

# Flexible Schedules and Flexible Thinking: How Districts and Schools in NNPS Are Responding to COVID-19 Challenges

## NNPS Annual Report

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District and School 2021 UPDATE Data  
March 2022

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# Flexible Schedules and Flexible Thinking: How Districts and Schools in NNPS Are Responding to COVID-19 Challenges

## NNPS Annual Report: 2021 *UPDATE* Data

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The 2020-21 school year called for flexible thinking, customized schedules, and quick decisions in districts, schools, and families. After COVID-19 closed school doors in March 2020, educators, families, and students hoped to return to some-kind-of-normal in the new school year. However, the Delta and Omicron variants led districts and schools across the country in different directions. Some opened the 2020-21 school year with face-to-face classes; others mixed days at school with days learning from home; and still others continued remote learning online or with instructional packets. NNPS wanted to know: **How did the continuation of COVID in the 2020-21 school year affect the quality of programs of family and community engagement?**

### PART 1 2021 *UPDATE* DATA: DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS IN NNPS

#### DISTRICT DEMOGRAPHICS

Twenty-seven district leaders for partnerships in highly diverse communities across 12 states submitted data on their work and progress on partnerships in the 2020-21 school year.<sup>1</sup>

- Districts were located in central cities (24%), small cities (32%), suburbs (24%), and rural (20%) areas. The districts varied in size with enrollments from 483 students to more than 38,000 students.
- The districts had been members of NNPS for from 1 to 23 years. All districts join NNPS to use research-based approaches to guide schools to strengthen their programs of family and community engagement. They proceed at different rates and face different challenges.
- On average, about 75% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals, ranging from 33% to 100% of students across districts.
- The districts served populations of students and families who spoke from 1 to over 70 languages and dialects at home, with an average of 21 languages spoken by students and their families across districts. On average, about 9% of students were English Language Learners (ELL), ranging from under 1% to 55% of students across districts.
- Taken together, district leaders facilitated over 380 schools in the 2020-21 school year.
- District leaders estimated that their schools conducted engagement activities with over 65,000 families in the 2020-21 school year.
- Most district leaders for partnerships (93%) expected to continue in their positions in 2021-22. This kind of stability is important for continuous progress on partnerships in districts and schools (Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011).

## SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS

Just over 300 school-based Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs) participated in the 2021 *UPDATE* evaluation. They were located in highly diverse communities in 11 states.<sup>1</sup> The sample included 53 preschools, 154 elementary schools, 13 elementary/middle (K-8) schools, 45 middle schools, and 34 high schools. A few schools (8) combined these secondary grade spans or omitted the information. In this report we summarize data for Elementary Schools (preschool and elementary grades) and Secondary Schools (middle and high school grade levels).

- Schools were located in central cities (32%), small cities (32%), suburban (15%), and rural (22%) areas.
- Schools included students and families who spoke from 1 to 29 languages and dialects at home, with an average of about 3 languages across schools. On average, about 14% of students were English Language Learners (ELL).
- On average, about 86% of students in these schools were eligible for free or reduced-price meals, ranging from 0% to 100% of students across schools.

**Summary.** Districts and schools in NNPS serve economically, racially, linguistically, culturally, and geographically diverse students, families, and communities. The schools serve high concentrations of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals at school or distributed to families for students learning from home during COVID closures. Some districts and schools have been members of NNPS for many years and have been working to continuously improve outreach to parents and community partners to support student learning and development. Other districts and schools—new to NNPS—are just starting to use research-based approaches to organize and strengthen their programs and practices family and community engagement. The variations among districts and schools in this sample permit us to analyze whether and how well specific actions affect the quality of partnership programs and outreach to families facing COVID-19 challenges (Epstein, Sheldon, & Chappell, 2021). In other publications, we report results of family and community engagement for students (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016, and in press; Sheldon, 2005, 2007, 2019).

## QUALITY OF PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMS

On the annual *UPDATE* surveys, each district and school in NNPS paints a “portrait” of the status and progress of its partnership program on a continuum from Just Starting (e.g., mainly new and recent members), to Good, Very Good, and Excellent Programs. District leaders and school teams also provide details about the quality of their partnership programs.

### District Data

Figure 1 reports the *Overall Quality* of district partnership programs. Just over 14% of district leaders were planning or just starting their work with NNPS. About 33% reported a good start in the 20-21 school year. A large number of new districts and schools joined the network in the prior school year. Thus, about half of the districts in this year’s sample were, appropriately, in start-up stages of program development. Others (mainly more experienced districts), reported good (18%), very good (22%), or excellent (11%) programs. An “excellent” rating requires district leaders to report that their partnership programs at the district and school levels would continue “even if district leaders changed.” This kind of certainty about the sustainability of partnership programs is the ultimate goal in NNPS for all districts and schools.

The varied “portraits” indicate that district leaders were clear about the status of their programs in the 2020-21 school year. The responses indicate that district leaders were aware that having a very good or excellent program is an on-going improvement process.

