

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

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Case Study: Shaker Road Elementary School

Shaker Road is one of the most magical places to work, and talking with other people, it's just set apart from other schools. I think we all feel very supported by our administrator. All of the teachers in my building get along. We share, we share everything. The families adore us, and we feel the same way. – teacher



School Context

Shaker Road Elementary School is located just six miles north of New York's state capital, Albany, in the populous suburb of Colonie. Shaker Road is one of five elementary schools that serve the K-4 population of the South Colonie School District before students graduate to one of two middle schools.

The proximity to Albany and the city of Schenectady to the west creates a unique context in which the town "blends into those urban areas," as one district leader put it. This blend has stimulated increasing levels of socioeconomic and cultural diversity at Shaker Road over the last

several decades. While previously the school had a reputation for being “upper-middle-class” – as one teacher put it – families, the principal explained, are now a mix of working- and middle-class. Though lower than the state average, the number of families in poverty has also grown. In addition, the burgeoning number of English learners was seen by many participants as a salient feature of the school culture. While 12% of Shaker Road’s students are identified as English learners (a number higher than New York State’s average), participants noted that a larger number of students have parents and caregivers whose first language is not English – a characteristic that requires special consideration when communicating with homes.

Shaker Road ES was described by educators as a warm and caring environment, one in which the well-being of students was kept as the highest priority. Throughout the difficulties of the pandemic, the principal explained how the “student-centered” approach of Shaker Road staff was kept intact:

Everything that goes on here is student centered. And it would be very easy to fall into a pattern of doing what’s best for teachers and the kids will be fine. But fortunately, everyone seems very, very unwilling to take that approach. They continue to keep the kids at the center of what they’re doing.

Close-knit and trusting relationships between educators, students, and families were evident in the interviews and focus groups conducted with teachers, support staff, and leaders. The deliberate efforts described by educators to engage families and involve them in their children’s learning echoed a sentiment found on the school’s homepage: “The student life at Shaker Road is vibrant, enriching and the product of a meaningful connection between home and school.” The generally harmonious relationship between the school and families has been cultivated through open communications, a stable team of veteran teachers and educators, and the deep ties to the community of many staff members. As many respondents explained, this strong foundation was crucial in weathering the many challenges brought by the pandemic.

Participants also spoke of the high levels of collegiality and collaboration that were embedded in the school’s culture and relationships between staff members. “I really think our school is a family,” remarked a support staff member. These collegial relationships, as many participants explained, were a crucial source of support during the pandemic. The principal summed up the team-based approach taken by staff members despite the adversities they experienced over the last two years:

I think it’s extraordinary given the amount of stress that’s been placed on us individually to kind of look out for own families and our own well-being in the midst of this – that people have always been very willing to pick up the slack and help their colleagues.

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.

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.

School Selection Criteria

Shaker Road Elementary 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 80% compared to an overall sample mean of 36.9% and standard deviation of 15.4%, Shaker Road Elementary School qualifies as a positive outlier in this study.

Student Demographics 2020-2021: Shaker Road Elementary School, South Colonie CSD

	Shaker Road Elementary School	South Colonie Central School District	New York State
Grades Served	K-4	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	329	4,653	2,512,973
Economically Disadvantaged	33%	37%	57%
English Language Learners	12%	4%	10%
Students with Disabilities	10%	15%	18%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
Black or African American	5%	9%	16%
Hispanic or Latino	11%	9%	28%
White	61%	63%	41%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%	1%
Asian, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	12%	11%	10%
Multiracial	11%	8%	3%

Demographic data are from the state report cards for 2020-2021 (<https://data.nysed.gov/>).

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

Highlights

Tackling Pandemic-Related Challenges through a Team-Based Approach

While not discounting the trying conditions created by the pandemic, educators at Shaker Road ES approached these challenges through teamwork and collegiality. Supportive relationships among colleagues were evident in the distributive forms of leadership utilized by school and district leaders, which provided educators with autonomy in how to address remote and hybrid teaching. Teachers also exhibited a high level of collaboration as they frequently communicated with each other and shared pedagogical strategies and lesson plans in order to meet the needs of their students throughout the pandemic. As the principal put it, “[We] were all pulling on the same rope, and that was obvious.”

Although participants acknowledged the stress and uncertainties across the last two years, a common refrain was that they were not alone in their struggles and that their colleagues were there to support them. “Anyone will do anything for anybody,” said one teacher as she explained why she felt Shaker Road was a unique place to work.

