

Connecting with K-12 Students During COVID-19: Findings and Recommendations from a Survey of North Carolina Teachers

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This brief uses data from a survey of educators in nine districts participating in the North Carolina Resilience and Learning Project on the challenges of remote learning and education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It offers recommendations for improving educational equity during remote learning, addressing the following areas: technology access, availability of adult support, student well-being, adapting to virtual learning, reimagining expectations, and supporting teachers.

Introduction

With the ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, members of the education community from district staff and educators to students and families are finding themselves in uncharted territory. Most schools in North Carolina are set to open their physical and virtual doors next week. However, the challenge of educating our future generations amidst a pandemic remains. As schools transition to online and hybrid classrooms for the fall, they must continue the process of innovating and improving strategies to best serve all students equitably.

Background

Schools serve as institutions that not only provide children with education, but also with critical resources for nutrition, physical and mental health, and social connection. As schools scramble to identify ways to meet these myriad needs, the first and most basic conversation around educational equity in the age of COVID-19 has centered on access. In order for students and teachers even to begin to participate in the virtual education system, they must have reliable access to computers and high-speed Internet. Beyond addressing access to technology, school districts must consider the inequities that will be further exacerbated if they choose to focus solely on the academic aspect of distance learning. During a traditional school year with in-person instruction, schools can monitor well-being and acknowledge and address the multitude of factors that influence students' and teachers' lives. The coming academic year will require schools to think strategically and plan carefully on how to best accommodate issues ranging from child care for teachers' children, to unsupervised students at home, to training for new technology.

Educators have made tremendous efforts during the past school year and over the summer to engage with their students and communities in ways that lessen the burden of the pandemic. They have reached out with surveys and phone calls, staffed student hotlines, and provided free meals to students in need. All of this and more will be needed to support students and families as schools reopen.

Moreover, continuous fluidity in the scope of this pandemic will require schools to pivot and flex their strategies based on ongoing and emerging needs. We will begin this year with schools operating under one of two plans, “plan B” or “plan C,” per North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper’s guidelines. Schools choosing “plan B” will open for classes in person at reduced capacity while still offering a fully remote learning option for students and families who choose it. Schools choosing “plan C” will operate entirely remotely for all students.

Regardless of which option schools choose, this year will place an enormous burden on educators, students, and parents. Teachers again will be asked to serve on the front lines of the pandemic, managing their personal safety and navigating new ways of teaching while caring for their own families. Students will face the need to learn and grow without the social interaction that is so integral to their development and education. Parents will face the struggle of working while ensuring that their children have the safety and structure they need at home. As districts grapple with decisions and priorities, teachers’ voices may provide the best roadmap we have.

In an end-of-year evaluation in 2020, surveys were sent to educators in nine districts participating in the North Carolina Resilience and Learning Project, a collaboration between the Public School Forum of North Carolina and the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University. Surveyed educators teach in schools that are predominately rural, low-income, and located in central to eastern North Carolina. Through the survey, educators were able to express their thoughts, feelings, and concerns on a range of issues relating to remote learning and education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief provides a summary of survey data related to educational access and connection and offers recommendations for improving educational equity during remote learning. A [companion brief](#), “K-12 Social-Emotional Support during COVID-19,” highlights survey recommendations for supporting student and educator mental health and wellness in the coming year.

Making Learning Possible

Attendance is one of the many facets of education that changed suddenly and dramatically when the pandemic hit, with the majority of U.S. schools closing their buildings and transitioning to remote instruction.¹ Normally, taking attendance means simply assessing whether the student is physically present in the class. However, with physical instruction broadly limited, the concept of attendance is being defined by more unstructured elements: whether students log on to the school software, whether students turn in assignments, or whether students check in with teachers. Alarming, surveyed teachers reported that following school closure in mid-March, more than one in three students had 0 days of attendance for the remainder of the school year, regardless of the metric used to capture attendance. Specifically, 38% of students did not participate in *any* form of remote learning, online or paper-based.² This means that a considerable number of students missed out on three months of education, which is likely to compound the documented learning loss that occurs during summer break.³

Table 1.ⁱ Top reasons teachers hypothesized for lack of student engagement

Reason	% who listed this in their top 3 reasons for lack of engagement
No adult available to provide support and structure	77%
Student disinterest	65%
Lack of sufficient resources and technology at home	57%
Difficulty understanding material	25%
Student caring for younger siblings	24%
Uncertainty about expectations, lack of accountability	17%
Student working a part- or full-time job	10% (note: only 14% of respondents were from secondary schools)

The substantial reduction in school engagement is, perhaps, not surprising given the level of chaos and uncertainty that came with the pandemic, both for schools and families. Educational strategies and requirements fluctuated, families were left with no child care, and priorities for many parents shifted to basic needs and safety. Nevertheless, discrepancies in academic engagement will only serve to broaden existing achievement gaps: middle- and upper-income families are more likely to have the infrastructure and availability to support continued learning, while families living in poverty may be pressed to meet basic needs. Indeed, when asked their opinions as to the reasons for lack of student engagement, teachers highlighted many concerns that disproportionately affect families in poverty (see Table 1), where there are fewer resources and adults are less likely to have jobs that enable them to work from home.