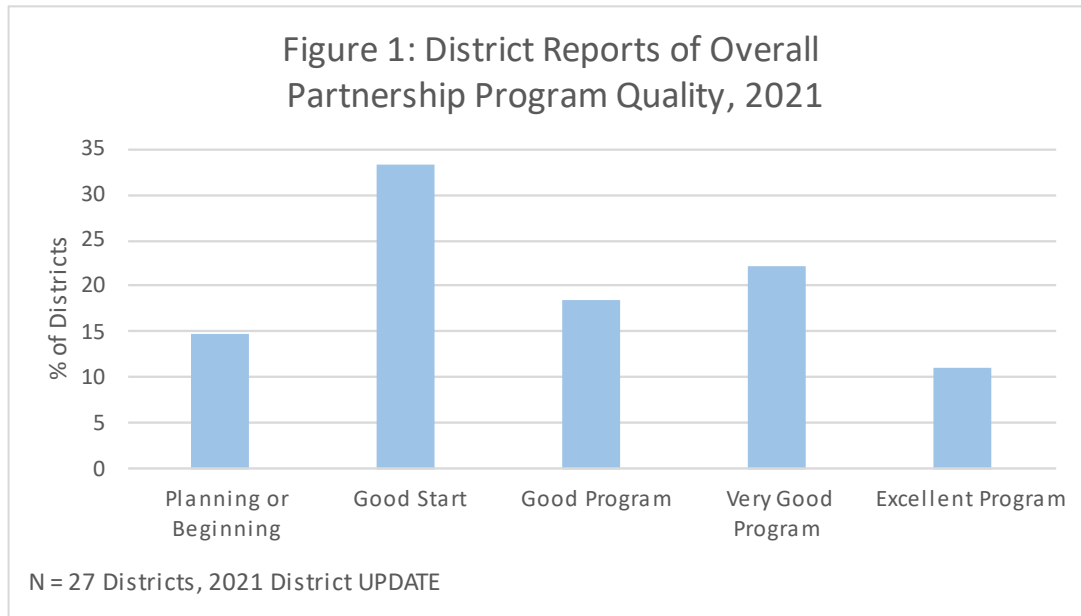


Figure 2 explores an important aspect of district leadership—*facilitation of school ATPs*. This 9-item scale ( $\alpha = .92$ )<sup>2</sup> measures how actively district leaders fulfilled NNPS guidelines to help school ATPs build their capacities to plan, implement, and evaluate their own school’s partnership program in the 2020-21 school year (Epstein, et al, 2019). Responses ranged from Did Not Do, Need to Improve, OK, to Very Well.

Figure 2 shows that over 90% of district leaders reported they did OK or Very Well in helping school ATPs write their *One-Year Action Plans for Partnerships*.

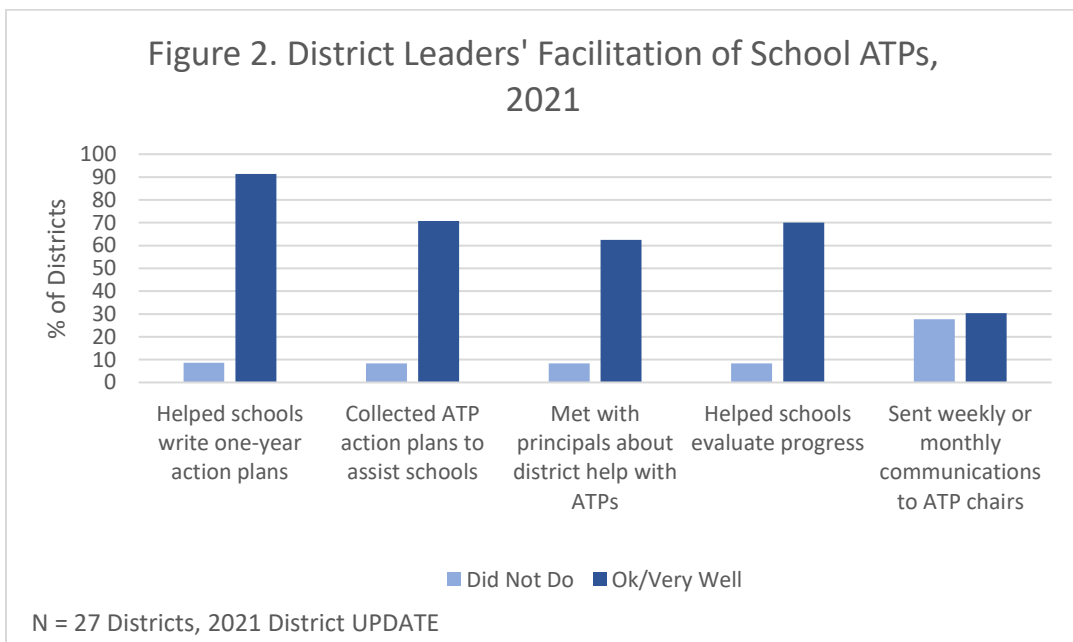


Figure 2 shows that most leaders (70%) collected their schools’ plans to keep track of and assist the ATPs’ work and progress. By contrast, just 30% of the district leaders reported that they communicated weekly or monthly with ATP chairs. This may reflect communication challenges during the year as district and school schedules and locations changed due to COVID-19 conditions and restrictions. These data also tell NNPS that district leaders need additional guidance about the importance of communicating with their school ATPs on a regular schedule.

**School Data**

ATPs in elementary and secondary schools identified a “portrait” of the *Overall Quality* of their partnership programs that was most closely associated with their school. As shown in Figure 3, elementary and secondary schools were represented across all ratings, from Just Starting to Excellent programs. More elementary schools reported very good or excellent programs than did secondary schools (29.4% vs. 15.1%, respectively). More secondary schools were just starting or had fair/average programs compared to elementary schools (59.5% vs. 34.2%, respectively). The responses created a near-normal curve, as in prior years. This pattern prevails because at any point in time, some schools just joined NNPS, some have worked for several years developing their program, and some schools have strong district leaders who guide them to continually improve their programs.

