San Diego State University

Program in Educational Leadership Dissertation Defense Announcement

Student Name: Jeffrey Friedenberg

Committee Chair: Nancy Frey, Department of Educational Leadership

Committee Member: Doug Fisher, Department of Educational Leadership

Committee Member: Matthew Tessier, San Diego County Office of Education

Title of Dissertation: The Antidote: School Leaders' Impact on Student Achievement Recovery After the COVID-19 Pandemic School Closures

Date of Defense: Tuesday, November 3, 2026

Time of Defense: 4:00 PM PT

Location of Defense: Virtual via Zoom @ https://SDSU.zoom.us/j/85934013313

Abstract

Five years after the COVID-19 pandemic school closure event, it was reported that only 13% of schools in a large southern California county were achieving at or above their pre-pandemic levels. This study identifies three elementary schools in the county that were successful in meeting or exceeding their pre-pandemic achievement levels and led by the same principal from before the closure and five years later. The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify what leadership actions these principals perceive as being attributable to their schools' success. Participants represented one of three different National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale types: Suburban, Urban, and Rural (Town – Fringe). The review of scholarly literature includes information about the contributing factors to learning loss during the school closures, case studies of leadership actions after natural disasters, and discussions about three prominent leadership theories: Instructional, Transformational, and Integrated Leadership. Using a multiple case study design, participants were interviewed and submitted primary source documents from their work between 2019-2024. An Explanation Building approach was used to analyze data. The main finding suggests that the principals successfully led their schools to achievement recovery by approaching their actions along an Integrated Leadership spectrum. More Transformational Leadership-aligned actions took place during and immediately after the closures then incrementally more Instructional Leadership-aligned actions were implemented as the learning experience at the school evolved. A four-phased Integrated Leadership approach to recovery gleaned from the principals' approaches emerges as a transferable action plan for school leaders whose schools experience a significant disruption in the future.