A Snapshot of How New Jersey's Working Parents Managed Work, School, and Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented challenges for families, impacting the economic, psychological, and social well-being of parents and their children since the first cases of the virus were reported in the United States in March 2020. The brunt of these effects has been felt by the nation's working parents, who were tasked with supervising the virtual schooling of their children while also telecommuting, reporting to their jobs as essential personnel, and in some instances, looking for new work. The U.S Census Bureau estimates that in 2021, at least one parent was employed in 89.1% of families with children in the United States.

In New Jersey, one of the states hit hardest by COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths, school district governing bodies were given general autonomy to determine the best course of action for reopening schools. Tasked with providing effective educational experiences commensurate with government rules and guidelines, and also confronted by staffing problems, personal protective equipment supply chain shortages, and the uncertainty of the progression of the pandemic, a hybrid or virtual schooling model was the default for the state's school districts during the 2020-21 school year.

In March 2022, researchers at the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey sought to document the experiences of working parents/guardians during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, and the challenges they faced in trying to balance their work lives and the schooling of their children. The Heldrich Center partnered with the New Jersey Parent Teacher Association (NJPTA) to conduct 10 in-depth qualitative interviews of working parents of elementary school children (kindergarten through fifth grade) to better understand the firsthand experience of working parents of school-age children during the pandemic.

This brief describes the experiences of these working parents and their opinions of the policies and supports offered by their employers and school districts. The goal of this effort was to document how the pandemic affected New Jersey households socially, psychologically, and economically, and describe the ways employers and local education boards adapted their policies to accommodate, or not accommodate, the plight of parents working and schooling during a challenging and unprecedented time. This brief is not intended to be a comprehensive assessment on the subject, but as a piece of a larger puzzle toward understanding a working parent's experience during, and in the immediate aftermath, of COVID-19 and how worker-centric employment policies, and family-centric education policies, contribute to more positive outcomes overall for workers, their families, and employers in the future.

Findings

"Same Storm, Different Boat"

"I'll go back to [a] place that was a little dark," a working mother told us. "It was a nightmare. I hope it never ever ever ever happens again."

The irony of the pandemic's impact on the working parents of public-school students in New Jersey was that, while all families were living through the same pandemic reality, each family's experience was unique. The interviews demonstrated that working parents who were afforded one or more of the following favorable personal and professional circumstances seemed to fare better than others:

- The **ability to work a flexible schedule, including evenings, early mornings, and weekends**, other than the typical 9 to 5 workday, compared to parents who were expected to report to the office regularly during weekday business hours.
- Worked in their job for some indiscriminate amount of time, so that **they had developed a rapport with their immediate supervisor**, team members, supervisors, and workplace culture, especially the ability to feel comfortable communicating about their family's situation and asking for help when needed, compared to parents who were newer in their positions.
- **Worked remotely prior to the pandemic, having developed a routine for doing so** and especially having a set of expectations for productivity to rely on, compared to parents who started working remotely because of the pandemic. Where work was already hybrid prior to the pandemic, managers were "understanding and supportive."
- **A child or children without special medical, developmental, psychological, or other learning needs**, compared to parents who had a child or children with special needs that were managed prior to the pandemic or realized during the pandemic.
- **An older child or older children (i.e., upper elementary age) who were able to self-direct** to a reasonable extent while in virtual schooling and had some experience using computer technology, and understanding expectations when it came to school, compared to younger children, especially kindergarteners.
- **An only child, with one set of schooling, extracurricular, psychological, and physical needs to manage**, compared to having multiple children with distinct and sometimes conflicting needs (i.e., one child preferred virtual schooling, while the other child was unable or did not want to use technology to attend school).
- **A live-in partner who was able to supervise schooling or care for children** because their work schedule was flexible.
- **A family member living nearby**, not living in the family household, who could care for children while the parent reported to work.
- **Families that had the ability to pay for extracurricular activities that were available in the area**, such as sports and dance classes, for their children.
- **The ability to hire a tutor/caregiver to assist with schoolwork** if work hours were inflexible.

How They Coped: Parents Worked, Supervised Schooling, and…

Working parents took drastic measures to deal with the challenges brought on by the pandemic. They:

- **Relinquished or postponed opportunities for advancement** because they knew it wasn't the time in their professional career to be promoted, or because shifting priorities, deadlines, work hours, and expectations affected the ability to advance, or even the perception that they could advance.

