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

Kristen C. Wilcox, C. Fred Engelhardt, Jr., Aaron Leo, Jessie Tobin, & Maria Khan. July, 2022

Case Study: Chatham Middle School

If someone's in need, the key here is, they [Chatham Middle School staff and community members] jump in quickly to help. It's a small community. People say, "Wow, you're really generous. I can't believe you did that for that family." We don't think of it that way. - principal

School Context

Chatham Central School District is situated in the Taconic Mountain range of eastern New York. It is within commuting distance of the Capital Region and also a short drive from the Taconic Parkway, which extends to New York City's suburbs. The town of Chatham includes a quaint hamlet with a number of restaurants and shops surrounded by rolling hills and farm country. At the center of this picturesque rural community sits the original old brick Chatham School, now the home of the Chatham Middle School. The district also includes the Mary E. Dardess Elementary School and Chatham High School, both of which are nestled on a newer campus a short distance from the middle school.

The pandemic differentially affected New York communities, with rural communities like Chatham benefitting from a variety of unique assets (e.g., close community connections) offset by a number of limitations (e.g., staffing shortfalls), all of which converged to impact educators' experiences of the pandemic. In Chatham's case, as the Superintendent explained, real estate prices rose precipitously during the pandemic as wealthy urbanites sought new living options; the resulting rising costs began to change the community as well as the prospects of finding staff to fill openings at the school.

> *So having a larger wealth base is certainly attractive in one perspective—it's the basis on which your tax levy and other financial considerations are based. However, it also has had . . . a negative effect in that the average middle-class individual finds it tougher to locate here, and that has ramifications . . . in terms of staffing.*

In addition to the demographic shift of relatively wealthy residents moving into the district from other regions, the superintendent also pointed to a shift from families with school-aged children to new residents with no school-aged children and rising numbers of families choosing to home

school. Although already underway prior to the pandemic, all of these changes combined and were exacerbated by the pandemic, resulting in lower numbers of students attending the Chatham School District and more difficulty in filling staff openings.

Nonetheless, the teachers, support staff members, and district and school leaders who participated in interviews and focus groups for this study were united in their characterization of the middle school as "tight-knit," with strong traditions of teacher collaboration and school-community connections. For instance, one teacher described the school's climate this way:

> *The nice thing with this building . . . is the camaraderie. We are a family here. We hang out after work. We organize parties and family get-togethers.*

During the pandemic, maintaining relationships among school staff and between school staff and community members was difficult, as people were no longer interacting as frequently or in the same ways as previously. Despite this challenge, working on relationship-building with students, parents, and other caregivers was a constant priority for Chatham Middle School leaders and staff. The principal described how important the school is to this rural area, acting as "a hub of the community," and explained that parents looked to school and district leaders and educators "for advice" about a wide range of issues beyond just academics for their children.

In addition to focusing attention on maintaining close relationships and connections with students, parents, caregivers, and community members, several other characteristics stood out as contributing to Chatham Middle School educators' willingness and capacity to adapt and innovate during the pandemic. These included their team approach to collaboration and an innovation-friendly problem-solving approach toward teaching and learning, social-emotional well-being, and parent and community engagement.

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 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.

---

[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

School Selection Criteria

Chatham Middle 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 42.9% compared to an overall sample mean of 36.9% and standard deviation of 15.4%, Chatham Middle School qualifies as a positive outlier in this study

Student Demographics 2021-2022: Chatham Middle School, Chatham Central School District

	Chatham Middle School	Chatham Central School District	New York State
Grades Served	6-8	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	222	910	2,512,973
Economically Disadvantaged	32%	43%	57%
English Language Learners	0%	2%	10%
Students with Disabilities	18%	16%	18%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
Black or African American	0%	1%	16%
Hispanic or Latino	5%	7%	28%
White	86%	87%	41%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%	1%
Asian, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0%	1%	10%
Multiracial	8%	4%	3%

