

*These are Their Stories:*  
**Challenges, Successes, and Lessons  
Learned from Florida Education  
Stakeholders' Experiences of the  
COVID-19 Pandemic**

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**UF** | Lastinger Center for Learning  
UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

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### Research Team

Dr. Philip Poekert, Principal Investigator  
Dr. Pengfei Zhao, Co-Principal Investigator  
Stephanie Cugini, M.Ed.  
Ali Jones  
Catherine Schroeder  
Dr. Natalie Hagler  
Mu Zhang  
Lin Deng  
Dawayangzong

### Graphics and Design

Anna Horton

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THESE ARE THEIR STORIES: CHALLENGES, SUCCESSES, AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM FLORIDA  
EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beginning in March 2020, COVID-19 created a seismic shift in the United States' birth through post-secondary education systems. School districts and early childhood programs were forced to make swift decisions, develop comprehensive response plans, and quickly pivot to enact these measures within the constraints caused by the pandemic. By May 2020, the University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning had launched a comprehensive analysis of the responses and approaches taken by birth through 12th grade public and private education programs throughout Florida as a result of the closure of brick and mortar schools. The purpose of the study was to identify both the challenges and successes of stakeholders to inform planning and future decision-making at the local, state, and national levels.

During this statewide Virtual Listening Tour, researchers interviewed students, parents, teachers, and early childhood and K-12 educators and administrators about COVID-19's impact on the delivery of educational services. In addition, more than 5,000 surveys were completed, in both English and Spanish. The team also collected information on school districts' instructional plans and supports from a variety of sources, such as the Florida Department of Education, media outlets, and district communication channels.

While the individual realities differed based on many factors including role and region, our data showed common sentiments across stakeholder groups particularly around challenges such as internet access and student engagement as well as bright spots like increased frequency of communication within school communities. These common themes include:

### *The persisting challenges of educational inequality and its manifestations in a pandemic*

Many families and communities faced dire circumstances brought on by the COVID-19 public health crisis and significant increase in the unemployment rate. Educators and researchers have worried that the closure of schools would exacerbate existing educational inequalities, widen the achievement gap, and create long-lasting negative impact, particularly on the students of minoritized social groups, with special needs, from low-income families, and with other forms of vulnerabilities.

### *Enhancing the technological infrastructure for all*

Access to broadband has become a civil right in 21st Century America. Without it, youth, especially those from less affluent neighborhoods, minority groups, and rural areas, have a high risk of being denied access to schooling. In some urban areas with abundant access, family financial constraints prevented some students from continuously accessing internet service. Rural districts faced challenges in even providing internet access in areas where no provider or infrastructure exists.

### *The importance of adequately preparing teachers to execute distance learning*

Educators pivoted from face-to-face instruction to distance learning almost overnight, but many lacked the experience, familiarity, and technical skills to be successful. Training primarily focused on

familiarizing teachers with digital platforms and had little emphasis on effective instructional practices, emotional support, parents/caregivers support, or working with marginalized students in a distance learning setting.

### *Systematizing communication among educators, families, and students*

Teachers and school administrators deployed a variety of innovative approaches to communicate with students and families using multiple channels like social media, videos, apps, online surveys, phone calls, emails, and text messages. It was also through frequent communication that teachers developed their understanding of unique student needs and paved the way for customized instruction — a very effective teaching method in distance learning.

### *Assessment, acceleration, and accountability: “The COVID slide plus the summer slide”*

The issue of assessment and accountability emerged as a crucial topic as parents and educators expressed concern about the potential learning loss, or “COVID slide”, caused by the temporary closure of brick-and-mortar schools. Educators highlighted the validity challenge of evaluating students in a distance learning setting, as well as the social-emotional consequences of evaluation. Some shared that this is an opportune time to rethink accountability, assessment, and how we afford learning opportunities to students.

### *Early childhood providers are critical to keep communities functioning and supporting the economy*

Access to quality early learning programs that prepare children for academic success and support working families who fuel the economy is a cornerstone for our society’s well-being. When child care programs closed in March, it affected every aspect of a community’s economic stability. Without child care, working parents scrambled to find help or risked losing their job and without the income from parents, programs couldn’t pay their staff.

## CONSIDERATIONS

From these themes emerged several key considerations as school and system leaders face an incredible number of decisions on what to start doing, what to stop doing, what to do differently, and what to continue doing to optimize success for students, families, and communities. These may offer insights for leaders as they recover, restart, and re-envision their schools.

### *What leaders stopped doing*

The COVID-19 pandemic encouraged educators and staff to rebalance their use of resources, particularly instructional time, in order to attend more to trauma and healing -- prerequisites to accessing learning. As such, leaders reduced the priority placed on assessments and evaluations, as wellbeing in school communities became the highest priority. Leaders also recognized that broadband connectivity is

fundamental for learning, participation in civic society, and access to basic services. Growing numbers of school systems stopped expecting struggling families to provide their own internet services, empowering families to choose the most appropriate educational approach to meet their students' unique learning needs.

### *What leaders started doing*

School districts became trusted conduits of information from community agencies to families, and leaders proactively gathered and organized resources from across their communities to ensure that families' basic needs were met and children could be better prepared to continue learning. The rapidly shifting nature of schooling required a unified, coherent, and frequent approach to communication among staff and families. Leaders learned that new communication channels and modalities were needed to reach the entire community, and that multi-directional conversation was essential to account for stakeholder input in evolving plans.

### *What leaders are doing differently*

Distance learning increased visibility of students' home lives and brought to light inequities of many kinds, while also uncovering previously invisible opportunities to support families in ways that could build on a school's existing support programs. Improving equity in education is a whole-school, whole-community endeavor, including services, resources, and understanding.

Educators perceived the available professional development opportunities to be inadequate in preparing for and supporting them through distance learning and instead turned to their trusted colleagues and personal networks for support and ideas. They demonstrated the power of the Community of Practice (CoPs), which is expected to become a more significant component within professional development as educators look for collaborative experiences to integrate and practice their knowledge and skills.

### *What leaders are continuing to do*

COVID-19 brought an increased emphasis on personalized, mastery-based approaches to learning, enabling school communities to experience its potential benefits, shifting to a more seamless and continuous assessment process. Students, families, and educators also experienced the benefits of flexibility in synchronous and asynchronous learning and also saw how different modalities provide tailored learning experiences that more equitably address each child's needs.

Although COVID-19 has brought challenges of varying breadth and depth to our communities, the incredible resilience, creativity, and hope shown by so many is reflected in this report and, more importantly, in the homes, classrooms, and schools across the state. We must harness the knowledge and wisdom gained during this pandemic and take the opportunity to improve, and in certain cases, rebuild the educational systems in place to ensure that all learners and educators have equitable access to the tools, resources, and support they need to thrive, no matter their academic environment.

## INTRODUCTION

*In May 2020, the University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning launched a comprehensive analysis of the responses and approaches taken by birth through 12th grade public and private education programs throughout Florida during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

As part of a Virtual Listening Tour across all regions of the state, researchers interviewed students, parents, teachers, and early childhood and K-12 educators and administrators about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the delivery of educational services.



In addition to one-on-one interviews, more than 5,000 surveys were completed, in both English and Spanish, to identify patterns and themes from early childhood and K-12 educators and families.

This report is a summary of our findings. While each stakeholder experienced different challenges from the closure of schools and early childhood programs, there was a consistent thread of resilience and creativity to bring our societal members together to overcome the challenges and support each other.

### Once we compiled all the data we identified six common themes:

- The persisting challenges of educational inequality and its manifestations in a pandemic
- Enhancing the technological infrastructure for all
- The importance of adequately preparing teachers to execute distance learning
- Open communication between schools, parents and students is a must for stability
- Assessment, acceleration, and accountability
- Early childhood providers are critical to keep communities functioning and supporting the economy

The following is a detailed account of the lessons we have learned from the COVID-19 Virtual Listening Tour Project. There are many considerations and best-practices to inform how Florida's education system moves forward to serve students and prepare its workforce.



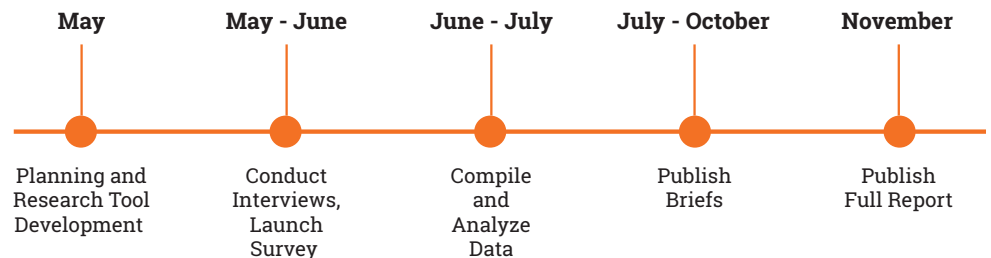
## METHODOLOGY

The Virtual Listening Tour was conducted over a period of six months, from May to November 2020. It employs a concurrent mixed-methods research design to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from different stakeholders including educational leaders, teachers, parents, and students.

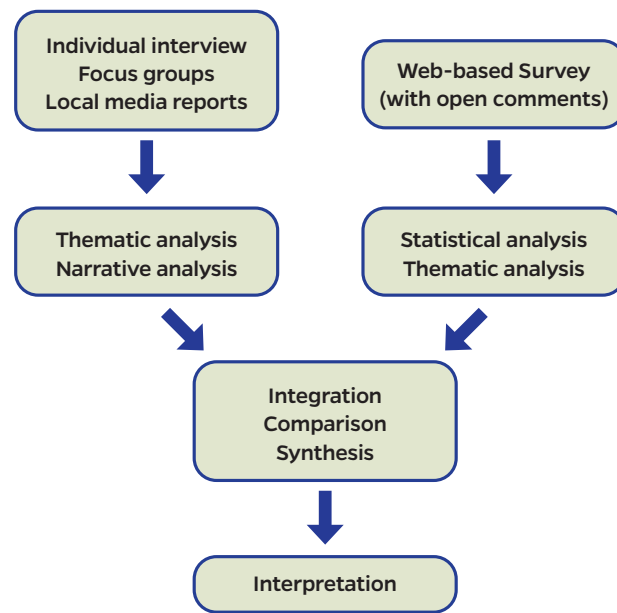
Figure 1 shows the timeline of the research project and Figure 2 illustrates the key activities we conducted at different stages of the study, which included: collecting media and news stories across Florida related to COVID-19 impacts on education; developing interview protocols and survey instruments; conducting interviews with educators, education leaders, families, and students; disseminating surveys to early childhood and K-12 educators and families; analyzing data collected; creating briefs on emerging themes; authoring this final report on findings; and releasing findings through digital channels, virtual presentations, and webinars.

### Timeline

**Figure 1: COVID-19 Virtual Listening Tour Project Timeline**



**Figure 2: Flowchart Illustrating the Mixed Methods Research Design**



**Concurrent Mixed Methods Research Design**

For the web-survey component of the mixed-methods study, we constructed three surveys for PreK-12 teachers, parents/caregivers, and early childhood educators respectively. Tables 1-3 in the appendix present the professional background information for the teacher and early childhood educator respondents, as well as the children's educational background for parent/caregiver respondents. All surveys included a list of multiple choice questions to explore respondents' perspectives on distance education and a final open-ended question for respondents to expand their views or share thoughts that are not covered in the multiple choice questions. We worked with our partner organizations to disseminate the surveys through social media, email, and professional networks. As a result, we received 380+ responses for the PreK-12 educator survey, 4,100+ responses for the parent/caregiver survey, and 220+ responses for the Early Childhood Educator survey.

For the interview and focus group component, we started with a maximum variation sampling strategy to recruit six types of participants from Florida's 10 Designated Media Areas: (1) educational leaders, (2) teachers, (3) parents and caregivers, (4) students (including two subgroups: younger children, age 12 and under, and older children, age 13-18), (5) early childhood educators, and (6) local media reporters. Table 4 in the appendix shows the regional distribution of the interview participants. Altogether we interviewed 66 participants in more than 50 semi-structured interviews or focus groups. The interview sample has a stronger regional representativeness for educational leaders and PreK-12 teachers, whereas the regional representativeness for parents/caregivers, students and early childhood educators is relatively limited. The length of the interviews vary from 15 minutes to an hour, with the younger children having the shortest amount of time. In the interview, we asked our research participants to share with us their experience, challenges, successful practice, and suggestions about distance learning. All interviews were conducted either through Zoom or by phone, and transcribed verbatimly. The transcripts were coded collectively by the research team in two rounds, focusing on the thematic and narrative analysis of the data respectively.

Meanwhile, we also collected another type of qualitative data, the local newspapers' reports on school closure and the ensuing distance learning in the spring semester. The approximately 110 newspaper reports we compiled offer rich and real-time accounts of how the shift took place in different parts of Florida. We coded and analyzed the media reports data thematically.

The preliminary findings from the survey, interview, and news reports data were juxtaposed, compared, and integrated to develop a comprehensive understanding of the educational system's response to the COVID-19 school closure in the state of Florida. Please see the appendix for demographic data on interviewees and survey respondents.

