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

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Case Study: Whitesboro Middle School Campus

> *We're not afraid to try things here. And when things don't work out, we go back and we adjust, and . . . even when things do work out, we ask "What can we do better?"* - teacher

School Context

As the "Heart of the District" (School Website), the Whitesboro MS campus serves c. 750 students in two buildings. Grade six students attend the Parkway building, and grades seven and eight go to the Middle School building, both of which are housed on one middle school campus in the Whitesboro Central School District. Parkway is fed by four elementary schools, and Middle School campus graduates proceed on to Whitesboro High School. The district is located in central New York and covers a large geographic area spanning suburban, rural, and urban communities. As the principal explained,

> *Our district runs all the way north up to Route 12, which is a significant distance, and we go through Utica and all the way out to Schuyler and then north of Schuyler. It really is a vast area.* - principal

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Several teachers and support staff reported that they had attended the school district as students themselves and/or had children enrolled in the school district. This, they explained, contributes to a sense of family and commitment to go above and beyond in their work with children and families. Shared commitments among school staff and parents and caretakers were seen as key to helping sustain relationships and trust as the pandemic persisted over two school years.

> *I went to school here, so I'm from this community. I live in the community, so I know a lot of people, and I think a lot of my [students'] parents either I went to school with or they know my family, so when they see or hear my name I almost feel like they . . . have trust already, which, I think, has certainly helped during this [the pandemic].* - teacher

The team that led the Whitesboro MS campus though the pandemic included the principal, a 29-year veteran educator, accompanied by two assistant principals, who in the words of the principal, "come with varying expertise and that is one of the great things about us is that we complement each other so well." The 18 teachers and support staff and five school and district leaders who participated in interviews and focus groups for this study characterized the Middle School campus climate as collaborative and caring and pointed to how committed to the school and community they are:

> *Parkway really is a caring building. Those teachers care about the kids. And we want to do a good job. . . . I want these kids to have a good experience.* -teacher

This commitment to the school and community emerges as an important aspect of the Middle School campus' pandemic journey. During the pandemic, this "tight community," said a teacher, was challenged like others around the country when pivoting to and from remote instruction. Some parents, caretakers and educators did not have internet access in the early days of the pandemic, and many of them had to learn how to use new technologies to support student learning in very short time frames. A teacher reported that these changes "threw everybody for a loop. . . . It was a very stressful time."

Despite these and the multitude of other challenges the pandemic posed, Whitesboro MS campus leaders and educators reported relatively lower levels of stress and higher levels of job satisfaction than their peers in other schools based on a survey. Several characteristics of the campus and district stood out as contributing to their abilities to adapt and innovate during the pandemic: Proactive, conscientious, and caring district and school leadership; a problem-solving and innovative culture built on norms of collaboration and cooperation; and user-friendly systems and communications that kept teaching and learning and social-emotional supports flowing.

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[1] for details about the study design and educator survey questions.

This case study of the Whiteboro Middle School campus 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 highlights those policies, processes, and practices that facilitated educators, parents, and community members support of children's academic and social-emotional learning throughout the pandemic.

School Selection Criteria

The Whitesboro Middle School campus met the criteria for inclusion in this study based on our 2020-21 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 41.5% compared to an overall sample mean of 36.9% and standard deviation of 15.4%, the Whitesboro Middle School campus qualified as a positive outlier in this study.

Student Demographics 2021-22: Whitesboro Middle School Campus, Whitesboro CSD

	Parkway Middle School	Whitesboro Middle School	Whitesboro Central School District	New York State
Grades Served	6	7-8	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	242	513	3,075	2,512,973
Economically Disadvantaged	43%	36%	37%	57%
English Language Learners	0%	0%	1%	10%
Students with Disabilities	23%	17%	16%	18%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution				
Black or African American	2%	2%	1%	16%
Hispanic or Latino	2%	6%	4%	28%
White	90%	88%	89%	41%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%	0%	1%
Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	1%	1%	1%	10%
Multiracial	4%	4%	3%	3%

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

Highlights

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.

