

# *Opportunities and Challenges for Adaptation and Innovation: A Study of Educators' Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

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## **Case Study: Deerfield Elementary School**

*I know they say flexibility is the biggest thing. You have to be willing to be flexible and adapt and change with what [is] happening, and I think that has been the biggest thing because from everybody being flexible and willing, they are looking at things in a different light. Instead of just saying, “Nope, this is my content; this is the way that I’m teaching it,” they’re like, “Okay, yeah, I never thought of presenting it that way or engaging the kids that way.” – teacher*



### **School Context**

Deerfield Elementary School is one of four elementary schools in the Whitesboro Central School District in central New York. The school is surrounded by single family homes and situated within a short drive of downtown Utica, with farm country not far away. Along with its four elementary schools, this district, with similar demographics to other upstate NY suburban districts, includes a middle school campus serving 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade students and the Whitesboro High School serving 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades.

A distinguishing feature of Deerfield ES is its supportive and caring climate and collaborative and family-oriented culture. As one teacher expressed it,

*[M]y kids have gone here — absolutely loved their teachers — and we get along as a group of teachers, inside and outside of school. The teachers just have a way about them that if they know if there is something going on in a child’s life, they are right there for them. We’re caring. . . . If you are a family in need, this school rallies around you, whether it is out of our own pockets, whether it is basket raffles, we get lists of names, we send clothing, wrap gifts for Christmas, it’s supportive.*

During the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Whitesboro, like other communities across NY State and the country, experienced a number of novel challenges that needed

immediate action. As the Deerfield ES principal explained, providing technology support, delivering meals to families in need, or communicating changes to procedures required the district and school to provide frequent and clear communications with staff and families:

*They [district offices] set up a link for parent tech support immediately . . . the parent could just click on the link for tech questions or help. . . . Our technology was phenomenal from the get-go. They thought of all resources. For example, food: almost immediately our food service department was giving out hundreds of meals a week. We often set up times for materials to be picked up. We luckily have the robo-call, so we could send out messages with dates and times for people to stop by the elementary schools to pick up materials and technology. . . . The robo-call was huge. I do feel like we are very fortunate, I don't think there was anything that we could have asked [the superintendent] for, you know, within reason, that he wouldn't have figured out how to get for us.*

Along with the challenges of meeting immediate needs like those described above, teachers needed to make significant changes to their instruction—in most cases needing to create all new materials and use new methods for teaching online using Google Classroom and Zoom, among other technologies. Meanwhile, support staff such as social workers and school psychologists needed to make a number of adjustments to how and when they provided services to students and families. As a district leader explained, “I don't think enough can ever be said about how well they [district and school staff] adapted and how quickly they adapted.”

What explains the capacity of Deerfield ES leaders and staff to adapt and innovate?

In this community, district and school leaders and school staff relied upon their pre-pandemic supportive and welcoming climate and collaborative and familial culture to mitigate negative impacts of the pandemic on their staff, children, and families. Building and sustaining relationships was a top priority. For leaders' part—they listened to educators', children's, and parents' and community members' needs and ensured resources were allocated to meet those needs in a timely manner. They above all remained child centered and focused on maintaining a balance between compassionate care and high expectations of themselves and their students.

### **The Study**

In March 2021, the NYKids research team undertook a study to try to understand educators' experiences during the first year of the pandemic. We were especially interested to learn what conditions might account for different levels of stress and job satisfaction from school to school, and so solicited the participation of schools across the state. See the methods and procedures report<sup>1</sup> for details about the study design and educator survey questions.

This case study reports how district and school leaders, teachers, and support staff members approached adapting and innovating in the context of the challenges of the pandemic. It

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<sup>1</sup> Discovering Differential Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Education Workforce: Methods and Procedures Report (ny-kids.org) [https://ny-kids.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/nykids.covid\\_study\\_methods.FINAL.pdf](https://ny-kids.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/nykids.covid_study_methods.FINAL.pdf)

highlights those policies, processes, and practices that facilitated educators, parents, and community members supporting children’s academic learning and social-emotional well-being.

