

# **BACK TO SCHOOL (MAYBE)**

Neoliberal **Crisis** Governance in **COVID-19** School Reopenings

**Tim Lazaroff**

**Back to School (Maybe): Crisis Governance in COVID-19 School Reopenings  
as Reflections of Neoliberal Predispositions Towards Uncertainty**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Science in Urban Management  
at Technische Universität Berlin

Berlin, 12th of April, 2021

## **Statement of authenticity of material**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any institution and to the best of my knowledge and belief, the research contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text of the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tim J Lazaroff". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "T" and "L".

Timothy James Lazaroff

Berlin - April 12, 2021

## Acknowledgements

To my classmates: our time physically together was cut short, but our group is special. I hope to meet each of you again, wherever you land. For this thesis, some of you deserve special recognition: Carlos Cruz, Kathe Prieto, Laura López, and Nancy Naser Al Deen, for coming in clutch; Ella Kay, for being there at every turn; one who I can't disclose (you know who you are), and to Carolina Salazar, for giving me the confidence to stay on track when I most needed it.

To Berlin, for welcoming me and providing occasional glimpses of humanity on a rare sunny day, and New York, for always being there for me. As Jenny Odell acknowledges in *How To Do Nothing*, these words are as connected to places like Tempelhofer Feld as they are to my home office.

To my collaborators, whose bluntness, humor, and insights made a foray into education both possible and entertaining. I hope this work doesn't let you down and does justice to your work.

To my Urban Management professors and the program administrators, who punctured many thought bubbles, and did their best to replicate an in-person co-creation under the circumstances. Things turned out okay, after all. A special thanks to Bettina Hamann and Claudia Matthews, whose patience gave me the opportunity to join UM. They have genuinely looked out for us since arrival.

To my advisors: Christian Haid, for taking the chance on my wildly unspecific topic in June, and for continued valiant attempts to pull this back to Earth; and Diane Barbé, for continually encouraging me to explore boundary-pushing ideas, and for the most timely crystallizing of those ideas.

To the Penn Urban Studies Department, who had enough of my bachelor's thesis, but whose ideas I always carry. Alec Gershberg brought an impossible narrative to life, and pushed me to be bolder. I regret not taking more of his suggestions. Elaine Simon is a treasure, and Penn forgets how lucky it is to have her. Lastly, Michael Nairn, who introduced me to uncertainty, and paths through.

To my family and dearest friends, especially my parents and grandma. We've had to find new ways to connect and heal. I can't wait to share more moments together (even if that means a long trip).

To my girlfriend, whose list of incredible qualities runs too long for this section. This thesis is an extension of you, both as a future public school teacher, and as a partner in a quest to hold ourselves up during impossibly challenging times. Your family took me in when they didn't have to and kept me going. I'll do my best now to pick up the load.

And, lastly, to those we've lost to COVID-19, and to others suffering in staccato, cruel, distanced, and wholly insufficient grieving. This is for my grandpa, Donald Hitter, who passed away on April 15, 2020. He probably wouldn't care to read this, but he'd be happy to share a laugh and talk about last night's ballgame. Of all I've missed these last 12 months, my grandpa's been the biggest. *Naturally*.

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores crisis governance in two similar neoliberal cities, Berlin and New York, and neoliberal relations with uncertainty under COVID-19, a collection of complex emergency crises. Such exploration necessitates an intersectional approach and focus into a microcosm of broader crisis conditions. Political economy, deep ecology, communication, multispecies anthropology, and economics – among many fields – complement and challenge each other in materializing COVID-19 and crisis governance under uncertain conditions. Education governance in COVID-19 became ‘school reopening’ processes, forcing the basic service of education to encompass epidemiological and political complexities that proved destabilizing. Societal reopening processes were mixes of restriction and loosening (as the German ‘*Lockerung*’ suggests) and manifested along neoliberal fault lines in schools. School communities in Berlin and New York contended with mismatched centralized crisis governance. COVID-19 governance centralized idea generation at educators, students, and families’ expense, and – compounded with collective trauma – threatens the teaching profession. Leaders projected control of uncertainty conveniently distanced from epidemiological and educational reality. Propaganda and categorical-based policies, devised in narrow decision-making cohorts, call accountability mechanisms for authoritarian leaders incapable of imagining alternatives to neoliberalism into question. Insufficient, avoidant planning and periods of reopening limbo proved devastating, particularly for remote learners and already-underserved communities. Schools were not the sole theater of neoliberal crisis governance, but to understand manifestations of neoliberalism in essential services facilitates knowledge transfer for future crises. COVID-19 was unimaginable for policymakers and broader publics, without a ‘manual’ to navigate complex emergencies. This thesis hopes to contribute to that collective imagination and efforts to research future crises of similar proportion.

**Keywords:** *COVID-19, crisis governance, neoliberalism, public education, school reopening, uncertainty*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BMBF	<i>Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung</i> (Ministry of Education)
CDU	<i>Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands</i> (Christian Democratic Union)
COVID-19	Coronavirus pandemic (of COVID-19 disease, caused from SARS-CoV-2 virus)
FPB	Floral Park-Bellerose Union Free School District
NYC	New York City (also used to denote New York City government)
NYCDOE	New York City Department of Education
NYC DOHMH	New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
NYS	New York State (also used to denote New York State government)
NYSDOH	New York State Department of Health
NYSED	New York State Education Department
RRG	<i>Berliner Abgeordnetenhaus</i> (Berlin House of Representatives)
SPD	<i>Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> (Social Democratic Party)

## GERMAN-LANGUAGE TERMS

<i>Amt</i>	<b>Office</b> (as in <i>Gesundheitsamt</i> - Health Office)
<i>Beamte</i>	<b>Tenured teacher</b> (versus <i>Angestellte</i> - Employee)
<i>Beirat</i>	<b>Advisory board</b> (most notably for <i>Hygienebeirat</i> )
<i>Bezirk</i>	<b>Borough</b> (as in <i>Bezirksamt</i> - Borough Office)
<i>Bildung</i>	<b>Education</b> (as in <i>Bildungspolitiker</i> - Education Politicians)
<i>Gremien</i>	<b>Bodies</b> (as in government body)
<i>Rat / Räte</i>	<b>Council / Councils</b> (as in <i>Personalrat</i> , other civil <i>Räte</i> )
<i>Schulleiter</i>	<b>Principal</b>
<i>Verwaltung</i>	<b>Department</b> (as in <i>Senatsverwaltung</i> - Senate Department)

# **INTRODUCTION**

## 1.1 Background and Relevance

The great world seemingly stopped spinning in March 2020. It is not hyperbole: everyday people, basic services, and the global economy were locked down for a novel coronavirus, so much of which was, and remains, uncertain. 13 months (and waves of virus and crisis restrictions) later, the pandemic continues, indefinitely. COVID-19 crisis governance is fascinating for cruel reasons: intersecting crises threatening global stability, daily life, democracy, and basic services that render society functionable. From an American sociological perspective, crises reveal underlying conditions. Just as COVID-19 revealed health conditions in people, so too societal conditions under neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a holistic system predicated on certainty, vying for hegemonic dominance in an epoch of uncertain collisions; investigating neoliberal crisis governance is, by nature, an intersectional investigation of power and underlying assumptions.

Neoliberalism dominates in Germany and the United States, and their largest cities bring the urban into this thesis. Shared processes in Berlin, my new home, and New York, my first home, lend themselves to 'genetic comparison' of emergent neoliberal crisis governance (Robinson 2015). Neoliberalism materializes itself through essential service provision, as government-accelerated climate change disasters continually demonstrate (consider Louisiana in 2005 and Texas in 2021). In an 'essential services under neoliberalism' lens, schools — like hospitals — became contested crisis theaters during COVID-19. Education governance processes, known as 'school reopening' in the COVID-19 lexicon, were as emblematic of politics and epidemiological uncertainty as phonics and childcare. Children, parents, teachers, principals, bureaucrats, and politicians' fates were one.

This thesis investigates school reopening processes as reflections of neoliberal predispositions towards uncertainty, placing decentralized public education departments, political crisis responses, and the basic service of education under examination from March 2020 to March 2021. Intersections span the social sciences under the holistic umbrella of deep ecology to render neoliberal systems more accessible. Qualitative methods gathered crisis perspectives from below (predominantly, interviews) and above (media analysis and government communications) during and in the immediate aftermath of crucial school reopening happenings. This thesis ventures to connect perspectives and disciplines disjointed by time, discipline, and location, holding the neoliberal crisis response to account for COVID-19 and future crises. This thesis calls for 'moving with' uncertainty, rejecting authoritarian pivots that sacrifice democracy for short-term certainty.

This thesis is a product of the capacity to reflect — a luxury that neoliberal crises accelerating chaos and accumulation do not afford in real time. As such, it represents an early attempt to digest COVID-19 during a 'strange in-between time' (Meyer 2021) of lockdowns, momentum towards herd immunity, and temporal distance from the initial shock. This investigation into school reopening processes is distinct in its adherence to deep ecology. Other investigations have narrow emphasis on particular fields, which served their purpose and this thesis. This thesis hopes to serve future academic investigations during 'strange in-between times', and democratic mechanisms that could preempt and mitigate neoliberal crisis consequences.

## **1.2 Objectives**

*To better understand neoliberal policy evolutions under crisis governance conditions.*

*To recontextualize the current governance epoch and advocate the right to pause and reflect.*

*To bridge conceptual gaps in consideration of essential services; namely, that public school governance be considered as a microcosm of essential service governance in unprecedented times.*

*To encourage compassion across perspectives, particularly given the central role of children and disproportionate ramifications in marginalized communities.*

*To further develop understanding of governance dynamics in Berlin and in New York.*

*To warn against the perils of human exceptionalism.*

*To hold neoliberal leaders accountable.*

## **1.3 Research Questions**

How does crisis governance overseeing COVID-19 'school reopenings' reflect underlying neoliberal predispositions towards uncertainty?

Sub-question 1: How do tensions in decentralized education departments between central authorities and educators manifest in crisis decision-making and communication?

Sub-question 2: How do neoliberal leaders project certainty and controllability in crises?

Sub-question 3: In what ways did public school reopenings in Berlin and New York embody chaos innate to the neoliberal crisis response?

Sub-question 4: How do scholars research complex crises like COVID-19?

## **1.4 Motivation**

During lockdown – today, commonly understood as mid-March to late April 2020 – my focus was learning Italian recipes, and making sure to call my grandpa each day at 4 P.M. Eastern Time, trapped in his new room at an assisted living facility that would bring the opposite outcome. Even as I published pieces on political communication dynamics in New York and Germany, the notion of devoting nine months to public education systems was inconceivable. Yet it became evident my thesis would venture into crisis governance and uncertainty during COVID-19; to me, focusing on anything else would be a disservice. ‘COVID-19 and uncertainty’ was too broad, as were unfettered ideas of pandemic rule-making. School reopenings were chosen as microcosms of COVID-19’s intersecting crises, and as the theater where arguably the most potent intersections conflate to become wicked problems. Social justice implications of political interference in essential service provision were clear, and presented an extension from my previous devotion to New York’s mass transit, which (prior to COVID-19) was its lifeblood. Generating momentum for this thesis was personally challenging, but a conversation in Key Food with my friend’s mom (she works in the Floral Park-Bellerose School District) was sufficiently jolting. Things hit home: it was unnerving to learn my old elementary school got hacked, and that the district felt at mercy to politics and the crippling weight of COVID-19. Being in a unique position to research is a privilege. Rather than raising children at home, or struggling to resuscitate a small business, all I needed was Wifi.

## **1.5 Note on 2022 Update**

After over a year removed from this thesis for personal, political and professional reasons, interviewees, advisors, friends and mentors encouraged me to revisit it for eventual publication. Many thanks to their continued love and support – it’s been easy to forget what drives you amid the steady drum of seemingly ‘practical’ daily concerns.

I chose to primarily focus on analysis one could make with the benefit of hindsight and additional contributions synthesizing our collective understanding of COVID-19. In this light, the intersecting genius of Amitav Ghosh, David Graeber and David Wengrow (among others) writing in the midst of these times has given me energy and this work further credibility. These additional contributions appear across the entire paper, either via direct additions to text or in more liberal footnotes.

The original version was restricted to 25,000 words. The revision is unrestricted.

# **LITERATURE REVIEW**

## **INTERSECTIONALITY AND ARGUMENT STRUCTURE**

The research approach assembles cross-sections of relevant fields to navigate the COVID-19 haze. COVID-19 is both a disease and global crisis emblematic of epochal concerns that extend far before and beyond the research's time scope. Unpacking COVID-19 means calling on fields of political economy, anthropology, governance, communications, political science, history, public health, philosophy, economics, semiotics, deep ecology, and sociology. This research recommends promoting learning beyond the anchors of neoliberal centrism that relegate non-economics dissent to the periphery; as such, the intersectional approach casts a wide net in contextualizing those anchors. Practically speaking, intersections across disciplines allow better comprehension of school reopenings, the disorienting and controversial theater for many COVID-19 intersections.

### ***What is COVID-19?***

This thesis leans into *The Atlantic* contributor Ed Yong's work for COVID-19 coverage and commentary. Yong developed a "guide to making sense of a problem that is now too big for any one person to fully comprehend" for reasons of a "slew of forces scientific and societal, epidemiological and epistemological" (2020). The SARS-CoV-2 virus is one of several airborne coronaviruses known to have infected humans and originated from bat populations in China. COVID-19 is the resulting disease that most directly attacks the human pulmonary system. Its spread has been a matter of public confusion, particularly since it can spread asymptotically and prior to soon-to-be symptomatic carriers developing symptoms. Yong (ibid) highlights confusion from research, expert testimony, inconsistent messaging, proliferated misinformation and epidemiological statistics as furthering public disorientation during COVID-19. Perhaps most profound is the impossibility of crafting a simple narrative amidst complex trade-offs, protests, and our unwillingness to "accept the harsher truth that was prone to [coronavirus], but not ready for it" (ibid).

### ***Argument Structure***

This literature review progresses towards actualizing uncertainty in COVID-19 public education. To do so requires understanding uncertainty, complexity and materializing neoliberalism (2.2), then using this baseline in 2.3 to grasp the magnitude of contemporary risks and crises (COVID-19, and foundational crises of which COVID-19 is a part). Prospective frameworks for 'moving with' profound uncertainty (2.4) inform conceptions of more appropriate governance, discussed in the subsequent section of crisis governance and communication as governance (2.5). The review concludes with applied theory in 2.6: school reopenings and the COVID-19 lexicon, and education governance from perspectives of complexity and uncertainty.

## CONCEPTUALIZING UNCERTAINTY IN RESPONSE TO NEOLIBERALISM

*This book is an exploration of [the law of reversed effort] in relation to man's quest for psychological security, and to his efforts to find spiritual and intellectual certainty in religion and philosophy. It is written in the conviction that no theme could be more appropriate in a time when human life seems to be so peculiarly insecure and uncertain. It maintains that this insecurity is the result of trying to be secure, and that, contrariwise, salvation and sanity consist in the most radical recognition that we have no way of saving ourselves (Watts 1951: 9).*

This review seeks to depart from terminological commingling that renders uncertainty, complexity, risk and crisis less accessible. Commingling is particularly corrosive to conceptualizing uncertainty within broader neoliberal structures. Often, these structures see uncertainty, complexity, risk, and crisis as threats to meeting a longing for remedy and clarity. An intersectional approach provides balance and humility in tracing connections between complexity and uncertainty, then in how the neoliberal need for control manifests into restricted imaginative capacity.

### 2.2.1 Neoliberalism and The Instability of Capitalism

Questioning the stability of global capitalism is questioning its "avatar": neoliberalism (Klein 2014, cited in Ghosh 2021: 100). Harvey sees neoliberalism as "a form of political economy that strives to accomplish only one mission: to restore the class power of the global economic elite" (Lee 2016); Ghosh (2021: 142) adds that "neoliberal capitalism creates an illusion of wealth while picking the social fabric threadbare, so that it rips apart during disasters and climate shocks."

The comparative schema in this thesis stems from the argument "that neoliberalism shapes each locality, only instantiated differently in each case" (Robinson 2015). Neoliberal orthodoxy preaches liberty, but applies it as impunity: "the good freedoms are lost and the bad ones take over" (Harvey 2005: 37, cited in *ibid*). Particularly relevant for COVID-19 governance is Harvey's warning that "a strong preference exists for government by executive order and by judicial decision rather than democratic and parliamentary decision-making" (*ibid*: 66).

Neoliberalism extends from the broader "cosmology of domination" granting Western industrialized societies "carte blanche to subjugate the Earth, to exploit and plunder the planet" (Hathaway and Boff 2009, cited in Elbers 2020: 11). Per Elbers (*ibid*), foundational principles include materialism, reductionism, objectivism, dualism and determinism. This cosmology also "excludes 'other knowers and other ways of knowing' from the generation of knowledge" (Shiva 1989, quoted by Hathaway and Boff 2009: 143-144, cited in Elbers 2020: 20), of relevance to COVID-19 education and wherever the planetary crisis "will unfold in surprising and counterintuitive ways" (Ghosh 2021: 133).

Neoliberalism's dogma of maintaining certainty upholds capitalism as stable, which Marxian theory diametrically opposes. Schumpeter, in a different vein of political economy, saw capitalism as

inherently unstable and notions of economic progress equated to static equilibrium as narrow. Through his theories of creative destruction, Schumpeter saw the capitalist order as inherently unstable, and “incompatible with its own fundamental conditions, motives and social institutions” (1928: 386), suggesting that capitalism’s faux-stability will inevitably deliver its own demise. In fact, Ghosh (2021: 133-145) sees places whose “growth has been made possible by extensive alterations to their surroundings” – often, wealthy countries or in wealthier regions of poor countries – as sites for unanticipated devastation, connecting capitalism-fueled destruction to place.

## **2.2.2 Compartmentalizing Uncertainty**

Shah’s (2010) review splinters uncertainty into three digestible categories: related to time, context, and nature. Shah, a cross-disciplinary economist, writes of transformative development initiatives, appropriate for considering governance challenges in times of immense intersecting change.

### ***Time***

Regarding time, Shah recognizes many economics-driven pursuits as “concerned with one project – finding probabilistic solutions aimed at taming uncertainty, attempting to collapse the radical distinction between risk [future outcomes of reasonable determinability] and uncertainty [an event whose probability cannot be known in advance] first postulated by Knight and later developed by Keynes and Shackle” (2010: 54). Whether mainstream postwar economic theory (utility theory, game theory, general equilibrium) or “on the fringes” – as Shah characterizes Shackle’s investigation into inceptive choice – this ‘project’ of ‘taming uncertainty’ implies certain relations and postures. Nonetheless, Shackle’s (1972: 27, cited in Shah 2010: 54) departure takes a humbler approach towards time – “Time is a denial of the omnipotence of reason” – and opens economic thinking to less dependence on predictability, simplification and control. Arrow’s (1992: 46, cited in Shah 2010: 54) caution against belief in predictability remains framed, still, within what is certain and capable of imagination; namely, precedent.

### ***Context***

Anthropology informs Shah’s investigation of context and relationality. Interventions are inherently uncertain and indeterminate because of the universality of interrelatedness. Scholars like de Castro (2003, cited in Shah 2010: 54-55) warn against conceiving an “other” in light of power dynamics and the futile quest to render everything explicit. De Castro’s reminder – “Every determination is a relation” – debunks “the fantasy of an intellectual intuition of other forms of life ‘in their own terms’” (ibid). Rather than inspire paralysis, the fact of relation encourages deeper contextual exploration. Gadamer’s concept of a ‘fusion of horizons’ (1960: 271-273, cited in Shah 2010: 55) sees acquiring a higher understanding as a symbiotic process: closely investigating

smaller horizons that “we imagine to exist by themselves” to proportionally place them into a larger whole, consequentially fortifying localized understandings.

## **Nature**

Conceiving nature as a separate, singular and mute entity – particularly given the aforementioned infinite nature of relations and multispecies interactions that produce pandemics – builds a problematic conceptual distance. Multispecies anthropology dismantles these illusory constructs and receives attention further in this review. The economics-laden posture towards nature – more precisely, *against* nature – in which “progress is seen as co-terminus with the conquest of nature,” troubles Shah (2010: 55). This mindset instills control of, and a capacity to project understanding of, future outcomes as necessary. Static understanding of the future underpins many economic assumptions, like discounting. Per Perrings (1987: 116, cited in Shah 2010: 56), discounting the future grants economics license to fuel future uncertainty, aggravating a problem it is designed to mitigate. Foisting uncertainty invariably leads to games of (scorching) hot potato.

### **2.2.3 Complexity In Relation to Uncertainty, and Chaos**

Shah calls for investigating epistemologies and casualties, considering rapid evolution of pandemic policy in public education: “In such highly complex and highly coupled systems, characterized by both intricate interconnections, as well as novelty, uncertainty has a deep presence” (2010: 51). Bhaskar pivots eastward, warning of false dichotomies in relations of complexity and uncertainty: “critical realism... displaces mechanistic modes of causality with a far more heterogeneous and uncertain landscape in which the relationships between science and politics are made explicit” (Graeber 2014). Determining causality is difficult, but mapping interconnections builds potential relationship schema as precursors to accountability.

This helps examine complexity, the meaning of which – similar and in relation to uncertainty – is unclear. Padalkar et. al. (2016) disentangle uncertainty and complexity, mapping their intersections and casualties amidst “terminologically confounded” literature (ibid: 695). No consensus exists as to whether uncertainty is a component of complexity, the opposite is true, or if they are independent (ibid: 689). Different types of uncertainty also emerge: epistemic (unknown unknown, which is strongly confounded) versus stochastic and external (ibid: 695). As a hedge, Padalkar et. al. incorporate complexity theory, an emerging ontology that delineates complexity in nonlinear dynamic systems. Interconnected, dynamic feedback loops and historical importance suggest strong relations between complexity and uncertainty (Cilliers 2000, cited in Padalkar et. al. 2016: 695). Tainter (1988: 7) sees systemic complexity not as a robust asset, but as a catalyst for instability, particularly in contexts of intensely integrated and diversified social systems (cited in Cárdenas et. al., 2018: 2). Complexity theory reemerges in discussions of education governance.

The mathematical theory of ‘sensitive dependence’ informs the understanding of chaotic systems as deterministic and nonlinear (Bishop, 2015). Scholars debate whether chaos is quantifiable and of models, or of real world systems beyond science’s grasp (ibid). Curtis would likely dismiss chaotic systems thinking altogether as a fruitless search for patterns and ideas of systems in nature. Nonetheless, chaos theory yields relevant implications for COVID-19 and education governance. Small changes can spark indeterminate and sweeping consequences, and presupposing organization in chaotic circumstances is inappropriate. Baker (1995: iii) discusses principals’ perceptions of sensitive dependence, and how decisions, not behaviors, magnified ripple effects. Whether ripples determine chaos, or nature is simply chaos, warrants consideration.

#### **2.2.4 Materializing Neoliberalism, and Limits to Neoliberalism’s Imaginative Capacity**

*The discovery of the mystery, the wonder beyond all wonders, needs no belief, for we can only believe in what we have already known, preconceived, and imagined. But this is beyond any imagination. We have but to open the eyes of the mind wide enough, and ‘the truth will out’ (Watts 1951: 28).*

Neoliberalism is difficult to materialize, perhaps deliberately so. Its ideological core presumes stability and control, and eschews alternatives in preemptively squashing dissent. This subsection does not detail implications for school reopening, but these tenants are necessary as evaluative lenses for neoliberal leaders and school reopening policies dictating control-oriented procedures.

##### **Challenge of Materialization**

Anthropologists, environmental historians and even visual artists ruminate on ways of materializing neoliberalism and overcoming the economics-laden need to quantify. Robinson (2015), in “thinking the urban through elsewhere” (3), acknowledges the struggle of “seeking to grasp anything like a totality” (5). Toscano and Kinkle (2015) devote *Cartographies of the Absolute* to this conceptual feat, and the paralyzing implications an inability to materialize neoliberalism has for potential agents of change. The ‘cognitive mapping’ methods they collect move beyond the “proxy perspective [from above] that projects delusions of stability, safety, and extreme mastery into a backdrop of expanded 3-D sovereignty” (2015: 4-5). While still an inherently colonial exercise (Haraway would label it wishful thinking), Toscano and Kinkle frame the need for mapping as an exercise in power:

“An inability to cognitively map the gears and contours of the world system is as debilitating for political action as being unable mentally to map a city would prove for a city dweller. Works emerging under the banner of this aesthetic would enable individuals and collectivities to render their place in a capitalist world-system intelligible” (ibid: 7-8).

COVID-19 has witnessed dramatic reduction in activity, amounting to ‘cartographic blanks’ (Mattern 2021). Many essential services that “are often designed to fade into the background” have been

rendered visible (ibid). To materialize these blanks of apparent 'nothingness', particularly in states of lockdown, Mattern advocates looking and listening around these voids to "acknowledge all the countless somethings that make that nothing imaginable" (ibid).

### ***Presupposing Control That Does Not Exist***

From multispecies anthropology, neoliberalism projects human-centric relations and solutionism onto fellow beings. This extenuates the already-heightened degree to which humans are "colonized by certain ways of thinking about relationality" and "narcissistically ask other species to provide us with corrective reflections of ourselves" (Kohn 2013: 21). Curtis attributes recent colonization to a flawed imposition of computer systems onto ecological relations. The notion of a self-regulating 'ecosystem' is nothing more than "the dream of the machines" and is "wholly inadequate in the face of dynamic change that governs our world today" (2011 2). This hints at the forces and randomness greater than *homo sapiens* that Western thought rarely acknowledges beyond religious contexts, wholly ignoring other realms of connection that indigenous thinkers cultivate in smaller numbers and more isolated settings (Ghosh 2021).

In the *Weltkritik* canon, (Kempter 2020), state control capable of devising futures in accordance with reason and procedures is illusory:

"It holds that not only unavoidable crises bear witness to the fact that the economy does not obey any political or social rationality outside or above its own. Even the normal functioning of the capitalist wealth machine is a process that does not follow any social reason" .

Yet neoliberalism's reductionism and stability are durable. Per Pickett (cited in Curtis 2011 2):

"The really remarkable thing was when people began to find out that [the theory of a stable world] might have some chinks in it, that it might not be right, people were almost viscerally upset because it offended that very comfortable idea that nature was stable."

Solutions are presupposed to exist, and "the fields that organize urbanization... are set up to reward stability" (Holmes 2020). Holmes calls for collaboration and speculative future-making predicated on change, rather than control. A final consideration is the future's impact on the present. Kohn's (2013) discussion of semiotic processes brings Peirce's "living future" concept – acknowledging future as a "constitutive feature of any kind of self" (23) – into relationality.

### ***The Neutered Neoliberal Imagination***

Recalling Shackle's position on the economics theoretical fringes, his acknowledgement that "there are a range of phenomena for which no 'pre-image' exists in our minds" (1972: 18, cited in Shah 2010:

56) rings somewhat hollow if misconstrued to represent economists. Neoliberal thinking, per Armiero (2021), continues to see uncertainty “within the frame of what is certain”. Part of this explanation is a flawed baseline: human-centric frames described above, and misapplied misunderstandings of ecology. Linnitt (2020) dismisses capitalist notions of normality:

“COVID-19 reveals what philosopher Isabelle Stengers describes as the hidden gap between the probable and the possible... In many ways, our shared sense of what is normal and probable is conditioned by both capitalism and our social histories. But these expectations, according to Stengers, prevent other possibilities, other realities from appearing, or from appearing sensible.”

In the post-2008 hegemonic crisis, neoliberal-dominant imagination is neutered. Per Curtis (2011):

“We are now living through a very strange moment. We know that the idea of market stability has failed, but we cannot imagine any alternative.”

The way through, from a multispecies anthropology perspective, is “to create the conditions for new thoughts” (Strathern 1988: 20, cited in Kohn 2013; 10). Taking on the challenge of materialization – informed by complexity and uncertainty, while debunking axioms of control and natural stability – becomes resistance to puncture a constrained neoliberal imaginative capacity.

This calls for ‘defamiliarization’ – coming to see the strange as familiar so that the familiar appears strange (Kohn 2013: 22). Transferring semiotics to neoliberalism, neoliberalism has created a negative association and unfamiliarity with uncertainty, provoking an adverse reaction to make the uncertain more certain. The defamiliarization process applied to neoliberalism is with certainty: coming to see uncertainty (the strange) as familiar, so that certainty (the familiar) appears strange.

## CONTOURS OF MODERNITY: RISK AND CRISES

*There is, then, the feeling that we live in a time of unusual insecurity. In the past hundred years so many long-established traditions have broken down – traditions of family and social life, of government, of the economic order, and of religious belief. As the years go by, there seem to be fewer and fewer rocks to which we can hold, fewer things which we can regard as absolutely right and true, and fixed for all time (Watts 1951: 14).*

COVID-19 exists in the context of novel global emergencies. One could seemingly belittle the climate and pandemic emergencies with a reminder that the ongoing perception of current slipperiness and past stability is a historical fallacy. Among Norberg's (2020) several explanations for this collective tendency: "One possibility is that we know we survived past dangers—otherwise we wouldn't be here—so in retrospect they seem smaller. But we can never be certain we will solve the problems we are facing today." Situating COVID-19 into an epoch of compounding uncertainty and risk is prerequisite to diagnosing the pandemic as a crisis and situating its crisis-ness. This section builds on previously established understandings of uncertainty and cognitive mapping for modern risk and crisis. Combined with sociological frames of crises as revelatory phenomena, 2020 literature can establish the COVID-19 crisis (or crises) contours and associated revelations.

### **2.3.1 Risk Society and Questions of Its Applicability to COVID-19**

Irrespective of this research's adherence to Beck's *Risikogesellschaft (Risk Society)*, references (particularly German ones, like Dostal) call for his inclusion. Written in the 1980's amidst resurgent neoliberalism, automatization, and ecological activism, *Risk Society* altered conceptions of modern 'man-made' risk. Beck's epoch of risk is "a phase of development of modern society in which the social, political, ecological and individual risk created by the momentum of innovation increasingly allude the control and protective institutions of industrial society" (Beck et al. 1994: 27, cited in Mythen 2018: 3). Three 'pillars of risk' exist: time, and space; the changing nature of risk; and the breakdown of institutional mechanisms of insurance (Mythen 2004, cited in Mythen 2018: 3).

Implications of this third pillar are total in COVID-19. Beck sees the scope of risk having outpaced state capacity to manage them. Geographically mobile risks, in particular, "overrun" state institutions. This does not render leaders humble and willing to admit a vulnerability to these risks:

"At the same time, structural incapacity to manage risk properly leads to institutional actors involving themselves in dramaturgical displays of risk management. For Beck, such displays amount to nothing more than cosmetic treatment of risks, exacerbating rather than alleviating the problem. In such an insecure climate, public uncertainties are amplified, and risk-regulating institutions become party to public critique and distrust" (Mythen 2018: 3).

Bauman (2012) questions the implied controllability in Beck's theories: "Even if not explicitly, the semantics of 'risk' needed to assume, axiomatically, a 'structured' ('structuring': manipulation and the resulting differentiation of probabilities), essentially rule-abiding environment" (51). Hence, policy-making frames potentially discount the prospect of disorder and constrict futures. Further critiques note *Risk Society's* focus "largely on threats and anxieties in the Global North rather than the South" (Mythen 2014 and Nugent 2000; cited in Mythen 2018: 6). Irrespective of dichotomies, Beck's scope of risk is most applicable to countries like Germany and the United States, thereby lending credit to skeptics arguing in favor of co-creating knowledge with global participation.

### **2.3.2 Crises as Revelatory**

This research presents crisis definitions and characteristics, per Cárdenas et. al. (2018). Per Schulz (2016: 49), 'crisis' is a term "that has lost some of its sharpness due to inflated uses":

"Crisis evokes an urgency, a necessity for quick decision and action. It presents a "shock", a 'state of emergency' (*Notstand*), a 'state of exception' (*Ausnahmezustand*). A 'crisis' can sever the connection between the 'horizon of expectation' and the 'space of experience'.... As a fighting word, "crisis" can be employed to open or narrow the horizon of expectation" (ibid).

Schulz then lists several examples of crisis as a tool – something to be deployed and employed, potentially manufactured from above or produced from below. In noting its flexibility, Schulz highlights the intrinsic relation of crisis to power in "the contentious politics of futures" (ibid: 54). Schulz warns of neoliberal hegemonic narratives, which drastically narrow imagined futures and "can take hold when they are not challenged", crucially from below (ibid). As such, "studying the discourses of crises is studying futures in the making" (ibid: 56) – in line with Kohn's semiotics outlining the future impacting the present. Moments of crisis represent the "unraveling of a system whose intelligibility was always partial but is now suspended" (Toscano and Kinkle 2015: 33).

European scholars ascribe to Beck's interpretation that "accentuates the transformative capacity of change", whereas the American sociological canon sees crises and risk as revelatory, "excavating the ways in which risk reinforces cleavages and exacerbates social divisions" (Mythen 2018: 538). Klinenberg's *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, based on Bachelard's principle "it quite often happens that a phenomenon is insignificant only because one fails to take it into account" (Klinenberg 2002: 11), dissected the complex 'total social fact' of Chicago's failed inner workings when isolated, minority and elderly residents died alone, in droves. Any blame-based investigation is "pointless" because every institution and everyone is implicated (ibid: 32). The communications component is particularly transferable to this thesis, as Klinenberg notes the "symbolic construction of the heat wave as a public event and experience" (ibid: 23). His account "pays particular attention to the processes through which political officials, journalists, and research scientists established the dominant analyses of the heat wave as well as the basic categories that organized public discourse about the trauma" (ibid).