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[1] 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

Proactive, Conscientious, and Caring Leadership
District and school leaders' approaches to pandemic related issues were indicated as key drivers for educator adaptation during the pandemic. One of the most important qualities of the school leadership team, as educators described it, was their accessibility. This accessibility took shape in several ways: physically (leaders being outside the building at arrival and dismissal for example); digitally (leaders being on Zoom calls, in Google Classrooms, and in team meetings); and emotionally (leaders being available for 24/7 phone calls or texts or in school visits to assuage fears or deal with particular problems). This presence sent a meta-message of expectations for everyone to approach pandemic challenges with conscientiousness and care and contributed to a sense of feeling supported. As educators described appreciating this support, leaders reciprocated appreciation for staff's efforts as well. As an example, a teacher explained,

> *We do our job, and we work hard, and they [school leaders] appreciate it. And I just feel like, if you need anything . . . if you needed to take a day because you needed to take care of this personal issue, you could go in and tell them . . . this is what's going on in my life. I just feel comfortable walking in there [school leaders' offices]. They [school leaders] truly want to work as a team. During the pandemic, they would come to our team meetings, and they come to team meetings here and now too, but like when we all felt so isolated, they were coming to team meetings. They were listening to the struggles we had. They listen.*

Importantly, both the district and Middle School campus leadership team backed up their words of encouragement with the timely provision of supports, technical and otherwise.

Problem-Solving and Innovative Mindsets
Connected to leaders' proactive, conscientious, and caring qualities and practices, educators and leaders alike described how they approached problem solving and innovating. They expressed how in Whitesboro you are encouraged to "try things out," as one teacher described it, and this was seen as facilitated by clear expectations from leaders about being child and family centered and collaborative. As one teacher reported,

> *We are very open to new things and an advocate for kids. You know, if it's good for kids, we're on board. I appreciate the fact that the expectations are very clear. They're concise and we know what to expect. We know what we're walking into, we know what we're getting from them [school and district leaders]. We know they're backing us.*

This problem-solving and innovative mindset was tested in many different ways throughout the pandemic. The superintendent described some of the ways they addressed problems around: technology use:

> *We had plenty of technology. We had the hotspots. We had the Chromebooks. So we were able to get those in the hands of our students and their families. But what we found is that there were a lot of challenges navigating their use: "How do you use it?" The platforms were sometimes tricky as far as the academic programs that the students were using. We heard that they [students and families] were having difficulty. We created a system of*

online support for them that they could access 24/7 on our website. We had countless documents there . . . helping them walk through different technical issues. If they were having a hardware issue, they could submit a ticket, and our techs would get in touch with them. They went to their houses and helped.

This problem-solving and innovative approach was fed by norms for being collaborative. Educators at the Middle School campus described ongoing informal collaborations to solve immediate problems – oftentimes related to particular student needs or an instructional adaptation – but they also benefitted from structured time in team meetings to problem solve collectively. This combination of flexibility and cooperativeness fueled staff's abilities and willingness to collaborate in solving problems.

User-Friendly Systems and Communications

Another signature feature of the approach to the pandemic on the Whitesboro MS campus was making user-friendly changes to systems and communications. This was captured in the following quote from a support staff member regarding how they used a variety of standard practices to ease use of resources and information for staff, students, parents, and caretakers:

