

---

June 2021

## Preparation, Expectations, and External School Contexts: Navigating the COVID-19 School Closures

Samuel F. Fancera

*William Paterson University, fanceras@wpunj.edu*

Evan Saperstein

*William Paterson University, sapersteine@wpunj.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/joel>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Fancera, Samuel F. and Saperstein, Evan (2021) "Preparation, Expectations, and External School Contexts: Navigating the COVID-19 School Closures," *Journal of Organizational & Educational Leadership*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/joel/vol6/iss3/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Organizational & Educational Leadership by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@gardner-webb.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@gardner-webb.edu).

## **Introduction**

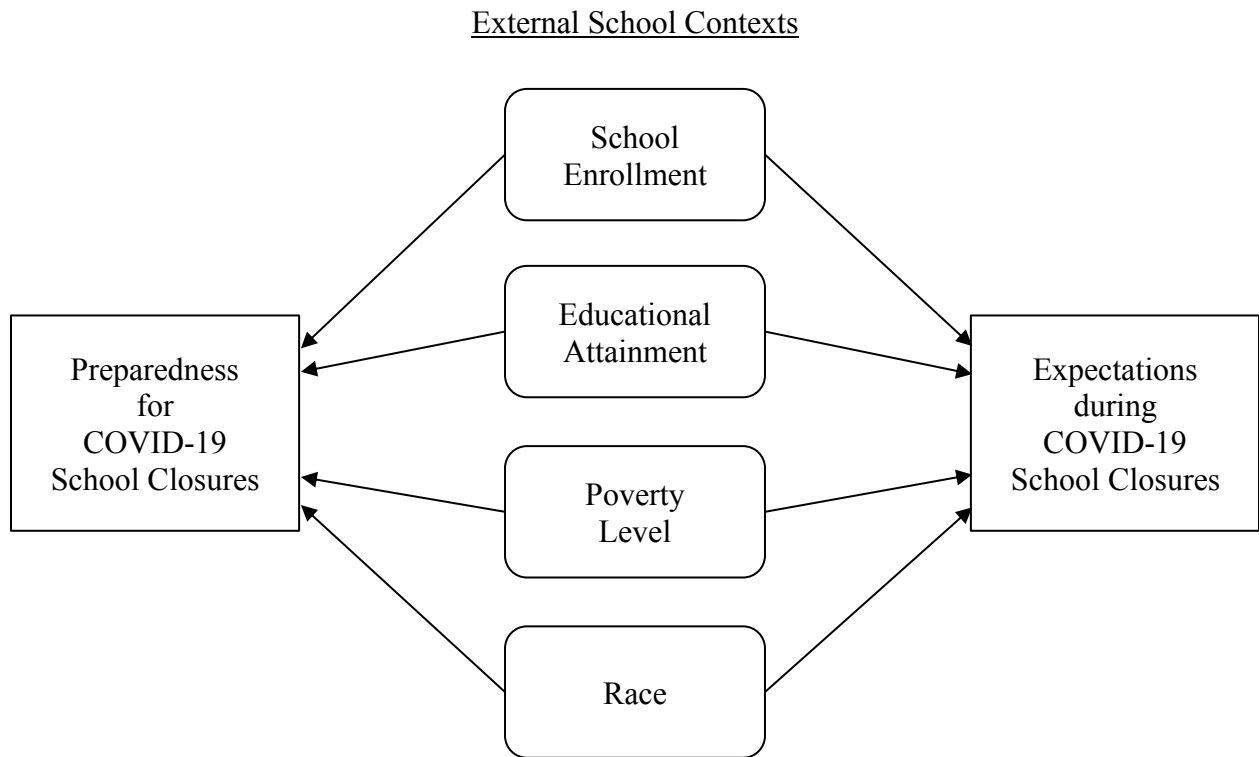
In this study, we examined how New Jersey (NJ) educators perceived the home instruction they provided to students during the COVID-19 pandemic using context-responsive leadership theory. Bredeson et al. (2011) defined context-responsive leadership theory as practical wisdom in action, which reveals a complex mix of knowledge, skills, and dispositions appropriately deployed by effective leaders as they engage in fluid conversations with dynamic situational variables. Context-responsive leadership is expressed through action, the way the leader behaves, not any one predisposed style consisting of de-contextualized qualities or leader actions. (p. 20)

Context literacy is important for successful school leadership practice, since it helps leaders determine how to apply their knowledge of specific leadership models and styles to improve educational outcomes (Hallinger, 2018). The context-responsive leadership literature is, however, limited in the amount of empirical research to further apply and develop this theory (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Klar et al., 2020). Scholars have studied the importance of context-responsive leadership for principals (Angelle, 2017; Khanal et al., 2019; Klar & Brewer, 2013, 2014; Klar et al., 2020; Okilwa & Barnett, 2018; Pashiardis et al., 2018; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016) and superintendents (Bredeson et al., 2011, 2009; Roegman, 2017) regarding general school improvement processes, as well as for building and district-level administrators to improve their data informed practices (Roegman et al., 2018). There is a dearth of research, however, regarding how school leaders use their context literacies to plan for urgent/emergent situations or develop instructional contingency plans, such as those adopted in response to the COVID-19 school closures. Therefore, our intent with this project was to fill this gap in the literature.

