

An Educational Leader's E-Mails to the Parents During COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 Salgını Sırasında Bir Eğitim Liderinin Velilere Gönderdiği E-Postalar

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Abstract

This study was conducted to determine what kinds of e-mails an education leader (school principal) sent to the parents of the students at the beginning, during, and end of the term during the COVID-19 pandemic process. In this study, the expression “educational leader” was used instead of the school principal. The reason for this is that the school principal fully assumes the role of educational leadership during the pandemic period. The subject of the study is the transformation process in communication due to the pandemic. This transformation is e-mails, one of the digital communication tools that aim to reach everyone at the same time. The e-mails in this study were chosen from non-personal and non-private e-mails. The data included from 74 e-mails sent to the parents by an educational leader in Ohio State in the United States. E-mails were analyzed using document and content analysis method. Most of the e-mails contained more than one subject. In each of the e-mails was written the education leader's good wishes and not be hesitate from contact. The education leader sent e-mails about health, and cleaning, technology, information, activities, family-related, and other topics. At the end of the study, recommendations such as sending a survey to the parents to determine communication preferences at the beginning of the school year, and e-mails translated into their own language were offered who did not speak English.

Keywords: Education, educational leader, school principal, e-mail communication, COVID-19 pandemic.

Öz

Bu çalışma, COVID-19 salgını sürecinde bir eğitim liderinin (okul müdürünün) dönem başında, esnasında ve sonunda öğrencilerin velilerine ne tür e-postalar gönderdiğini belirlemek amacıyla yapılmıştır. Bu

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çalışmada okul müdürü yerine “eğitim lideri” ifadesi kullanılmıştır. Bunun nedeni, ilgili okul müdürünün pandemi sürecinde eğitim liderliği rolünü tam olarak üstlenmesidir. Çalışmanın konusu salgın nedeniyle iletişimde yaşanan dönüşüm sürecidir. Bu dönüşüm herkese aynı anda ulaşmayı hedefleyen dijital iletişim araçlarından birisi olan e-postalardır. Araştırmadaki e-postalar kişisel ve özel olmayan e-postalardan seçilmiştir. Veriler, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin Ohio Eyaletindeki bir eğitim lideri tarafından ebeveynlere gönderilen 74 e-postayı içermektedir. E-postalar, doküman ve içerik analizi yöntemi ile analiz edilmiştir. Maillerin çoğu birden fazla konu içermektedir. E-postaların her birinde eğitim liderinin iyi dilekleri ve velilerin iletişimden çekinmemeleri yazılmıştır. Eğitim lideri velilere sağlık ve temizlik, teknoloji, bilgi, faaliyetler, aile ile ilgili ve diğer konularda e-posta göndermiştir. Çalışmanın sonunda okul yılı başında iletişim tercihlerinin belirlenmesi için velilere anket gönderilmesi ve İngilizce bilmeyen velilere e-postaların kendi dillerine çevrilmesi gibi öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eğitim, eğitim lideri, okul müdürü, e-posta iletişimi, COVID-19 salgını.

Introduction

With the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the world, unusual changes began to occur in people's lives. All areas, from health services to social life, human relations, economy, human psychology, nutrition habits, and education have been affected by these changes (The World Health Organization, 2021). Considering the population density of the United States (US) and the fact that it consists of 50 states, its problems can be considered as problems occurring in different countries. One of these problems is the problem experienced in education. Approximately 56 million school-aged children (aged 5–17 years) resumed education in the US in the 2020-2021 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

When COVID-19 cases were examined between March 1 and September 19, 2020, in the US, it was seen that 277,285 children were coronaviruses tested positive, of which 140,755 were girls (50.8%) and 136,530 (49.2%) were boys. While 101,503 of the children are between the ages of 5-11; 175,782 of them are in the 12-17 age range (Leeb et al., 2020, p. 1411). Face-to-face education of children of all age groups has been interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since there is no national education policy in the US, each state decided on its own studies, educational arrangements, and planning.

Education was conducted as online (virtual/remote) and in-person (face-to-face) learning. Districts themselves decided on the education to be carried out according to the cases in the states, and sometimes they applied the hybrid education model. Districts sometimes sent surveys to the parents/guardians for requesting learning types between online and face-to-face education. Both students and parents were informed about what to do, regardless of whether the students are online, hybrid, or face-to-face. The main task in providing information fell to education leaders (US Department of Education, 2021). Because students couldn't continue their face-to-face education, principals communicated with students and their parents by e-mails and other communication channels. The main subject of the study is the transformation process in communication due to the pandemic. This transformation is e-mails, one of the digital communication tools that aim to reach everyone at the same time. In the study, it was aimed to evaluate the e-mails sent by education leader (school principal) to parents during the pandemic process.

Literature Review

Leaders have a variety of roles. The most important of these are team leader and coordinator roles. Namely as the team leader; ensuring effective management of the organization with the highest standards, quick decision making, leading in communication (Smith & Riley, 2012, pp. 63-64); as coordinator; providing communication (telephone, message, etc.) between all relevant persons and management, preparing plans, timelines (Stotka & Miller, 2002). These items are also valid for educational leaders. Education leaders not only manage their own schools as a team but also coordinate the activities by using communication effectively and use the necessary communication networks.

Since communication is the process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another (Keyton, 2011, pp. 11-12), leaders should put this at the basis of their management practice. As leaders solve the social problems in the group, they aim to identify and eliminate all the problems in the team that will prevent the goal. They produce, plan and implement appropriate solutions for these problems (Zaccaro, Gualtieri, & Minionis, 1995, pp. 78-80). For this reason, leaders must use communication channels effectively (Boin, Kuipers, & Overdijk, 2013, pp. 79-91). Anyway, the most important characteristic of effective leaders is their effective communication (Barker, 2011). Administrators can be effective by communicating and behaving in a way that changes people's behavior and affects them, establishing an effective communication network, developing relationships between individuals, groups, teams, and coordinating individuals (Lunenburg, 2010, pp. 2-9).

Robbins (2003) states that communication in management undertakes tasks such as achieving organizational goals, providing control, motivation, and sharing information and documents. Leaders should be supportive, motivating, and communicators (Kiral, 2020). For this reason, the channels that enable communication to take place must also be open in order to ensure a regular flow of information (Thompson, 2009, p. 21). This situation shows that communication in educational organizations is a phenomenon that must work constantly. Because schools are social organizations and institutions where interpersonal communication is common (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1991), having an effective and strong organizational communication network for schools, which is one of the most important factors affecting social development, is of great importance for the development of society (Thompson, 2008, pp. 218-220). There are a number of advantages for education leaders to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) in their schools. Various subjects related to the school agenda and the opportunity to send notes to teachers via e-mail are provided. This saves time for principals. Teachers' lesson schedules are sent by e-mail. They can take advantage of the speed of technology to inform families about a variety of issues. By asking teachers to create web pages for their classes, their work can be exhibited. With teleconference, they can see what other schools do and these applications can be used for school improvement (Canturk, 2016). Especially in the pandemic, the importance of the use of communication technologies has increased even more. Researchers state that new technologies have a great potential to increase family participation by providing communication between the child's family and other stakeholders, and this potential will

continue to increase in the future and even become an important part of family participation studies (Natale & Lubniewski, 2017; Whyte & Karabon, 2016).