Figure 1. Parkway App

> *The way that teachers are naming their Google Classrooms needed to be streamlined so that it comes up clearly for kids and for administration. So, we [support staff] can Zoom in to any period, any point in the day. So just things like that – nuanced things that we laid out – had that expectation, so that we could eliminate barriers as best we could for our kids and for our families.*
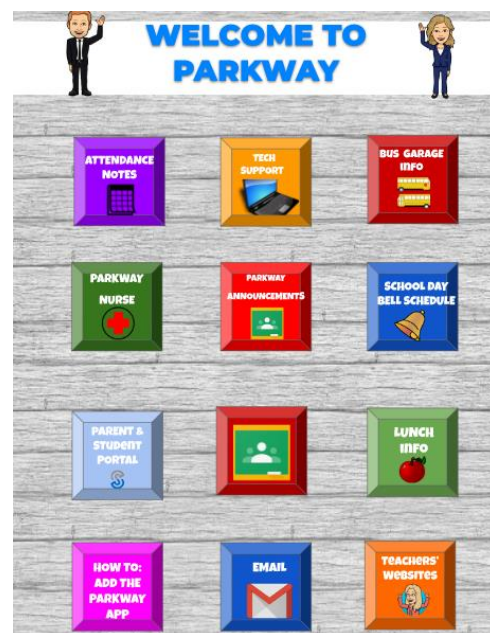
This attention to how everything from Google Classroom to using apps to provide important school and district information (see Figureb1) aligned with the Middle School campus' penchant for taking a caring and empathetic approach.

A Closer Look

Leadership Practices

Balancing the Use of Systems and Individual Autonomy

As described above, the leadership team – from district to Middle School campus – showed evidence of being proactive in developing systems to manage important functions such as staff and community communications and resource allocations. During the pandemic, these systems needed to flex in new ways. Three aspects of the district and school leaders' approach coalesced to facilitate this flexing and struck a balance between providing enough direction and

consistency across the district while still inviting choice for individuals and allowing differences from school to school. As a school leader expressed it during a focus group, these two aspects of leaders' approaches (providing systems to align practices and policies and encouraging problem-solving and innovative mindsets) coalesced to support educators in managing the ongoing disruptions of the pandemic:

> *And our administrators don't micromanage the problems on the table. It's not like "You guys figure it out, or hey, you're going to do it this way." It's more like, "This is what needs to be done, let's figure out how to make it work."*

Systems of communications were key drivers in leaders' attempts to mitigate stressors on staff, students, parents, and caretakers, as well. These systems included not only how and what messages leaders were sending, but also how and what messages they were inviting and listening to. The district leadership team shouldered the lion's share of messaging around pandemic-related policy changes and other important information, and here, too, they were proactive. As one district leader explained, pre-pandemic communication systems (e.g., newsletters and community forums) were ramped up during the pandemic. Particularly important was the increase in frequency of collection of public input through such methods as forums, which the Whitesboro CSD implemented prior to the state requiring all districts do so.

> *We had numerous forums with our parents and our employees prior to going into our hybrid system, where students were going to be here either every other day or one out of three days at the secondary level. We fully explained that and the rationale. We gave examples of how that was going to work. And this is after we put our reopening plan on our website. Employees, families could go on there and look at it before the forum. We allowed questions, and families submitted questions before the forum. The forums were extremely helpful, and that's where we received a lot of feedback.* - district leader

A Collaborative Team Approach
Picking up on the highlights above regarding proactive leadership and problem solving and innovative mindsets, when asked about how they met pandemic-related challenges, teachers and support staff cited the role that teams played in helping them problem solve together. Team meetings allowed for continual and frequent collaboration and exchange of ideas on a variety of topics including technical assistance in using technologies for remote instruction, student social-emotional or academic needs, and parent or caretaker outreach, among others. One teacher explained how this "team approach" took shape:

> *They have a weekly meeting of administrators, where it's basically like setting the stage: "Where are we? Where are we going?" So there were four of us [in my team], every Monday. . . . So it wasn't like, "Here take care of this, do it." You know, it was a team approach.*

This collaborative team approach extended to a variety of opportunities for staff to not feel alone in tackling challenges. As mentioned above, formal and informal learning opportunities were offered on demand and oftentimes 24-7, especially in the early phases of the pandemic. Google trainers (staff trained in Google Suite technologies), those who had been in place prior to the

pandemic and new ones who were added during the pandemic, were tapped for their expertise. As one school leader explained,

