



CONNECTICUT SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR PERSPECTIVES ON SHIFTING PRIORITIES DURING COVID-19

A CSCH Brief by Sandra M. Chafouleas, Emily A. Iovino, Marlene B. Schwartz, & Helene M. Marcy

Background

The year 2020 has brought rapid evolution in the landscape of what it means to have a safe and healthy school. Conversations about physical school safety, for example, have quickly pivoted from a primary focus on hardening strategies designed to prevent intruders to environmental considerations such as ventilation, cleaning practices, and social distancing protocols. In data collected prior to COVID-19, the majority of principals in a national sample reported having written crisis plans that addressed willful acts of violence, yet slightly under half indicated plans for pandemic disease.¹ In short, school leaders have been thrust into many decisions for which “there is no guidebook.”² Rising to this leadership challenge has included a push not only for rapid knowledge gains and time-sensitive decisions related to these physical health-related topics, but also academic, social, emotional, and behavioral domains. A whole child and school focus has never been so critically at the forefront of district and school administrator decisions, yet little data have been gathered to share perspectives on their experiences to date.

This study sought to understand Connecticut school official perspectives on shifts in school health-related priorities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. District and school building administrators in Connecticut completed a brief survey containing questions related to priorities and concerns across the comprehensive domains provided in the [Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child](#) (WSCC) model. Participants were also asked to participate in a follow-up interview to further explore their perspectives on leadership during the pandemic.

The survey was sent to a convenience sample of administrators working in 54 districts across Connecticut; all data were collected between late August and early October of 2020. Districts were selected to include representation across the nine [District Reference Groups](#) (DRG's), which is used by the Connecticut State Board of Education to group districts based on similar demographics (e.g. socioeconomic status, size). A total of 34 administrators participated in the survey, including 12 district-level administrators and 22 building-level administrators. In addition, five building administrators participated in follow-up interviews to explore the issues in further depth. The survey asked administrators to reflect on priorities and concerns prior to the pandemic (pre-March 2020) as well as shifts in those priorities and concerns during the pandemic (early fall 2020).

Regarding district and building learning formats at the time of survey completion, 12% of participants' schools were open fully in-person, 79% were open in a hybrid model (mix of in-person and virtual), and 3% were fully remote. One participant indicated that their district was fully in-person for grades prek-8 and hybrid for grades 9-12, and another participant indicated that their school or district was starting the year using a hybrid model but was expecting to be fully in-person after a month.

Key Findings

School-Health Related Priorities and Activities

Administrators were first presented with the ten components of the [WSCC model](#) and asked to identify the top 3 components that were priority areas for their school/district prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and what they consider the priority areas to be now.

As the table shows, when asked about both the time before the pandemic and at the time of the survey, **social and emotional climate** was named as one of the top three priorities by the largest percentage of administrators.

Post pandemic, administrators were very concerned about the effect of COVID-19 on that climate and were planning to focus work in the first re-opening weeks on social and emotional learning.

“We are planning to open and plan for the first weeks of school to focus on social and emotional well being.”

“Anxiety and stress [are] at unprecedented levels for staff, students, families.”

The greatest shift since the pandemic was the greater number of administrators naming **employee wellness** as one of the three top priorities. More than twice as many administrators (54%) indicated it was within their top three priorities now as compared to before the pandemic (20%).

Next, survey respondents were asked to identify the one component (of their top 3 priorities) that most worried them. The chart on the next page shows the shift to **employee wellness** as a top worry; 3% said it was a top worry before the pandemic compared to 17% at the time of the survey.

“The others remain as huge concerns, but I am very cognizant [that] the physical and mental health of my employees...will most definitely impact our overall school efficacy.”

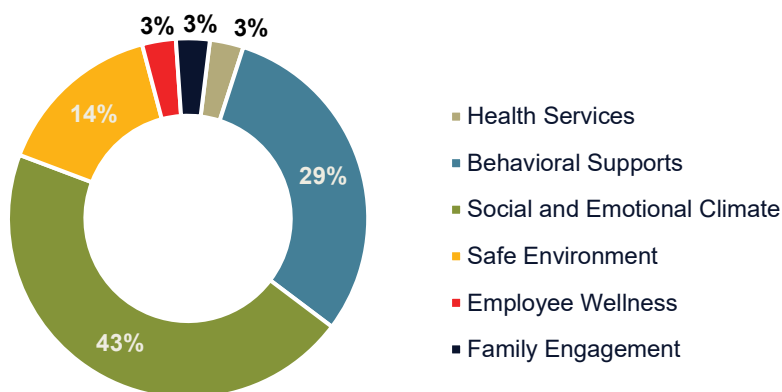
“Our employees are having tremendous difficulty adjusting to new family and professional stressors. If they can’t provide for themselves, providing for others becomes limited.”

Top three components that you consider to be the priority areas in your school/district...

