

CRISIS COMMUNICATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY OF A
K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all the amazing people I have met in my life. I love you all and appreciate each and every one of you. From those of you who have been by my side every step of the way to the acquaintances I've met for only a brief time, each of you have helped to shape me into the person I am today. I hope to continue to help make you feel loved and happy. This major life accomplishment is not just my own and is not just for me. It is for all of us and for a brighter future. God bless.

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Abstract

Safety and security are of the utmost importance for public school districts. The COVID-19 pandemic made school district crisis management and communication personally relevant to families with school-aged children. The purpose of this study was to learn how school administrators described their communication with families during the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative case study explored building-level and district-level school administrators' experiences and perspectives communicating with elementary families at one Pennsylvania public school district from March 2020 through May 2022. Interviews were conducted with participants to gather rich, deep data and document review provided additional context and insights. Inductive analysis of interview data revealed two main themes: school administrators described being responsive and supporting trusting relationships with families. Specifically, participants felt they were responsive to the ongoing pandemic situation and to their school community's needs. Additionally, participants believed they supported trusting relationships with families by keeping kids at the core, communicating support, and navigating community division. This study's findings have implications mainly for school leaders but also for other key school stakeholders, policy makers, and institutions of higher education. Study findings provide considerations for practitioners including prioritizing relationships; communicating with families to support trusting school-family partnerships; considering the communication platform; being reflective and responsive; collaborating with other school leaders; and using, reviewing, and updating school crisis response plans. This study adds to the limited amount of research on crisis management and communication in the public school context. More research is needed on crisis management and communication in the public school context to gather the perspectives, experiences, and needs of administrators, students, families, and teachers.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

School districts face different types of crises. From teacher misconduct to school shootings, each crisis has a different range and duration and therefore a different impact on school districts and their communities. School safety legislation and mandates also impact school districts. For example, school districts have always been required to have district-wide school safety, emergency preparedness, or all-hazards safety plans; however, recent legislation made those requirements more specific. Act 44 of 2018 amended the Public School Code of Pennsylvania to include various topics related to school safety and security. As required by Act 44 (2018), school districts must review existing school safety and security plans for crisis response and mitigation as well as analyze communications practices and available technology tools. Consequently, school districts were already highly interested in topics related to crisis management and crisis communications when the COVID-19 disease pandemic started. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted all school districts across the U.S. and made school district crisis planning, management, and communication relevant and important to every household with a school-aged child.

K-12 public school districts need to adhere to federal, state, and Department of Education laws, mandates, and oversight when it comes to crisis planning, management, and communication. In addition, school districts have available to them a number of resources to assist them with their plans, from sources like the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) and the National Education Association (NEA). Furthermore, there is a significant amount of research on crisis management and communication for organizations. However, the K-12 public school context is unique. Schools have multiple stakeholder populations to consider, including the vulnerable student population to protect. Districts ought to

consider their stakeholders' needs when managing and communicating throughout a crisis event. These stakeholders' needs are dependent upon the relationships formed between schools, families, and the community prior to the crisis event. Moreover, these relationships rely on collaboration and communication prior to and throughout a crisis event. Up to this point, crisis research is scarce in the K-12 public school setting.

Statement of the Problem

Even though there are laws mandating school crisis management and communication plans, multiple resources available to assist schools in developing comprehensive plans, and plenty of research on crisis planning and management in private and public organizations, many K-12 public schools are still not adequately prepared to manage crisis events (Kingshott & McKenzie, 2013; Mazer et al., 2015; Page et al., 2019). Schools across one state studied by Page et al. (2019) were identified to be at a "basic level of preparedness" (p. 261). In particular, although districts had plans for active shooter events, bomb threats, building issues, fires, and natural disasters, about half (50.8%) of the districts surveyed lacked plans for public health emergencies such as infectious diseases, bioterrorism, and pandemics (Page et al., 2019). Similarly, Rebmann et al. (2016) reported "school preparedness for natural disasters and biological events is critical, but remains poor" (p.801). In addition, many school districts are unprepared for effective communication during school crisis events (Mazer et al., 2015; Page et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2017). Page et al. (2019) showed that over three-quarters (88%) of school districts surveyed lacked plans for managing social media during crises. Similarly, crisis team members interviewed in Thompson et al. (2017) identified social media as a challenge to crisis communication for which schools were grossly underprepared. This lack of preparedness

was made starkly evident to schools, families, and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools were not ready for such a disaster.

In Pennsylvania specifically, the School Safety Task Force Report (Wolf & DePasquale, 2018) acknowledged that districts were inadequately prepared for school crises. Under the direction of Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf and Pennsylvania Auditor General Eugene DePasquale, the Pennsylvania School Safety Task Force gathered information related to school safety from government officials, statewide education organizations, law enforcement officials, community leaders, school officials, teachers, parents, and students to identify and address ways schools, communities, and the state could support safe and secure learning environments in schools (Wolf & DePasquale, 2018). Of the ten actionable items recommended in the report, five items related directly to crisis management and communication:

- improving communication and information sharing,
- building connections to the community,
- effectively integrating law enforcement and school resource officers,
- providing actionable guidance and information to schools to determine priorities, and
- utilizing training and evidence-based practices (Wolf & DePasquale, 2018, p.4).

The release of this report coincided with the passing of Act 44 of 2018, which mandated actions for school districts to take to improve safety and security.

School safety and security had been under increased scrutiny in recent years, especially in response to the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida in February 2018, where 17 students and staff were killed. Media coverage of school crises like the Parkland shooting made it a more pressing concern than ever to ensure school crisis management and communication plans were current and thorough. The problem was, at that

time, school safety and crisis preparedness focused primarily on violence in schools. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the school safety narrative shifted and the focus became school district preparedness for a health-related crisis. School districts need research-based strategies from studies in their particular context to help them prepare adequately for managing crises. Additionally, K-12 public school districts need research-based guidance on how to communicate effectively with families regarding crisis events.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Parent communication is an integral part of successful school-home partnerships (Epstein et al., 2019; Heath et al., 2015). In many ways, technological advancements helped improve school-home communication. For example, email enables teachers and parents to communicate regularly in an asynchronous way. However, societal changes as a result of technological advancements also cause new communication barriers. Many people no longer have home phones. Instead, they use cell phones, they may have expiring contracts, they use pay-as-you-go phones, and they have the ability to change their phone number. This results in people's switching phone numbers frequently. Lavergne (2017) described how the district being studied found that many district phone calls went to disconnected numbers, letters were returned, and parents were more difficult to contact. Traditional means of communicating with families were no longer effective. Ultimately, the district in Lavergne's study (2017) discovered the internet was the most reliable method of communication with families, particularly social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. "Choosing the appropriate communication technology is essential to maximize school and home communication efficacy and encourage familial involvement" (Heath et al., 2015, p.364). School districts need to revisit their communication strategies to ensure they are reaching all families.

At the same time that communication technology has been changing the way families and school districts communicate, school districts have been facing unprecedented levels and types of crisis situations related to the COVID-19 pandemic. That makes it more important than ever for school districts to collaborate and communicate with families. Effective communication is key to building trust, forming partnerships, and engaging families. Therefore, it is imperative to understand public school district communication plans.

The purpose of this study was to discover how school administrators described their communication with families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gaining a deeper understanding of how administrators communicated with families not only contributes to the scant existing research on crisis communication in the K-12 public school setting, it also helps to inform school-family partnerships, general school-home communication practices, and school safety planning. Taking a deep look into one school district's context, practices, and experiences with school-family communication during the COVID-19 pandemic provides insights and considerations for all school leaders as they manage their roles day-to-day as well as during crises.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Epstein's theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence (2001). This theoretical framework highlights the importance, responsibility, and interconnectedness of the school, family, and community for student (and school organizational) success. It also incorporates six types of involvement as a way to help schools engage families and communities inside and outside of school. These include parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaboration with the community (Epstein et al., 2019). Collaborative school-family partnerships are realized when school leaders prioritize and their

communication supports such relationships. Epstein's constructs informed this study by providing a comprehensive, research-based framework for school, family, and community partnerships that emphasized individual as well as overlapping responsibilities of each key stakeholder; time, age, and grade level as impactful forces; and collaboration and communication as means by which partnerships are built and sustained.

Research Question

Although there are numerous studies on crisis management and communication, research conducted in the K-12 public school setting is scarce. This study adds to the research on crisis management and communication in the public K-12 school setting and addresses the following research question:

- How do school administrators describe their communication with families during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Overview of the Study

This qualitative case study took place in a K-12 public school district in Pennsylvania. Hillview School District (HSD), a pseudonym, is a mid-sized suburban school district that serves approximately 3,600 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. The study was limited to the timeframe from March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and shut down schools, until the time of the data collection in May 2022. The study employed purposive sampling to focus on communication with families of elementary-aged children. The participants of this study were four of the district's five elementary school principals, the assistant superintendent for elementary education, the community relations coordinator, and the superintendent. This purposive selection of participants provided building-level as well as district-level perspectives.

In addition to exploring various perspectives, this study incorporated multiple sources of data. Seven participants completed semi-structured interviews. Zoom was used to record and transcribe these individual interviews. In addition to the interviews, this study included a review of HSD safety plans, school board meeting minutes, communication documents, video communications, and archives of the district website. Inductive analysis of the interviews searched for underlying themes to emerge from the data; while the document review provided deeper understanding of the context of the study and the experiences of the participants. Trustworthiness was established through participant quotes, member checking, and the triangulation of data.

Definition of Relevant Terms

Communication: one-way means by which schools share information with families about programs, events, student learning, and student behavior and two-way means by which schools and families dialogue and exchange ideas and information. Some examples include letters, emails, phone calls, automated messages, videos, social media posts, and communication via platforms like Dojo and SeeSaw.

Crisis: “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2015a, p.3)

Crisis Communication: “Fearn-Banks (2002) suggests that ‘Crisis communication is verbal, visual, and/or written interaction between the organization and its stakeholders (often through the media) prior to, during and after a negative occurrence’ (p. 480). These communication processes are designed to reduce and contain harm, provide specific information to stakeholders, initiate and enhance recovery, manage image and perceptions of blame and responsibility, repair

legitimacy, generate support and assistance, explain and justify actions, apologize, and promote healing, learning, and change (Seeger et al., 2003). Crisis communication seeks to explain the specific event, identify likely consequences and outcomes, and provide specific harm-reducing information to affected communities in an honest, candid, prompt, accurate, and complete manner... Crisis communication typically is associated with [public relations] and is grounded in efforts to strategically manage and frame public perceptions of an event so that harm is reduced for both the organization and stakeholders” (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005, p.46).

District (also known as a local education agency [LEA]): “a board of education or other legally constituted local school authority having administrative control and direction of public elementary or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or political subdivision in a state, or any other public educational institution” (PA DOE, 2022)

Engagement: “refers to the systematic inclusion of families in activities and programs that promote children’s development, learning, and wellness, including in the planning, development, and evaluation of such activities, programs, and systems. For family engagement to be integrated throughout [educational] systems and programs, providers and schools must engage families as essential partners when providing services that promote children’s learning and development, nurture positive relationships between families and staff, and support families” (US DOHHS & US DOE, 2016, p.1)

Family: “all adults who interact with educational systems in support of their child, to include biological, adoptive, and foster parents; grandparents; legal and informal guardians; and adult siblings” (US DOHHS & US DOE, 2016, p.1)

Social Media: “various digital tools and applications that facilitate interactive communication and content exchange among and between publics and organizations” (Jin et al., 2014, p.75).

Summary

Schools have always faced crises and effective school-family communication has always been important. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, school district crisis management and communication impacted just about every family with school-aged children. Although there are laws, mandates, and policies that drive school safety planning and management, actual implementation depends on the programs and practices in place. School districts have a variety of resources to assist them with their crisis plans. However, research on crisis planning, management, and communication in the K-12 public school context is scarce. This qualitative case study adds to the literature by exploring the communication experiences of administrators in one mid-sized suburban school district in Pennsylvania. This study provides rich, descriptive data from multiple perspectives and sources that reveal important considerations for school leaders related to communicating with families and supporting trusting relationships with families.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Every K-12 public school district will experience a crisis event at some time. From a student death or a bus accident to a school shooting or natural disaster, K-12 public school districts face crises with ranging impacts, from those that are localized to large-scale community-wide events. It is imperative for K-12 public school districts to be prepared for any type of crisis that could occur.

Crisis (or emergency) planning is critical to preventing, preparing for, responding to, and recovering from crisis events (National Education Association [NEA], 2018). One of the most important components of crisis planning and management is communication. K-12 public schools not only need to have relevant and adaptable crisis response plans, they also need to plan for communicating with staff and families throughout a crisis event.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how unprepared K-12 public school districts were for a health-related crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic was unique as a school crisis because it impacted all schools across the U.S. and was an enduring and constantly evolving situation. The COVID-19 pandemic sparked increased and widespread conversations about school district crisis planning, management, and communication. It made school district crisis response strategies relevant and meaningful to every household with a school-aged child. More than ever, school districts need to have effective and efficient means of communicating with staff and families.

The purpose of this research study was to learn about K-12 public school district communication with families during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, this review of the literature will examine school district safety and crisis planning, school-family partnerships, and gaps in the research relevant to school district crisis communication.

School Safety and Crisis Planning

K-12 public schools are tasked with providing safe and healthy environments for children and maintaining stakeholder trust in the public education system. To accomplish this, it is essential for K-12 public school districts to have crisis management plans. Although it is impossible to predict crises, all crisis events must be managed, and crisis events are better managed when plans are already in place. Pennsylvania K-12 public school crisis plans are directed and informed by a variety of mandates, institutions, and publications.

What Governs PA K-12 Public School District Crisis Planning

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has three main goals for education: high student performance; high quality teaching and administration; and a safe, secure, and supportive environment for each school and every child (Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency [PEMA], 2013). Safety and security are paramount to successful education in Pennsylvania K-12 public schools. Ensuring student safety at all times “requires extraordinary security measures as well as comprehensive emergency, risk, and crisis communication strategies” (Barker & Yoder, 2012, p.79). Due to the extreme importance of school safety and security, crisis management plans are mandatory and many resources exist to guide schools in developing and improving their plans.

In Pennsylvania (PA), there are numerous laws, policies, and regulations related to school safety and crisis planning. For example, Title 35 of the PA Consolidated Statutes, also known as Pennsylvania’s Emergency Management Services Code, originally passed in 1978, established the requirement that all public school districts “develop and implement a comprehensive disaster response and emergency preparedness plan consistent with the guidelines developed by the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency and other pertinent State requirements” (PEMA,

2013). In addition, the Safe Schools Act of 1995 (Act 26) added Article XIII-A (Safe Schools) to the PA Public School Code of 1949 and created an Office for Safe Schools in the Department of Education and listed the office's powers and duties. Moreover, Act 104 of 2010 amended sections of the Safe Schools Act of 1995, clarified requirements for reporting school violence, instructed updates to memoranda of understanding with local law enforcement, and mandated the creation of a statewide school safety advisory committee. Then, in 2018, Act 44 amended the PA Public School Code of 1949 again, significantly impacting public school district safety and emergency planning. Act 44 (2018) created the School Safety and Security Committee within the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, which is tasked with establishing best practice criteria for school safety security assessments and administering the safety and security grant program (Pennsylvania Department of Education [PDE], 2021). Act 44 (2018) also required public school districts to appoint a school safety coordinator and provide district employees with mandatory school safety and security training, instituted provisions for school resource officers, and mandated the Safe2Say Something program for anonymous reporting of school safety concerns. Most recently, Act 55 of 2022, amended the PA Public School Code of 1949 once more, this time with provisions for mental health services including threat assessments, new requirements for school safety coordinators, and training and professional development requirements for school personnel. School safety and security is an ongoing and constantly evolving concern, as evidenced by the amendments to state laws over time.

In addition to state laws and regulations, the federal government is also involved in governing school safety and crisis planning. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the U.S. law passed in 2015 that governs public K-12 education policy, emphasized that schools needed to improve school climate and safety. Under Titles I and IV of ESSA (2015), federal funds may

be used on programs or services to improve school climate and safety (NEA, 2018). Another way the federal government regulates school safety is through the National Incident Management System (NIMS). NIMS outlines standard processes, protocols, and procedures that all local, state, federal, and private emergency services can use to coordinate their response to a crisis (PEMA, 2021). Pennsylvania adopted NIMS in 2004 and all public schools must comply with NIMS to be eligible for federal grants to help fund their emergency planning programs. While state and federal laws and mandates govern school safety, a wealth of resources and publications also guide schools in the creation of crisis management plans.

What Informs PA K-12 Public School District Crisis Planning

Pennsylvania K-12 public schools are required to have a comprehensive disaster response and emergency preparedness plan (Title 35, 1978), which may also be referred to as “All-Hazards School Safety Plans” (PEMA, 2013), or “Emergency Operations Plans” (PEMA, 2013; U.S. Department of Education et al., 2019). Regardless of what the plans are called, school districts can pull from a variety of resources to inform their crisis plans.

School districts can find an abundance of government and agency resources for developing their safety and crisis management plans. Federal-level guidance can be found in the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Guide for Developing High Quality School Emergency Operations Plans (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013), which helps school districts align district-level and school-level emergency planning with national emergency preparedness practices. Presidential Policy Directive 8 (PPD-8) guides national preparedness efforts based on lessons learned from terrorist attacks, hurricanes, school incidents, and other experiences (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013). An example of a state-level resource is the All Hazards School Planning Toolkit released by PEMA (2013), which provides a

framework to help PA school districts develop plans based on standard procedures while incorporating conditions and resources specific to individual schools or facilities. The Pennsylvania Department of Education's Office for Safe Schools provides opportunities for professional development and other security-related activities and has a website with helpful information, resources, and tools (PDE, 2021).

Other agencies have published resources that schools may find helpful when writing school safety and crisis management plans. One example is the NEA's School Crisis Guide (2018) which is designed to help schools enhance their crisis plans by sharing resources, tools, recommendations, and evidence-based practices for school safety. Another example is the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) manual that "provides an evidence-based framework and best practices for anyone who communicates on behalf of an organization responding to a public health emergency" (Reynolds & Lutfy, 2018, p.2). To ensure comprehensive plans, schools may find it beneficial to pull information from a variety of sources. Each resource provides a particular perspective and prioritizes information based on specific goals. For example, CERC may be best for health-related emergencies but not for crises caused by violent acts. In addition to government and agency publications, there is a large amount of research on crisis planning, management, and communication. This research was conducted mostly at private and government organizations, with some studies done at institutions of higher education (Rasmussen & Ihlen, 2017). While research in the private sector and with government organizations tended to focus on minimizing reputational damage, the studies in higher education highlighted topics such as the complex nature of crisis communication when having competing stakeholder groups of students, parents, and the media (Barker & Yoder, 2012).

While Pennsylvania K-12 public school districts may share similar hazards such as school violence, fire, and bus accidents, there is not a pre-established crisis plan that will fit the needs of all schools. Every school is unique in its context, and thus, unique in its crisis planning needs (NEA, 2018). Even so, taking all the various types of possible crisis situations into consideration, there are recurring themes that emerge when looking at the literature regarding crisis planning and management. First, school districts should have a theoretical basis for their crisis management plans (Aspiranti et al., 2011; Patashnick, 2016), such as the five mission areas of prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2019) or the four sections of the School Crisis Guide – prevent, prepare, respond, and recover (NEA, 2018). Although theories vary, they are typically based, at minimum, on stages before, during, and after a crisis.