> *We certainly offered trainings, and formal trainings, in person and remote. But also, the thing that I saw be the most effective was when you know, they [staff] were able to be together and teach each other: This is how you set this camera up, this is where it works best in your classroom, hit this button, the volume needs to be down. All that nuanced stuff because they were doing a lot at once. Nine periods a day we have teachers Zooming in entire classes, or you know, two thirds of the classes on Zoom, one third is in person. It was a very heavy lift for an individual teacher all day every day.*

Conscientiousness and Care Backed up with Resources

While conscientiousness and care were two ways educators characterized district and school leaders' approaches during the pandemic, and these were valued, educators also valued that leaders listened to their needs and consistently followed through with providing needed resources in a timely manner as discussed above. The sense of "panic," as one teacher put it, when faced with a new situation that needed to be dealt with quickly was mitigated by leaders' availability to listen to concerns and respond quickly with appropriate resources.

> *There was no panic. You almost had to expect that because everybody's feeling this crunch time. But I've never seen it, never felt it, nothing. It was just always a very supportive atmosphere with everybody in the building. And if you had a question, or whatever, if I were to call [leader name] or [leader name], I got an answer. And if I didn't, every time they [leaders] got back to you really quickly.* - teacher

In summing up leadership lessons learned in regard to resource allocations, the principal explained that aligning resources to needs requires constant attention, and doing so comes with multiplier effects on staff's willingness to put forth their best effort and in collaboration with others.

> *I think what I learned is that, one, you have to be open minded and you really have to be a good listener. You've got to listen to what the staff is telling you. We made conscious efforts as administrators to make sure we were in those team meetings and to ask them [staff], "What do you need? What are you seeing?" We have open door policies, but a lot of times, they don't want to bother us with the little things, but we try to reinforce that we're working on this together and we – I – don't have the answers, but collectively, we come up with better answers.*

Academic Learning

Out with the Old (But Not for Everything)

In alignment with the "try it out" approach, Whitesboro MS campus teachers described ways that they redesigned what and how they engaged students, parents, and caretakers to support student learning. While this was not described as an easy or stress-free process for many, resources in terms of the expertise of Google Trainers and other colleagues and technologies, as well as outside professional development opportunities through such organizations as the Teachers' Center, were invaluable. One example of Middle School campus teachers' willingness to

reinvent, came in how they embraced using tools in Google Classroom rather than their traditional homework boards. The principal explained this schoolwide practice:

> *There were some things that we used to do that we just got rid of, because, again, going back to wanting to take some things off of the teachers' plates, we saw that there were some things that were a little bit redundant. For example, one of the things that we used to have was homework boards. Homework boards were an area where parents could go and see, Monday through Friday, every teacher's plan for the week. If there was a test, if there was homework, so on and so forth. We gave parents and students Google Classrooms, so now, instead of asking teachers to do this in more than one place, we just were having everything in Google Classroom.*

Besides Google Suite technologies, Whitesboro MS campus educators adapted to support student learning utilizing a variety of different hardware and software. For example, early in the pandemic teachers were provided with second monitors and cameras to ease video conferencing, as well as programs like Kami (an interactive learning platform) and Go Guardian (a student activity monitoring program). While these technologies were not specifically for use with certain groups of students, teachers working with students with special needs or particularly hard to engage students found them especially useful. In the case of Kami, it was provided for teacher use in the fall of 2020 and aided in making materials accessible. As one teacher explained,

> *When they approved us to use Kami for my students with disabilities, that was a game changer. . . . Kami gives access to any type of document to be written, annotated, read to them [students], and speech to text is inserted in any type of document, a Word document or a PDF document. That was huge for teachers when we first went into the pandemic, because a lot of materials were in PDFs, and they were just hard copies.*

While innovating around new technologies was omnipresent throughout the pandemic, norms for behavior were purposefully maintained. The conscientiousness and care evidenced in adults' behavior was extended to students. For instance, when students were engaged in remote instruction, they were expected to maintain the same behaviors as when they were in school. A few teachers described the importance of upholding of norms for behavior.

