

The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the
Culture of Teaching and Learning

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Education
in the
Educational Leadership Program

Youngstown State University
August 5, 2024

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Culture of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic that took the world by storm in 2020 had a large-scale effect not only on the world, but also on the field of education. Most educational systems were not equipped to address the needs of the students, families, faculty, staff, and community as they related to education. This study explores the administrative response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Northwestern Pennsylvania. Surveys, document reviews, and semi-structured interviews are utilized to understand the varied responses to the pandemic, particularly in the area of support systems. This qualitative phenomenological narrative study explores how school leaders describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness to maintain effective post-pandemic student support systems including financing increased staffing and resource needs, implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and addressing outside factors that affected student learning. The gathered data indicates a need for both creation and maintenance of comprehensive student support systems. The results of this study should encourage administrators to develop robust contingency plans and flexible policies that can adapt to the changing academic and mental health needs of educational landscapes, should they arise.

Keywords: COVID-19, effective student support systems, learning loss, pandemic

Dedication

While it is difficult to truly share my gratitude for those who supported me throughout this process, completing this program would not have been possible without the support of my family and selected committee. Most importantly, I would like to thank my husband, Brett, for encouraging me to reach my potential and never questioning my ability; his unconditional love and support made the process move from a place of a pipedream to a reality. Thank you for always asking what you can do to help, how you can support, what you can make for dinner, and who needs a ride to soccer practice. You never questioned when I turned on a mobile hotspot while traveling to another soccer game and spent the ride working to the soundtrack of your Pandora stations. Much like you've always been, thank you for being my absolute best friend and unwavering cheerleader; there is no way I could have done this without you. Thank you to my daughters, Addie and Bailee, for always inspiring me to show you what strong women are capable of and for telling me how proud you are of me; with your simple presence, you inspire me to be a better mom and person. Thank you to my parents and sister, who checked in on me to make sure they could help when needed and offered me periods of focus or quiet or celebration when they were warranted; your complete support reflects your unconditional love. To my niece, Ainsley, you can call me Dr. Aunt Jennie now.

Thank you to my current superintendent, Shane, for seeing my true potential, being the devil's advocate that I need to grow and learn and challenging me on a daily basis to improve as an administrator and human; your support means a lot to me. Thank you to my current assistant superintendent, Thad, for answering all my questions, talking me off the ledge when I felt overwhelmed, and always asking how you can help; your

suggestions and assistance made this process possible. Thank you to Heather, Veronica, and Emily, for being my in-house work cheerleaders on a daily basis, you don't know how to let a person just be subtle about things.

Thank you, Dr. Larwin, for your constant encouragement, words of wisdom, and guidance. When I found out I would need to switch chairs part way through the process, I was nervous, but the universe knew you would be the perfect fit for my type-A personality. I appreciate you always answering my questions and having confidence in me. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Myers and Dr. Schafer, for asking great questions, critiquing my work, and ensuring that the intentions of my research were communicated correctly. A special thank you to Dr. Schafer for checking in on me throughout the entire process and offering words of encouragement and affirmation when I needed them most. Your positivity gave me the confidence to keep on pursuing this degree and I'm beyond thankful.

The pursuit of this degree would not have been possible without the combined support and encouragement of people who believe in me, sometimes more than I believe in myself, and for that, I am eternally grateful. Thank you for being proud of me.

Jennifer Foutz

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Chapter I

Introduction

Many key elements of school leadership in America consist of well-established parameters, including teacher and leader qualifications, stringent guidelines for fiscal decision-making, and mandated requirements for teacher evaluation. What school leadership has not addressed is how to best lead schools, given what leaders learned about students' needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, America's school leaders knew that a main component of successful leadership included addressing complex challenges via the creation and maintenance of effective systems through strategic planning (Dreier et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 shifted the entire educational landscape, and its educational implications linger within the confines of the community, walls of the schools, and minds of the educators on an almost daily basis, forever transforming education in America (Midha, 2021). After being asked to make often un-informed decisions toward forward progression through the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders must now answer the question: how will we use what we learned from the pandemic to sustain effective student support systems, post-pandemic?

During the pandemic, as leaders attempted to navigate a territory otherwise unexplored, legislators provided guidance and assistance, families re-determined whom they could trust to care for their children, students' health and safety needs rose to the forefront, and the mastery of content fell by the wayside (Hough, 2022). This shift in priorities disrupted education.

Additionally, during COVID-19, school districts received additional state and federal resources to address student learning loss and disruptions in student learning, but that support diminished in subsequent years. Yang et al. (2023) believe that the next major disruption in school is a “perfect storm of financial chaos brought on by the abrupt ending of federal pandemic relief funds, falling district enrollments, and slowing state revenues” (para. 2). Moving forward from the pandemic, school leaders and communities must reinvent themselves to repair the damage caused by learning loss, financial strain, and mental health concerns (Argyropoulou et al., 2021).

As a leader of an elementary school who took the helm during the height of the pandemic, my experience provided a unique perspective of the trials and tribulations experienced during the 2020-2021 school year and subsequent years following the onset of the pandemic. Because I am early in my career as an administrator, my particular interest lies in how past experience can shape future plans, should another worldwide issue impact education in a similar way.

As the COVID-19 pandemic is a relatively new problem, there are limited findings on this topic; however, with the small amount of literature reviewed, it is evident that long-term changes from addressing pandemic-related problems can positively impact school districts and communities in the future. Naidu (2021) asserts that “for long-term survival and resilience against the current and any future catastrophe, a systemic rethink and reengineering of educational and institutional choreographies is required, and along various critical dimensions” (p. 1).

From an equitable instruction standpoint, solving problems for me as a school leader became a constant state of improvisation where I was perpetually tasked with

being able to provide guidance or create a new plan on the spot after an affirmation (Midha, 2021). Solution-based thinking was required, but the problems requiring solutions shifted and evolved daily, not to mention the difficulty in addressing teacher-posed questions, many of which did not have answers. This change required other leaders and I to “[learn] to develop adaptive capabilities necessary for successful leadership” (O’Connell & Clarke, 2020, p. 4). Families were also looking to leaders to communicate how their children’s basic needs would be met, further complicating the trusting relationship established in prior years. Overall, leaders were tasked with addressing seemingly impossible situations, while social inequities were amplified and students were underserved (Midha, 2021). Regardless of the decisions made as school systems move forward, it is important to remember that “effective and efficient learning and teaching has to do with design, development, and orchestration of productive student learning experiences” (Naidu, 2021, p. 2).

The COVID-19 pandemic and administrative responses are relevant as the world moves closer to a post-pandemic state. In her study, Superville (2021) shared that the American Institutes for Research and the National Association of Elementary School Principals compiled data from elementary school principals regarding their leadership experiences during the pandemic, and, despite the difficulties they faced in navigating new territories, several unintended positive outcomes were garnered for their school communities. Thus, it is essential to recognize effective instructional and systemic shifts that will produce long-term gains for years to come to build a future response system for a potentially similar situation. Additionally, metrics from the American Institutes for Research focus groups suggested that principals who built school cultures grounded in

strong support systems were more equipped to pivot and weather the impending hurdles of the pandemic (Superville, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

The educational system was not prepared to navigate a system-disrupting event like a global pandemic successfully. Considering that many schools experienced long-term closures, extended use of virtual instruction, and lack of ability to procure health and safety equipment, school leaders must take their shared experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and create plans to sustain effective support systems post-pandemic (Hooge & Pont, 2020). School leaders often address systemic needs through strategic planning, which involves decision-making, a leadership skill that is heavily tested during times of uncertainty. Moreover, during the pandemic, decision-making was a multi-faceted process that included information gathering, consideration of alternatives, reviews of best practices, employment decisions, and monitoring results (Matthews et al., 2022). School leaders faced immeasurable uncertainty at an unprecedented rate and “guided their schools through circumstances that could never have been anticipated” (Longmuir, 2021, p. 2). A review of current literature demonstrated that many strategies explored and executed were fundamentally flawed, resulting in long-term learning loss and amplifying social inequities (Midha, 2021). Even so, given the additional resources that schools received during the pandemic, many leaders implemented effective student support systems. However, it is not known how school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness to maintain effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased

staffing and resource needs, implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and addressing outside factors that affected student learning.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative, phenomenological study aims to understand how school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness to maintain effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs, implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and addressing outside factors that affected student learning. Understanding how these leaders were able to leverage resources post-pandemic may support other leaders as they support students' post-pandemic needs (Longmuir, 2021). This study supports school leaders by providing information on strategies that were employed to address an event that redefined the educational landscape and by providing information how school systems can maintain effective post-pandemic student support systems, which include: resourcefulness when financing increased staffing and resource needs, resiliency when implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and responsiveness when addressing outside factors that affected student learning.

Research Questions

The following questions directed the study and were devised to attain information from school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania.

RQ1: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs?

RQ2: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they fostered resiliency and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including implementing remediation processes to offset student learning loss?

RQ3: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated responsiveness and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including addressing outside factors that affected student learning?

Operational Definitions

This section provides operational definitions that state how terms are used specific to this research study.

Challenges - a stimulating task or problem (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a)

COVID-19 - an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (World Health Organization, 2023)

Effective student support systems - a well-rounded support network that caters to a student's educational needs, physical and emotional well-being, involvement in the community, hidden and extracurricular learning experiences, and ultimately, their successful completion of the program (Rangara-Omol, 1970)

Increased staffing - professionals hired by organizations during the COVID-19 Pandemic to keep organizations functioning at their best capacity

Student learning loss - a loss of knowledge or skills, either general or specific, triggered by an extended gap or break in a student's traditional education program (Law Insider, 2023)

Online learning - using web-based tools and platforms where resources and assignments are posted for students to navigate and complete independently (Walsh-Rurak, 2020).

Outside factors - external factors influencing student performance include the familial and academic environment. A positive family setting and a supportive academic atmosphere play pivotal roles in motivating students, fostering their academic achievements, and enhancing their enthusiasm for learning (Ramli et al., 2018).

Pandemic - of a disease: widespread that affects a large quantity of a population; also: of or relating to such a disease (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023)

Remediation - the act or process of remedying (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b)

Resources - a source of supply or support (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-c)

Student learning - Learning is a diverse and multifaceted experience that unfolds across different dimensions and stages when individuals engage in problem-solving activities (Harel & Koichu, 2010)

Rationale and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative study is to understand how educational leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness to maintain effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs, implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and addressing outside factors that affected student learning. Due to the recent onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is

limited literature and experience with successfully implementing strategies that can help a leader maintain effective support systems for students. Researchers acknowledge that school leaders faced immeasurable uncertainty under strict and fluid timelines to guide their schools and those within their walls through circumstances they could not predict (Longmuir, 2021). Therefore, it is imperative to consider that the challenges faced by America's school systems "are not related to a lack of experience of commitment on the part of educators and other school staff, but to insufficient supports and external resources that can and must be addressed" (Watson et al., 2021, p. 26).

This qualitative, phenomenological methodology was employed to provide the reader with a first-hand account of the difficulties leaders faced in navigating decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic. This study supports school leaders by providing information on strategies that can be employed to address an event that redefined the educational landscape. A phenomenological research method allows for an in-depth study of the affective, emotional, and human experience of school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study examines how leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness to maintain effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs, implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and addressing outside factors that affected student learning. This study provides information that may be useful to school leaders, teachers, families, and students who experience a systems-disrupting event, such as a pandemic, in the future.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as a key data collector for the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data collection methods included interviews to elicit information from administrators in Northwestern Pennsylvania. Conducting qualitative research on the COVID-19 pandemic requires a researcher to acknowledge several assumptions that underpin the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is assumed that individuals' experiences and perceptions related to the pandemic are multifaceted and nuanced, shaped by a range of cultural, socio-economic, and personal factors. It is also assumed that study participants offered honest perspectives of their experiences. For this study, the primary data collection instrument was interviews, as a means to understand how school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness to maintain effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs, implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and addressing outside factors that affected student learning.

The first limitation involves participants' willingness and ability to provide honest and reflective accounts of their experiences despite potential memory biases and social desirability effects (Moustakas, 2011). Another limitation is that of misinformation due to inaccurate recalling of events. Participants may have difficulty remembering past events or experiences accurately, leading to memory bias in their responses. Inaccurate reporting can also originate from fear or providing socially acceptable or desirable responses (Moustakas, 2011). Interviewees may provide information that they believe is socially desirable or expected rather than providing their true feelings or experiences for fear of judgment.

A second limitation of qualitative research is subjectivity or bias. Interviews are inherently subjective as they rely on the interpretation of both the interviewer and the interviewee (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviewers may unintentionally introduce bias through questions, tone, or body language. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that the researcher's positionality, including their own experiences and biases, may influence the data collection and interpretation process. The qualitative approach using interviews is suitable for capturing the school leaders' rich and diverse experiences (Moustakas, 2011) surrounding the pandemic, offering valuable insights into the lived experiences of individuals and communities during this global crisis.

A third limitation is geographical, as the study is being conducted in Northwestern Pennsylvania, which may not be representative of the lived experiences of administrators across the nation. Additionally, the small sample size reflects the need to understand the experiences of a specific population of our nation's administrators. This limitation may prevent the transferability or generalizability of the study to a widespread population.

Summary

A review of the literature revealed that although school administrators faced ever-changing deadlines to make decisions and lacked the training and experience to design systems to support the pandemic, many of them did implement long-term changes that addressed the needs of students. Hence, the purpose of this qualitative, narrative study is to understand how school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness to maintain effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource

needs, implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and addressing outside factors that affected student learning. The intended outcome of this study was to support administrators by providing information on strategies that can be employed to address an event that redefines the educational landscape.

Chapter II

Literature Review

When an organization faces problems, leaders use data to inform the organizational vision for the future and define organizational goals; this practice is known as strategic planning (Bigelow & Pratt, 2022). Mathias (2023) suggests that strategic planning yields a three-pronged benefit: alignment of mission and vision among stakeholders, promotion of production decision-making, and assistance for students to reach their full potential. Strategic planning begins with goal setting and is followed by responsive decisions regarding action steps to reach the established goals. Additionally, strategic planning is supported by leveraging the resources needed to bring the action steps to fruition and by repeated assessment of the process and product (Mathias, 2023). Considering that change takes time, all strategic planning steps require a level of resiliency. At the school district level, community support and mobilization are key components when considering successful student outcomes. Effective leaders “know that their strategic plans are more likely to succeed with community support and the insights that come with community engagement” (Mathias, 2023, para. 7).

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, school leaders were required to strategically plan in a way that had not been done in the past. The leaders’ abilities to leverage resources with limited knowledge and unanticipated, rapidly changing guidelines may support other leaders who experience similar circumstances in the field of education (Longmuir, 2021). Metrics from the American Institutes for Research focus groups suggested that principals who built school cultures grounded in strong support

systems could pivot and weather the impending challenges of the pandemic (Superville, 2021).

It is not known how school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness to maintain effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs, implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and addressing outside factors that affected student learning. The specifics of what school leaders did are not known; however, this study seeks to discover and address these specifics so that the strategies used and deemed effective during the pandemic can be repeated in the future if a similar situation is encountered. As a result, this study aims to address how experience can shape future plans should another worldwide issue impact education in a similar way by using the strategic planning process, which involves key elements of decision-making, a leadership skill that is heavily tested during times of uncertainty (Le Bris et al., 2019). Strategic planning and a review of the literature informed the following research questions as a basis for the study:

RQ1: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs?

RQ2: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they fostered resiliency and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including implementing remediation processes to offset student learning loss?

RQ3: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated responsiveness and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including addressing outside factors that affected student learning?

After reviewing the literature and examining the data, this study aimed to understand the factors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the culture of teaching and learning.

The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Culture of Teaching and Learning

When Pennsylvania schools were ordered to close in March 2020, I was uncertain how students, teachers, families, and the community would respond, especially since Pennsylvania school students did not return to mandatory instruction until August 2020. In four short months, districts were tasked with reinventing the educational landscape to provide students with continuity of instruction. Schwab et al. (2022) shares that “all faculty needed to quickly re-think and adapt their established ways of teaching to transfer their classes to online environments” (p. 2). Decisions about instructional directions were left up to local jurisdictions, provided they followed the state requirements. It is not known how school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania specifically demonstrated resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness to maintain effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs, implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and addressing outside factors that affected student learning.

Because my district is economically disadvantaged, the earliest days of the pandemic were spent prioritizing making strategic decisions about how to provide meals

to students. Creation and implementation of health and safety plans became the focus of every administrator in the Summer of 2020. Because of so many unknown factors surrounding the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pennsylvania schools followed guidance enacted by Governor Tom Wolf in partnership with the Center for Disease Control and local and state health departments (Pennsylvania Department of Health, 2020). School boards and school leaders leapt into action to create health and safety plans to address what a safe return to in-person learning would look like after the abrupt end to the 2019-2020 school year.

In his June 2020 message to school communities, Pennsylvania Secretary of Education, Pedro Rivera, shared research with school leaders to help draft health and safety plans and asked them to utilize the data provided when making long term plans regarding the upcoming school year, including the shifts in health and safety, which may require quick transitions to remote learning (Berks Weekly, 2020). This was the beginning of the guidance presented to school districts to create plans surrounding the red, yellow, and green phases of COVID-19 transmission in Pennsylvania. This was also the point where educators knew they would need to create comprehensive plans that likely opposed their fundamental educational philosophies. Rather than a focus on in-person classroom instruction, leaders had to create systems for remote instruction and build capacity surrounding perceptions that virtual learning is ineffective or inappropriate for learners who are not mature or self-disciplined enough to thrive in an asynchronous format (ION Professional eLearning Program, n.d.).