**School Selection Criteria**

Deerfield Elementary School met the criteria for inclusion in this study based on the 2021 survey of educators’ responses to the pandemic because it exhibited more positive workforce responses with regard to stress and job satisfaction than other schools in the sample (n=38). Cluster analysis (i.e., the grouping of responses in clusters by similarities and comparing those to other clusters) was used to categorize teachers’ responses into three categories: high, medium, and low for the variables examined. Standardized means were calculated to identify and rank schools. With a score of 52.2% compared to an overall sample mean of 36.9% and standard deviation of 15.4%, Deerfield Elementary School qualified as a positive outlier in this study.

**Student Demographics 2021-2022: Deerfield Elementary School, Whitesboro Central School District**

	Deerfield Elementary School	Whitesboro Central School District	New York State
Grades Served	K-5, UE	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	318	3,075	2,512,973
Economically Disadvantaged	41%	37%	57%
English Language Learners	3%	1%	10%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
Black or African American	1%	1%	16%
Hispanic or Latino	3%	4%	28%
White	92%	89%	41%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%	1%
Asian, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0%	1%	10%
Multiracial	4%	3%	3%

Demographic data are from the state report cards for 2021-2022 (<https://data.nysed.gov/>).

**Highlights: Facilitators for Adaptation and Innovation**

**Collaborative and Familial Relationships**

The COVID-19 pandemic acted in many ways to strain relationships as people experienced social distancing and significant disruptions in their personal and professional lives. In Deerfield ES, educators and staff benefitted from pre-pandemic collaborative and familial relationships between those working in the district and between district staff and community members. As one district administrator explained,

*Our school community was tremendous. During the pandemic we had countless people volunteer for different events. We held food giveaways, milk giveaways, vaccine clinics, and COVID testing clinics. We tried to do everything we could. If the farmers had milk to give away, we were happy to distribute. When the food bank had food to give away, we had cars lined up for miles. We tried to do the best we could to support our community.*

These efforts to maintain relationships and tap people’s good will and desire to help others provided the necessary human connection to buffer school staff’s stress during the most challenging times. The potent combination of good will and tangible resources from the district

and community partners offered in a timely manner were key to maintaining relationships and building trust between district and school staff and community members.

### **Inclusive Problem Solving and Distributed Decision Making**

Another major facilitator for Deerfield ES staff's adaptations during the pandemic was their distributed approach toward problem solving and decision making. Teachers and support staff shared their view that the school and district culture supported staff's willingness and capacity to solve problems individually and together. They connected their problem-solving approach to the principal as well as district leaders' philosophies and behaviors that balanced autonomy with high expectations for individual and group effort and performance. Importantly, everyone thinking creatively about how to solve problems was key to the school's responsiveness to child and family needs during the pandemic. As one teacher explained,

*So it was . . . very chaotic, I think, in the beginning [of the pandemic], but yeah there was a feeling of working together and really just trying to . . . problem solve together.*

Opportunities for each individual to be part of solving some problems was fueled by leaders who encouraged innovative thinking, but also with clear expectations for staying child centered.

### **Responsive and Developmentally Appropriate Approach to Change**

As the pandemic required school staff, children, and families to learn to do things in new ways, oftentimes without much, if any, preparation, having a responsive and developmentally appropriate approach to change was key to staff responses and ultimately to children's and families' experiences. In this respect, the Deerfield ES principal, in alignment with district leaders, provided space and time for staff to adapt their instruction, parent engagement strategies, and other services. Two teachers explained how this approach to change impacted their stress levels and capacities to adapt:

*I would say that towards the end of that spring, the first year [2020], was when it was kind of said, "Well, try to meet [on Zoom] once a week at least." It was just very manageable. And it happened over a period of time. Then, you know, once we came back the following year [fall 2020], then it was all-in at that point. I think the pacing of it was extremely helpful. – teacher 1*

*So it was more laid back in the beginning [of the pandemic] for sure. And, like I said, just paced out and everybody had to just kind of gain a comfort from it. Our expectations for our community weren't too high and unmanageable, and then that trickled to us too. But as educators, we hold ourselves to a higher standard. So we did that ourselves. I don't think administration pushed that onto us, which was super helpful. – teacher 2*

These highlights are evident throughout the four lines of inquiry (i.e., leadership practices, academic learning, social-emotional learning, and parent and community engagement) that guided the study of which this case is one part. The sections below report findings within this framework.

