4-28-2022

The Value of Education: School Policy Decisions During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Honours Thesis
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Macalester College
Individually Designed Interdepartmental Major - Public Health and International Development
Completed April 25th, 2022

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A. Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, lacking national U.S. policies, wide variation and conflict over chosen public school policy decisions emerged. What factors and guidelines informed the decision-making process in K-12 public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and who were the key stakeholders? This study examines three school district types – a large city, medium city, and small-town – across Minnesota as case studies to unpack how policy decisions were made during the pandemic. Stakeholder interviews uncovered that the school decision-making process was a) connected to a district's political opinions, b) made by the superintendent and school board, c) primarily influenced by then current-day health and safety concerns, and d) justified using ethics, emotions, and take-your-pick science. In the absence of formal decision-making frameworks, school administrators justified policies based on ethical and political opinions with scientific evidence, state guidance, constituent support, and ethics. This led to conflict over the perceived 'right' choice and worsened the divisiveness of public COVID-19 opinions. Additionally, varying levels of disagreement with the U.S.'s education governance structure, particularly on local control vs state/federal imposition, emerged. This research identifies the individual nature with which COVID-19 school policies were formed and suggests a need for developing ethical decision-making frameworks for future scenarios.

Keywords: decision-making, COVID-19, education governance, school reopening

B. Introduction

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools worldwide were closed based on the presumption of schools being central to disease transmission. Globally, most K-12 schools closed in mid-March 2020 with immense variation in reopening dates – the earliest, August 2020, and the latest, still closed as of April 2022. Public schooling during COVID-19 was dire, with many students lacking the internet connection to participate in online learning and some countries simply not providing schooling. In June 2021, 770 million children weren't attending full-time in-person school and an estimated 150 million children in 19 countries had no access to in-person learning (UNICEF, 2021). Around 24 million children globally dropped out of school in 2021 (UNICEF, 2021). The U.S generally prioritised learning – compared to some other countries – as demonstrated by a quicker return to in-person learning (as early as August 2020) and strong efforts for online learning when not in-person. The global disparities in education access where the U.S.'s policies have been challenging, but nowhere near as disruptive as some other countries.

In the U.S., at the start of the 2020-21 school year, 40% of school districts offered some form of in-person learning (Dorn, 2021). It was only by the end of the 2020-21 school year that the majority (98%) of students were in-person (Dorn, 2021). The debate on whether or not to reopen schools during the COVID-19 pandemic is charged with fluid complexities weighing the risks and benefits of infection versus education loss. States, counties and districts grappled with the dual burden of balancing the immediate health and safety of students and staff with the long-term consequences of disrupted online education. The consequences of disrupted education are severe, affecting students and families now and long-term economic, education, and social prospects. The predominance of local control in the structure of education policy, which makes the U.S. distinctive from most other countries, led to conflict on who held power and authority – the federal government, states, or individual districts – during COVID-19 (Hatfield, 2015). Generally, the federal government relegated decision-making power regarding reopening schools to states. In the State of Minnesota, the governor established metrics and recommendations for reopening, but further relegated decision-making power to school districts. As a result, wide variations district-to-district in instruction modality (in-person, hybrid, or remote) occurred during the 2020-21 school year. Yet, most of Minnesota experienced a similar disease burden throughout the school year, thus if school reopening decisions were based primarily on COVID-19 case rates, as found in national and state guidelines, why did variation occur? This incongruence suggests that investigating how district-level school reopening decisions occurred across Minnesota is needed.

Whether and how to reopen schools during the 2020-21 school year was one of the most complex and far-reaching decisions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, sparse literature exists on who was given a seat at the decision-making table, their motivations, and the process of decision making. With the high educational and economic costs of 'closed' schools, uncovering the who, how, and why behind when a district chooses to open its public schools to in-person instruction will shine a light on high-impact decisions. This thesis examines four Minnesota school districts, as case studies, to unpack how school decision making occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. The key research question is what factors and guidelines informed the decision-making process of COVID-19 related school policies (reopening, masking, etc). This research contributes to the existing literature by exposing U.S. district-level education governance during COVID-19 and suggests lessons for future public health-public education emergency planning.

C. Literature Review

This literature review will cover key theories and arguments related to COVID-19 and education theory in the U.S. It provides a background and situates the thesis within the larger context of U.S. education policy, decision-making during a public health emergency, and the COVID-19 pandemic. This section first delves into a) Factors Related To Reopening Schools, then b) COVID-19 and Schools in the U.S. and the State of Minnesota. More context on the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. is covered in C. The Media, Politics, and COVID-19. This section concludes with an examination of the D. Theory of Education Policy in the U.S.

A. Factors Related To Reopening Schools

Caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic started in early 2020. By mid-March 2020, U.S. transmission was rampant and school closures, among other containment strategies, were implemented. The pandemic's impact cannot be overstated – with 425 million diagnosed cases worldwide and nearly 930,000 deaths in the U.S. as of February 20th 2022 (Hannah et al. 2022). Two years into this pandemic, when do social and economic disruption impose harms worse than COVID-19? How severe are the adverse consequences of disrupted schooling on students now and in the future workforce? School closures and resultant policies are one example where policymakers must ethically balance global priorities.

In March 2020, it was unclear at the time what risk the virus posed to children and what role children played in disease transmission, thus a precautionary approach of stopping in-person schooling was taken. Historically, with yearly influenza and the 1989 pandemic, children are a key vector for disease spread – high-contact individuals with minimal symptoms (Cauchemez, 2009; Christakis et al, 2020; Esposito et al, 2020). By May 2020, age-stratified data suggested the opposite, that children are less likely to become infected and transmit the virus (Munro et al, 2020; Esposito et al, 2020; Walger et al, 2020). Of U.S. diagnosed COVID-19 cases between March 2020 and February 2022, children under 18 account for around 19% of cases but make up 22% of the population (American Academy of Paediatrics, 2022). In the U.S, 0.01% of pediatric cases resulted in death (Sisk et al, 2020). Cross-cultural data from Israel also suggests that children are less likely to contract COVID-19 compared to adults (25% to 44%) (Dattner et al, 2021). Although COVID-19 is mild, even asymptomatic, in most children, reports of increased severe risk in those with underlying conditions and multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) following SARS-CoV-2 infection are concerning (Feldstein et al, 2020).

During a major infectious disease outbreak, school closures theoretically have the potential to slow the spread of infection. A meta-analysis published in November 2021 found that school closures did not sufficiently reduce local disease transmission and were not suitable as a primary intervention (Wu, 2021). In a systematic review of school closures during major infectious disease outbreaks, all papers reported social mixing outside the home despite school closures, further supporting the lack of evidence connecting school closures to significantly reduced COVID-19 rates (Brooks et al, 2020). By June 2020 and onwards, scientific and epidemiological evidence suggested children do not get, transmit, or die from COVID-19 as easily as initially predicted (Brandal, 2020; Brooks, 2020; Ertem, 2021; Falk, 2021; Hershow, 2021; Sisk, 2020; Tupper, 2021; Varma, 2021; Zimmerman, 2021). The other key question plaguing school reopening policies is, even if child

mortality and hospitalisation risk are low, how efficiently can COVID-19 spread in schools and does it put adults working in schools and the surrounding community at higher risk.

The majority of the school COVID-19 literature focuses on the safety of children. Chernozhukova et al's (2021, p. 1) analysis of COVID-19 spread and school instruction status found that "an increase in visits to both K–12 schools and colleges are associated with a subsequent increase in case and death growth rates". A study by Lesser (2021), conducted from April-December 2020, estimated that full in-person K-12 schooling is associated with a 5% (SE = 2) increase in the growth rate of cases (the Ro). Mitigation strategies had a positive effect on decreasing disease transmission in schools, suggesting that precautionary measures such as masking, physical distancing, and vaccines can help prevent excess disease spread in schools (Lesser, 2021). Thus, the objectives of in-person schooling, whether it is to have maintainable COVID-19 spread or eliminate it, matter in how districts approach reopening. Sparse data on the risks school reopening pose to staff and teachers exists – yet disease prevention and safety with in-person learning are major concerns of teachers' unions (Ludvigsson et al, 2020). Of the available literature, one study from Sweden, published in June 2020, which continued in-person schooling throughout most of the pandemic, found that the sex-and age-adjusted relative risk of schoolteachers receiving intensive care hospitalisation for COVID-19 compared to other occupations was 0.43 (95% CI, 0.28 to 0.68) (Ludvigsson et al, 2020). This suggests in-person schooling has no increased risk to teachers' health safety. 98% of students were in some form of in-person learning by the end of the 2020-21 school year in the U.S. Epidemiological data from 2021 onwards shows little increase in community COVID-19 cases and school-based outbreaks (Bhopal, 2021; Brandal, 2020; Ertem, 2021; Falk, 2021; Hershow, 2021; Stein-Zamir, 2020; Tupper, 2021; Varma, 2021; Zimmerman, 2021). The uncertainty of increasing population-level disease by keeping schools in-person drove school closures. By the end of the summer of 2020, when it came time for school reopening decisions, the scientific evidence on the risks of COVID transmission in children was still ambiguous and widely debated.

Early on in the pandemic, learning disruptions and the challenges associated with remote learning were outweighed by the uncertainty of infectiousness and the challenges of managing potential outbreaks. While this 'either/or' framework is oversimplified – not taking into account the many pressures from politics, society, stakeholder groups, economic justifications, scientific uncertainty and more – it raises a critical point about the consequences of interrupted education. It is estimated that 90% of students, more than 1.5 billion children, are affected by school closures (Hanno, 2022; Strauss, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). In the U.S. alone, more than 55 million children missed months of instruction by finishing out the 2019-20 school year remotely (Sharfstein et al, 2020). Inequities in home learning environments, technology and internet access exacerbate learning difficulties. More than 30 million children reliant on school breakfast and lunch are potentially going hungry (Sharfstein et al, 2020). In Philadelphia alone, just three days of school closures resulted in more than 405,000 missed meals for school-aged children (Rundle et al, 2020). On the other end, sedentary activities, screen time, and weight gain have all worsened the physical health of students. Millions of children have lost access to school-based health and physical activity services (Petretto et al, 2020; Rundle et al, 2020). 80% of parents (n=16,370) said that they were concerned about their child's mental health and social and emotional development (Dorn, 2021). Previous studies on other infectious disease outbreaks, such as the 2014-16 Ebola epidemic, suggest higher frequencies of

school dropouts, child labour, violence against children, teen pregnancies, and persisting socioeconomic and gender disparities (Armitage et al, 2020).

The educational, social, and economic harms will be the greatest among those students who are already at risk (Hammerstein, 2021). Younger students and those in high-poverty schools had the biggest declines, showcasing widening learning divides along race and economic lines (Barnum, 2021). Two separate reports found that by the end of the 2020-21 school year, students were on average 4-5 months academically behind, with students in majority Black, Hispanic and low-income schools the most behind (Dorn, 2021). Similar academic decreases during 'COVID' school years were noted in The Netherlands, which had a short lockdown, nationwide internet access, well-funded public schools, and Belgium suggesting even the most inclusive online learning programs stunt education (Bekkering et al, 2021; Engzell, 2021; Kuhfeld et al, 2020). These effects on students appear to increase with time spent in online learning, a phenomenon known as residual confounding, thus reopening time is a priority (Bekkering et al, 2021; Kuhfeld et al, 2020).

Children's education is a key pillar of 21st-century society. It is the site of intellectual and social development, a determiner of life path, and critical for future society. Economists and statisticians have tried to estimate the future losses from pandemic-related school closures. Although their methods are controversial and estimates, current K-12 students are projected to experience a 3% lower income over their lifetime because of school closures related to COVID-19, which is the equivalent of a USD 18.4 trillion economic loss (Hanushek et al, 2020). Another researcher found that across the U.S., an estimated 5.53 million years of life lost (YLL), a metric of premature mortality, are associated with COVID-19 school closures with a "98.1% probability that school opening would have been associated with a lower total YLL than school closure (Christakis et al, 2020). Educational attainment is associated with longevity (YLL) based on the assumption that lower education status leads to lower socioeconomic status, which leads to poorer health and wellbeing and a greater potential to die earlier than projected. While Christakis et al makes assumptions as to the degree that interrupted school instruction reduces educational attainment, decreased declines and slowed progress in yearly school testing in 2021 thus far supports this argument (Lewis et al, 2021). Observational studies support the relationship between education, health, and economic success; however, to date, no randomised trials have evaluated the effect of school on health and economic performance. Going forward, we have ecological and longitudinal cohort data of different children's learning experiences during the pandemic to understand the impacts of school disruptions on education, social, and economic development.