The practices of education leaders in communication with parents are effective on the school (Patten, 2017). Ensuring parental involvement is an important leadership responsibility (Epstein et al., 2002). Therefore, it is imperative that school leaders communicate with parents, inform them about school and school-related matters, and support families (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009). The education leader should communicate in a variety of ways to please parents and to involve them in school life. Ensuring parents' involvement in school, providing information, and making school-related connections are to the benefit of the students and play an important role in their development (Mapp, 2003). Many processes that take place in schools are intertwined with communication. Establishing a strong organizational communication network and achieving the goals of the organization depends on a healthy flow of information within the organization (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1991). With the rapid spread and widespread use of social and mobile media devices and communication formats such as text message, e-mail, Facebook, and Skype video conferencing services, communication is established in various ways (Rudi et al., 2015). One of the fastest of these is e-mails that reach many people at the same time. But e-mail is a versatile tool used not only for communication, but also for task management, calendar, contact lists, reminders, and job management (Berthiaume, 2015). Education leaders reach every stakeholder of the school by using information and communication technologies (Lunenburg, 2010).

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer families a large number of formats for collaboration, information exchange, and spending time; these all contribute to feelings of family strength and intimacy. Keeping in touch with the family is vital (Green, 2002, pp. 284-290) to maintain the relationship, managing resources, fulfill family responsibilities, and ICTs allow family members to stay in touch and connect over long distances at relatively low costs (Kennedy & Wellman, 2007). For these reasons, it can be associated with Social Information Processing Theory which was developed at the beginning 1990s (Walther, 1992; cited Walther, 2016, pp. 1-2) emphasizes the improvement of interpersonal impacts and relational communication through computer-mediated communication. This theory assumed that when people were motivated to engage in social relationships, they could use this communication as efficiently as possible in face-to-face environments, but that enough time was required. Based on this theory, it can be said that e-mails motivate people to communicate, and because they reach so many people at the same time, they cause rapid communication and interaction compared to face-to-face communication or phone calls. So present research is important for cited reasons.

There are many studies related to both COVID-19 and communication separately. Firstly the researchers found "COVID-19 studies" such as health (Cao, 2020; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020); vaccine (Graham, 2020); family (Campbell, 2020); learning/teaching (Dorn et al., 2020; Hamilton et al., 2020); education/systems (Darling-Hammond & Kini, 2020; Kafa & Pashiardis, 2020; Varela & Fedynich, 2020); school/education leaders (Fotheringham et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; Hooge & Pont, 2020; Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020; Netolicky, 2020; Pius-Uwhubetiyi, 2020); teachers (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Harris & Fullan, 2020); poverty (Dodley,

Bandealy & Tschudy, 2020); nutrition and children (Zhen-Dong et al., 2020); social equity (Wright & Merritt, 2020); university closures (Sahu, 2020); return to school (McNamara & Sahlberg, 2020) etc. All the studies listed were conducted during the COVID-19 process, and were related with the virus. However, it has been determined that no studies have been conducted on communication in education with COVID-19.

There are also some “*education (teachers, principals, parents, students etc.) and communication studies*” in the literature that do not include the COVID-19 pandemic-communication such as parent communication (Rudi et al., 2015); text messages (Boden, 2017; Grutzmacher et al., 2018); WhatsApp messages (Erdem & Avci, 2020); e-mail communication (Berthiaume, 2015; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005; Duran, Kelly, & Keaten, 2005; Thompson, 2008; Thompson, 2009), etc.

Berthiaume’s (2015) study aimed to provide more information on how e-mail affects communication and relationships between three American high schools, their principals, and teachers. How high school principals and teachers communicated by e-mail at school, its effect and importance on the working environment, school culture, and climate have been determined. Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) examined e-mail messages sent by American and international students enrolled in a teacher-preparation program to their professor over the course of one semester. Students’ used of e-mail to solicit face-to-face appointments and input on projects more. Duran, Kelly, & Keaten (2005) found that e-mails provide motivation, such as making a lecture announcement. So it was useful for it. Additionally, students used e-mails to make appointments; to clarify and ask questions about the course material, and the students offered excuses such as late work. Overall, e-mails were seen as both useful and students’ responsibilities in the educational context.

Thompson (2008), interviewed teachers and parents about e-mails. He also examined e-mail messages each other. The research revealed how parents and teachers communicate and on what subjects they communicate such as students’ grades, health, and social issues, etc. Thompson’s (2009) research was conducted to determine the problems that parents and teachers encounter while communicating via e-mail and the strategies they use to solve these problems. The findings revealed several important problems such as misinterpretations, reductions in face-to-face communication, and impacts on student responsibility. In the research, some strategies such as phone calls and giving students responsibility opportunities were suggested instead of e-mails.

Fotheringham et al. (2020) determined that communication is the most difficult issue for school leaders in England. It has been determined that cooperation and communication have a supportive role for all stakeholders in the pandemic process. Anderson and Hira’s (2020) study in the US it was determined that teachers communicate with parents more during the pandemic than before the pandemic. It was stated by the teachers that they used various types of communication such as video conferencing, home learning packets, text messaging, phone calls and other means of communication for support purposes.

Akyavuz and Cakin’s (2020) study with school principals in Kilis and Hatay was determined that school principals had difficulties in communication with parents and students. The main reasons for this can be listed as network problem, not being able to access the internet, and not being able to

reach the parents. School principals have implemented practices such as sending SMS, sending hand brochures, sharing information from Whatsapp groups, keeping the school web page up to date in order to inform parents. Flack et al. (2021) study for Australian school leader's communication and crisis planning were rated the most useful pandemic leadership skills.

Arar et al. (2021) study was conducted in five Arab countries (Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Qatar). All of the education leaders in these countries stated that they did digital leadership. Digital communication tools such as WhatsApp, Zoom, MS Teams, Instagram were used in teaching, learning, team leadership, communication with students and parents. It has been determined in the research that only Kuwait leaders do not use these communication tools. School leaders in public schools in Qatar had WhatsApp groups both with other public schools and within the school. They shared their experiences and best practices. But they did not communicate with private schools in the same country. School leaders in other countries did not mention any sharing practices with other school leaders in the same country or between countries. Harris (2020), Harris and Jones (2020), Hooge and Pont (2020), and Netolicky (2020) emphasized the importance of communication skills of successful and effective leaders during the pandemic in their study.

The researchers (Berthiaume, 2015; Thompson, 2009, etc.) written above did not examine about COVID-19 pandemic period communication. In this context, the studies are similar as using communication channels but not specific like this research. Because this research focuses only e-mails from principals to parents. And also different from other studies with present research. When the researchers examined the researches about COVID-19 pandemic, "they could not find specific research about the e-mails sent by the education leaders to the parents", the e-mail communication with the parents, and what the education leaders wrote yet. Today's leaders avail themselves in increasing numbers of electronic communication channels, most notably e-mail to give information to the parents.

