

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

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Case Study: Tamarac Secondary School

Everybody's in the same boat and everybody's been very understanding of each other being in the same boat.

– teacher

I wanted the parents to see, and the kids for that matter – that even though we're not there [in the school], we're always there.

– superintendent



School Context

Tamarac Secondary School serves approximately 634 students from grades 6-12 and is part of a larger campus that also includes an elementary school building. The school campus is situated in the rural locale of Brunswick, New York, and is surrounded by sprawling acres of farmland, forests and nearby state parks; yet it is only seven miles east of the city of Troy and just a 30-minute drive to Albany, the state capital. Its close proximity to these urban areas has created a mix of rural and suburban qualities in the district. This demographic characteristic is evident in a “range of socioeconomic status[es]” represented in the student population, as one support staff member explained. A teacher elaborated on the community context:

It's a close-knit community; we're kind of suburban-rural, so it's a mix of almost Beverly Hills meets Appalachia. You've got a suburb of Troy, and then we reach all the way out to the far reaches of rural Rensselaer County. I think the parents are family oriented and education is valued. Definitely, the kids come in with a pretty strong center; the school [is] sort of the place that they come together.

Many respondents described this “close-knit” community as one with deep connections between families and the school. “Everyone knows everyone. . . . people are very familiar,” said the superintendent. “A lot of our students’ parents are also Tamarac grads,” said one teacher, and several participants in this study were themselves graduates of the school. Such close connections to the school engendered a sense of “loyalty and tradition” among parents and community members, according to the principal.

While several participants characterized the relationship between the school and students' families as a "positive" one, others acknowledged increasing tensions stemming from pandemic-related mandates. To address these strains, school and district leaders endeavored to keep families informed and engaged through social media platforms throughout the pandemic and involved them in important decisions involving school reopening plans. Leaders also emphasized the need to be "transparent" and "present" (principal and superintendent) for families at the onset of the pandemic. The principal explained this approach to engaging families:

[My] priority was [to] build relationships built on mutual respect and transparency and know where people are coming from . . . [to] make ourselves accessible to parents, to comfort them or reassure them, answer questions. It's something that we definitely prioritize and have to continue prioritizing.

As explored below, teachers and support staff reported significant challenges at the beginning of the pandemic and the rapid shift to remote learning. "There is no playbook for this," said one support staff member. Working together and with leaders, teachers explained how they utilized different technologies to keep students connected and engaged while effectively delivering content. Such collaborations were particularly important to identify students who struggled during remote instruction and identify learning gaps once schools reopened for in-person instruction.

Participants at Tamarac also highlighted their efforts to address the impacts the pandemic and school closures has had on students' mental health and social-emotional well-being . To support students' mental health, school and district leaders eased students back into fulltime, in-person learning and viewed their well-being as their foremost priority. New initiatives focused on social-emotional learning (SEL) were also added to curricular and extracurricular programming, and additional counselors were hired to support students' mental health.

These approaches were consistent with the primary goal articulated by many respondents: to provide a safe, nurturing, and caring space for their students. The principal, for instance, explained a duty that he felt came before all others: "Ensure these kids come to school every day safe and fed and cared for."

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 report¹ for details about the study design and educator survey questions.

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

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 supporting children’s academic learning and social-emotional well-being.

School Selection Criteria

Tamarac Secondary School met the criteria for inclusion in this study based on the 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 37.9% compared to an overall sample mean of 36.9% and standard deviation of 15.4%, Tamarac Secondary School qualifies as a positive outlier in this study.

Student Demographics 2021-2022: Tamarac Secondary School, Brunswick Central School District

	Tamarac Middle School High School	Brunswick Central School District (Brittonkill)	New York State
Grades Served	6-12	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	634	1,112	2,512,973
Economically Disadvantaged	32%	32%	57%
English Language Learners	0%	0%	10%
Students With Disabilities	13%	12%	18%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
Black or African American	2%	1%	16%
Hispanic or Latino	5%	5%	28%
White	89%	89%	41%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%	1%
Asian, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	2%	2%	10%
Multiracial	3%	3%	3%

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

Highlights: Facilitators for Adaptation and Innovation

Being Present for Students and Families

An important feature of educators’ approach to engaging students and their families was to be present and accessible. For many educators, this entailed using social media platforms to keep families informed, with updates about the pandemic as well as their children’s learning. Others described the importance of communicating with families through email, Google Classroom, and phone calls. Home visits were also mentioned by respondents as an important method used to check up on students who may have been missing classes while the schooling was remote.

