

INTRODUCTION

School, district, state, and national-level policies directly impact students, families, and educators. Their voices, which are [often underrepresented](#) in education decision-making, are thus critical to ensuring that these stakeholders' needs are being met.¹ Decisions regarding the adaptation of student learning needs to be informed by the voices of students, families, and educators. In the winter of 2020, Teach Plus Nevada Senior Policy Fellows facilitated a trio of community panel discussions. Each diverse panel of educators, students, and families reflected upon their personal and professional experiences with remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

On March 15, 2020, [Governor Sisolak](#) closed all public and private schools in response to the COVID-19 crisis, transitioning students from in-person learning to full-time remote education.² In August 2020, at the beginning of a new school year, a number of challenges were immediately apparent. Most students, families, and educators had not yet fully mastered the use of the online learning management systems. Most educators had not taught remotely within an effective model of online teaching and learning. In March, April, and May 2020, most classroom teachers were in crisis teaching mode rather than a fully realized remote teaching model. Schools throughout the state employed an instructional schedule unique to their teaching and learning context, including synchronous and asynchronous learning sessions, hybrid teaching, and face-to-face, in-person instruction.

Given these challenges and the associated decisions necessary to solve them, Teach Plus Nevada, in partnership with Nevada PTA, Nevada Succeeds, and Opportunity 180, held a [series of community panels](#) to discuss the impact of remote learning.³ Students, families, and educators shared their challenges and successes in the virtual environment as well as what they would like to see in the future of education. In this memo, we present reflections from these community panels to inform and impact education in Nevada as we continue to contend with the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic.

REFLECTIONS

Overall Experience with Remote Learning: Students

While students experienced remote learning differently than their families, they both felt that the absence of face-to-face instruction illuminated the need for clear, frequent, and consistent communication. Students noted that although the adjustment to more independent learning was challenging, they appreciated the efforts of their teachers. They noted that educators were consistent, attentive, and focused not only on facilitating rigorous instruction, but mindful of and attentive to students' social and emotional needs. [Regular wellness checks](#) by educators



served to maintain social interactions with and among students, and allowed students a sense of normalcy.⁴ During the panel series, students remarked that small group breakout rooms held via Google Meets provided interaction with their peers, although some students felt that this mode of engagement could be intimidating for those more introverted.

Acknowledging that remote education requires self-motivation and effective time management skills, students appreciated the flexibility and adaptability of their teachers. Although the experience with remote learning varied from student to student, panel members agreed on the following:

1. The abrupt shift to remote education took considerable time to adjust to and students believed that there should have been less of an emphasis on grades during that time.
2. The focus on mental health, necessary during time of crisis, should remain a priority as face-to-face instruction is resumed.
3. Smaller class sizes during online and face-to-face learning are key to effective and efficient communication and relationship building. (The student panelists shared their perspectives that larger class sizes make it harder to engage and get the individual attention that they need.)

Overall Experience with Remote Learning: Families

When the families convened for their panel discussion on parenting during COVID-19, there was again a wide variety of experiences. Depending on the ages of the children, families had to facilitate establishing routines and work spaces to [create at-home learning environments](#) that would enable students to focus well and engage remotely.⁵ Many families shared that the initial challenges of this adjustment were overwhelming, especially when managing the learning engagement of multiple children within the same household.

Families noted that as familiarity increased with the use of new technologies, such as Zoom and Google Meets, they began to see improvements in their children's performance and achievement. At the same time, they expressed strong concerns about the number of hours students are required to be in front of computer screens. In the virtual environment, families witnessed their students sitting for long periods of time, often up to six hours or more, with a diminished opportunity for exercise or movement. In the absence of schoolwide events such as PTA events, school dances, traditional school spirit days, and sporting events, families also assumed the essential responsibility for finding ways to engage kids in social activities in an effort to attend to their social-emotional development and well-being.