The purpose of the e-mails sent to the parents is to inform them briefly and clearly on some issues (Thompson, 2009). The communication established between the parents and the education leaders enables parents to become an important element of school life. Because leaders aim to ensure their participation in the school by conveying the policies, expectations, and instructions of the school to the parents (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Thanks to the communication that parents establish with the school, the school can achieve its goals. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the education leaders to inform the parents about the current practices and actions related to the school (Epstein et al., 2002). Especially in the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders who sent e-mails to reach many people quickly and at the same time have tried to fulfill these responsibilities. For this reason, research is considered to be important.

This research was conducted to evaluate the e-mails (non-private/non-personal) sent by an education leader (school principal) to the parents during the pandemic process. Based on this general purpose, the following questions were sought: What is the distribution of numbers, months, reasons, and scope of mails sent by an education leader to parents for general purposes?

Methodology

This research was a qualitative research method. The data has been analyzed using the document analysis method. The purpose of document analysis is to examine the documents in accordance with the subject to be investigated. There are some stages in document analysis. These are identifying documents and accessing data, checking and understanding the originality of the data, analyzing the data and using the data where necessary (Bowen, 2009). The document to be analyzed within the scope of this study is to examine the general purpose e-mails sent by an education leader to the parents of students in the Ohio State in the US. In this study, the education leader for the school principal was used. The reason for this is that the school principal exerts more effort than ever before and acts as an educational leader during the pandemic process. The researchers used code names, pseudonyms. The school's code-name is "*Eagle School (ES)*". The reason for using code names is that what is written in e-mails is used in the work with direct quotations. It is given general information about it.

Eagle School (ES) and Education Leader John (School Principal)

ES is a public school, which is located in Ohio. The school has nearly 2300 students (Female 48%, Male 52%) grades 9-12 with a student-teacher ratio of 18 to 1 and almost 130 teachers. There are 76% of teachers have master's and higher degree, 24% have bachelor's. The seven connected buildings on school area. The school has one main principal and each unit has its own principal and counseling staff. ES (800 high schools) is in the top 100 in the ranking and also best teachers. %33 ES' students are eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. It is examined to students' diversity is White 82.4%, African American 6.3%, Multiracial 5.7%, Hispanic 4.3%, Asian 1.1%, Pacific Islander 0.1%, Native American 0.1% (Niche, 2021).

The school principal's code-name is "John". Education leader John has master of education degree on educational leadership. He worked as a teacher and principal in different schools before becoming a principal in Eagle School. He is member of variety associations about school administrators (The information was taken the school's web site). He is nearly 45-50 years old. He has effective communication with teachers, parents, students, school staffs and other administrators. He does not hesitate to help people. He is good at communication and human relations (First author's observations).

Educational leadership is the process of influencing and directing (Gumus, Bulut, & Bellibas, 2013) teachers, students, staff, parents and all stakeholders around the school so that the school can achieve its purpose. Educational leadership is a type of leadership that puts the student in the center, defines the mission of the school, manages the curriculum and instruction, develops a positive school climate, communicates and manages with families, and consists of related tasks (Chirichello, 2010). For the reasons listed, it was used as the education leader for the school principal in this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data in the research was collected between 17 July-17 December 2020 from an education leader's e-mails to the parents in Ohio State in the US. All the e-mails were written in English. There were no other languages. It was determined that there are 74 general purpose e-mails sent to parents by an education leader in the US. While some e-mails focused on only one subject (such as COVID-19); some e-mails focused on more than one subject (such as nutrition, transportation, technology). These e-mails were taken from the e-mails of three parents from the same grade level and school, checked for general purpose e-mail (non-private e-mail) and analyzed using document and content analysis method.

The reason why July 17, 2020 was chosen as the starting date is that the education leader sent an e-mail to parents before the school was opened, since September 8, 2020 was the first day of school. December 17, 2020 was chosen because the end of the semester date of the relevant school was this day. These dates consisted of the first term of the 2020-2021 academic year. In short, it was aimed to determine what kinds of e-mails an education leader sent to the parents of the students before the beginning, during, and at the end of the term.

The relevant e-mails were confirmed from the e-mail addresses of the three parents, and the general purpose e-mails were recorded by the researchers and necessary studies were carried out on them. One of the parents who received the e-mails is one of the researchers in this study. Others are parents from the same grade level who volunteered to participate in the research. researchers downloaded e-mails sent by education leader John from a parent's e-mail address. Then they filed by date and month, then compared with other parents. Document and content analysis were used in analyzing the research data. For this, first the necessary codes were extracted from all e-mails and a code table was created with their dates and subjects. Then, the categories were created, the codes were placed under the categories and the necessary interpretations were made. Frequencies were counted and written.

In order to ensure the validity of the study, the experts in educational administration and communication opinions were taken first, the literature review was kept rich, the codings and categories were made depending on the literature, and direct quotations were used without any changes. They also demonstrate the credibility, objectivity, transferability, and transparency of information (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In addition, general purpose e-mails and special purpose e-mails sent were sorted, and this process continued throughout the research.

Researchers' Role

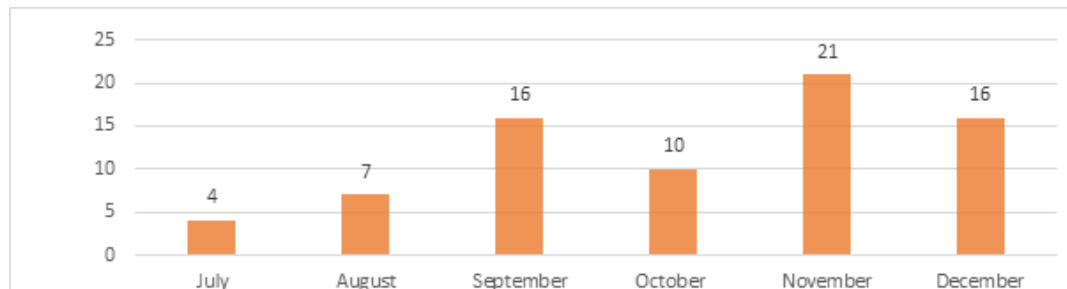
The researchers acted objectively from the beginning to the end of the research, and the research was completed in accordance with ethical principles. Special e-mails sent to parents of students were excluded from this study and were carefully examined and sorted. The names of the school and the leader were confidential throughout the study, and various code names were used in the parts of the study containing the district, school, teachers, school address, telephone or other information.

Findings

In this part of the study, the reasons for the e-mails sent to parents, and their distribution by months and subjects were examined.

Rate of E-Mails by Months

It was determined that total 74 e-mails were sent to parents between 17 July-17 December, 2020. The rate of these e-mails by months is given in Graphic 1.



Graphic 1. E-mails by Months

The e-mails shown in Graphic 1 cover the six-month period between July and December. Four e-mails were sent in July, Seven in August, 16 in September, 10 in October, 21 in November and 16 in December. The least e-mails were sent in July. The reason for this is the e-mails sent for preparatory purposes only for the opening of the schools, as the schools are closed and during the summer break. Unfortunately, the schools could not be opened in September due to the pandemic. The most e-mails were sent in November. The reason for this is that in the 2nd Quarter of the 1st Period, which consists of 2 quarters, schools will switch to hybrid learning and the schools are planned to reopen.

