



Opportunities and Challenges to Adapt and Innovate }

How Educators
Confronted the
COVID-19 Pandemic



SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
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About Know Your Schools~for NYKids (NYKids)

Since its inception in 2004, one goal of NYKids has been to help educators learn about promising practices from other educators. To date NYKids has identified promising practices at all levels, elementary, middle, and high school, with special attention to schools with above-predicted performance among socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically diverse youth. Results of all studies are available in reports, case studies, articles, books, and presentations.

To download a copy of this report and other NYKids resources, to learn more about NYKids and earlier studies, or to use our searchable database to compare school outcomes go to: www.ny-kids.org/

NYKids is housed in the University at Albany's School of Education and is a university-school improvement hub with the mission to "inform, inspire, and improve" in the service of youth, families, and educators in New York State and beyond.

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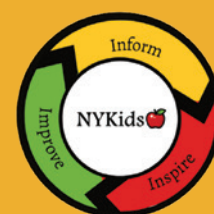
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The Case Study Schools

This report is based on case studies of six schools the NYKids team identified as positive outliers based on responses to a 2020-21 survey of teachers and support staff about their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. 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 these six schools exhibiting relatively more positive workforce responses with regard to stress and job satisfaction. Each complete case study is available at ny-kids.org, and highlights from them appear throughout this report. A brief introduction to each school can be found on these pages, and sampling criteria can be found in the study methods on page 34-35. A separate methods and procedures report provides more detail about the sampling method and conduct of this study and is available at ny-kids.org.

Deerfield Elementary School, Whitesboro Central School District



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

Deerfield Elementary School met the criteria for inclusion in this study with a score of 52.2% compared to an overall sample mean of 36.9% and standard deviation of 15.4%. Overall, Deerfield educators characterize their school as having collaborative and familial relationships, inclusive problem solving and distributed decision making, and a responsive and developmentally appropriate approach to change.

Lake George Elementary School, Lake George Central School District



Situated in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains, Lake George Elementary School serves approximately 300 students from kindergarten through grade six. The school is just minutes away from Lake George and the downtown center, which is the site of bustling tourism through the summer months. Classified as a rural school, Lake George Elementary School is surrounded by forests, trails, and wildlife, yet it is close in proximity to urban areas such as Glen Falls and Saratoga Springs and only 60 miles north of the state capital of Albany. Upon graduation, students from Lake George Elementary move to the Jr./Sr. High School for the six years of their secondary schooling.

Lake George Elementary School met the criteria for inclusion in this study with a score of 47.6% compared to an overall sample mean of 36.9% and standard deviation of 15.4%. Teachers described relationships of collaboration, trust, and support both within the school and with the community.

Shaker Road Elementary School, South Colonie School District



Shaker Road Elementary School is located just six miles north of New York's state capital 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.

Shaker Road Elementary School met the criteria for inclusion in this with a score of 80% compared to an overall sample mean of 36.9% and standard deviation of 15.4%. Educators reported that they tackled pandemic-related challenges through a team-based approach focused on meeting the diverse needs of students and families. They credited their success, in part, to long-standing close-knit relationships between educators and families.

Chatham Middle School,
Chatham Central School District



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.

Chatham Middle School met the criteria for inclusion in this study with a score of 42.9% compared to an overall sample mean of 36.9% and standard deviation of 15.4%. Educators described an innovation-friendly problem-solving climate and credited their team structure for supporting them through the crisis.

Tamarac Secondary School,
Brunswick Central School District



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.

Tamarac Secondary School met the criteria for inclusion in this study with a score of 37.9% compared to an overall sample mean of 36.9% and standard deviation of 15.4%. Educators described the importance of being present for students and families, prioritizing students' social, emotional, and mental well-being, and working within an atmosphere of collaboration and mutual support among colleagues.

Whitesboro Middle School Campus,
Whitesboro Central School District



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

Whitesboro Middle School met the criteria for inclusion in this study with a score of 41.5% compared to an overall sample mean of 36.9% and standard deviation of 15.4%. Educators praised their leadership as proactive, conscientious, and caring; and they described a culture of problem solving and innovative mindsets as well as user-friendly systems and communications.

Demographics of the Case Study Schools

School	Enrollment ¹	Grade Span	Urbanicity	% Economically Disadvantaged	% ELL	% American Indian / Alaska NaActive	% Black / African-American	% Hispanic Latino	% Asian / Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	% White	% Multiracial	PPE ²
Deerfield ES	318	K-5	Suburb: Midsize	41	3	0	1	3	< 1	92	4	\$18,607.03
Lake George ES	309	K-6	Rural: Fringe	21	< 1	< 1	2	3	1	92	2	\$27,013.29
Skaker Road ES	329	K-4	Suburb: Large	33	12	< 1	5	11	12	61	11	\$18,307.96
Chatham MS	222	6-8	Rural: Distant	43	< 1	0	< 1	5	< 1	86	8	\$28,385.72
Tamarac MS	634	6-12	Rural: Fringe	32	< 1	0	2	5	2	89	3	\$18,958.25
Parkway MS ³	242	6	Suburb: Midsize	43	< 1	0	2	2	1	90	42	\$16,839.68
Whitesboro MS	513	7-8	Suburb: Midsize	36	< 1	< 1	2	6	1	88	4	\$23,468.15
NYS Average	2,512,973	K-12		57	10	1	16	28	10	41	3	N/A

¹ All data in this table are retrieved from <https://data.nysed.gov/downloads.php>

² Total per pupil expenditures as reported in the 2020-21 NYS fiscal supplement.

³ Parkway is part of the Whitesboro Middle School campus, but demographic and student performance data are reported separately.



Introduction and Preview of Findings

“Now is the time to transform education systems.”

- António Guterres – United Nations Secretary General – September 19, 2022

At the United Nations Transforming Education Summit held in New York City in September of 2022, the UN Secretary General António Guterres remarked that “The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on learning worldwide.” Yet, as he made clear, “The education crisis began long before—and runs much deeper.” This deep crisis includes a persistent educational opportunity gap between the most vulnerable and marginalized youth and their more privileged peers. These gaps are rooted in systemic inequities ranging from the ways knowledge and resources are distributed in different communities to how, and to what extent, leaders and educators in different school contexts are prepared and supported in their work.

In New York State, the COVID-19 pandemic hit relatively early and hard. All New York state public schools were mandated to be closed for in-person instruction in March of 2020 as public health experts attempted to slow the virus’ spread. This situation significantly and abruptly disrupted the routines students, parents, caregivers, educators, and whole communities relied upon to function. Since New York state is a demographically diverse state, with considerable variation in populations served and resources in different regions, the COVID-19 pandemic affected different communities in very different ways.

As the pandemic persisted through the 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 school years, school and district staff members were called upon to adapt and innovate in novel ways while attending to their own and their loved ones’ needs. This environment required significant shifts in how the work of teaching and learning, as well as how myriad other school-sponsored mental health and essential service supports for youth and families would be delivered. This scenario put school and district staff at risk of stress, with the potential for affecting their job satisfaction and willingness and ability to persist in their essential service roles.

Therefore, while the impacts of the pandemic on youth and families was of high concern, and many researchers focused their attention on them, NYKids chose to examine leaders’ and educators’ experiences of the pandemic, with the goal of identifying key drivers and related promising practices for adaptation and

innovation. We designed this study of six positive outlier schools, identified for statistically significant better outcomes with regard to stress and job satisfaction on our statewide survey⁴, to investigate the research question: What leadership practices and academic learning, social-emotional learning, and family and community engagement adaptations and innovations do positive outlier schools share and what contributes to them?

As a preview to our findings, in this study we identified four common drivers for adaptation and innovation in the six case study schools: 1) Empowerment and Collective Responsibility; 2) Responsiveness and Flexible Problem Solving; 3) A Relationship- and Connection-Centered Orientation 4) Adaptive and Innovative Systems.

Building on Prior Research

This study builds from, and adds to, emerging research around the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students, parents and caregivers, school and district leaders, and other educators (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022). With regard to academic learning, the pandemic transformed the ways in which instruction was delivered to students, posing numerous challenges that were experienced in variable ways. Among families throughout the country, and especially in rural locations, the availability and access to reliable high-speed internet limited some

⁴[Please click here for Phase 1 Survey Methods and Procedures Report](#)

students' access to remote schooling more than others (Hamilton et al., 2020). In addition, in order to be effective, remote instruction – especially for young children – necessitated more direct supervision and guidance from family members and caregivers (Garbe et al., 2020). Such requirements were especially challenging for families where both parents worked full-time, single-parent households, and those experiencing economic fallout from the pandemic (Hertz et al., 2021). To this point, scholars have found that the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities across lines of class and race as students of color, low-income students, and those requiring specialized forms of instruction (such as English learners and students with special needs) experienced more severe impacts to their academic learning (Haelermans et al., 2022). Economically disadvantaged and youth from diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, for instance, were more likely to experience longer school closures and receive less in-person teaching time, which contributed to more significant interruptions in their learning (Fox et al., 2021). These more extended interruptions to academic learning may take some youth several years to recover (Bailey et al., 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

The pandemic also had adverse effects on students' social-emotional well-being and mental health as evidenced in the reports of rising symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide attempts among young people (Leeb et al., 2020; Margolius et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2022). As with academic impacts, the prevalence of these symptoms was higher among racially minoritized students as well as students facing economic hardships worsened by the pandemic (Lowenhaupt & Hopkins, 2020; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021). For millions of students and their families, the stress of the pandemic was further compounded, as school closures meant

those in need faced challenges in accessing a range of resources and services provided by schools such as counseling and mental health supports, as well as meals (Bernstein et al., 2020; Levinson et al., 2021).

Other scholarship provided evidence that the pandemic also had severe impacts on educators. Already serving in a profession historically characterized by high levels of stress, educators encountered a range of new challenges as they were required to suddenly shift to remote instruction (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Klapproth et al., 2020). The use of new technologies that they may have been unfamiliar with, combined with concerns over their teaching effectiveness through remote modalities, contributed to educators' stress levels (Ferren, 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2021). Student support professionals, such as counselors and social workers, faced increasing caseloads as they were often tasked with providing services to both students and their families where no other options were available (Kearney & Childs, 2021; Koşir et al., 2020; Minkos & Gelbar, 2020).

