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## Concern, Conflict, and Chaos: Nebraska Educator Experiences during the Pandemic

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# Concern, Conflict, and Chaos

## *Nebraska Educator Experiences during the Pandemic*

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**ABSTRACT:** During the spring of 2020, Nebraska's 983 public schools sat vacant, and Nebraska's 329,290 Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 students were learning in environments other than school. Educators were expected to pivot quickly from traditional classroom instruction to remote experiences. Understanding the effects of the pandemic on educators is necessary to effectively meet their needs and the needs of students. The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the experiences of Nebraska's urban and rural PreK–Grade 12 educators during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. In surveys collected in July 2020, participants (i.e., superintendents, principals, and teachers) completed both fixed-response items and one open-ended question that assessed experiences during the initial pandemic-related school closings. The results indicate educators identified lack of family help and inability to engage students as a top concern about student academic progress. Educators reported dramatic increases in stress during school closures. Many reported coping only somewhat well or worse. Educators also reported personal challenges with remote instruction, including mental health issues and blurred work- and home-life boundaries. Significant differences were found between rural and urban educators, as well as between elementary and secondary educators. Direct quotes from participants vividly describe their lived experiences.

**Key Words:** COVID-19, elementary–secondary, pandemic-related stress, principals, remote-work engagement, rural/urban, superintendents, teachers

### Introduction

During the spring of 2020, all of Nebraska's 983 public schools sat vacant, and all of Nebraska's 329,290 children from Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 were learning in environments other than school. Schools were expected to pivot very quickly from traditional instruction in classrooms to completely remote or online experiences for students (Malkus et al. 2020). Assurances that educational practices ensue, that instruction is delivered, and that students continued to learn, fell on the shoulders of educators. Nebraska is a microcosm of the nation, where educators continue to experience pandemic-related stress and anxiety (Will 2020). Teachers and administrators are among the most essential frontline workers in our country (Beames, Christensen, and Werner-Seidler 2021). They are responsible for ensuring a positive and productive pathway for our next

generation of leaders. Understanding the effects of the pandemic on educators is necessary to effectively meet their needs and ultimately the needs of their students.

The global pandemic and related school closures resulted in interrupted learning, unequal access to learning opportunities (Malkus 2020), gaps in nutrition services (Chrisman and Alnaim 2021), and social isolation (Asbury et al. 2021). The potential impact of COVID-19, and subsequent school closures, on educational professionals and the systems within which they work is significant. Teacher workloads have increased significantly since the pandemic (Ziebell et al. 2020) and teachers are reporting increased mental health challenges (Barnsley 2020). Whereas previous crises have caused schools to close (e.g., tornados, flooding), never before have all Nebraska educators been faced with such widespread uncertainty that impacted their very mission and purpose. Teachers were not only charged with developing lesson plans and delivering instruction but were also responsible for translating their lessons into alternative platforms (Gross and Opalka 2020) and ensuring pos-

itive student-teacher and teacher-parent relationships despite social distancing. They were expected to understand the impact of stress on children's learning and ensure educational equity. They were also charged with communicating a sense of safety and security in a potentially unsafe and insecure reality. School leaders were not only required to ensure that teachers had necessary tools and instructional supports for use in classrooms—they were also concerned about the creation of borderless learning environments so that the diverse array of students in their system received an adequate education (Hamilton, Kaufman, and Diliberti 2020).

### *Urban and Rural Contexts*

The communities in which educators work may have impacted their experiences during the pandemic. For example, there is some evidence that pandemic-related school closures and access restrictions have uniquely affected rural communities (Hine et al. 2020). Loneliness and isolation—always a risk for those in rural areas—may be experienced acutely during times of crisis such as a pandemic (Tittman, Harteau, and Beyer 2016). Similarly, a greater proportion of children living in rural communities experience externalizing behavior difficulties (Sheridan et al. 2014) and more challenging temperaments (Neumann et al. 2020) than children living in urban settings. Behavior difficulties may result in less engagement with remote work. Internet speed in rural communities is often slower than in urban areas, which could affect educator ability to connect with students and parents. On the other hand, urban schools tend to have larger student populations and larger school staff relative to rural schools, which may create challenges when moving thousands of students and hundreds of teachers from in-person to remote teaching and learning. Although the poverty rate in rural Nebraska is slightly higher (10.9%) than in urban Nebraska (9.4%; USDA-ERS 2020), small rural school districts tend to serve all students together in a small number of buildings. In contrast, large urban districts have multiple buildings that serve local neighborhoods, resulting in some buildings with high populations of students from low-resourced households. Educators who serve primarily students from low-resourced households may experience high percentages of students without access to internet or other resources.