Close-Knit Relationships between Educators and Families

A consistent theme articulated by educators at Shaker Road ES was the caring and close-knit relationships between staff, students, and families. Leaders, for instance, explained that the high level of trust families had for the school was generated through the consistency brought by veteran leadership teams and educators. Several respondents also explained how the ties between Shaker Road ES and the surrounding community ran deep: The children of many staff members had gone through (or were currently attending) the school, and several teachers were former students as well. A member of the support staff described the unique character of these relationships and their benefit to students:

It’s not like this in other schools. . . . This school is very close knit. We’re very supportive of each other. Lots of community outreach, and the parents are really involved. And the kids feel that.

During the pandemic, staff members sought to maintain close relationships with families by communicating using various tools such as Google Classroom and other communication and social media platforms. As discussed below, educators at Shaker Road ES also adapted events and programs throughout the pandemic to continue fostering families’ connections to the school. A “super strong and supportive” Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), as one teacher described it, was also mentioned by several participants as an important ally in fostering these relationships and conveying important information to the community.

Meeting the Diverse Needs of Students and Families

Going through [the pandemic] together, I think made a big difference in terms of how people continued to feel connected to their children’s school. We did lots of other things off the screen, too. We were involved in food drives and clothing drives, we did parades

through neighborhoods. We found different ways to get the staff driving through neighborhoods and visiting with kids. – principal

Educators at Shaker Road employed an array of strategies to meet the various needs of students and their families. Seeking to ameliorate families’ most immediate needs during the pandemic, they provided food, school supplies, and computers. These efforts involved educators taking flexible roles, such as packing and delivering items to homes, and maintaining donation services throughout the school shutdown. School staff also sought to preserve the close connections between the school and the wider community by developing creative ways to continue holding extracurricular events and programs either virtually or socially distant. In addition, districtwide social-emotional learning frameworks and other interventions were set in place to address the social-emotional and mental health needs of students. These varied approaches ensured that students and families were supported in multiple ways throughout the pandemic.

A Closer Look

The approaches highlighted above 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.

Leadership Practices

Utilizing a Model of Distributed Leadership

Leaders at Shaker Road ES utilized a model of distributed leadership that shared decision-making duties with teachers and staff members. This approach to power-sharing had been established prior to the beginning of the pandemic but provided a useful way to address the challenges as they unfolded. As the principal reported:

And to the credit of our staff, I always tried to use the distributive leadership model from the moment I got here, and they responded to that. So pivoting into them holding up some of those responsibilities as we went through peaks and valleys and different forms of delivering instruction – it paid its benefits no doubt.

Educators validated the benefits of the forms of distributed leadership practiced by leaders in the school and district. Describing the principal’s approach, one support staff member said, “And [the principal] doesn’t take the stance that he’s the boss. We’re all collaborators, so he lets us lead a lot. He just kind of guides it.” Another support staff member echoed these comments, “He doesn’t have to be the captain. He lets the crew, he’s like, ‘You’re the captain this week.’”

Amid the unprecedented context of the pandemic and school shutdown, leaders sought educators’ input on how to address the challenges as they emerged over the past two-and-a-half years. A district leader, for instance, explained “I’m not into micro-managing. . . . I just want real local control.” One example of this approach was in the second year of the pandemic when educators were working to safely bring students back to the school. A teacher explained how

their input was valued in making certain decisions about how to transition students back to in-person teaching “[The principal] was great in saying, ‘How you guys want to get through this year is up to you, your grade,’” explained one teacher.

While many educators appreciated the hands-off approach of leaders, others felt that there were many uncertainties, especially surrounding the delivery of remote instruction. One teacher explained the bumpy transition to remote instruction yet noted the reassurances offered by school and district leaders:

I think just because it was sort of like we were trying to build an airplane while it was up in the sky. They kind of helped us out realizing that this is something brand new for all of us, and I think they were just trying to help us feel supported and help us not kind of freak out because it was such uncharted territory.

Assuming Multiple Roles and Staying Flexible

According to leaders at Shaker Road ES, an important part of adapting and innovating during the pandemic was to be flexible and adopt multiple roles and responsibilities. The principal, for instance, recounted the numerous duties he undertook, especially during the three months the school was shut down in 2020:

I didn't really have a clearly defined, everyday role. . . . I was a delivery service: I was delivering food, I was delivering clothes, I was delivering Chromebooks, I was delivering schoolwork. I was a go-between for teachers that needed to get these resources into the hands of kids and getting things from those families back to those teachers so they could do the kind of assessment they wanted to do. It was an honor. Every day I looked forward to hopping in with a few classes in the morning and then spend the balance of my day getting out there and doing some good.

