

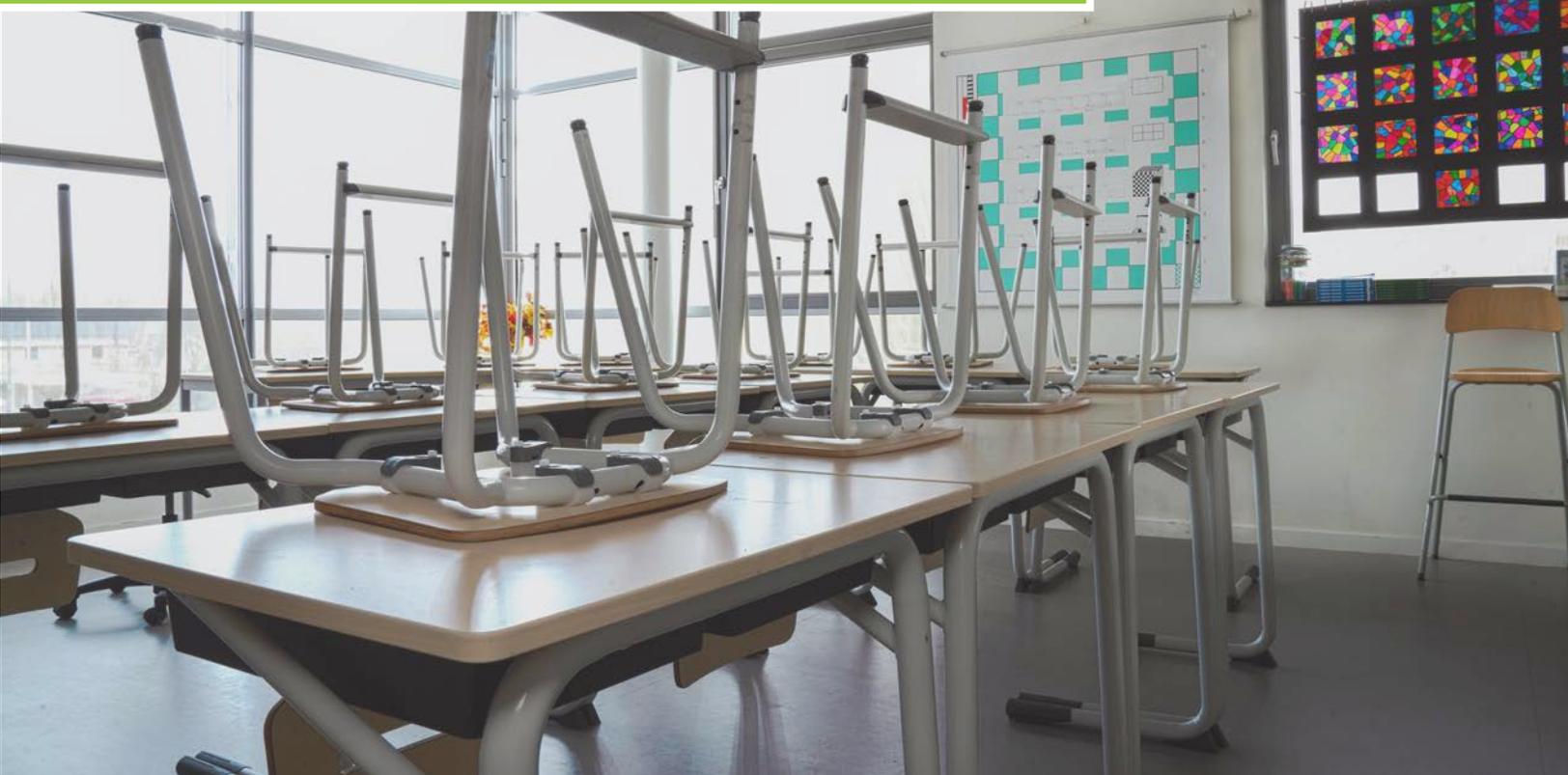


# Barriers to Bridges:

**TEACH  
+PLUS**

Teacher Perspectives on Accelerating Learning, Leadership, and Innovation

IN THE  
**PANDEMIC**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THIS REPORT EXAMINES THE FRONTLINE EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATORS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. To understand these and gauge teachers' perspectives on teaching and learning in the COVID era, Teach Plus and Teach Plus teacher leaders conducted focus groups with hundreds of teachers nationwide. We provide recommendations for education leaders and policymakers based on teachers' guidance and input.

IN THE FOCUS GROUPS, **FIVE FINDINGS** EMERGED:

1

Teachers recognize the enormous social and emotional toll of the pandemic on students. They want to ensure that school leaders prioritize the mental health and well-being of both students and teachers in the coming school year.

2

Whether schooling takes place in-person, remotely, or as a hybrid, teachers know that teaching and learning will need to look different for the coming school year. They want specific professional development in order to bring their best in this new era, including on how to teach remotely and on how to integrate social and emotional learning into their instruction.

3

Teachers see this moment of crisis as a potential transformative point in education, to address inequities and support innovation in teaching and learning. They believe schools can and must use it to shape longer-term solutions for the future of education.

4

Teachers want to meet students where they are in their learning and focus their instruction on what matters most. They support the use of student learning data — including data collected through diagnostic assessments — paired with curated or “power” standards to tailor their curriculum and pace of teaching.

5

Collaboration across school roles and more distributed leadership in schools are needed to meet the challenges of the coming school year. Deeper partnerships and relationships with families and community partners are also urgently needed to better serve students, especially students with disabilities, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged students.

# SIX RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR SCHOOL, DISTRICT, AND STATE LEADERS:

1

**Embrace teacher leadership and include teachers in the decision-making process.**

Empower teachers to meet the challenges of teaching and learning, identify solutions, and lead the change management process with their peers.

2

**Prioritize and incorporate the expertise of teachers in school planning and instruction.**

Provide teachers with the tools and training they say they need, and give teachers greater autonomy in their instructional strategies and in meeting the challenges of teaching and learning that evolve throughout the year.

3

**Increase resources for trauma-informed instruction, student mental health, and the well-being of teachers.** These should include high quality teacher professional development on social and emotional learning and resources for connecting families to training and resources.

4

**Strengthen communication, connections, and partnership with parents and families to better support students.** School and system leaders should focus on building out strategies, opening lines of communication, and enhancing access to educational resources, particularly for students who typically require additional resources or supports.

5

**Identify, evaluate, and scale-up promising practices and approaches, particularly from teachers who are uniquely qualified to understand and re-envision how schools can best serve children.** School and system leaders should embrace innovative practices and ideas that best meet and address the educational challenges of this year and beyond.

6

**Prioritize education funding — and pay particular attention to those schools that serve the highest need students.** Federal, state, and local officials should take steps to increase funding for schools to address the effects of the pandemic, and to ensure sufficient funding for a safe and equitable education.

# BARRIERS TO BRIDGES: Teacher Perspectives on Accelerating Learning, Leadership, and Innovation in the Pandemic

## INTRODUCTION

*“COVID-19 has pushed our schools and teachers to constantly look for new ways to promote efficient learning at home. The whole time we have been affected by this pandemic, teachers and administrators have pushed boundaries and exceeded job descriptions in order to reach students in their homes, despite distractions and barriers put in place when the instruction is not face to face.” (High school teacher)*

*“We need professional development on how to build bridges for engagement of reluctant distance learners. This PD should be academic as well as social/emotional. We need PD on how to reach out to parents so that they are truly informed about their children’s participation level in distance learning.” (Middle school teacher)*

Whether or not this school year is in-person, blended, or remote only, there is one certainty: the essential role of the teacher. The American education system has faced its largest crisis in memory and we have seen a lot of pain, and a little hope. We have seen teachers rise to the challenge, and begin to reinvent their profession.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has forced school closures for millions of students across the country, teachers have proven that they are so much more than deliverers of content. They build trusted relationships with students and families. They identify what inspires each student, leveraging the science of learning to invest in the whole child. They determine what works, and lead transformation in their schools, districts, and states. They leverage technology, creative student groupings, and blended learning to personalize instruction to maximize the potential of each individual learner. They are lowering barriers and building and strengthening bridges to students, families, and one another.

This is a moment of deep peril, and also of promise. We must act not only because the needs are so great and the challenges so large — but because if we listen to teachers, we could emerge from this pandemic with a school system that is stronger, more responsive, and more equitable than ever before.

# METHODOLOGY

TO LEARN WHAT TEACHERS HOPE, FEAR, AND KNOW WILL BE REQUIRED IN THE COMING YEAR, TEACH PLUS SPENT THE SUMMER OF 2020 WORKING WITH TEACHERS TO UNDERSTAND WHAT GUIDANCE THEY HAVE FOR POLICYMAKERS AND SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS AS THEY MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT THIS SCHOOL YEAR AND BEYOND. In June 2020, 69 Teach Plus teacher leaders conducted 152 virtual focus groups with 532 teachers from 25 states. In these focus groups, teachers discussed their perspectives on teaching and learning, student equity and needs, student and teacher mental health and social and emotional learning resources in schools, and how schools can emerge stronger from this crisis.

Teachers who participated in these sessions came from across public school types, including 35 percent who teach in elementary schools, 10 percent in K-8 schools, 19 percent in middle schools, and 30 percent in high schools. One percent came from early childhood centers and five percent came from other school configurations.<sup>1</sup> In terms of school settings, 16 percent of the participants teach in schools in rural settings, 31 percent in suburban settings, 50 percent in urban settings, and three percent from other settings.<sup>2</sup> Eighty-nine percent of teachers came from district schools and 11 percent from public charter schools.<sup>3</sup> On average, teachers had 13 years of teaching experience.<sup>4</sup>



# FINDINGS

## FINDING 01

TEACHERS RECOGNIZE THE ENORMOUS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL TOLL OF THE PANDEMIC ON STUDENTS. THEY WANT TO ENSURE THAT SCHOOL LEADERS PRIORITIZE THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF BOTH STUDENTS AND TEACHERS IN THE COMING SCHOOL YEAR.

One of the most consistent themes we heard was that overall, teachers are overwhelmingly concerned about their students' mental health. When asked about how this year compared to a "typical" school year, a staggering 89 percent of teachers said that they are more concerned for their students' mental health (see Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> The teachers who participated in our focus groups were emphatic that now, more than ever, explicit support for the mental health of students and teachers needs to be a priority.