Figure 1 illustrates how we conceptualized context-responsive leadership in this study, which builds on the framework previously developed by Bredeson and Klar (2008). The unidirectional arrows indicate the external school contexts we examined in this study are related with NJ educators' perceptions of preparedness and expectations during the COVID-19 school closures. A review of the literature specific to external school contexts and school leadership follows.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework*



## **External School Contexts**

The context responsive leadership theory literature supports a wide-range of school contexts that might influence how school leaders practice their craft to improve educational outcomes. Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017) discussed situated, professional, material, and external contexts, but they concluded "there remain many distinctive environments which warrant closer academic attention because of their implications for the situated understanding and exercise of school leadership" (p. 179). Okilwa and Barnett (2018) examined societal level contexts, including cultural values, social and economic trends, governmental policies, and school level contexts. Hallinger (2018) identified six types of school contexts: institutional, community, sociocultural, political, economic, and school improvement. This wide-range of school contexts to positively influence teaching and learning suggests that "it is important to take context seriously in all aspects of education, including leadership at the school level" (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017, p. 172). Understanding context is important for all educators. However, the importance to school leaders appears paramount. Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2019) wrote, a school leader's main question should always be 'Under these conditions, what should I do?' Indeed, there is credible case to be made that the role of research is to identify forms of leadership that will be helpful across many different contexts and that the prime role of school leaders is to figure out how best to use that information as they craft their responses to their own unique contexts. (p. 6)

While Roegman (2017) discussed the importance of organizational, personal, and occupational contexts in schools, others have focused on the socioeconomic, educational, and family contexts (Pashiardis et al., 2018). Socioeconomic status (SES) is defined as "the social standing or class of an individual or group" (American Psychological Association, 2020). SES

can impact many areas, including health, career development, and education (American Psychological Association, 2020). For instance, low SES can cause physical and mental health issues (Morissey & Kinderman, 2020). At the same time, low SES may affect early career development, particularly when there are less opportunities to learn and fewer resources (Kay et al., 2017). Low SES also corresponds to educational outcomes, including academic achievement and behavior (Caro et al., 2009).

SES can be measured through multiple indicators, including educational attainment, poverty status, race, and school enrollment. Educational attainment relates to “the highest level of education that an individual has completed” and differs from “the level of schooling that an individual is attending” (United States Census Bureau (USCB), 2020b). To determine poverty status, the USCB (2020b) “uses a set of money thresholds that vary by family size and composition.” Additionally, the USCB (2020b) characterizes race as an individual’s self-identification with one or more of the following social groups: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or multiple races. Finally, school enrollment refers to students attending “regular school” to advance, for example, “towards an elementary school certificate” or a “high school diploma” (USCB, 2020b).

In addition to quality educators, school leadership plays a critical role in providing teaching and learning opportunities for students from various backgrounds (Leithwood et al., 2004). Effective school leaders in diverse school contexts tend to concentrate on: “building powerful forms of teaching and learning”; “creating strong communities in school”; “expanding the proportion of students’ social capital valued by the schools”; and “nurturing the development

of families' educational cultures" (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, pp. 6-7). In particular, context-sensitive leadership can enhance the overall school climate (Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2011).

Developing a clear and coherent vision is one way to promote school improvement. This vision is dependent upon not only open lines of communication, but also the external school context (Penlington et al., 2008). When school leaders are responsive to the external school context, they are more likely to achieve buy-in from teachers and students (Penlington et al., 2008). Building the leadership capacity of faculty and staff is another way to increase student learning in diverse school contexts (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). This particular strategy of supporting teachers, for instance, has been successful in many high-performing, high-poverty schools (Parrett & Barr, 2010). Initiating school reform and organizational change also can improve the professional learning community in different school environments (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). This includes developing a school culture, altering the school structure, encouraging collaboration, and managing the various educational stakeholders (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). As Leithwood and Riehl (2003) conclude, "While mastery of these basics provides no guarantee that a leader's work will be successful in a particular school context, lack of mastery likely guarantees failure" (p. 5). This reflects the importance of context-conscious school leaders fulfilling the needs of their school community (Rikkerink et al., 2016).

Overall, the purpose of this study was to examine educators' perceptions of preparation and expectations for teaching and learning during the COVID-19 school closures through the lens of context-responsive leadership theory. We developed the following research questions to guide this study:

RQ1: Are external school contexts, including school enrollment (SE), educational attainment

(EA), poverty status (PS), and race (R), related with preparations for the school closure plans caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: Are external school contexts, including SE, EA, PS, and R, related with educator expectations for teaching and learning during school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: How might school leaders use their external school context literacies to prepare instructional contingency plans that include meaningful teaching and learning opportunities for all students?

### **Methods**

During the winter months of 2019-2020, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) began to emerge as a serious threat to public health across the globe. On February 3, 2020, NJ Governor Phil Murphy established a COVID-19 taskforce to prepare for widespread infection of residents due to this virus (Murphy, 2020, February 3). In early March, the NJ Department of Health [DOH] began to issue guidance to public schools to help them plan and prepare for potential outbreaks of COVID-19 in local communities (NJDOH, 2020, March 2). Part of this initial guidance called on schools to cancel athletic and extracurricular activities to limit exposure while urging schools to plan for the possibility of extended closures.

On March 5, 2020, the NJ Department of Education [DOE] issued guidance to schools to prepare and plan for extended closures. The NJ Commissioner of Education informed schools that “any day in which students impacted by a public health-related closure have access to home instruction...will count as a day in which the board of education has provided public school facilities toward its compliance with the 180-day requirement” (Repollet, 2020, March 5). On

March 16, 2020, Governor Murphy announced the indefinite closure of all K-12 schools beginning March 18, 2020 (Murphy, 2020, March 16).