It is no secret that the everyday lives of people around the world changed with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. When mandates were put in place and restrictions

were issued, everyone was required to navigate a brand-new landscape without a map. Among the most difficult occupations in which to work were healthcare and education. The phrase ‘building the plane as we are flying it’ was the most accurate description of what educational leaders faced as they tried to make local decisions about creating and implementing health and safety plans, returning to in-person instruction, and providing students with basic needs. Additionally, educators attempted to address mounting mental health concerns. School leaders faced immeasurable uncertainty at an unprecedented rate and “guided their schools through circumstances that could never have been anticipated” (Longmuir, 2021, p. 2). Strategic planning from a building level during the COVID-19 pandemic required three key attributes: responsiveness, resiliency, and resourcefulness. Although this unprecedented time called for unique solutions, there are positive long-term implications garnered from this difficult period in education.

Educational Culture Pre-Pandemic

Pre-pandemic, school districts utilized available resources to address the needs of students based on various data sources including, but not limited to, census data, assessment scores, academic progress monitoring, and self-reported information about family structure. This data collection provided leaders the opportunity to acquire resources for students that aimed break down barriers and allow better access to educational programming and a more positive student learning environment. When students, and ultimately families, are invested in educational programming, teachers experience a higher level of job satisfaction (Bangs & Coryton, 2020).

Responding to Students’ Needs

In a study executed by Bangs and Coryton (2020), the researchers reviewed data collected from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), wherein teachers and administrators review the learning environment in schools. The study aimed to generate comparable information with an emphasis on aspects of the educational environment that affect student learning (Bangs & Coryton, 2020, p. 23). Despite the 2018 TALIS being administered pre-COVID-19, the results are fully relevant and serve as a foundation for rebuilding the post-pandemic educational system. TALIS is administered in 48 countries varying in economic status and educational level and includes nine main themes: “teachers’ instructional practices, school leadership, teachers’ professional practices, teacher education and initial preparation, teacher feedback and development, school climate, job satisfaction, teacher human resource issues and stakeholder relations, [and] teacher self-efficacy” (Bangs & Coryton, 2020, p. 24). Results in the TALIS findings are self-reported, which indicates levels of opinion, belief, bias, and personal accounts. Through the TALIS study, Bangs and Coryton found that 90% of teachers communicated job satisfaction, yet only 26% believed that society values the work they do. In terms of stress levels, 18% experienced a lot of stress, and 49% reported that “excessive administrative work causes their stress” (p. 25). Classroom instruction has been a passive activity for most students, wherein teachers deliver content, and students work with that content to prove their understanding through an assessment (Landin & Pacenka, 2021, p. 9). An important question was raised regarding past practices and whether the way instruction was delivered in the past would continue to be the best way to expose students to educational endeavors.

Identifying Educator Effectiveness

An annual rating of teachers is a requirement of every school system. However, much debate has surfaced regarding how to adequately rate educator effectiveness post-pandemic, when so many instructional and emotional gaps exist. Administrators must consider how to provide teachers with time to collaborate to have a better outlook on their effectiveness, as they are the ones who experience the student learning gaps daily. For example, “Teachers who regularly collaborate with peers...tend to report using cognitive activation practices more frequently in class,” leading to better educational outcomes for students (Bangs & Coryton, 2020, p. 30). With the demands of new online curriculum access, lingering fear about exposure to COVID-19, and the already high demands of teaching on a daily basis, time for collaboration to support educator effectiveness is not at the forefront of educators’ minds.

Educational Culture During the Pandemic

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational culture took a rapid turn and set both teachers and administrators on a roller-coaster ride filled with highs and lows. Both administrators and teachers experienced periods of effectiveness and connection with students paired with periods of perceived incompetence and inability to make contact or reach some students. Many of the lows were born out of situations beyond the school system’s control, at which point creativity paired with responsiveness was required to attempt to meet students’ needs in any way possible.

Responsiveness

Strategic planning requires a leader to be responsive to the needs of the system, which includes the stakeholders, the resources, and the shared vision of the school system (Mathias, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inequity among families, tasked

leaders with responding to situations that seemed nearly impossible, and amplified social inequities as students were underserved (Midha, 2021). Responsiveness as a component of strategic planning provides the opportunity for leaders to address the needs of the stakeholders by setting shared goals and leveraging available resources.

Responding to the Need for Equitable Instructional Opportunities. Globally, over 162 country-wide school closures amounted to more than 70% of learners engaging in remote instruction around the world (Gerber & Leong, 2021, p. 99). These shifts amounted to unequal educational opportunities for students around the world and marked the beginning of a fast-paced need to address educational delivery worldwide. As a newly appointed elementary principal, I adopted the shared focus of my educational entity, which was a commitment to providing students the opportunity to return to in-person instruction at all costs. Navigating the social distancing, masking, and mitigation requirements became a monumental task to take on as a school leader. Preliminary planning was “rooted in ‘setting out to solve a problem with no preconception as to how [I would] do it, permitting everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for [me] in solving a problem’” (Midha, 2021, p. 35). This is directly related to the aforementioned ‘building the plane as we are flying it’ analogy. This level of improvisation required creativity and spontaneity, both of which are my strong suits.

Working with administrative colleagues, the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, and the school board offered a variety of strategies, viewpoints, and conflicting belief systems from which to affect a final plan for the return to in-person instruction. The school board’s unwavering desire to keep all students in the school buildings required me to open additional classrooms with the same number of staff, offer

alternative locations for students to eat lunch, and limit time for recess and student electives. Teachers were required to move from classroom to classroom, as students stayed in their classrooms for much of the school day. Building this schedule and adapting it as cases rose or teachers fell ill became a constant state of “improvisation based on ‘yes-and’” (Midha, 2021, p. 36), where I was perpetually tasked with being able to provide guidance or create a new plan on-the-spot after an affirmation. Teachers would often ask if their instruction, planning, and myriad other educational duties were enough, and I would often need to respond with ‘yes’ followed by additional, on the spot, suggestions for support or planning to alleviate teachers’ fears. An additional measure of inequity that surfaced was the lack of internet access for some students during a time when internet access was vital to participation in school. This disruption in education became one of the many cornerstones upon which future instructional methodology was built (Landin & Pacenka, 2021, p. 10).

After the school year was underway, it became evident that both students whose parents elected for them to return to in-person instruction and those whose parents chose virtual learning were still in need of additional supports both in basic needs and mental health. As a leader, I was required to have a level of responsiveness to which I was not accustomed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. I was tasked with creating solutions to problems that were ever-evolving, such as socially distanced in-person instruction, cyber education, and meeting the basic needs of students; at the same time, I had to keep the building staffed and alleviate the fears of my teachers and colleagues. Overall, consistent problem solving was a monumental task.

Additionally, it was important to garner feedback from stakeholders before planning what in-person instruction would look like for families, teachers, and community members. From the beginning, it was evident that one focus would need to be “reduction of teachers’ self-efficacy when having to deliver instruction using new instructional activities and e-learning platforms” (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021, p. 77). As difficult as it was for students and families to transition to a new educational landscape, teachers were thrust into a completely new frontier with minimal time to prepare. Our school districts used as much time as they could to train teachers on new learning management systems (LMS), online resources, curriculum shifts, and health and safety changes, but time was not a commodity afforded to districts, and the school year had to begin. Even after pushing the start date back by two weeks for the 2020-2021 school year, there was not enough time to acclimate all stakeholders to the drastic changes that would take place, the largest of which was scheduling.

Scheduling began after school districts had to determine what in-person instruction was going to look like with the mitigation requirements, many of which required changes in well-established school routines: the length of classes during the school day, student access to electives, locations of classrooms, and a myriad of other difficult problems to solve. For administrators so accustomed to philosophical practices rooted in student-centered pedagogy, this unprecedented challenge required unprecedented action (Hough, 2022). Rather than students being permitted to move among classrooms, I had to create modified instructional blocks with teachers moving instead of students, which included student electives in the classroom rather than in the traditional settings such as the art room, music room, gymnasium, and library. Due to the

need for six feet of spacing between students at mealtimes, there was limited cafeteria seating, which required some grade levels to have students eating in classrooms, causing increased adaptability and changes for food service staff. The schedule for the primary grades (only kindergarten through grade two) had students restricted to their classrooms for the duration of the school day, except for going outside for recess. Building this schedule and adapting it as cases rose or teachers fell ill became a constant state of “improvisation based on ‘yes-and’” where I was perpetually tasked with being able to provide guidance or creating a new plan on the spot after an affirmation (Midha, 2021, p. 36).

The burden of making these decisions weighed heavily on school leaders across the world. Decision-making is one of the leadership skills that is heavily tested during times of uncertainty (Le Bris et al., 2019). Moreover, during the pandemic decision-making is a multi-faceted process that includes information gathering, consideration of alternatives, reviewing best practices, employing decisions, and monitoring the results (Matthews et al., 2022). This level of decision-making required an inordinate amount of time, and still, “from a whole child perspective, education and learning online or through other virtual or non-presential means is a poor substitute for the whole endeavor of education” (Hooge & Pont, 2020, p. 135). Any solution could be met with opposition from so many angles that networking and combatting leader isolation were key components to the resilience needed to face the tasks at hand. Decision-making had to be a group effort to ensure that all students were provided with equitable opportunities and, at the same time, a built-in support system for when plans needed to pivot or be changed entirely. When confronted by faculty, staff, families, and students, leaders in all parts of

the world had to pretend that everything was under control to “preserve their professional identity in front of their district colleagues and supervisors” (Sutton & Gong, 2021, p. 42). Leaders were trying to make decisions about student learning and well-being. In their article published in the *European Journal of Education*, Hooge and Pont (2020) state:

As the world [became] more complex and nonlinear, and as problems [were] deeper and more interdependent, there [was, and still] is a need for leaders who can lead and learn in unpredictable situations and are able to see ‘both the trees and the forest’. (p. 136)

Taking the time to see ‘both the trees and the forest’ allowed for creative strategic planning and provided families with amenable educational opportunities in an unprecedented time. Bangs & Coryton (2020) suggests giving the teachers greater voice and influence in both running their classrooms and the system to prevent irrevocable damage from the pandemic (p. 27).

Despite all the efforts put forth to design safe in-person instruction, some families still opted to continue with virtual instruction due to compromised immune systems or concerns with large populations of students. In my district, enrolling 20% of students in a cyber option not only increased the virtual learning expenditures, but also increased the technology costs. The cyber platform required the purchase of additional Chromebooks, new printers with multiple functions, a multitude of ink cartridges, and mobile hot spots with service for families. Because implementing “crisis-driven online education is significantly different from well-planned online teaching and learning,” a solid plan was not in place, and the format of the virtual learning was new (Manca & Delfino, 2021, p.

1396). As such, the district had to hire an educational consultant to come in and conduct multiple virtual learning trainings for all families wishing to use the virtual option. This took roughly four weeks, with multiple days of families attending. Losing 20% of the students in attendance at our school also weighed heavily on the teachers who spent so much time connecting with them in prior school years. Responsiveness to the instructional needs of all students and families was paramount in attempting to provide students with equitable educational opportunities during the pandemic. Because the pandemic did not call for a curriculum upheaval, teachers were tasked with utilizing new technology to deliver similar content, some of which were not best suited for instructional delivery (Landin & Pacenka, 2021, p. 10). The success of technological programs also largely depended on the teacher's attitude toward and willingness to deliver content in new and unfamiliar ways.

Responding to Teacher Uncertainty. The uncertainty that teachers felt when trusting local jurisdictions to create plans and school administration to follow them was palpable. Teachers often looked to leadership for reassurance and affirmation, which was problematic due to the lack of experience all stakeholders had to navigate the pandemic. Every decision made and plan executed had to be considered a learning experience to grow from each situation, but the integral focal points of the school administration were “detecting signals and responding appropriately; demonstrating empathy and [prioritizing] well-being; communicating frequently and effectively; leading collaboratively and taking a community leadership role; and taking opportunities to learn at all stages of the crisis” (Longmuir, 2021, p. 3). My teachers' desires to feel heard were never more apparent than during the pandemic, when my decisions held such weight over

their daily quality of life. At that point, I acknowledged that what seemed an insurmountable task required me to take a step back and view this as an opportunity for me to “[learn] to develop adaptive capabilities necessary for successful leadership” (O’Connell & Clarke, 2020, p. 4); I was either going to tap into what I knew to be true about strategic planning and learn how to fly the metaphorical plane or be the reason it came crashing down.

Responding to Equitable Access to Basic Needs. Strategic planning during the pandemic required me to become not only incredibly responsive, but also be deliberately reflective about my leadership style and the true needs of the school community. According to Watson et al. (2021), schools “have become a key provider of social services for students and their families, including medical and behavioral health care, health and mental health promotion, nutritional supports, and case management” (p. 17). The pandemic served to “[amplify] social inequities and severely [impact] the already marginalized students served by high-need schools” (Midha, 2021, p. 28). After examining the results of several community-based surveys that were conducted, it became clear to me that I needed to be aware of “resource inequities affecting students’ learning opportunities and family dynamics” (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021, p. 77). The largest need for my students’ families is resource inequity.

Through a study conducted one year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Watson et al. (2021) discovered that school social workers “indicated that the children and families they served had significant unmet basic needs, including for food, healthcare, and housing” (p. 17). Families in Northwest Pennsylvania, in particular, experienced food insecurity, health and hygiene needs, and a need for basic clothing to

make it through the changing seasons. Daniunaite et al. (2021), discovered that students “living in a family with low income or low education... [is an] important risk factor” for students at all facets of life, but especially during the pandemic (p. 1). Students living in poverty are more likely to face food insecurity, lack of access to health and hygiene products, and seasonal clothing needs. Both poverty and mental health “compounded pandemic difficulties, which were associated with the socio-demographic makeup of schools” (Watson et al., 2021, p. 17).

According to Kent et al. (2022), food insecurity is three-pronged and involves “appropriate availability, access, and utilization of food” (p. 1). The necessary health and safety mitigation restrictions imposed by the pandemic inadvertently sparked large-scale increases in global food insecurity (Kent et al., 2022, p. 2). To combat food insecurity, we implemented a backpack program for students, which allowed them to take home food on a weekly basis in addition to a food pantry that families were able to access when needed. The backpack program utilized support from the local food bank, wherein families could apply for additional food, which provided them with multiple meal options on a weekly basis. As Kent et al. discovered, the populations most at risk for food insecurity across the study were those in the youngest age category of 18-29, which directly correlated with the ages of parents in Pennsylvania elementary school (p. 6). The Community School Food Pantry was accessible if families had additional needs, at which point they were able to access our outreach pantry for additional items. If transportation was or became a barrier, the food could be sent home with students or delivered.

All students, whether choosing in-person or virtual learning, received free breakfast and lunch daily, either served in school or picked up on campus. In addition,

summer meals were provided due to the school district's application for additional funding to provide students who needed it with breakfast and lunch seven days per week. The need for this measure is substantiated by the results of Kent et al. (2022) study, wherein they discovered that "the high levels of food insecurity documented at the beginning of the pandemic during a lockdown reduced but did not recover to pre-pandemic levels after one year" (p. 8). Subsequent studies of United States families found that food insecurity prior to the COVID-19 pandemic was averaged 37% and rose to 54% in May 2020; however, by September 2020, the levels decreased only to 45%, which was still remarkably higher than the initial rate (Kent et al., 2022, p. 9).

Because food was not the only basic need, we also created a health and hygiene pantry to provide cleaning supplies, personal care items, and paper products to families. For many families who relied on community-based services, disruption of access to those services due to COVID-related closures "affected their ability to meet basic needs on a daily basis" (Kent et al., 2022, p. 7). Bertoldo et al. (2022) recognize the long-term health implications that food insecurity can have on families and further assert that a focus on health and hygiene took a back seat to food during the pandemic; therefore, leaving families without the many important health and hygiene products needed to avoid long-term medical intervention (p. 777).

Watson et al. (2021) found that "children and families...had significant unmet basic needs and needs for supportive services, and their poverty and unaddressed mental health issues were believed to be compounding their difficulties during the early phase of pandemic school closures" (p. 22). Community partners provided funding to support the acquisition of toiletry and cleaning supplies for families, and the community school

director created an electronic form that families could utilize to request supplies and then would deliver them to the families as needed. Due to the increasing correlation between families experiencing food insecurity and delay of health care when needed, providing families with the basic necessities allowed them to focus what little income remained on acquiring medical care if needed amid the pandemic (Bertoldo et al., 2022, p. 777). The community school director maintained contact with outside partners to replenish the pantry when supplies were running low. The storage of these items became problematic at times; however, the need to support families far outweighed the difficulty of determining how to safely store them.

For those students in need of clean clothing, we created a clothing closet they could access by simply asking an adult in the building. Families, organizations, and teachers donated both new and like-new clothes to the community school director, who then washed and organized them by size and season. Clothes were handed out to students when they were in need, and teachers could request clothes on behalf of their students. With the globally recognized limited access to food and families' resistance to spending what limited income they have on healthcare (Kent et al., 2022, p. 10), local partners recognized that an additional resource they could offer to families was clothing. Therefore, local partners donated higher-cost items like winter coats and boots for students. Providing students and families with the resources needed allowed the district to break down any lingering barriers to student access to education.

As a school leader attempting to navigate this difficult terrain, it is important for me to “develop an adaptive stance, constantly looking for ways to test [my] knowledge about the teacher and learning within [my] unique school context” (Dunn, 2020, p. 36).

As this pandemic continues to wage war on our school system, I plan to continue to be responsive and utilize my creativity and spontaneity to create solutions that best address the needs of my faculty, staff, students, and community to combat the “social-emotional toll [the pandemic has] on teaching staff, students, families, and communities” (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021, p. 77).