## PERSPECTIVES OF OUR STAKEHOLDERS

We documented the transition Florida schools made to distance learning by presenting the perspectives of four types of key stakeholders: educational leaders, teachers, parents/families, and students. Each perspective features their reflections, practices, struggles, and challenges both personally and professionally as a result of COVID-19. As stakeholders continue to grapple with the lasting impacts of school closures and adjust their daily responses to COVID-19, it is critical to shed light on these differential experiences.

**We believe that only by fostering candid and transparent conversations can we better understand the short- and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on our society.**

### EDUCATIONAL LEADERS: “THERE WAS REALLY NO PLAYBOOK.”<sup>1</sup>

As the pandemic rapidly evolved from late January to March, local educational leaders never suspected that the coronavirus, a novel virus at the time largely impacting other parts of the world, would eventually shake every aspect of their personal and professional lives. Most of those interviewed reported that, initially, they did not expect the pandemic to impact their communities at all. One recollected,

*“What was interesting is that day, on the 13th, they were literally in a principals’ meeting telling them, ‘We’re not closing schools, we’re not going to close the schools. Don’t even think about it’... And then literally had to say hold on a second, stop the meeting. Get on the phone, the DOE is closing schools. So it was like literally from one sentence to the next of okay, nevermind. We’re going to close schools.” (Interview with Research Participant EL23)*

As leaders closed schools and shifted to distance learning, they found themselves evaluating many uncertainties. The depth and breadth of school closures’ impact were largely unknown, and there were no protocols to guide the response. While local educational leaders primarily relied on the COVID-19-related information they received from health departments, experts, and high-level officials to make their judgements, many of the initial estimates and expectations were found to grossly underestimate the impact.

In spite of these uncertainties, many education leaders shared that their first call-to-action was prioritizing the various needs of students, parents, and employees. Some of them considered their approach to the pandemic very different from the medical workers; medical professionals’ primary goal focuses on controlling and mitigating the disease, whereas educators’ work, includes but is not limited to: student safety, employee wellbeing, uninterrupted instruction, ample food, access to devices and broadband, supporting teachers in the delivery of distance learning, establishing communication channels with parents, and providing to some extent the needs of their communities. These leaders were involved in nearly every facet of learning and emotional support for students, families, and teachers.

<sup>1</sup> Quote from interview with research participant EL18.

## THESE ARE THEIR STORIES: CHALLENGES, SUCCESSES, AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM FLORIDA EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In addition to understanding students' needs, many educational leaders were simultaneously working on another key task at the initial stage of the school closure — proactively mobilizing employees to meet these various needs. Often, this included convening online and/or face-to-face meetings to disseminate information and make critical, real-time decisions:

*“And I remember [...] sitting in a conference room full of people. I very quickly assembled my team together, not only the superintendent staff but department directors, transportation, food, nutrition, curriculum folks. [...] my assessment research management folks. I mean, I just had them all in the room and I had to break the news to them that we’re going to take two weeks off. We’ve got to be ready to teach.” (Interview with Research Participant EL7)*

Our analysis also shows that leveraging existing infrastructure played a key role in local educational leaders' decision-making process. Educational infrastructure, defined broadly, encompasses but is not limited to existing material, organizational, and relational conditions ranging from the microscopic, such as a complete list of parents' contact information, to the macroscopic, such as the communities' broadband access. In the unexpected and sudden move to distance learning, the current infrastructure available to leaders became one of the most important enabling conditions. Whether a district or school was prepared to quickly make this transition often shaped the course of educational leaders' action, directly impacting the challenges they encountered or the successful practice they implemented. Two important challenges that educational leaders frequently brought up were (1) the lack of stable internet access and devices and (2) the lack of training for teachers to use the technologies to deliver distance learning. Schools and districts that had existing infrastructure benefited from previous investment in distance learning access and training, while districts and schools without systems in place had to put much more energy in preparing for distance learning.

It was in the process of enhancing educational infrastructure for distance learning that we found the greatest number of innovative solutions and collaborative/coordinated efforts. Financially, Florida's state leaders made concerted efforts to support the purchase of technological equipment. Multiple partnerships were formed between public and private sectors, such as internet providers and public schools. Some schools and districts even decided to pay families' internet bills so students would have continued access to online instruction because the cost was less than the labor necessary to work around a lack of access.

While many leaders interviewed made technological infrastructure and personnel training a high priority, district-level leaders also developed instructional continuity plans. Prior to the pandemic, many school districts did not have existing plans in place for mandatory school closures. One exception was in Miami-Dade County where the district was further along in the development of their plan due in large part to the frequency of hurricanes in that region. One of the state-level educational administrators shared a behind-the-scenes story about how the Florida Department of Education coordinated with school districts to develop continuity plans:

*“[An educational leader from Miami-Dade] said we think we have a good framework and a platform that other districts may be able to build off of, and immediately shared those resources with the entire state. Superintendents started taking some of those big ideas and bucking it up and*

*personalizing it to make instructional continuity plans that worked best for them. And we asked districts in about five days, within five days, to take these kind of big ideas and frameworks and start flushing them out, and then turn them back into us so that we can go through them and see how we're going to implement this." (Interview with Research Participant EL18)*

Because of Florida's unique geographic location, the creation of COVID-19 distance education playbook was built upon and profoundly shaped by existing experience of and knowledge about other natural disasters. As we move forward to discuss perspectives from other stakeholders, we will see how this characteristic of Florida's COVID-19 response came into play again.

## **TEACHERS: "BE AS READY AS WE CAN, AS QUICKLY AS WE CAN."**<sup>2</sup>

Teachers were concerned about their students. Back in March 2020, they were dealing with many uncertainties related to the pandemic and worried about the wellbeing of their families. Throughout our research, we found that teachers employed acute, grounded, and deeply localized knowledge about what the school closure meant for their students and the local communities. This is best epitomized through our interview with a teacher from Panama City, where schools and communities were severely impacted by Hurricane Michael:

*"(In 2018,) within about three hours we had schools destroyed that were never reopened. We had schools temporarily closed combined. We were out of school for six weeks [...] what I saw, very quickly, not just upon school closing, but reopening was trauma responses from students for lots of reasons. Of course, many of them had lost homes; they had friends move away that they never saw again; their teachers changed. And so we saw a deep and abiding need immediately for mental health responses. And so our community had already been dealing with that for about a year and a half. When COVID became a thing on the radar, my immediate response was, again, concern for my students, concern about taking them out of the classroom, especially for many of our still vulnerable populations." (Interview with Research Participant K12T6)*

The first thing many teachers did was connecting immediately with students and families. But there were challenges. For instance, teachers reported that not all the students' and parents' contact information was current. Schools and teachers had to make concerted efforts just to connect with each and every family, revealing the need to ensure standardized maintenance of accurate student and family records.



<sup>2</sup> Quote from interview with research participant K12T6.

## Case Study: Technology Trailblazers

Districts with technology training and infrastructure already in place were more prepared for distance learning, saving time and resources during the transition. The School District of Palm Beach County did not know just how vital their Teaching with Technology Trailblazers program would become when it was first established in 2017. When COVID-19 forced school closures, the foundation of technology training and the cadre of teacher leaders created by the program made for a much smoother transition to distance learning. Their heavy investment in distance learning training has resulted in the district having more Google Certified Educators than any district in the world. Led by the school district's Departments of Educational Technology, Information Technology, and Teaching & Learning, the program aligned professional growth opportunities to classroom technology deployment.

*“Our Tech Trailblazers were an integral part of the switch to distance learning. Due to the investment our District made in training and technology, every school had Trailblazers who had the skills and experience to support all of their peers,”<sup>3</sup> said Adam Miller, the Director of Educational Technology.*

In our interview, Keith Oswald, Deputy Superintendent and Chief of Schools, mentioned that he felt the district was well prepared even though this event was unforeseen and unprecedented:

*“I think we’re pretty well prepared. You know, had I thought in January, that we would have to tackle an issue like this, I would have laughed [...] But I think one of the things we learned is that when given no other option, you’ve got to find a way through. So it wasn’t like we had any other options or choices, we just had to do it. People stepped up, and I think we were prepared through the infrastructure and the work that was being done behind the scenes already.” (Interview with Keith Oswald)*

Our research also found that teachers’ experience varied based on how ready they were to use distance learning. Some districts were more prepared, having made technological investments and providing professional training prior to the pandemic. For teachers unfamiliar with the various digital platforms and the materials suddenly available for them for free, a quick transition involved a much steeper learning curve. The self-paced, intensive learning pushed out by school districts in a manner of crisis responses was not necessarily the best professional development opportunity. For instance, a teacher shared her experience during the interview:

*“We were sent out instructions via email. And basically, it was a self-learned thing, and it was a lot of reading and it was just scattered all over the place. It’s like I was calling different teachers. I was like,*

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.palmbeachschools.org/news/what\\_s\\_new/august\\_2020/technology\\_trailblazers\\_lead\\_the\\_way](https://www.palmbeachschools.org/news/what_s_new/august_2020/technology_trailblazers_lead_the_way)

*where do we go for this because I just felt like that it wasn't very organized and there were so many different parts that you had to click on and it stressed me out, because it was like I was only given like a three-day period to figure all of this stuff out and get my class ready and together and then assign lessons for my kids." (Interview with Research Participant K12T8)*

So, after the uneven and, in many cases, hasty training, how did teachers spend their time teaching remotely?

### Our data revealed a general pattern:

- 69.4% of the teacher survey respondents reported that they spent significantly or somewhat more time planning for instruction since the shift to distance learning.
- 84.6% of teachers also reported that they spent significant or somewhat more time creating materials for parents/caregivers to provide students with instructional support for learning at home.

While the overall pattern indicates that it took longer for the majority of the teachers to prepare for their teaching and communicate with parents/caregivers, the instruction time seemed to decrease.

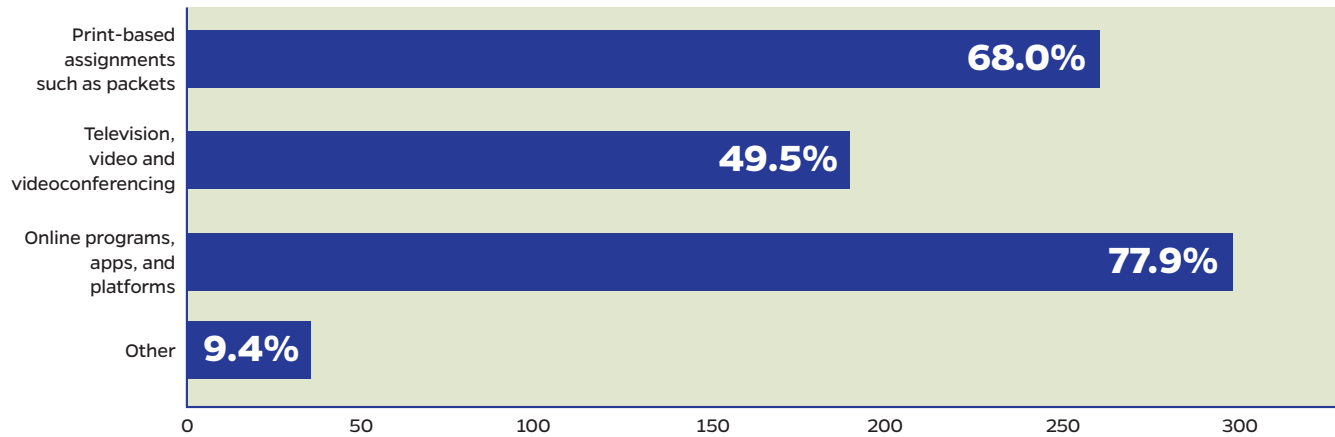
- 70.5% of the same respondents reported significant or somewhat less time spent in instruction with students. Meanwhile, teachers also shared that they had to work prolonged hours at home to deliver distance learning, in the midst of taking care of their own families and observing the social distancing rules. Their work appeared to be “no time on and no time off”, and teachers shared that they feel “an obligation to be available, almost all the time.” (Interview with Research Participant K12T6)

As the teachers prepared to launch distance teaching and continued to adjust their practice, they constantly needed to make pedagogy-related decisions. More than perhaps anytime in the history of American education, technology was so intimately incorporated into instructional decision-making that it was almost impossible to think about teaching without talking about the supporting technologies. Educational technology became a crucial constraining and enabling condition for content delivery and greatly shaped the teaching and learning experience. In the second half of the report, we further discuss the instructional decisions that teachers made and the challenges they identified in their teaching and their students' learning process.

## DISTANCE LEARNING FORMATS

As reflected in Figure 3, 77.9% of PreK-12 teacher survey respondents indicated that they utilized online programs, apps, and/or platforms to deliver instruction during school closures, 68% of them indicated that they used print-based materials as part of their distance learning instruction during school closures, and about half of the surveyed teachers held videoconferences and/or created videos for their students. A majority of the teachers incorporated various instructional modalities to reach all students within the new learning environment.