From the initial NJDOH notice to Governor Murphy's order, NJ schools only had 14 calendar days to prepare for the closures. Districts put their approved home instruction plans into action to provide students with access to uninterrupted instruction to ensure they progressed toward the 180-day requirement. What remains unclear, though, is how prepared educators were to deliver home instruction and whether educators perceived the teaching and learning during these closures as meaningful for students.

For this descriptive research, we used a mixed methods approach to answer the empirical and interpretive research questions developed for this study. We received approval from our Institutional Review Board for Human Subject Research prior to beginning this work. P-12 educators from NJ served as participants and provided the quantitative and qualitative data relative to educators' perceived levels of preparedness and expectations for teaching and learning during the COVID-19 school closures. We accessed publicly available quantitative data from the USCB for the county level external school context variables of interest included in the study's conceptual framework (USCB, 2020a). We aggregated participant responses to the county level, which enabled us to analyze their perceptions of preparedness and expectations for home instruction through the lens of context responsive leadership theory. We also examined how school leaders use their external school context literacies to prepare instructional contingency plans through open-ended questions. This qualitative data yielded key findings and provided further insight on the importance of external school context variables.



## **Participant Recruitment**

Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous. From June 1 through August 31, 2020, we recruited educators in NJ via Twitter and email to participate. We sent tweets to NJ school district Twitter accounts, as well as to NJ educators' individual Twitter accounts at irregular intervals throughout the recruitment period to ensure broad coverage. We emailed a unique group of educators every Wednesday throughout July and August 2020 using email addresses found on school websites. Throughout the recruitment period, we sent a total of 449 tweets and 4,015 emails to educators in each of NJ's 21 counties.

## **Data Collection**

Participation in this study was voluntary, and we ensured participant anonymity by using the survey hosting site Qualtrics. To collect the necessary data, in part, to answer the research questions we developed for this study, we developed a 32-item research instrument, which is included in Appendix A. Each participant provided responses to six demographic-type items, 21 Likert-type items related to levels of preparedness and expectations for teaching and learning during the school closures, and five open-ended items that allowed participants to reflect on their experiences of teaching and learning during this period. We received 553 responses to our 32-item research instrument. We collected NJ county level data for each external school context variable from the USCB website (USCB, 2020a).

## **Data Analysis**

Our unit of analysis for this research was the NJ county. We established the inclusion criterion at a minimum of 10 participants per county for a county to be included in the study's sample. We aggregated participants' responses to our 32-item instrument to the NJ county. We summed average item scores for all participants in a county to generate two county level

educator perception variables. The first, preparedness for home instruction, was the sum of the average scores for items seven through 16 in our instrument. The second, expectations for home instruction, was the sum of the average scores for items 17 through 27 in our instrument. To answer research questions one and two, we conducted a correlation analysis with the county level external school context and educator perception quantitative data. For research question three, we performed a thematic analysis of the educator perception qualitative data we collected from items 28 through 32 in our instrument. After conducting a preliminary exploratory analysis of the responses, we classified the data into codes, developed broad themes, and reported the principal findings through a narrative discussion of the NJ counties included in this study.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

We designed this study to examine NJ educators' perceptions of preparation and expectations for teaching and learning during the COVID-19 school closures through the lens of context-responsive leadership theory. Although the study's participants represented a convenience sample and provided the data required for us to answer our research questions, they do not represent the perspectives of all NJ educators during the school closures. Participant recruitment via Twitter and email may have influenced the sample, too, because those who regularly used Twitter for professional reasons may have been more likely to participate. The COVID-19 pandemic itself may have influenced educator participation in this study, because anecdotal reports indicated many educators began to experience survey-fatigue during the school closures. We did not refine and test the 32-item instrument we developed to collect data from the study's participants. Nevertheless, it provided us with the data required to answer our three research questions.

## **Results**

A total of 553 educators participated in this study. From this total, 334 participants indicated their NJ county of employment. We achieved the study's inclusion criterion of a minimum of 10 participants per county for 13 counties, and the sample includes 270 participants. Table 1 provides a description of our sample, as well as the preparedness and expectations scores we calculated using the data we collected from our instrument. One NJ county, Middlesex, is overrepresented in this sample. Table 2 includes a description of the external school context variables we examined for each NJ county included in the sample.

**Table 1**

*Description of study's sample*

NJ County	Number of Participants	Preparedness Score	Expectations Score
Atlantic	10	21.30	34.20
Bergen	12	23.58	33.00
Camden	11	24.18	33.82
Essex	17	23.47	34.31
Gloucester	11	22.07	34.00
Mercer	14	22.64	36.36
Middlesex	114	22.85	34.22
Monmouth	12	21.42	32.35
Morris	10	19.60	32.69
Passaic	18	21.40	33.20
Salem	11	18.09	32.82
Somerset	19	19.05	32.76
Union	11	20.63	32.89
<i>M</i>	20.77	21.56	33.59
<i>SD</i>	28.18	1.84	1.07