Reasons for Sending E-Mails

The reasons for sending e-mails from the education leader to parents are given in Figure 1 below.

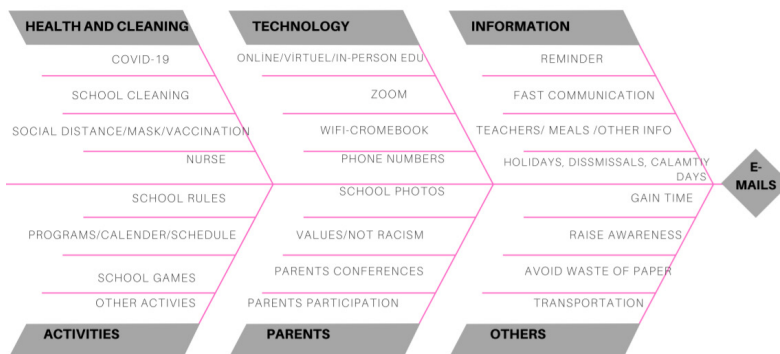


Figure 1. Reasons for Sending E-mails

As seen in Figure 1, the reasons for the e-mails sent by the education leader John to parents are divided into six categories. These are e-mails on health and cleaning, technology, information, activities, family and other topics. Direct quotations from the e-mails pertaining to each category are given below.

“This is notification that ES has had positive COVID-19 tests of staff and students on 11/13/20. The letter attached to this e-mail is a form letter that we are required to send if we have any positive tests. The positive tests from today consisted of:
1 Virtual Learning Student (0 quarantines due to close contact)
4 In-person Students (4 quarantines due to close contact)
1 Staff Member (0 quarantines due to close contact)” (Category: Health and Cleaning)

“Everyone has anxiously been awaiting the reopening plan for the schools. We are able to share with you two options for the return to school, and we are hopeful you will feel one of them is the correct fit for your student(s). Please note each option is outlined in detail on the linked survey. It is important to note you must complete this survey to select the educational plan for your student(s) by next Friday, July 24” (Category: Activities).

“The Grab-and-Go Bus Stop Meal Program will operate Monday-Friday from bus stops. Students will be able to visit a bus stop in their neighborhood each day, beginning on Wednesday, September 9, to pick up grab-and-go breakfast and lunch meals. If your child(ren) will be participating in the Grab-and-Go Bus Stop Meal Program, please complete and submit the form (link below) by Friday, September 11.

Thank you” (Category: Information).

“Our Technology Services Department will continue to provide Technology Support to students and parents each weekday at ES. Parents/students can also exchange Chromebooks and/or pick up hotspots (as available) at ES” (Category: Technology).

“I have heard back from some of you that the assigned time for you and your student to attend the X grade student/parent meeting does not work for your family. I understand that having assigned times can be difficult, but to adhere to our social distancing and capacity guidelines, we had to break the meetings up into specific groups. If families show up for a meeting that they are not assigned to, we will unfortunately not be able to let you in” (Category: Parents).

“If your student is in need of transportation for the 20-21 school year and you are not routed when you login to the transportation website, please call Ms. X at phone... She will take care of getting your information to the transportation office to be routed” (Category: Others).

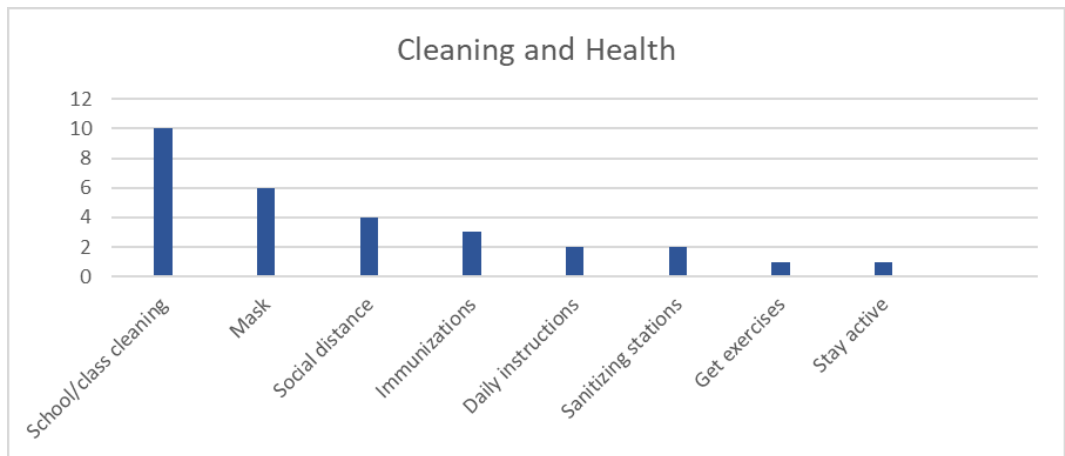
Subjects and Contents of E-Mails

Some of the e-mails are from the superintendents (The leader forwarded the e-mails directly). They are 17 in total, one in July, one in August, five in September, three in October, four in November and three in December. The education leader John directed the decisions, actions to be taken, activities and superintendent e-mails of the school district in the meetings to the parents.

Between the relevant dates, there are 17 e-mails about COVID-19 case reports. These are about positive cases, quarantine rules, symptoms, info nurses about situation, case letters and stay at home. An example direct quote from the COVID-19 category is given below.

“This attachment to this e-mail is the required notification for positive cases of COVID-19 at ES. To this date, we have not traced any positive cases back to being transmitted during the school day at ES. Our teachers and students are doing a great job of following our protocols, which have helped tremendously. It is a rare occurrence that a student is in close contact with another student (6 feet for 15 minutes) in our classrooms due to the fact that we are in a hybrid model”

E-mails related to health and cleaning category are school and classroom cleaning, face covering/mask, social distance, daily health check instructions, immunization, flu vaccine corner, hand sanitizing stations, get some exercises, stay active. Information on health and cleaning category is given in Graphic 2.



Graphic 2. *Cleaning and Health*

As seen in Graphic 2, school/classroom cleaning is mentioned the most. This category is important for all the students and staff due to the pandemic. An example direct quote from the cleaning and health category is given below.

“Masks must be worn at all times, except when eating lunch.

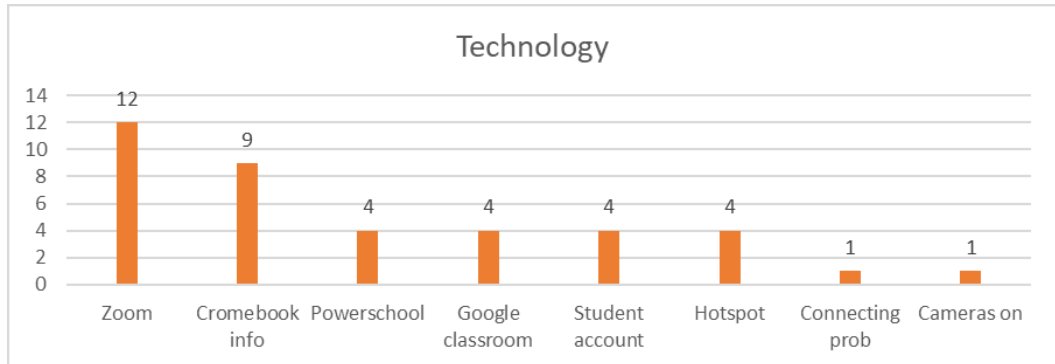
– During class change, our hallways will be designated as “one-way” hallways. A map will be given to students on their first day and we will work with students to map out their path from class to class.