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

Highlights: Facilitators for Adaptation and Innovation

All about Those Teams

Chatham Middle School teachers and leaders pointed to their teams as a foundational support structure for supporting collaboration and their own motivation and well-being, as well as for helping them meet their students' needs throughout the pandemic. As one example, a teacher noted,

> *I think our team generates ideas outside the box. I've worked on a lot of teams . . . and these are all creative people. I think we think of things outside the box that can work for the student. It could be mentoring, it could be meeting with the parent, and it could be brainstorming some ideas.*

Chatham Middle School's teams were structured so that grade-level teams met frequently (at least once a week), and these meetings provided an important conduit for information flow and collaboration. Particularly important during the pandemic, team time provided opportunities for teachers with more experience utilizing technologies for remote learning to share promising practices with less experienced colleagues. One teacher explained,

> *We met as a . . . team and that's kind of the main group that I was able to share a lot of my instruction with. We have two teachers who . . . had never even heard of Google Classroom or had no idea how to create one or post a video or make a video. For some of the teachers we had to catch them up on how to use technology like this. So we would meet at least once or twice a week, and that was crucial for them.*

The Middle School's teams also provided opportunity to get and give feedback to school and district leaders about a variety of issues needing attention. The guidance team, for instance, included the guidance counselor, social worker, school psychologist, school resource officer, and assistant principal, and this team was key to ensuring that school and district leaders were in the loop about what might be needed to engage particular children and families. Meeting monthly and in some cases attending grade-level team meetings, this team helped address the important issue of student attendance. As the principal reported,

> *We [the guidance team] would meet and look at students that we're really concerned about. And then we either had parent meetings, virtually or on the phone, or we did some house visits . . . for some kids that were chronically absent . . . to get them here. Our SRO [school resource officer] played a role in that too.*

Leveraging Relationships and Maintaining Connections

> *I think it takes a certain type of person to be able to teach middle school. So I think it gives us a common connection.*   – teacher

While the team structure in the Middle School helped maintain relationships and connections among staff, Middle School leaders and educators also expressed a consistent desire and effort to maintain relationships and connections with students and their families. As discussed earlier, Chatham, as the "hub of the community" with a history of serving multiple generations of families, benefitted from deep pre-pandemic relationships. As one teacher described, keeping these relationships was a purposeful effort and was supported through a variety of communication strategies and efforts to maintain school traditions that brought people together:

> *Kids' opportunities had been blocked for two years, and we went right back to having our Queen of Hearts dance, which has been a tradition for 55 years here at Chatham. . . . Our principals made sure that happened.*

Despite these relationships and efforts at making and maintaining connections, Chatham Middle School staff still confronted challenges in engaging some students and family members. Their approach was to tap staff who might have the greatest success with that effort by identifying those who had close relationships with students and families. One educator explained how the school counselor with 20+ years of experience would meet with the guidance team, and together they would identify what staff member might be best to contact a student or family member. In a discussion on how students and families were engaged, a teacher reflected,

The history of the families [mattered]. You're like, "Oh, we had her sister 10 years ago. That's important in a small community. We know there's a lot of [population] turnover, but a lot of those families, who are maybe lower income, have stayed here. So, we get the ability to say, "Oh, I remember that family; I know what works."

Innovation-Friendly Problem-Solving Climate

A lot of schools didn't do art—didn't do PE and music. We did it. We kept it. . . . [W]e found a way to do it. So kids are doing art projects online. PE was kind of tough, but the teachers worked really hard and had them journaling about exercising. – principal