In addition, leaders explained the importance of involving families in important decisions and listening attentively to their concerns and frustrations, even through difficult conversations. The superintendent explained the need to continue being visible and present as the school reopened and parents began to drop their students off to school again:

But most of all, to not hide, to be very, very present.... I stood right out in front of the school so parents ...would know that we weren’t hiding.

Common to these efforts was educators’ desire to maintain the deep connections between the school, students, and their families. “We always have to meet the needs of [our] community,” explained the principal.

Collaboration and Mutual Support among Colleagues

At Tamarac, educators utilized a team-based approach to identify and solve problems as they arose throughout the different phases of the pandemic. This “all-hands-on-deck” mindset, as several teachers and a district leader put it, was evident in the collaborations between teachers to share lesson plans and remote-teaching strategies and problem-solve technology-related issues. Leaders, too, worked together across a range of departments, along with educators, families, and community members, to facilitate a quick and safe return to school. Educators not only reported collaboration with one another, but also described the crucial support that they gave each other through the stress caused by the pandemic. As one support staff member explained:

I have a very supportive – and I think we all do – [grade-level] team, we all helped each other out a lot. So the core people that I work with every day, we definitely kept each other together the last two years.

Prioritizing Students’ Social, Emotional, and Mental Wellbeing

Educators at Tamarac recognized the deep impacts that the isolation, anxiety, and depression brought by the pandemic had on their students. While acknowledging the academic gaps that emerged through the shift to remote and hybrid learning modalities, respondents affirmed the need to first focus on students’ social and emotional well-being and mental health. To this end, a range of programs were created, including a summer program targeting at-risk students. Additional guidance counselors were hired during the second year of the pandemic as well as a teacher to run a new social-emotional learning class.

In addition, participants described their efforts to reach out to students and reestablish connections that had been weakened through the first year of the pandemic. A support staff member recounted a conversation she had with a struggling student that exemplifies the determination and care characteristic of educators at Tamarac: “There’s nothing that you’re going to do that I’m not going to care about. Nothing. You have to realize that.”

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

Staying Accessible, Available, and Present

A primary way in which leaders at Tamarac Secondary School maintained connections between their students, colleagues, and the wider community was by being accessible and present. The

principal, for instance, explained that an important aspect of building leadership was to be visible and present throughout the day. “I pride myself in being visible and trying to build relationships with the kids,” he explained, noting how participating in activities such as floor hockey in the gym and Spirit Week helped build rapport with students and faculty. “Administration is always present . . . we’re always accessible,” he continued.

During the pandemic, leaders sought to maintain their presence and availability in a variety of ways. The superintendent explained, “I felt like I needed to be present so that people knew I was still engaged and cared and was working.” In many cases, and as dictated by the threat of the pandemic, leaders created a virtual presence through social media platforms and instructional technology. The principal, for instance, described the importance of keeping the school’s Facebook page current with updates and news. The superintendent also explained her efforts to keep students and families connected to the school through social media:

It started off as something really silly, like “I’m gonna read a book to you,” and I would read a book in the morning and do the Pledge of Allegiance and read a book at night. And then it kind of got into some other things. Like sometimes we’d talk about, “Okay, there’s been an update, and this is what the governor is saying,” or “You should be on the lookout for meals,” or whatever those things are. And then sometimes it was like trivia and fun. One time I did a series on presidents, and then I went to the Bennington monument and then I went to where Chester A. Arthur is buried. And so it was trivia, and then I bought pizza gift certificates, and I gave them away for people to participate online. And some of the teachers thought it was fun, so they got their kids to participate online.

Leaders recognized the need to be accessible to teachers as well. The principal, for instance, added Friday updates for faculty in addition to faculty meetings so that staff were kept up to date. During periods of remote instruction, this entailed dropping into virtual classrooms to check in on teachers and also engage with students. These moments provided insights for leaders, too, as the superintendent explained, “It also helped me have an understanding of what the teachers were going through and how hard it is.”