**FIGURE 1 | HOW CONCERNED ARE TEACHERS ABOUT THEIR STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH?**



Having appropriate social and emotional learning (SEL) supports in schools, including well-trained teachers, sufficient counselors, and access to curricula and tools, can help schools address student mental health. We asked teachers if their schools or districts are prepared to support their students' SEL needs in the next school year. While 42 percent said that their schools or districts were "very well" or "somewhat" well prepared to address their students' social and emotional learning needs, 50 percent of teachers reported that their schools or districts are not well prepared (see Figure 2).<sup>6</sup>

**FIGURE 2 | DO TEACHERS THINK THEIR SCHOOLS OR DISTRICTS ARE READY TO MEET THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING NEEDS OF THEIR STUDENTS?**

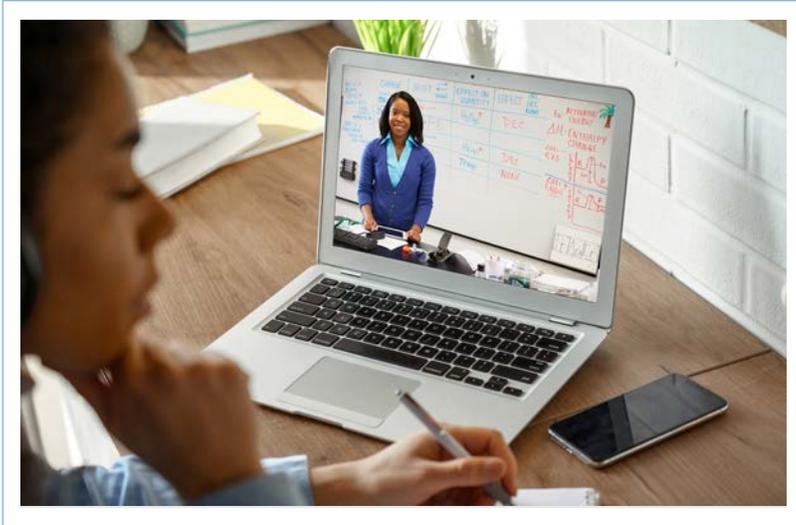


Teachers believe that districts should take a two-fold approach to address the social and emotional needs of their students: Schools should have access to additional resources to address students' mental health needs, and districts should provide support for families and communities to make sure students are getting continuous care even if they are not in the school building.

Teachers believe schools need increased mental health resources such as counselors, curriculum, and teacher training. Some teachers noted that their schools lacked sufficient mental health resources even before the pandemic. In our focus groups, teachers told us that ensuring student access to counselors equipped with the training to help meet student SEL needs is critical: ***“We need more school counselors. Furthermore, we need our school counselors to actually be able to devote their workdays to meeting with and counseling students rather than on test coordinating and other related tasks.”*** (High school science teacher)<sup>7</sup>

Teachers also discussed the need for enhanced teacher and parent training to support and address the social and emotional learning of students. They are worried that teaching social and emotional skills will be a challenge if students and teachers are not physically in the same place during schooling hours, and they want access to curricular resources and materials aimed at student mental health. As a middle school ELA teacher explained, ***“Teachers will need support with helping students with mental and emotional challenges from COVID-19. The uncertainty of the future for school will create a lot of anxiety. Teachers will need strategies and support helping their students through this uncertain time.”*** Teachers want professional development in social and emotional learning and mental health because they worry about the stress placed on students during the pandemic and how the normal social needs of students interacting with peers have been upended.

*“I would like to see some training that better prepares teachers to be able to identify, mitigate, and support students who have, and are experiencing trauma. Also some training on how to help families who are experiencing trauma. Teachers will not be able to send every student who has experienced trauma to the counselor's office because that would overwhelm the counseling system. Instead teachers need to be able to offer those supports in the classroom to a wider range of students on both the individual and class level.”*  
**(Kindergarten teacher)**



Teachers also want to make sure that SEL is meaningfully and intentionally incorporated into the school day in a way that many feel has not been the norm previously:

*“There should be intentional (instructional) time set aside for teachers to build up the social and emotional aspects of their classrooms. If in a virtual setting, these first few meetings and assignments should address community-building and relationship-building amongst teachers and students. If in-person, adequate time to test out the school procedures and assess students’ degrees of feeling safe and OK at school will be very important.”*

**(High school world languages teacher)**

Teachers suggest adjusting the curriculum to provide time to explicitly meet the SEL needs of students, to teach students coping skills, and to provide students with opportunities to interact socially.

Additionally, teachers recognize the importance of close partnership with parents and families in order to meet students’ SEL needs, particularly if remote learning continues. As the pandemic forces more learning to occur inside the home, teachers are already thinking of strategies to ensure that learning, including social and emotional learning skills, does not get interrupted. Teachers suggest the possibility of conducting home visits as well as utilizing questionnaires to better gauge student needs. As a kindergarten teacher suggested, **“Connect more effectively with caregivers and develop stronger alliances with community groups and services- consider focus groups to find out from families what their needs may be for next year.”** As families and caregivers are drawn more closely into their children’s academics, teachers are making clear the importance of parent and family engagement and partnership in addressing the social and emotional learning needs of their children.

Teachers are by no means immune to a global pandemic, with the health, economic, and societal effects impacting the whole country. In this moment of crisis, school systems cannot neglect the well-being and mental health of teachers themselves. Teachers emphasized just how important it is, and will be, for educators to care for their own mental health if they are to be successful in their roles. They told us that school leaders should create school environments that foster educator well-being by prioritizing support, patience, and clarity. As one middle school teacher explained:<sup>8</sup>

*"I think that these past five months were rough for a lot of educators because of this sense of unknown and leadership/admin provide almost last minute updates for every key moment. For expectations of staff, there was not a lot of clarity outside of 'students will be submitting work, make sure you post and grade it.' Some staff went above and beyond and worked many more hours than other staff members did. The burnout by the end of year was felt by all and you could visibly see it when we had staff meetings, and it wasn't the best feeling."*  
**(Middle school teacher)**

Teachers also suggested check-ins by administrative staff and administrators and treating teachers with patience and grace as they adjust to the new challenges brought on by COVID-19 and the shift to new instructional arrangements.

Given their new, atypical working conditions, teachers want clarity of guidelines to help maintain a work-life balance. Without a traditional school day schedule, teachers worry that being always "on" creates additional stress in an already stressful time. A middle school science teacher suggested, **"Administration and districts should communicate and enforce end of day hours for teachers. Adopt 'out of office' alerts at the end of the day hours."** While simple fixes like this help signal the importance of teachers' mental health, teachers also suggested larger, structural adjustments that require greater political will and resources:

*"First, understand that [teachers] have had trauma during COVID-19 as well. Family members may have been sick or [have] spouses who lost jobs. Allow more mental health days for educators beyond the state-allowed five. Adjust expectations for teachers in the same way we need to adjust expectations for students. Show teachers WHAT self-care and balance looks like, not just tell us."*  
**(Middle school college & career readiness teacher)**

Finally, teachers expressed deep worry about the health and safety of their students and themselves. When asked about their greatest concerns for the coming school year, teachers underscored the seriousness of the challenge: They are concerned about the physical well-being and health of their students and themselves as well as their ability to do the job they have been called to — that of being a teacher.<sup>9</sup>

*"There are many things that concern me for the next school year, the overarching theme being the health and safety of our students. While the state has given guidelines on the amount of students that can be in a classroom and how far apart, there are still a lot of what ifs. Given the shape and design of my building there are many classrooms that won't be able to provide social-distanced learning. Hallway space is not adequate enough for students to be able to walk down the hallway...I am also concerned with the accessibility of materials for all students at our school. We center our ELA curriculum around books, and I am not confident that we can provide books to all our students in a timely manner...[S]ince not all students have chromebooks or an electronic other than their cellphone, reading a text online is not easily accessible for all of our students."*  
**(Middle school teacher)**

## FINDING 02

WHETHER SCHOOLING TAKES PLACE IN-PERSON, REMOTELY, OR AS A HYBRID, TEACHERS KNOW THAT TEACHING AND LEARNING WILL NEED TO LOOK DIFFERENT FOR THE COMING SCHOOL YEAR. THEY WANT SPECIFIC PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN ORDER TO BRING THEIR BEST IN THIS NEW ERA, INCLUDING ON HOW TO TEACH REMOTELY AND ON HOW TO INTEGRATE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING INTO THEIR INSTRUCTION.

In a series of surveys Teach Plus administered across Massachusetts, Mississippi, and New Mexico soon after school buildings closed, teachers said that while they understood what was expected of them and largely had the resources and tools they needed to do their jobs, more than a third were not able to meaningfully engage with their students.<sup>10</sup> Recognizing that the shift to remote or hybrid learning environments will likely continue in many schools across the country this fall, in our focus groups, we asked teachers what kinds of professional learning they and their peers need to meet the challenges of the new school year. Almost three quarters — 73 percent — said that they wanted professional development in teaching online, and 37 percent asked for support on social and emotional learning.<sup>11</sup>

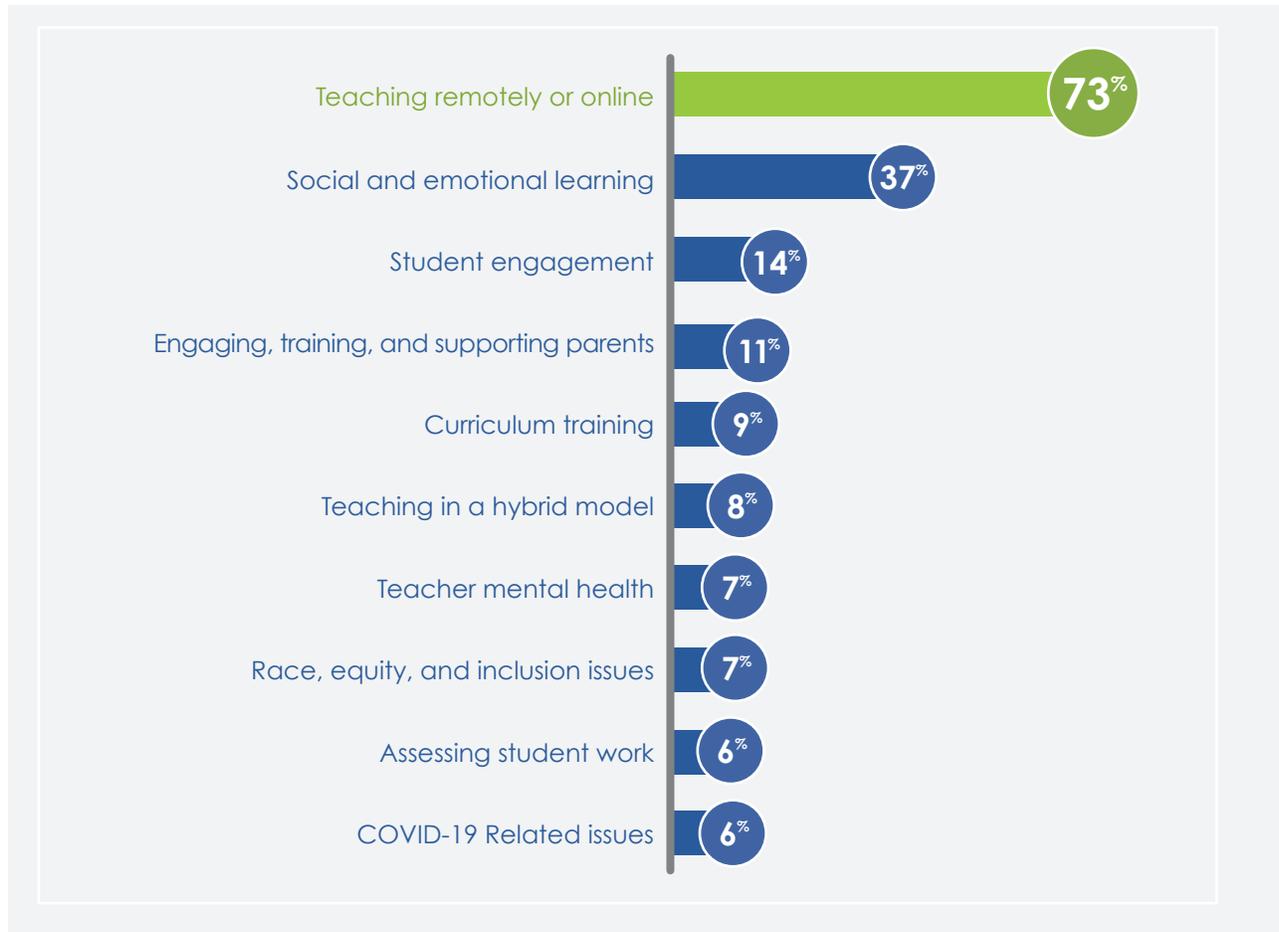
*“Teachers should all be involved in professional development focused on digital literacy and online learning. COVID-19 has exposed major shortcomings in our understanding of best practice when using technology in education. It has also revealed to many that children are not, in fact, digital natives simply because they were born into a digital world. These skills, like any other academic area, need to be explicitly taught, modeled and scaffolded. Teachers need to be prepared to teach these skills to all students, as well as have a deeper understanding of digital platforms and literacy skills.”*