– We are spending time setting up classrooms to maximize space and spread students out as much as possible.

– Cafeteria tables have been spaced out and plexiglass barriers will be on the tables making individualize eating spaces.

- Classrooms will be cleaned between each class and again every evening.
- 35 hand sanitizing stations have been mounted on walls throughout the building.
- We will continue to evaluate our protocols and change as we see fit”

E-mails related to technology category are powerschool, Cromebook info and changes, hotspot, google classroom, created student account, connecting and zoom problems and fixing technological problems, zoom cameras on in the courses. Information on technology category is given in Graphic 3.

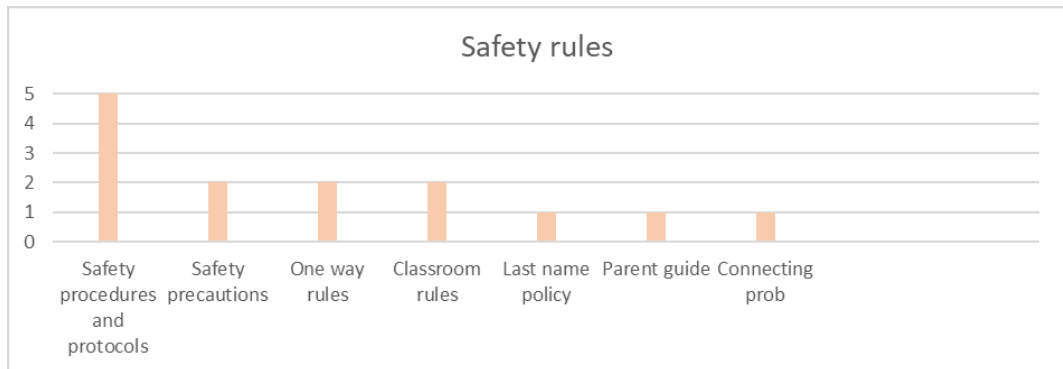


Graphic 3. Technology

As seen in Graphic 3, zoom is mentioned the most. This category is about education, courses and technology. An example direct quote from the technology category is given below.

“This e-mail is to let you know that you can access student schedules via PowerSchool. If you have any questions, please contact your student’s counselor. If you would like to request a schedule change, please do so by clicking the link below”

E-mails related to Safety Rules are last name policy, classroom rules, one-way hallway rules-map, eating places-cafeteria rules, safety procedures and protocols, safety precautions, parent guide teens safe. Information on safety rules category is given in Graphic 4.

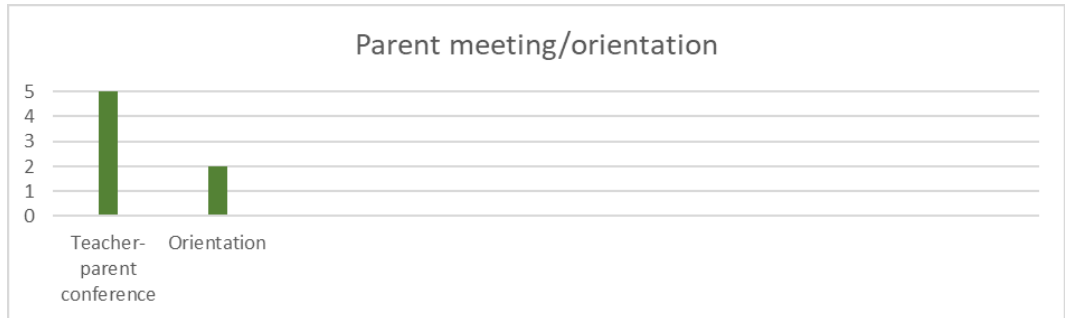


Graphic 4. Safety Rules

As seen in Graphic 4, safety procedures and protocols is mentioned the most. An example direct quote from the safety rules category is given below.

“Students who wish to be assigned a locker will have the opportunity to make this request once we return to school. No students will have lockers immediately when they return and we will share the procedure to request a locker through advisory and over announcements”

E-mails related to the parent meeting-orientation category are teacher-parent conference, orientation. Information on parent meeting-orientation category is given in Graphic 5.

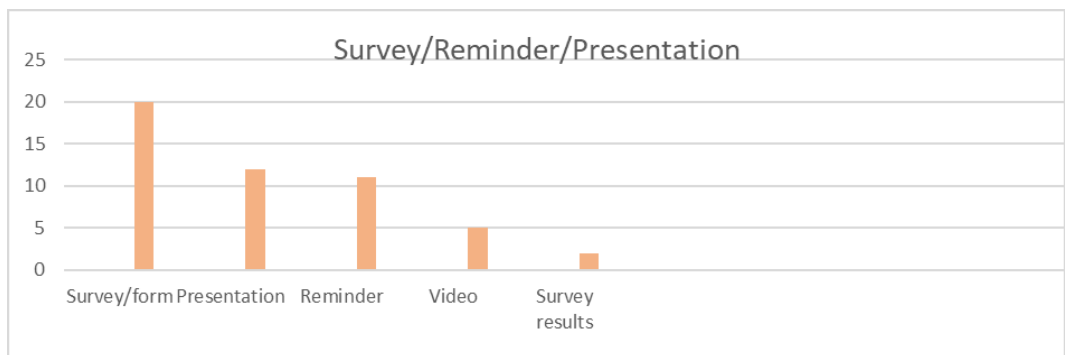


Graphic 5. Parent Meeting-Orientation

As seen in Graphic 5, teacher-parent conferences are mentioned the most. An example direct quote from the parent meeting-orientation category is given below.

“Parent/Teacher Conferences at ES will be held virtually this quarter. To sign-up, please contact the main office at ES (call number) and ask to speak to Mrs. X. As we get closer to October 1, which is our first p/t conference date, you will get an e-mail from the teacher with a link to a Zoom meeting. If you would prefer to have a phone conference, please let Mrs. X know this”

E-mails related to Survey/Reminder/Presentation Category are survey, form, link, presentation, video, reminder and survey results. Information on survey/reminder/presentation category is given in Graphic 6.