### *Elementary and Secondary Contexts*

Educators serving different grade levels may experience differences in remote learning. For example, during school closures educators had to rely on technology to communicate with students and parents. Secondary students are more likely than their younger peers to regularly use technology; however, there is some evidence that elementary teachers are more likely to use instructional technology than their secondary counterparts (Dogan et al. 2021). It may also be expected that older students are better able to learn independently without needing as much support from parents. Secondary schools also typically have larger student and staff populations, potentially contributing to increased workload and burden for secondary principals.

### *The Current Study*

Given concerns about unfinished student learning (Epler and Vargas 2021), attention is justifiably focused on the need to meet student academic and social-emotional needs. However, with current and anticipated educator shortages nationally and in Nebraska (Nebraska Department of Education 2021) and Nebraska teachers reporting high rates of stress and mental health concerns (Jensen 2022), a better understanding of educator experiences during all stages of the pandemic is needed to determine how best to support educators.

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the experiences of Nebraska's urban and rural PreK–Grade 12 educators during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were closed. Our research questions (RQ) were:

1. What were the remote-learning and stress-related experiences of Nebraska's superintendents, principals, and teachers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were closed?
2. How did principal and teacher experiences vary by geographic locale (urban or rural) or grade level (elementary or secondary)?

## **Methods**

### *Sample*

Over 7,000 teachers, principals, and superintendents representing 243 of Nebraska's 244 school districts participated in the study. Elementary schools included

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

	Teachers ( <i>n</i> = 6,938)	Principals ( <i>n</i> = 207)	Superintendents ( <i>n</i> = 84)
Geographic local			
Rural	47%	80%	96%
Urban	53%	20%	2%
Grade level			
PreK and elementary	49%	54%	—
Secondary	51%	46%	—
Title 1 eligible			
Yes	78%	86%	—
No	22%	14%	—
Years of experience	<i>M</i> = 14.95 ( <i>SD</i> = 9.99)	<i>M</i> = 21.03 ( <i>SD</i> = 8.9)	<i>M</i> = 25.05 ( <i>SD</i> = 10.28)

Note: One superintendent did not respond to these items.

those that serve PreK through Grade 5, with secondary schools encompassing Grades 6 through 12. Urban districts included those with National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2007) classifications of city or suburb (i.e., NCES local codes 11, 12, 13, 21, 22, 23) and rural districts were those classified as town or rural (i.e., NCES local codes 31, 32, 33, 41, 42, 43). All but one of the urban districts are located in the easternmost part of state. See Table 1 for sample demographic information.

### *Surveys and Data Collection*

The Nebraska Department of Education emailed a Qualtrics survey link to all public-school teachers, principals, and superintendents in Nebraska. The researcher-developed survey included the following: instructional modifications and delivery, supports for instructional delivery, interactions with students and families, stressors and coping mechanisms. Surveys were collected in July 2020, the summer immediately following initial pandemic-related school closures. Each group of participants (i.e., teachers, principals, and superintendents) completed a survey that included both fixed-response items (e.g., Likert-type ratings) that assessed experiences during the initial pandemic-related school closings in the spring of 2020 and one open-ended question at the end of the survey asking if respondents had anything else they would like to share. Although the survey questions were similar

across participants, some response options on items in the superintendent survey were more aligned with their district-level roles. The response rate was 40% for superintendents, 26% for principals, and 29% for teachers. This study was approved by the authors' institutional review board (IRB) prior to data collection.

### *Data Analysis*

To address RQ1, all fixed-response items were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The responses to the open-ended question were examined for evidence to expound upon the descriptive statistics. Quotations from the open-ended responses are included in the "Results" section to illustrate the experiences associated with each of the quantitative survey results.

