The Evolution of Family-School Partnerships in New York State Rural Middle Schools as a Result of COVID

Prepared By:
Sacha Bennett and Katie Ralston

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With gratitude & love,

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are 9.7 million students in U.S. rural schools (National Rural Education Association [NREA], 2021). New York State serves the 6th largest population of rural students, with almost 300,000 enrolled in rural schools across the state (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). To bring attention, awareness, and advocacy to rural education, we partnered with the Rural Schools Association of New York State (RSANY), a member-driven organization that represents the interests of the small and rural districts of New York.

In initial meetings with RSANY, association leaders voiced that family-school partnerships are particularly critical to the success of rural school students. However, establishing these partnerships has been historically challenging in rural schools due to constraints like poverty and geographic isolation (Witte & Sheridan, 2011). To aid RSANY in addressing this issue, our study examines current family-school partnerships in New York State middle schools and how they have evolved due to the COVID pandemic.

Joyce Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence (Epstein, 2006; Epstein, 2010; Epstein, 2011; Epstein & Galindo, 2011) emphasizes the interconnectedness of school, family, and community while placing the child at the center of their convergence. We used Epstein's Family Involvement Framework as a tool to better understand the interplay between families, schools, and communities in building authentic and effective partnerships.

This study explored two research questions that informed our findings and recommendations:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

01 What do New York State rural middle school families, teachers, and administrators perceive as effective practices that maximize family-school partnerships?

02 According to families, teachers, and administrators, how have family-school partnership practices evolved since COVID?

Data collection that included surveys and focus group interviews of families, teachers, and school administrators, coupled with a literature review of middle-level education, family-engagement practices, and the effect of COVID-19 on rural communities, revealed the following:

FINDINGS

- **Families, teachers, and administrators report a need for frequent, purposeful two-way communication – school to home and home to school.**

- **Families want to be more involved in meaningful decision-making opportunities at school.**

- **Virtual meeting and communication options increased family involvement and family-school connectivity.**

- **An enhanced focus on social-emotional care and community collaboration is beneficial to all members of the school community, especially students.**

Based on the research and findings, four main recommendations emerged:

01 Rural middle schools should convene a family-school advisory council or action team with administrators, teachers, and family leaders who can serve as representatives to initiate partnership plans and forge bridges with other families.

02 Rural middle schools need to establish two-way channels for communication from home to school and school to home that focus on student success.

03 Rural middle schools must communicate the difference between family engagement and family partnerships with the school community and explain why a primary focus of the school community should be strong family-school partnerships.

04 Rural middle schools must align community services with school goals and integrate child and family programs.

RSANY will use the findings and recommendations to inform professional support offerings to member schools.

INTRODUCTION

"The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families."

-Joyce Epstein

The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural areas as regions outside an urbanized area or urban cluster (NCES, 2019). There are 9.7 million students enrolled in rural schools across the country (NREA, 2021). One in five students enrolled in public schools is in rural settings (NCES, 2019), which makes up 53% of the nation's school districts (School Superintendents Association & Rural School and Community Trust, 2017). Despite the statistics, rural education receives little attention in research or policy; urban and suburban counterparts often overshadow the unique needs of rural communities (Lavalley, 2018). Rural American children and their families face more unique obstacles than urban and suburban areas, such as lower diversity rates, higher poverty rates, and significantly less state and federal funding (School Superintendents Association & Rural School and Community Trust, 2017). Despite these challenges, many rural schools succeed academically, with higher graduation rates and students more prepared for the workforce than urban settings (School Superintendents Association & Rural School and Community Trust, 2017).

New York State serves the 6th largest population of rural students, with almost 300,000 enrolled in rural schools in the state (NCES, 2019). To bring attention, awareness, and advocacy to rural education in New York State, the Rural Schools Association of New York State (RSANY) is a member-driven organization representing the interests of the small and rural districts of New York State. The association, a state affiliate of the National Rural Education Association, initiates research and provides information and services to its members to provide the best public education to support a solid and influential rural community culture (RSANY, 2020). As the client partner for this project, board members of the organization shared concern for the missing voices of rural families in educational research. They strive to support rural school districts in becoming more educationally effective through solid family-school partnerships.

Since COVID-19, RSANY is re-examining ways to best support its member schools. Professional development needs and the focus of member schools have changed due to the global pandemic. The Rural Schools Association must first understand the need to offer resources, training, and support relevant to the member schools' new circumstances. While academic expectations and curricular changes are state-driven, family-school partnership goals are specific to schools and regions. The purpose of this project is to provide RSANY with the research and school-based evidence needed to best support member middle schools in the area of family-school partnerships. Information gathered highlights effective practices and supports in place pre-COVID and provides recommendations for improved methods and supports revealed as a result of COVID.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

The Rural Schools Association of New York State is a member-driven organization representing the interests of the small and rural districts of New York State. The group initiates research and provides information with the vision of providing the best public education available to support a solid and influential rural community culture. The association was founded in 1978 and is housed and supervised by Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. RSANY staffs an Executive Director, David Little, Esq. and Deputy Executive Director, Dr. Gretchen Rymarchyk. A Board of Directors representative of ten zones within New York State and directors from supporting organizations and members at large serve as the governing body of the association, currently comprised of approximately 45 delegates.

RSANY has established six organizational goals (RSANY,2020):
1. To assist districts in liaison with state and national government leaders and with officials of rural interest organizations
2. To conduct research pertinent to small and rural school districts and to disseminate results to the membership, the public, and decision-making bodies
3. To assist members in developing organizational policy at the state and national level
4. To provide service and information to district members relating to staffing, curriculum, in-service training, instruction, and general school management
5. To provide a clearinghouse function and promote communication among members of the program
6. To conduct regional and statewide conferences concerning the broad issues facing RSA members.

This capstone considers the voice of rural residents and educators in six of ten zones across New York State. Input from direct stakeholders for this project include school administrators, teachers, and rural families, but rural students and communities will ultimately benefit from the findings and recommendations. The evidence from this project will inform organizational decisions around services provided to member schools such as professional development opportunities, organizational partnerships focused on crucial areas of family-school relationships and provide valuable information for policy proposals on behalf of rural schools. Commonalities among the various regions can drive regional and state conferences agendas, while the overall project can expand the association's geographical footprint and increase visibility.

Meetings with the RSANY Executive Director and Deputy Executive Director revealed the ongoing concern that rural communities are politically marginalized, underrepresented, and underfunded. As a result, association leadership shared that the voice of rural educators and families is noticeably absent in educational research, leaving an unfortunate gap in the nuances that make rural communities unique. Leaders commented that the lack of attention and credit to rural areas contributes to the "brain drain," with students leaving rural areas seeking other opportunities and threatening the future relevance of rural schools. To best support the RSANY member districts, the association wants to understand what is needed to bolster family-school partnerships at the "make or break" middle school years.

New York State serves the 6th largest population of the
nation's rural students
(NCES, 2019).

AREA OF INQUIRY

Given the limited resources in many rural communities, family-school partnerships are particularly critical to the success of rural school students; however, establishing these partnerships has historically proven to be challenging in rural schools due to constraints like poverty and geographic isolation (Witte & Sheridan, 2011). In addition, unique contextual factors plaguing rural education heighten the necessitation for a concerted effort to develop stronger partnerships between schools and families to meet the needs of rural students in and outside of school (Semke & Sheridan, 2012).

More frequent interactions between the school and home model the importance of education to young adolescents (Epstein, 2010), yet a pervasive disconnect among families and schools exists (Christenson, 2004). It is not a lack of want for these partnerships that dissuades their development, but a lack of understanding and support on how best to form and sustain them. Most educators want to engage families on a deeper and more practical level but do not know how to build and preserve effective family-school programming (Christenson, 2004). Many admit they fear trying new approaches that may harm what already exists (Epstein, 2010).

With the onset of the COVID pandemic, this family-school partnership became vital as challenges specific to rural areas were exacerbated. Inequitable internet access, inability to access the school building often seen as the hub of a rural community, and increased financial stressors in already economically depressed areas further threatened educational access and opportunity. The pre-existing differing opinions between the role of the school and the role of the family prevalent in rural communities (Christenson, 2004; Epstein, 2010; Semke & Sheridan, 2012) were intensified by the pandemic. More than ever, a focus on effective family engagement practices has emerged as paramount to the success of rural middle-school students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Effective partnerships improve student attendance, graduation rates, school connectedness, behavior, and performance scores (Yamauchi, 2017) and are also correlated to improved teacher retention rates and overall school ratings (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009).

A family-school partnership does not constrict the roles of the family and school but instead embodies a complementary system with the child as the central focus " (Semke, & Sheridan, 2012).

To understand existing research around family-school partnerships and engagement specific to this study, we conducted a literature review on family engagement and partnership theories and how these relate to the areas most pertinent to our investigation. First, we examined literature about the importance of family partnerships in education. This general theme allowed us to deconstruct research around the power of partnerships, regardless of demographics or location and illuminated the difference between family partnerships and family engagement. Second, we narrowed our research lens to explore family engagement in rural settings. The RSANY leaders warned us that the rural voice is missing in much of the research about family-school partnerships, which moved us to focus on characteristics unique to rural districts and permitted us to identify gaps in the research. Finally, we limited our literature review to concentrate on effective family engagement at the middle level and determined this as the main research area.

This literature review begins with family engagement and partnership theories. It continues with a view of the intersection between the family and their partnerships with education, their involvement in rural schools, and their involvement at the middle school level, each of which was examined to inform our findings and recommendations. Finally, the section concludes with a discussion on the implications of COVID on rural communities.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIP THEORIES

In examining research around family-school partnerships and family engagement, several theories surfaced, revealing relevant connections. The most prevalent ideas that emerged in our inquiry include the Bioecological Theory, Funds of Knowledge Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Theory of Overlapping Spheres.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory considered the child's development dependent on experiences at multiple levels, known as an ecosystem (Yamuci et al., 2017). The levels include a microsystem, the child's type of school and home environment, and extend into the macrosystem, which includes the customs and beliefs of the greater society in which the child lives (Velez-Agosto, Soto-Crespo, Vizcarrondo-Oppenheimer, Vega-Molina, Coll, 2017). Bronfenbrenner's theory is respected in the field because it considers a conglomerate of experiences over time rather than context alone (Yamauchi et al., 2017). However, this theory has faced criticism for its lack of variability across familial circumstances (Munhall, 2001) and lack of clarity around the concept of culture (Velez-Agosto et al., 2017), which has resulted in inconsistent and subjective interpretations by researchers (Yamauchi et al., 2017).

Funds of Knowledge Theory came from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Yamauchi et al., 2017) but was reconceptualized to bring families' hearts, homes, and minds as a strengths-based approach in partnerships (Gonzalez, Wyman, & O'Connor, 2011). This theory relies heavily on educators' understanding of familial backgrounds and contributions and is seen as especially helpful in understanding the assets marginalized families and students bring to situations (Gonzalez, Moll, Tenerey, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzalez, & Amanti, 1995). However, critics warn that the funds of knowledge approach may position the school above the family, making the family dependent on the school for involvement opportunities rather than encouraging a proactive, conjoined approach (Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013).

Social Capital Theory is another theory referenced in family-school partnership literature, yet it appears to be the most limiting (Yamauchi et al., 2017). Social Capital Theory refers to the exchange or transformation of assets among individuals (Moore, 2012). It has been thought to hold inequities and barriers at the forefront, especially when addressing the needs of historically underrepresented communities (Yamauchi et al., 2017). This theory is limiting due to its exclusive nature, implying that partnerships are dependent on social networks and resources (Yamauchi et al., 2017).

Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Influences combines psychological, educational, and sociological perspectives of child development, emphasizing the interplay of family, school, and community (Yamauchi et al., 2017). The child is the nucleus of this theory that considers how the overlap of family, school, and community directly impacts the child's growth and development (Sanders & Epstein, 2000). Epstein's theory is considered an expansion of Bronfenbrenner's ideas, marked with a clearer conception of culture and interconnectedness of the systems that impact a child's development (Magwa, Magurai, 2017; Yamauchi et al., 2017). Placing the student at the center and acknowledging the necessity of a communal support system of families, schools, and community resonated with us and became the most appropriate theory to ground our study.

FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS IN EDUCATION

It is essential to clarify the difference between family engagement and family partnerships. Family engagement is a focus on engaging families in educational practices within the home. It is a multi-dimensional approach that emphasizes the importance of continuity between school and home, offering resources and strategies for parents to engage with their children on an educational level. Although working together, family engagement defines a distinct role for the family and school (Fantuzoo, Tighe, & Childes, 2000). Family-school partnerships, however, extend the concept of family engagement. In partnership, two-way communication exists, along with shared power, collaboration, and mutual respect (Henderson et al., 2007). A true family-school partnership does not constrict the roles of the family and school. Instead, it embodies a complementary system of consistent interaction with the child as the central focus (Semke & Sheridan, 2012).