Meanwhile, school and district leaders grappled with the unprecedented challenges wrought by the pandemic, often amid strained community-school relationships (Grissom & Condon, 2021; Hartney & Finger, 2020). Pandemic-related stressors, combined with the pressures to reopen schools both quickly and safely, also caused leaders to report increased levels of stress (Diliberti et al., 2020). Taken together, these challenges have resulted in higher turnover rates and educator shortages in districts across the United States (Collie, 2022; DeMatthews, et al., 2022).



Findings

This study offers insight into leaders' and educators' experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on how they adapted and innovated. As detailed in the Methods section (p. 34), the research team's methodology included the use of semi-structured interview and focus group protocols and collection of documents, as we sought to identify differences across school levels, community demographics, and workforce characteristics.

Analysis of our study results showed that Chatham Middle School, Deerfield Elementary School, Lake George Elementary School, Shaker Road Elementary School, Tamarac Middle/High School, and Whitesboro Middle School shared four drivers for adaptation and innovation in times of stress. Differences in school context and level, as well as workforce characteristics, helped to account for some differences between the schools in how these drivers translated into the practices discussed throughout this report.

These four drivers for adaptations and innovation are:

1. Empowerment and Collective Responsibility
2. Responsive and Flexible Problem Solving
3. Relationship- and Connection-Centered Orientation
4. Adaptive and Innovative Systems



How Educators
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Pandemic

1.

Empowerment and Collective Responsibility

There are going to be a lot of situations where you have I think in general, [the principal] is very good at listening to everyone's ideas, getting all of us to think about what we're doing, and giving us a lot of autonomy to address issues.

– Teacher (Chatham)

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

– Principal (Whitesboro MS)

An important distinguishing characteristic of case study school leaders and educators in this study was how they approached empowering people (including their peers and other school staff, students, parents, caregivers, and community partners) and committing to take collective responsibility for meeting pandemic-related challenges.

We found that to empower people and meet pandemic-related challenges, leaders and educators encouraged the assertion of individuals' agency to make changes in a dynamic student-and family-focused way. As study participants reported, educators and other school staff were afforded, what some scholars call, "bounded autonomy" (Fullan, 2015) in that they experienced a welcome degree of latitude to deal with the challenges at hand, and this was accompanied by clear and consistent expectations for individual effort and collective responsibility (Timperley & Robinson, 2000; Wilcox & Lawson, 2018). In this way agency, autonomy and shared expectations for collective responsibility converged to empower individuals, teams and groups within and outside schools and districts to stay motivated and productive. How did they empower and take collective responsibility? We identified three related dimensions in this theme:

- a) Centering Diverse Voices and Needs
- b) Balancing Autonomy and Consistency
- c) Keeping High Expectations and Leading with Empathy

a) Centering Diverse Voices and Needs

In this study, we asked a number of questions about how individuals and groups of individuals engaged in problem solving as the pandemic persisted. In response to these questions, we noted a pattern among educators and leaders in the case study schools with regard to the ways they centered their attention and efforts on diverse voices and needs. This is in contrast to a "one-size fits all" top-down approach or one that is responsive to the loudest or most prominent or powerful voices in the community. Instead, educators and leaders in these schools purposefully sought out information about the needs of those children and families that were most vulnerable to the negative impacts of the pandemic. This was accompanied by willingness of leaders and educators to be vulnerable themselves, as they invited opportunity for students, parents, caregivers, and community members to voice their ideas and concerns, while they offered transparency around their own efforts (and sometimes struggles) to do their work under unprecedented challenges.

Emphasizing Being "In It Together," Yet Recognizing Differences

At Shaker Road, like other schools in this study, centering attention on diverse voices and needs was rooted in an overarching desire to maintain relationships and connections. As discussed in Theme 3, connections were both a desired outcome and also a method for ensuring that diverse voices and needs, especially among the most vulnerable youth and families, were heard and attended to with appropriate and timely action.

While this sense of going through challenges "together" can build a sense of shared commitment and draw people closer, the state's social distancing mandates and other local school responses were not always perceived as benefitting everyone equally well. Numerous reports in national media outlets (Bornfreund & Fretwell, 2021; Harwin & Furuya, 2021) as well as in research studies (Fox et al., 2021; Larsen et al., 2021; McLoone et al., 2022) revealed that in many places, particular groups of children and families were suffering more negative impacts than others and/or did not feel their needs were being met or prioritized. For instance, youth and families without reliable high-speed internet access, youth who required specialized instruction (e.g., special education students, English language learners), and youth suffering from food insecurity or mental health issues were particularly disadvantaged. Meanwhile, leaders, educators and school staff members faced the dilemma of being called upon to open for in-person instruction as quickly as possible while putting their own and their loved ones' health at risk.

In the six cases in this study, leaders and educators were attuned to different needs and sought out different insights to meet their community's and their own staff's needs. As an example, in one Lake George ES focus group, support staff (SS) discussed the process of getting diverse stakeholder input on reopening plans:

SS1: I feel like they [district leadership team] were there with [school-based] teams and brought us together to talk and discuss our fears, our concerns, and our anxieties about coming back to school. Because at that point [reopening fall 2020], we really didn't know what was going to happen. And then there were a lot of different opinions, but the district really took the time to listen to everyone and make those decisions. How we can come back and how we needed to do it . . . the first thing was like, okay, we can do it because we have the physical space. But what else do we need to do to make our staff members feel safe? And that was a really high priority.

SS3: We did 10 categories. It included the mental well-being . . . down to classrooms and physical space, and there was safety. So each committee had a different topic, and they really homed in on each topic. I remember being like, "Why am I on this?"

SS2: And the emphasis was on including parents of students with disabilities.

Inviting Dialogue

Schools in the study also showed a pattern of seeking to diffuse tensions around such hot-button issues as masking and other social distancing protocols. One example comes from Tamarac where educators recounted sometimes difficult interactions with parents and caregivers and their efforts to diffuse tensions. Such efforts included providing a high level of transparency about the decision-making process and invitations for parents, caregivers, and other community members to voice their concerns and opinions. As one support staff member elaborated, "You build a relationship with families. You don't make assumptions; you leave all assumptions at the door and make those connections, and it helps them moving forward."

Such invitations into difficult dialogues were crucial to making sure diverse youth and family needs were accounted for and met. The Tamarac 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 Tamarac superintendent reiterated this message, noting the need to preserve working relationships with families, "especially in a small community, because you're going to see those people again," she explained as she recounted a difficult conversation with parents. "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." Tamarac

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 educators explained that school and district leaders would reach out to parents and caregivers to make sure conversations remained respectful. "Administration has been amazing supporting me with parents. They've been over-the-top great," said one teacher.

Whitesboro CSD also centered on diverse voices and needs through thoughtfully planned and implemented communications with the intent to engage transparently with all stakeholders. Whitesboro district and school leaders, for example, made concerted efforts to listen to staff, youth, parent, caregiver, and community member needs and concerns as they crafted their communications. One of their hallmark practices was to use resources like Thought Exchange (a discussion management platform) to gather community member ideas and concerns and, through this feedback, align their decision making and communications addressing those concerns. The superintendent explained this approach as he discussed engaging with teachers and union representatives about decisions impacting when and how much teachers would be expected to be offering in-person instruction and under what conditions:

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

In the Whitesboro spirit of transparency, Deerfield ES teachers realized how important partnering with parents would be to their children's success. To this end, they extended the same accessible and transparent approach to parents and caregivers as they were given by school and district leaders. For instance, one teacher described the kinds of messages she and her fellow teachers were sending out as they engaged parents and caregivers in learning their way through the pandemic's challenges, particularly in the use of new technologies:

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

b) Balancing Autonomy and Consistency

As we describe in more detail in Theme 2, autonomy is characterized by the ability and willingness to put forth individual effort and can enhance responsiveness and flexibility as one tackles complex and dynamic challenges (Fullan et al., 2015; Wilcox & Lawson, 2018). While autonomous behavior is desirable, in an organization it can also contribute to inconsistencies, misalignments, and incoherence (Gaias et al., 2018; Zee & Koomen, 2016). In this regard, educators and leaders in this study showed evidence of working toward a balance between autonomy and consistency in a variety of ways. A particularly salient expression of how this balanced approach to autonomy affected school staff was captured in one Deerfield ES teacher's expressed appreciation for not having mandates "shoved down our throat." This balanced approach toward autonomy and consistency took shape in several ways.

Flexing Policies, Procedures, and Practices

First, schools and districts require structures so that people can coordinate their work, but these same structures can reduce adaptability and hamper innovation (Lipsky, 1980). In the case study schools, there was evidence of a readiness and openness to flexing policies, procedures, and practices as people worked together to solve immediate and often novel problems.

In Whitesboro, for example, the district leadership team showed evidence of being proactive in adapting important procedures such as staff and community communications and resource allocations (discussed more in Theme 3). During the pandemic, these needed to flex in new ways and to do this, district and school leaders' approach was to strike a balance between providing enough direction and consistency across the district while still inviting some autonomy for individuals to change things as they needed. Importantly, they allowed different approaches from school to school, so as to take into account unique school cultures and climates and different needs at different school levels. As one school leader expressed it, these aspects of leaders' approaches (providing some consistencies in policies, procedures, and practices while at the same time encouraging some autonomy in making changes) coalesced to support educators in adapting to the problems in front of them.

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

Distributing Leadership

A second finding with regard to balancing autonomy and consistency was with regard to how leaders utilized and modeled the distribution of leadership for decision making. Leaders at Shaker Road ES, for example, utilized a model of distributed

leadership that encouraged the sharing of decision-making responsibilities with teachers and other frontline staff members. This approach to sharing responsibility for decision making had been established prior to the beginning of the pandemic but provided a useful way to help educators address challenges as they unfolded in their individual classrooms and across the school. 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.

Shaker Road ES educators validated the benefits of school and district leaders inviting teacher autonomy as well. Describing the Shaker Road ES 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 [lead]; he's like, 'You're the captain this week.'"

This distribution of leadership extended to district offices. As a South Colonie district leader 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 educator 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 and your grade.'"

While many educators appreciated not being "micro-managed" by leaders, others felt that there were many uncertainties, especially surrounding the delivery of remote instruction that were difficult to navigate. One teacher explained the bumpy transition to remote instruction yet noted the reassurances offered by Shaker 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.

And in Tamarac, 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 micro-manage. 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, “Our 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.”