The impacts of remote schooling on children's social, emotional, and educational development were well known by the first COVID-19 summer (Dooley, 2021). The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Federation of Teachers published a report on July 10th, 2020 that "returning to school is important for the healthy development and well-being of children … Science should drive decision making on safely reopening schools". This phrase – 'using science' – was co-opted across the political spectrum as a means to justify motives to reduce or maintain COVID-19 mitigation strategies (including school closures). The science was clear early on, especially given the cost-benefit analysis, for school reopenings. Political opinions and their influence on public health were at play. For example, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released reopening guidelines for the 2020-21 school year that suggested school reopenings were high risk and mitigation strategies would be expensive and difficult to implement (Goodnough, 2020). A leaked

internal report classifies the "full-sized, in-person classes" as the highest risk category (Goodnough, 2020). The following week, on July 7th, 2021, the White House expressed "concern about the practicality of the guidelines, its associated expenses, and pushed the CDC to revise them" (Rasmussen, 2020). The CDC did not, but a statement from the Department of Health and Human Services focused on the "positive impacts on children's mental health from school" (Goodnough, 2020). The working group, according to an anonymous official, did not include experts from the CDC. This signifies three issues. First - the CDC's guidance was too cautious compared to scientific literature out there. Second - how political administrations and organisations wanted to use science and CDC backing to make politically-motivated pandemic decisions. Lastly, how a working group on school reopenings – a key public health issue – did not include experts from the country's public health organisation. The exchange among federal instructions – using science and public health evidence as methods to sway the national COVID-19 response in political favour is unprecedented. It is one of many instances sending the message that school decision-making in response to COVID-19 was not solely based upon scientific evidence, but politics.

There is minimal evidence that school closures reduce COVID-19 incidence; yet, the social, economic, and educational costs associated with school closures are immense. Studies have concluded that primary education is one of the biggest driving factors for improvements in under-five mortality and life expectancy across the world in the past 50 years (Brown, 2021). Hence, school closures globally, especially in areas where primary online education didn't occur (due to technological and staffing issues), are a social development setback. Discussions on reopening U.S. schools focus on infection among children and staff. At the start of the 2020-21 school year, immense nationwide variation in teaching modality existed. The challenges of managing infection control measures, potential outbreaks, resource disparities, and strong, divisive political opinions from stakeholders slowed school re-openings and led to varied instruction methods across the U.S. It was only by the start of the 2021-22 school year that a majority of schools returned in person. With (limited) scientific evidence available by August 2020 that children and staff, particularly those under ten, are not at high risk for COVID-19, but are at high risk for social, emotional, and economic harm from online schooling, it is critical to understand how school policy decisions during the pandemic unfolded.

B. COVID-19 and Schools in the U.S. and the State of Minnesota

In the United States, for the Fall 2020 term, the K-12 educational delivery format varied tremendously state by state and between districts. Across the U.S., of districts that provided school reopening plans, 24% were fully online, 51% used a hybrid model, and 17% were entirely in-person (Honein et al, 2021). Hybrid, in this study, means that schools were operating in a mix of in-person and remote learning (ex. two days in-school, three days remote). In Minnesota, Governor Tim Walz passed Executive Order 20-02, closing in-person schooling on March 15th, 2020 until at least March 27th, 2020, giving district's a planning period to respond to COVID-19 (Exec. Order 20-19). Statewide school closures were extended through May 1st with every district finishing the year remotely. On July 30th, 2020 Governor Walz signed Executive Order 20-82, implementing Minnesota's 2020-21 Safe School Learning Plan (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021b). The order absolves state responsibility, deferring school districts, charter schools, and counties to independently decide their learning model. The Minnesota Department of Education's (MDE) Safe Learning Plan "ensures that every student … receives an equitable education and has equal access to

learning and instruction" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021a). The data-driven plan calls upon schools to use county-level COVID-19 cases as the determining metric for instruction method. Critically, these state guidelines are recommendations, not mandates. Each district and county can decide on school learning modality independently, but the state mandated all districts to provide a distance learning option (Minnesota Department of Health, 2021a). At the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, a majority of Minnesota schools were in hybrid learning (Minnesota Department of Health, 2021b).

With vaccines available in early 2021, Governor Walz updated the state's learning plan pushing students to return in person. It dictated mandatory face coverings in K-12 school buildings and recommended mitigation strategies for in-person learning. On February 17th, 2021 all schools were expected to offer in-person learning by March (either full time or hybrid) with families given the choice to continue in remote instruction. By March 10th, 2021, 32% of Minnesota school districts were in-person, 11% were hybrid, 12% were distance, and 45% were in a combination of the three modes (Minnesota Department of Health, 2021b). The majority of districts finished the 2020-21 school year in person. Throughout the year, many school districts faced staffing shortages, particularly bus drivers and substitute teachers, impacting in-person learning. For the 2021-22 school year, with vaccines available for those 16+, most districts started in person. The state released a revised safe learning plan. Critically, they choose not to instil a statewide vaccine or masking mandate, leaving each district to decide. Staffing shortages continued to be an issue. Generally, teacher's unions (and other unions) across Minnesota were heavily involved and influential in decision-making. The policies that various unions supported during COVID-19 varied. Generally, teacher's unions were among the strongest advocates (and most successful) for public health mitigation measures in schools (ex. Physical distancing, HVAC systems, etc) and at stopping a return to in-person learning until vaccines were available. The other notable issue during the 2021-22 school year was the Omicron-variant induced online learning for parts of December and January.

C. Challenging Decisions – the Media, Politics, and Policymaking

Policymaking during any pandemic is challenging — it requires making highly uncertain, complex, ethical and moral decisions. In particular, it involves a moral dilemma – "a problematic situation with a conflict between two mutually exclusive alternatives, both implying negative and undesirable consequences" (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1987; Tasso et al., 2017; Palmiotti et al., 2020). The key issue in any decision is that it assigns judgements on the balance between protecting health (i.e. more disease prevention) and preventing social and economic harm (i.e. less disease prevention). This is essentially what school reopening decisions came down to – an ethical decision on what to prioritise. There are different ways of deciding, utilising utilitarianism via a cost-benefit analysis, deciding one over the other via emotional or cognitive reasons, or looking at the consequences of each (deontological resolution). Particularly during a pandemic, moral decision-making involves uncertainty (Van Bavel et al., 2020). Moral dilemmas and moral distress are often inevitable (Dunham et al., 2020). Breaking down the decision is a series of trade-offs. School closures might better protect the current community from COVID-19-related health effects, but it has high socioeconomic costs of potentially worsening child education, stunting future economic potential, and shuttering the current workforce and economy. Assessing the best policy means weighing up lives saved now versus future impacts. Berger (2020) describes the 'optimal' (i.e. utilitarian) policy as one that weighs the costs and benefits by comparing each policy to other possible courses of action and their impact.

A major issue among decision-makers and in policy is that humans are not rational thinkers. From confirmation bias to motivated reasoning, multiple terminologies, theories, and studies all showcase how human decision making and reasoning are misguided by personal opinion and reasoning. We often first make conclusions and then find the reasoning to support them (Baumann, 2022). This is Haidt's main claim in the Social Intuitionist Model, where moral judgement comes first and is justified with moral reasoning (2001). It is at play in other psychological phenomena – Lerner's Just World Hypothesis (1965) where we filter information to fit the world we live in, defence motivation where we "hold attitudes and beliefs that are congruent with existing self-definitional attitudes and beliefs (Chaiken et al, 1996, pg. 557), cognitive dissonance, and more. We use or dismiss evidence and information by how it fits into our "sacred values" (Tetlock, 2000). Even more justification in favour of humans 'using science to justify moral judgements' is the "makes-sense epistemology" whereby the goal is not to reach the most accurate conclusion but instead to find a conclusion that fits our belief and support it with evidence that upholds that belief (Perkins et al, 1983). It is this psychological context that humans are biased that is directly relevant to COVID-19 decisions.

A linked factor to the highly charged, political reopening decisions that occurred is the extent to which ethics and emotions surfaced. One education policy researcher, who publicly tweeted about COVID-19 in schools, mentioned that "one thing that always ends an argument is a statement that "you would want children dead" (Willyard, 2021). She stopped posting on Twitter in March 2021 because the discourse became too emotional and personal. Another op-ed published multiple anecdotes of pro-school reopening parents who were demonised as racist, Trump supporters on social media (Bodenheimer, 2022). These highly-emotional opinions are impacting politics – with a recall election for California Governor Gavin Newsom arising out of Democratic parents petitioning against his plan for in person schooling. The creator of the 1619 project Nikole Hannah-Jones was "called a teacher-hating corporate shill" by "progressives" when she was mildly critical of school closures and union support for them (Bodenheimer, 2022). However, post widespread children's vaccine release (mid-Fall 2021), progressive media and political opinions shifted from the 'safe and right thing to do is to keep children home' to 'any disruption from in-person schooling is horrendously unethical'. Anecdotes around the U.S. of clashes at school board meetings, threats against school officials, and more highlight how complex, emotional, and turbulent these decisions have been for some districts. In San Francisco, three board members were recalled by a public vote against criticism for prioritising the renaming of 44 public schools by April instead of planning for having kids fully in-person by then (Granitz, 2022). This "nationalisation of local politics" is not new, but it has worsened with COVID-19 (Mahken, 2020). Partisanship is "so wired into who we are that we carry that identity with us", and it is particularly challenging because "it distorts the decision making in ways that are dangerous" with local decision-makers bringing "those attitudes and biases to the table" (Valant, 2020). This highly polarised political battle over schools is particularly worrisome because "if there was one set of public authorities that would address a public health pandemic in a less political way, it would be our nonpartisan local governments that are tasked with watching out for kids. If that threshold isn't being driven by public health indicators, then good luck finding a political institution that is" (Hartey, 2020).

The initial round of school closures in March 2020 was supported by health, education, and political officials all agreeing on the uncertainty of children's and school's role in SARS-CoV-2

transmission. It was when questions of reopening emerged that discussion exploded. Schools quickly became a proxy for the social and political battle occurring over varying COVID-19 opinions. In politics, schools became a partisan issue and the already politicised pandemic response. For example, President Trump's tweet in July 2020 that "SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!" made it "sacrilegious for anyone in science to say it was OK for schools to be open" because so "many of us were wired to not believe anything the president was saying" (Willyard, 2021). School reopening and related policies became another space scapegoated for the siding of politics and opinions. From White House interference in CDC policies to varied state reopening responses, the decision to reopen or keep schools open has sparked fervent public debate. This intense polarisation has an impact on public opinion. For example, Democratic opposition to in-person learning grew from 46% to 70% after President Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos demanded states reopen in the 2020 fall (Navigator, 2020). As early as May 2020 in parts of the U.S., bars, restaurants, and other social activities were open (i.e. in-person) but schools were not. Even in some of the strictest public health states and school districts, schools have been closed for longer than bars and restaurants have. Despite education and children being core to the future of a country, this very fact alone speaks to current societal values.

American viewpoints on whether K-12 schools should open in-person follow wide partisan lines. In August 2020, "36% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say that K-12 schools in their area should offer in-person instruction; just 6% of Democrats and those who lean Democratic say the same. (Horowitz, 2020). While 41% of Democrats say schools should offer online instruction, just 13% of Republicans agree" (Horowitz, 2020). Those in lower-income areas, in counties with a higher number of COVID-19 cases, and Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans all more strongly support online instruction. When asked what factors should be considered in school reopening decisions, 61% of adults say COVID-19 risk should be the main consideration, 49% parents' ability to work, and 48% academic disruption from remote instruction. Key factors and considerations also follow partisan lines with 82% of Democrats saying the risk of students and teachers getting or spreading COVID-19 should be given a lot of consideration compared to 37% of Republicans. Republicans are more likely to consider academic lagging (61% to 36%) and parents' inability to work (56% to 43%) than Democrats (Horowitz, 2020). These widely varying public perspectives on what is the 'right' COVID-19 strategy makes school policy decisions, especially in districts with split Republic and Democratic voters, extremely tough. Here is where political uniformity in a district has an impact on constituent agreement with chosen school policies. If a district is more uniform, there is more consensus over school policy which, even for different policies, can be a good thing. If keeping constituents – parents, teachers, and students – happy and making sure their opinions guide decision making in schools, as one might argue is the function of local education governance, how among widely varying COVID-19 perspectives can superintendents and school boards make informed decisions?

State and federal judges are getting involved in the difficult question around reopening schools - questions that politicians, school administrators, education and medical experts, and private citizens (parents, teachers, students) all have varying (morally backed) opinions on. Several lawsuits have occurred related to school reopenings – some, mainly from teachers, asking for schools to remain closed despite state orders to reopen, others suing school districts that have not re-opened. The director of the Education Law Association wrote that "one could see courts not wanting to

decide whether schools should open or close, but there are some questions that are the province of the courts, such as in Florida where the issue is whether the governor has the authority to order schools to open" (Walsh, 2020). Florida's case – DeSantis v. Florida Education Association – highlights the very subjective nature of reopening decisions. The teacher's union argued that the state's order to reopen schools in person or risk funding loss violated the constitutional guarantee of safe and secure public education. In August 2020, the case first went to Leon County Circuit Judge Charles Dodson who sided with the teachers union and rejected the state's executive order (Saunders, 2020). It was then brought to a three-judge panel of the 1st District Court of Appeal in October, where they upheld the governor's emergency order (Walsh, 2020b). He reasoned that "nothing in the emergency order requires any teacher or any student to return to the classroom" (Saunders, 2020). While that might be true, the reality of losing state funding if a district does not comply, given how cash strapped and reliant on state funding schools are, essentially (to the teacher's unions) forces teachers to return to the classroom. The second judge (who decided in favour of DeSantis) went as far as to say that the first judge got into "deciding a "political question" about whether the state violated its constitutional obligation to "make adequate provision" for a "safe, secure, and high quality" public school system" (Walsh, 2020b). Even from a legal perspective, the 'right' school policy decision is ethically and morally uncertain.