**Table 2**

*External school context variables*

NJ County	School Enroll	Ed. Attain	% Poverty	% White	% Black	% AI-AN	% Asian	% NH or PI	% Other Race
Atlantic	41573	18.2	12.9	68.5	16.6	0.7	9.6	0.2	8.6
Bergen	150923	30.9	6.9	73.3	7.2	0.7	18.0	0.2	3.8
Camden	84313	19.3	13.3	63.7	22.4	0.6	6.7	0.1	10.0
Essex	137069	21.2	15.2	42.7	41.1	0.5	6.5	0.2	11.6
Gloucester	48503	21.8	7.8	84.3	12.0	0.7	3.7	0.0	2.3
Mercer	57883	22.0	11.2	63.3	21.3	0.4	12.2	0.0	4.9
Middlesex	130757	26.6	8.3	58.9	11.6	0.6	25.7	0.1	6.6
Monmouth	103124	29.7	6.6	85.2	8.5	0.2	6.4	0.0	1.8
Morris	81991	31.7	4.5	84.0	4.5	0.5	11.7	0.1	2.0
Passaic	88989	19.9	13.6	64.4	12.7	0.5	6.0	0.2	18.9
Salem	10422	16.5	11.6	80.6	15.8	0.7	1.3	0.0	3.2
Somerset	57176	30.8	4.6	68.9	10.9	0.6	19.7	0.0	3.1
Union	95250	22.6	7.3	55.3	22.9	0.8	6.2	0.0	17.4
<i>M</i>	83690.2	23.9	9.5	68.7	16.0	0.6	10.3	0.1	7.2
<i>SD</i>	40698.8	5.32	3.6	12.7	9.5	0.2	7.0	0.1	5.8

In the following NJ counties, the participants mentioned certain challenges and student outcomes they observed during the transition from in-person to remote learning. In Atlantic County, the participants cited technology issues and insufficient time to fully meet the needs of their students, including special education students. Additionally, certain students lacked the motivation to learn, failed to complete assignments or participate, and did not attend class during school hours. Others did not receive support from their family.

In Bergen County, the participants felt that administrators did not provide enough support for teachers to use new online platforms and provide accommodations to special education students. Some students did not receive family support, attend class, complete work on their own, participate, or express interest in problem solving or learning new material. Others noted the difficulties of personalizing instruction, revising units, and finding a balance between school work and leisure time.

In Camden County, the participants mentioned the challenges of teaching remotely through a school device and the difficulty of learning new online programs with little support from administration. One participant questioned why administration “kept telling us that we had no idea what kids were experiencing” when “they never considered what staff were experiencing.” Others revealed that certain students, with little family support, did not attend class, complete homework, or participate. This, however, had little impact on their final grade.

In Essex County, the participants described the limitations of Google Meet and laptop issues they experienced. They noted that administration did not provide professional development, clear directions, or accountability for students. One participant explained the challenges of balancing teaching and parenting responsibilities, adding that “it was not fair that I needed to choose who to give my attention to” during the school day. Some students were not

engaged, willing to use Google Classroom, or complete their work. In addition, some parents were unresponsive and apathetic. The lack of personalized instruction also made it difficult to meet the needs of the special education students.

In Gloucester County, the participants commented on problems they experienced with technology (e.g., internet connection, not enough devices, issues with Zoom or Google Meet, preparing online lessons, creating thought-provoking digital assignments) and the lack of support from administration. Several students did not attend class, complete their own work, or collaborate in their assigned groups. One participant discussed the social and emotional impact on students, especially those that did “not have any parental support or had to work in order to help their unemployed families.”

In Mercer County, the participants mentioned internet connection issues and difficulties creating online lessons. Without adequate professional development, departmental collaboration, or strong leadership from administration, some participants experienced fatigue and sadness. Many students, especially at a younger age, had trouble focusing, engaging in class discussions, attending class, or submitting work at a reasonable hour. One participant concluded that those “with the ability to focus and handle online learning . . . should be set free to do so. . . . Students who need more focused, teacher infused learning might be the students who go to the classroom.”

In Middlesex County, the participants elaborated on the numerous issues that arose during remote learning. Teachers dealt with many technology-related challenges, including poor internet connection, issues with home computers, printers, or scanners, and trying to navigate multiple online platforms. Administration failed to provide teachers with enough preparation time (or include them in the planning process) to create meaningful assignments and revise

lesson plans. As a result, many students did not receive the same level of instruction. Since grades did not hold the same weight, various students refused to join the online class, submit work, participate in video meetings, or ask questions during the school day. Outside distractions at home (e.g., siblings, access to resources, no daily routine) and little support from parents, especially those working during the day, created further complications. Additionally, some students became disinterested and disconnected since they were unable to interact with their friends or experience interactive lessons. At the same time, teachers felt isolated and frustrated, as some balanced parenting and teaching responsibilities while others attempted to set up an adequate work space at home. They also struggled with meeting the needs of their special education and ESL students.

In Monmouth County, many participants felt unprepared since administration did not provide clear directions or guidelines. Nevertheless, teachers attempted to create challenging assessments and follow the curriculum. While some students did not attend Google Meet or listen to feedback, teachers still tried to communicate with parents, engage with students, and exhibit empathy. Some students, for instance, struggled socially and emotionally as they cared for siblings or worked full-time to assist their families.

In Morris County, the participants found it difficult to teach through a computer screen, as many students lost internet connection, struggled to learn new technology with little support from their parents, or faced outside distractions at home (e.g., dogs barking during Google Meet, younger siblings interrupting class, other electronic devices used during class). In one particular school district, the participant noted that the superintendent and director of curriculum and instruction did not provide adequate support or consistent communication. Although certain students did not attend class, complete assignments, or express interest in retaining new



concepts, many teachers still sought to provide meaningful and engaging lessons. Others, however, were not as flexible and willing to modify assignments for students with an individualized education program (IEP) or 504 plans.