The leadership team set the stage for innovative work to be done, whether it was related to instruction or social-emotional support or parent and caregiver engagement, by inviting open communications and welcoming a degree of autonomy for staff to problem solve individually and together. Scheduling of classes, for instance, required significant adjustment during the pandemic: First school needed to be shifted to entirely remote instruction quickly, followed by periods requiring hybrid scheduling (days remote and days in person) and with different configurations for in-person or remote learning for students with different needs or those having been exposed or been sick with COVID. The principal explained how he invited staff into thinking through scheduling options.
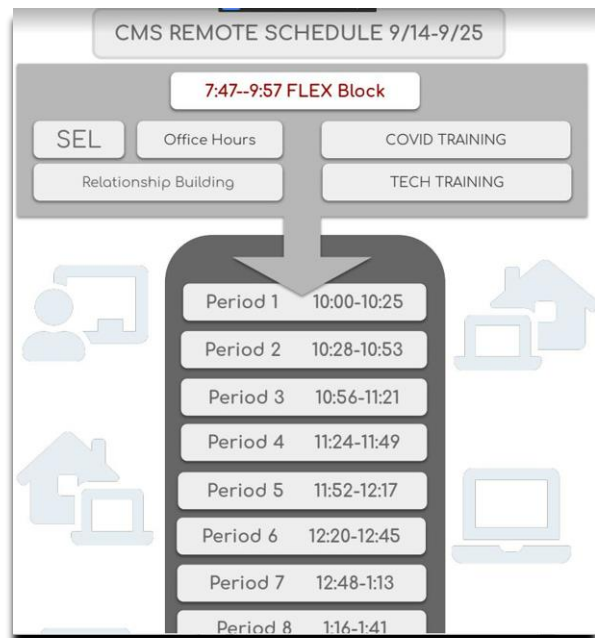

Figure 1. Relationship Building Time on Chatham MS App

I said, "Hey, before I give a schedule to you, I want you to try to create your own schedule." A lot of them waved the white flag, and they really didn't realize how tough scheduling actually was. Because for every little thing you do, it does have an adverse effect on something else. I gave teachers the opportunity to give it a shot, if you fail, you fail. We try and we adapt.

Innovative problem solving was also inspired by the Middle School priority to stay connected with students on a personal level. To this end, teachers and support staff reported having the opportunity to shift some of their time with students to "relationship building" time (see Figure 1). One teacher explained what he did with the time set aside to do this:

You want to be a little social. So, let's try to figure out ways we can create social time where you can just talk. We had office hours . . . we would do them in the morning. We had an hour delay schedule. So, first thing in the morning, every morning, all teachers, all administrators, all counseling staff, were available for kids. And that was one way for us to check in with them.

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

A Closer Look

Leadership Practices

Feedback-Driven Leadership
Middle School teachers and support staff described the leadership at the school and district as welcoming feedback, which was exhibited in the multiple surveys and other methods they employed to gather insight from students and staff. These data sources were then used throughout the pandemic to inform changes to existing practices or procedures and development of new ones. As an example, the assistant principal explained how he used student surveys to provide staff with valuable insight into students' needs:

> *When it [the pandemic] started, I was doing a lot of surveys of kids and getting to know what was a challenge–like how were they holding up. And they actually were filling out the surveys a lot . . . and then I took the comment and gave it to the teachers—whether it was a positive thing or something just to kind of get them [teachers] to reflect on. We were surveying the teachers, too, to try to get a sense of where they were and address their needs. [The principal] was doing a lot of that; he was taking a lot of that feedback.*

This tendency to look for and use feedback reflects a leadership disposition of driving to improve by consistently asking for information about student and family needs. This data-informed approach is something the superintendent also espoused. Using the metaphor of a voltage regulator, he described the importance of feedback in how district and school leaders adjusted to needs and demands,

> *In a voltage regulator, there's an input box. . . . [I]t senses, based on feedback, what the voltage should be, and if the voltage is too high, it mutes it; if the voltage is too low, it boosts it, and out comes your stable voltage. That's the way we have to handle leadership, right? We have a desired outcome, we have this black box, and we have this input. And what we're doing is we're taking this feedback loop, and we're constantly saying, "Is the voltage too high, voltage too low, what do we have to do inside the box to continue to get the output [we want]?" And that was kind of the philosophy we used.*
> - superintendent