Differing perspectives about the role of the school versus the families pose unique challenges in creating meaningful partnerships between the two (Wei et al.,2019). When educators limit their view to seeing students only as students, family and school are separated. This mindset fuels the belief that the family should focus on parenting while schools focus solely on academics. Epstein (2010) reports that when educators view students as children, a partnership forms where families and schools work together to improve students' opportunities.

Often, schools blame families for not doing enough, while families expect schools to take full responsibility for their child's education. As a result, each role is viewed as a separate entity, which becomes a barrier to developing collaborative relationships between families and school teams (Lewis & Forman, 2002). The idea that the family and school are not separate but should be harmoniously reliant on one other reflects a partnership of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2010). If schools put forth a concerted effort to develop relationships that welcome questions and even disagreement, trust builds, which often segues to problem-solving and joint decision-making (Epstein, 2010).

Family-school partnerships are considered inclusive of diverse family units, families with different needs, and the multiple domains in which alliances are formed (Henderson et al., 2007; Epstein, 2011; Miller et al., 2013). In addition, effective partnerships improve student attendance, graduation rates, school connectedness, behavior, and performance scores (Yamauchi, 2017). They are also correlated to improved teacher retention rates and overall school ratings (Allensworth et al., 2009).

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN RURAL SETTINGS

While significant research on family engagement in urban and suburban settings exists, there is a noticeable gap in research on family engagement and partnerships in rural settings (Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Lavalley, 2018). This gap in research means we are missing critical information that contributes to the educational success of nearly 20% of our U.S. student population. Low population density and geographic remoteness of rural areas are the main reasons for limited research attention (Iruka et al., 2019).

Rural areas are also considered less racially and ethnically diverse, which may deter researchers from studying schools in these areas (Anthony-Stevens & Langford, 2020). Yet, cultural rurality as we know it is changing. The "aging-in-place" of the white population is diminishing, and a demographic shift toward minority-majority communities has become more prominent in rural settings (Lichter, 2012). This change challenges cultural rurality and brings additional attention to rural education research and resources (Licther, 2012). Considering a student's culture does not solely mean ethnicity but the varied ways people participate in their community's activities to create culture (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). With a deeper understanding of students' backgrounds and experiences, educators are better equipped to work with families to connect students' experiences to actual practice through participation in broader communities beyond the confines of the school (Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Many of the family engagement practices suggested in the literature are evidence-based best practices rooted in conceptual frameworks; however, they lack the background and cultural nuances of a rural community (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). For example, a standard recommendation in the family engagement literature advises holding school events outside the school building to reach more parents and families (Voldovinas D'Angelo et al., 2015). However, in rural communities, community space is often limited, and the school is viewed as the hub or the center of the community (Tieken, 2014). In these instances, the recommendation to hold events outside the school may not be possible. Therefore, it is vital to provide solutions to the real challenges that may be causing barriers to family participation in rural areas. For example, schools are often encouraged to provide childcare and food for families to attend school events (D'Angelo, et al.,2012). However, unique to rural areas, many families live an hour or more from the school building, and public transportation is not available in those areas (Semke & Sheridan, 2012), giving rural schools the challenge of providing transportation as well.

When looking at a child's educational development, we must not overlook the ecological setting. Rurality is a significant factor that impacts children's learning and development (Showalter et al., 2017). In addition, rural settings present unique conditions that affect the opportunity to build and foster quality relationships between home and school, sometimes deterring rural families from taking an active role in their children's schooling (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). Fortunately, many rural schools have mechanisms already in place that could be readily accessed to enhance family-school partnerships, such as a willingness to creatively purpose limited resources to meet the needs of students (Witte & Sheridan, 2011).

While rural schools struggle to provide the same culturally rich experiences that many urban schools provide, Bauch (2001) advocates that rural communities benefit from social capital and a sense of place that urban areas do not. Rural communities are often "tight-knit" and take a sense of pride in their history, relational networks, and deep-rooted intergenerational connections, which strengthens a community's norms, values, and attitudes (Bauch, 2001). Literature also supports the strengths of rural schools, noting close ties among schools and communities, an attitude of perseverance among educators, and an emphasis on positive relationships (Durham & Smith, 2006; Miller & Votruba-Drzal, 2013). Rural schools can capitalize on the solidified sense of belonging and community in rural areas to enhance family-school partnerships.

As students progress into secondary school, family engagement tends to wane; however, research shows that students achieve academically and socially when families are actively involved in schooling during the middle-school years (Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018; Valdovinos D'Angelo et al., 2012; Bowen et al., 2008). Often a dip in family engagement is first observed at the middle-school level, as students gain more independence and responsibility for their education. Elementary educators prioritize family collaboration at a much higher level than secondary educators, even though adolescents need family support more than ever when they enter the middle grades as they develop as adolescents (Griffin & Steen, 2010).

A responsive middle school includes strong school-family-community partnerships where all stakeholders contribute to a shared vision (Epstein, 1996)

The collaboration seen among families of school-aged children changes from a primarily school-based partnership mentality in elementary school to an involvement mindset in middle school. Middle school involvement is characterized by communication mainly between the student and parent and learning environments in the home separate from those within the school (Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018). The differing partnerships show a more distinct overlap between school and home in the elementary grades but more isolated entities at the middle-school level. While the collaboration still exists, it drops from a practice of partnership to mere involvement. Effective middle-school home-school partnership practices should involve two-way reciprocal communication between the educators and parents (Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018). Attention to family engagement and partnerships at the middle level is crucial because of the transition period of adolescence (Bowen et al., 2008). Academic, social, and emotional habits formed in middle school indicate the trajectory for high school and beyond, making the middle-level years pertinent for powerful partnerships and significant for future success (Bowen et al., 2008).

Well-planned, articulated, and implemented family partnership practices are essential for middle-school student success (Garbacz, Minch, Jordan, Young, & Weist, 2020). A responsive middle school includes strong family-school-community partnerships where all stakeholders contribute to a shared vision (Epstein, 1996). When school leaders and teachers put home-school relationships at the forefront, families are more engaged in their students learning journey (Epstein, 2001; Mac Iver, Epstein, Sheldon, Fonseca, 2015). Intentional, well-developed partnerships move beyond a mere exchange of essential information into a comprehensive programming realm that increases success for the students and the school (Epstein, 1996). Effective partnerships depict the school, the home, and the community, all working synchronously to share information, guide students, make decisions, and influence progress (Epstein, 2011; Bryan & McCoy, 2007).

IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 ON RURAL COMMUNITIES

The onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic brought an air of uncertainty to school districts and communities across the world. Rural school districts faced glaring challenges related to internet connectivity, access to resources and services, and disrupted instructional time (Education in a Pandemic, 2021). Moreover, the interruption in school connectivity during the pandemic contributed to an already declining rural school enrollment; New York state districts in rural and economically challenged areas saw an enrollment decline of 3.9% over the past year (Silberstein, 2021).

The digital divide has been an area of concern in many rural school districts for quite some time. The lack of broadband access and infrastructure in many rural areas was a mitigating factor in enrollment decline during the pandemic since rural students lost access to internet-related instruction and resources (Jameson et al., 2020). High-speed Internet, a connection rate of 100 Mbps or greater, is "no longer a luxury, it's a necessity," as explained by New York State's Broadband Program Office (Broadband for All, n.d.). Yet, nearly 20% of New York's rural communities are still labeled as "Unserved" or "Underserved" when it comes to Broadband Access (Broadband for All, n.d.).

Aside from disparate academic conditions during the pandemic, localities with little to no internet access faced additional marginalization in the areas of mental health, employment inequities, and access to essential health services (Phillipson et al., 2020). Rural populations faced more severe unemployment, mental health, and economic impact than their urban counterparts (Mueller et al., 2020). For example, there was nearly a 40% increase in reports of anxiety and depression during the pandemic (Mueller et al., 2020), yet access to mental health services was harder in rural areas during the pandemic (Health Resources & Services Administration, 2021). Economically, there was almost a 10% increase in unemployment rates, which impacted rural communities' already strained social capital and economic health (Mueller et al., 2020).

Recognizing the implications of COVID-19 in rural communities is crucial to the future development and success of family-school partnerships. The emphasis on family, school, and community interrelationships helps us understand the implications of COVID-19 on each facet of home-school partnerships in rural middle-school settings. Our goal with this study is to amplify the rural voice on this educational topic.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Berman (2013) describes conceptual frameworks as models for relationships between variables to define the phenomenon in question. Multiple theories frame research about family-school partnerships and elucidate why family engagement is critical to student success (Yamauchi et al., 2017). We chose Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence to guide our investigation because of its comprehensive interplay of family, community, and school roles in student success (Figure 1).

We felt that Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence allows for the dissection of more variables than the other theories, giving RSANY and participating schools various avenues to explore when building powerful partnerships.

Figure 1
Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres
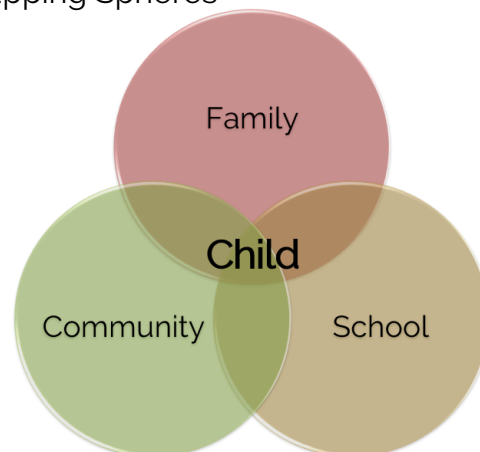
Epstein's theory states that frequent interactions between families, schools, and communities result in students receiving consistent messaging from different sources about the importance of school and can improve school and community culture (Epstein, 2020). This theory places the child at the center of their development and success as the basis of the conceptual framework.

Research centered in this framework shows that school-family-community partnerships positively impact student academic engagement and performance (Epstein, 2011; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson et al., 2011). Placing the child at the center of the framework stipulates the common link between all partners and emphasizes active learning in all settings (Epstein, 2011). Vital to the understanding of overlapping spheres of influence is the notion that no individual or entity acts solely on its own for students' success. When spheres overlap, there is two-way communication, shared responsibility, shared decision making, and continuous opportunity for partnership (Epstein, 2011).

Figure 2

Epstein's Six Types of Family Involvement Framework

Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement for Comprehensive Programs of Partnerships From School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action, Third Edition (2018)

Figure 2 shows Epstein's six types of family involvement that strengthen the comprehensive program of partnerships: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and community collaboration (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). Decades of research investigating how the three spheres identified in Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence mutually reinforce one another were based on this conceptual framework (Organizing Engagement, 2021). Epstein and colleagues stress that family-school partnerships will diminish unless concerted efforts build mutually beneficial and sustainable relationships (Organizing Engagement, 2021). The six types of involvement identified by Epstein should be co-developed with the school and family acting in communion.

TYPE 1 - PARENTING

HELP ALL FAMILIES ESTABLISH HOME ENVIRONMENTS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN AS STUDENTS.

Focuses on establishing home environments that support children as students. Within the realm of parenting, schools should empower families to share information about the family's background and culture and the child's strengths, needs, and interests. Parenting supports are offered to all families in various formats, not just those who choose to attend workshops.

TYPE 2 - COMMUNICATING

DESIGN EFFECTIVE FORMS OF SCHOOL-TO-HOME & HOME-TO-SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS ABOUT SCHOOL PROGRAMS & THEIR CHILDREN'S PROGRESS.

Emphasizes the importance of two and three-way communication with attention given to the language, readability, and accessibility of information for families. Communicating is not just dissemination of information, but conversational and informational for both families and schools.

TYPE 3 - VOLUNTEERING

RECRUIT & ORGANIZE PARENTS TO SUPPORT THE SCHOOL AND STUDENTS.

Intended to be inclusive of anyone who supports the mission and activities of the school, not just those who can participate during the school day. Flexibility in schedules is an important consideration when recruiting and maintaining volunteers, offering appropriate training, and capitalizing on individual skills and talents.

(EPSTEIN, 2018).

TYPE 4 - LEARNING AT HOME

PROVIDE INFORMATION TO FAMILIES ON HOW TO HELP STUDENTS WITH HOMEWORK, COURSE DECISIONS, & PLANS.

Redefines the idea of homework. Rather than homework assigned to be completed by the individual student, learning at home offers interactive family learning opportunities. A coordinated schedule is created to include families in curricular decisions and activities.