In Passaic County, the participants experienced setbacks when incorporating new technology (e.g., students unfamiliar with online platforms, internet connection, and device issues). Some felt unprepared to use Google Classroom or Zoom. Others were unable to access files from school computers or find enough online resources and digital textbooks. Several students were not held accountable for missing class, failing to hand in assignments, and refusing to participate or respond to teacher emails. Some teachers also tried to provide more structure during the school day and help IEP students that required more assistance.

In Salem County, the participants discussed impediments to student learning, including technology issues. Many students, for instance, did not have internet access or a device to complete assignments, particularly impacting IEP students. As a consequence, teachers sent home instructional packets or asked students to use their phone. Despite their efforts, some parents and students did not respond to teachers. As one participant pointed out, “It is easier to ignore a teacher’s emails and calls than it is a teacher standing right next to the student.” Since administration failed to hold many students accountable, they did not attend online video meetings (some held part-time jobs), participate, or submit work. Certain teachers also struggled to balance parenting and teaching with grading or writing daily lesson plans.

In Somerset County, the participants explained the challenges of incorporating technology when students experienced internet connection issues while trying to learn new online platforms. One participant was critical of administration for their lack of support and communication, noting that teachers were only “one step ahead” of students. Many teachers, for

instance, felt overwhelmed by the new online platforms. They also struggled with creating new lesson plans while dealing with responsibilities at home. Others found it difficult to fully implement IEP and 504 plans as some students required individualized attention. Additionally, certain students did not attend online classes, participate, or respond to emails. Another participant concluded that virtual learning fails to provide students with the same feeling of purpose (social and emotional impact) as in-person learning.

In Union County, the participants tried to manage technology-related problems (e.g., internet connection, not enough devices, students unfamiliar with technology). One participant mentioned that during the first four weeks of remote learning, many teachers used instructional packets. After most students had access to a working device, teachers tried to regularly interact with their students while grading assignments and revising lesson plans. Many teachers, however, did not find administration to be helpful in preparing them to teach remotely or in holding students accountable. Several students did not attend class, engage with the material, or hand in assignments. Others dealt with outside distractions and little support from parents or school counselors. Overall, the participants felt that there was not enough of a support system in place to fulfill their daily responsibilities as educators.

### **Research Question One**

We developed this research question to determine whether external school contexts are related with preparations for the school closure plans caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 3 includes the correlation coefficients for all study variables. School enrollment was the sole external school context variable we examined that was related with this sample's perceptions of preparations for the school closures ( $r = .638, p < .05$ ). This positive, moderate correlation indicates that as school enrollment increases, educators' perceptions of preparedness for the

school closures increases. The coefficient of determination for this relationship ( $r^2 = .41$ ) suggests that 41% of the variance between the two variables is accounted for by the other variable. The other external school context variables we examined are unrelated with perceptions of preparation for the school closure plans.

**Table 3**

*Correlation matrix for study variables*

	School Enroll	Ed. Attain	% Poverty	% White	% Black	% AI-AN	% Asian	% NH or PI	% Other Race	Preparedness for home
Ed. Attain	.476	--								
% Poverty	-.072	-.834*	--							
% White	-.436	.297	-.532	--						
% Black or AA	.131	-.557*	.701*	-.796*	--					
% AI or AN	-.184	-.257	-.053	-.122	.072	--				
% Asian	.440	.621*	-.431	-.174	-.330	.043	--			
% NH or PI	.487	-.093	.477	-.374	.177	.022	.147	--		
% Other Race	.226	-.472	.534	-.689*	.490	.116	-.238	.396	--	
Preparedness for home	.638*	-.060	.385	-.444	.361	-.117	.177	.451	.207	--
Exp. during home inst.	-.071	-.391	.481	-.428	.456	-.065	.121	.061	.055	.507

\*statistical significance at  $p < .05$

### **Research Question Two**

We developed this research question to determine whether external school contexts are related with expectations for teaching and learning during the school closure plans caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 3 includes the correlation coefficients for all study variables. All of the external school context variables we examined are unrelated with educators' expectations for teaching and learning during the school closure plans.

### **Research Question Three**

We developed this research question to consider how school leaders may use their external school context literacies to prepare instructional contingency plans that include meaningful teaching and learning opportunities for all students. Each of the school context variables included in our conceptual framework are critical to provide effective and personalized leadership.

Certain school leaders learned from this experience by providing more direct guidelines and clear expectations, rather than a generic list of resources, on how to deliver content to students and lead virtual classes. Without state mandated guidelines, school districts benefited from district level leaders collaborating and sharing best practices and policies. This is especially helpful for leaders who work in a similar school context. Leaders also can continue to establish stricter consequences and emphasize student accountability for those not attending class, participating, or submitting work. Requiring uniform testing procedures and synchronous instruction has served as a good starting point.

Some school leaders used their external school context literacies to empower and listen to local educational stakeholders, including teachers and school counselors. Effective administrators teach faculty and staff how to lead and instruct students in their particular

community. Empowering teachers makes them feel included in the distance learning decision-making process. It is also vital to have reasonable expectations for each grade level and department to build cohesiveness and handle student issues. Some leaders, for instance, oversaw the creation of grade level teams, which focused on developing common daily activities with listed modifications when appropriate.

Several school leaders also tailored their leadership approach to fulfill the needs of a particular school district. This included working to fully fund schools. In certain cases, district leaders may need to apply for grants or funding to provide, at a minimum, basic resources for every student to learn virtually if necessary. Some school leaders successfully provided additional devices to underfunded districts for students living at a higher poverty level. In particular, they provided devices with updated online programs to families based on the number of enrolled students. They also helped families seeking internet access.