**(Elementary school fourth grade teacher)**

For many teachers, the sudden, dramatic shift to remote learning brought on by the pandemic was one for which they had little preparation or training. The result was many challenges on how to deliver instruction in an online or virtual format, including troubleshooting their own technology and access issues, identifying and using suitable online resources, and engaging with students and their families under new circumstances. Across the Teach Plus surveys, teachers were quick to point out that they were unable to remain meaningfully connected to some students while teaching remotely. These tasks and new expectations would have been challenging even with time to prepare in a typical year; the abruptness of this occurring in the middle of a school year only compounded the difficulties teachers faced.

As teachers contemplated the coming school year and what they feel they need to more fully do their jobs as educators, we asked teachers what types of professional development and learning they felt they needed to fully do their jobs as educators during an ongoing pandemic. In our focus groups, teachers spoke most often about the need to improve their ability to deliver instruction remotely and to continue to meet the social and emotional learning needs of their students even when they are not in the school building with them (see Figure 3).<sup>12</sup>

**FIGURE 3 | WHAT DO TEACHERS SAY ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TOPICS?**



Teachers reported that they need guidance to learn how to effectively deliver instruction in an online environment; they are seeking the skills, knowledge, and resources to teach even if they are physically separated from their students. Such professional development is often best led by fellow teachers who have been early adopters of innovative new methods and online platforms. Many teachers reported that as instruction moved to a remote setting, they were inundated with lists of online teaching resources and felt too overwhelmed to figure out which resources were best suited to their classes. Teachers want to understand best practices for online instruction, make decisions about which online resources and strategies will be most helpful to engage their students, or include curated resources from trusted or reliable sources.

*“First and foremost teachers need an example of what a successful online class looks like in terms of structuring lessons, utilizing media, sequencing and pacing, etc. Moving from brick and mortar type teaching to online teaching was not a smooth transition for most because we didn’t know what we were supposed to be replicating. [What would be helpful is] optional professional development for teachers who struggle with technology or offering demonstrations of different online platforms.”*

**(High school ELA teacher)**

Teachers also want to more fully involve families and other caregivers in their children's learning. They pointed out that their schools or districts should choose just a few online platforms to use so teachers, families, and students would not have to learn different online systems as they worked with different teachers.

While receiving training on how to best deliver remote instruction will allow teachers to continue to deliver academic content, teachers also recognized that they will need to find new ways to address the social and emotional needs of their students as well. As teachers look to the new school year, they are looking for the skills and knowledge to be effective educators while caring for the traumas that their many students have experienced due to the pandemic. Now, more than ever, teachers are emphasizing the need to prioritize student mental health through social and emotional learning.



## FINDING 03

TEACHERS SEE THIS MOMENT OF CRISIS AS A POTENTIAL TRANSFORMATIVE POINT IN EDUCATION, TO ADDRESS INEQUITIES AND SUPPORT INNOVATION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING. THEY BELIEVE SCHOOLS CAN AND MUST USE IT TO SHAPE LONGER-TERM SOLUTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION.

While teachers are thinking about the many challenges of the pandemic, they are also considering how this moment in history might lead to long-term changes to the educational landscape that will outlive COVID-19. Teachers are hopeful that as conversations take place about what teaching and learning will look like this year, policymakers and school leaders might also look for and embrace innovative ideas that improve students' and teachers' experience for years to come. In our conversations with teachers, there was no shortage of ideas for how schools could and should look different in the future.

Teachers in our focus groups suggested strategies such as small group instruction, smaller class sizes, extra help, extended school hours or years, differentiated instruction, and other interventions designed to creatively meet the needs of students whose learning is being most affected by COVID-19. Some teachers called for looping younger students, switching to year-round school, and vertically teaming teachers so they can more easily share data about student progress.

**Throughout our discussions with teachers, five promising innovative approaches and perspectives to reimagine schooling emerged:**

RECOGNIZE THE POTENTIAL THAT TECHNOLOGY CAN PLAY IN TRANSFORMING CLASSROOMS.

Technology was already a powerful educational tool, and the need to equip teachers and students with technology will be even more acute this year as many students will be learning remotely. In the spring, access to technology gave educators the means to reach and individualize instruction for students and many teachers reported that some of their students actually engaged more with the use of technology than they had in a traditional classroom setting. Districts and schools should ensure technology equity for all their learners and ensure that teachers have access to appropriate professional development on using technology — by doing so, teachers will be able to expand the possibilities of how they help their students learn until they can return to live, classroom-based instruction.<sup>13</sup>

*“I see how COVID-19 has taught us the power of using technology for individual and more personalized learning. It has shown me how I can use more of a hybrid experience for my students to more individually meet their instruction with a combination of some direct instruction and individual student practice. This experience has catered to the needs of students with social or anxiety issues within a school building; many have had greater success being away from a full-day, traditional schedule with several other students. I have also seen how students engage better with tasks that challenge them to solve a problem or investigate an idea further, versus completing a simple task that is low in the DOK scale*

*and requires little effort. Students responded better to tasks that let them create and choose where they wanted to take their learning. This is true in a virtual setting and reminds me when we return in-person, not to revert back with worksheets or simple task-oriented learning."*

**(High school world languages teacher)**

Similarly, some of the lessons and knowledge gleaned from the closing of school buildings in the spring can have lasting implications for how teachers deliver instruction under both typical and atypical conditions.

*"I think more schools will go one-to-one. There will be less books and paper and more things done online. Snow days could still be instructional days if all students are able to take home chromebooks. I think teachers' roles will start to be more as a planner and guide and students will be able to do more of the work and heavy lifting of learning. A flipped classroom style might become the new norm."* **(K-8 school teacher)**

#### REFINE THE ROLE OF TEACHER.

When school buildings closed, the role of teachers changed. Our school systems can learn from that change, building school communities in which teachers develop meaningful relationships with students and families, facilitate and support students in becoming the agents of their own learning, personalize instruction to affirm students' cultures and identities, and serve as leaders informing decisions in their schools and districts.

When instruction became remote, teachers responded by giving students more ownership over their learning. Many teachers we spoke with reported that their role shifted from more of a deliverer of content to a facilitator of learning — and they were excited about how this might lead to increased student engagement. Teachers also highlighted how the pandemic shone a spotlight on the many ways they support their students besides providing instruction. They heard from parents about a newfound respect for their children's teachers — never having previously fully realized just how complex the role of the teacher is. Teachers are optimistic that one result of parents being in teachers' shoes will be deeper, more widespread respect for the work that teachers do and for the essential role they play in students' lives.

*"I feel that this situation has shined a light on how valuable our local public schools are. Not only have they been meeting the academic needs of students, but they were also: safe childcare for working parents, source of food, source of emotional support, source of special services (physical therapy, etc), and the list goes on. I think communities were able to see how much teachers and schools do for our students and how critical they are in the way our society functions. It is clear we have to find better ways to support our students when we can't be with them physically."* **(High school career and technical education teacher)**

## ADAPT AND DIFFERENTIATE MODES AND MODELS OF INSTRUCTION TO MEET STUDENT NEEDS.

The sudden shift to remote learning in the spring proved to be an opportunity for educators to re-think how their students learn best. Teachers who had never considered implementing a flipped classroom model — in which teachers assign videos or reading covering the content of the lesson as homework, and then use class time to provide individualized support or for engaging activities and discussion — were suddenly interested in experimenting and continuing with it. Others worked to differentiate content and instruction, and to individualize the learning experience. Teachers believe that this moment, when districts and schools are being forced to implement innovative models, can serve as a test run to implement these same models in the long term if they better serve their students' needs.

*“We have to change the way we approach and support learning for students by recognizing and addressing the difficulties they are experiencing in their lives outside school. We also need to re-think how instruction happens. Many students may not need in-person initial instruction, which is typically how we spend much of our class time, but may instead benefit from doing a ‘flipped classroom’ model, in which they get the initial learning from a teacher-created video and then use the classroom time to support students as they apply the learning for the first time.” (Middle school English language arts teacher)*

Teachers also worked to differentiate content and instruction, and to individualize the learning experience for their students.

*“Individualized education is finally happening — I love that teachers who were reluctant to implement technology for individualized education before the COVID-19 shutdown have risen to the task, learned the technology, and were successful in addressing the individual learning needs of their students through technology. I see these skills persisting into ‘normal’ school in the future.” (Middle school technology specialist)*

## PRIORITIZE WHAT MATTERS MOST IN EDUCATION.

As policymakers and district leaders endeavor to find workable solutions to continue educating students, teachers believe that this moment presents an opportunity for all educational stakeholders to pause and distill the essential components of the school experience. Teachers hope district leaders will prioritize ensuring the social and emotional well-being of students and teachers as a prerequisite to focusing on academic skills. They want decision makers to remember that their students get so much more out of school than just learning academics — they also learn how to be responsible, engaged members of society. Teachers believe learning those kinds of skills are just as important, if not more so.

*"I hope that schools move to focusing on the mental health of teachers and students and not just their academic growth. We need to be raising better humans, not just humans who can complete a test. I think that now we not only need to think about COVID but also the racial movements in the US at this point. We need to prepare our students for the future, not as we have known it to be but as we want to make it."*

**(Elementary school teacher)**

Some teachers also see this moment as a wake-up call to reflect and re-evaluate the status quo in schools.