> Teacher 1: *And it was one of these things. Like, just because they [students] were remote, it didn't mean that school rules changed. With our kids, if you're not allowed to wear a hat in the classroom, you don't wear a hat on Zoom. You're not allowed to cuddle up with your favorite blanket.*

> Teacher 2: *And, it was like, we were in their home and they were in our atmosphere, too, but they still had to go by the rules. And I would tell a student, "Hey bud, you gotta remove your hat, you're in class."*

> Teacher 3: *For some of them it was hard to get them to sit up because laying down that's the way that they work. But, "You've got to sit up" – you know. And they did.*

Instructional Continuity and Connection
A top priority at Whitesboro was maintaining as much continuity in instructional programming and student-student and student-teacher connection as possible. Decisions such as being one of the only area districts opening for classes early in September 2020 were evidence of this priority, despite it being difficult to do. A teacher explained,

> *Our administration said that on September 4th we're starting. So that summer was a lot. But we all stepped up . . . other communities started two weeks later or even three weeks later. And in Whitesboro, we were the first school to start, and we said, "We're starting, and we're going to start well."*

Keeping as much continuity of instruction as possible was particularly important for students with special needs and those struggling to keep engaged, according to teachers at the Middle School. For students with special needs, extra human resources were added, and looping was used so those students maintained connections with the same adults from year-to-year.

> *We hired special ed content specialists for science, math, ELA and social studies, and they teach 6-8 now. They have the same group of kids every year for 15:1 classes, and they really get a chance to know them, just like the resource room teachers and the school counselors.* – principal

This focus on connection also related to how Whitesboro MS campus teachers used instructional time. While leaders and teachers expressed keeping high expectations for academic rigor and prioritizing core content in the curriculum, teachers also described feeling free to make sure they took time for students to relate to each other. A teacher explained how she attempted to make student-student connections between "Roomies" and "Zoomies" part of her everyday routine.

> *I only saw one-third of the kids each day in person, so I really made an effort, first to call them out. You were "Roomies" and you were "Zoomies," and that really kind of brought them together. And I would turn and say okay, "Zoomies wave to your roommates," and they'd be on the screen waving. So, then I said, "Alright, so we're going to do a song of the day." And so, every day we played a song, and the kids would stand up and start dancing.*

Attendance Tracking and Changing Up Instruction
Like other secondary school educators across the country, keeping adolescents engaged on a computer screen for hours on end did not come without challenges for the Whitesboro MS campus staff. Much of the attendance tracking work fell upon school leaders, who were vigilant in gathering information daily and even throughout the day on student absences and then following up to re-engage those who were missing. With a sprinkle of that care that characterizes the climate of the school, a school leader described those "Zoomers" (students who consistently attended remote class) and "Dreamers" (students who didn't attend consistently).

> *Something we really changed is how we approached attendance, and we became much more focused on the period-to-period attendance so that we could identify [who needed attention]. You know, we had Zoomers and Dreamers, we would call them, lovingly*

named by one of our teachers here. Were they attending every single class throughout the day? Were they always skipping science, or what were some of those patterns like? And we would go through our normal processes and our teachers would contact home, our counselors were always involved, our social workers always involved, TAs, everybody. And then when we were finding that okay, this kid has missed this number of classes, the principal gets involved.