By assuming these different roles and responsibilities, the principal was able to ensure that the emerging and changing needs of staff, students, and families could be met. Several staff members, for example, commented on the principal’s determination to get Chromebooks in the hands of every student during the shutdown. As a district leader put it, “He [Shaker Road ES principal] makes sure that every pothole is filled.”

Communicating Frequently and Clearly with Leadership Teams

The need to communicate frequently among the school and district leadership team was described as an important priority by school and district leaders. As a district leader put it, “Having constant communication with the leadership [team], that was the biggest thing. . . . I learned that I could not over-communicate with the leadership team.”

As schools across the district began to shut down in spring 2020, leaders set up districtwide meetings with over 20 people through Google Meets. “They would call in and we would brief them on everything we would know,” explained a district leader. Once a plan had been put in place, he explained how weekly meetings were held with leaders from each school level, “Every single week from March to June, we were in weekly calls with everybody . . . going over what had come up during the week in either smaller or less formal meetings.” District leaders followed

up on these meetings with written updates disseminated to school-level leaders each week. The “Full Leadership Update,” as it was referred to by a district leader, reiterated the most important “three or four bullets” to school leaders throughout the pandemic.

Lastly, school and district leaders explained the need to collaborate not only with one another but across districts as well. In describing, for example, some of the challenges regarding assessment during the school shutdown, a district leader spoke of the usefulness of cross-district conversations:

And what was also very interesting [was that] the conversations with the emerging regional community was the same exact thing. We were begging, borrowing and stealing from different districts on what they were doing.

Academic Learning

Managing Expectations and Prioritizing Student Engagement

Recognizing the deep impacts the pandemic had on their students, educators at Shaker Road ES managed academic expectations as students transitioned to remote and hybrid learning. This “care before the curriculum” approach – as a district leader put it – acknowledged the need to address students’ well-being and engagement rather than focus solely on academic learning during and immediately after the school shutdown.

Similarly, teachers explained how they mitigated expectations for students as they transitioned to remote instruction. Noting the challenges students faced, teachers explained the need to pare down elements of curriculum and minimize learning loss by focusing on basics. As one teacher explained, “This was a time to just keep them reading, writing, doing math, talking with each other, and feeling connected. It wasn’t a time to challenge kids.”

As students returned to fully in-person learning, educators explained the need to be flexible with students during the transition. A teacher explained how one of her students, for instance, had recently been struggling to complete homework on time as he assisted his mother to study for the citizenship test. “Every family has its own priorities and differences, and I have to be understanding of that,” she explained.

Leaders also considered the demands placed on teachers at this time, recognizing the unprecedented nature of the pandemic and abrupt transition to remote learning. As a district leader said:

We had to get guardrails in place to get reasonable expectations on everybody’s part, to kind of set up what we wanted teachers to do with the kids. We had to get reasonable expectations for the kids as well; we spent a lot of time talking about what that was going to look like. And [came] to the realization that whatever we could do with the kids was going to be good.

Despite the stressful experience of remote teaching recounted by teachers, several respondents acknowledged the impact of these considerations. “I did feel like there was some pressure off of us,” said one teacher.

Addressing Academic Gaps and Making Gains

A factor brought up by several participants as possibly contributing to Shaker Road’s positive outlier status was the quick return to school for the majority of students after the school shutdown. According to the principal, 86% of all students returned by September 2020, and this helped educators more effectively identify and close emerging academic gaps.

Leaders described the shared priority that emerged in the summer of 2020 to have students safely return to school in the fall. “We had to get them back, we had to get them under our wing, we had to get them feeling good about being here. Also, the adults had to feel good about it,” explained a district leader. Likewise, the principal said, “We just knew the most important thing was for our students to be able to be in the building.”

Once students returned in the fall, smaller class sizes provided educators with the capacity to differentiate more effectively and target students who were in need of remediation. Using an online diagnostic tool, grade-level teams grouped returning students by ability and developed specific curricula to address learning loss as students returned to school. “I was able to meet their needs, to talk to them, to remediate them, to sit down and conference with them,” explained one teacher.