- **Contended with job security concerns**, such as refusing to attend a "mandatory" out-of-state conference and dealing with pushback from management. "There was a hint of – if you don't go, we might have to talk about your job going forward," a nonprofit manager said. As an immunocompromised individual, "I stood my ground and made sure they knew my position."
- **No longer used older family members for caregiving while working**, whether the parent was working in person or working remotely but needed help with virtual schooling.
- **Searched for, hired, and fired multiple sitters/ caregivers** who would fit the family's situation when it came to their children's schooling needs.
- Used older family members for caregiving while working, **thereby risking family members' exposure to the virus**, because hiring outside help was not possible or not successful.
- **Took time off from work** – paid or unpaid leave – to supervise virtual schooling.
- **Moved out of state** to a school district that planned to have in-person instruction.
- **Declined hybrid schooling**; children attended 100% virtual due to hybrid schooling not being conducive to work schedules or one child feeling more comfortable participating in schooling from home.
- **Organized reading groups, show-and-tell sessions, and bedroom tours with other parents** to provide opportunities for social interaction when the district did not provide any.

Voices of Working Parents: Employer Experiences

When it came to work schedules and expectations, parents distinguished between their immediate supervisors and upper management. In some workplaces, working parents reported positive, benevolent relationships with their managers and teams that they collaborated with on a daily basis for some time. One working parent shared, "Everyone kind of knew everybody's situation. It was kind of one of those things where you 'do what you need to do.' We all knew we would eventually get the work done."

One working parent said that her manager "having an open dialogue" with colleagues and attempting to "make [the situation] equitable for all" was built on trust, empathy, and clearly defined expectations. "I still had benchmarks to hit, I still had a lot of pressure to succeed in the budget we had," the parent said. But **"letting the results speak for themselves,"** no matter when the work was done, was the expectation. Job tenure was also an important circumstance, as one parent indicated that "they trusted [her] opinion to navigate because I had been there for a while." Another working parent said her "boss was really understanding and very supportive." While it was still hard to concentrate and productivity suffered, she said that she "[gave] credit to [her] company…[making sure because it's hard to hire people right now] they want to try and keep us as best as they can and support us." Even so, this parent said she thought on some particularly challenging days, as she had to support her children who were learning virtually, **"What are they paying me for? I'm not doing anything today."** These mostly empathetic relationships between supervisor and subordinate were rooted in whether the manager and/or other team members themselves had children, whether youth or even adults, and if the team had worked remotely prior to the pandemic.

For other working parents, it was difficult to reconcile the values of their immediate supervisors with the performance expectations of upper management. This was especially challenging during the height of the pandemic, when children attended school virtually, but was also true at the time of the interviews in spring/summer 2022:

> *"My direct supervisor was very flexible when I was online and what I had to step away to deal with things. The higher level of management was still very much – we have to get this work done."*

One working mother expressed concern about the need to work remotely in the future, especially because expectations and policies were not yet defined:

> *"Before the pandemic, our company CEO was against working from home. But now, pivoting back to the office, there are still issues with COVID. Now – [they] want people in [the] office. It's interesting because what they're trying to implement doesn't match the reality of the situation because we are still essentially in a pandemic. We're not sure what direction they're going to take with this."*

According to another parent, her company's desire to remain in person was frustrating and perplexing – she spent all of her day on a computer as a restaurant group's marketing director, and had to report to the office on a consistent five-day, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. basis – "old school values" was how she labelled it. She says it was her opinion that she could have worked from home, saving her the worry of exposing an older family member to the virus in order to care for her child, and giving her the flexibility she needs as a parent. The small scale of the office, with less than 10 employees working from the space, was not suited for social distancing; however, working from home was not an option.

Work hours were shifted for nearly all working parents who were not reporting to an office – flexible work, especially on-the-clock hours shifting to early mornings and evenings, was a benefit that parents utilized. While flexible work hours relieved some of the overlap between schooling and working experienced day in and day out, it also meant that working parents were "working" (doing their job and managing their household) non-stop:

> *"...it meant for a lot of people, myself included, a lot of us were working evenings because we had to do what we needed to do with our families during the day."*

> ***"When I tell you I worked 24/7...you never got that break to take a minute and not have the kids in your hair when you're working from home**. Until my husband got home, I would hold my breath if I had a client scheduled and he was late coming home from work."*

For some working parents, the circumstances were dire, especially because of the nature of a business needing to be in person to deliver services. For at least one working parent, this led to thoughts about quitting:

> *"...one time, I used to think, do I need to quit this because it's too much? Like you know? Because at one time it used to be so tough to kind of deal with the actual home and making sure they are fed on time and jugging between everything, you know? There was a time I felt, if I'm not able to handle both, it's going to be tough."*

This parent ended up taking paid leave to spend the time she needed at home, supervising her children's virtual learning and managing her home responsibilities. For another working parent, the situation created **"decision fatigue from the minute you woke till the minute you went to bed and then you woke up and it started all over again."**

A therapist interviewed for this project maintained patient confidentiality by locking her bedroom door while her children were schooling virtually, and even in the evenings and early mornings, telling researchers that she is:

> *"holding [my] breath from that trauma of the past stress of being on that gerbil wheel, and waiting for the shoe to drop and trying to figure out how to navigate everyone's schedule again and everyone's needs while working at home so I'm accessible to everyone."*

Voices of Working Parents: School District Experiences

Most of the working parents interviewed for this project were appreciative of the efforts of the teachers who supported their children, while also dissatisfied with some of the school districts' attempts to deal with the difficult challenges brought on by the pandemic, including inconsistencies in applying COVID-19 policies and procedures across schools, such as scheduling in-person events, which led to cries about unfairness within the district; chaotic and last-minute decision-making to open or close schools due to rising case counts or simply poor planning; implementing hybrid schedules that made it impossible for parents to report to work or work at all; and a lack of creativity in encouraging social interaction, whether virtually or outdoors, even when parents, and parent groups such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), contacted leadership to request these opportunities during the 2020–21 school year.

One parent described their children's disappointment and sadness at waking up to attend in-person school only to find out that school had been cancelled due to rising case counts. Parents found it "very frustrating" because they were unable to call out of work or rearrange meetings at the last minute. They also had to deal with the mental toll of their children looking forward to attending school, but being told to stay home. In fact, hybrid schooling was cancelled more than what was expected.

"Schools say they have working families in mind. From where I sit, it doesn't seem like they take into consideration [us] working parents," shared an IT financial services project manager who has a child with a Section 504 plan and a partner who was activated in the National Guard during the pandemic. Half days, professional development days, delayed openings, before-care needs, and unused snow days are all problematic for working parents before and throughout the pandemic. It was "hard to understand the thought process" of the school district and how its decisions were affecting working families.

Once hybrid schedules became a reality, some found them unfeasible. A half day of instruction, with drop-off at 8:45 a.m. and pickup at 11:00 a.m., with no after care or other child care, was not conducive during normal business day operations. "The hybrid schedule did not work for working parents," said one parent who opted to keep their child home for the entire 2020-21 school year, even though they were aware of how important socialization was to their child. Schools had learning pods or centers that children could attend while parents worked, but parents were paying for these services and children had more trouble paying attention in those facilities than at home. The interviewees wondered: Why would schools be able to have these pods/centers but not in-person instruction? In some cases, this care was as expensive as a full-time day care center. One parent indicated, "I thought I was done with that." One participant indicated that she knew of fellow working parents who needed to report to work, but couldn't afford child care. The parent said, **"I literally, am still trying to figure out what people did who didn't have the financial resources to do that. Because I don't know how they survived. It blows my mind."**

In many cases, some parents, school groups, and school districts worked to improve situations for families. For example, a parent who works as a county health educator said that their school district **"reached out to [parents] to try to help spread the word to identify – are there parents who are working who are going to have an issue being with their child?"** This school district in northern New Jersey hired an external vendor to run an aftercare program for families who needed it. "They did a really good job of communicating and trying to anticipate the needs of the community," this parent reported, saying that she believes the smaller size of the district was the reason the administration "stood out in being innovative." This school district asked working parents to assist their peers with forming learning pods during virtual schooling. Parents and staff were invited to virtual committees to share ideas about safety, social and emotional needs, and curriculum. The PTA in several districts tried to bridge the gap between the school and working families, including creating virtual meet-ups via Zoom for parents to socialize, exchange ideas, and vent.

Parents who thought outdoor activities were possible, but whose school district leadership either never responded to their requests or denied them, perceived this as a lack of effort on the part of the school district administration. One parent said, "There definitely could have been some more thought…so people didn't have to be so isolated." A working parent in a large school district said:

> ***"There's a lot of resources if you get creative**. And there was no creativity. And that I think was very frustrating to the community. We were offering solutions, not just saying we need a solution, but we were trying to help collaborate and make solutions as working parents and it was like no, we got this we got this and it didn't. And a lot of the kids suffered because of it, whether it was because they didn't attend online because the parent had to go to work, or the special [education] population."*

Parents heard about things to encourage social interaction were being worked on, but they never happened. One parent said, "There are ways that we can still function and learn – get tents, do something."