Figure 3: Distance Learning Formats



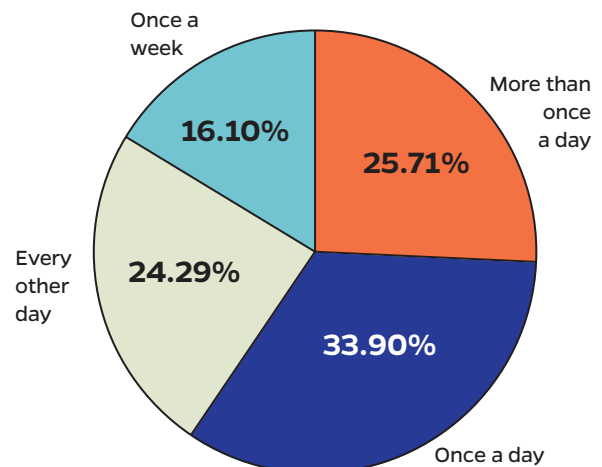
## TEACHER COMMUNICATIONS AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

As Figure 4 shows, 59.6% of the teachers reported that they communicated with their students at least once per day. A quarter of the teachers sent communications to students every other day. Educators consistently told us that they significantly increased the frequencies with which they reached out to families. Some educators noted that families’ voices to a large degree shaped their vision of what the distance learning in a pandemic would look like:

*“We’ve done so much more surveying and asking our families for input. They really have become co-creators with us which has been my vision for a long time. We really need our families to feel like they are co-creators in their children’s education.” (Interview with Participant EL2)*

*“We found that, because everybody was at home, a lot of families were connecting with teachers much, much more so than they had in face-to-face instruction. So that was a lot of the feedback that we received from teachers. They felt like they communicated with families, way more than they ever did, whether it was through email, face to face, on the telephone or some combination thereof.” (Interview with Research Participant EL22)*

Figure 4: Overall frequencies with which teachers sent communications to students and their families (PreK-12 Teacher Survey)





## CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS TO DELIVER DISTANCE LEARNING

Although teachers and schools consistently endeavored to reach out to families, their efforts were not always successful and the educators we surveyed still considered communication and student engagement among the top challenges in distance teaching and learning. As Figure 5 shows, teachers indicated that the most challenging aspects of transitioning to distance learning was student attendance, followed by communicating with parents and caregivers. About one third of teachers also stated that creating engaging learning environments and providing individualized instruction also posed significant challenges. Figure 6 added more information to this point: Nearly one-third of the surveyed teachers indicated that either only a small number of their students or less than a half of the students were frequently engaged in classroom activities and assignments.

Figure 5: Teachers' perspectives on top challenges to deliver distance learning

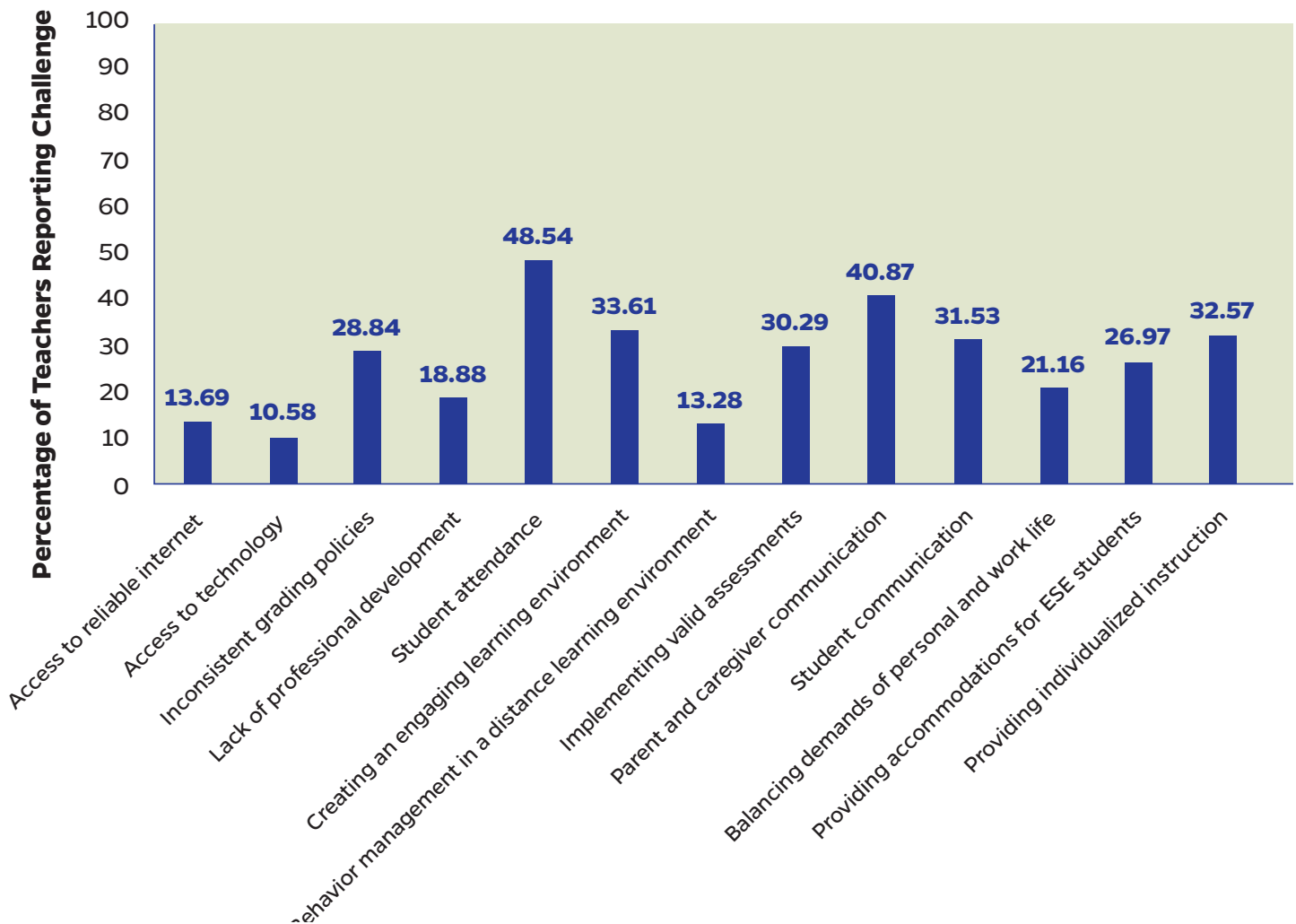
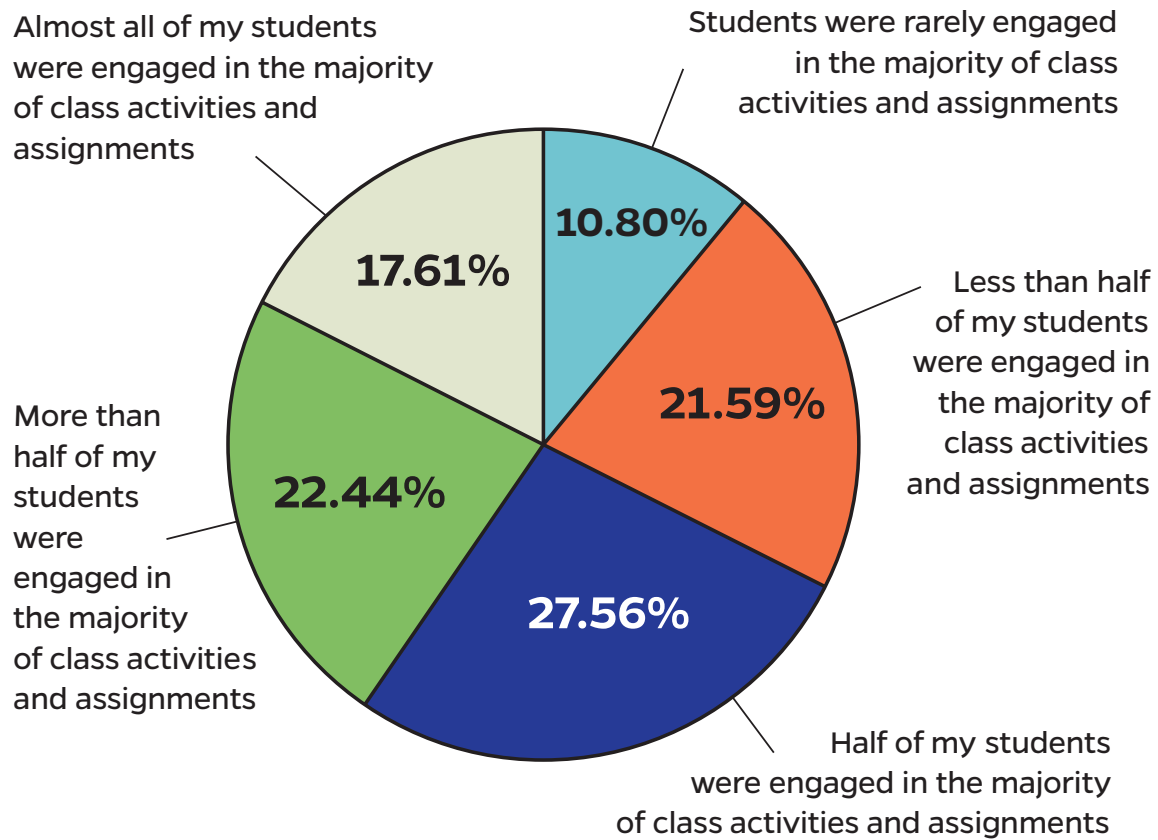


Figure 6: Teachers' perspectives on student engagement

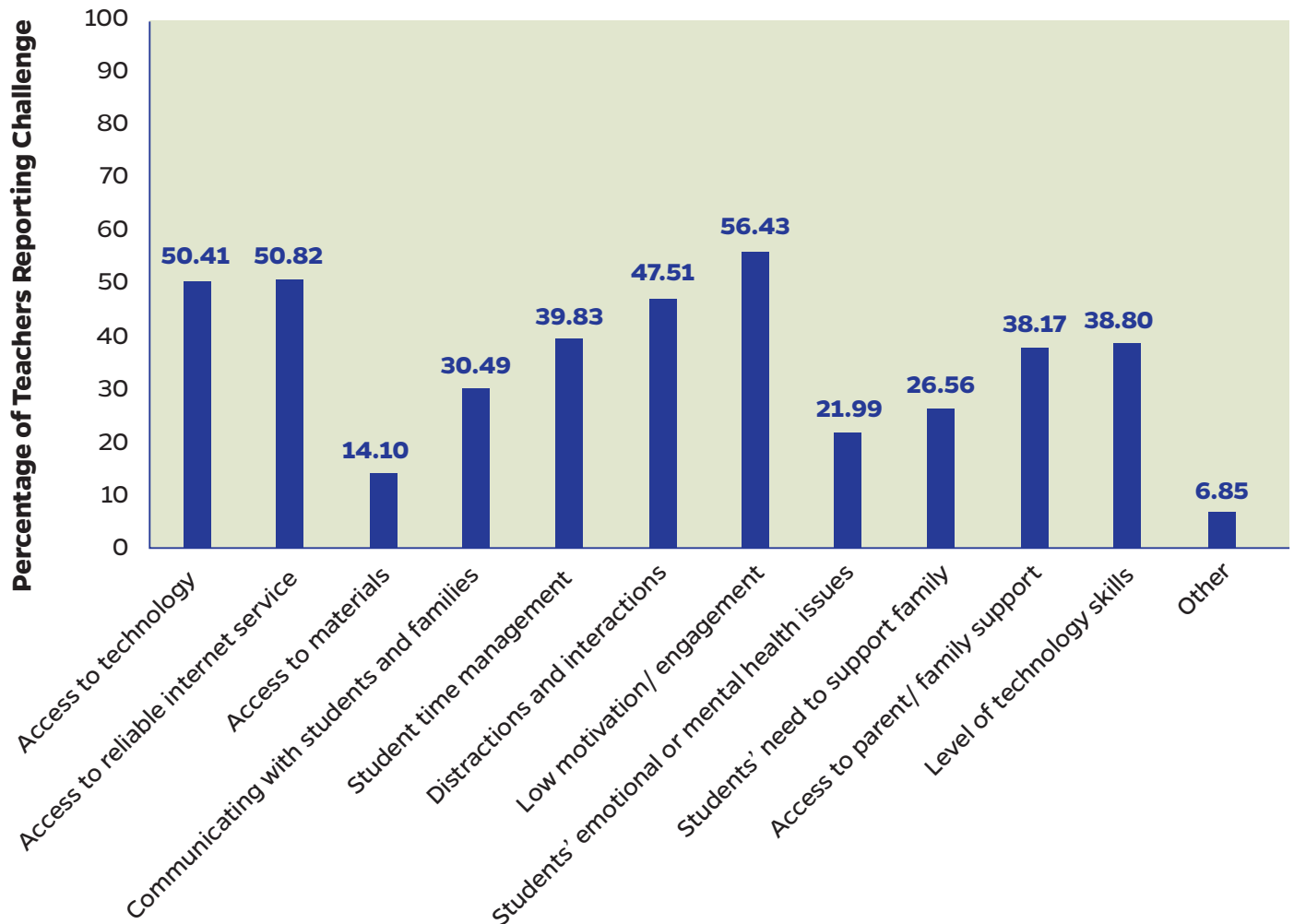


## TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS TO ENGAGE IN DISTANCE LEARNING

Figure 7 shows teachers' perspectives on their students' challenges to engage in distance learning. According to teachers surveyed, their students lacked motivation for learning, struggled to access reliable internet and technology, and were often distracted and interrupted in the distance learning environments. A teacher recalled:

*"I had 34 students and on my best day [of distance learning] I had a total of maybe 17 - I never had all 34. And the engagement was challenging. They were there, but they're at home. The TV is there. Their siblings, multiple siblings, are there. Their mom is there. The dog is there. It was hard to keep them focused on what I was saying. And, you know, they'll turn off their video, turn off their microphone. It was challenging, from my point as a teacher." (Interview with Research Participant K12T11)*

Figure 7: Teachers' perspectives on top challenges for students to engage in distance education



**PARENTS: “THIS TIME HAS BEEN EXTREMELY CHALLENGING”<sup>4</sup>**

Our research found that supporting distance learning during the pandemic was, in large part, gendered work. 77.4% parents/caregivers who participated in our survey reported that, other than their child(ren)’s teachers, female parents and guardians provided the most support for their children’s schoolwork. Parents and caregivers also revealed that students who have sufficient caregiver support learn more through distance learning than those without.