While those who returned to school in September 2020 made tangible gains, several respondents expressed concern that those who remained home for much of the 2020-21 school year may have fallen further behind. Several strategies were used to address these disparities. For one, teachers worked together with colleagues from other grade levels to share insights about potential gaps in instruction that may have occurred in the previous school year. For instance, a teacher explained how these collaborations allowed her to anticipate gaps in students’ knowledge:

One of the areas . . . where they did not get the content that they needed to in third grade was fractions. So we [fourth-grade teachers] knew that this year we were going to need to do a little bit of preteaching and to kind of cover what they missed in third grade. So that was something that was useful, and we already knew going in that was going to be necessary.

In addition, leaders encouraged teachers to make sure that the content delivered had been retained by students who were learning remotely. A teacher explained this approach:

A suggestion from the district was to look back at what they didn’t get last spring, what units weren’t covered, and hit those. And we’re gonna like adjust the schedule all year, and the focus was more reading, math; and if we got to anything else that was great, but the pressure was off to try to hit all the subjects, every day so hard, like you normally would have. And I think after we got settled, I think we fell into a place where we could go, “Okay, we can fit some of this back in and it’s going okay, and we can do better.”

A particular area of concern was the school's ENL (English as a New Language) population, many of whom continued to stay home in the 2020-21 school year. As a point of emphasis, educators explained the need to continue supporting these students and their families through targeted interventions. One program mentioned by respondents was a reinstated ENL club that met twice per week after school. With 30 students participating, teachers admitted that the meetings tended to be hectic but explained its significance not only academically but also for students' cultural identities. "Emotionally that is important to them to make that connection and to have that chance to speak their home language, perhaps, or identify with their home culture," reported one teacher.

Evidence from the most recent school year shared by the principal lends credibility to these approaches:

The gains that we've just seen between the back-to-school diagnostic done in September and October to the mid-year we just concluded in January – huge numbers of gains, significant gains. Being back, even though we are in classes of 22, 23, 24 again, being back in person and having that direct access to instruction is making a difference.

Finding Creative Ways to Engage Remote Students

As for many educators throughout the world, the abrupt transition to remote instruction posed challenges for teachers at Shaker Road ES. To engage their remote students, educators quickly learned to use various forms of technology. Aiding teachers in their use of these new applications and platforms, the district offered in-house professional development and relied on school staff members who had completed Google training to assist colleagues.

While several participants commented on the steep learning curve in transitioning to remote instruction and difficulties engaging students virtually, others recounted a "sense of pride" – as one support staff member put it – as they learned to effectively use these applications. Other participants explained the benefits to their teaching that accrued as a result of using these tools. A support staff member, for instance, said:

I didn't use Google hardly at all before the shutdown, I was just using [Microsoft] Word for all my documents. Then it was like, alright, as soon as we started having to send things home, it was just so much easier to put things in each classroom's Google Classroom.

In addition to the Google suite of applications, educators used multimedia tools to make presentations more engaging and interactive for students. "I just tried to make it fun and to keep the kids engaged and making them want to learn when they were home," explained one teacher. Another teacher described using Bitmoji to digitally recreate her classroom with the help of a colleague: "We got to set up a room that looked like our classroom, like mine had a piano and [teacher] helped me do that, taught me how to make that entire page. Just to make it, you know, aesthetically pleasing so the kids were excited to go into our classroom."

Though grateful that all students were now fully in-person during the 2021-22 school year, several participants felt their experiences with remote teaching provided a unique opportunity to

adapt their teaching style and develop new lesson plans. As one teacher explained, the autonomy teachers had during the first year of the pandemic – though immensely challenging – opened up spaces to use new approaches that they otherwise could not; in some cases, these new adaptations were seen as valuable additions to continue even after all students were back in school:

In a normal year, we're driven by curriculum. We don't have a lot of say in what we teach and how we teach it. So it was almost a fun opportunity to try some things that maybe normally we wouldn't have the opportunity to do. I think we also learned to simplify in a way that a lot of the things that we were doing maybe aren't really necessary. We let some things go, and some of those things did not come back when we went back to normal teaching because we realized in the end it wasn't really necessary. We tried some new things and some of those new things we realized work really well. So we kept them.