Various school leaders also opened the lines of communication among educational stakeholders to promote educational attainment. Many encouraged faculty and staff to be understanding and flexible for families working and not available during the day. Struggling students without family support benefit from having the opportunity to receive additional home instruction. Providing additional assistance to special education teachers is also critical to achieve equity for all students within the local population.

School leaders also improve teaching and learning when providing faculty and staff with enough time for mandatory training and professional development (e.g., technology, online curriculum design and development, culturally responsive practices). When students learn more about new online platforms from their teachers, the virtual classroom experience is enhanced. In

some cases, school leaders have even suggested that teachers use a consistent platform to create more continuity for students and families in need.

### **Summary of Results**

School enrollment is the sole external school context variable that we examined that is related with educators' perceptions of preparedness for the COVID-19 school closures in NJ. The external school context variables we examined are unrelated with educators' expectations for teaching and learning during this school closure. School leaders may improve teaching and learning during school closures when using their external school context literacies in certain situations.

### **Discussion**

We met our objective for this study, which was to examine NJ educators' perceptions of preparation and expectations for teaching and learning during the COVID-19 school closures through the lens of context-responsive leadership theory. The research evidence supports that context literacy is important for successful school leadership practice, allowing leaders to move beyond knowing what to do so they can improve educational outcomes in their schools (Hallinger, 2018). We were interested in uncovering this "practical wisdom in action" (Bredeson et al., 2011, p. 20) - context responsive leadership - to better understand how educators in NJ perceived the school closures that began in March 2020.

In our sample, educators reported they are more prepared to offer remote/virtual learning for their students during the school closures when they work in counties with larger school enrollments. We offer several explanations for this positive, moderate relationship between school enrollment at the county level and educators' preparedness score. First, larger school enrollments are typically associated with more personnel and opportunities for professional

growth and development. Perhaps educators from the NJ counties included in this sample are employed in schools and districts that have the capacity to offer professional development and learning opportunities that are technology focused. Therefore, participants believe they are more prepared to offer remote/virtual learning opportunities for their students.

Second, the number of educational leaders in a school and district is often tied to overall school enrollment. As enrollments increase, school leadership might be better staffed and equipped to establish procedures and programs that result in educators feeling more prepared to deliver remote/virtual learning opportunities. We are not suggesting our explanations for the relationship between school enrollment and perceptions of preparedness immediately preceded the COVID-19 school closures. Rather, the increased school enrollments in the counties in our sample likely enable school leaders to develop sustained professional growth and learning opportunities across several areas. This potentially leaves our study's participants feeling more prepared to deliver remote/virtual learning, or more specifically technology driven learning, to their students. It is likely that the school leaders in counties with larger school enrollments leverage the benefits often associated with this external school context to sustain growth, development, and preparedness across several categories, which leads to educators feeling more prepared to deliver remote/virtual learning. This finding illuminates a gap between larger and smaller school enrollments, which should help school leaders use this external school context literacy to better prepare their personnel for instructional contingency plans.

Although the external school context variables we examined are unrelated with participants' perceptions of expectations for teaching and learning during the school closures, we believe our quantitative findings regarding one external school context, poverty level, warrants some discussion. In Table 3, the correlation coefficient between poverty level (variable 3) and



expectation score (variable 11) is 0.481 ( $p = .09$ ). Although this correlation coefficient is not statistically significant, the positive association between these variables approaches moderate strength to indicate that as poverty level increases, so do educators' perceptions of expectations for teaching and learning during the school closures. This finding offers promise because it indicates our study participants have high expectations for teaching and learning for their economically disadvantaged students during the remote/virtual learning period. School leaders may use this external school context literacy to ensure that educators are aware of the expectations for teaching and learning for all students during remote/virtual instructional periods, or during other situations that require the implementation of instructional contingency plans.

The 12.4% response rate to our calls for participation in this study are aligned with those of other researchers who conducted education research using online instruments (Saleh & Bista, 2017). What was a greater concern to us was the percentage of participants who met the study's inclusion criterion. The sole inclusion criterion we established was a participant's response to indicate the NJ county of their employing school/district. We required this data from each participant to examine the sample's perceptions at the county level, but less than 50% of participants completed this item in our instrument. When we designed the research instrument for this study, we debated whether to ask participants to identify their employing school or district. This data would have permitted us to examine external school contexts at the school or district level. We decided, however, that participants were likely to be reluctant to report this information, so we opted to ask them to report their county of employment. Although we could not identify a participant's employing school/district with the county data we collected, the majority of participants were uncomfortable identifying the NJ county in which they worked.

Analysis of some of the qualitative data from these participants indicates their general sense of uneasiness during the COVID-19 school closures and displeasure with their level of preparation to facilitate remote/virtual instruction. This not only included professional development opportunities but also preparation time among colleagues to collaborate on best teaching practices. Additionally, many of the participants who did not reveal their county of employment expressed concerns with the lack of student accountability during this remote/virtual instructional period. Some of the participants also mentioned the challenges of providing remote/virtual instruction without state mandated guidelines from the DOE or clear directions from their school leaders. Other participants felt excluded and disillusioned by the inequities of the process that impacted students and families in certain districts. The sudden nature of the COVID-19 school closures in NJ created a great deal of apprehension for educators who preferred not to provide any identifying information.