Much like politics, the media's intense scrutiny of COVID-19 as a battlefield with the other side villainized has not helped. "It has been perpetuated in the American media that COVID is dangerous and kids are super spreaders and schools are super-spreader places" (Willyard, 2021). Existing literature and epidemiological data do not suggest that. "Except for one study, the literature said that schools opening and school closing have very little community effect on the spread of disease" (Walsh, 2020). Repeated failures of public health communication and media on COVID-19 risks have confused parents, decreased trust, and increased the divisiveness of school policies. Media, politics, and school stakeholders need to "stop asking whether schools are safe. Instead, acknowledge that in-person instruction is essential; then apply the principles we learned from other essential services to keep schools open" (Wen, 2021). Around Fall 2020, there were two opinion camps spurred by politics and the media: a more Republican-aligned, pro-local decision-making of schools should reopen and a more Democratic-leaning, 'health' first, the 'right' thing to do is keep schools closed. These sides have been drawn not just with school policies, but masking, vaccines, lockdowns, and more.

D. Theory of Education Policy in the U.S.

Education decision making in the U.S. is unique – it is both part of democratic governance where decisions are made locally by the community and also seen as something to be left to professional experts, akin to most other countries (Tracy, 2010). Some argue that given the multiple levels of education control there is no true "system" of education governance (Cistone, 1974). "If one were to sketch an organisational chart of the American education systems, one would discover that there is no line of responsibility. One would find something closer to a spider's web that has grown increasingly tangled — a web in which it is difficult, if not impossible, to figure out whether anyone is in charge" (Epstein, 2004, pg. 1). The major stakeholders in school governance are 1) local administrators – the school board and superintendent, 2) state institutions such as the Department of Education, 3) the federal government (who gains power via targeted funding), 4) local power groups such as teacher's unions and parent organisations. To an extent, courts and other state and federal

institutions are also involved but are not key authorities. Teachers' unions, of which the majority of U.S. districts had one by the 1980s, are also a key player in education politics today (Moe, 2000).

Local control is at the heart of U.S. public education and is the institution that perhaps most strongly embodies democracy, with everyone from the U.S. president to individual school board members given a role (Carol et al, 1986). We have a separate education governance system with local superintendents and school boards as key leaders in an intentional act to shield schools from political influence. "In the public mind, the local school district has been viewed as the embodiment of democratic values" (Bachrach, 1981, pg 3). While 93% of school boards elect members in nonpartisan elections, fifty-four different governance structures are legally recognized (Briffault, 2005). Across the country, there's immense variation in school governance – elections and appointments, paid versus unpaid, partisan or nonpartisan, at large or within wards, and more. Most American school boards and superintendents are elected, hence they are perceived as representative bodies whose 'bosses' are their constituents. School boards, because of voters' accessibility and proximity to their representatives, are a democratic institution. In particular, it is ordinary, not representative democracy, that occurs. Ordinary democracy is about talk – it's the observable "communicative actions that uphold the ideal of democracy, and it includes actions that challenge, appeal to, and subvert that ideal" (Tracy, 2010, pg 3). In theory, this is democracy in action yet the reality is that democracy, power, and accountability in U.S. public education are complicated (Zeigler, 1994). How democratic were school decisions during COVID-19 is a critical question?

School boards are a uniquely American democratic feature designed to support local governance and keep out political interference. However, school boards have shifted far from their original apolitical, local, democratic ethos to one characterised by high conflict (McGuinn & Manna, 2013; Newman, 1992). Tracy's (2010) six-month observation of a Boulder school district brought much-needed detail charting the entirety of school governance from school board relationships to functions of democracy and state imposition. One key feature observed is that challenges in decision making – protracted conflict, disagreement, unhappy constituents – are justified as "inevitable by-products of democracy (pg. 49). "The concept of democracy can be used to justify problematic outcomes", specifically 'democracy' was used strategically to justify divisive actions or questions of decision-maker competence (pg 49). The term 'democracy' is taken up by most stakeholders as a means of justifying opinions. After all, school governance is a key example of American democracy, thus referencing democracy is an influential tactic. How could a board not vote on an action labelled as a progressing democracy? While public board meetings are a key signifier of democracy, that alone is not democracy in action. The challenge is that "democracy" is a vague, but useful term just as it is maintained. Even with perfect democracy – all voices and opinions being shared, there is still a decision to be made in which someone loses. A Boulder superintendent's resignation speech stated the following – "*this board does not listen well*. We do not even listen respectfully to each member on this board, let alone to different constituents. Decisions are made from the *top-down*, often reflecting the needs of special interest groups, rather than a collaborative process of a larger community" (Tracy, 2010, pg 58).

Most Americans think that local school boards are the entity responsible for local public schools, yet legal rights to education fall within the state. The 10th Constitutional Amendment gives states (among other entities) functional power over education. As a result, school districts are typically funded by district taxes and the state, leading to wide fluctuation in funding. From the

curriculum, teaching methods, instruction materials, and maintenance of programs, states determine standards, policy, and thus the quality of education. Every state legislature and constitution has specific criteria to ensure children receive an adequate education as well as mandatory requirements for graduation. The degree to which education is state-specific (ex. mandating textbooks and educational materials) or controlled at the district level depends on the state. The state is the "principal agent" and local boards of education get legal authority from the state (Manna & Harwood, 2011). The state has the legal right to modify education and local education leaders as desired through various means (Briffault, 2005; Ryan, 2004; Viteritti, 2005).

At the same time, "contrary to common belief the Constitution [the 10th Amendment] does not restrain federal power over schools" (Epstein, 2004). The Amendments' absence of assigning responsibility for education has led to a common misconception of local control, but it doesn't specifically prohibit Congress or federal entities from acting within public schools. "Congress can do pretty much as it pleases with education, even establish a national curriculum and a national exam, without running afoul of the Constitution " (Ryan, 2004). Hence, over the years, particularly in the 1970s among wide variation in school standards, state officials began regulating schools – creating academic standards, taking over failing schools, and more. In 1920, 83% of school funding was generated from local taxes and revenues and 1% came from the federal government. In 2005, that figure was 45% with 50% of funding coming from the state and 7% federally (Howell, 2005, pg 4). Kirst (2002) sees local control "with all their imperfections, the superior governance choice", but little chance of reversing today's centralising trend". This outward control has only expanded -–with both state and federal claims to classrooms occurring through funding. Federal money comes with strings attached in line with federal priorities. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) gives significant state funding but requires districts to meet minimum education standards via annual maths and reading tests. While the government is quick to help schools through specific policies, their reach into governance, accountability, and who has power is more nuanced. Add in the district, state, and federal courts, as well as state and federal agencies and the power dynamics are even more blurred.

Increasingly, local school boards are seen as outdated, bureaucratic, and dysfunctional (Chubb, 1990; Finn, 1992; Hess, 2010). This shifting gubernatorial and federal control of education is perceived differently across geographies. Multiple U.S. cities have proposed or passed legislation transferring school control from boards of education to mayors, including Boston, Chicago, and Detroit (Kirst 2002). State and mayoral control of education is a rural-urban issue – with urban residents generally more supportive of stripping local autonomy and accountability (Epstein, 2004). One impact of the centralization of education power is that state and federal priorities and goals over local ones are implemented. "Federalism has produced dramatic variation across and within each state, while localism has left superintendents, principals, and elected school board members to make most major decisions about personnel, programming, and budgets. The massive number of school districts nationwide makes it difficult for federal and state officials to provide effective oversight. At the same time, individual school leaders have lost discretionary power" (McGuinn, 2013). The challenge lies in how much weight should be placed upon each stakeholder. 62% of parents and community members believe that they (the local community) should be responsible for school decisions and allocating funding, while only 15% of administrators and 26% of teachers believed the same (Mathews, 1996).

Yet even while control is shifting to state and federal entities, this show of local governance remains strong. In Tracy's, 2010, six-month analysis of a Colorado School District, she shares a complaint written by a school board president "It's got to be great to be a senator. You've got all these layers to protect you from members of the public that aren't happy with what's going on … Here you have no layers to protect you. You're next-door neighbours. You're at the same dry cleaner with everybody else. There is a localness to it" (pg 11). Alongside elements of localness, apoliticalness is a key (historical) feature of school board elections. Up until *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the dominant belief was that school governance was apolitical. "Progressives sought to drain any parisian fever from the electoral process since … there was no Democratic or Republic way to pave a road or run a school" (Hess, 2002, pg. 33). Board members historically adopted "the ideology of rational deliberation, application of technical information, and consensus-building" in working together to come to a decision that is best for the community (Cibulka, 1996, pg 12). Historically, school board elections are nonpartisan and held on a different day than other elections; however, as of 2002, only 53% of school districts still hold elections on a different day (Hess, 2002).

D. Methodology

First, I will begin with an explanation of my positionality. First, I am an outsider to the U.S. K-12 public school experience as I went to grade school outside the U.S. This helps me maintain a more objective and open view of school governance not clouded by personal experience. Second, I currently work in public health and the COVID-19 response efforts. In particular, I have worked for multiple countries on their response efforts, including the Minnesota Department of Health. None of my work in public health has focused on COVID-19 in schools. Hence, while I have pandemic response work experience, it has not been in the area of schools and education. This is still a limitation and I took measures (such as keeping personal opinion out of my discussion) to minimise bias. Lastly, I personally (somewhat) follow utilitarian philosophy. My interest in how different philosophical approaches guide decision-making and outcomes informed my research topic selection. I tried to separate personal opinions on school policy decisions from my research and conclusions by selecting a grounded theory approach and keeping personal opinions outside of my discussion. However, bias is a possibility. These are all personal background details that might have influenced and biased this research, thus are important to share out of transparency and accountability.

This research aims to provide knowledge on Minnesota school district decision making regarding school teaching modality (in-person, hybrid, or online) and other COVID-19 related policies. The key research question is what factors and guidelines are informing the decision-making process of when to reopen schools during the COVID-19 pandemic? Two specific sub-research questions are who are the parties involved in the COVID-19 decision-making process in schools and how is power distributed? The research timeline was from March 2020 until December 2021. This research only considers publicly funded K-12 educational settings – not private schools, vocational schools, or higher education institutions. This research is not a policy assessment on the effectiveness of education policies implemented. It does not compare or make judgements on policies, rather it aims to shed light on how school districts made the decisions they did and why such decisions were made.

I selected a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from identified school districts. The data collection period was from August-December 2021. Four school districts in Minnesota, stratified by geographic density ('Large City', 'Middle-Sized City', 'Small Town') served as case studies identified via snowball sampling. With each of the identified districts, I asked to interview education stakeholders and conducted all interviews online via Zoom. Otter.AI and Zoom were used for transcription. The semi-structured interviews followed a grounded theory approach and were coded for emerging themes using Atlas. TI. Appendix A lists the guiding questions asked in each interview and Appendix B lists all the interviews conducted. District superintendents, given their perceived role as visible leaders and decision-makers in school policy, were the primary stakeholders interviewed. Additional stakeholders such as teachers, teacher's unions, parent-teacher organisations (PTO), school board members, and school health professionals were interviewed as well. Interview data is supported by supplemental evidence from media reports and school board minutes. Snowball sampling was used, which can lead to bias in selecting participants with shared beliefs and agreement on issues (ex. superintendent recommends teacher's to talk to those who agree with their perspectives). However, I don't believe this was a serious limitation in this research since a) the district leaders were relatively small and publicly reachable without a connection, b) the superintendent did not connect me via email to the other stakeholders interviewed. Rather,

they suggested names and I contacted them. This was then snowball sampling but also reaching out to all the identifiable stakeholders in the district (ex. all seven school board members, not just the ones the superintendent recommended). Also – the limiting factor was stakeholders agreeing to participate, thus it was less limited by intentional bias and more a responder bias where I interviewed anyone who responded to me.

One additional methodological limitation is having two school districts representing the 'small town' results. The 'large city' and 'mid-size city' were one school district each. I had to use two districts for the 'small town' because the first district I included (which was selected based on who responded to my email first) stopped communicating with me after the first superintendent interview. I did not have enough information to suggest how decision-making occurred in a small town school district, hence I added a second district. I did this by reaching out to all small-town district superintendents by email and then interviewing the first superintendent to respond. This is the same method used to select the other districts.

The hypothesis regarding school decision-making during COVID-19 is as follows. First, decision making is highly localised and complex – with multiple stakeholders and opinions involved. Second, decision-making power is highly concentrated among school officials (ex. Superintendents and the school board). Lastly, school district location (ex. urban vs rural), size, and political leaning will be key differentiators of school decisions variations. The decision to reopen schools will reflect a) the scientific data on the effect of school reopening on the health of the children, b) whether schools have the resources to reopen with effective disease prevention measures, and c) the attitude of key figures (ex. teachers, parents, and political figures) toward school reopening. Within the framework of the U.S's unique socio-political situation, my argument is that more liberal and health responsive school administrations will be more conservative in their COVID-19 containment approach, keeping schools closed. Secondly, I argue that decision-makers (superintendents and the school board) made decisions based on personal moral perspectives and justified them with evidence, particularly scientific evidence.