Resiliency

Another key component of implementing a strategic plan is the ability to be resilient when goals are not met, resources are not available, and changes must be made (Mathias, 2023). Assessment and evaluation of processes are necessary to determine if a school system is on track to meet goals, and when re-assessment or realignment is necessary, both the system and the stakeholders must be resilient to respond to the changes (Mathias, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic required those within the system to bounce back at a fast pace due to the rapid changes taking place as the national, state, and local jurisdictions responded to the needs of the people (Longmuir, 2021).

Resiliency in the Face of Rapid Change. Ongoing responsiveness also requires a level of resiliency due to the number of rapid changes that need to be made at a moment’s notice. Even though generally, resilient individuals often achieve greater academic success, “these findings may have become more complicated when including an examination of socioeconomic disparities” following the pandemic (Garagiola et al., 2022, p. 11). With an ever-changing landscape, “rapid change, and uncertainty for school communities [are] commonplace and school leaders [must guide] their schools through circumstances that could never have been anticipated” (Longmuir, 2021, p. 2).

Each time it seemed as though my team and I could reach a decision, a new requirement or recommendation was published, and then additional support at the board level was needed. This proved difficult due to the timing of board meetings. Strategic decision-making under both pressure and time constraints is incredibly difficult, and the long-term implications of the call-to-action type planning in an unprecedented situation means “going to...teachers and saying, ‘I don’t know yet, but I’ll figure it out’” (Khoshaba, 2022, para. 1). Additionally, reaching out to teachers and giving them the opportunity to collaborate allowed and provided (and continues to allow and provide) me with the opportunity to observe the classroom and receive feedback about day-to-day operations. Through “active listening, empathetic decisions, and collaborative problem solving [I am able] to create an infrastructure that recognizes and reinforces the greatness in every educator” (Khoshaba, 2022, para. 3). This level of trust and transparency with faculty and staff is imperative to finding success and building resiliency when initial and subsequent plans do not come to fruition.

Professor Andreas Schleicher (2021), the Director of Education and Skills for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, noted that “the pandemic has heightened the urgency to strengthen the resilience of both learners and educational systems to external disruptions” (p. 22). Disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic were inequitable in that some educational organizations were equipped to maintain in-person learning and provide students with learning opportunities that were less disruptive than those who shut down completely and relied on remote learning. The disruptions in education were unpredictable, and their effects continue to plague educational organizations that attempt to address the collateral damage. Garagiola et al. (2022)

described the educational disruption as both abrupt and unsustainable, as it is estimated that “more than 1.6 billion students spanning across 190 countries have experienced disruptions to their education, and 24 million children and youth may drop out permanently as a result of the pandemic” (p. 10). Coryton (2021) asserts that a system-wide change in diagnosis and assessment is vital to addressing the educational inequities experienced during the pandemic (p. 24). However, Naidu (2021) reinforces that, despite the hardships faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, students, families, educators, and administrators “have the capacity for being more resilient than we might have thought” (p. 2).

Lee et al. (2021) conducted a study wherein university students were given a survey to garner specific information about their experiences with distance learning during the pandemic (p. 165). Many assumptions were made regarding how students felt, but very few students were surveyed to determine what their true perceptions and experiences were. To elicit comparative data, students answered questions about their experiences before and after the pandemic to determine what shifts occurred with the closures. Overall, Lee et al. determined that school satisfaction decreased from a value of 3.78 pre-pandemic to 3.38 during the pandemic, and their findings were statistically significant (p. 165). Despite a decrease in satisfaction with school, students expressed the same level of contentment with the instructional methodology, as most students shared a high satisfaction with the level of communication between professors and students. These findings are significant moving forward when considering how to best support students should future situations occur wherein remote learning is required. Based on the findings of Lee et al., a focus on communication and connection may be vital to student success.

Naidu (2021) discovered that “although resilience may seem more like an innate or personality trait, it can be developed and enhanced through direct action,” which may be in the form of support from one’s educational organization (p. 2).

Resiliency in Response to Health and Safety Concerns. The main concerns presented by faculty and staff were usually in response to the health and safety plan required by the state of Pennsylvania, which was difficult to maintain at times because changes must be approved by the school district board of directors (Pennsylvania School Boards Association [PSBA], 2017). Following mitigation protocol while providing educational continuity and taking individual health needs into account requires its own level of resiliency. When working on creating and executing the plans, administrative “workload [increases] due to technical/infrastructure deficiencies and the need to communicate daily with school community members...to provide guidance and psychological support” (Argyropoulou et al., 2021, p. 18). Psychological support becomes paramount for all stakeholders, including increased mental health resources for students.

Despite the landscape looking quite bleak, it is important to note that building resilience in students can net positive and sustainable outcomes. Garagiola et al. (2022) report that students who exhibit high threshold resilience, defined as “children who are high-functioning and able to thrive despite barriers and adversity,” are more likely to overcome barriers to achievement within a system and can “display positive educational outcomes on par with peers from high socioeconomic backgrounds” (p. 11).

Resiliency in Response to Rising Mental Health Needs. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the already fragile student population in our schools, and this shift

made strategic planning more difficult because an additional layer of increased mental health support is added to the customary role of administration. Prior to the start of the pandemic, one in seven adolescents aged 10-19 experienced a mental health disorder worldwide (Garagiola et al., 2022, p. 3). After studying the effects of the pandemic on America's youth, the Office of the Surgeon General recommended that schools "provide a continuum of supports to meet student mental health needs, including evidence-based prevention practices and trauma-informed mental health care" (Murthy, 2021, p. 19). To help support the increased mental health needs of our students, my team and I implemented a district-wide student support system, Specialized Student Intervention Program (SSIP), that currently includes a mental health case manager and a therapist that students can access in the school building. Wiedemann et al. (2022) discovered that "the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a notable deterioration from existing mental health-related trajectories, resulting in an overall increase in psychological distress and decrease in mental well-being" (p. 10). Our school found that many students were presenting with acute needs but being put on waitlists for mental health services for months on end and with "the prevalence of both anxiety and depression [seeming] high when compared to existing per-pandemic epidemiological data," this was a cause for concern (Wiedemann et al., 2022, p. 10). With an in-house program, students can access mental health services on-demand once parents grant permission. Garagiola et al., (2022) studied and found that "systems-level resilience enhances individual resilience by providing positive support in times of adversity as well as modeling active coping and providing emotional assistance," which is the aim of the in-house mental health services

(p. 2). Both the mental health and basic needs resources help break down the barrier of basic human need for students.

Daniunaite et al. (2021) conducted a study wherein they found a small but significant increase in students aged 12-16 experiencing “hyperactivity/inattention, emotional symptoms, and prosocial behaviors” (p. 7). This study also concluded that adolescents generally experienced “psychosocial difficulties during the Pandemic, which might constitute a risk for future mental health problems” (Daniunaite et al., 2021, p. 7). Resilience comes into play as the interventions we offer for students are either declined by parents or prove to be ineffective due to larger environmental needs in the home. At that point, it is imperative to forge on and acquire additional resources or encourage families to try something new. As a response to the increasing needs of our students, “[educators] can begin by nurturing student social and emotional well-being to support academic progress” (Hough, 2022, para. 14). Dombo et al. (2021) suggest that the pandemic revealed the extent to which society relies on school systems to provide support for students beyond education. Furthermore, James (2015) recognizes the increase in students experiencing traumatic events either during the pandemic or facing re-traumatization of past events triggered by situations faced during the pandemic. His belief is that experiences affect both learning and behavior and asserts that the use of Christian Moore’s four sources of resilience (relationship, street, resource, and rock bottom) could provide students with the tools needed to develop resilience moving forward (Moore, 2014, as cited in James, 2015). In terms of helping students and families cope with the pandemic, Levine (2020) notes that many students living in poverty are already dealing with the effects of a national opioid epidemic and recognizes the

compounded pressure being put on students, families, and the public organizations that serve them due to the COVID-19 pandemic (p. 70). Students and families existing in this multifaceted, difficult world have developed some level of resiliency but may not possess the necessary coping skills to deal with both issues simultaneously, which increases the pressure on the school system to develop resources for students. Levine recognizes that for most children, “school is the most stable environment in their lives” (p. 71). As a school leader, it is imperative that I take whatever measures necessary to preserve the philosophy that school is a student’s most stable environment.

Resourcefulness

Mathias (2023) established that a third key element to strategic planning is “mobilizing the resources needed to take [the] actions” (para. 4) outlined through the organization’s goal-setting process. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of resources initially existed due to lack of familiarity with addressing a pandemic within a school system. However, once federal, state, and local jurisdictions identified fiscal, informational, and human resources for school districts to use, determining how those resources should be employed fell back to the goals set by the school district (Midha, 2021).

Leveraging Resources. Seeking out additional resources is the final key to strategic planning during the COVID-19 pandemic. With a lack of experience in the situation that education is currently facing, leaders must leverage resources, become creative with staffing, and focus on building organization. At the outset of the pandemic, preliminary planning required me to leverage all resources, both human and supplementary, to solve ever-evolving problems (Midha, 2021). This level of

improvisation required creativity and spontaneity; therefore, leveraging resources for the benefit of all students became a focal point of my daily practice. Frequently revisiting the needs of the school community provided me with an opportunity to assess the current problems and brainstorm possible solutions. What I discovered is that I “might be able to [hypothesize] a possible solution, [but I still needed] to test and learn through iterative cycles to reach a point where [I established] a workable context specific solution” (Dunn, 2020, p. 32). Using the resources I had at my disposal and pairing them with repeated practice helped develop long-term solutions to problems. In order to develop long-term solutions, a leader must show resourcefulness with strategies that not only “develop a mindset of acceptance... [but also] design lean improvement processes and foster psychological safety” (Dunn, 2020, pp. 35-36). Daniunaite et al. (2021) recommend purposeful inclusion of positive peer-to-peer and adult-to-peer interactions in addition to encouraging students to volunteer their time and talents to the school community.

Staffing and Building Organizational Solutions

During the pandemic, creative solutions to staffing were paramount. School districts reported an increased number of teacher absences due to sickness, quarantine, or identification as an immunocompromised individual. As classrooms became more difficult to staff and smaller class sizes were required, classroom coverage became one of the tasks that required increased administrative attention. Watson et al. (2021) note that throughout the pandemic, “principals were working to understand and address the needs of school staff, and that school staff were collaborating to deal with pandemic-related challenges” (p. 25). Teachers were being asked to cover classes on their plan periods, substitute for ill colleagues, and teach content they had never taught before, all of which I

attempted to avoid at all costs to take the pressure off the teachers. Educators were looking for leaders whom they could trust and who had their best interests in mind. Those same educators were looking to their leaders to assuage their concerns, and a leader who was perceived as weak or unable to secure resources would have a difficult time providing the necessary support to ensure student success. Coletrain (2020) states:

While no one is able to predict the future, countless lessons have been learned thus far to transform teaching, learning, and leadership. Schools and educators want strong leadership to ease fear, confusion, and uncertainty. Because of the pressures to reopen schools, principals should not miss the opportunity to create the kind of educational system that serves ALL children. (p. 1)

In response to meeting the basic needs of students and their families, Watson et al. (2021) notes that “if schools and communities fail to reorganize to strengthen their provision of...basic human services, children and families will not receive the support they need to re-engage academically” (p. 23). This finding emphasizes the importance of identifying and leveraging all resources to ensure that materials, both fiscal and personnel, are as equitably distributed among all families as possible. Although economic disparity is not new, the COVID-19 pandemic “has brought to the forefront the deep damage unmet material needs [causes] to poor and minoritized populations in our country” (Watson et al., 2021, p. 23). To that end, a larger-scale shift in practice must take place beginning with the coordination of services from all relevant professions rather than “the discipline-specific and siloed approach reported by practitioners working in schools,” which, out of necessity, has become the norm (Watson et al., 2021, p. 24).

Using all available resources to create a solid organizational structure is the crux of strategic planning. During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers relied more heavily on leaders to provide direction for every scenario since prior knowledge and experience are non-existent. To that end, administrative adaptation is an organizational requirement for planning as this pandemic continues to wage war on school systems.

Educational Culture Post-Pandemic

Following the pandemic, school systems must reinvent the way they operate to include pandemic-related policy, procedures, and protocols, while still attempting to return to 'normal', or as close to it as they can. School systems need to balance the need for normalcy with alleviating the fears of the stakeholders who are still concerned about mitigation requirements and educational gaps. Achieving this balance is not an easy feat, nor is there a one-size fits all answer for moving forward.

Long-Term Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite the present difficulties that school communities face, it is also imperative to consider the long-term implications of decision-making that are born out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amid the difficult decision-making that took place at the school level during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are outcomes that administrators are looking to implement for years to come. The American Institutes for Research and the National Association of Elementary School Principals compiled data from elementary school principals regarding their leadership experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, and, despite the difficulty they faced in navigating new territory, several unintended positive outcomes were garnered for their school communities (Superville, 2021, p. 1). A large sampling of elementary administrators provided a list of changes that they wish to keep in

place post-pandemic to support students, such as continued remote learning for weather and sickness-related needs, staffing changes, community partnerships, and changes to daily routines.

After two school years of implementing COVID-19-specific changes, I have had many conversations with teachers about what changes they would like to sustain in a post-COVID school year. Even in the midst of ‘building the plane as we are flying it’ educators are looking for permanence. Teachers nationwide reported that “virtual learning was only a ‘slightly better’ alternative to skilled school altogether,” and that learning loss is a global and significant problem (Garagiola et al., 2022, p. 11).

Instructional and socioeconomic gaps were both created and exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many of the mitigation strategies aimed to minimize the gaps and reduce barriers to education that many students faced. According to Garagiola et al., students cited that difficulties with online learning were just as significant as financial hardship faced in the home, with the topmost difficulties being “lack of interaction with their instructor, instructors’ response time, and the loss of opportunities for traditional classroom socialization” (p. 11). This lack of traditional socialization has led to intense feelings of disconnect among students and teachers in addition to feelings of isolation in times of natural school transitions, such as semester or school year changes (Garagiola et al., 2022, p. 11).

As the landscape changed drastically for students and teachers, administrators faced daunting challenges and tasks that left them questioning their capabilities, resilience, and overall effectiveness as leaders. Despite being more resourceful than they had been in years prior in terms of creating and finding solutions for families and

teachers, the price paid for this resourcefulness is earlier administrative retirements and burnout. Districts should be showing value to the leaders whose creativity sustained their school systems during the pandemic, and “if long-term leader retention is truly a goal, district officials and policymakers will need to reimagine how principals engage in their work and what systemic shifts are necessary to make the work sustainable over time” (Sutton & Gong, 2021, p. 43). By nature, educators and administrators are student-centered and aim to sacrifice their own time, effort, and resources for the greater good, which was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. A study done with school leaders from five metropolitan areas in the southwest United States highlighted strategies and practices of effective school leaders. The researchers found that “although many of the school leaders...may not self-identify as social justice advocates, [their] findings suggest that during the pandemic their identities were strongly affected by the unsettling circumstances teachers, students, parents, and communities were experiencing” (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021, p. 77). Administrators exhausted all possible resources for the betterment of their school communities.

Creating a New Normal Post-Pandemic

Moving forward with strategic planning, it is imperative to recognize effective instructional and systemic shifts that can produce long-term gains, regardless of their catalyst. Naidu (2021) asserts that “for long-term survival and resilience against the current and any future catastrophe, a systemic rethink and reengineering of educational and institutional choreographies is required, and along various critical dimensions” (p. 1). It is the responsibility of leaders to move forward and create a new normal for school communities. However, leaders must remember that rebuilding takes time and that they

cannot “accelerate [the] way to recovery” (Dugan, 2022, p. 58). A deliberate and specific actionable plan is the only way to navigate our way into a world that is slowly returning to pre-pandemic conditions.

The first focus area is combatting the large instructional gaps left by the long-term school closures in the spring of 2020, followed by inconsistent instruction during the 2020-2021 school year. A “study examining oral reading fluency in grades 1-3 found that in the spring of 2020, the development of reading fluency largely stopped. Students’ reading fluency was again growing at normal rates by the fall, but the return to nearly average gains was not sufficient to recoup spring’s losses” (Hough, 2022). From an instructional standpoint, it is not time for leaders to provide students with interventions to address the long-term learning loss. Introducing small group instruction for reading and math, additional assessments, and after-school tutoring are ways to combat the collateral academic damage caused by a lack of instructional continuity. For example, the role of schools conceived as genuine learning [organizations] becomes more pressing as [society makes] progress towards a post-COVID-19 environment” (O’Connell & Clarke, 2020, p. 9). Educational leaders at all levels are now tasked with developing and supporting a new understanding of school reality, which became the primary role of school administration when attempting to make strategic plans involving unexpected changes.

The American Institutes for Research and the National Association of Elementary School Principals conducted 36 focus groups of elementary principals in 43 states. Metrics from the focus group suggest that principals who had established a strong school culture and implemented shared leadership models before the disruptions were better equipped to adapt and manage the challenges (Superville, 2021, p. 1). Manca and Delfino

(2021) conducted a study in Italy to determine the correlation between the pandemic and the changing effects on teaching and learning; they found solid school culture, professional communities, and collaboration among all stakeholders to have the highest impact on positive outcomes (p. 1395). Feng et al. (2021) found that regardless of age level, “the difference between online teaching and face-to-face teaching was significant in terms of student performance” (p. 313).

