

Social-Emotional Supports for Students and Families



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

In 2020–21, many districts faced challenges related to students' social-emotional needs. This brief includes brief profiles of the challenges and promising practices related to **social-emotional supports for students and families** for five districts across the United States:

- Aurora City School District, Ohio
- Newport School District, Arkansas
- Regional School District 15, Connecticut
- Giant City CCSD 130, Illinois
- Peoria Public Schools, Illinois
- Windham Exempted School District, Ohio



Ohio



Suburban



Medium Size



Low Poverty



Primarily In Person

Aurora City School District

Used Various Academic and Social Support Strategies

The Challenge

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Aurora City School District had already prioritized the need to help support young people in developing essential social-emotional skills, including empathy and resilience. In the 2020–21 school year, some students were able to apply these skills successfully to adapt to pandemic-related stressors and build resilience. However, other students showed increased anxiety and social-emotional needs. According to Superintendent Mike Roberto, “The pandemic amplified some of the characteristics or skill sets that our young people had,” both good and bad.

Promising Practices

At the beginning of the 2020–21 school year, staff focused on building meaningful relationships with students and identifying students' proximal zones of development, with the goal of developing their independence and making them feel supported as they learned through productive struggle. Staff paired in-person students with remote students to promote collaborative learning among peers, even for remote students learning from home. In 2021–22, Aurora City School District switched from a traditional schedule to a modified block schedule 2 days a week at the secondary level, giving staff additional time to support students in class. Superintendent Roberto explained, “By having [that time and] those connections with the staff, hopefully, the young people will be able to lower their anxiety, or at least they'll be able to talk about what it is that they are doing, what they need help with.” To help mitigate anxiety in the school community and keep lines of communication open between school and home, Superintendent Roberto recorded 3- to 4-minute videos for families twice a month.



Illinois



Rural



Small Size



High Poverty



Hybrid

Giant City CCSD 130

Used Various Student Engagement Strategies

The Challenge

In the 2020–21 school year, many students in Giant City CCSD 130 showed signs of mental health distress due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, many students struggled emotionally with the cancellation of significant events, like their eighth-grade class trip or high school graduation; other students struggled with a sense of isolation or family tensions that were exacerbated by extended time at home. Staff also saw an increase in the number of students—including younger students—who had attempted or planned some form of self-harm. Although staff expect students to be better adapted to virtual instruction in the future, Superintendent Belinda Hill noted, “One of the biggest things that has come out of this for us is understanding that kids want to be in a classroom with their peers and with the teacher.” Even with using a cohort model so that students could attend school in person on alternate days, many students—particularly those in middle school—continued to struggle emotionally.

Promising Practices

Giant City CCSD 130 implemented a variety of strategies to address students’ social-emotional needs in the 2020–21 school year. As a universal support, staff began using the first 10 minutes of every lesson to check in with students and provide space for them to share their feelings. Staff also used some of their virtual instructional time for fun social activities, such as pajama parties, to keep students engaged. Superintendent Hill said, “I think we just kept our mind open to trying. If this didn’t work, what are we going to try next?” The district also hired additional social workers to help older students manage behavioral expectations during in-person instruction, knowing that many older students missed the opportunity to develop these skills earlier in the school year.

For students who were struggling with remote instruction, Giant City CCSD 130 brought them into the school building for socially distanced, in-person learning supported by paraprofessionals. In addition, staff used meals as an opportunity to connect with students and families, either when dropping off food parcels for families at home or when feeding students at school. The district worked to stay connected with families by purchasing virtual meeting software that could host hundreds of participants, which allowed them to share information regularly with families and learn more about directly families’ experiences. Superintendent Hill explained, “It’s all those little things that you can make a little bit of progress every day for your kids.”



Arkansas



Rural



Medium Size



High Poverty



Primarily In Person

Newport School District

Student Support Strategies

The Challenge

Throughout the 2020–21 school year, many students in Newport School District who were learning remotely struggled with a sense of isolation and disengagement. Staff also felt they were not equipped to support the full range of students’ mental health needs (for both in-person and remote learners) or trained on how to recognize specific mental health issues.

Promising Practices

To better support students’ mental health in 2020–21, Newport School District began working with three organizations to provide mental health services directly to students by bringing therapists and caseworkers into the school. The district also offered staff more supports and training to help them manage mental health challenges, including holding a mental health day and a de-escalation day to help teachers learn how to navigate difficult situations with students. In addition, the district established a student committee to offer students an active voice in the school community, underscoring the importance of listening directly to students perspectives. According to Superintendent Brett Bunch, it was important to “give the kids a voice and let them have their voice in what they think is or isn't working or what needs to change. Once you have those voices that are sounding out, then the positivity starts to spread.”