E. Results: a Narrative Case Study of Minnesota School Districts

This results section will present a narrative overview of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected each school district, highlighting how, when, and by whom decisions from March 2020 until December 2021 were made. One critical note is that all the research was concluded before the Omicron variant affected Minnesota public schools. Minnesota is one of two states with a state education board overseeing state education policy. A timeline of Minnesota school closures, reopenings, and other mandates is viewable in Appendix D. In-person instruction ceased on March 15, 2020, with the state's Executive Order 20-02, which directed schools to close to students until March 27, 2020, and engage in a COVID-19 response planning period (Appendix C). Remote instruction was accompanied by two other policy actions: 1) to create and implement a system of food delivery for students at home and 2) to create a method of learning for students whose parents are essential workers. Following the governor's mandate, all districts ultimately finished the 2019-20 school year remotely. District-level autonomy was given for the 2020-21 school year. Federally, the CDC suggested instructional guidelines based on county COVID-19 case rates. At the state level, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) publicly upheld CDC guidelines. Published guidelines at the federal and state levels were suggested and not mandatory, which ultimately left districts the ability to make decisions. This lack of mandated guidance was perceived by some education administrators to be an abdication of responsibility at the federal and state levels, forcing local administrators to make tough public health choices despite not being public health experts. In other districts, the suggested guidelines were perceived as federal and state control over what should be a local decision.

A. Case # 1: Large City School District

In the large city school district, in-person instruction ceased on March 15, 2020, with the State's Executive Order for schools to close. By March 27th, 2020, a COVID-19 Response Plan was put forth for all students to "participate in Distance Learning until at least May 4, 2020" through iPads issued to all K-12 students (Large City COVID-19 Response Plan, 2020, p. 1). Instruction for the remainder of the school year was online and asynchronous. For the 2020-21 school year, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz gave districts the ability to make their own learning modality decision but published recommended learning models based on COVID-19 case rates. The district's 2020-21 reopening plan outlines a tentative schedule with students starting fully online, moving to hybrid (two days a week in person, three days remote), and eventually full-time in person by the end of the school year (Reopen Urban District Plan Synopsis, 2020). It also outlines a 'Virtual Learning School' for families that wish to remain fully online. The large city district announced on September 25th, 2021 that all students would be in distance learning until otherwise stated (KARE 11, 2020a). The recommendation and plan to remain in distance learning was proposed by the district's Pandemic Preparedness and Response team, made up of members from various school departments, school officials, and the county health department. The COVID-19 response plan was based on 23 disclosed readiness targets, primarily the number of COVID-19 cases over 14 days/100,000 in the county. The guiding principles were to "focus on the needs of students and families, prioritise community well-being including the social-emotional and physical health needs of students and staff, and champion equity" (Reopen Urban District Plan Synopsis, 2020, p.5).

The decision-making plan emphasised efforts to include family voices (via Parental Advisory Councils) and community input via email, social media, virtual meetings, feedback forms, and the district's Teachers' Union. The top health concerns related to in-person schooling were no vaccine (64%), students' keeping social distance (75%), and hallways/space (65%). In June and July 2020, 25% and 43% of families said they would enrol their child in full-time distance learning (n=1500), compared to 30% and 23% who would not. The district self-declared that they did not have enough MERV 11 rating air filters to transition all younger students to hybrid learning. This guidance on air filtration and quality is based on CDC and MDH recommendations but is not required. With high levels of health concerns related to in-person learning and difficulties maintaining safe in-person learning environments ("across all middle and high schools, only 25% of classrooms can accommodate 50% enrollment while still maintaining social distancing"), distance learning was implemented by the district (KARE 11, 2020a). In both the 2020 and 2021 academic years, the superintendent asked the school board for a resolution that gives the superintendent the authority to make decisions without board approval. Referring to the resolution, the superintendent told the school board "I [was] making a lot of decisions … we can do it the other way but I will be calling you into meetings daily" and quickly "they [the school board] didn't want to do that". Ultimately, the board gave the superintendent decision-making authority at the start of the 2020-21 school year (August 2020). The primary reasons seemed to be to facilitate quicker decision-making and was based on strong superintendent–school board trust.

Multiple suggested return to hybrid learning dates were put forth by district administrators; however, the school board stated that students in "third grade or higher won't return to in-person classes before 2021" due to surging cases in November of 2020 (KARE 11, 2020a). With the introduction of vaccines in January 2021 and declining case counts, Gov. Tim Walz suggested that all elementary schools should return to full in-person learning. Vaccines shifted the cost-benefit analysis and the key arguments against reopening. Teachers' unions were primarily the strongest holdouts on reopening, citing health risks, and stating that until vaccines were available, they would not be in favour of returning to the classroom. Hence, when vaccines got approved in January 2021 and Gov. Walz prioritised teachers and school staff, it dramatically changed the education landscape in favour of in-person learning with unions having lost their key objection. This first vaccine approval was for those 16+, so did not aggressively change the dynamics of child safety in schools. Pre-kindergarten through 2nd grade shifted to hybrid learning on February 1st (with students given the option to remain virtual). This was the first chance most students got to be inside a classroom (for two days a week) since the start of the pandemic. The district's teacher's union held a rally in response – with the union President claiming "there's no specific guidance statewide right so it feels like everybody's left to their own. For that reason, there are no consistent measures about how we go forth" (KARE 11, 2021a). Despite the protest, grades 3-5 went to hybrid learning on February 16th. Hybrid schooling was supported by testing in all schools (KARE 11, 2021b). Aside from vaccines, a key determinant of how hybrid occurred was staffing shortages. "The number of buses we had available and the number of drivers we had available forced that schedule to be the way it was. Students would be in school half days, four days a week … and that was to accommodate all the bus routes that needed to happen" (Large City Superintendent, 2021).

With vaccines available for the general population, the 2021-22 school year started with in-person learning. The district provided an online K-12 school as well. These decisions were all put

forth by the Superintendent and approved by the school board. In September 2021, the board unanimously approved a vaccine requirement for all teachers and staff (or the option to do regular testing if you had an exemption). This was one of the first districts in the state to do so and was encouraged by the union president and the majority of district staff (55% of survey respondents). Weeks prior, the board unanimously voted to require masks in school buildings for those 2+ for the 2021-22 school year. At that board meeting, while the school board decision was unanimous, there were 14 parents' speeches – with ten in favour, and four against (KARE 11, 2021c). There was no state mask mandate. Logistical challenges with staffing shortages, particularly in bus drivers, mired in-person schooling. Several schools sent students to school via public transport and a number pushed back their start dates (KARE 11, 2021d). The district also received $207 million from the federal government via the American Rescue Plan (ARP) to spend on COVID-19 related learning loss (to which 20% of funds must go) and relief efforts (ex. on health and safety). To allocate the funds, the district formed an internal workgroup and ended up with four priorities: "safely reopen schools for all students, address pre-and post-pandemic unfinished learning, build lasting, equitable systems of teaching and learning, and support student and staff social-emotional needs on returning to full on-site learning" (2021 Strategic Plan, 2021). This district chose to allocate the majority ($88 million) to improve the quality of education, $66 million to virus safety and sanitization, and the rest to a variety of equity, social-and-emotional health, student service programs and operational expenses (KARE 11, 2021e).

In terms of how decisions were made throughout the past two academic years, the district worked to give the community and staff members a platform to share opinions. From March 2020 until late May 2021, COVID-19 planning groups and the school board met regularly (weekly, if not more often) to plan and respond. This took the form of response teams, staff input (via feedback form), community (family and student) input (via open forum meetings, surveys, etc), a Health Protocols Workgroup, and additional feedback forms. "Everybody was pretty much in agreement to sort of stay distance and slowly roll our students and staff back in. There wasn't a strong push to just start school in the buildings right away" (Large City Board Member, 2020b). Through engaging various stakeholders in different communication methods, the district took sizable steps to understand COVID-19 related opinions relevant to education (Safe Learning Plan Stakeholder Input, 2020). Another key feature is that for the large city district, staying in alignment with suggested state 'guidelines' is a political must. It is one of a few high profile large city districts in Minnesota, with a majority of Democratic voters who support(ed) Gov. Walz, and any straying from following the Democratic-led state guideline would be perceived negatively in an education policy system that is heavily dependent upon both constituent and state approval for funding and re-election. At the same time – the general homogeneity in opinion and political beliefs between education leaders and constituents led to very little conflict. The Superintendent reflected that "not every Superintendent felt supported to do that [to talk about the 2020 Presidential Elections to their district] because their board might be divided, or they're in a state that's very divided", but he was able to "pen a communication that went out" (Large City Superintendent, 2020).

The district is part of the Council of Great City Schools, which makes up the 75 largest school districts nationwide. They meet weekly and have an advocacy group in Washington, DC, that "was invaluable" and has "the ear of the President and the Department of Education, and the movers and shakers" of U.S. education policy (Large City Superintendent, 2021). The large city

superintendent also leads a group of larger-sized school districts in Minnesota. With strong connections and support from federal, state, and other education officials, the large city superintendent feels "pretty good…like I have a lot of, I don't want to say power. I've been very successful navigating both national and state and local political structures" (2021).

B. Case # 2: Medium City School District

In the medium school district, school closures occurred on March 15th, 2020 per the Governor's executive order and remained entirely online through the end of the school year. This decision was made by the superintendent and school board. As described by a district's school board member, "the Governor did not give directions till August 2020. It put a strain on local districts in the education system to come up with a plan that would have been appropriate" for the upcoming school year (Mid-Size Board Member, 2021a). The district had an "On Dial" Learning Model with three modes – in-person, hybrid, and distance (Return to Learning Plan, 2020). This decision was made with "a lot of meetings - a committee from MDH, a support team with an epidemiologist, county and state health officials" (Mid-Size Superintendent, 2021). The district followed a "stakeholder approach looking at state data, the county data, community data, and school data to make decisions"(Mid-Size Superintendent, 2021). "Using the local data when making decisions helped a lot because our goal was to keep kids in school as much as possible and learning and safe"(Mid-Size Superintendent, 2021). The state-required school districts to provide a fully remote learning option for all students in the 2020-21 school year and 25% of students in the district chose this online learning option.

For the 2020 Fall, the school board delayed the start of school to prepare for "an unusual year of learning" (Mid-Size District Website, 2020). Schools opened in a hybrid format with students attending school in-person two days a week and at home for three. This structure allows for better physical distancing in the space. The learning plan was designed to be flexible and amenable to local disease conditions. For example, a statewide surge in COVID-19 cases in November 2020 caused schools to move to online learning. Grades 6-12 moved to distance learning on November 16th and pre-K through 5th grade on November 30th as voted by the board. This decision was primarily motivated by the high COVID-19 case rate in the county (51 per 10,000) where the MDH suggests closing in-person schooling past 30/10,000 residents (Pioneer Press, 2020). This decision to follow state guidance was contentious with one board member describing it as "once we [the district] decided to bring the kids back, the conversation got very heated. There was just a lot of pressure. We got lots of emails from families, very intense emails saying let them learn. Families did not like that the school board was following the state guidelines", which speaks to a larger national movement occurring of school district autonomy (Mid-Size Board Member, 2021b). This conflict between state guidelines versus local constituents, termed local autonomy, is a critical issue that even district decision-makers did not like. "I think it should be a local decision. And I think it should curtail the data within your community and not be done by higher powers. What's good for the [redacted] district isn't what's good for counties or communities way up north or way down south. Everybody has their uniqueness to their community" is what the mid-size superintendent (2021) perceives. The sentiment is that different districts have "different demographics and that is the reason for being independent - that it's left up to the local community. But that didn't happen" (Mid-Size Board Member, 2020a).

The school board ultimately ended up passing a mandatory indoor masking mandate (Mid-Size District Website, 2021a). The first few weeks of August until "it was clear that the Delta variant was a whole different ball game – that kids are getting sick this time" (Mid-Size Board Member, 2021b). At the end of the 2019-20 year, the district sold the devices they were providing students for online learning, meaning returning to online learning was not an option. The district did not have the technology for online learning and could not afford to buy it. The administrator's conversations switched to "we have to do a mask mandate" to keep our kids in school (Mid-Size Board Member, 2021a). The mandate was for K-8 since older students had the option of getting vaccinated. When pressed on how the decision came about, one district board member stated "quite honestly, we decided to do it when our neighbouring districts decided to do it so there isn't an open enrollment frenzy. There was some coordinated effort, that we're all going to do this together and see what happens" (Mid-Size Board Member, 2021b). This was to prevent parent's moving students to districts whose mask policies fit what they wanted via the open enrollment mechanism. The board was worried about the financial loss from a decrease in enrollment related to the mask mandate. Further chaos ensued from the coordinated mask mandate, with a board member reflecting that "I got maybe 400 emails in two or three weeks and at first, it was pretty split between non-maskers and maskers, but by the time we made the decision, it had kind of switched to 70% pro-mandate and 30% not" (2021a).