To address RQ2, principal and teacher quantitative responses were analyzed for significant differences between groups (i.e., urban and rural; elementary and secondary) using chi-square or one-way ANOVAs for categorical outcome variables and t-tests for continuous outcome variables. Since superintendents provide leadership from PreK to Grade 12, elementary–secondary comparisons were not appropriate. In addition, given the small number of urban Nebraska school districts, insufficient numbers of urban superintendent responses precluded our ability to conduct urban–rural comparisons.

## Results

### Overall Responses

The following section presents results for RQ1: What were the remote-learning and stress-related experiences of Nebraska’s superintendents, principals, and teachers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were closed? In this section we describe the results of the fixed-response survey items, followed by direct quotes from respondents organized by specific barrier to student engagement with remote learning.

#### BARRIERS TO STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITH REMOTE SCHOOLWORK

Superintendents, principals, and teachers were asked about their concerns regarding students’ ability to complete schoolwork and make sufficient academic progress. Participants were allowed to select all answers that applied. A majority (90%) of superintendents indicated they were most concerned that the *inability of families to help* with schoolwork, *students with special needs* (79.8%), and *student economic insecurity* (73.8%) would prevent students from making sufficient academic progress. See Figure 1 for the graph of top superintendent concerns.

Nearly two-thirds of principals (65.2%) and nearly three-fourths of teachers (72.5%) selected *lack of student motivation* as a top barrier to student schoolwork completion. See Figure 2 for the graph of areas of concern selected by principals and teachers. Additionally, more than 40% of teachers reported that only up to 50% of their students participated in remote learning. This finding points very clearly to the possibility that a majority of

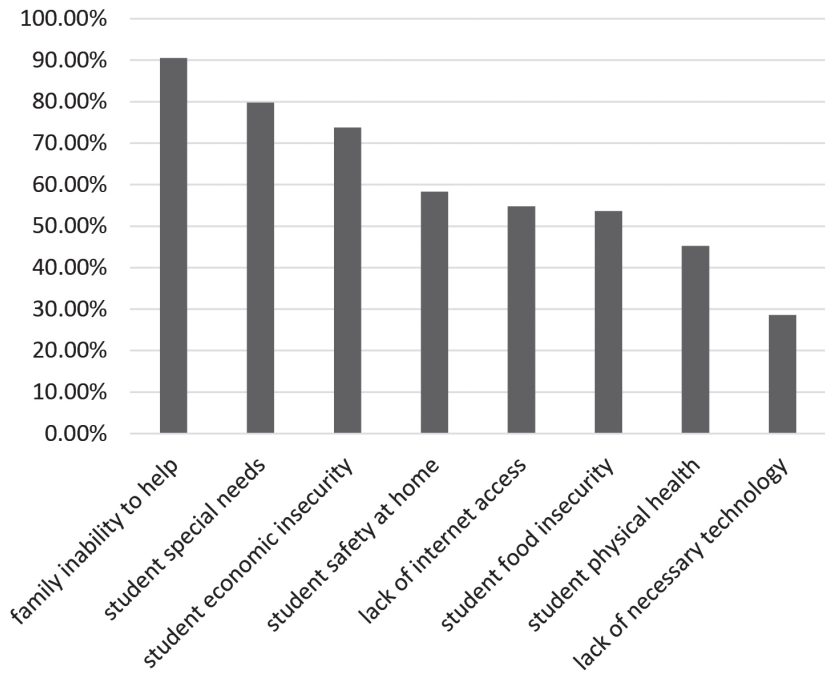


Fig. 1. Superintendents’ concerns about students’ schoolwork and academic progress.