Second, K-12 public school districts should use an all-hazards approach to crisis management planning (e.g., Aspiranti et al., 2011; PEMA, 2013; U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013). In other words, district plans should include steps for as many specific crisis events as can be reasonably considered for that school context. General plans may not be sufficient to adequately manage the variety of different crisis events that could occur. There are lists of emergencies that all schools face, and then each specific school needs to consider what additional hazards they may have and add those to their plans. For example, a school near a nuclear power plant would need to include plans for a nuclear emergency. A school located 50 feet from a waterway and therefore susceptible to flooding would need a customized flood plan.

Third, the importance of communications plans in crisis management plans cannot be understated (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Patashnick, 2016; Pierce, 2016). Communication with internal and external stakeholders is crucial during all stages of crisis management and in all

crisis situations. Research has demonstrated crisis communication should come from a spokesperson (e.g., Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014; Reynolds & Lutfy, 2018; Roshan et al., 2016), such as the superintendent of schools for K-12 public school districts, since crisis communication is more effective when delivered by a person who shows compassion and concern (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Reynolds & Lutfy, 2018; Zdziarski, 2016). Regardless of who is delivering the crisis communication, Coombs' (2007) suggested people need specific types of information beyond the organization-centric, damage-repair strategies commonly utilized up to that point. School districts should communicate instructing information as well as adjusting information. Instructing information helps protect people from harm, while adjusting information helps people cope psychologically (Coombs, 2015b). Additionally, K-12 public school districts need to ensure multiple stakeholders receive crisis communications and thus must use multiple means of getting that information out there. This includes traditional media like press releases and telephone calls, online and social media, and word of mouth (e.g., Austin et al., 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Schultz et al., 2011; Veil et al., 2011).

Moreover, when considering communications plans as part of crisis management plans, school districts should communicate swiftly, efficiently, and regularly throughout a crisis (e.g., Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014; Cheng, 2018; Heath et al., 2015), balancing the expediency of crisis communication with its accuracy (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Onsolve, 2017; Stephens et al., 2013). Poor crisis communication can devastate a good crisis plan (Barker & Yoder, 2012); however, “the right message at the right time by the right person can save lives” (Reynolds & Lutfy, 2018, p.2). Therefore, it is crucial for crisis plans to incorporate crisis communication through all stages (Palttala & Vos, 2012; Pechta et al., 2010; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

Some school organizations choose to utilize mass notification systems (MNS), also known as mass communication systems. These systems can incorporate a variety of media forms such as phone calls, texts, emails, and social media posts. For organizations such as K-12 public school districts, Onsolve (2017) recommended having a mass notification system in place, as it “can help you reach any number of people at once, by a wide range of modalities, and will allow recipients to respond with important information” (p.5). After the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, federal law was passed mandating all university and college campuses to have MNS in place (Connolly, 2013). By utilizing various media channels for communication, mass notification systems ensure multiple stakeholder groups will be reached.

Furthermore, school district communication plans must consider stakeholders’ communication needs. For K-12 public schools, stakeholders with special communication needs include young children, individuals with disabilities and other access needs, and individuals with limited English proficiency (NEA, 2018). For young children and individuals with limited English proficiency, modifications are typically obvious and simpler, such as using age-appropriate language and translating information into other languages. There are a variety of methods for ensuring effective crisis communication for individuals with disabilities, including providing closed captioning and sign language interpreters during press conferences; publishing print materials in Braille; and publishing online content that is accessible to the blind, deaf, and those who must navigate web content by voice, screen reader, or other assistive technology (Reynolds & Seeger, 2014; U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013). Meeting special communications needs of stakeholders may not be complex or costly, but it does take planning and preparation and needs to be a consideration for K-12 public schools as they create and revise their crisis communications plans.

Returning to the themes which emerged from the literature on crisis planning and management, the fourth theme is that K-12 public school districts should develop their crisis management plans in collaboration with emergency and community partners such as law enforcement, fire departments, and mental health agencies, and in coordination with other local, regional, state, and federal emergency plans (Barker & Yoder, 2012; PEMA, 2013; U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013). In 2011, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) published a document outlining a community-centric approach to emergency management. According to Craig Fugate, the current administrator of FEMA in 2011, they had realized a government-centric approach was no longer going to be enough to meet “the challenges posed by a catastrophic incident” amidst the changing dynamics of communities in the U.S. (FEMA, 2011). This “Whole Community approach” to emergency management is based on three principles: understand and meet the actual needs of the whole community, engage and empower all parts of the community, and strengthen what works well in communities on a daily basis. This approach also identified six strategic themes: understand community complexity, recognize community capabilities and needs, foster relationships with community leaders, build and maintain partnerships, empower local action, and leverage and strengthen social infrastructure, networks, and assets (FEMA, 2011, pp. 4-5). FEMA’s Whole Community approach to emergency management highlighted the importance of building on existing relationships between emergency responders and community partners at the local level as well as building on existing collaboration and communication methods among those stakeholders at the local level. In addition to collaborating with emergency management and community partners, research has also recommended including various staff, students, parents, and community members in crisis planning (Aspiranti et al., 2011; PEMA, 2013; U.S. Department of Education

et al., 2013). Networking, collaboration, and cooperation in planning as well as in execution, improve the likelihood of effective crisis management (Palttala & Vos, 2012).

Finally, districts need to evaluate and update crisis management plans on a regular basis (e.g., PEMA, 2013; Sellnow et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013). Not only should plans be updated after every drill, they should also be updated annually and after any actual crisis event (Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014; Barker & Yoder, 2012). These reviews should be conducted by a team of various stakeholders who have participated in drills or experienced the actual crisis event.

In summary, crisis management experts and researchers have proposed suggestions for writing crisis management plans. These suggestions include basing the plans on a theoretical framework, using an all-hazards approach to planning, including communications strategies in the plans, collaborating with multiple stakeholders to develop plans, and regularly reviewing and updating plans. A common theme throughout the recommendations is to involve multiple stakeholders. For years, crisis communication research focused on an organization-centric approach to crisis communication, emphasizing the importance of crisis response strategies for reputational damage control and repair; however, current research has taken a public-centric approach, which takes into account various stakeholder perspectives (Cheng, 2018; Palttala & Vos, 2012; Stephens et al., 2013). For K-12 school districts, this means they must also consider the families and community they serve as they are managing and communicating about a crisis.

School Context is Unique

Educational settings, in particular K-12 public schools, are unique settings for managing crisis events (Thompson et al., 2017). Crisis management and crisis communication in schools pose a “unique set of challenges due to the vulnerability of its key constituency: the student

body” (Barker & Yoder, 2012, p.80). Schools not only need to protect the physical and psychological safety of students, but they must also shield students from the media (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Page et al., 2019; Poland, 2007). Media coverage of school crises can be high volume, extensive in duration, and intrusive on school grounds. Another factor that makes schools unique and challenging for crisis management and communication is the dynamics of the internal and external stakeholders. K-12 public schools have students, teachers, and staff as well as parents, the community, and the media as key stakeholders. Often these groups have competing communication priorities and needs. Schools must work to balance the communication needs of various stakeholder groups while trying to manage the crisis event (Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014; Kingshott & McKenzie, 2013; Mazer et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2017).

Parents’ communication needs can be difficult to meet, further complicating crisis situations in K-12 public school settings. One difficulty is meeting the needs of parents who have significantly different levels of involvement (Barker & Yoder, 2012) and therefore different levels of expectations when it comes to crisis communication. Another difficulty with parents is that crisis events are especially tense for parents because they are separated from their children (Page et al., 2019). Kenneth S. Trump, president of the National School Safety and Security Services, who has over 30 years of experience working with school and public safety officials, declared that parent and media demands can create “the crisis after the crisis” (2009, p.31). Without effective communication during a crisis, school office telephone lines could become overloaded with calls, and concerned parents could arrive en masse to the school to pick up students. Nevertheless, this has been the reality for some schools as they faced major crises.

An additional consideration for schools, that is not typically a concern for other organizations, is the need to adhere to privacy laws such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). This means school officials must refrain from sharing students' personal information in their crisis communications (Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014; Mazer et al., 2015; Page et al., 2019). In their study of school shooting incidents, Mazer et al. (2015) showed a more favorable audience response when the school districts and local news agencies withheld the names of the school shooting suspects and victims. Thus, schools need to be intentionally careful with the type of information they share. Similar to the research on crisis management and communication in general, the unique context of schools demands they pay particular attention to meeting the needs of their families and community when managing and communicating about a crisis event. Family and community communication needs and expectations are dependent upon the following: the individual school, family, and community context; the specific crisis situation; and the relationships that exist between schools, families, and communities.

School, Family, and Community Partnerships

All school districts will experience a crisis at some point. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many school district crisis events impacted just the immediate community; however, now that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted schools everywhere, school district crisis management and communication have become personally important to families across the U.S. School district crisis management and communication are dependent upon the relationships and means of communication established between the school district and the families and community it serves prior to any crisis event's taking place. Therefore, to be fully prepared for a crisis, school districts must focus on building strong school, family, and community partnerships.

Defining School, Family, and Community Partnerships

Among the literature on school, family, and community partnerships, different terms may be used to refer to these relationships. Some educators and researchers focused on parent involvement, a school-centric approach that Ferlazzo (2011) described as schools leading with their “mouth... telling parents how they can contribute” (p.12). Parent involvement emphasizes bringing parents into the school context, such as getting parents to attend parent-teacher conferences and school events. Other educators and researchers have expanded the concept from parent to family and from involvement to engagement. Family is a more inclusive term than parent, and accounts for diverse family structures and circumstances. Similarly, engagement is a more goal-oriented approach than involvement, reflecting a shared vision for students (Baker et al., 2016), seeing parents and guardians as equal partners, and emphasizing shared responsibility and mutual respect (Stefanski et al., 2016). A school working to improve family engagement “tends to lead with its ears – listening to what parents think, dream, and worry about. The goal of family engagement is not to serve clients but to gain partners” (Ferlazzo, 2011, p.12). Where collaborative partnerships exist, schools welcome all families, not just those easy to reach, and families recognize children as students and reinforce the importance of school (Epstein et al., 2019).

Although research has shown any kind of increased parent interest and support of students can be helpful, the research has also demonstrated even greater gains when schools use a framework that considers school, family, and community partnerships (Ferlazzo & Hammond, 2009; Epstein et al., 2019). Therefore, this literature review takes the broader approach to important relationships for schools, including family and community partnerships, as described by Epstein et al. (2019):

The concept of “partnership” recognizes that parents, educators, and others in the community share responsibility for students’ learning and development. The term *partnership* includes concepts of involvement, engagement, participation, collaboration, and other favorite terms that show that people at home, at school, and in the community work together to improve schools and increase the success of all students. (p. 2)

School, family, and community partnerships cannot be a peripheral concept; rather, they must be central to all aspects related to the business of schools. For that to happen, students, teachers, administrators, and families need to recognize the importance of those partnerships.

The Importance of School, Family, and Community Partnerships

Discussions about the impact of family on a student’s success in school can be traced back to the Coleman Report of 1966. Formally known as The Equality of Educational Opportunity Report, the Coleman Report was spurred by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and was intended to present data on school segregation; however, the lead researcher and author of the report, James Coleman, used the opportunity to also gather data about school outcomes (Evitts Dickinson, 2016). Data gathered from over 600,000 students and 60,000 teachers from 4,000 schools nationwide showed one of the most important factors in a child’s educational success was family background (Evitts Dickinson, 2016). The Coleman Report changed the way education was studied and sparked a flurry of research into family influence on education.

More than 50 years have passed since the release of the Coleman Report, and there are now countless studies showing the importance of family (and community) for schools. According to Epstein et al. (2019), “there is no topic in education on which there is greater agreement than the need for family and community involvement” (p. 1). The research is clear: to provide the best possible education, schools must partner with families and communities (Baker

et al., 2016; Christenson & Reschly, 2009; Moles & Fege, 2011; Weiss et al., 2010).

Furthermore, Epstein (2001) argued that school, family, and community partnerships would not only benefit children, but would also benefit teachers, the school, families, and the community.

A multitude of researchers over the past 30 years in over 40 countries have studied family and community engagement in schools (Epstein et al., 2019). For example, Bryk et al. (2010) used data from the Consortium on Chicago School Research's 15-year intensive longitudinal study of internal and external conditions at Chicago-area elementary schools that impacted whether or not they demonstrated academic improvement to develop, test, and validate a framework of essential supports for school improvement (Bryk, 2010). This framework incorporated parent, school, and community ties. Bryk et al. (2010) learned "that schools were four times more likely to improve in reading and ten times more likely to improve in mathematics when parent involvement was strong" (p.123). They also learned that school leadership and relational trust strongly impacted parent, school, and community ties.

At the most basic level, relational trust is grounded in social respect. Key in this regard are the conversations that occur within a school community. Respectful exchanges are marked by a genuine sense of listening to what each person has to say, and in some fashion taking this into account in subsequent actions. (Bryk et al., 2010, p.138)

Similarly, Bryk et al. (2010) concluded "inclusive, facilitative leaders connect parents more fully to the school" (p.133). Bryk et al. (2010) explored school, parent, and community ties in relation to school improvement; however, their findings have possibly significant implications for how these partnerships impact other areas of school organizations, including crisis communication.

With an overwhelming amount of research showing the importance of family and community engagement for school success, the federal government and state governments have

incorporated family and community engagement into laws, mandates, and regulations. In addition to incorporating family engagement into the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a 2016 policy statement from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (US DOHHS) and the U.S. Department of Education (US DOE) provided recommendations to early childhood systems and programs for family engagement. “Positive relationships between families and providers reinforce learning at home and in the community. They enable two-way communication and the development of mutually beneficial partnerships” (US DOHHS & US DOE, 2016, p.4). Among several other recommendations, the US DOHHS and the US DOE (2016) recommended developing family and professional relationships based on respect and trust as well as providing two-way communication that includes sharing consistent messages that support strong family engagement.

Similarly, the PA Office of Child Development and Early Learning (PA OCDEL) along with the PA Department of Education (PA DOE) and the Pennsylvania Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (PA OESE) established the Family Engagement Coalition which released a comprehensive framework for family engagement in PA public schools (2019). “Family engagement doesn’t just promote academic success but can improve overall student wellbeing and strengthen entire communities. However, the traditional methods of family involvement need to be refreshed to ensure they are effective for today’s families” (PA OCDEL & PA DOE, 2019, p.4). The PA family engagement framework highlighted the importance of leadership and identified six standards, including “building partnerships with families that are strength-based, authentic, reciprocal, and respectful” as well as “partnering with families to identify information, resources, and strategies to support them” (PA OCDEL & PA DOE, 2019, p.33).

Researchers, practitioners, and lawmakers recognize how essential school, family, and community partnerships are for school success (e.g., Bryk et al., 2010; US DOHHS & US DOE, 2016; PA OCDEL & PA DOE, 2019). These partnerships are not just important for daily operations, school climate, and academic success; they are also critical for school safety and in times of crisis. However, acknowledging that these partnerships are important and mandating that something be done to foster them is not enough. Policies, laws, and mandates must be supplemented with programs and resources that help schools take action. Schools must be intentional at building school, family, and community partnerships. “Strong programs of family and community engagement are part of good school organization and district and state leadership – not accidental or left to chance” (Epstein et al., 2019). This is where Epstein’s Overlapping Spheres of Influence and Six Types of Involvement become so important. Together these constructs provide the theory, framework, and research-based guidelines necessary to help schools take deliberate steps toward fostering meaningful and successful partnerships between schools, families, and the community (Epstein et al., 2019).

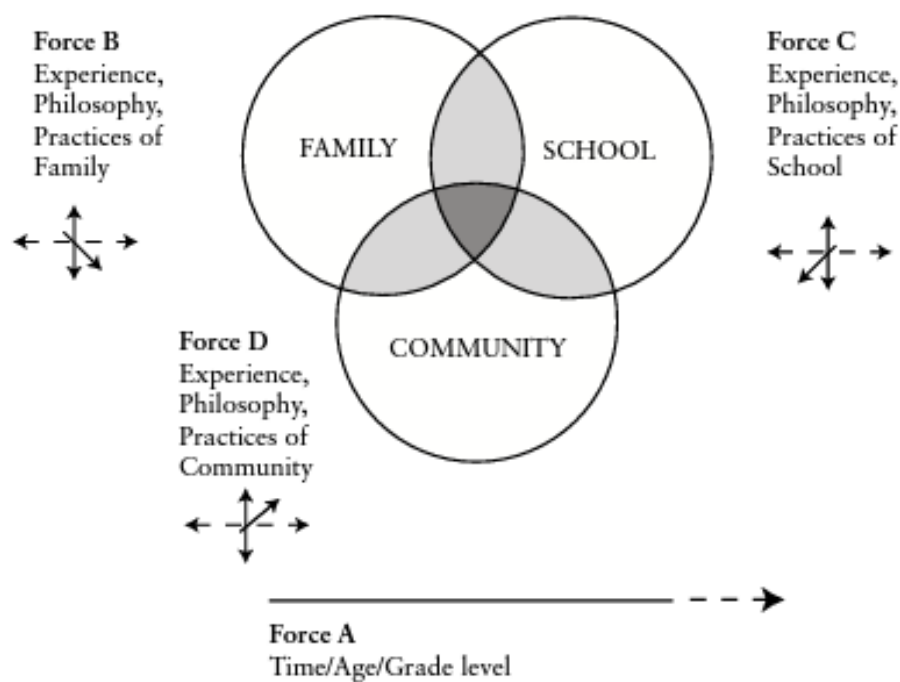
Epstein’s Overlapping Spheres of Influence and Types of Involvement

In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, Dr. Joyce Epstein emerged as a leading researcher in the field of parent and community involvement and school improvement. In 1995, Epstein established the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University, which joins schools, districts, states, and organizations together to use research-based strategies to implement and support family and community partnership programs (Johns Hopkins University School of Education, 2022). After 30 years of research in family and community involvement and over one hundred publications, Epstein continues to contribute to the field, focusing on connections between research, policy, and practice.

From her research, Epstein developed the theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence (2001). Figure 1 shows the external structure of the theoretical model of Overlapping Spheres of Influence of family, school, and community on student learning (Epstein, 2001). The spheres may be pushed together or pulled apart, expanding or diminishing the areas of overlap. The areas of overlap represent joint practices and functions. Forces impact the degree of overlap. Force A, time, is based on the age of the student, the student's grade level in school, and the historical time when the student is in school. Typically, the greatest overlap of family and school spheres occurs when the child is in preschool and early elementary grades. Forces B, C, and D represent the experiences, philosophy, and practices of family, school, and community respectively. When parents increase interest and involvement in their child's schooling (Force B), they create greater overlap between the family and school spheres. Similarly, when schools make parents feel part of the learning and decisions made at school (Force C), they create greater overlap. Moreover, when communities provide supplemental services and supports to students and families (Force D), they create greater overlap between all three spheres. The degree of overlap is also impacted by the nature and degree of communication and collaboration between the partners (Epstein, 2001; Hohlfeld et al., 2010).

Figure 1

Overlapping Spheres of Influence



Note. Students are at the center. From *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools* (2nd ed.), by Epstein, J. L. (2001). Westview Press, p.32.