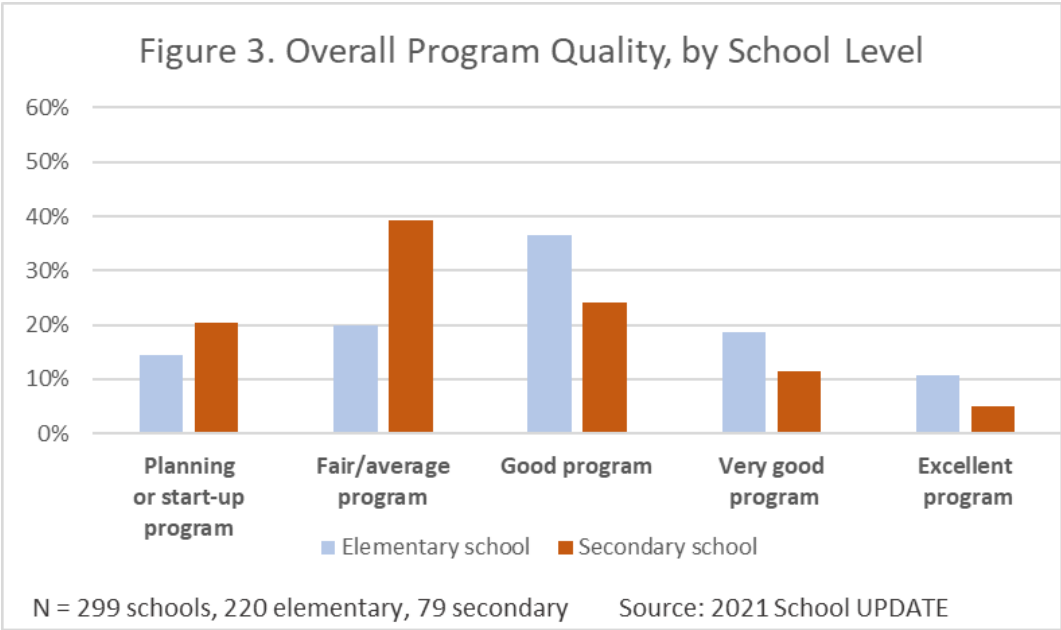
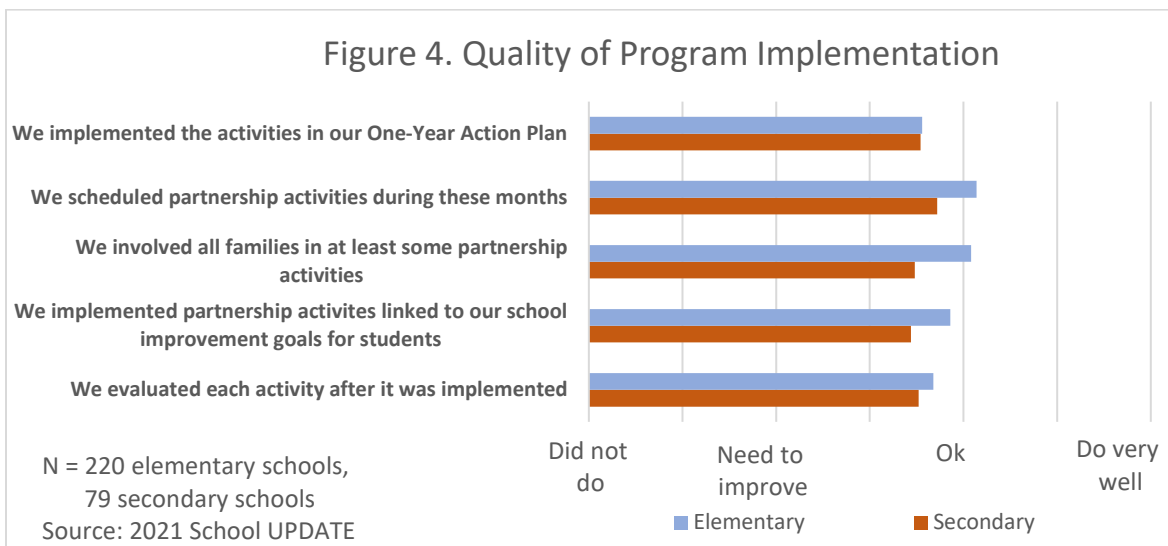


Figure 4 features a few major implementation activities of school-based partnership programs. This year’s measure of *Implementation* is a 5-item scale ( $\alpha = .90$ ) on how well the ATP implemented and evaluated their planned partnership activities in the 2020-21 school year. Responses (scored 1-4) ranged from Did Not Conduct, Need to Improve, Doing OK, to Doing Very Well on the implementation activities. Figure 4 reports the average scores for elementary and secondary schools on these items. Elementary schools reported close to “doing OK,” on average. Secondary schools reported similar, but slightly lower, levels of implementation of partnership activities. In NNPS, even schools that are doing very well in the prior school year are expected to continue to improve the quality of their plans, outreach to families, and evaluations of program quality in the next school year.



## PART 2 Special Topic 2021

### Addressing COVID Challenges to Family Engagement and Student Learning

#### DISTRICT DATA

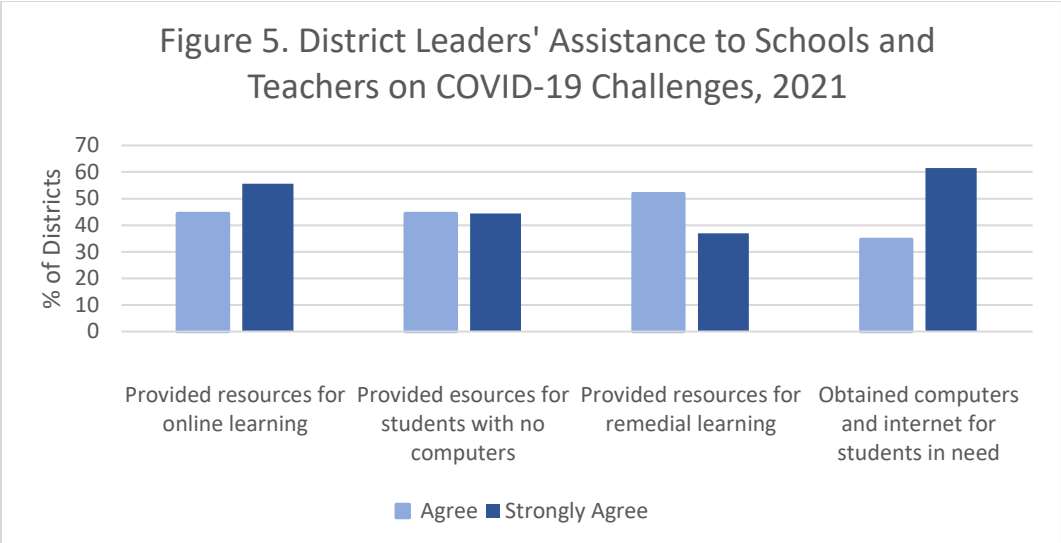
Districts in NNPS made important decisions at the start of this school year. They faced several challenges, including the availability of school bus drivers, substitute teachers, adequate space and air quality in classrooms, mask mandates and cleaning regimens, parents returning to their workplaces, and other school, family, and community conditions and constraints.

