

Promising Practices for Addressing Common Challenges:

Social-Emotional Supports for School Staff

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) launched a national survey in late January 2021 to gather insights on public school district experiences in the 2020–21 school year, including how districts continued to adapt to the persistent and evolving challenges of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May and June 2021, AIR interviewed a sample of leaders in districts that responded to the survey to learn more about the challenges and promising practices they described in their survey responses, with a focus on innovative practices from which other districts can learn or that they can replicate in their own context. This brief summarizes findings related to social-emotional supports for school staff from these interviews with district leaders. For more findings, check out the project web page at <https://www.air.org/project/national-survey-public-educations-response-covid-19>.

In 2020–21, many districts saw a need for social-emotional supports for school staff (not just supports for students). This brief includes profiles of the challenges and promising practices related to **social-emotional supports for school staff** for three districts across the United States:

- Cascade School District, Washington
- Windham Exempted Village School District, Ohio
- Shenendehowa Central School District, New York



Cascade School District

Provided Support Through Communication

The Challenge

At the beginning of the 2020–21 school year, many staff in Cascade School District were understandably concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertainty it generated. According to Superintendent Tracey Beckendorf-Edou, “The hardest thing for staff was fear ... we had staff who were very emotionally impacted by fear.” She also recognized the incredible pressure that staff felt throughout the school year: “This has been the hardest year everybody remembers in education.”

Promising Practices

To alleviate staff concerns, Dr. Beckendorf-Edou began gathering and sharing key information from the state health department and local medical centers on a regular basis. Realizing that email has less potential to alleviate fear than personal connection, she started creating short videos to share the most important information of the week and to answer questions from district staff. This strategy enabled the superintendent to reduce fear through a calm demeanor and reassuring message: “It helps to be calm as a leader when you’re in a crisis, and then figure out the communication style that works best for the people that you’re trying to communicate with.” Dr. Beckendorf-Edou also recognized that transparency in communication is important because “when you see your leader just calmly explaining what’s going on, and what we’re doing to keep staff and students safe and healthy, and where we’re at, and who we’re talking to, and how we’re learning, it just eases [the fear].” Superintendent Beckendorf-Edou plans to continue using short, frequent videos to communicate with staff, as many staff still need time and support to process their pandemic-related concerns.

Cascade School District also worked to provide staff with direct supports and accommodations, including creating an employee assistance program that offers mental health support to staff and using professional learning communities to foster connections among staff. The district also worked with their local teacher association to make teaching assignments more flexible as needed to ensure that all staff could keep their jobs despite changing needs and situations.



Illinois



Rural



Small Size



Low Poverty



Primarily Remote

Shenendehowa Central School District

Provided Support Through Professional Connections

The Challenge

In the 2020–21 school year, Shenendehowa Central School District recognized that the uncertainty around the pandemic and the challenges associated with transitioning to remote instruction (e.g., a shift to a block schedule, increases in students’ social-emotional needs) were stressful for school staff. According to Superintendent L. Oliver Robinson, the district knew that it would be critical to alleviate stress and uncertainty for staff so that they could successfully support students: “It speaks to the larger social-emotional pieces of teachers. Prior to COVID, the reason why people got burnt out [was] because they felt isolated, or they didn’t feel as if they had the appropriate professional development, or resources, or support to do the job. Now with the added stress of COVID, it forced us to pause... we have to sustain ourselves in order to be there for our children, who are going to look to us for that support.”

Promising Practices

Shenendehowa Central School District transitioned to a block scheduling model to better facilitate remote instruction, reviewing planning time and making adjustments so that staff had common, scheduled planning time during which they could collaborate. Given the significance of these instructional shifts, the district emphasized that the expectation was for staff and students to do their best, rather than to strive for perfection. Providing safe spaces for staff to share their feelings was also important. Dr. Robinson explained, “Sometimes that’s the best remedy, just to be able to get it out of your system and also to know that others [are] feeling the same way ... [it’s important to create] an environment where people know it’s okay to struggle and you know that a colleague or peer will be there for you. No one’s being judgmental.”

Shenendehowa Central School District invested heavily in professional development in the 2020–21 school year, using staff feedback about their needs to directly drive the professional development that the district offered. By using this approach, the district was able to meet professional development needs nearly on demand (rather than in future school years). Staff also had dedicated time at staff meetings to give video presentations on best practices in their area of expertise; in some cases, the district requested staff permission to share these presentations across the district. By using dedicated staff meeting time for these presentations, staff were able to focus on identifying universally effective pedagogical practices rather than creating silos within academic departments or grade levels.

As a leader, Superintendent Robinson has worked to cheer on staff and praise the work they are doing. As a result of the various supports provided, Dr. Robinson believes that staff have become more resilient to pandemic-related challenges and more reliant on each other for support. According to Dr. Robinson, “Because of the pandemic, we have learned that our responsibility to each other and as educators and our responsibility to teachers is so much more essential than I think we have ever given any credit to in the past.”



Ohio



Town



Small Size



High Poverty



Primarily In Person

Windham Exempted Village School District

Provided Support Through Prioritization

The Challenge

The 2020–21 school year brought continual change for Windham Exempted Village School District, with weekly changes in who was learning in person, remotely, or through a hybrid model. Superintendent Aireane Curtis noted that staff worked hard to make “anything and everything happen” to adjust to these changes throughout the school year. Staff acknowledged that while all this disruption was difficult, it opened up a new opportunity for reflection on the efficacy of their practices and what they want the school year to look like moving forward.

Promising Practices

Windham Exempted Village School District recognized that many of its staff (especially teachers) were working extra hours, learning new technologies and instructional modes, and experiencing personal stress in the 2020–21 school year. Therefore, the district sought to reduce the expectations for teachers outside of their regular instruction. Rather than supporting staff by adding events or activities, the district instead sought to reduce pressures and expectations. For example, they reviewed the meetings, training sessions, and professional development that teachers were expected to attend and postponed those that were not immediately relevant to teachers’ work. Superintendent Curtis noted that staff appreciated these efforts to acknowledge the stress they were under and the latitude to focus their limited time on the most important aspects of their work: teaching and supporting students.

For more information on the Public Education’s Response to COVID-19 project findings and publications, please visit the project web page at <https://www.air.org/project/national-survey-public-educations-response-covid-19>.

Demographic Icon Definitions

Geographic Region. Based on regional divisions determined by the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.).

Locale. Based on four locale categories (city, suburb, town, and rural) determined by the U.S. Department of Education (2019).

Size. Based on district enrollment data provided by the U.S. Department of Education (2019). Small = < 1,000 students; Medium = 1,000 to < 10,000 students; Large = 10,000 or more students.

Poverty. Based on child poverty data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau (2019). Low = < 10% of children; Medium = 10% to < 20% of children; High = 20% or more of children.



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