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

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Case Study: Lake George Elementary School

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. And I think that kind of every grade level across the board has a really good team. – teacher

School Context

Situated in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains, Lake George Elementary School (ES) 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.

In recent years, declining enrollment has become a major issue for the district. According to the principal, the number of students at the school over the last decade has declined from over 500 to about 300. Although this provides for smaller class sizes and lower student-to-teacher ratios,

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efforts to stem the decline were seen by district leaders as a priority. Participants in this study acknowledged that, although the community is relatively homogenous in its racial and ethnic makeup, there are socioeconomic disparities, or as one teacher put it, differences "between the haves and have-nots."

Respondents viewed the relationships between educators and students' families as "supportive" and closely "connected." In the "small" and "tight-knit" setting, the school plays a central role, and teachers are embedded within the wider community. "You always feel like you know what's going on in and out of school," explained a support staff member. The culture of the school was described as a safe, caring, and enriching environment for children. As one support staff member said, "The kids . . . all feel loved here. I can tell that." Another commented on what it was like to work at Lake George ES:

> *And this school is a wonderful place to be; it's a happy place. This building is a happy place; our kids run into the building in the morning. And I think, in large part, that's because our staff is happy to be here too.*

Educators at Lake George ES described a high level of trust as they worked closely and collaboratively with one another. The supportive relationships that had been cultivated prior to the pandemic were seen as crucial resources upon which educators drew to mitigate the challenges of the pandemic. This "family feeling," as one support staff member described it, was evident in the ways that educators relied on one another over the course of the pandemic. "Everyone's willing and offering help at all times, which I think is huge," said one teacher. Shared decision making and open and honest lines of communication emerged as salient themes in interviews with school and district leaders, who explained their efforts to work with a range of school and community stakeholders in order to address challenges.

The Study

In March 2021, the NYKids research team undertook a study to try to understand educators' experiences during the first year of the pandemic. We were especially interested to learn what conditions might account for different levels of stress and job satisfaction from school to school, and so solicited the participation of schools across the state. See the methods and procedures report[1] for details about the study design and educator survey questions.

This case study reports how district and school leaders, teachers, and support staff members approached adapting and innovating in the context of the challenges of the pandemic. It highlights those policies, processes, and practices that facilitated educators, parents, and community members supporting children's academic learning and social-emotional well-being.

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[1] Discovering Differential Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Education Workforce: Methods and Procedures Report (ny-kids.org) https://ny-kids.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/nykids.covid_.study_.methods.FINAL_.pdf

School Selection Criteria
Lake George Elementary School met the criteria for inclusion in this study based on a 2020-21 survey of educators' responses to the pandemic because it exhibited more positive workforce responses with regard to stress and job satisfaction than other schools in the sample (n=38). Cluster analysis (i.e., the grouping of responses in clusters by similarities and comparing those to other clusters) was used to categorize teachers' responses into three categories: high, medium, and low for the variables examined. Standardized means were calculated to identify and rank schools. With a score of 47.6% compared to an overall sample mean of 36.9% and standard deviation of 15.4%, Lake George Elementary School qualifies as a positive outlier in this study

Student Demographics 2021-2022: Lake George Elementary School, Lake George CSD

	Lake George Elementary School	Lake George Central School District	New York State
Grades Served	K-6	K-12	K-12
Total Enrollment	309	699	2,512,973
Economically Disadvantaged	21%	22%	57%
English Language Learners	0%	0%	10%
Students With Disabilities	13%	14%	18%
Student Ethnic/Racial Distribution			
Black or African American	2%	2%	16%
Hispanic or Latino	3%	2%	28%
White	92%	93%	41%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0%	0%	1%
Asian, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	1%	2%	10%
Multiracial	2%	1%	3%

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

Highlights: Facilitators for Adaptation and Innovation

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

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. As demonstrated throughout this report, 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 coworkers 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. Another teacher explained at length the selfless culture of collaboration that was embedded in the school 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.

Maintaining Extracurriculars and Enrichment Opportunities

Another salient theme that emerged from interviews and focus groups with staff at Lake George ES was the determination to continue offering extracurricular programs, activities, and arts and music programs despite the pandemic. While ensuring student and staff safety was always a primary concern, educators nonetheless found ways to adapt and leverage existing resources in order to continue providing students with enrichment. As the principal said, "[W]e were able to maintain a lot of things that are most important to our students and to the culture in this school."