Although most parents and caregivers told us how challenging distance learning was for their families, some had more barriers than others. Single-parent households and/or those suffering financially struggled the most as did parents who cannot read, cannot speak English, have limited knowledge of subjects and technology and/or have multiple children.

<sup>4</sup> Quote from a parent/caregiver respondent’s answer to an open-ended survey question.

## WORKING REMOTELY AND PARENTING

Many parents shared that balancing work and parenting was extremely challenging.

*"[I] had to put off my graduating for at least two semesters because of the need to homeschool 3 children." (Survey open-ended question)*

*"As a one-parent household, I was not prepared to take on an additional Academic Teaching Role. I don't feel equipped. Although we loved my son's teacher, there was very little direct instruction. We received emails with assignments and were asked to turn in via email. Detailed worksheets were emailed and we do not have a working printer so I had to rewrite/recreate the worksheets. My son was not excited about learning online and was not prepared for independent learning. I work full time during the day and fell behind trying to do both my job and teach my son." (Parent/caregiver survey open-ended questions)*

As we collected data, many parents also expressed the feeling of being caught in between. For instance, although feeling extremely challenged to assist her children in distance learning, the same single parent whose words we cited above also told us,

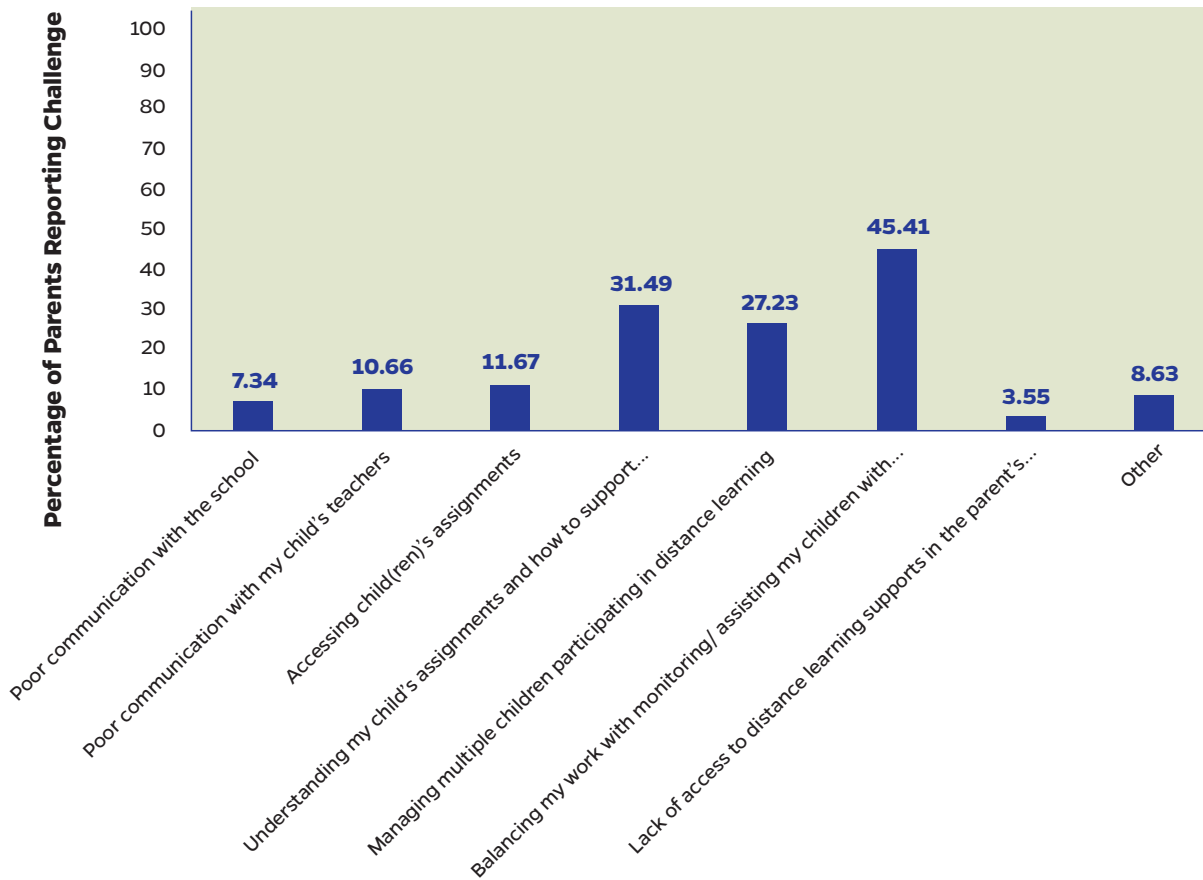
*"Due to the increase in COVID-19 cases, I feel that it is unsafe for children to return to the classroom." (Parent/caregiver survey open-ended questions).*



**As Figure 8 shows, our parent/caregiver survey responses indicated that:**

- 45.4% of the parents/caregivers considered balancing work and monitoring/assisting their child(ren) one of the most significant challenges in the transition
- 31.5% thought understanding and supporting their child(ren)'s assignment was one of the top challenging tasks
- 27.2% identified managing multiple children participating in distance learning as very challenging

Figure 8: Parents' perspective on their top challenges to support their children in distance learning



## ADAPTING TO DIFFERENT ROLES

Even parents who prided themselves at staying on top of their children's education were struggling with the new learning formats and confused about their responsibilities. For instance, a parent who considered herself very involved in her child's education before the pandemic, shared with us the challenges she experienced after the school closure:

*"Once they switched to online, it was hard to manage. I had no clue...what are the due dates? Even if they say in the group email, they still change all the time. You have to go to the Google Classroom under his name to really look at the due dates. So as a parent I don't have access because only my child has access." (Interview with Research Participant PC8)*

Another parent described the difficult balancing act of playing multiple roles for their children during this time:

*"I think I would say just as the adult just...having the time and space to be able to go from being a parent to [...their educational support system...] and then doing behavior management in that context. I became the IT person and lunch lady. I think one of the biggest challenges was the relationship with them. They're used to coming to me for comfort. They're used to like a couple tears and I'm like it's okay but then I would be like, yes, you have to log on. Yes, you have to do this. So that was challenging." (Interview with Research Participant PC4)*

## STUDENT LEARNING

Less than half of parents indicated that their child was spending as much time on distance learning as they did when attending in-person school. 18% of parents and caregivers shared that their children spent no more than two hours per day engaging in distance learning. Figure 10 shows the top challenges that parents identified for their children to engage in distance learning. Like teachers, parents identified the most significant challenges for their children to engage in online learning as navigating distractions and interruptions, effectively managing time, and completing assignments without parents' support. Further, parents indicated their concern with distance learning not fully meeting their children's social emotional needs with the lack of social interaction and extra curricular activities to provide enrichment and outlets.

**Figure 9: Parent/Caregivers' perspective on hours per day a child spent on distance learning**

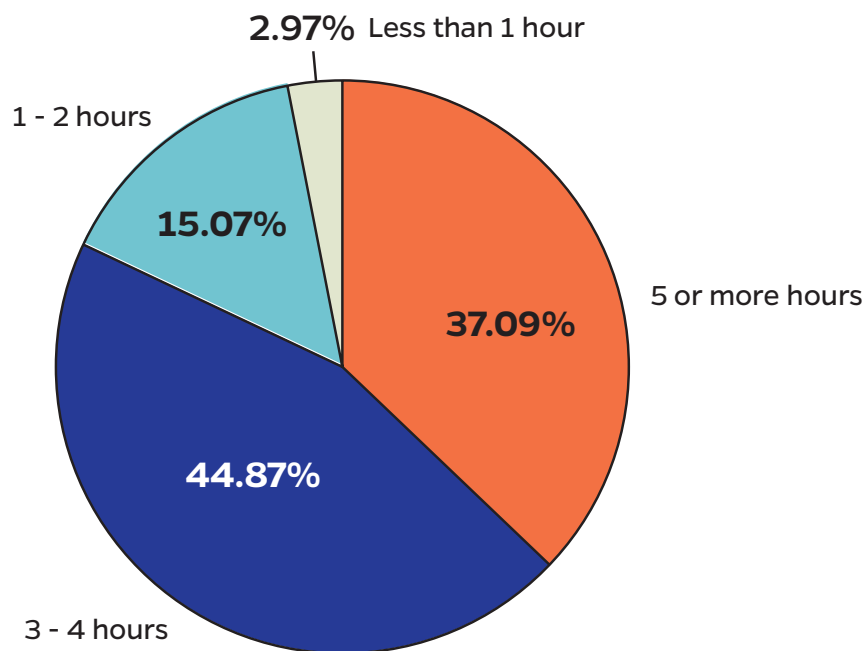
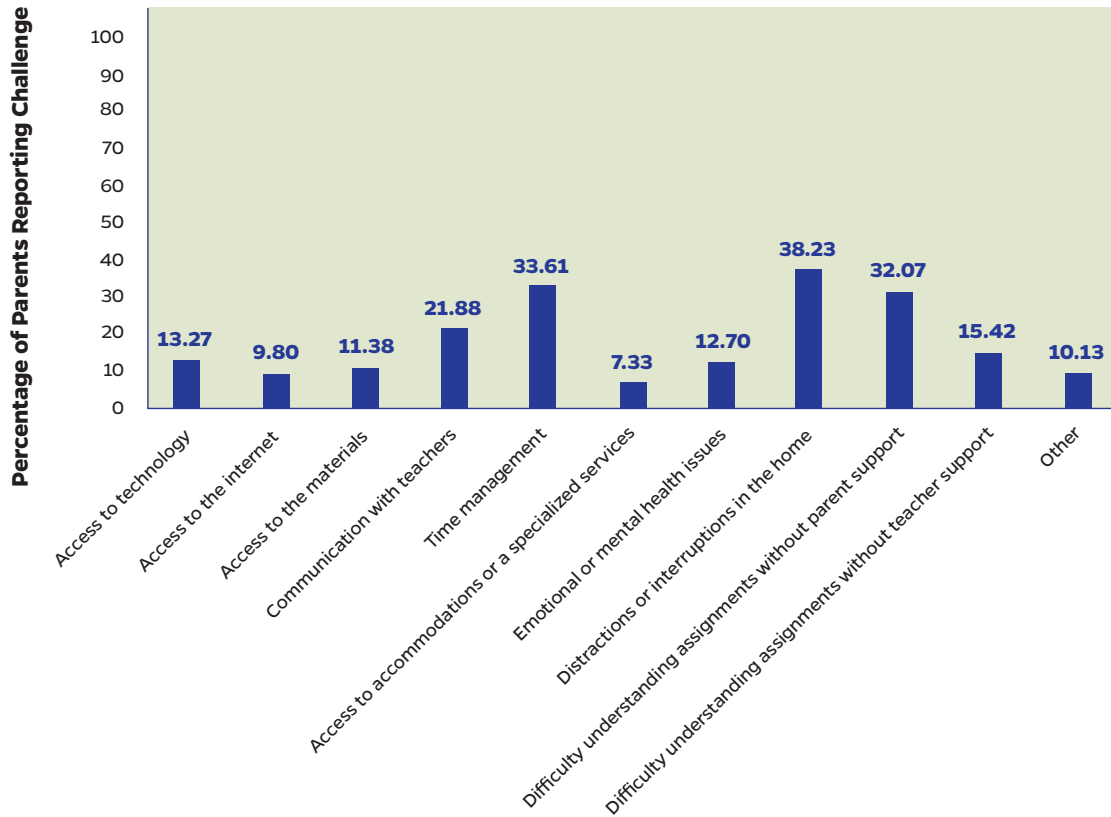


Figure 10: Parents' perspectives on top challenges for their children to engage in distance learning



Although there were numerous challenges, parents also shared some positive experiences. For instance, some of them acknowledged that their children were doing housework, taking care of their families, developing their hobbies, and doing outdoor activities. It was beyond what schools typically offer. Other parents appreciated the opportunities to spend more time with their kids and getting to know them better. Still others took the time to understand their children’s academic progress, identifying potential gaps and weaknesses and helping them further their academic learning.