**Flexible schedules; flexible locations.** Districts opened the 2020-21 school year on different schedules and locations. A few (12%) invited all students in all schools to return to face-to-face classes. More (35%) started the year with all students continuing remote learning from home. Some (23%) set a hybrid schedule for all students to attend face-to-face classes on certain days each week, and to learn from home on other days. Still others varied these options in some schools with some students.

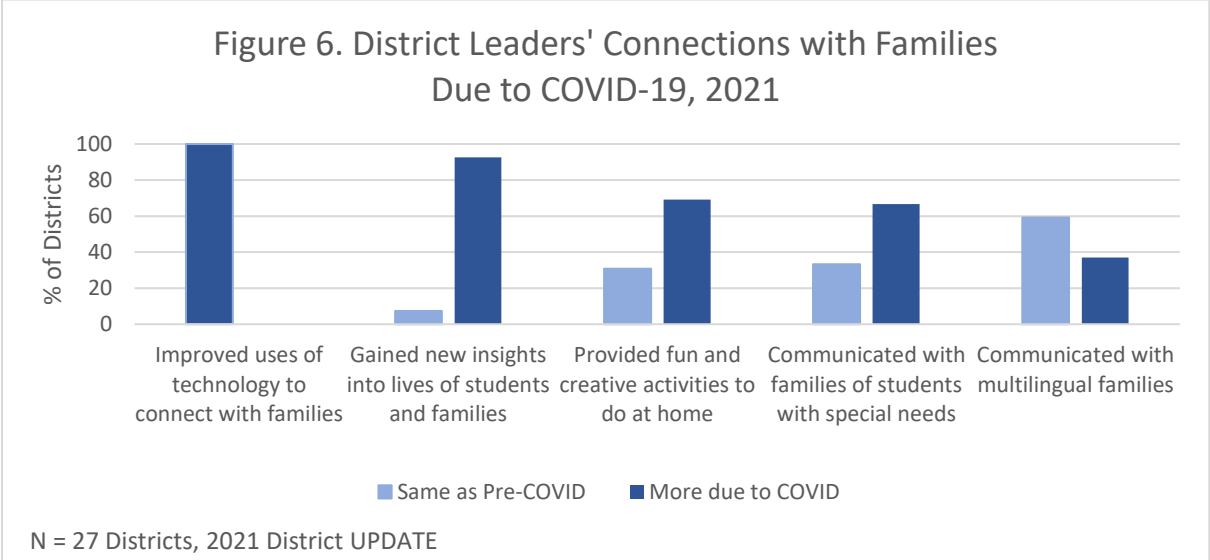
Districts reported that their school schedules and locations changed once (26%) or twice or more (41%) during the school year. Teachers, students, and families had to remain “on alert” for changes in school locations as the Delta and Omicron variants of COVID-19 surged and faded throughout the year. In some districts, face-to-face meetings with parents resumed. In other districts, parents and community partners were not permitted to enter district or school buildings.

**Solving COVID-19 challenges.** District leaders reported whether and how strongly they addressed key challenges created by COVID-19. *Addressing COVID-19 Challenges* (7-item scale;  $\alpha = .79$ ) measured district leaders’ efforts to provide teachers with resources for student learning online; equipment for students who had no computer at home; resources for students who needed remedial instruction; and whether they communicated with school ATPs on a regular schedule.

Figure 5 shows that district leaders in NNPS were working to meet the needs of teachers, families, and students under COVID-19 conditions in the 2020-21 school year. Just about all district leaders strongly agreed (60%) or agreed (35%) that they helped schools obtain computers and internet access for students who lacked technology for online learning. Just about all district leaders strongly agreed (56%) or agreed (44%) that they helped teachers obtain or develop resources and lessons for students’ online learning. Most district leaders agreed or strongly agreed (81%) that they continued to guide teachers and school ATPs on creative ways to design or redesign family engagement activities in virtual formats.



Another set of questions asked district leaders for partnerships to compare their work with families in pre-COVID and post-COVID years. Figure 6 shows that 100%—all district leaders—reported that, due to COVID-19, their district and schools “improved the use of technology to connect with all families.” Nearly all (93%) also reported that they “gained new insights into the lives of students and families” in the past two years through close connections with all families when students were learning from home.



About 70% of district leaders noted that COVID conditions required them to provide teachers and families with more ideas than in the past for fun and creative activities for students to do at home. These COVID-generated “learnings”—new uses of technology, more insight into the lives of students, and



more creative activities for student learning—are among the positive results of COVID-19 disruptions that are likely to continue to improve partnership activities in the future.

## District Correlates

Table 1 reports how district leaders’ scores on the *Addressing COVID-19 Challenges* scale are associated with the quality of district programs of school, family, and community partnerships in the 2020-21 school year. Leaders addressed more COVID challenges if they organized their offices to lead the district’s partnership agenda ( $r = .532, p < .01$ ) and if they actively facilitated their schools’ ATPs to strengthen their own programs of family and community engagement ( $r = .408, p < .05$ ). Districts working for more years with NNPS tended to address more COVID challenges than new districts in the network ( $r = .312, p < .10$ ).

**Table 1. Correlates of District Leaders’ Attention to COVID-19 Challenges to Teaching and Learning**

District Measure	Leadership for Partnerships	Facilitation of School ATPs	Years Working with NNPS	% free- or reduced-price meals	# Languages	Location (urbanity)
District Assisted School ATPs and Teachers to Meet COVID-19 Challenges <sup>1</sup>	.532**	.408*	.312#	NS	NS	NS

<sup>1</sup>*Addressing COVID-19 Challenges Scale*

Source: 2021 DISTRICT UPDATE, N=27

Zero-order correlations: \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ , #  $p < .10$ , NS= Not significant

Note: The small size of the district sample encourages attention to strong associations above .310,  $p < .10$ .

It is also important to note that district leaders’ attention to COVID challenges was not significantly (NS) linked to background characteristics of the schools in their districts. Table 1 shows that district leaders’ attention to COVID challenges was not associated to their location in urban, suburban, or rural areas, the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals, or the number of different languages that families spoke at home.