Facilitative, Positive, and Empathetic Leadership
While some decisions inevitably fell directly on the principal or district leaders, utilizing teams and supporting an innovation-friendly problem-solving climate gave people the opportunity to work together. Working together was in part impacted by how valued any staff member might have felt and how much they felt their ideas were valued, as well. In this regard, the Middle School principal showed evidence of seeking to facilitate leadership among staff by inviting

them into problem solving and innovating and also by communicating positivity and empathy toward people's needs. The principal, with his own young family's needs and well-being to be concerned about, put on what he characterized as his "game face" for others in an attempt to evoke calm in what some experienced as a "chaotic" (teacher) climate of trying to balance work and home life. He also spoke to the importance of maintaining a positive attitude. Here he described his approach,

> *You're always trying to be as positive as possible. Like, "You'll get through this." "We've got it." "It'll be all right."*

Related to maintaining relationships and connections with families, the principal's and other leaders' empathetic stance toward staff, student, and family needs provided important motivation for staff to commit extra effort to their work. The principal explained,

> *We [the leadership team] constantly remind teachers. . . we have to know our kids, and we have to know that 40% live in poverty. A lot of our kids don't have resources. They don't have two-parent family homes where they can go home and someone's going to help them with homework, and . . . there's not a lot out here . . . for kids to do.*

Speaking of the principal, another school leader reflected on the impact that facilitative, positive, and empathetic leadership had on him and others in the Middle School,

> *I think in general, [the principal] is very good at going with ideas and listening to everyone's ideas and getting all of us to kind of think about what we're doing, and gives us a lot of autonomy to address issues.*

Leading Communications with Students, Parents, and Caregivers
As the pandemic posed significant challenges to traditional communication channels, the Middle School principal took a lead role in communicating important information within the school and to students, parents, and other caregivers. For instance, he created a Facebook page to communicate with those who used Facebook and complemented such strategies with processes meant to surface student needs and respond to them in a timely manner. One such innovative example was the "Student Improvement Plan" (SIP) process. In describing SIP, the principal explained that this innovation was developed early in the pandemic:

> *We created SIP plans (student improvement plans) and there was an academic and . . . SEL [social-emotional learning] component. So we would meet as a group and write down the kids that we were concerned about either academically or for SEL. And then we have contact people—Who is going to be the person responsible for checking in with that student? We [would] do the same thing with parents . . . and it was effective because it wasn't like we were just talking to the students. . . . The families were involved.*

Teachers and support staff interviewed reported that the principal was responsive to students' social-emotional and mental health needs that they brought to his attention and noted his (and other staff members') use of personal phone calls, home visits, and even visits to family members' places of work to solicit their support. One teacher echoing this view explained,

And [the principal] was really good about reaching out. If you said, "Hey, we've been trying to reach this family," or "They're just missing in action," he was really good about picking up the phone or making a home visit.

Academic Learning

Using Technology Expertise

Chatham MS educators identified student attendance as a top challenge they faced throughout the pandemic. Finding new ways to engage students was encouraged by having technology resources available including instructional technology (IT) expertise, hardware (e.g., document cameras), and a variety of software programs. Prior to the pandemic Chatham Middle School had begun to integrate a variety of instructional technologies, with IT support staff to help teachers use new technologies and Google Suite technologies available. As one teacher explained, IT experts as well as tech-savvy teachers who were available to share their ideas informally in team meetings, as discussed above, were helpful as teachers navigated remote and hybrid modes of instruction. In a teacher focus group, a school leader/teacher (T1) and another teacher (T2) discussed their experiences using these resources:

> T1: *I contacted other teachers when we were home full time and then when we returned to school and we were hybrid. The technology department did step up and we had workshops. So that helped out a lot. And I ended up using the document camera, which was so valuable for me, and a program called Screencastify.*

> T2: *That was great too!*

> T1: *And just the Google Meets.*

> T2: *They [IT department] did "How To" videos that we could watch, too.*

Even with availability of resources for technology integration, teachers described their own and their colleagues' steep learning curves at the very beginning of the pandemic, when they needed to pivot to completely remote instruction abruptly. As one noted, "Everyone was kind of doing something different because there wasn't any clear expectation. Like the expectation was to post an assignment and have the kids do it. But there was no 'You need to be online at this time for class.'"