To inform how schools think about engaging parents and the community in different ways and in different places, Epstein et al. (2019) identified Six Types of Involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaboration with the community. According to Epstein et al. (2019), schools should design and plan activities aimed at each of the Six Types of Involvement to help build partnerships with families and the community. However, to help narrow the focus of the research and because it is critical to crisis planning and management, this study will concentrate just on communicating, which Epstein et al. (2019) redefined as “two-way, three-way, and many-way channels of communication that connect schools, families, students, and the community” (p.20). Epstein et al. also identified

several challenges to successful communicating including reviewing the readability, clarity, form, frequency, and quality of communications.

School districts that actively employ communication strategies and intentionally address the challenges should see improved results for students, families, and staff. For instance, Epstein et al. (2019) described how Arden Elementary School in Columbia, South Carolina, in a concerted effort to improve school, family, and community partnerships, implemented a new Move-Up Night to better prepare students and families for the transition to the next grade level. In addition to forging stronger relationships between teachers, the principal, and families, Arden Elementary also used the Move-Up Night to help connect families with community resources and supports. Similarly, there are examples of the theory of OSI and the Six Types of Involvement (Epstein et al., 2019) being used as the theoretical foundation for research. For example, one study used a sample of 16,425 kindergartners from 864 schools to find that a school's efforts to communicate with and engage families predicted greater family involvement in school and higher levels of student achievement in math and reading (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012). These are just two out of a number of available practical and research-based examples of Epstein's constructs used in action and in research to strengthen partnerships through communication, programs, and actions.

Epstein's theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence (OSI) is the best fit for a theoretical platform for this dissertation. Not only does Epstein's theory of OSI incorporate the experiences, philosophies, and practices of schools, families, and community, it also factors in time, a component which is not accounted for in other models such as Bryk's framework. Furthermore, the theory of OSI identifies that school, family, and community partnerships are fostered through communication and collaboration. Just like communication is critical to effective crisis planning

and management, it is also critical to forming and supporting school, family, and community partnerships. Additionally, according to Epstein et al. (2019), leadership is critical to the success of partnership programs and practices. School and district leadership determine “whether and how well actions will be taken to improve programs of school, family, and community partnerships” (Epstein et al., 2019, p.18). All of these – school, family, and community partnerships; communication and collaboration; and leadership - are also important for crisis management and communication. There is a high degree of overlap between Epstein’s constructs and the themes that emerge in the literature for crisis management and communication. The connection is clear enough that Epstein recently spoke about the role of family engagement for school safety as part of a lecture series for the Center for Safe and Healthy Schools (Myers, 2019).

Although it may be a novel idea to utilize the theory of OSI specifically for a study on crisis communication, using OSI as a theoretical framework for research is well established. According to Magwa & Mugari (2017), Epstein’s OSI is the “most commonly accepted contemporary framework for viewing [parental involvement]” (p.75). A study to investigate the theoretical frameworks used to research family-school partnerships from 2007 to 2011 found Epstein’s OSI was one of the four theories most often used (Yamauchi et al., 2017). This same study found that Epstein’s Six Types of Involvement was one of the two most commonly used conceptual frameworks in family-school partnership research over the same five-year period. Epstein’s theory of OSI has been used as a theoretical foundation for research related to a variety of topics such as cultural differences in education (Denessen et al., 2001), the achievement of African American urban adolescents (Sanders, 1996), and digital channels of communication (Palts & Kalmus, 2015). Furthermore, it has been used in some recent dissertations. Walker

(2017) completed a dissertation that explored ELL parent involvement using Epstein's theory of OSI. Similarly, Kuusimäki (2022) used Epstein's OSI for a dissertation on the views of Finnish parents and teachers on digital communication in home-school partnerships. In all, Epstein's theory of OSI and Six Types of Involvement provide a rich theoretical foundation for this study on crisis communication.

Gaps in the Research

There is a wealth of research on crisis communication. Much of the current literature on crisis communication can be found in public relations, communications, crisis management, and business journals. Studies have also been conducted with businesses, government organizations, and institutions of higher education (Rasmussen & Ihlen, 2017). So far, what these journals and these studies have failed to account for are crises in K-12 public schools (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Kingshott & McKenzie, 2013; Mazer et al., 2015; Page et al., 2019; Rasmussen & Ihlen, 2017; Thompson et al., 2017). Few topics will get parents, community members, and media outlets more engaged than situations involving the safety of students at school; yet minimal scholarly research exists on crisis communications in K-12 public school settings. Because the K-12 public school district setting is so unique, schools need research on crisis management and communication conducted in the K-12 public school setting to guide their preparedness.

Given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools and families, it is more important now than ever for public school districts to communicate effectively with stakeholders. Some school districts are fortunate enough to have public relations officers who have received training in how to communicate with the public during crisis events; however, many districts do not have trained and skilled public relations employees (Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014). Often, the burden of crisis decision making and communicating falls on school and district leaders who

received little to no formal training in effective crisis communication. It is essential for school and district leaders to understand the principles of effective crisis management and communication (Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014; Barker & Yoder, 2012; Burdon, 2013; Kingshott & McKenzie, 2013; Page et al., 2019; PEMA, 2013; Trump, 2009; U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013).

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked an interest in crisis management research in the public school context and studies from early on in the pandemic have been published. Although many studies are related to impacts on students like learning loss and mental health concerns, some research is focusing on school leadership and communication during the pandemic. For example, Longmuir (2021) interviewed eight Australian school leaders about their experiences in the spring of 2020 when schools shut down and found school leaders directed their attention to the well-being of their communities and prioritized compassionate, reassuring, honest, positive communication with their communities. Similarly, Hauseman et al. (2020) described how school leaders who worked during the COVID-19 pandemic learned about the importance of collaboration, communication, and wellness. Orta and Gutiérrez (2022) produced a research brief for the UChicago Consortium on School Research that identified communication insights gained from focus group interviews with parents and educators. In addition to the lessons they drew from the focus group interviews, Orta and Gutiérrez (2022) also identified a central challenge: “participants described a desire for additional guidance and support in improving their communication efforts” (p.5). Thus, although COVID-19 pandemic-related research in schools and about communication is starting to be produced, there is still a need for additional research in this area. More research is needed to understand crisis management and communication in K-

12 public school settings and to inform school and district leaders (as well as crisis management teams) how to communicate effectively with a variety of stakeholders throughout crisis events.

Direction for Research in the K-12 Public School Context

States have compulsory attendance laws, meaning parents must send their children to school. For most families, this results in their kids' attending public school. Public schools operate under federal government as well as state government regulations; however, what influences a school district the most is its local community. From the parents who purchase homes in the district, to the businesses that operate in the district, to the members who serve on the school board, each key stakeholder has a vested interest in the operation of the local schools. For student (and societal) success, it is paramount for K-12 public school districts to partner with their key stakeholders - parents and the community.

This is also applicable to crisis management and communication. School districts know they need to adhere to federal, state, and Department of Education mandates and oversight when it comes to crisis planning. Districts also know they need to consider their context. In crisis management and communication, that context is related to things like the type of crisis, school geography, facilities and operations, and the general stakeholder groups any school district would consider. School, family, and community partnerships, which are specific to the different populations of students and families served (Epstein et al., 2019), also need to be factored into school district crisis planning and communication. Existing research on crisis management and communication in schools does not take into consideration these essential partnerships. To fully understand how best to manage and communicate about crises, K-12 public school districts need evidence-based guidance from research in the public school context that focuses on school, family, and community partnerships.

Summary

This literature review first took a journey through school safety and crisis planning, management, and communication, then through school, family, and community partnerships. School safety and crisis planning are governed by the federal government, state government, and state department of education. There are a number of laws, mandates, and policies in effect that govern what schools must do to plan for crises. Additionally, there is a wealth of information available from government agencies, educational agencies, researchers, and practitioners to guide schools in their crisis planning. However, the K-12 public school context is unique; therefore, the importance of incorporating multiple stakeholders throughout the process may be understated in resources based on research conducted in other types of organizations.

Furthermore, it is generally accepted today that family partnerships are critical for schools to succeed. Epstein's theory of OSI provides a comprehensive, research-based theoretical framework for how districts can cultivate school, family, and community partnerships. Effective communication is key to building trust, forming partnerships, and engaging parents. Epstein recognizes the importance of communication, including it as one of the Six Types of Involvement essential for schools to actually accomplish the very important work of partnering with families and communities. Therefore, this dissertation will not only add to the literature on crisis communication, it will add to the scant research in the K-12 public school context. Additionally, this dissertation will study school district crisis communication from the lens of school, family, and community partnerships.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology used in this dissertation, beginning with the worldview, methodology, research design, and theoretical framework of this study. This is followed by sections for the research question; research context; participants; COVID-19 pandemic context; background, role, and perspective of the researcher; data collection; and data analysis. The chapter then concludes with a discussion on validity, limitations, ethical considerations, and a summary.

The purpose of this study was to explore one district's communication with families at the elementary level during the COVID-19 pandemic to help gain a deeper understanding of how administrators communicated with families and considered their needs and preferences. This study adds to the limited research on crisis planning, management, and communication in a K-12 public school context and provides practical considerations for school-family partnerships and crisis communication.

Worldview, Methodology, and Research Design

Planning research requires an intentional approach that incorporates philosophy, design, and methods. A researcher's philosophical worldview influences the research design and guides the methods of research, effectively turning the research approach from philosophy into practice (Creswell, 2014). Butin (2010) stated how the research type "is interlinked [with] the research question, guiding framework, and particular methodology" (p.80). Thus, it is important to realize how the worldview and methodology of a dissertation interrelate and interconnect.

A constructivist worldview guided this study. According to Creswell (2014), "constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" and "develop subjective meanings of their experiences" (p.8). Constructivist researchers

seek to gather and understand participants' views and then interpret them, developing a theory or pattern of meanings. For example, the purpose of this study was to uncover administrators' communication with families during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to better understand how schools can communicate and partner with families. The participants' voices were the primary focus and were used to "construct" knowledge about school-family communication.

Constructivist researchers also focus on the setting in which participants live or work, seeking to understand the phenomena being studied within the participants' context. Similarly, this study, situated in a K-12 public education setting, was one in which understanding context was crucial for understanding the phenomena. Therefore, multiple sources of data were used to create a rich, deep understanding of the context and phenomena.

A constructivist worldview is often associated with a qualitative methodological approach to research (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research is concerned with understanding the meaning people have constructed and is characterized by a focus on process, understanding, or meaning; a researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; an inductive process; and a richly descriptive product (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This research study was a particular type of qualitative study: a case study.

A case study is a research design that gathers rich data to develop an in-depth picture of a complex issue. "Case study usually takes place within the qualitative paradigm, providing a genre that focuses not on large populations but on smaller groupings or individuals and attempts to answer questions about contexts, relationships, processes and practices" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p.23). Case studies are bounded by a unit of time, people, or activity; incorporate multiple sources and perspectives; and occur in a real-life context (Creswell, 2014; Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). For this qualitative case study, the bounded unit was a single K-12

public school district during the COVID-19 pandemic and the complex issue was school-family crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, this qualitative case study incorporated multiple participant perspectives (school principals and district office staff) and a variety of data sources (interviews, documents, and videos). Converging multiple sources of data and various stakeholder perspectives enabled the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of crisis communication in a K-12 public school setting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

Qualitative researchers use theory in their studies as a broad explanation for behavior and attitudes, as a theoretical lens or perspective, or as an end point (Creswell, 2014). This qualitative case study approached research with a theoretical perspective grounded in Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence (OSI), which emphasizes the individual and interconnected responsibilities of schools, families, and communities for student achievement and organizational success. According to Epstein (2001), the three spheres represent school, family, and community and have a varying degree of overlap based on the experiences, philosophies, and practices of each partner. The student is at the center and is the focal point of the school, family, and community spheres. Epstein's theory of OSI proposes that collaboration and communication between schools, families, and communities helps build partnerships that support students' growth and development (Epstein et al., 2019). Epstein's theory of OSI fits this study well because it recognizes the importance of student age and grade level, communication and collaboration, and leadership for building school, family, and community partnerships; all of these are also important for crisis management and communication.

A theoretical framework is essential for research. It provides a lens from which the research is designed, "highlighting the constructs of interest and guiding researchers in data

collection and analysis” (Yamauchi et al., 2017, p.26). Beyond a conceptual framework, a theoretical framework is based upon one or more theories that have already been tested. In this case, Epstein’s theory of OSI combines “psychological, educational, and sociological perspectives on social institutions to describe and explain the relations among parents, schools, and local environments” (Yamauchi et al., 2017, p.19). Epstein’s theory of OSI is based on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory and others’ models of “natural, nested, and necessary connections between individuals and their groups and organizations” (Yamauchi et al., 2017, p.20). Epstein’s theory of OSI emphasizes the relationships between schools, families, and the community and the practices that support these relationships. This is the lens through which I studied COVID-19 crisis communication between schools and families, with an emphasis on relationships and practices to support them.

Research Question

- How do school administrators describe their communication with families during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Context

The setting for this qualitative case study was Hillview School District (a pseudonym), a K-12 public school district in Pennsylvania. Hillview School District (HSD) is a mostly suburban school district that serves approximately 3,600 students in five elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. HSD is not racially diverse; however, the district is socioeconomically diverse, serving families from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, including families living in million-dollar homes to families living in trailer parks. In the 2020-2021 school year, 81.7% of the district population was white and 25.9% of HSD students were considered economically disadvantaged (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2022). Approximately

1.7% of students were English Language Learners in the 2020-2021 school year, while the percentage of the student population in special education was 17.4% (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2022).

Instead of exploring the entire district, this study focused on the elementary level in HSD. There were several reasons for choosing to focus solely on the elementary setting. First, research shows family engagement declines by grade level and by differences in school structure/transition (Green et al., 2007; Epstein et al., 2019). For this reason, studies on family engagement tend to differentiate between elementary, middle, and high school levels. Second, Epstein's theory of OSI also recognizes the importance of student age and grade level on school-family partnerships (Epstein et al., 2019). Third, I had a professional relationship with secondary-level administrators at HSD during some of the time covered by the study. Thus, focusing on the elementary level reduced some potential bias due to my past professional involvement in the district. The HSD elementary schools had similar demographics as the district as a whole; however, there was some variation in the elementary schools' enrollment and demographics as well as their principals' backgrounds.

Table 1 provides enrollment and demographic information for the four elementary schools included in the study. Yellow Tree Elementary has the highest enrollment as well as the greatest racial diversity of its student population; whereas, Blue Ridge Elementary has the second highest enrollment but the least amount of racial diversity and the lowest percent of students designated as economically disadvantaged. Orange Grove Elementary has the highest percent of students designated as economically disadvantaged. Although the school numbers for English Language Learner students is low, Orange Grove and Yellow Tree have the highest of the elementary schools in HSD.

Table 1

Demographic Data of Elementary Schools in HSD

Building	Enrollment	Percent Student Population		
		White	Economically Disadvantaged	English Language Learners
Red Clay Elementary	200	80.4	30.4	0.0
Orange Grove Elementary	250	85.9	34	1.4
Yellow Tree Elementary	400	76.3	28.6	1.7
Blue Ridge Elementary	300	88.1	12.5	0.3

Participants

Participants for this study included elementary principals, the assistant superintendent for elementary education, the district community relations coordinator, and the superintendent. I purposively sampled participants to include building-level administrators as well as district-level administrators. Including multiple perspectives helped to make richer case study data. It also helped to understand the context better, since some school-family COVID-19 pandemic communications came from the principals while others came from the district office. Furthermore, the purposive sampling was designed to attain saturation, when gathering additional data no longer uncovers new insights or themes (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I invited all eight potential participants to participate in the study by sending them an email that described the purpose and methodology of the study as well as the expected time commitment for participation. One building principal potential participant did not respond to several email requests to participate in this study. Therefore, four out of the five district's elementary principals participated in the study along with three district office administrators. Each participant was interviewed one time, for approximately 45 minutes using a semi-structured format. I conducted all interviews and used Zoom to record and transcribe them.

It is important in research to take steps to protect the identities of the participants and, in this case, the district in which they worked. Therefore, I assigned pseudonyms to all participants, schools, and the district. In addition, due to the small percentage of female administrators in the district, I de-gendered all participant names and used they/them pronouns instead of gendered pronouns. The participants included:

Principal Red from Red Clay Elementary

Principal Red became principal at Red Clay Elementary School in July 2019. The 2019-2020 school year (during which the pandemic hit and schools were closed in March 2020) was Principal Red's first year as a building principal, and as an elementary administrator. Principal Red worked in the private sector for nine years prior to joining the public education field. They taught high school for three and a half years and were a secondary-level assistant principal for 17 years, 16 of which were in HSD. Red Clay Elementary School has the smallest enrollment of all HSD elementary schools. It serves approximately 200 students, of which 80.4% are white and 30.4% are economically disadvantaged.

Principal Orange from Orange Grove Elementary

Principal Orange became principal at Orange Grove Elementary School in June 2021. This was principal Orange's first position as an administrator at the elementary level. Principal Orange was a secondary-level teacher for nine years and was in secondary-level assistant and head principal positions for eight years, the final two of which were in HSD. Orange Grove Elementary School enrolls close to 250 students. It has the highest percent of economically disadvantaged students (34%) of the elementary schools in HSD and the second highest percent of white students (85.9%).

Principal Yellow from Yellow Tree Elementary

Principal Yellow became the principal of Yellow Tree Elementary School in October 2019. Prior to that, Principal Yellow was an elementary teacher for 15 years in HSD. Unlike all of the other elementary principals in HSD, Principal Yellow was the only one who did not have primarily secondary-level experience prior to becoming an elementary principal. Yellow Tree Elementary School has the highest enrollment and the greatest racial diversity of all elementary schools in HSD. It enrolls over 400 students, of which 76.3% are white and 28.6% are economically disadvantaged.

Principal Blue from Blue Ridge Elementary

Principal Blue had been principal at Blue Ridge Elementary school since November 2015. Prior to that, Principal Blue was a secondary-level teacher for nine years and was a secondary-level assistant principal for three years. All of Principal Blue's prior experience had been in districts other than HSD. Blue Ridge Elementary School enrolls just over 300 students. It has the highest percentage of white students (88.1%) and the lowest percentage of economically disadvantaged students (12.5%) of all the elementary schools in HSD.

Assistant Superintendent (AS) Pink

Assistant Superintendent Pink had been the elementary assistant superintendent at HSD since July 2015. Assistant Superintendent Pink was an elementary-level teacher for three years and a middle school teacher for one year. They were then a middle-school level administrator for three years and an elementary-level administrator for thirteen years (eleven of which were in HSD).

Community Relations Coordinator (CRC) Indigo

CRC Indigo had been in this role at HSD since June 1999. CRC Indigo has a bachelor's degree in journalism, a graduate certificate in homeland security, and a MPA in Public Administration. Their role in the district has changed over the years, originally focused on communications and then changing to focus more on community relations. Most recently, their role has incorporated school safety. As required by Act 44, the district must appoint a school safety and security coordinator and CRC Indigo fills that role for HSD.

Superintendent Violet

Superintendent Violet had been in this role at HSD since January 2018. They were a secondary-level teacher for six years and held various secondary-level administrative roles for about five years in a local school district. Then, Superintendent Violet became a secondary-level principal in HSD for five years and a district-level administrator in HSD for seven years. They left HSD for two and a half years to be a superintendent of another PA school district. All of Superintendent Violet's public education experience, prior to his superintendencies, had been at the secondary level.