Like the largest district – they were impacted by bus driver and other staffing shortages. They are a "long, elongated district, which, when you run out of drivers, you run out of buses. We have all the buses we need, we just need people in them to drive them. For us, that was our biggest challenge" (Mid-Size Superintendent, 2021). The reason why: according to one board member, was that "as a bus driver, you did not have the ability to know whether or not you were going to be able to drive your route or not. We lost a lot of bus drivers to other professions, garbage and truck companies, that had a reliable, sustainable source of income that bus driving couldn't offer. That is a huge fallout you're seeing nationwide right now." (2021c). The superintendent and the school board decided to redraw bus routes with families who live within two miles of schools receiving no buses (Pioneer Press, 2021). It was in Spring 2021 that in-person instruction began again with Pre-K returning on Jan 6th, K-2 on January 27th, 3-5 on February 10th, 6-8 on March 1st, and lastly 9-12 on March 8th, 2021 (Learning In A Pandemic, 2020). The decision was made primarily by "following state guidelines and following the leader and going back", which occurred due to adult vaccine approval, low case counts, and testing measures (Mid-Size Board Member, 2021b). The district schools ultimately returned and stayed in person (with a few closures due to COVID-19 outbreaks) throughout the end of the 2021 school year.

The 2021-22 school year started in person with hopes for "a more 'normal' routine this year" while following guidelines and recommendations from the MDH and MDE (Back To School 2021-22, 2021). In district planning, "the conversations around COVID were non-existent over the summer. It was not even on our radar, we all worked under the assumption that we were going back to school like normal. Two weeks into June, we realised we were in a pandemic – we needed to decide about masking and there was not going to be any official mandate from the state level. On August 12, the superintendent announced "we are following the governor's guidance that we will be recommending masking" (Mid-Size Board Member, 2021a). This was not without pushback —"it

was the most intense pressure cooker" according to one board member (Mid-Size Board Member, 2021b). "Everybody was now directly lobbying board members. We are not medical experts. This is so far outside of our wheelhouse. The administration - they're all educators. So it was following CDC or MDH guidelines. We were still trying to figure out how we can follow recommendations, but the recommendation was a recommendation – it wasn't a mandate" (Mid-Size Board Member, 2021b). The last two board members quit before their term ended because, according to them, they "can't take this anymore" (2020b). Ultimately, masks were recommended and no vaccine mandate was made.

"There are so many complicated things that are wrapped up in this that are unique to [the district] that make things ten times harder for navigating through all of these decisions" (Mid-Size Board Member, 2021b). The major issue in the 2021 Fall was an operating and technology levy. The last district levy was eight years prior – the district had cut $7 million from their budget due to a lack of state and local funding. A school board member framed it as "if this levy does not pass, then we lose our funding. It is a pretty big deal that we are doing this really intense levy coming out of the pandemic and we've got one shot at passing this" (Mid-Size Board Member, 2021a). On top of an operational levy, "one of the biggest challenges during the pandemic that just kind of ripped open for all of us is that our technology is woefully inadequate. We're one of the only districts without a tech Levy, which means we do not have any money for a one to one programme for laptops. Quite frankly, when we were deciding to go back last February, we couldn't afford to go back on the hybrid model because of our technology. It was glaringly obvious that we need a tech levy" (Mid-Size Board Member, 2021a). Voted in November of 2021, ultimately, 56.45% of voters approved a replacement operating levy that stabilises the budget and generates around $14.7 million per year (for 10 years) (KSTP, 2021). 51.54% of voters approved the district's first technology levy, which provides each student with a device, replaces out-of-date classroom technology, and generates $4.7 million per year over the next 10 years to be available for technology-related expenses (KSTP, 2021). Getting the levy passed was not simple - "the last several [school board] meetings have been some of the worst experiences I've ever had because people are so angry. Right now all of their anger is directed at the levy, but it has rolled into outbursts at our board meetings, and not just during open forum" (Mid-Size Board Member, 2021b). The district spent most of the 2021 summer on community surveys related to the levy. The behaviour is affecting the school board - with two members (out of seven) stepping down early. Levy opinions got mixed with masking opinions, with the rhetoric "if they do masks in our schools, you shouldn't vote for the levy" (Mid-Size Board Member (2021b). Not approving the levy would have cost the district around $12 million - 10% of the district's budget, translating to firing 100 teachers from a 550 teacher staff - and dramatically shifting the district's class sizes (KSTP, 2021).

C. Case # 3: Small Town School Districts

Two small town school districts participated in this research with a mix of superintendents and school board members interviewed. The purpose of selecting multiple districts was the recognition that small town communities are not homogenous, thus wanting to capture distinctions within small town community school decision-making. This decision to include two districts in the small town' case study was not employed with the mid and large sized districts because a) it was more

operationally feasible to focus on one district for each and b) there are fewer larger districts so sampling only one is more representative of decision-making in larger sized schools as a whole.

The two small town districts selected had population sizes of roughly 2,600 individuals and 1,500 individuals with each school district containing approximately 1,200 and 600 children respectively. In both of the districts, schools closed on March 15th, 2020 with the Executive Order. They both formed an incident command team, made up of a few students, staff, parents, and school board members, to respond to COVID-19. The decision-making model followed was that recommendations from schools or stakeholders were brought forward, the team then evaluated the recommendation and decided whether to bring it to the school board. If brought forth, then members voted on it. For 2020-2021 planning, they "either had staff in the buildings bring recommendations to the incident command team and the school board or we'd survey parents, take that information to the incident command team, and then make recommendations"(Small Town Superintendent, 2020a). Open communication with stakeholders was a focal point in both districts. There were also "administrative team discussions, cabinet-level discussions, and school board meetings". This process of multiple work sessions and discussions eventually culminates in calling "a formal school board meeting and making a recommendation". In general, according to a district superintendent, "the board is going to accept the recommendation of their administrative team", especially if they were involved early on in the planning process (which in both districts they were), and "generally, it was a 7-0 vote with the board supporting the process and product they were involved in" (Small Town Superintendent, 2020b). This structure was used in both districts to decide to finish the 2019 school year remotely. One major immediate challenge was not having devices for elementary students, only for older ones. They "had to make some immediate decisions about how we are going to provide education" and that initially was via physical packets for elementary students and remote instruction via technology for older students.

A second key factor in the decision-making process was COVID-19 case rates. The superintendent of the first district would "look worldly then nationally, then the state of Minnesota, then our county, and then what's going on in our school. And so I kind of tried to track all of that and try to come to a determination about what we should do next"(Small Town Superintendent, 2020a). Once the emergency executive orders ended in February 2021, there wasn't that same guidance. Both small town districts worked closely with neighbouring districts to ensure everyone is taking a similar approach. "We really have a lack of direction and guidance, which on one hand allows us to make it up as we go, but on the other hand, if you don't have anything to fall back on, you just have to respond to it when it happens. The decision making. The process is just way different now, and we have to be more nimble. So if something were to happen, I'm calling that incident command team together. We're calling an emergency school board meeting, we're making a decision and we're moving forward" (Small Town Superintendent, 2020a).

Both districts started the 2020-21 school year in a hybrid model, following MDH-MDE recommendations for instruction-method based on case rates. Both districts were hearing from the community that "we need our kids in school. We will cooperate with the mask, we will do these things and we need our kids in school", and so had masking requirements (Small Town Superintendent, 2020a). They found variation in needs across the school-age groups, with high schools fairly equipped to continue some remote learning, but elementary teachers and students

needing instruction in how to use devices and do online learning. Getting technology and the internet for families was also a significant challenge. One unique challenge was that the districts "didn't see any significant surge in COVID cases until about October 2020. People questioned if it was real because we're not seeing anything here. State-wide mandates set the stage for some political happenings by not being responsive to where this area was" (Small Town Superintendent, 2020a). From a COVID-19 perspective – infectious diseases usually spread outward from high-density areas (cities), hence many small Minnesota communities did not see their first (diagnosed) COVID-19 case until the summer or even Fall of 2020.

The feeling that small town communities are not the intended target of state and federal policy decisions is, in part, likely due to political divides. Many rural communities in Minnesota are Republican-leaning, while the Minnesota governor and the U.S. President, the ones making the recommendation to close schools, are Democrats. One small town superintendent commented multiple times on the desire from families to make "those decisions [on masking, vaccines, quarantines, and school instruction method] and instead of the government trying to make those decisions for us" (2021b). "There's a strong feeling that a lot of times governments make decisions based on what's happening in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Duluth, Rochester, Mankato and they're not making decisions based on what's happening in [redacted] district. There's a tension in Minnesota that exists and a feeling that government generally doesn't apply to a [redacted] School District" is what one small town superintendent expressed (2021a). Local control and the perceived imposition of the state and federal government is a recurring theme that heightened during the pandemic. In-person learning was difficult to sustain with "staff affected by quarantine due to exposures, not necessarily cases, so there wasn't enough staff to safely operate our buildings" (Small Town Superintendent, 2021a). Coming back in January 2021 post-surge with vaccines available for adults, schools opened in person and concluded the year that way.

The 2021-22 school year continued fully in person. The board decided to "follow the language of the CDC and MDH on masking. If they mandated a mask, we would mandate masks. If they recommended it, we would recommend it. If they strongly recommended, we would strongly recommend". They ended up recommending masks. "What we strongly feel is I don't have a health background. I'm the worst person in the world to be making decisions about public health. But the CDC, I assume, has some of the world's leading experts. The MDH has our state's leading experts in public health. And so who am I, superintendent of schools, to say something different than what they say, and who's the gal, she's on her school board, she works at Target and she checks people in and out, to say that she knows better than the CDC or MDH. So the mentality we took is we'll follow their language. There's been some disagreement. We have one board member who would like a mask mandate. I keep telling him we're not there yet [in September 2021] and I don't know if we'll get there because, to get there, we would have a public health decision being made by a bunch of people who are not involved with public health" (Small Town Superintendent, 2020b). Ultimately, this district followed MDH language and encouraged, but did not mandate masks.

Below are tables summarising decision-making throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in each of the three (the two small town districts are merged) district sub-types.

Table 1: Summary of Decision-Making in Each District Type

Cases	**Decision-Makers**	**Key Stakeholders**	**Evidence Used**	**Conflicts**	**Outcome: Hybrid Reopening Date**
Large	Superintendent	State, Teacher's Union	Case counts, Political opinions	**Little:** with teacher's union	Feb. 2021
Medium	School Board	Constituents; Superintendent	Case counts,	**High**: Within school board; between constituents; masking, vaccines, reopening; related to levy; state vs local control	August. 2020
Small	Superintendent	Constituents; School Board	Case counts, Constituent opinions, Surrounding district policies	**Medium**: State vs local control; less support and resources	August 2020

Table 2: Stakeholder Summary

	Opinion and Role					
Cases	**Superinten-dent**	**School Board (SB)**	**Teacher's Union**	**Parents**	**State/ Federal**	**Key Decider**
Large	Cautious, focus on relationships, low conflict	Cautious, politically aligned, unanimous	Very anti-reopen, not listened too	Cautious, not-highly engaged	Strong alignment, supportive	Superintendent
Medium	High conflict, 1st one fired, poor SB relationship	Divided - not unanimous, Highly pressured	Not too involved; cautious, anti-reopen	Highly involved, divided, at Open Forum	Generally seen as imposing or negatively	School board
Small	Focused on community input; low conflict	Good relationship with Superintendent, generally unanimous	Not too involved; listened to, cautious	Open communic-ation, key voice, listened to	Very imposing on local autonomy	Superintendent

F. Discussion

The decision-making process was primarily at the district level and key stakeholders were the superintendent and school board. The primary motivating factor was student and staff safety related to COVID-19. Learning disruptions and socio-emotional health were secondary considerations. Prioritising disease prevention versus education impacts did vary – with the large city district being the most COVID-19 cautious (as represented by longer remote/hybrid schooling). A secondary key factor was power centralised locally. While the state set parameters on decision making via Gov. Walz's orders, the work of the MDH and MDE, and the disbursement of COVID-19 relief funds, ultimately districts choose their strategy. The ability to make decisions based on the local disease profile was highly appreciated by some stakeholders. For others, it was a divisive burden placed on school administrators. This local vs state/federal control issue is a larger U.S. education policy debate.

Superintendents are held accountable by school boards, who vote to approve or deny proposed policies. In some cases, school boards can vote to relinquish power to the superintendent. This occurred in the large city district. As demonstrated by the case studies of four school districts, the superintendent-school board relationship is critical - with communication and trust necessary for a smooth relationship. Although school boards formally hold power over the superintendent, Zeigler and Jennings (1974) found that school boards are "mere agents for legitimacy that give superintendents broad discretion and a wide berth in running the district". School boards are often not determiners of policy. Most board members are occupied more with constituents than policy creation (Howell, 2005). Localised education is a hallmark of American representative democracy, thus significant attention to constituent services is a key expectation of school boards. Constituent services are a key feature of local governance, and in this research, significant attention was given to hearing stakeholder opinions, particularly from teachers and other school staff, students, and parents.

The unprecedented-ness and unpredictability of school decision making during a pandemic greatly challenged efforts. There were no preparatory plans in place leading up to COVID-19 or even in the first months of 2020 when the virus was public knowledge. Many other institutions, especially those in other countries that experienced SARS and MERS outbreaks, two similar outbreaks, made concrete operating plans knowing their imminent fate. The U.S. blundered their COVID-19 response by neglecting the basic rules of infectious diseases – that they spread – and not preparing accordingly in early 2020. The tangled school governance system and uncertainty over who holds authority made COVID-19 planning and execution a black box that no one claimed true responsibility for.