As we move into a new year of remote learning, it will be critical to address as many barriers as possible, both through resources and through policy, if we are to equitably re-engage students in learning. While many of these challenges are beyond school control, there are steps that districts can take to increase student engagement and attendance.

Expectations

First, teachers are asking schools and administrators for greater support in communicating consistent expectations about technology, attendance, workload, and accountability to students, parents, and teachers.⁴ When expectations are variable or unclear, and students believe that their work will not be required or graded, they are far less likely to prioritize school engagement. Certainly, teachers will need to consider individual circumstances. Overall, however, a return to clear accountability (which many districts have carefully considered over the summer) is likely to greatly increase student engagement.

ⁱ This data was collected by asking respondents the following question: “For students with reduced participation during remote learning, what do you think are the top 3 reasons for their lack of engagement? (please choose 3)” Respondents were also allowed to write in other reasons.

Rosanbalm, K. (2020). Resilience and Learning COVID-related Educational Survey Data. COVID Teacher Survey. Durham, NC: Duke University.

Technology

For many, especially in rural communities, the greatest impediment to remote learning will simply be the means of connecting. The Internet has been championed as a solution for safe education at a distance, but the pandemic has exposed the considerable inequities in technology across our state (and nation). It is not merely that families struggle to afford a high-speed Internet connection—they may not even have access to the infrastructure needed to bring this service to their homes. While teachers reported on the creative and multifaceted efforts of their schools and districts to meet connectivity needs of the student body, technology remained an enormous barrier to learning from home. An average of 41% of students in the surveyed schools lacked sufficient Internet or computing devices to participate successfully in online learning, leaving them to rely on paper packets to learn content and complete assignments. Even among the teachers, 5% lacked sufficient access to reliable computers and Internet for online instruction, leaving them to work from their cars in the school parking lot or use their cell phones as hotspots, which proved to be costly and slow.⁵

According to the Federal Communications Commission, an estimated 21.3 million Americans lack broadband Internet access.⁶ Under both “plan B” and “plan C,” all members of the school community will require the Internet and the accompanying technology necessary to make use of it. Of all the challenges the pandemic has brought us, this one is something we can fix. There is momentum at the state level around meeting technology needs in the coming year, but it is imperative that policymakers see this plan through. In the modern age, lack of Internet access is a significant barrier to equity.

Availability of Adult Support

With teachers relegated to their computer screens, parents have been forced to fill the roles of caregivers and teachers’ assistants. Parents who are essential workers and/or have a job that cannot be done from home are put in a difficult position of finding child care, leaving an older sibling in charge, leaving the workforce (and losing their income), or simply leaving children to fend for themselves. Even for parents able to work from home, monitoring educational activities and supporting online instruction while trying to work can verge on impossible. Teachers who are parents will also face these struggles, either as they leave home to provide instruction from their classrooms or as they attempt to provide remote instruction while also supervising their own children.

There are no easy answers to these challenges—it is more evident than ever that our child care and educational systems are the essential backbone of our society. However, pulling together as a community, we may find some safe options to ensure that all children have the care and structure they need each day. Teachers suggest the following strategies, which should be implemented in collaboration with public health experts:

- **Provide child care options for teachers so that they may focus on instruction.** Under both plans B and C, teachers will need solutions for caring for their own children while they teach. This is especially true for school districts that are transitioning into hybrid learning under plan B or requiring teachers to do remote instruction from their classrooms. For safety, child care options should maintain small, consistent groups and practice social distancing to the extent possible, equivalent to school practices under plan B.

- **Organize a system of after-school programs and community organizations to facilitate supervised group virtual learning while parents are working.** In normal times, after-school programs operate from school buildings or sites provided by community organizations to provide extended care to students while parents are at work. During the pandemic, this system could be modified to provide extended care and supervise remote learning so that students are not left alone without supervision. This model could address two common barriers to engagement: Internet access and supervised structure. Sufficient space to enable social distancing might be found by using rooms in empty school buildings or closed businesses. Importantly, all programs would require oversight and monitoring to ensure they are staffed by qualified care providers, maintain safety and hygiene standards, and provide positive, supportive, developmentally appropriate care for children.