### 2.3.3 Interregnum and Crisis Scale of COVID-19

*If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer “leading” but only “dominant,” exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear (Gramsci 2003: 276, cited in Møller Stahl, 337).*

When confronted with planning for uncertainty in COVID-19, Balducci (2021) placed the contours of his response within a series of disruptive 21st century shocks: September 11; the 2008 financial crisis, and COVID-19. In doing so, he acknowledged the inseparability of COVID-19 from turbulence and institutional uncertainty, particularly in the post-2008 world. This is an appropriate starting point for what COVID-19 – as a crisis – captures and embodies. We are living through “a series of catastrophes which continually we have no idea the dimensions of,” and we lack “a story of where we’re going that allows us to put those shocks in proportion” (Curtis, cited in Brand 2021).

Per Gramsci, these times may be that of an interregnum, “a period of uncertainty, confusion, and disagreement among the dominant elite, in which former ideologies, although they still have institutional power, lose traction and become disoriented” (Møller Stahl 2019: 336). Møller Stahl proposes four main elements of an interregnum period: (1) absence of a stable consensus, (2) presence of competing economic strategies, (3) institutional continuity but decreased effectiveness of key institutions, and (4) realignment of social forces (ibid). Møller Stahl’s interpretation of Gramsci’s oft-cited theory guides this research’s reluctance and resistance to narratives insisting that timely, predictable resolutions to COVID-19 are foregone conclusions. If one considers the post-2008 era as “one of sustained political crisis and confusion,” less a calm, imagined ‘normal’, then materializing neoliberalism (as outlined in 2.2.3) allows for considering the post-2008 interregnum as the uncomfortable norm, in lieu of a more hegemonic and stable capitalist project (ibid: 345). Interregna can be considered natural for capitalism, and as ‘normal’, unbound time periods. They begin “when a crisis for the previously hegemonic regime becomes so severe that the prevailing methods of excluding alternatives break down” (ibid).

In the post-2008 interregnum as proposed by Møller Stahl, neoliberalism remains dominant, but slipping. Government paralysis ought not to be misinterpreted as a neoliberalism doomed to fail given competition from the left and right; rather, that further instability should be expected before a new hegemony “*might* be established” (ibid: 353). The post-2008 crisis is “deeper than in the 1970s: we are witnessing a crisis not only of economic strategies but also of the core institutions of representative democracy” (ibid), as growing uncertainty about neoliberalism has sparked concerns about promises unfulfilled. If combined with the notion of crises as revelatory, the shock of COVID-19’s arrival could be considered a reminder of the already-existing interregnum period. Alternatively, one could consider the COVID-19 shock crisis as the propulsion into a magnified interregnum, or a new one entirely. This research does not purport to fully digest the West’s epochal status. But the notion of an interregnum – and the argument we already live in one – helps

cement the argument that hegemony is fleeting. Government “still must react”, but “the traditional institutions are no longer as effective as they once were” (ibid), placing the state in a “paradoxical position” of only one part of a wider order, but required to manage its entirety.

Scholars have imagined COVID-19 not as a singular crisis, but as interconnected ones. Design thinking would see COVID-19 a series of “wicked problems” conflating social and environmental issues to those of economy and public health (Irwin 2011: 233, cited in Elbers 2020: 83; IPK 2021). Dörre’s ‘epochal economic-ecological double’ or ‘pincer-grip’ crisis intertwined with COVID-19 appears similar at face value, only he takes this notion further, seeing these as symptoms of the post-financial crash interregnum and a “hyperglobalization that is gradually undermining its own conditions of existence” (2020: 1). Dustal (ibid: 542) agrees the “collapse of globalization as we knew it in spring of 2020 has revealed pre-existing shortcomings.” Ghosh (2021: 158) attributes this collapse to its prime beneficiaries: “multiple crises are of one broader planetary crisis “deeply rooted in history, and they are all ultimately driven by the dynamics of global power.”

Neoliberal regimes are conceptually and fiscally ill-equipped in their ‘fights’ against COVID-19 and against climate change. From a public health standpoint, COVID-19 may reach a manageable resolution – with patience required in navigating its complexity, and a potential new ‘Viralocene’ of new pandemics and omnipresent COVID-19 (Kristensen 2020) – but Dörre asserts the lurking pincer-grip crisis (*Zangenkrise* in German) will remain unresolved. The financial crisis was a “turning point in society-nature relations”, since default remedies for economic downturns are ecologically ruinous and facilitate societal decay (2020: 3). Kristensen (2020) sees COVID-19 as emblematic of a similar relational tipping point, in which “the entwinement of colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization” (Whyte 2020) limited kin relationships to mobilize against ecological ruin.

## FRAMEWORKS FOR NAVIGATING UNPRECEDENTED UNCERTAINTY

*The more one studies attempted solutions to problems in politics and economics, in art, philosophy, and religion, the more one has the impression of extremely gifted people wearing out their ingenuity at the impossible and futile task of trying to get the water of life into neat and permanent packages (Watts 1951: 14).*

Shah, Schön, and Haraway converge on overlapping principles. This review blends them: first deconstructing cynical anti-responses, then outlining principles to move with uncertainty. A more appropriate response amidst complexity and uncertainty is an advance through paralyzing gridlock (Dustal 2020: 543) towards presence, with newfound connections. This review incorporates deep ecology. Linnitt (2020) connects Haraway's epochal climate works with neglected essential services (depending on context: education, healthcare, welfare, transport, etc.): "Marginalized communities and ecological systems share a common bond in that they represent interests and needs often not reflected in executive decision-making, in the arguments of lobbyists and the fine print of economic packages". Public education in neoliberal major cities is a vulnerable and marginalized essential service. Among the justifications: 1) American K-12 public education is underfunded, and teachers are historically underpaid (Wright 2020); 2) Open schools are seen as a precursor to economic activity, placing educators on COVID-19 'front lines' (ibid), and 3) Socioeconomically vulnerable students suffered disproportionately (OECD 2020).

### 2.4.1 Accepting Upheaval and Breaking with Anti-Responses

Schön blended emerging Gestalt principles with Heraclitan and Buddhist traditions. Accepting continual upheaval, versus faith in return to an imagined normalcy or future steadiness, is core to *Beyond the Stable State*. Although organizations may embrace "the unchangeability, consistency of certain central aspects of our lives, or belief that we can obtain such a constancy" (Schön 1971: 9, cited in Ramage 2017), this construct insufficiently conceptualizes and responds to constant change. The perils are defensible, acting as a "a [conceptual] guard against many forms of uncertainty" (Ramage 2017). Recalling Balducci's (2021) reference to Schön on shocks accelerating the concurrent erosion of institutions that would uphold a stable state illusion, "anchors" were loose in Schön's time (1971: 15, cited in Ramage 2017), despite climate oblivion not having yet permeated common consciousness. Schön's core message: "change is here, it's pervasive, and it's accelerating, so learn to handle it" (Ramage 2017). Like Schön, Haraway (2016) calls for "learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present [to] make trouble [and] stir up potent responses to devastating events" (1). While Beck asserts managing modern risks is impossible, Haraway empathetically levels with and dismisses cynical postures. Her refusal straddles the "fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference" (ibid: 4).

## **Anti-responses**

The aforementioned 'conceptual guard' against uncertainty is what Schön would term an "anti-response". His three rough categories constitute denial and escapism: "1) an attempt to return to the previous stable state, as best as possible; 2) a revolt which is apparently against the past state, but in such a way that the past is enabled surreptitiously to return; and 3) a state of mindlessness, which seeks to escape from the reality of change through drugs, violence, or other techniques" (Schön 1971: 29, cited in Ramage 2017). Regarding the first, Armiero (2021) criticizes calls for resiliency that entail returns to a problematic normal. Haraway (2016) appeals that "we cannot denounce the world in the name of the ideal world," arguing for cosmopolitics in which "decisions must take place somehow in the presence of their consequences" (12). Echoing Schön's distaste for escapism, Haraway rebuffs "a comic faith in technofixes, whether secular or religious: technology will somehow come to the rescue of its naughty but clever children" (ibid: 3). In COVID-19, vaccines are marketed as antidotes to newfound upheaval via return to normalcy.

### **2.4.2 Principles of 'Moving With'**

With Haraway's reminder, "It matters what ideas we use to think other ideas (with)" (2016: 12), the following principles guide organizational shifts to thinking with uncertainty.

#### ***Pivots Towards Humility***

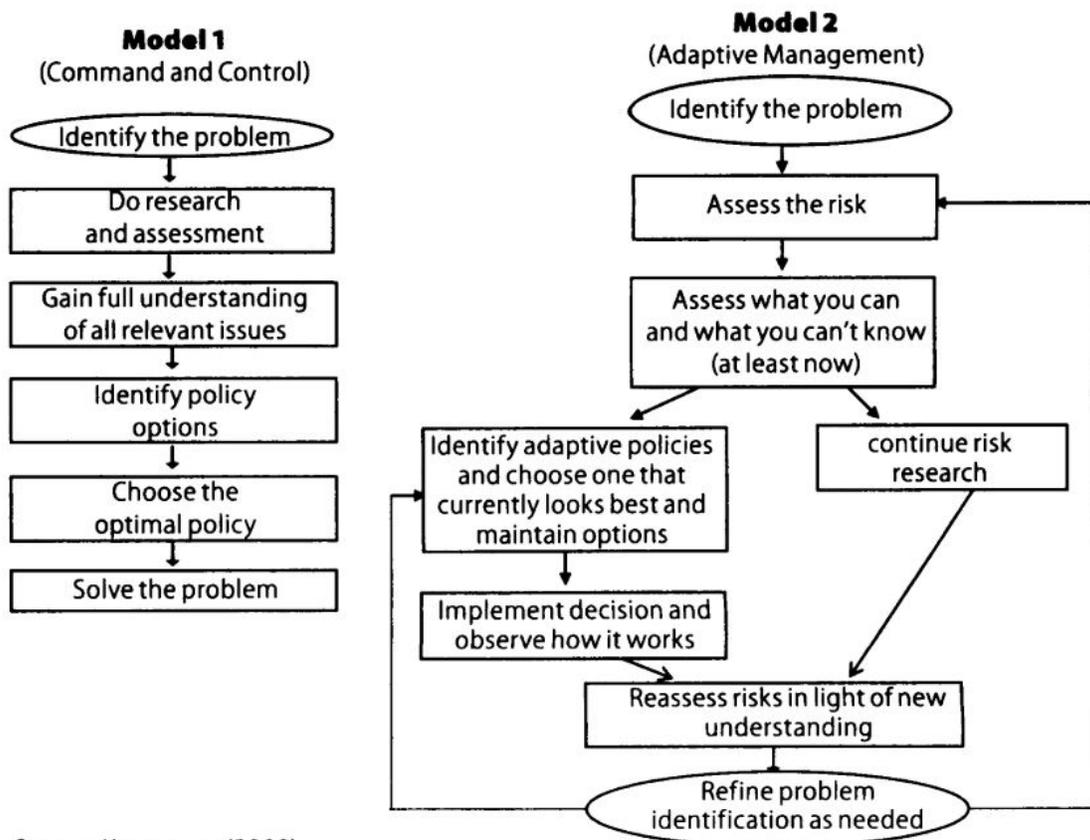
Uncertain times require surrendering to not knowing, *and* "the non-presumption of the arrogance of complete knowledge. [Uncertainty] calls for a non-assertion of the definitive correctness of one's own viewpoint" (Shah 2010: 56-57). This leaves leaders in COVID-19 playing the "paradoxical sport" of public relations where "[they] cannot purport to know much, yet much project a certain level of certainty" (Lazaroff 2020). Haraway sees this dilemma as a product of Western political economy: "What happens when human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social? Seriously unthinkable: not available to think with" (2016: 30).

#### ***Nimble-footedness***

In lieu of "heavy-handed inflexibility", Shah argues in favor of "an openness to mid-course correction" (Shah 2010: 57). This is increasingly relevant in an epidemiological context, as available knowledge regarding a new disease and effects of lockdown measures evolve rapidly, perhaps contradicting previous assertions. A reflexive practice to justify this openness, as Schön (1983: 345, cited in Ramage 2017) observes, could "[demystify] professional expertise... to recognize that the scope of technical expertise is limited by situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and conflict." The wisest preparation under these conditions is less theory, more nimble-footedness.

## Dialogue and Forging New Partnerships

Accepting the humble proposition that abundant, necessary knowledge exists elsewhere means fostering dialogue of an “open and rich” nature, “both transparent and participatory” (Shah 2010: 57). Schön also recognized the value of “deep listening” from “elsewhere” (ibid) and saw the most fruitful opportunities for learning at the periphery, not the center; “central [government] comes to function as facilitator of society’s learning, rather than society’s trainer” (Schön 1971: 177, cited in Ramage 2017). Part of what is required, according to Haraway, is “making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We became-with each other or not at all” (2016: 4). Appropriately extending this beyond the human, Haraway reminds us that “companion species infect each other all the time” (ibid: 29). Ghosh, a Haraway disciple, sees the value from otherwise destructive global connectivity as an ability to forge partnerships; a “necessary first step” is a broader and humbler narrative “in which humans acknowledge their mutual dependence not just on each other, but on all our relatives” (2021: 242). As applied to COVID-19 education governance, the manifestations of humble mutual dependency and broader possibilities for connection revealed themselves in abundance.



Source: Kasperson (2009).

Figure 1: Adaptive Management in The Face of Uncertainty

## ***Reconsidering Organizations***

Shah and Schön see the need to arrive at a new kind of organization: a “clumsy institution” for Shah (via Thompson 2008), and a “learning system” for Schön. A ‘clumsy institution’ commits to continual self-transformation, learning, new partnerships, and openness, as opposed to an ‘elegant’ one that projects confidence “around just one of the definitions of the problem and a unique solution, thereby silencing other voices” (2010: 60-61). Better “noisy, constructive argumentation” of adaptive management than imitating Stasi headquarters taking orders from Moscow, Shah would argue. He warns that old bastions of certainty (if not harnessed deliberately) may limit space for the “power of uncertainty to flower” (61).

Schön’s response to a loss of a stable state was reconfiguring government as a decentralized “learning system”, enabled by new communication and “fluid, ad hoc” (as opposed to fixed, hierarchical) leadership (Ramage 2017). Particularly when parameters for standards are unclear or unapplicable, Schön sees double-loop learning – “a double feedback loop [which] connects the detection of error not only to strategies and assumptions for effective performance but to the very norms which define effective performance” (Argyris and Schön 1978: 22, cited in Ramage 2017) – as an effective guide for organizational pivots to learning systems. Figure 1 contrasts command-and-control governance with an organization suited to COVID-19.

## CRISIS GOVERNANCE AND COMMUNICATION

'Governance' – a broadening field – and 'crisis' – a flexible term and political tool – do not lend themselves to simplicity. This thesis narrows crisis governance to co-production from below, and governance of complex emergencies from government above. Recognizing communication as crisis policy, Section 2.5.2 discusses communication as public health governance with evidence from Singapore in 2003 and early COVID-19 findings in Germany and the United States.

### 2.5.1 Crisis Governance

Governance is preferable to 'government', 'administration', or 'management' in its emphasis of "the relationships and interactions between [political] actors as well as the conditions and rules that frame those relationships and interactions" (Cruz, Rode and McQuarrie 2018: 5). This thesis avoids attaching to a particular governance style or adjective, whether 'agile and adaptive' (Janssen and van der Voort 2020), 'anticipatory' (OECD 2019), or a myriad of others. Based on Bregman's (2019: 6-7) optimistic view of humanity and critique of elites, this crisis section explores co-production from below – "adversity strikes and there's a wave of spontaneous cooperation" – and complex emergency management from above – "then the authorities panic and unleash a second disaster".

Governance from below is a necessary complement, particularly since state actors can exert considerable influence in 'dispersed yet centered urban governance' (Lindell 2008: 1885). Participatory governance can extend into co-production – "a state that is both participatory in decision-making and which allows local groups to be directly involved in the implementation of state policy" (Mitlin 2006: 45). Western models favor 'institutionalized co-production' (likely more palatable to public education hierarchies) but may miss opportunities for new solutions driven by bottom-up social movements (ibid). This amounts to governments controlling the participatory processes versus delegating responsibilities. Rode and Flynn (2020) call for citizen assemblies; if implemented as co-production, focus can shift from politics to practical service provision (Mitlin 2006: 49), particularly relevant in democracies that disempower poor citizens. History is rich with citizen assemblies and egalitarianism; in fact, Graeber and Wengrow (2021) argue historical narratives of inevitable hierarchical control in cities systematically ignore archeological evidence of complex democratized decision-making in prehistoric settlements.

Graeber and Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything* (2021) devotes an entire chapter to the seasonality of governance arrangements, arguing humans have "spent most of the last 40,000 or so years moving back and forth between different forms of social organization, building up hierarchies then dismantling them again" (113). There are profound questions to consider for this thesis. The first, which the authors spell out directly, pertains to context for sustained domination:

"Be this as it may, it's becoming increasingly clear that the earliest known evidence of human social life resembles a carnival parade of political forms, far more than it does the

drab abstractions of evolutionary theory. If there is a riddle here it's this: why, after millenia of constructing and disassembling forms of hierarchy, did *Homo sapiens* – supposedly the wisest of apes – allow permanent and intractable systems of inequality to take root?" (119)

As opposed to collective agreements permitting these temporary autocracies, can it be said of today's societies that there is some conscious, agreed upon social contract for crisis autocracy? Are there rules or limits to states of exception? What of popular disagreement?

Separately, is something innate to the human condition (separate from neoliberalism, or the neoliberal form more appropriately considered) that encourages temporary hierarchical arrangements with a small number of individuals wielding near-total power? Certainly the notion of one man to protect the Romans is embedded in Western political thoughts; Cheyenne temporary soldiers executing disobedient tribesmen during the buffalo drive. less so.

Decision-makers often lack all essential information, crises are time-sensitive, and managing complex emergencies is delicate. As such, COVID-19 governments were learning "on a trial-and-error basis" (Dustal 2020). Post-shock policy concerns the economic, legal, and social consequences rather than epidemiological ones (Dustal 2020). As COVID-19 progressed, Rode and Flynn designed a 'Governance of Complex Emergencies' framework. Complex emergencies are political in nature, exhibit high degrees of uncertainty, and have many unclear intersections and interlinkages that threaten societal stability (Rode and Flynn 2020: 8).

From ten principles (see Appendix), several delicate links emerge. Although governments should direct crisis response, they should avoid 'command and control', opting for 'governance by empathy' to "ensure collaboration, co-creation and caring" in 'hybridity'-driven multilevel governance (ibid: 9). Common-and-control does not meet the need to align with current structures for decentralized education departments. Rode and Flynn's 'Pathway for Establishing Emergency Governance Structures' (ibid: 10) establishes basic city-level structures to "introduce additional democratic and scientific functions" for concurrent national integration. Beyond initial shock and crises phases, they establish processes for integration in longer emergencies (ibid: 12).

Rode and Flynn warn that emergency governance arrangements – given unusual levels of government power – can threaten democracy and social cohesion (ibid: 9). *Shock Doctrine* describes neoliberal crisis governance design as intentionally authoritarian. 'Disaster capitalism', furthered by an ideology Klein (2007) terms "corporatism," capitalizes on shock crises that "[explode] the world that is familiar" (16) to 'soften' societies (akin to torture) into relinquishing "things they would otherwise fiercely protect" (17). Draconian measures become permanent, and a corporatist oligarchy robs people of essential services and fundamental liberties. This speaks to potential objectives of regimes as crises evolve, particularly in initial stages of suspended worldviews. As motivations for authoritarian tilts, Bregman (2019: 6-7) cites Solnit's (2009) account of Katrina's aftermath: "elite panic comes from powerful people who see humanity in their own image," ruled by self-interest. COVID-19 authoritarian tilts are highlighted in Section 4.3.

Figure 2: Emergency Governance Structures

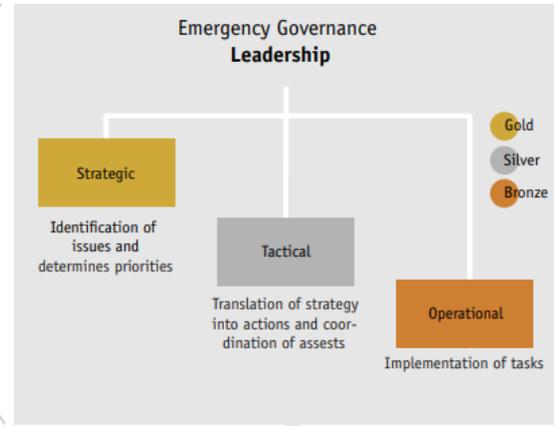
**POD Existing multi-level urban governance structures**



➔ 1

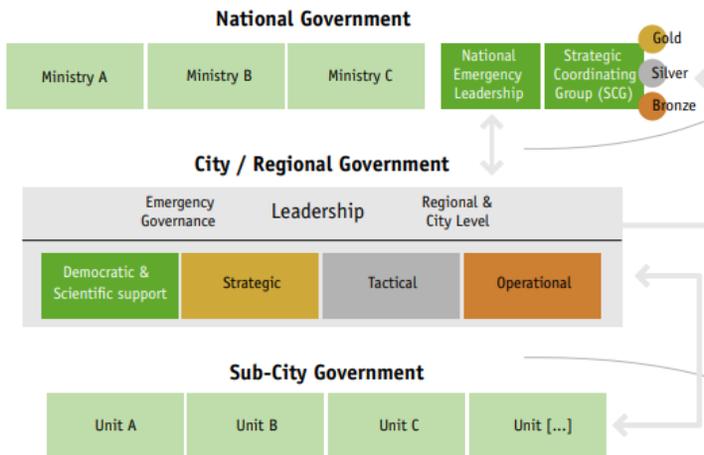
**01 City / regional emergency governance**

Source: adapted from Cabinet Office, 'UK Emergency Planning: Our Context and Approach'



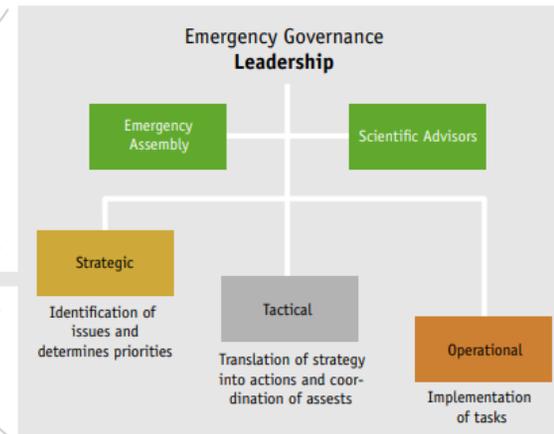
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**03 Multi-level emergency governance structures**

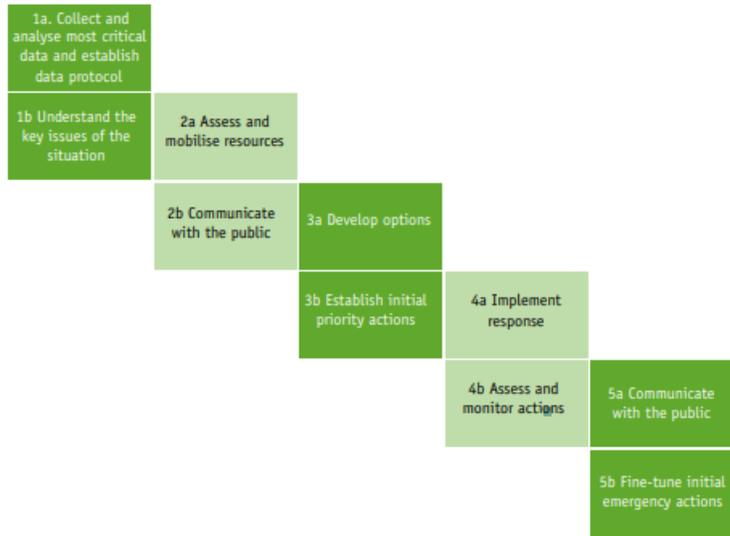


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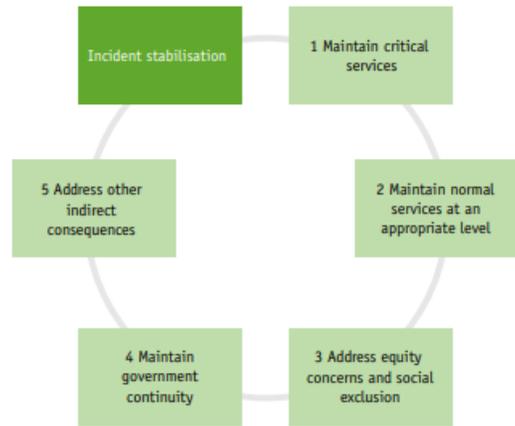
**02 Democratic and scientific components**



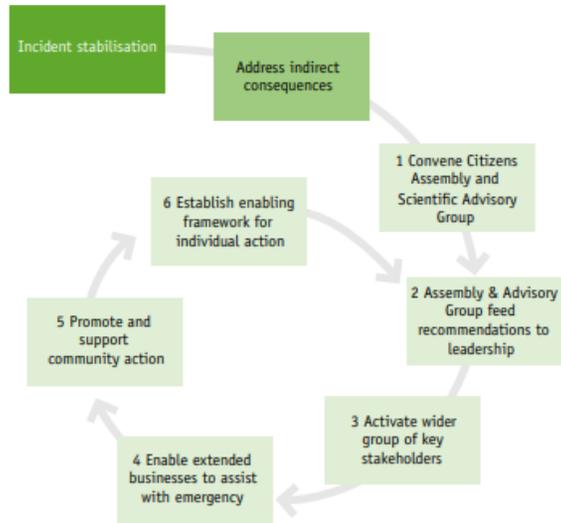
**Component 1: Direct incident stabilisation**



**Component 2: Addressing indirect consequences**



**Component 3: Deliberation and enabling wider response**



**Component 4: Long-term transformation**

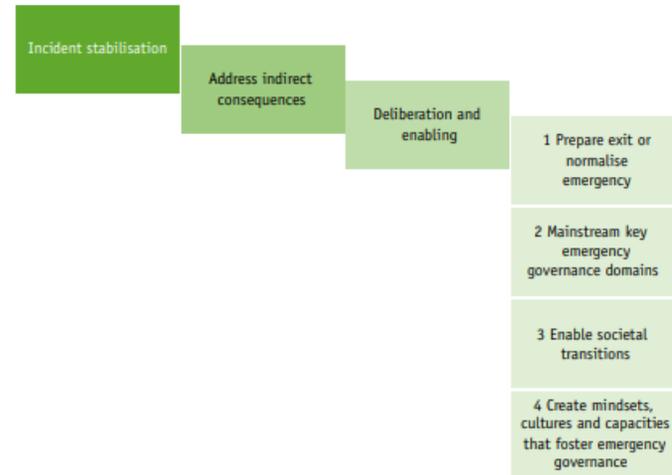


Figure 3: Emergency Governance Processes

## 2.5.2 Communication as Public Health Governance

For leaders directing national or statewide policy on COVID-19, public health communication is enormously challenging. It functions within and aside crisis governance. Interest in intersections between public health, communication, and governance accelerated during early 2000's pandemics, and exploded exponentially in March 2020. Lessons from recent pandemics (SARS and H1N1, in particular) informed both COVID-19 literature and government plans.

### Brief Communication Overview

Combining theories on narrative change and crisis narrative, it is conceivable that how the story of COVID-19 was conveyed to the public requires delicate attention and was subject to changes that cannot be explained with pure rationality. Fink and Yolles (2012), for example, visualize modes of paradigm change. In their model, crises catalyze transformation and narrative death, but can resurrect the status quo.

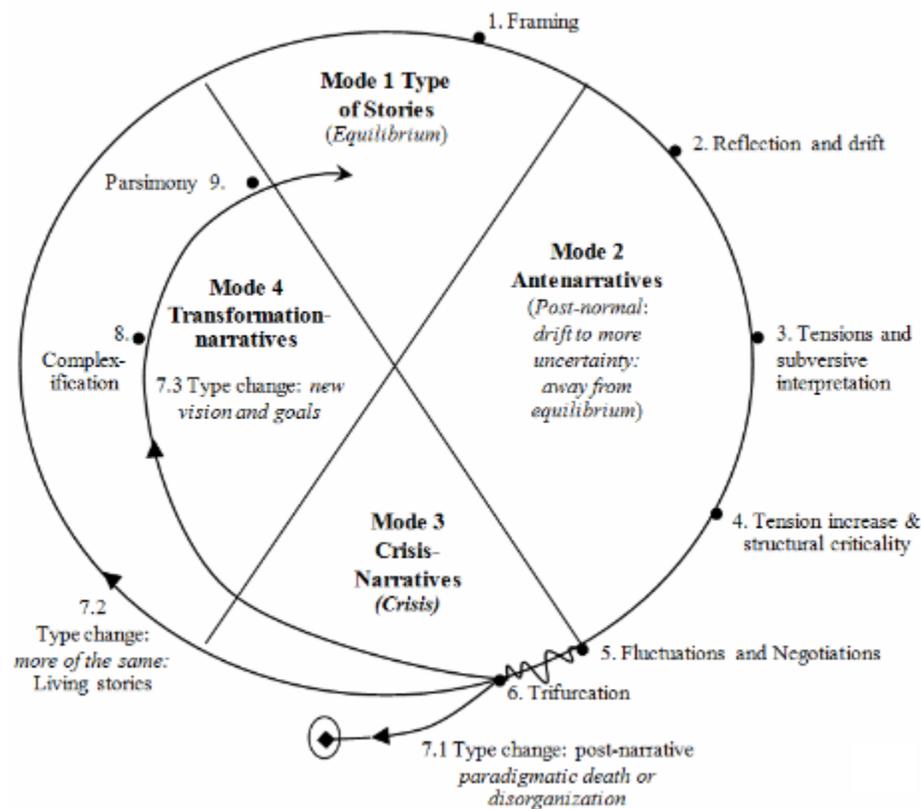


Figure 4: Cycle of Narrative Change

With Gostin's (2020) commandment – “The first rule of public health is to gain the public's trust” – communication of uncertainty in the ‘post-truth era’ is essential. Scientists poorly convey their ideas, and “this lack of transparency could potentially compromise important decisions people make based on scientific or statistical evidence, from personal medical decisions to government policies” (van der Bles et. al. 2020: 1). Openness is preferable, yet accepting vulnerability in communicating uncertainty is integrated neither into scientists' modus operandi nor the public's digestion of communication. Van der Bles et. al (2020) focused on communication of ‘epistemic uncertainty’ – “[that which] arises because of what we do not know but could know in theory” (2) – as a means of questioning ‘perceptions of uncertainty’ (8). With little evidence of eroded trust from communicating uncertainty, the authors urge openness, honesty, and transparency, with collaborative, transdisciplinary discussions about communication (ibid: 9).

### ***Limited lessons from SARS in Singapore***

The 2003 SARS outbreak in Singapore (see timeline in Appendix) provides several lessons, but the far shorter, narrower disease scope limits prospective knowledge transfer. The idea of different publics with whom to communicate and differentiable crisis stages emerged: “What became evident was that from the beginning, the government had identified and isolated the SARS virus as the common enemy that everyone should battle against. Consequently, it was able to galvanize its public to join its battle to overcome the enemy” (Jin et. al. 2006: 93). Singapore also could differentiate between the quarantined and non-quarantined publics. School responses are very difficult to compare, as information was more consistent for SARS, and a one-time shutdown is not precedent. SARS in some sense, felt more controllable – surrendering to uncertainty was less required of the Singaporean government than during COVID-19.

### ***German Context in 2019: Hall and Wolf, Discussion of German National Pandemic Plan***

The National Pandemic Plan used the 2009 H1N1 Pandemic as a baseline. The central government recognizes public health communication as vital and conducted workshops to develop and revise a National Pandemic Plan. In it, conflicts between democracy and crisis governance emerge. Recall Gramsci's concepts of hegemony. The stated German pandemic communication goal is forming a single voice that “prevents uncertainty in the population about what to expect and to do and prevents the media from undermining the communication campaign” (Hall and Wolf 2019: 12). Dissent is seen as a nuisance, the public as panic-prone, and the media as untrustworthy. Perhaps teachers are lumped into the ‘general public’ for pandemic education governance, despite the essential nature of their work, ability to digest complex information, position to communicate with the most affected publics, and potential learning opportunities from teachers. Normal bastions of democracy (dialogue, independent media) become – in the eyes of German pandemic preparedness – a hindrance to effective policy making. Thus, the goal of communication is to be the victor in hegemony, recalling insights from the interregnum:

“Communication is framed as a struggle for public opinion among various societal actors that is fought and won by deploying the communication strategies described here” (ibid: 14).