*"I believe this is going to change education completely. Some students may have really enjoyed the freedom that virtual learning provided. Some may realize that sitting in a building for eight hours is not the best way to learn and may choose to go a different route. The same could go for educators as well. Some may realize that teaching can be done outside of a school building. On the other hand some teachers may realize that the material and information that we thought was important is not the only reason why we are teaching. Interacting with students, talking about particular issues is really the reason why students are in school. That will change the content in which is discussed in class."*

**(Middle school arts teacher)**

The innovative and out-of-the-box thinking evident in our discussions with teachers was often grounded in a recognition that the current system and the instructional patchwork that has taken place since school buildings closed in the spring were failing to meet the needs of many students, especially those who typically require or should have additional educational resources and supports. The pandemic has made clear how deficient the education system is in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable students.



ADDRESS EXISTING INEQUITIES IN EDUCATION, SUCH AS THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND INSUFFICIENT FUNDING FOR HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on existing inequities in education, many of which were exacerbated by the closing of school buildings. Many teachers worried about their students' access to technology and to their students' families affording devices. They expressed fear that students who already faced disadvantages would be pushed further behind their peers who did not have trouble accessing online lessons and resources. Teachers stressed that districts need to do more to address student inequities like this, to make sure every student can continue to learn, whether from the school building or from home. They want to see lawmakers direct necessary resources to ensure that all students have the opportunity to flourish in school, and that this pandemic doesn't leave students behind, on the other side of the digital divide.

*"I think that COVID will make technology and the access to technology even more important and gives education an opportunity to make certain that all students have that access. COVID has made the lack of equity in education very obvious."*

**(High school English teacher)**

*"I teach at a Title I school that is completely on free breakfast and lunch. The majority of my parents are essential workers who barely make a living wage. Many of them lost their jobs and some nearly lost their home, while others had to move in with family because they couldn't pay rent. There just aren't enough resources for them to survive. The struggle for these students has become worse. Many of our students were already behind academically and now with the closures, they'll more than likely be even farther behind. Even with devices and internet, this new approach to learning is very difficult for adults, much less children. It's almost an impossible situation. The economic and educational divide has widened. WE NEED TO HELP but POLICYMAKERS NEED TO FUND EDUCATION first."*

**(Elementary school teacher)**

What's more, with many state, district, and school budgets likely to experience fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, an overwhelming number of teachers were concerned that budget cuts would result in layoffs that could further disadvantage the highest need students. In our focus groups, 85 percent of teachers reported being "very concerned" or "somewhat concerned" that reduced budgets could limit districts' ability to keep talented and qualified teachers in the classroom.<sup>14</sup>

## FINDING 04

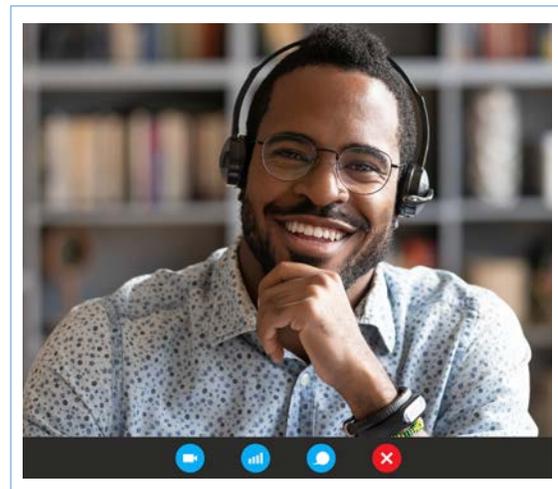
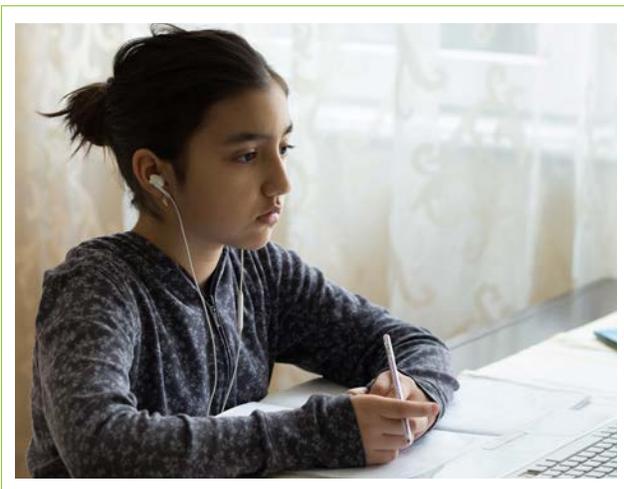
TEACHERS WANT TO MEET STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE IN THEIR LEARNING AND FOCUS THEIR INSTRUCTION ON WHAT MATTERS MOST. THEY SUPPORT THE USE OF STUDENT LEARNING DATA — INCLUDING DATA COLLECTED THROUGH DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENTS — PAIRED WITH CURATED OR “POWER” STANDARDS TO TAILOR THEIR CURRICULUM AND PACE OF TEACHING.

*We will have to start from where the kids are at when they return to school, not try to begin where we normally do. There needs to be discussions on what the critical standards are that need to be taught, and what standards are of lower priority. This needs to be a deliberate process and not a “whatever we can get to” attitude. There also will need to be clear guidelines and expectations that both teachers and students will need to follow regarding any virtual instruction. Instruction must continue even if students are not in the classroom. Districts need to make sure that each and every student has what they need to be successful under such a model.*

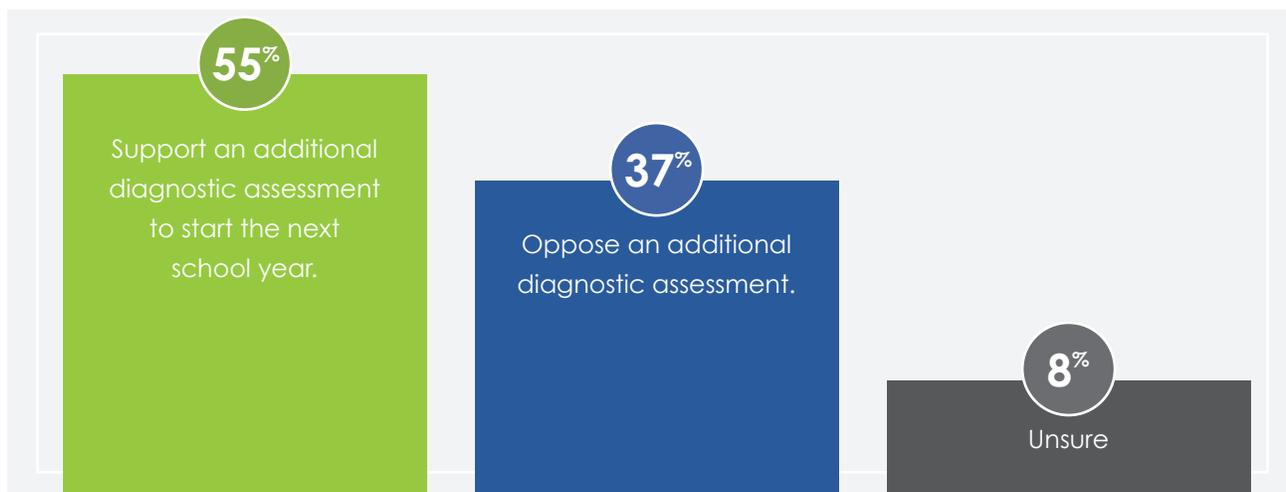
**(High school physics teacher)<sup>15</sup>**

A common refrain we heard from teachers is that they need to be equipped to “meet students where they are.” Many of them expressed that this year, more than ever, having informative diagnostic tools and the ability to be flexible with the curriculum will be critical to effectively meeting their teaching and learning objectives.

When asked if having an additional diagnostic assessment at the beginning of the year would be helpful, a majority of the teachers, 55 percent, expressed support for an additional assessment near the start of the upcoming school year, while 37 percent were opposed (see Figure 4).<sup>16</sup> With states having mostly eliminated end-of-year testing for the spring of 2020, educators believe that this year presents a special need for students to have diagnostic testing, but teachers stressed that that testing needs to be designed with the objective of helping teachers address having a new cohort of students who received uneven levels of instruction in their most recent semester. For these reasons, administering a diagnostic assessment near the beginning of the year would help teachers more fully understand how their instruction this year can ensure students can master grade-level content, despite gaps caused by the shift to remote learning.



**FIGURE 4 | DO TEACHERS SUPPORT AN ADDITIONAL DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT TO BEGIN THE SCHOOL YEAR?**



Teachers advocate for the expertise of teachers to be considered in identifying which assessments to use and how to approach assessment overall. Those who did favor an additional diagnostic assessment contend that they need the data to effectively address students' needs after the shift to remote learning.<sup>17</sup> ***“There was so much left in the unknown at the close of the 2019-2020 school year, and it was very difficult to get an accurate read of my students’ abilities, due to lack of engagement. So this assessment would help us see where they are and meet them there.”*** (Middle school world language teacher).

Some of the teachers who reported they were opposed to an additional assessment said that their district already had such an assessment and therefore does not need to impose an “additional” one: ***“My district currently uses an entry diagnostics assessment. I believe there isn’t a need for an additional assessment to configure base skills or learning levels for students during the 20-21 school year.”*** (Third grade elementary school teacher) One common idea among teachers was that any diagnostic assessment should not be the first order of business when the new school year starts — teachers generally regarded providing and nurturing a safe environment for students to ease back into learning as the most important concern, and felt that assessments should be administered only once students had an opportunity to adequately settle into their new school year.

In addition, teachers are looking to policymakers to provide them with clear, specific learning standards that have been curated or narrowed to reflect this year’s priority learning objectives for students’ progress. School districts can provide teachers with the flexibility to tailor the delivery and pace of their instruction by providing a curated set of “power standards” to guide teachers this year. By paring down the standards to hone in on those that are most important, teachers will be able to focus on accelerating learning and address their students’ social and emotional learning needs. Many teachers noted that it will be necessary to modify curriculum and standards in some way, including focusing on most essential material and standards. ***“Teachers as professionals should look at their priority standards at the beginning of the year and assess those standards. Then they can address them in their unit planning.”*** (High school history and psychology teacher)<sup>18</sup>

## FINDING 05

COLLABORATION ACROSS SCHOOL ROLES AND MORE DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS ARE NEEDED TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF THE COMING SCHOOL YEAR. DEEPER PARTNERSHIPS AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS ARE ALSO URGENTLY NEEDED TO BETTER SERVE STUDENTS, ESPECIALLY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS, AND ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS.