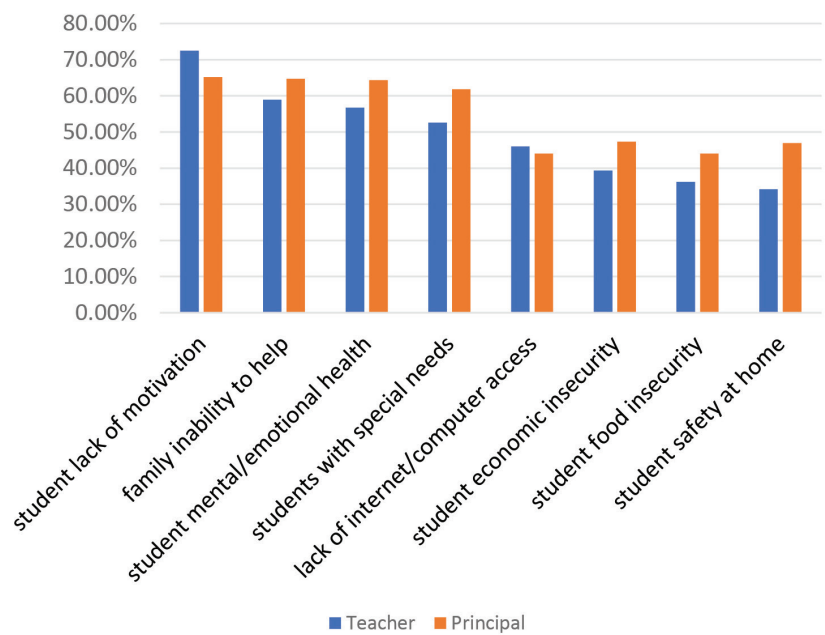


Fig. 2. Principals’ and teachers’ concerns about students’ schoolwork and academic progress.

Nebraska students did not engage in learning during school closures.

**Family Inability to Help.** In their open-ended responses several superintendents commented that limited family support contributed to student disengagement

with remote work. One described the cause of limited student academic progress succinctly as “lack of motivation and support from families for our educational efforts.” Another wrote that a barrier to student remote work engagement was “lack of parent support in getting students to take virtual learning seriously and put forth effort.” One teacher wrote that supporting remote learning was “too overwhelming for my students’ parents.”

**Students with Special Needs.** Superintendents indicated in their open-ended responses that it was challenging for them to support the academic progress of students with special needs. One superintendent described their biggest challenge to supporting students while schools were closed was simply “meeting equity and special needs requirements.” Another superintendent wrote their biggest challenge was “working remotely with an autistic child who does much better with one-on-one face-to-face instruction.”

Teachers expressed similar frustrations with supporting students with special needs. One teacher wrote, “It was extremely difficult to teach students that have disabilities via Zoom. Many of my students are hands-on learners and I couldn’t give them what they needed to accomplish their assignments like I could have in person. It was extremely frustrating for everyone involved and I did have a handful of families that just gave up.” One teacher wrote, “Special education teachers had to take on a lot of extra work to meet the legal requirements of students’ IEPs, progress reports, amendments, review of existing data, etc.”

**Student Economic Insecurity.** One superintendent described student and family need to prioritize financial concerns that precluded students from engaging in schoolwork this way: “Our biggest obstacle now is, living in a very rural area, families had their kids working jobs outside of the home . . . during the closure. So many of our kids want to continue that and do schoolwork remotely on their own time to keep their jobs.” One teacher wrote, “Our students are all from families that are below poverty level. They did not have anything at home to support online learning.” Another teacher wrote, “I work in a high poverty area and limited support for learning at home is a big issue as well as food insecurity.”

**Inability to Engage and Motivate Students Remotely.** Principals’ open-ended responses indicated a decrease of student motivation and engagement in remote instruction, not only due to adjustment to a new mode of delivery but also related to how students were

able to demonstrate their progress. One principal wrote, “It’s hard for anyone (student or teacher) to stay motivated when education becomes a screen and grade on an app.” Another principal explained that “students’ expectations were lowered. Deadlines did not exist. Being able to take class pass/fail lessened student motivation. Attendance in Zoom meetings were not required and did not affect student grades.”

In their open-ended responses, teachers reported their concerns and frustrations regarding their inability to engage students in remote schoolwork. One teacher wrote, “In the classroom, I can easily engage students in the content and motivate them. This is difficult online.” Another teacher wrote, “We were left with zero guidance from administrators on how to engage students more if they were not participating in optional lessons.” A teacher explained, “I am not tech savvy. I do not know how to instruct students virtually.” Another put it succinctly, “Virtual learning and teaching is hard.” Other teachers described compounding challenges, “Learning new delivery methods, trying to motivate students to get work done when it wouldn’t affect their grade, getting students to get previous work done in order to pass the class, getting parents to help with all of these endeavors, was exhausting.” One teacher put it bluntly, “Student motivation is low and cheating is rampant.”