A. Decision-Making and Stakeholder Involvement

In all districts power and authority were situated with the superintendent and school board, with their opinions guiding decisions unless other stakeholders are invited in. One key stakeholder was teacher's unions. However, in all districts, teacher's unions recalled feeling less included in decision making compared to the level that the school administrators felt they included the unions. For example, the midsize district teacher's union president remembers "being a part of a lot of the lead up to those decisions, but was not, as George W. Bush called it, the decider" (Mid-Size Teachers Union President, 2020). This is an interesting contradiction to the literature, which suggests that union influence was strong in influencing school reopening decisions. DeAngelis et al (2020) found, using data on the reopening plans of 835 districts and controlling for local demographic differences,

that school districts with stronger teachers' unions were less likely to reopen in person. In the large city district, the superintendent "works for a seven-member elected board" (Large City Superintendent, 2021). They are his bosses; however, the teacher's union was arguably more of a key player in decision-making since the school administrators had to keep them content with chosen policies to prevent a strike. The superintendent and school board compared to the unions were allies. This pitting of unions against administrators was fairly unique to the large city district, as was the alignment of the school board to the superintendent.

In the large city district, the superintendent and school board retained most of the power, with the school board ultimately voting on plans put forward by the superintendent and the superintendent's team. The teacher's union in particular played a role given that days before school closures in March 2020, the union went on strike for the first time in over decades. On March 12th, the day before mandatory school closures, they reached negotiations. This is critical district background as teacher-district relationships were already tense, so the superintendent made a special effort to include teacher and union perspectives in the decision-making process. However, from the teachers union's perspective, the union president felt their opinions were not well considered. The inclusion of constituent and stakeholder perspectives does not necessarily translate into decision-making itself. In particular - "public meetings are democracy's litmus test" where listening is not guaranteed (Tracy, 2010, pg 6). With a highly divisive issue, as with decisions during COVID-19, decision-makers have multiple opinion groups, thus can always justify a preemptive decision via evidence from a public meeting rather than work ground up to let public opinions guide decision-making. A key feature of democratic institutions is that power is equally spread among the masses where your vote counts. Yet, a common political theme is the reality of pluralism where power and authority are not held in a representative fashion. In a sense, teachers were given a platform so that the district could claim they included teacher perspectives. In reality, aside from the threat of a strike – of which the district had just ended one thus another one is unlikely and would be perceived poorly (with the union looking bad) by the public – there was no governance tool to ensure administrators followed union opinion (nor should they necessarily have). Hence, a contradiction exists between the strength of unions and the actual influence and power they had in shaping decision making.

Since the vast majority of states left the decision to return to in-person learning up to districts, this made teacher's unions a key player. If they did not approve of a district's plan, all they had to do was threaten to strike. The typical power balance between parents, administrators, and unions are off (Will, 2020). Many union arguments early on were that in-person schooling was not safe (something health experts and the scientific literature disagreed with by August 2021). They typically argued against in-person schooling until vaccine availability. This was especially true in high-profile urban districts – Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles, even Minneapolis and St. Paul, which struggled with union approval (Strunk, 2022). Hemphill et al (2021) found that 25 out of the 101 urban districts in the U.S. negotiated short-term amendments to collective-bargaining agreements (CBAs) between unions and district administration on compensation, workload, and distance learning. Districts with stronger unions were more likely to be in remote learning in the fall of 2021, controlling for partisanship (Grossmann, 2021). Marianno et al (2022) further found that districts with unions that had stronger second face power, meaning had the proactive ability to set the policy agenda, spent more time in distance learning in the 2020 Fall.

A key conflict lies in that it's socially unacceptable, even though it's occurring, to determine what amount of extra lives lost to COVID-19 (or infection) is acceptable for better education. That's what school decisions come down to. "The unions have made it pretty clear that they do not want teachers back in school buildings until they're 100% sure they're safe" (Will, 2020). First, without eradication, can you ever ensure 100% safety? Secondly, we live with risk every day – unions don't threaten school closure over potential motor accidents driving to school. Especially challenging to navigate is this risk relationship between preventing excess COVID-19 cases and deaths and excess long-term harm. In the Fall of 2020, while there were some evidence from public health (primarily based outside the U.S.), national and state public health authorities were generally more cautious with their reopening metrics, hence districts also had to balance traversing official public health recommendations and new data emerging that schools pose little risk of increased COVID-19 spread (Zimmerman, 2021). Public health was not clear – and finding the data suggesting schools were relatively safe required officials to look beyond official sources, the CDC and MDH, to preprints, newly published studies, and reopenings in other countries. Reopening decisions in the fall of 2020 were controversial with no clear scientific consensus and differences in public health opinion. Generally, schools are risk-averse, hence, choosing to protect immediate health was the common reasoning for many districts' cautious reopening plans. Vaccines were the initial endpoint most unions agreed upon for returning to in-person learning, yet not all abided by that. The Chicago Teachers Union voted to return to remote learning in January 2022, citing "unsafe conditions due to COVID-19" despite 91% of Chicago Public School staff being fully vaccinated, a masking requirement, and distribution of high-quality masks (Olsen, 2022). This is knowing the serious impacts of closures on children's education and future, and against direction from the city, state, and national officials in education and public health. Safety is a valid concern – however, the power balance between unions and administrators that is a direct result of the American system of local governance has shifted scarily to a point where it's unclear that accountability exists.

In the mid-sized school district, decision making was centrally made by the school boards and superintendents, similar to the large city and small town districts. However, other key actors in the decision were the general public (particularly parents) who chose to be actively involved. School board meetings were a site of dissent and active conflict about decisions regarding school reopenings and masking in a manner unseen in the other districts. It is critical to consider why one district was a site of open discussion and disagreement (mid-size), while the other had, at least the external appearance of, general agreement on COVID-19 plans (large). Lastly, in the small town school districts, decision making was centralised primarily within the superintendent and it was generally a very inclusive, constituent-forward environment. The decision-making process generally is that when policies come forth to the school board from the superintendent, they are passed. While the structure was in place for a lack of democratic decision-making to occur (the school board simply listening to superintendent recommendations), the opposite occurred. Both small town districts were strongly democratic in letting constituent opinions guide decisions as well as being transparent in how decisions without majority constituent approval were made. For example, the key motivating factors for reopening decisions were to follow expert public health guidance. The small town superintendents listened centrally to the CDC and MDH and attempted to implement their suggestions as best possible to the unique needs of the district – a more conservative, farming community. Specifically for smaller decisions such as vaccines, masking, and quarantine orders, they

followed the towns' culture. "From a political perspective, we're a conservative community and we believe that we can make decisions in the best interest of our family and community". Conservative in this context is rooted in self-government and characterised as "definable only by its opposition and rejection of abstract, universal, and ideal principles" (McLean, 2003, pg. 114). Generalised, multi-district federal and state plans on school reopenings would be a conservative opposition since it takes away local control. This focus on clear communication and transparency in the superintendent-school board's process resulted in decisions without uproar and disagreement from parents, teachers, and the community.

One key question is the extent to which decisions during COVID-19 were democratic. The U.S. political system allows for leaders to take power during emergencies via executive orders, such as Gov. Walz in Minnesota did. It's an instance where the fundamentals of democracy – its checks and balances – are removed to expedite decision-making with faith that it will return and such decisions in the public's best interest. At the beginning of the pandemic, democratic choice went away – with district-level leaders and students under mandates. Further into the pandemic, by the summer of 2020, is when pieces of democracy were restored. However, arguably power was never fully given back to districts – many administrators felt they had to follow state 'recommendations'. Studies on democratic backsliding pay little attention to the education system (Kahne, 2011). Yet, according to Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), the "erosion of democratic institutions and democratic norms and commitments is how democracies die" (pg. 101). Education decision-making was not democratic, certainly not at the start of the pandemic, but even before COVID-19, U.S. education governance was slipping from its history as the key local democratic institution. State regulations, taking control over 'poor functioning districts' (as defined by state standards), and federal dollars tied to policy implementation all demonstrate this slip of democracy.

Frankly, why should everyone get a voice in U.S. public education? Should the Target lady with limited public health knowledge get to directly contribute to health-related education plans? Having her input is what's best to maintain democracy, but that's not the purpose of schools – it's education. Perhaps pure representative democracy isn't what's best for educational outcomes. With COVID-19, the balance shifted slightly from direct participatory democracy to delegating responsibility to authorities. Historically, open forums are the purest form of participatory democracy. During the pandemic, while open forums occurred, they were a representation of 'democracy' without the accountability of implementing what the majority wanted. It became a perception challenge where constituents felt they deserved decision-making power, yet administrators knew the reality of state 'guidelines'. Districts had to navigate giving constituents a space to feel heard while implementing state wants. Some districts did it better than others. In the large city district, constituent wishes largely mirrored state recommendations, thus little visible conflict emerged. Contrastingly, in the mid-sized district, such a visible division of opinions between school board members (their votes were not unanimous), stakeholders, and the state and constituents emerged. It was a tipping point where any decision could not please the majority, hence no impetus to try to agree occurred. This balancing act is not unique – general education trends sit more authority with the state/federal government than ever before, while public opinion still believes in 'local control'. COVID-19 kickstarted how divisive local education politics can and will be. Models of governance have been put on trial at the global level with COVID-19. Differences in policy outcome, conflict, and public opinion in various governing methods – social welfare states, liberal democracies with a

strong ethos of local governance, authoritarianism, etc – uncover how governance during emergency scenarios best occurs. In the U.S., the long-term consequences of the democratic sliding that occurred in U.S. education institutions from COVID-19 are daunting, and potentially legitimise a further shift from local governance.

B. Local Control and Autonomy

A central conflict in U.S. education politics is who holds authority over decisions. Is power held locally or in the state and federal government? This power struggle emerged visibly during the pandemic with decision making confusingly falling at both the state and district levels. Across all the districts, clear communication with constituents was expected. What differed was the level of autonomy and independence desired by the decision making actors (the school board and superintendents primarily) and recipients (parents, staff, and students). The large city district was by far the most state-directed. The plans were perfectly in alignment with state 'recommendations' and timelines. For example, while stakeholder opinions were brought forth, the option to start the 2020-21 school year in person was not discussed by the superintendent and board — conveniently in agreement with state 'recommendations' to begin the school year in online learning. There was little conflict with that plan since the appearance of uniform agreement on the 'right thing to do' hampered any conflict. If you were to publicly disagree, you disagreed alone against the community's values. It's questionable if having extremely strong preventative COVID-19 measures was truly unanimous or a result of conformity to district norms (being an urban, primarily democratic, high population-of-colour). When state and district opinion fall in line together (the large city district), the issue of local autonomy does not emerge as dominantly. By contrast, in both the small and mid-sized school districts, all options were on the table (remote, hybrid, in-person, as well as yes or no to mask and vaccine mandates) with public support for each.

One specific aspect that influenced decision making is district funding and support. Variations in technology access, American Rescue Plan (ARP) allocations, and non-funding support methods (such as connections to state officials, other district plans, etc) all varied between the districts. Online schooling requires many resources – individual computers, at-home broadband access, school services such as meals at home, etc – that most districts were not equipped to provide. Hence, shifting to remote learning in March 2020 was an operational feat. In-person was also operationally challenging, with a need for smaller class sizes, masks, filters, and more. The execution of multiple learning modes – hybrid and remote or in-person is exceptional. The large city district received far more support – from state officials such as the MDH, MDE, and Governor's office and administrator-to-administrator – that no other districts mentioned having access to. For example, at the beginning of COVID-19, the large city superintendent had "a good friend who is Superintendent in a district out there [in Washington state where the first COVID-19 outbreak occurred] so I'd been in touch with her" (2021). The large city district received notice on Saturday, the 14th of March, 2020 that they "had a call with a Governor on Sunday, the 15th in the morning, and followed with the Commissioner from the Department of Education" to give them a heads up on executive order closing schools (Large City Superintendent, 2021). In comparison, small and mid-sized districts never mentioned being in conversation with federal officials, and only limited direct communication with the governor's office. They more heavily relied upon communication and support from surrounding district-level officials. For an education policy system within democratic systems, the discrepancy in

resource and support access is worrisome. It was political support levels that varied – not that of public health or education officials suggesting how politics and political actors strongly influenced some of the largest, most critical school districts in the country. Compared to the long, intentional history of education remaining outside of politics – this direct influence of politics on education is worrisome and perhaps suggestive of larger trends.

As shared in the results section, members of the small and mid-sized districts alluded to strong desires for local control over decisions, while none of the large city stakeholders interviewed did. This difference in perception of who held control and how much state/federal officials dictated decisions varied between districts and stakeholders. One mid-sized school board member reflected that "it was just following orders from the top. That's what our district did", whereas the large city district superintendent said, "the state was also very clear in not directing districts. They are providing district options". In differing districts, the power dynamic of independent decision making versus state and federal guidance was perceived differently. The medium city and small town districts perceived the state's 'guidelines' to be unofficial mandates with 'recommended' in place to give the (false) perception of local control. In contrast, multiple key stakeholders in the large city district noted a sense of independence in decision-making and congruence with state 'recommendations' that they followed by choice. Their decisions aligned strongly with the state's opinions (which were more strict and health-conscious) likely because it's a Democratic government and the district votes majority Democratic. The large city district and the state-aligned in ideology and COVID-19 opinions, hence the sense of local control and district-level independence was not threatened as it was in the medium and large city districts. This shift away from local power is not unique to COVID-19; it's been happening and continues to happen and depending on the district's general ideology, is happening calmly or with intense opposition. It's not necessarily bad: "the hyper-local authority sounds good on paper and in theory. To give total authority to the school board to make these decisions seems very attractive. In real life, the school board doesn't have a lot of power. It looks like it does. It seems like it should. But really, our hands are tied in so many ways" – coming from a school board member in a medium sized district, one that campaigns strongly for independent, district-level decision-making powers. Back to Target lady, why should she, over a specialist employed by the state or federal Department of Education, be the determiner of education?