Summary of Participant Information

Knowing some background data about the participants helps to develop a deeper understanding of their perspectives and experiences. Study participants included four of the five

elementary building principals in HSD and three district office administrators. Table 2 summarizes background information for each participant. Of the four elementary principal participants, two (Principal Red and Principal Yellow) were in their first year in that role when the pandemic hit and schools shut down in March 2020; however, they both had worked for HSD for over 15 years in other roles. One elementary principal (Principal Orange) did not enter that role until over a year into the pandemic (in June 2021). Principal Orange was also relatively new to HSD, having been at the district for less than one year when the pandemic hit in March 2020. The three district-level administrators had all been with HSD for 14 years or more, and had been in their current roles for at least two years.

Table 2

Participant Job Experience

Participant	Building	As of March 2020		
		Time in Their Current Role	Total Time as An Administrator	Total Time at HSD
Principal Red	Red Clay Elementary	8 months	18 years	17 years
Principal Orange	Orange Grove Elementary	n/a	7 years	8 months
Principal Yellow	Yellow Tree Elementary	5 months	5 months	16 years
Principal Blue	Blue Ridge Elementary	4 years, 4 months	7 years, 4 months	4 years, 4 months
AS Pink	District Office	4 years, 8 months	18 years	16 years
CRC Indigo	District Office	21 years	21 years	21 years

Superintendent Violet	District Office	2 years, 2 months	21.5 years	14 years
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COVID-19 Pandemic Context

To better understand the data collected during this study and themes that emerged from the data, it is important to know some details surrounding the district's journey through the COVID-19 pandemic.

On March 13, 2020, PA Governor Tom Wolf announced that all schools would close for 10 days starting on March 16, 2020. HSD decided to provide optional online activities for students for those initial ten school days. On March 23, 2020, Governor Wolf extended the school closure through at least April 6, 2020. HSD developed a Continuity of Education Plan for providing enrichment, review, and planned instruction during the school closure. Then, on April 9, 2020, Governor Wolf closed all PA schools through the end of the 2019-2020 school year. One major difficulty the district faced with planning instruction for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year was it was one-to-one with laptops only at the secondary level. The district felt it was important to provide educational opportunities for students during the closure, but did not feel it was right to require completion of assignments and activities for all students, especially given that a number of families did not have consistent use of a computer and/or reliable internet access. According to the April 20, 2020 Board of School Directors Meeting Minutes, Superintendent Violet remarked:

It is a work in progress. It has been a challenge for some families. Not everyone is working under the same conditions, but we will get over the hump and will provide some good learning opportunities. We have provided a FAQ document for faculty and families as well. We are providing technology resources needed by families at the elementary

level including laptops and hotspots. (Superintendent Violet, Board of School Directors Meeting Minutes, 4/20/2020).

The 2019-2020 school year ended with a virtual commencement ceremony in June for HSD graduates.

At that time, HSD administrators were also discussing how to reopen schools for the 2020-2021 school year under the guidelines provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and Department of Health (PADOH). Over the next several weeks, HSD developed a committee of various stakeholders and sent out a survey to families for feedback about the Continuity of Education Plan to help the district plan for the reopening in the fall (Board of School Directors Meeting Minutes, June 8, 2020). They also took into account guidance documents from the PADOH, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Governor's office, and the PDE (Board of School Directors Meeting Minutes, June 8, 2020). From there, the district created a Health and Safety Plan, which had to be approved by the school board and submitted to the state.

On July 16, 2020, HSD shared videos with families outlining the district's plan to reopen in the fall under a hybrid model of instruction. There were videos specific to elementary families, secondary families, and families of students with disabilities. In HSD's hybrid model, half of the students would attend classes in person on Mondays and Wednesdays while the other half would attend in person on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Students would attend virtually from home on the days they did not attend school in person. All students would attend virtually from home on Fridays. HSD provided families with options for educational programming when feasible. For example, at the elementary level, families who did not want to send their child(ren) to in-person school were given the option to participate in the HSD e-learning program. This program used

district elementary teachers who only taught fully online students and who provided instruction through a mix of live online learning opportunities as well as asynchronous independent learning opportunities. For students who could not attend live sessions during the day, the e-learning teachers also offered evening office hours for check-ins.

On July 20, 2020, HSD held its regularly-scheduled board meeting, where a large number of families attended in person and via Zoom. Twenty-three parents spoke directly to the board at that meeting to share their thoughts and opinions about reopening in a hybrid model.

Superintendent Violet thanked the parents for “sharing their thoughts during public comment and appreciates how this community with different positions and concerns is able to express their thoughts and concerns in a way to hopefully move us forward and not divide us” (Board of School Directors Meeting Minutes, July 20, 2020). As part of that board meeting, the school board approved (9-0) the Health and Safety Plan which reopened schools under a hybrid model of instruction. The board members also approved (9-0) a revision to the calendar for the 2020-2021 school year which moved the first student day back a week, to provide five full in-service days for staff to help prepare for the hybrid model of instruction.

There were several reasons the district chose to reopen under a hybrid model. One of the reasons was to allow students to be socially distanced in classrooms so they did not have to wear masks. However, at 3:00 PM on August 17, 2020, the PADOH updated their mask requirements for schools, indicating students had to wear masks at all times while at school (regardless of social distancing) except for 10-minute masking breaks. This announcement came after the deadline the district had set for elementary families to commit to a program (hybrid or e-learning) for their child(ren) for the first trimester of the school year and just two weeks before the first student day. The school board held their regularly-scheduled meeting the evening of

August 17, 2020, announced the update from the PADOH, and indicated the district would share with families updated information in accordance with the new requirement. A superintendent's video update was shared with families the following day.

The 2020-2021 school year started with students in the hybrid model. With only half the number of students in the buildings each day, masking of all students and staff, social distancing to the maximum extent feasible, and numerous other mitigation efforts, the number of positive COVID-19 cases in schools remained low. Staff and students were monitoring symptoms before coming to school buildings and were able to work or attend school virtually from home if sick. Four weeks into the school year, Superintendent Violet shared a video with families about how things were going so far and thanked students, families, and staff for all their hard work and dedication to keeping everyone safe. At the October 19, 2020 school board meeting, one elementary parent addressed the board, expressing their desire to get elementary students back to school five days a week. Superintendent Violet responded by sharing that an informational video was coming out the next day in regard to that topic. On October 20, 2020, Superintendent Violet released the video explaining the district's intention to try to return kindergarten and first grade students to five days per week of in-person instruction for the second trimester. Based on information from a parent survey after that video, some recent studies published about COVID in young children, and the district's data regarding positive cases and transmission in its elementary schools, HSD revised their plans to have grades K-5 move to full-time in-person instruction for the second trimester; however, only kindergarten, first grade, and second grade would be able to be socially distanced in their classrooms. HSD continued to offer the e-learning program as an option and families were asked to commit to a full return or the e-learning program for the second trimester. At the November 2, 2020 school board meeting, one parent addressed the

school board, sharing their concerns about the elementary students' returning to in-person school full time. Superintendent Violet made some remarks about the plans for the elementary full return, including clarifying the district could only provide two programs given current staff and facilities, emphasizing "the importance of the primary elementary students to return to in-person instruction as it is at this stage where they are learning to read and other fundamental skills," and citing that other local school districts (two specifically) had already done a full return at the elementary level and had reported zero positive cases for COVID-19 at their elementary schools (Board of School Directors Meeting Minutes, November 2, 2020).

On November 23, 2020, all elementary schools in HSD changed to full in-person instruction for all students in grades K-5 or fully online instruction through the district's e-learning program. Of the approximately 1550 students enrolled in grades K-5 in HSD, 206 students chose the e-learning program. Two days later, on November 25, 2020, the PADOH released new orders for in-person instruction learning models and an associated matrix for determining when schools would need to close, based on the number of COVID-19 cases. One week later, on December 2, 2020, the PADOH shared clarifications on those orders. There were no other major updates to the COVID-19 orders for schools the rest of the 2020-2021 school year; although there were 16 instances of HSD elementary schools or classrooms being closed between November 2020 and June 2021. In addition to temporary classroom or school closings, schools and families also had to follow 10-day quarantining rules when potentially exposed to a person positive with COVID-19.

Throughout the 2020-2021 school year, schools followed the PADOH guidelines for quarantining and contact tracing. Case numbers were relatively low, as were the numbers of close contacts in school buildings. However, a student could easily miss 10 or more days from

school because of quarantining rules depending on the way COVID-19 moved through their family. At the elementary level, because of the full return, joining classes virtually from home was not an option. Thus, principals and teachers worked with families to continue providing educational opportunities for students who had to stay home. Sometimes, however, due to family circumstances, students or families were too sick to support learning at home and the school would have to work to catch that student up when they returned. Each school managed this process individually for each student and family. Nearing the end of the second trimester, elementary families were again given the option to choose full in-person schooling or the e-learning program for their child(ren) for the final trimester. After a first trimester with many updates and changes, and other than school and classroom closings and sometimes lengthy quarantining for individual students, things were relatively stable for the second and third trimesters of the 2020-2021 school year.

The summer of 2021 brought about a new wave of difficulties related to schools and COVID-19 mitigation. During this time, families and community members were becoming increasingly opinionated and divided on issues such as masking. In particular, a growing number of families and community members were beginning to tire of pandemic regulations and were taking actions socially and politically to fight them. The COVID-19 vaccine had been rolled out to adults and children aged 13 and older in the spring and summer of 2021, case counts were much lower than they had been, and on June 28, 2021 Governor Wolf removed the mandatory mask wearing order for schools, leaving the decision for masking to local school board control. HSD released their updated Health and Safety Plan for the 2021-2022 school year in July 2021. According to the July HSD Health and Safety Plan, masks would be optional for all students and staff for the 2021-2022 school year. Superintendent Violet shared a video on July 16, 2021,

explaining the new plan and showing families where they could go to make public comment on the plan. Approximately 70 guests attended the school board meeting on August 16, 2021 and 25 of them spoke directly to the board, sharing their opinions of mask wearing in school. Speakers represented both sides of the issue; however, more speakers advocated for requiring masks than the opposite. At the end of the board meeting, one board member moved to schedule another meeting one week from that day to revise or go over the Health and Safety Plan one more time. This motion passed with a 6-2 vote (one board member was absent). One week later, on August 23, 2021 the HSD school board met again. This time there were approximately 200 guests at the meeting with 48 individuals scheduled to address the board directly, including a number of students. After three hours of public comment with opinions on both sides of the issue, and after board discussion, the school board voted 6-2 (one member was absent) to amend the Health and Safety Plan to make masking optional for all adults, optional for students in the high school, and mandatory for students in grades K-8. The main reason for the difference between the groups was that high school students and adults were able to get fully vaccinated. Mandatory masking for students at the elementary level was also based on the 14-day rolling average for community transmission in the county (Board of School Directors Meeting Minutes, August 23, 2021). The next day, less than one week before the first day of school, Superintendent Violet shared a video with HSD families and staff about the updates to the Health and Safety Plan as approved by the board the evening before.

As a result of the pushback by family groups over the summer on state decisions regarding COVID-19 mitigation strategies, some of the guidance changed and schools were allowed to begin accepting mask exemptions. Those exemptions needed doctor approval and did not need to go through the official process for accommodations for individuals with a disability

under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 or the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Now that the HSD school board had voted for a Health and Safety Plan that made masks mandatory in grades K-8, families began exploring the mask exemption process. This became significant to manage at the school buildings. It hit one of HSD's elementary schools particularly hard, as the school had families who threatened litigation unless their mask exemptions were approved, and had other families who threatened litigation if their children were in classrooms with students not wearing masks. Principals did a great deal of work during this time, talking with families about masking, social distancing, quarantining, and other policies and procedures related to opening schools and mitigating COVID-19 while also honoring students' and families' rights.

After the tumultuous local debate about masking, schools opened in HSD on August 30, 2021. At the elementary level, all students in grades K-1 and 4-5 returned to full-time, in-person instruction. HSD did offer an e-learning option, but only for a small number of second and third graders. This decision was in response to a parent survey sent out over the summer, assessing the number of families interested in such an option. All HSD students and bus drivers were required to be masked on school buses, due to the federal government regulation mandating masks on public transportation. Only elementary and middle school students were required to be masked at school, due to the school board's approval of the Health and Safety Plan. Some elementary schools had students refusing to wear masks. Each of these situations was handled mainly by the building principal. On August 31, 2021, the second day of the school year for HSD, the acting PA Secretary of Health signed an order requiring face coverings for all adults and students in all schools. This order went into effect on September 7, 2021. In addition, although the PADOH had said they would handle contact tracing for schools for the 2021-2022 school year, they did not.

Thus, this responsibility fell again to school nurses and principals. Even with masking in grades K-8, the full return of students at the elementary level paired with higher community spread meant higher case counts at schools. The process of contact tracing and communicating with students and families about quarantining became more cumbersome and, at times, conflict-ridden, as some families pushed back on schools for following PDE and PADOH orders.

Then, on December 10, 2021, the Supreme Court of PA overturned the acting Secretary of Health's mask order, stating the acting Secretary of Health did not have the authority to make such an order. At the December 20, 2021 HSD school board meeting, Superintendent Violet recounted some of the major developments in masking guidelines and cited the most recent development with the Supreme Court's decision. Superintendent Violet provided information about what decisions the school board can make and how they work. In light of the Supreme Court's decision, the school district would continue to follow the board-approved Health and Safety plan from August 23, 2021. Board discussion ensued about quarantining and close contacts, vaccinations, and what is a PADOH requirement versus what is in local board control (Board of School Directors Meeting Minutes, December 20, 2021). The school board agreed to revisit the Health and Safety Plan at the January 10, 2022 meeting, specifically targeting masking in grades K-8 and quarantining. At the school board meeting on January 10, 2022, board members voted 8-1 to make masking optional for all staff and students, and voted 9-0 to align the Health and Safety Plan with Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's recommendations regarding asymptomatic close contacts and their quarantining and masking, and voted 9-0 to revise the Health and Safety Plan from a 10-day quarantine for positive cases to the CDC-recommended 5-day quarantine period. These updates eased tensions and hardships on staff, students, and families.

The HSD Health and Safety Plan was updated twice in March 2022. On March 7, 2022, the school board voted 7-0 to continue to ease district requirements related to COVID-19 mitigation measures. This was in response to the PDE, the PADOH, and other governing bodies relaxing requirements. The updates included making masking optional on school district transportation and referring families to report positive cases directly to the PADOH who would implement contact tracing protocols and notify the district of the number of close contacts identified (Board of School Directors Meeting Minutes, March 7, 2022). The PADOH was supposed to have been responsible for contact tracing throughout the 2021-2022 school year but did not officially begin doing so until this time. Then, two weeks later, on March 21, 2022, the HSD school board voted 7-0 to again amend the Health and Safety Plan. This time, the board removed the guidance for families to notify the PADOH of positive cases, since the CDC was no longer requiring contact tracing. The district also no longer needed to communicate with families regarding contact tracing (Board of School Directors Meeting Minutes, March 21, 2022).

From March 2020 through March 2022, HSD experienced the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. From closing all schools, to providing educational programming options including in-person and virtual hybrid learning, to a return to full-time in-person learning, the district experienced a variety of unprecedented instructional models. In addition, as the guidance and political landscape changed throughout the pandemic, sometimes rapidly, HSD navigated the impacts of these changes on students, families, staff, and the community.

Background, Role, and Perspective of Researcher

Researchers inherently bring bias to their studies. Creswell (2014) explained that “good qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background” (p.202). Creating an open and honest narrative about

researcher bias is one strategy to help improve validity (Creswell, 2014). Thus, it is important for me to explain my background, role, and perspective as the principal researcher for this study.

Until November of 2021, I was an employee of HSD. I served as a teacher, assistant principal, and building-level principal. All of these positions were at the secondary level in HSD. I lived the world of crisis communication as a building-level principal before and during the pandemic. My experiences helped build my passion for the subject. In addition, my firsthand experiences in public education during the pandemic resulted in more accurate and in-depth interpretation of the data.

Although I am no longer a public-school employee, I resigned my position while in good standing due to family and personal reasons. Seidman (2013) recommended finding balance when establishing rapport with interview participants, and staying away from having too much or too little rapport. My background in public education administration and therefore my level of familiarity with the larger context the interview participants were experiencing helped improve the candidness and depth of participant responses. By choosing to limit this study to the elementary level, I reduced the potential for a lower level of candor in regard to communications that involved secondary-level administrators with whom I had a prior professional relationship. This helped me to maintain a balanced level of rapport with the interview participants.

Data Collection

This qualitative case study gathered data from a variety of sources to explore how school administrators described their communication with families during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study gathered qualitative data from semi-structured individual interviews with study participants as well as from communication documents. The research methods included talking

directly to participants and gathering information up-close as well as obtaining the language of the participants in written and visual form in an unobtrusive way (Creswell, 2014).

Interviewing gathers data on the experiences of the participants and the meaning they make of those experiences (Seidman, 2013). I conducted semi-structured individual interviews with seven research participants via Zoom, which recorded the meeting's video and audio as well as automatically transcribed the audio of the interviews into text. To ensure the automatic transcription by Zoom was accurate, I reviewed the video recordings while I checked the transcription text and fixed any errors. The purpose of the interviews was to gather the participants' actions, experiences, and perceptions of their and the district's COVID-19 communication with families. I used a semi-structured format to ensure the capture of specific information desired as well as to allow me to respond to the participant's perspective and any new ideas that emerged in the conversation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used an interview protocol (Appendices A and B) when interviewing the study participants. In addition, I took notes during the interviews in the event the Zoom technology failed to record.

I also gathered data from documents for this qualitative case study, which Creswell (2014) identifies as one of the basic types of data collected in qualitative research. This included written documents such as letters, emails, and district safety plans as well as audiovisual documents such as video messages posted on YouTube. With the exception of the district safety plans, all of the documents I gathered were part of the public record, meaning they were distributed to the public and/or were publicly accessible and were ongoing records of the district's communications (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These documents were also what are considered primary sources, in that they were recorded in close time and place to the phenomenon by a qualified person (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In all, I included the following

documents: school and district email and phone communications to families, superintendent video communications to families, Board of School Directors meeting minutes, school district Health and Safety Plans, and archives of the district website using Wayback Machine (an internet archive library). Although the plan for gathering data via documents was systematic, this study also allowed for the inclusion of any additional documents that emerged as useful as the research was conducted. Once a document was located and identified as useful, the document was authenticated by verifying the author, place, and date of writing or production as well as the conditions and context under which it was created, its intended audience, and its use.

I took measures to secure and protect the data collected for this study. The interview recordings and transcripts and research documents were saved on my personal computer and on my personal Google Drive, both of which are password protected and accessible only by me. Five years from the completion of the study, I will permanently delete the data from my laptop and from my Google Drive.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data collection and analysis are intertwined, often taking place simultaneously (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, I analyzed the data while also collecting data. “Data that have been analyzed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.197). For example, I began analyzing data from one interview before conducting the next interview. This enabled me to capture my reflections, identify tentative themes, and develop ideas from one interview to help inform the next interview. I also analyzed data inductively, looking for emerging themes.

In general, I followed the process for analyzing qualitative data as described by Creswell (2014). After collecting data, I organized and prepared the data for analysis, making notes of my

general thoughts about the data collected and putting together a description of the setting. I coded the data for underlying topics or themes, identified interrelating categories or themes, and interpreted the meaning of the description and themes (Creswell, 2014).