**STUDENTS: “WHEN THEY STARTED IT, UM, IT WAS REALLY WEIRD...”<sup>5</sup>**

Students’ experiences with distance learning varied significantly not only because of the differential support they received from their families and schools, but also where they were developmentally when the pandemic started. It was made clear through our data, corroborated by local media reports, that younger students needed much more intensive support during distance learning.

<sup>5</sup> Quote from the interview with research participant OC3.

Like teachers and parents, students also recalled a steep learning curve as they were ushered into distance learning mode, and in many cases, virtual classrooms. The older students interviewed shared how weird they felt when initially engaging in virtual learning:

*“And it’s like going pretty well so far, [...] but at the same time, like it was kind of weird with the online school, I guess. I don’t feel like I have been learning as much. [...] it’s actually like, sometimes, um, a lot of time, [I] learn more on myself, [...] So if I don’t understand [if] things [are] a little harder, like, I don’t have a teacher’s response, like right there at that moment.” (Interview with Research Participant OC1)*

As the student interview participant mentioned above, students are used to receiving immediate and direct feedback from teachers in a brick-and-mortar school setting. With the shift to distance learning, the communication cycle was unavoidably prolonged. Students and teachers used multiple digital platforms, which created another layer of challenges.

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**Depending on the platforms, these challenges manifested in different forms:**

- Unstable internet signals while teachers were holding videoconference sessions.
- Learning from the YouTube videos posted by teachers delayed students’ engagement with teachers if they had any questions.
- Problems with multiple teachers sending several emails and using different platforms to assign homework, making it challenging for students to manage time and deadlines.

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Even without technological issues, distance learning at times still made it challenging for students to initiate communication with teachers compared with face-to-face teaching. For instance, a student shared that even though her teachers offered office hours online, she chose to not meet with teachers virtually. A different student said that, because he realized that his teachers were so overwhelmed by the hundreds of emails sent daily, he sometimes would opt to discuss his questions with his peers instead of asking his teachers directly. As for younger students who could not adeptly use computers or phones, their communication with the teachers became virtually impossible without the assistance of adults or other older kids in their families. A second grader commented that learning from home was harder than learning in school because, “it was all on the computer and I couldn’t do everything I could do in my class.” (Interview with Research Participant YC5)

Meanwhile, students also told us that distance education felt slow to them. The slowing down started with the shift, as both teachers and students spent one to two weeks adjusting to the new learning format. As most of the students moved to the last quarter of the academic year, they were not introduced to as much new content as they were in previous quarters. Students we interviewed also commented that the same workload could be more time-consuming if they completed them at home. What’s more, many of the subjects and extracurricular activities such as music, art, and sports that



require substantial face-to-face practice were stagnant. Teachers had to substitute the course content with something more feasible for students to do at home and, in many cases, significantly simplified the expectations.

Consistent with our findings in teacher and parent/caregiver data, the students we talked with also told us that they were less motivated to learn in the distance learning setting. Compared to face-to-face learning, they tended to procrastinate more and were more easily distracted. Sometimes, having a space of their own designated for schoolwork helped concentration, but not every student has access to a quiet learning space.

The students interviewed were concerned about the evolving pandemic. When we collected data weeks before the school districts announced their reopening plans, some of the students wondered whether they could return to their brick-and-mortar schools in the fall. A middle schooler, watching the local trend of COVID-19 confirmed cases told us that he would probably not return to school if the cases kept rising. For other students, especially younger ones, they missed their regular schools. When asked what they missed most, a second grader told the interviewer,

*"I like regular school because I like the PE court. In the morning, I'll get to walk in the field with my friend and we get to talk since we're not really in the same class. [...] [After the walk], I would stay on one table and he would stay on the other but we would stay as close as we could so we could talk." (Interview with Research Participant YC2)*

It is this kind of closeness that was dearly missed by students in an era of social distancing. Younger students brought up sports, music, and teachers as what they value most about their schools. Older students mentioned games, chats, doing sports, and having fun with their friends. For both, schools are not simply a place to learn academically, but a central piece of their life that brings joy, self-fulfillment, and growth of various kinds.

## UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES, EFFECTIVE RESPONSES, AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

A significant focus of our research was on the local and state educational systems' responses to school closure in the state of Florida, particularly the ongoing challenges, effective responses, and relevant reflections. This section is organized around the themes we identified in integrating and interpreting the survey, interview, and textual data: educational inequities, technological infrastructure, educators' professional development, and assessment and accountability.

### ***The persisting challenges of educational inequality and its manifestations in a pandemic***

Educational inequality has long been a critical and determining issue in fulfilling our society's promise for America's next generation. During the pandemic, many families and communities faced dire circumstances brought on by the public health crisis and significant increase in the unemployment rate. Many educators and educational researchers have worried that the closure of schools would exacerbate existing educational inequalities, widen the achievement gap, and create long-lasting negative impacts,

particularly on the students of minoritized social groups, with special needs, from low-income families, and with other differential forms of vulnerabilities. In our research, we explored the persisting and new manifestations of educational inequality exacerbated by school closures. We also identified educators' effective practice in supporting families and students through this challenging period.

An education leader shared their district's concerns about the imminent regression of progress made in closing achievement gaps with their most vulnerable students:

*"We had been making very steady progress. Marked progress, significant progress in closing the achievement gaps in our district and rising graduation rates. We are at an all time high in terms of our graduation rate and we had been, we had closed the achievement gap in terms of graduation for our Black and students with disabilities.[...] So we had had a really great run at closing the achievement gap and we knew that we were facing a situation where inevitably those gaps are going to grow." (Interview with Research Participant EL22)*

Our study found that precarity became one of the key terms when describing educational inequality, as students stayed home and families were coping with uncertainties and challenges on multiple fronts. A sobering account in the parent/caregiver survey offers us a glimpse of how difficult it was:

*"I am on a fixed income. No internet, no computer, laptop or tablet. Unfortunately, I was not prepared for distance learning. With us having to move out of our home for health reasons (All furniture was moved out) for two-and-a-half months, living with relatives and out of the car. I found myself being overwhelmed. I asked the school to loan me a tablet or laptop. I was told they didn't have any. I borrowed one. I called around to hire help. I was able to pay for eight hours of assistance. Then that tutor said she needed more money. I could not afford to pay more. She left. I felt so stressed out that I started having chest pains. Unfortunately, my grandson suffered. At the ninth hour the principal said they had a device. But I didn't get the message in time to get one. I believe if I had not been displaced, we (I) would have done a better job with his school work. I feel really sad about this. I didn't have good support." (Parent survey open-ended question)*

The grandparent we cited above struggled at the verge of falling out of the safety net to support their grandson transitioning to distance learning. As we single out the individual factors that contribute to the inequalities of education below, the quote reminds us how precarious circumstances can be from housing, to technological devices, physical and mental health, and human resources.

In terms of individual contributing factors, some of the unique challenges that different social groups faced and how educators pulled together resources to address these challenges are addressed below. Studies show that minoritized social groups, especially Black, Latino/a/x, Indigenous, and other People of Color communities have been disproportionately influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health experts have identified strong associations between race, ethnicities and the health outcomes of the COVID-19 infection (Yaya, et al., 2020). In particular, using data published by state and territory public health authorities or statements from officials, [the COVID tracking project](#) found that, nationwide, Black people are dying at 2.2 times the rate of white people due to COVID-19. Systematic racism, multiple existing diseases, risk factors that affect disease outcomes, and limited access to resources all contribute

to this national trend (Pirtle, 2020). In the spring of 2020, educators who were serving these People of Color communities had to grapple with the dual challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racism. Before anything else, teachers worked hard to continue the food service and the social emotional support for the students. For instance, on top of technology and internet access, Executive Director at KIPP Jacksonville Schools, Dr. Jennifer Brown, shared with us the work she and her colleagues have done to support their students, 98% of whom were Black students and more than 70% coming from low-income families.

*“Duval County Public Schools did, they offered a meal program for all children in a county ages, like five to 18, so school aged, where you could go to location and pick up a meal every day. [...] The good news is our families were able to do that, to be a part of that. [Our schools] contracted with a food service provider that’s based in South Florida and because our campus was shut down, it was just really difficult for us to continue. We provide breakfast, lunch and an afternoon snack for our kids and so that was one of our worries on was how they are going to eat. I’d add to that list, we have had a partnership with Children’s Home Society for this going into year four. So we have embedded mental health therapists in our schools and I was really worried about how our kids would continue to receive counseling services. [...] We’ve even had some cases where whole families have done counseling. So I was wondering about the mental, the social emotional well-being of our kids as well. And they were able to continue services to the best of their ability over technology. [...] They were really flexible with meeting the needs of our families. (Interview with Dr. Jennifer Brown)*

Students of low-income families were more likely to suffer from the lack of technological devices. Students from rural areas and impoverished urban areas were more likely to have challenges in accessing stable broadband internet access. Like many leaders across the state, one middle school principal interviewed was determined to continue fighting for resources for his students:

*“The students I serve are vulnerable. We have a low socioeconomic status population. I fight for them to have equity of resources every day in a normal brick and mortar setting. So my concern was how do I have that same fight, how do I provide the same resources when they’re not here. So that was the biggest concern for me off the bat.” (Interview with Research Participant EL15)*

Teachers also noticed patterns between student engagement and impoverished areas of the community that may lack stable internet access or other necessary resources:

*“We could definitely see demographically around our city that the number of students who were logging into the platforms that were provided were very sporadic in certain areas. So our more lower income areas we might have 30% buy-in, but we might have 70% in our more affluent ones. And we might have 100% buy-in in some schools, but there was certainly a pattern that we had to grapple with.” (Interview with Research Participant K12T6)*

Our analysis also shows that students of younger ages (approximately PreK to second grade) encountered more roadblocks in engaging distance learning compared with older students, as many of them were not developmentally ready to use digital devices or navigate online platforms independently. If the distance learning format involved the use of multiple platforms and applications, it typically

required considerable assistance from their caregivers. For English Language Learners, many of their parents do not speak English and therefore cannot communicate with teachers to assist them in their distance learning. One teacher shared the challenge in attempting to directly communicate with parents who did not speak English:

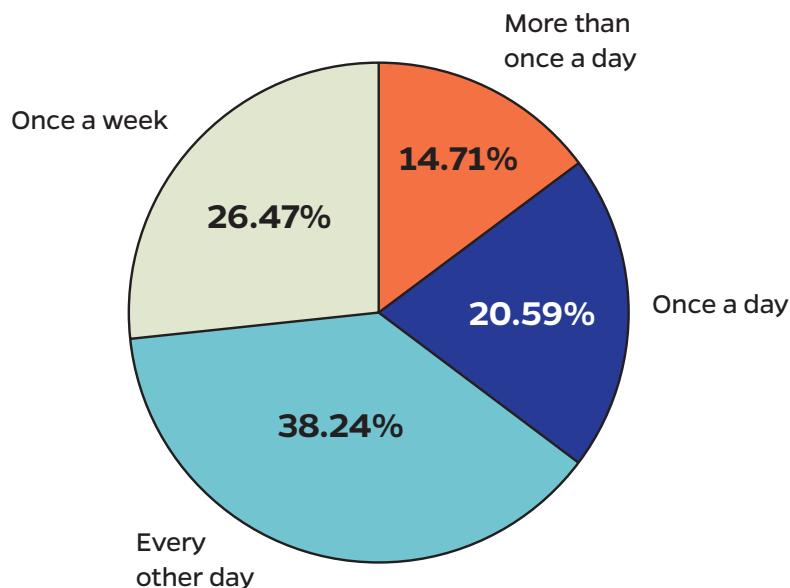
*“Communication. Just being able to communicate with the parents and trying to help them. For me it was a language barrier. I couldn’t just pick up the phone and try to, you know, talk with them because they didn’t understand me and I tried to speak with a student to tell them, and it was too complicated for them to even tell their parents what I was asking them to do so communication that’s my biggest thing.” (Interview with Research Participant K12T11)*

Our data analysis suggests that students who are exceptional learners lacked critical support because of being isolated at home, placing them in a more disadvantaged position.

**Among the parents and caregivers we surveyed;**

- 61.1% of the respondents whose children are receiving special education services reported that their child’s access to the service significantly or somewhat decreased.
- Consistent with this trend, Figure 11 shows the frequencies with which special education teachers sent communications to students and their families. 35.3% of teachers indicated that they communicated with families at least once per day, whereas for the overall teachers, this percentage is 59.6%.