Employing Empathetic Decision Making

Amid the uncertainties and challenges of the pandemic, leaders at Tamarac Secondary School described an approach to decision making that took into account the experiences and perspectives of their staff, students, and students’ families. For one, leaders explained how they empathized with families who expressed frustrations over the school shutdown. The superintendent explained how she made decisions while keeping in mind the perspectives of families:

I wanted them to know that I wasn’t somebody sitting on a throne just making decisions and pretending like they didn’t really impact real people because obviously they did. . . . So I just tried to hear them, listen to them, try to understand.

To this end, reopening plans were developed with community input. According to the principal, four teams were created, which included community members and parents. Likewise, leaders

explained the need to empathize with their staff during the stressful and challenging period of the pandemic. While acknowledging that she sometimes had to make difficult decisions that did not please everyone, the superintendent expressed her desire to “be really present and put myself in the same shoes as the people that work with me. I need to support the people that are doing the work on the frontlines,” she said.

The principal explained a similar approach to decision making and leading during the pandemic. “I have expectations for teachers, but at the same time, I don’t micromanage. I put a lot of trust in the teachers,” he explained. For instance, in acknowledging the feedback from teachers regarding the difficulties of delivering hybrid instruction, in the second year of the pandemic school leaders created a professional development day on two Fridays each month in order to provide teachers with the necessary time to plan, catch up, and collaborate to solve problems.

Several teachers and support staff members described their positive response to this approach to decision making. One support staff member said, “[O]ur administration did give us a lot of grace. . . . I think the general message was ‘Do the best you can, we’re here to support you.’” Despite leaders’ efforts, some educators noted the tensions that emerged over reopening plans and hybrid learning arrangements. While noting such frictions, a teacher added, “[Leaders] were in the thick of it with us, but I think that they recognized that we were trying and that we could reach out for help.”

Managing Resources Effectively and Efficiently

The challenges brought by the pandemic required leaders at Tamarac Secondary School to manage resources at their disposal effectively and efficiently. First, the rapid and unexpected shift to fully remote learning required leaders to collaborate with one another to quickly distribute Chromebooks to each student – an effort that was underway before the pandemic hit. Pivotal to this process was the Technology Department as well as an Instructional Technology Committee comprised of educators and instructional technologists throughout the district.

As the district shifted to a hybrid model and then to fully in-person instruction, school and district leaders worked together to ensure students and staff could return to the building safely. This “all hands-on-deck” process, as the superintendent put it, involved the coordination of numerous departments within the school district and beyond. For instance, a district leader described working with Operations and Management and the Food Service Director, as well as members of the local BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services) and Department of Health to secure cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) for the district.

Space inside the school was a major concern during the reopening plan. To balance the needs of student groups requiring specialized instruction with social distancing requirements, district and school leaders had to come up with a creative plan to bring students back for in-person instruction at different rates. Ultimately, the district prioritized sixth graders and Special Education students, the latter of which came to school every day. Students from grades 7-12 were at the school one day and then spent the next two days at home receiving remote instruction. The principal explained how educators navigated the spatial challenges they encountered:

[W]e're using every space available that we have: the cafeteria, auditorium. I mean we had teachers teaching in every part of this building. We're going to figure out lunches, how to have kids eat when they're . . . 12 feet apart. We tried to look at every nook and cranny of the building and be flexible and come up with a best plan to get kids in the building.

The surrounding geography also posed challenges for leaders. Like other rural locales throughout the country, some students in the district did not have reliable or high-speed internet access at home. To address this challenge, educators transformed the school parking lot into a space where students could get reliable WiFi. Despite these efforts, the pandemic continued to create shortfalls in resources, especially staffing. Even the superintendent acquired her Commercial Driver's License (CDL) so she could occasionally drive a school bus, as a driver shortage hit the district.

Academic Learning

Using Technology to Keep Students Engaged

Educators at Tamarac Secondary School utilized a range of technology and web-based applications to keep students engaged during periods of remote instruction. The rapid shift to remote instruction required district leaders to quickly complete the process of the one-to-one Chromebook rollout that had been underway and allocate new funds to acquire additional software that could help support teachers.

In interviews and focus groups, teachers recounted the different applications and programs that they used to engage students remotely. Pear Deck, Kahoot, and Screencastify, in particular, were mentioned as effective and engaging applications. For instance, a teacher explained how Pear Deck could be used to create “interactive” lessons that were preferable to a more traditional PowerPoint lesson.

You can actually answer, participate, mark maps. . . . There's a lot of different interactions is probably the best word, but there's a lot of ways to engage students to stay involved. . . . Now they can kind of maneuver, and it's something that they can manipulate a little bit to sort of create their own learning.