The one-voice policy was conceived as a hedge against contradictory information. Presciently, the authors warned against the pitfalls (ibid):

“But this policy cannot (and should not) prevent controversy altogether.... The struggle for hegemony with respect to vaccination campaigns in Germany, at least in part, seems to be centered on the question of whether vaccination is negotiated according to the rules of medical sciences or politics. If this is the case then it would be prudent to actively foster public debate about vaccination rather than waiting for the next pandemic to occasion the debate.”

### ***American COVID-19 Context: Kreps and Kriner***

Recalling van der Bles et al (2020), striking the right balance in emphasizing uncertainty is essential. In the United States during 2020, political implications of scientific uncertainty were enormous, as discrepancies between Democratic and Republican attitudes towards science became rifts in perceived validity of COVID-19 models (ibid: 4). Public trust erodes with high uncertainty, whereas downplaying uncertainty “can raise support in the short term, but reversals in projections may temper those effects or even reduce scientific trust (Kreps and Kriner 2020: 1). Political elites attempting to clearly and consistently communicate a shifting scientific consensus to the public were challenged (ibid: 5). Long-term gain is preferable to potential short-term political benefit: “Acknowledging and contextualizing uncertainty may minimize public backlash should scientific projections and guidance change markedly” (ibid: 10). Versus ‘weaponizing uncertainty’, “it can be communicated dispassionately, acknowledging the uncertainty, knowns and unknowns, ranges of probabilistic projections, and data imperfections in ways that are both more scientifically grounded and possibly more effective in terms of earning trust with the public” (ibid: 3).

## EDUCATION GOVERNANCE AND PRELIMINARY RESEARCH DURING COVID-19

What is the scope of education governance? Education's already-expansive boundaries were less fixed in COVID-19. Governance for school reopening became enmeshed with broader public health measures and politically-dictated timelines. Stakeholders – politicians, epidemiologists, parents, students, unions, administrators – exerted unequal influence. This research calls on several preexisting education governance frameworks, mindsets, questions, and policies for wading through the 'reopening treadmill'. All tools cited in Sections 2.6.2 and 2.6.3 were publicly available during the research period in question, either prior to or midway through 2020. These could be considered pillars to guide the research *and* to have hypothetically guided education governance. The Background section discusses governance structures in Berlin and New York.

### 2.6.1 'Reopening' and the COVID-19 Lexicon

The sudden ubiquity of 'school reopening' and 'phased reopening' calls into question what 'reopening' entails, and whether the term itself is misleading. Its 'back to normal' focus constitutes an anti-response. The COVID-19 lexicon created and injected words. The injection of 'reopening' appears permanent, despite the notion of a 'reopening' not reflecting situations when schools are, in fact, also reclosing. Schools appear locked in a 'Reopening Treadmill', "marked by continual churn and closures until the virus is contained" (Gross et. al 2020: 1). 'Reopening' implies an end mission (to a state of being 'open'); *Lockerung*, perhaps a yearning for less restriction.<sup>1</sup>

Pre COVID-19, the phased reopening concept only applied to schools after a traumatic event (for example, the 2018 Parkland school shooting). The only precedent for a public health school reopening is SARS in Singapore. Even so, the notion of "reopening" was a bit more straightforward. Per the timeline in the appendix, schools closed once during an initial outbreak of a novel coronavirus disease, then reopened in several weeks' time upon introduction of wider protective protocols and suppressed disease counts (Straits Times 2013; Singapore Media Relations Division, Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts 2003). Governance in a one-party, disciplinarian city-state is also less complex than in bureaucratic, federal and diverse countries.

The implied mission of COVID-19 education governance deserves considerable reflection, as does seeping militaristic, contrarian language that clouds structural issues (Krasovitski 2020). Reardon (2020) offers a potent reply: less 'us versus them', more building 'veracity', derived from the Proto-Indo-European root 'were-0', meaning 'true' or 'trustworthy'. Reardon's veracity "necessitates stepping back from the imaginaries of isolation and containment to muster the courage to craft language and practices that recognize and respond to our interdependencies" (2020). Wartime metaphor "[blinds] us from deeper systemic problems in our relations" (ibid). If conceived as wartime, learning stopgaps and hope in vaccines may not support education systems.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Appendix for Google Trends results and semantical differences.

## 2.6.2 Complexity-focused Education Governance

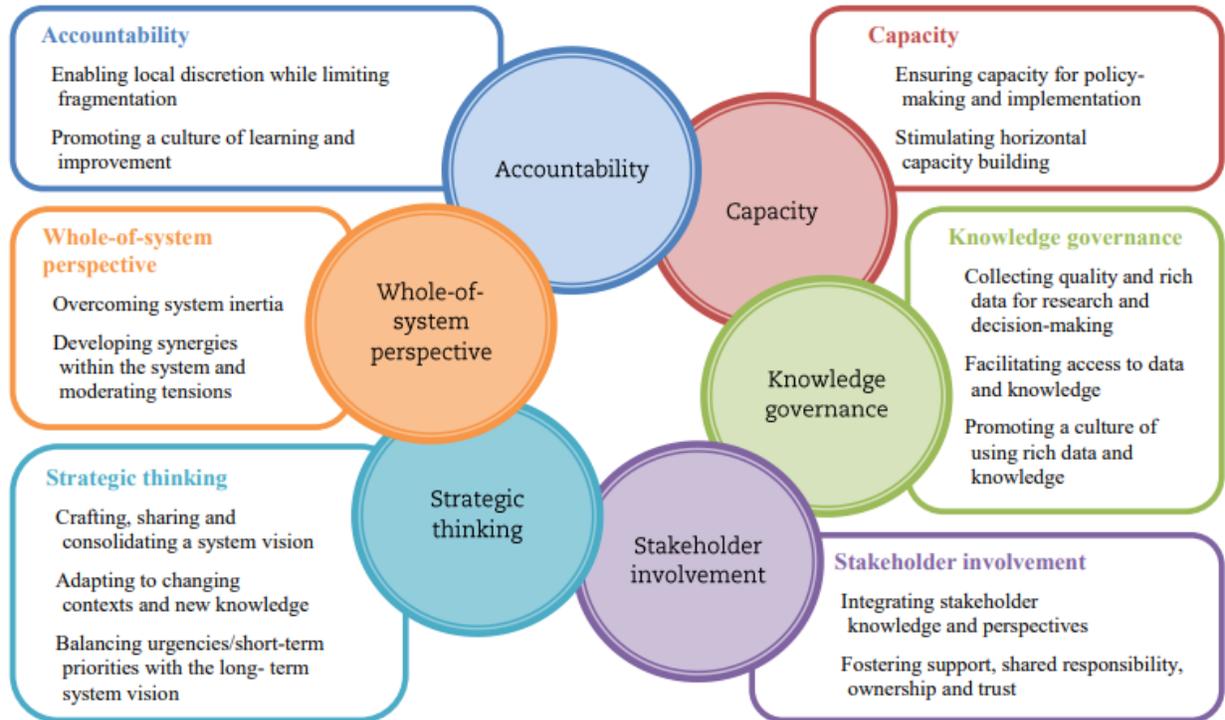


Figure 5: Strategic Governance Paradigm

Recent OECD research rooted in complexity from 2016 (Governing complex education systems) and 2018 (Strategic Education Governance) inform this discussion of modern education governance. The OECD stresses revised approaches to collaboration and decision-making that, in turn, enable “open, dynamic, and strategic” processes (Burns and Koester 2016). An earlier OECD conference presentation in 2013 noted the importance of “multiple forms and sources of knowledge [having] to talk to each other” (Van Damme 2013: 25), particularly relevant in COVID-19. Solutions like these are emblematic of the difficulties in complex education systems. Templates do not apply to complex, unpredictable issues, versus complicated problems that only need solving once (OECD 2018: 2).

Informed by an understanding of complexity that “can lead to unpredictable reactions or unexpected consequences to even seemingly simple changes”, effective governance: focuses on processes, not structures; is flexible and can adapt to change and unexpected events; works through building capacity, stakeholder involvement and open dialogue; requires a whole system approach to align roles and balance tensions; harnesses evidence and research to inform policy and practice; and is built on trust (Burns and Koester 2016). In COVID-19, Gross et. al argue, “While safe reopening ought to be a priority, so should efforts to meet student needs wherever learning happens” (2020). The OECD noted potential disproportionate impact on vulnerable students; Cerna (2020) encouraged a “holistic approach to education... that addresses students’ learning, social and emotional needs,” involving newfound partnerships between government and relevant agencies.

### **2.6.3 Uncertainty-focused Education Governance**

Complementing complexity from above is uncertainty from below. The Penn Graduate School of Education's Project for Mental Health and Optimal Development developed an 'educator's guide to navigating the COVID-19 era'. It sees the scale of COVID-19's impact on schooling as total:

"Teaching in the era of COVID-19 has shaken the foundations of how we've always understood and practiced "schooling" (2020: 6).

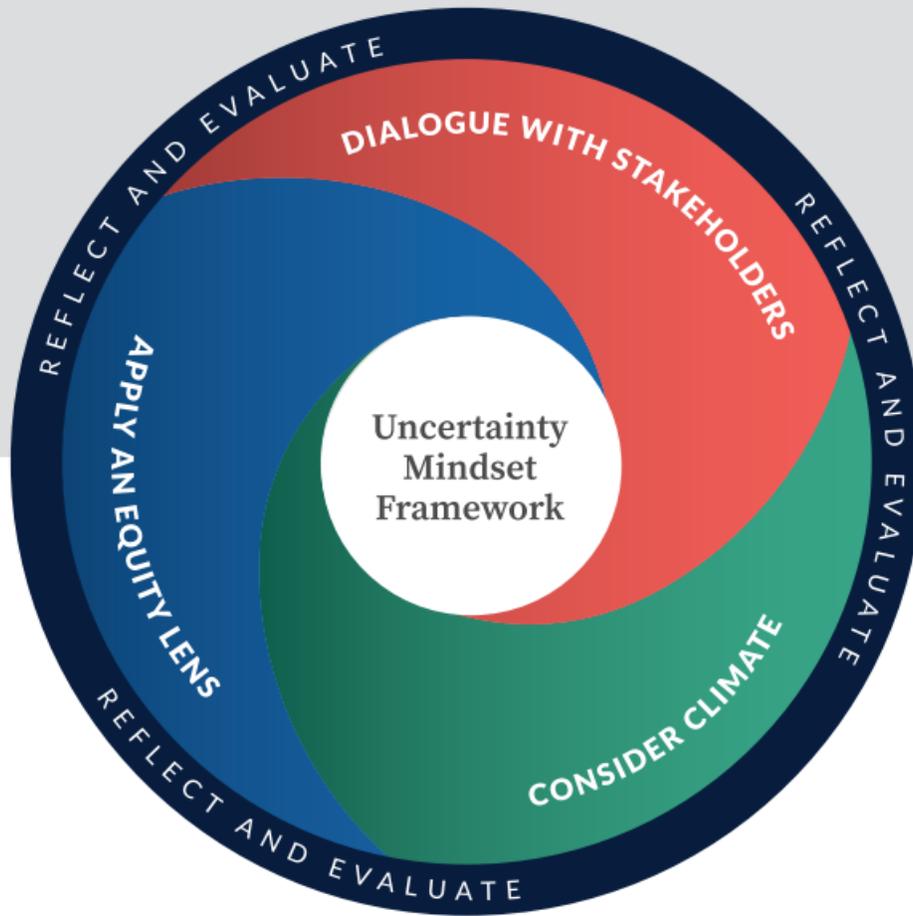
Rooted in disciplines of Possibility Development (Nakkula), Critical Consciousness (Friere), Planned Happenstance (Krumboltz), and Inquiry as Stance (Cochran-Smith and Lythe), the framework meets the historical moment in moving past paralysis:

"We define an Uncertainty Mindset as a disposition that encourages embracing the unknown to remain responsive to needs and opportunities as they emerge. An Uncertainty Mindset is not carelessness or a lack of planning; rather, it is a state of intentional inquiry that encourages educators to analyze existing systems and adapt them to meet emerging needs" (ibid).

Most school districts developed their own standards, irrespective of industry-wide recommendations. Educators pooled resources independently. *Education Week*, for example, developed an online article series to disseminate best practices, including topics like cultivating online learning, building remote relationships, and virtual classroom routines. PACE (Policy Analysis for California Education) released "Navigating the Uncertainty of Reopening Schools: A Guide for Parents, Students and the Public" in August. The report reveals numerous intersecting public health, education, community, social justice, governance, and crisis considerations, structured as questions for parents, families and the public to ask (see Appendix).

PACE highlights the need for meaningful stakeholder engagement at the school level – which the report sees as distinct from California's announced plans – and to be mindful that "there is no straightforward formula for safely reopening schools" (Humphrey 2020: 10). Navigating COVID-19 is a two-way street: deep willingness and commitment to engage from school communities, met with leaders creating space for that kind of collaboration. Davis (2020) created a robust list of principles for school boards (see Appendix). Overall, schools were forced to rapidly consider a multiplicity of interlocking concerns traditionally beyond their administrative bounds and be mindful of nonlinear components. These were monumental tasks for which they were not trained. Findings evaluate how the massive public education systems in Berlin and New York coped with COVID-19.

The Uncertainty Mindset relies on four nonlinear components: *Dialogue, Climate, Equity, and Reflection.*



### Dialogue with Stakeholders

Engaging in ongoing dialogue with stakeholders allows us to expand our network of support and co-construct interventions.



### Consider Climate

Through analyzing the classroom, school-wide, and societal practices in which we and our students exist, we can adapt and restructure them to more responsively support our students.



### Apply an Equity Lens

Looking more deeply at our and our students' positioning in the world pushes us to consider how these identities influence our perspectives, actions, and opportunities.



### Reflect & Evaluate

Committing to ongoing reflection and evaluation helps us see what we've learned, what requires further attention, and what remains to be done.

Figure 6: Uncertainty Mindset Framework for Educators

# **METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The dynamic, far-reaching COVID-19 crisis requires qualitative methods that assemble perspectives and narratives of governance under duress. Therefore, methodology must provide opportunities to reflect on fast-moving pieces gathered in real time, and to empathetically recognize each perspective's limitations. Qualitative data collection compliments the literature review's intersectional approach. This section outlines the comparative schema, qualitative methods, and organizational approach for data analysis, concluding with a note on positionality.

This methodology is my best attempt to pragmatically materialize very recent history and connect co-occurring neoliberal processes. It recycles methodological components of a previous thesis on New York's metropolitan transit governance, albeit with more reliance on academic literature than on narrative. Qualitative research accessed governance touchpoints: direct engagement with educators and journalists, and secondary engagement with political actors and administrators. Media, interview, and communications data were organized chronologically and topically to group similar manifestations of neoliberal crisis governance during school reopening processes. Time proved advantageous. Data collection entailed staying current with co-occurring developments, while granting myself sufficient temporal distance to materialize them. This is the product of hundreds of articles and several dozen books, many conversations, and continual engagement (voluntary and involuntary) with an omnipresent, all-encompassing pandemic.

### **3.2 Comparative Schema**

Robinson's 'genetic approach' guides the comparative schema (2015). Berlin and New York are emblematic of neoliberal processes, and share many commonalities as independent capitals beholden to brittle federalism. The scale of New York City - New York State - United States mirrors that of Berlin - Germany - European Union. Scale and context-specific political dynamics were prescient during COVID-19, as public education dissolved into broader public health and crisis governance. Both the NYCDOE and *Berlin Senatsverwaltung für Jugend und Familie* – as the governing bodies of each city's public education – receive special attention, as do the politicians and administrators executing central commands in decentralized structures. The NYSED and BMBF were excluded, given their relative distance from daily operations.

The findings and analysis sections are written in a continuous stream of processes to emphasize the common genetics. Per Tilly's (1984) 'encompassing approach' cited in Robinson (2015: 4), the research "seeks to link cases together for comparison because they are part of shared [systems]". This thesis's 'genetic' form of comparison aims to trace repetitions of interconnected processes operating (and simultaneously being produced) in each case (Robinson 2015: 10-14). New York events are not deliberately juxtaposed with those in Berlin; the comparative intent is to highlight two sets of education governance responses under pandemic conditions in neoliberal federal regimes and draw relevant conclusions for neoliberal predispositions towards uncertainty that

emerge in crisis. When considerable differences arise, they are mentioned. Often, those differences are in manifestations of neoliberal processes, less the neoliberal themselves. I was mindful of 'singularities' (Hallward 2001: 2, cited in Robinson 2015: 5); New York's scale of suffering – 114,000 homeless students, and 32,000 dead in 3 months – often dwarfed Berlin's.

### **3.3 Qualitative Methods**

The fourth research question asks how one can research a semi-current multidimensional crisis. These qualitative methods represent my pursuit of a better answer. Semi-structured interviews and media analysis constitute the bulk of data. Informal conversations informed research strategy, and supplemented official industry reports and government communication.

#### ***Semi-Structured Interviews*** (11 interviews in total)

These interviews were designed to assemble perspectives from below. While media and government viewpoints were publicly accessible, ideas from educators were often expressed indirectly or diluted through other forms of communication. The content is extraordinarily sensitive; unsurprisingly, only one educator of the six chose not to be anonymous. Government officials would have been welcome participants, but were difficult to access and mostly unwilling to share their views publicly. More than 11 interviews would have been preferable, but with the focus on perspectives from below, sources that cited interviews with public officials (plus other parents, students, teachers, and principals) sufficiently complemented the 14 collaborators' perspectives. 'Collaborator', versus 'interviewee', 'participant', or 'subject' was chosen to reflect our method of engagement and co-production of knowledge, as well as the continuous nature of the engagement.

Interviews were deliberately semi-structured and conducted from October 2020 to March 2021. None of the interviews shared the same preparatory guide because each collaborator's vantage point was deliberately complimentary. Teacher 3, for example, was the oldest, suffered from chronic stress, and discussed German pandemic education beyond Berlin. Interviews were loosely designed to reflect the exploratory nature of these conversations, meandering within the confines of what a particular collaborator felt most pressing from their year of COVID-19 education. Conversations with teachers and parents were designed to include reflections on their positions as beyond central administration decision power, and to understand pandemic teaching and learning.

Many prospective collaborators also appeared in publicly accessible webinars, rendering their direct participation unnecessary. Some include New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, Berlin *Regierender Bürgermeister* Michael Müller (not cited), and Senior Advisor for Public Health Dr. Jay Varma. Journalists were crucial. They were particularly insightful in uncovering how preexisting education dynamics manifested themselves during COVID-19, plus in highlighting pressing debates.

## BERLIN COLLABORATORS

### *Education Journalist:*

**Susanne Leinemann** - Reporter, *Der Tagesspiegel* - March 2, 2021

### *Berlin teachers:*

**Ryan Plocher** - Head of Public Relations at GEW Berlin, and Teacher at Fritz-Karsen-Schule in Neukölln (American native, 15 years in Berlin) - February 13, 2021

**Teacher 1** - Music teacher at an international school (non-German native, 5+ years in Berlin) - October 27, 2020

**Teacher 2** - Social science teacher at an international school (non-German native, 15 years in Berlin) - October 28, 2020

### *Non-Berlin, Germany-based teacher:*

**Teacher 3** - Language teacher at rural Gymnasium in Rheinland-Pfalz (German native, 20+ years) - November 18, 2020

### *Berlin learning service providers:*

**Providers 1 and 2** - Founder and administrator of learning service provider in Wedding (non-German native and German native, 5+ years in Berlin) - November 18, 2020

### *Berlin parent:*

Married parent of 6-year-old and 3-year-old daughters in Kreuzberg (non-German native, 2+ years in Berlin) - February 17, 2021

## NEW YORK COLLABORATORS

### *Education Journalist:*

**Alex Zimmerman** - Reporter, *Chalkbeat NY* - December 10, 2020

### *Suburban public school administration, Floral Park-Bellerose Union-Free School District:*

**Kathleen Sottile** - Superintendent since 2019, former principal of Floral Park Memorial H.S. - October 18, 2020

**Michael Fabiano** - Assistant Superintendent for Business - October 28, 2020

**Debbie Sawicki** - Assistant Business Manager, mother of Joe Sawicki - October 28, 2020

### *New York teachers:*

**Teacher 4** - District 75 occupational therapist, South Brooklyn (New York native, 3+ years in DOE) - November 2, 2020

**Teacher 5** - Middle school science teacher, South Bronx (New York native, 3+ years in DOE) - November 19, 2020

## BERLIN WEBINARS

### *N-AERUS 2021: How to plan in a world of uncertainty? Day 2 - February 5, 2021*

**Marco Armiero** - Director of KTH Environmental Humanities Laboratory

**Alessandro Balducci** - Professor of Planning, Politecnico di Milano

## NEW YORK WEBINARS

*First Read Coronavirus Update: Health* - January 21, 2021

**Dr. Jay Varma** - Senior Public Health Advisor to the Mayor

*Recalibrate Reality with Scott Rechler* - February 19, 2021

**Governor Andrew Cuomo**

*First Read Coronavirus Update: Effect on Schools* - March 23, 2021

**Gabrielle Ramos-Solomon** - Deputy Chief of Staff, Office of the Chancellor, NYCDOE

**Kapil Longani** - Counsel to the Mayor

**Alexis Blane** - Principal Deputy Counsel to the Mayor

*Crisis and Recovery Event Series: Panel #3 - Climate Crisis: Urban Recovery, Planetary Risk (Institute for Public Knowledge)* - February 18, 2021

**Diana Hernández** - Tenured Associate Professor of Sociomedical Sciences, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University

**Media Analysis** (~100 pieces cited, over 200 not cited)

Reporting and commentary pieces were invaluable. They agglomerated public communication, parent, teacher, administrator, politician and journalist viewpoints, providing a running feed of events for the research period in question. Commentary from journalists contextualizes and furthers analysis-making. Continuous engagement with media content allowed for subsequent trimming and consolidation. However imperfect, this thesis relied upon several daily and weekly education and political newsletters, plus a consistent pool of trusted online sources. *City & State NY's First Read*, for example, is a New York political staple. *Chalkbeat New York's 'Rise and Shine'* shares local education stories from *Chalkbeat* and other relevant local and national ones. *The New York Times Education Briefing* has a similar purpose, while *Education Week's* weekly 'EdWeek Update' is principally national in scope. Articles from *Gothamist*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The City* were consistently insightful, as were local television reports. Profound commentaries from national sources were core to conceptualizing the ever-shifting COVID-19 landscape. *The Atlantic* pivoted its focus to compelling pandemic-related coverage, and its journalists were afforded the ability to explore, speculate and connect ideas in ways that local reporters could not. *The Atlantic* could also gather insights from scientists, thinkers, and industry experts. Experts from science-focused blogs, magazines, think tanks, and academia also appear in this thesis.

Although limited in education coverage, the English-language *Hochhaus* newsletter covers German and Berlin politics relevant to epidemiological and *Lockerung* discussions. English-language Facebook groups, although uncited, proved helpful. Berlin's most consistent education coverage appears in *Der Tagesspiegel* and *Berliner Morgenpost*, and Susanne Vieth-Entus is perhaps the most well-regarded local education journalist. *The Local DE* and *The Berlin Spectator* were accessible English-language sources for Berlin-based news, as *Deutsche Welle* was for national events.

### ***Reports and Communication from Public Officials***

Projections of policymaking for public consumption reveal, to some extent, decision makers' thought processes. This is not a linguistics thesis, but patterns in diction and presentation can serve research functions. Hopeful axioms ('light at the end of the tunnel'), digestible policy briefings (color-coded timelines and protocols), policy announcements, and the very medium through which policy is communicated (via tweet, email, in-person discussion, etc.) were valuable data, given communication's function as policy. Official reports appeared in formats for public consumption.

### ***Informal Conversations***

Despite exclusion from findings, Informal conversations highlighted prospective, previously unexplored research avenues of interest, and allowed for chances to reflect conversationally in times bereft of typical social interaction.

## **3.4 Data Collection and Analysis**

Data pertaining to the time period of March 2020 to March 2021 were sourced continuously in real time, and in the following weeks and months. Schools have remained relatively accessible to research during the pandemic and active in operations (in contrast to many other facets of life). This activity translated to availability for school administrators, students, teachers, and officials, consistently producing data for this research both directly and indirectly. Berlin and New York were accessible in person (I spent time in both during the research period) and familiar. Interviews were conducted when opportunities arose, especially prescient during abrupt changes in lockdown regulations. Literature was sourced primarily from previous urban studies research and suggestions from supervisors; otherwise, independent searches for particular literature review subcomponents procured relevant scholarship, as did deep-dives scouring the Internet.

Data sources and source content were organized on Google Sheets, with two sheets in parallel categorized by source type and time. Sources were divided into the following categories: literature; official government or organizational reports; media from first wave and summer; media from second and third waves, and official government communication. The source content was processed in a corresponding sheet, then combined with interview and webinar data from dispersed documents. The original plan was to issue code data, but it became apparent that an iterative process building the argument and key findings first would naturally order and filter the findings. Only one quarter of the data appeared in the final thesis.

Generating conclusions was possible after time to digest news and make connections between original interview data and secondary sources. Investigative journalism and official reports also provided insights impossible to procure in real time. With time, repetition, and exposure, it became

easier to generate connections and notice patterns, particularly with guidance from collaborators. Data analysis, in this way, constantly reinforced itself. In the final months of research, independent reading and longer discussions allowed the most salient conclusions to crystallize, and for the entire written structure to emerge. Prior to February, there was no written structure to contain ideas in the thesis. This was, in many ways, deliberate.

### **3.5 Positionality**

It was essential to remain mindful of my position: a white, English-native practitioner with minimal non-experiential exposure to education. Finding data touchpoints in communities beyond my own, admittedly, fell short, but it became clearer during research that secondary sources would prove crucial to rounding my perspective. I was particularly excited to interview Teacher 5 for this reason; the South Bronx deserves more attention. I also felt compelled to engage with my hometown; a chat with my friend's mother in the supermarket led to the FPB administration interviews. Notably, all but three collaborators (Plocher, Leinemann and Zimmerman) were within one degree of personal separation. There were more Berlin-based interviews than New York-based ones, since my previous thesis and childhood provided more familiarity with New York. This thesis was also an opportunity to improve German, and reading complex articles became far more possible throughout. Being cognizant of one's position as a non-native speaker in any context is essential; in Berlin, it is easy to overlook one's obligation to learn some degree of German.

Previous politically driven crisis governance spurred my interest in COVID-19 and school reopenings. I see the connection between those crises – Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Sandy, and the 'Summer of Hell' – as essential service provision and neoliberalism during the non-hegemonic times. From this position, COVID-19 was not narrow, but the frame of interregnum is somewhat clearer. This research seeks to better understand governance under indefinitely uncertain and complex circumstances. As Zimmerman (Interview) noted, "it's probably the craziest thing I've ever covered". To others, school reopening may seem daunting, and 'too much' for a thesis. To me, the confusion is fascinating, and requires closer examination.

# DATA

## **BACKGROUND**

This section highlights relevant education governance features in Berlin and New York of general significance and particular relevance during 2020-21; statistics are as of April 2021. Both cities are their country's largest, with expansive education systems that enjoy fair degrees of federal autonomy. Local political dynamics exert influence in ways unique to each. As mentioned, the governance scale of Germany - Berlin corresponds to that of New York State - New York City.

### **4.1.1 Emergency Powers**

Germany's particular form of federalism and patchwork legal frameworks regarding emergency powers left considerable room for deliberating the most appropriate policy. After Chancellor Merkel and the sixteen heads of state agreed to joint guidelines on March 16, 2020 (Thielbörger and Behlert 2020), they asked for a revision to Germany's Infection Protection Act (*Infektionsschutzgesetz*), subsequently passed on March 27. Legal scholars noted the federal legislature's "exemplary speed", and flagged multiple potential breaches of constitutionality, which stood in contrast to the otherwise consensus-oriented and carefully communicated government actions at the pandemic's onset (Stelzenmüller and Denney 2020). After May 2020, individual states began exercising their constitutional rights to autonomy, falling out of lockstep with Merkel-led meetings between herself and the 16 heads of state at *Ministerpräsidentenkonferenzen*. The Chancellor renewed centralization efforts in late March 2021, cementing new rules on April 11 (Ismar 2021).

On March 2, 2020, the NYS Legislature bestowed Governor Cuomo with the authority "to issue by executive order any directive necessary to respond to a state disaster emergency" in response to COVID-19 (NY State Senate Bill S7919). In NYS, power is connected to funding, and this arrangement allowed the Governor to make budgetary changes in real time. Two weeks later, Mayor de Blasio suspended laws and regulations related to procurement (Emergency Executive Order No. 101), allowing his administration to bypass standard procedures when awarding millions in city contracts. Cuomo's power superseded that of de Blasio. The NYS Legislature stripped Cuomo of his emergency powers in early March 2021. Trump's limited role left Cuomo and de Blasio unhinged.

### **4.1.2 Public Education in Berlin**

Education is a particularly complex and independent component of German federalism. The central government retains little control over education policy after 2006 reforms that delegated more control to the *Länder* (Busemeyer and Vossiek 2015: 15). In city-states like Berlin, potential conflicts of interest between local municipalities and central education authorities do not arise like in states stretching across wide areas (ibid: 17). A joint OECD-BMBF study (ibid: 9) recommended to "create

governance structures that are both inclusive and effective,” and, “clearly define responsibilities and ensure accountability to multiple stakeholders,” among other findings.

The *Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Familie* oversees Berlin public schools. It directly manages a total of 827 schools serving 369,841 students: 680 public schools with 331,049 pupils, and another 147 private schools with 38,792 pupils (Metter 2021: 12-14). 39.3 percent of students’ families do not speak German at home (ibid: 18). Mayor Michael Müller has limited involvement with the *Senatsverwaltung*, besides appointing the *Bildungsministerin*. Ministerin Sandra Scheeres has led the *Senatsverwaltung* since 2010; directly under her are the two *Staatssekretärin*, Sigrid Klebba and Beate Stoffers, who are less public facing than Scheeres but arguably as influential (Plocher and Leinemann Interview). With limited research, it was difficult establishing their concrete roles and perspectives of crises. The SPD has exerted uninterrupted control over schools for 25 years, which – according to Plocher – could be its own thesis. Per Susanne Vieth-Entus, “Four Senators have come. Three have gone. Student performance has remained in the basement” (2021). Reforms in 2010-11 merged multiple vocational school types into an *Integrierte Sekundarschule* (ISS). The SPD emphasizes access to the *Gymnasium* track, and largely neglects ISS (Leinemann Interview).

Different *Gremien* (organizational bodies) gather stakeholders to deliberate policy. On the citywide level, the *Landesschulbeirat* is the most important, while the *Landeselternausschuss* gives parents direct access. Given Berlin’s extraordinarily decentralized governance, policymaking also happens on the *Bezirk* level; per Plocher, most *Bezirk*-level policies go through the respective *Bezirksschulbeirat* (BSB). The *Bezirksselternausschuss* (BEA), *Bezirksausschuss des pädagogischen Personals* (BpP), and *Bezirksschulerausschuss* (BSA) also gather parents, teachers, and students, respectively. Geographic and historic particularities lend added relevance to individual *Bezirke*.

The *Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft* (GEW) represents Berlin’s unionized teachers. Although *Beamte* cannot strike, unionized *Angestellte* (employees) can. GEW mobilized nationwide strikes as recently as February 2019. The Berlin protests were particularly raucous, and “protested against policies that for decades have subordinated every area of social life to the drive for profit” (Gaisenkerstig 2019). The GEW and the *Senatsverwaltung* have an increasingly fraught relationship.

#### **4.1.3 Public Education in New York City**

The U.S. federal government has very little bearing on education policy (U.S. Department of Education 2008). Much of American education policy is beholden to budgets; considering the relatively meager average contribution of the federal government to any given school district, this monetary independence empowers states and municipalities. Local school districts directly operate public education, and states provide funding, oversight, and guidance. The New York State Education Department (NYSED), part of the state university system, performs this statewide function. NYC funds 57 percent of the NYCDOE budget, versus 36 percent from the State and 7 percent from the federal government and other sources (NYCDOE 2021 2). NYS’s share is lower in

suburban districts able to generate property taxes. Floral Park-Bellerose, for example, relies on NYS for 15 to 17 percent of its revenue (Fabiano).

The NYCDOE is “a labyrinthine bureaucracy with roughly 150,000 employees and a \$34 billion annual budget” (Zimmerman, Veiga and Amin 2021). There are 1.1 million pupils, 13.2 percent of whom are English-language learners, and 72.8 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged (NYCDOE 2021 1). Each 32 Community School Districts for K-8 education has a superintendent, as does every high school. Networks of 25 schools each also empower principals. District 75 administers special education across the city and shares physical spaces with ‘regular’ education environments. Multiple advisory councils and community education councils administer schools with local participation, though few have direct contact with the Chancellor (ibid).

The Mayor assumed a more direct role in education with reforms in 2002, though historical factors grant principals and local schools tremendous autonomy. The Mayor directly appoints the Chancellor, who in turn, administers the DOE like a city agency. Richard Carranza was Chancellor from 2018 until his resignation in February 2021. The Counsel to the Mayor has been negotiating legal arrangements across city agencies; school-related policies often require its involvement.

Official governance structures cannot overlook the political minefield that is New York City. There are decades of political games to contend with and interests to appease, not even including Albany. Of particular relevance during COVID-19 is the acrimonious relationship between de Blasio and Cuomo that impedes their ability to govern collaboratively. Cuomo technically has the authority to close NYC schools, opting to intervene when politically expedient (Zimmerman Interview).