Educators validated this comment and explained their shared dedication to continue offering activities programs safely by transferring them outside or using the large spaces available to them in the school to social 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. A support staff member described how she approached innovating and adapting during the pandemic, especially as it related to maintaining extracurriculars and after school programs, "I'm not really a roadblock person. Like if there's something in the way, you just find a different way to do it."

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, respondents 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.

A Closer Look

Leadership Practices

Utilizing Shared Decision Making

> *There were a lot of different opinions, but the district really took the time to listen to everyone and make those decisions [about] how we can come back and how we needed to do it.* – support staff member

A culture of collaborative decision making was evident in comments made by leaders and staff members at Lake George Elementary School. The principal, for example, discussed the shared decision-making process in place in the district and how it was used during the pandemic: "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." Members of the decision-making body include various stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and school and district-level leaders, as well as specialists and support staff members serving various student subgroups. Emphasizing that such practices were not simply "lip-service," the principal explained that both small and large decisions were made collectively throughout the pandemic. When meetings could not be held in-person, they were held through Google Meet to accommodate families and community members. He continued,

> *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.*

A district leader explained in detail how the decision to move to hybrid teaching in the second year of the pandemic was one reached through committee:

> *That was an extensive committee-based decision at the district level. So it was part of what the state was requiring districts to do, and you had to spell out what your different options were. And it was tricky going into that second year to figure out what the best option would be. We were all hoping BOCES would have a solution for us. We were hoping there might be some sort of regional kind of solution. And when that didn't come about, this really was the only option that the committee – which included a lot of stakeholders -- parent stakeholders and staff stakeholders at every level, teachers, TAs. In that planning, it's so broad -- you had Buildings and Grounds, we had our SROs and you know, we had a wide range of people. It [a hybrid model] was really the only one we could see that would fit for this community.*

Educators and staff members echoed the comments made by leaders. One support staff member, for instance, described their appreciation for the "the process that we have in the district of shared decision making." He continued, "I've never been in a district that had that." Another support staff member explained that school and district leaders welcome the voices and input of staff members at all levels and that educators are frequently encouraged to take up positions as leaders as well:

We have a districtwide innovation team. Anybody from the elementary school to the high school can be a part of it. So you can really be a leader if you want to be a leader here, which I really appreciate. And then when it comes to like, curriculum grade level, we have meetings with every teacher there, so everybody's talking vertically along with at their grade level as well. So we're always on the same page, which is super nice.

Supporting Staff Well-Being during the Pandemic

In responding to the challenges brought by the pandemic, leaders supported their staff members in various ways throughout the pandemic. Educators commented positively on the cooperative and supportive messaging sent by leaders in the uncertain climate they faced. As one teacher put it:

I think leadership was like, "We're all in this together; this is unprecedented historically." So I know that was my mindset and just connecting with kids, trying to keep some kind of normalcy. I have young school-aged kids at home, so I know how important that is.

Once it was safe to return to full in-person schooling, leaders continued to acknowledge the impacts of the pandemic on staff members and prioritize their well-being rather than expect a quick return to normal. As a support staff member explained:

When we came back to school, [school principal] did an excellent job of like, "Listen, life is different. We're just going to take this one step at a time." We didn't go back into this like really strict meeting schedule and SMART goals and everything that is in a regular school year that stresses you out normally. It was just like, "We're just gonna take it month by month and week by week."

Leaders also developed several initiatives aimed at addressing and supporting staff well-being. One change mentioned by numerous participants was the addition of "Remote Days" to staff schedules once a month. Such days might have previously been focused on professional development or curricular design, but during the pandemic they were reserved for mental health and for teachers to catch up on work, plan ahead, or simply take a break. "That was an understanding from the top that everyone needed that step back and that breather," explained one support staff. Once the school re-opened, educators were able to work together in-person during these days while social distancing. As one teacher said:

That really helped. We had time to plan. So I felt like we weren't behind all the time. That took so much stress off. And then like those days, we would order out lunch, just those things that we didn't [normally] do, so we created a better tight community within our teams. And that really boosted morale. So that brought us through.

Under such difficult circumstances, however, tensions were still evident. Hybrid teaching, for instance, was mentioned by several respondents as a particularly stressful arrangement. Additionally, leaders commented on the stress and guilt that some educators experienced as they worried about meeting their own high teaching standards. A district leader explained:

But they weren't satisfied with doing anything less than what they normally do. So a lot of their pain and frustration came from "I'm not being the teacher that these kids deserve. Whether it's to the kids in front of me or the kids at home when I have them both. I can't be my best to any of them." Which, again, just shows that commitment and dedication, but that was the hard part.

