

## INTRODUCTION

In early March, thousands of Mississippi public school teachers and students left their schools for Spring Break. They had no idea that they wouldn't return for the rest of the year. Mississippi's public schools would ultimately close for the rest of the semester, by order of Governor Tate Reeves, to mitigate the risk of community spread of COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> This was an unprecedented situation for our public education system, requiring educators to make immediate, drastic changes to their normal practices and systems.

Nearly a month into the closing of our schools, [Teach Plus Mississippi](#) partnered with the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) to gain the perspective of teachers who were adjusting to the changes and conducted a state-wide survey of teachers. We wanted to know if teachers and their students had access to virtual learning, and/or if there were barriers to full participation. The initial findings from the survey were shared with State Superintendent Dr. Carey Wright and her leadership team. In this brief, we present our findings and recommendations for Mississippi's policymakers.

### Findings

1. A vast majority of teachers feel well informed about the severity of the pandemic and what is expected of them during school closures.
2. While teachers report having the tools they need to do their jobs, they are concerned about the barriers their students face when seeking to participate in virtual learning, including lack of access to the internet, devices, and support.
3. Teachers are worried about the ongoing ramifications of the pandemic and its effect on students and teachers' return to school buildings.
4. Teachers believe that students will face several significant challenges in the next academic year, including learning loss and mental health issues such as anxiety and trauma.

### Recommendations

1. Mississippi must **close the digital divide** by ensuring that each teacher and student has access to high-speed internet, computers or similar devices, as well as the training and support needed to fully engage in virtual learning.
2. Each Local Education Agency (LEA) should, with guidance from MDE, develop a detailed **emergency virtual learning plan** for students and teachers in case of another public health crisis or natural disaster.
3. Districts and MDE should **amend testing and accountability policies and procedures** to reflect the academic and social emotional needs many students will bring when they return to school this fall.
4. The state government must provide resources to Mississippi's public schools to **address the social emotional and mental health challenges** that will likely impact a significant number of students upon their return to school.

# METHODOLOGY

In April 2020, Teach Plus Mississippi surveyed 2,462 Mississippi teachers about their experiences with guidelines and requirements for COVID-19-related education. Our goals were to:

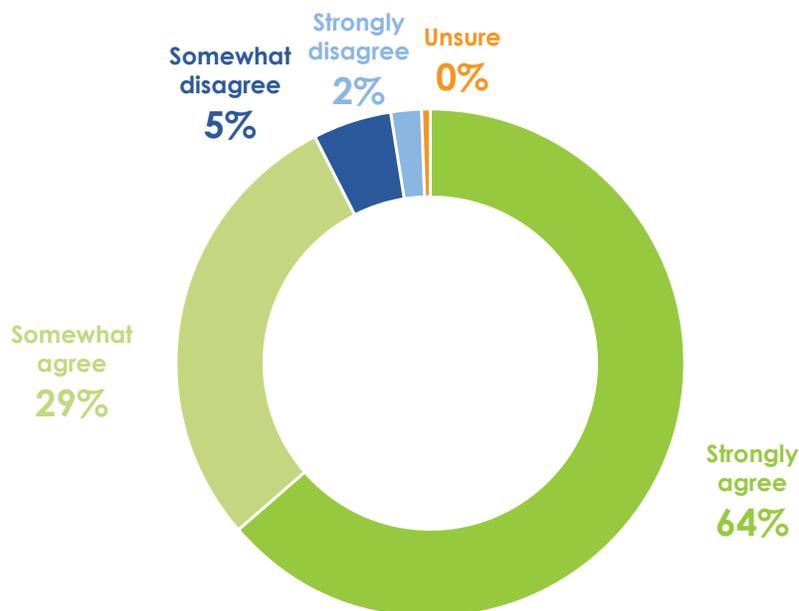
- + Determine if teachers understand what is expected of them during this time and if the expectations are appropriate.
- + Identify if teachers have the resources they need to do what is being expected.
- + Determine if communication during this state emergency is effective.
- + Understand how students are being engaged and if activities are meaningful.
- + Identify other issues and needs that teachers have during this time.