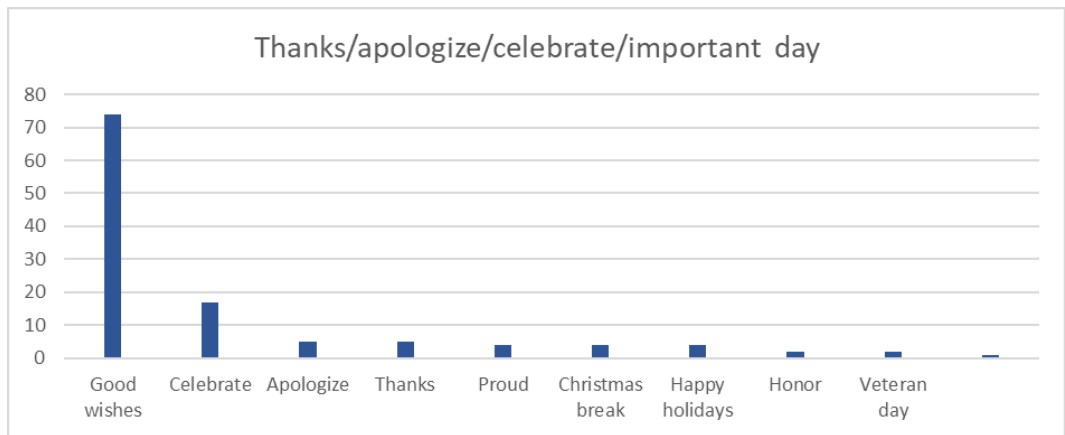


Graphic 6. Survey/Reminder/Presentation

As seen in Graphic 6, survey/form/link are mentioned the most. An example direct quote from the survey/reminder/presentation category is given below.

“This is just a reminder that all parents should complete the survey (link below) by 9:00pm on Wednesday, July 29 to let us know if you are choosing online or in-person learning for the fall semester of the 20-21 school year. Counselors and unit secretaries return to work tomorrow to join our unit principals and guidance secretaries in the unit offices. With that being said, we are at full staff to answer any questions you may have. Do not hesitate to give us a call or send us an e-mail. We will respond as quickly as possible”

E-mails related to thanks/apologize/celebrate/important day category are apologize, thanks, proud, honor, good wishes, celebrate, happy holidays, suicide prevention month, veteran day. Information on thanks/apologize/celebrate/important day is given in Graphic 7.

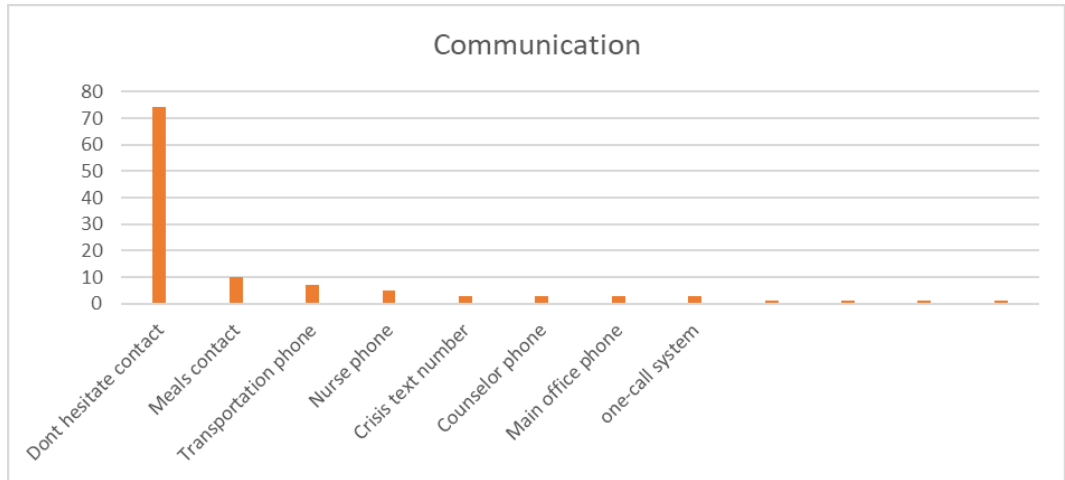


Graphic 7. Thanks/Apologize/Celebrate/Important Day

As seen in Graphic 7, good wishes are mentioned the most. An example direct quote from the thanks/apologize/celebrate/important day category is given below.

“September was Suicide Prevention Month and I want to share with you a video that was put together by one of our Hope Squad Advisors, Mrs. X, with the help of many of our Hope Squad members. If you are ever in need, please do not hesitate to reach out to the staff at ES! We are here to support our families during tough times”

E-mails related to communication category are transportation/nurse/technology service/ absences call/crisis text/counselor/main office/one call system-meals contact-care line health support-suicide prevention phone numbers, and don't hesitate teacher/principal and other staff. Information on communication is given in Graphic 8.

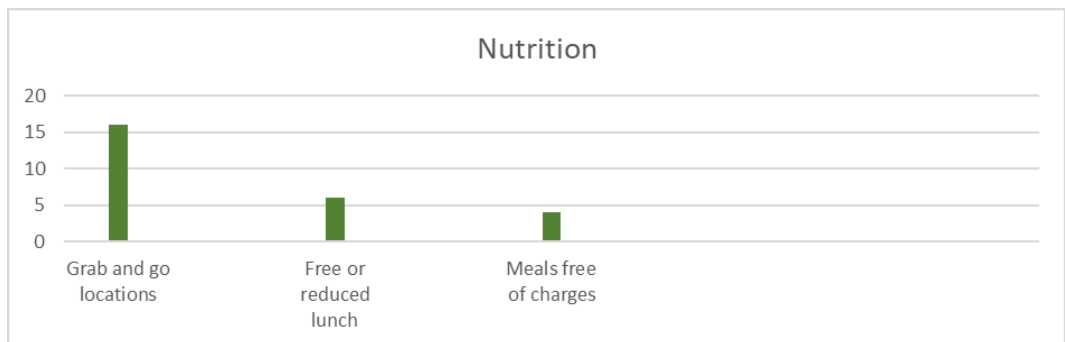


Graphic 8. *Communication*

As seen in Graphic 8, don't hesitate contact (teachers/principals/staff/nurse etc.) are mentioned the most. An example direct quote from the communication category is given below.

“If your student is going to miss one of your virtual classes, please contact your teacher directly via e-mail. Please do not report virtual learning absences to any of the offices or leave a message. If your student is going to be absent from an in-person learning class or Quiet Learning Space, please call, choose Option #1, and leave a message. Also, please e-mail the teacher to let them know your student will not be present. We will contact you directly if we have any questions about your absence”

E-mails related to nutrition category are free or reduced lunch, grab-and-go breakfast and lunch meals info and locations, free of charge under 18. Information on nutrition is given in Graphic 9.

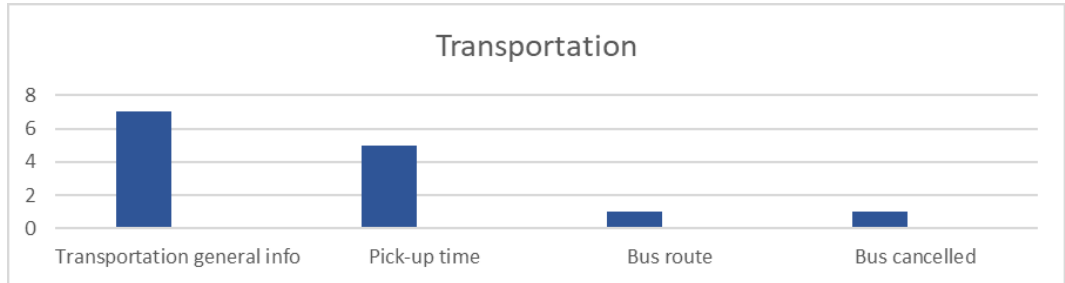


Graphic 9. *Nutrition*

As seen in Graphic 9, grab-and-go locations are mentioned the most. An example direct quote from the nutrition category is given below.