#### STRESS, COPING, AND PERSONAL CHALLENGES

**Stress.** Educators have stressful jobs, but stress levels were exacerbated as a result of COVID-19-related school closures. Educators were asked, *How stressful was your job before the coronavirus?* and *How stressful is/was your job during the coronavirus?* They rated their coping on a scale of one to five, with 1 indicating “not at all stressful” and 5 indicating “extremely stressful.” Only 27.9% of superintendents, 30.1% of principals, and 28.3% of teachers reported that prior to COVID-19, their job was moderately to extremely stressful. During the pandemic, educators’ job-related stress levels increased significantly, with close to 90% of superintendents (89.8%) and principals (86.8%) and more than two-thirds (67.5%) of teachers reporting moderate to extreme stress.

Superintendents’ and principals’ open-ended responses indicated their frustration with the schools’ closures and the new mode of instruction delivery. One superintendent wrote, “It is a huge mess and so stressful

to all families and teachers. The amount of work for the teachers is unfair. It is also unfair for the students.” One superintendent put it bluntly, “I am afraid we are going to lose good educators because it is becoming increasingly more difficult to be an educator.” One principal wrote, “Personal/professional stress for school administrators at this time is nearly unbearable.” Several principals mentioned experiencing stress due to inability to support staff and students. One wrote, “I’m just concerned that we’re not doing enough.”

Teachers reported high levels of stress and anxiety associated with teaching during the pandemic. “I have more stress and anxiety about the unknowns of the upcoming school year, constant change of plans by the district, and slow release of information.” One teacher wrote, “We dealt with a different stress before (related with how we educate our students, the unknown of their personal situation, not wanting them to fall behind, etc.). Now I deal with my safety as a teacher being exposed to the virus and bringing it to my home, my children, and where my husband is a high-risk patient.” One teacher put it this way: “I am terrified and stressed for the upcoming school year. I don’t know if it will be more stressful to be in the classroom or teaching from home. If there was any way we could financially afford for me to resign, I would have.”

**Coping.** Educators were asked, *How well are/were you coping with the stress of your job during the coronavirus-related school closure?* They rated their coping on a scale of one to five, with 1 indicating not at all well and 5 indicating extremely well. Over one-third of superintendents (38%) and principals (43.4%) and half of teachers (50.1%) reported coping “not at all well” to only “somewhat well.”

Educators expressed strong feelings regarding their abilities to cope with the stress related to changes in