Although correlations cannot be interpreted as “causation,” the data suggest that, regardless of district demographics, leaders for partnerships with stronger partnership programs did more to address unexpected COVID-related challenges to connect with teachers, families, and students in the 2020-21 school year.

In other analyses, we found that district leaders whose schools started the year with all students continuing remote learning from home reported doing more than leaders following face-to-face or hybrid schedules to obtain computers for students ( $r = .590, p < .01$ ). The districts with all students learning from home likely included schools with many students who still lacked adequate technology for online learning.

## District Examples of Responses to COVID-19 Challenges

Almost all district leaders (25 of 27) added comments at the end of the *UPDATE* evaluation. Chart 1 summarizes typical examples of good partnership activities conducted during the 2020-21 school year and district leaders' plans for next steps to continue to strengthen their programs.

<b>Chart 1 Examples: DISTRICT reports on School, Family, and Community Partnerships in the 2020-21 School Year</b>
<b>Part A. A Few District Best Practices</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The district created a parent portal that included videos in English and Spanish on how to use all of the technology and devices in their schools.</li><li>• We used surveys to find out what our families needed to be successful with virtual learning. Then, we put a lot of information on our district website for parents to access.</li><li>• Created and shared with students and families 4 videos about the technology platforms that would be used district-wide by students.</li><li>• Provided a special district e-mail address that parents could use to ask questions about the re-opening of school and operation plans. Contacts were filtered to appropriate staff responsible.</li><li>• We worked closely with several community agencies to connect with and assist families who were struggling. We developed a translation committee to look at how to best reach and include families who spoke different languages.</li><li>• All schools engaged in parent e-mail drives to ensure that parents had registered e-mail addresses so that they received district and school information.</li><li>• Just about every school had an Open House that was well attended. Families and teachers were excited to get the new school year started.</li></ul>
<b>Part B. District Reports of a Few of Their Schools' Best Practices</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• One school created a weekly program that brought the school (e.g., teacher and student activities) out to the community. Parents and staff coordinated and conducted the program.</li><li>• For <i>Virtual Math Night</i>, one school distributed supplies needed for activities in advance. Students and families logged in.</li><li>• <i>Lawn and Learn</i> invited families to bring lawn chairs to sit under oak trees for hands-on tutorials online.</li><li>• One school conducted a virtual workshop for parents on ways to keep kids learning over the winter break. It was well attended.</li><li>• <i>We Hear You</i> is a series of virtual meetings with parents to encourage 2-way communication.</li><li>• The school published its own <i>I AM ME Book Project</i> with stories by families, students, and teachers on themes of reading/literacy, social studies, and equity issues.</li><li>• By conducting <i>Parent-Teacher Conferences</i> online, more families were able to "attend" and participate.</li><li>• <i>Academic Night</i> focused on math and reading in the elementary grades and college and career awareness activities with area business representatives in the middle and high school grades.</li></ul>
<b>Part C. Next Steps to Improve Family and Community Engagement</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This district plans to increase the number of schools with ATPs in its network and raise awareness of the ATPs in our community.</li><li>• More principal buy-in. We have good principal support, but not as much as needed to fully support the ATPs and programs of family and community engagement in all schools.</li><li>• Provide on-site training at schools to address areas needing improvement in individual schools. We need to help more parents feel comfortable filling leadership roles such as ATP Chair or Co-Chair.</li><li>• We will do more to prepare ATPs to fully implement activities in their action plans to support school goals for student success.</li><li>• At the MS/HS levels, the district will focus on engaging parents and students on career awareness and options for students who are not planning to attend a 4-year college.</li></ul>

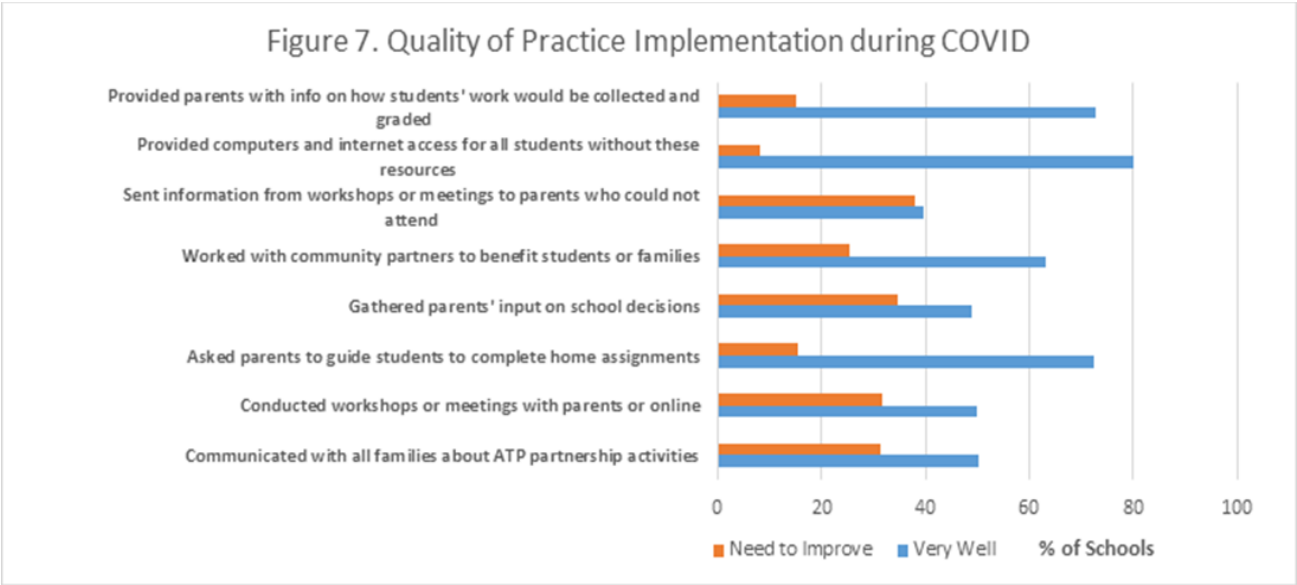
See more examples of district and organization best practices in *Promising Partnership Practices 2021*, at [www.partnershipschools.org](http://www.partnershipschools.org) in the section Success Stories (Thomas, et al., 2021)..

