing, for example, determines where children will go to school in much of North America, and what the tax base will be for schools in the United States. The Tacoma Housing Authority case demonstrates the power of stable housing in the lives of our children. Other countries, such as Singapore, have figured this out writ large. We could as well.

Instead of redlining and other legally sanctioned exclusionary practices notably used in the United States (Rothstein, 2017), all neighborhoods or “housing estates” in Singapore were built to include comparable access to supermarkets, food courts, recreational facilities, hospitals, good schools, Mass Rapid Transit stations, and bus stops. Housing, likewise, was integrated, and battles for an exclusive flat to live in were minimized. Residents became acquainted with and friendly toward those from other nationalities or ethnic groups. Some fifty years later, Singapore society is one of the most equitable in the world, and the country’s students rank among the top three in the Programme for International Student Assessment exams in all categories (Schleicher, 2019).

For the first time in the last century and a half, Harvard University and numerous other Ivy League schools celebrated Juneteenth in 2020. In the months prior to these announcements, the United States government issued billions of dollars to sustain corporations closed down due to COVID-19. Anything is possible at this juncture, including full funding of schools and support systems such that equity is realized.

9. *Vote for children!* Education is barely on the ballot in many nations, especially during the pandemic. Yet every teacher strike in the recent past in the United States has led to better outcomes for educators and students. The issue isn’t always about “not having enough money.” It’s about “not wanting to prioritize children and those dedicated to caring for and educating them.” It’s time to reprioritize.

WHAT IF WE DON’T SEIZE THIS MOMENT?

We are experiencing a collective “aha” moment like no other in modern-day history, the outcome of which has yet to be decided. Teachers can reach vulnerable students like never before and change their lives. Principals can tap into the newfound understanding of their staff and students and change their