During the beginning phases of the pandemic when classes were fully remote, teachers described also changing up their instruction to keep students engaged and help those who might have fallen off the radar or behind for whatever reason. One innovation they used was recorded videos that provided recaps or summaries of key content available in their Google Classroom. A teacher explained how this worked and why they used this practice:

> *If kids couldn't access it [the class] at the time due to circumstances, they would have a video lesson available to them as a resource. They could access it at a different time. Certainly, we wanted them attending and engaging with their teachers and with their classmates as much as possible, but we did have that essential video they could access and engage with.*

Social-Emotional Learning and Mental Health

Building Self-Regulation Skills and Providing Opportunities for Interaction
Living its mission "to foster an educational and respectful environment by providing rigorous and inspirational programs which prepare adolescents for challenges and choices that enable them to be motivated, self-directed learners" (Whitesboro Middle School Campus Home Page), educators described how the pandemic opened up opportunities for young people to take ownership over their learning. As one example, a teacher described posting materials in Google Classroom so that students who were absent for any reason (including just needing a "mental health day") could keep up:

> *I post all my lessons in PowerPoint slides. So if a student is absent, they can see everything. If they needed a mental health day -- are having anxiety -- or they can't come to school, they can go to my classroom and basically teach themselves the lesson. So, everything I do in class, I have an online version of it every single day. So, they can access everything, even if they're absent. And I've had really positive feedback with that.*

Teachers also remarked on how making themselves available to students through email or text messaging encouraged students to "self-advocate" (teacher). Two teachers described how this shift happened.

> Teacher 1: *There was a huge change. The kids would email you instead of their parents.*
> Teacher 2: *They were self-advocates, which was great.*

Whitesboro leaders also addressed the needs for more support in social-emotional learning (SEL) in general and encouraged school counselors to be present in Google Classrooms with accompanying frequent "check-ins" with students.

Mentoring and Wellness Efforts

While keeping standards high for student performance and behavior was important on the Whitesboro MS campus, so too was empathy and flexibility around the challenges students were facing socially, emotionally, and in regard to their mental health overall. As the principal reflected on ways they grappled with adapting some of their SEL programs, he described the importance of making sure that every student had a trusted adult they could turn to for support. While their extended homeroom had functioned as a place for adults to support and connect with kids prior to the pandemic, the principal described other efforts like implementation of "mentor meetings."

> *We started trusted adult surveys. We wanted to make sure that our kids have somebody here on campus that they feel comfortable around and it was something very simple. We put in a Google Classroom all of the names of the staff; we included everybody – secretaries, monitors, aides, cafeteria people, custodians, everybody that they may come in contact with. We don't do it first thing in the year, usually the week before Halloween. We just asked them to list two or three staff members [that] if you were having a bad day or needed someone to talk to, who would those staff members be that you would be willing to talk to? . . . and we've continued to do that, but it also gave us an idea of which students did not have connections.* - principal

Figure 2. Wellness Poster

These mentor meetings typically take place bi-monthly and in 30-minute blocks. In them students are grouped with a trusted adult. Harkening back to balancing systems and autonomy, not all teachers felt comfortable with what they would be expected to do during mentor meetings, and after discussion, choices were offered. As one teacher explained, "If I'm more comfortable with playing a game with kids, or, you know, whatever I'm comfortable with, I can do that. We're still building relationships with kids."

While these mentor meetings represent just one formalized method of connecting students to adults, other attempts at addressing students' social-emotional and mental health needs were based in part on what students were providing in wellness surveys). These "quick five to six question" surveys (principal) asked students to give feedback on how things were going in school and then the wellness committee used this information to come up with ideas like a "wellness ready" poster (see Figure 2).

Finding and Modeling Balance

As just one example of the demands put upon Whitesboro staff during the pandemic, a teacher explained how while waiting outside a hospital when her own family member was sick, she used her district-issued hotspot and Chromebook from her car to reach parents.

And at that time, you couldn't go in the hospital. I'm in the car with my hotspot that the school gave me [and] with my Chromebook answering parents' emails because they needed to be answered. And the kids were asking questions. Because that's just what you did.

"That's just what you did" aligned with the norm in Whitesboro, or, in the words of one teacher, "The expectations are high here. They're very high." While the press for staff to meet such high expectations was clear, so, too, was a recognition that leaders and staff needed to etch out balance in their work and life. The principal was frank about the need to set aside personal time while still maintaining that accessibility so valued by school staff.