Panel 1 of Chart 1 emphasizes the importance to district leaders for partnerships of using various technologies to contact students and families. Panel 2 shows district leaders’ awareness that their schools are implementing creative connections with families to support and increase student learning and academic achievement. Some also included strategies to include students with families in partnership practices. Panel 3 lists typical next steps that district leaders plan to strengthen in the next school year. Many focused on improving teamwork and helping ATPs improve connections with families in ways that increase student learning, career awareness, and post-secondary plans.

**SCHOOL DATA**

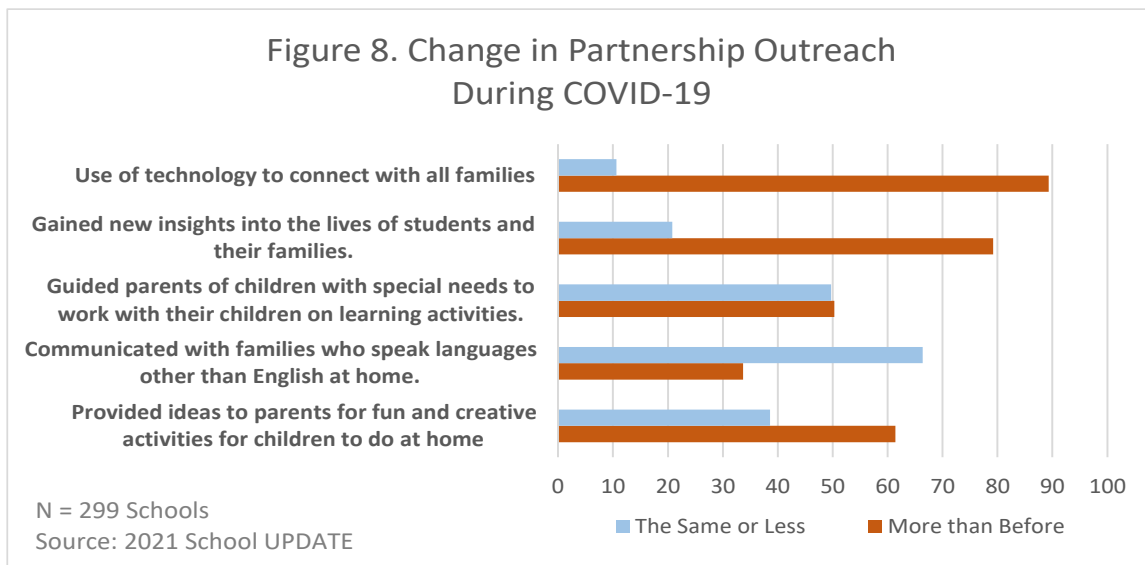
**Flexible schedules; flexible locations.** We asked school-based Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs) whether their school returned to in-person classes, virtual schooling, or a hybrid of the two. The results show that there was no one way that schools operated through the 2020-21 school year. The largest percentage of schools conducted full-time remote learning for all students (43%). Other ATPs reported fully in-person schooling (17%), daily in-person schooling for some students (22%), and some face-to-face school on some days of the week (18%). The diversity in how schools operated combined with many schedule changes. Fewer than 20% of ATPs reported that their starting school schedule and location remained constant through the end of the year. About 60% reported that their school operations changed *more than once* during the school year. These figures reveal a high degree of fluidity, transitions, and disruptions experienced by school staff, teachers, families, and students in 2020-21. Nevertheless, these ATPs persisted in working to confront the challenges of COVID-19.

**Solving COVID-19 challenges.** *Facing Challenges of COVID-19* is an 11-item scale ( $\alpha = .81$ , scored 1-4 for Conducted Very Well, Need to Improve, Will Do Next Year, or No Plans to Do This) on specific actions to meet partnership challenges during COVID-19. A large percentage of ATPs reported that their school did many of the listed practices very well. At the same time, as shown in Figure 7, about one-third of ATPs indicated that they need to improve specific practices: Communicating with all families about partnership activities (31%); conducting workshops or meeting with families at school or online (32%); gathering families’ input on school decisions (35%); and getting information from workshops or meetings to family members who could not attend (38%). Additionally, one-quarter (25%) of ATPs agreed that they could improve connections with community partners to benefit students. These patterns were similar across elementary and secondary schools.



It is equally important to note that certain activities were implemented very well by a majority of NNPS schools. These practices include: Provide families with computers and internet access (80%), ask parents to guide students to complete home assignments (72%); and provide families information on how students' assignments are collected and graded (73%). Most school ATPs reported that they were doing very well on these fundamental connections needed for virtual schooling and student learning. These patterns were similar across elementary and secondary schools.

ATPs reported how some partnership efforts changed due to COVID-19. They noted whether practices occurred more often, about the same amount, or less often than before COVID-19. Figure 8 shows that almost 90% of schools increased their *use of technology* to connect with families. Nearly 80% believed they *gained new insights* into the lives of students and families. Over 60% reported that their ATP and school provided *more ideas to families about activities to do at home*.



About half of the school ATPs reported doing more to help guide families of students with special needs, and even fewer (about one-third) said they did more during COVID-19 to communicate with families who do not speak English at home. These last two findings are critical given national reports about how these already-disadvantaged groups have struggled to be adequately served during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020; Hoofman & Secord, 2021). It may be that some NNPS schools with strong partnership programs already had good communications with these groups of parents, making pre- and post-COVID connections similar (same as) in practice. NNPS can explore these patterns with other data.

## School Correlates

Table 2 reports correlates of ATPs actions to solve COVID-19 challenges with important qualities of their programs of school, family, and community partnerships. We learned that scores on the *Facing Challenges of COVID-19* scale are significantly and positively correlated with the overall quality of the school's partnership program ( $r=.468$ ); the quality of basic and advanced program implementation ( $r=.232$ ;  $r=.509$ , respectively); the extent of support from school colleagues ( $r=.509$ ); and district facilitation ( $r=.509$ ).