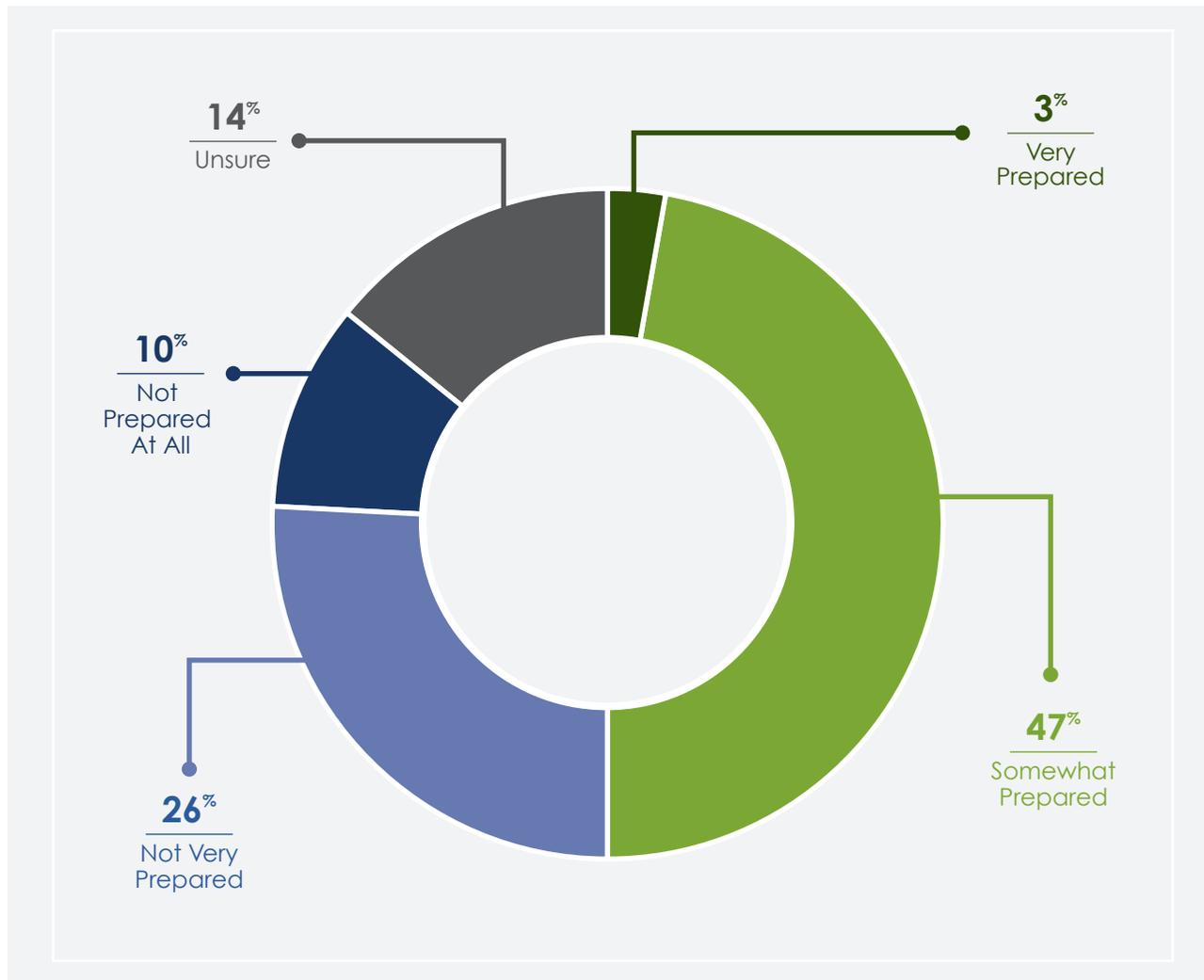
Teachers see greater and more intentional collaboration — between school leaders and teachers and between educators and families — as critical to meeting the challenges of a school year unlike any other. They contend that roles, relationships, and division of responsibilities that may have been sufficient in a typical school year will not be enough within the new normal. This kind of collaboration will be especially important when it comes to reassessing school plans throughout the school year and responding to challenges as they arise. Teachers in our focus groups were clear that their role in schools gave them first-hand knowledge and experience of how best to navigate the demands of this school year, and they want to see district and school leaders form authentic partnerships with them to share what's working and what needs improvement.<sup>19</sup>

*"I think the most important recommendation I could make to policy makers and school leaders is to utilize teacher voice in your decision making process. Teachers live and breathe the day-to-day experiences in schools, they are experts in the field and their seat and voice at the decision making table will largely impact the success of any plan or policy." (Elementary school teacher)*

Districts and schools can best capitalize on teachers' unique position to understand students' needs by implementing systems of distributed leadership in schools. Distributed leadership would help shift decision-making closer to those who were charged with implementing the work, and would ensure that the best, most innovative ideas, are shared with those who can implement them at scale.

The second partnership teachers believe will need to be strengthened in the coming year is that between teachers and their students' parents and families. Based on their experiences with shifting to remote learning in the spring, teachers want to see greater collaboration with families, and want districts to provide families with resources to take more active, informed roles in their children's educational experiences this year. Teachers stressed that these types of partnerships will be particularly important for students who typically require additional resources and supports, including students with disabilities, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged students. We asked teachers how well their schools or districts were prepared to meet these students' needs and what more they believed needed to be done. While half of all teachers in our focus groups said their schools were prepared to meet these students' needs, more than a third of them expressed a lack of confidence in their school's ability to do so (see Figure 5).<sup>20</sup>

**FIGURE 5 | HOW PREPARED ARE SCHOOLS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS?**



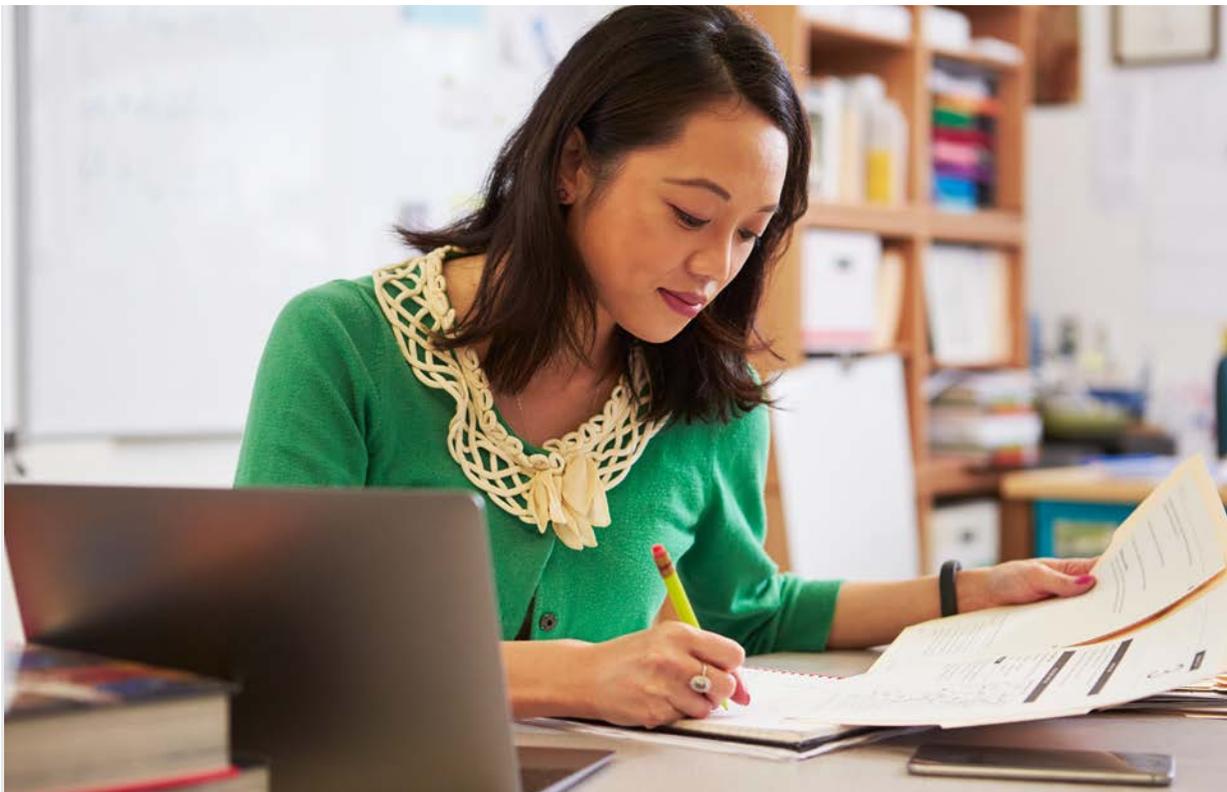
Teachers offered many ideas for how schools could adapt to the new normal to better serve these students. One common theme was that schools should take an all hands-on-deck approach — all educators within a school should work together as a team to make sure all student needs are being met, even or especially if that might require school leaders to think innovatively about collaboration and problem solving.<sup>21</sup>

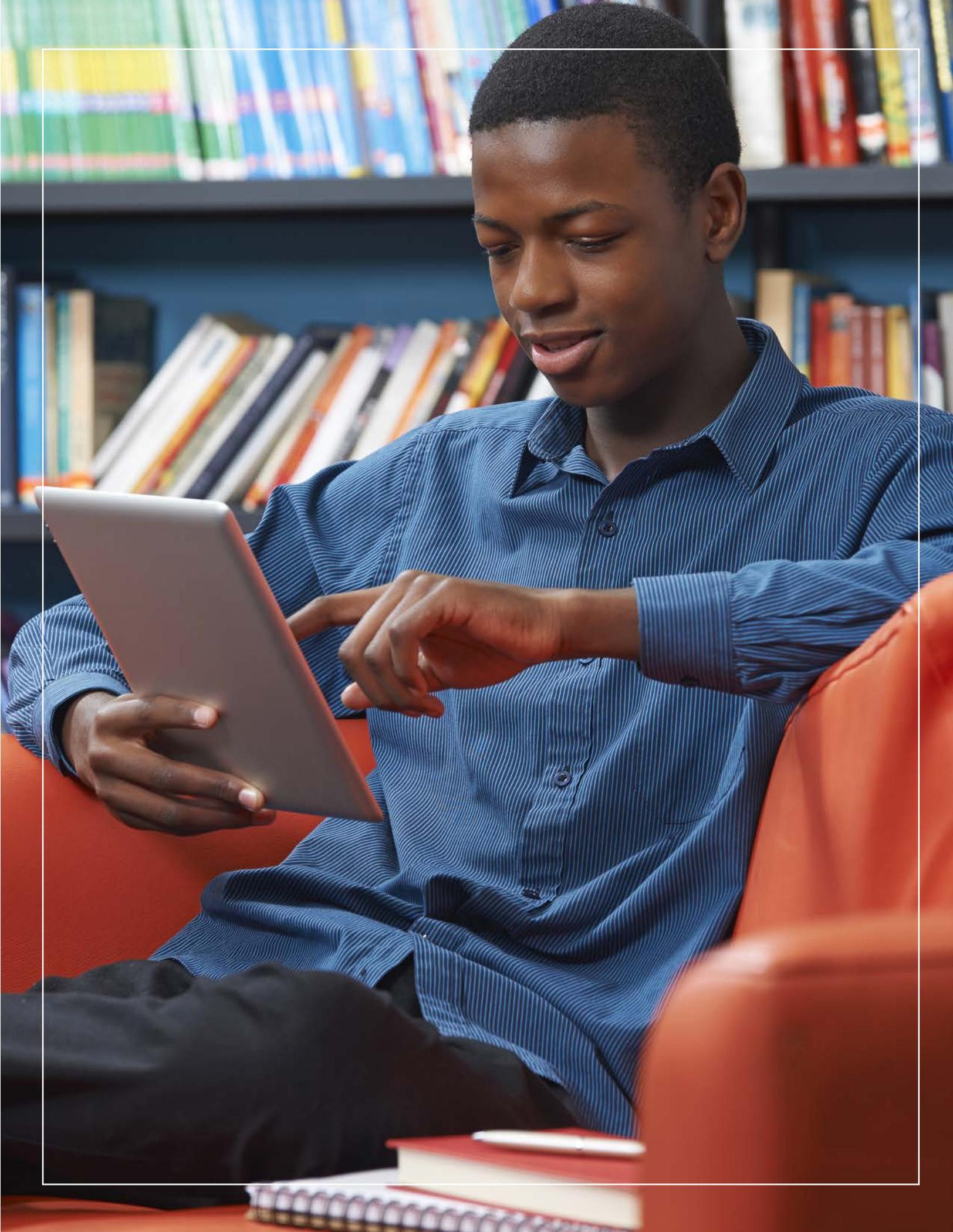
*“Fostering communication between general education and Special Education, but also special education teachers across campuses is essential. With our limited amount of mental health professionals (we have one social worker, no counselor, and share a psychologist with 2 other schools), teachers are going to need support in who/how to connect students to resources plus professional development in trauma-informed practices.”*