Changes in Instructional Delivery

Bergmann (2022) identifies two important instructional gaps that are a result of the pandemic: learning loss in early grades in English language arts and disparity in education for English language learners and economically disadvantaged students (p. 46). As a result, he proposes that teaching falls back on its roots of learning grounded in mastery at varying rates for individual students. Bryson and Andres (2020) recognize that the necessary, but very expeditious, transition from classroom-based learning to complete online learning is problematic (p. 609). Bergmann (2022) suggests the flipped learning model wherein students are introduced to materials on their own, and then practice and assessment occur as students are ready with the support of the teacher. This type of teaching can address the large learning gaps formed by the pandemic because students are able to access information with “the same large effect in lifting students’ learning that individual tutoring would give at-risk students,” as they are seeing many students reach mastery of content (Bergmann, 2022, p. 51).

Dugan’s (2022) powerful conclusion that our educational leaders must avoid leading with fear and resist the urge to remain hyper-focused on students’ perceived deficits to lead to a better future is both thought-provoking and transformational (p. 59).

Additionally, Casas et al. (2021) explore the idea of providing students with educational opportunities grounded in relationship-building and risk communication wherein they are given proper education and voice surrounding issues experiences in their environments (p. 317). They discovered that treating students as passive objects of treatment, education, etc. denies them the opportunity to “use knowledge and act to increase resilience” (Casas et al., 2021, p. 316). Garagiola et al. (2022) recognize that more research will need to be done to determine what, if any, long-term effects remote education have on learning and performance, stating, “past research examining the effects of stress on learning has found that stress impairs memory retrieval and interferes with shifting and updating memories with new information” (p. 12). This knowledge can better prepare administrators and teachers to instruct students in a world that is beginning to move closer to a post-pandemic existence. Regardless of the type of instruction that is created moving forward, it is important to remember that “effective and efficient learning and teaching has to do with design, development, and orchestration of productive student learning experiences” (Naidu, 2021, p. 2).

One portion of the COVID-19 pandemic related to children that is discussed less frequently is the neurological impact that the COVID-19 virus could have on the cognitive functionality of students. Based on the contraction of another coronavirus in children, those who contract COVID-19 could experience “exacerbation of executive functioning weaknesses, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, somatic symptom disorder, and neurocognitive disorders” which could translate to barriers in educational success (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021, p. 2).

Emphasis on the Whole Child

During a meeting of the International Summit on the Teaching Profession, the delegations present identified the importance of focusing on the whole child to address gaps in learning, both social/emotional and academic post-pandemic. The consensus is that “the most disadvantaged in society, who had suffered most during the Pandemic, had to be helped more” (Coryton, 2021, p. 22). The help required comes in many forms, one of which is providing teachers with training regarding trauma-informed classrooms to prepare for the increasing needs of students (Dombo et al., 2021, p. 69). Dugan (2022) encourages administrators to view rebounding from the pandemic as an opportunity to shape and change educational systems that provide students with the chance to achieve more than what was presented pre-pandemic (p. 57). She argues that taking the time to reconstruct is to “understand the outstanding inequity baked into [the] system, acknowledge the impact of the pandemic, and develop solutions aimed at an equitable future” (p. 57-58).

It is reasonable to predict that the demand for online course offerings will continue to increase as families communicate the need to focus on health and safety in the future (Major, 2020, p. 265). Major notes that it is essential that the faculty “continue to innovate as the situation demands” (p. 265). Runchina et al. (2022) studied the changing digital landscape of education and discovered:

...regardless of the details of concepts and approaches [to teaching and learning],...[educators] must also consider that there is a new and different literacy or set of skills necessary to successfully navigate across these media platforms and...follow the thread of the development of the narrative. (p. 3)

Educational leaders must look at the whole picture when it comes to incorporating digital platforms for students because their skill sets have changed, and teaching and learning must account for this new shift. Because the school is tasked with educating the whole child, becoming competent digital citizens falls on the educational organization as well (Runchina et al., 2022, p. 4).

Moving forward from the pandemic, teachers have become painfully aware that their role of teacher as facilitator has never been more accurate. To foster increased engagement in the classroom, teachers must find creative ways to provide students with more autonomy and say in the classroom when it comes to lesson design and implementation (Marshall, 2022, p. 34). To shift the balance toward student agency and voice, a belief in the importance of student autonomy is essential, which includes Marshall's (2022) assertion regarding a student's "ability to choose and make self-directed, self-determined decisions" (p. 34). Teachers must be comfortable with this shift in power and pedagogy for student agency to take place and educational outcomes to change. According to Runchina et al. (2022), students recognize that their own learning processes should involve technology and that "if technologies are omnipresent in life in general, they should also be omnipresent in education" (p. 10). This understanding leads to a deeper appreciation that technology does bring value to education, but it does not have to be the only tool used to facilitate meaningful instruction. Runchina et al. further state, a "balance must be found between innovation and the maintenance of classical structures that do not allow the educational institution to lose its meaning" (p. 12).

With the evolution of present-day students, who spent much of their time making decisions at home during the pandemic, comes the need for students to feel a sense of

control in their own educational environments. One teacher found that his students who were given the chance to explore and engage in topics of their choosing became more voracious learners with determination and grit that he had never experienced with students (Redford, 2022, p. 22). Once those students returned to the classroom; however, their abilities to interact with each other, express empathy, and demonstrate patience were incredibly delayed and their enjoyment for learning has all but vanished. Redford discovered that education for his students had become a transaction rather than an experience, and it was his job to change that dynamic. Like other educators, Redford did not possess the necessary skill set to initially recognize the shift that had taken place and was ill-equipped to deal with the fall out of the pandemic and how it would reveal itself in the classroom (p. 24). Minkos and Gelbar (2021) emphasize the importance of providing educators with trauma-focused training to prevent students and teachers alike from re-traumatization (p. 2). Additionally, Watson et al. (2021) suggest the introduction of professional development to address the “impact of a collective traumatic event like this pandemic so that all school professionals are equipped to meet the needs of children and families as the nation continues to recover from the pandemic” (p. 25). This level of training stands only to enhance the culture of teaching and learning in a school system.

Addressing the Needs of Educators

School administrators have a responsibility to foster a culture of connection within school buildings to support teacher retention and recruitment (Hope, 2022, p. 50). Furthermore, Coryton (2021) discusses the rationale that the well-being of children is dependent on the well-being of teachers (p. 22). Despite their deep love of children and desire to help students find success, many teachers have abandoned the profession due to

burnout, increasing mandates, and the chaotic pace of education (Dugan, 2022, p. 58). According to Hope (2022), teachers are still reporting elevated levels of stress, depression, and fatigue despite the pandemic's inception being almost two years past (p. 51). Dugan (2022) argues that shifting to a dream-based philosophy post-pandemic provides educators an opportunity to move forward rather than re-establish what didn't work prior to the pandemic; this shift can lay a foundation of self-love and agency for students (p. 58).

With the support of the administration, teachers must take the time to build connections with students to support educational progress, but this requires teacher self-efficacy, wherein teachers have the confidence to affect change and build strong relationships (Hope, 2022, p. 52). Hope contends that "the social nature of teaching means that there is a consistent connection between strong teacher collaboration and improved working experience" (p. 53). Helping teachers establish a connection to the profession of teaching can also garner positive student outcomes based on teacher connectedness to the craft of teaching (Hope, 2022, p. 55). For example, many teachers, found themselves grounded in foundational teaching strategies, like the importance of routines and procedures (Matteson, 2021). Taking the time to create procedures that benefit student learning and a new educational landscape post-pandemic that foster student choice and teacher facilitation can yield impactful results.

Additionally, some teachers shared optimistic views about how their online learning experiences "sparked enthusiasm" and gave them an opportunity to share "power in their classrooms with students whose technological expertise surpassed their own," which allowed them to gain empathy for their students in the process (Cutri et al.,

2020, p. 537). Philosophies like this one can positively impact the return to in-person learning by adopting some of the same outlooks on student autonomy within the classroom.

Sparks and Harwin (2022) identify specific teaching strategies that they have earmarked as those that will outlive the pandemic based on a study conducted by the North Shore School District in Illinois (p. 15). Some of these strategies include continued use of technology, an increase in learning time, mental health support, assistance with controversial teaching topics, and reassurance about funding sources (Sparks & Harwin, 2022, pp. 15-17). A survey of school leadership across the country demonstrated that these areas need to be addressed for the foreseeable future. Stanistreet et al. (2020) confirm that recognizing the importance of transformative and reflective learning should be at the forefront of education along with the creation of sustainable education in times of disruption and chaos (p. 629). Although the COVID-19 pandemic was certainly an era of hardship and devastation, it can also be seen as an opportunity to “re-think and re-organize education-providing an opportunity to make lasting change” (Garagiola et al., 2022, p. 12).

A positive and productive school culture is paramount to educator well-being and student success. Iturbe-LaGrave et al. (2021) recognize that “culture shapes the way individuals understand the organization, including imparting its shared understandings, values, and beliefs” (p. 159). Further, Iturbe-LaGrave et al. review how culture is dynamic and often molded by interactions among stakeholders and their subsequent understanding and adoption of shared assumptions of the community (p. 160). Building a positive organizational culture as the world is moving closer to a post-pandemic

landscape can set the foundation for a future wrought with collective purpose, shared vision, and community partnership.

According to Schwab et al. (2022), educational leaders must be cognizant of the inherent needs of educators in the workplace regardless of what is happening on the world's stage; thus, the importance of a focus on faculty well-being (p. 2). Schwab et al. promote the self-determination theory, which asserts that “an individual's motivation and well-being depend on the satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness” (p. 2). When this is translated to education, teachers are looking for “agency over their actions,” successful use of their skills within their environment, and “connection and mutual caring with others” in the educational environment (Schwab et al., 2022, p. 2). The COVID-19 pandemic stripped away a teacher's ability for all those elements due to the rapid pace at which everything shifted without a proper amount of time to train educators. Moving forward, a focus on autonomy, competence, and relatedness is paramount due to the discovery that those three components have been shown to increase achievement, engagement, satisfaction, and positive experiences, all of which are mutually beneficial for students and teachers (Schwab et al., 2022, p. 2). Although limited research exists regarding the emotional experiences of educators, Schwab et al. found that, overall, “one or more multiple psychological needs was associated with intrinsic motivation, higher levels of positive emotions, over levels of negative emotions, and higher (teaching) satisfaction” (p. 3). Based on the findings of Schwab et al., providing teachers with explicit opportunities to exercise their instructional autonomy within the confines of the board-approved curriculum, access increased training to address feelings of incompetence, and “build

relationships and experience a sense of belonging and mutual caring” could benefit educational outcomes (pp. 3-4).

Summary

Despite the difficulties faced by people all over the world, the skillset of school leaders was reinvented and “based on human interaction, less control, extended use of emotional intelligence and the need to tackle ethical aspects of teaching and learning” (Argyropoulou et al., 2021, p. 18). It is important to consider that the challenges faced by America’s school systems “are not related to a lack of experience of commitment on the part of educators and other school staff, but to insufficient supports and external resources that can and must be addressed” (Watson, 2021, p. 26). It would be easy to drown in the ever-changing landscape that exposed the “inequities in our society and in our schools,” but it is important to consider the adage, “never let a good crisis go to waste,” and appreciate how a “disruption in the status quo presents an opportunity to reimagine and rebuild our educational systems to better serve America’s students” (Hough, 2022, para. 15). This fundamental change in philosophy requires responsiveness, resiliency, and resourcefulness from our nation’s administrators to continue to shape the educational landscape and positively impact the culture of teaching and learning.

Given the literature, it is critical to understand how school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness to maintain effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs, implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and addressing outside factors that affected student learning. To address this problem, the researcher of the current study will use

phenomenological methods to understand the response of Northwest Pennsylvania leaders. The researcher will use the following questions to better understand administrators' perspectives:

RQ1: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs?

RQ2: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they fostered resiliency and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including implementing remediation processes to offset student learning loss?

RQ3: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated responsiveness and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including addressing outside factors that affected student learning?

Chapter Four will summarize the study's data, highlighting key findings.

Additionally, Chapter Five will connect the findings to the literature review and the study's theory.

Chapter III

Methodology

It is not known how school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness to maintain effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs, implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and addressing outside factors that affected student learning. The study was guided by the following research questions, which were formulated to gather information from school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania.

RQ1: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs?

RQ2: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they fostered resiliency and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including implementing remediation processes to offset student learning loss?

RQ3: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated responsiveness and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including addressing outside factors that affected student learning?

These research questions are significant because they are largely unaddressed in current research. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic occurring only recently, the existing research contains a qualitative deficit when analyzing how the COVID-19 pandemic

affected education. Focusing on the deficit in the research can provide a description of solutions to pandemic-related problems. School leaders can use these solutions to develop strategic plans for providing effective support for students' learning, even when pandemic-related state and federal funding sources end. These questions suggest that more detail must be explored, including supporting students' learning needs that emerge from their experiences outside of the school day, issues of teacher perception and burnout, and fostering positive relationships among all members of the school community.

Research Method

This is a phenomenological qualitative study that describes the experiences of school leaders who were charged with making decisions on behalf of their educational constituencies during the COVID-19 pandemic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because the research was conducted in K-12 educational settings and attempted to capture the experiences therein, phenomenological research methodology best suited the study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that “a phenomenological approach is well suited for studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences,” all of which describe school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic (p. 28).

Participants and Sample

The study involved a small number of K-12 administrators who were in administrative roles from July 2020 to June 2023. I solicited participation through an open access database of elementary school principals in Pennsylvania. In the recruitment correspondence, a statement was included that participants should be administrators from Northwest Pennsylvania who led through the pandemic. The specific geographic nature

of the sample size was a reflection of the unique configuration of the Pennsylvania Departments of Health. Because Northwest Pennsylvania was required to follow regulatory statutes as prescribed by the Erie County Department of Health, as opposed to the Pennsylvania Department of Health, choosing participants who fell under the jurisdiction of the Erie County Department of Health were chosen. Participation included a one-hour interview with transcription that were returned to participants to verify accuracy following the interview. Once responses were received from willing participants, an informed consent document was sent to them, signed, and returned prior to scheduling an interview. Next, the researcher scheduled interviews at the convenience of study participants, which included in-person interviews, phone interviews, video conferencing interviews, and electronic interviews. The number of participants were no fewer than five, as Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend that phenomenological studies include three to 10 participants. Leaders from Northwestern Pennsylvania schools encompassing a variety of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics were utilized to provide a holistic picture of what leadership encompassed in a targeted geographic region. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend using purposeful nonprobability sampling when solving problems wherein a researcher aims to “[discover] what occurs, the implications of what occurs, and the relationships linking occurrences” (p. 96). Typical, purposeful sampling allows a researcher to select a sample that provides the most information to discover, understand, and gain insight (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96).

Role of Researcher

Due to my current role as an administrator who made decisions from July 2020 to June 2023, my role as a researcher was an internal role. A description of my related experiences as an administrator in a school building impacted the research in that my own experiences are included in the study as a piece of comparative data. Because of my role, there may have been implicit bias present during the study; however, measures were taken to minimize the impact of the bias on the research results and allowed for authentic data to answer the research questions. Measures included bracketing assumptions before conducting interviews and analyzing data, practicing interviews in advance, and ensuring that I, as the researcher, were not close acquaintances of any study participants.

Navigating the COVID-19 pandemic was daunting and difficult, and my school board's commitment to in-person instruction was exemplary; however, many school districts moved to and sustained virtual learning for great lengths of time. The difference in educational delivery could prove to have some level of bias, yet the overall outcomes achieved by school districts with varying responses to educational needs will stand on their own from a data perspective. The researcher used triangulation, incorporating diverse data sources such as participant interviews, observational data, and written reflections. This multifaceted approach validated and corroborated findings, ensuring that the interpretations were grounded in a rich and multifaceted understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Triangulation minimizes bias, increases the trustworthiness of results, and offers a more holistic view of the studied phenomenon.

Data Collection Instruments

Data collection occurred through a triangulated data collection strategy to provide the clearest picture of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the educational landscape.

Triangulation of data collection involved the use of interviews, observations, and documentary evidence. The main data collection technique were interviews of administrators who were tasked with leading during the school years most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and thereafter. Interview questions were formulated based on initial research categories to provide leaders with the opportunity to detail their experiences and reflective assessment of how the decisions they were required to make shifted their educational philosophies, school cultures, and potentially, their ability to make a positive academic impact. Observation of local school districts and/or their board of education minutes were used to flesh out the research as well as a review of district documentation of health, safety, and academic plans that were established to address the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic. To collect accurate data, sampling accurately represented a pool of leaders in an administrative role from July 2020 to June 2023. The goal number of participants ranged from three to 10, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018). Overall, there were a total of five participants. Following the receipt of informed consent, interviews, which included in-person interviews, phone interviews, video conferencing interviews, and electronic interviews were conducted. The areas explored through the interview process included funding sources to subsidize relief funding, academic intervention/remediation strategies for closing instructional gaps, outside factors affecting student achievement and mental health, and the normalization of new strategies, initiatives, and cultural changes.