TYPE 5 - DECISION MAKING

INCLUDE PARENTS IN SCHOOL DECISIONS & DEVELOP PARENT LEADERS & REPRESENTATIVES.

Indicates the equal representation of all families within the school. Whenever possible, students should be included in decision-making opportunities, with the precept that decision making is a collective process inclusive of shared views and goals.

TYPE 6 - COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY

IDENTIFY AND INTEGRATE RESOURCES AND SERVICES FROM THE COMMUNITY TO STRENGTHEN SCHOOL PROGRAMS, FAMILY PRACTICES, AND STUDENT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Matches community contributions with school goals and connect families to many available resources. In this frame, the community is not limited to the school or family neighborhoods but should include social and economic influences supporting student growth and success.

(EPSTEIN, 2018).

PROJECT QUESTIONS

Research surrounding the importance and effectiveness of family-school partnerships coupled with evidence of lower rates of family-school partnerships in rural schools justified the need for attention to this topic in New York State rural middle schools. Conversations with board members and employees of the Rural Schools Association of New York State further affirmed the gap in research of family-school partnerships specific to New York State middle schools. Understanding current partnership practices and needs of member schools was necessary to allocate resources to member schools properly.

The onset of COVID-19 presented incredible challenges to schools, especially those in rural areas. However, a reframing of the pandemic features the bond and true dependency that exists among rural schools and the greater community. COVID-19 acts as a catalyst for rural middle schools to evaluate opportunities to implement proactive, meaningful, and family-focused partnerships through this project.

RSANY strives to provide services and resources to district members to support rural school needs. They asked us to investigate current perceptions of family-school partnerships among school stakeholders to inform future resource creation and refine existing resources. A compilation of research, conversations with RSANY and COVID-19 informed the research questions for this project.

1 **What do New York State rural middle school families, teachers, and administrators perceive as effective practices that maximize family-school partnerships?**

2 **According to families, teachers, and administrators, how have family-school partnership practices evolved since COVID?**

STUDY DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study is to examine the family-school partnerships in New York rural middle schools. Using an explanatory design mixed-methods approach, we solicited opinions from families, teachers, and site administrators from member schools of the Rural Schools Association of New York. We sought information about the practices and activities that contributed to the success and limited the progress of family-school partnerships before COVID and after COVID.

An explanatory mixed methods design aims to collect qualitative data to expand or provide additional context to the quantitative information (Cresswell, 2006). Figure 3: Explanatory Mixed Methods Design illustrates the process of using the initial analysis of the survey's findings to inform the design of the questions for the focus groups. The data collected during the focus groups further explained the information garnered from the survey. The collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data in two phases culminated in a comprehensive understanding of the area of inquiry.

Figure 3

Explanatory Mixed Methods Design

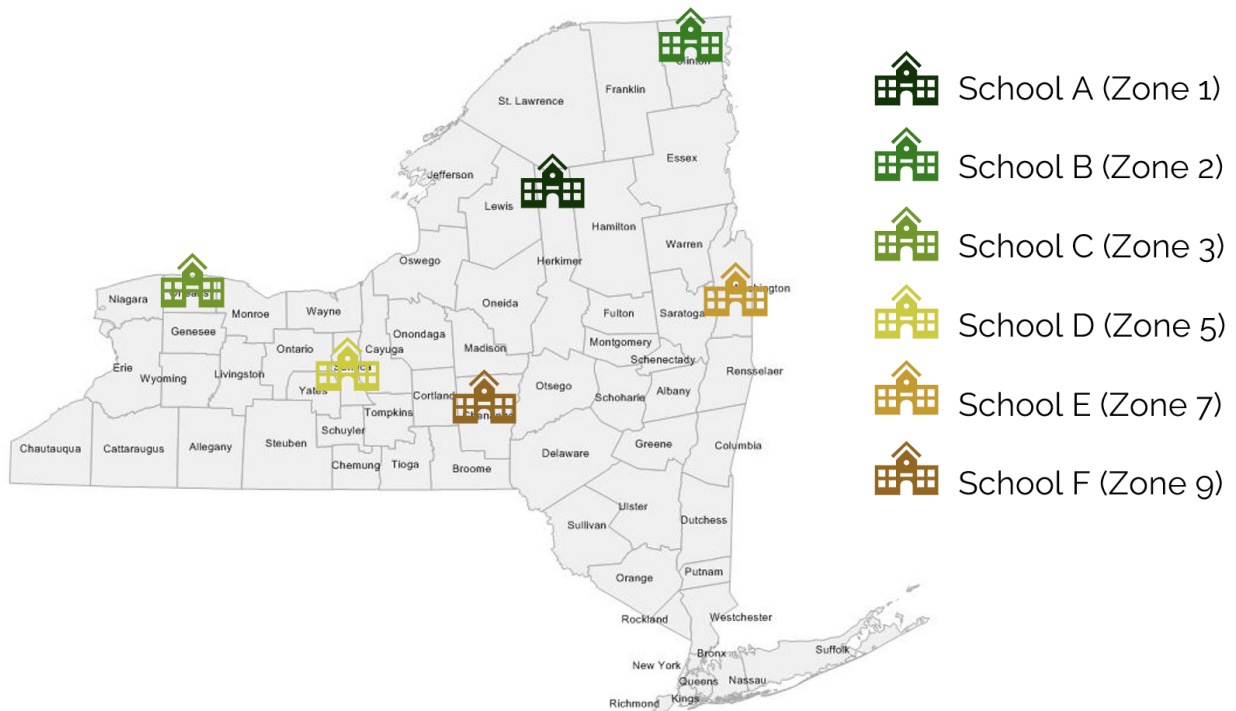| Quan/Qual Data Collection *Survey* | → | Quan/Qual Data Analysis *Survey* | → | Qual Data Collection *Focus Groups* | → | Qual Data Analysis *Focus Groups* | → | Interpretation based on Quan->Qual Results |

(Cresswell, 2006)

PARTICIPANTS

We opted for a volunteer sampling technique to gather participants from the invited RSANY member schools who self-selected to participate in the study. At the onset of the study, the goal was to enlist one middle school member in each RSANY zone, totaling ten schools. The RSANY Director led the outreach efforts by posting an announcement about the study on the RSANY.org website and invited the researchers to present a project overview to the RSANY Board members during a scheduled monthly meeting to enlist their help in participant recruitment. In addition, we agreed to create and share a school-specific findings report to participating schools as an incentive for participation. Those combined efforts secured ten schools, one from each of the RSANY member zones; however, shortly after the study launch, four schools withdrew their participation, citing constraints due to pandemic response efforts. This resulted in only six member schools participating in the study. As noted in Figure 4, these six rural school participants represented different New York zones.

Figure 4

Map of Participating RSANY Member Schools

School A (Zone 1)

School B (Zone 2)

School C (Zone 3)

School D (Zone 5)

School E (Zone 7)

School F (Zone 9)

There were no other qualifying characteristics required to participate in the study other than being an RSANY member, which meant the school serves a rural population and had middle grades on the campus. Table 1 summarizes the average enrollment, percentage of white students, and economically disadvantaged students at the six participating schools. The enrollment numbers represent the entire student population at the school. One of the schools was a K-12 campus, two of the participating sites served 6-12 grades, and the other three were 6-8 middle schools.

Table 1
Average Demographic Characteristics of the Six Participating Rural Schools

n = 6	Mean	Range	SD
Enrollment	379.7	259-485	81.9
% White	93.3	88-97	0.04
% Economically Disadvantaged	46.5	30-55	0.09

DATA COLLECTION

Once school participation was secured, we hosted a kickoff meeting with the RSANY Director and administrators from the six participating schools. The kickoff meeting was an opportunity to introduce the project, participation expectations, and timeline. Each site principal agreed to serve as the primary contact and aid with information dissemination, survey distribution, and focus group participation during the meeting. We communicated directly with lead administrators for the study's duration, and the administrators shared the information about the study with the teachers and families. The RSANY director was included in all significant correspondence for the course of the study.

Family-School Partnership Survey

To understand the experiences of families, teachers, and administrators, we adapted the validated Measure of School, Family, and Community Partnership Survey (Epstein, 2018), which was grounded in the six types of family involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. The survey assessed whether the school involved families in meaningful ways. The original survey included 54 Likert scale questions and three open-ended responses. In comparison, the survey adapted for this study was condensed to 31 Likert questions and two open-ended response questions to encourage and maximize participation. The complete survey used for this study is in Appendix A.

The survey used a five-point Likert scale – Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Frequently – to determine how often the school provides specific activities to support aspects of solid family-school partnerships. In addition, the two open-ended responses asked participants to share specific practices in their school community that either supported or limited successful family-school partnerships. See Table 2 for a breakdown of survey questions and connections to the study's research questions.

Table 2
Survey Questions Tied to Research Questions

Six Types	Number of Questions	Type	Research Question
Parenting	5	Likert	1
Communicating	8	Likert	1
Volunteering	4	Likert	1
Learning at Home	6	Likert	1
Decision--Making	5	Likert	1
Collaborating with Community	3	Likert	1
Contribute to Success	1	Open-ended	1 and 2
Limit Success	1	Open-ended	1 and 2

Administrators, teachers, and families completed the same survey. Surveys were distributed via a RedCap access link to the administrator at each school with dissemination directions and messaging to share with families, teachers, and other site administrators. Schools were encouraged to print and share paper copies with those stakeholders who could not access the survey online. All queries in the survey were voluntary except for the school's name and the school community role. We collected 315 surveys from the six sites, with 172 individuals also completing the open-ended responses (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Survey Responses by School and Total
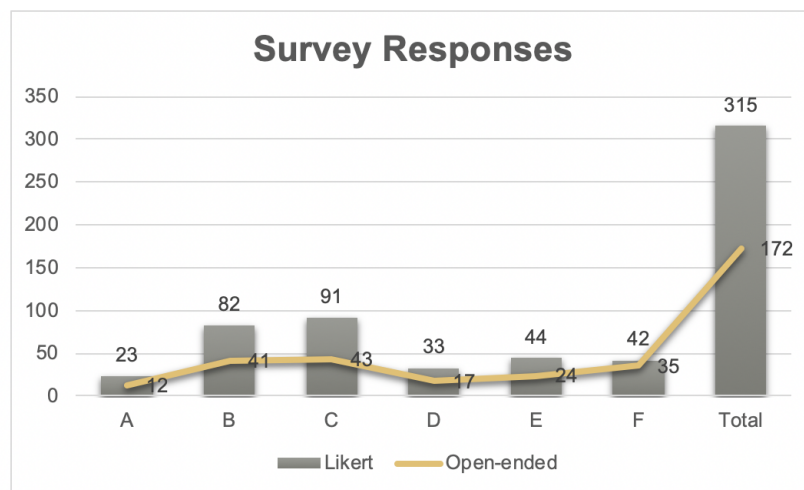
From the 315 surveys submitted, 236 families, 68 teachers, and 11 site administrators completed the Likert scale questions. One hundred seventeen families, 47 teachers, and eight administrators also provided qualitative data by responding to one or both open-ended questions (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Survey Responses by Role
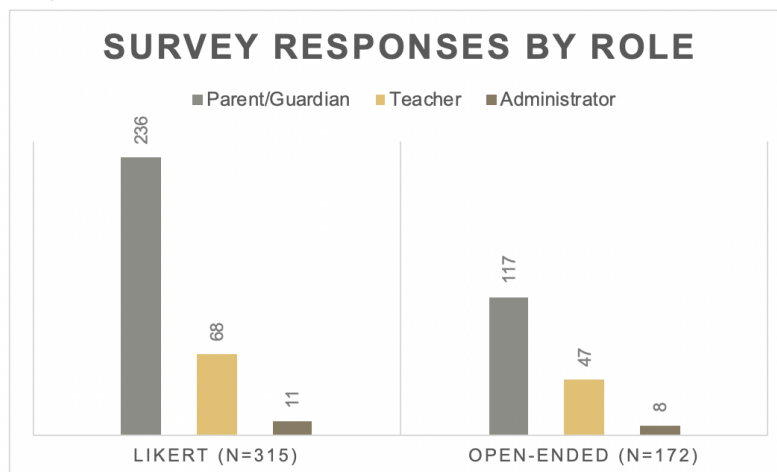
Focus Groups

We enlisted the primary contact administrators at each site to recruit families and teachers to participate in the focus groups. We convened one focus group for administrators, two sessions for teachers, and two sessions for families. Six administrators, 13 teachers, and 15 families participated in the virtual focus group interviews via Zoom.