Social-Emotional Learning and Mental Health

Identifying Students' Social-Emotional Needs through Formal and Informal Mechanisms

Numerous formal and informal mechanisms were mentioned by participants as important ways to identify students' social-emotional needs. One example highlighted by school and district leaders was a universal screener that was adopted across the school district. Conducted twice annually, the screener is given to students, staff, and families in order to identify any mental health needs or social-emotional issues. The screener, explained the principal, is part of the wider use of the social-emotional learning (SEL) framework used in the district. The principal explained how this program included a process to regularly solicit students' perspectives and feelings to ensure that timely interventions can be made:

We get kids' thoughts about this, that, and the other thing, and then to get their reactions and responses to things as they go through the program. We do a lot of surveys, a lot of half-dozen questions, Google Forms, fill it out and send it in. Put a quick timeline on it so that if they really want to respond, you hear from them right away and get that done in a few days and then get that data out to everybody and take a look at what it means.

Other informal processes were developed by educators to identify potential issues related to their students' social-emotional well-being and mental health. A teacher, for instance, created a Google Form that students could respond to each week with how they were feeling:

I wanted students to know they could talk to me and tell me things in a private way because when you're doing a Google Meet with the whole class, some kids are a little nervous about sharing anything with you. So that was a way for them to privately talk to me.

Drawing on Existing Programs to Enhance Social-Emotional Learning

While noting the increasing prevalence of behavioral issues among students over the last schoolyear, participants also explained how several programs had been in place prior to the pandemic to support students' social-emotional well-being. Such systems helped not only to

identify emergent issues, as described above, but also to address these issues as they were uncovered.

In addition to the SEL framework referenced above, a project designed to foster positive relationships was described as useful by many participants, who reported it had begun before the beginning of the pandemic. The project involves daily 15-minute lessons in which students focus on character traits. According to the principal, the program has been instrumental in mitigating some of the fallout stemming from the pandemic:

We already had a foundation in place for that kind of expectations, those kinds of lessons, those discussions with our students and their families before all this happened. And I think that made a big difference in terms of us being able to address some of the social-emotional things that were naturally going to come out of this stressful situation in the last two years.

Another teacher explained how lessons from that project were conducive to the school culture educators had already cultivated at Shaker Road ES, “We [tried] to make that part of our school culture where we try to focus on the positive and teaching kids how to express themselves or how to resolve conflict in a positive way. I think that’s something that’s just always been embedded in our school and in our classrooms.”

In addition to these programs, the district has begun rolling out a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) plan to help target intervention services to individual students’ needs. In concert with the “team-based approach” described by the principal, the school has also added a part-time social worker and instituted a mental health committee to identify and address emerging issues surrounding social-emotional learning and mental health.

Maintaining Connections to Students while Remote

A salient theme that emerged through interviews and focus groups with educators and staff were coordinated efforts to remain connected to students during the school shutdown and periods of hybrid instruction. The principal described the importance of these endeavors during the pandemic:

We made a deliberate effort, and there was just an unspoken commitment by the staff that we were going to stay connected to our kids and their families. And I think it made a difference for sure.

In some cases, teachers and support staff developed ways to safely continue events and practices that had previously been held in person. A support staff member elaborated on the mindset that she and her colleagues took in adapting these programs rather than canceling them: “We [were] like, ‘We can’t do it this way. But how can we do it in a different way?’”

Examples mentioned by participants ranged from a traveling zoo, a parade to celebrate National Reptile Day (the school mascot is the Turtles), to a virtual holiday sing-along for students and families that featured a guest musician. A support staff member described a book pickup program she had developed where families could come to the school to take out books that had

been sanitized before and after use. Participants also described holding a graduation ceremony for fourth graders in which educators drove by students' houses and hand-delivered certificates. A teacher explained what the event meant to students and their families: "They were so precious. . . . I remember one of our former parents and their kids were outside . . . they were so excited to see people."

As the principal explained above, maintaining these connections to students made a "difference" to students while also strengthening community ties during a time when home-school relationships across the country were becoming fraught. "We enjoyed a lot of community support because we continued to do things to let them know the good things that were going on," he said.

Parent/Caregiver Engagement

Building Trust through Consistency

Throughout the challenges wrought by the pandemic, educators and leaders at Shaker Road ES experienced continued support and goodwill between school staff and the wider community. One aspect that was viewed by staff members as an important characteristic that helped engender this trusting relationship with the wider community was consistency. "[The community is] very trusting of us. They like consistency; they don't like us outside the guard rails," explained a district leader.