**(Elementary school teacher)**

There was a consistent worry among teachers we spoke with that if the needs of students who typically require additional resources go unaddressed, many of them will receive inequitable or inaccessible education as long as schools are operating in remote or hybrid environments. Teachers also stressed the need to equip families with the communication tools necessary to discuss their children's instruction, and that family buy-in and accountability are essential components to ensuring equitable, comprehensive instruction for every student, ***"I think that our parents and our teachers need a voice in creating a school plan."*** (Middle school special education teacher)

*There will need to be a more deliberate process put in place to ensure that the needs of these students are met. There will need to be additional supports for the students, and also for the SPED teachers so that they have the ability to meet these needs. We already have a huge teacher shortage in these areas, and we need to make sure that they don't get burnt out. What the kids get is completely dependent on how good our staff is!*  
**(Middle school math and special education teacher)**





# RECOMMENDATIONS

BASED ON OUR CONVERSATIONS WITH OVER 500 TEACHERS FROM ALL OVER THE COUNTRY, WE HAVE SIX RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL, DISTRICT, AND STATE LEADERS TO ADDRESS DURING THE 2020-2021 SCHOOL YEAR AND THE YEARS THAT FOLLOW. We include “Suggested Resources” to help states, districts, and schools implement the recommendations. Policymakers should consider these recommendations whether school plans call for in-person, remote, or hybrid settings. We also include a set of “Look Fors” at the end of the report as a way to further translate this research and these recommendations into action.

## RECOMMENDATION 1

**Embrace teacher leadership and include teachers in the decision-making process. Empower teachers to meet the challenges of teaching and learning, identify solutions, and lead the change management process with their peers.**

*“LISTEN TO THE TEACHERS. Too often decisions are made without taking into consideration the opinions of the people on the front lines. The teachers are the ones that are working with students, talking to them, helping them navigate the world we live in right now. We are teachers, friends, guidance counselors, therapists, cheerleaders ... to name just a few of the roles we take on. The vast majority of teachers went into teaching to help students. COVID-19 did not change that - it will never change that. Please listen to the teachers.”*

**(High school English language learner teacher)**

Policymakers and district leaders need to create authentic, continuous opportunities for teachers' voices to be heard. They should make clear that the practice of distributed leadership can be a powerful strategy to address the complex and enormous challenges facing schools. By empowering teacher leaders, school and district leaders not only build capacity and bring solutions-oriented educators to the table, they are also helping grow and advance the field. We stress the importance of making these teacher leadership opportunities “authentic” and not afterthoughts to the process. As one high school world languages teacher expressed, **“Communication. Expectations. Rely on the expertise of teachers. Ask us for input before putting out policies. Don't plan something that you want, then ask teachers to OK it. See us as valuable parts of the planning process.”**

Teacher engagement could include the following:

- If the state or district is creating an advisory or decision-making body — such as a remote instruction task force or academic planning committee — ensure that teachers are on it.
- Form a Teacher Advisory Cabinet that meets regularly with the chief state school officer or superintendent.
- Create teacher leadership roles that provide teachers with opportunities to lead change projects in their schools or districts.

Teach Plus teacher leaders across the country, for example, held online professional learning and growth sessions for their peers across their respective states to address the transition to remote instruction and social and emotional needs of students and teachers. Authentically empowering teachers to lead is vitally important this year when so many critical learning decisions will need to be surfaced and addressed — but this should be the norm and not the exception, not just in this year but in every school year.

### *Suggested Resources*

- See [Teach Plus' Voices](#) section for op-eds by teachers and [Publications](#) for additional teacher-led research and recommendations.<sup>22</sup>

## **RECOMMENDATION 2**

**Prioritize and incorporate the expertise of teachers in school planning and instruction. Provide teachers with the tools and training they say they need, and give teachers greater autonomy in their instructional strategies and in meeting the challenges of teaching and learning that evolve throughout the year.**

Districts should provide teachers with diagnostic assessments to understand where students are and what they need to access grade-level content for the current year. These assessments should be timed appropriately, e.g. not necessarily given at the very beginning of the school year, and should be designed to provide teachers with actionable data they can use to drive their instructional planning. Districts should also consider the use of “power standards” to help teachers prioritize the curriculum and tailor their instruction accordingly.

We also recommend that districts provide access to high-quality, culturally responsive instructional materials that can be used in remote and hybrid settings, and a curated set of online tools. While some teachers may be sufficiently knowledgeable and experienced to select their own online resources, others may need a curated set of materials to reduce the amount of time they need to spend sorting through and selecting resources themselves. Districts should also consider choosing a limited set of online platforms to use district-wide, which would help foster collaboration and learning among teachers and would ease the transition to remote learning for students.

*"In-depth professional development on a limited number of platforms: I am bombarded on a daily basis with advertisements and endorsements of new programs. I would like to focus on one or two and become really proficient. I would also like some professional development on turning my traditional materials into effective online materials."*

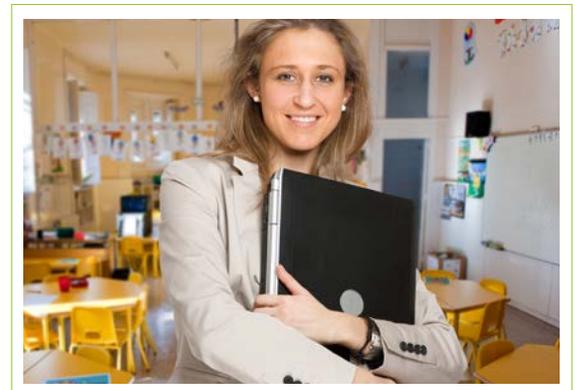
**(Elementary first grade teacher)**

No two districts, schools, or even classes will have identical needs, so while teachers want high quality resources, policymakers should allow teachers and schools to leverage those resources as appropriate for their students. School leaders and teachers need to be given autonomy and support to assess their students' particular situations and needs, and make instructional choices that respond to those needs. What works well for one school might not address the particular challenges another school is facing, and students will benefit if solutions are driven by teachers and school leaders who know them best.

Finally, recognizing the important role teachers play in not just schools, but as essential professionals in our society, districts should leverage the expertise of outstanding teachers not only to participate in decision making, but to lead professional learning for their peers. District leaders, school administrators, teachers, students, and families have rarely had to face a set of circumstances as challenging as they do now, and many outstanding teachers have risen to the challenge. Schools and districts should identify teachers who have found ways to provide engaging, meaningful learning opportunities for all students and compensate them to support the learning of their peers, delivering professional development, facilitating professional learning communities, and leading change projects in their schools.

### Suggested Resources

- [Ed Reports](#) helps decision makers identify high quality instructional materials.<sup>23</sup>
- [Student Achievement Partners](#) offers a list of [Priority Instructional Content](#) that can help schools focus on the key standards that students need to master in order to access grade level standards.<sup>24</sup>
- [TNTP's Learning Acceleration Guide](#) provides tools for district leaders seeking to engage stakeholders and accelerate student learning.<sup>25</sup>



## RECOMMENDATION 3

**Increase resources for trauma-informed instruction, student mental health, and the well-being of teachers. These should include high quality teacher professional development on social and emotional learning and resources for connecting families to training and resources.**

Districts should provide opportunities for professional development on best practices for teaching social emotional skills, and for incorporating those skills into what teachers already teach, especially if teachers will be delivering instruction remotely. Teachers know the value of social and emotional learning, and want to be equipped with the best practices on how to teach it in their classrooms. Many teachers also worry that while they typically feel confident teaching social and emotional skills, they foresee challenges doing so if they are not in the same physical space as their students. Districts can ensure that social and emotional learning is not interrupted by the pandemic by providing teachers with professional development on how to foster those key skills even while their students are learning remotely.

In addition, teachers believe that social and emotional learning should be a robust component of students' educational experience, and district leaders should commit to ensuring this by adopting social and emotional learning objectives for students alongside academic objectives. This will clearly convey to teachers that they should spend time focusing on social and emotional learning. Many teachers we spoke with expressed frustration that while they know the importance of social and emotional learning, they are often made to feel as if it is a secondary priority, and that there is only room to focus on it after all academic lessons have been addressed. During this time of national disruption and trauma, teachers need to be assured that caring for their students' social and emotional well-being is an educational priority for all stakeholders.

Schools, districts, and states can ensure they're addressing the mental health of students by:

- Ensuring that they're meeting recommended guidelines for adequate student-to-counselor ratios and are taking into account the unique challenges posed by remote learning.
- Providing evidence-based trauma-informed instruction training to teachers.
- Addressing student and teacher mental health in school plans for the coming year.

Districts should also focus on pushing social and emotional learning supports and resources out into communities, so families can access them throughout and outside of the school day. By equipping families with training on social and emotional learning resources, they will be able to take ownership over their children's education which will be much needed in a year likely to be filled with so many uncertainties. Given that many students will likely be spending more time at home this year than in a typical year, wrap-around SEL resources will be especially important, and their value will continue even when schools fully return to "normal."