All five focus group sessions began with an overview of the study, an explanation of the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected, and a description of the focus group meeting process. Each focus group lasted between 45-60 minutes. Participants answered the primary guiding questions (Figure 6), and we asked follow-up probing questions to encourage participants to expand on and clarify previous answers.

Figure 6
Focus Group Questions

What family-school partnership practices were successful before the onset of COVID-19?

What practices have been put in place as a response to COVID you feel should be maintained in the future?

Who are the families you are not yet reaching, and what is causing that barrier? How has your school prioritized partnerships with the families you are not yet reaching?

How do you envision family-school partnerships at your school three years from now?

DATA ANALYSIS

Coupled with Epstein's Theory of Overlapping Spheres and Six Types of Involvement Framework, the two research questions guided quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Using the explanatory mixed-methods design, we collected and analyzed the data from the surveys before conducting the focus groups. Following the culmination of the focus groups, we analyzed the focus group data, which further explained the phenomenon in question and informed essential findings.

Quantitative Analysis

We utilized RedCap for survey creation and submission, a secure web application for building and managing online surveys; all completed surveys are housed in that system and accessible to generate descriptive statistical reports for each survey question. Initially, we reviewed the Likert-scale responses aggregately by survey question, noting the questions with answers that favored one end of the frequency spectrum. For example, upon preliminary examination, a question that displayed a clear trend toward higher frequency was in the Communicating section of the survey and asked how often there is a clear two-way channel for communication from home to school and school to home (Figure 7). We identified that question as one that could have critical implications. We repeated this process for all the Likert scale items.

Figure 7

Example of Likert-scale Response Graphs in RedCap

Counts/frequency: Never (3, 1.0%), Rarely (22, 7.1%), Sometimes (52, 16.9%), Often (94, 30.5%), Frequently (137, 44.5%)
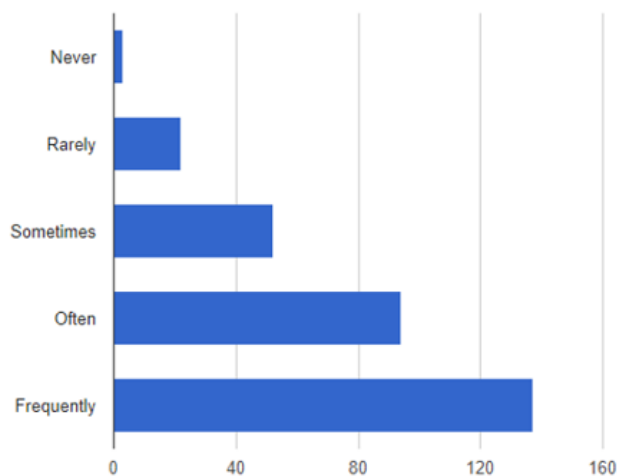
In addition to reviewing the aggregate data for each survey question in RedCap, we exported the data into Excel to disaggregate by role – family, teacher, administrator – and created graphs displaying the survey responses by question by role (Figure 8). We then reviewed these data for commonalities and discrepancies between the three groups. Next, we compared the questions with similar means and notable differences to the aggregate data from each question to determine the need for additional qualitative data to expand on these findings.

Figure 8

Example of Graphs Disaggregating the Mean Response by Role
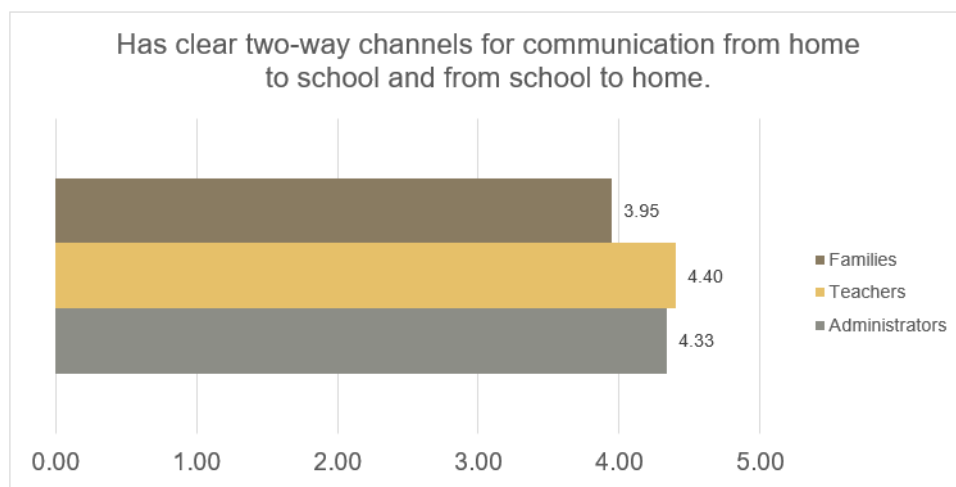
Qualitative Analysis

We exported the survey open-ended question responses from RedCap into Excel for coding purposes. First, we used a deductive approach thematic analysis of the open-ended response data using the six types of involvement from the conceptual framework. We included the seventh category of "other" for responses that fell outside the six types and considered outside of this project's scope – poverty, internet access, work schedules, etc. Next, we examined each response and added a "1" column in the category the response addressed. If someone discussed more than one type in the response, a "1" was placed in all relevant columns. After we categorized responses, we summed the number of times each categorization occurred within the open-ended responses (Table 3). Finally, we filtered the report by stakeholder group to delineate the number of reactions each group contributed for each category.

Table 3

Survey Open-Ended Response Coding Summary by Family Involvement Type

	Total (n=172)	Admin (n=8)	Teachers (n=47)	Families (n=117)
1. Parenting	8	0	8	0
2. Communicating	102	5	26	71
3. Volunteering	3	0	2	1
4. Learning at Home	4	0	3	1
5. Decision-making	14	0	1	13
6. Collaborating with Community	25	3	8	14
7. Other	37	3	22	12

This process illuminated that communicating, collaborating with the community, and decision-making were the most referenced type of involvement in the responses, leading to the next analysis phase. To further investigate the three prevalent qualitative findings, sub-themes were identified for each prevalent overarching theme. For example, when examining the responses tied to the communicating theme, we determined that four sub-themes were the most pervasive – use of technology, frequency, accessibility, and responsiveness. In collaborating with the community theme, we found two sub-themes – services/programs and gathering opportunities. We also identified two sub-themes for the decision-making category – trust and flexibility (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Identified Sub-themes for Most Referenced Themes

COMMUNICATING

Use of technology
Frequency
Accessibility
Responsiveness

COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY

Services/Programs
Gathering Opportunities

DECISION MAKING

Trust
Flexibility

With a significantly higher number of responses falling into the communicating type of involvement (N=102), we found it essential to disaggregate the responses further and analyze the number of affirmative and adverse reactions in each sub-theme by stakeholder role. By doing so, we were able to see that there were nearly as many negative comments about communication practices as there were positive comments. For example, families shared 56 positive responses and 53 negative responses, and many of the negative comments left by families were tied to accessibility and responsiveness (Table 4).

Table 4
Positive and Negative Survey Open-ended Responses About Communicating

Communicating	Total	Admin	Teachers	Families
Positive	87	5	26	56
Use of Technology	18	1	3	14
Frequency	24	3	3	6
Accessibility	42	3	15	24
Responsiveness	27	2	8	17
Negative	72	3	16	53
Use of Technology	14	2	4	8
Frequency	16	0	1	15
Accessibility	42	1	9	32
Responsiveness	37	0	5	32

We used a similar deductive thematic coding process for the open-ended survey response analysis of focus group transcripts. Again, Epstein's Six Types framework was the primary guide in the thematic analysis. Again, we assigned specific colors to each of the six types of family involvement; we read through the transcripts highlighting text sections in the associated category color. Finally, we compiled quotes into an Excel document by theme using the same sub-themes identified in the open-ended responses for the three main types – communicating, decision making, and collaborating with the community.

FINDINGS

From the analysis of the survey Likert-scale questions, the open-ended survey responses, and the focus group interviews, we found four primary findings that addressed the two research questions of this study. Table 5 outlines the salient findings by research question and associated type of family-school partnership. Elaborated explanations of each finding are presented following.

Table 5

Key Findings by Research Question

Research Question	Type of F-S Partnership	Finding
1	Communicating	Families, teachers, and administrators need frequent, purposeful two-way communication - school to home and home to school.
1	Decision-Making	Families expressed a desire to be involved in meaningful decision-making opportunities at school.
2	Communicating	Virtual meeting and communication options increase family involvement and school connectivity.
2	Collaborating with Community	An enhanced focus on social-emotional care and community collaboration is beneficial for all stakeholders, especially students.

What do families, teachers, and administrators report would be helpful to maximize family-school partnerships?

FINDING 1

Families, teachers, and administrators need frequent, purposeful, two-way communication – school to home and home to school.

In this study, **communicating** is defined as school-to-home and home-to-school interaction about programs and children's progress. This was by far the most prominent of all the types of family involvement mentioned in our research. There were eight Likert-scale questions on the survey about how often communication practices occurred between families and the school. The five-point scale included never, rarely, sometimes, often, and frequently as response options. Table 6 displays the Likert-scale responses from each of the eight communicating section survey prompts of highest mean to lowest with responses by stakeholder role disaggregated.

Table 5

Q2: Communicating Type Descriptive Statistics by Mean

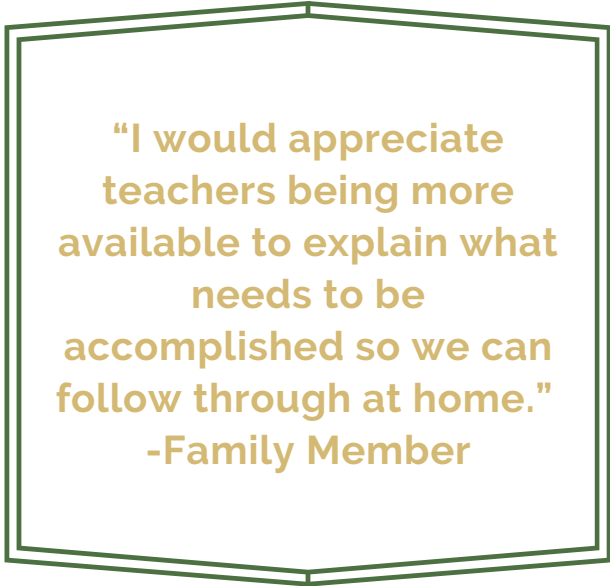| Question	Prompt		N	Mean	SD
Q2.1	Provides communications that are clear and easy to read.		309	4.29	0.18
		Families	230	4.04	0.37
		Teachers	68	4.39	0.20
		Admin	11	4.45	0.50
Q2.3	Has clear two-way channels for communication from home to school and from school to home.		308	4.23	0.20
		Families	230	3.95	0.43
		Teachers	67	4.40	0.22
		Admin	11	4.33	0.42
Q2.7	Produces a regularly scheduled school blog or newsletter with up-to-date information about the school, special events, organizations, and meetings, as well as parenting tips.		303	3.96	0.02
		Families	230	3.99	0.47
		Teachers	63	3.96	0.80
		Admin	10	3.95	1.04
Q2.4	Conducts a formal conference with every parent at least once a year.		307	3.86	0.27
		Families	230	3.90	0.65
		Teachers	67	4.17	0.59
		Admin	10	3.50	0.78
Q2.8	Provides paper copies of e-communications for families who do not have computers, internet access, email, or connections on social media platforms.		270	3.65	0.05
		Families	197	3.60	0.39
		Teachers	63	3.71	0.48
		Admin	10	3.63	1.50
Q2.2	Develops communications with parents who do not speak English well, or who need large type.		233	3.47	0.09
		Families	161	3.47	0.44
		Teachers	62	3.36	0.50
		Admin	10	3.59	0.42
Q2.6	Trains teachers, staff, and principals on the value and utility of family involvement and ways to build positive ties between school and home.		274	3.10	0.29
		Families	198	3.34	0.41
		Teachers	66	3.26	0.21
		Admin	10	2.70	0.60
Q2.5	Sends home folders of student work weekly or monthly for a parent review or comment.		304	2.74	0.26
		Families	228	2.78	0.45
		Teachers	65	2.40	0.78
		Admin	11	3.03	0.86

The N in Table 5 denotes the number of participants who responded to that question. The mean shows the response averages on the 5-point Likert scale, and the standard deviation indicates the extent of the variation from the mean. **Q2.1: Provides communication that is clear and easy to read** scored the highest total mean at 4.29, while **Q2.5: Sends home folders of student work weekly or monthly for a parent review or comment** had the lowest total mean at 2.74. We noted a discrepancy in the mean family responses to **Q 2.3: Has clear two-way channels for communication from home to school and from school to home** when compared to the responses of the teachers and administrators to the same question. The families' mean answer to that question was 3.95, while the teachers and administrators reported a much higher frequency of two-way communication practices at a mean of 4.40 and 4.33. All three stakeholder groups shared similar information about the frequency of **Q2.7: Produces a regularly scheduled school blog or newsletter with up-to-date information about the school, special events, organizations, and meetings, as well as parenting tips**. These data correlated with the need for two-way communication, not just one-way information dissemination. We found evidence in the qualitative data that also supported this correlation.