The history of education largely charts this unclear power divide and divisive disagreement. "Divergent views exist on whether education should be considered a public good that benefits everyone or a private good that primarily serves individual needs" (McGuinn, 2013). In public opinion surveys collected during the pandemic, 40% of Americans think that state health agencies should exercise "a great deal of influence" on school COVID-19 policies compared to 25% for local school boards (Helmstetter, 2022). This is in contradiction with the reality that school boards and superintendents did ultimately retain decision-making power as long as they were generally in line with state recommendations (determining case counts via instruction modality and accepting state testing resources). Perception of who decision-makers listened to heavily determined levels of district conflict. In the large city district, state guidelines validated district decisions in a way that allowed them to borrow authority from the state. In the small and medium districts, this power balance between constituents and the state was constrained – while they felt pressure to follow state 'recommendations', a strong opposing constituent perspective on reopening guidelines and local autonomy made doing so challenging. State authority was perhaps intentionally blurry. They issued

guidelines as recommendations but offered financial and health support (ex. COVID-19 testing) if you accepted state imposition. The state controlled districts by their pursestrings and via resource access while outwardly promoting local control and independence, throwing district leadership in the conflict zone to deal with the consequences.

C. Ethical Uncertainty and Weighting

Notions of what is considered morally and ethically right and wrong have shifted during the pandemic (Francis et al, 2020). Public messages that utilise moral principles - for example 'you are a bad, immoral person if you don't get vaccinated' - have increased during the pandemic (Everett et al., 2020; Francis et al, 2020). District school administrators are unique as decision-makers relative to other leaders as they are in contact with their constituents daily. That's the intention of local governance. Yet, if every person that had a differing COVID-19 opinion proposed a moral argument to their superintendent or board member, that is an overwhelming amount of moral uncertainty and distress going into the psyche of one person. Add in the media, politicians, and the intense scrutinization of education leaders and district administrators have to be emotionally and ethically drained. Decision-making is proposed to involve both cognitive and affective (emotional) processing according to the dual-process model (Greene et al, 2001). Cognitive processes are based on reason and utilitarian methods (cost-benefit analysis), while affective processes are faster and rely on emotion processing and social cognition (Greene et al., 2001; Patil et al., 2020). It's unclear what mix of processes school administrators went through psychologically, but decision-making was emotionally taxing and ethically complicated. In the large city district, one school board member passed away from COVID-19. This likely massively disrupted the board's perspective, skewing them towards a more cautious approach because of the emotional, personal experience with COVID-19 risk they all had. Personal COVID-19 experiences are a very salient example of affective reasoning clouding decision-making.

The key challenge in decision-making is the uncertainty of how to weigh different future impacts. How should policymakers balance the many proximal and distal, direct and indirect, health and socioeconomic consequences of varying COVID-19 policies? Ultimately, one must make trade-offs on what to prioritise and without a framework to do so, a biased (thus wrong from an ethical perspective) decision will be made. Early on in the pandemic, the expected value (EV) of 'lockdowns', meaning school closures and more, were high in reducing direct mortality and morbidity. However, at a point in time – around the fall of 2021 – that seesaw shifted with long-term consequences of school closures and other stay-at-home measures adding up. After vaccines were available, the bar shifted further away from school closures being justifiable as its benefits decreased (people were now less likely to be severely sick or die from COVID-19). At some point, we entered a new phase of a protracted pandemic where it was no longer an emergency state, thus total 'lockdowns' were not justifiable (to some), but COVID-19 was still very real thus 'return to normal' was also not favoured. With schools, this was arguably in the fall of 2020 Fall when we knew reopening was relatively safe, closed schools were increasingly harmful, but opinion was divided on what policy to follow since one group suffered in each scenario. These trade-off calculations are difficult with answers depending on the objective. The decision to reopen implies prioritising long-term indirect harms of remote learning over immediate COVID-19 health risks. Keeping schools closed implies the reverse. How policymakers decide justifiably what objectives and measures

to take is perhaps one of the trickiest long-term political questions and it has only gotten more complex and emotionally charged with COVID-19-related decisions.

The most utilitarian and rational framework for policy making, according to Berger (2020), is to look at the expected value (EV) of different outcomes, particularly weighing the costs and benefits of each course of action and its impact, in both the short and long term. This did not occur. Decision-makers were influenced by personal opinions, politics, teacher's unions, the media, parents, and more. Humans are not inherently rational or utilitarian (Francis, 2020). Policy is not either – discounting via discount rates (typically set between 3-7%) is a metric used that translates into us as a society valuing future human lives 3-7% less than those of us alive now (Frederick, 2003). With education, much of its benefit lies in impacting students' future, future society and future generations. Hence, school closures massively impact the future relative to now. It appears, based on CDC guidelines, that public health institutions did not appreciate the sizable long-term impacts of closing schools. Teacher and student safety was a much higher priority, with Gov. Walz, a former teacher, stating he "knows what you're losing" and that the "decision to close schools has a magnitude of consequences. (This) will change life in Minnesota" (MPR, 2020). The same day, Gov. Walz was "not yet ready to take such a step" and close bars and restaurants (MPR, 2020). It is an ironic reality that schools closed before bars. This makes sense given that humans choose present impacts over future ones (Nan, 2019). It is both an issue of poor framing with a high emphasis on short term impacts, a lack of foresight that online learning is not effective for learning, and that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was not that harmful to kids. The child safety question was unknowable with the initial school closures in March 2020 but at the start of the 2020-21 school year, scientific and epidemiological evidence suggested that COVID-19 infection in children and schools was not extremely dangerous and the education and social impacts of poor learning are. When questioning the school board and superintendents on this balance, child safety remained a key reason for delayed opening until January 2021 after vaccines were introduced. At the same time, science and evidence were the guiding factors determining such school policies. Important to note is that there was different science – from differing local COVID-19 rates to different conclusions on the safety of reopening. This was all science, and districts did make scientifically-informed decisions. Districts could choose the science they wanted to fit their decisions. Relative safety still means children and staff in schools are at risk, but generally, the health risk COVID-19 posed was perceived to be higher than what science was suggesting. This is not surprising – emotions and misconceptions rather than pure science and rationality guide one's risk perception (Ambady, 2002). What is harmful is knowing that bars and restaurants and other social functions were closed as late as possible, after schools, and reopened before schools suggesting that we as a county and society care least about education and future society. As one scholar puts it, "schools should be the last to close and the first to open" (Elissa, 2021). Unfortunately, this hasn't been true.

A second ethical consideration is who should make school policy decisions? Each decision stakeholder has different biases and that, coupled with the fragmented nature of education governance, challenges decision-making. Many local education leaders expressed a desire for public health officials to make decisions since it is a public health emergency. However, public health officials, as seen in the CDC's 2020 Fall guidance, prioritise health. Teachers Unions' prioritise their safety. This ultimately left local-level school administrators to choose which 'guidelines' aka values to follow. The challenge is that instrumental policy decisions were left up to individuals, who were not

elected to make decisions during a pandemic, making decisions in a highly emotional, ethical, and politically charged public manner. The large city superintendent mentioned having " to make a lot of decisions that weren't in policy and weren't scripted. I took some critical feedback from staff" (2021). He also had "one pretty strong board member who knows how bad distance learning was …so that was challenging to work through" (Large City Superintendent, 2020). The school board member did agree to the Superintendent's plans and publicly approved them. The reality that two education leaders had different perspectives on what's 'right' is normal, showcasing different values and decisions, but ultimately one's views were influenced and amended to match the other.

Stress can influence moral decision-making (Lützen et al., 2010; Starcke et al., 2011; Youssef et al., 2012; Romero-Rivas et al, 2020). Specifically, those in high-stress professions can have higher levels of emotional involvement, empathic concern, and view utilitarian decisions as less morally acceptable (Mazza, 2020). High-stress professions in this study were frontline workers during the pandemic who had to respond to stressful situations, such as limited resource allocation in the hospital setting and seeing illness and death. School leaders, particularly at the district level were in an extremely high-stress position during the pandemic – responsible for keeping students, staff, and the community safe while also ensuring learning goals are met. If school administrators fit the high-stress profile, it provides an argument for how school policymaking was emotionally driven and less utilitarian. It suggests that utilising standardised decision-making frameworks built upon utilitarianism could alleviate highly impactful high-stress, emotionally charged, and potentially irrational (or less than rationality) decision-making. With COVID-19, the first few months were an emergency – it simplified, even clarified, decision making to emergency executive orders. Initial school closures were generally agreed upon and received little backlash. When the Governor removed the emergency executive order over the 2020 summer, COVID-19 was no longer an emergency – there was no unifying, singular decision accepted. The subsequent phase of protracted, semi-emergency where impacts remained high but the long-term social harms of school closures also built up created the conditions of uncertainty and opinion differences. It is in this second, more protracted and ethically uncertain phase that more conflict, controversy, and mistrust among decision-makers and school decisions occurred.

With these case studies being situated in Minnesota, George Floyd's murder over the 2020 summer impacted how districts were thinking about race and other socio-economic demographics. Race and equity became such a necessary consideration for school reopening decisions. The data on the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 and school closures on students of colour meant supporting at-risk students became a key guiding factor for some districts, particularly the urban ones. That conversation was happening nationally. However, since his murder occured in Minneapolis, everything was much more salient to the communities, particularly in the large city district, because of it's high student of colour rate. It changed the conversation how schools interact with the pandemic, systematic racism, and supporting families. It also placed significantly more deemand on school leaders to be community leaders and make racially-infored decisions. The large-city superintendent reflected that "we talk about the emotions of a distance learning school district. Well, how about losing a community leader who's also your boss, your governing board leader, and then having the tragic circumstances of George Floyd being murdered for everyone to watch and not a staff member or student to even hug and embrace for what we were all witnessing with a coverage of. So it was truly a dark time and I had to do my best as a black leader to be there

for our community in a virtual way in such a personal time. It just made it very, very, very hard. Summer was reprieve for everyone to just really get away and kind of disassociate from what had been going on" (Large City Superintendent, 2021).

The challenge is twofold. High-risk students (low income and people of colour) face disproportionately negative consequences of remote learning, thus getting them back in the classroom is a priority. However, those same students (and their families) also experience the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19, where they or members of their communities are more likely to suffer serious health consequences (hospitalisation and death). Specific communities experience disproportionate short-and-long-term impacts, challenging decision-making. Race and equity conversations escalated over the 2020 summer and affected the conversations about reopening. This was especially true for the large-city district where the district being primarily students of colour and a high-poverty rate school pushed leaders towards a cautious reopening. Given the high-risk status of the school district's community, school leaders felt the immediate harms of COVID-19 were too high to consider reopening schools. While conversations around race and disproportionate harm came up in the other districts, they were not nearly as salient. One reason is that the other districts generally had both hybrid and remote learning opportunities so those high-risk families always had the option to be more cautious and continue in remote learning. In the large-city district, families didn't have to make that choice – the district-mandated remote learning in the fall of 2020. The politics of race, especially since this research focused on Minnesota districts, got translated into school COVID policies with the tradeoff between short-and-long-term consequences becoming more salient.

The other serious complication – something even the most prepared systems would struggle with – is that it was not one decision or one crisis. Throughout COVID-19, it's been thousands of layered small decisions and crises that combine to produce a phenomenon of remarkable complexity. With reopening schools came questions of transportation among driver shortages, food among staff shortages and supply chain disruptions, inside air quality, filtration systems, physical distancing, testing, masking, quarantine, isolation, grading, curriculum changes, and more. Leaders could not make one decision to close schools and be done, as some other countries did with COVID-19 and other disrupted events (ex. Ebola in West Africa in 2014). Especially in the Fall 2020, decision-making was less of a two year decision on school policy and more month-by-month. There was a lack of pressure to make long-term decisions – most districts made fall 2020 plans with statements that they would revisit the COVID-19 situation monthly to make appropriate changes. This perhaps led to a sunk cost fallacy and putting off changes, where it was easier to continue with the method they have been in (hybrid or remote) since changes in instruction methods demanded so much planning and resources. Perhaps driving the large-city district's decision to stay in remote learning large-city was more driven by (a lack of) resources than cautious COVID perspectives. While resource constraints were an issue, from the interviews with stakeholders in the large-city district, COVID cautious personal opinions from key leaders and the district community appeared to more saliently influence outcomes. The U.S.'s democratic system is a double-edged sword in that it keeps accountability where schools simply couldn't have closed without providing suitable distance learning. At the same time, because everyone has power (via channels like open forum), that massively complicates how decisions should be made in the best interest of everyone.