Creating Relationships of Mutual Trust

And [school principal] empowers us to be the problem solvers, which I think has helped me personally as a teacher. . . . It's probably made me a better teacher. – teacher

Even while they acknowledged the uncertainty and stress brought on by the pandemic, educators at Lake George Elementary School generally described feeling supported by school and district leaders, who trusted them to make the best decisions for their students. As a teacher explained:

Not only are my colleagues supportive, administration is very supportive of us. So I mean, we've run into problems, too. But I always feel backed by [principal] and above. So I think that that's really unique about our school, because I know there's other schools, and they don't feel like that. And it's a great feeling to have, that I'm not alone.

The Remote Days described above provide an example of the trust that leaders had for their staff. As the principal explained, "So it was kind of like this is time for you, you know what your needs are. . . . It really was their time to breathe, get caught up." A district leader echoed this sentiment, saying "And it really was their choice on how to use [the days]."

Several respondents also felt that leaders listened to and acknowledged the challenges that educators and staff members experienced during the pandemic. "We're fortunate that the administration gave us some leeway and understood that we were going to make mistakes," said one teacher. Although differences in opinion and disagreements sometimes arose, educators felt that their "voices were heard," as one teacher put it. One support staff member explained:

The school did a great job of recognizing that I was also a parent . . . and so that anxiety was also coming into play on top of my anxiety at work. And they did a really good job of recognizing that there were so many teachers that had kids in other school districts, so they were dealing with that home stuff as well. – support staff member

Reciprocally, educators also described trusting leaders to make the right decisions. When asked what lessons learned from the pandemic that she would like to share with other educators, a support staff member responded, "Having trust in leaders who you know are making confident decisions."

Lastly, leaders also reflected on the collaborative and trusting relationships they fostered between colleagues at the school and district levels. The school principal, for instance, described the importance of communicating "daily, multiple times" with his colleague at the Jr./Sr. High

school for mutual support and brainstorming. Despite some turnover at the district level, a district leader explained the supportive relationships that she and other leaders had developed:

> *We [district and school leaders] have a very open, honest, trusting relationship, and we were able to sort of join arms and power through regardless of some of the other stuff that was happening. . . . There's also a level of "You do what you need to do, and you let me know when you need my help."*

Academic Learning

Finding Creative Ways to Facilitate Academic Engagement

As discussed below in regards to parent and family engagement, educators at Lake George ES were determined to continue with the same academic supports and extracurriculars they had offered prior to the pandemic. In many cases this meant utilizing new and innovative or "creative," as several respondents put it, ways to do things while still ensuring students' safety. The principal explained his thinking behind this approach:

> *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?*

Some examples of adaptations that were developed to provide this "sense of normalcy" at the beginning of the pandemic included shifting activities such as chess to a virtual version or conducting field trips in places outside rather than inviting local speakers to the school. Another innovation mentioned in interviews was the transformation of the annual bookfair to outdoors. Recognizing the importance of the event to maintain literacy skills, educators and support staff designed a "drive-thru" book fair where caregivers and children could still find and pick out books from the safety of their vehicles. "Families still came, and we found a way. Teachers volunteered and they helped; the kids pointed to the book, we put it in a bag," explained a support staff member who headed the project.

Leveraging Available Resources

The resources available to educators at Lake George ES were mentioned as helpful supports in adapting to the challenges of the pandemic. For one, respondents commented on the financial security of the district and availability of equipment or funding that they sought. A district leader explained that the budget had "flexibility" to provide support to educators upon request and that the PTSO was another source of funding. "Anything that we needed we are able to get pretty easily," said one teacher. Another teacher echoed this comment almost verbatim, saying "Anytime we need stuff it's like they find a way, if it's going to benefit the kids."