## A Closer Look

### Leadership Practices

#### **Balancing Autonomy and Shared Responsibility**

Stress and ensuing disengagement are typical responses to dynamic situations -- like the pandemic -- that force individuals to work outside their comfort zones. Despite these adverse conditions, Deerfield ES teachers and support staff, while not being immune to the pandemic's stressors, expressed benefitting from an established school culture that balanced educator autonomy with shared responsibility. This culture was something the principal had established over several years, as she explained:

*I think that my teachers will tell you that I have clear communication and we all know where we are headed. To be successful here, we all have to move in the same direction.*

Heading in that “same direction” relies on norms for cooperation and collaboration, as well as high expectations for individual performance (for children and staff alike); a valuing of clarity and order; and a shared belief that caring for each other and children is core to their purpose. And from staff perspectives, one teacher reflected on his experience coming to Deerfield ES from another school and how different he felt about how his ideas were valued:

*Coming here I had that . . . feeling, “Oh, geez, here we go again . . . I’ll be quiet, keep my mouth shut.” But over time you just realize . . . that there are people here that actually care. There was leadership, I knew there was direction. There were no questions of like, “What was I supposed to be doing? Am I allowed to do this idea?” Everybody’s willing to listen here. Everybody cares about you, and from outside [community] I don’t feel much judgment ever. And after a few months, I was able to open up and just be myself and enjoy what I love to do, and it’s because of the building and the people here.*

#### **Using Individual Expertise, Teams, and Committees**

In this environment teachers were given space to develop their own strategies, while also working together to help each other learn new things. As one newer teacher explained, she used different communication methods than some her colleagues and this was not discouraged.

*I use Class Dojo. I just like it, but it’s not adopted by the school. So some use mostly communications through Google Classroom and then some just use email, so I think they left it to us to figure out what we’re most comfortable with.*

While many of the ways teachers and support staff helped each other manage pandemic-related disruptions were through their informal networks, others were encouraged through structured team and committee work. One teacher, when talking about her instructional adaptations, described how committees helped distribute information and make decisions about what technologies teachers needed:

*There’s been various committees throughout the year that you’re able to go through and say, “Okay, what are some online resources that you found [that] have really helped you during the pandemic? Is this something that we want to consider purchasing? Do we*

*need the licensing for the whole entire school? Do we need it for like certain grade levels?" and kind of going through and having those discussions. And then there are network meetings that are available at each grade level where different conversations are happening regarding things that have been shared or created, how one person's working through content versus another school. We looked at our pacing guides and how we are going to present information from there. And then again, we share that information back to our building principals, and then it gets shared with [district leadership].*

### **Communicating, Phasing In, and Building Up**

Whitesboro district and school leaders made concerted efforts to listen to staff, youth, parent, and community member needs and concerns as they crafted their communications. One of their hallmark practices was to use resources like Thought Exchange (a discussion management platform) to gather community member input on their ideas and, through this feedback, align their decision making and communications around decisions. The superintendent explained this posture and process as he discussed engaging with teachers and union representatives about decisions impacting when and how much teachers would be expected to be offering in-person instruction and under what conditions:

*We believe that we had covered all the bases, but it's possible we had overlooked something. We asked everyone to let us know what concerns they had so that we could address them. We wanted no question unanswered, no concern unaddressed.*

In addition to using multi-way communication strategies, one of the ways the Deerfield ES principal, along with district leaders, assisted staff in adapting to pandemic-related problems was by inviting them to draw on their own knowledge and each other's knowledge to solve problems and in ways that built up their individual and shared expertise over time. Teachers and support staff expressed appreciation for not having mandates "shoved down our throat," as one teacher put it.

As an example, since the pandemic persisted from one academic year to the next, a number of children were needing extra academic support beyond what had existed pre-pandemic. While daunting to implement any new initiative or academic program during a time of dynamic change and uncertainty, some things of high import like this were not delayed in Whitesboro. Rather, innovations were thoughtfully phased in, with feedback loops used to check on how staff were progressing with any new initiative or program implementation. Several Academic Intervention Specialists (AIS) described how important the phasing in of new initiatives (e.g., changes to AIS) was for them.