During periods of remote instruction, the entire school adopted Google Classroom, and many participants commented on its effectiveness in keeping students engaged as well as in communicating with students who may have missed classes. Others explained how quickly their students were able to utilize the technology. As one support staff member said:

I was actually very impressed with the fact that once I figured out Google Classroom and got it up and running, how many kids were on there and knew how to use it. They knew more than we did, and they were great. They wanted to have [Google]Meets, and they wanted to see us and do something.

Although educators overall described these technologies as useful tools to engage students remotely, several respondents also acknowledged that their students have become increasingly “dependent” on them, as one support staff member commented. “There are kids walking with the

Chromebook open. . . . [I said to the student,] ‘Close the Chromebook, know where you're going, say hi to a friend.’” Many respondents, however, said they continued to use many of these applications after students returned to fully in-person learning and felt that the shift to remote learning provided them the opportunity to use new technology to connect with students. As one teacher said, “[I] feel like we’re playing in their sandbox, so to speak. I think they’re going to feel more comfortable . . . when students feel like we have at least an awareness of what matters to them.”

Addressing Academic Gaps through Targeted Intervention

Respondents noted the academic gaps that emerged during the pandemic, especially during periods of remote instruction. Teaching staff mentioned that utilizing a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework, along with programs such as iReady, helped to identify students who may be falling behind and who may need additional support for remediation and intervention. In addition, educators at Tamarac kept close track of attendance, making weekly reports to the school principal about students missing virtual classes. These students’ families would then be notified with emails, phone calls, and home visits to try to ensure no one was “falling through the cracks,” as one support staff member said. Tutors and teaching assistants were also mentioned by several participants as playing an important role in supporting the efforts of teachers. “We wanted people to know that we were present, and we weren't forgetting about them, especially if we were getting reports that the kids weren’t engaging,” said the superintendent.

As the school went to hybrid instruction, sixth graders and students with special needs were prioritized for full-time, in-person instruction. Most students, however, attended classes in person once every three days, and teachers recognized the need to “maximize” that time, as one teacher put it. He continued:

When we have them in class, we're going to give them the details. And then when they're home, they're going to kind of take a look at some of the main ideas. . . . They can reinforce things that we talked about, but when we have them – because we only had them once a week, you really had to nail it. . . . How are we going to be able to maximize the time that they're with me? More of the stuff that they do project-wise would be all on their own, whereas the stuff that we lecture and . . . interact, that's going to be here.

Recognizing that closing academic gaps would be facilitated by bringing students back to school, educators and leaders at Tamarac redoubled their efforts to return safely as quickly as possible. “Definitely the kids did much better when they were here,” said one teacher.

Collaborating to Solve Problems

Teachers described the ways they worked together to solve problems and improve their teaching practices during periods of remote instruction. In many cases this involved sharing ideas or lesson plans and helping each other figure out technology-related issues. With the uncertainty brought by the pandemic, teachers explained the necessity of collaboration and mutual support. “It made for excellent collaboration between the other teachers because our colleagues, we kind of had to figure out how,” said one teacher.

As described above, leaders expressed a high level of trust in teachers to do “what’s right for kids,” as the superintendent put it. “We have a lot of teacher autonomy here, but in the grade levels that have teams, there was a lot of conversation,” she continued. In many cases, teachers appreciated the flexibility granted to them by school and district leaders. As one teacher reported:

I would say for me, support wise, I mean, I have an amazing team that I work with. So . . . we all kind of just worked together to make it happen. I would say what helped us was administration was like, “Do this however you want.”

However, other teachers expressed frustration over the uncertainty regarding plans to return to school and how to deliver hybrid instruction effectively. In these moments, teachers relied heavily on their colleagues for support. As one support staff member explained, “Our team got together, and we figured it out.”

Teachers also explained the importance of meeting with colleagues to discuss students who might be struggling. One teacher recounted how he and colleagues instituted meetings to discuss student progress:

With our grade-level meetings, that was just kind of something we decided: “Hey this student is struggling, let’s all meet and try to figure out how we can lift this student back up and get them the assistance they need.” So those are kind of more teacher driven in those situations, but using the flexibility that was provided by the administration on those Fridays really helped out.