Unionized labor is vitally important to school politics and administration. The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) represents the overwhelming majority of city public school teachers. Michael Mulgrew has been its President since 2009, and negotiates directly with Cuomo, de Blasio, and Carranza, among other top officials. UFT relies on school-level School Leadership Teams (SLT) to communicate policy. The Council of School Supervisors & Administrators (CSA), led by President Mark Cannizzaro, negotiates on behalf of principals and other school administrators (WNYC 2021). Cannizzaro is traditionally less involved than Mulgrew, given CSA’s traditionally apolitical stances.

During COVID-19, preexisting governance structures did not necessarily function as designed, and crisis governance strategies exacerbated, or capitalized on, neoliberal fault lines. The subsequent findings sections detail policy measures, public relations, stakeholder interactions, and pandemic education. Political dynamics and relations not detailed above are made apparent via analysis.

## FINDINGS SECTION I

### *Consequences of Command-and-Control Governance in Decentralized Public Education Hierarchies*

Command-and-control responses did not align with decentral organizational structures. Evidence from Berlin and New York points to conflicting degrees of autonomy<sup>2</sup>, exclusionary communication, and unclear expectations. First, this section highlights preexisting tension between educators and central leadership. Growing roles for educators and parents, plus distant communication from central administration, left school communities frustrated and confused. Decentralized structure and department personnel themselves encouraged competent educators to act independently, yet central leaders criticized them for ‘unauthorized’ action. This section concludes with manifestations of this confusion: barriers to obvious solutions, and questions of governability.

#### **4.2.1 Educator - Central Administration Tension**

Preexisting education governance tensions were abundant and magnified in pandemic education. This section highlights one such tension: educators versus central administration authorities. Tension bred and reinforced mistrust, particularly in the lens of labor-employer relations<sup>3</sup>. During COVID-19, mistrust discouraged cooperation, facilitating polarized entrenchment.

Given education departments’ organizational complexity and the multiplicity of policies that facilitate school reopening procedures, schools were continuous theaters of negotiation. Cohen’s (2021) analysis of labor-employer relationships in school reopenings clarifies how different perceptions of workplace safety exposed preexisting mistrust, making negotiations tense and entrenched. Teachers were preoccupied with safety, and concerned that administrators would not incorporate their palpable angst into decisions. Administrators, parents and the broader community, conversely, saw teachers as “letting perfect be the enemy of the good” (ibid). Particularly amidst shifting and conflicting health guidelines, each side accused the other of “not following the science”<sup>4</sup> (ibid). Per one occupational health specialist, “We’re speaking across a gap trying to understand each other, and it’s been a long and challenging road” (Harrison, cited in Cohen 2021).

Teachers unions’ established capability to strike restricts discussion to certain channels. Germany uses work councils to preemptively prevent mass disruption<sup>5</sup> (Plocher 2021); Berlin has a myriad of

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps being autonomous with the right things is essential – from a management perspective, some things ought to be centralized, others not. This section highlights those apparent mismatches.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike in white-collar work, pink-collar workers (teachers, nurses, etc.) didn’t necessarily get as much power and flexibility, byproducts of previous shifts that accelerated during COVID-19. It’s unclear how gender discrimination also played a role in tension failing to manifest into material improvements for teachers.

<sup>4</sup> Who knows what ‘the science’ is, anyway? What science ought to be followed? There might not be a right answer – this theme emerged in the 2022 revision. The political frame very much informs the scientific one.

<sup>5</sup> Who does this serve? Would a less contained mass disruption, maybe, be better?

them. School teachers, for example, are represented in different citywide *Personalrat* councils: the *Hauptpersonalrat* with all other city government employees; the *Gesamtpersonalrat* for public schools, and the *Personalrat der zentralverwalteten und berufsbildenden Schulen* for vocational schools. Plocher emphasized that work councils on the district level are “supposed to be involved in everything” (ibid). During COVID-19, these local *Räte* became arenas for tension, given the perceived preexisting notions of what speeds and levels of involvement are acceptable. Further complicating the picture is the divide among “two classes of citizens” *Beamte* and *Angestellte* (Teacher 2). Teacher 3 noted her struggle as a *Beamte* who could not formally air grievances or strike. In New York, crisis conditions restricted long-earned freedoms, aggravated when UFT President Mulgrew signed away teachers’ right to strike in 2020 during private negotiations with Cuomo (Teacher 5).

Collaborators mentioned media and administrator perceptions of teachers as disengaged, problematic to education, and lazy (Teachers 2, 3, and 5, Leinemann). This highlights the blanket mistrust of central authorities towards teachers, accentuated by so-called ‘bad apples’ that tarnish peers’ reputations and seemingly confirm administrators’ biases when neglecting their duties. This research did not engage with teachers who characterized themselves as ‘bad apples’: collaborators demonstrated considerable engagement with and care for their school communities. The best served tension would be ‘bad apples’ versus everyone else. Self-described ‘good’ teachers loathe lazy peers, and feel victimized when associated with them. Central administrators appear generally wary of teachers, given the propensity of some willing to neglect educational responsibility and hide behind strong organized labor. Provider 1 also mentions the plight of principals: poor teachers “drag down” proactive principals trying to manage public schools during a pandemic. Ultimately, mistrust of teachers from central administration appears both warranted (from previous poor teacher engagement and some shirking responsibility) and misplaced (for good teachers) – and nevertheless amplified – during COVID-19<sup>6</sup>.

#### **4.2.2 Changing Roles for School Communities**

Akin to pandemic education intensifying and broadening roles for educators, school systems’ roles were ill-equipped for COVID-19 expectations and economic climate. This unwittingly shifted the attention to the services schools provide besides education.

Even in socioeconomically secure districts, economic insecurity became apparent during COVID-19. The U.S. unemployment rate had its highest-ever over-the-month increase in April 2020, soaring to 14.7 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). In a suburban district with very few below the poverty line, FPB central administration staff spent the summer of 2020 delivering lunch to 200 needy families (Sottile). Hyperlocal personalization is challenging for the NYCDOE next door and in Berlin, where there was a “massive disparity in response” (Teacher 1). To take an inspiring case amidst socioeconomic challenges, Community School 55 in the South Bronx functions as “the

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<sup>6</sup> It’s interesting to consider the extent to which digitalization bred and amplified further mistrust, particularly in traditional realms of communication.

lighthouse in the neighborhood” with dental, vision, and medical care (plus the obvious benefit of childcare) in America’s poorest congressional district (Dressner and Garcia 2020).

Keeping schools afloat fell to principals. Principals were the first line of communication, managed newfound staffing concerns, monitored evolving epidemiology, and made rules understandable. Grissom (2021) suggests that “it’s difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership.” Yet, they “are so overwhelmed and split in a million directions that their ability to be good instructional leaders right now is a very school-by-school question” (Zimmerman Interview). Thoughtful, intentional principals kept communities together and coordinated responses, like Teacher 1’s school. Teacher 2’s school, conversely, did not have a headmaster, so crisis response leaned entirely on teachers and parents.

Teachers were stretched even thinner than usual, suddenly expected to comfort children, build relationships with families, find new ways to engage students, and hunt down missing remote learning attendees, among many additional non-teaching responsibilities and processing their own grief. The NYCDOE recognized teachers as innovating more than central administrators in teaching methods, noting they were “leaning on” their teachers to share successful approaches (Ramos-Solomon). This paradoxically empowered and abandoned teachers.

Parents with remote learners became daytime caretakers (a function previously delegated to teachers) and learning assistants when students lack facetime with teachers. Work schedules, childcare arrangements, and morning routines became beholden to school reopening announcements (Zimmerman, Amin, and Veiga 2020, Berlin Parent). Yet these drastic accommodations did not guarantee good results; if anything, education quality almost certainly suffered. The Berlin parent<sup>7</sup>, for example, was expected to teach her 6-year-old daughter German despite being in German language school herself. For Teacher 4, an occupational therapist, it was clear parents could not possibly serve their children with acute needs and her aim shifted to avoiding considerable regression.

Overall, school communities absorbed more and different responsibilities while simultaneously being less capable of performing them<sup>8</sup>. The next section considers an additional challenge and frustration – communication – in the context of magnified mistrust (4.2.1) and overburdened school communities (4.2.2).

### **4.2.3 Communication Channels (Or Lack Thereof)**

In the case of essential information trickling to educators, parents, and students during COVID-19, the term ‘communication channels’ can be misleading, as it implies multiple access points to

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<sup>7</sup> She’s since left Germany, citing another pandemic-accelerated local challenge (housing) as the key push.

<sup>8</sup> This is almost certainly not limited to schools, another point of emphasis for this thesis that ought not to be lost. COVID-19 asked more of everyone – it’s just that many vulnerabilities collided in school communities.

exchange useful information. When school communities managed to receive accurate information from central administrators, it was often indirect, distanced, after-the-fact, and without possibility of substantive dialogue. These methods multiplied the already-incomprehensible range of educational challenges that left principles, students, parents, and teachers scrambling to accommodate sudden changes. Recalling the Uncertainty Mindset for Educators discussed in the Literature Review, dialogue with stakeholders was wholly insufficient.

The digital 'where' is an appropriate point of departure for pandemic communication. When information passed directly from decision-makers, emails (often with lengthy PDF attachments) were popular communication methods, with principals or school-level union leaders sending the emails merely functioning as mediums for centrally-dictated policies passing through them. Separately, Teacher 2 felt it was preposterous to expect teachers to read massive PDFs. Distanced and indigestible communication fostered skimming (Teacher 4), not absorption. Not everyone who wanted to read could, either. The Berlin parent struggled to even read lengthy German-language guidelines from her daughter's *Schulleiter*, a story that repeats itself in New York, home to 142,000 English-language-learner students (and surely many more of their parents) (Bauman 2021).

When asked, "Where are you finding essential information?" teachers described finding or learning from second-hand virtual mediums that relay information second-hand, like Twitter and media outlets. Some teachers saw Twitter as trustworthy and speedy<sup>9</sup>. Teacher 5 "found her family" on Twitter threads, especially after feeling abandoned by UFT President Mulgrew. She noted that once teachers or administrators would receive information relevant to their peers at schools across the city, they shared information via Twitter for neglected fellow teachers. 'Reliable' Twitter accounts and threads clarified policy implementation, like ventilation standards in a report officially unavailable to teachers. With this information she would not have otherwise received but for Twitter, Teacher 5 was empowered to ask the right questions to ask her school's custodial staff.

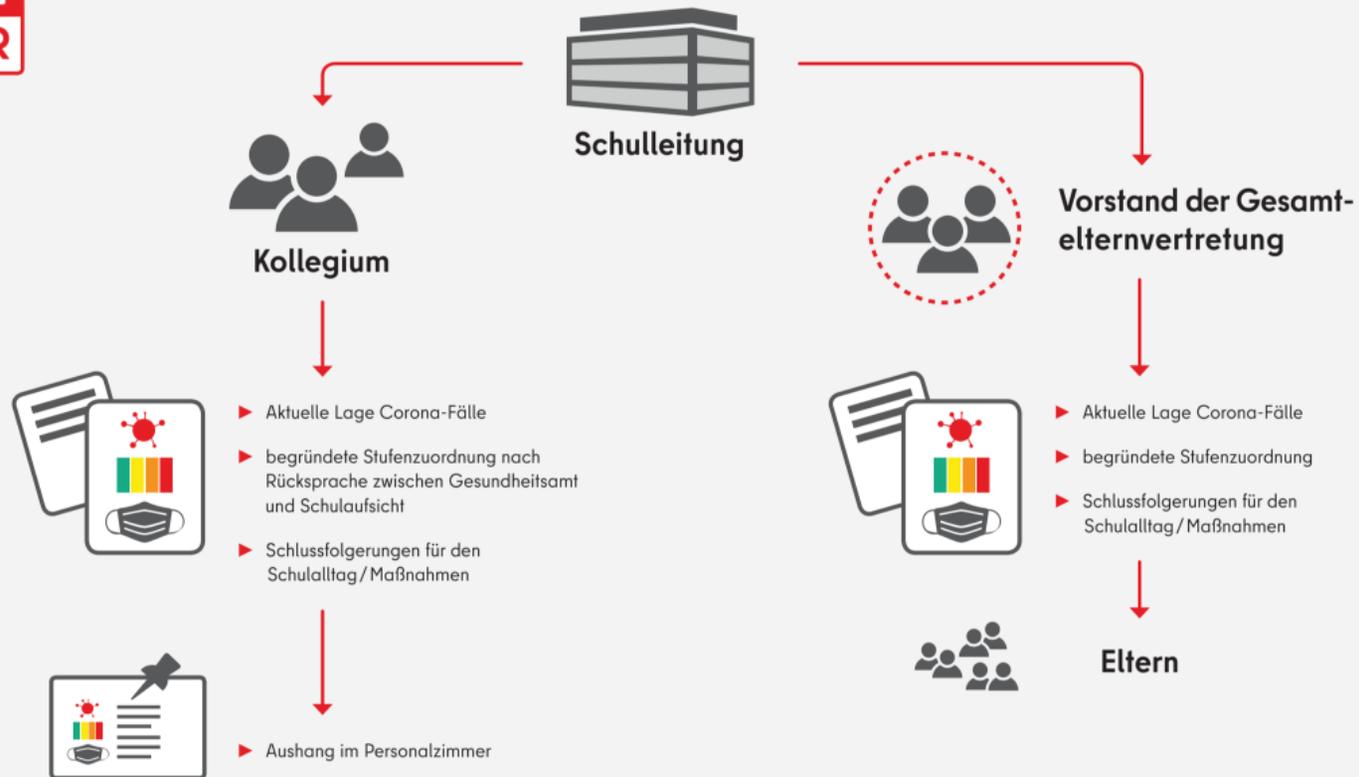
These types of complications, however deliberate, hint at the problematic nature of indirect, distanced communication. It cemented the relationship of central administration relegating those most directly involved in education (children, teachers, and principals) to 'the other'. Although some degree of top-down communication was wise (see Figure 7), communication arrows constantly pointing in one direction left school communities agitated, "always surprised" (Teacher 3), and confused. Teacher 1, for example, received a Thursday schedule at 5 P.M. on Wednesday. The epidemiological reporting established precedent to breach typical norms of communication with teachers and parents. Decisions for a particular school's place in the *Stufenplan*, for example, were finalized on Friday for the following week. However practical from an epidemiological perspective, it gave school communities little time to prepare. Decisions were made from above, with little consultation from below.

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<sup>9</sup> It's unclear if Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter will change its ability to exist as a trusted social media medium for teachers and, if not, what alternatives teachers will turn to.

# KOMMUNIKATIONSWEGE INNERHALB DER SCHULE

Wöchentliche Information am Freitag über die Einordnung in den Stufenplan



Gestaltung: Referat ZS I Stand: 26.01.2021

Figure 7: Communications Within Berlin Schools During COVID-19, Regarding Procedures to Decide and Disclose A School's Weekly Stufenplan Status

In New York, a surge in public health-related 311 calls in the days of school reopening changes suggests that future school announcements needed clearer communication (Eugene et. al 2021), but central administrators were too distanced to fully grasp destructive consequences. Take the reopening delay in September 2020. In lieu of engaged consultation,<sup>10</sup> teachers learned via the Mayor's press briefing that schools would not open when planned, much to their chagrin. A tweet from NYC teacher Mino Laura encapsulates the view from below:

"@NYC Mayor and @DOEChancellor: our students, families, teachers and principals deserve better. Where is the open communication? How is it that the timeline for school openings keeps changing and our school principals hear about it from a press conference?? #DoBetter #respect" (cited in Chang, Hogan, and Gould 2020).

L. Joy Williams, president of the Brooklyn NAACP, saw this communication as emblematic of distance from everyday reality:

"I don't think the Mayor and the DOE have any idea how these abrupt changes are impacting students, teachers and parents"<sup>11</sup> (ibid).

Teachers, particularly in Berlin, felt the tone of communication was problematic. Plocher noted how teachers felt reduced to daycare workers, versus educators who deserve more respect from their employers. Teacher 2 was particularly aghast at perceived slights from the *Senat*, seeing this 'Defizit-Sprache' as manifestations of German (precisely, Prussian) values in education hierarchy that encourage conformity and submissiveness:

"Some [*Senat* bureaucrats] are just executing orders, which makes it very difficult to engage with them. It's just 'This is the rule, execute the rule'. [This mentality] comes in very strongly. We're treated with such little respect from the *Senat*. It treats us like annoying children who need to be disciplined periodically. It's the *Defizit-Sprache*<sup>12</sup>. This is the way the *Senat* talks to the administrators, and the way the administrators communicate to us."

His critique broadened to beyond the *Senat* to the German educator-producing process at large:

"It seems to be a very conservative system where those who were successful in school in Germany – despite the pervasive *Defizit-Ansprache* – study *Lehramt* (teaching) at university and then pass on that way of learning to the next generation. Those who were able to fit to the requirements of their teachers end up teaching and seek to require the same from their pupils. It rewards submissiveness to the system and poorly serves those who do not fit the system. It creates an environment where people are afraid to make mistakes (seen as *Defizite*) and are thus afraid to take creative chances" (ibid).

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<sup>10</sup> Did leaders feel they needed to do this? To what extent is this a common organizational issue?

<sup>11</sup> If they did understand, when did they care?

<sup>12</sup> Per Teacher 2, "you only describe deficiencies, and criticize short-comings."

Communication ventured beyond impersonal to hostile, as if dialogue or potentially asking for help were misplaced. Educators and parents were justified in misgivings about delays, nature, and tone of communication. In short, one could describe central communication style as ‘social distancing’, an ineffective communication *modus operandi* lacking in empathy, exchange, and clarity. This style, in conjunction with mistrust (4.2.1) and greater, more difficult responsibilities (4.2.2), left members of school communities feeling disrespected and increasingly frustrated.

#### **4.2.4 Paradoxical Independence**

Imposing issues of global public health onto school districts rendered some decisions central by necessity. Funding, mask procurement, broadband infrastructure and countless other necessities were under central control and were beyond a single school community’s administrative capability.

This made for “a strange combination in the moment, with things that are really decided from up to down, and things where the down just organizes itself” (Leinemann Interview). The speed and scope of changes appeared to outpace school systems’ ability to navigate this heightened ‘strange combination’<sup>13</sup>. Per Zimmerman (Interview), the NYCDOE was at a “structural disadvantage”: typically, education choices are principal and teacher-driven, yet central decisions had to guide remote learning. Formal social partnership schemes in Berlin require decentralized inclusion, yet the *Senatsverwaltung* continually made decisions last minute, including revisions in April 2020 to citywide exam policy which were too rushed to incorporate feedback from work councils. Plocher saw ‘governing via tweet’ as bypassing long-established democratic forums. Instead of inclusively deliberating policies, “you’re seeing things on a far faster timeline” that excludes stakeholder involvement. The *Senatsverwaltung*, in Berlin’s case, could link a tweet to a press statement on a Friday for a policy change going into effect the following Monday. Plocher warned this speedy centralization “[exploits] the fact that social partnership functions through dialogue,” given that typical legal countermeasures would take too long to affect the present.

Teacher 2’s *Defizit-Sprache* remarks point to personnel challenges. Many mid-level administrators in the *Verwaltung* are former teachers entrenched in bureaucracy who embody the *Senat*’s lack of incentive for reform (Leinemann Interview). They also lack decisive power, but function as intermediaries between the *Senat* and schools with “the ability to ease (or to make difficult) their staff’s lives” (Teacher 2). In a fast-moving crisis, these managers were poorly positioned to enable schools: they lacked familiarity with current school environments (*ibid*) and linger in bureaucracy. Per Leinemann (Interview), “It’s people who went out of old fires, and are now in the middle of it!” Teachers and principals were unsure how to communicate with ‘lingering’ administrators. In Berlin, requests for guidance were met with hostile annoyance: “Please, can you not burden us?” (Teacher 2). To outside observers, it was unclear what, exactly, the *Verwaltung* ‘wants’. Leinemann (*ibid*) sheds light on the answer:

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<sup>13</sup> Again, this is not merely a school problem, but one heightened in large urban public school systems.

"One time, [a former school director, now head of the new digitalization] was writing about something that wasn't solved. Before [COVID-19], he really wanted to know: what does the *Verwaltung* want? What do they *really* want? He got on their nerves, and wrote a lot of emails, and called in a lot. And sometimes he had the *Staatssekretär* on the phone.... He had one of the department managers on the phone. They said: 'Just stop asking, just do it.' The *Verwaltung* doesn't want to get disturbed all the time by principals that are asking tons of questions and are insecure. It's really unclear what they want, in a way. It's really strange. It would get on my nerves, too, because there are awful principals: 'I have this problem, and this problem, and I want help, and want everything organized'. And that's not how it works!"

Schools must act independently (as is tradition in New York and Berlin), but not all schools are prepared or leaders sufficiently confident. While "the good schools do not wait for the *Verwaltung*" (ibid), those sorely needing assistance must suffer through dead-end interactions with reluctant, irritated managers. Effective principals overcame these tensions in COVID-19. Whether a school in Berlin had disinfected during fall 2020, for example, was "entirely based on the headmaster's having independently called the *Bezirksgesundheitsamt*" (Plocher). In both cities, confident principals and teachers acted quickly to secure what they felt most appropriate for their schools (Leinemann Interview, Plocher, Cannizzaro cited in Jorgensen 2020). Tensions arose when central administrators disagreed with independent actions, setting up contradictory, confusing scenarios.

### ***Gerhart-Hauptmann-Gymnasium Case***

The case of Gerhart-Hauptmann-Gymnasium's return from the summer holidays set the tone for a contentious and confusing school year. Monday, August 10 was the first day of classes. On the evening of Wednesday, August 12, principal Thomas Hänert learned a teacher tested positive for COVID-19 (rbb24 2020). Without a phone number for contacting the *Gesundheitsamt*, Hänert was effectively left to independently decide the next course of action, choosing to close the school.

Yet, per Leinemann (Interview), Scheeres saw Hänert's actions as *eigenmächtig* ('unauthorized'), going so far as to criticize Hänert on television. With the dogma that school settings do not spread COVID-19, Scheeres stated if the rules were followed, there would not have been infections, strongly suggesting teachers were at fault for their testing positive during a global pandemic (rbb24 2020). Teachers "were not very happy" (Leinemann Interview). GEW subsequently criticized the *Senatsverwaltung* for lacking plans, after already having criticized Scheeres for having "overslept" the chance for preparedness during the summer vacation (rbb24 2020). Leinemann (Interview) had two main takeaways: 1) that the *Senatsverwaltung* "don't think they have any feeling how to communicate", and 2) the tension regarding independence would be unresolved.

COVID-19 sparked sizzling hierarchical tensions, with leaders continually forced into centralized decisions with incomplete information, and school communities looking for guidance forced to act independently. Yet, decentralized hierarchies left mid-level bureaucrats in compromised positions, and schools confused in paradoxical independence. Mismatched roles and contradictory directives call the governability of large public education systems into question. When public education is seen as a microcosm of broader public services, the questions of governability multiply infinitely.

#### **4.2.5 Impediments to Obvious Solutions, and Questions of Governability**

Multiple collaborators noted similar feelings about hierarchical tensions, and how public education systems on the scale of New York or Berlin are fundamentally ungovernable. Irrespective of one's position regarding the extent of governability<sup>14</sup>, central procedures stifled confident educators. Mistrust made obvious solutions more difficult to attain, as did bureaucracy.

Independently-acting educators could theoretically preempt unresponsive central authorities. Yet as Gerhart-Hauptmann-Gymnasium showed, education departments minimized independence. In October, for example, Scheeres instituted a 'traffic light' warning system designed for schools and *Bezirke* to determine severity, yet unilaterally decided to start all schools on the least severe level. Leinemann (Interview) was perplexed: "This is the moment where you would normally allow the director to decide. They [the *Senatsverwaltung*] were afraid to give them even one week of self-control." Principals were waiting for clear direction from Scheeres that never came. When the *Senatsverwaltung* unilaterally declared risk to be uniform citywide despite evidence to the contrary, it undermined local school boards and competent school directors (Leinemann 2020).

Some central policies proved impractical entirely. Superintendent Sottile purchased equipment worth tens of thousands of dollars to retrofit buildings and outdoor spaces for class, only to have NYS change its guidance regarding which tents were acceptable (in the end, Sottile kept the tents anyway). In Germany, strict data protection laws limited teacher-student engagement to 'approved' digital platforms. Realistically, "every teacher in Germany has committed some infringement of [data protection law]" by opting to communicate via WhatsApp and Zoom versus not at all (Plocher)<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, older teachers cannot be expected to learn and unlearn different software upon regulatory approval (Teacher 3). Here is Teacher 3's opinion on a directive mandating remote lessons could only occur during school hours:

"It was a completely dumb idea. Anybody with a bit of a brain could realize that not everybody has 5 or 6 computers. Maybe a few people do, but not the people around here [in rural Rheinland-Pfalz]."

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<sup>14</sup> Are governability and controllability too often commingled?

<sup>15</sup> German data privacy law "often stands in the way of them getting to innovate" (Provider 1), not just for 'legal' video lessons. Multiple teachers discussed the impractical nature of online learning under these conditions.

Educators had difficulty escalating evidence of their real problems up hierarchies to effectively push back against impractical policies. Institutions are only designed to listen in particular ways, and policy decision-makers chose to exacerbate those structural deficiencies by failing to seek and incorporate information from below. In New York, the backdoor political nature of dialogue left many principals unheard or ignored. “Months” of concern over potential staffing issues that were obvious to principals were not incorporated into NYCDOE plans for the 2020-21 school year until the last moment, after de Blasio delayed starting the school year for a second time (Zimmerman, Amin, and Veiga 2020). The “unfathomably huge” NYCDOE bureaucracy relies on individual schools to select curriculum and spending priorities, offsetting some function for central administration (Zimmerman Interview). Yet the culture of pervasive negligence coupled with nonexistent communication and bureaucratic “run-arounds” (Teacher 5, Holden cited in Smith 2020) raises questions as to both the DOE administration’s motives and their capability to oversee 1,800 schools and 1,800 principals.

Governance in Berlin can, at times, become somewhat informal and anarchic, in that formal mechanisms become theaters for unintended informal negotiation. Negotiations during the pandemic – when legal structures that would typically intervene were too slow – were quite crude. Here, Plocher described negotiations in the Neukölln *Bezirk* regarding mask wearing:

“For my school, everyone was wearing a mask after the fall holidays (we ended up being at the stage three weeks later where it would have been required). There was some discussion within the trade union and work councils of, “Is this entirely legal?” since some schools on their own wanted mask requirements, and boroughs were going to say no. This was another one of the situations where a court would have [typically] decided. [It’s] one of the classic situations [operating under the absence of traditional government in Berlin].

At a *Schulkonferenz*, for example, is where schools make these big decisions. [Regarding mask wearing], the Borough head said, “Oh, I don’t like that.” So, we said, “You, and what army?” Eventually, he [relented]. The city is not, per se, governed [jokingly]. In theory, if he really wanted to, he could have [gotten the higher ups involved]. But, he said, “No, screw it.” As long as the parents are cool with it, it goes. They listen to parents more than us since they’re potential voters. But so are we, and that’s another story”.

In the end, power – crucially, how and with what intention power was wielded— guided negotiations in both Berlin and New York like this small mask-wearing debate. **Ethics, logic, epidemiology, and staged plans were among the bucket of options to display for justification.** Perhaps school communities are self-governing, but games of power and politics simply do not bode well for educators, and – ultimately – children. Undermining legions of public servants with trickle-down policy making and communication promoted confusion, frustration, inefficiency, inconsistency, and mistrust. These are not effective crisis governance traits. They are seeds for dissent.

## **FINDINGS SECTION II**

### *Projections of Control From Above*

COVID-19 is total and interconnected in ways novel to neoliberal policymakers. This section discusses projections of decision-making rationale, as well as some decision-making mechanisms. I argue COVID-19 revealed leaders' tendencies to project certainty and control with categorical thinking and confidence, and how neoliberalism's ideological confines encourage this kind of leadership. Coupled with public propaganda, leaders limited dissenting opinions and narrowed their inner circles. Newly created proxy boards of deliberative, responsive governance complimented projections of a controllable reality and coalesced central authority.

#### **4.3.1 Projection of Controllable Reality**

Politicians' messages of control, unity, success, and hope dominated headlines amidst uncertainty. Premature confidence of having 'tamed the virus' and 'won the war' ignored (perhaps, dismissed) the forecasted epidemiological 'rollercoaster' of pandemic life (Emanuel, cited in de Groot 2020).

For 111 consecutive days during New York's devastating first wave, Governor Cuomo – flanked by top aide Melissa DeRosa and public health officials – appeared each morning at 11 A.M. to provide pandemic updates. Experts estimate that 10,000 New Yorkers were already infected by the first recorded case on March 1 (Sexton and Sapien 2020), yet both Governor Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio "projected an unwavering confidence that the outbreak would be readily contained" (Goodman 2020, cited in Lazaroff 2020). As the outbreak exploded in mid-March, Cuomo changed course, and his profile elevated<sup>16</sup> to an "unlikely savior", internationally recognized for data-heavy PowerPoints (Nazaryan 2020). After conflicts with de Blasio on shutting down NYC schools (discussed in section 4.4.3), Cuomo put NYS on PAUSE. On March 24, he ushered 'New York Tough' into public rhetoric, allowing New Yorkers suffering and dying to imagine it was not in vain.

This is an appropriate point to reenter the traumatic, unrelenting onslaught that was New York's first wave of COVID-19 whose only contemporary is September 11, 2001. 10 times as many New Yorkers died in that first wave than when the Twin Towers fell. Seemingly every day, someone you knew had a loved one in the hospital, or was writing a Facebook or Instagram post mourning their loss. It was an unrelenting avalanche of anguish, with collective blunt trauma that political pandering only forced down a bit more.

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<sup>16</sup> Cuomo's team would paint this as a chicken-and-egg situation; I argue this was Cuomo and his team actively elevating his profile for clear political benefits.

For those unfamiliar with Governor Cuomo's practices or willing to latch onto a self-proclaimed pandemic savior<sup>17</sup>, his press briefings served as validation of transparency, particularly as the Democrats' counterweight to Trump. Brookings fellow Linda Peek Schacht (2020) described Cuomo's daily briefings as "a case study in transparency and truth to build trust". As late as November 2020, Cuomo was awarded an Emmy "in recognition of his leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic and his masterful use of TV to inform and calm people around the world"<sup>18</sup> (Shelley 2021). As I and other observers warned, however, Cuomo was at the peak of his propaganda act, where 'deceive' blurred with 'inform and calm'. In January 2021, shortly after receiving an Emmy for informing the public, Cuomo's manipulation of infection statistics and concealing deaths in old age homes (direct results of their policies in March and April 2020) became public. This was the first trickle of the incoming bombshell accusation avalanche in deception, abuse, and egotistical management, in part enabled by the public perception of savior that Cuomo's team helped cultivate. But, in April 2020, most were fooled, and Cuomo's team was in on the act.

In Germany, Chancellor Merkel assumed a public-facing role, opting to deliver prime-time televised speeches. Adhering to plans discussed in Section 2.5.2, her messages stressed unity, adherence to rules, and empathy in the '*Kampf gegen Corona*' (struggle against Corona). A physicist by trade, Merkel stressed having to "learn from experts – and from observing reality" (Bennhold and Eddy 2020). The federal government's coronavirus website – *Zusammen gegen Corona* (Together Against Corona) – upholds the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) as the 'trusted' source of information.<sup>19</sup> Merkel's March 16 address set the tone for Germany's initial response, which was praised domestically and internationally, particularly given low case counts and deaths relative to European peers:

"Right now, we can take decisive action all together. We can accept these current limitations and support one another... The situation is serious, and the outcome uncertain... Our success will also largely depend on how disciplined each and every one of us is in following the rules... Even though this is something we have never experienced before, we must show that we can act warm-heartedly and rationally – and thereby save lives. It is up to each and every one of us to do so, without any exception"<sup>20</sup> (Merkel 2020 1).

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<sup>17</sup> My bachelor's thesis studied the Governor's communication style during a 2017 transit crisis of his own making, the 'Summer of Hell'. Cuomo created low expectations and positioned himself as the savior for a controllable situation: track repairs disrupting commuter rail schedules. In doing so, he exposed his team to public relations criticism, when his 'hellish' messaging encapsulated the experience of commuters on New York City's Subway and Bus systems. Public-facing breakdowns and culminations of decades of transit management came to a head for the Governor later that summer, and he was forced to acknowledge culpability and responsibility in overseeing the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Lazaroff 2018).

<sup>18</sup> 'Inform and calm' is misleading. Has the Emmy Awards previously doubled as propaganda and an implicit endorsement?

<sup>19</sup> Merkel's diction is interesting and seemingly common practice. Instead of other prepositions, the German government chose *gegen* to position the collective public in a fight against a disease, as Singapore did with SARS. It's the same rhetoric as 'against climate change'. Are we, then, to fight against Earth? Here, let us reconsider the 'Moving With' as an alternative to 'against', accepting uncertainties versus resisting them.