Relying Upon and Reinforcing a Problem-Solving Culture

Finally, in light of the stress and ensuing disengagement that many educators experienced during the pandemic, Deerfield ES teachers and support staff noted that while not being immune to the pandemic’s stressors, an established school culture that balanced educator autonomy with some shared aims to guide collective action was helpful. This culture was something the principal had established over several years, as she explained:

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

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

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

c) Keeping High Expectations and Leading with Empathy

As the survey results from the first phase of this study revealed (see Methods section), many educators reported increased levels of stress and declining job satisfaction during the pandemic (Wilcox et al., 2021). These negative experiences were most prevalent among female teachers, especially female teachers

with school-aged children of their own (Leo et al., 2022). Some of these teachers and support staff expressed appreciation for the support and empathy of their colleagues, school and district leaders, and the school community as they attempted to manage the multitude of work and life challenges they were experiencing. In case study schools, we identified a pattern of high expectations for performance yet with a focus on empathizing with individual’s experiences and needs. Several ways this coupling of expectations and empathy played out are described below.

While some decisions inevitably fell directly on the principal or district leaders, in Chatham Middle School, 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. In this regard, the principal showed evidence of seeking to facilitate distributed leadership among staff by communicating positivity and having 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” 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

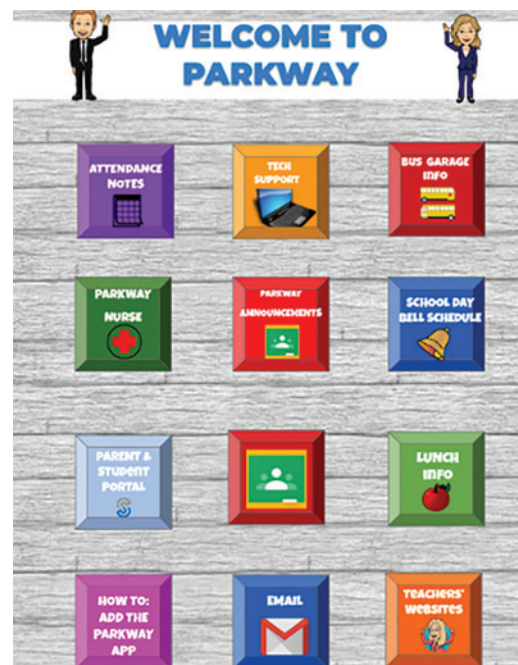


Figure 1: Parkway Student Schedule

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.

Amid the uncertainties and challenges of the pandemic, leaders at Tamarac Secondary School described an approach 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 school shutdowns. 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.

Considerations for Practice

Theme 1: Consider . . .

How to do it

Implementing policies, processes, and practices for multi-way exchange of ideas including the airing of what can sometimes be controversial

Provide multiple pathways for communication to occur including at the district, school, and classroom levels.

Offer transparency and humility regarding problem solving and decision making.

Spotlight the voices and needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized in the community and ensure that variable needs are met in timely and appropriate ways.

Encouraging collective problem solving and decision making by striking the right balance between autonomy and consistency

Reinforce a student-centered and high expectations culture by sharing value and belief statements and reinforcing norms for collective problem-solving behavior.

Establish enough consistency in policies, procedures, and practices to offer clarity while also being flexible to adapt to circumstances in different contexts and based on different viewpoints.

Recognize and articulate the value of every individual's ideas and viewpoints.

Maintaining high expectations with a focus on empathy

Model commitments to meeting high expectations balanced with empathy toward different people's experiences.

Summary

As other research on the pandemic and particularly that related to effects in schools, the pandemic impacted different people and communities differently (Fox et al, 2021; Leo et al., 2022). These differential impacts were proactively addressed, while not entirely alleviated, in the case study schools by centering diverse voices and needs; balancing autonomy and consistency; and keeping high expectations and leading with empathy. These findings provide a partial roadmap for how to disrupt the predictable correlation between individual, group, and community vulnerability prior to a crisis and deeper negative impacts in a crisis. The "Considerations for Practice" above provide guidance for those seeking to engage in examining and improving on their own strategies for empowering and encouraging collective responsibility in their own school setting.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN

Whitesboro Middle School Campus

The section below (excerpted from the case study⁵) highlights practices from the Whitesboro Middle School campus that illustrate their approach to empowerment and collective responsibility.

Proactive, Conscientious, and Caring Leadership

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

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

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

Problem-Solving and Innovative Mindsets

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

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

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

We had plenty of technology. We had the hotspots. We had the Chromebooks. So we were able to get those in the hands of our students and their families. But what we found is that there were a lot of challenges navigating their use: "How do you use it?" The platforms were sometimes tricky as far as the academic programs that the students were using. We heard that they [students and families] were having difficulty. We created a system of online support for them that they could access 24/7 on our website. We had countless documents there . . . helping them walk through different technical issues. If they were having a hardware issue, they could submit a ticket, and our techs would get in touch with them. They went to their houses and helped.

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

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

(Whitesboro CSD)

⁵Please click [here](#) for the complete case study.

2.

Responsiveness and Flexibility

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

– Teacher (Deerfield ES)

I’m not really a roadblock person. Like if there’s something in the way, you just find a different way to do it.

– Support staff (Lake George ES)

The COVID-19 pandemic instigated a variety of new challenges with which educators across the world grappled. As the virus surged, schools were forced to close their doors and shift to remote instruction. This abrupt shift in modality presented new predicaments for teachers, including lowered levels of engagement and participation among students, difficulties using online technology, and unfamiliarity with adapting instruction for online delivery (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Ford et al., 2021). Teachers whose students had special needs or required specialized forms of instruction such as English learners encountered additional obstacles as they shifted to a fully online mode of instruction (Marshall et al., 2020). Even as schools reopened and students returned to in-person learning, concerns emerged regarding academic gaps that may have opened or been exacerbated during the pandemic.

In such an uncertain and rapidly changing terrain, educators in this study applied a responsive and flexible approach to facing the many challenges initiated by the pandemic. As discussed in this theme, educators utilized novel strategies and relied on new technologies to maintain student engagement throughout the pandemic. Educators also described the innovative techniques they utilized to redress gaps in students’ academic learning that emerged during school shutdowns. Lastly, educators explained the need to adapt extracurricular programs and activities in order to maintain a level of normalcy during abnormal times. These efforts also included ways to return to school quickly and safely. Three dimensions of this theme are:

- a) Engaging Students in New and Challenging Contexts
- b) Developing Strategies to Address Academic Gaps
- c) Innovating Together to Maintain Normalcy

a) Engaging Students in New and Challenging Contexts

Like educators throughout the world, educators in this study noted the drop in engagement and participation among many of their students. To address these concerns, teachers developed a range of strategies to promote academic engagement, especially during periods of remote instruction.

Harnessing Technology

Many of the techniques recounted by teachers during interviews and focus groups involved the use of technologies and online applications to make learning more engaging. Pear Deck, Kahoot, Kami, and Screencastify, in particular, were mentioned as effective and engaging applications. For instance, a teacher at Tamarac 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.

At Whitesboro, a teacher explained how using an interactive learning platform called Kami helped make materials more accessible for students with disabilities:

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

Other applications were designed to provide a sense of familiarity and comfort for students during periods of school closures. A teacher at Shaker Road, for instance, 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.

As schools shifted to remote learning, Google Classroom became the primary platform for many educators to communicate with students and deliver instruction. While this created difficulties for some teachers at first, others highlighted its effectiveness in keeping students engaged as well as in communicating with students who may have missed classes. Several teachers observed how their students were quickly able to utilize the technology. A support staff member from Tamarac 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.

Teachers also described the different ways they adapted lessons to fit the new online modality while focusing on engagement. One innovative strategy used by a teacher at Whitesboro was to record videos that provided recaps or summaries of key content that would be available through Google Classroom. A teacher explained how this worked and why they used this practice:

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

At Chatham, educators utilized subscriptions to educational game platforms for math instruction and “Encore” classes (art, music, technology, home and careers, health, family and consumer science) to maintain a focus on providing students with a well-rounded education. An art teacher, for instance, 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! [See Figure 3]

Making Curricular Changes

While engagement was a significant priority for educators, educators also spoke of the need to adapt both curricular elements and assessment tools during and after periods of school closures. Recognizing that it would be impossible to cover content at the same rate as the class would in person, educators described how they reprioritized elements of their curriculum and created new ways to deliver the content that was most essential for their class. A teacher from Chatham described this process:

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.

Representative of the distributed approach to leadership described in Theme 1, educators were entrusted by leaders with the ability to make these important decisions about curriculum and pedagogy with support from leaders. As the superintendent of Deerfield explained:

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

This autonomy – while challenging in many cases – also provided teachers with opportunities to use new approaches they otherwise would not have. In some cases, these adaptations were valuable additions that teachers continued to use after students returned to fully in-person teaching. As a teacher from Shaker Road explained:

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.

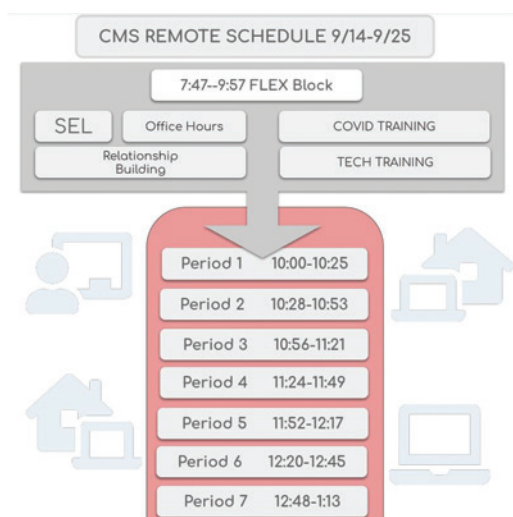


Figure 2: Chatham Remote Schedule

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.

b) Developing Strategies to Address Academic Gaps

Educators also expressed concerns over academic gaps that may have emerged or been exacerbated during the pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

Anticipating and Identifying Learning Gaps

Educators developed mechanisms to identify potential learning issues and offset any negative academic impacts stemming from the pandemic. At Lake George, for instance, several respondents noted the consequences that the pandemic had on students' learning as they returned to school. As one teacher explained:

Having second graders who missed three months of first grade . . . was a huge impact on their academics. So when they came to us in second grade, I remember my coteacher and I gave our first math test and we were like, "Whoa!"