To address these questions, Teach Plus Mississippi distributed a survey in partnership with the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE). The respondents are all current teachers in Mississippi public schools. Seventy percent of respondents reported teaching in a Title I school. Forty percent of respondents reported teaching in elementary schools, 32 percent reported teaching in high schools, 16 percent reported teaching in middle schools, and five percent reported teaching in K-8 schools.

## FINDINGS

### 1. A vast majority of teachers feel well-informed about the severity of the pandemic and what is expected of them during school closures.

A significant number of the teachers who responded to our survey expressed satisfaction with the communication they've received about the pandemic and their expectation for virtual instruction. Eighty-six percent of teachers reported that communication efforts about how students, teachers, and schools have been effective.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, 93 percent of teachers reported that they know what was expected of them while school buildings are closed.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1:** 93% of teachers report that they know what their expectations are.

During this pandemic, teachers have likely received information from multiple sources, including some level of information about expectations from local administrators and MDE. They've also likely received information from local, state, and national media sources. Teachers should continue to receive valuable information as we continue to navigate this time of tremendous uncertainty.

*"I'm very satisfied with the initial steps taken by my district and building administration pertaining to a plan for online learning and the approach for reaching every child during the pandemic. All stakeholders have been informed and encouraged to communicate, needs, problems, and solutions for continuing learning."*

*"My superintendent, principal, and assistant principals have all been in constant contact to let everyone know what is going on and taken care of each resource while closed. I feel they have done a remarkable job."*

*"My administration is engaging teachers, students and families. My district understands the circumstances we are in."*

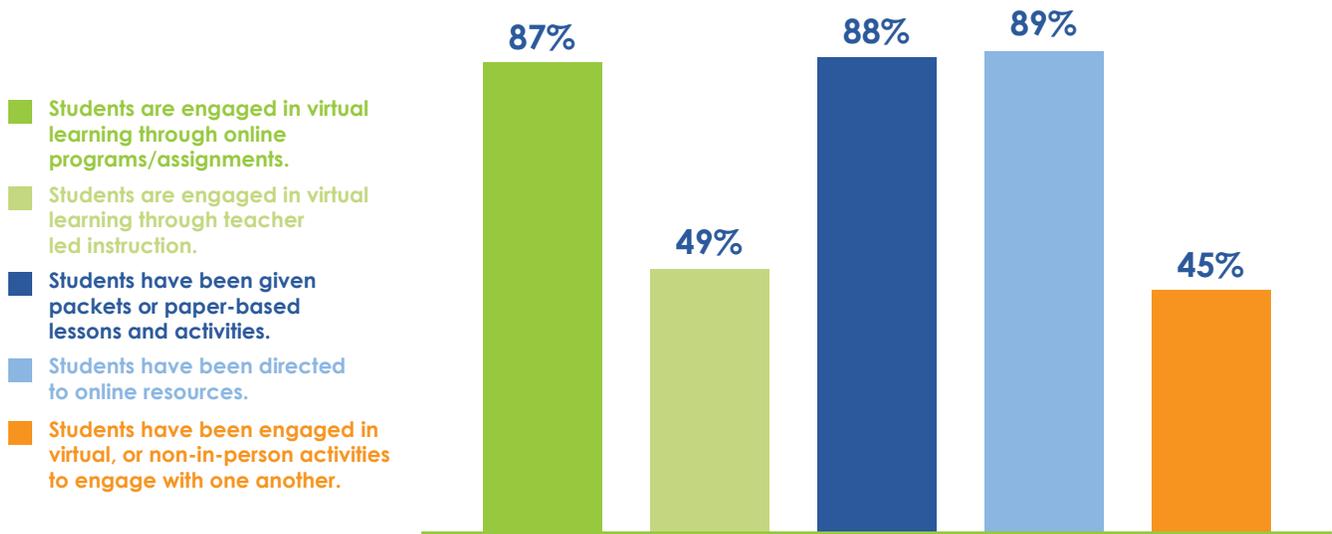
## **2. While teachers report having the tools they need to do their jobs, they are concerned about the barriers their students face when seeking to participate in virtual learning, including lack of access to internet, devices, and support.**