Keeping Content Engaging

During the early phases of the pandemic, when expectations for teachers and students, as well as staff knowledge and skill in using instructional technologies, were just beginning to develop, school and district leaders maintained open communication channels; using these they sought educators' requests for technologies and to maintain Chatham Middle School's focus on a well-rounded education. From subscriptions to educational game platforms for math instruction to "Encore" classes (art, music, technology, home and careers, health, family and consumer science), Chatham Middle School students reaped the benefits of their teachers' and school and

district leaders' organic innovations. As one example, an art teacher described some of the ways she helped students tap their own interests in treehouse design while teaching in the challenging hybrid mode:

> *I taught a two-point perspective lesson to grade seven. And their assignment was to design a personal tree house. So they had artistic license to pretty much do whatever they wanted with it. . . . I was able to demonstrate how to actually draw the tree house using a two-point perspective to students at home and in class by using a document camera and Google Meet, and it worked out really well. The students [working remotely at home] could see what I was doing and they would pipe in and ask questions. I was able to hear them and so that worked. It worked out really well!*

Revisiting the When, How, and How Much of Essential Content

Shifting to remote or hybrid instruction required not only revisiting how to teach the curriculum, but also revisiting what was the most essential content to teach and when. As one teacher explained, when the pandemic hit, particular content typically taught during that time needed to be revisited, as the sequence of instruction had been disrupted and some students were falling behind. A balance needed to be struck between keeping all the content and activities typically covered in a traditional classroom setting and making sure that essential content was learned.

> *I didn't really shortchange it [a unit of instruction], but with some of the assignments, I was noticing that I had to dial back. . . . I kept all the content and I kept the rigor to all of it, but some of the extra things like, when you research . . . I would just take the one thing and cut the other one out. So we still have the content, you still have the research, you still have the knowledge, and you still applied it in some way . . . because you can see how the kids are getting a little more overwhelmed or falling behind quicker.* - teacher

As it became clear that some students might need new strategies and interventions to make up for what they did not learn as well as pathways to continue on to more rigorous coursework in the high school, a number of changes were made. These included the addition of a new Algebra II preparation class and a "bridge" program to help students experiencing anxiety and other mental health issues begin to re-engage in their academics.

An SEL-Ready School
Chatham Middle School teachers and support staff reported that the school had been working hard on their social-emotional learning (SEL) programming prior to the pandemic. As teachers explained,

> Teacher 1: *I think in our building social-emotional learning was a thing before it was a thing. It's something we've always been focused on.*

> Teacher 2: *We won character awards for the district—several times. We had that sense of how to tackle it [SEL].*

While Friday morning meetings were one way Middle School teachers made time to connect with students and focus on SEL, and this had been built into their schedules in the past, they developed a number of new strategies to make personal connections with students throughout the pandemic. As described above, the Student Improvement Plan (SIP) was a process intended to address both academic and social-emotional needs. In addition, some teachers spoke of the need to shift the emphasis of their SEL instruction to re-establishing students' social skills after prolonged distancing from their peers. A teacher explained her approach:

> *We had to really work on reestablishing just being in a group and talking and taking turns, like some very basic skills. So [we were] having to go back and revisit all of that. It was a lot of like revisiting skills that they had before the pandemic, that they didn't need to use as often [during that time].*

Connection Time, Traditions, and Social Events
One of the major challenges Chatham Middle School leaders and educators faced was students' limited opportunities to engage in what one teacher described as the "drama" of middle school.