Interview Questions

The researcher utilized the following interview questions to gain the perspectives of study participants:

1. Briefly describe your administrative experience up to this point. How long have you been in administration?
2. What position were you in during the 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
3. Please describe the configuration of the school district in which you were employed during the 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years. (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
4. What was your school district's initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
5. What level of involvement did you have in making plans for the school district or your school during the 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
6. What was the greatest challenge you faced when planning for the 2020-2021 school year? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
7. How was your experience potentially different other than that of administrators with whom you worked? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
8. What changes were you required to make that did not align with your personal philosophy of education? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
9. How did your district utilize COVID-19 relief funds? (RQ1)
10. What plans does your district have to supplement the positions, programming, and/or other additions that were introduced to the educational landscape of your district? How will these items be funded moving forward? Did you find the additional funding helpful? (RQ1)

11. What methods did your district employ to address the March 2020 school closure?
(RQ2, RQ3)
12. How did your district plan for a return to in-person learning? When did students return to in-person instruction? (RQ2)
13. What supports systems did you put in place to meet student needs? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
14. Briefly describe any remediation or intervention time offered to students by your school district. (RQ2)
15. How successful do you believe your district was in closing the academic gap that was either introduced or became more apparent because of the COVID-19 pandemic? How do you know? (RQ2)
16. Some people believe that the quarantine and isolation that occurred during 2020 due to COVID-19 negatively impacted all students. What do you think about this opinion? (RQ3)
17. What factors outside of the educational system do you feel most impacted students and teachers during the 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years? On what factors do you base this belief? (RQ3)
18. What changes that were made because of the COVID-19 pandemic did you decide to make permanent? What is your rationale for making those changes permanent?
(RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
19. What is your overall opinion of your district's response to the COVID-19 pandemic from fiscal, academic, and mental health standpoints? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)

20. Now that the pandemic is coming to an end, how do you plan to maintain student support systems both from a human and fiscal standpoint? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)

21. Now that you know what the research is about, is there anything that I should have asked but did not?

The questions provide a combination of experience/behavior, opinion/values, feelings, knowledge, sensory, and background elements, which led to robust descriptions of participants' experience, for both the interviewer and the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis, Validity, and Limitations

Due to this study occurring in an educational setting with the production of myriad interview data, the constant comparative method was employed in the analysis of the data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that the constant comparative method involves “comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences” (p. 32). This allows similar data to be grouped together and compared to identify patterns and establish a theory regarding the research question. The constant comparative method “requires continual revision, modification, and amendment until all new units can be placed into an appropriate category and the inclusion of additional units into a category provides no new information” (Rudestam & Newton, 2015, p. 217). Rudestam and Newton's open coding process provides researchers with the opportunity to review an entire text to identify additional descriptive categories that support the initial research.

Additionally, data was analyzed as it was collected from the selected sample. Relationships among data were established, and then the data was coded and sorted into initial research categories of fiscal needs, academic intervention, outside factors, and

normalization of changes. The findings were then determined based on the repeated patterns in the categories, as reported by the participants. Further, grounded theory was used, which involves “checking and revising an emerging theory against additional data, whether the new data come from inspecting all data fragments within the same case or from examining data across cases” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, as cited in Rudestam & Newton, 2015, p. 220). This research is not limited to initial categories only; it was flexible with the addition of new categories or revision of original categories as the data indicates.

Ethical Considerations

This study involved data collection from human subjects in the form of administrators who experienced the effects of the COVID19 pandemic from June 2020 to July 2023. Based on the university’s responsibility to review and approve research involving human subjects, the Youngstown State University Institutional Review Board has approved this research study with the knowledge that there is a potential risk of negative consequences to participants, such as backlash from fellow administrators, school board disapproval, and teacher skepticism (Appendix A). To protect individual identities, informed consent via digital agreement was sought from participants. Prior to acquiring informed consent, research subjects were provided with information regarding the nature of the research. Participants were informed that they may withdraw from the study at any point without penalty or prejudice. To protect participant identities, schools were given alternate names including demographic information with vague identification of the administrative role (i.e. Suburban School 1, Dean of Students; Urban School 2, Assistant Principal, etc.). Survey information was collected through

survey software with built-in safeguards, and participants were informed that the results of the research may be published. Because the responses are anonymous, no identifying information is included. Additionally, if participants decided they would not like their survey responses to be included in the research, there was an ability to request this change and have their responses deleted. Interview data is securely stored in a password protected folder. After three years, all interviewee data will be deleted/destroyed.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to understand how school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness to maintain effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs, implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and addressing outside factors that affected student learning. This phenomenological qualitative study includes the experiences of administrators and their decision-making about changes made within the school system due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including my own experiences, which is represented in the research. Triangulated data collection including interviews, observations, and documentary evidence illustrate both the processes and products of principals tasked with leading during the school years most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and thereafter. Preliminary sampling indicated a participant pool of no fewer than five participants in the formal data collection, which mainly consisted of electronic surveys. After data collection occurred, the constant comparative method was employed to analyze the results. Relationships among data were established, and then the data was coded and classified into initial research categories with the option of including

additional categories as the results warrant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth recommend aggregating text and visual data into categories and subsequently assigning a label to the code, discarding any information that is not pertinent to the study. To create distinctive boundaries among data and thematic reliability, a codebook was established once a finalized list of codes with corresponding descriptions was created (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Protection of research participants is of the utmost importance; therefore, informed consent with explanation of data collection procedures, opt-out protocol, and data security was included. Other than participants' willingness and ability to provide honest, reflective accounts of their experiences, despite potential memory biases and social desirability effects, there are no other known limitations (Moustakas, 2011).

Chapter IV

Results

This study aims to provide an in-depth analysis of how school leaders in Northwest Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness to maintain effective post-pandemic support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs, implementing remediation processes to avoid student learning loss, and addressing outside factors that affected student learning. Data was gathered from five administrators through semi-structures interviews, coded, categorized, and analyzed to determine how the administrators studied responded to the pandemic, specifically in the areas of fiscal need, remediation, and outside factors that affected student learning. All three of these paradigms have been reported in the literature review as being important factors of post-pandemic needs within school systems.

This chapter is a presentation of the findings of the qualitative study conducted to answer the following established research questions posed in Chapter One:

RQ1: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs?

RQ2: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they fostered resiliency and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including implementing remediation processes to offset student learning loss?

RQ3: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated responsiveness and maintained effective post-pandemic student

support systems, including addressing outside factors that affected student learning?

Further, this chapter presents the analyzed data, culminating in the findings or categories. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the collected data supports the categories; in particular, how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the educational landscape and the school administrator's role in rebuilding the local educational system.

In the following section provides background information on the school district where the administrators work, as well as descriptive details about each administrator. Additionally, relevant findings from the gathered data will be reported and analyzed. Key findings emerged through the use of both open and axial coding, combined with participant vetting, to ensure that respondent participation reflects authentic experiences. It is the intention of the researcher to provide an abundance of information to accurately describe the experiences of the studied administrators.

Description of Sample

Five administrators agreed to participate in this study on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the culture of teaching and learning. Participants all work in school districts in Northwestern Pennsylvania and were in leadership roles from July 2020 through June 2023. Each of the participants was tasked with some level of leadership and/or planning in his/her respective district that involved demonstrating resourcefulness, resiliency, and responsiveness.

Recruitment Process

Before the study commenced, an invitation through an open data base of administrators was sent to garner interest, at which point five participants expressed

interest in the research study. Random selection was not used due to the low response rate. After the five participants agreed to take part in the study, surveying instruments with follow-up interview invitations were sent. All participants agreed to fill out the preliminary survey and participate in follow-up interviews to flesh out the data as deemed necessary by the researcher.

Participant Background

Due to the small sample size, specific profiles will be described anonymously to ensure no administrator can be identified. While personal, professional, and demographic data will be generalized to protect participants' anonymity, important information will be shared to provide context that supports the experiences described by the participants.

Administrative Profile 1: Participant A. Participant A is a female leader with three years as an assistant principal leading a junior/senior high building in a school district with a nine-building configuration, a district enrollment of 3911, and an economically disadvantaged population of 52.8% (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2024).

Administrative Profile 2: Participant B. Participant B is a male leader with 24 years of experience in various roles, but who led a middle school during the pandemic in a school district with a three-building configuration, a district enrollment of 1876, and economically disadvantaged population 24.9% (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2024).

Administrative Profile 3: Participant C. Participant C is a male leader with 25 years of experience in various roles, but who led an elementary school during the pandemic in the same district as Participant B.

Administrative Profile 4: Participant D. Participant D is a male leader with 20 years of experience in various roles, but who served as the assistant superintendent in a school district with a two-building configuration, a district enrollment of 1077, and an economically disadvantaged population of 71.9% (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2024). Participant D's main role within the school district is to mentor the building administration.

Administrative Profile 5: Participant E. Participant E is a female leader with seven years as an elementary principal in a school district with a five-building configuration, a district enrollment of 1988, and an economically disadvantaged population of 50.7% (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2024).

Data Analysis

Data was gathered from two sources: surveys and follow-up interviews. Participants completed the surveys at a time and location that was convenient for them. This was done to protect participant anonymity and allow flexibility in timing for participation. Responses to survey questions were documented through time-stamped surveying software. Follow-up interviews were conducted as deemed necessary and at a time and in a format convenient for the participants. The surveys offered the researcher the most extensive and detailed evidence for analysis, and follow-up interviews were conducted if additional questions or further information were needed for a thorough analysis. It was important for the researcher to allow participants time to reflect on the questions because many of the questions required participants to review and document experiences from up to four years prior.

Surveys

As the researcher analyzed the results from the surveys, it became evident that the data collected provided incredible insight into the experiences of the administrators. Although follow-up interviewing was beneficial and in addition to the context of the responses, the wording drafted by the participants through the surveys were informative, reflective, and well thought-out. Each survey was electronically saved and later collated to begin the coding process. In addition, the researcher conducted follow-up interviews that allowed for clarification when answers were ambiguous and lacked specificity. By using surveys and interviews in conjunction, the researcher developed a clear understanding of the experiences of school leaders who were charged with making decisions on behalf of their educational constituencies during the school years affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

All participants could respond to the survey questions according to their comfort level and took between 35 and 60 minutes to complete the survey. Follow-up interviews ranged from five minutes to 20 minutes and served to allow participants to clarify and expand upon their points. Many participants indicated that the researcher asked relevant questions and expressed that they did not have any lingering questions regarding the study. This chapter examines each finding and provides detailed evidence, supported by examples from the surveys and interviews conducted.

Coding and Category Creation

The researcher analyzed each data source after collection to capture a comprehensive view of the participants' experiences. Each survey was analyzed using open and axial coding to develop and refine categories and key findings based on common themes across all questions. Many codes were created during the open coding

process, highlighting the most integral ideas expressed by participants. Many codes were common among all administrators studied, while others were unique to specific district experiences or configurations. Open codes were organized into broad categories such as adaptive decision-making, communication, transparency, resource allocation, well-being, support systems, and remediation. During this preliminary process, it was crucial to refer to the conceptual framework of strategic planning and the reviewed literature to focus on key findings and draw conclusions.

Broad categories were initially generated, but as data was collected, the categories were better established based on disaggregation of participant responses. Categorization and re-categorization were a vital step in establishing key findings and newly emerging trends in the data. This allowed the researcher to ensure that categories accurately represented administrators' experiences during the school years most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Triangulation. Triangulation of the data was used to develop the most comprehensive understanding of the phenomenological aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Reviewing participant responses, conducting interviews, and reviewing school board documentation of the school districts of the participants allowed for increased credibility and validity in participants' explanations of their experiences.

Member Checking. In addition to triangulation, the researcher conducted a member-checking process by sharing the interpretation of the survey and follow-up interviews with administrators who were interested to ensure that the data accurately reflected their experiences. All participants agreed with the findings of the study and shared that the questions that were asked were relevant to the research.

Resulting Categories and Findings

Category #1: Adaptive Decision-Making

School administrators demonstrated adaptability in decision-making processes, often relying on evolving guidelines from public health authorities and governmental mandates. Flexibility and agility were paramount, as administrators navigated the complexities of balancing safety protocols with educational goals.

Finding #1: Dynamic Response to Evolving Circumstances. School administrators demonstrated remarkable agility and flexibility in their decision-making processes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. All five respondents noted that changes had to be made to the instructional day to proceed with educational delivery. Faced with rapidly changing circumstances, administrators adeptly navigated uncertainties by continuously reassessing and adapting their strategies in response to emerging information and shifting guidance from public health authorities and governmental mandates. The main sub-categories being flexibility in policy implementation and collaborative decision-making.

Flexibility in Policy Implementation. Administrators exhibited a willingness to modify and update policies and procedures as new data and recommendations became available. This flexibility allowed schools to adjust safety protocols, instructional models, and operational guidelines to align with evolving public health requirements and community needs.

Qualitative data gathered illuminates the nuanced landscape of policy implementation flexibility within schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant A led a school that chose complete virtual instruction the 2020-2021 school year, an A/B

schedule with half students attending each day for the first half of the 2021-2022 school year and all students attending for the second half of the 2021-2022 school year, and then movement to choice for the 2022-2023 school year, wherein students could choose to attend either in person or virtually. Participant B's school district moved "immediately to online/virtual learning on day one [and] already had iPads in the hands of all students prior to COVID" for the 2020-2021 school year. Participant C echoed Participant B, adding that for the 2021-2022 school year they stayed with virtual instruction due a decision made by the superintendent; however, at the mid-point of the school year, they "went hybrid where [they] had half the students come in the morning and the other half come in the afternoon." Participant D noted that, after the March 2020 closure, his school district initially "thought it was much ado about nothing and we would be back after Spring break," sharing that when this did not happen, the school board aimed to return to in-person instruction at all costs for the 2020-2021 school year. Participant E shared that they "closed in March of 2020 as required by the state. In the fall, we had a delayed start and opened for full in-person instruction."

Surveys conducted with school administrators provided multifaceted insights into the challenges and adaptations made in response to evolving circumstances. A prevalent finding that emerged was the importance of resourcefulness, agility, and adaptability in policy implementation, with four out of five of participants highlighting the need for schools to adjust protocols and procedures in real-time to address emerging public health concerns and logistical challenges. Participant D noted his frustration that the state and local mandates did not align, and the school district was then forced to rely on the local

jurisdiction for decision-making. Participant A noted the difficulty of managing many moving parts at every turn.

Responses highlighted the significance of decentralized decision-making structures, with three out of five of respondents advocating for schools to empower local administrators and educators to consider the unique needs and circumstances of their communities when drafting policies and procedures. Participants B and C noted that their school board was not in agreement with the superintendent or the stakeholders, which caused some disruption for families.

Responses highlighted the role of innovative approaches in policy implementation, with five out of five respondents expressing appreciation for schools that embraced creative solutions such as opening additional classrooms, hybrid learning models, and flexible scheduling to meet the diverse student needs while prioritizing safety. The qualitative data highlights the importance of flexibility and adaptability in managing the complexities of policy implementation in schools during the pandemic, highlighting the resilience and innovation demonstrated by educators and administrators in responding to unprecedented challenges.

Collaborative Decision-Making. Administrators engaged in collaborative decision-making processes, soliciting input from various stakeholders, including teachers, staff, parents, and local health officials. By fostering a collaborative approach, administrators were able to leverage diverse perspectives and expertise to inform their decision-making, enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of implemented strategies.

Qualitative data collected provides rich insights into collaborative decision-making processes within schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Surveys conducted

with school administrators revealed diverse perspectives and approaches to navigating the complexities of decision-making amidst uncertainty.

Responses stressed the significance of interdisciplinary collaboration, with four out of five respondents emphasizing the value of involving multiple leaders in decision-making forums to ensure comprehensive consideration of safety concerns, educational needs, and logistical challenges. Participant A shared that she was only asked to carry out plans and was not part of the planning process, which left her feeling devalued. Conversely, Participants B, C, D, and E were integral in all facets of planning. Participant C noted that his school district recognized that:

We are all in the same boat trying to navigate the unknown waters. We all had to make internal decisions and coordinate between buildings. I believe that we all worked well together to make an undesirable situation bearable. I was highly involved in the all the coordination and planning. We had to coordinate three buildings, with transportation and all the internal considerations for social distancing.

Participant D echoed this planning process, stating that a collaborative approach with the administrative team was used and all parties from the school board to the administrators were involved in doing what was in the best interest of kids. He stated: “We did our best. We trusted each other. I am proud of our response.” Participant E shared that while she was a part of the planning process, she was somewhat limited to control within her own building.

Data highlighted the role of adaptive leadership in facilitating collaborative decision-making, with four out of five respondents expressing appreciation for

administrators who demonstrated empathy, flexibility, and a willingness to listen to diverse perspectives in guiding schools through the pandemic. Participant A was the only one who struggled, citing feelings of alienation as her school district attempted to navigate the changes. The qualitative data highlights the importance of collaborative decision-making in building trust, resilience, and effective responses to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic within school communities.

Finding #2: Balancing Safety and Educational Goals. Administrators faced the complex challenge of balancing the need to protect the health and well-being of students and staff with the ongoing provision of quality education. This necessitated careful consideration of risk mitigation measures, such as implementing social distancing protocols, enhancing sanitation practices, and transitioning to hybrid or remote learning models, while also prioritizing academic continuity and equitable access to education. The main sub-categories being risk assessment and mitigation and academic adaptations.

Risk Assessment and Mitigation. Administrators conducted ongoing risk assessments to identify and mitigate potential health hazards within school environments. This involved monitoring local infection rates, assessing the efficacy of existing safety measures, and implementing targeted interventions to address emerging concerns or outbreaks.

Qualitative data gathered offers valuable insights into the risk assessment and mitigation strategies implemented by schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Answers gathered provided an understanding of the challenges and successes in safeguarding the school community. A prevalent finding that emerged was the importance of comprehensive risk assessments, with five out of five participants emphasizing the need

for schools to conduct regular evaluations of their facilities, protocols, and school health and safety plans to identify potential vulnerabilities and areas for improvement.