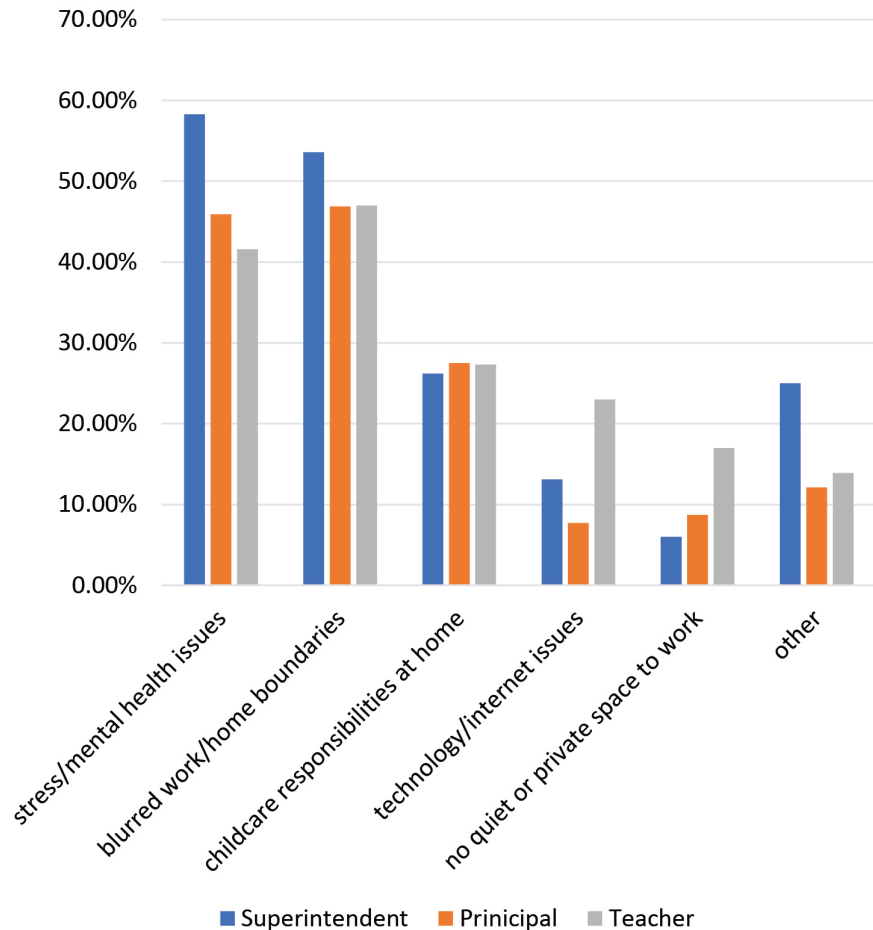


Fig. 3. Top three personal challenges with remote learning.

their job. One principal wrote, “I was worrying about everyone else and then my own body shut down from exhaustion.” Another principal described experiencing “mental, emotional, physical, and cognitive exhaustion from constantly being in problem-solving mode while maintaining regular duties.” One teacher wrote, “The COVID-19 pandemic has been difficult on my mental health. I haven’t had many opportunities to try new things due to the difficulties in coping and dealing with stress.” A significant number of teachers expressed concerns about finding mental health support during and after the remote learning, as illustrated by one teacher, “I think many teachers and others have needed and will need trauma-related counseling due to the effects of the pandemic and school closures.”

**Personal Challenges.** Educators were asked, *What were the top personal challenges you faced with remote learning processes?* They were instructed to select only their top three challenges. Over half of all superinten-



Table 2. Teachers' concerns about students' ability to complete assigned schoolwork

Response options	Elementary (%)	Secondary (%)	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
Student lack of motivation <sup>a,b</sup>	66.7	78.4	75.1	70.2
Family inability to help <sup>a</sup>	65.4	52.6	59.0%	58.8
Student mental and/or emotional health <sup>a</sup>	54.0	59.2	56.0%	57.3
Students with special needs	53.7	51.8	52.8	52.4
Lack of internet/computer access <sup>a,b</sup>	47.7	44.3	44.1	47.7
Student economic insecurity	40.4	37.8	35.9	42.2
Student food insecurity	40.7	31.6	32.2	39.7
Student safety at home	36.7	31.5	31.8	36.3
Lack of school supplies and materials	35.9	21.2	23.1	33.3
Students learning to speak English	30.3	21.0	18.5	31.7
Other	6.4	7.1	6.5	7.2
No concerns	0.9	1.1	1.3	0.8

<sup>a</sup>Indicates significant differences between elementary and secondary teacher ratings.

<sup>b</sup>Indicates significant differences between rural and urban teacher ratings.

dents (54%) and just under half of principals (47%) and teachers (47%) reported that blurred work/home boundaries and their own stress/mental health were among their top three personal challenges. See Figure 3 for the graph of personal concerns endorsed by educators.

The challenge of balancing work and home responsibilities was clearly expressed in participants' open-ended responses. One principal wrote, "My superintendent expected me to work in the building, leaving my eight-year-old daughter home alone." One teacher wrote, "The stress of working from home, while caring for four kids (ages 7, 3, 2, 1), was challenging. Making sure my first grader received the education she deserves, while also serving my students/families, and taking care of my younger three (who aren't independent) was extremely challenging. The seemingly constant meetings were so hard with my children around. . . . To say I was burned out by the end of May would be an understatement." Another teacher wrote, "It was very hard to keep getting negative feedback with little direction (because of the unknown) while continuing to pour our hearts and energy into our school families, leaving very little for our personal families." Several principals and teachers reported physical symptoms related to stress and anxiety, such as inability to sleep, and several reported their own mental health struggles impacted their ability to do their jobs. One teacher wrote, "It was a huge struggle with depression and anxiety. . . . We had parents and families struggling with their own mental health and I

felt completely useless because I couldn't help them because I was drowning at home myself?"