Social-emotional Learning and Mental Health

Easing Students Back into School

As students transitioned back to in-person learning, educators continued to make student well-being and mental health their foremost priority. One teacher, for instance, explained the need for flexibility with assignments. As he reflected on how the pandemic impacted his students, he noted the importance of “being flexible to students and actually seeing them as people who were affected by the pandemic just as much as we were all affected by the pandemic.”

To ease students back into a full-time, in-person school schedule, a Summer Scholar program was created in 2021 for struggling middle-school students. The program included academic learning but was designed with a clear focus on social-emotional learning. During the program, teachers developed workshops for students, such as making birdhouses or learning about the history of baseball while playing the game. According to the principal, the program is slated to expand next summer into the high school and expand from two weeks to four.

A support staff member explained the challenge of bringing structure back into the lives of students in careful and compassionate ways, “[We’re] trying to give them some kind of structure to get them back in . . . and I think it’s that we don’t want to put too much on them because they’re just coming back.”

Keeping Students Connected while Remote

A common theme among respondents in this study was the importance of staying “connected” to students during the pandemic, especially through periods of remote and hybrid learning. A support staff member explained the directions from the superintendent, “[She] said get them online and talk to them, make them feel human, give them a connection, give them a reason.” To keep students connected and engaged in their schooling, teachers often utilized social media platforms like Instagram to share photos. A teacher explained:

So this year’s eighth graders, I have seen their kitchens, their bedrooms. I’ve gotten tours of their houses, I’ve met their pets and all their little brothers and sisters. And it’s just a different kind of relationship to have with these kids.

Teachers also created informal Google Meets with their students to “check in” on them while remote. An example of this approach was a “Lunch Brunch” set up by a teacher with a group of girls who had not been coming to remote classes:

I would like set up a Meet with them that was not going to be academic, just kind of a check-in Meet. And that’s how I got them to come, it’s our Lunch Bunch . . . just to get them and see them and make sure they’re okay and try to get them back connected with their teachers.

Despite the challenges that teachers encountered while delivering remote instruction, some felt that it provided unique opportunities to connect with students. One teacher, for instance, explained that remote teaching created extra “mentor time” with students. He explained that “talking to kids while they’re in their room, in the comfort of their own safe space, was definitely some of the best social-emotional stuff that we handled.”

Focusing on Mental Health and Social-Emotional Learning

Educators commented on the severe effects that the pandemic had on their students. Such changes were evident in more negative attitudes towards schooling, tense relationships with peers and teachers, and increasing frequency of substance abuse and mental health crises. Recognizing these impacts, educators at Tamarac Secondary School developed a range of programs, practices, and interventions aimed at supporting students’ mental health and working on social-emotional learning (SEL) skills.

Curricular elements with SEL aims were embedded in new programming once students returned to full in-person learning. One such initiative is the REACH program, designed to focus on supporting at-risk students not currently identified as having special needs. Utilizing additional grant funding, the program has recently hired a full-time teacher. The school also has adopted the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework to identify students who are at risk and create SEL benchmarks for students across grade levels. A new SEL class was also created for students to take during the first class period of the day, with lessons ranging from structured activities or informal spaces to check in with students as they begin their day.

Under the direction of a school leader with counseling experiences, the school has added two new counselors and shifted its plan so that students and their families will work with the same

counselor throughout their time in Secondary School. A SEL Committee was also formed with leaders, specialists, and support staff throughout the district. In meetings, restorative justice practices were discussed as an important alternative to traditional forms of punishment. The superintendent explained that these changes would be important, given the disruptions that students have experienced in the last several years. “[W]e can’t punish a kid for something that they don’t know that they did wrong,” she said.

In addition, a range of informal efforts at supporting students’ mental health and encouraging SEL were described by respondents. “We do a lot more social-emotional stuff with them than we ever did before,” said one teacher. Such practices involved more involvement with students in extracurricular activities such as sports, school dances, or simply eating lunch together.

Respondents were quick to acknowledge, however, that additional work would need to be done in order to address the social and emotional fallout from the pandemic – the effects of which could unfold over years.

Parent, Caregiver, and Community Engagement

Engaging Parents through Technology

Teachers and support staff members at Tamarac utilized a range of technologies to effectively communicate with parents and families and keep them engaged throughout the pandemic. Google Meets, for instance, was mentioned by several respondents as a useful way for educators to move some family events to a virtual platform. The online format of some events even increased attendance, according to the superintendent:

We utilized technology to get more capacity. So our Parent Night was virtual, [and] we had some of the greatest participation we’ve ever had. I think we learned how to reach people in a different way.