More specifically, I took the following steps to analyze the data from the interviews for this qualitative case study. I recorded the audio and video of each interview via Zoom, which also automatically transcribed the audio. I listened to the audio while checking the audio transcript text for accuracy and fixed any errors. I also anonymized the text transcription to help protect the identities of the participants and the district. I took notes in my research journal about my thoughts, reflections, tentative themes, and additional things to pursue in the next interview. Initially, I used NVivo to code the data; however, I ended up switching to Microsoft Excel to code, organize, and analyze the data. I coded the interview data inductively, searching for emerging themes and I used *in vivo* terms (the language of the participants) for the codes when possible (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In all, I analyzed 292 minutes of interview transcripts.

I had originally planned to collect and analyze data from documents including Superintendent Violet's video communications to families, school board meeting minutes, school and district email and phone communications to families, school district safety plans, and archives of the district website. Although I did collect all of these documents and some additional ones, I did not analyze all of them. It was important for me to "winnow" document data into a manageable amount (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, the initial deductive analysis of the documents for Epstein's theory of OSI did not yield new meaning outside of the themes from the inductive analysis of interview data. Therefore, I used the documents for triangulation, to help better understand the context, and to help tell the story of

the interviewees' experiences at the district during the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 3 provides a summary of the documents I reviewed for this qualitative case study.

Table 3

Document Data Reviewed

Document Type	Amount
School Board Meeting Minutes	42 meetings, 375 pages
Superintendent Video Communication to Families	16 videos, 151 minutes
School Safety Response Plans	113 pages
Health and Safety Plans	8 versions, 121 pages
Other District Staff Videos	3 videos, 16 minutes
Participant Communication Documents	21 documents, 32 pages
Archives of District Website Using Wayback Machine	177 captures

Qualitative data provides up-close and in-depth information. For this study, I gathered a variety of qualitative data for a deeper and richer understanding of the context as well as school district administrator views and practices. Findings are reported using detailed, thick descriptions and narratives as recommended by Creswell (2014), including using direct quotes from participants and documents. I also took steps during the data collection and analysis process to ensure the validity of the data.

Validity of Interpretation

Trustworthy research incorporates strategies to ensure validity (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These strategies were embedded in the design of the study, especially in the data collection, data analysis, and findings of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While this qualitative case study strived for deep understanding, validity strategies ensured the findings accurately reflected reality. One way this was achieved was through disciplined inquiry, which is when a study uses systematic and verifiable steps and procedures (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This study's rigorously planned methodology is an example of disciplined inquiry.

I employed several additional strategies, as recommended by Creswell (2014), for validity including triangulation, member checking, using rich descriptions to convey findings, and identifying researcher bias. Triangulation, using multiple methods and types of data, helped confirm the study's accuracy. I used triangulation by converging findings into common themes among different participants and via different data sources. Member checking, or sharing the findings with the participants to determine whether they feel they are accurate, also added to the trustworthiness of the study. I emailed the findings to the participants and asked them to confirm they accurately represented their experiences. Additionally, I used rich, detailed descriptions to convey the findings, helping the reader to develop a shared experience through deep understanding of the context, experiences of the participants, and documents. Finally, I bolstered the validity of the study by clarifying any bias I brought to the study as the researcher. "This self-reflection creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers" (Creswell, 2014, p.202). Reflection is not only a characteristic of qualitative research; it is also a validity strategy. I spent ample time diving into this case study, interviewing the participants and engaging with the documents, to acquire a deep understanding of the context, participant

experiences, and school-family crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the study, I took steps to confirm the validity of the data collection, analysis, and findings.

Limitations

This study had several limitations which are relative to qualitative research in general. Typically, qualitative studies are not generalizable, meaning the results are not applicable to other settings. Rather, “in qualitative research, a single case or a small, nonrandom, purposeful sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.254). This study, as is a hallmark of good qualitative research (Creswell, 2014), emphasized particularity, or detailed and rich descriptions and themes in a specific context, as opposed to being generalizable. In addition, another aspect of qualitative case study research that leads to limitations is the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. For this reason, my personal values, assumptions, and biases were identified and clearly communicated right from the start. They were a consideration as I collected and analyzed the data and reported the findings. Although every effort was made methodologically to reduce bias, my preconceptions and biases may have shaped the way I viewed, understood, and interpreted the data (Creswell, 2014). It is important to mention this for validity and for identifying limitations.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are important to the validity of a study and are heavily dependent on the credibility of the researcher and the research methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers need to protect participants, promote the integrity of research, and address challenges (Creswell, 2014). Ethical issues can occur at many points in the process of conducting

research, especially during data collection, data analysis, and when reporting findings. Issues can be procedural, situational, or relational. Procedural issues are mostly minimized by sound research methodology and adherence to guidelines established by the institutional review board (IRB). Situational and relational ethical issues also depend on pre-established guidelines; however, they also rely on the researcher's sensitivities and values (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Situational ethical issues, such as those that may come up in the research context, must be resolved as they arise. Similarly, relational issues may appear between researchers and participants and must be addressed as they occur. In this study, the interviews carried a greater risk of ethical issues, in contrast to the document collection and analysis; however, ethical considerations were important at all times before, during, and after this study.

I took numerous steps, as suggested by Creswell (2014), to protect the ethics and validity of this study. One major step was gaining approval by the IRB. This required me to assess and protect against any harm to humans. As part of the IRB review process, I asked participants to sign informed consent forms, which provided them with important information about this study as well as the protection of their rights. In addition, for ethical reasons, I read a statement prior to each interview (see Appendix A or Appendix B). This statement encouraged participants to be as honest as possible while also protecting their role as leaders. Another step I took for ethical purposes was through the disclosure of information in the planning stages of the study. This included clearly stating the purpose of the study as well as my background, role, and perspectives as the researcher. To protect the validity and ethics of the study while conducting research, I respected the research setting and participants, disrupting as little as possible. I did not deceive or exploit participants; nor did I collect harmful information. When analyzing the data, I avoided "taking sides" on any issues that arose, I recognized negative as well as positive results,

and I respected participants' privacy. When reporting, sharing, and storing data, I did not falsify or plagiarize anything. I communicated clearly using appropriate and straightforward language. Additionally, I did not disclose any information that may have been harmful to participants and I kept raw data and other materials secure.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of school-family communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. To do that, this qualitative case study explored one school district's communication with families at the elementary level during the COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by a constructivist worldview, the participants' voices and the setting were the primary focus areas and were used to construct knowledge about school-family communication. Qualitative research methods were employed to gather rich, detailed data from various participant perspectives and multiple sources of data to improve understanding of COVID-19 school-family crisis communication. Epstein's theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence, as the theoretical framework for this study, provided the lens through which I considered COVID-19 communication between schools and families.

This case study took place at a K-12 public school district in Pennsylvania and was limited to the elementary level and the time from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 until the time of data collection in May 2022. The seven participants were purposively sampled to include elementary principals as well as district office staff. Each participated in a semi-structured interview of approximately 45 minutes. Data for this case study was also gathered through documents including district safety plans, school board meeting minutes, emails, phone messages, website postings, and video messages. Interview data was coded and

analyzed for underlying and interrelating themes. Document data was used to help triangulate data, understand the context, and understand participants' experiences.

As is common to qualitative research, I was the researcher and I was the main instrument for data collection and analysis. It was important for me to disclose my background, views, and potential biases and keep them in mind as I collected and analyzed data and presented findings. Because there is a scarcity of research on crisis communication in the K-12 public school setting, this study is a potentially important addition to the literature. And since schools will inevitably continue to face crises, this study is potentially important for helping to inform school district communication practices.

Chapter 4: Findings

This qualitative case study explored one Pennsylvania K-12 public school district's communication with elementary families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of how administrators communicated with families and how communication practices supported relationships between schools and families. Qualitative data provided up-close and in-depth information, delivering a deep description and telling a rich story. For this study, qualitative data was gathered and analyzed based on one research question.

Research Question

- How do school administrators describe their communication with families during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Emerging Themes

To explore the research question, I conducted interviews with the seven study participants. The interviews were semi-structured and the interview protocol was designed to be open-ended and elicit study participants' perspectives and the meaning they make of their experiences communicating with families during the COVID-19 pandemic (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research seeks to uncover participants' understanding of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Major themes emerged from the inductive coding of the interview data. These themes capture the experiences of the participants as school administrators responsible for school-family communications throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The first theme that emerged was being responsive. Looking at the corpus of data, two subthemes emerged which captured how participants responded to the evolving pandemic situation and to the school community. The second theme that emerged from the data was supporting trusting relationships between the school district and families. From the body of data also emerged several subthemes

related to participants' experiences with keeping kids at the core, communicating support, and navigating community division.

Being Responsive

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a constantly evolving situation for schools to react to. Not only did the scientific understanding of the COVID-19 virus evolve over time, but the status of the pandemic in the local, state, and national landscape varied with time as well. The Governor, the Secretary of Health, Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), and Pennsylvania Department of Health (PADOH) released updated mandates and guidelines for public schools throughout the course of the pandemic. These updates usually had significant impacts on the way schools could operate and educate students. In fact, the impacts from these mandates and guidelines presented the true crisis for schools - how to educate students under the current evolving pandemic circumstances. For example, in November of 2020, the Secretary of Health released a new order requiring schools still providing in-person instruction, among other things, to social distance students during lunch. This one change alone impacted students' ability to socialize, schools' utilization of space and staff, and even educational programming. According to Superintendent Violet in their December 2020 video to families, "we want the students to have that social time, their break from instruction, and have their lunch, but if we wanted to remain open, we needed to make some changes." Throughout the pandemic, school administrators were responding to the changing circumstances created by COVID-19's effects on policies and procedures.

In particular, participant interviews showed how HSD administrators were responsive to the evolving pandemic situation as well as to their school community. Participants described being responsive to the constantly, and usually rapidly, changing guidelines for schools. They

also shared how they responded to families' changing needs throughout the pandemic as well as varying community dynamics and needs around the district. In addition, participant interviews revealed how HSD administrators felt school-family partnerships helped everyone get through the pandemic. Participants believed the schools and families had strong relationships prior to the pandemic. They also believed it was important to communicate in welcoming, comforting, and caring ways with families and to keep a focus on the students. Even though the community experienced division and disagreement as the pandemic wore on, respect remained intact, families continued to be involved, and participants were hopeful for rebuilding partnerships.

Responding to the Evolving Situation

The participant interviews showed how HSD administrators worked to be responsive to the evolving pandemic situation. "Communication has been nothing but flux for the past 18 months, or however long it's been," said CRC Indigo. At times, the change happened rapidly; in other cases, the change occurred gradually over time. Data analysis showed how study participants were responsive to the evolving situation in public education, whether that was involving rapid or longer-term change.

HSD administrators described experiencing constant, oftentimes rapid, change throughout the pandemic. Every participant, at some point in their interview, talked about the ever-changing pandemic situation. For example, Principal Orange stated, "the hardest part was trying to navigate the rapid changes that we didn't control at a district level." Assistant Superintendent Pink (AS Pink) shared an example of the impact of continuous and rapid change, noting how in the summer of 2020, "we'd have a meeting and by the end of the week the meeting was pointless because [the government] would change what we were doing." Likewise, CRC Indigo pointed out how "[PDE] especially seemed to wait 'til Friday at 5 o'clock a lot to

make announcements. So, we'd think we had a game plan, and then we'd [have to] work over the weekend then to revise things." Even the HSD school board acknowledged the "ever changing guidance" in their July 2020 board meeting. Because of how rapidly things could evolve, HSD administrators had to learn to wait sometimes before sending communication updates to families. Principal Blue shared how they would be in update meetings with Superintendent Violet and they would think, "this is what I'm hearing, but I'm going to wait to communicate this for a day or two because I know there's other pieces of this that have to also come into play." Similarly, changes to the guidelines oftentimes took time to be enacted in schools. Principal Orange shared some of their frustrations related to guideline changes being announced:

And, by the way, the protocol could literally change tomorrow because the CDC woke up and decided to change the line. And your Health and Safety Plans, what you live by, so until you vote on that, CDC says this but the Health and Safety Plan says this. So, we're stuck with the Health and Safety Plan 'til next week, when the board meeting happens.

You know that was hard for people. (Principal Orange, interview, 5/24/2022)

The constant, and often rapid, change to guidelines for operating schools created difficulties for the district and for families.

One particularly significant and difficult change happened just before the start of the 2020-2021 school year. HSD decided to open in a hybrid model, partly to allow for social distancing so that students would not have to wear masks all day. Then, less than two weeks before the first student day (and after families had made their decisions about how their kids would be educated at HSD), the PADOH changed the rules, requiring students to wear masks at all times, regardless of being socially distanced. Principal Orange recalled, "you have no mask, no mask, no mask, and then masks! Wait a minute." This updated guidance caused some families

to change their minds about educating their child(ren) fully online or in the hybrid model and gave the district less than two weeks to adjust their plans, schedules, teacher assignments, etc. Despite the constant, and frequently rapid, changes to guidelines, the district remained responsive and tried to anticipate updates if possible.

HSD administrators talked about how they preferred to be proactive with communications, but the frequent and rapid changes made that difficult. Superintendent Violet remarked, “I think you want to always be proactive, but things changed so quickly... so it’s kind of hard to be proactive but we tried.” Likewise, Principal Blue explained how the rapidness of the changes made communicating with families difficult:

Things just changed so quickly that you’re constantly reacting to it and you’re getting bombarded with questions because people are hearing about something in the news or from their own work experiences and they want to know what that’s going to look like for us. But we don’t have all of the information about what that’s going to look like yet.

And so that became tough. (Principal Blue, interview, 5/17/2022)

AS Pink shared a similar sentiment, describing, “sometimes you had to make decisions. You would put information out [and then] you get more information back... it just made it tough, trying to anticipate what the best decisions were going to be.” Even so, HSD administrators worked hard to be as proactive as possible with their communications. “I think we did a very nice job of trying to keep what we could control consistent and communicate it clearly so parents knew expectations in advance - not, it changed tomorrow, it’s in effect,” said Principal Orange. For instance, even though many in the school community would know about potential updates before they were voted on by the school board, the board would put an effective date on any changes they voted on, giving families a day or two to prepare before the changes were enacted.

Thus, although changes in the guidelines were sometimes rapid and significant, HSD administrators and the school board were responsive by being intentional in their approach to communicating with families.

As the COVID-19 pandemic evolved and the guidance governing schools changed over time, HSD changed school-family communication in response. For instance, the HSD school board acknowledged the state of change and HSD administrators' efforts to communicate with families at the August 2020 school board meeting:

[Two board members] thanked the superintendent and the administrative team for being so prepared and really on top of things and implementing a plan to inform parents to allow them to prepare. They thanked them for their flexibility as it will be needed as conditions change. (School Board Members, Board of School Directors Meeting Minutes, August, 17, 2020)

Study participants shared their perspectives on the longer-term changes in guidance and communication as well. For instance, when asked about communicating with families throughout the pandemic, Principal Blue remarked, "I think it's evolved and... there's different periods of the pandemic and the communication changed based on where we were." HSD administrators described the responsive changes over time in how messages were shared (i.e., on what platform), the content of the messages, and who was sending the messages.

Initially, when the governor closed schools in March 2020, Superintendent Violet was doing most of the communications. As Principal Blue described:

A lot of the communication at the beginning was coming from the superintendent from the district office because we had no idea what was actually going on. At first, we thought [schools would be closed] a couple of days, a week, two weeks, three weeks, a

month. Then three months and we weren't coming back for that 2020 school year.

(Principal Blue, interview, 5/17/2022)

The district-level communications were primarily through SchoolMessenger phone calls. SchoolMessenger is a mass notification system that allows families to sign up for notifications from the school district. Prior to the pandemic, this system had been utilized mainly just for delays, early dismissals, and closings due to inclement weather. Oftentimes during the pandemic, the SchoolMessenger phone calls would refer families to the district website for more detailed information, resources, and links.

Meanwhile, elementary school administrators felt like they were scrambling for how to communicate with families since schools were closed. Principal Red noted that prior to the shutdown, families “relied a lot on just flyers and things coming home in their kid’s book bag. So, I think as we had to reinvent ourselves... parents had to reinvent themselves to paying a little bit more attention to electronics.” Beyond switching from paper communications in students’ book bags to other platforms for communicating, the district had to contend with its elementary schools not having a consistent alternate platform. AS Pink shared, “when we first shut down the first initial big concern was, how are we going to communicate with families? Some of the elementary buildings had no other plan in place but basically big email dumps.” According to AS Pink, this was a “tricky” situation. Different buildings were using different platforms, and most of the platforms were designed to push out information one-way. Without more solid plans in place, elementary schools communicated with families using their different methods throughout the spring of 2020.

Just as the platforms varied between district-level and building-level communications, so did the content of the messages during that initial shutdown of schools. While the district office

was sending out district-wide messages to all families as updates happened, Superintendent Violet had directed school principals to send messages to families on a regular basis with building-level information. This was a new communication expectation, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the shutdown of schools. Principal Red explained that Superintendent Violet, “expect[ed] us to communicate to parents and update the scenario... every two weeks we had to put a new updated communique out.” The messages from the principals included some of the same updates as the district-level messages plus level-specific and building-specific information. For example, a district-level message was sent near the end of the school year to families, including telling families that HSD schools were working on plans for how students could pick up their belongings and turn in textbooks when the school year officially ended. Then, the elementary principals sent messages to their school communities elaborating on their building-specific plans for that process. Principal Blue described this situation:

So, the superintendent definitely had the lead in the communication because he had to set that vision and what the big picture looked like. And then I was taking that message and tailoring it to our families. Okay, what does the [Blue Ridge Elementary School] specific information look like? So going back to that spring of 2020, okay, we're going to be out of school. This is what education is going to look like. But then it's little things like everyone has all of their stuff in the building. How are we going to get this back to the kids? How are we going to distribute yearbooks? (Principal Blue, interview, 5/17/2022)

Hence, the shutdown in the spring of 2020 presented new and ongoing communication challenges for the district-level and building-level administrators. They responded by using what platforms they had in place and by sending district-level updates as well as building-specific updates to families.

In the summer of 2020, HSD changed their primary communication for district-level messages from SchoolMessenger phone calls to videos posted on YouTube. Seeing and hearing directly from Superintendent Violet seemed especially important considering schools had been shut down the whole spring of 2020. The videos helped bridge the gap from losing those in-person connections that happen naturally when school is in session under “normal” circumstances.