Finally, we recommend that decision makers carefully consider the health and safety of students and teachers when designing plans for school reopening. Decisions should reflect the most current scientific knowledge about how the virus spreads, and what measures can prevent infection.

### Suggested Resources

- **Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)** has provided a set of [COVID Resources](#).<sup>26</sup>
- **Transforming Education** has a set of resources on [Integrating SEL in a Distance Learning World](#).<sup>27</sup>

## RECOMMENDATION 4

**Strengthen communication, connections, and partnership with parents and families to better support students. School and system leaders should focus on building out strategies, opening lines of communication, and enhancing access to educational resources, particularly for students who typically require additional resources or supports.**

In this time, when there is a likelihood that the classroom will no longer be the primary educational domain as students participate in significant learning at home, families and other caregivers will not succeed if they are left to be passive observers of their children's learning — they need to be active participants with the information and tools they need to support their children. This will require intentionality, training, access to resources, and cultural responsiveness. It will also require, in the words of a teacher, "grace" from all involved.

We recommend that educators and families work together to evolve from the idea of "family engagement" and toward "family and educator partnership." One middle school English language arts teacher explained this shift, saying, ***"I also think parents [and students] need some type of training instead of just hoping they'd get it or telling them how to do it over the phone. There needs to be a lot more communication."*** Plans for remote learning should not only outline teachers' roles and objectives, but should also include clear roles and objectives for parents, so they can take an active, informed role in their children's education. This will be a learning curve for families, but it will be a necessary one to ensure students' success. ***"Learning is not a linear process. We need to allow teachers and parents and students and administrators to have the space and time to learn about one another, make decisions, receive feedback, and make changes without the need to fit a square peg in a round hole,"*** as one elementary school teacher explained.

Efforts to build out a system of partnership among educators and families will be especially important for students who require additional resources or supports, including students with disabilities, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged students. To ensure that those students continue to receive a robust, equitable education, it is crucial that their families have the support and educational resources to facilitate their learning, working in concert with their teachers.

### Suggested Resources

- **Learning Heroes** has a set of [Family Engagement Resources](#) for educators.<sup>28</sup>
- **The Education Trust** has a new report titled, [Social, Emotional, and Academic Development Through and Equity Lens](#).<sup>29</sup>

## RECOMMENDATION 5

Identify, evaluate, and scale-up promising practices and approaches, particularly from teachers who are uniquely qualified to understand and re-envision how schools can best serve children. School and system leaders should embrace innovative practices and ideas that best meet and address the educational challenges of this year and beyond.

*"I would like for us to be creative, outside-of-the-box thinkers. We have been driving the horse and buggy for education for the last several hundred years and now we are being forced into this electric car. We can't put the saddle of the horse and buggy on the electric car. It's not going to work. We need to push the bounds of how we envision education. This is an excellent opportunity for reform. I would like professional development to reflect that."*  
**(Elementary school teacher)**

A myriad of both large and seemingly small decisions will need to be made about the 2020-2021 school year, and we urge policymakers to not be constrained by pre-pandemic educational models. This moment, while traumatic, unplanned, and difficult, is an opportunity to think creatively about how instruction is delivered to students and to distill what matters most to ensure their educational success. When we asked teachers what message they'd like to convey to policymakers, many of them reported that they are ready and willing to embrace novel modes of instruction in order to emerge from the pandemic stronger and more equitable than before. Promising practices highlighted by teachers reflecting on the pandemic include:

- Leverage technology to support student learning.
- Rethink the role of teacher, engaging them as coaches who support students in developing agency in their own learning, community connectors with meaningful relationships with students and families, and teacher leaders, shaping decisions in their schools and districts.
- Leverage creative methods of instruction, such as flipped classrooms and personalized learning, to meet student needs and advance equity.
- Prioritize the needs of the whole child, leveraging the science of learning to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to thrive.
- Close the digital divide and provide sufficient funding, especially for the highest poverty schools.

New models could include not only new technologies for delivering instruction, but also re-thinking the hours of instruction and the way students collaborate with one another.

Teachers expressed a willingness to try new ideas in all facets of education, like one elementary school teacher, who said, ***"Think outside the box in terms of curriculum, budgeting, and scheduling because this will not be a normal year so we can't treat it that way. Use teachers in a different way, i.e. specials teachers become classroom teachers to make sure all students are supported and don't get lost."***

To make sure there is a place for innovation this year, teachers need to be given autonomy to try out different instructional methods to find out what works best for their students. School and district leaders should then invest in finding ways to scale best practices so they can be implemented on a wider scale, ensuring that all students continue to have opportunities to learn in these uncertain times.

For many teachers, this re-imagining also meant taking the time to distill what matters most in education. As policymakers and school leaders consider the upcoming school year — and think about the school years that lay beyond — we urge them to consider what innovative practices, real inequities, and new perspectives — have emerged from the duress of the pandemic.

### *Suggested Resources*

- **The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)** has a set of [Considerations for Teaching & Learning](#) that provide guidance on wellbeing & connection, academics, system conditions, and other priorities.<sup>30</sup>
- The **Center for Reinventing Public Education (CRPE)** has [tracked how districts and states have responded to the pandemic](#).<sup>31</sup>
- **Instruction Partners** has a [COVID-19 School Resource Hub](#) that provides resources for distance learning and recovery.<sup>32</sup>

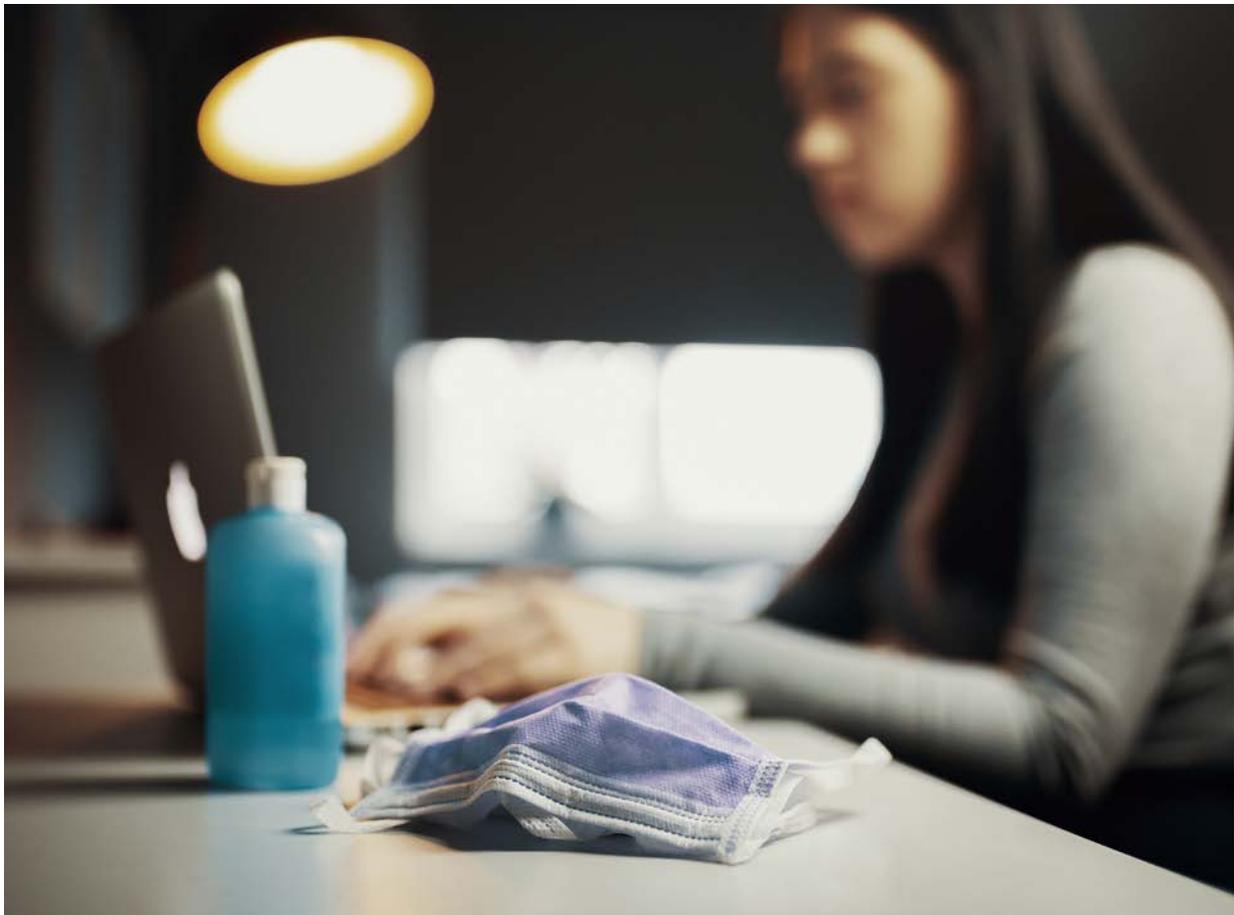
## **RECOMMENDATION 6**

**Prioritize education funding — and pay particular attention to those schools that serve the highest need students. Federal, state, and local officials should take steps to increase funding for schools to address the effects of the pandemic, and to ensure sufficient funding for a safe and equitable education.**

Because of the economic downturn associated with the pandemic, state budgets are expected to steeply decline. Federal, state, and district governments must prioritize education, ensuring sufficient investments to allow schools to reopen safely, ensure continuity of learning, and advance equity for the highest need students. In particular, we recommend that decision makers prioritize maintenance of equity. If budget cuts are necessary, ensure that they do not disproportionately impact low-income students, students of color, English language learners, students who receive special education services, or homeless students. In addition, policymakers must be transparent about the impact of cuts and layoffs on schooling overall, and on vulnerable populations in particular.

## CONCLUSION

Teachers give clear guidance on what needs to be done to address the unprecedented situation schools, teachers, and students face this year. But they also challenge us to consider how we might be able to break barriers and reimagine education to better serve all learners during the pandemic and beyond. Teachers want to see greater focus on and more resources for students' mental health. They are looking for innovative, redesigned ideas around curriculum, assessments, and instruction to better serve students' learning needs. Finally, they want district leaders and policymakers to understand how critical teacher voice is — this year more than ever. They know that too many barriers exist within and around schools and emphasize that teachers' expertise and leadership are essential not just for responding to today's challenges, but in order to build schools and systems that are more equitable for all children.