Teachers also utilized various practices to keep parents engaged in their children’s learning while remote. One teacher, for instance, discussed bringing guest speakers, ranging from singers to athletes, to virtual meetings where parents and family could join. Another teacher made recordings of teachers, students, and their families singing songs together and then posted the videos to YouTube. She described how these moments provided unique opportunities for family members to be involved with their children’s education:

It was great to be able to see the parents engaged with the students when they were home doing their work. . . . Parents would be on with the kids, and I’d constantly be noticing the faces; the kids would be sitting there and the parents would be on their shoulder, and they’re waiting for my song to come on. So that was neat to be able to, for the very first and only time, have a parent sitting there a part of their kids’ learning and having a chance to see them in their own environment.

Educators used technology such as Google Classroom and eSchool not only to communicate with families but also to keep them informed about their children’s progress in school. In addition, during periods of remote and hybrid instruction, teachers would send reports with

grades and comments to parents on Fridays to provide them with complete details about their children's learning.

Frequent and Personalized Communication

Many respondents described the need to communicate with family members frequently and in personalized ways. For example, as discussed above, social media were used by school and district leaders to keep family members engaged. As the superintendent said, "I found using the social media platform, either live or videotaped things to communicate directly with people, made [parents and family] feel like it was a more personalized message to them, as opposed to an email or just a letter."

If the applications described above were not reaching some parents and families, educators utilized other methods. One teacher, for instance, said she pursued "any avenue of communication" to contact parents. "Honestly, sometimes texting worked for families because they can just respond in the moment when they're available," she reported. In other cases, educators described visiting homes to deliver food or to "just say 'hey'" as one support staff member put it.

Phone calls were also mentioned by several participants as an effective strategy to directly engage with family members. "I actually think that the pandemic has made me better at calling parents," explained a support staff member. "I find they're so much more receptive," she continued. The superintendent explained that she would sometimes reach out to parents and family members who may have responded negatively on social media posts. "I just called them up and tried to have a personal conversation with them," she said.

Diffusing Tension through Dialogue

In interviews and focus groups, respondents reported increasing levels of stress and socioeconomic adversity that families in their school district faced during the pandemic. In addressing these issues, many educators recounted difficult interactions with parents and family members and their efforts to diffuse tensions that had arisen over pandemic-related mandates. Such efforts included a high level of transparency and understanding for families who were frustrated with state mandates. As one support staff member elaborated, "You build a relationship with families. You don't make assumptions; leave all assumptions at the door, make those connections, and it helps them moving forward."

Such conversations were crucial. The principal explained how "getting parent feedback and really making sure parents feel heard and explaining why decisions are made when they're made" is crucial in "a close-knit community" such as Tamarac. The superintendent reiterated this message, noting the need to preserve working relationships with families, "especially in a small community, because you're gonna see those people again," she explained as she recounted a difficult conversation with parents that had recently taken place. "Even though they didn't see things the way I saw them, the relationship wasn't fractured in a way that they couldn't work with me on things as we go forward."

Teachers and support staff also commented on the support they received from school and district leaders when they ran into difficulties communicating with family members. Several respondents

explained that school and district leaders would reach out to parents and families in order to make sure conversations remained respectful. “Administration has been amazing supporting me with parents. They’ve been over-the-top great,” said one teacher.

In a Nutshell

I love teaching and learning. That's what it's about. I love being with the kids. – principal

There's a lot of good things about Tamarac. And we care; I think we go above and beyond. – support staff member

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it unprecedented challenges for educators at Tamarac Secondary School. As the school shut down in-person instruction and teachers shifted to teaching remotely, educators reiterated one priority was kept above all else: stay connected to students and their families. Through various technologies and social media platforms, teachers, support staff, and leaders endeavored to maintain their relationships with students, parents, and the wider community and involve them in important decision-making processes. Even when conversations surfaced different opinions about hot-button issues (like masking), educators at Tamarac described listening to family members with empathy and going the extra mile to reach out to students who were struggling while at home. During the transition back to in-person learning, educators set in place a number of initiatives to attend to students’ social and emotional well-being. Such efforts were characterized by collaboration, mutual support, and a shared sense of doing “what’s right for kids,” as the superintendent put it.

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