I'd always told the staff, listen, you need to take my phone number. I'm not checking emails at night. If you need something, you call me, text me, whatever you want, but don't expect me to check my emails at nighttime, that's my opportunity to unplug from being on the computer screen all day and . . . just taking time for myself and my family was very important to me, and it continues to be very important to me.

Parent/Caregiver Engagement

Staff Role Shifts and Parent and Caregiver Communications
As typical modes of in-person interaction with parents (e.g., Committee on Special Education [CSE]) meetings), were disrupted during the pandemic, support staff members needed to adjust how they communicated with parents and also shift to take up new roles and responsibilities like checking in on food security and technology needs. One support staff member summed up how their roles and responsibilities shifted during the pandemic:

But we [support staff] were the ones making calls home because teachers were trying to not skip a beat. They were still trying to have Zoom classes and trying to communicate with their kids. So, I think the support staff did a lot of those phone calls to parents and to kids, trying to see "What do you need? How can we help? What do you need in your home? Do you need food? Do you need technology?" That put a lot on us. I think that was a change . . . and that wasn't a part of my role before.

Increasing communications with parents and caregivers was also facilitated by the use of systems – a hallmark of the schools' and district's approach to managing a number of complex and dynamic needs during the pandemic. Communication logs, opening of Google Classroom to parents for announcements, and the Parkway App (see Figure 1) were just a few of the ways leaders and educators systemized communications with parents and caregivers. While these innovations required time and extended staff's roles, the ease of use and accessibility for many parents and caregivers to attend meetings with school leaders, teachers, or support staff by Zoom was one bright spot of pandemic-prompted adjustments as the principal explained,

What we did for the parents is, we have Google Classrooms, so we put all of our announcements on there so parents can go on . . . and see exactly what our daily announcements are. We are using Zoom for our meetings and for better communication and participation. I actually feel that by using Zoom we had better parent participation a

lot of times, whether it's for our CSE meetings or whether it's for our team meetings with parents.

Engaging Parents and Caregivers as Partners

While Whitesboro was not spared the controversy of masking mandates that prompted what one school leader characterized as a "constant battle" with some parents, these issues, quite common in school districts around the country, were mitigated by a number of parent and caregiver engagement efforts. For instance, the Whitesboro Middle School hosted several "Virtual Open Houses" and with creative twists. One teacher, also a Google Classroom Trainer, helped other teachers create Bitmojis in their likenesses to personalize their classroom spaces.

> *We did our virtual classrooms and our open houses. They [teachers] put videos up and then I just made the Bitmojis [for them].*

Systems came into play here, too, in order to help parents and caregivers work together with Middle School campus staff as partners in students' learning. As one teacher reported, school and district leaders supported consistency to ease parents' and caregivers' engagement while leaving space for individual teacher choice in how they structured their classrooms.

> *Our Google Classrooms were all synced very similar. Not that they [school and district leaders] were like micromanaging or anything like that, but they wanted to be able to tell parents, "This is where the Zoom link is." And so for everyone, the Zoom link to just be there is easy for parents to find, or for the kids to find.*

In a Nutshell

> *My grandchildren are in the neighboring district in different counties. And we're [Whitesboro] miles ahead of them. Absolutely miles. Everything from counseling to . . . scholastics—everything. It just blew my mind. Why aren't people using the Whitesboro model?*
>
> -teacher

A combination of proactive, conscientious, and caring district and school leadership; a problem-solving and innovative culture built on individual and group collaboration; and user-friendly systems and communications that support positive relationships with parents, caretakers, students, staff, leaders, and other community members are highlights of the Whitesboro Middle School campus. On this campus, a balance of proactive approaches and restorative practices have been used during the pandemic to support student engagement and attendance; and parent and caregiver engagement have been supported through communication systems and personal staff outreach. Adaptation and innovation lessons from this school point to the importance of school leader accessibility and the maintenance of trust and commitment to supporting students academically and socially and emotionally.

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