Illinois



Urban



Large Size



High Poverty



Primarily Remote

Peoria Public Schools

Assigning Staff and Partners to Support Students

The Challenge

Staff from Peoria Public Schools frequently “huddled” to define district priorities to establish common goals for the 2020–21 school year. During that time, staff focused on four strategies: feeding children, wellness for staff and students, continuous communication, and continuity of learning. While the district created a variety of strategies to support students academically (e.g., creating a virtual school, offering a summer school program) during 2020–21, they prioritized student and staff mental health over academic instruction because of the observed need. Staff observed pandemic-related stress during remote learning and anticipated that the effects of the pandemic would likely be a continued, significant cause of stress for staff and students alike.

Promising Practices

In spring 2020, Peoria Public Schools relied on staff such as campus safety officers and internal and external supports to serve as “champions” for students identified as needing additional supports at the beginning of the pandemic. These champions conducted home visits and stayed in close contact with students and families to promote engagement and ensure safety throughout the 2020–21 school year.

Peoria Public Schools worked with several external partners to provide additional supports to students and families. Our local Regional Office of Education was instrumental in assisting with our volunteer infrastructure to help with medication, food, and computer distribution. Our partner, ELITE, hires adult mentors and family engagement staff (mostly men of color) who achieved success after growing up in challenging circumstances. According to Superintendent Sharon Kherat, these partners were instrumental in keeping families and students updated and engaged because “they’re very good at building relationships. They know the families. They’re not afraid of going into the neighborhoods. They have a good rapport with the parents.” The district also worked with many other external partners, including therapists and home school facilitators, not only to provide support in schools but also to conduct home visits and identify student needs. These individuals helped address technological issues, including device distribution and internet connectivity assistance, and they assisted with various personal needs. Overall, the district was successful in keeping many students safe and enrolled in school.



Connecticut



Suburban



Medium Size



Low Poverty



Primarily Remote

Regional School District 15

Focused on Family Communication

The Challenge

At the beginning of the 2020–21 school year, Regional School District 15 initially posited that it was most important to prioritize in-person instruction for younger students and that older students would be more likely to succeed in an online environment. However, the district soon realized that older students also struggled with remote instruction and that their social-emotional needs were similar to those of younger students. Among middle and high school students, loneliness and isolation were negatively affecting students’ mental health. In addition, remote instruction increased stress for some families, as parents and guardians struggled to manage both work and school responsibilities. Staff recognized that some families could not accommodate remote learning, especially those with children too young to stay home alone while the adults worked essential jobs; therefore, it was critical for District 15 to provide a safe place for children to be during the day.

Promising Practices

Throughout the 2020–21 school year, District 15 invested a significant amount of time communicating with families, sharing not only updates and decisions but also the thinking behind decision making to increase trust and transparency. In early 2020, District 15 created a publicly available web page with information on contact tracing, the number of students in quarantine, and plans for reopening the school. According to Superintendent Joshua Smith, “It felt like all I did some days was just write press releases and parent emails, but that established trust within our community that we cared about [families’] children.”

Throughout 2020–21, staff emphasized the importance of routines and patterns, even in remote instruction, to ground students and provide a sense of consistency in their daily lives. Staff also provided direct mental health supports to students through webinars on topics such as self-care and suicide prevention. Superintendent Smith observed, “Routine and consistency and trust were really important during [2020–21]. We always knew it was there, but I don’t know that we knew how important it was.”



Ohio



Town



Small Size



High Poverty



Primarily In Person

Windham Exempted Village School District

Provided Community Support to Meet Students' Basic Needs

The Challenge

Windham Exempted Village School District began offering students a food pantry a few years before the pandemic to help combat food insecurity at home. The food pantry was an important source of social-emotional support for students: It helped ensure that their basic needs were met and, because students had the freedom to choose what food to take, empowered them to make their own decisions. Students who visited the pantry in person had an opportunity to interact with senior citizen volunteers running the pantry. According to Superintendent Ariane Curtis, these volunteers “quickly became adopted grandmas and grandpas to the kids,” showing interest in students’ lives and building positive rapport with them. When schools closed and new safety protocols were put in place over the course of the 2020–21 school year, the pantry had to pause in-person shopping, but staff knew that their students and families still needed food resources.

Promising Practices

Windham Exempted Village School District used a multipronged approach to ensure that their school community continued to have access to food. The district offered free breakfast and lunch in school, used buses to deliver food to families in need, and sent food packages home with all elementary students unless the parents opted out. For secondary students, staff placed prepacked bags at school exits so that students could easily grab food parcels on their way out. The district partnered with a local foundation to ensure they had sufficient funding to give food to everyone, not just to those who requested it. Families could also receive a full week’s worth of food during a Tuesday “drive through” service. While the district is returning to the original food pantry model in 2021–22, staff were proud of the strategies they used to ensure they could still support students’ and families’ food needs during the pandemic.

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

Demographic Icon Definitions

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

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

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

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



1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202-3289
+1.202.403.5000 | [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org)

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