**Table 2. Correlates of SCHOOL ATP Partnership Program Qualities and Responses to COVID-19 Challenges**

	<b>Overall Program Quality</b>	<b>Basic Implementation</b>	<b>Program Implementation</b>	<b>Collegial Support</b>	<b>District Support</b>
<b>Actions to Solve COVID-19 Challenges to Family and Community Engagement<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>.468***</b>	<b>.232***</b>	<b>.509***</b>	<b>.379***</b>	<b>.324***</b>

<sup>1</sup> *Facing Challenges of COVID-19 Scale*  
 Source: 2021 SCHOOL UPDATE, N=312  
 Zero-order correlations: \*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<.01, \*p<.05.

In short, school ATPs did more to try to solve COVID-challenges to family engagement, teacher practices, and student learning if the school had stronger partnership programs. Measures of the overall program quality, program implementation, collegial support, and district facilitation all predicted whether ATPs reported that their school was “doing very well” in addressing partnership challenges related to COVID-19. The positive and significant correlations are unlikely to be due to chance.

In other analyses, we learned that the overall quality of partnership programs encouraged ATPs to address particular COVID-19 challenges including conducting workshops for families in person or online ( $r = .483^{***}$ ); gathering family input to school decisions ( $r = .442^{***}$ ); and working with community partners to benefit students and families ( $r = .439^{***}$ ). These relationships suggest the programmatic work implemented by schools in NNPS and supported by district leaders serve as a strong foundation for addressing the unexpected challenges to connecting with families and students caused by COVID-19.

It is important to note that school percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals and the percentages of students identified as English language learners were not significantly (NS) associated with school efforts to respond to COVID-19 challenges to connect with families in new ways. This tells us that ATPs in schools with few or many economically-stressed students and families worked in similar ways to try to help students keep learning from home during the COVID crisis.

**Examples of School ATPs’ Best Practices, Challenges, and Next Steps during COVID-19 Crisis**

ATPs shared a best practice that their school conducted to support partnerships during the COVID-19 crisis through the end of the 2020-21 school year. Chart 2 shows that ATPs used many social media platforms to contact parents and students, hold meetings, and deliver resources (e.g., extra food, medicines, computers).

Many ATPs and teachers concentrated on connecting with parents when their children were “absent” from online classes to learn if and how to help these students attend class every day. They created new designs for home visits; put meeting information in video format on-line; had virtual meeting spaces for families to connect with teachers, administrators, and other families; provided families and students with computer hardware and software; and started a parent group for non-English speaking families.

## Chart 2. SCHOOL ATP Reports on Partnership Actions during COVID-19 Crisis

### Part 1. Examples of School Best Practices during the 2020-21 School Year

- We met with every parent and student at the beginning of their assignment to our school to share and discuss our school and district. We also developed growth goals and lines of communication.,
- We offered online book club groups for parents and guardians.
- Virtual coffee chat - used MS Teams to conduct virtual coffee chats. Families dialed in using their phones as we conducted language-based coffee chats.
- We used informative videos by the administration and certified staff. They seemed a lot more personable than fliers and voice messages.
- We provided laptops, headphones, and supplies to all students at the beginning of the year.
- We helped all families in need register for hot spots and laptop distributions so 100% of students had the technology they needed.
- The creation of *Familias Unidas de Frost-Bilingual* is a parent group that focuses on the leadership capacities of our families.
- All parents were given an opportunity to participate in our yearly Open House, virtually. All virtual Open Houses were taped and loaded to our new YouTube channel.
- One of the best practices for engaging families was our work with community partners to ensure basic needs were met so that student learning could continue at home (food, school libraries, computers, etc.)
- We sent out surveys to parents to find out their needs.
- Our school provided on-site technology assistance for families and launched a team for home visits to provide food/technology assistance and others recourses to virtual students

### Part 2. Reports of Parents' Concerns during the 2020-21 School Year

- What are students gaining and losing due to screen time?
- How can we extend the number of hours our children are back in school?
- Will my child be ready for kindergarten?
- Parents want to know how to help their child during remote learning sessions.
- What guidance is being given to high school students about options after high school?
- How are grades given and how long do students have to complete online lessons and assignments?
- How is my child's attendance determined and how does attendance affect grades?
- Many parents are concerned about keeping their children safe from Covid-19
- Most parents want to know about technology and resources at home to help their child.
- Most want to know about the health and safety policies and procedures that schools and districts are putting into place.
- Parents are seeking face to face activities to enjoy engagement activities again.
- The most common concern is keeping their child engaged during remote learning
- Parents want to know when we are returning to in-person learning.

See more examples of schools' best practices in *Promising Partnership Practices 2021* at [www.partnershipschoools.org](http://www.partnershipschoools.org) in the section Success Stories (Thomas, et al., 2021).

Panel 2 of Chart 2 shows that parents' most common concerns include: Understanding information from districts and schools on systems to grade students' work; ways that parents can provide feedback to districts and schools; how to use technology effectively when children are learning from home; strategies to motivate students in remote learning; supporting children's social-emotional development across grade levels in face-to-face and remote learning; and deciding if and when schools are safe and healthy for children to return to in-person classes.

## Summary and Conclusions

Despite the disturbances and disruptions that characterized the 2020-21 school year due to COVID-19 variants, district leaders for partnerships and school teams continued to guide their schools to conduct responsive family engagement activities. They worked under unprecedented conditions to assist teachers with remote teaching tasks and to communicate with families to help them support their children's learning from home. The 2021 *UPDATE* data revealed three areas that continue to need attention from districts and schools in the next school year.

**Students' learning losses.** The 2021 *UPDATE* asked district leaders and school teams to estimate the percentages of students in their district who started the school year in need of remedial instruction in reading/English Language Arts and math to catch up on skills missed due to the COVID-19 closures in the prior school year. About half of the district leaders (47%) and similar percentages of school ATPs reported that *more than half* of their students (50%-100% of students) needed remedial instruction in both subjects. The others (just over 50% of districts and school ATPs) estimated that *up to half* of their students need to catch up on these skills.

This is a big challenge that will not be quickly solved, as it takes time and well-designed, engaging materials to help students catch up *and* move ahead on reading and math skills at the same time.