A Learning Experience: Promising Lessons

Interviewees were in agreement that the pandemic brought about some positive impacts for themselves as working professionals, for their children, in their schools, and for their families as a whole, including:

- **An outpouring of positive affirmations for school staff**, including teachers, substitute teachers, and front office personnel.
- **Children learned flexibility and resiliency**, and to become more patient when dealing with real-life situations that did not just affect themselves or their households, but their communities.

- **PTA meetings, back-to-school nights, and other parental involvement opportunities were more frequently held online**, allowing working parents to participate, get informed, and learn about what's going on in the school without rushing home from work, or finding child care. Participants expected (and hope) this will continue.
- **Married partners worked together more**, exposing one another to their responsibilities at work and at home. The pressure to manage work and family responsibilities was no longer just on the mother "[making] it more comfortable for all of us as a family," one participant expressed.
- For some working parents, **the pandemic eliminated commuting, thereby "adding" time to the day**. "I don't think people were aware that you could be successful outside of 9 to 5," said one working parent. "I think that proved to people that if I eliminate the 2.5-hour commute to the city, I'm very productive at 7 in the morning and I'm very productive at 7 at night."
- **Empathy and support for families** between managers/supervisors and workers became more apparent than ever, and in some cases, workers expect will continue after the pandemic.
- **Parents spent more time at home**, collaborating with children on their schoolwork, discussing social situations, and connecting virtually with teachers and staff, compared to prior to the pandemic.
- A few working families **changed their spending habits** in order to save more and spend less, and intend to continue to do so after the pandemic.
- One working parent **found she was even more productive than she thought she could be**. She said:

  "I feel like I had a lot less time during that year to focus on certain tasks so it helped me focus in smaller windows, I guess, and just be able to get things done a lot more quickly – but focus in these little areas and get them done so it feels like it frees up time to do some of the other things, even work-related things. Things seem easier now, after it was so hard."

Where Are We Now? Where Are We Going?

Flexibility and trust for working parents pay dividends for productivity and commitment to the job. Despite the recent relaxation of COVID-19 guidance, parents expressed that even so, flexibility from their employers to manage home and school will still be needed in the future. Circumstances that necessitate this flexibility are a near constant for parents who are working. Yet, the reality of how flexibility manifests is unique to each employer, manager, and worker—the needs of the company, the work to be done, and the family. One working parent, who needed to report to the office regularly despite believing her job could be done remotely, indicated that she still tries not to "overuse" her flexibility for her daughter's school events and sicknesses—flexibility that is not necessarily counted by a number of earned or given days or hours, but is instead an unstructured but available "benefit" she can take advantage of when she needs it. Trust between the employer (immediate manager or supervisor) and the employee—to take the time needed to deal with family responsibilities while also getting the job done—is key for working parents. The parents who participated in this study indicated that they need the expectation of flexibility and support for their family responsibilities, but were also aware of the importance of communicating with their employer, and their responsibility to still "get the job done." One parent said that simply being accessible to her manager/supervisor was essential to make flexibility work: "My direct supervisor is pretty flexible. If there's a reason I need to be working from home, to deal with my kid or an appointment, he's generally okay as long as he can reach me."

The employer's "toolkit" of ways to help working parents—flexibility, trust, and clear communication of performance expectations agreed upon by immediate supervisors and upper-level management—will lead to hard work, job satisfaction, and employee retention. One parent shared:

> *"There's never enough time in the day. I think for employers to really know that makes a huge impact and…if their employee is less stressed and if their family and work balance is in check, it makes for a more productive employee. They're going to do more than what's expected and be in a better mind-set."*

School districts had the impossible task of prioritizing the safety and well-being of school communities. Going forward, districts should consider adopting clear and comprehensive standards for when and how virtual learning is implemented, and communicate those criteria to parents. The PTA was a lifeline for working parents during the pandemic, and should be an invited participant when collaboration and brainstorming for solutions to a district-wide problem or situation is needed, especially when it comes to representing the voices of working parents. Virtual opportunities—conferences, informal get-togethers, and meetings—are vital to working parents who may work in the evenings, or for workers who have some flexibility but choose to use it only when absolutely essential.