Whenever a new video from Superintendent Violet was released, the district would use SchoolMessenger to send a voicemail to families to check the district website for the link to the video. Many of the district and building-level communications throughout the pandemic would refer families to the district website. HSD consistently used the district website throughout the pandemic to share information with families. The district posted announcements, videos, documents, resources, links, and a COVID-19 webpage that included a dashboard for tracking positive cases in the district. CRC Indigo explained:

[HSD] really relied on the website a lot. We'd post updates on the website without videos. Every time the board would update the Health and Safety Plan, we would post a short blurb about what the updates contained, and then post the new Health and Safety Plan online. (CRC Indigo, interview, 5/18/2022)

Principal Yellow described how the website provided a historic record of information that was helpful for families:

[Families] needed to have an essential place to go to. Because it's easy to erase all your emails to get your inbox at zero and it's easy not to scroll back through [other school messages]. But knowing that the website was there as a constant was going to combat that. (Principal Yellow, interview, 6/29/2022)

Likewise, Superintendent Violet described how the website was a resource for administrators:

The nice thing about the videos, if you think about it is, people can go back, or administrators could go back and say, what are we doing? What is the recommendation or what is the [document]? And it's there. It's a historical thing... You can go back and say, this is the number of cases or we're wearing face coverings, or you know. So, it was a resource for us too. (Superintendent Violet, interview, 5/17/2022)

The district's COVID-19 webpage on the district website was another example of the district being responsive to the evolving pandemic situation and related communication needs. The website and COVID-19 webpage became a consistent place for families to find up-to-date information and resources throughout the pandemic. Moreover, Superintendent Violet, in their video to families in August 2020, described how families could sign up for notifications when the district's COVID-19 webpage was updated:

So, what you can do is instead of going to the district website daily to see if there's been a notification of a case or cases in a building or the building your child attends, you can sign up for notifications of updates to our district webpage. And if you're not sure how to do that, please contact [CRC Indigo] at [this phone number]. (Superintendent Violet, video communication to families, 8/27/2020)

Although families could sign up for webpage update notifications, the district still communicated out to families when a new video message was shared or when major updates happened. At a district level, that was most often through SchoolMessenger phone calls; and, for elementary buildings, that began as a building-specific method in the spring of 2020 but changed for the 2020-2021 school year.

Having realized the communication methods in the spring of 2020 were “a bit survivalish” (AS Pink), HSD responded by making the decision to be consistent with its communication platforms for the next school year. Additionally, opening under the hybrid model and having students in school in-person only two days out of a week, HSD realized there needed to be a consistent way to post and collect assignments. Thus, HSD adopted a learning management platform for sharing academic resources and submitting assignments, as well as an educational technology called ClassDojo for elementary school-family communications for the 2020-2021 school year. “ClassDojo is an online classroom management platform and app where teachers can record and track student behavior, facilitate classroom activities, curate student portfolios, and engage in school-to-home communication” (Rogowski, 2020). AS Pink explained the HSD elementary principals liked what ClassDojo offered, specifically that it allowed classroom communications, whole-school communications, and English-to-Spanish translations for non-English-speaking families.

Six out of the seven study participants mentioned ClassDojo explicitly in their interviews, with the majority speaking positively about it as a communication platform. “We lived off ClassDojo,” explained Principal Orange, who went on to explain how “it just gave us a quick way without having to take [families’] time” and “it allowed us to stay connected.” Principal Yellow described a “cool” feature they liked about ClassDojo, saying “if a parent reads a message, a check mark comes up so you can kind of track who gets your messages, and who doesn't. So that was a nice way of knowing that the information got out there.” Most interview participants seemed happy with ClassDojo as the choice for the main platform for elementary building-level communications with families to start the 2020-2021 school year.

Although all HSD schools K-12 started the 2020-2021 school year in a hybrid model with students attending school in person two days a week, HSD decided to bring all elementary students K-5 back to full-time, in-person instruction five days a week in November 2020. When HSD elementary schools returned to full-time in-person instruction, they were able to also return to paper communications in student book bags. However, since school closures were still a somewhat regular occurrence, they maintained ClassDojo as their alternate communication platform for the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year.

Sometimes an entire school would have to close due to COVID-19 cases, and other times just a classroom would need to close. School closures would be communicated with families via SchoolMessenger phone calls whereas classroom closures were communicated with families mostly via ClassDojo messages. Orange Grove Elementary School had the first classroom closure of the 2020-2021 school year. Principal Orange described how the message they crafted was edited by the district office and then used for all subsequent elementary classroom closures:

We were the first one that had to close a classroom, so I had the prompt that I wrote.

Anytime we had a class closure at an elementary school the rest of the year, there was typically an email to me that said, 'can you share your script out with so and so?' It was the superintendent, 'hey, someone's gonna ask you, can you give [them] the script?' Or Principal Yellow reached out one time, 'hey, the superintendent said to ask you for this?' So, we might have modified it a little bit. But the script that I created the first time - that went through the community relations coordinator, the superintendent, and the assistant superintendent for elementary - kind of became our model. And so, any time we closed, that was the same thing. (Principal Orange, interview, 5/24/2022)

Because of the potential for school and classroom closures, HSD administrators felt it was important for the 2020-2021 school year to have a consistent platform for communicating with families as well as consistent messages.

By the summer of 2021 and the start of the 2021-2022 school year, schools were mostly back to “normal” operation. All students were attending school in-person full-time and school/classroom closures were no longer a looming possibility. Thus, HSD administrators responded accordingly, returning to “normal” communication practices. This meant the elementary school principals moved back to using their own personal choices for communication platforms - mostly emails and ClassDojo messages. This did not mean, however, that school-family communication did not still have its challenges. Principal Blue described that period of time:

The difference is that there's not as much coming from the superintendent and from the district office because there doesn't need to be anymore because it's quote unquote more like normal. The reality is that this year was anything but normal because of all of the changes with COVID protocols and contact tracing and masks and all of that. That was tough this year. Very, very tough. But the communication side of it has kind of gone back to what it looked like pre-pandemic. (Principal Blue, interview, 5/17/2022)

Although school operations and communications returned to looking more “normal,” there was still debate in the community in regard to COVID-19 mitigation procedures in schools and there were several changes to the guidelines throughout the 2021-2022 school year. The changes reduced mitigation procedures such as quarantining and masking, and therefore reduced the impact on staff, students, and families. While Superintendent Violet released videos in August

2021 and January 2022 regarding updates to the Health and Safety Plan, the principals made the bulk of the communications with families during the 2021-2022 school year.

During their interviews, HSD administrators described their experiences responding to the evolving pandemic situation and related school operations changes. They talked about how rapidly things could change at times; and, they talked about changes to school-family communications over time. From feeling like they were scrambling to communicate with families when schools were shut down in the spring of 2020, to adopting standardized methods for communication for the 2020-2021 school year, and to a return to more “normal” communication practices for the 2021-2022 school year, HSD administrators explained experiencing and responding to changing situations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. It became clear from the data that study participants responded to the evolving pandemic situation and its impact on public education.

Responding to the School Community

Just as the evolving pandemic situation changed how schools operated and, thus, how HSD administrators communicated with families, study participants also described being responsive to families’ needs and feedback throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant interviews showed how HSD administrators considered and responded to the needs and preferences of the school community throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. As Principal Red explained, “I’m going to be responsive to the parents whenever I can because they’re the ones that I work for really.” This was evident in how HSD administrators communicated with families.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, HSD administrators considered families’ communication preferences, sometimes actively seeking out feedback and other times receiving

unsolicited feedback. Starting in July 2020, the district changed to primarily using videos to share information with all families K-12. This was in response to a recommendation that came out of the district's reopening committee, which was formed at the end of the 2019-2020 school year. According to Superintendent Violet:

There were like 50 people in our reopening committee over the summer, and one of the things that people were asking for was videos like some other districts were doing to communicate what was going on. So, I started doing a lot of videos... But it became a thing. Anytime things changed, I'd get on there, whether it was a Health and Safety Plan or just an update on face coverings from the state. So that's kind of where I was with things. (Superintendent Violet, interview, 5/17/2022)

Superintendent Violet used videos as their main means of communicating with families through the rest of 2020. Two HSD elementary principals also made videos for families. Principal Blue described the use of videos to communicate with families, saying, "I don't think pre-pandemic I'd ever made a video to communicate something out for somebody or for a group of stakeholders. But that was what made sense in that situation - to be able to hear it directly from somebody." Similarly, Principal Yellow mentioned how videos helped make communications more "personal" and helped families feel more "connected" to the person doing the communicating. This seemed especially important when schools were shut down in the spring of 2020 and when schools were open in the hybrid model to start the 2020-2021 school year. This was an example of HSD altering its means of communicating with families in response to solicited feedback from a committee of various stakeholders.

At other times, HSD administrators received unsolicited feedback about their communications. Regardless of whether or not they actively sought out the feedback from

families, HSD administrators took that feedback into consideration. For instance, Principal Orange described getting feedback around the spring of 2021 from some families on the district's video communications, saying, "we had some parents tell us they stopped watching videos - that there were too many videos." Principal Orange elaborated:

Our community is more of a text message, give me the answer, move on kind of parent crowd. To sit down and watch a YouTube video of five or 10 minutes to see a whole PowerPoint, it's just not who a lot of our parents are. (Principal Orange, interview, 5/24/2022)

Along the same lines, families stopped responding as positively to SchoolMessenger phone calls. When the SchoolMessenger phone calls would go out to families, they would show up on caller ID as the main school district phone number. In fact, all calls from all phones in all school buildings in the entire district show up as coming from that same phone number. Upon answering the SchoolMessenger phone calls, families would be automatically prompted to listen to a recorded message. Thus, according to interview participants, people began to associate the district phone number with a recorded message. Principal Orange described how, "you'd call people and they'd sit and not answer because they assumed it was a recording because it had happened so frequently." Superintendent Violet shared a story about that same phenomenon:

I was calling a parent, and I said, "Hello." And she said, "Hello?" And I said, "Hello, this is the superintendent from Hillview School District." And she was just, it was just dead silent. And I said, "Are you still there?" And she said, "Oh, I was waiting for the recording, I didn't know you were on live." (Superintendent Violet, interview, 5/17/2022)

In response to feedback from families about communications, the district moved away from videos and SchoolMessenger messages and toward communications directly through the principals.

HSD switched to having elementary school principals do the bulk of the communicating with families, but also wanted the messages to be consistent across buildings. AS Pink described it by saying, “we have always pushed very hard to keep our neighborhood school feel with our elementaries, and yet keep them all the same at the same time.” Consequently, HSD elementary principals kept the main substance of the communications the same as much as possible.

Principal Orange described doing that:

I focused on making sure that whatever came out from the district we kept completely consistent with how they worded it. So, rather than reinvent a wheel or try to communicate it, we would push [families] back towards district communications like the superintendent’s videos or the district website so that the voice was consistent. We were simply providing context and clarification where they needed it. And I think that helped a lot, because it allowed [families] to see a constant thing coming out, and it wasn't one school said this, and you said this, and this school said this. We all kept pushing back towards that very common place so it was less confusing for people in the community.

(Principal Orange, interview, 5/24/2022)

Although the substance of the messages was consistent, the method of delivery varied from school to school.

Each elementary school community had somewhat different demographics and preferences for school communications; therefore, in being responsive, school-family communication methods ended up looking somewhat different from one school to the next. For

example, Principal Orange talked about how Orange Grove Elementary families preferred quick communications, so Principal Orange used ClassDojo messages for many of the school-family communications. Whereas, Principal Blue felt that Blue Ridge Elementary School families liked to get detailed information, so Principal Blue used emails to incorporate more descriptive information. Principal Yellow found Yellow Tree Elementary families responded well to using a variety of communication methods including ClassDojo messages, emails, and even parts of PTO meetings as a town hall format. Principal Red talked about how since Red Clay Elementary was a smaller school community they could do things differently than other schools and they often used phone calls. In fact, all elementary principal participants talked about phone calls as an important way of communicating with families throughout the pandemic.

HSD administrators' communication practices demonstrated their responsiveness to their school communities. In particular, the elementary principals described the importance of phone calls with families throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Principal Red stated how when schools shut down in the spring of 2020, "I just wanted to talk to people and to reassure them and to get feedback from them and make sure everybody was getting what they needed. And I thought that calling was the best route." Likewise, Principal Yellow shared how talking on the phone with families supported important dialogue and families "would actually compliment that - they're like, I just feel so good about calling you." Phone calls allowed direct, real-time, two-way communication between schools and families. Oftentimes, phone calls were the best way for families and elementary principals to converse about questions or concerns. Principal Red talked about how phone conversations could help prevent miscommunications:

You have to be really careful about how you word things so that people don't read it the wrong way. And I think that was kind of why I felt like talking to people was a good way

of doing business, just because you could verbalize things and if they didn't understand you could verbalize it again. (Principal Red, interview, 5/31/2022)

Again, through their use of phone calls with families, HSD elementary principals demonstrated their responsiveness to their school community preferences and needs when choosing which method(s) to use for their school-family communications.

In their interviews, HSD administrators described being responsive to the school community throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Superintendent Violet began making videos for families based on a recommendation from a reopening committee with various stakeholders. Then, based on unsolicited feedback from families over time, the district switched from the videos and SchoolMessenger messages to the principals as the primary means of communicating with families. The elementary principals chose different means for that communication, based on their specific school community preferences; however, all principal participants mentioned the importance of phone calls for dialoguing with families. Overall, participant interviews revealed HSD administrators' experiences with school-family communications during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as participants' meaning-making of those experiences. The overarching theme of being responsive emerged from the interview data. Looking at the entirety of data available, it was clear that study participants were actively responding to the evolving situation as well as the needs of the school community.

Supporting Trusting Relationships

Data analysis showed that being responsive was a major theme in the administrators' communications. Additionally, a clear theme of supporting trusting relationships emerged from the interview data. Participant interviews uncovered how HSD administrators felt that HSD schools and families had built solid partnerships prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and that these

existing relationships helped schools and families work together throughout much of the pandemic. For example, AS Pink shared, “we’ve always built those relationships in our elementary schools... prior to COVID and through COVID. I think that’s part of what helped the elementary get through.” Likewise, Principal Blue discussed how the school-family relationships endured through the pandemic, saying, “that’s primarily a testament to how strong the relationships have been between the school and the community for years. That we have a very highly invested, highly engaged community in our schools.” Similarly, other HSD administrators talked about community pride in HSD schools. Principal Red shared that Red Clay Elementary School families “are proud of their school; they love their school.” In the same way, CRC Indigo stated that people in the community “love our kids and...they love their neighbor’s kids. They’re proud of the kid down the street.” Principal Orange also spoke about the relationship between the school and families, explaining that “we have a lot of families that rely upon us for more than school... they’re very good about understanding we’re working together. There’s a lot of trust.” Taking into consideration the data gathered, it was evident study participants felt schools and families had established trusting relationships and that these relationships helped them throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, inductive coding of participant interviews revealed several sub-themes related to these trusting relationships: keeping kids at the core, communicating support, and navigating community division.

Keeping Kids at the Core

Participant interviews showed how the trusting relationships between schools and families were supported by HSD administrators' decisions, actions, and communications. For instance, almost every HSD administrator talked about keeping a focus on the students. Principal Yellow shared how families “knew that I was there to help them and that my focus was on the

kids, their kids.” In the same way, Principal Red discussed the importance of taking the time “to know your families and communicate with them” and the importance of families knowing you’re “in their [kids’] classrooms and getting to know their kids.” Principal Orange elaborated on the strong relationships between the school and families, built on keeping a focus on the students:

The same message came through all the time: that parents truly believe in the teachers in the school and the teachers in the school believe in themselves. And so that goes a long way here. It probably helped us a lot with this pandemic, because [families] knew that we weren't just trying to do something for the sake of doing it. We still had their kid at the core. And they were great to work with, and that trust factor to us of we're trying to support you, and the fact we follow through. (Principal Orange, interview, 5/24/2022)

On a grander scale, it became more important than ever to show “kids doing good things” (CRC Indigo) to families and the community. Despite masks, social distancing, and other COVID-19 mitigation procedures and because parents could not be in schools to see firsthand what was going on, the district kept a focus on the students by publishing positive content for families and the community to see. AS Pink mentioned several times about being intentionally positive in communications with families. CRC Indigo talked specifically about the importance of highlighting student accomplishments in district communications and local papers, saying:

It’s an important thing for kids to feel recognized and seen when they do good things... and that’s still a cornerstone of my job, to publicize all the happy things that go on in our buildings and let people see the good - not just our parents but all of our stakeholders. (CRC Indigo, interview, 5/18/2022)

HSD administrators’ continued focus on the students throughout the pandemic helped maintain strong relationships and trust with families. Even though the pandemic was an unprecedented

situation, creating unique crisis scenarios for schools, the focus on students endured. For example, Principal Blue mentioned some of the difficulty the pandemic presented, but returned at the end to a focus on the students:

It's doing the best you can because there's no playbook, none of us are prepared or trained in what this looks like and what we're doing. And there were so many new things that got added to our plates that we had no idea about. And I think primarily for principals and the nurses, so much got added there with communication because what does this look like at the school level? And I think everyone did the best that they could. And, yeah, there were bumps along the road but we made it. And now that we're kind of on this end of it and looking back, there was a lot of good that happened. And I think, you know, I'm very appreciative for the team we have here and for our community. And I think we did a lot of things really well, and we were there for the kids. (Principal Blue, interview, 5/17/2022)

Participant interviews showed that HSD administrators felt they kept students at the core of their work and their relationships with families. In addition, the interviews showed how participants valued being welcoming, comforting, and caring toward families, which is another way to help maintain strong school-family relationships and trust.

Communicating Support

Just like keeping kids at the core helps to support trusting relationships between schools and families, so does expressing support in school-family communications. Participants shared how they strived to communicate with families in a welcoming, comforting, and caring way.

“We have always been very welcoming to parents,” said AS Pink who went further, explaining, “we always try to communicate as positively as we can, to keep it as inviting as we can, so that

parents feel safe sending their kids to school.” Communicating support for families was something HSD administrators said they strived for prior to the pandemic and continued throughout the pandemic. However, each administrator shared their different strategy for that. Principal Red discussed how important it was for them to be a cheerleader, a good listener, and “put in the time to know your families and communicate with them.” For Principal Orange it was important to show empathy to families:

To me, the most important one we have in there is empathy. That, when you’re reaching out to somebody it’s not just they’re frustrated because now their kid’s home and they have to find daycare, but you’re also potentially scared because it’s a scary thing. Particularly at the height of it all, and kids not being able to be vaccinated, to be called and told your kid might have been exposed. You don’t know what they’re going home to and if they have somebody who’s high risk at home as well. Now there’s real fear that comes with that piece. (Principal Orange, interview, 5/24/2022)

Principal Orange’s response to those types of conversations was to express empathy and show support, “shifting the narrative away from policy and practice and into what can we do to make sure your kid’s okay.” Principal Yellow cared for and supported families by opening up texting and phone call communications with some families on their district cell phone:

I would call [parents] back with my personal cell phone number or the school-issued one and they would be like, “wow, I can't believe you called me from home.” And I was like, “well, yeah, you know we're not in the office right now.” And they're like, ‘I really appreciate that you're sharing that and trust me with that.’ I'm like, “listen, you have an issue, you call, you text, you email and I'll call you back.” And I was consistent with that.

I would get back to parents the same day, unless it was like 8 o'clock or 9 o'clock at night.