The open-ended survey response data from 172 participants yielded 102 references to communication, which was the most prevalent of the six types of involvement. The families, teachers, and administrators used four primary characterizations when discussing communication: accessibility, responsiveness, use of technology, and frequency. Accessibility emphasizes the ability to acquire information or engage in interactions. Responsiveness indicates that two-way communication was happening, and school staff considered issues and concerns with care. The use of technology had to do with communication channels such as app notifications, social media, emails, and electronic newsletters for school-to-home information dissemination. Finally, frequency refers to the number of communication occurrences happening during the school year.

ACCESSIBILITY

Fifty-three percent (N=84) of the total survey open-ended responses mentioned the importance of accessibility when building strong communication practices in a family-school partnership – 52% of families' responses about communication, 57% of the teachers' responses, and 50% of the administrators' responses were about accessibility when considering communication. During the focus group interviews, three of the six administrators expressed the value of open and transparent communication between families and school staff. One administrator shared the progress in building stronger relationships between families and teachers; however, in doing so, families were beginning to reach out after teachers' work hours, thus requiring the school to establish clear guidance on when families can reach out to teachers.

During the focus groups, teachers reiterated the desire for open communication with families to share what is going on in the classroom and how well their child meets expectations. One teacher mentioned they wished they had more time to reach out to families and share celebrations and achievements, rather than only reaching out to families when there were challenges or concerns. When asked an open-ended response question about what was limiting family-school partnerships, six teachers reported on the difficulties they faced getting in touch with families, which they attributed to parents' work schedules, not picking up their phones, and being reluctant to support their child's education or apathy about school.

> **"I would appreciate teachers being more available to explain what needs to be accomplished so we can follow through at home."**
> **-Family Member**

Some family members praised their school's open communication approach and commitment to understanding and responding to families' needs. For example, one parent shared that they felt their school was an interactive community of teachers, students, and parents who are there for each other. While another family member shared that if someone does not personally know one of the staff or the teachers at their school, then "good luck to finding out what is really going on."

RESPONSIVENESS

We determined it was essential to distinguish between accessibility and responsiveness when coding the survey responses and the focus group interviews. Responsiveness adds a layer of compassion and concern, a feeling of being heard and respected. Being available for a the conversation is one crucial piece but being an active participant in the dialogue and a partner in solving problems and decision making is another. Upon analysis, 40% (N=64) of the responses about communication dealt with responsiveness, with the majority of those reactions coming from family stakeholders.

> "We are open to parent communication, but we do not spend enough time promoting and fostering those relationships overall between families and school unless there is a problem and a specific need to reach out.
> I also believe that positive school-parent conversations do not happen enough and that people shy away from making direct and meaningful connections. "
> - Teacher

Two teachers expressed their attempts to make meaningful connections with families, particularly with at-risk children, in the survey responses. However, they concluded that many parents do not respond to their outreach due to socio-economic needs outweighing their child's academic needs in school. In the focus group interviews, a teacher shared that they would love to see families feel more comfortable reaching out and connecting with them. They added that they prioritize contacting parents to share and discuss positive information about their child, such as how hard their child is working and how funny they are in class. The teacher continued, "Some of the barriers are built up thick, but there is nothing to say that if we make a concerted effort to connect, that it's impossible."

In the open-ended responses, one family member shared that they feel they must advocate for their child in school, or their students will "fall through the cracks." Another family member expressed that some teachers are "very caring and look out for their students," while others do not seem concerned about their child's wellbeing. During the focus groups, a family member shared that they felt an abundance of communication between school and home but only at a surface level. They suggested that there needs to be some concerted effort placed on relationship building and establishing trust between the school and family to build a "real partnership."

Twenty percent of the survey open-ended responses mentioned using technology to share school information with families, yet almost half of those comments had a negative attribution. Both in the open-ended responses and the focus group interviews, all three groups cited the use of communication platforms, like ParentSquare, Remind and School Messenger, as helpful tools in providing families with important reminders, notifications, and other mass communication announcements. During the focus group interviews, a teacher expressed using these apps was simple yet effective way to keep everyone connected, especially during the pandemic. Administrators appreciated the ease of use and ability to share information through the best channel for the families, whether email, text, or phone call.

"We get electronic messaging through School Messenger, and an email posted on the website. These practices and the redundancies of communication are beneficial, so we can know what is going on at school."
– Family Member

"It has been frustrating for me as a parent to try and get all of the information and to see everything without being on multiple platforms. I don't know where to go sometimes."
– Family Member

Some families expressed dissatisfaction with using technology for communication when schools used multiple different tools to disseminate information. One family member explained that they felt confused because the school shared some information on Facebook, other information through Google classroom, and additional information from the Remind app. Another family member explained they do not have access to the internet, which made it challenging to know what was going on in the school. A teacher explained that the ParentSquare app was overused and had become the primary way the school communicated with the families, even more so during the pandemic, making it challenging to build relationships and make meaningful connections with families.

FREQUENCY

Twenty-five percent of the open-ended comments about communication was about the frequency of communication in their school community. Again, many alluded to the use of technology as beneficial to provide regular, ongoing communication; however, when it came to the frequency of personalized information from home to school and school to home, all three groups expressed discontent with the timeliness of communication.

Many survey respondents indicated that ongoing, regular communication is a critical factor in successful family-school partnerships in their school; however, a recurring sentiment in both the open-ended survey responses and focus group interviews was the lack of family members' understanding of homework and assignments expectations. The majority of family members in the focus groups shared that they felt like they did not have regular communication from the teachers about the learning in specific classes, which negatively impacted their feeling of connectedness to the school community. One family member expressed that they wished there were opportunities to visit their child's classes throughout the year to see what they were learning. Another family member shared that the school depends on the students to tell the family what is happening in school, and because they are middle-school students, that is not a realistic expectation.

> **"But once in a while, just some communication about what is going on in the classroom or with grades or a subject or something would be nice, so that we can start a conversation with our kids. I would love that. We don't find out until it is too late to do anything."**
> **-Family Member**

What do families, teachers, and administrators report would be helpful to maximize family-school partnerships?

FINDING 2

Families express that they want to be more involved in meaningful decision-making opportunities at school.

Epstein's Six Types of Family Involvement Framework defines **decision-making** as including families as participants in school decisions and the development of parent leaders in the school community. Table 6 below displays the Likert-scale responses from each of the five decision-making section survey prompts of highest mean to lowest with responses by stakeholder role disaggregated.

Table 6

Q5: Decision Making Type Descriptive Statistics by Mean

Question	Prompt		N	Mean	SD
Q5.4	Addresses parents' questions, concerns, and conflicts openly and respectfully.		294	3.99	0.51
		Families	219	3.66	0.49
		Teachers	64	3.73	0.81
		Admin	11	4.58	0.40
Q5.1	Has an active PTA, PTO, or other parent organization.		299	3.56	0.53
		Families	223	3.87	0.49
		Teachers	65	3.86	0.71
		Admin	11	2.95	0.65
Q5.5	Develops the school's plan and program of family involvement with input from teachers, parents, and others.			3.46	0.18
		Families	213	3.32	0.43
		Teachers	62	3.40	0.55
		Admin	11	3.66	1.11
Q5.2	Includes parents and families on the school council, improvement team, and/or other committees.		285	3.19	0.43
		Families	210	3.48	0.52
		Teachers	64	3.40	0.49
		Admin	11	2.70	0.70
Q5.3	Involves parents in organized, ongoing, and timely ways in planning and improving school programs.		286	3.04	0.38
		Families	212	3.21	0.51
		Teachers	64	3.32	0.40
		Admin	10	2.61	0.49

Q5.4: Addresses parents' questions, concerns, and conflict openly and respectfully recorded the highest total mean at 3.99, though there is a notable gap between the response mean of the administrators (4.58) and then the teachers (3.73) and families (3.66). **Q5.3: Involves parents in organized, ongoing, and timely ways in planning and improving school programs** incurred the lowest total mean in the decision-making category at 3.04. The administrators' frequency mean was much lower on this question (2.61) compared to the teachers (3.32) and the families (3.21). **Q5.2 asked how often the school includes parents and families on the school council, improvement team, and/or other committees;** the administrators recorded the lowest mean at 2.70, again lower than the teachers and families. These data indicated that families were not always included in purposeful decision-making opportunities at the school, corroborated by what we heard in the qualitative data collection.

Family members offered 12 of the 13 references to decision-making in the open-ended survey responses, and it was a pervasive theme in the family focus group conversations. Families who provided feedback about decision-making practices shared the perspective that they were not actively involved in most decisions made at school. However, they had a desire to be involved. Five teachers reported in open-ended survey responses that families did not want to be involved in their children's education. One specifically stated that many families in their community are "overwhelmed with everything going on in their lives and are not interested in anything extra." Another teacher expressed that parents were too apathetic or busy to get involved. On the other hand, other administrators and teachers admitted that families are often not invited to share decision-making opportunities.

> **"Community involvement is limited to communication opportunities. There are very few opportunities for community members to participate in committees or organizations to create a stronger bridge between school and home."**
> **- Teacher**

In the survey responses, seven family members mentioned that people feel ostracized or alienated by the school community. One person said that if you are not part of one of the families in the "close-knit circle," then there are few opportunities to offer opinions or participate in decisions at the school. All three groups mentioned the challenge of the intergenerational nature of a small, rural community citing evidence of family members having bad experiences when they were in school, sometimes with the same teachers or school staff. These families carry those negative memories into their role as school parents or guardians, resulting in a reluctance to become actively involved in school decision making.

> There aren't many opportunities outside of field trips for parents/guardians to be welcomed into the classroom to help and be partners. It very much feels like there are two separate groups - the school vs. the families - and while we communicate well, there doesn't appear to be a true partnership in the day today.
> - Teacher

> "There is generational hostility where they don't think that we're here to help. They see us as an enemy, or they see us as a a judge. Like who are you to judge me? Who are you to tell me how to raise my kid when we're looking more top-down and say, like, hey, I want to help you navigate this minefield that we call life right now? And no matter what happens, I'm in your corner. Some people don't hear that."
> -Teacher

How do families, teachers, and administrators describe how school-family partnerships have evolved since COVID?

FINDING 1

Virtual family meetings and participation opportunities increased family involvement and school connectivity.

All three stakeholder groups explained that although the pandemic kept people away from the school building, it created more **communicating** opportunities using online meeting platforms like Zoom. In addition, in both the open-ended survey responses and focus groups, there were multiple mentions of increased family participation due to the availability of virtual meetings and events resulting from the pandemic response efforts.

One site principal shared that his school had more parent participation this year than in the previous years because of the opportunity to join virtually from home. A teacher touted a record number of parents attending parent-teacher conferences during the year. Another teacher revealed that they felt more closely connected to the families than ever before because everyone was more available to communicate virtually than they would have been if they had to come to the school to meet. The teacher claimed that the school's wifi hot spot pandemic response provided internet access to many without access before COVID, making it easier to connect with families via apps, email, online platforms, and virtual meeting spaces. Many family members shared that the constant communication incurred because of COVID via email, portal, website, and Zoom meetings, increased their sense of trust and confidence. .

"The other thing that's been really helpful, and I don't think this is going to go away, is things like streaming the athletic events and those types of things. Being able to engage the community or people, even grandparents that can get out of the home but want to see their kids can attend these events virtually. So being able to continue to do those types of things is a service and a way to draw the community together."
– Family Member

In the focus groups, the teachers and family members referred to the school as a community hub, and they expressed how difficult it had been during COVID not to attend events and functions at the school. Again, the creative solutions enacted by schools to continue to host events and stream them virtually allowed for an expanded audience. An administrator commented that the school's rural setting required many families to travel extended lengths to arrive, so they were already reluctant to attend gatherings before COVID due to transportation restraints, work schedules, or health issues. The move to live streaming events online allowed those family members who may not have attended in the past to partake in community and school events.