<sup>20</sup> Curiously, many government officials were notably making themselves exceptions. Jens Spahn and Andrew Cuomo, not to mention the likes of Boris Johnson, are among the boldest examples.

Some leaders declared success after the first wave ended in May. In his May 22 piece, “How Germany Contained the Coronavirus,” Spahn (2020) asserted the country’s relative epidemiological success “makes us humble, rather than overconfident”. Upon reflection, this humility did not translate into preparation for the upcoming school year (Plocher), or long-term pandemic measures. Rather, there was a sense in Germany of prior crisis success preordaining future outcomes. The first wave “led to a certain carefreeness in the population” (Liebert, cited in Bender 2020), as Germans’ perceived risk of infection did not rise when infection rates quintupled in November (Bender 2020). Spahn was then criticized for overpromising and under-delivering: “*Er immer Großes ankündigt, es dann aber nicht einhält*” (Ehring 2021 2), and for potentially lining his pockets with a mask purchase deal with Burda GmbH, his husband’s lobbying client (Schmid 2021).

De Blasio fostered conditions to face similar criticism. Generally, outward projections of control distorted leaders’ perceptions of policy-making complexity. Education departments’ messaging cited preparedness and the ethos of schools as ‘the safest place to be’ (Leinemann Interview; Ramos-Solomon), despite this being impossible to say with the alleged degree of simplicity, safety or certainty. Revisiting de Blasio’s attempt to force schools to reopen on September 10 without having incorporated principals’ staffing concerns makes his blasé attitude clear. When confronted with the issue of staffing shortages, the Mayor’s attitude towards the NYCDOE was “You guys are acting like bureaucrats; just make it happen” (Fitzsimmons, Mays and Shapiro 2020). They could not remedy the ‘it’ of simmering staff concerns, and reopening was delayed a second time.

Cuomo’s self-proclaimed success was audacious, “wildly offensive” to some after 32,000 New Yorkers died from coronavirus in three and a half months’ time (Myrie 2020, cited in Rosa 2020). Nothing better encapsulates this braggadocio than the ‘retro political poster’ Cuomo’s administration began selling for \$15 in July 2020. It unabashedly stoops to a “work of political propaganda” (ibid) that broadcasts the Governor’s ignorance of COVID-19’s scale and willingness to profit from the collective ignorance and fear that fueled his popularity. Per Cuomo:

“What we did was historic because we did tame the beast. We did turn the corner. We did plateau that mountain. And then we came down the other side” (cited in ibid).

Among the mountainous jumble of cartoons masquerading as fact-based motivation:

- Images on the poster appear wholly detached from three months of unimaginable suffering, particularly during the ‘peak’: the only references are to ‘111 days of hell’ in blue font (diction consistent with Cuomo’s public transit ‘Summer of Hell’ three years earlier) and a hospital surge featuring Cuomo’s trusted confidants. There is no mention of nursing homes.
- The days of mid-April, when the highest number of New Yorkers died from COVID-19, feature a ‘Love Wins’ rainbow, ‘E Pluribus Unum’ (the Latin motto appearing on the U.S. Great Seal), ‘Love COMMUNITY Support’, and the case count from ‘Day 43’ on April 12, 2020.



- At no point does the poster mention the number of New Yorkers who died from COVID-19. This is clearly intentional, as the designer found space for an octopus, Cuomo's daughters and a boyfriend cliff for said daughters.
- Despite evidence COVID-19 was in New York prior to March, 'Day 1' refers to March 1, 2020; even the idea of having a day counter is a rejection of uncertainty.
- The poster epitomizes the 'New York Tough' pandering core to Cuomo's messaging that was a remarkably effective tactic. 'Smart, united, disciplined, loving' was meant to carry New Yorkers through unimaginable tragedy, versus necessary basic resources and the 'moving with' uncertainty this thesis advocates. Ushering 'New York Tough' into public rhetoric allowed Cuomo's team to push responsibility onto New Yorkers by tokenizing and parasitizing their resilience, which is inseparable from the aftermath of September 11th and, to a lesser degree, Hurricane Sandy.
- One could interpret Cuomo's insistence to 'Forget the Politics' as ignoring Cuomo's political manipulation of crises to his benefit.
- Cuomo's team deflected accountability onto 'Europeans', the White House Task force, Trump sitting on a crescent moon, and the New Rochelle hotspot at a synagogue.
- Many policies in the poster have since been dismissed as 'pandemic theater', like state-made hand sanitizer, subway disinfectants, and the Javits Center hospital site.

Cuomo even published a book in October just as signs of a second wave emerged, titled *American Crisis: Leadership Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Cuomo's team concealed death tolls and worked directly on the manuscript<sup>21</sup> that netted Cuomo \$4 million (McKinley, Hakim, and Alter 2021). Although the book deal was not yet public, Robbins (2020) critiqued the idea of post-mortem:

"That the book was published so soon after these events transpired—essentially while they are still happening—means that even the kind of limited, if illuminating consideration seen in some political memoirs is almost impossible. How can anyone clearly and candidly reflect on something they are still living with? (A less generous critic might suggest that Governor Cuomo doesn't want to tell us anything we haven't heard before.)"

Projections of control and success were distanced from uncertain reality, but served leaders' political interests. Whether outright propaganda or confident op-eds, leaders furthered narratives of certainty and victory, turning to axioms drifting from constructive public debate into hopeful projection and outright manipulation of public opinion. The public was very complacent in enabling this deceptive communication. This begs the question: for contemporary (and especially socially-distanced) democracy, what does accountability look like?

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<sup>21</sup> Reports from January 2023 indicate Cuomo's team was putting a timeline with a book specifically in mind as early as March 30 (Hammond 2023). This might be the clearest indication of Cuomo's political priorities directly interfering with New York's essential services during crises.

### 4.3.2 Categorical Thinking and Policy

Leaders relied on categorical thinking to guide decisions and communication. The idea of stages and categories of severity emerged, furthering certainty-fueled narratives of COVID-19 as categorizable. This proved problematic for two reasons: the dangers of categorical thinking, and overreliance on data as representing reality. De Langhe and Fernbach (2019) warn of ‘fossilization’ – entrenchment in fixed worldviews – given we “are such categorization machines that we often see categories where none exist. That warps our view of the world, and our decision-making suffers”. Leaders delineated categories as they ‘followed the science’, insisting ‘data drove all decisions’<sup>22</sup>.

Focus on COVID-19 epidemiological data in decisions could be its own thesis. For one, epidemiological data could not possibly be fully accurate.<sup>23</sup> Per Meyer and Madrigal (2021), who spearheaded *The Atlantic’s* COVID Tracking Project, “data are how our leaders apprehend reality,” but are nothing more than “qualitative conclusions arranged in a countable way”. Data-driven thinking proved misleading, narrow, and categorical: “As a gap opened between the data that leaders imagined should exist and the data that actually did exist, it swallowed the [United States] pandemic planning and response” (ibid). This ignores when leaders deliberately manipulated data to their advantage, as Governor Cuomo did with dead New Yorkers in old age homes like my grandpa.<sup>24</sup>

In both New York and Berlin, broader societal reopening stages proceeded along a projectable timeline<sup>25</sup>. Cuomo’s ‘New York Forward’ phases established a path for different industries and social gatherings based on seven metrics (Office of New York Governor Andrew Cuomo 2020). Schools were included in the final Stage 4, which New York City did not reach until summer vacation. This, of course, begs the question as to whether schools should have been open over the summer, and closed during the winter that ultimately coincided with higher rates of infection during the cold.

Conversely, Germany chose to prioritize bringing children back first, doing so nationwide on May 4. Merkel and the sixteen heads of state developed a timeline for different industries and businesses, at which point different states began acting independently. In Berlin, Senator Kalayci instituted a ‘traffic light system’, which adopted the nationwide *Lockerung* to Berlin’s context. The light’s status incorporated three factors: 1) R-value (reproduction per infected person); 2) New infections per 100,000 residents, and 3) Capacity of ICU beds (*Senatsverwaltung für Gesundheit, Pflege und Gleichstellung* 2020). Different combinations of statistic-specific lamps make one whole status.

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<sup>22</sup> Science, of course, is no objective enterprise. Data and science can be used as justifications for nearly any end goal

<sup>23</sup> Reasons include test efficacy, asymptomatic spread, difficulties in procuring hasty test results, and different rates of testing, not to mention politics.

<sup>24</sup> My grandpa contracted COVID-19 in an old age home, but since he died in a hospital, his death did not ‘count’.

<sup>25</sup> Incredibly, Omicron and Delta case counts from 2021-22 dwarfed earlier Alpha variants, but policy action later in the pandemic was far less attached to epidemiological data.

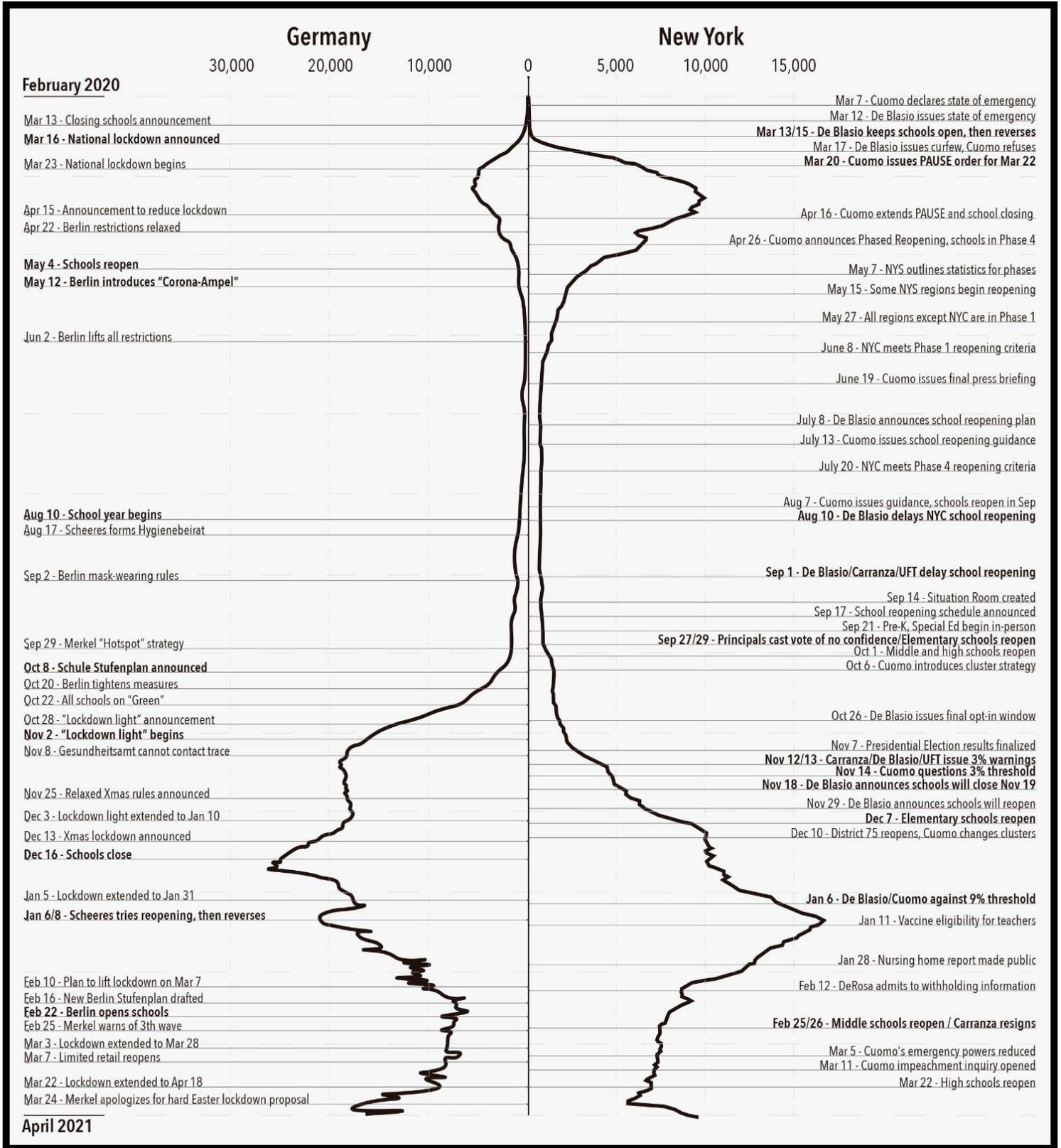


Figure 9: COVID-19 Case Counts in Germany and NY S Compared With Timeline of Crisis Governance Measures

Color-coded potential closing scenarios emerged as roadmaps for rising rates in autumn, but policy implementation proved fungible and clarity was short-lived. The Berlin schools' *Stufenplan* (staged plan) instituted after the fall holidays increased in severity from green, yellow, orange, to red. Stages were deliberately designed to be digestible, and not to encourage progression from one stage to the next (Leinemann Interview), although rising rates effectively dictated progression towards red. In announcing the *Stufenplan*, Scheeres noted "*Der Stufenplan gibt den Schulen Handlungssicherheit*" - the *Stufenplan* gives the schools confidence to act<sup>26</sup> (Klessman 2020). As mentioned, Scheeres unilaterally started all schools on green, despite metrics dictating otherwise.

NYS created yellow, orange, and red geographic zones. Officially, this 'cluster strategy' was "to detect and eliminate small outbreaks" (Phillips Lytle LLP 2020); unofficially, it was to avoid using the term 'second wave' (Kim 2020). Zones were based on two metrics – cases and positivity rate – although NYSDOH could consider additional ones. These categories left public health experts and veteran reporters confused, including *Wall Street Journal* reporter Jimmy Vielkind, who sought clarity from Cuomo at a press conference on November 18th (ibid). Cuomo's exchange (CNBC Television 2020) with Vielkind encapsulated confusion over application to NYC schools. When NYC's rolling positivity threshold reached 3 percent, it triggered de Blasio's previous agreement to close schools (which Cuomo and de Blasio reached an understanding to ignore), and a NYS 'orange zone'. Cuomo's outburst – he called Vielkind "obnoxious and offensive," then insisted the law was simple – did not alleviate parents' confusion while de Blasio went back on his agreement with Cuomo to close DOE schools (ibid). NYS revised its own guidelines after NYC schools closed.

Stage and color-based categories could seem clear, but were hamstrung by rigid categorizations that proved epidemiologically and politically untenable. Bounding oneself to categorical thinking inevitably led to uncomfortable junctures (discussed Section 4.4.3) and reversals when prescribed future scenarios did not match unfolding reality. Germany encountered perils of hope-driven categorical thinking in March 2021. Leaders created a reopening roadmap in early March allowing people to track epidemiological progress (Müller, cited in Ehring 2021 1), only to reverse course twice. Germany re-extended lockdown restrictions and imposed strict rules over Easter, then backtracked on the latter as Merkel admitted a 'mistake' (Oltermann 2021).

Journalists gave timelines for a 'return to normal', discounting a "strange in-between time" (Meyer 2021), with "[numbness] to numbers, complacency, and fatigue" worrying top epidemiologists (Oltermann 2021). Understanding 'in-between time' very much inspired this thesis. Even when uncertainty made its omnipresence felt, a longing for certainty defined collective visions of reality. Whether this is willful ignorance, something innate to the human condition or a conditioned response to fear is for debate, but I see it as a natural predisposition towards uncertainty embedded within neoliberal doctrine. Categories are manifestations of this refusal to embrace omnipresent uncertainties.

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<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, the literal German language composition of 'Handlungssicherheit' translates to 'security to act', placing security on equal footing with (or perhaps as an ingredient of) confidence needed for sound decision-making.

### 4.3.3 Narrowing Decision-Making to A Select Cohort

Leaders resorted to control-oriented propaganda and categorical thinking to navigate COVID-19. Why? Particularly as entire countries have repeated mistakes, it is worth considering where, and with whom, leaders developed their ideas. Leaders narrowed the group of people whom they relied upon for advice and policy deliberation, thereby expelling certain opinions and frames of reference. This limited dissent within leaders' earshot as leaders sought out their chosen experts' opinions. Politicians' expertise is not necessarily public health and education. For political ramifications of epidemiological concerns, advisory cohorts and preconceived notions of COVID-19 proved crucial.

In line with Germany's 'one voice' pandemic policy, Chancellor Merkel sought to align opinions among the sixteen state leaders and federal government. After the first wave this proved challenging. In the contentious crescendo of cases before Christmas 2020, Merkel felt it necessary to minimize further spread, simultaneously injecting and removing herself from the school debate:

"And it may be the case that sending children home is the wrong thing to do, if so then it will have to be digital lessons or something else. I don't know, this is not my area of expertise, and I don't want to fear. I only want to say: if we have too many contacts now, in the run-up to Christmas, and it ends up being the last Christmas with our grandparents, then we will have done something wrong. We should not let this happen" (Glucroft and Raish 2020).

Germany then entered 'hard lockdown', and schools eliminated in-person learning. Early January was contentious in Berlin: Scheeres planned for students to return, but a petition demanding the virus 'gets under control' accompanied by teacher protests caused the *Verwaltung* to change course. Müller subsequently admitted to "mistakes in communication" amidst "great uncertainty" (Berlin.de 2021). In late January, the *Ministerpräsidentenkonferenz* was set to debate further lockdown and *Lockerung* regulations. Merkel refused to welcome Dr. Klaus Stöhr, a well-respected epidemiologist who advocated loosening restrictions, instead inviting a scientist advocating 'Zero Covid'<sup>27</sup> (Luyken and Bard 2021). Stöhr saw her wishes as "wishful thinking" and "illusory during winter", arguing "the physicist Chancellor has allowed herself to be convinced by mathematical modeling without considering human psychology" (ibid). Instead, "she should be engaging in honest conversations with the German public that set long-term, achievable goals" (ibid).

In New York, Governor Cuomo's behavior demonstrated a similar pattern: he publicly deflected to the idea of experts; privately, they were of his own choosing. As his publicly available schedules from February to April 2020 show, Cuomo's "circle of regular contacts dwindled to a handful of close advisers" (only one of whom had a public health degree), and his "contact with lower-ranking officials in the Health Department appears to have been limited" (Hammond 2021).

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<sup>27</sup> In light of China's continued 'Zero Covid' policy until December 2022, this does seem draconian in hindsight.

Preemptively limiting dissent allowed leaders to choose the reality they were willing to see. De Blasio was known for “keeping his counsel and discounting the views of advisers and outside groups (Fitzsimmons, Mays and Shapiro 2020). Reluctance to acknowledge the looming outbreak morphed into undercutting experts from NYC DOHMH, refusing to heed their warnings as early as February 26, 2020 to begin considering drastic measures (Sexton and Sepien 2020). *ProPublica* shared one health official’s diary, revealing how “City Hall [continued] to sideline and neuter the country’s premier public health department” (ibid). Among the explanations for this ‘neutering’:

- 1) De Blasio relied heavily on Dr. Mitchell Katz’s advice. Katz, the head of the city’s Health and Hospitals Corporation, “downplayed the impact of social distancing measures” in a March 10 email to de Blasio’s top advisors (ibid). De Blasio valued Katz’s advice more than NYS DODMH, and a March 9 letter from 18 academics and community leaders, “demanding that the mayor seriously begin to consider closing schools and curtailing business hours” (ibid).
- 2) Cuomo perceived de Blasio as a “feckless annoyance” (Robbins 2020) and instructed NYSDOH to stop communicating with NYC DOHMH (Sexton and Sepien 2020).
- 3) Per one city health official, on Cuomo and de Blasio, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do”<sup>28</sup> (ibid).

An investigation into March 2020 NYCDOE protocols revealed how central downplayed COVID-19 via communication (including a systemwide email March 10) and directives that deliberately obscured data.<sup>29</sup> School-level consequences of de Blasio’s tunnel vision did not end in March 2020. NYCDOE and the Mayor consistently focused on in-person education. In Teacher 5’s estimation, this focus caused the DOE to create skewed school preference surveys, and for the Mayor to present survey results in a “misleading” way. To further justify his push for in-person learning, de Blasio “would visit the schools we wanted to see, the ones with plexiglass and PPE” (Teacher 5). But, per Teacher 5, the Mayor’s actions amount to selection bias: “It wasn’t the case in most schools. There are no basics in schools like mine [in the South Bronx]”. Considering that Teacher 5’s school lacked necessities, and eventually dropped Friday classes, I suggested NYC was “hiding behind lack of preparation with the illusion of preparation”, to which Teacher 5 agreed: “Now it looks even worse. It’s a false narrative”. This ‘false narrative’ amounts to a de Blasio anti-response. After the November closing and subsequent December reopening, de Blasio’s statement on the prospect of potentially reclosing was telling: “Our goal is to never have it become part of our reality” (Amin 2020). This epitomizes the reluctance to ‘move with’ uncertainty that entrenches itself in the policymaking imagination.

Leaders preferred staving off conflicting visions of reality within their decision-making cohorts, narrowing those worthy of their trust to a select few. This cemented internal narratives and

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<sup>28</sup> Do ego and neoliberal crisis governance go hand-in-hand?

<sup>29</sup>A sample of *ProPublica*’s findings: Presumed positive cases were not logged into systems; school supervisors withheld vital information from teachers and parents; DOE headquarters instructed staff not to contact DOHMH; the DOE allowed large event gatherings despite CDC recommendations to cancel them, and UFT-led allegations asserted the DOE did not follow state protocols (Smith 2020).

procedures, paving way for public messaging aligned with leaders' preconceived notions, potentially disconnected from realities on the ground. In Germany's case, this made flexibility during six months of winter lockdowns difficult; in New York, this killed thousands more people during the first wave and perpetuated the stubborn narrative of in-person schooling preparedness.

#### **4.3.4 New Decision-Making Bodies as Proxies of Innovative Co-Production**

The importance of projecting competency justified the narrative projection from above. What leaders had in vision and dogma, they were lacking in participatory policymaking, and sorely needed to demonstrate innovative and participatory governance to validate their decision-making. Enter boards for complex pandemic decision-making, where education departments and politicians collecting bright minds in one room doubled as public-facing displays of central competence. These proxies' very creation is telling, both as a projection of response, and how each central administration approached its respective mission for the school year.

##### ***Berlin: Hygienebeirat***

Scheeres formed an 18-member committee in August 2020 to discuss complex school governance issues. The idea of a roundtable, "where democracy has to be *zu ähnlich* (for everyone)" stems from German reunification (Leinemann Interview). Who was 'everyone'? Photos showed an all-white *Hygienebeirat* group: experts of the Senatorin's choosing, long-tenured and well-connected. The previous section notes the perils of such an arrangement. For reference, the federal government initially leaned on 26 experts from Germany's Ethics Council, which has convened since the early 2000's, to dissect the crisis "from every angle" (Renn, cited in Matthers 2020). Merkel since shunned epidemiological dissent, justifying her zero-COVID leanings with preemptive validation.

In its local roundtable imitation, the Scheeres-led *Hygienebeirat* also mimicked national policy: "In reality, the Chancellor and ministers made decisions, then translated them to Berlin" (Plocher). Participation included "genuine discussion" (Leinemann Interview) of understandably complex issues, but the purpose remains unclear. Leinemann (ibid) did not believe Scheeres arrived with decisions already made; she "does try to have democratic structures... and listens there". But Leinemann acknowledges that "this dogma [of no infections in schools] is very *geprägt* (fortified) by the *Hygienebeirat* and what she hears there [especially from children's doctors]." Plocher was less forgiving:

"It's a classic move by any German government anywhere. If they want to seem like they're involving all the relevant stakeholders, they invent a *Hygienebeirat*... The idea was for [Scheeres] to get feedback from everybody quickly. They were all in her little *Beirat*, they would meet weekly and have lots of different working groups. This is just a fig leaf for them pretending to involve all relevant parties."

By being given a *Hygienebeirat* seat, parties could not, in effect, publicly air disagreement for policies with which their presence implied agreement. Leinemann (Interview) saw Scheeres as “really pissed at the GEW because... they carry the decisions in the moment.” Per Plocher, the GEW support was misquoted in the newspapers. The GEW left the *Hygienebeirat* in January 2021, claiming, “Real participation and joint consideration with all actors were not possible” (Hanisch 2021), then helped mobilize resistance against Scheeres. In sum, the *Hygienebeirat* did not serve a critical role in making decisions, rather in projecting the idea of inclusionary, deliberative decision-making with a tokenized forum. The roundtable was designed to revolve around a preordained center<sup>30</sup>.

### **New York: The NYCDOE Situation Room**

The temporary crisis apparatus also made an appearance in New York, albeit with a far more limited scope. NYCDOE formed a ‘Situation Room’ in September to implement the ‘two case rule’ that triggered a building shutdown on a case-by-case basis. Conceived after learning from mishaps in March 2020, the Situation Room’s stated function was to streamline the information gathering and decision processes with DOE, DOHMH, and Test & Trace colleagues working in tandem (La Rocca and de Blasio, cited in Chang 2020). The ‘Situation Room’ concept mimicked the White House’s emergency conference hub for national security. The President can make high-stakes decisions behind closed doors, with his brightest minds and key intelligence at his disposal.

NYC was transparent regarding the Situation Room concept, but – as the name suggests – decision-making and communication were “opaque” (Lander and Treyger, cited in Veiga 2020). Situation Room staff designed and redesigned rigorous protocols in an attempt to fulfill the Mayor’s mission of ‘swift and decisive action’. Yet, the nuanced, subjective nature of individually applying the ‘two case rule’ contributed to one teacher’s (perhaps quite accurate) view: “I feel like they’re just making it up along the way, and it doesn’t make sense” (Veiga 2020). Per Veiga (ibid), “the program has been riddled with glitches – long waits for test results, failures to let ‘close contacts’ know that they may have been exposed, conflicting guidance for principals, and confusing letters to families.”

The official NYCDOE position was that Situation Room employees “have made the safe reopening of schools possible” (Margot, cited in ibid). But, at what opportunity cost? Considering the hyper focus on a single in-person schooling issue, and public-facing concept, the elephant in the room was remote learning:

“Some have argued that keeping buildings open has been a distraction, taking the focus away from remote instruction even though most New York City children have chosen to learn exclusively online amid the health crisis” (Veiga 2020).

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<sup>30</sup> That preordained center has since been replaced in the 2021 elections, with no mention of a Hygeinebeirat since.

In terms of people, the opportunity cost of undeniably talented staff members' time was exorbitantly high. Recall that the NYC government attracts premier national and international talent, unlike Berlin (per Leinemann Interview). De Blasio counts experts like Dr. Jay Varma, who designed Africa's first public health agency and spent 18 years with the CDC, as a senior health advisor. The DOHMH is among the world's most well-regarded municipal health agencies. Biden's government has looked to NYC for school reopening guidance, not the other way around (Longani).

The question remains: why did this particular Situation Room – with this exact purpose and these exact people – exist<sup>31</sup>? It purported to be evidence of uncertainty-focused governance, flexibly adapting protocols to pandemic realities with new multi-agency partnerships. Yet, one cannot overlook the possibility it was a public relations maneuver, one that distracted from elements of the broader school reopening chaos. The same can be said for the multitude of projections described in this findings chapter. They maintained an image of competency, consolidated power, and deceptively attempted to render an incalculably complex and uncertain time simple.

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<sup>31</sup> Incredibly, the Situation Room remained an entity until December 2022. Its function was largely replaced by having positive cases reported through an online form.

## **FINDINGS SECTION III**

### *Evidence of Neoliberal Chaos*

Schools became traumatic and confusing theaters for children, interwoven with political and epidemiological phenomena distanced from – but entirely related to – education. The inability to plan from above, paired with unclear, open-ended guidance, left school communities and entire cities unprepared for key decision-making junctures, leaving public education systems suspended in limbo. Sections 4.4.4 and 4.4.5 discuss remote learning, a microcosm of broader ineffective, neglectful planning and service provision challenges. Section 4.4.6 details trauma for children and teachers. Neoliberal chaos unfolded as expected: devastatingly for underserved communities.

#### **4.4.1 Planning Without A Roadmap**

COVID-19 – as a pandemic and manifestation of the ‘pincer-grip’ crises – was too all-encompassing and assumption-shattering for legitimate preparation. Public school bureaucracies – as massive, inflexible theaters of health, essential service, and economic crises – were especially unprepared.

COVID-19 metrics dictated action, but were fundamentally incomplete and subject to tremendous variability beyond state control. Per Varma, “[Leaders are] trying to make incredibly consequential decisions with incomplete information... so there’s uncertainty in everything that we do” (2021). NYC DOHMH used a ‘Swiss Cheese’ model: multiple imperfect layers stack atop each other, curbing infections through public health restrictions, personal behavior, and sheer fortune. The degree of novel policymaking was astounding. For example, in the Office of the Counsel to Mayor de Blasio, Logani and Blane discussed the implications of having to create new legal tools for schools and daycares from a patchwork of contradictory, overlapping, and unclear regulations (2021).

School administrators and politicians have been tied to numbers and forced into epidemiological judgments beyond their expertise. Sottile planned massive future changes to the academic calendar on instinct, with safety and maximizing facetime as guiding principles. She chose to forgo spring break for 2019-20 and front-loaded in-person instruction before Thanksgiving in anticipation of rising COVID-19 rates during November<sup>32</sup>. Her roadmap was educated guessing. She is not a public health professional, but a trained communicator and community leader, with the luxury of deep familiarity with the small Floral Park-Bellerose community. Senatorin Scheeres, conversely, lacks the ‘pulse’ for communicating with Berlin despite a decade on the job. Per Leinemann (Interview), she never fully communicated her COVID-19 decision-making process to the community or confidently justified herself<sup>33</sup>, opting for a distanced approach that demands blind trust.

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<sup>32</sup> Rewriting the calendar was a missed opportunity to recognize massive challenges that COVID made clear.

<sup>33</sup> Leinemann spoke of the German colloquialism ‘*Auf Augenhöhe*’: to talk at ‘eye level’. It suggests taking the other party seriously, and attaining the level of conversation beyond superficial chit-chat. Leinemann noted the Senatorin’s failure to talk *Auf Augenhöhe* with her constituents and the broader Berlin school community.

Emerging research influenced narratives and decisions for in-person learning as it became clearer that school environments were disease vectors<sup>34</sup>. As the summer progressed and the 2020-21 school year began, the majority of research asserted schools were not significantly spreading COVID-19. Operating dogmas in Berlin and New York preached safe school buildings. Varma, on November 13, asserted that, “You are less likely to encounter somebody with infection in a school than you would be outside the school, and not just by a little but by a lot” (Cruz and Gould 2020). Yet, Christian Drosten, Germany’s most famous epidemiologist, declared in January that a U.K.-based study showing higher positivity rates in schoolchildren “pretty much answers the question of how children contribute to the pandemic” (Bender 2021). This contradicted operating dogmas, justifying hesitancy from teachers<sup>35</sup>, parents, children, and safety-preoccupied administrators, plus preference for remote learning or testing.

Recalling NYC’s status as the only large U.S. school district to attempt offering in-person learning, Haspel’s (2021) indictment of school reopening debates in early 2021 casted New York in a positive light, relative to latecomers Chicago and San Francisco. Per Haspel (ibid):

“The entire debate about reopening schools – focused as it is on safety and what precautions districts should take – is now happening on a plane one dimension removed from the operational realities schools labor under. It is a conversation we should have had last spring and summer and are instead having this winter, when it’s totally unrealistic.”

Similar debates emerged in Germany. In February, Plocher lamented:

“The stuff we spent the fall demanding for is finally happening. [The powers that be] are realizing that school reopening is a touchy subject.”

Berlin was forced to juggle escalating cases with Scheeres’s insistence that schools are safe. Per Teacher 1, “the politics of giving the parents the impression that we are returning to normality is priority,” even as reality shifted seismically towards the other direction. Another teacher felt “officials have failed to learn the right lessons more than a year into the pandemic” (Jordans 2021).

No roadmaps were on offer for novel crises borne out of an asymptomatic virus. Contrasting Sottile to Scheeres, a humble, explanatory approach with deeper community engagement was more appropriate than an indignant distance treating trust as a given. A humble roadmap cultivates presence and engagement, versus imposing wishful thinking detached from uncertain variables. Education administrators should be willing to learn and feel the need to demonstrate progress. After all, this is the standard for their teachers, principals, and students.

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<sup>34</sup> I do find it odd that this would not be obvious – of course children get each other sick in school!

<sup>35</sup> In subsequent studies, teachers’ caution far outpaced their peers and stemmed from safety concerns, as discussed in the labor-management tensions from Section 4.2.1.

#### 4.4.2 Unclear Guidance

Open-ended guidance from central authorities consistently lacked essential specifics, deflecting accountability with façades of assistance. One could argue lack of specificity was necessary. After all, “this is a time to practice living with uncertainty – a useful muscle to develop” (Hamblin 2020). But those awaiting guidance were misled by those leaders “offering false certainty” (ibid).