Participant responses highlighted the significance of proactive mitigation measures, with five out of five of respondents citing the implementation of strict hygiene protocols, physical distancing measures, and ventilation improvements as essential strategies to reduce the risk of virus transmission within school premises. Participant A noted her own personal struggles with being the maternal head of a large family. This configuration meant repeated exposures, quarantines, and time away from the building due to district mandates. While she understood the need from a safety standpoint, this provided difficulty. Participant B and C did not experience the same level of risk mitigation due to the immediate movement to and sustaining of virtual instruction for an extended period. However, Participant B was part of the development of a district-wide plan that, once students returned for in-person instruction, “included guidelines for the numbers that would trigger buildings and/or the district to revert to virtual learning.” Participant C noted that the district did purchase items to facilitate face-to-face instruction, but later asserted that most of these items were disposed of because they did not end up using them. Participant D shared that to ensure the schools opened and stayed open, air purification, implementation of cleaning protocols, and strict mask enforcement became the focus of mitigation efforts. Participant E’s biggest concern was “how was I going to open the school and have everyone feeling safe and secure when I didn’t know if I felt safe and secure! Once students returned, it was clear that they experienced some trauma from being isolated, which complicated the re-opening process.” Participant E’s school district focused on social distancing, masking, and following the local health

departments mitigation suggestions and “spent the summer months preparing classrooms, purchasing plexiglass, acquiring masks, gloves, and other personal protective equipment, and stocking up on other needed materials to ensure that students could return in the fall.”

Results revealed the role of flexibility and adaptability in responding to evolving risks, with five out of five respondents expressing their appreciation for their schools because they demonstrated agility in adjusting protocols and procedures. The qualitative data confirms the complex nature of risk assessment and mitigation in schools during the pandemic, highlighting the importance of proactive measures, stakeholder engagement, and adaptability in safeguarding the health and well-being of the school community.

Academic Adaptations. In response to disruptions caused by the pandemic, administrators implemented innovative instructional strategies to ensure continued learning opportunities for students. This included the adoption of technology-enhanced learning platforms (Participants D and E), the development of asynchronous and synchronous instructional models (Participants A, B, and C), and the provision of additional academic support services to address learning gaps and accommodate diverse student needs. Qualitative data collected offers a deep understanding of the academic adaptations undertaken by schools in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Responses from administrators provided a multidimensional view of the strategies implemented to ensure continuity of learning amidst disruptions. A predominant finding that emerged was the embracing of technology-enabled learning solutions, with a unanimous five out of five respondents highlighting the rapid adoption of online platforms and digital resources to facilitate remote or distanced instruction; however, all

noted that this was a precarious situation because facilitation of remote instruction when needed presented its own problems. Participant A's school district relied heavily on their already built-in cyber program and allowed fluid enrollment that best supported student needs. Participant B notes that a focus was maintaining student engagement during remote instruction to ensure academic fidelity in programming. His district put measures in place to support students who did not have a built-in support system at home.

Participant C shared that, despite the district's best efforts, the push to online instruction was detrimental to students because "online instruction did not work, and many kids suffered academically" due to questionable levels of instructional capacity and a lack of ability to provide remediation to those struggling students in a virtual format. Participant D's district was fully committed to in-person learning and they "collaborated with the health department and it just worked from the first day." He shared that there was an increase in the use of technology to deliver instruction, with teachers posting work through the LMS, Schoology, but that many students who were quarantined were not successful with acquiring skills and mastering academic concepts electronically.

Participant E's "school offered virtual instruction to students and used school district staff to run it, which took teachers out of the classrooms at a time when [she] needed more teachers to satisfy the requirements of social distancing." Further, Participant E's school allowed students to move in and out of cyber programming throughout the year, which caused continuity issues with instruction.

The data highlights the adaptability and resilience of schools in responding to the academic challenges posed by the pandemic, highlighting the innovative approaches and

collaborative efforts undertaken to ensure continued educational progress for students in the face of unprecedented disruptions.

Finding #3: Communication and Transparency. Effective communication emerged as a cornerstone of adaptive decision-making, enabling administrators to disseminate timely information, clarify expectations, and foster trust and collaboration within school communities. The main sub-categories being transparent communication channels and addressing stakeholder concerns.

Transparent Communication Channels. Administrators utilized diverse communication channels, including virtual school board meetings, email updates, and school websites, to provide regular updates and guidance to students, families, and staff. Transparent communication was meant to foster a sense of trust, empowerment, and community solidarity, facilitating collective adherence to safety protocols and operational guidelines; however, five out of five respondents cited difficulty with communication.

Qualitative data collected unveils the intricate dynamics of establishing transparent communication channels within schools amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The information provided revealed the degree to which all stakeholders demonstrated an understanding of the challenges and successes in fostering transparent communication. A recurring finding was the importance of clarity and consistency in messaging, with four out of five participants emphasizing the need for schools to provide regular updates on safety protocols and changes in guidelines. Participant A noted that the constant change and unknown answers made communication difficult because the changing guidance and recommendations came so fast that parents often felt like they were being given conflicting information. Participant B attempted to maintain regular communication with

parents, but he was alone in the building most days, attempting to handle the day-to-day tasks. Participant C noted that the transparency presented a challenge due to parental backlash when the majority did not agree with the decisions made by the school board. Participant E mentioned that communication was difficult because oftentimes the information was lacking and without having parents present on campus, it was difficult to make connections that foster trust. Participants highlighted the significance of accessibility in communication channels, with four participants expressing the use of multiple platforms such as emails, newsletters, and online portals to ensure information reaches all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and students. All four respondents utilized either Schoology in conjunction with a mass messaging system to inform stakeholders of decisions being made at the district level.

The data highlights the multifaceted nature of transparent communication channels in schools, emphasizing the importance of clarity, accessibility, responsiveness, and empathy in fostering trust and collaboration within the school community during the pandemic.

Addressing Stakeholder Concerns. Administrators proactively addressed stakeholder concerns and uncertainties by providing accurate information, clarifying misconceptions, and soliciting feedback through surveys and feedback mechanisms when applicable. By fostering open dialogue and responsiveness, administrators cultivated a reciprocal relationship of shared responsibility and collaboration, enhancing the effectiveness of implemented strategies and promoting community resilience.

Qualitative data sheds light on the multilayered approach schools employed in addressing stakeholder concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis of responses

revealed a variety of strategies implemented by school administrations to address the varying needs of parents, teachers, and students. A recurring finding was the importance of proactive communication and transparency, with four out of five respondents emphasizing the value of regular updates and clear information regarding safety protocols and contingency plans. The four respondents (B, C, D, and E) again emphasized the use of Schoology, district messaging systems, and surveying mechanisms such as google forms and ThoughtExchange. All participants highlighted the significance of fostering an open dialogue with stakeholders, with only one of school administrators, Participant D, identifying the use of repeated surveying as a mechanism for actively seeking feedback and input from parents and staff to inform decision-making processes.

The data exposed the role of empathy and support in addressing stakeholder concerns, with the finding of collaborative problem-solving being the most consistent. Four out of five expressing appreciation for their district's push to engage the public in transparent discussions and decision-making processes, but also cited difficulty in doing so because Participants B and C in particular faced backlash from parents when virtual instruction spanned multiple school years. Conversely, Participants D and E noted that involving all members of the school community was not as difficult due to their rapid return to in-person instruction. Participant A was unable to substantiate any attempts for her school district to engage the public.

Clear Communication of Safety Protocols. Administrators communicated clear and concise safety protocols and guidelines to students, parents, and staff, outlining expectations for mask-wearing, social distancing, hand hygiene, and other preventive measures. By providing clear directives and rationale behind safety protocols,

administrators fostered a shared understanding of the importance of adhering to these guidelines to protect the health and well-being of the stakeholders.

Qualitative data analysis reveals a consistent finding among respondents regarding the critical importance of clear communication of safety protocols amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Four out of five participants emphasized the significance of transparent and comprehensible communication strategies in navigating the challenges posed by the public health crisis. Respondent B remarked, "Clear communication of safety measures is paramount in ensuring the well-being of students, staff, and families. It fosters a sense of trust and confidence in the school's ability to prioritize safety." Participant E echoed this sentiment, stating, "When safety protocols are communicated clearly and consistently, it alleviates anxiety and uncertainty among stakeholders, allowing for a smoother transition into the new normal of education." These sentiments underscore the pivotal role of transparent communication in fostering a sense of security and promoting adherence to safety guidelines within educational settings amidst the ongoing pandemic.

Accessibility of Information. Administrators ensured the accessibility of information by providing translations and accommodations for families with diverse linguistic and accessibility needs. Informational materials, such as posters, flyers, and online resources, were made available in multiple languages and formats to ensure that all members of the school community could access vital information and resources.

Qualitative analysis of the data reveals a unanimous consensus among all five respondents regarding the crucial importance of accessibility to information during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each participant highlighted the significance of readily available and easily understandable information in navigating the complexities of the public health crisis. One respondent emphasized, "Access to accurate and up-to-date information is paramount in making informed decisions about health and safety practices. Without it, individuals may be left vulnerable to misinformation and confusion." Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating, "During a time of uncertainty, having access to clear and reliable information empowers individuals to take proactive measures to protect themselves and their communities." These perspectives underscore the pivotal role of accessibility in promoting public health literacy and fostering a collective response to the difficult circumstances posed by the pandemic. Respondents all noted the use of public health and safety plans, school websites, newsletters, and mass messaging systems as a vehicle that provide this communication. The unanimous recognition of the importance of information accessibility among respondents highlights its foundational role in effectively mitigating the impact of COVID-19 within educational contexts.

The data underscores the importance of a holistic and inclusive approach to addressing stakeholder concerns during the pandemic, emphasizing communication, empathy, and collaboration as key pillars in navigating the challenges and uncertainties faced by schools and their communities.

Category #2: Resource Allocation and Technological Integration

The pandemic necessitated rapid shifts in resource allocation, with administrators reallocating funds to support remote learning infrastructure, personal protective equipment procurement, and facility modifications. Technological integration became

essential, as schools transitioned to online learning platforms and adopted digital tools to facilitate remote instruction and communication.

Finding #1: Rapid Adaptation of Resource Allocation Strategies. School administrators faced the unprecedented challenge of reallocating resources to confront the multifaceted needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. From ensuring the safety of students and staff to facilitating remote learning and addressing technological gaps, administrators demonstrated agility and strategic decision-making in allocating resources effectively. The main sub-categories being a comprehensive approach to allocation and investment in technological infrastructure.

Comprehensive Approach to Allocation. The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled schools to rapidly adapt their resource allocation strategies to meet the unprecedented challenges presented by the crisis. Schools have redirected funds towards technology infrastructure to facilitate remote learning, while also reallocating staffing resources to support online instruction and student welfare initiatives. This rapid adaptation underscores the importance of agility and innovation in addressing the evolving needs of educational institutions amidst the ongoing pandemic.

Qualitative analysis reveals a unanimous acknowledgment among all five respondents regarding the imperative nature of rapid adaptation in resource allocation strategies amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant identified the necessity of addressing a diverse array of needs with both fiscal and human capital to effectively navigate the challenges presented by the crisis. Respondent B articulated, "In times of crisis, it's essential to swiftly reallocate resources to where they're most needed. This includes not only financial resources but also human capital, ensuring that staff are

equipped and supported to meet the evolving demands." Participant D echoed this sentiment, stating, "A flexible approach to resource allocation is crucial for addressing the multifaceted needs of our students, staff, and community. It requires a holistic understanding of the challenges and a willingness to adapt quickly to changing circumstances." Participant E noted that "the additional funding received was helpful at the time, but now we must figure out which positions are able to be supported. The building substitute positions will likely fade out and other funding will need to be used to preserve technology needs." Participant A fears the loss of the mental health liaisons that were acquired through the allocation of the federal funding provided.

These insights emphasize the importance of agility and responsiveness in resource allocation strategies, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach that considers both fiscal and human resources to effectively meet the diverse needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic within educational settings.

Investment in Technological Infrastructure. Recognizing the crucial role of technology in supporting remote learning and communication, administrators allocated funds towards the procurement of devices, software licenses, and internet connectivity to ensure equitable access to educational resources for all students. This investment in technological infrastructure was essential for facilitating the transition to remote and hybrid learning models and minimizing disruptions to education.

Qualitative analysis reveals a unanimous consensus among all five respondents regarding the critical importance of investment in technological infrastructure to address the increased demands associated with remote learning or distanced in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant highlighted the necessity of

comprehensive investment strategies that prioritize addressing all needs associated with the adoption of enhanced technological resources. Participant D emphasized, "Investment in technological infrastructure must go beyond mere provision of devices; it should encompass robust internet connectivity, software platforms, and technical support to ensure equitable access and effective utilization." Participant B echoed this sentiment, stating, "Addressing all aspects of technological needs, including training for educators and technical assistance for students, is crucial for maximizing the potential of remote learning initiatives and minimizing disparities in access." These perspectives highlight the importance of holistic investment approaches that recognize the multifaceted requirements of adopting increased technological resources in educational settings. By prioritizing comprehensive solutions, educational institutions can effectively navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic and facilitate meaningful learning experiences for all students.

Finding #2: Technological Integration for Remote Learning. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid shift towards remote learning modalities, requiring administrators to integrate technology into instructional practices and administrative processes to maintain continuity of learning and support. The main sub-categories being adoption of LMS and professional development for digital literacy.

Adoption of Learning Management Systems (LMS). Administrators implemented LMS to facilitate the delivery of online instruction, organize course materials, and track student progress. LMS platforms provided a centralized hub for teachers to upload assignments, conduct virtual lessons, and communicate with students and parents, streamlining the transition to remote learning environments.

Qualitative analysis of the data reveals a consistent finding among four out of five respondents regarding the significance of addressing all needs associated with the adoption of a new LMS amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant emphasized the importance of comprehensive planning and support to ensure successful implementation and utilization of the LMS. Respondent C stated, "Adopting a new LMS is not just about introducing a new tool; it requires careful consideration of training, technical support, and alignment with instructional goals to maximize its effectiveness." Participant E echoed this sentiment, highlighting, "Effective adoption of an LMS necessitates addressing infrastructure, pedagogical training, and ongoing support mechanisms to empower educators and students to utilize its full potential." These insights once again illuminate the importance of a holistic approach when navigating the complexities of new systems like an LMS into educational practices. Further, this data emphasizes the importance of addressing technical, pedagogical, and logistical needs to facilitate seamless adoption and enhance the quality of online learning experiences.

Professional Development for Digital Literacy. Recognizing the importance of supporting educators in adapting to new instructional technologies, administrators invested in professional development opportunities to enhance teachers' digital literacy skills. Training sessions, workshops, and online resources were provided to help teachers leverage technology effectively in lesson planning, content delivery, and student engagement strategies.

Qualitative analysis reveals a prevalent finding among three out of five respondents concerning the critical significance of professional development for digital literacy amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant revealed the importance of

tailoring professional development initiatives to address the diverse levels of technological expertise among educators. Respondent A articulated, "Providing professional development opportunities for digital literacy is essential in equipping educators with the skills and confidence needed to effectively integrate technology into their instructional practices." Participant D echoed this sentiment, stating, "Addressing various levels of technological expertise ensures that educators receive targeted support and resources that are relevant to their individual needs, fostering a culture of continuous learning and growth." These perspectives highlight the importance of personalized and differentiated professional development approaches that recognize and accommodate the diverse proficiency levels of educators in leveraging technology for teaching and learning. By prioritizing customized training programs, educational institutions can empower educators fully utilize digital tools and platforms, thereby enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes in the current digital landscape.

Finding #3: Mitigation of Technological Inequities. Administrators implemented strategies to mitigate technological inequities and ensure that all students had access to the necessary devices and internet connectivity to participate in remote learning. The main sub-categories being device distribution programs and internet connectivity initiatives.

Device Distribution Programs. Administrators coordinated device distribution programs to provide laptops, tablets, or Chromebooks to students in need, ensuring that every student had access to a device for remote learning. Additionally, administrators partnered with community organizations and local businesses to secure donations or discounted devices for families facing financial hardship.

Qualitative analysis reveals a consistent emphasis among four out of five respondents on the critical importance of device distribution to ensure equitable access to education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant highlighted the pivotal role of providing devices to students in facilitating remote learning and mitigating disparities in access to educational resources. Respondent E emphasized, "Device distribution is paramount in bridging the digital divide and ensuring that all students have the necessary tools to engage in remote learning effectively." Participant D echoed this sentiment, stating, "Access to devices is about enabling students to participate in online classes and providing them with opportunities for continued learning, collaboration, and skill development in an increasingly digital world." These insights show the significance of device distribution initiatives in promoting educational equity and empowering students to thrive in remote learning environments. By prioritizing access to devices, educational institutions can address systemic inequities and create pathways for all students to access quality education, regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographic location.

Internet Connectivity Initiatives. Administrators collaborated with internet service providers to expand access to affordable internet connectivity options for families without reliable internet access at home. This included subsidizing internet service fees, distributing mobile hotspots, and leveraging community resources to bridge the digital divide and ensure equitable access to online learning opportunities.

Qualitative analysis of the data reveals a prevalent concern among four out of five respondents regarding internet connectivity issues and its impact on equal access to education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant emphasized the critical importance of addressing connectivity challenges to ensure equitable educational

opportunities for all students. Respondent B articulated, "Internet connectivity is a fundamental requirement for accessing online resources and participating in remote learning activities. It is imperative that efforts are made to bridge the digital divide and provide equal access to educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their geographical location or socioeconomic status." Participant D echoed this sentiment, stating, "Unequal access to the internet exacerbates existing disparities in educational outcomes. It is essential to prioritize initiatives that address connectivity issues and provide support to students and families who lack reliable internet access." These perspectives highlight the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address internet connectivity issues and promote equitable access to education. By prioritizing initiatives that ensure equal access to the internet, educational institutions can mitigate the impact of the digital divide and create a learning environment characterized by inclusivity and student success.