### **Implications for Research**

Future work should build on the findings we reported in this paper, since additional research is needed to more clearly understand how school leaders use their external school context literacies to prepare instructional contingency plans. More specifically, research that explores external school contexts at the school or district level should help school leaders and other educators improve educational outcomes for all students. Future work at the school and/or district level of analysis that examines school enrollment and poverty level should benefit K-12 education practice.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study uncovered school enrollment as an external school context that is related with educator perceptions of preparedness for the COVID-19 school closures in NJ. This is an

important finding for school leadership practitioners as they prepare for instructional contingency plans. For school leaders with larger school enrollments, future practice should ensure they are leveraging all of their available resources to plan sustained growth, development, and learning opportunities while preparing teaching staff for instructional contingency plans. For school leaders with smaller school enrollments, this finding should help practitioners establish procedures and programs, albeit with fewer resources, to prepare teachers for instructional contingency plans.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides evidence for a positive relationship between one external school context variable, school enrollment, and NJ educators' perceptions of preparedness for the COVID-19 school closures. Knowledge of this relationship should help educators prepare instructional contingency plans during future school closures. External school context literacies also should help school leaders in the future provide meaningful opportunities for remote/virtual instruction. The lessons gleaned from participant responses across 13 NJ counties demonstrate the wide range of opinions regarding remote/virtual instruction and the importance of creating multiple approaches to account for the various school contexts within a particular state.

## References

- American Psychological Association. (2020). *Children, youth, families and socioeconomic status*. <https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/children-families>
- American Psychological Association. (2020). *Socioeconomic status*. <https://www.apa.org/topics/socioeconomic-status/>
- Angelle, P. S. (2017). Beliefs and behaviors of two high school principals in developing a sense of school community for students. *NASSP Bulletin*, 101(1), 5-22. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0192636517694957>
- Bredeson, P. V., & Klar, H. W. (2008). Context matters: Lessons learned from successful superintendents about preparation, practice, and professional development. In R. Papa (Ed.), *Leadership on the frontlines: Changes in preparation and practice Yearbook of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration* (p. 274–282). ProActive Publications.
- Bredeson, P. V., Klar, H. W., & Johansson, O. (2011). Context-responsive leadership: Examining Superintendent leadership in context. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 19 (18). <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/739>
- Bredeson, P. V., Klar, H. W., & Johansson, O. (2009). Superintendents as collaborative learners in communities of practice: A sociocultural perspective on professional learning. *Journal of School Public Relations*, 30(2), 128-149. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jspr.30.2.128>
- Caro, D. H., McDonald, J. T., & Willms, J. D. (2009). Socio-economic status and academic achievement trajectories from childhood to adolescence. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 32(3), 558-590.

Clarke, S. & O'Donoghue, T. (2017). Educational leadership and context: A rendering of an inseparable relationship. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 65(2), 167-182.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2016.1199772>

Hallinger, P. (2018). Bringing context out of the shadows of leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 46(1), 5-24.

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1741143216670652>

Kay, J. S., Shane, J., & Heckhausen, J. (2017). Youth's causal beliefs about success: Socioeconomic differences and prediction of early career development. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(10), 2169-2180.

Khanal, J, Perry, F., & Park, S-H. (2019). Leadership practices of principals of high-performing community high schools: Evidence from Nepal. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1741143219884076>

Klar, H. W. & Brewer, C. A. (2014). Successful leadership in a rural, high-poverty school: The case of County Line Middle School. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 52(4), 422-445.

Klar, H. W. & Brewer, C. A. (2013). Successful leadership in high-needs schools: An examination of core leadership practices enacted in challenging contexts. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 49(5), 768-808.

Klar, H. W., Moyi, P., Ylimaki, R. M., Hardie, S., Andreoli, P. M., Dou, J., Harrington, K., Roper, C., & Buskey, F. C. (2020). Getting off the list: Leadership, learning, and context in two rural, high-needs Schools. *Journal of School Leadership*, 30(1), 62–83.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684619867474>

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2019). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership and Management*,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>

Leithwood, K., & Riehl, C. (2003). *What we know about successful school leadership*.

[https://olms.cte.jhu.edu/olms2/data/ck/file/What\\_we\\_know\\_about\\_SchoolLeadership.pdf](https://olms.cte.jhu.edu/olms2/data/ck/file/What_we_know_about_SchoolLeadership.pdf)

Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. The Wallace Foundation.

Morrissey, K., & Kinderman, P. (2020). The impact of childhood socioeconomic status on depression and anxiety in adult life: Testing the accumulation, critical period and social mobility hypotheses. *SSM - Population Health*, 11, 1-8.

Murphy, P. D. (2020, February 3). Governor Murphy signs Executive Order establishing coronavirus task force.

<https://www.nj.gov/governor/news/news/562020/approved/20200203d.shtml>

Murphy, P. D. (2020, March 16). Governor Murphy announces aggressive social distancing measures to mitigate further spread of COVID-19 in New Jersey.

<https://www.nj.gov/governor/news/news/562020/20200316c.shtml>

New Jersey Department of Health. (2020, March 2). COVID-19 guidance for child care and K-12 schools.

[https://www.nj.gov/health/cd/documents/topics/NCOV/COVID19\\_schools\\_FINAL\\_updated\\_3.17.2020.pdf](https://www.nj.gov/health/cd/documents/topics/NCOV/COVID19_schools_FINAL_updated_3.17.2020.pdf)

Okilwa, N. S. & Barnett, B. G. (2018). Four successive school leaders' response to a high needs urban elementary school context. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 46(1), 45-85.