“Attached are the Meal Stop Locations and times, starting today, Tuesday, December 1. Meals can be picked up at any stop, on Monday-Friday. Meals are available FREE OF CHARGE for any child between the ages of 0 and 18. You can go to ANY Meal Stop – Find the stop that is closest to your home! Please contact in Community Relations at with any questions.”

E-mails related to transportation category are transportation, pick up time and locations, bus route and location time, bus cancelled. Information on transportation is given in Graphic 10.

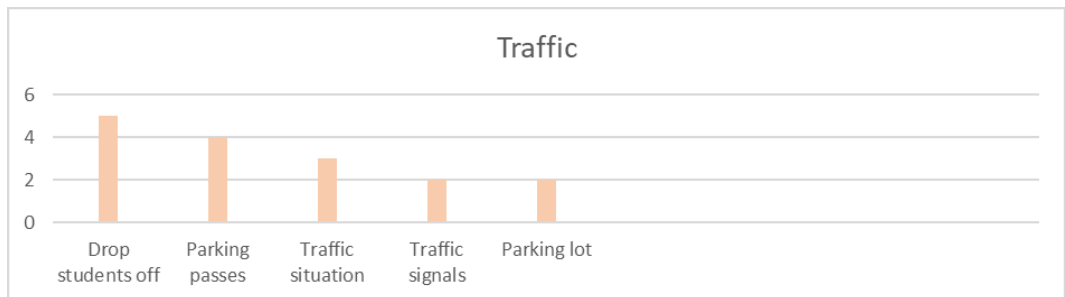


Graphic 10. *Transportation*

As seen in Graphic 10, transportations are mentioned the most. An example direct quote from the transportation category is given below.

“As you have noticed from my all-calls, we have a shortage of bus drivers in the School District. This has led to a total of 11 routes at ES being cancelled over the last two days. We now have the one-call system setup to call only the families who are impacted by cancellations, so you will not get a call if your student’s bus is running as scheduled. If you know anyone who would like to drive a bus, please have them contact X at phone number”

E-mails related to traffic category are parking passes, no charge for parking, signs, traffic signals, parking lot, drop students off/pick up, traffic situation. Information on traffic is given in Graphic 11.

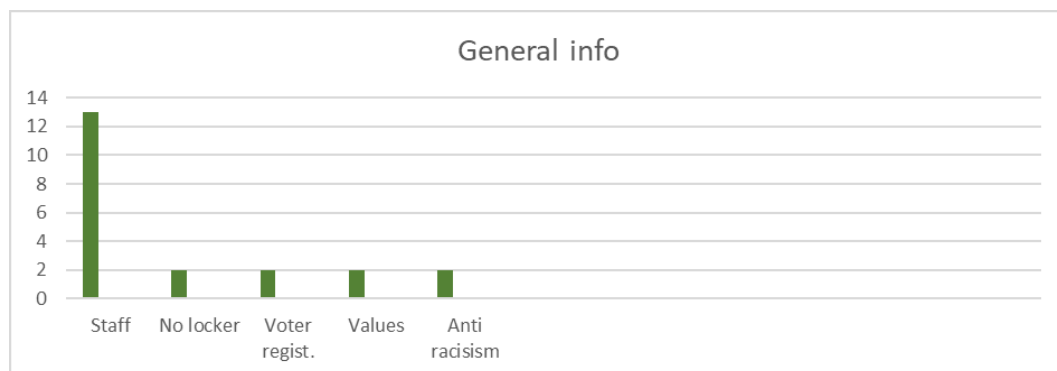


Graphic 11. *Traffic*

As seen in Graphic 11, drop students off/pick up is mentioned the most. An example direct quote from the traffic category is given below.

“You may have noticed “No Left Turn” signs on the south end of the main parking lot when you are dropping your student off in the morning. These were added to help with traffic flow onto now that a left hand turn signal was installed at the intersection of Park”

E-mails related to general info category are looking for a job, voter registration, picture days/pick up, football team lost, level 4 info, all schools virtual, essay contest (Martin Luther King), preventing suicide info, racist comments, using social media, discipline rules, values, showing respect, holiday season-breaks, main office, office hours. Information on general info is given in Graphic 12.

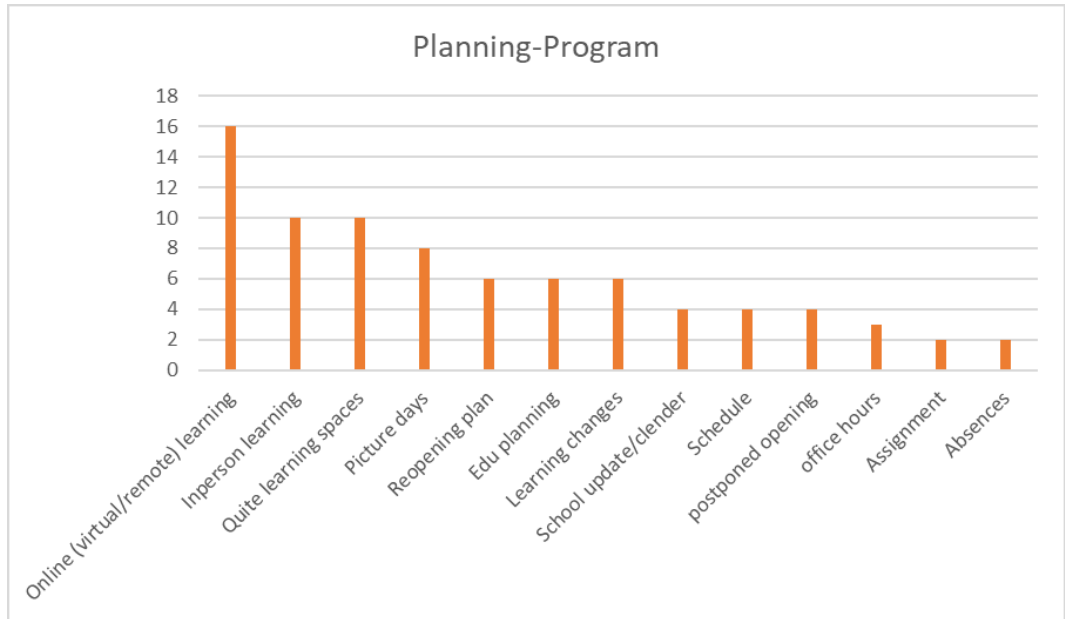


Graphic 12. *General Info*

As seen in Graphic 12, staff is mentioned the most. An example direct quote from the general info category is given below.