(Principal Yellow, interview, 6/29/2022)

According to Principal Yellow, “by being available all throughout the day and at nighttime and texting... I think that communication helped me be a better principal and also helped solidify my role in the community.” Principal Blue’s strategy for helping families feel comforted and cared for was to provide ample information and details. For example, Principal Blue talked about how, “I was trying to explain what the day looks like for kids because parents... don’t see what it looks like. And there were a lot of parents who were nervous about what school looked like.” AS Pink discussed how essential it was for the district to provide families options and opportunities for input, so that families would not only feel welcomed and comforted, but also heard. This included encouraging families to reach out to the building principals, with whom they were more comfortable. AS Pink explained:

It was important that I would put information out... but, at the same time, it was coming from the building principal and that was purposeful too because that’s your school home and everybody’s more comfortable at home, and people are more comfortable calling the building principal... They’re more comfortable to call or email or respond to the building principals and say I do like this or I don’t like this or you know, and so we gave them a voice. (AS Pink, interview, 5/16/2022)

CRC Indigo’s strategy was to continue to highlight student accomplishments and talk “about how great our kids are,” which “helps families feel connected.” Superintendent Violet felt it was important to educate families as much as possible in their communications:

I wanted to not just give them what we were doing, but I wanted to try and say why. And I really tried to research. Here's some of the details that went into, or the data that went

into it. This is why we're in a hybrid or this is why we're coming back or this is why some kind of research or information. I tried to put a lot of links in so that it wasn't just okay, the superintendent is saying this or HSD is saying this. This is where they're getting it from. That there was something that they could go to beyond what I was saying, so that they could verify... So basically, in short, I wanted to make sure I tried to give people information as much as I could. (Superintendent Violet, interview, 5/17/2022)

Superintendent Violet felt that families were comforted by knowing the district's decisions were not arbitrary, and that they were based on research, information, and guidance from other agencies and authorities.

Although their approaches may have differed, all study participants expressed similar sentiments about the importance of communicating with families for comfort and care, which helps to support school-family partnerships. As Principal Orange explained, “we tried to really accommodate people, to fit what they needed to feel like we have their back.” Communicating support is key to maintaining trusting relationships with families.

Despite HSD administrators' desire to be responsive, keep kids at the core, and communicate support to families, as the pandemic wore on, participants felt that discord grew. Some families expressed growing distrust in government institutions and disagreement with COVID-19 mandates in schools, while other families remained staunchly in support of increased safety protocols. Over time, the community became divided. HSD administrators talked about how this impacted the district and their experiences with families.

Navigating Division in the Community

Interview participants shared how, over time, some families' disagreement with school protocols and decisions escalated. Every study participant talked about challenges they faced

because of some families' growing distrust in government institutions and/or because of the growing disparity between families' opinions and feelings about COVID-19 mandates in schools. However, participants felt disagreement was mostly communicated with respect and participants believed they could rebuild trusting relationships. Some participants shared their perspective that other school districts experience far worse community division and disrespect. For example, AS Pink commented, "I think that we were fortunate to be in a community that wasn't as divided as some." Participants also shared their perspective that they felt HSD "survived" the discord because of having built strong school-family relationships prior to the pandemic.

Interview participants described HSD's community division and disagreement on school district COVID-19 mitigation policies and procedures. Principal Red explained it by saying, "I think that it's been the most divisive thing to ever hit the school district. At least in the 19 years that I've worked here. It created division amongst people that used to be really good friends." CRC Indigo shared more specifically what that looked like in August 2021, when the district was allowed to make a local decision regarding requiring students to wear masks at school. As said by CRC Indigo, "we had board meetings with 50 plus people who came out to speak pro- and con- face coverings and other mitigation strategies. I think it fractured our community a little bit." Indeed, according to the Board of School Directors meeting minutes, over 70 guests attended the August 16, 2021 school board meeting, with 25 guests speaking directly to the board; and, approximately 200 guests attended the special board meeting on August 23, 2021, with 48 guests speaking directly to the board. At both meetings, guest speakers addressed the board both in favor of and opposed to requiring students to wear masks at school. AS Pink also talked about the community division:

We definitely had some opposing groups, with every decision. And groups that felt that they were right regardless. The doctors would come out and use their title as medical doctors as to why we should be listening to them. And then other groups would come out and use their position and say that's why we should be listening to them. So that caused a lot of community division. (AS Pink, interview, 5/16/2022)

Likewise, Superintendent Violet shared how they would think about hearing from the community:

Unfortunately, there is always bias of what is the group from [the local hospital] gonna say or what is the group that is anti-mask, anti-vax, what are they gonna say? So, even though I tried to base my decisions or my recommendations to the board on the facts, I always would think, this is gonna make this side upset and here's who we're gonna hear from. (Superintendent Violet, interview, 5/17/2022)

Principals also heard from families on both sides of the debate. For example, Principal Yellow talked about having conversations with those families:

I could be on the phone with somebody that's like, "let me do this," and I'm like, "I understand your point of view. Yep, I can understand where you're coming from." And then I'd have to call back the next parent, and I'd wait to hear, okay, what side am I gonna hear? "I just cannot believe that you are not social distancing this far apart. What are you doing in your lunch rooms?" And it was just like a whiplash type of [thing], because it was so completely opposite. (Principal Yellow, interview, 6/29/2022)

Almost every study participant mentioned talking with families who were in disagreement with school district COVID-19 mitigation policies and procedures. Sometimes that disagreement was because families felt the school district was not being safe enough and other times the

disagreement was because families felt the school district was taking mitigation efforts too far. Even though some families were angry when speaking about such issues, and participants acknowledged the stress they felt as a result, participants also spoke positively about how the school community handled these contentious times.

Interview participants talked about how HSD families and the school district maintained respect through the discourse and discussion surrounding COVID-19 mitigation strategies in schools. For example, Superintendent Violet referred to families' participation in school board meetings as a form of engagement:

There was a lot of engagement, a lot of communication, a lot of involvement at board meetings. But even those weren't over the top. It wasn't like some of the things I was hearing about in some of the other districts. I won't name them, but I know in one district, the school solicitor had to get escorted to their car... So, they came, they spoke. The board president had to gavel a couple of people down, and we had to remind people of how the process worked with public comment. But they were definitely engaged.

(Superintendent Violet, interview, 5/17/2022)

Along the same lines, Principal Red shared their thoughts on how guests and district staff remained respectful at the board meetings, saying, "all those board meetings that transpired, and the fact that [Superintendent Violet] allowed everybody to speak, and that there wasn't any screaming and shouting... I think it was done as respectfully as they could have done." Board meeting minutes also show respect between families and the school district. For example, a guest speaker at the November 2020 board meeting said, "while [they] were very appreciative of everything that has been done, [they] shared [their] concerns with the upcoming changes." Likewise, after public comment by guests at a July 2020 school board meeting, Superintendent

Violet spoke, thanking “the 23 people for sharing their thoughts during public comment” and noting how they appreciate “how this community with different positions and concerns is able to express their thoughts and concerns in a way to hopefully move us forward and not divide us.” Similarly, board meeting minutes recorded a board member commented at an August 2021 board meeting, “thank you to everyone who came out tonight. Thank you to each and every one of you that have spoken at this meeting and subsequent meetings, especially the students.” Although the school district and families may have been at odds about COVID-19 mitigation policies and procedures, they engaged in respectful dialogue about it.

Interview participants shared some other strategies for continuing to maintain trusting relationships with families through the disagreement and division that they experienced. Principal Yellow, after talking about communicating with families on both sides of issues said, “And you have to keep your own personal feelings out of it. So, I bet you nobody knows where I stood on it, because I was always like, I can understand that.” Similarly, AS Pink talked about their strategy for working through discourse with families:

One of the factors that we had to consider all the time is kind of the stance of everybody. You always have to do kind of a balancing act. Some families were sure that if we left the house, you were gonna be exposed to the virus and you were going to die. And other families said I got a greater chance of getting hit by a bus. So that was always a trick to balance that line, knowing that people have very different perceptions of what was going on. And so, trying to keep that balance of reminding them that hey, regardless of where you stand with things, we're still trying to do what's best for kids. (AS Pink, interview, 5/16/2022)

Along the same lines, Principal Red shared, “I think that's what my community likes - I mean, that's what they tell me anyway - that I'm in their classrooms and getting to know their kids and that type of thing.” Principal Red continued, elaborating about how their focus on the students and relationships with families helped during times of discourse:

I didn't hear much negative from my parents at all. What I attribute a lot of that to is my entry plan to the school and being highly visible and communicating often in establishing those relationships. And, I think, having a positive relationship with the children and some of the parents who I got to meet, allowed me to weather that. (Principal Red, interview, 5/31/2022)

Not only did a focus on the students help build and maintain trusting relationships between the schools and families, but it also helped them work through the division and discourse. In addition, participants felt it could help repair and rebuild from that division and discourse.

HSD administrators talked about how the district community can heal from the division that happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. A school board member commented at the August 2021 school board meeting:

As leaders in this community, we have a lot of repair work to do on both sides of this issue, both in this board room and in the communities we serve. I am concerned with what I have seen on social media on both sides of this issue. We have to do better. We must be better. We have to be better for our students and our future students. (School Board Member, Board of School Directors Meeting Minutes, 8/23/2021)

In this statement, the board member acknowledged the community division, recognized the district had work to do to rebuild, and ended with a focus on the students. Likewise, CRC Indigo said in their interview, “we have work to do to rebuild,” and “even though [families] may not

agree politically with everything that goes on in their school, they still love our kids and I think that's something that we can really capitalize on as we begin that healing.” Superintendent Violet talked about feeling that rebuilding was already happening, noting, “even some of the people who were most dissatisfied... are moving on.” Superintendent Violet also commented that “families are always going to be there when they can.” According to AS Pink, that is already happening. For example, AS Pink shared how in May 2022, HSD held a special event for Title 1 families and had a record turnout. AS Pink explained their thoughts on why:

I think it was just, it was format, and it was timing, and what have you? But I also think that it is the nature of our district, in that those reading teachers made it sound like fun. And the kids got out and the parents came out, and when we were there, we had a lot of fun... So, I say that to say, I think that a lot of what we do, especially in our elementary, we get that kind of family response. Because we have built an inviting culture with our families so they don't feel uncomfortable coming to the school. They feel welcome here. And so, even through the COVID [pandemic], I think that [through] that communication we maintained that feeling of being welcome. (AS Pink, interview, 5/16/2022)

Even through and after what, according to Principal Red, may have been the most divisive thing to impact the district in the past 19 years, HSD administrators felt they and HSD families worked through the adversity. Interview participants believed this was a testament to the trusting relationships established between schools and families prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the respectful discourse and dialogue during the pandemic.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how school administrators communicated with elementary families during the COVID-19 pandemic. This

qualitative case study gathered data from a variety of perspectives and sources, helping to create a rich, deep understanding of the context and experiences of the participants. From the inductive coding and analysis of the interview data, two major themes emerged: being responsive and supporting trusting relationships. These themes encapsulate the experiences of the participants as school administrators responsible for school-family communications throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Although participants faced unprecedented challenges, the corpus of data showed they believed they remained responsive to the evolving pandemic situation as well as to their school community. In addition, the data demonstrated participants felt they supported trusting school-family relationships that were established prior to the pandemic. Inductive coding of participant interviews revealed sub-themes related to these trusting school-family relationships: keeping kids at the core, communicating support to families, and navigating division in the community. From the data gathered and the analysis of the data, it is clear how HSD administrators communicated with elementary families throughout the pandemic and how communication practices helped support relationships between schools and families.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Public school shootings like those at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012 and at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in February 2018 brought widespread focus on school safety and crisis management. Laws were passed, research was conducted, and resources were written to guide and inform school safety planning for violent intruders. And then, in March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic and public schools across the country faced a type of disaster for which they were mostly unprepared – one caused by a biological hazard. Schools were shut down statewide in Pennsylvania from March 13, 2020 through the end of the 2019-2020 school year. In the fall of 2020, schools began to reopen, but were impacted by the ever-changing pandemic situation as well as under the control of constantly evolving guidance from agencies such as the Department of Health and the Department of Education. The COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on public education highlighted more than ever the importance of crisis research in the public school context to help schools prepare and manage crisis events.

Communication is an integral part of crisis management; it is also vital to typical school success (Crum & Sherman, 2008; Mapp & Bergman, 2019; National PTA, 2021). School-family communication is key to building trust, forming partnerships, and engaging families in schools (Garcia et al., 2016; Orta & Gutiérrez, 2022; Redding et al., 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented crisis situations for schools and families to navigate, making school-family communication even more important. The purpose of this study was to discover how school administrators described their experiences communicating with families during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study not only adds to the limited amount of crisis management

research in the K-12 public school context, but it also helps to understand school-family communication and relationships.

The guiding research question for this study was: How do school administrators describe their communication with families during the COVID-19 pandemic? This qualitative case study explored the experiences of building-level and district-level administrators in one K-12 public school district in Pennsylvania. Seven study participants shared their experiences and perspectives of communicating with elementary families throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Inductive coding and analysis of interviews uncovered emerging themes in the data. District communication documents provided deeper understanding of the context and participants' experiences. In addition, Epstein's theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence (OSI) was used as the theoretical framework to inform and guide this study. Epstein's theory of OSI emphasizes the relationships between schools, families, and the community and the practices that support these relationships. In all, this study provided rich, detailed descriptions from various participant perspectives and multiple sources to improve understanding of COVID-19 school-family crisis communication.

This chapter focuses on what can be learned from this study, starting with a discussion of the findings. After that, the chapter presents implications for practice and recommendations for research. The chapter finishes with a conclusion section that summarizes the main findings and importance of this study.

Discussion of Findings

In interviews conducted during this study, study participants described their experiences communicating with elementary families throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the interviews, document review helped to develop a deeper understanding of the context and

experiences of the participants. Inductive analysis of participant interviews revealed two major themes in the data: being responsive and supporting trusting relationships. Study participants believed they were responsive to the evolving pandemic situation as well as to their school community. Study participants also felt they helped support trusting relationships with families by keeping kids at the core, communicating support, and navigating division in the community. This study helped develop a deep understanding of one school district's administrators' perspectives of and experiences communicating with families during the COVID-19 pandemic and how communication practices supported their relationships with families. The study's findings align with existing research on crisis management planning, crisis communication, and school-family partnerships.

Every crisis situation is unique, and schools are a unique context for managing crisis events (Thompson et al., 2017). The literature suggests schools should use an all-hazards approach to crisis management planning, to be as prepared as possible for as many specific crisis events as can be reasonably considered for a school context (e.g., Aspiranti et al., 2011; PEMA, 2013; U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013). However, research also suggests that schools are underprepared for managing crisis events (Kingshott & McKenzie, 2013; Mazer et al., 2015), particularly biological hazards like a disease pandemic (Page et al, 2019; Rebmann et al., 2016). HSD school safety response plans addressed a variety of potential crisis situations, but did not adequately address the situations the COVID-19 pandemic created for public education. For example, HSD's plans included a section for managing a disease pandemic, which was most recently updated for the H1N1 virus outbreak in 2009, and recommended that students not wear masks to school. The COVID-19 pandemic was different, initially shutting down schools while also expecting schools to continue educating students from afar, and then reopening schools

under strict guidelines such as requiring students wear masks, social distance, and quarantine. Thus, because of the unprecedented impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on public education, even though school safety response plans were in place for a disease pandemic, they were not designed to address the situations that ended up arising.

Study participants described how changing circumstances and family needs prompted changing school-family communication methods throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of the circumstances, HSD administrators discussed considering who delivered messages, how messages were delivered, and the content of messages. The literature has also shown the importance of the who, how, and what of crisis communication messages delivered by an organization experiencing a crisis. Research shows crisis communication should come from a spokesperson (e.g. Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014; Reynolds & Lutfy, 2018; Roshan et al., 2016). Moreover, crisis communication is more effective when delivered by a person who shows compassion and concern (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Reynolds & Lutfy, 2018; Zdziarski, 2016). Study participants described periods of time when the superintendent was the spokesperson and then other times when elementary building principals were the primary communicators with families. Research has also shown that crisis communication needs to reach multiple stakeholders and therefore organizations should use multiple ways of getting information to stakeholders, such as telephone calls, online media, and word of mouth (e.g., Austin et al., 2012; Coombs & Halladay, 2014; Schultz et al., 2011; Veil et al., 2011). Study participants detailed using multiple means of getting information to families including SchoolMessenger phone calls, YouTube videos, the website, and principal communications via a variety of platforms. In a similar way, schools must also consider stakeholders with special needs such as individuals with disabilities and individuals with limited English proficiency (NEA, 2018). Participants

mentioned the importance of being able to communicate with families with limited English proficiency. One participant talked about liking ClassDojo as a communication platform because it had a feature where it could translate messages into Spanish for families. The YouTube videos posted by the superintendent also had the feature where the transcripts could be translated into Spanish. Additionally, research emphasizes the importance of communicating swiftly, efficiently, and regularly throughout a crisis (e.g., Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014; Cheng, 2018; Heath et al., 2015), while balancing the speed of crisis communication with its accuracy (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Onsolve, 2017; Stephens et al., 2013). Study participants mentioned sending regular communications to families. They also talked about having to balance communicating updates swiftly with families with needing time to consider how updated guidance impacted what schooling looked like. There were numerous ways in which the study findings about school-family communication during the COVID-19 pandemic aligned with what the research says about crisis communication.

Additionally, study findings align with research which clearly shows school-family partnerships are essential for student and school organizational success (e.g., Baker et al., 2016; Bryk et al, 2010; Christenson & Reschly, 2009; Epstein et al., 2019; Moles & Fege, 2011; Weiss et al., 2010). Researchers over the last 30 years in over 40 countries have studied family and community engagement in schools (Epstein et al, 2019). With an immense amount of research showing the importance of family and community engagement for school success, federal government, state government, and private organizations have incorporated family engagement into laws, policies, and guidance for schools. Thus, study findings also align with government recommendations for building school-family partnerships. For instance, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (US DOHHS) and the U.S. Department of Education (US DOE)

recommend schools develop family and professional relationships based on respect and trust and provide two-way communication opportunities for sharing consistent messages supporting family engagement (US DOHHS & US DOE, 2016). Similarly, the Family Engagement Coalition, established by the PA Office of Child Development and Early Learning (PA OCDEL), the PA Department of Education (PA DOE), and the PA Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (PA OESE), emphasizes the importance of “building partnerships with families that are strength-based, authentic, reciprocal, and respectful” and “partnering with families to identify information, resources, and strategies to support them” (PA OCDEL & PA DOE, 2019, p.33). The overarching theme of supporting trusting relationships and the related sub-themes that emerged from this study agree with the research and government recommendations.

Researchers, practitioners, and lawmakers recognize how essential school-family partnerships are for school and student success. But family engagement policies, laws, and mandates need supplemental programs and resources to help schools learn how to take effective action. Epstein’s theory of OSI provides the theory, framework, and research-based guidance for helping schools take steps to support school-family partnerships (Epstein et al., 2019). According to Epstein et al. (2019), “partnerships are about the shared responsibility of parents, teachers, and the community to help students succeed in school and beyond” (p.26). In addition, “this kind of shared work is all about *caring*,” and there are “two defining components of caring: *trusting* and *respecting*” (Epstein et al., 2019, p.26). Study participants spoke about care, trust, and respect in regard to working with families. District communication documents also showed caring, trusting, and respecting statements to families. Clearly, the study findings about supporting trusting relationships align with Epstein’s OSI as a theoretical framework.