**Figure 11: Frequencies with which teachers sent communications to exceptional learners and their families**



As a result, many parents witnessed their children's behavioral regression during the pandemic.

*"I have an autistic child who has lost socialization skills and regressed and another child with cerebral palsy who has lost a lot of academic progress due to the watered down work they were doing at home as well as the significant reduction in amount of school work assigned. This experience has been very damaging for my children and my family. I have been unable to work with two special needs children at home so our resources have been dwindling as we go through our savings." (Survey open-ended question answer)*

As schools reopen, with many exceptional learners returning to classrooms, it is critical to resume these services and continue to explore the lasting impact of school closure on these students.

### **Enhancing the technological infrastructure for all**

Historically speaking, proponents of digital educational technology in the U.S. link such an investment with lowering educational cost, increasing teaching effectiveness, and bringing the world to students to cultivate a global citizenship (Good, 2020). Most research in this field focuses on the issues of equity and quality of integrating digital tools in teaching in a face-to-face classroom teaching setting (eg. Heinrich, Darling-Aduana & Good, 2020; Rafalow, 2020). However, after the outbreak of COVID-19, one of the most salient and consequential forms of educational disparity we found is that students' and teachers' access to broadband sets up the precondition for students to engage in consistent and quality education. It becomes increasingly clear that in addition to the cost-and-effective reasoning, access to broadband has become a civil right in the 21st Century America. This access is closely tied to students' rights to education, democracy, and opportunity. Without it, youth, especially those from less affluent neighborhoods, minority groups, and rural areas, have a high risk of being denied access to schooling.

The Federal Communications Commission [reports](#) that to successfully download content, use video conferencing, or stream video, the broadband speed should be at least 25 Mbps (megabits per second). The demand increases as more users in the household log in and share the stream. Based on the broadband map created by [BroadbandNow](#), there are no internet providers in vast rural areas in Florida, particularly the panhandle, northern and central Florida regions. The maximum internet speed is also much slower in many rural areas compared to urban areas. Our survey data suggest that two-thirds (64%) of educators reported that access to internet services required for distance learning was a challenge for their students and 20% of educators themselves indicated they lacked the speed to deliver online classes. Meanwhile, about the same percentage of teachers considered access to technology required to participate in distance learning a challenge for their students. Slightly fewer educators (14.5%) reported that lack of access to technology was a challenge.

As school districts statewide moved quickly to launch distance learning programs, many districts had to swiftly distribute thousands of devices to students in a minimal-contact manner that protected school staff and families. A first priority for many districts was to survey families to identify technology and device access and subsequently distribute electronic devices to students who lacked appropriate technology at home. When executed, school leaders realized that in some areas, even when provided a device, students did not have access to broadband and were unable to successfully engage in distance

learning. In some urban areas with abundant access, financial support became a barrier. Students who logged in found themselves booted because they had exhausted their personal data plan (paid subscription) allotment for the billing period or were unable to be approved for new internet service due to past unpaid late fees or other restrictions. Superintendent Kurt Browning reported that for Pasco County families who lost internet service due to the inability to pay, the school district recognized that covering the cost (on average \$30) to reconnect was an investment worth making. When compared to the toll that remediation would have on the student and school resources, covering this expense made sense.

Rural districts faced even more daunting challenges to provide access to devices and high-speed internet in areas where no provider or infrastructure exists. In these unique circumstances, districts such as Santa Rosa Public Schools leveraged their resources to connect students through both a blended and targeted approach utilizing devices and paper packets. Superintendent Tim Wyrosdick also [reported](#) working with internet providers to expand capacity and bandwidth to enable the school district to provide virtual instruction.

To address the issue of internet access, a number of districts, such as [Alachua](#) and [Manatee](#), outfitted school buses as mobile hotspots to be deployed to connect students in hard-to-reach areas of the community. Brevard Public Schools [leveraged their relationships](#) along the Space Coast to garner more than \$100,000 in funding for devices and hotspots from companies like Lockheed Martin. In Bay County, the [district allocated funding](#) for short-term service contracts with local providers to distribute 600 hotspots. Hillsborough County Public Schools distributed more than 50,000 devices and quickly launched a [resource page](#) to support students at home. Additionally, the Florida Department of Education [gave rural districts](#) 32,000 devices in partnership with their area education consortiums.

After digital devices were distributed and internet service became available, offering timely technological support became the key in maintaining a smooth flow of the teaching and learning.

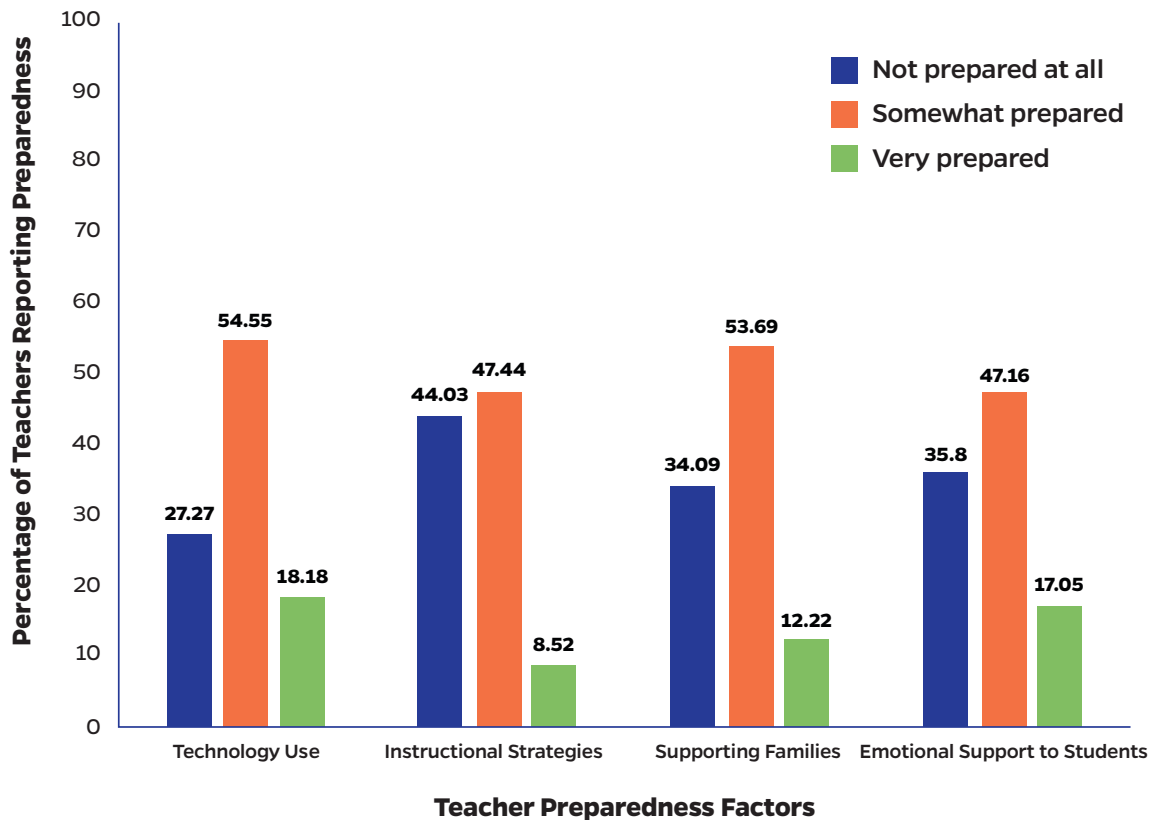
*“I know we’re trying to mix the school so that we have a diverse student population. But are we thinking about the fact that the students who really are probably going to be using the paper packets live 30 minutes away. They’re not going to come get the packets. So how can we take it to them or provide it in a way that is still accessible - that was the biggest piece. There’s a lot, there’s a huge gap. It’s inequitable and it’s seeing that there is already inequity in education and then to move to this type of platform so quickly, there’s a lot of kids that I think dropped off the map, unfortunately. And then thinking about next year. Is this going to be another year where they’re losing instruction and how far back is that going to set them to being able to be successful and compete with their peers?” (Interview with Research Participant EL23)*

### **Professional Development for Teachers: “Building this plane as we’re flying the plane”**

Our study reveals an important gap in teachers’ professional development in responses to the shift to distance learning. On one hand, teachers across the state were not fully prepared to execute distance learning, yet on the other hand, these supports had limited impacts in their transition to learning.

As Figure 12 shows, teachers felt least prepared for effective instructional strategies for distance learning (44% reported not prepared at all). About one-third of the teachers also suggested that they were not ready at all to support parents and caregivers to provide home-based instruction or support students emotionally through distance learning. Teachers felt relatively more confident in the technological aspect of distance learning, such as the use of learning platforms and programs. Still there were slightly more than one-fourth of the teachers reporting that they were completely unprepared for the use of technology.

**Figure 12: Teachers' level of preparedness for distance teaching**



As professional training programs were implemented to prepare for the school closure, the training primarily focused on familiarizing teachers with the digital platforms and applications, without the opportunity to dive deeper into pedagogical issues related to distance learning. There was even less about emotional support, parents'/caregivers' support, or working with marginalized students in a distance learning setting. The insufficient conversations on these crucial topics led to some of the major roadblocks that teachers, parents/caregivers, and students identified in the initial transition. There was a lack of streamlining the use of multiple digital platforms, not being able to provide individualized distance learning, obstacles offering accommodations for exceptional learners, and challenges of communicating and supporting parents. Appropriate professional development training will mitigate these issues.

Given the challenges and needs, however, only about 20% of the teachers considered professional development activities offered by schools or districts the most impactful resources in supporting their transition, while most teachers considered support from peers and colleagues as most impactful. As Figure 13 has shown, in this challenging situation, teachers resorted to each other for support, information, and learning. Instead of ignoring this trend, schools and districts may want to build upon it in designing their professional development programs.