### *Group Differences*

The following section aims to answer RQ2: How did principals' and teachers' experiences vary by geographic locale (urban or rural) or grade level (elementary or secondary)?

#### DIFFERENCES BY GEOGRAPHIC LOCALE

**Principals.** There were no significant group differences between urban and rural principals in concerns about students' ability to complete schoolwork, levels of stress or coping during the pandemic, nor in the top personal challenges with remote learning processes.

**Teachers.** Lack of student motivation was rated as a top concern by rural teachers significantly more often than by urban teachers. Significantly more urban teachers reported lack of internet access as a top concern, compared to rural teachers (see Table 2). There were no group differences between urban and rural teachers in levels of stress or coping during the pandemic. No significant group differences were found between rural and urban teachers in the top personal challenges with remote learning processes (Table 3).

Table 3. Teachers' top personal challenges with remote learning processes

	Elementary (%)	Secondary (%)	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
Blurred work/home boundaries <sup>a</sup>	43.6	50.4	47.3	46.8
Stress and related mental health issues <sup>a</sup>	40.2	43.1	41.8	41.4
Childcare responsibilities at home	28.8	25.8	28.3	26.4

<sup>a</sup>Indicates significant differences between elementary and secondary teacher ratings.

Table 4. Teacher stress and coping mean ratings

	Elementary	Secondary	Rural	Urban
Stress <sup>a</sup>	3.89 (SD = 0.99)	3.79 (SD = 1.04)	3.81 (SD = 0.99)	3.86 (SD = 1.04)
Coping <sup>a</sup>	3.35 (SD = 0.91)	3.44 (SD = 0.98)	3.42 (SD = 0.93)	3.37 (SD = 0.96)

Note: Coping was rated on a scale of one to five, with 1 indicating not at all well and 5 indicating extremely well. Stress was rated on a scale of one to five, with 1 indicating not at all stressful and 5 indicating extremely stressful.

<sup>a</sup>Indicates significant differences between elementary and secondary teacher ratings.

#### DIFFERENCES BY GRADE LEVEL

**Principals.** Similar to the urban–rural comparisons, there were no significant group differences between elementary and secondary principals in concerns about student ability to complete schoolwork, levels of stress or coping during the pandemic, nor in the top personal challenges with remote learning processes.

**Teachers.** For teachers, lack of student motivation was rated as a top concern by secondary teachers significantly more often than by elementary teachers. Significantly more elementary teachers reported lack of internet access as a top concern, compared to secondary teachers. Significantly more secondary teachers reported student mental health as a top concern, but significantly more elementary teachers expressed concerns with limited family availability to support learning (see Table 2).

Elementary teachers reported significantly higher levels of stress and lower levels of coping during the pandemic than secondary teachers (Table 4). Significant differences were found in the top three personal challenges during the pandemic (see Table 3). Secondary teachers reported personal challenges with blurred work/home boundaries and stress/mental health challenges significantly more often than elementary teachers as a top challenge.

#### Conclusions

As educators continue to grapple with pandemic-related challenges that evolve as virus infection rates

rise and fall, it is important not to lose sight of the unique experiences across phases of the pandemic, including those associated with early school closures prompting a host of effects that continue to cumulate over time. This study aimed to capture the real-time experiences of Nebraska educators in the wake of unprecedented school closures.

The results indicate superintendents, principals, and teachers identified lack of family help and inability to engage students as top concerns about engagement with remote work and student academic progress. Principals and teachers also noted lack of student motivation as an additional top concern regarding student academic progress.

Despite different job duties and responsibilities, superintendents, principals, and teachers alike all reported dramatic increases in stress during school closures, and many reported coping “only somewhat well” or worse. Educators also reported personal challenges with remote instruction including mental health issues and blurred work/home life boundaries. Direct quotes from the participants vividly describe their lived experiences during the initial phase of the pandemic.