Category #3: Addressing Academic and Emotional Needs Post-Pandemic

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing students' academic and emotional needs in schools has emerged as a paramount concern. Comprehensive support systems must be implemented to address the multifaceted challenges students face, including academic disruptions, social isolation, and heightened emotional stress. By fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment that prioritizes both academic achievement and emotional well-being, schools can facilitate the holistic development and resilience of students in the post-pandemic era.

Finding #1: Addressing Outside Factors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students' learning and overall well-being were profoundly influenced by a myriad of

outside factors. Two subcategories that warrant further examination are the disparities in access to resources among socioeconomically disadvantaged students and the long-term effects of social isolation on students' mental health and social development.

Disparities in Access to Resources. Economic disparities and access to resources emerged as primary determinants of educational outcomes, with students from marginalized communities facing heightened challenges due to limited access to technology, stable internet connectivity, and educational support.

Qualitative analysis reveals a unanimous concern among all five respondents regarding the significant disparities in access to resources exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant emphasized the critical importance of addressing these inequities to ensure that all individuals have equal opportunities to thrive in the post-pandemic era. One respondent articulated, "The pandemic has laid bare the stark reality of unequal access to resources, exacerbating existing disparities in education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. It is important that efforts are made to bridge these gaps and create a more equitable society." Another participant noted that "Providing access to resources is not only a matter of social justice but also essential for building resilience and fostering inclusive growth in our communities. We must prioritize initiatives that address systemic barriers and ensure that marginalized groups have the support they need to recover and thrive in the aftermath of the pandemic." These perspectives reveal the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address disparities in access to resources, emphasizing the importance of equitable distribution and inclusive policies to build a more resilient and equitable society following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Long-Term Effects of Social Isolation. Additionally, the social and emotional impact of prolonged isolation and disrupted routines significantly impacted students' mental health and socio-emotional development, exacerbating feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

Qualitative analysis reveals a unanimous concern among all five respondents regarding the long-term effects of social isolation stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant highlighted the profound impact of prolonged isolation on individuals' mental health, socio-emotional development, and overall well-being. Respondent A emphasized, "Social isolation has taken a toll on individuals' mental health, contributing to increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Addressing these long-term effects is essential for promoting psychological resilience and fostering a sense of connectedness in our communities." Participant C shared "The pandemic has shown the importance of social connections for individuals' overall well-being. As we transition into the post-pandemic era, it is crucial to prioritize initiatives that rebuild social networks, strengthen community ties, and support individuals' mental and emotional recovery." These perspectives expose the imperative of addressing the long-term effects of social isolation, emphasizing the importance of fostering social connections and providing support systems to promote individuals' resilience and well-being in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Finding #2: Remediation for Learning Loss. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing learning loss has become a critical priority for educational institutions worldwide. Remediation efforts must be multifaceted and tailored to the diverse needs of students who have experienced disruptions to their education. Two

subcategories that merit further exploration are personalized learning interventions and social-emotional support strategies.

Personalized Learning Interventions. Personalized learning interventions involve individualized assessment and instruction to target specific areas of academic need, ensuring that students receive tailored support to close learning gaps effectively.

Qualitative analysis reveals a prevailing consensus among four out of five respondents regarding the necessity for personalized learning interventions to address the diverse needs of students following the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant shared the importance of tailored support to mitigate learning gaps and promote academic success. Respondent D emphasized, "Personalized learning interventions are essential for addressing the individualized needs of students who have experienced disruptions to their education during the pandemic. By providing targeted support and differentiated instruction, we can help students regain lost ground and foster a sense of academic confidence and achievement." Respondent E noted "We must prioritize personalized interventions to address the diverse learning needs of students, especially those who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic." Participant A thinks that by tailoring instruction to individual strengths and challenges, students can be empowered to reach their full potential and thrive academically. These perspectives highlight the critical importance of personalized learning interventions in supporting students' academic recovery and promoting equitable access to educational opportunities in the post-pandemic era.

Social-Emotional Support Strategies. Social-emotional support strategies encompass initiatives aimed at promoting mental health and well-being, fostering

resilience, and rebuilding social connections among students following periods of isolation and uncertainty.

Qualitative analysis reveals a unanimous consensus among all five respondents regarding the need for social-emotional support strategies to address the emotional well-being of students following the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant emphasized the critical role of fostering resilience and emotional regulation in navigating the challenges posed by the pandemic. Two participants shared information to support the idea that social-emotional support strategies are essential for promoting students' mental health and well-being, particularly after experiencing prolonged periods of stress and uncertainty. Participant E echoed this sentiment, stating, "Initiatives that support students' social and emotional development are of the highest priority. By providing access to counseling services, mindfulness activities, and peer support groups, we can create a supportive environment where students feel valued, understood, and empowered to thrive." These ideas support the critical importance of social-emotional support strategies in fostering students' resilience and well-being in the post-pandemic era, highlighting the need to prioritize these interventions to ensure that all students have access to the support they need to succeed academically and emotionally.

Finding #3: Overall Well-Being and Support Systems. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritizing the overall well-being of students and faculty has emerged as a critical imperative for educational institutions. Robust support systems are essential to address the myriads of challenges experienced by both students and faculty, including heightened stress, burnout, and emotional distress. Two subcategories that

warrant deeper examination are mental health resources and professional development initiatives.

Mental Health Resources. Mental health resources encompass a range of services and interventions aimed at promoting psychological well-being, providing counseling support, and destigmatizing help-seeking behaviors among students and faculty.

Qualitative analysis reveals a unanimous consensus among all five respondents regarding the urgent need for resources to support students' mental health in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant shared the profound impact of the pandemic on students' mental health and emphasized the critical importance of providing accessible and comprehensive support services. Respondent A articulated, "Mental health resources are essential for addressing the emotional toll of the pandemic on students. Providing a variety of services and access to professionals in the field is crucial for helping students cope with stress, anxiety, and trauma." Participant D shared that "As we transition into the post-pandemic era, we have to focus on mental health resources to support our students' well-being and resilience. By investing in these supports, we can create an environment wherein students feel it is acceptable to seek help and access the resources they need to thrive." This data shows the critical role that mental health resources play in supporting students' well-being and success in the wake of the pandemic, emphasizing the need to prioritize these interventions to safeguard student access to supports needed to navigate the challenges of the post-pandemic landscape.

Professional Development Initiatives. Professional development initiatives focus on equipping educators with the necessary skills and resources to navigate the evolving

demands of teaching in a post-pandemic landscape, fostering resilience and facilitating professional growth.

Qualitative analysis reveals a consistent consensus among four out of five respondents regarding the critical need for professional development initiatives to support teachers in navigating the challenges of the post-COVID-19 educational landscape. Each participant emphasized the need to provide teachers with ongoing training and support to effectively adapt to new instructional methods and technologies. One respondent emphasized, that professional development initiatives are essential for “equipping teachers with skills and resources to navigate the changing demands of teaching in a post-pandemic world.” Another participant shared that, “Providing ongoing training and support is crucial for ensuring that teachers feel confident and prepared to meet the needs of all students.” A third respondent agreed, noting “Professional development initiatives to support teachers in adapting to new instructional approaches and technologies should be at the forefront. By investing in these supports, we can empower teachers to deliver high-quality instruction and promote student success.” These perspectives support professional development initiatives and their part in supporting teacher effectiveness and enhancing student learning outcomes in the wake of the pandemic, highlighting the need to prioritize these interventions to ensure that all teachers have access to the support they need to thrive in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

Summary

The initial findings underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by school administrators in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the importance of adaptive leadership, effective communication, resource management, and holistic support

systems in navigating crises within educational settings. Further analysis and interpretation of data will provide deeper insights into the nuanced experiences and strategies employed by administrators in this unprecedented context.

These findings support the adaptive decision-making strategies employed by school administrators in navigating the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic. By embracing flexibility, collaboration, and transparent communication, administrators were able to effectively manage uncertainties, balance competing priorities, and safeguard the well-being of school communities while maintaining a focus on academic continuity and student success.

Further, additional findings highlight the importance of proactive communication and stakeholder engagement in navigating the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. By fostering transparency, clarity, and collaboration, school administrators were able to build trust, empower stakeholders, and cultivate a sense of shared responsibility within the school community, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of the school's response to the pandemic.

In addition, strategic resource allocation and technological integration strategies employed by school administrators used to navigate the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic were integral in student success. By prioritizing health and safety measures, investing in technological infrastructure, and addressing technological inequities, administrators were able to support the continuity of learning and promote equitable access to education for all students, despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Understanding and addressing these findings is essential for developing targeted interventions and support systems to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic on

students' educational and emotional well-being. Delving into the information can provide insights into effective remediation practices that address the complex challenges posed by learning loss in the wake of the pandemic, ultimately supporting students' academic recovery and holistic development.

By examining the categories and findings, educational institutions can develop comprehensive support systems that promote the holistic well-being of their academic community; therefore, fostering a culture of care, resilience, and mutual support in the wake of the pandemic.

Chapter V

Discussion

The educational system was ill-prepared to effectively navigate a disruptive event of the magnitude of a global pandemic. The prolonged closures of schools, the extended reliance on virtual instruction, and the significant challenges in procuring essential health and safety equipment underscore the systemic inadequacies that were laid bare during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is imperative that school leaders leverage the collective experiences garnered during this period to devise and implement strategies aimed at sustaining robust support systems in a post-pandemic landscape.

The research results emphasize the urgent necessity for the establishment of effective support mechanisms to ensure resilience and continuity in educational delivery. Consequently, a strategic focus on the development and maintenance of such systems is essential for enhancing the preparedness and adaptability of educational institutions in future crises.

Summary of Findings

These preliminary findings elucidate the complex array of challenges encountered by school administrators in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the acute need for adaptive leadership, robust communication frameworks, strategic resource allocation, and comprehensive support systems in managing crises within educational institutions. A more granular analysis and interpretation of the data will yield profound insights into the intricate experiences and tactical approaches adopted by administrators in this unparalleled context. After examining each of the key category and the findings derived from the data, it will be important to review how each finding highlights

administrative experiences during the school years most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, key findings will be aligned with the research questions to provide an understanding of how each of the research questions was addressed by the findings derived from the data.

Each finding generated from the data addressed the corresponding research question selected for the study. The finding of dynamic response to evolving circumstances relates to how leaders describe their experience in terms of financing increased staffing and resource needs. Balancing safety and educational goals relate to two research questions addressing increased staffing needs and implementation of remediation processes to offset student learning loss. Communication and transparency relate to all three research questions as administrators described the importance of clear communication for better decision-making. Each of these three findings addresses collaborative processes to address the needs of the school districts. Having the ability to demonstrate responsiveness through continual designing and redesigning of plans in addition to resilience when shifts are required substantiates administrative ability to be resourceful and utilize the resources present to accomplish a shared purpose.

The finding of rapid adaptation of resource allocation strategies aligns with two of the research questions: one regarding increased staffing and resource needs and one addressing outside factors that affected student learning. Technological integration for remote learning once again addresses increased resource needs, but also addresses remediation processes to offset learning loss. Mitigation of technological inequities addresses all the research questions because administrators at all levels shared the importance of supporting students with the appropriate technological infrastructure to

prevent any further learning loss, regardless of the environment. Increased staffing and funding are needed to support widening the infrastructure and leveling the educational playing field for students who are adversely affected by outside factors that may prevent access.

In terms of addressing academic and emotional needs following the pandemic, administrators reported an increased need for resources to address outside factors, remediation, and overall well-being and support systems. These findings effectively address almost all the research questions unanimously due to the current landscape of the educational systems in which the respondents work. All of them are working to figure out how to maintain student support systems without the influx of federal funding that was initially given because the increased level of student and teacher support has proven to make a positive impact on student outcomes.

Research Question Results

This section will address how participants responded to each research question with corresponding rationale for the findings paired with participant examples. The collected information will be compared with reviewed literature and research encompassing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Question 1: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including financing increased staffing and resource needs?

Bigelow and Pratt (2022) identify strategic planning as a means for leaders to make data-informed decisions when identifying organizational vision and defining organizational goals. This type of systemic approach is supported by the data that school

leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania had to be exceptionally resourceful to maintain effective student support systems in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Administrators described a dynamic response to evolving circumstances, which included reallocating existing resources and seeking additional funding to finance increased staffing and resource needs. All participants identified the need to address a wide variety of needs from a fiscal and human standpoint with an emphasis on swift decision-making. Having the ability to make swift decisions that meet district goals can be difficult. However, Schwab et al. (2022) shared that the ability to think quickly and adapt expeditiously garnered positive results. From a financial standpoint, all participants identified the importance of utilizing funding in a manner that meets the needs of the majority.

This implies the necessity for school leaders to possess strong financial management skills and the ability to quickly adapt budgets to meet new demands. Participant A stressed the importance of seeking out additional funding to sustain mental health support within their districts due to the uptick in needs exhibited by students. Participant E was charged with the task of determining which positions warrant continuance within the district and how they will be financially able to support that need. As such, Murthy (2021) tasked school districts with providing “a continuum of supports to meet student mental health needs,” a task administrators took seriously in their responses (p. 19).

Strategic planning also emphasizes the importance of creative problem-solving in times of crisis; therefore, participating leaders often had to think outside the box to secure the necessary resources. The most common resource identified by participants was access

to both technology and internet connectivity, which warranted, at times, a complete overhaul of technological infrastructure. Participant D noted that "investment in technological infrastructure must go beyond the mere provision of devices; it should encompass robust internet connectivity, software platforms, and technical support to ensure equitable access and effective utilization." This level of need requires a fiscal commitment of both the actual resources and the personnel to ensure its longevity.

The other side of technological infrastructure to consider as a product of the COVID-19 pandemic is that of remote learning integration. Garagiola et al. (2022) noted that more than 1.6 billion students around the world experienced some level of disruption in their educational programming due to remote instruction, which resulted in lesser school satisfaction for students (Lee et al., 2021). Study participants unanimously embraced technology-enabled solutions such as online learning management systems and digital resources to address remote learning needs for school shut-downs. Participant B's school district already had a built-in cyber program and was better equipped to address the rapid changes in instructional delivery. However, other school systems, such as Participant C's found remote instruction detrimental to students because "online instruction did not work, and many kids suffered academically" due to questionable levels of instructional capacity and a lack of ability to provide remediation to those struggling students in a virtual format.

All respondents, in addition to Lee et al. (2021), stressed the importance of communication and transparency in decision-making to either foster trust and collaboration among stakeholders or contribute to student success. That being said, all respondents noted difficulty with communication due to changing regulations, isolation,

and inability to utilize established connections to maintain trust. Participant C noted that transparency was challenging because the board made the decisions, but the administration presented the information to families. In turn, participants identified addressing stakeholder concerns as a priority, with four out of five respondents emphasizing the value of regular updates and clear information regarding safety protocols and contingency plans. Partnered with leveraging resources, a cornerstone of strategic planning, respondents relied heavily on regular communication through a variety of outlets to keep stakeholders up to date on district information and bring action steps to fruition (Mathias, 2023).

Collaborative decision-making is one prong of strategic planning that respondents rely on to leverage diverse perspectives and approaches to navigating a new landscape. All participants stressed the importance of comprehensive collaboration to consider and address safety concerns, educational needs, and logistical challenges. Participant C used an analogy of all participants being in the same boat and navigating unknown waters, which required coordinated efforts and collaborative decision-making, a practice endorsed by Khoshaba (2022) as a way to create genius-level infrastructure.

Regular assessment of school protocols, health and safety plans, and facilities was part of the risk assessment and mitigation element of planning. Schools worked in concert to identify potential vulnerabilities and areas of improvement and addressed the gaps using allocated funding. Participants all identified the implementation of hygiene protocols, physical distancing, and ventilation improvements as unanticipated additions to the budget. Participant C noted that his district purchased required items to facilitate face-to-face instruction, but those items soon became obsolete as instruction returned to

normal. Participant D shared the increased cost of air purification, cleaning routines, and mask purchasing/enforcement as a new financial burden. Yang et al. (2023) forecasted this financial storm with the assertion that the end of federal funding would provide financial hardship for districts needing to upkeep current supports.

By prioritizing comprehensive solutions, educational institutions can effectively navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic and facilitate meaningful learning experiences for all students. This approach not only ensures the continuity of education but also highlights the importance of equity, adaptability, and resilience in the face of unprecedented disruptions. Additionally, by addressing diverse student needs and integrating technology and innovative teaching methods, institutions are better equipped to support academic success and well-being in a rapidly changing environment.

Theoretical frameworks in strategic planning and leadership are particularly relevant here, as they highlight the importance of flexibility and innovation in maintaining effective support systems through resource allocation, collaboration, and communication.

Research Question 2: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they fostered resiliency and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including implementing remediation processes to offset student learning loss?

Leaders emphasized the importance of fostering resiliency both within their staff and student populations. They balanced safety and educational goals by increasing staffing where necessary and implementing remediation processes to address learning loss. Furthermore, they exercised flexibility in policy implementation to ensure students have the best chance of academic continuity despite changing regulations. This indicates that a dual focus on health and academic performance is critical in times of crisis.

Longmuir (2021) highlights the importance of navigating rapidly changing guidelines, and administrators were required to do just that with policy implementation during the pandemic. Responses from participants exemplified the ability to find the nuances in the regulations as they were able to enact complete virtual instruction, hybrid schedules, and full in-person learning. Regardless of the instructional methodology chosen, participants all closed their schools as required in March 2020 and spent the spring and summer months determining the best outcomes for their schools and districts.