Cuomo, for instance, issued lengthy school reopening guidance in July advertised as comprehensive. However, he “consistently sought to avoid major decisions related to school reopening and has shifted nearly all the authority over schools to local districts” (Shapiro and Goodman 2021). Unsurprisingly, schools struggled mightily to plan for safety in 2020-21 and financially for future budgets. Regarding the latter, Governor Cuomo issued a blanket statement over the summer warning schools to prepare for a 20 percent cut. In small Floral Park-Bellerose, Financial Planner Michael Fabiano was not told (as of November 2020) whether this reduction would be to the State’s base aid, or for the entire school budget, a difference in magnitude that could spell fiscal ruin for FPBSD. In his words, “How do you deal with this uncertainty?” (2020). Floral Park-Bellerose has extraordinarily thin margins with the county’s lowest per pupil expenditure. NYCDOE schools were also left without answers and, potentially, essential funding.<sup>36</sup>

National politics partially excused lackluster guidelines.<sup>37</sup> Per Dr. Ashish K. Jha, dean of Brown’s School of Public Health, “A lot of school districts have kind of figured [epidemiological guidelines] out on their own. It’s pathetic that every school district has to come up with its own pandemic response plan” (Gewertz 2020). In a point that transcends boundaries, Hartney (cited in Vestal 2020) noted that historically nonpartisan school districts “got wrapped up in the larger national debate about how we should respond to COVID”. The Biden Administration’s CDC guidelines also underwhelmed. Per Mills (cited in Cohen 2021), “it still has too much emphasis on ‘Covid theater’ – like taking daily temperatures and cleaning.” In March and April of 2020, schools were preoccupied with ‘Covid theater’ (Teacher 2), but – echoing Haspel’s concerns – calls for excessive cleaning and temperature checks, versus testing and pedagogy, were removed from reality in February and March 2021. On the state level – although guidance from New York and Berlin can be extraordinarily comprehensive – they were unclear in areas requiring decisions that are most challenging for districts. NYSED’s 145-page reopening document was filled with cleaning guidance (including an entire page on toilets and water fountains), but devoted all of four vague sentences to closings (NYSED 2020: 42), conveniently the deepest NYS-NYC conflict and most challenging to navigate.

In sum, schools were preoccupied with fulfilling measures distanced from their operational reality, while simultaneously forced to make crucial reopening, closing, and budgeting decisions alone.

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<sup>36</sup> This was particularly challenging for high schools, since their funding is tied to enrollment.

<sup>37</sup> The Trump Administration’s ineptitude and rebuttals of science impeded the Center for Disease Control (CDC)’s ability to control COVID-19. This thesis purposely avoids giving Donald Trump attention.

#### 4.4.3 Back-and-Forth: Public Education in Limbo

Pivotal reopening decisions were protracted affairs that left public education momentarily suspended. Politicians squabbled, contradicted themselves, reversed decisions, and exacerbated already-heightened anxiety for parents, educators, and students. Ultimately, “[it reflected] a lack of a coherent strategy... for how to safely keep the schools open” (Jordans 2021). It is worth reconsidering the nature of school reopening strategies, since the pandemic cannot be tamed upon request. Safety-driven goals are not necessarily explicit tradeoffs with personal interactions and children’s emotional well-being, but strategies could not possibly satisfy every essential need of education systems or imagine the scope of potential ramifications (Zimmerman Interview).

This research did not fully incorporate implications of public-facing back-and-forth governance in Berlin during January to March 2021. Leinemann (Interview) noted the default ‘over-democratization’ of decisions: “[the *Verwaltung* is] very proud that for all the big decisions, they usually speak with the *Schulleitungsverbände* before, and with the GEW”. ‘Chaotic’ school decisions (Jordans 2021) crescendoed nationally in March. Locally, fissures accelerated with Scheeres reversing her January reopening decision, then when the RRG allowed children to stay in school an extra year:

“They do try to involve democratic things, and what happened now... was something that came from the Berliner RRG, and from the *Bildungspolitikern*. It was nothing that Scheeres wanted because she knows it’s going to be a big chaos in the schools. And what happened there too – the Parliament – the schoolteachers all cried, they said we can’t do that, it’s not possible. And the democratic parliament said, ‘We don’t hear what you are saying’. The parents are the voters, and they’re already in voting mode” (Interview).

At each of its arguably most pivotal reopening junctures – March, September, and November 2020 – New York descended into limbo. Recall De Blasio and Cuomo bickering and undercutting experts in March. The Mayor insisted on keeping schools open for poorer students dependent on meals at school, forewarning a series of spillover effects from shuttering classrooms. Negotiations in August and September for the school year schedule reflected a growing discord between de Blasio – who had “dug in his heels” – and principals who, along with teachers, were pushing for a delay all summer (Zimmerman, Amin, and Veiga 2020). November was the magnum opus of chaos: an arbitrary statistical threshold conceived in September negotiations to assure teachers of safety (McDonough 2020) thrust all stakeholders to the negotiating table. Yet, this table was limited to Cuomo and de Blasio, who privately agreed to, but publicly fumbled, their own plan.

Ramifications for school communities were devastating. Teachers were expected to remain “fluid” (Teacher 4) in 2020-21, but the school year’s many adjustments were beyond their well-trained capacity for fluidity. Planning for 2020-21 was “ad-hoc,” emblematic of “a complete lack of

preparation on all levels” (Teacher 5). Training never materialized beyond token engagement, while delays in school survey results left schools individually forced to push for answers (ibid)<sup>38</sup>.

In late October, de Blasio accelerated the opt-in deadline for in-person learning and removed a promised future opt-in. To parents, it was “an unnecessary stressor,” “disrespectful,” and amounted to “a bait and switch” (O’Connell-Domenech 2020). Per one parent (ibid):

“Our children are not pawns.... To make them like they are chess pieces and to move them around to suit some whim and some idea that was not workable from the start is wrong.”

Tensions soared amidst worsening COVID-19 metrics, the 2020 Election, and early vaccine trials. As NYC’s 7-day rolling positivity rate neared 3 percent (eventually crossing November 18), De Blasio, Carranza and Mulgrew pushed NYC into limbo with warnings to immediately prepare for remote learning that created a palpable fear and confusion. Carranza wrote principals Thursday evening (November 12), followed by de Blasio’s public radio appearance Friday morning (November 13) and Mulgrew’s email to teachers that evening. Preparing for the upcoming week was impossible – leaders enforcing the 3 percent positivity threshold were as unprepared as anyone. Consider Cuomo: after months of removing himself, Cuomo publicly questioned NYC’s threshold (Zimmerman 2020 2). Then, with the understanding de Blasio intended to keep schools open, Cuomo announced schools would stay open, only to be contradicted in real-time by the NYCDOE.

This two-week-long collective experience, where New York was glued to the rolling positivity rate, was an extension of the perpetual state of limbo for in-person schooling. At any given moment (not just the week of November 16), the ‘two case rule’ could shutter schools. Per one parent leader:

“For families who chose in-person learning, the individual closures add another layer of stress to a chaotic year that has also seen the whole system shut down... The mayor might be able to say that our schools are open, but they’re not open” (Gould 2021).

De Blasio’s announcement for universal closures sparked parent-led protests and condemnation from fellow elected officials, notably City Council Education Chair Mark Treyger and Public Advocate Jumaane Williams. Parents were frustrated with being excluded from decisions, while elected officials questioned the wisdom of closing schools before gyms and indoor dining<sup>39</sup> (Eyewitness News 2020). De Blasio reversed course after Thanksgiving. Cases were twice as high when elementary schools reopened December 7 (see Figure 9). The threshold “backed [NYC] into the closure,” and – in de Blasio’s words – “locked [NYC] into a social contract” (McDonough 2020). That is a loose interpretation of Rousseau. Only two months earlier, the Mayor did not consult principals on reopening, then attempted to force them into promising more than they could deliver (Algar 2020). Limbo happens when political expediency discretionarily enforces a social contract.

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<sup>38</sup> At Teacher 5’s school, only 14 families completed the school preference survey. “If it wasn’t for the outreach my school did [in early September], we would be [completely screwed].

<sup>39</sup> New York’s priorities, unfortunately, were laid bare.

#### 4.4.4 Planning for Remote Learning

Planning for the most significant COVID-19 education adjustment – the shift to remote learning – was oxymoronic: Berlin and New York prioritized in-person learning, largely leaving school communities to individually navigate remote learning. The need to plan for 2020-21 was evident from 2019-20. New York “remote lessons went every single way” (Zimmerman 2020 1); Berlin, whose teachers only received email addresses during 2020-21 (Plocher), fared no better.

Whereas Floral Park-Bellerose and well-resourced international schools could more smoothly shift online, the *idea* of planning for remote learning was inconvenient for huge education departments. Warnings from teachers and officials regarding insufficient remote learning planning grew louder in the summer. Mulgrew felt “City Hall didn’t want to start planning until July,” despite his continued insistence since April (Zimmerman 2020 1). After January 2021, the GEW felt similarly. Per Plocher:

“These issues could have been anticipated – they weren’t. Lots of these issues were pointed out by us – they were ignored. All of the mechanisms that would lead to better government – they were ignored.”

Much of central remote planning was pretending to be prepared, a logical conclusion after sections ‘Projecting Competency’ and ‘Unclear Guidance’. Perhaps education departments actually believed their teachers could instruct children remotely; NYCDOE communications assumed an underlying assumption of quality remote instruction. Teacher 5 accused the DOE of outright deception:

“Oh, they know it’s not true. They know it’s not [figured out]. It’s relying heavily on the nature of teachers (just to figure it out) what’s happening. We have to do that for the kids.”

There was something fatalist and cynical about the nature of remote education.<sup>40</sup> Here is Plocher’s take on the *Hygienebeirat*’s strategy for remote planning from August to December:

“The Berlin [city-state] government has had to decide – are we going to sacrifice the kids’ education by going remote, because we don’t have the resources to pull this off. Everybody knew if they did remote learning, they’d be fucked. So let’s pretend as long as we can.”

Unlike Berlin, New York attempted to simultaneously provide three learning offers: in-person, remote, and ‘hybrid’. The Mayor hoped three-quarters of students’ families would choose fully in-person; less than one-third did (Shapiro 2020 2). From a planning perspective, the complexities of orchestrating remote and hybrid learning outpaced administrative capacity. Hybrid, particularly, “was revealed to be impractical in the daily operation of schools; many educators said the rules were nearly impossible to follow, and some schools disregarded them” (ibid). The City curbed hybrid instruction after November, leaving the remote learning option that was still insufficiently planned as the main educational medium for its 1.1 million students. It went as planned: poorly.

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<sup>40</sup> Provider 1 noted central’s odd reluctance to issue IT plans during the fall.

#### 4.4.5 Remote Learning in Practice

This section discusses consequences of ineffective planning for shifts online. A revelatory starting point is the relatively well-prepared Floral Park-Bellerose. Even with having invested in technology the previous year, and given teachers two-week toolkits for transitions to online learning, Sottile characterized March to June 2020 as “survival”. Then, on the first day of 2020-21, FPB was hacked.

The NYCDOE was less digitally prepared than FPB, despite the latter having an IT staff of one. Remote learning lagged behind, both for reasons of infrastructure and “the city [treating] remote like an afterthought” (Shapiro 2020 1). Upon further reflection in 2022, it’s evident that districts like NYCDOE and Berlin were unprepared and engaged in emergency remote learning, versus high quality online learning. Powell (2022) explains the differences:

“Emergency remote learning differs from high quality online learning in that everyone was forced into it without any preparation. In more traditional online schools, leaders, educators, and families had the option to participate in this new way of learning.”

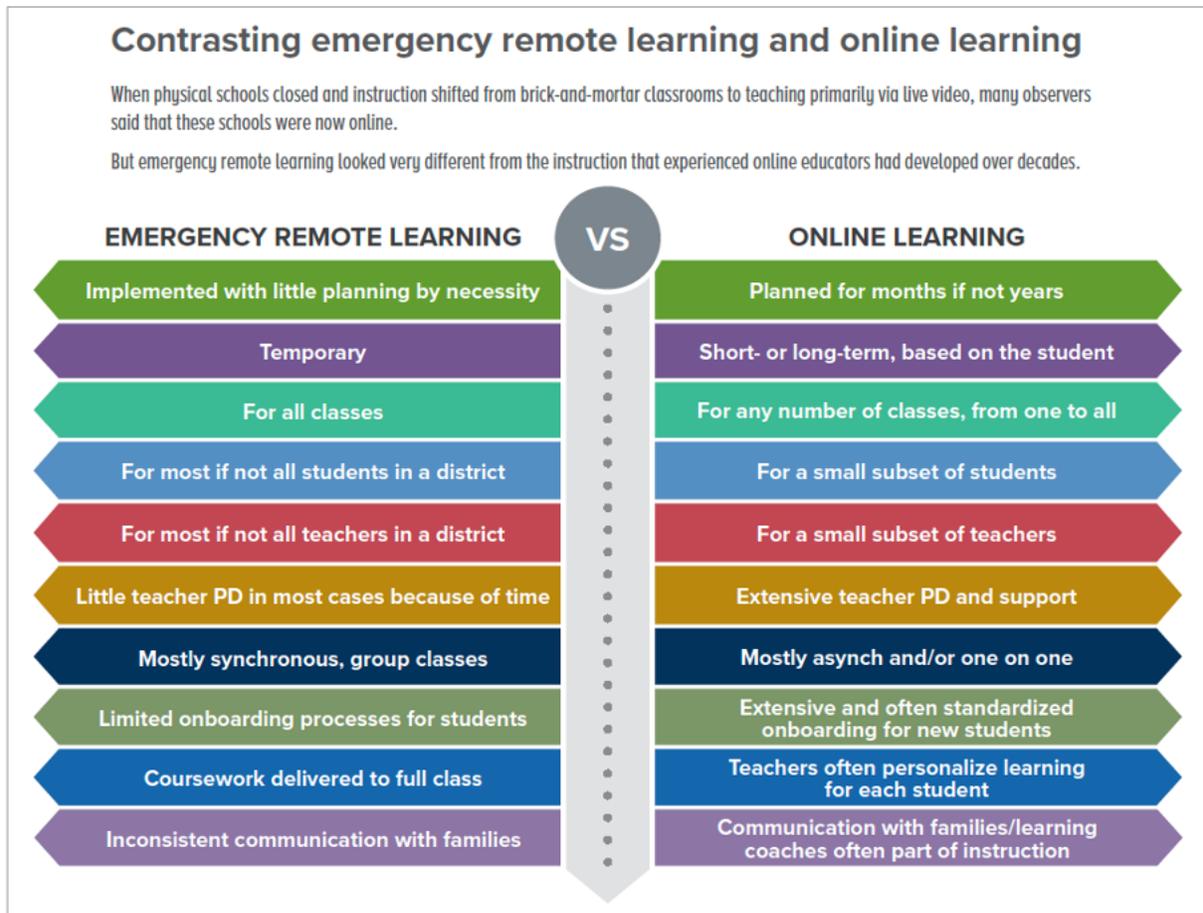


Figure 10: Contrasting emergency remote learning and online learning (Powell 2022)

NYC teachers used NearPod, a platform with such limited storage that teachers had to delete content prior to new uploads. Per Teacher 5: “Basically, here’s what you’re expected to do, and you get nothing to do it.” DOE-distributed tablets did not support the relatively low-tech Google Suite and were inoperable in summer, collecting dust instead of helping students make up for lost time (Shapiro 2020 1). Tablets were emblematic of this emergency remote learning. Revisiting Powell:

“There was little to no training provided, teachers had to create digital content/courses while teaching it and learning how to use new technology. They tried to replicate what was happening in their in person classrooms in their online classrooms” (2022).

Germany is the antithesis of digital pioneering, with digital infrastructure far below EU standards (Hille 2021). Berlin’s citywide platform “[was] so overloaded during the day that some elementary school students [had to] wait until 6:30 PM to have their video lessons” (Jordans 2021). Berlin schools had long solely managed IT, per the “neoliberal ‘every school should do its own thing’ mindset” (Plocher).

Internet access proved monumentally challenging in both cities, most strikingly for the plaintiffs in a December 2020 lawsuit against the NYCDOE for failures to provide WiFi in homeless shelters: 114,000 homeless NYC students. Tablet distributions were flashpoints of controversy; mentioning iPads drew a perverse reaction from Teacher 5. Ramos-Solomon blamed global supply chains for initial delays in 2019-20, yet 60,000 students still needed tablets in December (Shapiro 2020 1). Leinemann (Interview) noted similar struggles in Berlin; only 70 percent of tablets, by March 2021, shipped to students. Provider 1 faulted bureaucratic ineptitude: “The *Senat* basically just [circled kids names]. Some kids who really needed an iPad didn’t get one, some got two.”

For those able to access lessons, pedagogy did not necessarily translate online. Among many causes: teachers were not instructed how to teach remotely beyond engaging with tools (Teacher 5); there was no systemic, coherent remote strategy (Zimmerman Interview), and in-person quality consistently outpaces remote (Leinemann Interview), particularly for special education (Teacher 4). Teacher 3 was sapped of innovation: “You just function, you don’t teach.” Teacher 2 noted teachers are “performers that get their energy from being in a classroom”. To him, teaching dissolves online:

“The biggest trick with teaching is listening. You can’t tell what’s going on with the kids who have turned off their cameras – maybe they’re checking something else. How are you able to keep them in the lesson? You need to draw kids out. The biggest danger with online teaching is that kids fall through the cracks. Unless you’re very skilled, it’s very difficult to prevent a few kids who want to dominate from doing that. The absolute classic teaching method is ‘I, you, we’<sup>41</sup>... you can try to explain this to [politicians], but it’s still difficult for them to think like someone who’s in a classroom.”

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<sup>41</sup> Per Teacher 2, when the discussions take place, it’s how you get the shy kids to build up enough confidence to eventually contribute in class discussion.

Politicians and top education officials did face tangible political repercussions as the pandemic progressed. However unappreciated Cuomo – “either way, they’ll criticize us” (2021) – and the *Verwaltung* (Leinemann Interview) felt, these were the roles they chose, unlike children. Left unplanned and unchecked, remote learning was chaotic and distanced from substantive education.

#### **4.4.6 Trauma on The Ground**

COVID-19 was a collective trauma event, with “collective inability to process in the present” amidst prolonged grief and upheaval dismantling building blocks of reality (Prideaux 2021). COVID-19, as a pandemic, may affect well-being and education for decades (Treyger, cited in Bauman 2021; Purdum 2020).<sup>42</sup> Approaching COVID-19 from the collective trauma perspective allows space for health, equity, and personal development. Forward-thinking ministers like Hamburg’s Ties Rabe (cited in Friedmann et. al. 2020) think holistically, as does Teacher 2, who worried for children’s socio-emotional growth and his school community’s mental health. Take this bleak summary of high school life from a NYC social worker (cited in Amin and Zimmer 2021):

“We see symptoms of depression, the lack of motivation, withdrawal, not wanting to engage with friends and family. Their sleep cycles are completely out of whack... They’re staying up all night watching TV or online. They feel like they’re not working toward anything.”

What does a teacher do? What is the crisis here? This exchange with Teacher 5 provides a frame:

“Teacher 5: These kids are in crisis. We have to treat it like one.

[What is a crisis in this situation?]

Teacher 5: Anytime we can’t account for a child, where we can’t reach them, that’s a problem.

[And how often is that?]

Teacher 5: Lately, all the time. I have a handful of kids who I regularly don’t see.

[What do you do?]

Teacher 5: I call them. I call their parents. I talk to some of their friends, who tell me, ‘Oh, so and so’s around’. I know they’re not going to school.”

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<sup>42</sup> 2022 data confirmed COVID was a ‘wrecking ball’ for education. The findings from CRPE’s Fall 2022 report are attached in the appendix.

Was the essential service of education happening? Incomplete evidence looks poorly upon large urban districts. In spring 2020, more than one-fifth of NYC high schoolers received a failing grade (Amin and Zimmer 2021). Berlin schools often neglected social components to education as teachers opted to “set up a pile of worksheets” (Provider 1), common practice for students in NYC jails who could only communicate to their teachers via text (Goldensohn 2020). Of course, this was not all ‘doom and gloom’; Zimmerman (Interview) felt “there’s more room for coverage on what schools are doing that’s really working.” Teacher 4, for example, recreated her autistic students’ entire classroom routines. Sottile changed the entire structure of FPB’s school day to increase facetime. Teacher 3 admired her students’ hard work, despite the diminishing personal contacts reducing them to “robots” obediently “waiting to be told what to do”.

But the evidence of Rikers Island points to COVID-19 education fault lines. It is not a mystery who suffers in “the perfect storm of marginalization” (Newman, cited in Shapiro 2020 1). Ethnic minority, socioeconomically disadvantaged, non-native speaking, and already-underserved children are less likely to receive the basic service of education, and were most prone to lower achievement growth, particularly in low-income and remote-only districts (Schwartz 2022). Fault lines revealed themselves in school-based mental health services, particularly acute for 8,700 children whose caregivers died of COVID in NYC. A January 2023 investigation detailed a system “ill-equipped to handle” students’ grief; culprits range from social worker understaffing, NYC’s disproportionate pandemic burden, inadequate training for grief, and language barriers (Donovan and Khan 2023).

Germany is no different: education was in an equity crisis before COVID-19 (Kuhn and Voges 2021). During COVID-19, per Plocher:

“Distanced learning is very difficult in poor neighborhoods [like] Neukölln, with one-third of students in poverty, [and] households share one computer. Whereas, in a district like Dahlem, kids who have their own bedrooms could have been doing distance learning since March with (seemingly) fewer consequences.”

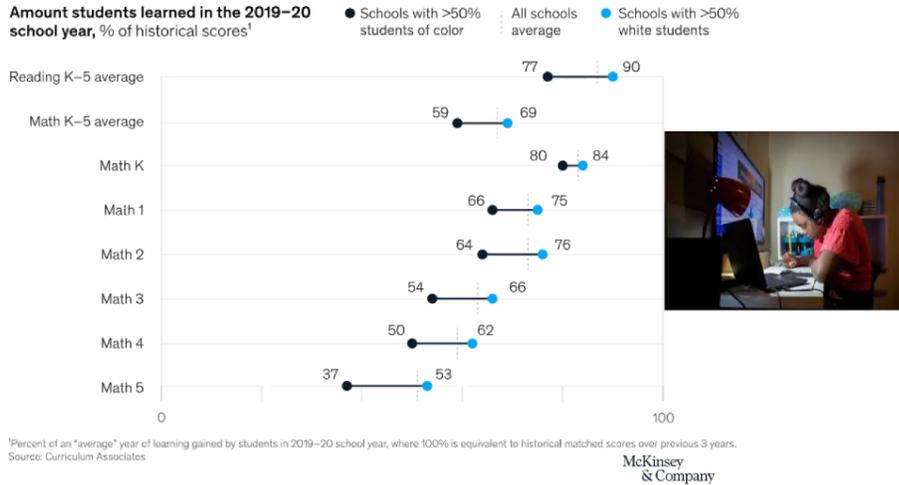
Germany pretends not to see race, choosing not to measure racial disparities in schools (Mohdin 2017). In the United States, where race is acknowledged, race and income (see Figures 10 and 11) correlated exactly to learning loss and remote learning access. In New York, Black and Asian children were underrepresented in-person, while White students (who only make up 16 percent of the NYCDOE student body) accounted for a quarter of in-person learners (Kirsch 2020). National surveys reflect similar remote gaps (Kamenetz 2020, Kamenetz 2021) and race-based academic losses (see Hernández 2021). In the global year of Black Lives Matter protests, Black children were denied the fundamental right to an education more often than White children.

When I asked Teacher 5 if anyone wins during COVID-19, she put things in perspective: “No, but I can tell you who definitely loses: the kids.” It is not just any kids: these are the children in schools like hers in the South Bronx. That is the crime of COVID-19, a time that kicked a whole generation of children while they were down, for no fault but the accident of their birth.

# Academic Losses

Most students are falling behind, but students of color are faring worse.

Amount students learned in the 2019–20 school year, % of historical scores<sup>1</sup>



COLUMBIA MAILMAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH 13

Figure 11: Academic Losses by Race in United States During COVID-19

If your school is offering distance learning activities, how much has your child been able to use these resources?

Answered: 1,558 Skipped: 38

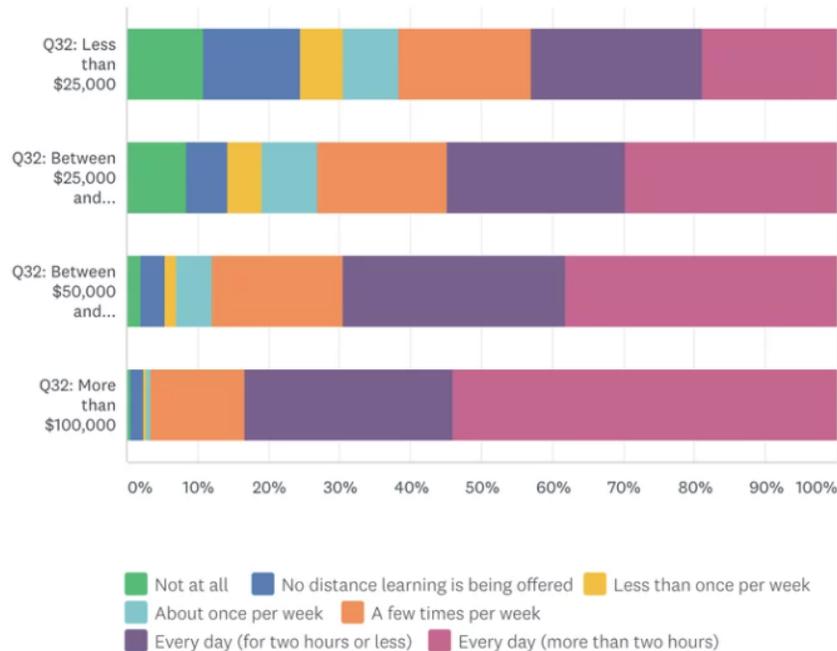


Figure 12: Distance Learning Resources by Income in United States During COVID-19

# **ANALYSIS**

## 5.1 Eschewing the Periphery: How Mistrust and Mismatched Governance Stifle Educators

Public education governance hierarchies are simply not designed to accommodate shock. They were largely incapable of managing COVID-19 logistical complications. Centralized crisis responses – however ‘necessary’ – proved wholly mismatched with decentralized school systems.

This section considers how governance principles can bring out the greatest strength of public education systems: the educators themselves. I revisit principles of ‘moving with’ crises (discussed in Section 2.4.2) to deconstruct the worldviews distancing decision-makers from innovative ideas. Mistrust between educators and administrators furthers a view of educators (and of human nature) that is cynical. Eschewing educators – especially in uncertain crises short on good ideas – rejects realities of idea generation. Here is Bregman’s conversation with Dutch entrepreneur Jos de Blok, whose minimalist self-organization principles inadvertently earned him worldwide acclaim:

“The gap between the people at the top and the folks doing the actual work – in healthcare, in education, you name it – is enormous.[...] Managers tend to band together. They set up all kinds of courses and conferences where they tell each other they’re doing things right. That cuts them off from the real world.

There’s this notion that doers can’t think strategically.[...] That they lack vision. But the people out doing the work are brimming with ideas. They come up with a thousand things, but don’t get heard, because managers think they have to go on some corporate retreat to dream up plans to present to the worker bees.

[De Blok has a very different take on things. He sees his employees as intrinsically motivated professionals and experts on how their jobs ought to be done.] In my experience, managers tend to have very few ideas. They get their jobs because they fit into a system, because they follow orders. Not because they’re big visionaries” (Bregman 2019: 274).

Navigating crises means empowering educators and relearning organizationally. The NYCDOE understood this. Carranza was insistent that teachers generate the best COVID-19 teaching and learning concepts (Ramos-Solomon), but insistence did not transfer power or improve classroom conditions. The NYCDOE also appeared broadly committed to self-reflection, subjecting its many frustrating COVID-19 policies to review. Not everyone participated: Mulgrew resisted calls to change protocols for closing schools, despite newfound evidence suggesting the potential for less conservative policies (Amin 2021). Whether teachers’ lessons permeate backdoor education politics remains unclear. Teacher 5, for one, didn’t feel Mulgrew’s interests represented hers.

Berlin, and Germany generally, appeared less willing to admit needing to learn, choosing handcuffs to bureaucracy over unlocking themselves with different keys. Per Leinemann (Interview), Scheeres – who felt it necessary to frame her criticism of a principal with a slight at teachers – had actually gotten worse at communicating during the pandemic. This – combined with the federal

government's underwhelming vaccine rollout, mismanaged third wave, and indecisiveness with school reopenings – challenge the German crisis governance strategy's capability to relearn. Merkel insisted "*Die ganze Bundesrepublik ist auf Vertrauen aufgebaut*": the whole country is built on trust (2020 2). How trustworthy, then, are teachers, principals, parents and children?

Ghosh (2021: 134) expands this line of thinking, attributing inadequate response of affluent nations to COVID-19 leaders misapplying 'beliefs in the intrinsic superiority of the West':

"One of the more unfortunate aspects of these outcomes is that they were partly the result of the belief, cherished by Western elites, that their countries' wealth, infrastructure, and vaunted health care systems would insulate them from the worst effects of the pandemic... In less euphemistic language, it could be said that many Western leaders were misled by their own historically rooted prejudices."

Whereas politicians (unlike teachers) in the U.S. and Germany felt they could lean into systems, leaders in African countries, Ghosh (2021: 138) argued, had a more honest appraisal of system fragility and led more effective responses to COVID-19 as a result:

"Contrary to received wisdom, the conditions that Western elites have long stigmatized as 'backward' and 'underdeveloped' may in fact create certain kinds of resilience. It was probably because African leaders had prior experience of infectious diseases, and were therefore well aware of the fragility of their health care systems, that they took prompt and decisive action, while their Western counterparts complacently assumed that the pandemic would pass them by."

If COVID-19 was representative, large public school systems *appear* inherently ungovernable, due in no small part to leaders' conscious (and perhaps unconscious) choices. Cutting teachers, principals, and families off from vital information and decision-making, then scolding them for the audacity to innovate and be decisive, only discouraged creativity and neutered holistic crisis response. As for education? If schools wanted to stifle children's creativity, restricting their teachers' freedom was a terrific start. Per Bregman (2019: 279):

"Of course, there are already scores of teachers and bankers, academics and managers who are passionately motivated to help others. Not, however, *because* of the labyrinths of targets, rules, and procedures, but *despite* them."

Reliance on lingering bureaucrats and parachuting orders left educators scrambling, stuck between applying rules they know to be counterproductive and the threat of discipline. A more delicate, intentional approach to multilevel crisis governance is needed – one that deeply engages those most connected to education, and realistically aligns with existing structures. Complex emergencies require a 'governance by empathy' and hybridity that combines clear hierarchies with

super networked-governance (Rode and Flynn 2020: 9). If COVID-19 ushered in an epoch of omnipresent complex emergencies, striking a better multi-level governance mix is essential.

Relegating educators, then ignoring them, risks jeopardizing teachers' intrinsic motivation to help their students. When I asked Teacher 3 – hospitalized the previous week for stress – when COVID-19 education would be over, she refused to relinquish her love of teaching:

“It just doesn't end. Despite the frustration, it's a brilliant job and I love doing it.”

Crises are not excuses to abuse teachers' love for their work. Governance that dehumanizes and belittles the teaching profession stifles current and prospective educators. Public education must harness and cultivate educators' intrinsic motivation, instead of taking it for granted. There are governance structures and participatory forums that bring out the best in creative problem solving, akin to workshop settings with which educators are intimately familiar. But teachers aren't the reason their ideas were excluded: the onus is on political leaders and administrators.

## **5.2 White Lies of Elegant Governance: Masking Uncertainty With Competence**

*Certainty is necessary.* This maxim permits the neoliberal crisis response to pivot ever more closely to authoritarian centralization. Propaganda is seen as a permissible means to protect the masses, unable to handle indefinite, total change and in need of a select, all-powerful few. Uncertainty is seen as weakness, eliminating room for humility and participation. Not having 'the answers' is unacceptable, and it becomes preferable to project order than humbly approach the community.

This description roughly corresponds to what Shah (2010) describes as 'elegant governance', the antithesis of 'moving with' uncertainty. Old bastions of certainty become deceptive guideposts, participation is token, and presupposed selfishness discounts cooperation inherent to human nature. COVID-19 governance was of the elegant variety, as power became radically concentrated in an ever-smaller cohort. This was not exclusive to the boards of proxy deliberative governance and narrowing decision-making cohorts in Berlin and New York. The 'iron fist of oligarchy' (Bregman 2019) is a potential peril of representative democracy. Blakeley, along the lines of Klein (2007), sees COVID-19 crisis governance as a radical monopolization of power under the holistic capitalist system, "one in which states, capitalists and other powerful ruling class actors cooperate in order to ensure their own survival, and the survival of the system that created them" (2020: 57).

The connection between faltering public services and willingness to challenge political power<sup>43</sup> is clear – recall citywide protests, impeachment inquiries, and votes of no confidence. Whether neoliberalism responds to pleas and trauma from below is not, calling into question the processes

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<sup>43</sup> Elbers (2020: 24-25) makes sure to distinguish between *power-over*, versus *power-from-within* and *power-with*. Empowering individuals via *power-from-within* (creativity, healing and love) creates connection for *power-with* (openness, vulnerability and willingness to change). *Power-over* "suffocates" other forms.

modern democracies have to depose ineffective or destructive leaders. Cuomo – simultaneously under investigations for covering up how many New Yorkers died, sexual misconduct, and expediting faulty bridge construction – may have seen protracted formal investigations as ways to maintain his power, rather than enforce accountability. The entire notion of elections as accountability mechanisms has proven itself problematic, particularly in the United States. Formal processes, although accompanied by bold announcements and considerable effort, do not necessarily lead to democratic outcomes. In crisis, accountability vacuums can be seen as intentional products of neoliberalism subsuming democracy. Blakeley ends her book *The Corona Crash* with this warning:

“The inefficiencies, inequities and corruption generated by state-monopoly capitalism do not result from centralization in itself, but from centralization absent the centrifugal force of democratic accountability. In the wake of this crisis, the resources by then under the command of the state should be allocated by the public, for the public. Absent the extension of the principles of political democracy into the realm of the economy, this crisis, like so many others, will simply be exploited by capital, for capital” (2020: 77).