**Progress and persistent problems with the digital divide.** Both district leaders and school ATPs reported working with community leaders and local organizations to obtain computers and internet access (e.g., local hotspots, increased bandwidth) for students who lacked the necessary technology to participate easily in online classes. They made some progress in the 2020-21 school year and provided many students with needed equipment. However, more than a year after the onset of COVID-19, about 30% of district leaders and more than 40% of school ATPs estimated that from 25% to 100% of their students still did not have working computers and adequate internet access at home.

Not surprisingly, district leaders and school teams linked the lack of computers and internet access at home with students' learning losses. District leaders reported strong connections of the lack of computers with students' need for remedial instruction in reading/language arts ( $r=.51$ ,  $p<.01$ ). School ATPs associated students' lack of computers and technology at home with the percentage needing remedial instruction in reading and math ( $r=.28^{**}$  and  $r=.25^{**}$ ,  $p<.01$ , respectively). According to district leaders and school teams, the digital divide remains a destructive force disrupting many students' learning. This is a persistent problem that requires continuing attention.

**Hoping for More and Better.** In thinking ahead to the next school year, many district leaders and school ATPs raised one common wish: To return to more face-to-face connections to meet, greet, and strengthen relationships with parents. They recognized that over the past two years they learned new technologies to connect with parents. The new connections actually increased the participation of many parents who, pre-COVID, were unable to attend meetings and activities at school. This "silver lining" on the dark cloud of COVID is likely to continue in the future. At the same time, district leaders for partnerships and school teams acknowledged that they missed the depth of connections that come from meeting parents in person to hear their views and experience the fun and pride of students' presentations and productions, as in pre-COVID days.

Typical comments from district leaders and school teams included:

“We want to get our families comfortable again coming back into the schools.”

“I am hoping that parents and the community will return to being as involved in person as before COVID.”

“We are hopeful to again have parents engaged in programs on site. For some, virtual meetings were difficult to navigate.”

“We are looking forward to having more face-to-face time with our students to ensure their needs are met.”

“We are struggling with *Zoom* burnout.”

“We look forward to engaging our families and parents through multiple venues to extend the modes/methods for engagement and participation in our school, family, and community activities.”

These hopes echo throughout NNPS and across the country. With luck and on-going flexible thinking, the next school year will combine more face-to-face connections of educators, families, and students with the best virtual connections developed in response to COVID-19 challenges. The result will be stronger and more equitable programs of school, family, and community partnerships.

## NOTES

- 1) In 2021, data are from NNPS districts in 12 states: AR, AZ, CA, CT, ID, LA, MI, MN, OH, PA, SC, and WA. Data are from NNPS schools in 11 states: AR, CA, CT, FL, LA, OH, MI, PA, SC, and WA.
- 2) The *internal reliability* ( $\alpha$  or alpha) of a scale indicates whether the items represent a common construct. Reliability coefficients of .6 or higher indicate that the items are related and that the scale is useful.
- 3) ( $r$ ) refers to a correlation coefficient that reports the strength of relationships between two variables.
- 4) States and organizations in NNPS also completed 2021 *UPDATE* evaluations. We examine these data, but the samples are small and agendas are too varied to analyze aggregated data.



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## HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

Review each section of this report and reflect on how *your* program compares with reports from districts and schools across the country.

- Discuss with your colleagues and school teams:

**What are we doing well now? What can we improve in the next school year?**

**What advice or professional development from NNPS would help us meet our goals?**

- District leaders: Review your *Leadership Plan for Partnerships*.  
School ATPs: Review your *One-Year Action Plan for Partnerships*.  
How will you improve your plans for the 22-23 school year? Retain good practices and consider needed improvements.
- District leaders who have 8 schools or more in NNPS that completed the 2021 School UPDATE, will receive a *customized report* from NNPS on your schools' data in the next week or so. You will be able to compare your schools' data with the figures in this report. Discuss patterns of results that are important in your location.
- Share this document with your colleagues and supervisors to show that you are working with NNPS to evaluate your work and to improve your plans and practices every year.
- Contact NNPS with questions about this report or to talk about your next steps to improve district-level and school-based partnership programs.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FROM NNPS

Members of NNPS have many options for professional development to continually improve their programs of school, family, and community partnerships.

- **Visit the NNPS website:** [www.partnershipschools.org](http://www.partnershipschools.org).
- Read the monthly NNPS *E-Brief* for news and ideas. Use information from *E-Brief* in your own communications with school-based ATPs.  
Make sure your IT office allows *E-Brief* and other e-mail from NNPS, Johns Hopkins University, and Constant Contact.
- District, organization, and state leaders may register for the NNPS Leadership Institute in March or in October. Leadership Institutes are for district, organization, and state leaders who are new to NNPS or who are ready to conduct *One-Day Team Training* workshops with their schools' Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs). Check the NNPS website to register for the next Leadership Institute. Follow the links from the home page, [www.partnershipschools.org](http://www.partnershipschools.org).
- NNPS conducts a free webinar for district leaders and for school teams in January and February, respectively, to review basic guidelines for successful partnership programs. Watch for information in the monthly E-Briefs about the free webinars each year.
- Find good ideas in the NNPS annual books of *Promising Partnership Practices* on the website in the section *Success Stories*.<sup>7</sup>
- Follow NNPS on *Facebook* and *Twitter* for photos, notes, and newsletters from NNPS Institutes and from network members. "LIKE" NNPS on **Facebook** at: <https://www.facebook.com/partnershipschools> and follow us on **Twitter** at: [https://twitter.com/NNPS\\_JHU](https://twitter.com/NNPS_JHU).
- Scaling up? Ask the next set of schools to complete the *NNPS School Membership Form*. See the section Join NNPS at [www.partnershipschools.org](http://www.partnershipschools.org). See "Why NNPS?" in this section.
- E-mail NNPS Facilitator—Brenda Thomas, [bthomas@jhu.edu](mailto:bthomas@jhu.edu), with YOUR questions about next steps at the district level to strengthen your program and assist your schools.
- Want on-site or online professional development? Contract with NNPS for keynote addresses, presentations, and workshops to support your work and to prepare your schools' ATPs. Contact us by email for more information.



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