Furthermore, how the district and families navigated community division relates to Epstein's tenets for school-family partnerships. HSD administrators described navigating community division around pandemic mitigation policies and procedures in schools. They felt the strong school-family relationships established prior to the pandemic helped schools and families get through the adversity they faced during the pandemic. According to Epstein et al. (2019):

In a caring school community, participants work to continually improve the nature and effects of partnerships. Although the interactions of educators, parents, students, and community members will not always be smooth and successful, partnership programs establish a base of respect and trust on which to build. Good partnerships encourage questions and debates and withstand disagreements; provide structures and processes to solve problems; and are maintained - even strengthened - after conflicts and differences have been discussed and resolved. Without a firm base of partnerships, the problems and concerns about schools and students that are sure to arise will be harder to solve. (p. 15)

Families and schools with trusting relationships do not necessarily avoid disagreement; rather, they dialogue through it. This is what study participants described the HSD community did during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to aligning with previous research, recommendations, and Epstein's theory of OSI, this study also adds to the literature on crisis management and communication and school-family partnerships. First, it contributes to the scant amount of crisis management research in the K-12 public school context by providing qualitative case study research at the elementary level in a public school district. Second, this study helps to gain a deeper understanding of administrators' experiences communicating with families. This is important because

communication practices impact school-family partnerships, which are essential for student and school success. Moreover, not only does this study give insight into the district's communication programs and practices, it also illuminates the interconnectedness of relationships and communication. Who, how, and what administrators communicated with families impacted school-family relationships, and existing school-family relationships helped everyone navigate the unprecedented situations and circumstances they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, including communication challenges.

Furthermore, the study findings add to the literature by providing specific examples of how administrators can support trusting relationships with families. Moles and Fege (2011) discussed how “all of these ways of communicating, sharing responsibility, and fostering mutual respect are essential building blocks of successful partnerships, but dependent [*sic*] on the leadership, skills, and will of the state and local education agencies” (p. 7). The sub-themes that emerged in the data analysis in this study provide some specific ways for school leaders to communicate to support relationships. By communicating their focus on students, using welcoming and caring language, and navigating community division, study participants felt they supported strong school-family relationships.

Study findings clearly showed two main themes: being responsive and supporting trusting relationships. Study participants felt they were responsive to the evolving pandemic situation and to the school community. Additionally, study participants valued trusting relationships with families and felt they communicated to support those relationships. These findings align with the literature and government recommendations for schools to partner with families. Epstein's theory of OSI provides further support for helping schools to develop and

maintain school-family partnerships through communication. Taking all of this into consideration, the next step is to discuss the implications for practice and research.

Implications for Practice

It is important to consider this study's limitations as we prepare to dive into the implications for practice. One of the main limitations of this qualitative case study is that the findings are not generalizable. Since the study's aim was to understand a particular context in depth, it cannot be assumed to be generally true in other contexts. For example, the study was bound to one school district and to the elementary level of that school district. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other school districts or to other grade level spans. Furthermore, this study was bound to the time during the COVID-19 pandemic and, thus, the findings may not be generalizable to other crisis situations or to non-crisis times. A final limitation of this qualitative case study is that the researcher was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis and therefore may bring biases. Although I took steps methodologically to reduce bias, my preconceptions and biases may have shaped the way I viewed, understood, and interpreted the data. Even though this study had its limitations, all research has limitations, and limitations do not negate the value of the research. The findings may not be generalizable to other settings, but the findings still give practitioners something to consider adapting to their particular contexts.

This study's findings have implications for building-level school leaders, district-level school administrators, school board members, state and national education policy makers, aspiring school leaders, and educational leadership preparation programs. These implications relate to various aspects of being a school leader including communicating, maintaining

relationships, and planning for and managing crises. Each major implication will be discussed individually in this section.

Prioritize Relationships

Findings from this study show participants believed strong school-family partnerships helped the school community navigate unprecedented challenges created by “the worst biological hazard in recent history” (McEntire, 2022, p. 22). It was important to study participants to build strong school-family relationships from the start of their roles as leaders in the district. Two study participants were in their first year as elementary principals when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. They were still relatively new to their elementary school communities; however, they had both prioritized building relationships with families as part of their entrance plans for their new roles as building leaders. Thus, when the pandemic hit only two-thirds of the way into their first school year at their buildings, they had already worked to build relationships and communication channels with families. School leaders should prioritize building relationships with families right from the start.

It was also important to all study participants to maintain relationships with families throughout the community division they experienced. Much of what schools had to do during the pandemic was not in school administrators' control; and what was in local control was up to the school board, not the school administrators. Thus, school leaders were often stuck in the middle, as messengers of information from updated guidance from the state and other controlling agencies as well as school board decisions to staff and families. They heard from families on all sides of the issues that divided the community. Study participants shared how they did not want to alienate any families through the discourse. So, study participants described supporting all families by being good listeners. They also shared how they maintained a focus on students,

expressed their empathy and caring, and tried to remain neutral in regard to the topics being debated. This helped preserve relationships through the community division. From this study's findings, it is clear school leaders must recognize the importance of forming and maintaining relationships with families, regardless of the issues they face. Build relationships early and those relationships will help school leaders and families navigate issues, even crises, together later on. And as school leaders navigate issues or crises, they need to remember they are in this together. They should be mindful to stay neutral and focused on supporting students and families.

Communicate with Families to Support Trusting School-Family Partnerships

Educators are told to build strong school-family relationships. After all, theory and practice overwhelmingly support engaging families in schools. However, “policies tell educators to do something, not *how to do it*” (Epstein et al., 2019, p. 12). Laws, policies, and recommendations for family engagement do not tell educators how to build trusting school-family partnerships. Without knowing how to build partnerships with families, some school leaders may choose not to even try. Others may try, and fail. This study provides some specific examples for school leaders to consider about how to communicate with families to support trusting school-family partnerships.

School leaders face a multitude of responsibilities and stakeholders and can easily get so entrenched in their jobs that they lose focus on who should be at the heart of their decisions, actions, and words – students. The COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on public education demanded even more of school leaders' time and attention than typical. Even though study participants spoke about facing a multitude of additional challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, they also talked about keeping kids at the core. And this was something they felt was important to show families through their words and actions. It is important to families to trust

school leaders care about their students and are committed to keeping students' best interests at heart. Regardless of what adversity schools and families face, maintaining a focus on the students, will be respected and valued. Thus, from this study, school leaders must consider keeping a focus on students, and communicating that ongoing focus on students with families to help build and maintain strong school-family partnerships.

Similarly, findings from this study provide other specific considerations for how to communicate to support strong school-family partnerships. "The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about children's families" (Epstein et al., 2019, p. 11). Hence, caring for families also helps families trust schools are caring for students. Study participants shared their strategies for communicating care and support to families: expressing empathy, being welcoming, and listening to families. Study participants believed communicating in these ways helped meet families' needs. Some families actively seek out engagement opportunities on their own while other families need to be invited to engage with schools. Either way, families need to feel they are welcomed. In addition, families need to feel they are heard and understood. Families and schools will not always agree on things, but they can work through disagreements via respectful dialogue. Study participants described navigating community division around school COVID-19 policies and procedures by listening to families, empathizing with them, and communicating their focus on students. These are important ways to communicate with families to support trusting relationships.

Beyond simply reinforcing the importance of school-family relationships, this study provided some specific ways to communicate with families to encourage school-family partnerships. The more school leaders maintain a focus on students and care for families by communicating in welcoming ways, listening to and empathizing with families, and dialoguing

through disagreements, the more families will feel to connected to their school and to their school leaders. The stronger those connections, the stronger the trusting relationships between schools and families.

Consider the Communication Platform

Schools have a multitude of means for communicating with families. From more traditional methods such as letters and phone calls, to newer methods like social media and mass notification systems, there are many options. Drawing on this study's findings, school leaders must consider the situation and the audience when choosing the communication platform for school-family communication. Study participants described using different communication platforms at different times throughout the pandemic based on the state of public education and families' needs. For instance, after schools had been shut down in the spring of 2020 and when it was uncertain what school might look like in the fall, stakeholders expressed the desire for the superintendent to communicate via video. There was a stronger need for a communication method that provided greater human connection than an email or phone call. Similarly, study participants identified the need for a consistent means of communicating with families for the fall of 2020 and adopted ClassDojo as their main communication platform. ClassDojo provided a platform for communicating with families that was direct and quick but also had the capability of supporting two-way communication. Whereas one-way communication methods such as the website, phone calls, and videos may have been mostly sufficient at the start of the pandemic, as time wore on and discord grew, it became more important for the district to utilize platforms that supported two-way communication with families. Participants described using ClassDojo and phone calls as platforms for dialoguing with families. This is not to say that school leaders must consider using ClassDojo for their communications; rather, the findings from this study show

how it could be beneficial for school leaders to consider using various communication platforms at different times based on the current situation and families' needs. Communication platforms have different capabilities and therefore have different benefits and drawbacks, which may make them a better or worse fit, depending on the context. School leaders must take into consideration their particular circumstances, purpose, and their audience when determining which communication platform to use for school-family communication.

Be Reflective and Responsive

Public education resists change; and when it does change, it changes slowly. The COVID-19 pandemic required school leaders to navigate rapid and significant change. This could have been seen as an opportunity instead of a challenge. This study's findings provide insight for school leaders about realizing and embracing the need for change. For example, several study participants described how, at one point or another, they called families during the COVID-19 pandemic who initially did not respond to their greeting. It turned out the family member did not realize it was a live human being who was calling them from the school district because they were used to getting automated messages from the district phone number. Participants eventually realized this was a wake-up call to change how they were communicating with families. The pandemic provided the opportunity to reinvent ways of doing things, but some things, like people's desensitization to the call from the district phone number, were less obvious. School leaders had to recognize the need to change the communication platform and then act on that need. Ultimately, not only did they move away from their traditional paid mass notification system, they decided to adopt a free educational software program with communication features for teachers, students, and families. The main takeaway from this is for school leaders to reflect on their experiences and respond accordingly. Just because something

has always been done a certain way does not mean it still works. As the findings from this study show, school leaders can reflect on the situation, the context, and the stakeholders, and then respond by making relevant and meaningful change happen.

Collaborate with Other School Leaders

It is important for school leaders to network and collaborate with each other. Findings from this study showed how administrators worked together. Study participants discussed collaborating on school-family communications. For example, one elementary principal talked about crafting a message to families about temporarily closing a classroom due to COVID-19 cases. That message was workshopped by the district administrative team and then shared with the other elementary principals to use when they had to temporarily close classrooms for COVID-19 reasons. By collaborating on the classroom closure communication, study participants shared some of the burden of their work. Furthermore, the district empowered elementary principals to make communication decisions for their school communities. While keeping the message consistent, elementary principals could tailor additional content, format, and the communication platform to meet their particular school community's preferences and needs. This helped school leaders be more responsive to their school communities, supporting school-family relationships. Given all of the responsibilities and demands of being a school leader, it is important to make the time to collaborate with other school leaders. Findings from this study show how school leaders can team up to reduce some of their workload and how district administrators can empower building administrators to be responsive to their particular school communities while still keeping things consistent between buildings.

Use, Review, and Update School Safety Response Plans

Crisis events, by their very nature, are chaotic, disruptive, confusing, and oftentimes unexpected. Having a crisis management plan will reduce uncertainty in times of crisis and will increase the likelihood of effectively managing crisis events (PEMA, 2013). Crisis management and communication literature is very clear on this issue - crisis planning and preparedness are critical to effective crisis management (e.g., Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014; Aspiranti et al., 2010; Barker & Yoder, 2012; Connolly, 2013; Onsolve, 2017; PEMA, 2013; Pierce, 2016; U.S. Department of Education et al., 2019; Zdiarski, 2016). School safety response plans include research-based, context-dependent, and community-specific information and action steps for responding to a variety of crisis situations. However, findings from this study show that school district crisis plans are not utilized or updated enough. Although several participants mentioned the district's Health and Safety Plans – forms required by the state, completed by the district administration, and approved by the school board to guide school operations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic – no study participants mentioned the district's school safety response plans. A review of these plans for this study illuminated their incorporation of what could have been valuable information and considerations for HSD school leaders managing the COVID-19 crisis. Yet, none of the participants referenced these plans in their interviews and no district communication documents referenced these plans. Perhaps that is due, at least in part, to the plans not adequately addressing the circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting mandates for schools. What this brings to light is the glaring need for updates to the school safety response plans. District crisis plans must align with district practices. It is currently a mandate in PA for school safety response plans to be updated at least once each year. However, that seems to be more a matter of checking a box instead of a meaningful exercise. In addition to

a regular review schedule, school safety response plans should be reviewed and updated after any crisis event. Furthermore, they should be reviewed and updated by a variety of stakeholders. The reviewing and updating of plans with multiple stakeholders is a great way for schools to collaborate and partner with community resources and emergency management specialists. School safety crisis plans should be living documents – editable and adaptable to changing circumstances – not relics stored on shelves. School districts inevitably face crises. Thus, school leaders need to take this opportunity, while memories are still fresh and school crisis planning and management are still valued, to review and update their plans with a variety of stakeholders. By participating in the updating of crisis plans, perhaps then school leaders will use them when facing their next school crisis. This will help them be better school leaders during crises, which will ultimately benefit students and the school community.

Recommendations for Research

There is a real need for more crisis management research in the K-12 public school context. Although research is starting to emerge regarding schools and the COVID-19 pandemic, more research is needed to understand crisis management and communication in public K-12 school settings and to inform school and district leaders (as well as crisis management teams) how to communicate effectively with families throughout crisis events. Future research of any sort conducted in the public school context and relating to crisis management would help to add to the meager body of literature. This study adds to the literature by contributing qualitative case study research at the elementary level at a public school district in Pennsylvania during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are multiple directions research could go from here considering the findings of this study and how this study was conducted. Research should be done in other districts, to gather other school administrators' perspectives and experiences, to continue to learn

more about how to communicate with families, especially in times of crisis. Research should also be conducted at all grade level bands – elementary, middle, and high school – to help better understand potentially varying needs based on the age of the child and the level of family engagement. Furthermore, school leaders could benefit from additional research to provide insight about how to form and support trusting school-family partnerships.

Future research should also explore other perspectives. Of great importance would be research to learn families' perspectives, experiences, and needs with school-family communication. It is just as important to consider families' input as it is to consider administrators' input. Quantitative methods could be used to gather data from a wide-range and large number of families whereas qualitative methods could be used to dive deeper into the family perspective, experience, and needs. Future research could also incorporate the teacher or student perspective, as they are also major stakeholders in public education, school communication, and crisis management. Therefore, their perspectives and needs are also important and would be helpful for school leaders to have more research-based insights into. Likewise, school board members and education policy makers could benefit from more research into crisis management, communication, and school-family relationships in the public school context. As they are decision-makers around school policy, it would be beneficial for them to have more research-based information about effective communication, relational, and crisis management leadership to inform the policies they write and approve. Ultimately, all public school stakeholders stand to benefit from this study and future related studies on crisis management, communication, and school-family partnership research.

Institutions of higher education are a similar context to public school districts, but are still their own unique context. They can learn from this study but would also benefit from studies in

their particular context. Leaders in institutions of higher education can learn from this study similar to what public school leaders can learn – considerations for forming relationships with stakeholders, how they communicate with stakeholders, and how they manage crises. In addition, leaders in institutions of higher education could benefit from more future research in the higher education context in the fields of crisis management, communication, and how school leadership can support relationships. Moreover, faculty who teach in leadership preparation programs at institutions of higher education could benefit from this study and related future studies, as they inform effective school leadership practices and could be incorporated into leadership preparation program curricula and instruction.

In all, communication and school-family partnerships will continue to be essential as schools rebound from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and seek to educate students in communities across the nation. Therefore, research on crisis management, communication, and school-family relationships will continue to be imperative for successful schools.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study explored one PA school district’s administrators’ perspectives and experiences communicating with elementary families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Epstein’s theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence provided the lens through which this study was conducted – emphasizing the importance of school-family partnerships and practices to support them. Data analysis and document review revealed emerging themes related to administrators’ being responsive and supporting trusting relationships. While, by their very nature, the findings from this study are not generalizable to other contexts, they still present important considerations for school leaders at all levels; and, although this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has important implications for school leaders in normal times

as well as during other crisis situations. From this study's findings, it is important for school leaders to consider prioritizing building and maintaining relationships with families from the start that can help everyone navigate crisis situations together, communicating with families in ways that support trusting relationships, choosing communication platforms that fit the situation and meet the audience's needs, being reflective and responsive at all times and especially during times of change, collaborating with other school leaders to share responsibilities, and committing to review, update, and use school safety response plans as an integral part of crisis preparedness and management.

School leaders have many responsibilities and many stakeholders to consider. However, their primary goal (and that of every stakeholder) is student safety. Ultimately, every school administrator will experience a school crisis that threatens the safety of students to some extent. Thus, school leaders need to be intentional in their approach to leadership to prepare for and then manage a crisis situation. Relationships and communication are paramount to successful school leadership at normal times and in time of crisis. This study provides specific ways school leaders can consider how they communicate with families in ways to support trusting school-family relationships that can help them at all times, and particularly in times of crisis.

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Appendix A

Principal Interview Protocol

Researcher statement: Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study and for taking the time to talk with me today. As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how administrators communicated with elementary families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose is not to be evaluative; rather, to explore and understand the context and the situation. I want to understand your perspective on communication with families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Please be as honest as you can be to help me understand while also balancing the need to protect your role as a leader. This is a semi-structured interview, meaning I have some set questions but it is also acceptable to go off script as the conversation allows. I will be taking notes during the interview in case Zoom fails to record. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

1. Tell me about your career in public education (*including your degrees and positions held*).
2. How would you describe your communication with families during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How do your communications align with district-level communication practices?
4. What factors did you consider when crafting and delivering communication with families regarding COVID-19 information and issues?
5. What, if any, communication challenges with families did you encounter during the COVID-19 pandemic?
6. Would you consider your COVID-19 communications with families mostly proactive or reactive?

7. What feedback have you received from families in regard to your and the district's COVID-19 communication programs and practices?
8. How did your and the district's communications respond to the community?
9. Do you believe the people who were communicating with families were the "right people" at the time to be doing that?
10. How would you describe the relationship between the school and students' families?
11. How are families typically involved with the school?
 - a. Would you like to see that change in any way?
 - b. If so, how?
12. Do you believe your and the district's communications helped families feel connected to the school? Why or why not?
13. Is there anything else you think would be important for me to know regarding your and the district's communications during the COVID-19 pandemic?
14. Would you be willing to share any documents which could help me research your communication with families?

Appendix B

District Office Staff Interview Protocol

Researcher statement: Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study and for taking the time to talk with me today. As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how administrators communicated with elementary families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose is not to be evaluative; rather, to explore and understand the context and the situation. I want to understand your perspective on communication with families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Please be as honest as you can be to help me understand while also balancing the need to protect your role as a leader. This is a semi-structured interview, meaning I have some set questions but it is also acceptable to go off script as the conversation allows. I will be taking notes during the interview in case Zoom fails to record. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

1. Tell me about your career in public education (*including your degrees and positions held*).
2. How would you describe the district's communications with families during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What role do you play in regard to those district communications?
4. How do the district-level communications align with building-level communications?
5. What factors did you consider when communicating with families regarding COVID-19 information and issues?
 - a. What factors influenced your decisions about communicating information you were relaying from the state?
 - b. What factors influenced you from a local level?

6. What, if any, communication challenges did the district encounter during the COVID-19 pandemic?
7. Would you consider your COVID-19 communications with families mostly proactive or reactive?
8. What feedback have you received from families in regard to the district's COVID-19 communications?
9. Do you believe the people who were communicating with families were the "right people" at the time to be doing that?
10. How would you describe the relationship between the district and students' families?
11. How would you describe the level of engagement of the families in the district?
12. Do you believe the district's communications helped families feel connected to the school/district? Why or why not?
13. Is there anything else you think would be important for me to know regarding the district's communication programs and practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?
14. Would you be willing to share any documents which could help me research the district's communication with families?