"This would be a great idea to bring in more parents so they can see, you know, what their kids are doing in school and learning in their classrooms."
- Family Member

Along the same line, during one of our focus groups, a family member expressed that after using digital tools for school-home connectivity during the pandemic, they wondered if there were additional opportunities to connect to the school in a virtual setting. They suggested using technology to provide parents and families access to the classroom and learning that transpires. The family member said they want to know more about their middle-school student's daily life at school and felt that schools could leverage technology for classroom visits and random snapshots of the kids in action. Another family member agreed and added that if they knew more about what was going on in the classroom, they would ask their child questions and have deeper conversations about school.

How do families, teachers, and administrators describe how school-family partnerships have evolved since COVID?

FINDING 2

An enhanced focus on social-emotional care and community collaboration is a support that should extend post-COVID.

Collaborating with the Community is the practice of collectively coordinating resources and services for families, students, and the school, especially around social-emotional care. Table 7 displays the Likert-scale responses from each of the three collaborating with the community section survey prompts of highest mean to lowest with answers by stakeholder role disaggregated.

"I love all these ideas about having a barbecue and getting to know teachers and staff maybe before the school year gets going. That would be really cool. I'm like, wow, wouldn't that be great to have a little face time with my 7th grader's teachers. That would be nice."
– Family Member

Table 7

Q6: Collaborating with the Community Type Descriptive Statistics by Mean

Question	Prompt		N	Mean	SD
Q6.1	Provides a resource directory for parents and students on community agencies, services, and programs.		287	3.69	0.28
		Families	215	3.51	0.52
		Teachers	61	4.02	0.54
		Admin	11	3.56	0.78
Q6.2	Works with local businesses, industries, libraries, parks, museums, and other organizations on programs to enhance student skills and learning.		283	3.54	0.16
		Families	210	3.49	0.54
		Teachers	62	3.42	0.50
		Admin	11	3.72	1.00
Q6.3	Provides "one-stop-shop" as a full-service school with family services, counseling, health services, recreation, job training, summer programs, and connections with other agencies.		284	3.42	0.08
		Families	210	3.49	0.57
		Teachers	63	3.34	0.26
		Admin	11	3.45	1.45

Q6.1: Provides a resource directory for parents and students on community agencies, services, and programs scored the highest total mean at 3.69, while **Q6.3: Provides "one-stop-shop" as a full-service school with family services, counseling, health services, recreation, job training, summer programs, and connections with other agencies** had the lowest total mean at 3.42. The frequency responses in this section were more closely aligned between the three stakeholder groups, with the most considerable discrepancy in means between how the teachers responded to how often the school provides a resource directory of services for families (4.02) compared to how the families (3.51) and administrators (3.56) responded. These responses are important because the administrators and families mentioned this type of family involvement greater than it was mentioned by the teachers in the open-ended responses and focus groups.

During the focus group interviews, there were numerous open-ended survey responses and mentions from all three stakeholder groups about the need for an increased focus on collaborating with the community. Four of the six administrators discussed the concern they shared for the mental health of their school community during the pandemic. One principal detailed how the pandemic shed light on the necessity to dedicate time and energy to social-emotional learning. They admitted they felt the most significant challenge the school community could face post-COVID is reverting to old habits that were "far from effective." The administrator expressed deep concern that the school would return to focusing on academic interventions and leave social-emotional care behind. Another principal revealed that they are convening students, families, and staff to determine how they will continue with their social-emotional attention so they can "keep kids at this age level feeling unique, special, and empowered." The administrators and teachers alike voiced that the whole-child priority heightened during COVID helped with attendance, test scores, and overall student success. Family members expressed similar appreciation for the enhanced mental health services and focused on social-emotional wellbeing during the pandemic.

"I would also say the one other thing that I'm super proud of is the mental health support that they've pumped in from the county. They've hired more people because as all of us know, this has been a strain on all of our mental health, and they've really kind of beefed that up. So I hope that does not go away."
– Family Member

"A result of COVID is the social-emotional aspect that we brought into the school as a common practice. I really do hope we do keep moving forward where we are focused on the whole student, not just what they're producing for us in the classroom."
-Teacher

To ensure students were not "falling through the cracks," one school in our study enacted a mentorship program where each teacher would choose five to eight students they felt needed additional attention during the pandemic. They were "responsible for those students" for the entirety of the school year last year. The teachers committed to calling the students at least once a week to check how they were doing. They would also reach out to the families to check on their well-being. Teachers perceived that consistent, dedicated effort built strong, enduring relationships with the families. During the focus group interviews, one of the teachers from this school shared that before COVID, they did not have the time or motivation to engage in such a practice; however, they felt this practice "made their job better" and would be something they would continue in the years to come.

Some schools reported that the pandemic strengthened family-school relationships, while others shared that the pandemic increased the chasm between home and school for those most at-risk. A few administrators told stories of students who did not come to school and families they could not reach, and they explained that the families had tenuous relationships with the school pre-COVID. Several family members shared how the pandemic uncovered how much or how little they knew about the teachers and staff at the school and illuminated who "truly cared about the students." A shared sentiment across all role groups was that the pandemic exposed the importance of intentional and strategic community collaboration events. The open-ended survey responses and the focus group conversations yielded specific examples of when families felt welcomed in the school community and did not. For instance, one family shared that being new to the community was incredibly challenging because they did not know how to find out information or even ask.

"I have read about schools that make an effort to reach out to all kids. They make sure that each and every kid has at least one adult that will check in on them. Supportive, caring relationships are the most important ingredient in determining success."
- Family Member

Another family new to the community shared that they felt intimidated by the closeness of the community and did not feel comfortable at the school. Several other families and teachers mentioned special events planned to build community and increase collaboration like barbecues, open houses, and other social gatherings. All groups expressed the desire to improve the quantity and quality of community gatherings post-COVID.

DISCUSSION

The study examined family-school partnership practices across six rural middle-schools in New York state and how those practices could evolve based on discoveries during the COVID pandemic. We surveyed school administrators, teachers, and families and convened focus group interviews to collect data on this topic. Our investigation uncovered that all three stakeholder groups considered communicating the most significant type of family-school involvement, with decision-making and collaborating with the community also critical areas when considering effective family-school partnerships.

The survey and focus group data revealed that communication is the most significant family involvement amongst families, teachers, and site administrators. In this study, all three stakeholder groups cited evidence of schools using effective forms of school-to-home communications about school programs, events, and student progress. However, despite schools using various technology channels to regularly share information and communicate with families, such as mass communication apps, electronic newsletters, and email correspondence due to the pandemic response efforts, families reported that using multiple digital platforms made it confusing cumbersome to find information. In addition, families and teachers tended to over-rely on technology for communication purposes which became detrimental to relationship building, especially with families who do not have access to the internet or are not comfortable accessing information via specific apps and websites.

On the other hand, all three groups attributed increased family involvement to the availability of virtual meetings and online tools during the pandemic. Teachers and administrators shared that participation in parent-teacher conferences during the pandemic doubled because families could attend from home and at a time suited to them. Family members explained that attendance at school events and functions also increased during the pandemic due to being available virtually. All stakeholders felt that virtual meetings and event options should continue to better support family-school partnerships.

Though many expressed school-to-home communication efforts existed and were standard practice in their school communities, they did not feel there was strong two-way communication. Many families expressed that no developed home-to-school communication pathway was available to ask questions, express concerns, and offer input. Teachers and administrators corroborated that there were often only a handful of families who participated as critical decision-makers in the school community. In contrast, many others remained on the periphery of the community. All three groups mentioned intergenerational aspects of rural settings as a possible contributor to this longstanding chasm between school and home. Some families are reticent to come to school or actively engage because they had a negative experience as students and possibly with the staff that still works at the school. The intergenerational nature of rural schools is a reality that needs to be addressed creatively and proactively to expand family-school partnerships to families outside of the usual circle of involvement.

The school is a hub for rural communities and should be lauded as such. If fostered and developed as a welcome place, more students could access resources, and community members could receive necessary services. COVID-19 illuminated the need for expanded social services to deal with mental and physical health. The school can be a safe place for the coordination and delivery of those services. If student and family health and wellbeing are attended to, then learning and academic success can follow. The school can become a place of positivity rather than viewed as a place of judgment or divisiveness.

Recommendations

Each of the recommendations was informed by findings and supported by research. The recommendations are specific practices to be implemented within the school. To support the necessary paradigm shift from family engagement to family-school partnerships, the Rural Schools Association of New York can create resources to add to their website and implement a professional learning series specific to the findings of this study. Providing member schools opportunities to learn about the difference between family involvement and family engagement is critical. After redefining family engagement, the association can offer resources and workshops for member schools to implement activities to support this redefinition of family involvement. RSANY can help middle schools create a vision of expected outcomes that will help keep their work focused and purposeful. Developing a virtual series for member schools based on the Epstein framework will give them a bank of reliable sources and ongoing support for their change efforts.

Recommendation 1

Establish a family-school advisory council or action team with administrators, teachers, and parent leaders who can serve as representatives to lead partnership initiatives and build a bridge with other families.

Supporting Research

One person cannot sustain the work necessary to build long-lasting and robust partnerships (Epstein, 2010). Established teams should represent the ethnic and racial diversity within the school and work to assess current practices, explore new opportunities for partnerships, implement partnership activities, and evaluate ongoing partnership efforts (Epstein, 2010). The action team attends to all six types of involvement to be most potent, with duties divvied out among team members. The action team acts as the leaders of the work, but participation and commitment for families, administrators, and teachers are necessary for the success and continuity of the work.

Recommendation 1A

Networking sessions that can link families with parent representatives – provide transportation, food, and childcare.

Supporting Research

Well implemented network events give families access to and knowledge of resources available in the community (Epstein, 1996). In addition, the school removes barriers that may create inequity in participation or access by offering transportation, a meal, and childcare during the workshop session.

Recommendation 1B

Convene family groups or gather information from family groups about their children's problems, difficulties, and successes.

Supporting Research

Support groups nurture a sense of collaboration and community. Benefits gained from such groups include a sense of community, psychological safety, emotional support, role models and mentors, idea sharing, sense-making, conflict resolution, and coping mechanisms (Solomon et al., 2001). While ongoing communication from the school is vital, expansion to community support groups indicates an interest in the wellbeing of the whole child. Interagency networking throughout the community bridges gaps between organizations that may cause deficits in services available to families (Wang et al., 2004). Parents often feel stressed when they have to navigate services independently, but parents feel protected, grateful, and in partnership with the school and other agencies when networks are employed (Wang et al., 2004).

Recommendation 1C

Provide workshops (facilitated by community members, family leaders, or teachers) for families on issues they have identified as concerning.

Supporting Research

Workshops allow families to realize they are not alone in their concerns. When families inform workshop topics, parents act as partners in activities and are valued contributors. When family leaders facilitate workshops under the supervision of the school, collegiality is built as families learn how to engage in content to aid in academic development and confidence (Redding & Walberg, 2012). Workshops create a sense of community, collaboration, learning, and problem-solving, and most importantly, create a safe platform to share experiences, concerns, and ideas (Goodman, Sutton, & Harkavay, 1995).

Recommendation 2

Establish clear two-way channels for communication from home to school and school to home.

Supporting Research

A school's attempt to engage students and improve learning outcomes is primarily informed by family-provided information; therefore, implementing strong partnership-based practices requires two-way communication between school and home (Meier & Lemmer, 2014). Ongoing two-way communication cultivates collaboration, trust, mutual respect, and transparency, strengthening family-school partnerships (Graham-Clay, 2005; Swick, 2003).

Recommendation 2A

Determine how all families can access general information – multiple channels (tech and non-tech).

Supporting Research

School personnel is often unaware of the communication barriers created by some communication methods (Nagro, 2015). Schools must consider and employ multiple media for communication opportunities while also understanding and acknowledging limitations. When implementing traditional strategies such as school-to-home notebooks, phone calls, and written communication, educators must consider the literacy levels of families (Nagro, 2015). Digital communication, while more efficient in two-way communication, requires internet access and digital competency (Bordolba & Bochaca, 2019). The PROSE checklist (Nagro, 2015) is a practical guide for creating written or digital communications for families. See Appendix B.

Recommendation 2B

Enact digital or written interactive homework routine or weekly student work folders sent home for review and comments.

Supporting Research

Notebooks established with a routine agreed upon between the school and family create consistency in the purpose and timeliness of communication. Inconsistent use of interactive notebooks impedes effectiveness and defeats the purpose of meaningful two-way communication (Hall et al., 2003). Effective interactive notebooks collaboratively problem-solve situations, gather and analyze student data, and maintain ongoing records of student performance, needs, and progress (Hall et al., 2003). Digital notebooks allow continuous communication between the family and school while respecting the student's independence (Bouffard, 2008). Ultimately, the notebooks serve as a way for families to have their voices heard, providing them a meaningful venue for contributing to their child's education (Davern, 2004). Simple guidelines help ensure the notebook is established on a foundation of trust and continues to be a powerful tool for partnership (Davern, 2004). See Appendix C.