Evolving circumstances provided challenges for administrators. However, all participants noted that they used resourcefulness with policy implementation because of the need to adjust policies, procedures, and protocols in real-time to address emerging health concerns and logistical shifts. Participant A found this to be cumbersome due to the difficulty in managing many moving parts at every turn. Longmuir (2021) identified this ever-changing landscape and concluded that school leaders had to guide “their schools through circumstances that could never have been anticipated” (p. 2). An additional area of concern with policy shift and implementation was the realization that decision-making was decentralized, making continuity among districts next to impossible. Conversely, respondents noted appreciation for colleagues who embraced creative solutions to meet the needs of students while prioritizing safety and shared successful strategies.

Furthermore, the need for professional development for digital literacy was highlighted as essential for addressing learning gaps and ensuring all students had access to the appropriate educational support. Participants shared the importance of educating teachers in the areas of digital literacy to leverage technology for teaching and learning.

This allowed for a more robust educational experience with the full use of digital tools and learning management systems. Manca and Delfino (2021) advise against crisis-driven online education and notes the significant difference found in that format as opposed to regimented instruction. Providing teachers with the needed professional development alleviates a misstep in online instructional delivery.

Regardless of format and commitment to positive outcomes, Garagiola et al. (2022) believe that learning loss is a global and significant problem that must be addressed. Participants concur with the assertion that personalized learning interventions must be utilized to address the educational gaps developed or exacerbated by school closures and educational shifts during the pandemic. The prevailing methodology to address this involves data-driven small group instruction, differentiated groupings, and celebrations of small successes when achieved. The implementation of an intervention of this magnitude has the potential to make a significant impact on those students disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Addressing only the academic gaps would be a disservice to students who need intervention in the social-emotional realm as well. Okilwa and Barnett (2021) notes that the pandemic took a social-emotional toll not only on staff, students, families, and communities but also students. Introducing curriculum materials that promote mental health and well-being, as well as fostering resilience, can combat future periods of uncertainty or disruption. Overall, a focus on resilience and strategic planning can shed light on how educational institutions can build systems that are robust yet flexible enough to handle such disruptions.

Research Question 3: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated responsiveness and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems, including addressing outside factors that affected student learning?

The data indicates that administrators had to be highly responsive to a range of external factors that affected student learning, including socioeconomic challenges and technological inequities. Rapid adaptation of resource allocation strategies was critical, as was the integration of technology for remote learning. This underscores the importance of having infrastructure and policies in place that can quickly address and mitigate external disruptions. The findings also highlight the importance of equity in educational technology, as ensuring all students have access to necessary tools is fundamental to preventing further learning loss.

Communication included topically relevant categories, including communication of safety protocols and accessibility of information, both of which participants identified as being holistic and inclusive approaches to addressing stakeholder concerns. One participant noted that “during a time of uncertainty, having access to clear and reliable information empowers individuals to take proactive measures to protect themselves and their communities.” Mathias (2023) further supports this statement with the assertion that strategic plans have the best success rate when they are supported by the community and its corresponding insights. With increasing numbers of English language learners, one participant mentioned the imperative issue of leaders making information accessible in the family’s native language to avoid misinformation and confusion. A second participant shared that “having access to clear and reliable information empowers individuals to take proactive measures.” All respondents confirmed their district’s use of public health and

safety plans in addition to the use of pandemic coordinators to provide assistance outside of the school day for students and families.

Technological support of remote instruction brings its own set of challenges when outside factors prevent students from accessing valuable information. Because many schools were required to transition to remote models, the school districts became responsible for ensuring access to the curriculum and minimizing educational disruptions. A unanimous consensus among all respondents revealed the critical importance of investing in technological infrastructure to meet the increased demands of remote and distanced learning during the pandemic. Landin and Pacenka (2021) addressed the inequity of internet access at a time when the need for it was vital to student success. In addition to connectivity, respondents noted device distribution as critical to providing students access to instruction and reducing outside barriers affecting student learning during the pandemic.

Economic disparities and access to resources emerged as the biggest outside factors affecting students and families during the pandemic. Respondents unanimously identified disparities in access to resources exposed by the pandemic as having a significant impact on students. One respondent noted that the pandemic exacerbated “existing disparities in education, health care, and economic opportunities,” while a second participant believed that access to resources is a matter of social justice and building resilience. Watson et al. (2021) echo this sentiment and further shares that unmet material needs causes deep damage to compromised populations.

Paired with a lack of access to resources, long-term social isolation had a profound impact on students during the pandemic. Research from Garagiola et al. (2022)

substantiates how a lack of traditional socialization leads to disconnect and feelings of isolation. Respondent A mentioned increased loneliness, anxiety, and depression, while respondent C notes that social isolation exposed the need for social connections and the need to prioritize initiatives that promote connection and overall well-being. The implication suggests that fostering resiliency involves not just addressing immediate academic needs but also ensuring the emotional and psychological well-being of the all members in the school community.

To combat the “overall increase in psychological distress and decrease in mental well-being,” participants noted their use of funding to increase student support systems that address mental health needs (Wiedemann et al., 2022, p. 10). All participants noted student mental health as a priority area and one on which they are unwilling to compromise. They mention a key component of mental health as resilience and connection, two areas essential for students to thrive both in and beyond the school walls.

Supporting students requires support from educators who are responsible for meeting their educational needs. Sparks and Harwin (2022) outline specific teaching strategies that have the potential to outlive the pandemic based on a relevant study. Professional development aligned with topics such as technology use, mental health support, and trauma-informed instruction has the ability to make an educational impact on teachers as they navigate the post-COVID-19 educational landscape. All participants noted the value of ongoing professional development as an adaptive technique with one participant noting "as we transition into the post-pandemic era, it is essential that we prioritize professional development initiatives to support teachers in adapting to new instructional approaches and technologies. By investing in these supports, we can

empower teachers to deliver high-quality instruction and promote student success." Both participant perspective and literature support the need for continued professional development in a post-pandemic era.

Table 1 shows how each of the findings above relates to the three research questions chosen for the study.

Table 1.*Findings and Research Questions*

Leading question: How do school leaders in Northwestern Pennsylvania describe how they demonstrated resourcefulness and maintained effective post-pandemic student support systems...

<i>Finding</i>	<i>RQ1: ...including financing increased staffing and resource needs?</i>	<i>RQ2: ...including implementing remediation processes to offset student learning loss?</i>	<i>RQ3: ...including addressing outside factors that affected student learning?</i>
<i>Dynamic response to evolving circumstances</i>	x	x	
<i>Balancing safety and educational goals</i>	x		
<i>Communication and transparency</i>	x		x
<i>Rapid adaptation of resource allocation strategies</i>	x		x
<i>Technological integration for remote learning</i>	x	x	
<i>Mitigation of technological inequities</i>	x		x
<i>Addressing outside factors</i>			x
<i>Remediation for learning loss</i>		x	
<i>Overall well-being and support systems</i>			x

Importance of Findings

The findings underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by school administrators in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the importance of adaptive leadership, effective communication, resource management, and holistic support systems in navigating crises within educational settings. Further analysis and interpretation of data provide deeper insights into the nuanced experiences and strategies employed by administrators in this unprecedented context.

These findings support the adaptive decision-making strategies employed by school administrators in navigating the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic. By embracing flexibility, collaboration, and transparent communication, administrators were able to effectively manage uncertainties, balance competing priorities, and safeguard the well-being of school communities while maintaining a focus on academic continuity and student success.

Further, additional findings highlight the importance of proactive communication and stakeholder engagement in navigating the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. By fostering transparency, clarity, and collaboration, school administrators were able to build trust, empower stakeholders, and cultivate a sense of shared responsibility within the school community, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of the school system's response to the pandemic.

In addition, strategic resource allocation and technological integration strategies employed by school administrators used to navigate the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic were integral in student success. By prioritizing health and safety measures, investing in technological infrastructure, and addressing technological inequities,

administrators were able to support the continuity of learning and promote reasonable access to education for all students despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Understanding and addressing these findings is essential for developing targeted interventions and support systems to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic on students' educational and emotional well-being. Delving into the information can provide insights into effective remediation practices that address the complex challenges posed by learning loss in the wake of the pandemic, ultimately supporting students' academic recovery and holistic development.

By examining the categories and findings, educational institutions can develop comprehensive support systems that promote the holistic well-being of their academic community; therefore, fostering a culture of care, resilience, and mutual support in the wake of the pandemic.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be noted. The reliance on self-reported data from school leaders may introduce bias, as respondents might present their actions in a more favorable light or might not fully recall all aspects of their experiences. The sample size and focus on a specific geographic region (Northwestern Pennsylvania) limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Additionally, the study primarily captures the perspectives of administrators, potentially overlooking the experiences and insights of other stakeholders, such as teachers, students, and parents.

Implications of the Research for Practice

The need for comprehensive support systems was a recurrent theme across all research questions. Administrators consistently reported the increased need for resources

to address not just academic remediation but also emotional and psychological support. This holistic approach to student well-being indicates that effective support systems must be multifaceted, addressing a range of student needs to promote overall resilience and recovery. The data suggests that maintaining these support systems beyond the immediate crisis period is crucial for sustained positive outcomes. Theoretical insights from educational psychology and holistic education support the notion that addressing the whole child is essential for long-term success.

Recommendations

When anticipating a future systems-disrupting event and following the research, various recommendations for education in the areas of administration and general areas to explore can be garnered. The only way to prepare for the future is to learn from the past and make needed changes to ensure that a better outcome can be achieved.

Recommendations for Administrators

Considering this study clearly highlights the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the landscape of teaching and learning, administrators may want to consider the following recommendations when navigating upcoming school years. To effectively address the challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, school administrators must emphasize flexibility and adaptability by developing robust contingency plans that accommodate various scenarios, including remote, hybrid, and in-person learning. They should implement flexible policies that can adapt to the changing needs of students, staff, and families. A crucial aspect of this adaptability is the investment in technology and training. Ensuring that all students and staff have access to the necessary technology and reliable internet is essential, alongside providing

continuous professional development for teachers on digital tools and online teaching methodologies.

Prioritizing mental health and well-being is another significant lesson from the pandemic. Administrators should expand support services to increase access to counseling and mental health resources, fostering a supportive environment that emphasizes well-being and mental health awareness. Strengthening communication is also vital; maintaining regular, transparent communication with students, parents, and staff through multiple platforms ensures that the entire school community remains informed and engaged.

A focus on equity and accessibility is essential to address disparities in access to resources. Administrators must identify and address these gaps, providing tailored support to vulnerable and underserved student populations. Another critical element is planning for future events that may disrupt the educational system, which involves developing comprehensive emergency preparedness plans that account for various contingencies, including pandemics, natural disasters, and other crises. These plans should be regularly reviewed and updated based on lessons learned.

When administrators were forced to navigate the new educational landscape in 2020, a roadmap for continuity of educational activities during a global emergency did not exist. There is potential for another local, national, or worldwide emergency, as such, this study is significant because it highlights administrative accounts of important supports and recommended programming needed to maintain meaningful educational experiences in an emergency. By incorporating these recommendations, school

administrators can build more resilient, adaptive, and inclusive educational environments that are better prepared for future challenges.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research into the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic in education holds promise for providing valuable insights that can guide policy and practice improvements.

Key recommendations for future research include conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impacts of disrupted learning environments on students' academic achievement, social-emotional development, and mental health. These studies should investigate differential effects across student demographics such as socio-economic status and race/ethnicity to better understand disparities in learning outcomes and recovery trajectories.

Researchers should evaluate the effectiveness of various remote and blended learning models in maintaining student engagement, learning progression, and overall well-being, comparing synchronous and asynchronous approaches to identify best practices for implementation.

Research should also focus on analyzing policy responses to manage educational disruptions at local, national, and international levels during crises like the pandemic. Evaluating the effectiveness of emergency preparedness plans and crisis management strategies in maintaining continuity of learning is crucial for improving future response efforts. Lessons learned from the pandemic experience should inform strategies for future crisis management in education, emphasizing factors that enhance educational system resilience, including policy flexibility, stakeholder collaboration, and adaptive leadership.

Comparative studies across regions and countries are also recommended to examine variations in educational responses and outcomes, identifying international best practices that can inform efforts to build resilient and inclusive education systems globally. By addressing these research areas, scholars can contribute evidence-based insights that support informed policy decisions, enhance educational practices, and foster resilience in future crises.

Conclusion

These findings clarify the complex challenges encountered by school administrators in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The critical need for adaptive leadership, robust communication frameworks, strategic resource allocation, and comprehensive support systems is evident in their responses. Aligning key findings with the research questions has illustrated how administrators navigated these unprecedented times, providing valuable lessons for future crisis management and the sustained well-being of school communities. These insights emphasize the importance of resilience, equity, and holistic support in educational leadership, highlighting the need for continuous investment in these areas to ensure that schools are better prepared for future disruptions.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

7/19/24, 10:17 AM

2024-15 - Initial: Initial - Exempt

do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>

Fri 2/16/2024 2:57 PM

To: Jennifer Foutz <jfoutz@student.yzu.edu>; Karen H Larwin <khlarwin@yzu.edu>



Feb 16, 2024 2:56:57 PM EST

Karen Larwin
Teacher Ed and Leadership St

Re: Exempt - Initial - 2024-15 The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Culture of Teaching and Learning

Dear Dr. Karen Larwin:

Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board has rendered the decision below for The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Culture of Teaching and Learning

Decision: Exempt

Selected Category: Category 2. (i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the IRB.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,
Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board

APPENDIX B: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Dear Administrators,

I hope this letter finds you well. As we continue to navigate the challenges presented by the pandemic, I am reaching out to invite you to participate in a doctoral study focused on leadership during these unprecedented times. Your experiences and insights as educational leaders are invaluable, and by participating in this study, you have the opportunity to contribute to the development of effective strategies for leading through adversity.

Benefits of participation include:

1. Making your voice heard and sharing your successes
2. Gaining new perspectives and strategies for leadership
3. Building a supportive network of fellow educational leaders
4. Impacting the future of educational leadership practices

Your leadership has been remarkable, and I believe your involvement in this study can inspire and empower others facing similar challenges. If you have interest in participating or would like more information, please reach out to me at xxx.xxx.xxxx or respond via email at xxxxx@student.ysu.edu.

Thank you for your dedication to your school community, and I look forward to potentially working with you on this important study.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Foutz

APPENDIX C: SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The researcher will utilize the following interview questions to gain the perspectives of study participants:

1. Briefly describe your administrative experience up to this point. How long have you been in administration?
2. What position were you in during the 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
3. Please describe the configuration of the school district in which you were employed during the 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years. (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
4. What was your school district's initial response to the COVID-19 Pandemic? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
5. What level of involvement did you have in making plans for the school district or your school during the 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
6. What was the greatest challenge you faced when planning for the 2020-2021 school year? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
7. How was your experience potentially different other than that of administrators with whom you worked? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
8. What changes were you required to make that did not align with your personal philosophy of education? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
9. How did your district utilize COVID-19 relief funds? (RQ1)

10. What plans does your district have to supplement the positions, programming, and/or other additions that were introduced to the educational landscape of your district? How will these items be funded moving forward? Did you find the additional funding helpful? (RQ1)
11. What methods did your district employ to address the March 2020 school closure? (RQ2, RQ3)
12. How did your district plan for a return to in-person learning? When did students return to in-person instruction? (RQ2)
13. What supports systems did you put in place to meet student needs? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
14. Briefly describe any remediation or intervention time offered to students by your school district? (RQ2)
15. How successful do you believe your district was in closing the academic gap that was either introduced or became more apparent because of the COVID-19 Pandemic? How do you know? (RQ2)
16. Some people believe that the quarantine and isolation that occurred during 2020 due to COVID-19 negatively impacted all students. What do you think about this opinion? (RQ3)
17. What factors outside of the educational system do you feel most impacted students and teachers during the 2020-2021, 2021-2022, and 2022-2023 school years? On what factors do you base this belief? (RQ3)

18. What changes that were made because of the COVID-19 Pandemic did you decide to make permanent? What is your rationale for making those changes permanent? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
19. What is your overall opinion of your district's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic from fiscal, academic, and mental health standpoints? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
20. Now that the Pandemic is coming to an end, how do you plan to maintain student support systems both from a human and fiscal standpoint? (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3)
21. What future policies and procedures have been put into place within your organization in response to what was learned from going through the COVID-19 Pandemic?
22. Now that you know what the research is about, is there anything that I should have asked but did not?

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Upon arrival to an agreed upon location, the researcher will meet the participant, conduct introductions, and provide an area for the participant to sit.
2. Participants will be seated across from the researcher at a table. The researcher will have a writing utensil, documents pertaining to the study, and a recording device (to be turned on after being given permission by the participant).
3. Copies of the parameters of the study will be provided, should the participant have interest in a hard copy. NOTE: Electronic consent will be established prior to the interview participation.
4. The researcher will provide her own background information in the educational field so as to build trust with the participant and provide an opportunity for in-depth questioning to follow.
5. The participant will be notified that the recording device will be turned on and the researcher will begin taking notes.
6. No more than 60 minutes will be utilized to provide the participant a chance for elaboration upon prior responses given. Clarifying questions will be asked as deemed necessary to allow for a more detailed exploration of the participant's experiences.
7. Following the questioning, the researcher will notify the participant that the recording device will be turned off and note taking has finished. The researcher will express gratitude for the participant's presence and contributions and inquire

if the participant would like a copy of the transcription. Contact information will be obtained if the participant indicates interest in a copy of the transcription.

8. The researcher will accompany the participant to the exit and proceed with additional interviews if conducted on the same day. A period of 30 minutes will be provided between each interview for reflection and anonymity of the participants.