> *For an eighth grader today, they had their sixth-grade year end in March [2020]. They didn't have a normal seventh-grade year. . . . Just in the last few weeks we're kind of looking like a normal school again. But, you know, a middle school kid learns so much in that unstructured time [in school], whether it's the hallway, the cafeteria, or art class. They learn so much about themselves and how to deal with people and even the drama; they learn sometimes from it. And that didn't exist for two years. I think they're trying to play catch up as 14- year-olds, like, "I'm interested in this boy or girl, how do I go about like letting them know that?" They don't know. Eighth graders had a dance a couple of weeks ago, and they were so nervous. . . . "When do we ask somebody to dance?" They didn't know how to go about normal social interactions that kids learn in middle school.*

To support students' relationship skills and offer safe ways for them to interact, Chatham Middle School leaders and educators adapted some activities and traditions and restarted social events as soon as they were able. One example of these efforts was the use of Google breakouts first thing in the morning (see relationship time in schedule in Figure 1) for the sole purpose of connecting with students on a personal level. In addition to the dance mentioned by the teacher in the quote

above, teachers and school leaders also worked to offer other important traditions and social events like the 8th grade moving up ceremony. In another example of a popular activity adapted during the pandemic, a social studies teacher described efforts to bring back a Revolutionary War re-enactment activity with tents on the campus grounds.

> *[In 2021] the restrictions were lightening up a little bit, so we were allowed to go outside and do stuff. So I brought all the tents outside, and we had six kids building a tent by hand. We did our best with cleaning and everything else to still have that kind of experience.*

Parent/Caregiver Engagement

Utilizing Communication Channels to Support Student Social-Emotional Well-Being
Beyond communications about essential information (e.g., guidance around Department of Health social distancing and other pandemic-related guidelines) the principal and other Middle School staff used appslike that pictured in, phone calls, and home visits to make sure that parents and caregivers were tapped to help children who were struggling socially, emotionally, or just with keeping up with their academics. Support staff voiced appreciation for the principal and assistant principal who helped keep communication channels open with parents and caregivers and showed "investment" in children and families by using a variety of creative outreach strategies:

> *[The principal] and [assistant principal] always volunteer to sit with us, with the student, and with the parent. And that's like our go-to, number one strategy. Then number two, it comes to brainstorming other ideas, like [the principal] bringing over two high school kids every Wednesday to meet with two eighth graders who are struggling. I mean, to me, that's investment, you know, like he's driving them over.*

Other adaptations to keep communications open with parents and caregivers included shifting pre-existing events to virtual ones, like the virtual open house.

Leveraging Community Support
While outreach to parents and caregivers was a focus of the Middle School leadership team's approach to help students stay connected and on track with their academics, their efforts were also reciprocated by community members' support. Although not without some difficult discussions around social distancing and other hot-button political issues, as in other districts around the state, Chatham Middle School also had some valuable community support that they leveraged to keep morale up. One support staff member expressed a shared sense of appreciation for community support saying, "They [parents, caregivers, and community members] just did a beautiful luncheon for us. So every building gets that [support] from the parents."

And while concerns about students' academic progress among some parents and caregivers were high, a teacher described parents and caregivers as affording some grace about how difficult teaching throughout the pandemic actually was for teachers. One teacher said,

Last year [2021], when we were hybrid every other day, trying to get the kids logged in at home, while you had live kids in front of you -- that was an utter nightmare. And I think that's where parents were really like, "We know this is not easy."

In a Nutshell

I think when we went into the pandemic, and we had to stay home and all try to communicate as a team, it helped that we were so close (the grade levels), because we weren't meeting physically, but we knew we would all reach out to each other. So that setup did help. — teacher

In a socioeconomically diverse and demographically shifting rural community, Chatham Middle School leaders and staff focused their efforts on staying connected with students, parents, and caregivers through significant effort and through a variety of channels. Their team structures, and what educators described as a generally collaborative and supportive climate, helped them problem solve and maintain important educator relationships through the most challenging moments in the pandemic. This school also benefitted from the use of data to inform their decisions and responsiveness to students' and staff's needs.

Chatham Middle School
Mike Burns, Principal
50 Woodbridge Avenue, Chatham, NY 12037
https://www.chathamcentralschools.com/o/cms/