**Figure 13: Resources Most Impactful in Supporting Transition to Distance Learning**

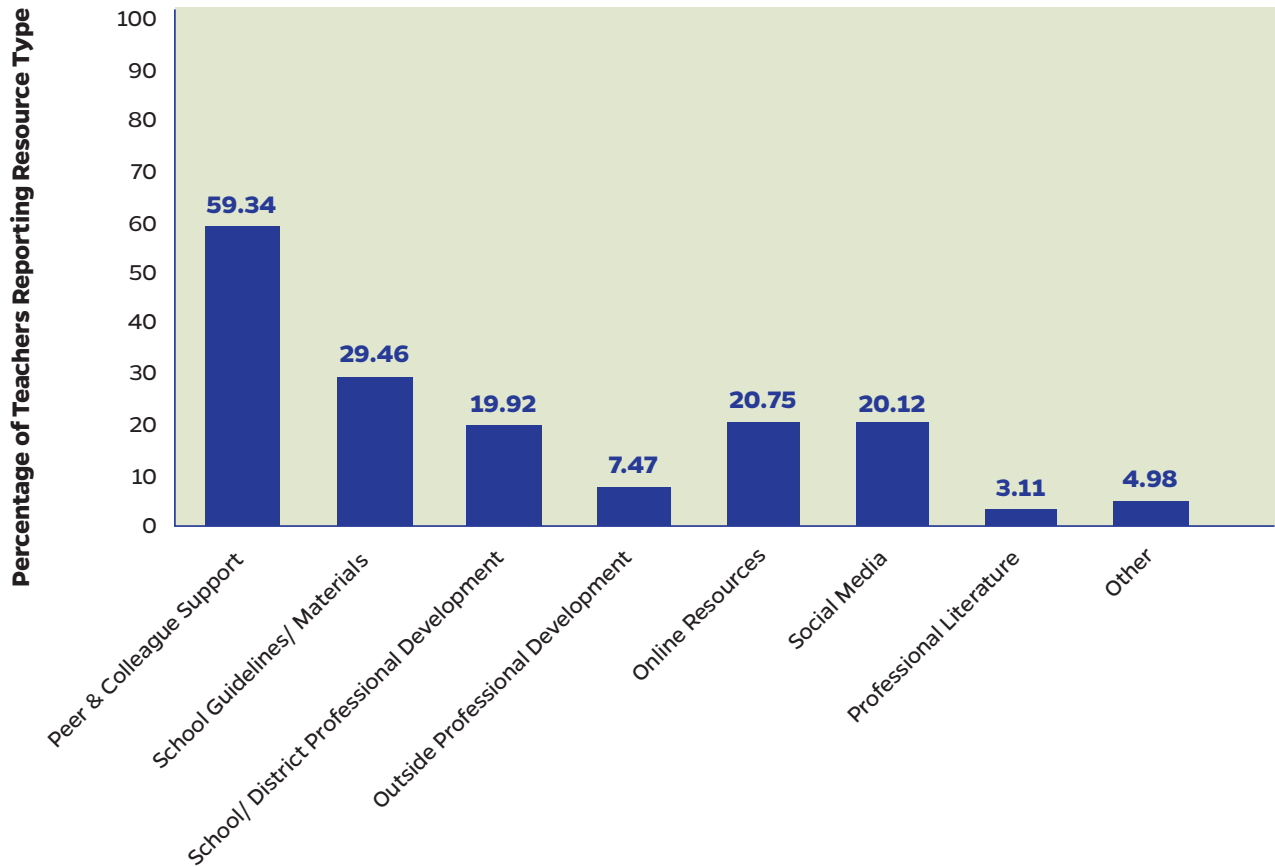
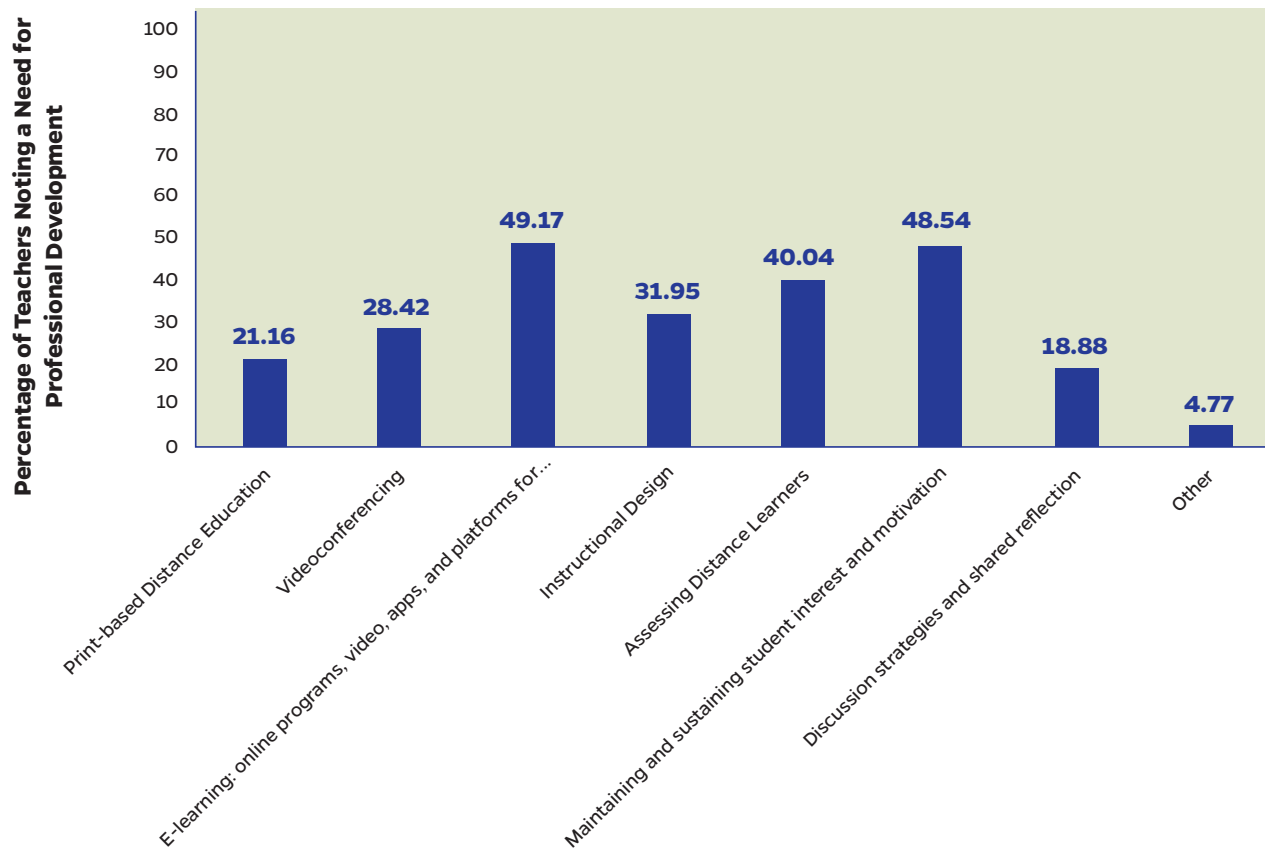


Figure 14 shows educators' perspectives on the priorities for professional development if districts must continue offering distance learning. More than two-thirds of the surveyed teachers listed maintaining and sustaining student interest and motivation as a priority in future training for distance learning. This finding is also consistent with our interviews with parents and students, who identified the lack of motivation in distance education as one of the major challenges.



Figure 14: Areas of priorities for professional development around distance learning



In addition, educators we interviewed also pointed out the importance of training teachers to communicate with parents more effectively. Educators reflected on the widely held assumption that teachers naturally know how to talk with parents but they were never trained for that. As an educator observed, along with the massive increase in the needs for teacher-parent communication throughout distance learning,

*“[...] it’s so hard to get teachers sometimes to call a parent. But I also realize that no one’s ever really been taught how to call a parent and for some of our folks it’s hard. And we got a lot of young teachers. I’ve got young teachers who are 21 years old and have no idea how to talk to a 40-year-old parent who is having struggles.” (Interview with Research Participant EL15)*

One of the unintended effects of the mass move to distance learning was that teachers have become more open toward technologically-enhanced teaching. Many of them realized the benefits of integrating technology into their teaching and their comfort level of trying novel technologies improved. Just as a self-identified “traditional” teacher shared with us in the interview,

*“[Distance learning in the spring] definitely will change the way we move forward. I have always been kind of a traditional teacher. I never really put anything online. I would[...] what we do is in our classroom... and of course, I mean, I do flip the classroom and use YouTube videos of me doing lectures and stuff like that. But it’s nothing that’s on a classroom website for various reasons. But now I will definitely. That’s what I’m working on this summer is getting everything transitioned so that if it does happen again, we can just roll right into it. And there isn’t that lag time so you don’t lose momentum.” (Interview with Research Participant K12T5)*

After navigating the challenging distance learning landscape in the spring, more and more teachers recognized the potential to integrate technology and instruction; thus, it is imperative that educators are offered more opportunities to continue their learning journey.

### ***Beyond delivering information: Systematizing communication among educators, families, and students***

Our study found that many educators, including both administrators and teachers, had a keen understanding of the significance of communication. Transparency, trust and caring-- these are the key messages that educators delivered at the moment of crisis. They have demonstrated to us that, in an era of social distancing, communication is a lifeline that knits communities together. However, given the unexpected nature of the school closure and the numerous challenges that educators had to grapple with, the communication loop from school to families and back was not always a complete cycle.

Teachers deployed a variety of innovative approaches to engage in two-way communication with students and families. Almost 60% of surveyed teachers continued to communicate with their students and families once a day or more throughout distance learning. About 71% of them developed materials for parents to use to support their children with distance learning activities. Teachers and school administrators used multiple channels to check-in with students and families, including online videos, apps, online surveys, phone calls, emails, and text messages. Social media, including YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, also proved to be valuable tools to leverage engagement with families. For parents, timely and frequent communication with their children’s educators motivated them to jump in and get involved in the distance education. It also helped them understand the situation that teachers were in. For children, effective, real-time communication made them feel like they were connected to schools and their teachers. As a parent interviewed reflected upon her experience after receiving voice messages from the principal of her child’s school:

*“I remember thinking like, wow, I never thought I would be so happy to hear the principal’s voice like I was like. He said he got, like, I think there’s about 600 kids in our school and he got over 50 emails after his message of parents saying it’s so good to hear from you or the kids were really happy. Like my kids were like it’s Mr. Adams (a pseudonym)! It’s like, Wow!” (Interview with Research Participant PC4)*

In many cases, communication like this strengthened the tie between families and schools, and cultivated more family involvement, which proved to be crucial in the success of distance education.

It was also through frequent communication that teachers developed their understandings of unique student needs. This knowledge then paved the way for customized instruction — a very important and effective teaching method used in distance learning settings.

In spite of the efforts that educators made to reach out to students and families, connecting with certain student populations during distance learning was still not an easy job, especially with students with exceptionalities, younger students, English Language Learners, and students with limited or not access to the internet and/or digital devices. This challenge prompted many schools and districts to innovate. In an article by the Palm Beach Post, Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind president Jeanne Glidden Prickett reflected, “Having video and audio available and so readily usable for blind students and deaf students has been a major breakthrough for distance learning.” A private school participating in the Step Up For Students program hired Spanish translators to ensure they were effectively communicated with their large English Language Learner population. This video by Pinellas County Schools also demonstrates the use of a sign language interpreter to ensure accessibility.

During our interviews, many educators told us that a good lesson they learned was to utilize a central hub to streamline information dissemination. Using a student information system or a centralized platform for all teachers is a beneficial communication strategy for teachers as well as families, particularly those whose students had multiple teachers. Creating a designated space for resources, messages, assignments, and grades reduced confusion and increased student participation. Pasco County Public Schools required teachers to use the Canvas platform to provide consistency and consolidate information for teachers and families. In some districts, teachers relied on more informal or familiar platforms to stay connected. For example, teachers in Polk County transferred an organically-developed Facebook group into a new communications and collaboration hub for district leaders, educators, and community members.

Educators also offered much-needed social and emotional support to students and families. Voice and video communications are particularly powerful tools to convey information while improving student and family engagement. Collier County Public Schools’ principal Jon Bremseth recorded a video on campus to the song “Mr. Lonely” as a way to show students they were valued and missed. In Pinellas County, Superintendent Michael Grego and Associate Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, Kevin Hendrick, recorded and disseminated numerous videos to both encourage students and teachers and keep them informed as they navigated the transition to distance learning.

Among the educators themselves, timely and frequent communication between administrators and educators fostered a sense of trust and collaboration in the spring. Regular check-ins with teachers provided administrators and district-level staff with valuable, real-time information to inform higher-level decision-making. Similarly, teachers who felt they had open and honest lines of communications with school and district administrators expressed a greater sense of trust and confidence. More frequent communication among teachers also facilitated idea-exchange, collaboration, and sharing of best practices to overcome challenges and better support students and families. The increased frequency of communications that emerged throughout the distance learning period was cited by interview participants at all levels of the school community as one thing that they would like to see continue as schools resume in-person instruction.

**Assessment, acceleration, and accountability: “The COVID slide plus the summer slide.”**

As the pandemic continues to evolve in the fall and winter of 2020 and schools in Florida move to a combination of more robust face-to-face and distance offerings, the issue of assessment and accountability emerges as a crucial topic among our stakeholders. Parents and educators are concerned about the learning loss due to the closure of brick-and-mortar schools in the spring. This concern is very often framed as “the COVID slide compounded with the summer slide” (Interview with Participant EL7). Thus, it is important to consider how the learning loss in the spring and summer of 2020 is interpreted and measured among different stakeholders. For instance, some educational leaders we interviewed presented an effectiveness-driven, interventionist approach to this issue:

*“If you are a struggling learner in the face-to face-environment and have not had any connection with the school or a teacher throughout distance learning in the summer, you have to be identified right away and brought into the school system and get that targeted instruction intervention. Because the chances or likeliness of you falling further behind are really high. And working with districts that are identifying those students and putting those resources in place so that students have access to high quality teachers and direct instruction is something that we’re supporting districts with each and every single day.” (Interview with Participant EL18)*

It is, indeed, very important to work on closing the educational achievement gap, especially because the learning support that students received from their families varied significantly during the period of distance learning. However, when putting this approach into practice, the stakeholders with whom we talked added more nuances and raised many questions.

First, educators reflected upon the grading approach that many adopted in the spring, and highlighted the validity challenge of evaluating students in a distance learning setting, as well as the social consequences of evaluation.

*“At the end of the day, the question is always student achievement. That’s a tough one to measure because we purposely chose not to give summative assessments or, or even some sort of benchmark thing at the end of the year. [...] We talked to some other large districts that gave it and they really struggled with validity. You know, they, they found out quickly that a lot of kids just weren’t going to do it or just ran through it. Or the flip side is their parents did for them. So I don’t know that student achievement-wise any district could really say this is exactly where we are.” (Interview with Research Participant EL12)*

As much as teachers needed to know how students’ learning had been going, they were also keenly aware that grading would have real social emotional consequences on students. In an era when students were already socially isolated, perhaps even experiencing COVID-related anxiety, loss, and traumas, educators asked what is the most reasonable, caring, and effective grading approach:

*“How would we handle the grades? Would we make sure that we had a level of compassion for how we would grade kids, but yet understand that students had to be graded because if not the*

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*instruction or the expectations will not be taken seriously. So balancing our policy of having grades was important against a real social emotional response that we have to be careful how we grade children and how the outcomes emerge.” (Interview with Research Participant EL8)*

Teachers' concern about evaluation is also reflected in the professional development priorities they identified, as 54.9% of the surveyed teachers reported that assessing distance learners should be one of the top priorities for professional development. With a significant number of students still engaging in distance learning and classes transitioning online due to students and teachers placed under quarantine, schools and districts are far from solving the issue of assessment.