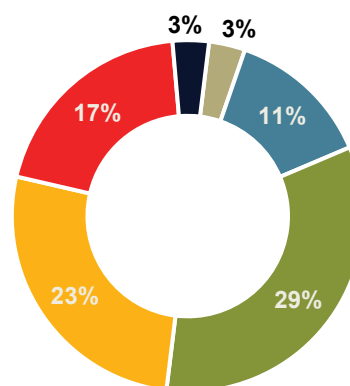
	Before COVID (pre-March 2020)	During COVID (early fall 2020)
Social and Emotional Climate	86%	83%
Behavioral Supports (counseling, psychological, & social services)	54%	37%
Safe Environment (physical environment)	49%	46%
Family Engagement	43%	29%
Employee Wellness	20%	54%
Community Involvement	14%	3%
Health Services	9%	14%
Nutrition Environment & Services	6%	3%
Health Education	3%	3%

The table reflects the percentage of respondents who selected the component. Note that since participants were asked to name their top three, the percentages do not add up to 100%.

Greatest Worry Before COVID



Greatest Worry At Time of Survey



Not surprisingly, there was also a shift on the topic of **safe environment**, with over one fifth (23%) of administrators naming it as a top worry at the time of the survey compared to only 14% prior to the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, school violence was the main concern.

“Though the type of school violence that keeps us up at night is relatively rare compared to other risks to children’s lives, the shock that it exists at all becomes all-consuming when we think about our fears for our children.”

At the time of the survey, those concerns had shifted to keeping students safe from the pandemic.

“There are many concerns and safety risks we are trying to mitigate, and it is an awesome responsibility to be charged with to keep students, families and the community safe.”

“People are stressed about all the COVID procedures and getting sick.”

Although fewer administrators named **behavioral supports** among top priorities or worry at the time of the survey, those who did discussed it in their narrative responses – and it was often tied to **social and emotional climate**. Administrators were very concerned about potential social, emotional, and behavioral consequences.

“The pandemic has created uncertainty. Students who were marginally stable became and continue to exhibit anxiety. Anxiety halts learning.”

“I am concerned that we do not yet know the extent of the trauma our students will be recovering from.”

Access to Supports and Resources Related to Priorities

Administrators were asked to rank the degree of their overall access to needed networks, supports and resources in light of their three named priorities. On average, administrators ranked their access at 6.4/10 (0 = not at all, 5 = somewhat, and 10 = most definitely). Several cited the lack of access to protective equipment and COVID-related safety concerns as a problem; this included funding for additional staff to maintain a safe environment.

“There is a lot to do to appropriately prepare our physical environment this year, and little support and minimal resources and time to do it.”

Others said they needed more guidance and better communication. One administrator summed up the situation by saying:

“I have a picture in my head, it’s like, we had an earthquake. And now we’re trying to figure out how to get from point A to point B. But in the middle of it is all of these fissures that we have to jump over... that’s a huge concentration.”

Administrators were also asked to name the network, support, or resource that had provided the greatest assistance. Top resources included colleagues and health departments.

“An informal group of 12 principals in the region who have met every Wednesday to discuss challenges and problem solve.”

“My colleagues - other building administrators - are providing helpful support regarding planning and strategic thinking around resources, timing, prioritization, etc.”

“Department of Public Health weekly meeting for superintendents and regional health department’s advice and support.”

Implications

School leaders in Connecticut have found resourceful ways to rapidly shift school health-related priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet they need additional assistance in supporting the shifts. As expected, safe environment is a priority. And although supports and resources in enabling a positive social and emotional climate remain among top concerns, the pandemic has magnified the need to address and provide resources for employee wellness.

Additional Resources

[CSCH WSCC Think about the Link Project](#)
Project designed to facilitate school efforts in integrating health and learning

[School Resources: Aligning Operating Guidance with the WSCC Model, V2](#)
Aligns re-opening guidance from multiple organizations with the 10 components of the WSCC model

[Planning for the Next Normal at School: Keeping Students, Staff, and Families Safe and Healthy](#)
Comprehensive reopening resources from Kaiser Permanente

This brief was made possible in part by funding from the State of Connecticut Department of Education and the Neag Foundation, which serves as a philanthropic force for positive change in education, health, and human services initiatives.

To cite this brief: Chafouleas, S. M., Iovino, E.A., Schwartz, M. B. & Marcy, H. M. (2020, October). *Connecticut School Administrator Perspectives on Shifting Priorities During COVID-19*. Storrs, CT: UConn Collaboratory on School and Child Health. Available from: <http://csch.uconn.edu/>.

¹ Diliberti, M., Jackson, M., Correa, S., and Padgett, Z. (2019). Crime, Violence, Discipline, and Safety in U.S. Public Schools: Findings From the School Survey on Crime and Safety: 2017–18 (NCES 2019-061). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

² Superville, D. R. (2020, March 18). ‘There is No Guidebook’: Being the Principal in the Age of Coronavirus. Education Week. Retrieved from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/District_Dossier/2020/03/principals_coronavirus_sel_teaching.html.