D. Following the 'Science'

Federal material on COVID-19 education decision making has often gone awry, either influenced by or taken up as a partisan, political tool or simply unfeasible to implement locally. For example, CDC recommendations for the 2020-21 school year suggested a 14-day COVID-19 case count as the metric for determining if in-person schooling is 'safe' or not – yet chose a scale where only 4% of children were in districts with disease transmission is low enough for in-person learning. The C.D.C itself emphasised that "the recommendations were not intended to prevent in-person learning", yet they did exactly that by selecting low case count metrics unreachable by most U.S. counties (Keefe, 2021). Additionally, these CDC guidelines are based on community spread, which is often unrelated to school spread (NPR, 2021). The CDC, the nation's leading public health authority, essentially suggested that schools should not return to in-person instruction for a long-time. Yet, this is very oversimplified and one-sided compared to the complexity of what the scientific literature, epidemiological data, and other non-government public health leaders supported. Generally, there was no clear consensus on whether reopenings were safe in the Fall of 2020. However, evidence was quickly emerging that schools are generally safe to reopen in person, especially considering the known harms of remote learning. It's a bad sign when public health government guidance varies so drastically from what scientific evidence supports and showcases how public health and science have not been spared by pandemic politics. This reality is a scary thought when all of the districts interviewed utilised CDC and MDH (of whose guidance was based on the CDC) guidelines for school COVID-19 decisions. Districts needed to go beyond the public health chain of authority (listening to the MDH and CDC) to international data and pre-prints to see the evidence that school reopenings could be done safely, yet officials making that jump between public health officials was perhaps not normative and acceptable.

Across all districts in this research and the literature, school administrators noted that quarantine orders, such as those in the CDC guidelines recommending children be quarantined for 10 days when a contact tests positive, heavily disrupted in-person instruction. "We had a quarantine outbreak, we didn't have a COVID outbreak" is how one mid-sized city school board member described it (2020a). One small town district went to hybrid learning in November 2021 because of "staff that were affected by quarantines – not necessarily an exposure, not necessarily cases" (2020b). According to another small town superintendent, "if I could have changed anything, it would have been our quarantine practices. It was frustrating because the guidance was it didn't matter if you were wearing a mask [if you got exposed], so what is the incentive for a person to wear the mask if they're going to be quarantined anyway? (2020a). The only district not affected was the large city one – because they were heavily cautious (beyond what the scientific community was supporting) and not in person until these quarantine guidelines changed.

They are just guidelines and districts (should) have local autonomy in decision-making. It takes extreme self-confidence for a school district administrator not trained in public health to disregard the guidelines from the national and state public health authorities and make their determinations of how best to educate during a pandemic. Most, if not all, leaders did not and would not feel comfortable making that decision and why should they? The CDC/MDH guidelines

highlight two remarkable issues. First, the unprecedented situation of CDC guidelines bowing more to political pandemic alignments than to scientific evidence. Public health was highly politicised during the pandemic. Second, how school administrators – often one person, the superintendents themselves, were placed with the immense burden of making health and safety decisions without or against clear guidance from public health officials. The burden of deciding between people's lives with COVID-19 against children's education and future is in the hands of individual school administrators, who, no matter what decision they made and with what evidence, always harmed someone. In the best-case scenario – that upset was small and not shared widely, as occurred in the large city district. In the worst-case scenario – it led to firings (in the mid-sized district the superintendent was brought out of their contract early after the 2019-20 SY ended), verbal abuse and threats against school board members, and heated political and personal attacks. This does not include the consequences of chosen policy decisions – of which some group is harmed.

What this suggests is that decision-makers had opinions on the 'right' course of action for schools and found the evidence to justify it. "It's disconcerting. We have doctors telling us one thing, we have people working in the system that tells us something different. And so who are you going to listen to?" is what one small town Superintendent said when asked what was used to make decisions (2020a). They reflected that "I have a different perspective than my director of finance, who's in the very next room … than my administrative assistant. We have different perspectives amongst our principals" (Small Town Superintendent, 2020a). Whether scientific studies, guidance from the CDC, or presidential support for reopening schools, people support or condemn evidence based on if it fits their narrative. With the science available to support a myriad of decisions, trusting that decisions based on science were made objectively, as multiple stakeholders said they did, is difficult. While districts did use different science – their local case rates and resources differed – there was an option to justify leadership decisions with pick-and-choose scientific evidence. For example, in the Fall of 2020, all districts across Minnesota had a relatively similar COVID-19 case count. The urban areas were generally higher because of a higher population count, but the cases per 100,000 people were generally similar across Minnesota. Yet, each district in this research made different school policy decisions in August 2020 and primarily justified based on COVID safety (measured via case counts). How did they reach different outcomes based upon a similar statewide epidemiological COVID-19 profile? Is science guiding decision-making or are highly-emotional, morally-guided decisions justified via science? This phenomenon is known by many names – motivated reasoning, confirmation bias, the Dual Process Model, and cognitive justification. When we justify a chosen conclusion rather than use evidence to make conclusions, the best (most utilitarian) decision isn't always selected.

Within moral psychology, theories such as the Social Intuitionist Model propose that moral judgements are often made via intuitions and then rationalised (Haidt, 2001). Reason "is often like a press secretary" where we find " reasons to justify decisions that were not made through deliberate reasoning" (Baumman, 2022). Political decisions and policymakers are not immune to these arguably universal errors in decision making. There is no reason not to believe (and a plethora of evidence in favour) that these moral judgements and reasoning biases did not occur in school policy makers' decisions. If, and there exists enough evidence to say so with certainty, COVID-19 education policies were political decisions, then the decisions were certainly influenced by social groups and personal affiliations. Public health was similarly influenced by politics and personal beliefs. Social groups and attachments are key factors determining political beliefs where the primary motive of decisions is to

signal loyalty to one's ingroup (DeScioli, 2016; Simler & Hanson, 2018, ch. 16; Hannon, 2021). With this in-group lens, the goal shifts from what is the best policy to what is best for me and my group. Parisian divide with Democrats only voting for democratically-supported policies, not based on what's best for the public – and the inverse with Republicans – best exemplifies this. "Hot cognition", where political decisions become emotionally charged with a positive affect (emotional regard) on our own political sides' judgments and a negative affect on 'the other side' could also be occurring (Lodge, 2005). One's emotions, political opinions, and moral perspectives bias decision-making. Likewise, we side strongly on politically, emotionally, and morally divisive opinions. With the general political situation around COVID-19 in the U.S., including years of build-up partisanship and political aggression, school policies were very politically divisive, sided, and emotionally charged to a point that most certainly influenced policymakers (superintendents and school boards). Objective decision-making did not occur.

Power was deferred from the federal government to states, who then deferred it to districts – to unique individuals who – except the superintendent – are in volunteer roles (the school board members) and not public health experts. It's unclear whether federal and state officials abdicated responsibility because it was too challenging or due to the historic structure of local education governance. The twenty-year trend of centralising education away from districts does not align with the decision to give power to districts, suggesting that it was an abdication of power, perhaps due to the complexity and uncertainty of COVID-related decisions. District officials made ethically-ambiguous decisions outside of their expertise, with limited state and federal guidance, among highly varying and divisive public opinion, and faced backlash regardless of the outcome.

G. Conclusion

School is important and protecting health is important. Unfortunately, in an ongoing long-term public health emergency, we must figure out a way to delicately balance both, prioritising minimising immediate loss and long-term harm. With the COVID-19 pandemic and education in the U.S. the primary challenge was conflict in the 'right' decision regarding reopening. While it was communicated among the public as 'reopening or not', the decision was not binary. Hybrid existed as the default compromise with many districts, especially non-partisan mid-sized ones, choosing to cater to all constituent needs with in-person, hybrid, and fully online learning. It also explains the sluggishness of returning to full in-person learning, where districts could push back on deciding by choosing both through hybrid. Hybrid should have erased conflict – everyone could get what they wanted. It didn't because school decisions weren't just about schools, it was an overreaching social, emotional, and political division. In Minnesota, the school decision making process was a) influenced by politics and political considerations, b) made by the superintendent and school board with stakeholder input from those invited into the conversation, and c) justified using ethics, emotions, and take-your-pick science. Conflict between published state and federal guidelines and local decision-making power was an issue only in the small and mid-sized districts, suggesting geographical differences in resources, support, and perspectives on state/federal guidelines. An explanation is the level of homogeneity in the district's COVID-19 perspective where districts with higher perceived homogeneity in opinions (ex. mask mandates) had fewer visible conflicts. Generally, trust between the school board, the superintendent, and key constituents (parents and teachers) was essential for simplified, lower conflict decision making. A secondary key result of local control and governance is that districts and decision-makers (i.e. superintendents and board members) had to articulate value schemes and evidence to justify their policy decisions. The content of these value schemes varied district-by-district, with decisions justified by a combination of science (ex. supporting scientific literature), ethics (i.e. this is right or wrong), and politics (i.e. my constituents want this). School district leaders emerged as the key deciders in school policies and used science to defend premade political and ethical decisions.

The key limitation of this research lies in its focus on four school districts. It is to be expected that across the roughly 13,800 school districts across the U.S. immense variation in their methods for COVID-19 policies occurred. While more generalised takeaways on how school policy decisions can be made from a case study of four districts combined with theoretical justifications, additional research into other districts, particularly in other states, is needed. Secondly, there are three methodological issues. Firstly, not all stakeholders were interviewed due to timing constraints and unwillingness to participate, hence this is an incomplete picture of a district's education profile. Secondly, interviews lasted approximately 1-1.5 hours, which is not enough time to capture the entire COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, this was done retrospectively with hindsight bias and forgetfulness certainly occurring. While nothing can solve this, in the future, transparent public sharing of the decision-making process as it occurs would prevent hindsight bias and secondly reduce the need for this research in the first place.

The key conclusions are that decision-making during a public health emergency is extremely complex and requires an ethical selection between competing priorities. Given the education policy framework in the U.S. is highly decentralised, conflict between federal, state, and local opinions regarding school policy, COVID-19 safety, and partisan politics challenged notions of who held

responsibility for making such policy decisions and any decisions made. Key challenges were there was a) no pre-set framework for ethical decision making, b) public health decisions were placed on non-field experts (i.e. superintendents and school board members), c) it was highly politicised, sensationalised via media, and d) an emotionally-charged public with avenues to voice opinions invited conflict. Ethically complicated, publicly divisive school public health decisions were put in the hands of school administrators with little guidance. Individual districts chose via personal moral and political opinions, justified by science, and depending on whether those decisions fell in line with the district's public opinion faced immense criticism and anger or silence and respect. In essence, school decision making was as highly politicised, emotionally and ethically driven, and divisive as the rest of the U.S.'s COVID-19 experience. It also speaks to the struggles with the U.S.'s education policy framework. This research adds value by identifying the process by which COVID-19 policies were made and suggests considerations for future school-disruption decision-making.

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I. Appendix

a. Guiding Questions for Interviews

1. Tell me your story
2. What was your reaction to the pandemic?
3. What was the hardest part?
4. When did you start discussing a return to in-person school and what were those conversations like? How did they progress?
5. What work do you do and how was it impacted by the pandemic? What are your role and responsibilities typically? What about during the pandemic?
6. Who and what were guiding your views and your opinions?
7. Who are you listening to when you were making these decisions?
8. Could you tell me a little more about that
9. How did the political situation and political representatives influence the conversation around re-opening?
10. Elections, state guidelines, federal guidelines
11. How did you ultimately decide? How did you balance the needs of all the stakeholders?
12. What was the most important goal in making these decisions?
13. How much did guidance from above (what the state was promoting) versus from your constituency impact your decision?
14. What would you have done differently if you had known what you know now?
15. How is the nature of where you are - the geography, your town's culture - impact the decision?

b. De-Identified List of Interviews Conducted

Large City District

1. Superintendent
2. School Board member
3. Second School Board member
4. Third School Board member
5. Teachers union president

Mid-Sized City District

1. Superintendent
2. School board member
3. Second School board member
4. Third School board member
5. Teacher

Small Town District

1. Superintendent (District 1)
2. Superintendent (District 2)
3. School Board member (District 2)

c. Governor Walz's Decision to Close Schools on March 15th, 2020

"My top priority as Governor is the safety of Minnesotans. As a former teacher, and father of two teenage kids, I am ordering the temporary closure of schools so educators can make plans to provide a safe learning environment for all Minnesota students during this pandemic. Closing schools is never an easy decision, but we need to make sure we have plans in place to educate and feed our kids regardless of what's to come." (KARE 11, 2020a)

d. Minnesota School Timeline

March 15th, 2020: Gov. Walz signed Executive Order 20-02 calling for school closures until at least March 27th, 2020 to allow for district planning on schooling during COVID-19

April 16th, 2020: Gov. Walz extended Executive Order 20-02 to mandate that all Minnesota schools finish the 2019-20 school year remotely

July 30th, 2020: Gov. Walz signed Executive Order 20-82, implementing Minnesota's 2020-21 Safe School Learning Plan

August/September 2020: Minnesota schools began the 2020-21 school year

Late-November/December 2020: Many school districts went fully online as a surge in COVID-19 cases occurred across Minnesota

January 19th, 2021: The State of Minnesota mandates that all teachers are eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine

February 17, 2021: Gov. Walz released a plan stating that all middle and high school schools must offer in-person instruction (either full time or hybrid) to students by March 8th, 2021

June, 2021: The 2020-21 school year ends, most districts in Minnesota ended with in-person instruction

August/September 2021: Minnesota schools began the 2021-22 school year, most districts began with in-person instruction