*AIS2 - She's [the principal] one that's like, do it, go in, and you've got to . . . do it 100%.*

*AIS3 - It's [new initiative] eased in.*

*AIS2 - It's always eased in. It's like, read it, learn it, do what you can do.*

*AIS3 - And they [leaders] ask for feedback along the way.*

*AIS2 - Yeah*

*AIS3 - They're good at getting the buy-in.*

## Academic Learning

### **Prioritizing the Curriculum**

The pandemic disrupted instruction significantly during the last few months of the 2019-20 school year, and then continued to disrupt instruction going into 2020-21, and to some extent in 2021-22. In response, the district leadership team engaged with school principals and staff in an effort to ensure that Whitesboro students would receive instruction in the most essential content for their grade level. To make such curricular decisions, the superintendent explained, this effort relied upon a foundation of trust in staff and their expertise held by leaders:

*We asked teachers K-12 to reprioritize their curriculum. We knew that it would be impossible to cover the same amount of curriculum in the way we were going to be delivering instruction on the hybrid model. We provided time and resources for teachers to do this work. They're the subject area experts. They're the content experts. We relied on them, knowing what the standards are, to put that plan together.*

### **Using Technology and Spreading Technological Expertise**

While having technology and technological expertise available to teachers and staff was clearly important to meeting staff, child, and family needs during the pandemic, how technologies and technological expertise were distributed and taken up to ultimately transform practice was an important part of Deerfield ES' pandemic journey. Since Deerfield ES's culture was such that cooperation and collaboration were expected, the use of Google Suite technologies (where teachers shared instructional materials) expanded on their collective learning opportunities. A teacher explained how the pairing of Deerfield's collaborative culture with technologies to allow for constant and more comprehensive sharing of instructional materials and strategies took shape and has endured to have lasting and beneficial impacts on their abilities to share instructional innovations.

*I feel like – not that we didn't share before – but I think it's just been easier and quicker because now we can send out a link or have a doc where maybe we're collaborating together and then we're both working on it. If one of us starts creating an assessment or an activity and someone else can finish it. I know during . . . that first year [of the pandemic], we were definitely doing that -- a lot kind of splitting, you know, divide and conquer, "Oh I'll digitize the social studies, and if you can do the science," and then we would share and push it out to the kids from there. So just being able to kind of divide and conquer in that way, and it was quicker and just more efficient.*

### **Different Needs – Different Approaches – Different Assessments**

One of the aspects of Deerfield ES staff's approach to meeting the needs of their students during the pandemic was through setting up systems for students to receive multiple opportunities, and in some cases, multiple modes (i.e., through video, text, audio) to access content. One example of how different needs were met through different approaches was through the use of "parallel practices" and offering program materials such as audio-recorded readings of texts. A support staff member explained,

*Then we did start setting up things like IXL math IXL ELA—it won't be the exact lesson we taught but there's a parallel lesson or a parallel practice. So we're saying, if you did*

*not get on [Google Classroom] Wednesday go on IXL 3.1. We found the parallels [in these programs] and teachers were also on their Google Classroom adding things like, from our reading program . . . recordings of somebody reading the book to you. It was part of the program that's always been there . . . we'd never used, but when this happened [the pandemic] we started using it. – support staff member*

A major challenge support staff and teachers described was in closing academic gaps for students who had not experienced challenges in their academics to the extent they did during the pandemic. As one support staff member explained, while Deerfield ES' interventions have been in place for students identified for intervention services prior to the pandemic, meeting the needs of the many more students who struggled academically during the pandemic required thinking outside the box. At the time of this study, how to address those academic gaps and use assessments not designed for such a scenario was yet unclear, but a focus of their learning coming out of the pandemic.

*We were hybrid then we were remote, then we were hybrid, then back in-person. It's just a lot of change in these young people's lives. . . . The academic piece is a huge part . . . and we're relying heavily on the Special Ed portion instead of implementing school-based interventions in the classroom setting to address these gaps. And it's hard for us in the evaluation team because we all know . . . the assessments we administer. They're not normed for this huge crisis . . . so we're using norms based on average exposure to the curriculum and everything, but they [students] haven't had that. – support staff member*

## **Social-Emotional Learning and Mental Health**

### **Communications and Human Connections**

Maintaining human connections was a top priority in Whitesboro and came with guidance and supports directly from district offices. The superintendent and other district leaders spoke to the importance of communicating what supports were available to maintain connections with children and families and enhancing accessibility to mental health.