With New Jersey families beginning a new school year, this snapshot of stories of how working parents coped during the pandemic, and what helped them in a time of crisis, is worth telling. The delicate work-life balance that working parents walk daily is not new. Flexibility-driven policies in the workplace helping employees manage their home responsibilities, and schools recognizing parents' limitations and prioritizing communication and collaboration were needed during the pandemic, benefitting working parents; both were necessary to support the mental health and resilience of parents and their families during an extraordinarily challenging time. But according to working parents, these needs will not disappear when the world's public health emergency ends. It is important to periodically revisit workforce and school policies to understand and endeavor to accommodate the changing needs of working parents, educate leaders in school districts and workplaces about how needs for flexibility and adaptation manifest, and recognize that a "person-centered" approach to academic life and employment policies is essential. Ultimately, while working parents may each be floating in a "different boat," of unique social, psychological, and economic circumstances, weathering the storm—hoping to thrive as working parents—remains the same.

Profile of Participating Parents

In order to protect the identities of the study participants, details about their employment situations and their socioeconomic demographics are presented generally, and in the aggregate. Participants reported working in companies/organizations of various sizes (100 to 149 employees was the most common), and have various working arrangements at their jobs, including the opportunity to work 100% of the time remotely or from home, having a hybrid schedule, and where they are mandated to fully work in person or in the office. A majority of the participants are salaried workers; one reported being self-employed, and two reported that their pay is hourly. Interviewees represent a mix of entry-level, above entry-level without supervisory responsibilities, and mid-level manager positions at their companies/organizations. The 10 interviews included parents working full- or part-time hours (the majority were full time). The list below shows the type of the interview respondents' jobs/companies, and their current work schedules. All interview respondents have children enrolled in public school districts throughout New Jersey.

1. Employee in a small-scale construction management company, hybrid schedule.
2. Therapist, went from working in a company to opening own private practice during pandemic, 100% remote.
3. Employee in the medical field, in-person schedule and able to work remotely if necessary.
4. Self-employed hair stylist/salon owner, 100% in-person per the needs of the job.
5. Marketing director for small-scale restaurant group, 100% in-person schedule.
6. Medical device manufacturing engineer, 100% remote.
7. IT financial services project manager, hybrid schedule.
8. County health educator, hybrid schedule.
9. Substitute teacher in a public school district, 100% in-person.
10. Director of fundraising and events at a nonprofit, hybrid schedule.

The working parents were between the ages of 35 and 49. Two indicated that their total annual household income was between $60,000 and $99,999; three earn between $100,000 and $149,999 annually, and five indicated that their total household income was $150,000 or more. Most interviewees said that another adult in the household was employed/responsible for helping to make ends meet, and a majority have two or more children under the age of 18 living in their household. At least one parent indicated that they had started a new job during the pandemic; most reported working at their company for at least some time prior to March 2020.

Interviewees live, and have children attending public school, in the following New Jersey counties: Camden, Essex, Middlesex, Monmouth, Sussex, and Union. All of the interviewees indicated that their school districts offered hybrid schooling at some point during the 2020–21 school year, although specifics varied widely across school districts. More than half of the interviewees indicated that they have a child in their household with an Individualized Education Plan and/or Section 504 plan, uses language services, is in the Gifted and Talented program, or requires some other special need or service from the school district. Most of the interviewees indicated they were involved with the PTA in their district in some fashion – whether serving on the board or on a committee of their respective school at the time of the study or before the study (see methodology section for more information).

Methodology and Limitations

The Heldrich Center partnered with NJPTA to contact parents of public-school children in New Jersey using the association's e-mail lists. An online survey asked interested parents eligibility questions and offered an incentive for participation in the interviews. Respondents who qualified for the study were working parents of children enrolled in kindergarten through fifth grades in New Jersey public schools. The goal of qualitative research is to explain and describe the details of societal reality – to discover perspectives, and to tell a story that may not be quantifiable in a survey or other quantitative research. This study is not intended to be generalizable to the population of working adults who have children enrolled in New Jersey public schools, as these parents do not necessarily represent the "average" working parent, given the sample composition and likely response bias to the invitation to be interviewed (as mentioned earlier, this study used NJPTA's e-mail list where subscribers tend to be mothers, and those who are interested in working with NJPTA or who serve on the PTA board). Cause and effect should not necessarily be inferred by these accounts, as the nuances of different jobs and situations are not all captured. Recall bias is possible, given that the participants were asked to reflect on events in 2020 and 2021. The qualitative study methodology, interview protocol, and recruitment materials were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University.

Further Reading

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About the Heldrich Center

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

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