Another resource that aided educators at Lake George ES was the physical space available to them both inside and outside of the school. Because the school was designed as an "open classroom" environment, educators were able to bring students back to school quicker than other schools while still maintaining the social distance needed for safety. Many educators even described measuring the spaces of different classrooms and putting down tape themselves to

ensure they could bring students back to school safely. A support staff member explained the advantages that their school space provided to them:

> *I think academically for our kids, we were definitely at an advantage because the school could be open. And because we could physically distance because we had the space and we had access to the outdoors from every classroom. . . . Our physical building allowed us to have kids in here.*

Despite the difficulties that the spacing of students in large rooms presented for instruction, the benefits of having students present was crucial. As the principal explained:

> *What we were able to do at times is just move our classrooms out and make them bigger; we didn't have to shut down. . . . It was horrible at sixth grade because we had 27 kids spread out [over] the equivalent of probably . . . half of a basketball court, but it kept everybody in the classroom. Teachers were able to space kids in a manner that some of their needs could be addressed.*

The outdoor space and rural environment surrounding the school was also viewed as a significant boon for educators seeking to adapt their instruction to periods of remote instruction or during times when social-distancing mandates were enforced. For instance, educators described going outside frequently and hiking on trails near the school, especially when students could not share athletic equipment. Another example recounted in a focus group was when the district purchased sleds for students to use on the hills behind the school, an activity that educators planned to continue every winter.

Identifying and Addressing Gaps in Academic Learning

Educators and leaders pointed to the academic gaps that were evident as students began to return to in-person classes. As one teacher described:

> *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, "Woah!"*

One of the ways that educators in classroom settings addressed these gaps was to design 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?*

Other ways to address academic gaps came from the school and district levels. One districtwide initiative described by a district leader in an interview was "Remote Mentors" who were teaching assistants assigned to individual students. These mentors would be responsible not only for extra one-on-one support built into students' schedules but also to check 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.

Schoolwide programs were also developed in order to address learning loss over the pandemic. In addition to a "Jumpstart Program" (an academic enrichment program that took place during the summer), another new initiative called "Sunrise Scholars" was mentioned as an important step in addressing academic gaps. Referred to by one teacher as "an amazing addition," the program allowed students to come in before school to help catch up on anything that was missed academically over the last two years.

Social-Emotional Learning and Mental Health

Prioritizing Students' Social and Emotional Well-Being

School and district leaders at Lake George ES prioritized the social and emotional well-being of students during the pandemic. While recognizing the deep impacts that the pandemic and shift to remote instruction had on their students, leaders understood the need to ensure students were first safe and secure before they attended to any potential academic gaps. The principal explained the collaborative process that was taken to ensure that the social-emotional well-being and mental health of students were put first:

> *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 and support staff commented similarly on the need to address student mental health and commended school leaders for allowing them to make it a priority throughout the pandemic. As one teacher explained, "[Leaders] were realistic, and it became a priority. Prioritize what's the most important things [students] need right now, including the social-emotional piece, and then start rebuilding from there." Even in the 2021-22 school year with all students back in-person, respondents continued to view social-emotional learning and student mental health as a major concern. "I also see that [student mental health] is the highest priority even now when we get to where we've pretty much put the assessments back into play," explained one teacher.

Re-engaging Social Skills and Using Tiered Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Strategies

Educators and support staff members spoke of the changes in behavior, including self-management and relational skills, that were evident in their students as they returned to school. "I've never seen anything like it," said one support staff member as they reflected on some of the behavioral issues they noticed among kindergarteners. Some of the issues that educators and support staff identified during interviews and focus groups included difficulties in being able to

follow directions, a reduction in confidence or reluctance to complete tasks, difficulties focusing on work, and a lack of social skills typically evident in early grade levels.

Although many educators commented on social-emotional learning concerns among the early grade levels, older students were affected as well. One teacher recounted the ways they sought to overcome challenges in their fifth-grade class as students returned to school and teachers slowly sought to reestablish a sense of normalcy:

> But they kind of just forgot how to work in a group. You know, that was really hard. I think by the end of the year, we figured out, let's go outside more, and put them in groups where we could take off masks, and, you know, come a little bit closer. And that helped. And we had to retrain those group behaviors. That was challenging. And they needed the group work because they didn't talk, so that's interesting to me because we were like, "What's going on?" Like these fifth graders, they won't talk. We tried to have little family meetings because we would always do that in the past. You know, like, let's just check in with everybody. Nobody would talk. We just kept at it. And then going outside helped, so we could remove the masks.

At the school level, the principal also explained the renewed focus on students who were most in need of social-emotional support based on an RTI (response to intervention) model:

> 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?