Recommendation 2C

Offer face-to-face and virtual communication opportunities for families to meet with administrators and teachers.

Supporting Research

Both positive and negative issues are too complex for written communication (Davern, 2004). Strictly written correspondence or phone calls remove a level of communication as it does not allow for body language, eye contact, and tone of voice (Mazza, 2013). Video conferences via Zoom and Facetime help overcome such communication barriers (Thompson et al., 2015). In any instance, parents should be allowed to choose the means of communication but should be encouraged to meet face-to-face, physically or virtually, for more pressing matters. Technology now offers new and more efficient ways for families and schools to communicate and provides a means of communication for those families who do not regularly communicate with the school (Goodall, 2016). Meeting face to face diminishes the risk of misinterpretation of the written word, and virtual meeting options allow schools and families to meet when it is most convenient for both (Goodall, 2016).

Recommendation 3

Communicate the difference between family engagement and family partnerships with the school community, and promote building strong family-school partnerships as a primary focus of the school community.

Supporting Research

Student learning and growth are not exclusive to one environment or isolated experiences. Children learn at school, at home, and in the community and are influenced by educators, family, and community members (Epstein and Jansorn, 2004). Seeing each role separately and only engaging families for specific events or reasons inherently encourages incompatibility and conflict (Epstein, 2011, cited by Joubert and Chetty, 2014). Traditional one-way involvement strategies no longer meet the needs of adolescents but instead broaden the divide between home and school (Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018). Connecting schools and families fosters reciprocal communication and shared responsibility and should be seen as a priority amongst all entities.

Recommendation 3A

Draft a commitment statement with teachers, families, students, and administrators detailing the school's definition and plan to build strong family-school partnerships.

Supporting Research

Partnership-based activities are not easily quantifiable but instead support continuous improvement; they demonstrate commitment to the development of every student every day and include unique and creative attempts to do so (Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018). In addition, linking purposeful and positive activities to goals will eliminate the dissonance between school and home and frame the family as an essential partner rather than an external factor in a child's education (Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011).

Recommendation 3B

Offer learning experiences that provide the school community with necessary information about effective family-school partnerships.

Supporting Research

In striving to involve parents, schools must initiate the opportunity and no longer expect parents to figure it out. Instead, a comprehensive program of well-planned initiatives with a team-based approach is necessary (Epstein, 2004). Schools should regularly involve families through collaborative planning workshops, two-way communication about curricular and extra-curricular events, and ongoing conversations about student strengths and needs (Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018).

Recommendation 4

Match community services with school goals and integrate child and family services into the school community.

Supporting Research

The interconnectedness between family, school, and community comprises a child's early existence. Collaboration amongst the three entities ensures the child's development with consistent messaging (Krynechin, Clark, & Benitez, 2008). In addition, the school's mission and vision expand beyond the school into the greater community (Valli, Stefanski, Jacobson, 2016). Students' educational experiences and prospects improve when schools can corroborate services that meet the whole child's needs. This is achieved through quality partnerships with community organizations, governmental agencies, and social services (Valli, Stefanski, Jacobson, 2016).

Recommendation 4A

School goals focus on social, emotional, and physical wellbeing, and community contributions (financial and human capital) should align with those goals.

Supporting Research

Schools can create family-interagency partnerships in which referrals are made for community organizations to provide services to individual families or the school itself. Schools can expand further to include a full-service model, offering such services within or near the school building. These services are not exclusive to students but include the family unit (Valli et al., 2016). Rural schools have an advantage in building this model, as the human capital for social, emotional, and mental health services are sparse.

Recommendation 4B

Ensure equity of opportunities for students and families to participate in community programs and obtain services.

Supporting Research

Rural areas have different needs and strengths than their urban and suburban counterparts (Zuckerman, 2019). Overlooking such challenges and strengths sets the potential for ineffective and possibly problematic partnerships (Schafft, 2016). The intersectionality of rural challenges, such as limited internet access, remote locations, and economic deficits, must be acknowledged (Coady, 2019). Although rural areas have few bilingual or multilingual families, national demographics suggest an abrupt shift toward minority-majority communities. With this in mind, family-partnership practices developed with sensitivity to multicultural families will strengthen school relevance. Research and action method helps conceptualize multicultural family engagement in rural areas (Coady, 2019). See Appendix D.
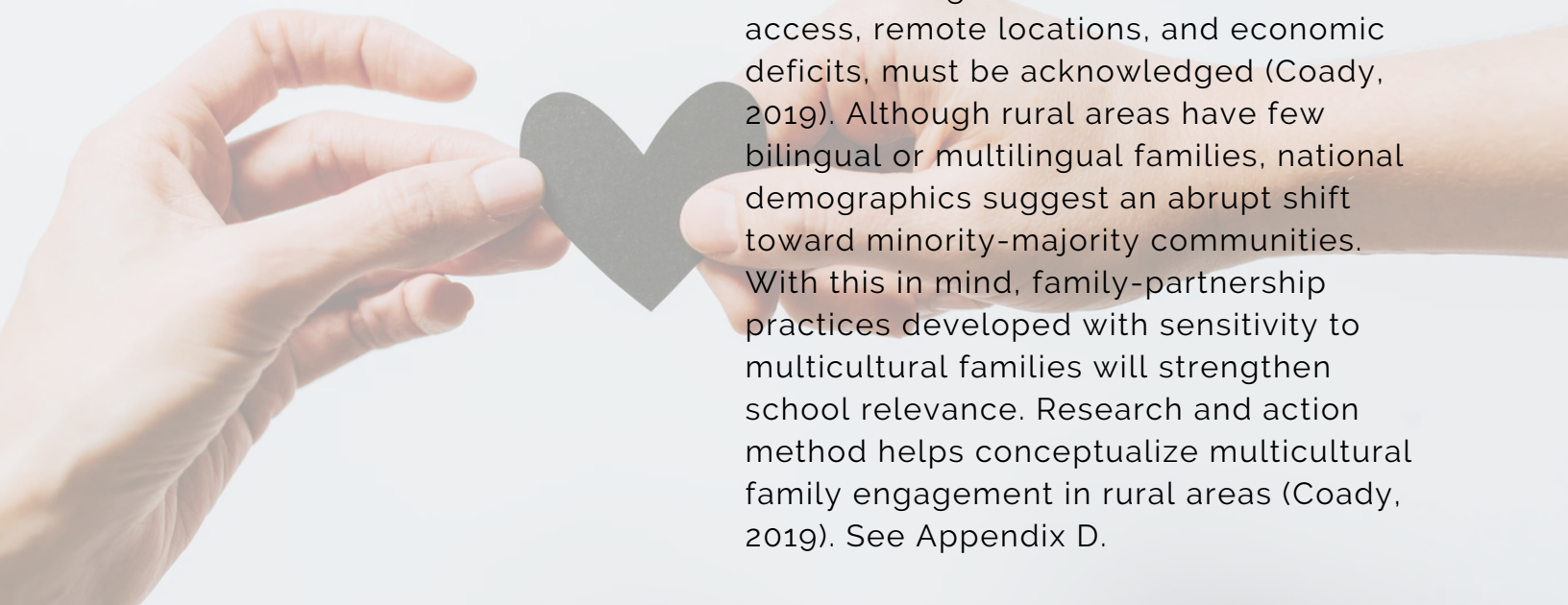
Recommendation 4c

Establish mentorships between teachers, at-risk students, and the families of the at-risk students.

Supporting Research

Mentoring relationships contribute to increased academic performance, improved sense of self, connectedness to school, and decreased at-risk behaviors (Koller & Cuo, 2014; Sipe, 2002; Grossman & Bulle, 2006). School-based and community-based mentorships create a team approach to meeting individual students' needs, leading to improved partnerships and increased institutional effectiveness (Hererra, 2004). The connectedness and understanding between mentee and mentor directly impact the overall effectiveness of the mentorship program (Coller & Kuo, 2014). See Appendix E.

RSANY Plan for Implementation

After presenting the findings and recommendations to the Rural Schools Association of New York, the association plans to offer support to member schools in each of the following ways:

Blog Series

Webinars

Conference Presentations

Panel Discussions

LIMITATIONS

When this project was initially established with RSANY, the hope was to include one school from each of the ten zones in New York State. We initially had ten schools to commit to the project, but four schools dropped from the study, citing the challenges of the pandemic as reasons for withdrawing from the study. As shared by schools who chose to drop from the study, school employees were faced with expectations unlike before and felt this study just added one more thing to their plate. In addition, most school principals or superintendents had a professional relationship with us for the schools that chose to remain, which may have influenced their decision to participate.

COVID restrictions most likely diminished participation in the surveys and focus groups because we could not visit the schools and virtually conducted all meetings. The surveys were completed electronically, and although schools were encouraged to submit paper copies, no schools did so. Lack of hardcopy responses could indicate that the study lacked the voice of those who did not have adequate internet access. It is also important to note that all school administrators, employees, and parents who participated in the focus groups were white. Thus, while the school demographics show a majority white community, the voice of ethnic and racially diverse families is absent from the data obtained in focus group discussions.

Finally, there was no consistency in how the six participating schools sought participation in surveys or focus groups. Some school leaders had teachers complete surveys as part of a faculty meeting, while others encouraged teachers to complete the survey when they had time. Some administrators automated calls to families directing them to the survey or emailed survey links, and other principals posted the link on the school's website to elicit participation. As far as focus group participation was concerned, some administrators sent personal invitations, while others posted a generic announcement asking families to contact the school leader if they were interested. Each of these variations in participation leads to possible gaps in our findings.

CONCLUSION

This study provided evidence about the state of family-school partnerships in six rural middle schools across New York State, which informed recommendations for RSANY to best support the needs of their member schools. Findings were consistent with research, as school leaders and teachers want to have stronger partnerships but do not know how to implement and sustain these partnerships. Using the findings from this study in conjunction with existing research, RSANY can create focused resources and a professional learning series for member schools based on our findings and recommendations. While the pandemic highlighted the importance of family-school partnerships in rural communities, after embarking on this Capstone journey, we are optimistic that rural schools are better positioned to establish more substantial and purposeful family-school alliances than ever before.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Family-School Partnership Survey

VANDERBILT **V** UNISERSITY

RSA
RURAL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION
OF NEW YORK STATE

◄)) Enable speech

School-Family Partnerships in New York State Rural Middle Schools

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey!

This survey is used to provide information about family involvement at the middle-school level. Your school may conduct all, some, or none of the activities or approaches listed below.

Directions: Use the scoring rubric below to rate your school on the six types of involvement. As you review each item, circle the response that comes closest to describing how the activity is implemented at your school. If you do not know if the activity is implemented at your school, please skip that activity and move to the next one in that section.

Scoring Rubric:
1-Never: Not used at our school.

2-Rarely: Conducted in one or two classes or with a few families.

3-Sometimes: Conducted in a few classes or with some families. The quality of implementation needs to improve.

4-Often: Conducted in many but not all classes, or with many but not all families. The quality of implementation is high; only minor changes are needed.

5-Frequently: Occurs in most or all classes and grade levels, with most or all families. The quality of implementation is excellent.

Adapted from: *School, Family, and Community Partnerships*, Fourth Edition by J. L. Epstein et al. 2019.

Name of School
* must provide value

- ○ Royalton-Hartland Middle School
- ○ Kendall Middle School
- ○ Town of Webb School
- ○ Greenwich Jr./Sr. High School
- ○ Beekmantown Middle School
- ○ Norwich Middle School
- ○ South Seneca Middle School
- ○ Pawling Central Middle School
- ○ Arkport Central School
- ○ Montauk Public School

What is your role in the school community?
* must provide value

- ○ Parent/Guardian
- ○ Teacher
- ○ Administrator

I. Parenting: Help all families understand child and adolescent development and establish home environments to support children as students. Help schools understand families' backgrounds, cultures, and goals for students.

Our school...

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Frequently
1	Conducts workshops or provides information for parents on child or adolescent development	○	○	○	○	○
2	Provides information to all families who want or need it, not just the few who can attend workshops or meetings.	○	○	○	○	○
3	Produces information for families that is clear, usable, and linked to children's success in school.	○	○	○	○	○
4	Asks families for information about children's goals, strengths, and talents.	○	○	○	○	○

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Frequently
5	Respects the different cultures represented in our student population.	○	○	○	○	○

II. Communicating: Use effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school programs and children's progress.

Our school...