“I hope our parents will take some time this weekend to speak to their student(s) about valuing differences, being inclusive, and showing respect to all people. We appreciate your partnership in teaching our students to be safe, respectful, responsible, and kind”

E-mails related to the planning/program category are quiet learning space, reopening plan, return school options, schedule, calendar, postponed opening school, school update, school year, education planning, online learning (remote/virtual learning), instruction daily classes, career tech, online parent/student resources, toolbox, in-person learning, office hours, 2-hour early dismissal, military pot-out info, midterm beginning, 2nd period, 2nd quarter, change learning type, 1st semester, learning pods. Information on planning-program is given in Graphic 13.



Graphic 13. *Planning-Program*

As seen in Graphic 13, online learning is mentioned the most. An example direct quote from the planning-program category is given below.

“The link below is a form to request a Quiet Learning Space at ES for the second quarter. These spaces will only be available on Wednesdays throughout the quarter. This is a brand new list, so please fill it out even if you had a spot in the first quarter Quiet Learning Space program. Please let me know if you have any questions and have a great week!”

Discussion

This study adds to the literature and knowledge based on leadership and communication in a time of crisis in PK-12 schools. Specifically, this study sought to examine how an educational leader used e-mail communication with families in his school community during COVID-19. The 2020-2021 academic year was challenging for school leaders and stakeholders. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, the US was plagued by two other pandemics: a racial one with the repeated police brutalities, the murders of several African American individuals, and the violent riots following these events. The country also experienced an economic pandemic as a consequence of the aforementioned ones. As a result of the health pandemic, schooling suddenly occurred remotely in the majority of the districts across the nation. The remote learning environment challenged the educational leader to find new ways to effectively communicate. In this study, the leader chose e-mails to communicate with his stakeholders. E-mail communication allows the sender to reach as many people as they need at once. The findings indicated that the leader sent 74 e-mail messages in six months. These messages aimed to quickly dissipate information about safety and health protocols,

food pick-up locations, and use and access to the technology needed to participate in distance learning. Fewer e-mail messages meant to and inform parents about specific events such as parent-teacher conferences. The educational leader in this study also used e-mails to send updates regarding transportation and to encourage kind and equitable behaviors in the midst of the three pandemics.

In times of crisis, communication is the most important element. The leaders must obtain quality and reliable information; implement the relevant emergency plan, distribute the duties of the personnel before the crisis, make quick decisions during the crisis; consider the safety of others and act accordingly; communicate openly and regularly to avoid confusion, rumors, and misinformation (Smith & Riley, 2012, pp. 63-64). In this study, the leader used various e-mails to rapidly communicate with the community. The educational leader saw e-mails as a versatile communication tool and a convenient way to have access to contact lists and to rapidly send messages to those on the contact lists. This finding is in agreement with Berthiaume (2015) who views e-mail as an efficient means to communicate from a daily operations standpoint. Also, e-mails were crucial to ensure parental involvement (Epstein et al., 2002).

The findings indicated that during a health pandemic as severe and contagious as COVID-19, it is crucial to inform, educate, and regularly remind families to follow health protocols to ensure their safety whether it be in an online or face-to-face environment. In this case, the leader wrote e-mails related to health. These e-mails contained rules to follow and advice on how to stay healthy during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the e-mail communications were mostly geared towards safety protocols and rules such as one-way rules in the school building, classroom rules, social distancing, and mask requirements. Sending procedural e-mails to families related to new health requirements was particularly important for the well-being of students and the peace of mind of parents when districts started to transition from online to face-to-face learning. The e-mail provides an example of how a new safety protocol was communicated with families prior to going back to face-to-face instruction. This e-mail embodies the characteristics of quality communication outlined by Smith and Riley (2012) because it is clear and to the point. It also emphasizes that families should look for further communication regarding this transitional rule. Additionally, this e-mail concisely identifies the true purpose of the communication, an attribute deemed important by Lunenburg (2010).

Nutrition plays a crucial part in the health of students. That's why the leader sent e-mails that pertained to food. In the e-mail below, the educational leader provided news regarding free or reduced lunch, grab-and-go breakfast, and lunch meals information and locations, all free of charge for any student under the age of 18.

In a time when the US faced three different crises, many families were not only affected by the possibility of contracting the COVID-19 virus, but also impacted economically when they lost their jobs, had additional expenses for sick family members, or lost loved ones. Giving clear information about free meals not only fostered an inviting school culture (Brion, 2021) but also relieved some families who counted on free school meals for their children. Following the saying "Maslow before Bloom," students are not able to focus and learn if their basic needs are not met, including their

nutritional needs. This study shows specific examples of e-mails sent by the leader to the families regarding health and nutrition. In this way, this study adds to what has been written about COVID-19 and its impacts on health within the general population (Cao, 2020; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020).

Additionally, this leader sent e-mails related to technology. In these e-mails, the principal shared information about how to use and access zoom, Chromebooks, Google classroom, and where to find hotspots when families needed them. The benefit of sending such communication by e-mail is that it is also possible to embed or attach links, instructions and pictures to explain the text further, or provide other options, as indicated in the e-mail below. This type of communication is important because during COVID-19 many parents reported being confused by the technology, not having enough bandwidth, or having to juggle several different technologies for their children attending various schools (Brion, 2021). Likewise, in various studies, it has been determined that administrators use different types of communication and their communication difficulties (Akyavuz & Çakın, 2020; Arar et al., 2021; Fotheringham et al., 2020).

Based on the research findings, the researchers provide two recommendations for practitioners. First, educational leaders could use the e-mails provided in this study as examples for their future communication with families. Second, Thompson's (2009) examined the challenges pertaining to e-mail communication. One problem the author stated was the risk for misinterpretations. In a school where many ethnicities are represented and languages spoken, misinterpretations are even more likely to happen because of cultural and communication differences. In addition, for families who do not speak English or do not have a way to afford Wifi, e-mails may not be an equitable approach to communication or at least should not be the only way to communicate. Consequently, communications should be translated and communication plans should be contextualized, and adapted in order to be culturally responsive and equitable and respond to the needs of the targeted audience. E-mails are one way to communicate that is fast, cost efficient, and reach a lot of people at the same time. However, e-mails may not be the preferred method for those who receive the information. As a result, a survey could be sent at the beginning of the school year or crisis that give parents an opportunity to select whether they prefer to receive information on paper, by e-mail, text message, or phone call. Leaders could then ensure that everyone remains informed, educated, and cared for.

Conclusion

This qualitative study sought to examine how an educational leader used e-mail communication during COVID-19. E-mail was the chosen and preferred mode of communication because it allowed the leader to reach as many people as he needed at once. Findings indicated that he used e-mails regularly for to send information on a variety of topics. These e-mail messages aimed to quickly dissipate information about safety and health protocols, food pick up locations, and about the use and access to the technology needed to participate in distance learning. Fewer e-mail messages meant to and inform parents about specific events such as parent-teacher conferences. The educational leader in this study also used e-mails to send updates regarding transportation and to encourage

kind and equitable behaviors in the midst of the three pandemics. In a time of three crises and for this particular leader, context, and audience, e-mails were an efficient way to communicate. The researchers offer some recommendations for practitioners that include using the example e-mails provided in this study and the need for leaders to contextualize their communications plans and be culturally proficient and responsive to their audiences' individual needs and preferences.

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