Educators used a variety of strategies to identify academic gaps. At Shaker Road, grade-level teams utilized an online diagnostic tool to group returning students by ability and developed specific curricula to address learning loss as students returned to school. As one teacher put it, "I was able to meet their needs, to talk to them, to remediate them, to sit down and conference with them." A support staff member at Deerfield explained the challenging process of identifying student needs as they returned to fully in-person learning:

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

As student concerns were identified, educators from each of the six schools explained the range of intervention strategies to meet the needs of students. Such strategies, as many explained, were especially important for students who may not

have been identified as requiring additional services prior to the pandemic. For instance, educators at Lake George utilized specialized instruction for all students rather than just those identified as having special needs. "We treated everybody like they all needed the differentiation," explained one teacher. Another teacher explained what this process looked like in practice:

The whole class was getting modifications rather than just the Special Ed students. And so, it was like a whole class of Special Ed students. And there was no distinction between who had an IEP and who didn't because they all needed all that help. And so then it was kind of trying to find that fine line of, okay, where do we pull back for those Gen Ed kids that don't necessarily need it? And where do we push them? Like, when is it okay to push them? And how long do we keep that going?

Shaker Road teachers described how they worked together with colleagues from other grade levels to share insights on instructional gaps that might need to be addressed in the current 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.

At Chatham, educators described several strategies they used to ensure students who may have missed content during school closures would not fall further behind. For instance, a new Algebra II preparation class and a "bridge" program was added to programming to help students experiencing anxiety and other mental health issues begin to re-engage in their academics as they prepared for high school. At Lake George, a districtwide "Remote Mentor" program was created where teaching assistants were assigned to individual students. Mentors helped with extra tutoring built into students' schedules and also checked in with students to ensure that they were not falling behind or experiencing difficulties in their classes. After students largely returned to in-person instruction, Remote Mentors continued to be used for students who had to quarantine.

In addition to these changes, several schools created summer enrichment programs such as the "Summer Scholars" (Tamarac) and "Jumpstart Program" (Lake George) that aimed to redress any learning gaps that emerged during the pandemic.

Staying Flexible to Meet Students' Needs

As described further in Theme 3, educators also explained the need to be flexible with students throughout the many challenges that the pandemic created. Many educators felt it was

important to acknowledge how the pandemic affected students and their families in different ways, and that it was crucial to understand students' challenges on a case-by-case basis. A teacher at Shaker Road, for instance, described a student who 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.

A teacher at Whitesboro echoed the need to be flexible as she explained a strategy that allowed a student who was absent for any reason, including mental health concerns, to catch up on material quickly:

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

In many cases, the flexibility described by educators was evident in the choices that were made available to students and families (a point discussed in Theme 1) regarding their own learning. These options were crucial strategies to involve parents and caregivers in important decision-making processes but also to ensure that all students' needs would be met. As a teacher at Deerfield explained:

I think this was one of the reasons we were successful through the pandemic — we gave people options, and we gave parents choice when it came to how to educate their child. If you need to be fully remote, we're going to allow you to be fully remote. If you're going to be back on a hybrid basis, great. If we allowed them to enter into the

CiTi BOCES, a secondary program and online high school, we allowed them to continue the following year, as we made a commitment to give kids these opportunities. We needed to see them through.

c) Innovating Together to Maintain Normalcy

A salient theme that emerged from interviews and focus groups with educators was a shared determination to maintain a level of normalcy in abnormal times. In many cases, such efforts involved strategic ways to maintain events and extracurricular programs and activities or reinstitute them as quickly as possible given constraints of the pandemic.

Keeping Extracurriculars Going

Educators at Lake George, for instance, described their shared dedication to continue offering activities and programs safely by transferring them outside or using the large spaces available to them in the school to socially distance. "We were determined. I think that was our mindset: we weren't going to stop just because this was happening. We were being safe, but we just wanted to keep things going," said a teacher. One example was the "Moving Up" ceremony that celebrated students' transition to the secondary school. The principal personally assisted in arranging the parking lot and removing fences to ensure all families could participate at a safe distance. He explained the thinking behind these efforts:

When I think about creativity, oftentimes it was creatively coming up with a way to maintain some sense of normalcy for kids and maintain the things that are most important to them. How do we provide those opportunities for kids instead of saying we can't do it?

Similarly, at Chatham, described by the principal as the "hub of the community," educators expressed the need to maintain extracurriculars and other school events as important activities where young people could develop social skills and build relationships with one another. One teacher described a school dance that was brought back as soon as restrictions were lifted, "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."

Another example at Chatham was from a social studies teacher who adapted 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.

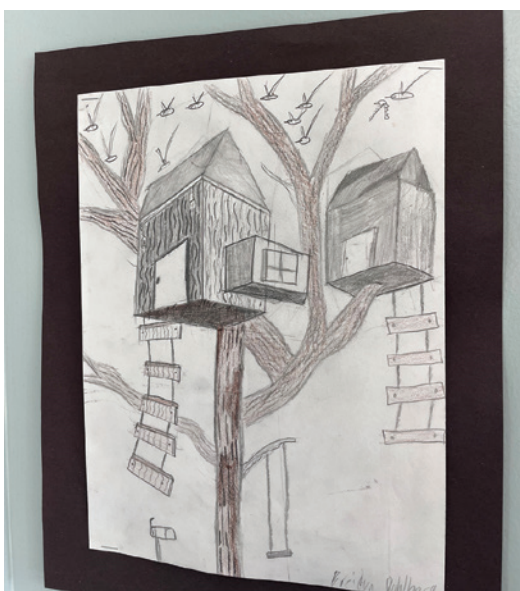


Figure 3: Chatham Student Treehouse Project



Reopening Quickly and Safely

In addition to the creative maintenance of extracurriculars and other events, educators also explained the collaborative efforts they undertook to reopen schools as soon as possible during the pandemic. Many respondents explained that bringing students back quickly and safely meant they could more effectively identify and close emerging academic gaps and also support students' social-emotional well-being.

For instance, at Shaker Road, educators felt that the quick return for the majority of their students (86 percent by September 2020, according to the principal) was a crucial factor that potentially contributed to their status as a case study. "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."

In many schools, the complex logistical arrangements that social distancing required meant educators had to coordinate efforts among a range of departments and services. At Tamarac, 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.

As discussed in Theme 1, educators at each school explained that these decisions were also made collaboratively and with the inclusion of a range of stakeholder voices. For example, at Lake George, the principal described a decision-making committee of parents, teachers, and school and district-level leaders, as well as specialists and support staff members serving various student subgroups. He explained, "Everything we do in this building is discussed with a shared decision-making body, and no decision is made without support [and] approval of that group." The committee weighed in not only on school reopening plans but also steered other details through the pandemic. As he said:

So that body was used for our reopening plans, right down to, hey how are we going to, what are we going to put out in the hallways as far as how are we going to keep kids spaced apart? Where are we going to put handwashing stations or sanitizer? They were involved in all of those conversations.

Considerations for Practice

Theme 2: Consider . . .

How to do it

Engaging students in new and challenging ways

Whether using technology in person or remotely, prioritize utilizing tools that are interactive and accessible for students with diverse needs.

Make available videos of lessons and use other multimedia for on-demand access.

Give educators resources, training, and autonomy to adapt instruction to meet diverse student needs.

Setting high expectations for all students in both academic and behavioral senses while recognizing how their individual affinities and aptitudes builds resilience and enhances motivation

Utilize data to keep track of students' performance and create personalized plans to meet their needs.

Provide sufficient time for educators of different grade levels, content areas, and specializations to collaborate and share insights into students' needs.

Facilitate flexible academic programming for students experiencing anxiety or other mental health challenges.

Utilize mentors for academic support and to help students make connections through extracurriculars and clubs.

Create innovative summer enrichment programs based on student interest and to address academic and social-emotional learning needs.

Apply empathy for families who may be experiencing unknown struggles or challenges and actively listen to parent and caregiver ideas on how to support learning.

Providing social and emotional supports in formal and informal ways to cement relationships and encourage attention to overall well-being, with reciprocal effects on academic performance

Strive to maintain a sense of normalcy for students and families by adapting events and traditions to circumstances.

Encourage peer to peer interaction wherever possible and safe.

When making decisions about safety and planning for events or other extra-curricular activities, center the voices of multiple stakeholders: parents, caregivers, teachers, support staff, school- and district-level leaders, and specialists.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN

Shaker Road Elementary School

The section below (excerpted from the case study⁶) highlights the way educators at Shaker Road Elementary demonstrate responsive and flexible problem solving.

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.

Tackling Pandemic-Related Challenges through a Team-Based Approach

While not discounting the trying conditions created by the pandemic, educators at Shaker Road 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.

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. – Principal (Shaker Road)

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. – Teacher (Shaker Road)

⁶[Please click here for the complete case study.](#)

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic created a set of unique and unprecedented challenges for educators in schools across the world. Although educators in this study, too, struggled with the new demands set by the pandemic, they also utilized a responsive and flexible approach to problem solving that helped them overcome obstacles. One particular challenge discussed by educators in this study was the difficulties they faced as they rapidly transitioned to remote learning. While educators acknowledged their struggles, they also adopted a range of innovative strategies to ensure that their students remained engaged during remote learning. Although students' social-emotional well-being was described as a major priority for educators (discussed in Theme 3 below), educators remained committed to supporting students' academic learning and created new ways to identify and address learning gaps that may have emerged during the pandemic. Lastly, educators explained their efforts to maintain a level of normalcy for students by adapting existing programs and events so that they still might be held safely during the pandemic.

3.

A Relationship- and Connection-Centered Orientation

In terms of colleagues in the school, the other teachers — all of the staff here — are just an amazing community. You know, I work with some of my best friends, which is great. I don't think everyone can say that about their job. So it's amazing because I feel like, as a school community of professionals, we really have each other's backs.

— Teacher (Lake George ES)

The pandemic had drastic effects on the ways in which educators interact with one another as well as students and their families. While caring relationships between teachers and students are a crucial component to students' academic performance and social-emotional well-being, social-distancing measures and school closures made it difficult for teachers to connect deeply with their students (Pianta et al., 2003). Similarly, teacher collaboration has been viewed as an integral component to delivering effective instruction (Vangrieken et al., 2015), yet the shift to remote learning necessitated by the pandemic hampered teachers' capacities to collaborate. Emerging scholarship suggests that educator collaboration and associated experiences of collegiality decreased during the pandemic (Schiller et al., in review). Lastly, the pandemic created a new and challenging climate for parent and family engagement (Wilinski et al., 2022).