- Parrett, W. H., & Barr, R. (2010). *Twelve secrets of success: Proven interventions to increase student achievement of poor and minority students*. <https://csi.boisestate.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/NSBAApril2010.pdf>
- Pashiardis, P., Brauckmann, S., & Kafa, A. (2018). Let the context become your ally: school principalship in two cases from low performing schools in Cyprus. *School Leadership & Management*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1433652>
- Penlington, Kington, & Day (2008). Leadership in improving schools: A qualitative perspective. *School Leadership and Management*, 28(1), 65-82.
- Reed, L. C. & Swaminathan, R. (2016). An urban school leader's approach to school improvement: Toward contextually responsive leadership. *Urban Education*, 51(9), 1096-1125. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042085914553675>
- Repollet, L. O. (2020, March 5). Guidance regarding requirements for public health-related school closure. New Jersey Department of Education. <https://www.nj.gov/education/broadcasts/2020/mar/05/Guidance%20Regarding%20Requirements%20for%20Public%20Health-Related%20School%20Closure.pdf>
- Rikkerink, M., Verbeeten, H., Simons, R. J., & Ritzen, H. (2016). A new model of educational innovation: Exploring the nexus of organizational learning, distributed leadership, and digital technologies. *Journal of Educational Change*, 17(2), 223-249.
- Roegman, R. (2017). How contexts matter: A framework for understanding the role of contexts in equity-focused educational leadership. *Journal of School Leadership*, 27, 6-30.
- Roegman, R., Perkins-Williams, R., Maeda, Y., & Greenan, K. A. (2018). Developing data leadership: Contextual influences on administrators' data use. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 13(4), 348-374. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1942775117719452>

Saleh, A. & Bista, K. (2017). Examining factors impacting online survey response rates in educational research: Perceptions of graduate students. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Evaluation, 13*(29), 63-74.

United States Census Bureau. (2020a). *Explore census data*. <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/>

United States Census Bureau. (2020b). *Topics*. <https://www.census.gov/topics.html>

Ylimaki, R. M., & Jacobson, S. L. (Eds.). (2011). *U.S. and cross-national policies, practices, and preparation: Implications for successful instructional leadership, organizational learning, and culturally responsive practices*. Springer.



## **Appendix A**

### **Research Instrument**

1. New Jersey county of your employing school/district.
2. What is your current position?
3. What level is your current position?
4. If you are a teacher, please list all content areas/courses you teach in your current position.
5. How many years have you been in your current position?
6. How many years in total have you been a K-12 educator, including current and previous positions?

**This survey is designed to better understand your perceptions of teaching and learning that occurred during the COVID-19 school closures.**

**Please answer the questions below by selecting one of the five responses. The scale of responses ranges from Not at all to A great deal, with A moderate amount representing the mid-point between these low and high extremes. You may choose any of the five possible responses. Your answers are confidential. Please respond to each of the questions by considering your experiences during the COVID-19 school closure.**

**PRIOR to the COVID-19 school closure, to what extent...**

7. Did you as a student at any level, have experience with distance/home/online/remote learning?

8. Did you as an educator, have experience delivering distance/home/online/remote instruction to K-12 students?
9. Did you as an instructor, have experience teaching a fully online course at an institution of higher education?
10. Did you have time to prepare for distance/home/online/remote learning?
11. Did your school/district provide time for "staff only" to prepare for the transition to distance/home/online/remote learning?
12. Did your school/district provide training, either mandatory or voluntary, to assist educators with the transition to distance/home/online/remote learning?
13. Did your school/district communicate expectations for students and staff during the distance/home/online/remote learning period?
14. Did your school/district provide guidance regarding asynchronous instruction and synchronous instruction?
15. Did your school/district provide technology for students and/or staff when requested?
16. Did your school/district prepare for distance/home/online/remote learning?

**DURING the COVID-19 school closure, to what extent...**

17. Did your school/district provide every student with distance/home/online/remote learning opportunities?
18. Did teachers experience success delivering BOE approved curriculum to all students?
19. Did students seem engaged in distance/home/online/remote learning activities and/or assignments?

20. Did activities and/or assignments consist mostly of supplemental and/or skill building activities?
21. Did teachers have success introducing new content to students?
22. Did educators spend time communicating with students and/or families to ensure students participated daily and/or completed various activities/assignments?
23. Was student learning maintained during this distance/home/online/remote learning period when compared to traditional, face-to-face schooling?
24. Did school/district leadership assist teachers to develop and/or design activities and/or assignments tailored to distance/home/online/remote learning?
25. Should schools/districts incorporate distance/home/online/remote learning days into the annual school year calendar?
26. Does distance/home/online/remote learning have a place in the current model of K-12 schooling?
27. Could educators benefit from extensive professional development & learning with respect to distance/home/online/remote learning?

**REFLECTING on the COVID-19 school closure...**

28. Please tell us about some of the challenges you encountered during this distance/home/online/remote learning period.
29. Please describe any events/settings/situations you think would be appropriate for schools/districts to use distance/home/online/remote learning in lieu of a traditional school day.
30. Please tell us about some of the positive student outcomes you observed/measured during this distance/home/online/remote learning period.

31. Please tell us about some of the negative student outcomes you observed/measured during this distance/home/online/remote learning period.
32. Please tell us what you think schools/districts might do differently, if anything, to improve on the successes and/or failures of remote learning in K-12 schools.