Recalling Figure 9, leaders were loosely beholden to epidemiology and applied COVID-19 rationale when politically expedient. Restrictions and reopening correlated to political will, *sometimes* mirroring COVID-19 rates. Fear drove momentum to preempt virus outbreaks, but leaders monopolized narratives of hope in attempting to propose loosened restrictions during the most aggressive outbreaks. De Blasio shut schools at a 3 percent positivity rate, but two months later, kept them open at 9 percent. Scheeres tried forcing schools to open at Germany’s epidemiological peak in early January. How leaders maintain power, and why leaders in COVID-19 felt it necessary to maintain ‘elegance’ with white lies, is a fascinating rumination. Bregman devotes considerable attention to traits of modern leaders, and found that their most common trait to be shamelessness:

“In our modern democracy, shamelessness can be positively advantageous. Politicians who aren’t hindered by shame are free to do things others wouldn’t dare.... Their audacious behavior pays dividends in our modern mediocracies, because the news spotlights the abnormal and the absurd. In this type of world, it’s not the friendliest and most empathetic leaders who rise to the top, but their opposites... it’s survival of the shameless” (2019: 241).

Bregman reasons with a broader anti-politician sentiment casting ego-driven pursuits of modern public servants as self-serving enterprises. Politicians have not always been cut of this cloth. Graeber and Wengrow showcase the parliamentary system in Tlaxcala, the indigenous people of Mexico whose alliance with Cortes brought down the Aztec empire. Revisits to first-hand accounts provide a shocking, humbling alternative more in line with values of civil service:

‘Those who aspired to a role on the council of Tlaxcala, far from being expected to demonstrate personal charisma or the ability to outdo rivals, did so in a spirit of self-deprecation – even shame. They were required to subordinate themselves to the

people of the city. To ensure that this subordination was no mere show, each was subject to trials, starting with mandatory exposure to public abuse, regarded as the proper reward of ambition, and then – with one's ego in tatters – a long period of seclusion, in which the aspiring politician suffered ordeals of fasting, sleep deprivation, bloodletting and a strict regime of moral instruction. The initiation ended with a 'coming out' of the newly constituted public servant, amid feasting and celebration' (356).

Although some American politicians might feel the end results of grueling campaign trails are pretty similar, values underpinning the modern Western politician-selection process could not be any more different than those in Tlaxcala. Speaking of differences, there is a noticeable gulf in tolerance for shameless leadership between the American and German contexts, perhaps accentuated by Trump and Cuomo blowing the roof off the shamelessness barometer. As of April 2021, Cuomo was under multiple investigations for scandals, yet opted for months to threaten political opponents and demean his accusers of sexual assault rather than resign:

"My natural instinct is to be aggressive, and it doesn't always serve me well. I am a controlling personality.... But you show me a person who is not highly controlling, and I'll show you a person who is probably not highly successful" (Robbins 2020).

Conversely, Merkel and Müller were compelled to swiftly issue public apologies for communications errors. Crises need leaders willing to plug into compassion, otherwise psychology goes unchecked:

"Power appears to work like an anesthetic that makes you insensate to other people... One of the effects of power, myriad studies show, is that it makes you see others in a negative light. If you're powerful you're more likely to think most people are lazy and unreliable. That they need to be supervised and monitored, managed and regulated, censored and told what to do. And because power makes you feel superior to other people, you'll believe all this monitoring should be entrusted to you" (Bregman 2019: 241).

The COVID-19 emergency granted leaders unencumbered power trips and the opportunity to project elegance, rather than humbly invite participation. Pessimism and cynicism reigned supreme, continually reinforced in dwindling political cohorts. An alternative: "What if schools and businesses, cities and nations expect the best of people instead of presuming the worst?" (Bregman 2019: 252). If public services welcome better views of human nature, people have room to judge and figure things out themselves. In other words: *Uncertainty is welcome*.

### 5.3 COVID-19 as Product and Precedent: Investigating Neoliberal Imaginative Capacity<sup>44</sup>

The nature of COVID-19 crises, as discussed throughout this thesis, is a coalescence of many interwoven, destabilizing phenomena of existential proportions. Whether Dörre's *Zangenkrise*, Beck's disintegrating illusions of modernity, or Blakeley's "[collapsing of all institutions] into the arms of the state" (2020: 23), neoliberal processes reinforce themselves, thereby accentuating old crises and producing new ones. 'Stuck' (Graeber and Wengrow 2021) in this cycle, corrosion becomes the only option.

Can neoliberalism imagine the crises of its own making? Recalling Armiero's (2021) warning that uncertainty remains framed in what is certain, and Linnitt's (2020) discussion of neoliberalism preemptively constraining future possibilities, it appears not. Evidence from 2008 was abundant and particularly worrisome. Blakeley sheds light on how neoliberalism misinterpreted itself:

"Economists failed to diagnose the root cause of the post-2008 stagnation for the same reason they failed to see the financial crisis coming in the first place. They have an incoherent account of how capitalism generates value, and their models are not built to account for broad structural shifts in political and economic institutions of the kind seen over the last forty years" (Blakeley 2020: 2).

Leaders thinking within neoliberal bounds<sup>45</sup> furthered and could not imagine the COVID-19 crisis. After a year in an epicenter of COVID-19 response, Governor Cuomo shallowly characterized it as a 'hurricane', drawing from his 1990's experience as U.S. Housing and Urban Development Secretary:

"Before you fly to a place where a hurricane is about to hit, you have to do the damage assessment, you have to let the hurricane pass. First, is help people during the hurricane... then you do the assessment. So, how do we build after COVID? Well, let the hurricane pass first. Let's see what's still standing" (2021).

Cuomo used this to justify real estate proposals in Manhattan to the webinar host, Scott Rechler, his real estate magnate friend. His well-rehearsed tunnel vision continued into speculative futures:

"Look, with the reopening of the economy, it's all balance [motions with hands]. Right, life is balance" (ibid).

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<sup>44</sup> I found it telling that the external reviewer for this thesis utterly dismissed the need to embed this in deep ecology, as if he wanted to read a thesis other than the one I had produced. It was in this dismissal that I empathetically and wholeheartedly counter-dismiss this attempt at critique, for clearly his imagination and willingness to go beyond its confines would be constrained.

<sup>45</sup> Ghosh (2021: 116) likens the modern citizen to 'Homo economicus'.

This is a particularly weak line of argument from someone purporting to be evidence-based. Little about COVID-19 suggests balance, rather rapid pendulum swings of unintended consequences. The faux ecological perspective that Curtis dismantles extends beyond Cuomo's misapplied idea:

"Balance of nature is an illusion, and we hold onto it so tightly in our culture. That is completely counter to what contemporary ecology tells us. We live in a very dynamic world. We have to discard the myth" (Pickett, in Curtis 2011 2).

The inadequate imagination in Cuomo's argument blinded him, and other leaders, from the task at hand. Ghosh (2021: 144-145) sees the failures of COVID-19 and climate response as inherently linked:

"Underlying another disquieting long-term trend, toward a form of governance that the anthropologist Joseph Masco has described as 'suicidal' because it 'privileges images of catastrophic future events' while being unable to respond to immediate challenges. Because of this 'the American public can simultaneously know the United States to be an unrivaled military, economic, and scientific superpower, a state with unprecedented capacities, agencies, and resources, and yet feel completely powerless in the face of failed US military, financial, and environmental commitment. Military and security assessments of climate change fit this pattern perfectly in the sense that they project images of catastrophe into the future in a fashion that negates the possibility of confronting climate change in the present day."

On the school level, politicians were incapable of imagining the crises of *their* own making. Recall Teacher 2: it is impossible to explain how essential listening is in pedagogy to politicians (especially politicians who are poor listeners themselves). Teachers and principals could see the extent of colossal policy ineptitude. Without knowledge sharing for navigating complexity – as the OECD (2018) would suggest – politicians decided on educators' behalf. Conversely, a modus operandi of substantively broadening collaboration built on trust promotes more imaginative chaotic imagination, such that more imaginative crisis responses can emerge. Politicians could not imagine pedagogical changes like teachers could because they do not work in classrooms. Teachers, parents, principals, children, journalists, and master thesis researchers cannot fully imagine what politicians see, hear, and must decide, either. But constraining the entire imaginative scope to a narrowing oligarchy cherry-picking policy justifications does not serve the public.

This is of existential importance for essential service provision, because the people for whom essential services did not properly function are often those for whom basic services already do not function. The COVID-19 essential service provision functioned in a very particular way. Black and brown, poor and non-native speaking, digitally isolated children and their families were forced to suffer, and not given a seat at the table. In Berlin schools, per Leinemann (Interview):

"You see that underneath corona, we don't have a functioning system. We have schools that aren't fair. Kids get totally lost and really don't learn there."

In this newfound scale of crisis, what happens to our most vulnerable? Per Blakeley (2020: 64):

"The coronavirus crisis has provided the world with an insight into what life might look like as our environmental systems begin to collapse under the pressures of unending capitalist accumulation: a world ripped apart by a series of natural disasters, where many are unable to access the resources they need to survive, and strict limits must be imposed upon normal economic activity to prevent further deterioration of our natural systems. Clearly, a continuation of lockdown is no solution to the problem of climate breakdown."

Who emerges living a decent life? For those in power, even if they purport to care or be aware, *could they see?* Do they imagine the possibility of alternatives? In the spirit of a bilingual thesis: *nein*.

How would that imagination emerge? Graeber and Wengrow (2021) provide a blueprint insofar as they simply welcome the considerable legacy of humanity's governance experimentation, rather than manipulating the evidence to serve a narrative of inevitable command-and-control governance upon the arrival of agriculture, a largely Western set of tropes. Our current imaginative predicament, in their eyes, is having 'gotten stuck' in dismissing the possibility for alternatives, neutering our own willingness to imagine. It's an impressive argument, all the more so when the evidence suggests they're right: people are pretty creative.

Education hosts many of our finest examples of that creativity: teachers who don't teach to the test, children with boundless imaginations, artists, musicians, and so on. Education also hosts our finest examples of resistance: any movement invariably starts with a student protest. For future crises, day-to-day administration, or anything school-related, for that matter, schools have the ultimate responsibility to incorporate the talent and imagination already at their disposal. Yet even in what has traditionally been a hotbed of creativity, neoliberalism's limitations were on full display.

# **CONCLUSION**

## **Consequences of Command-and-Control Governance in Decentralized Public Education Hierarchies**

*Preexisting mistrust between central administration and educators festered during COVID-19*

*School communities' underappreciated responsibilities expanded as their capacity stretched thin*

*Top-down communication neglected school communities' needs and collaborative prospects*

*Competent schools stuck in 'paradoxical independence' needed to act alone, but were ostracized for doing so, while less confident schools received little support*

*Many central policy ideas were too impractical to implement on the ground, while crude power dynamics guided negotiations absent traditional processes*

**Key departure question: Is educators' seemingly unending intrinsic motivation at risk?**

### **Projections of Control From Above**

*Politicians fueled self-serving narratives of certainty to justify central control*

*Categorical thinking guided communication and policy detached from epidemiological reality*

*Leaders narrowed decision-making cohorts, cementing their views and preempting dissent*

*Central proxy bodies projected innovative co-production response as public relation distractions*

**Key departure question: How does governance welcome uncertainty, less mask it with competence?**

### **Evidence of Chaos**

*Roadmaps for school reopening could not have existed, but flexible, engaged, and humble frameworks served as better guides than shuttered deceit with blind trust*

*Guidance emphasized 'Covid theater' and proved too open-ended for pivotal decision junctures*

*Pivotal reopening decisions were protracted political affairs leaving entire school systems in limbo*

*Central education departments deliberately chose to avoid planning remote learning*

*Remote learning was largely ineffective with insufficient digital access and in-person pedagogy*

*Amidst mental health and trauma crises, Berlin and New York did not provide the basic service of education to children, particularly to its most vulnerable and disadvantaged*

**Key departure question: Rather than allowing chaos to manifest along neoliberalism's fault lines, how do alternative crisis essential services provisions emerge?**

This was a crisis governance thesis seen through the lens of public schools, offering frameworks for 'moving with' unprecedented uncertainty applied to COVID-19 education. My contribution is the warning of neoliberal crisis response in uncertain times, with schools as a microcosm of essential service delivery. Public education was lackluster, and children from underprivileged backgrounds were disproportionately undereducated. The over-politicization of crisis response in basic services became an insurmountably overbearing series of policy tornadoes jolting school communities for thirteen months straight (and permanently). Under the tremendous pressure of the COVID-19 stimulus, neoliberalism defaulted to several tendencies of considerable concern for future crises.

Experts are considering many new policies<sup>46</sup>; I advocate centering those on what Robinson (2011) terms 'the other climate crisis': the "crisis of human resources, where people have little idea what they're capable of." The problem lies in an ideology of standardization and conformity: "we've disembodied our children, thinking of them as minds in a head, rather than people embodied" (ibid). Education must connect children with themselves (their sense of purpose) and with each other. Building 'ecological literacy' – our ability to understand the basic principles of ecology and to live accordingly (Capra 2011: 75, cited in ibid) – is essential for living in the 21st century. Robinson eschews mechanistic education for personalized approaches that educate 'the heart and mind':

- 1) Taking remedial program structures to mainstream: "Alternative education is based on personalized curriculum, close working relationships between teachers and students, negotiated programs, and collaboration, group work, and mutual support. It's interesting that it's called alternative education. It's the alternative that's causing the problem."
- 2) Centering the arts: "It's through all the things that are marginalized that we learn our own unique expression of humanity... If you leave out of account one of these major areas of human growth and development, then you're not doing the job."
- 3) Teaching mindfulness: "There are practical techniques that can be used in classrooms that get children to focus in on themselves, some calm in their lives, some points of practice that if they became routine, I think, would start to show themselves in the change of the overall culture of education."

Neoliberal crisis education was the opposite: impersonal, STEM-focused, and trauma-inducing. Today's children need the world to believe in them, and we cannot keep letting them down.

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<sup>46</sup> Some NYC schools' remote offerings, for example, have become more comprehensive and finely tuned to students' needs. Regarding the former, schools have been able to expand advanced course offerings with remote participation in expert teachers' classes across the city, especially vital for smaller schools. Regarding the latter, some schools are mitigating pitfalls of remote learning with in-person supervision of remote teachers' instruction. New school models have emerged, like Downtown Brooklyn's A School Without Walls, which has only half-day present instruction, encourages creative projects, and integrates site visits into the curriculum, among other innovative perks tailored to students' individual needs.

### ***A Final Reflection (from April 2021)***

Reflecting during this ‘in between time’, approaching 200 days of lockdown, it feels impossible to have ever imagined being isolated in neoliberal captivity<sup>47</sup>. But COVID-19 did not care how I, you, or we had imagined it would be. Politicians – for all their insistence on a balanced and controllable world, attempting to design the pandemic in their image – did not imagine things this way, either. We cannot expect leaders to be omniscient, or neoliberalism of imaginary capacity.

This humbling of decision-making is diametrically opposed to the neoliberal crisis response: discredit and tame the masses, consolidate control, trickle-down ideas, and assess damages later. Imagination with uncertainty is diametrically opposed to neoliberalism, deliberately constrained within certainty. Feeding this addiction to make the uncertain less so is futile, and particularized chaos in COVID-19. If collaborators in February 2020 foresaw how poor children were educated, teachers lacked basics, remote learning was unplanned, politicians squabbled, propaganda became policy, and already-reduced essential services were to suddenly transform into safety nets, all while living with the greatest global mass trauma event since World War II, the unimaginable becomes pretty believable, after all. Neoliberal captivity was here the whole time.

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<sup>47</sup> Ironically, I was locked in a ‘COVID hotel’ room for 18 days a few months later.

## **6.1 Limitations**

Purporting to fully resolve abstract research questions would be arrogant and misleading. This wide-ranging thesis could not adequately address every subtopic of school reopenings, COVID-19, and education governance. Selecting the most appropriate data took considerable effort and time. The education policy learning curve was considerable. Zimmerman (Interview) took one year to feel comfortable reporting education. I had 8 months. German was limiting. Most articles are English-language. I read many German-language pieces, but often translated, so I gravitated towards English sources. New York politics and American politics during 2020 were far more familiar than Berlin and Germany-wide politics.

COVID-19 was stimulating, but very debilitating. It dampened the possibility of conducting field research. It heightened personal health and grieving challenges. Researching took considerable planning with uncertainty, libraries were inaccessible, and workflows were frequently interrupted. The most significant challenge from COVID-19 was a reduced capacity to process. This was both personal and in education governance. Momentous events seemingly appeared each week.

## **6.2 Future Research**

Future research would benefit from deeper immersion within perspectives from below (keeping ethical concerns in mind), and distance (temporal and physical) from continual streams of news, particularly policy announcements from above. Political organizing in future digital publics and information-gathering in post-truth may pose considerable challenges to researchers.

COVID-19 is a reminder of future essential service crises, as Blakeley (2020) reminds in the conclusion. As such, future research must be transdisciplinary and across areas of expertise. Experts in education, transportation, water, waste management, power (recall Texas in February 2021), digital infrastructure, and other public services should share, and researchers should not be afraid to follow the crises, wherever they emerge. Building one's capacity to compassionately learn with is a precursor, as is ecological education. We cannot be above what we ask of children.

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# **APPENDIX**

## TIMELINES

### New York COVID-19 2020/21

March 1, 2020	First case of COVID-19 reported in NYS (estimates show likely 10,000 infections at this point)
March 2	Emergency powers bill passed for Governor Cuomo, Cuomo convenes interagency state task force
<b>March 7</b>	<b>Cuomo declares statewide state of emergency</b>
March 10	Cuomo closes schools in New Rochelle from March 12 - March 25
<b>March 12</b>	<b>De Blasio issues state of emergency (95 confirmed cases in NYC), DOE cancels extracurricular activities</b>
<b>March 13</b>	<b>De Blasio keeps schools open, citing equity concerns over meals and childcare</b>
<b>March 15</b>	<b>De Blasio reverses course, New York City schools ordered to close</b>
March 16	Cuomo orders all schools statewide to close by March 18
<b>March 17</b>	<b>De Blasio suggests stay-at-home order, Cuomo refuses</b>
<b>March 20</b>	<b>Non-essential businesses closed with New York State on PAUSE as of March 22</b>
April 4	Peak of new reported cases in first wave (12,274 New Yorkers)
April 10	Peak in 7-day rolling average of cases in first wave (9,877 New Yorkers)
April 13	Peak in 7-day rolling average of dead New Yorkers (978 New Yorkers); peak of COVID-19 hospitalizations (18,825 New Yorkers)
April 14	Highest number of New Yorkers die directly of COVID-19 (1,003 New Yorkers)
April 15	Donald Hitter dies of COVID-19 (my grandfather, and one of the old age home deaths N.Y. State chose to undercount); peak of 7-day average in COVID-19 hospitalizations (18,581 New Yorkers)
<b>April 16</b>	<b>Cuomo extends PAUSE and school closing until May 15</b>
<b>April 26</b>	<b>Cuomo announces 'Phased Reopening' plan. Schools not included until final Phase (IV)</b>
<b>May 7</b>	<b>State outlines statistical-based criteria for four phased plane</b>

<b>May 15</b>	<b>Some regions of NYS begin reopening</b>
<b>May 27</b>	<b>All regions of New York State except NYC are reopen</b>
<b>June 8</b>	<b>NYC meets criteria for Phase 1 of reopening</b>
<b>June 19</b>	<b>Cuomo issues final press briefing</b>
June 26	Pre-COVID planned last day of school in NYC
<b>July 8</b>	<b>De Blasio announces reopening plan for schools</b>
<b>July 13</b>	<b>Cuomo announces preliminary 'Data-Driven' Guidance for Reopening Schools</b>
<b>July 20</b>	<b>NYC meets criteria for Phase 4 of reopening</b>
<b>August 7</b>	<b>Governor announces schools to reopen in September, and issues long-awaited guidance</b>
<b>August 10</b>	<b>De Blasio delays NYC reopening plan, partially in response to criticism from State</b>
<b>September 1</b>	<b>Mayor and Chancellor reach agreement with UFT to delay reopening for second time</b>
<b>September 14</b>	<b>Mayor announces creation of COVID-19 Situation Room</b>
<b>September 17</b>	<b>Mayor and Public Officials Announce School Reopening Schedule</b>
<b>September 21</b>	<b>Pre-K and advanced special-needs classes begin in-person learning</b>
<b>September 27</b>	<b>NYC principals union cast vote of no confidence in Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Carranza</b>
<b>September 29</b>	<b>Elementary students return to public schools</b>
<b>October 1</b>	<b>Middle and high school students return to public schools</b>
October 4	Mayor sends State proposal to close schools in nine NYC zip codes
<b>October 6</b>	<b>Cuomo introduces cluster strategy, adds weekly testing requirements to schools in 'hotspots'</b>
<b>October 26</b>	<b>Mayor announces final single opt-in period for in-person vs. online learning from Nov 2 - 15</b>
<b>November 7</b>	<b>Presidential Election Results Finalized</b>
<b>November 14</b>	<b>Cuomo to publicly questions wisdom of 3% citywide positivity rate as benchmark</b>

<b>November 18</b>	<b>De Blasio announces all schools will close</b>
November 19	New York City public schools closed for reaching 7-day rolling 3% positivity rate benchmark
<b>November 29</b>	<b>De Blasio announces elementary schools will reopen, DOE will reduce hybrid learning</b>
November 30	Cuomo revises state school guidelines in Orange and Red Zones
<b>December 7</b>	<b>Elementary schools reopen</b>
December 8	President-Elect Biden vows to reopen schools in the first 100 days of his presidency
<b>December 10</b>	<b>District 75 schools reopen; Governor Cuomo announces new cluster guidelines</b>
December 11	Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine receives emergency use authorization from the U.S.
<b>January 6, 2021</b>	<b>De Blasio (with support from Cuomo) advocates ignoring the new 9% positivity threshold</b>
<b>January 11</b>	<b>Teachers included in next group of those eligible to receive COVID-19 vaccines</b>
<b>January 28</b>	<b>Attorney General Tish James releases nursing homes reports against Cuomo Administration</b>
<b>February 12</b>	<b>Cuomo's top aide, Melissa DeRosa, admits to withholding nursing homes information</b>
<b>February 25</b>	<b>Middle schools reopen</b>
<b>February 26</b>	<b>Chancellor Carranza announces his resignation</b>
February 28	Cuomo's second accuser speaks out against sexual assault
<b>March 5</b>	<b>State Legislature curbs emergency powers for Cuomo</b>
<b>March 11</b>	<b>State Legislature opens an impeachment inquiry against Cuomo</b>
<b>March 22</b>	<b>High schools reopen</b>

**Berlin COVID-19 2020/21 (assistance from Marcus 2020, Marcus 2021)**

March 2, 2020	First case in Berlin (first German case was January 27)
<b>March 13</b>	<b>Berlin announces schools to close, effective March 16</b>
March 14	Müller announces clubs and bars will shut on March 17
March 15	Berlin Senat announces restrictions, though still allows events up to 50 guests
<b>March 16</b>	<b>Merkel announces plan for national lockdown</b>
March 17	Berlin schools close
March 22	Merkel announces contact ban; Berlin sets up relief fund
<b>March 23</b>	<b>Lockdown in public space begins</b>
March 26	Peak in new reported cases in first wave - Berlin (292 Berliners)
March 29	Peak in new reported cases in first wave (6,294 Germans), peak in 7-day rolling average of new cases in first wave - Berlin (199 Berliners)
April 2	Amendments on rules from March 23 further detailing public restrictions
April 5	Peak in 7-day rolling average of new cases in first wave (5,595 Germans)
<b>April 15</b>	<b>Germany announces reduced lockdown restrictions</b>
April 16	Highest number of Germans die directly of COVID-19 in first wave (315 Germans); Germany announces step-by-step reopening of schools for May 4
April 21	Peak in 7-day rolling average of dead Germans in first wave (273 Germans)
<b>April 22</b>	<b>First relaxation of restrictions in Berlin, after the 'hard lockdown'</b>
April 30	Merkel and <i>Ministerpräsidentenkonferenz</i> announce reopening of schools
<b>May 4</b>	<b>Schools begin to reopen</b>
May 6	Merkel announces further nationwide relaxation, relinquishes control
<b>May 12</b>	<b>Berlin institutes 'Corona-Ampel' traffic light system for virus indicators</b>
May 27	Thüringen announces its own rules, the first break with unified federal response
<b>June 2</b>	<b>Berlin lifts final degree of restrictions</b>
<b>June 18</b>	<b>Merkel and <i>Ministerpräsidentenkonferenz</i> agree to reopen schools in August</b>
July 22	Berlin eases some gathering restrictions, particularly at restaurants

<b>August 10</b>	<b>School year begins</b>
August 12	Gerhart-Hauptmann-Gymnasium closes independently without <i>Senat</i> approval
August 13	Scheeres criticizes Principal Hänert, blames teachers for failing to follow rules
<b>August 17</b>	<b>Scheeres forms Hygiene Advisory Board (<i>Hygienebeirat</i>)</b>
August 25	Merkel and <i>Ministerpräsidentenkonferenz</i> agree to corona rules
<b>September 2</b>	<b>Berlin announces rules on mask-wearing</b>
<b>September 29</b>	<b>Merkel and <i>Ministerpräsidentenkonferenz</i> announce ‘hotspot’ strategy to avoid lockdown</b>
September 30	Berlin <i>Senat</i> announces further corona restrictions
October 6	Berlin <i>Senat</i> announces curfew and limits on private gatherings
<b>October 8</b>	<b>Schule Stufenplan announced</b>
October 9	Fall break begins
October 15	<i>Ministerpräsidentenkonferenz</i> agrees to new corona plan with restrictions for high risk area
<b>October 20</b>	<b>Berlin tightens its corona measures; Müller declares “Last Chance”</b>
<b>October 22</b>	<b>Senatorin Scheeres unilaterally places all schools on ‘green’ across Berlin;</b> Germany becomes a ‘High Risk’ country according to its own metrics (incidence above 50)
<b>October 28</b>	<b>Merkel announces ‘lockdown light’ effective November 2, keeps schools open</b>
October 30	Berlin <i>Senat</i> announces local measures for ‘lockdown light’
<b>November 2</b>	<b>‘Lockdown light’ begins</b>
November 3	Head of German Medical Association calls to pull ‘emergency brake’ for full lockdown
<b>November 8</b>	<b><i>Gesundheitsamt</i> publicly states they can no longer conduct contact tracing</b>
November 12	Peak in new cases second wave in Berlin (1,965 Berliners)
November 18	Peak in 7-day rolling average of new cases in second wave in Berlin (1,279 Berliners)
<b>November 25</b>	<b>Merkel announces rules for December, and lighter rules for Christmas and New Year’s</b>

<b>December 3</b>	<b>Merkel announces extension for lockdown light until January 10</b>
<b>December 13</b>	<b>Merkel announces lockdown over Christmas, closing of schools from December 16</b>
<b>December 16</b>	<b>Schools close across Germany</b>
December 17	Peak in new cases second wave (33,777 Germans)
December 23	Peak in 7-day rolling average of new cases in second wave in Berlin (2nd) and in Germany (1,273 Berliners, 25,851 Germans)
December 30	Peak in COVID-19 hospitalizations in Berlin (1340 Berliners)
<b>January 5, 2021</b>	<b>Merkel extends lockdown through January 31</b>
<b>January 6</b>	<b>Scheeres announces reopening plan for schools, beginning on January 11</b>
January 7	GEW leaves <i>Hygienebeirat</i>
<b>January 8</b>	<b>Scheeres reverses course after protest, massive parent petition. Reopening pushed to Jan 25</b>
<b>January 12</b>	<b>Traffic light system shows triple red for the first time</b>
January 13	Highest number of Berliners and of Germans die directly of COVID-19 (76 Berliners, 1,244 Germans); peak in 7-day rolling average of dead Berliners and Germans (46 Berliners, 896 Germans)
<b>February 10</b>	<b>Merkel and <i>Ministerpräsidentenkonferenz</i> agree to lift lockdown March 7.</b> They abandon the uniform approach to reopening schools, leaving it to states. <b>Teachers will be moved into higher priority for vaccinations.</b>
<b>February 16</b>	<b>New Berlin Corona Stufenplan drafted,</b> different strategy of 4 clusters and different relative infection rates as metrics when to switch between clusters
<b>February 22</b>	<b>Berlin opens its schools</b>
<b>February 25</b>	<b>Merkel warns of third wave</b>
<b>March 3</b>	<b>Germany extends lockdown until March 28</b>
<b>March 7</b>	<b>Limited retail reopens</b>
<b>March 22</b>	<b>Germany extends lockdown until April 18, announces 'hard lockdown' for Easter</b>
<b>March 24</b>	<b>Merkel issues public apology, reverses hard lockdown for Easter</b>

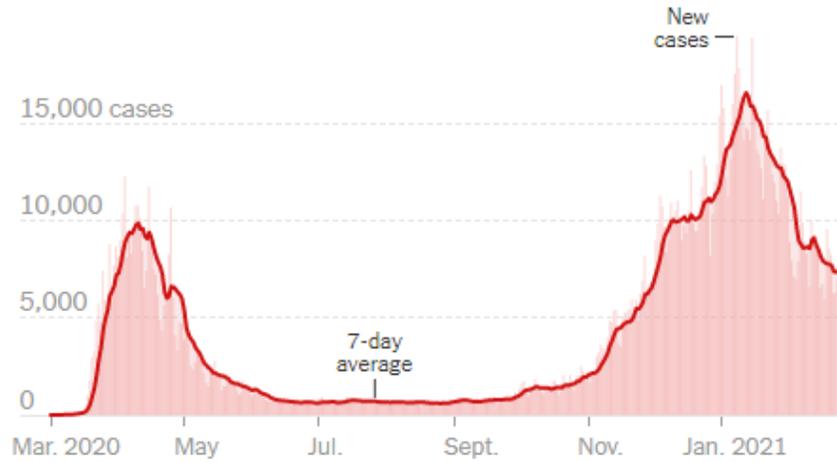
**Singapore SARS 2003 (Source: Straits Times 2013)**

March 1, 2003	Patient No. 1 is admitted to Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) for suspected pneumonia. She and two other women fell ill after visiting Hong Kong.
March 12	The World Health Organisation issues global alert on outbreaks of severe form of atypical pneumonia in Hong Kong, Vietnam and Guangdong.
March 15	The term Sars is coined. Singapore has 16 cases. The Ministry of Health (MOH) forms the Sars task force.
March 16	MOH issues hospital guidelines to screen emergency department patients for fever and travel history to Sars-affected areas. It issues infection-control guidelines.
March 22	TTSH is designated the Sars hospital. The Sars hotline is set up. The number of cases rises to 44.
March 24	The Infectious Diseases Act is invoked. About 740 people are home-quarantined for 10 days.
March 25	Singapore experiences its first Sars death - Patient No. 1's father.
March 26	A pastor who visited Patient No. 1 becomes the second person to die of Sars.
<b>March 27</b>	<b>All schools are shut till April 6. Those who die of Sars must be cremated within 24 hours.</b>
March 29	Temperature checks are introduced for all passengers entering Singapore through Changi Airport.
April 5	Singapore General Hospital (SGH) is hit by a Sars outbreak. The closure of schools is extended.
April 6	A ministerial committee is formed.
April 7	TTSH doctor Ong Hok Su becomes the first hospital worker to die from Sars. Patient No. 1's mother also dies.
<b>April 9 to 16</b>	<b>Schools reopen.</b>
April 22	Sars kills SGH vascular surgeon Alexandre Chao.
May 11	Nurse Hamidah Ismail, one of the first nurses warded for Sars, dies on Mother's Day.
May 18	Last Sars patient detected.
May 30	WHO declares Singapore Sars-free.
July 16	Sars eradicated in Singapore.