This theme focuses on the ways in which educators across the six case study schools featured in this study viewed their relationships with each other, their students, and their students' families. Interviews and focus groups revealed that the ways educators collaborated with one another to solve problems and relied on colleagues for pedagogical and emotional support were associated with the quality of their relationships. Our findings also demonstrate the ways in which educators at case study schools maintained connections with students and supported their social-emotional well-being and mental health. Lastly, this theme explores how educators strategically connected with family members during the pandemic and school closures. Three dimensions emerged from our findings:

- a) Drawing on Supportive and Collegial Relationships to Overcome Obstacles
- b) Staying Connected to Students and Supporting their Social-Emotional Development
- c) Engaging Strategically with Parents and Family Members

a) Drawing on Supportive and Collegial Relationships to Overcome Obstacles

Educators across the six case study schools described their relationships with colleagues as a crucial source of support through the pandemic. In interviews and focus groups, educators recounted the many ways that they worked together to identify and solve problems as they arose and relied on one another to help overcome obstacles.

Helping Each Other with Technology

Collaborative efforts described by teachers ranged from helping one another to develop lesson plans, sharing remote teaching strategies, and working together to solve technology-related issues. The team-based approach, for instance, was evident in the “all-hands-on-deck” approach, as several educators put it. This approach was especially crucial in addressing the challenges many educators encountered after the abrupt shift to remote learning. For example, a teacher at Chatham Middle School explained how teachers were able to work together to help support those struggling with the new technology:

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.

Similarly, a school leader at Whitesboro described how teachers supported one another to supplement the training programs that were offered at the school and district levels:

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

Providing Social and Emotional Support for Coworkers

In addition to the pedagogical and technical assistance educators offered one another, educators explained how their colleagues were also a crucial source of emotional and social support. A teacher from Tamarac summed up the ways in which educators regularly relied on one another for moral support through the pandemic:

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.

Similarly, during a focus group at Deerfield, teachers recounted the emotional supports that teachers and school leaders provided in trying times:

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

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

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

Many educators felt that the high levels of collaboration and support that proved crucial in weathering the storm of the pandemic were embedded in the climate and culture of their schools. A teacher from Lake George, for instance, explained how a selfless ethos was a feature of the school's fabric:

I think one of the real keys of why we are successful and why we may have shown up different than some other schools is everyone's willing to give a piece of themselves to help or make something come to reality. Everyone brings into it a little piece of something, we don't know who it is, and what that strength is, but it's the trust that we have and then follow through with that collaboration.

Relationships between school and district leaders and educators were generally viewed favorably by educators. Teachers, for instance, commented positively on the ways in which leaders responded to the pandemic with messages of support for educators as well as several initiatives aimed at addressing and supporting staff well-being. A teacher at Deerfield, for instance, described how school and district leaders eased the pressure on them by tempering their expectations of teachers during the transition to remote learning.

At Lake George, a teacher similarly said that school leaders helped teachers ease back into fully in-person teaching. One adaptation that was seen as particularly helpful at Lake George was adding "Remote Days" to staff schedules once a month. Whereas these days might have previously been reserved for

professional development or curricular design, leaders allowed teachers to use them for mental health and to catch up on work, plan ahead, or simply take a break. As one support staff member put it, "That was an understanding from the top that everyone needed that step back and that breather."

Lastly, educators in this study generally felt that leaders took into account their needs and responded to their feedback. For instance, a teacher from Whitesboro described how he met with school leadership weekly in order to provide feedback on new initiatives and issues faced by the teaching staff:

I think being able to work with [school leaders] and kind of just talk through things . . . They have a weekly meeting of administrators, where it's basically like setting the stage like, "Where are we? Where are we going?" . . . They moved it to the afternoons for me when I was here. So there were four of us, every Monday kind of talking about these things and how they would go. So it wasn't like, "Here take care of this, do it." You know, it was a team approach.

A similar approach was articulated by a teacher at Deerfield who explained how leaders regularly solicited feedback and offered support to teachers throughout the pandemic:

[Leaders] have been fully open and everything in saying that "We want you to be successful, we want the kids to be successful. What do you need from us? What are some things that we could do to help and support this learning and this type of learning?"

b) Staying Connected to Students and Supporting their Social-Emotional Development

A consistent refrain among educators was the need to maintain close connections to students throughout the pandemic and find creative ways to foster positive relationships with students, especially during periods of remote learning.

Educators were quick to acknowledge the impacts of the pandemic on their students in terms of mental health and social-emotional learning. Many educators, for instance, noted how their students struggled more than usual to follow directions and focus on work, exhibited a reduction in confidence or reluctance to complete tasks, and experienced regression in social skills. Other educators disclosed more severe impacts on students, including rising rates of substance abuse and mental health crises.

Prioritizing the Social-Emotional

To address the above concerns, many educators explained that a consensus had been reached among their colleagues to prioritize students social-emotional well-being and mental health over all other concerns. For example, at Shaker Road a "care before the curriculum" approach – as a district leader put it – was aimed at addressing students' well-being and engagement



Figure 4: Shaker Teacher's Remote Lesson

rather than a sole focus on academic learning during and immediately after the school shutdown. Likewise, the Lake George principal described striking a balance between a primary focus on students' social-emotional well-being without losing track of students' academic progress:

I think [it] was understanding that this is serious, and this is not normal. We as a collective backed up and said the most important thing for us, and I think everybody was in total agreement, is the social-emotional health of us and our children. And even though we were still assessing kids, we backed off academically, but we still put our finger on the pulse so that we understood where they were.

Teachers also acknowledged the need to alter their expectations of students as they noted the bumpy transition to remote instruction. For instance, a teacher from Tamarac explained the need to be flexible with students during the pandemic. Reflecting on the ways in which the pandemic has impacted his students, he explained the importance of “actually seeing them as people who were affected by the pandemic just as much as we were all affected by the pandemic.” For many educators, part of this process also included paring down elements of curriculum in order to keep students engaged. As a teacher from Shaker Road 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.”

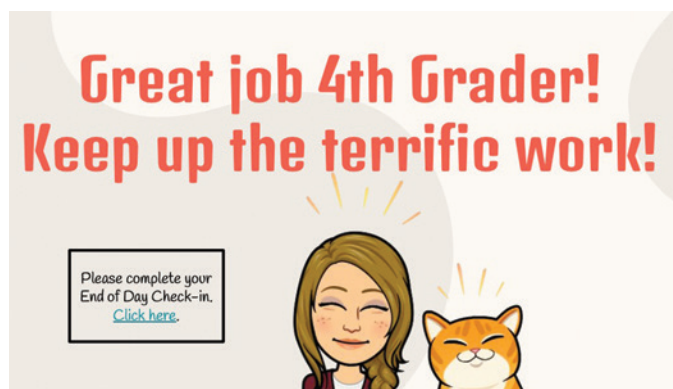


Figure 5: Shaker Teacher's Remote Lesson

Identifying and Addressing Students' Social-Emotional Needs

Educators relied on a variety of formal and informal mechanisms to identify students' social-emotional needs as they emerged. Some examples included surveys of students and families, Google Forms or spreadsheets that were maintained by educators on each student, or a universal screener that was recently adopted in Shaker Road. At Whitesboro, educators used wellness surveys to identify students' needs and match them with a mentor to ensure that students would have someone that they would feel comfortable reaching out to with any issues. In addition, students met with their mentor bi-monthly to share their concerns.

At Shaker Road and Tamarac, school leaders also utilized a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) to address students' social-emotional needs. The principal at Lake George explained how the school adopted an approach to support students' social and emotional needs similar to the Response to Intervention (RTI) model. As he explained, “If you think about a traditional RTI model, oftentimes we look at academics; we do the same with our social-emotional. So we meet regularly and talk about our students and [ask], ‘Are there kids that need more support?’”

In addition to these efforts, educators explained the need to continue developing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks and programs at their school or, in some cases, modifying and strengthening existing ones. Such programs often included extra-curricular elements and extended into the summer to continue supporting students. At Chatham, for example, meetings were built into the schedule for teachers to connect with students and focus on SEL. In addition, the principal explained a new initiative called the Student Improvement Plan (SIP) devised to address both academic and social-emotional needs:

We created SIP plans (student improvement plans) and there was an academic and . . . SEL 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.

At Tamarac, educators became more involved with connecting with students during lunch time and recess, and emphasis on SEL was enhanced. One initiative they implemented was the REACH program that is designed to focus on supporting at-risk students who were not identified as having special needs. A district leader noted that additional grant funding allowed the school to hire a full-time teacher for the program.

For many, the explicit focus on SEL was conducive to elements already emphasized in the school culture. As a teacher from Chatham explained, “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.” Similarly, a teacher at Shaker Road explained how lessons from a recent project



Figure 6: Whitesboro Wellness Chart

designed to foster positive relationships were conducive to the school culture educators had already cultivated, “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.”

Cultivating Positive Peer Relationships

Fostering healthy relationships among students was also seen as a priority among educators, especially during periods when the school was closed and later as groups of students returned to in-person schooling at different rates. For instance, educators described efforts to ensure that students who chose to remain home during the pandemic even as the school reopened would not feel disconnected from their peers. A teacher from Whitesboro explained how her daily classroom routine involved making connections between students at school and at home:

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

Similarly, educators at Lake George explained the different adaptations they used to keep students connected as schools reopened. A particular point of emphasis was to ensure that students at home were not disconnected from classroom activities and social interaction. As an example of this approach, a district leader described a teacher who attached an iPad to a music stand during class in order to keep remote students connected and engaged:

She buddied the iPad up with somebody during lunch-time so the kid who was at home was still having social interaction with their friends during lunchtime. I was in the library one time, and a class was coming down to pick out their books. And the teacher had their iPad and was pulling books off the shelf and showing them to the student at home so that she could check them out and they could pick up those books. So like it was just that level of commitment that they did. It was unbelievable.

c) Engaging Strategically with Parents and Family Members

Staying connected to students’ families through the pandemic and engaging family members was viewed by educators in this study as a high priority. While many highlighted the challenges of engaging families through the pandemic – especially during periods when schools were closed – they also elaborated on a number of effective strategies and techniques they used to foster connections to families.

In many schools, close-knit connections between schools and communities meant that educators’ own children were or had been students at the school. Numerous educators themselves were graduates of the school districts in which they currently taught. “So, we get the ability to say, ‘Oh, I remember that family; I know what works,’” explained a teacher from Chatham. These close connections meant that many educators had deep insights into the community as well as goodwill on which they could draw in their pursuits to engage families. As a district leader at Shaker Road explained, “[The community is] very trusting of us. They like consistency; they don’t like us outside the guard rails.”