Similarly to the feedback provided by students, families remarked upon the following:

1. Remote education requires collaborative teamwork and an authentic partnership between families and educators. Panel members specifically noted that effective and consistent communication is key to realizing student academic success.
2. Families appreciated teachers' flexibility, patience, and effort to maintain student engagement, active learning, and social emotional well-being in the virtual environment.
3. Screen time has become a critical concern as students spend the entirety of their instructional time on a device-including physical education, fine arts, and elective courses.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

1. Maintain focus on mental health upon return to in-person learning.

Mental health has become a recognized priority for all students and educators during the pandemic. Students expressed that feeling valued as an individual has led them to feel more connected to school and learning. As the panelists reflected on mental health, one of the student panelists remarked on the importance of his mental well-being: “I feel supported. The teachers have made it better. They make sure I am in class, they call me.” We should ensure students have an adult mentor, engage in consistent check-ins, and have access to a variety of social-emotional activities as part of teaching and learning. We must also prioritize the social-emotional well-being of educators, as they too have experienced trauma as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

2. Create learning opportunities for students and families focused on required technology.

Students, families, and educators expressed that one of the most challenging elements of remote education had to do with managing the required technology. It is imperative to offer equitable and adequate training on online tools to students and families. Whether the platform is Zoom, Google Meets, Canvas, or Google Classroom, students and families need to know how to navigate these platforms and understand the tools required for student engagement and learning. Technology training will increase user competency and confidence, allowing students and families to successfully navigate and support learning.

3. Ensure that communication with students and families remains clear and consistent.

Communication with students and families is imperative in any school year, and is even more essential during remote teaching and learning. As we transition to hybrid and in-person learning, communication between families and schools and students and teachers must remain clear and consistent. Families expressed that open communication is a necessary component of teacher-family partnerships. One of the parent panelists remarked, “We need to reach out to the teachers [as well as teachers reaching out to families] because they have a lot of students. It is up to us [as parents] to advocate for our own children. Text messages [and telephone calls] help open dialogue and [help us] have respect for each other.” While some students noted the limitations of teacher office hours, other students expressed that engaging with teachers during office hours or email check-ins leads to having more one-on-one time, allowing students to ask questions more freely and contributing to greater confidence when advocating for their needs.

4. Design learning with a focus on student choice and voice.

Students pointed to opportunities to grow in their independence during remote learning. As we move forward to hybrid and in-person learning, we need to create opportunities for students to have a choice and a voice in their learning. Leaning into activities and projects that allow students to explore their learning independently will help students have a deeper understanding of the content. As noted by a parent panelist, “Having discussions and practicing critical thinking with peers and not being in person is challenging. Teachers are trying to have students collaborate by going into breakout rooms, but students need to have more initiative to connect with each

other. Students need to bounce ideas with each other, and encourage students to communicate with each other.” Students are craving connection and we need to create opportunities for them to connect with each other, even if it is an extended nutrition break, lunchtime, or elective classes.

5. Ensure equitable access to technology for all students.

Every student must have access to a working device that allows them to complete schoolwork and enrich their learning environment in and out of the school building. Students rely on stable wi-fi to remain connected to the world around them and each other.

CONCLUSION

Our panelists underscored that student achievement, and mental and physical health, remained the north stars guiding daily instruction and communication within the educational ecosystem during the pandemic. The abrupt shift to remote education was not without its challenges and trials, as well as frustrations and steep learning curves, yet students, families, and educators did their best to rise to the occasion. With its focus on the need for social-emotional learning (SEL), and resources for student mental health, COVID-19 helped to illuminate that SEL resources are essential.⁶ As school buildings reopen, it is imperative that we do not return to normal as we knew it, but that we continue to shine a spotlight on equity, access, mental and social-emotional health, and technology integration as essential components of an equitable education system that supports all students, families, and educators.⁷

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ENDNOTES

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- ⁶ Overview of sel. (n.d.). Retrieved February 25, 2021, from <https://casel.org/overview-sel/#:~:text=Social%20and%20emotional%20learning%20>
- ⁷ Educator Perspective: How in-person school closures have impacted educators across Southern Nevada and their thoughts on what to consider for the future. (n.d.). Retrieved March, 2021, from <https://opportunity180.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/T-Report -Educator-Perspective FINAL.pdf>