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Frequently
1	Provides communications that are clear and easy to read.	○	○	○	○	○
2	Develops communications with parents who do not speak or read English well, or who need large type.	○	○	○	○	○
3	Has clear two-way channels for communication from home to school and from school to home.	○	○	○	○	○
4	Conducts a formal conference with every parent at least once a year.	○	○	○	○	○
5	Sends home folders of student work weekly or monthly for parent review and comment.	○	○	○	○	○
6	Trains teachers, staff, and principals on the value and utility of family involvement and ways to build positive ties between school and home.	○	○	○	○	○
7	Produces a regularly scheduled school blog or newsletter with up-todate information about the school, special events, organizations, and meetings as well as parenting tips.	○	○	○	○	○
8	Provides paper copies of e-communications for families who do not have computers, internet access, e-mail, or connections on social media platforms.	○	○	○	○	○

III. Volunteering: Recruit and organize parents to support the school and students.

Our school...

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Frequently
1	Conducts annual surveys to identify interests, talents, and availability of parent volunteers to match their skills and talents with school and classroom needs.	○	○	○	○	○
2	Creates flexible volunteering opportunities and schedules to enable employed parents to participate.	○	○	○	○	○
3	Schedules special events at different times of the day and evening so that all families can attend as audiences.	○	○	○	○	○
4	Recognizes volunteers for their time and efforts.	○	○	○	○	○

IV. Learning at Home: Provide information to families on how to help students with homework, other curriculum-related activities, course decisions, and future plans.

Our school...

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Frequently
1	Provides information to families on ways to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home.	○	○	○	○	○
2	Provides information to families on required skills in major subjects.	○	○	○	○	○
3	Provides specific information to parents on ways to assist students with skills that they need to improve.	○	○	○	○	○

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Frequently
4	Assists families to help students set academic goals and select courses and programs.	○	○	○	○	○
5	Provides information and ideas for families to use in talking with students about college, careers, and postsecondary plans.	○	○	○	○	○
6	Schedules regular interactive homework that requires students to demonstrate and discuss what they are learning with a family member.	○	○	○	○	○

V. Decision Making: Include parents in school decisions and develop parent leaders and representatives.

Our school...

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Frequently
1	Has an active PTA, PTO, or other parent organization	○	○	○	○	○
2	Includes parents and families on the school council, improvement team, and/or other committees	○	○	○	○	○
3	Involves parents in organized, ongoing, and timely ways in planning and improving school programs.	○	○	○	○	○
4	Addresses parents' questions, concerns, and conflict openly and respectfully.	○	○	○	○	○
5	Develops the school's plan and program of family involvement with input from teachers, parents, and others.	○	○	○	○	○

VI. Collaborating with the Community: Coordinate resources and services from the community for families, students, and the school, and provide services to the community.

Our school...

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Frequently
1	Provides a resource directory for parents and students on community agencies, services, and programs.	○	○	○	○	○
2	Works with local businesses, industries, libraries, parks, museums, and other organizations on programs to enhance student skills and learning.	○	○	○	○	○
3	Provides "one-stop shop" as a full-service school with family services, counseling, health services, recreation, job training, summer programs, and connections with other agencies.	○	○	○	○	○

What contributes to the success of your school's family-school partnership?

What limits the success of your school's family-school partnership?

P	**Print** ☐ All one font ☐ Consistent font size throughout ☐ Running text is medium font (e.g. 12-point font). ☐ Sentence case print rather than all capitals or italics ☐ Selective use of highlighting or bold print to draw attention rather than to decorate
R	**Readability** ☐ Reading level is ideally fifth grade but no higher than eighth grade ☐ Multisyllabic words are limited so most words are one or two syllables ☐ Sentences are 10-15 words ideally, but no more than 25 words ☐ Longer sentences are broken into several shorter sentences ☐ Prepositional phrases are limited to shorten sentence length
O	**Organization** ☐ Predictable left-to-write, top-to-bottom layout ☐ Headings guide the reader and are set apart from running text ☐ Diagrams are set apart from running text ☐ Diagrams are simple (no more than 15 labels) ☐ Diagrams are labeled and self-explanatory
S	**Structure** ☐ Ideally one page or broken into sections ☐ Page numbers are provided for documents longer than one page ☐ Balance white space so text is not overly dense ☐ Images and figures supplement the content rather than serve as decoration
E	**Ease** ☐ Written in the active voice ☐ Pronouns replaced by the original nouns, so sentences have no more than one pronoun ☐ Terms written out rather than using acronyms unless the acronym is widely known to parents ☐ Real world examples included when possible

(Nagro, 2015)

Appendix C: Guidelines for Family-Student Interactive Notebooks

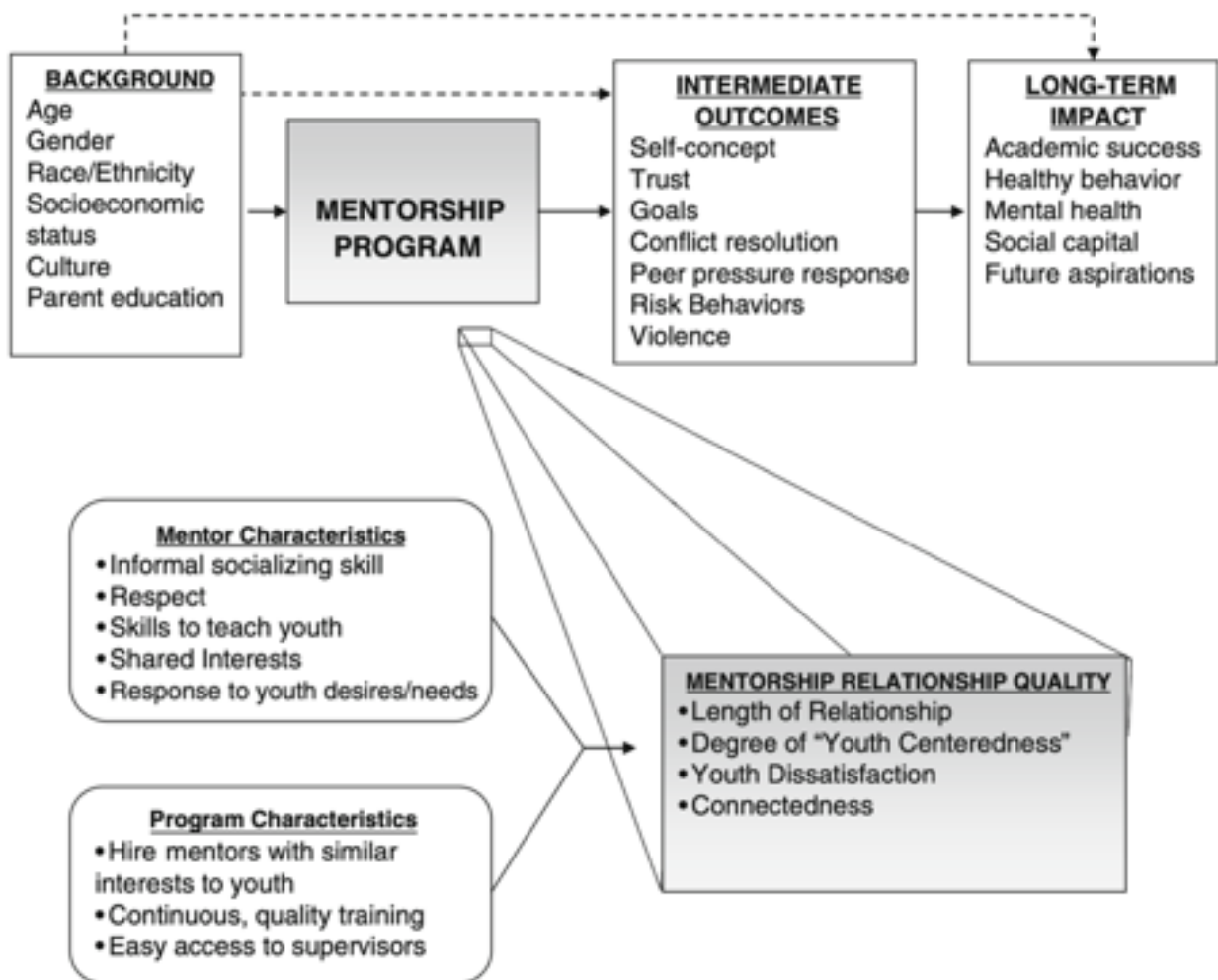|	
Establish a relationship first	o Understand the family's cultural background & communication norms o Emphasis on optimism & honesty o Personable and individualized to the child
Determine how and how often	o Digital or written notebook o Follow up method - phone call, email, etc. o What circumstances are a "must know" for the family? o Regular intervals of communication
Use good judgement	o Do not replace phone calls & conferences with notebooks o Be cautious of using the notebook to disseminate information rather than problem-solving solutions o Be aware of sensitive topics
Write so families want to read	o Careful balance of strengths & deficits, with emphasis on acceptance & appreciation of child's positive attributes o Avoid detailed reports of ongoing misbehavior
Clarity	o All contributors' names should be listed or signed o See PROSE checklist for readability
Reread for misinterpretation	o Does this sound demeaning, demanding, or critical? o Create the opportunity for person-to-person, ongoing communication
Evaluate its effectiveness	o Establish checkpoints to ask families if this is working o Adjust as necessary, remembering that this may be different per child

(Davern, 2004)

Appendix D: Rural, Multilingual Family Engagement: A Conceptual Model

Reflection

Action

- Educators listen to and learn about multilingual families, culture, language and literacy practices, needs
- Educators reflect on families' strengths and seek input for engaging them from community leaders and key informants
- Educators communicate with and build relationships with families in culturally and linguistically responsive ways
- Educators use knowledge of families' strengths and backgrounds to student support learning
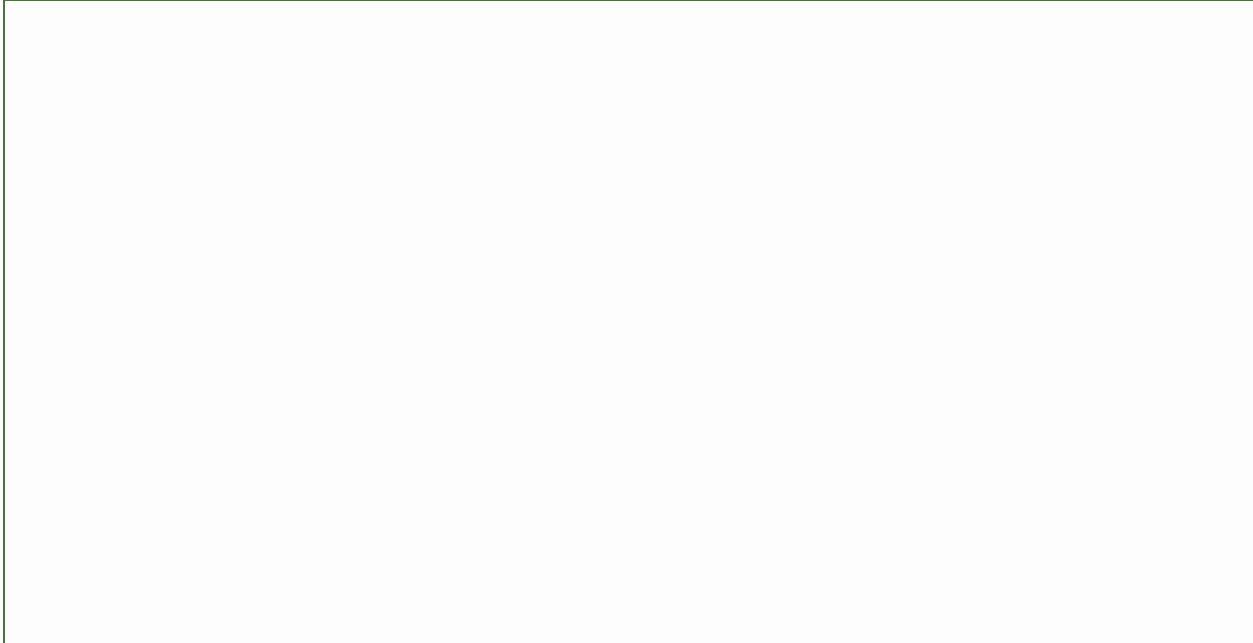- Educators advocate for equity and change in and outside of school

(Coady, 2019)

Appendix E: Model for Effective Mentorship

(Coller & Kuo, 2014)

This Capstone project was completed as final requirement for Ed.D Learning and Leadership in Organizations at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University.

Prepared By:
Sacha Bennett and Katie Ralston

Vanderbilt University
2021