Using a Range of Communication Tools

Educators at case study schools used a range of tools to communicate with families to address the difficulties of the pandemic. These tools were used not only to update families about their children’s academic progress but also to communicate important pandemic-related news related to the school. Applications such as Class Dojo and Google Classroom were mentioned by many educators as useful ways to contact family members and send important updates home. Educators made use of other forms of communication such as email and frequently updating school websites. For example, the Shaker Road principal described a weekly “community message” that he sent out to families to provide important updates to students’ families.

Social media were also used to send news to families and foster connections between the school and community. The superintendent of Tamarac described her efforts to keep families engaged in positive ways using a range of social media posts. “I found using the social media platform, either live or videotaped . . . 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,” she said. Text messages, phone calls, and home visits were also made in order to connect with students’ families, especially if other forms of communication were not working. “I actually think that the pandemic has made me better at calling parents. I find they’re so much more receptive,” explained a support staff member from Tamarac.

These platforms were important not only to communicate information to parents but also to assist them with technology. For instance, leaders at Lake George explained the important role of the district’s “Help Desk,” which connected teachers, students, and families with IT specialists. As a district leader explained, staff members would respond to “tickets,” often “taking phone calls from parents at nine o’clock at night and troubleshooting with them.”

Adapting to Stay Connected to Families

As previous methods of family engagement became unavailable during the height of the pandemic, educators in this study utilized innovative methods to continue connecting students’ families to the school. One example of these adaptations was at Whitesboro Middle School, where teachers created “Virtual Open Houses” and used Bitmojis to create online classrooms that resembled their physical class settings. Google Meets were also mentioned by many educators as a useful method for educators to transfer family events to a virtual platform. The online format of some events even increased attendance, according to the superintendent of Tamarac: “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 used various techniques to keep family members engaged in their children’s learning while remote. Several teachers explained the impact of bringing guest speakers, such as singers and athletes, to virtual meetings where students and their families could join. A Tamarac teacher, for instance, would start each lesson with a song, usually from the 1980s, as a way to connect with both students and their families. As he explained, these online lessons provided unique opportunities for family members to be more directly engaged with their children’s learning:

Parents were home and the kids were home. And so they were on the lessons. . . The parents would be like, “Oh my God, yes! I love that song. I danced with my girlfriend at the eighth-grade dance to that song.” So it just gave us a talking point. 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 kid’s learning and having a chance to see them in their own environment. I mean . . . that was neat. So that I think is a positive; from a parent perspective, we probably never communicated as well.

Communicating with Care, Empathy, and Respect

Educators also described the different strategies they used to effectively communicate with family members, especially during the rising tensions of the pandemic. For instance, as discussed in Theme 1, many educators explained the need to listen to families empathetically, even if conversations became challenging. As a support staff member from Lake George said, “I spent a lot of time talking to parents and being like, ‘It’s okay.’ They just needed somebody to hear them honestly.” The principal at Tamarac responded similarly when asked about the techniques he used to communicate with family members:

[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.

The principal at Lake George described using a similar communication style that empathized with family members and also invited feedback on important decision-making processes:

Staying calm and communicating regularly, involving people in the discussions, involving our staff, involving our parents, giving our parents voice. We had evening meetings where parents attended; they were virtual but just trying to maintain communication with folks so that they knew we had a plan, and they were involved in some of that planning.

Despite the numerous challenges that educators faced as they communicated with family members through the pandemic, educators noted silver linings. For instance, several educators felt that both educators and family members gained deeper insights into each other’s circumstances through the pandemic. As a support staff member from Deerfield said, “I think one positive [of the pandemic] also was when we were Zooming, I think it made staff more aware where our families were coming from. Because we really got an open view in the home life.” The principal at Shaker Road responded similarly. While teachers were able to “peek behind the curtain” to better understand the lives of their students, caregivers learned more about the responsibilities and duties of teachers. As he explained, “[Caregivers] have a deeper understanding of our approach, our resources, our expectations; and so ultimately, depending on the topic . . . it’s been a very good benefit for everybody,” he said.

Considerations for Practice

Theme 3: Consider . . .

How to do it

Redoubling efforts to maintain opportunities for educators to collaborate and provide support to each other in times of stress and upheaval

Create time and space for formal and informal meetings when educators can share knowledge, skills, and strategies with each other.

Be present for colleagues and actively listen and hear their concerns.

Set aside time to catch up on work and for mental health breaks.

Highlight teacher voice during administrative meetings to better understand needs and establish clarity around roles and responsibilities.

Encouraging educators and staff to develop close and caring relationships with students

Seek to strike a balance between focusing on academics and addressing students' social-emotional well-being.

Utilize tracking tools, such as surveys and focus groups, to better understand students' needs and concerns.

Develop mentorship programs to ensure students have at least one trusted adult they feel comfortable reaching out to.

Use a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) to address students' various needs.

Identify specific staff members to be point people to check in on struggling students.

Set aside times and places (e.g., during lunch or music breaks) for students to connect with one another and to focus on SEL.

Engaging parents and family members through a range of methods and communication tools

Make use of various forms of communication, including social media, to update parents and family members.

Personalize communications with parents and family members (e.g., through home visits and phone calls) and seek out opportunities to share good news as well as concerns.

Establish a digital "Help Desk" on the school webpage to assist with school-related issues parents and family members are experiencing.

Provide learning opportunities to family members who are supporting their child with classwork or school activities.

Listen to parents' and family members' concerns with empathy and authentic intent for understanding.

Encourage parent and family member voices when planning new initiatives and provide frequent opportunities for their feedback.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN

Lake George Elementary School

The section below (excerpted from the case study⁷) highlights the way educators at Lake George Elementary demonstrate an orientation towards relationships and connections.

Relationships of Collaboration, Trust, and Support

The relationships between educators, support staff, and leaders at Lake George ES are characterized by collaboration, trust, and support. These relationships were an important resource that staff members drew upon as they addressed the challenges they faced throughout the pandemic. In such unprecedented times, explained many educators, they leaned on colleagues for instructional advice as well as social and emotional support. “I really relied on my co-workers to help me get through it and to give me advice and help with the academics and the management and all of that,” said one teacher.

When we were completely shut down . . . we were calling [families] proactively. We were like, where are you with everything? Do you need help? What do you need? Do you need support? – Support staff (Lake George)

Prioritizing Student Well-Being

While acknowledging the deep impacts that the pandemic and shift to remote instruction had on students’ academic learning, educators at Lake George ES made the important decision to prioritize students’ mental health and social-emotional well-being. To this end, leaders allowed teachers to ease up on the normal pacing of instruction and temporarily pull back on assessments in order to focus on students’ well-being. As one teacher explained, “A lot came from the top down, just like [teacher] was saying – making it okay that we’re not keeping up with the pacing guide for math, or that we’re not giving this assessment on this day.”

Although this change was challenging for many teachers, who worried they may not be meeting their own high standards, educators agreed on the need to first provide students with a safe and secure environment before academic gaps could be addressed. Such priorities continued as students returned to in-person learning. “If the kids were happy and coming in with a smile on their face, everything else would work out,” said one teacher.

⁷[Please click here for the complete case study.](#)

Summary

As indicated in emerging research, the COVID-19 pandemic deeply impacted the relationships among educators, between educators and students, and between schools, families and communities. As demonstrated above, educators from the six schools in this study were not immune to the challenges brought by the pandemic, yet they also developed strategies to mitigate and overcome the obstacles they faced. Three main approaches emerged from interviews and focus groups in regard to focusing on relationships and connections: a) Drawing on Supportive and Collegial Relationships to Overcome Obstacles; b) Staying Connected to Students and Supporting their Social-Emotional Development; c) Engaging Strategically with Parents and Family Members. The “Considerations for Practice” above provide additional strategies for those seeking to focus on relationships and connections in their own school setting.

4.

Adaptive and Innovative Systems

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

The COVID-19 pandemic created a unique set of challenges that disrupted many of the services (e.g., instruction, health, athletics, operations/facilities management, food distribution, transportation) that schools and districts offer and use to function. According to social-ecological theory (one framework on which this study was based), each level in a system can be understood as embedded in and impacted by every other level, with the most micro-level of a classroom or a youth's home being impacted by what happens in schools and communities and, at the most macro-level, what happens in a state or a nation (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). Prior research has shown that the magnitude of a disruption is related to the degree to which any of these systems must change; and the social, economic, and political environment within each of these levels impacts "social resilience" in the face of disruption differently in different contexts (Folke et al., 2003, p. 354).

In this study, and in alignment with social-ecological theory, we investigated how leaders and educators working in demographically dissimilar contexts (by urbanicity and ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic characteristics of the population served) faced pandemic-induced disruptions. While all of the case study schools are situated within New York state with its particular set of COVID-19 challenges and associated mandates, we found that a variety of unique school, district, and community characteristics factored into how existing systems were adapted and what new innovations were developed. For instance, distributing hotspots (for internet access) and food in more remote communities and in districts serving relatively large geographic areas required adopting or adapting distribution systems, including who took on these roles. In addition, districts serving relatively large percentages of children and families living in poverty, those serving relatively large populations of children with special needs or families from diverse language backgrounds, and those providing mental and physical health services where local resources were particularly scarce, needed to discover new ways to meet diverse youth and family needs.

As described next, we identified a number of ways in which case study school leaders and educators adapted systems and/or developed innovations along the way:

- a) Shifting Roles and Professional Learning Opportunities
- b) Advancing Data Capture and Utilization Systems
- c) Adapting Essential Services and Community Asset Use

a) Shifting Roles and Professional Learning Opportunities

One of the ways schools and districts were impacted by the pandemic was in how staff roles and responsibilities needed to shift with changing demands, as well as what human resources would be required to meet the new pandemic related challenges. Teachers, for example, needed to intensify efforts to transform their lessons to effectively deliver instruction remotely. This monumental task required time, the development of new skills, and support from others. Through the lens of performance adaptation theory (Baard et al., 2014), one framework informing this study, staff had to learn new skills (a cognitive challenge), to use new pedagogical and outreach strategies (a behavioral challenge), and to muster motivation to work beyond their regular schedules, and when remote, in their own home environments, with all the work-life balance consequences that entailed (a motivational challenge) (Leo et al., 2022).

