

Opportunities and Challenges to Adapt and Innovate: How Educators Confronted the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Six Case Study Schools

- Deerfield Elementary School
- Lake George Elementary School
- Shaker Road Elementary School
- Chatham Middle School
- Tamarac Secondary School
- Whitesboro Middle School Campus

If there's something in the way, you just find a different way to do it.

– Support staff member (Lake George ES)

Introduction

Through the pandemic, educators around the world were called upon to adapt and innovate in novel ways while attending to their own and their loved ones' needs.

This situation required significant shifts in how the work of teaching and learning, as well as how myriad other school-sponsored mental health and essential service

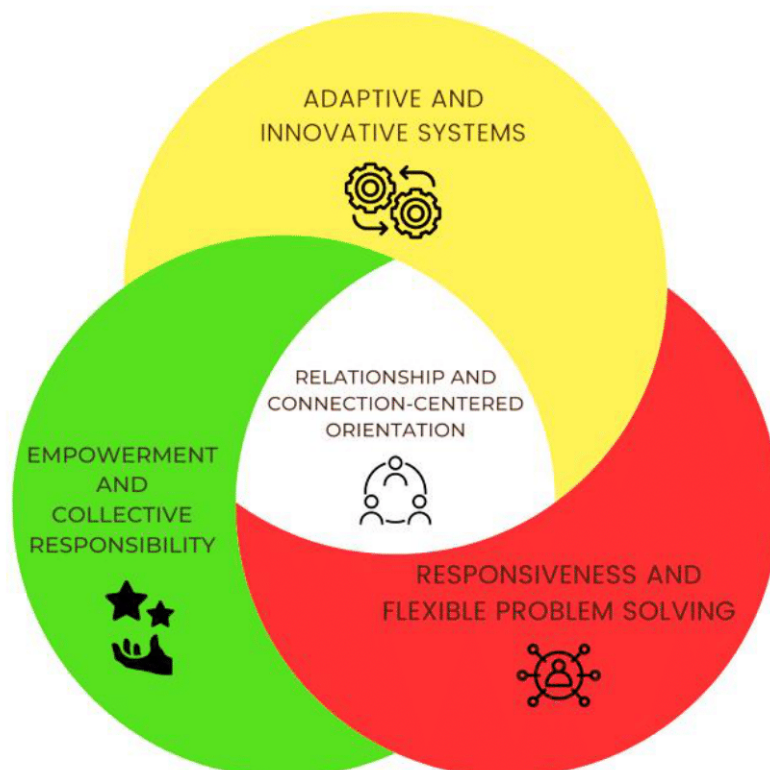
supports for youth and families would be delivered. These novel challenges put school and district staff at risk of stress, with the potential for affecting their job satisfaction and willingness and ability to persist in their roles.

This study examined educators' experiences of the pandemic with the goal of identifying key drivers, and

related promising practices, for adaptation and innovation especially during times of crisis.

Six schools, identified for statistically significantly better outcomes with regard to educator stress and job satisfaction based on NYKids' statewide survey, were studied.

The Findings: Four Drivers for Adaptation and Innovation



Empowerment and Collective Responsibility

[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)

An important distinguishing characteristic of school leaders and educators in this study was how they approached empowering people (including their colleagues, students, parents, caregivers, and community partners) and took 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.

Study participants reported a welcome degree of latitude to deal with the challenges at hand, and this was

accompanied by clear and consistent expectations for both individual effort and collective responsibility. In this way agency, autonomy and shared expectations for collective responsibility converged to empower individuals, teams, and groups of stakeholders in and outside schools to stay motivated and productive in their service of students.

Responsiveness and Flexible Problem Solving

Like educators throughout the world, participants in this study struggled with many new demands created by the pandemic. They were distinctive, however, in how they used both a responsive and flexible approach to solving novel problems.

For instance, one particularly daunting problem educators in this study faced was rapidly transitioning

from in-person to remote learning.

To tackle such problems, they tapped the expertise of colleagues who had been early adopters of instructional technologies prior to the pandemic. They then implemented a range of innovative strategies to ensure that their students remained engaged in learning often using technologies to make

lessons as interactive as possible.

Although students' academic learning was a top priority, educators in this study also recognized that students' social emotional well-being was critical to their success. So many of these educators recreated online classroom spaces that provided students with a sense of familiarity and normalcy.

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... they [educators] are looking at things in a different light.

–Teacher (Deerfield)

The COVID-19 pandemic deeply impacted relationships among educators, between educators and students, and between school staff, families, and community members.

Interviews and focus groups revealed the ways educators collaborated around

solving problems and how they relied on colleagues for pedagogical and emotional support, which was associated with maintaining the quality of their relationships.

Educators in this study worked to stay connected to students and support their social-emotional well-being

and mental health through targeted programs and enrichment programs.

Educators also relied on a range of strategies and techniques to engage with family members and share decision-making power with them during the pandemic and school closures.

Adaptive and Innovative Systems

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. For instance, distributing internet hotspots and food in more remote communities and in

districts serving large geographic areas required adopting or adapting distribution systems, including who took on these responsibilities.

The strategic use of indoor and outdoor space was crucial to continue offering activities and extracurriculars for youth and families and to reopen schools quickly and safely.

Districts serving relatively large percentages of families living in poverty, large populations of children with special needs, or families from diverse language backgrounds, also needed to discover new ways to meet diverse youth and family needs including providing mental and physical health services where local resources were scarce.

Conclusions

Participants in each case study school 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.

What kept educators engaged and productive through the most difficult challenges was strong human bonds. 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 coupled with an openness to re-design and innovate instructional, intervention, and essential service systems.

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

– Principal (Tamarac)

Lessons on Adapting and Innovating through Crisis

- Encourage educator collaboration and share leadership and decision making responsibilities.
- Emphasize expectations for staff to take on a variety of roles and responsibilities, including providing social-emotional learning and mental health support.
- Support the mental and physical health of students as well as their academic learning through a range of approaches including summer and after-school enrichment programs.
- Vary approaches to assessment, including how performance data are collected and used to adapt instructional and other interventions.
- Integrate instructional technology and increase technological expertise among all staff members.
- Expand and diversify strategies for parent/family member and community engagement.

Methodology

Of the 38 schools that participated in a state-wide survey exploring educators' experiences of stress and job satisfaction during the pandemic, six were selected for in depth case study analysis based on their relatively better outcomes with regard to educators' reports of stress and job satisfaction.

These six schools were also chosen to represent a range of community characteristics and demographics.

A total of 88 educators participated in 27 interviews and

14 focus groups. To analyze these data, the research team began with a set of codes based upon the literature review and research questions and then coded data inductively. At least two team members generated a descriptive case study of each school, each of which were then shared with participants to ensure accuracy and confirm interpretations. To generate the Four Drivers framework, the team mapped patterns and discrepancies across the case studies and

named themes and dimensions of themes. This report was also member-checked before being finalized.

We thank the school and district leaders and educators who participated in this study. This report is a result of the work of many, although ultimately only the authors are responsible for any omissions or misrepresentations.

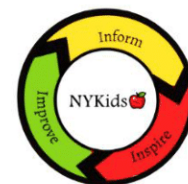


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Please visit our website at www.ny-kids.org or use the QR code to access the full report



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.

"... 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

We have named this innovation **COMPASS-AIM** as it is designed to engage improvers in

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

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