A support staff member explained how a spreadsheet was created by educators and leaders at the school in order to track students "that were at risk and were demonstrating behaviors during COVID." As she explained:

> We gathered all the information on the kids that were at risk and were demonstrating behaviors during this COVID time. Then each one was assigned a particular person so that the families were being worked with. I mean, that was like really going into the trenches to see. One issue would be high absenteeism; we couldn't even get the kid on [the computer]. Another was the outbursts of behaviors that came before COVID but now they were off the deep end. You know, it could be that there's a drastic situation going on within that family. And now you have a child who would really like, you know, to be able to continue being a good student, but their home life is a wreck. So what do we do?

The spreadsheet allowed educators and support staff to address the particular needs of students and ensure that they would receive adequate and relevant interventions when needed.

A range of programs and initiatives in the school were mentioned as important supports for students during the shutdown and as students returned to school. For instance, the school participates in SEL programs such as "The Leader in Me" as well as the "Covey 7 Habits," which emphasizes important SEL skills. The building also has a full-time social worker, full-time school psychologist, and part-time counselor to support students' mental health, and these

services continued virtually when school was held completely remotely. Additionally, students participated in an afterschool Mindfulness Club as well as a monthly event that celebrated character traits of particular students. The ceremony, called the "Georgies," was even held virtually during the pandemic, as students set up a studio to present their classmates with the awards.

School and district leaders and educators, however, acknowledged that increasing attention to social-emotional learning is necessary to cope with the long-term effects of the pandemic. For instance, a district leader explained that social-emotional learning was recently put into the district's strategic plan.

Maintaining Traditions and Connections During Remote Instruction
When discussing the importance of social-emotional learning and the mental health and well-being of their students, educators and support staff expressed the need to keep students socially connected with one another – and to the school – during the shutdown. To this end, educators at Lake George ES endeavored to continue any activities and programs either socially distant or online. One example that came up in several interviews and focus groups was the "Moving Up" ceremony to celebrate students transitioning to the secondary school. The principal described the need to continue such important community activities, "Despite having to change what it looked like . . . to get creative but to still keep things going." In order to have the ceremony take place safely, the principal "spent hours out in the parking lot figuring out how we could fit all the cars, and they removed fences" according to one respondent. A support staff member commented on the success of the ceremony:

> *It was still an important part of our community. And we still did it. And we all felt better for doing it. And then last year, of course, we didn't have to do it from cars, but we did it outside. It was a beautiful night.*

Others described the need to keep kids engaged and socially connected during remote instruction. As described above, the focus on social-emotional well-being often took priority in such unprecedented times. One teacher described the importance of these social "connections:"

> *[Students] just needed that connection. And we provided that. Most of our meets weren't even academic; it was just like, alright, tell us about your weekend, or let's go on a scavenger hunt or whatever. It wasn't like, we have to do math right now. Because that's what they needed. And then when some of them were able to get to those outside of the school meets, there was an impact on their affect.*

During the second year of the pandemic when classes were given in a hybrid format, teachers strove 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 lunchtime 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.

In a focus group, one teacher emotionally recounted the important role that the school plays in the lives of many young people:

You think kids don't appreciate the structure? They really need that structure. . . . And saying goodbye to those kids at the end of the year, holy cow. It was like a tear fest and kids were just sobbing, and I was sobbing.

Parent, Caregiver and Community Engagement

Proactive Engagement of Parents and Families

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

During the shutdown, educators and staff at Lake George Elementary School mobilized resources in response to the emerging needs of parents and family members. In some cases, this meant delivering school lunches to families and making home visits to check in with caregivers. One support staff member, for instance, described staying up until nine o'clock each night speaking with family members: "I spent a lot of time talking to parents and being like, 'It's okay.' They just needed somebody to hear them honestly."

Technology was a main concern for educators as the school, like others throughout the country, In March 2020, Lake George ES staff had to rapidly shift to remote instruction. Although the school already had one-to-one computers in schools for their students, educators understood the technological challenges that faced many parents and family members, who were tasked with assisting their children with remote instruction. As a district leader explained:

So it was really just the idea of the end goal being: Kids need to get on this device at home, and we're sending this home with a five-year-old. We need to be telling the parents how to do this. And so we had a one-pager with directions and all of that, and when we did that we said, "And here's our information." And it really just became the norm that when any communication was going out to families, we were constantly sharing "Here's how you access us."

One way that the district supported parents and caregivers during the transition to remote education was through the expansion of a "Help Desk," already in place before the pandemic. Staff members would respond to "tickets" created by family members (and teachers), often "taking phone calls from parents at nine o'clock at night and troubleshooting with them," as a district leader explained.