Roles and Responsibilities

One way these challenges were mitigated was by shifting roles and responsibilities. For example, support staff needed to adjust how they communicated with parents when face-to-face meetings were no longer possible; they also took up new roles and responsibilities such as checking in on food and technology needs. As one example of how such situations were managed in a relatively large, suburban district, a Whitesboro MS support staff member summed up how her colleagues' roles and responsibilities shifted during the pandemic:

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

Effective and timely communications with parents and caregivers, especially in larger schools and districts, was particularly challenging and required adapting communication systems and coming up with innovations: a hallmark of Whitesboro's approach to managing a number of complex and dynamic needs during the pandemic was to further develop their communication systems. They used communication logs, opened Google Classrooms to parents for announcements, and developed the Parkway App (see Figure 1).

Professional Learning Opportunities

Like all other systems, professional learning was also disrupted by the pandemic and required re-envisioning what mattered most and how best to use precious time and human resources. While all schools in this study had plans for professional learning, including those that required significant amounts of time for teachers to learn new programs or work on curriculum together, the pandemic's challenges necessitated adjustments. As one rural school leader explained, the professional development plan was "stunted" during the pandemic, as substitutes were in short supply to cover classes and for the practical reasons that some new programs were not compatible with remote or hybrid teaching or teachers were just out of steam to take on any new learning.

As for many educators throughout the world, the abrupt transition to remote instruction prompted by the pandemic posed challenges for teachers at Shaker Road ES, where a growing number of children and families are multilingual. To engage their remote students and families, educators quickly learned to use various forms of technology and, like other districts in this study, the South Colonie district offered in-house professional development opportunities and relied on school staff members who had completed Google training to assist colleagues with using new technologies.

In suburban Whitesboro, middle school teachers described how they redesigned the ways they engaged students, parents, and caregivers to support student learning. While this was not an easy or stress-free process for many, resources in terms of the expertise of the school's own Google Trainers and other colleagues who were particularly savvy with technology, as well as outside professional development opportunities through such organizations as the Teachers' Center, were invaluable, they reported.

b) Advancing Data Capture and Utilization Systems

While all schools in this study had some set of technological resources and instructional technology expertise prior to the pandemic, the magnitude and immediacy of the school shutdowns at the beginning of the pandemic challenged all to advance their technology integration and capacities to use data in order to engage students remotely. This required systemic changes, including systems for data capture and utilization. As described in Theme 3, the schools in this study were characterized by a responsive and flexible approach to technology

integration for instruction, and this extended to how they redesigned what data they captured and how they used data in other ways as well.

Systems for tracking student absences, for example, needed to be adapted as monitoring COVID-19 illness and subsequent quarantining was essential. How this was done differed in schools depending upon their human and technology resources. In relatively large Whitesboro MS, much of the attendance tracking work fell upon school leaders and support staff, who were vigilant in gathering information daily and even throughout the day on student absences and then following up to re-engage those who were missing. A school leader and support staff member shared how this was done:

School leader: We tried to track down kids every single day, anytime we would hear someone is potentially ill. Our nurses were making far more phone calls than ever, reaching out to figure out is this COVID? Is this something else? What is this illness? So really digging into where these kids are on an individual basis was a huge lift. Probably bigger than what we've seen ever before in education, but we needed to know: Can they come on their cohort day, or do we need to be looking at testing and keeping them out?

Support Staff: I was in the building with [this school leader] last year. It was every day, all day making sure where students are. And everyone in this room lives in a different community than Whitesboro . . . and this stuff was not happening in other schools. So when [someone's] like, "Yeah, we haven't heard from this student in you know, six weeks." [the school leader] would have a list by like, 8:35 . . . who is missing? And we're all taking turns on, where are you? How are you? What can we do to help? If it's medical, our two school nurses are calling home. So we were all in it all day every day.

With a sprinkle of that care that characterizes the climate of the Whitesboro MS campus, a school leader described those "Zoomers" (students who consistently attended remote class) and "Dreamers" (students who didn't attend consistently) and how their attendance system was adapted to encourage re-engagement.

Something we really changed is how we approached attendance, and we became much more focused on the period-to-period attendance so that we could identify [who needed attention]. You know, we had Zoomers and Dreamers, we would call them, lovingly named by one of our teachers here. Were they attending every single class throughout the day? Were they always skipping science, or what were some of those patterns like? And we would go through our normal processes and our teachers would contact home, our counselors were always involved, our social workers always involved, TAs, everybody. And then when we were finding that okay, this kid has missed this number of classes, the principal gets involved.

c) Adapting Essential Services and Community Asset Use

While staff roles and professional learning opportunities and data capture and utilization systems were adapted in some similar, yet unique ways, across all six schools in this study, school building configurations and campus space and community contexts factored strongly into how essential services and community assets were used. As mentioned earlier, the pandemic posed significant challenges to schools in how they distributed food, instructional supplies, and health services. In geographically remote and large districts and districts serving large or growing populations of vulnerable or marginalized youth and families, this was a particular challenge, and the adaptations and innovations differed. School building configurations and campus spaces also factored into what solutions they could develop and use.

Coordination of Services

The challenges brought by the pandemic required leaders at rural Tamarac Secondary School to manage resources effectively and efficiently. For example, although the pandemic created shortfalls in many areas such as staffing, the superintendent explained that recent federal grant money awarded to the district had allowed for additional hirings. 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, Tamarac 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. Other 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 had 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 at Tamarac. 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 spotlight shortfalls in resources, especially staffing for essential services like bus transportation. 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.

Community Assets

As in Tamarac, other schools in this study tapped local BOCES and other community resources to fill novel needs. For example, Whitesboro district leaders turned to their local BOCES to support youth who needed different options to complete their high school education and partnered with Mohawk Valley Community College to offer enrichment academies over the summer break (see Figure 7). And the district also engaged with a community agency that offers a comprehensive support service for families, including everything from eyewear to health services to firewood and clothing. Whitesboro district leaders also began networking with other district leaders in appealing to legislators to advocate for expanding mental health resources and making systems more efficient for people to apply and receive mental health services across their central New York communities.

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 vulnerable families with important resources. Drive-thru food pantries set up on the school campus were one avenue through

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Figure 7: Youth Science and Tech Academy

which Shaker Road 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 for in-person instruction. Teaching assistants

and hall monitors played a crucial role, as a teacher described, in packing up food and supplies 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.

Considerations for Practice

Theme 4: Consider . . .

Encouraging flexibility in what roles and responsibilities staff will be prepared to take when confronted with novel challenges

How to do it

Distribute new roles and responsibilities as equitably as possible.

Be proactive in securing funding to fill current and projected human resource shortfalls.

Flex professional learning opportunities with new demands.

Integrating technologies and upgrading data capture and utilization systems in proactive ways

Treat the use of technology and technology expertise as an essential component of strategic planning.

Open pathways for staff with technology expertise and/or interest to act in a supportive role – preferably compensated and acknowledged – to continue to deepen their expertise and support colleagues' learning.

Leverage learnings from the pandemic with regard to technology use instead of reverting back to antiquated systems not functional or effective during crisis.

Coordinating the delivery of essential services and use of community assets on a regular basis with planning for future crises

Encourage systematic communications across departments/ functions across the district.

Coordinate connections/networks across the community and/or region to supply health and other essential services to youth and families.

Re-imagine the school, school campus, and any other district spaces through the lens of the pandemic, asking “How and what do we need to change, improve, etc., to ensure the best use of spaces in and outside of the school now and in the future?”

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN

Deerfield Elementary School

The section below (excerpted from the case study⁸) highlights the way educators at Deerfield Elementary demonstrate adapting and innovating as described in Theme 4.

During the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Whitesboro, like other communities across New York state and the country, experienced a number of novel challenges that needed immediate action. As the Deerfield ES principal explained, providing technology support, delivering meals to families in need, or communicating changes to procedures required the district and school to provide frequent and clear communications with staff and families:

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

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

Responsive and Developmentally Appropriate Approach to Change

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

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

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

⁸[Please click here for the complete case study.](#)

Summary

The need to make fundamental changes to and sometimes develop entirely new systems to address pandemic-related challenges was experienced by all schools in this study, with unique characteristics to those adaptations and innovations in different school and community contexts. All schools showed evidence of making changes with regard to a) systems for human resource use and professional learning, b) technology and data utilization, and c) essential services and community asset use. An unexpected finding was with regard to how important school configurations in terms of indoor and outdoor space was to everything from when schools could reopen for instruction for all students to how important aspects of a youth's experience such as specials (e.g., art) and extra-curriculars (e.g., sports) were to engagement of youth and adults alike. Also, an important finding, with numerous policy implications, was the variability of burden and expense involved with supplying essential services in larger and/or more impoverished communities, as well as the variability in community assets for health and other human services available for schools to draw upon. The “Considerations for Practice” above provide guidance for those seeking to engage in examining and improving their own strategies for adapting and innovating systems in their own schools and districts.

Conclusion

This study offers several findings related to adaptation and innovation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that provide insight into the challenges crises pose to schools and districts, as well as the promising adaptations and innovations such crises prompt.

We found that the case study schools shared a focus on finding ways to empower educators, students, parents, family, and community members to act in the face of novel challenges and take collective responsibility for outcomes. They did this by positioning themselves in a responsive posture—seeking and using information about youth, family, and educator needs and values, and by being flexible about how they solved problems, extending to what roles and responsibilities people took and what community resources they tapped. The glue that held people together through the most difficult challenges was strong human bonds, and leaders and educators in these schools and districts showed evidence of working purposefully to keep people connected to each other. Finally, these schools and their district offices were characterized by a proactive positioning toward change (i.e., scanning for the latest resources as well as staying alert to changes in their community and workforce demographics and needs) coupled with an openness to system re-design extending from instruction and intervention to data and essential services.