Addressing Student Well-Being More Broadly

Unfortunately, even with clear expectations, technology access, and child care, many students and families will face practical barriers to remote educational engagement as well as broader wellness concerns. Teachers expressed profound worry about their students' well-being during the pandemic and reported extensive efforts to maintain contact and connection remotely. Despite these varied attempts, however, 22% of students in surveyed schools had no contact at all with any school staff following the closure of schools in mid-March.⁷ This means that, in addition to missed schooling, more than one in five students had no monitoring or connection with school personnel to provide social-emotional support or identify well-being needs. As summarized in Table 2, teachers had wide-ranging concerns about student welfare and were anxious to find ways to connect with their students.

Table 2.ⁱⁱ Teacher concerns about students' safety and welfare

Concern	% reporting this concern
Not having basic needs met (e.g., food, shelter)	34%
Unsafe homes and neighborhoods (e.g., abuse/neglect, domestic violence, exposure to drugs, lack of supervision)	29%
Mental and emotional well-being	19%
Lack of resources and structure to learn at home	13%
Lack of school check-ins	7%
Safety concerns about coming back to school	5%
Parent mental health and its effect on the children	2%
How the rising racial tensions will affect them	1%

ⁱⁱThis data was collected by asking respondents the following question: "What concerns do you have about your students' safety and welfare?" Responses were categorized based on themes addressed.

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Though schools cannot shoulder the burden of solving most of the welfare concerns listed, they do frequently play a central role as a hub of the community for families. School staff are often the primary adults in a child's life outside of family members and, as such, have a unique opportunity to monitor child needs and make connections to appropriate community supports. Furthermore, addressing child well-being is foundational to education, because students cannot learn effectively until their basic physical, emotional, and safety needs are met. As schools begin a new year, several strategies may help them to connect with students and identify needs for support and services.

- **Maintain or increase funding for student support staff.** School counselors and social workers have a critical role to play every year, but are particularly necessary this year. With intensified stressors and economic burdens, more families are likely to need the support services these staff provide. Furthermore, student support staff can assist teachers by reaching out to students who are disconnected, identifying barriers to school engagement and providing assistance and connections to community resources. In many districts, these crucial staff members are shared across multiple schools and have overflowing caseloads. As welfare needs intensify, it is urgent that state and district leaders prioritize funding for these key positions.
- **Begin the year by personally connecting with each family.** As educators welcome students back and begin to teach them the logistics of remote learning, it will be helpful also to connect one-on-one with their family members. This may take the form of a socially distanced home visit (outside with masks on), a video call or meeting, or a phone call. These connections can provide teachers with the opportunity to check on how each family is doing, learn about their concerns and challenges for the year to come, identify the best means of communication, and begin to form the critical relationships that can foster ongoing engagement.
- **Maintain regular communication with both students and families as the year unfolds.** Communication will empower families with the knowledge they need to engage successfully in this new educational format while also providing an avenue for two-way communication on family well-being. Families with needs for services and support can be connected with student support staff, who can in turn collaborate with families on problem solving and connections to community resources.

Adapting to Virtual Learning

Even before the pandemic, the field of education was experiencing a rise in the development, availability, and adoption of technology for virtual learning. However, COVID-19 forced an unplanned and rapid transition to learning online, and many schools faced this change with little to no staff training, insufficient technology access, and little preparation for the students. If the hurdle of technology access can be overcome, the next challenge educators and students face is adapting to teaching and learning effectively within a virtual classroom.

When asked about needs for the coming year, one of the most requested supports was for professional development focused on virtual teaching.⁸ Teachers would like ongoing training on both the technology and software they are now using, as well as on the best strategies for making online learning more engaging for their students.⁹ This is an entirely new medium of instruction for most teachers, but there is an entire field of online learning that can support their success.

Teachers also worry about how to teach their students to be successful at learning remotely now that students have lost the sense of routine and discipline that comes with in-person schooling. In effect, students must re-learn the rules and procedures of the classroom. How to ask a question, how to turn in an assignment, how to participate without disrupting other students, and how to organize their work materials and study habits outside of a classroom setting. Many children went from being discouraged from spending too much time online to having a big part of their lives take place in front of a screen, asked to refrain from the temptation of online games and social media. Before active learning can begin, both students and their parents will need guidance on strategies for being a successful distance learner. Surveyed teachers suggested the following strategies:

- **Train teachers, students, and families on the technology and technology platforms that will be used in the upcoming school year.** Offer these trainings on multiple dates and times to ensure everyone can attend and record trainings for later viewing. This will help everyone feel comfortable and prepared to begin the school year.
- **Create a technical assistance hotline that teachers, students, and families can call for support.** Technical difficulties are bound to take place, and that knowledge causes anxiety and apprehension for those with less technology experience. In a time when stress levels are high, learning new systems can feel especially overwhelming. Having a ready number to call to troubleshoot issues can help mitigate the stress and promote the universal access and successful connection needed for learning.
- **Guide families in developing a plan to provide structure at home for their students.** Routines provide a sense of safety and organized work habits, both of which help children feel ready to learn and engage intellectually with their schoolwork.
- **Devote lesson time at the beginning of the school year to practicing the logistics of remote learning and discussing expectations for behavior online.** Just as teachers would set the classroom norms in a traditional in-person class, they should do the same for their virtual and hybrid classes. Students need to know, and even participate in developing, the procedures that will support an effective online classroom.
- **Provide teachers with training on how to make online learning engaging.** Though it is now being practiced at an unprecedented scale, online learning has existed and been studied for some time. Teachers can benefit from the research and lessons learned as they launch their own virtual classrooms. For example, for older students, teachers can consider preparing lesson plans using a “flipped” classroom style where instructional content is pre-recorded in short segments for students to watch independently. This allows live online or in-person time to be used for active engagement, discussion, application, and group work. For younger students, online learning can be broken up into short, manageable segments, interspersed with engaging activities and wiggle breaks.

Reimagining Expectations

As instruction continues to be delivered partially or fully online for a substantial stretch of time, educators are well aware that learning is unlikely to keep pace with the expectations of a typical school year. Students are unlikely to receive as many hours of direct instruction as they would in person, and the hours they do get may be less effective, particularly for our

youngest students. While we do not yet know the full toll that these changes will take on cumulative learning for students across the K-12 spectrum, we do expect there to be a toll—and it is unlikely that the decrease and disparities in learning will be overcome quickly. Across the next several years, it will be imperative for state and local leaders to adjust and restructure the current academic accountability metrics. Many survey respondents communicated worries that teachers and students would not succeed in the coming year based on traditional standards.¹⁰ Students will learn more unevenly during remote and hybrid learning due to differences in the support they have at home, their learning styles, their access to technology, and other factors. Younger students and those with special needs will be particularly hampered without the direct and intensive educational support that schools can best provide in person. Therefore, it would be both unfair and inequitable to measure success for students, teachers, or schools on metrics established for a “traditional” school year. Indeed, students are already behind, so teachers are faced with first filling the gaps remaining from the last school year before they can even begin new content.

This is not to say that proficiency standards should be relaxed. Students need and deserve sufficient educational support to reach competency in academic content so that they are prepared for job and college success. However, remediation for lost months will take some time. As they work towards closing the gaps in learning, schools and districts can employ some of the following strategies to promote student success and create a more equitable online and/or hybrid school system:

- **Start the year by assessing students to see where they are in their learning.** Students will have absorbed and retained differing amounts of information from the past school year. Many will have received no new content for the latter portion of the year and will need to pick up where instruction left off. Other students will have mastered some components and missed out on others. For teachers to fill these gaps and address equity concerns, they will need a regular and individualized update on the performance of their students—not as a summative assessment for the sake of a grade, but as a formative assessment to inform tailored instruction and remediation.
- **Allow for personalized intervention and/or instruction and guided study halls for students with extra learning needs.** By incorporating asynchronous (independent) online activities as part of instruction (e.g., watching educational videos, reading texts, and doing independent assignments), schools can intentionally build time into their schedules for small group and one-on-one support. Reading and math specialists, among others, will be invaluable in assisting with remediation efforts. Meanwhile, students who need more structure while completing independent work might participate in a guided study hall with online monitoring and support.
- **Carefully consider the balance between equity and accountability.** Both are important, and they need not be mutually exclusive. The key is an understanding of individual student strengths, capacities, challenges, and barriers. Not all students will have equal access to resources for remote learning, so our benchmarks may need to be tailored. Nevertheless, all students deserve educator support in setting and striving for attainable goals that push them to be their best.

Supporting Our Teachers

Teachers face the uphill battle of shifting all that is familiar as they move from traditional to online instruction. They face changes to pedagogy and instructional practices, new technology and learning platforms, and evolving safety protocols. Teachers who work in school districts operating under “plan B” will have the added workload of being in a hybrid classroom, preparing both virtual and in-person lessons. They will face worry about their students and their families, all while missing out on the daily joys that come from spending time with the students they care so much about. For their tireless effort and devotion, teachers deserve far more than our gratitude, they deserve our support. They deserve funding and resources to meet the enhanced safety and technology needs that come with COVID-19, additional student support staff to reach out to students who are disengaged or in need, ongoing training and technical assistance with new online platforms, and the opportunity to share lessons and responsibilities with other teachers so there is more time available for small-group instruction.¹¹ We ask a lot of teachers, and they give even more. It is time for policymakers and district leaders to stand behind them with the funding, resources, and personnel needed to support their heroic efforts.

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