## ENDNOTES

1. Question: "Which of the following best describes your school setting?" Responses: (n = 531) "Early childhood center" (0.9 percent), "Elementary school" (35.0 percent), "K-8 school" (9.8 percent), "Middle school" (19.4 percent), "High school" (29.9 percent), "Other" (4.9 percent). Results may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.
2. Question: "Which of the following best describes your school's setting?" Responses: (n = 526) "Rural" (16.0 percent), "Suburban" (30.8 percent), "Urban" (49.8 percent), "Other" (3.4 percent).
3. Question: "Which of the following best describes your teaching status?" Responses: (n = 532) "I am a teacher in a public district school." (88.5 percent), "I am a teacher in a public charter school." (11.5 percent).
4. Question: "Including the 2019-20 school year, how many years of teaching experience do you have?" Open response question. Responses: (n = 522) Average years of experience is 12.6 years with 8.4 percent report having less than 4 years of experience, 35.3 percent have 4 to 9 years, 19.5 percent have between 10 to 14 years, and 36.8 percent have 15 or more years.
5. Question: "When compared to a 'typical' school year, how are you feeling about your students' mental health?" Responses: (n = 531) "I am more concerned about my students' mental health." (89.5 percent), "I have the same level of concern about my students' mental health." (9.0 percent), "I am less concerned about my students' mental health." (0.6 percent), "Unsure" (0.9 percent).
6. Question: "How well prepared do you think your school or district is to tend to the social and emotional learning needs of your students for the next school year?" Responses: (n = 530) "Very well" (4.0 percent), "Somewhat well" (38.5 percent), "Not very well" (33.4 percent), "Not well at all" (16.2 percent), "Unsure" (7.9 percent).
7. Question: "Thinking about the next school year, what suggestions do you have for how your school or district can better address the mental health and social and emotional learning needs of students?" Open response question.
8. Question: "What advice or suggestions do you have for how schools or districts can address the mental health needs of educators for the next school year?" Open response question.
9. Question: "When you think about the next school year, what are you most concerned about?" Open response question.
10. See Teach Plus Mississippi. (2020). *Learning through the Pandemic: Recommendations from Teach Plus Mississippi's COVID-19 teacher survey*. Teach Plus.; Teach Plus Massachusetts. (2020). *Lessons from the remote classroom: Teach Plus Massachusetts COVID-19 teacher engagement survey*. Teach Plus.; and Teach Plus New Mexico. (2020). *Teacher and student engagement during COVID-19: Recommendations from Teach Plus New Mexico Policy Fellows*. Teach Plus.
11. Question: "When you think about the professional learning needs of teachers due to the impact of COVID-19, what professional development topics or issues would be most helpful for teachers in preparation for the next school year?" Open response question. Responses were coded using 17 categories with the 10 most common themes represented in Figure 3. The results do not sum to 100 percent because a response could contain several themes and be counted across several categories.
12. See endnote 11.
13. Question: "How might COVID-19 contribute to longer-term shifts or specific changes in: (1) how our schools approach and support learning for students; and (2) the role of teachers in our education system?" Open response question.
14. Question: "As many districts face the possibility of reduced budgets for the 2020-21 school year, how concerned are you about your district's ability to keep talented and qualified teachers in the classroom?" Responses: (n = 525) "Very concerned" (48.6 percent), "Somewhat concerned" (36.6 percent), "Not very concerned" (9.5 percent), "Not at all concerned" (3.6 percent), "Unsure" (1.7 percent).

15. Question: "Many are concerned with the loss of instruction time from school closures due to COVID-19. From an instructional point of view, what do you think is the best way to address the effects of this loss of instructional time?" Open response question.
16. Question: "To what degree do you support or oppose the idea of schools beginning the 2020-21 school year with an additional diagnostic assessment to gather data and determine where students are in their learning?" Responses: (n = 525) "Strongly support" (23.8 percent), "Somewhat support" (30.9 percent), "Somewhat oppose" (17.1 percent), "Strongly oppose" (20.0 percent), "Unsure" (8.2 percent).
17. Question: "What is your rationale for supporting or opposing the use of an additional diagnostic assessment to begin the 2020-21 school year?" Open response question.
18. See endnote 15.
19. Question: "In general, as policymakers and school leaders make plans for the next school year, what additional advice or recommendations would you like to share with them?" Open response question.
20. Question: "As we approach the 2020-21 school year, how well prepared is your school or district to meet these students' particular needs?" Responses: (n = 527) "Very prepared" (3.4 percent), "Somewhat prepared" (47.1 percent), "Not very prepared" (25.8 percent), "Not prepared at all" (10.1 percent), "Unsure" (13.7). In this question, "these students" refers to a prior question regarding "students who typically require additional resources, such as English language learners, students who receive Special Education services, students who are economically disadvantaged, or students who are highly mobile or homeless."
21. Question: "What specific suggestions do you have about how to prioritize and better meet the needs of any one of these subgroups in the 2020-21 school year?" Open response question. In this question, "subgroups" refers to a prior question regarding "students who typically require additional resources, such as English language learners, students who receive Special Education services, students who are economically disadvantaged, or students who are highly mobile or homeless."
22. See Teach Plus teacher voices: <https://teachplus.org/news-events/teacher-voice> and publications: <https://teachplus.org/news-events/publications>
23. See Ed Reports: <https://www.edreports.org/>
24. See Student Achievement Partners Priority Instructional Content: <https://achievethecore.org/page/3267/2020-21-priority-instructional-content-in-english-language-arts-literacy-and-mathematics>
25. See TNTP's Learning Acceleration Guide: <https://tntp.org/covid-19-school-response-toolkit/view/learning-acceleration-guide>
26. See CASEL's COVID-19 Resources: <https://casel.org/covid-resources/>
27. See Transforming Ed's Integrating SEL in a Distance Learning World: [https://mcusercontent.com/48e838a6bdda9bc5cd2393a1c/files/596bfef3-841d-42d0-ba67-23c5ef5bfd37/SIA\\_Resources\\_2\\_.pdf](https://mcusercontent.com/48e838a6bdda9bc5cd2393a1c/files/596bfef3-841d-42d0-ba67-23c5ef5bfd37/SIA_Resources_2_.pdf)
28. See Learning Heroes' Family Engagement Resources: <https://bealearninghero.org/family-engagement-resources/>
29. See The Education Trust's report: [Social, Emotional, and Academic Development Through an Equity Lens](https://educationtrust.org/~/media/Assets/Reports/Social%20Emotional%20and%20Academic%20Development%20Through%20an%20Equity%20Lens.pdf)
30. See The Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) Considerations for Teaching & Learning: <https://ccsso.org/coronavirus>
31. See The Center for Reinventing Public Education's (CRPE) tracker: <https://www.crpe.org/current-research/about-work>
32. See Instruction Partners' COVID-19 School Resource Hub: <https://www.schoolresourcehub.org/>

# TRANSLATING RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS INTO ACTION

THESE “LOOK FORs” CAN SERVE AS A STARTING POINT TO HELP TRANSLATE THE TEACHER-DRIVEN RECOMMENDATIONS INTO ACTION AT THE SCHOOL, DISTRICT, AND STATE LEVELS. We encourage teachers, educational leaders, families, and policymakers to consider how plans for the school year and beyond address the perspectives teachers have shared in this research through these “Look Fors.”

## **RECOMMENDATION 1**

**Embrace teacher leadership and include teachers in the decision-making process.**

- How are teachers authentically included in the decision-making process?
- How are school and district leaders empowering teacher leaders to take on meaningful leadership roles?

## **RECOMMENDATION 2**

**Prioritize and incorporate the expertise of teachers in school planning and instruction.**

- If teachers need it, do they have access to high-quality professional development to improve remote or hybrid instruction, including how to deliver instruction and engage students?
- Do teachers have the flexibility to assess students, customize and develop their curriculum, and pace their instruction as they see fit?
- Are outstanding teachers leading professional learning, facilitating collaboration, and leading change in their schools?

### **RECOMMENDATION 3**

#### **Increase resources for trauma-informed instruction, student mental health, and the well-being of teachers**

- Is students' social and emotional learning supported by teachers who have received high-quality professional development?
- Are there sufficient school resources, including counselors or social workers, to address students' mental health needs?
- Are there intentional plans to recognize and support the mental health needs of teachers?

### **RECOMMENDATION 4**

#### **Strengthen communication, connections, and partnership with parents and families to better support students.**

- Do families have opportunities to become trained on relevant educational resources that will enable them to be partners in their children's learning, such as online tools adopted by the school or district?
- Is there a clear set of online or remote resources that the school or district uses that families have access to and are accessible for all communities, regardless of language or technology barriers?
- Are expectations for parents and families clear and actionable?

### **RECOMMENDATION 5**

#### **Identify, evaluate, and scale-up promising practices and approaches, particularly from teachers who are uniquely qualified to understand and re-envision how schools can best serve children.**

- Do teachers have the opportunity and autonomy to develop innovative teaching solutions?
- How are innovative teaching practices identified, recognized, evaluated, supported, and grown?

### **RECOMMENDATION 6**

#### **Prioritize education funding — and pay particular attention to those schools that serve the highest need students.**

- If budget cuts are necessary, do they avoid disproportionately impacting low-income students, students of color, English language learners, students who receive special education services, and homeless students?
- What are district leaders and policymakers doing to ensure educational funding needs are met for all schools?

## AUTHORS

Mark Teoh, Lena Rothfarb, Anthony Castro, Melody Coryell, Aja Currey, Darlene Fortier, John Gensic, Jamita Horton, Jennifer Smith, Tory Tripp, and James Jack

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to thank several Teach Plus staff who contributed to the design and development of this research, including Alison Avera, Anya Grottel-Brown, Anna Matejka, Roberto Rodríguez, and Lindsay Sobel. Additionally, Teach Plus recognizes and offers thanks to the 532 teachers who generously gave their time to share their perspectives in our focus groups.

## TEACHER LEADERS WHO CONDUCTED RESEARCH

Erica Abangan, Adeola Adegabi, Erin Armijo, Kristen Rhodes Beland, Joyce Bernau-Enriquez, Emily Biegel, LaTasha Boyd-Jones, Melody Bradley, Natalie Brown, April Brunelle, Angela Burke, Julia Burrola, Jawna Carlo, Jessica Carlson, John Chambers, Krystal Clifton, Kevin Cormier, Cristina Ann Correa, Thomas Courtney, Paul Degenkolb, Rachel Derico, Nicholas Dewald, Chevonne Dixon, Katie Dougherty, Ashley Farris, Liz Fyffe, Shana Gaines, Melissa Good, Caroline Greene, Danielle Grenader, Amanda Hope, Adrain Hudson, Theresa Hussey, Pierre Jean, Rachael Kabagabu, Natan Kotlyar, Danielle Kusmak, Loed Lacayo, Mallory Lawler, Yuridiana Lewis, Tennise Lucas, Jessica Mathias, Jay Mehta, Jeanie Mitchell, Briana Morales, Yvonne Morgan, Jamey Olney, Kate Parsons, Kelly Pearce, Sarah Perez, Fernanda Pierre, Michelle Pinedo, Irene Post, Christina Puga, Sarah Reed, Kendall Reiley, Veronica Rivera, Mark Rogers, Kahlil Russell-Starks, Orion Smith, Lisa Thyer, Sarah Tredway, Emily Weisman, Megan Whalon, and Coral Zayas

## ABOUT TEACH PLUS

Teach Plus is dedicated to the mission of empowering excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all.

[www.teachplus.org](http://www.teachplus.org)