Reflecting on worldwide calls that the imperative of educational transformation to meet the aims of equity and inclusion is more important than ever, we discovered that the prolonged disruptions of the pandemic caused fundamental changes in schools while at the same time they reinforced the value of schools as childcare and social support systems and hubs for youth and families. Leaders and educators spoke to their ongoing work to balance maintaining traditions that were strongly valued prior to the pandemic while forging ahead with innovative improvements. Some of the changes that educators pointed to as having staying power beyond the pandemic included:

- Increased emphasis on encouraging educator collaboration and distribution of leadership
- Increased emphasis and expectations for staff to take on a variety of roles and responsibilities, including providing social-emotional learning and mental health support

- Varied approaches to supporting mental and physical health as well as academic learning, including summer and after-school enrichment programs
- Varied approaches to assessment, including how performance data are collected and used to adapt instructional and other interventions
- Increased integration of instructional technology and spreading of technological expertise among staff
- Expanded and diversified strategies for parent/family member and community engagement

While this report has focused on four main themes that characterized the experiences and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by educators in this study, important differences also were evident across the six participating schools. As explained below, our sample purposefully included schools that differ in their geographic context, educator workforce, and student population. These differences emerged in various ways through interviews and focus groups with educators. For one, demographic differences in the student population served at each school altered the strategies that educators took as they sought to maintain relationships with students and their families. At Shaker Road, for example, educators described specific strategies they utilized to engage the large proportion of ELLs whom they served as well as their families. In other cases, the physical space of the school and surrounding environment impacted the ways educators responded to the pandemic and the resources they had at their disposal. Such differences were apparent at Lake George, where educators spoke of the ways that the rural space around the school afforded them opportunities to hold activities outside, while the open-classroom configuration inside the school provided more flexibility for reopening plans. Differences among the educators themselves also proved important. For veteran educators like the superintendent of Tamarac, many years of experience working in the district had created a sense of goodwill and trust with

colleagues and the community on which she could draw for support during the pandemic. In contrast, as educators at Chatham explained, new hires were instrumental in teaching their more experienced colleagues how to utilize new technological applications. Lastly, differences across school levels were significant. For instance, educators working at elementary schools explained that the shift to remote learning was

especially difficult for many working families, since online schooling for young children requires more direct guidance from caregivers.

The framework generated from the findings in this study provides a partial roadmap for adaptation and innovation during crisis.

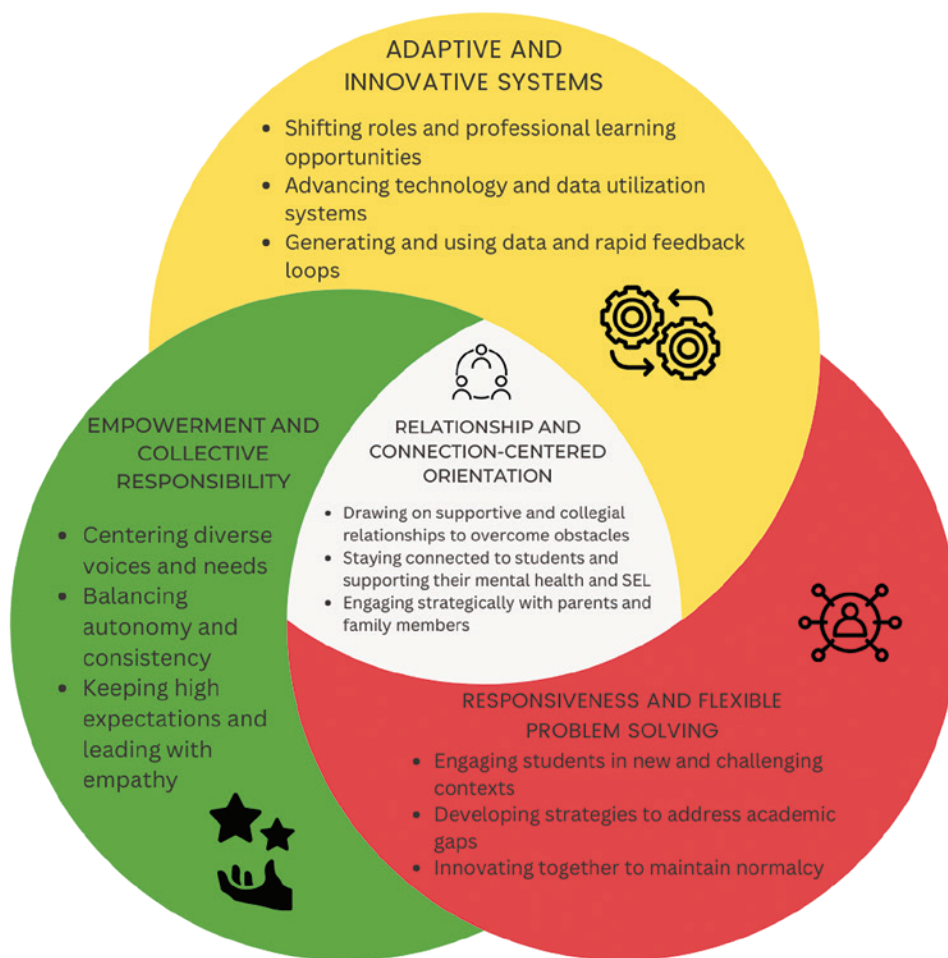


Figure 8: Four Drivers for Adaptation and Innovation

Methods

Sampling

We applied the following criteria to identify this study's sample: 1) the outcomes of the 2020-21 survey of teachers and support staff about their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic (all identified for relatively more positive workforce responses to the COVID-19 pandemic); 2) the school demographic profile including urbanicity and student population served; and 3) school level (elementary or secondary). We sought a sample that would allow for methodological triangulation (across interview, focus groups, and documents); source triangulation (across educators, support staff, school and district leaders) and site triangulation (3 elementary and 3 secondary) (Patton, 2014).

Data Collection and Analysis

We used Institutional Review Board approved protocols throughout this study to gain leader and educator consent for participation. Once consents were attained, a team of at least two researchers then collected documents and conducted interviews and focus groups with leaders and educators in the six sample schools. In these interviews and focus groups we asked participants to share their experiences in adapting to the pandemic as well as exemplars of adaptations or innovations. A total of 27 interviews, 14 focus groups, and 52 documents comprise the data set for this study.

To analyze these data, the research team began with a set of codes based upon the literature review and foci of inquiry and then coded data inductively (Miles et al., 2014). At least two team members generated a descriptive case study of each school, thus engaging in researcher and source triangulation to enhance the credibility of the findings. We then shared the case studies with participants, requesting feedback on any inaccuracies, a member-checking measure to ensure the integrity of the data and interpretations.

For this cross-case analysis, we mapped patterns and discrepancies across the case studies using NVivo 12 Plus software as well as through research team convenings. Finally we named themes and dimensions of themes noting specific exemplars to highlight in this report. This report was crafted with the intent to richly describe patterns (as well as anomalies) vis-à-vis the research questions and based on the six case studies. This report was also member-checked before being finalized.

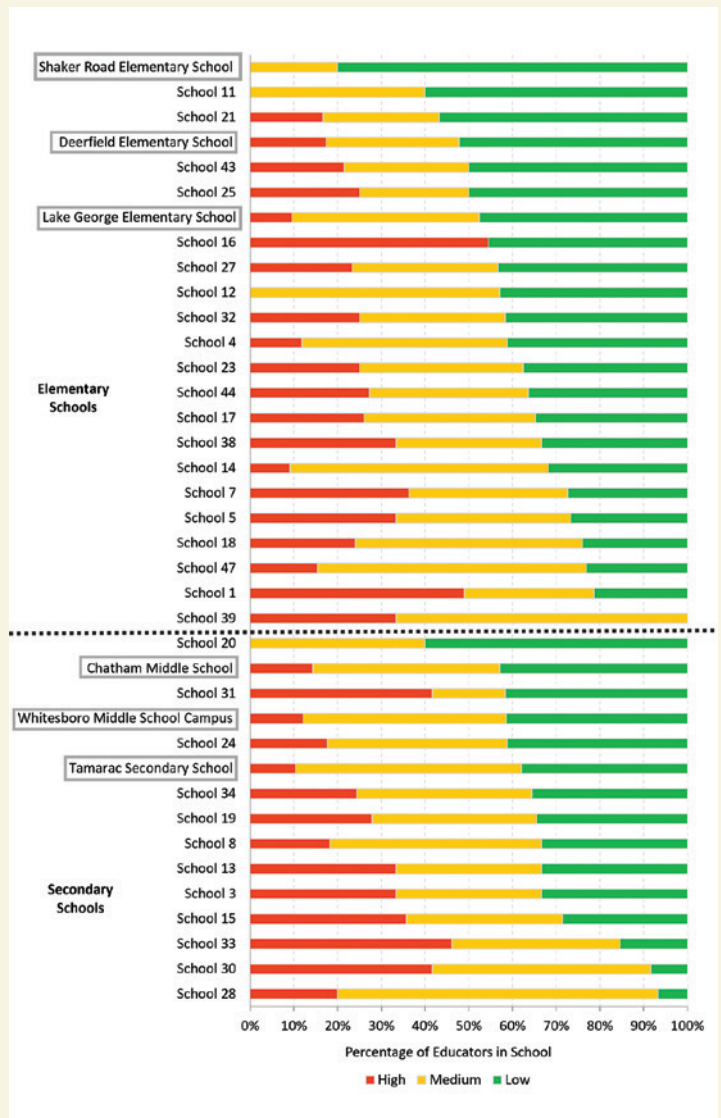


Figure 9: Levels of educator stress and dissatisfaction

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McGraw-Hill Companies
NYS Parent Teacher Association (PTA)
New York State Council of School Superintendents (NYSCOSS)
New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA)
New York State United Teachers (NYSUT)
School Administrators Association of New York State (SAANYS)
State University of New York, University at Albany

This report is a result of the work of many, although ultimately only the authors are responsible for any omissions or misrepresentations.
- Kristen C. Wilcox, Aaron Leo, Jessie Tobin, Maria I. Khan

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COMPASS-AIM: A unique direct school improvement support innovation based on NYKids research

NYKids has developed a unique direct school improvement support innovation that draws upon the principles of Improvement Science, melds them with action research procedures, and integrates NYKids case study findings to support school and district leadership teams in taking up promising practices in their continuous improvement efforts.

COMPASS-AIM is designed to engage improvers in:

- 1) Comparing their practices to those of case study schools
- 2) Assessing priorities for improvement in relation to community needs and district and school resources
- 3) Selecting levers for improvement by examining extant research and examples from case study schools
- 4) Setting *SMART* (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results Oriented/Relevant/Rigorous, and Time Bound) goals
- 5) Action planning based on specific near-term and long-term aims and a theory of improvement
- 6) Implementing the action plan
- 7) Monitoring progress

To join a growing number of our partners engaging in COMPASS-AIM, please reach out to us at nykids@albany.edu or 518-442-9085.

“... I think that schools talk a good game about vision, but I think we are living the vision, and I think that comes from COMPASS because that’s how we kicked it off.”

– School Principal Participant in COMPASS-AIM

To download a copy of this report and any of the individual school case studies that contributed to it or to learn more about the NYKids project, go to ny-kids.org