*We tried very hard to stay in contact with our students and families. We were fortunate that when we opened up in September 2020, we were able to do so on a hybrid model. We had kids at least coming to school regularly. Although for most it wasn't daily, it was enough to where at least a teacher could stay connected with the student and see if there were issues. We very specifically and consciously had to do those mental health check-ins. – superintendent*

In addition to prioritizing a hybrid (in-person and remote) model as soon as possible to help maintain connections and support children's mental health, the district also made mental health expertise, resource links, and materials available to the community 24-7, using various dissemination methods.

*We armed our social workers and our psychologists with cell phones. We published their phone numbers on the website. We communicated with family so if there were social-emotional or mental health needs, there was always somebody that they can call and get*



*to -- nights, weekends, whatever -- so we felt that that was very important. We put a ton of resources on the website, too, for the mental health piece. – district leader*

Despite this focus and district-level supports, Deerfield ES teachers described having been under-resourced due to a social worker being on maternity leave at the beginning of the pandemic and then several replacements thereafter: a situation one described as “really difficult – especially last year [2020-21].” Deerfield ES staff mitigated these issues by drawing on their shared commitments to children and each other as described in more detail below.

### **Managing Educator Stress and Child Behavior Changes**

While Deerfield staff members were clear that they experienced stress and significant ups and downs throughout the pandemic, they also shared how important their colleagues were for their own mental health and well-being throughout. Several teachers described how important the accessibility and empathy of the principal and their colleagues were to their own abilities to manage stress and take care of their students.

*Teacher 1: I've called her [the principal] crying. I felt comfortable to just say . . . this is happening. It [the principal's response] was just, "Do your best."*

*Teacher 2: . . . and the times she talked you off ledges at 7 in the morning.*

*Teacher 3: I was going through a lot in my personal life. And this is what I had that was a foundation. Like when everything else seemed to be like I don't know . . . I don't know. I still had the school, and I didn't fear for my job, so I was able to keep doing my best.*

Deerfield ES teachers and support staff also spoke to the social-emotional well-being and mental health of Deerfield students and characterized them as overall quite resilient. As one teacher remarked, “You know our kids are elementary. . . . They're young; they're resilient.” Yet, they also noted that elementary school children tended to exhibit a number of behaviors that were concerning. For instance, some described children as “emboldened to be able to just look at you and go, ‘Nope. Not doing it.’ Or, you know, just talking back in general” (teacher). Others described developmental delays among children, with children “acting more like first graders when they’re in second” (principal). Early in the pandemic Deerfield parents, along with staff, developed a number of creative ways of helping children interact even when socially distanced.

*The PTA [Parent Teacher Association] bought like 30 umbrellas so as long as you were under an umbrella [on the playground], that would be your six feet from the other student, but they could go out and read or play or sing if they just each had to get under an umbrella. - principal*

In addition to ramping up social-emotional learning opportunities throughout the school day and providing ways for children to interact with each other, staff and leaders began tackling the need for new assessment tools and procedures. One support staff member described the problems they were encountering with identifying children in need of social-emotional support or mental health services and providing them appropriate, timely services and supports:

*You can't tackle the academic piece until you attack the behavior piece, because if you don't have a good behavior management system in the classroom and have your behaviors taken care of, it's going to impact the academic piece. I think here they do a really great job.*

In response, a district leader described efforts among social workers to develop new instruments to be used with younger children, an effort that was underway at the time of this study. According to a teacher, staff also ramped up social-emotional learning opportunities with a focus on “some the basics like turn-taking and manners.”

### **Parent, Caregiver and Community Engagement**

#### **Parent and Caregiver Engagement Strategies**

Throughout the pandemic, teachers and support staff gained new insights into children’s lives at home. They realized some children live in very different environments from those most of their teachers and staff have lived in, and those children may have little adult supervision, as parents or caregivers are unavailable for a variety of reasons, including their work. Engaging these harder to reach parents and caregivers (while in number few) became a central problem for the Deerfield ES principal and staff to solve. As one support staff summed it up, “I think one positive [of the pandemic] also was when we were Zooming, I think it made staff more aware where our families were coming from. Because we really got an open view in the home life.”

Drawing on their shared commitments to children and collaborative culture, Deerfield ES staff explained that they used a variety of parent engagement methods—emails, text messages, phone calls, home visits, and messaging through Google Classroom. They also innovated, along with parents, in a number of ways. For instance, a group of Deerfield parents set up their own parent class in how to use Google Classroom, and teachers made videos on how to teach parents to help teach a math lesson.