Closely related to the issue of assessing students' learning is district, school, and teacher evaluation and accountability. Prior to the pandemic, the state-wide accountability system are derived from [metrics identified by the Florida Department of Education](#), which include student achievement, as measured by Florida Standards Assessments; learning gains, with a particular emphasis on the lowest quartile; four-year graduation rates; and acceleration success, such as AP, IB, Dual Enrollment, and industry certifications. Teachers' evaluations have historically been conducted using a [Value-Added Model \(VAM\)](#) that calculates their impact on student learning growth. In the spring, the state-wide teacher evaluation and assessment system was suspended to prepare for the implementation of distance learning. As teachers returned to campuses and some students to their classrooms, some educators argued that this was exactly the right time for us to rethink accountability and assessment-- what they entail and constrain in the midst of the pandemic.

*“How do you evaluate a teacher in a Google Classroom or Google Meet or Zoom session, and hold them accountable for that, when there’s so many things that they can’t control in that setting? Which you gotta, I mean, hopefully this makes us rethink the way we do that and the way we view accountability. I don’t know what the answer is and what it should look like. I think the world is still okay without all the testing, we didn’t, we didn’t all of a sudden just stop breathing.” (Interview with Research Participant EL15)*



While many educators noticed that the validity and reliability of assessments became very questionable during a pandemic, they also reminded us that standardized assessment defines learning and learning outcomes in a narrow and rigid way.

As crucial as assessment is, it would be unfair to assume students learned nothing during this time. Although their standardized test scores might fluctuate, that should not overshadow the growth they gained in other aspects of their life. For instance, parents commented that their children were actively learning things that are not included in their textbooks, such as cooking, taking care of family members, sports, and so on. One middle schooler we interviewed even explained to us how he made his first investment in the stock market (and learned how it works) with the support of his mother. Together with rethinking the role of assessment in our education, educators also argued that this is the time to reflect upon our definition of learning and how we afford learning opportunities to our students.

Some teachers also enjoyed the autonomy they reclaimed after the suspension of assessments in the spring. An educator illustrated this point using the example of making promotion decisions: Teachers had the flexibility in the decision making process and they found the flexibility serving them and their students well (Interview with Participant EL7). As schools continue to gauge the meaning of the learning loss and navigate the educational landscape during the pandemic, we see a need to further engage in the discussion about assessment and accountability.

### ***Quality childcare for working families and economic stability: A briefer section about ECE***

Data from our listening tour show that when schools and businesses shut down, the state's early child care providers faced exponential challenges. Stay open and run the risk of spreading COVID-19? Close their doors, lay off employees and leave essential workers scrambling to find child care? Like many of the findings gathered from our listening tour, the pandemic brought to light a fundamental need for families—access to quality early learning programs that prepare children for academic success and support working families who fuel the economy. Data and analysis compiled by the Center for American Progress this past April found that Florida could lose more than half of its child care slots (56%), impacting about 419,633 children. Since March, media outlets have reported the toll closures had on first responders with children, victims of child abuse without the safety of mandatory reporters and employees who work low-wage jobs who can't afford to miss a day of work. A series of key themes and recommendations emerged from our interviews and surveys of over 4,000 parents, educators and families from across the state—the availability of reliable child care ensures the wellbeing of working families and their children.

The absence of safe, quality child care programs has a negative economic impact on working families and local economies. When child care programs closed in March, it affected every aspect of a community's economic stability. Without child care, working parents scrambled to find help or risked losing their job. Without the income from parents, programs couldn't pay their staff (average wage less than \$12 per hour). It's estimated that without federal assistance, 40% of programs will close permanently this year. For those parents who can work remotely (only 37% of US jobs), caring for children while working is nearly impossible. This impacts working moms the most (77% work full-time) who already shoulder a majority of the caregiving and managed nearly all of it during school closures. These conditions, coupled with the need to ensure a safe, virus-free environment, exacerbated the struggles for the providers and parents.

**Access to quality child care programs for all children is critically important given that COVID-19 has exacerbated existing achievement gaps**

Children who participate in quality early learning programs are 80% more likely to attend college and their employability is increased by 23%. On average, minority and low-income children enter kindergarten significantly behind in reading and math skills. A recent report suggests current achievement gaps will grow by 15-20% as a result of learning loss throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Reducing the effects of school and child care closures on the achievement gap begins by ensuring children and parents have access to high-quality early learning programs. As Susan Block, Chief Executive Officer for the Early Learning Coalition of Southwest Florida put it,

*“If we have high quality early learning programs and children are getting those appropriate experiences early on, school readiness becomes a whole lot more prolific in our cities, and everything else follows.”*

Without access to a safe, reliable child care program, children are at greater risk for abuse and neglect. The Florida Department of Children and Families often sees a reduction in abuse hotline calls when school breaks for summer. There was a similar reduction as schools closed for an extended period of time because teachers and child care providers serve as mandatory reporters, leading to concerns that abuse and neglect went unreported. Since brick and mortar schools have reopened, there has been a 27% increase in calls to Florida’s Child Abuse Hotline. In an interview with one of the state’s early learning coalitions, staff described how a working parent, desperate to find care or risk losing their job, will leave their children in potentially unsafe environments.

## CONSIDERATIONS

School and system leaders, on a daily basis, face the essential questions of what to start doing, what to stop doing, what to do differently, and what to continue doing to optimize success for students, families, and communities. The COVID-19 experience has made these questions more urgent and complex than ever. The data and themes described in this report may offer insights for leaders as they recover, restart, and re-envision their schools.

Education leaders are motivated to rethink their short-term, long-term, and temporary closing plans.

*“I mean, the only thing I’ll add about looking forward is, you know, this was the year we were sunsetting our previous strategic plan. And we spent a whole lot of months with consulting groups creating our five-year plan. And what I was able to say to our board and to the organization is I still believe these are the right priorities -- these priorities that we’ve articulated for the next five years. I think these goals, the actual quantitative goals, are still the right goals. I think sequencing and timing is now where we adjust, right, so we’ve got a priority on improving literacy. I still think that’s the right priority. I think it’s actually more important than ever.” (Interview with Research Participant EL2)*

### ***What leaders stopped doing***

Schools and districts are a core of their communities, and when communities experience trauma, loss, and upheaval, schools have an increased responsibility to focus on healing and wellbeing. This responsibility in 2020 required a rebalancing of how educators and staff used their resources, especially their instructional time. While end-of-course assessments and other standardized assessments continued to guide instructional decisions, leaders reduced the priority placed on them, as wellbeing in school communities became the highest priority. Educators recognized that the stress and exhaustion that many students felt during the year would naturally influence their ability to learn. Creating safe and trusted virtual spaces for students and families required daily care and attention. These spaces were prerequisites for access to the stability, healing, and learning that educators orchestrated.

Broadband connectivity is fundamental for learning, full participation in civic society, and access to basic services. Growing numbers of school systems have stopped expecting struggling families to provide their own broadband services. Research indicates that successful distance learning requires planning and investment in reliable technology and effective instructional techniques (see our Best Practices Brief [here](#)). Ensuring access to broadband and technology promotes educational equity to empower families so they can choose the most appropriate educational approach to meet their students' unique learning needs.

### ***What leaders started doing***

As the backbones of our civil society, schools took on greater responsibility in 2020 to be a source of factual and science-based information, guidance, support, and education options for families at a time when families were suddenly disconnected from information and access to place-based resources. School districts became trusted conduits of information from community agencies to families, thus an avenue for social solidarity. In recognition of this expanded role, leaders proactively gathered and organized resources from across their communities at a larger scale than they had previously done to ensure that families' basic needs could be met and children could be better prepared to continue learning.

The schools' role as family hub and the rapidly shifting nature of schooling in 2020 required a unified, coherent, and frequent approach to communication among staff and families. Leaders and staff learned that new channels and modalities for communication were needed to reach the entire community, and that multi-directional communication was essential to account for stakeholder input in evolving plans. These approaches to communication reduced "transactional distance" within communities and built trust through increased transparency.





### ***What leaders are doing differently***

By virtue of it happening online and at least partially in students' homes, the learning experience was highly visible in 2020. Leaders and educators witnessed students' daily lives and families observed teaching. This visibility led to increased recognition of inequities of many kinds in school communities, and it uncovered previously invisible opportunities for communities to support families in ways that could build on a school's existing inclusion and support programs. Improving equity in education is a whole-school, whole-community endeavor, including services, resources, and understanding.

While quickly working to build their understanding in 2020, educators perceived the available professional development opportunities inadequate to give them the technological pedagogical knowledge that they needed to choose and implement new practices, tools, and digital content. They turned to their trusted colleagues and their personal learning networks to seek ideas and to share their learning. They demonstrated the power of the Community of Practice (CoP), which was especially relevant when educators were teaching and learning on the same or similar digital platforms. As student learning shifts from exposure-based to mastery-based, so should professional development. CoPs are expected to play an increased role in teacher learning, particularly in dynamic times, as spaces where educators can practice and refine the knowledge and skills they acquire in more formal Professional Development experiences.

### ***What leaders are continuing to do***

The shift toward a personalized mastery-based approach to learning in schools is not new. However, it is far from mainstream, and it typically requires a digital platform and flexible content that are familiar to educators and students. The work that leaders did to bring these requirements to most educators and students in 2020 brought a vision for mastery learning much closer to reality, and enabled school communities to experience its potential benefits. With substantially greater numbers of talented educators and leaders refining their approaches to teaching and learning, effectiveness of mastery approaches is likely to grow. Shifting to personalized approaches includes shifting the ways assessment occurs. When students are assessed as a part of learning, the need for assessments apart from learning are unnecessary.



Beyond changes in how content and assessment are used, the COVID-19 pandemic changed how time and space are used in education. Students, families, and educators experienced the benefits of flexibility in when and where synchronous and asynchronous learning happen, and they are considering ways to leverage these benefits in their schools. Most importantly, educators, leaders, and families saw for which students different modalities appeared to provide learning benefits, and they are envisioning ways to tailor the entire learning experience to equitably address each child's needs.

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## APPENDIX

Table 1: Professional Background of Surveyed Teachers

Community type in which one teaches	Public		Private		Charter		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Urban	49	13.6%	3	25.0%	1	11.1%	53	13.9%
Rural	176	48.9%	9	75.0%	5	55.6%	190	49.9%
Suburban	135	37.5%	0	0.0%	3	33.3%	138	36.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>360</b>		<b>12</b>		<b>9</b>		<b>381</b>	
<b>Whether serving Title 1 students</b>								
Yes	319	88.1%	8	72.7%	5	55.6%	332	86.9%
No	43	11.9%	3	27.3%	4	44.4%	50	13.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>362</b>		<b>11</b>		<b>9</b>		<b>382</b>	
<b>Whether teaching students who are exceptional learners</b>								
Only general education	148	40.9%	8	66.7%	4	44.4%	160	41.8%
Only exceptional education	38	10.5%	0	0.0%	1	11.1%	39	10.2%
Both	176	48.6%	4	33.3%	4	44.4%	184	48.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>362</b>		<b>12</b>		<b>9</b>		<b>383</b>	

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**Table 2: Parent/caregiver survey respondents**

Type of organization	Child care center		Family childcare home		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Whether the organization was closed due to COVID19 when the survey was taken</b>						
Yes	51	28.8%	1	4.0%	52	25.7%
No	126	71.2%	24	96.0%	150	74.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>177</b>		<b>25</b>		<b>202</b>	
<b>Whether the organization has to close for a period of time due to COVID19</b>						
Yes	109	63.7%	5	20.8%	114	58.5%
No	62	36.3%	19	79.2%	81	41.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>171</b>		<b>24</b>		<b>195</b>	

**Table 3: Professional Background of Surveyed Early Childhood Educators**

Levels of school that respondents' child(ren) attend	Yes		No		Total
	N	%	N	%	
Elementary	2610	63.3%	1515	36.7%	4125
PreK	543	13.2%	3582	86.8%	4125
Middle	1685	40.8%	2440	59.2%	4125
High	1467	35.6%	2658	64.4%	4125
<b>Types of school that respondents' child(ren) attend</b>					
Public	780	18.7%	3387	81.3%	4167
Private	3816	91.6%	351	8.4%	4167
Charter	165	4.0%	4002	96.0%	4167
<b>Whether child(ren) receives special education service</b>	781	18.7%	3397	81.3%	4178
<b>Whether child(ren) attends English as Second Language Class</b>	246	5.9%	3894	94.1%	4140

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**Table 4: Regional Distribution of Interview Participants**

	Educational leaders	PK-12 teachers	Parents and caregivers	Students	Early childhood educators	Local media reporters	Total
Fort Myers - Naples	1	1	0	0	2	0	4
Gainesville	0	0	4	1	0	0	5
Jacksonville	3	2	0	1	1	0	7
Miami	3	3	3	4	1	0	14
Mobile - Pensacola	0	2	0	0	1	0	4
Orlando	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Panama City	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Tallahassee - Thomasville	0	2	0	0	1	1	4
Tampa - St. Pete	3	1	3	2	1	0	10
West Palm Beach	2	0	0	0	0	1	3
Statewide <sup>6</sup>	8	5	N/A	N/A	1	0	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>66</b>

<sup>6</sup>In this row, statewide educational leaders refer to state-level administrators and leaders in Florida, statewide PK-12 teachers refer to teachers working at the Florida Virtual School.