This consistency was evident not only in the practices and programs of the district but in personnel as well. "We are not a turnover district," explained a district leader pointing to the several dozen years he and other leaders had served in the district. In addition to the long tenure of many key leaders, educators at Shaker Road ES emphasized that numerous teachers and support staff had children who were current or former students in the district – and that many staff members had themselves been students at Shaker Road ES. Such deep-seated connections to the community further facilitated a trusting, caring, and committed relationship between students, educators, and the wider community. "The families adore us, and we feel the same way," summed up one teacher.

Even amid the unprecedented challenges brought by the pandemic and shutdown, the principal explained how the last several years ultimately brought new insights for both educators and family members. Teachers, for instance, were able to "peek behind the curtain" – as he put it – to better understand the lives of their students, while caregivers learned more about the responsibilities and duties of teachers. "[Caregivers] have a deeper understanding of our approach, our resources, our expectations; and so ultimately – depending on the topic – but ultimately, it's been a very good benefit for everybody," he said.

Providing Additional Support for Needy Families

Recognizing that the pandemic impacted students and their families in economic terms as well as socially and emotionally, educators at Shaker Road ES endeavored to provide families with important resources during difficult times. The principal, for instance, explained his long-standing commitment to ensure that students' most immediate needs are met:

Your primary responsibilities are, that in the building your number one is to make sure it's safe and provides for learning . . . safety and taking care of primary needs. No one can teach, and no one can learn if they don't feel safe, if they're hungry, if they don't have enough sleep.

Such forms of support were maintained during the school shutdown, as many participants explained. Drive-thru food pantries were one avenue through which families could safely acquire donations of food as well as other items such as school supplies. A teacher also mentioned a backpack program that continued even as the school was closed. Teaching assistants and hall monitors played a crucial role, as a teacher described, in packing food and supplies up and delivering them to families in need. The school also partnered with the PTA and other local organizations such as a nearby church to gather any resources that families needed. A teacher explained the attitude taken by educators at Shaker Road ES who went the extra distance to ensure that students and their families were having their most immediate needs met:

You also had to put yourself in the shoes of those families, and they were really just trying to survive and have their basic needs met. If they weren't able to sign in every day, you were just checking in to make sure if everything was okay, if there was anything we could do to help the family out.

Engaging with Family Members through Varied Platforms

A range of platforms were used by educators at Shaker Road ES to communicate with and engage parents and family members. The principal explained a number of communications that he spearheaded in order to keep families informed throughout the pandemic. Because remote learning – especially for children – often requires additional support from parents and caregivers, the principal worked together with staff to develop short webinars that helped explain how to use these technologies and what caregivers could expect during virtual lessons. Another form of communication mentioned by the principal was a “community message” that he sent out to families each week. Although the message began as a way to keep families informed about the constant changes during the first year of the pandemic, the principal continues to deliver the message each week to the community. Other educators used Google Meets to communicate with families and “let them know what we were working on,” as one teacher put it.

During the 2021-22 school year, the school district decided to standardize an online, consolidated communications platform as the primary way staff members would communicate with families. As the principal explained, the application provided more “streamlined communication between home and school.” A support staff member noted the benefit of this program in comparison to Google Classroom: “With Google Classroom, you invite the parent, and if they don't sign up, you don't have a way to contact them,” yet on the chosen platform “every parent participates.” Several teachers noted that the application is especially useful for communicating with family members whose first language is not English. As one teacher explained, “A huge benefit is that if a parent goes in, I can change the language so things will automatically translate when I receive that message.” Though noting its utility, teachers acknowledge that additional efforts, such as individual phone calls, are often needed to effectively engage with the families of English learners.

Educators also employed various social media applications to engage with family members. One support staff member, for example, described her interactions with the PTA over Facebook as a useful way to increase participation in extracurricular activities held during the pandemic. “Parents are my best ally,” she commented.

In a Nutshell

At Shaker Road Elementary School caring, trusting, and supportive relationships served as important resources to draw upon in mitigating the adversities caused by the pandemic. Networks of support among colleagues, for instance, were instrumental in identifying disparities exacerbated by the pandemic and forming collaborative efforts to address emerging concerns. Leaders shared decision-making power with teachers and allowed them to deliver content innovatively and meet their students’ needs in individualized ways. Lastly, staff at Shaker Road built from the existing goodwill and trust that characterized their relationship to the surrounding community by consistently and clearly communicating with families. To further strengthen the strong connections between home and school, staff members creatively adapted programs and activities to ensure they could continue during the pandemic.

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<https://www.southcolonieschools.org/shaker-road-elementary-school/>