Other educators and support staff members explained efforts they made to assist caregivers with their children's remote learning. Because their students were already familiar with the

technology being used, educators were able to develop activities with which caregivers would be able to easily assist their children. A support staff member, for instance, explained creating interactive lessons using Google Slides. Because students were not able to read yet, the lessons contained Bitmojis with audio files embedded in each slide. "[Caregivers] were already anticipating their kid couldn't do something, and I had thought about that."

Multi-Pronged Communication Strategies

> *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.*
> – principal

Frequent communication with students' families was described by leaders, educators, and staff as an important priority throughout the pandemic. Respondents explained that communication with family members took place using a range of both formal and informal modalities. The school principal described not only the need to keep in touch with students' families but to also use different forms of communication in order to reach parents and keep them engaged. "It was a lot of videos that would go home just to update, 'Here's where we're at, this is what we're doing,'" he explained. A support staff member said the school shifted from using mail to inform parents to sending emails and adding information to the school website for more rapid updates during the pandemic:

> *A lot of it really became email. And also, we had to keep our website up to date. So that was a good thing that came out of it . . . making sure we always had current information on our website. I think there was definitely more communication from [principal's name] being emailed out to parents.*

Teachers also described using a range of approaches to keep in close contact with families. In addition to the "tried and true method" of phone calls home, as one teacher put it, others mentioned that the technology available to them facilitated communication with students' homes. For example, one teacher described various apps and software that could push message out to families using technology.

Challenges were still mentioned in interviews and focus groups with many educators and staff members. For instance, the frequent communication with families and the accessibility that was provided by technology sometimes created expectations for teachers to be constantly available for family members. As one district leader explained, educators sometimes struggled with setting boundaries between themselves and students' family members:

> *That was another area that our teachers struggled with -- wanting to be available and wanting to be helpful and knowing where to draw a boundary. And that was tough, and because they created such strong relationships, we had some expectations. We created a trifold brochure that we sent home with people that talked specifically about the*

expectations for virtual. We had a column for student expectations, teacher expectations, and parent expectations.

Other situations with family members were a source of tension. One teacher, for example, described caregivers sometimes entering into online classes unexpectedly, while others mentioned the difficulty in handling the frustration that some family members expressed over state mandates. Nonetheless, educators by and large felt that parents and caregivers were supportive and appreciative of their efforts during the pandemic.

Maintaining Parent and Community Relationships through Extracurriculars

It was just anything I could do to keep families feeling like they are engaged with the school. – support staff

Another way that respondents kept parents and families connected to the school and engaged in their children's learning was through extracurricular activities and programs. As documented above, educators at Lake George ES were determined to maintain a level of normalcy for students and their families with regard to extracurriculars and worked to adapt many activities to ensure they could be done safely, rather than canceling them. "There's always a work around," said one support staff member.

Educators explained that parents and family members in the district have typically been very involved in their children's education, and so they recognized how important such activities would be for families as they desired to remain connected to the school. A support staff member explained, "Families couldn't get into the schools, so like any connection they could have, they were kind of starving for." Whether it was an outdoor book fair, music concert, art show, movie screening or event held virtually, educators at Lake George ES utilized extracurricular activities to keep parents engaged and connected to the school community.

A teacher reflected on the powerful impact that these events had on family members during the pandemic:

Parents are proud of the fact that their kids come to this school . . . they want to be present, and they were not here. But when they had opportunities to be here [like] last year's spring concert, we had it outside on one of the fields, and it was so well attended.

In a Nutshell

> *We are a family . . .especially last year and coming back in with all the unknowns. Everybody knew how to pull on each other's strength. And if I was personally completely freaked out over the fact that we were all going to be back together again, other people were feeling the same thing, and we were feeding off of each other's, "We're going to make it, we're going to do it, we can make this happen." And the kids -- we're going to have them have a good experience. So I really felt like that's who we are.* – teacher

In their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, educators at Lake George Elementary School leveraged the resources that were available to them in order to best support their student population. These included physical resources such as the spacious classrooms inside the school as well as the outdoors surrounding the school grounds. Nonmaterial resources were also crucial to weathering the storm wrought by the pandemic, especially the supportive and trusting relationships that were fostered through collaboration and shared decision making. While educators acknowledged the academic impacts on students and developed ways to address them, the message was clear that the social and emotional well-being of their students was the number one priority. Lastly, educators at Lake George ES were determined to continue providing enriching learning opportunities and extracurricular events for students and their families and developed novel adaptations to ensure that these activities could be done safely.

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