Significant differences between rural and urban educators as well as elementary and secondary educators were found in several of their responses. For example, urban teachers were more likely to report lack of internet access as a top concern, while rural teachers were more likely to report lack of student motivation as a top concern. Findings regarding internet access may appear to contrast with demonstrated preexisting disparities for internet access in rural communities (Curtis et al. 2021; Graves et al. 2021). It could be that low-income

households in urban areas did not have access to reliable internet. It could also be that rural communities, acknowledging existing disparities, may have engaged in more “low-tech” distance learning options such as paper packets and television programming (Suarez-Lopez et al. 2021). Further, potential differences in distance learning options may partially contribute to observed differences in teacher-rated concerns regarding student motivation in our sample, as “low-tech” distance learning may be less motivating for students compared to more integrative online distance learning options (Suarez-Lopez et al. 2021). It could also be that given higher rates of behavior concerns in rural communities, rural teachers had more difficulty engaging students in remote work. Additionally, the pandemic may have exacerbated preexisting differences in teacher job stress (Antoniou, Ploumi, and Ntalla 2013) and student motivation (Gillet, Vallerand, and Lafrenière 2012) in elementary and secondary school contexts.

Taken together, the results support and extend other research on the effects of COVID-19 on education. Teachers have reported communication as the most challenging aspect of teaching online (Midcalf and Boatwright 2020), while parents reported lack of time and skill to support their child’s learning at home (Otero-Mayer et al. 2020). The results of this study indicate that Nebraska educators were concerned about parents’ inability to help their children with remote learning. Teachers also felt ill-prepared and under-supported to motivate their students to learn remotely. Recent reports of teacher shortages and educator job-related stress (Jensen 2022) suggest that the problems experienced by educators early in the pandemic have not yet been resolved.

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

This study is not without limitations. The survey used to collect data was developed by the authors without piloting it prior to the study. Future studies may examine other tools used to capture educator experiences during the pandemic to provide additional relevant information. Similarly, the responses to the open-ended survey items yielded a rich dataset that could be further analyzed in future studies. The current study was conducted early in the pandemic when all schools in Nebraska were closed. Nearly all Nebraska schools reopened in some capacity in the fall of 2020, and this study does not capture the experiences of in-person or hybrid instruction. Future studies may provide a better understanding

of the unique experiences of subsequent phases of the pandemic as well as compounding stress over the different phases of the pandemic from initial shutdown to ongoing risk due to variants (Nabe-Nielsen et al. 2021; Wilson et al. 2022). Also, during the initial school closures Nebraska schools adopted several different approaches to remote learning. Some offered different amounts of synchronous instruction via distance technology, some offered only recorded lessons, and others offered paper lessons with limited instruction. The current study did not investigate differences in educators’ experiences based on type of remote instruction delivered. Future studies may delve into the different methods of instruction during the initial school closures.

Educators’ experiences in Great Plains communities with relatively low population density may be unique relative to the experiences of those in other areas of the US and internationally. Future research may compare and contrast regional experiences during initial school closures and ongoing pandemic challenges to gain a more complete understanding of its impacts on educators from a variety of geographical contexts.

Furthermore, the initial pandemic-related school closures resulted in unprecedented ways of delivering education and impacts on the education system as a whole. Future studies may investigate postpandemic increases in remote instruction as an alternative to school closures due to weather-related incidents (e.g., “snow days”) and other events that previously resulted in canceled instruction. Future investigation into the long-term impacts on home-school relationships (e.g., teacher-parent trust) and teacher-administrator relationships may be warranted.

#### *Implications for Practice and Policy*

This study revealed the extreme pressure educators were under and the resulting job-related stress due to the initial school closures from the COVID-19 pandemic. Direct quotes from educators describe how job stress caused them to consider resigning from their positions. The teacher shortage, recognized by federal agencies prior to the pandemic, has only worsened (Nebraska Department of Education 2021). In order to retain current teachers and attract new teachers to the field, policymakers should strive to reduce overall educator job-related stress and to promote healthy work-life balance for all educators. School systems and policymakers may also apply lessons learned during

the initial pandemic closures to prepare for future crises. Working to identify multiple channels for two-way home-school communication, advocating for universal access to high-speed internet, and developing student and family engagement practices would not only contribute to education under routine conditions but may also prevent hardship in future times of crisis. In addition, given the current study's findings of group differences based on urban-rural and elementary-secondary contexts, policymakers should consider a tailored approach to address the unique needs of educators and families in different contexts.

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