To do all of this, and in alignment with the district priority of staying connected, teachers expanded their workday to engage parents. One teacher described what this looked like, and this same pattern of going above and beyond for parent engagement was echoed by others.

*I had an app on my phone from my own Google Classroom. So the second a parent would write on the Google Classroom, I was responding back to it at 6 o'clock at night, 7:30 in the morning, at school, at home, on the weekend.*

#### **Encouraging Parent Choice and Voice**

This effort to communicate with and engage parents in new ways extended to district leaders, which helped pave a smooth path for the schools as school staff and parents had an open communication channel with the district leadership team. According to the superintendent,

*[W]e held numerous forums with our parents and our employees when we were going to go into our hybrid system, where kids were going to be here either every other day or one out of three days at the secondary level. We fully explained the rationale; we gave examples of how that was going to work. This is after we put our reopening plan on our website so employees, families, and students could go review it before the forum.*

*Participants had an opportunity to submit questions in advance. We tried to answer a lot of them in our presentation. Our [district leaders] presented and our principals and directors were all on hand to answer questions. If there was a question about what filters we're using in the HVAC systems, our Director of Facilities would respond. These forums were extremely helpful, and that's again, where we got a lot of feedback.*

District leaders also used the information they were getting from parents and caregivers to align their offerings. Offering flexibility and choice was key to the Whitesboro experience of the pandemic, as the superintendent explained,

*I think this was one of the reasons we were successful through the pandemic— we gave people options, and we gave parents choice when it came to how to educate their child. If you need to be fully remote, we're going to allow you to be fully remote. If you're going to be back on a hybrid basis, great. If we allowed them to enter into the CiTi BOCES, a secondary program and online high school, we allowed them to continue the following year, as we made a commitment to give kids these opportunities. We needed to see them through.*

### **Partnering with Parents and Outside Organizations**

In the spirit of collaboration, Deerfield ES teachers realized how important partnering with parents would be to their children's success. To this end, they extended the same accessible and developmentally appropriate approach to learning they were receiving from their principal and district leaders to parents and caregivers. For instance, one teacher described the kinds of messages she and her fellow teachers were sending out as they engaged parents and caregivers in learning to use new technologies with their children:

*We did two different things of just kind of emphasizing that "You're there to support your child. They don't need to get the perfect score on it. They don't need to get the best answer, especially at the primary level. . . . [T]he biggest part of their learning is making those mistakes and be able to work from them." We did put information out through our Google Classroom and emails, and when we're preparing paper copies of everything to give them, we put notes in there just saying, "We want your child to work at their level. Here's ways that you can support them and help them." And then we did . . . a video of like, "We're all trying to figure this out and we're working through it." We asked for their patience in a lot of that because we said this is a new piece for us for teaching and being able to still reach your kids and meet their needs. . . . I think a lot of people just were available at basically any hour of the day to just say "If you have questions on something, reach out to us. We're here to help and support you the best that we can.*

In addition to engaging with parents and caregivers as partners in children's learning, district leaders also emphasized the importance of tapping outside organizations and services. As mentioned above, the local BOCES was a resource Whitesboro turned to for youth who needed different options to complete their high school education. And the district also engaged with the Connected Community agency that offers a comprehensive support service for families, including everything from eyewear to health services to firewood and clothing. Other efforts were in the works at the time of this writing, as Whitesboro district leaders were working with

other district leaders in appealing to legislators to advocate for expanding mental health resources and making systems more efficient for people to apply and receive mental health services.

## **In a Nutshell**

*You know, [our principal] might be feeling “ahh” inside but she’s always saying, “Look, you do what you can do.” So when you don’t see the higher ups panicking [you don’t] and honestly, I think [the superintendent] should be a national role model for the way he handled this pandemic, because he just forged through . . . so nobody really panicked.*

– teacher

Like other districts and schools across New York State, the COVID-19 pandemic tested Whitesboro CSD’s systems and leadership, and the Deerfield ES’ collaborative and familial culture. Deerfield ES benefitted from familial and collaborative relationships and a shared commitment to stay child centered. The school also enjoyed district and school leadership that emphasized the importance of multi-way communications and invited each individual to be part of solving problems in partnership with parents and community members. Finally, an approach to change that offered time and space for adaptation backed up with necessary resources and supports in the context of clear and high expectations for effort and performance helped Deerfield staff stay resilient and positioned to serve their community’s children and families.

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