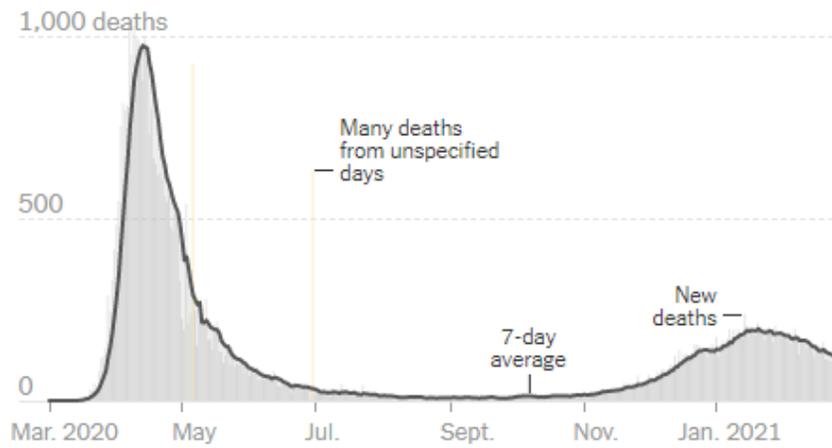
# EPIDEMIOLOGICAL DATA

## New York State

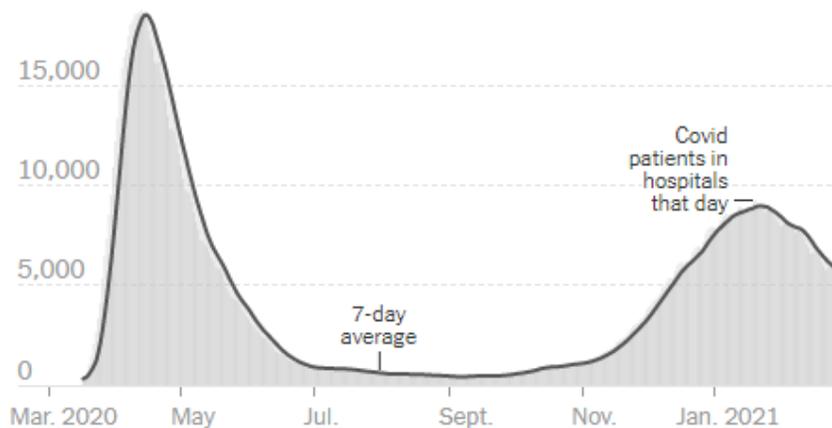
(All sourced from New York Times 20212)



Case Count (as of February 28, 2021)



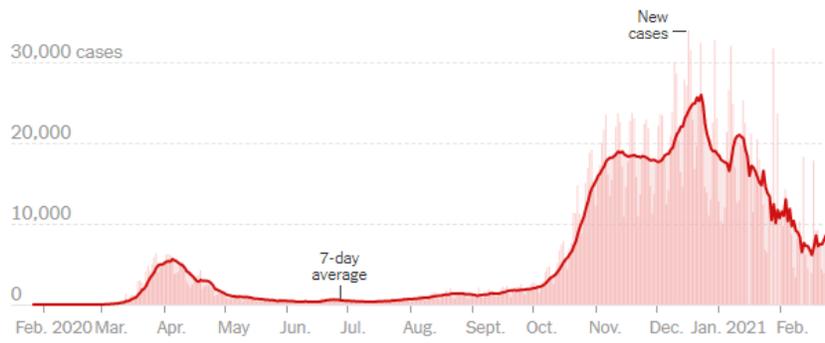
Death Count (as of February 28, 2021)



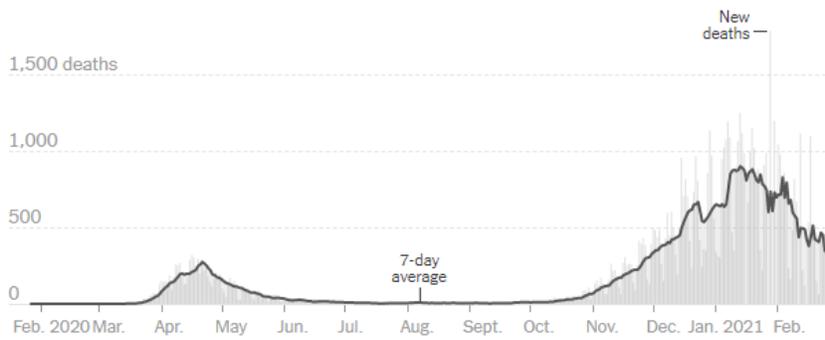
Hospitalizations (as of February 28, 2021)

## Germany

(All sourced from *The New York Times* 2021)



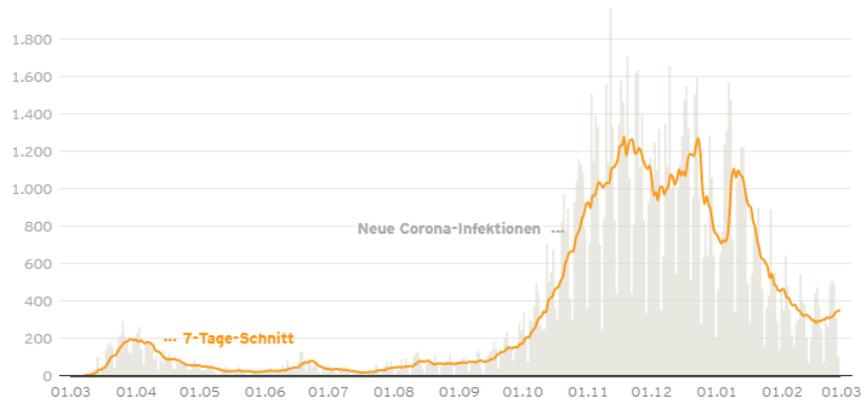
Case Count (as of February 28, 2021)



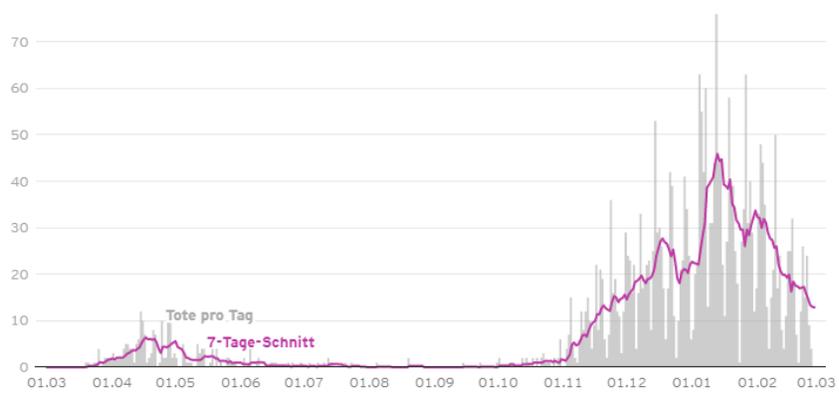
Death Count (as of February 28, 2021)

## Berlin

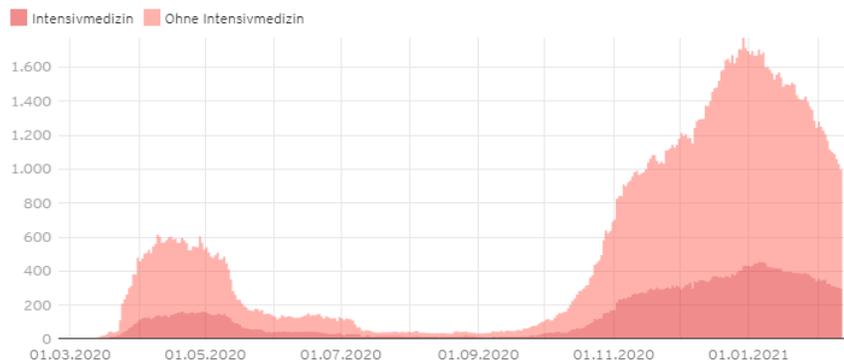
(All sourced from rbb24 2021)



Case Count (as of February 28, 2021)



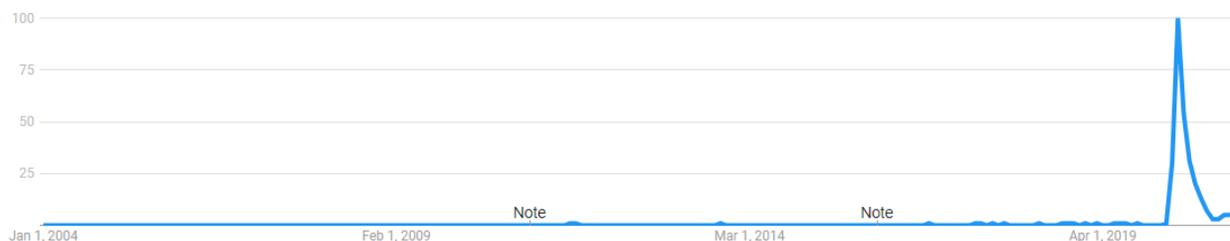
Death Count (as of February 28, 2021)



Hospitalizations (as of February 28, 2021)

## GOOGLE TRENDS DATA

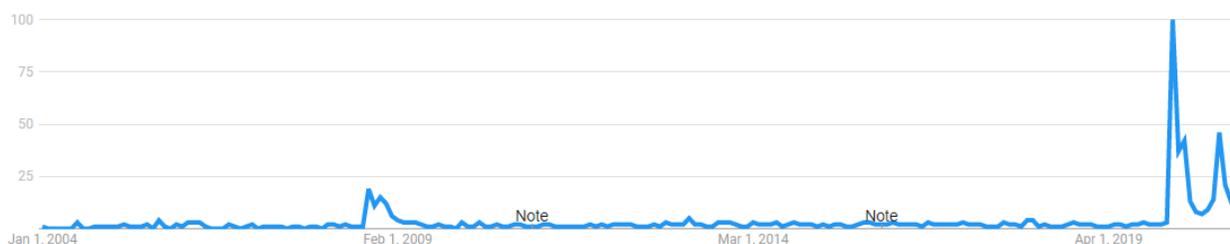
Google Trends queries into “reopening” as a search term in the U.S. reveal relatively low usage prior to April 2020, when interest immediately spiked as the term became introduced into the COVID-19 lexicon. In New York State, specifically, ‘Lockdown’ also spiked in the first wave, and regained new interest as the rates of infection began escalating for a second time in Fall 2020. New York was one of the earliest epicenters of COVID-19, and lockdown measures were more severe in the spring than in the fall or winter, perhaps accounting for the difference in peaks of ‘lockdown’ search inquiries.



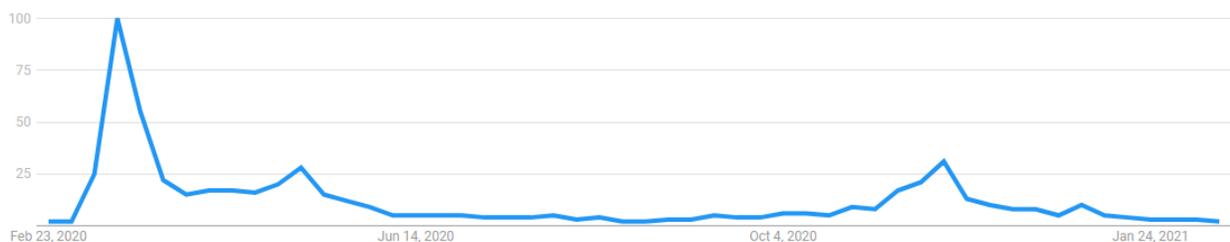
Source: Google Trends: [google.com/trends](https://www.google.com/trends), 'Reopening', results 2004 - February 2021, United States



Source: Google Trends: [google.com/trends](https://www.google.com/trends), 'Reopening', results February 18, 2020 - February 18, 2021, United States

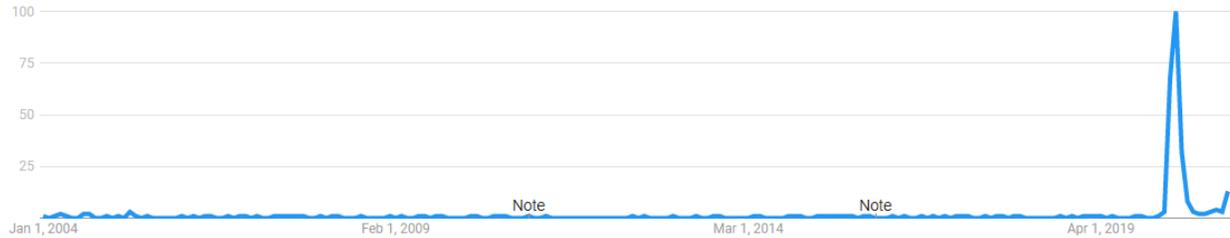


Source: Google Trends: [google.com/trends](https://www.google.com/trends), 'Lockdown', results 2004 - February 18, 2021, New York State



Source: Google Trends: [google.com/trends](https://www.google.com/trends), 'Lockdown', results February 18, 2020 - February 18, 2021, New York State

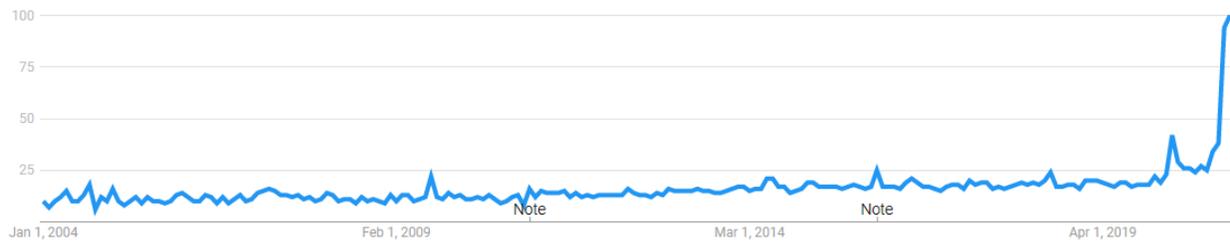
'Lockerung' is as ubiquitous in Germany as 'reopening' is in America. But, its semantics are quite different. It translates most directly to 'loosening', implying tightness where any breathing room is a welcome addition. Frequencies in results for 'Lockerung' spiked during the first wave, whereas the term 'Verlängerung' (extension, or prolongation) became ubiquitous during Germany's second wave.



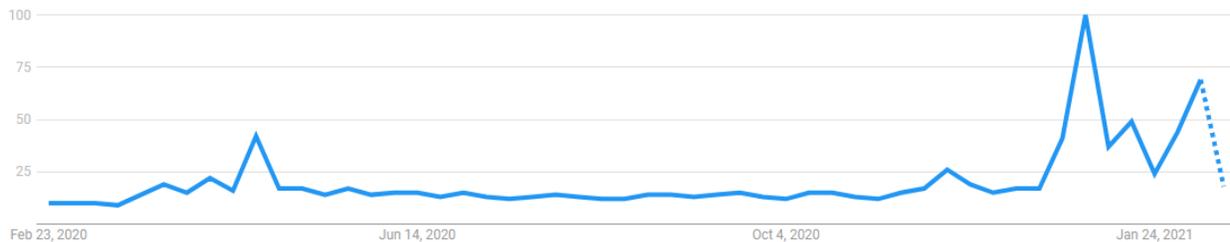
Source: Google Trends, [google.com/trends](https://google.com/trends), 'Lockerung', results 2004 - February 2021, Germany



Source: Google Trends, [google.com/trends](https://google.com/trends), 'Lockerung', results February 18, 2020 - February 18, 2021, Germany



Source: Google Trends, [google.com/trends](https://google.com/trends), 'Verlängerung', results 2004 - February 2021, Germany



Source: Google Trends, [google.com/trends](https://google.com/trends), 'Verlängerung', results February 18, 2020 - February 18, 2021, Germany

## LITERATURE

### **Ten Principles of Emergency Governance in Complex Emergencies (Rode and Flynn 2020)**

- Emergency governance requires government to be in the driving seat as convener in chief. Emergency responses require the leadership of trusted governments: “emergency management is the quintessential governmental role”
- Rapid and radical responses to complex emergencies can increase power imbalances and can potentially result in regressive policies and/or discriminatory practices. Human rights and social justice require the utmost attention as part of emergency governance alongside an open acknowledgement of the related risks.
- Governing complex emergencies requires new forms of democratic legitimacy, which routine and non-routine emergencies may not have to rely on. This requires experimentation with innovative forms of government such as emergency assemblies and juries.
- Conventional ‘command and control’ structures of emergency governance are not capable of addressing the sociopolitical nature of complex emergencies. Instead, a ‘governance by empathy’ is required to ensure collaboration, co-creation and caring are part of emergency responses while building on ideas of a more human government.
- Utilising existing trust and trusted institutions, critical truth-telling and acknowledging the scale of problem plays a key role in governing complex emergencies. Complex emergencies have a particular need for ‘social proof’ and are exposed to a ‘response paradox’. Continuous communication and education based on scientific evidence is needed, in order to emphasise the extreme time pressures that make gradual policies insufficient.
- Emergency governance needs to embrace a systems approach rather than adopting sectoral perspectives. This translates to cluster and nexus approaches which guide and direct sectoral responses that are then re-aggregated as part of an integrated response by the coordinating institutions.
- Emergency governance requires hybridity, combining hierarchical and network governance. Clear roles and responsibilities should be defined, while intensive communication and collaboration from all key stakeholders as part of super-networked governance is critical at the point of transitioning into an emergency mode.
- Multilevel emergency governance requires particular attention. It can build on, but needs to go beyond, normal mode multilevel governance. Multilevel involvement replaces single lead

roles with multiple lead organisations, which coordinate resource allocation and decision making. Emergency leaders at all levels need to be held accountable.

- Differentiating planning and implementation roles are a helpful starting point for structuring emergency governance systems. Avoiding a simple assignment of strategic, tactical and operational modes by governance scale (whereby national equals strategic, and local equals operational) and instead mixing modes and scales leads to more flexible emergency governance.
- The choice of an emergency governance framework depends on the need for alignment with existing governance structures, the attributes of key network actors and the context of the emergency. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to suit all local circumstances and contexts. The governance of complex emergencies must not be standardised.

## **Questions for parents, families, and the public to ask on school reopenings (PACE 2020: 3-9)**

### ***How Can We Optimize Physical Safety in Schools?***

- Physical Dystancing: How will schools keep people 6 feet apart in the classroom, on the playground, in the restroom, and during transitions? Will schools create smaller class sizes to reduce the number of people with whom students interact? Will students also be consistently grouped with a small number of the same students? What signs, directions, and other visual cues will be used to remind students to maintain social distancing?
- Cleaning Hands and Surfaces: How, and how often, will surfaces be cleaned? Who is going to do the disinfecting? If a school staggers start times, how will surfaces and equipment be cleaned between groups? How will schools reduce the use of, and maintain the cleanliness of, shared items including faucets, toilet handles, doorknobs, classrooms, playground equipment, furniture, storage bins, closets, curriculum materials, library books, art supplies, science equipment, and surfaces in common spaces? Will students be well-trained on washing hands, wearing masks, and practicing social distancing?
- Health Screening: How will schools monitor students', school staff and parents' health to prevent people who are ill from entering the school? How will schools limit visitors on campus, including parents and vendors, while still meeting parent needs and ensuring site maintenance and other vendor/supplier services? What provisions will be made for students, teachers, and staff who become ill during the school day? What will the schools' policies be regarding confirmed or suspected illness in the homes of students and staff? How will learning continue during quarantine periods? How will contact tracing be conducted within the school community?
- Ventilation Systems: What, if any, changes to the physical plant, including HVAC infrastructure, equipment, and filters, are being contemplated and to what end? What expertise is being brought to bear in the assessment of current indoor conditions and who is making recommendations for changes? What are the trade-offs between short-term relief and long-term solutions? Since different localities have different resources, how will equity be maintained between and within school districts? Will schools move classrooms outdoors to take advantage of natural ventilation? What contingencies will be made for inclement weather?
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): What additional precautions will be taken for children who are developmentally unable to wear masks effectively? For those who can wear masks, how will the school check that masks are being properly worn throughout the day? Given that different kinds of masks are more or less effective, what guidance will the district provide for appropriate masks? Will the school provide disposable masks to students who don't have one? Might transparent masks and face shields with covers on the

bottom that allow view of the wearer's mouth and expressions be made available? What physical barriers, such as Plexiglas between workstations, are being contemplated? How will PPE supplies be maintained?

- General Health: How will we work together to assure our children are fully immunized? What provisions will be made to ensure staff receive influenza vaccinations, and, when it becomes available, the COVID-19 vaccine? How will other health concerns, such as chronic or acute illnesses not related to COVID-19, be addressed? How will school lunches and other meals be provided safely? What provisions will be made for students and staff to receive behavioral health services as needed?

### ***How Can We Optimize Physical Safety in Schools?***

- Self-Quarantining Logistics: Will schools set up a mechanism with the local or state health department to ensure that educators, staff, students, and their contacts who are exposed are appropriately self-quarantined? Will districts work with health officials to facilitate contact tracing?
- Monitoring Exposure and Infection: If an educator, other staff person, or student tests positive, is ill or is exposed, how will schools know whether students and staff should self-quarantine for 14 days and when it is safe for them to return to school?
- Safety Training: Have all educators, support staff, and contractors been thoroughly trained on safety protocols? Who provides this training and what is its composition? For support staff (bus drivers, food service workers, custodians, etc.) whose various roles bring them into contact with students and each other in non classroom venues, who is teaching and tracking the provision of safety training?
- Immunization: Given the steep decline of immunizations among young children, what is the district's plan to increase immunization rates and prevent an outbreak of other communicable diseases during the COVID-19 pandemic?

### ***How Can We Ensure Learning Whether Schools Are Physically Open or Closed?***

- Instructional Practices: How will schools continue interactive learning in a pandemic altered classroom? How will teachers be trained to maximize opportunities for experiential learning even within the adjusted learning environment? What is the plan to disseminate innovative and effective instructional practices that some teachers and other experts have developed?
- Distance Learning: If the district employs distance learning as part of the reopening, how will all students have access to computers and the internet? Who will supervise each child's

online learning if their parents have to work? How much online time will students have with their teachers on an average day? What training will teachers receive to improve their ability to conduct distance learning? What can we do to support families to optimize the home environment for learning? Will childcare or other in-person support be provided for families that need it?

- Equity: Early research suggests that the achievement gap between Black students, Latinx students, students in poverty, unhoused students, students with disabilities, foster youth, and gender nonconforming youth, compared to economically and educationally advantaged students, will grow as a result of school closures during the pandemic. What are districts doing to ensure these students get the differential supports needed to close learning gaps?
- Physical Education and Arts Education: Some classes and activities will require new ways of thinking if schools are to continue to provide students with physical education, sports, and performing arts. How is the district delivering physical education? Is the district planning on fielding sports teams and how might it do that safely? Will decisions about sports include consideration of activity type and transmission risk across different types of sports? How is the district going to teach other subjects that appear to have a higher potential to spread the virus like music and theater arts?

### ***How Can Schools Help Meet the Social-Emotional Needs of Students?***

- Dealing with Trauma: What do schools have in place to deal with the trauma of isolation, disease, and disruption that children have experienced during the pandemic, as well as the social unrest, protests, and violence related to systemic racism?
- Support Staff: What is the ratio of students to counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and nurses in the district schools? Given likely shortages of support staff, what is the district doing to supplement mental health support providers from outside the school system?
- Family Support: What is the district doing to attend to the mental health needs of parents and educators so that they can best support their children's well-being? Can partnerships between the district, the schools, and mental health professionals be developed to augment existing services?
- Equity: Given the disproportionate infection rates among Black and Latinx students as well as students in poverty compared to White students and staff, how is the school district providing support to the most vulnerable students and families?

## **Features of sound school board governance highlighted in Davis (2020)**

- Having a positive mindset and taking the opportunity to be aspirational and ambitious. (Considering how the school may emerge from this challenge stronger, more engaged, and more capable than before);
- Ensuring that there is a strong degree of trust in and amongst the Board and the school leadership and that the Head of School/Board partnership is functioning effectively;
- Creating trust amongst all stakeholders through dialogue and actions and not just through public statements;
- Reaffirming the Head of School as the leader of the school community and ensuring that the respective roles, responsibilities, and authority of leadership and governance are fully understood and acted upon;
- Ensuring that all Board members are engaged in the decision making and not just the Board Chair and Head of School;
- Ensuring that all decisions are well-aligned with the school's guiding statements and protect the interest of students;
- Creating the understanding that decisions taken during the crisis may affect the school well into the future;
- Creating operational practices that allow for agility in decision making and strategic planning – (Many of the most successful organisations have moved to 90-day strategic planning and have reshaped Board committees and committee membership to bring in specific expertise to address particular challenges);
- Insisting on confidentiality of Board discussions and decisions, and identifying who is responsible for communicating decisions to stakeholders– (usually the Head of School);
- Keeping the school community connected and engaged by having a well-developed and comprehensive communication policy to keep all stakeholders, families, students, and staff, informed in a timely and considered manner;
- Having established policy and practice in relation to privacy and the disclosure of information;
- Ensuring that the Board understands the pressures that school leaders and staff have been under during the crisis and supporting them with their task as well as supporting their well-being.
- Reviewing and adapting strategic initiatives and their timelines;
- Having a predetermined proactive role with risk management and compliance requirements and making realistic assessments of potential outcomes;
- Advocating for and facilitating staff training to manage risk;
- Keeping the school community connected and engaged by having a well-developed and comprehensive communication policy to keep all stakeholders, families, students, and staff, informed in a timely and considered manner;
- Having well established and effective links with external agencies – (health, law enforcement, local and national government agencies, social service agencies, specialised professionals and embassies);

- Actively engaging in dialogue and sharing information with other schools and with educational associations;
- Shifting development priorities where necessary to ensure that the school has the technological capacity to provide engaging distance and remote learning;
- Ensuring financial stability by considering new models of financial planning and management;
- Establishing an early commitment to the issue of refunds to parents in areas such as tuition fees, transportation, catering, Boarding, activities etc.;
- Establishing future fee levels based on data as well as objective market evidence;
- Identifying alternative forms of income;
- Developing sound models to predict future enrolment;
- Reviewing and revising future contingency commitments;
- Establishing a compensation philosophy and reviewing school leader and staff salaries to ensure retention and recruitment of staff in uncertain times with the challenges of international travel, nationally imposed travel and quarantine restrictions, and uncertainty about future enrolment levels;
- Establishing a plan to retain school leaders: Ensuring that the Head of School and senior leaders feel valued by the Board and developing a long term succession plan for school leadership;
- Recognising that the pandemic has brought another dimension to the management of well-being and ensuring that strategies are implemented to manage student and staff self-care, emotional well-being, and mental health;
- Ensuring that appropriate protocols are in place to ensure the safeguarding of students engaged in remote learning;
- Ensuring that appropriate support is provided for the individual needs of students.

## **The State of the American Student Fall 2022: Executive Summary (CRPE 2022)**

The pandemic was a wrecking ball for U.S. public education, bringing months of school closures, frantic moves to remote instruction, and trauma and isolation. Kids may be back at school after three disrupted years, but a return to classrooms has not brought a return to normal.

This report draws on data the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has collected and synthesized during the pandemic. It outlines the contours of the crisis American students have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic and begins to chart a path to recovery and reinvention for all students—which includes building a new and better approach to public education that ensures an educational crisis of this magnitude cannot happen again.

What follows are highlights of the primary findings and recommendations. Students lost critical opportunities to learn and thrive as a result of the pandemic. The state of American students as we emerge from the pandemic is still coming into focus, but we know the following:

- The typical American student lost several months' worth of learning in language arts and more in mathematics. New NAEP scores reveal historic achievement drops.
- Students suffered crushing increases in anxiety and depression. Hundreds of thousands lost loved ones and were forced to mourn in isolation.
- Students poorly served before the pandemic were profoundly left behind during it, including many with disabilities who were cut off from essential school and life services.

This deeply traumatic period threatens to reverberate for decades, robbing a generation of its potential and exacerbating existing inequities. The academic, social, and mental-health needs are real, they are measurable, and they must be addressed quickly in order to avoid long-term consequences to individual students, to the future workforce, and to society.

The averages mask dire inequities and widely varied impact. Some students are catching up, but time is running out for others. Every student experienced the pandemic differently, and there is tremendous variation from student to student, with certain populations—namely, Black, Hispanic, and low-income students, as well as other vulnerable populations—suffering the most severe impacts.

- The effects were most severe where campuses stayed closed longer. American students are experiencing a K-shaped recovery, in which age and income-based achievement gaps, which existed before the pandemic, are widening even further.
- At the pace of recovery we are seeing today, too many students of all races and income levels will graduate in the coming years without the skills and knowledge needed for college and careers.
- More than one in 360 U.S. children lost a parent or caregiver to Covid-19. Children from racial and ethnic minority groups were, by far, more likely to lose a caregiver than white, non-Hispanic children.

The situation could be significantly worse than the early data suggest. What we know at this point is incomplete.

- The data and stories we have to date are enough to warrant immediate action, but there are serious holes in our understanding of how the pandemic has affected various groups of students, especially those who are typically most likely to fall through the cracks in the American education system.
- We still know too little about the learning impacts in nontested subjects, such as science, civics,

and foreign languages. We know little about students with complex needs, such as those with disabilities and English learners.

- The evidence we have to date may understate inequitable impacts or underestimate the long-term effects on students.

The harms students experienced during this pandemic can be traced to a rigid and inequitable system that put adults, not students, first.

- Despite often heroic efforts by caring adults, students and families were cut off from essential support, offered radically diminished learning opportunities, and left to their own devices to support learning.
- Too often, politics, not student needs, drove decision-making, and students with the most complex needs suffered the most, as they always have.
- Despite efforts from many well-meaning adults, students with complexities and differences too often faced systems immobilized by fear and a commitment to sameness rather than priority setting, prioritization, and problem-solving.

Diverse needs demand diverse solutions, and certain pandemic discoveries paint a path toward a better way. During the pandemic, vital building blocks began falling into place that could help make seemingly far-off visions of educational transformation a reality.

- Some students thrived outside of traditional school and classroom settings. Parents and teachers also discovered or rediscovered new ways to connect and engage with young people.
- Informal pandemic pods, virtual IEP meetings, and new connections between schools and community members showed a more equitable, joyful, and individualized education system is not only necessary but also possible.
- Freed from the routines of rigid systems, some parents, communities, and educators found new ways to tailor learning experiences around students' needs. They discovered learning can happen any time and anywhere. They discovered enriching activities outside class and troves of untapped adult talent. These were exceptions to an otherwise miserable rule— and they can inform the work ahead.

We must act quickly, but we must also act differently. The pandemic revealed a U.S. education system that was unprepared to deal with uncertainty, to meet diverse student needs, to respond quickly in a crisis, to overcome adult-centered political dynamics, and to marshal strong leadership on behalf of student interests. This pandemic was no one's fault, but the response was.

The kids aren't all right now, but many weren't all right before. As we look toward recovery and rebuilding, we must be clear-eyed about what this generation of students is owed. We must commit to rebuilding a system that's more flexible and prepared for future crises, more open to adopting new practices, and better prepared to deliver on the potential of future generations. Achieving that will require an ambitious national vision, goals for rebuilding, and a commitment to tracking progress. It will require bold leadership to build new constituencies for change across the education, health care, business, faith, and civic communities. The work is far from over.

Important next steps include the following:

- Districts and states should immediately use their federal dollars to address the emergent needs of the Covid generation of students via proven interventions, such as well-designed tutoring, extended learning time, credit recovery, additional mental-health support, college and career guidance, and mentoring. The challenges ahead are too daunting for schools to shoulder alone. Partnerships and funding for families and community-driven solutions will be critical.

- By the end of 2022–23, states and districts must commit to an honest accounting of rebuilding efforts by defining, adopting, and reporting on their progress toward 5- and 10-year goals for long-term student recovery. States should invest in rigorous studies that document, analyze, and improve their approaches.
- Education leaders and researchers must adopt a national research and development agenda for school reinvention over the next five years. This effort must be anchored in the reality that the needs of students are so varied, so profound, and so multifaceted that a single system can't possibly meet them all.
- Recovery and rebuilding should ensure the system is more resilient and prepared for future crises. School systems must be equipped to deliver high-quality, individualized pathways for students and build on practices that show promise.

This is the first in a series of annual reports CRPE intends to produce through fall 2027. The inaugural report provides an initial account of the damage done and debts owed to students, a roadmap for organizing research and community action around the most pressing concerns, and a call to act on what the data tell us. We hope every state and community will produce similar, annual “state of the student” accounts and begin to define ambitious goals for recovery.

The implications of these deeply traumatic years will reverberate for decades unless we find a path not only to normalcy but also to restitution for this generation and future generations of American students. Addressing immediate learning loss is essential, but the long-term goal of recovery must be far more ambitious. If the pandemic exposed a brittle, fragile, and deeply inequitable public education system, let's aim for what author Nassim Talib defines as an “antifragile system”—one that is far better as a result of shocks like a pandemic, not just capable of surviving those shocks.

If students need a richer array of mental-health support, mentoring, and social connections, let's find permanent ways to weave them into the school and neighborhood fabric. If families of racial minorities have lost trust in schools' ability to treat their communities with respect, let's cement ways to listen and respond more openly. If high school students need hope, direction, and practical skills, not a crushing load of AP exams, let's reimagine the programs and pathways we're offering them. If students with hidden talents finally thrived during the pandemic with more one-on-one support or activities that tapped their interests, let's help schools offer more individual attention.

Everyone has a role to play. CRPE is committed to helping community members, policy makers, and the media hold school systems and public officials accountable for these needed recovery and rebuilding efforts. We've helped collect and spotlight promising uses of federal recovery funding, we're continuing to gather and share the latest pandemic-related data on schools and families, and we're studying the practices of innovative schools that might hold promise for replication and expansion.

The road to recovery can lead us somewhere new. In five years, we hope to report that out of the ashes of the Covid-19 pandemic, American public education emerged transformed: more flexible and resilient, more individualized and equitable, and—most of all—more joyful.