COVID-19 forced Mississippi schools to make an abrupt shift to virtual learning, which required both teachers and students to rely very heavily on technology during the recent school closures. While many teachers, 83 percent, said that they had the necessary tools and resources to do their job, many of them also pointed out the considerable challenges they and their colleagues faced in moving so quickly to a wholly different model of delivering instruction.<sup>4</sup>

*"It would be helpful to have the resources I have been unable to access because our school has been locked down. I also need access to specific information that our district leadership has deemed viable instead of the constant flood of links to check out. It doesn't help that I don't teach a non-tested subject and have basically told that I should not be making any assignments. But I am and will continue to do so."*

While teachers still retain their core knowledge and skills, including some materials they regularly access, this shift to virtual instruction with relatively little or no advance planning highlighted particular needs in this new environment.

Perhaps more importantly, many teachers shared their concern about how their students were accessing learning during this time. We asked teachers how they were delivering instruction to their students, and more than four out of five reported that their students were receiving educational materials and resources through online tools or paper packets. But when it comes to direct, teacher-led instruction, the type of instruction that most resembles what takes place in a classroom, just 49 percent of teachers said that they were able to engage with students.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 2:** 49% of students are engaged in virtual learning through teacher led instruction

Access to technology was the most often-mentioned barrier by teachers. More specifically, many teachers reported that students don't have access to high-speed internet at their homes.<sup>6</sup> They reported that many students also faced significantly limited access to computers or other devices that can be used for virtual learning. Teachers also observed that some students often experienced a lack of supervision from parents who are "essential workers." New responsibilities at home also had an impact on students, as teachers reported that many students have been caring for siblings while their parents works, or even working part time jobs themselves when parents have been laid off.<sup>7</sup>

*"I know my kids need computers to access lessons (my school district is awesome and has handed out Chromebooks to anyone who needs it.) But the kids and teachers need reliable technology including access to WiFi even when schools aren't closed. It should not have taken a global pandemic to realize why students couldn't do 21st century work at home. It has been very hard to reach some students, because of these issues."*

*"I feel that there has been a lack of clarity throughout this process. For instance, our administrators are not giving clear direction on what we need to do besides post work online and contact students/parents. When questions are asked we are given the run-around and told they will get back with more information. MDE needs to mandate instructions to schools to follow during times like this so there is more sense of how things should function in the future. The message isn't getting through."*

### **3. Teachers are worried about the ongoing ramifications of the pandemic and its effect on students and teachers' return to school buildings.**

Teachers recognize the strong likelihood that COVID-19 will be an ongoing threat for communities across the state. There's a concern about whether or not school administrators will adopt appropriate measures to reduce the risk of a new outbreak, such as social distancing, cleaning and disinfecting of the building and supplies, and innovative class/school policies.<sup>8</sup> Teachers also worry that despite preventive measures, there may still be a new outbreak, thus forcing schools to abruptly return to virtual learning.

*“Give teachers the opportunity to assess their students and come up with a plan that will work for the students. I think we are going to have students who are ready for the new curriculum and those who are not. We need the freedom to have classes with different abilities based on what the students are able to do. It isn't fair that a student who worked as they were supposed to during the virtual learning-will have to sit through a month or more of repeated skills when he/she could be learning new skills.”*

*“I believe every teacher and every student will be prepared to do what needs to be done to help our students reach the levels of instruction they need. We are Mississippians, what do you hear after a major storm passes in our communities? Chain saws, we get busy, clear the paths, prepare food, and check on our neighbors. I expect no less from our districts and schools. I believe our communities will support us as we assess and provide the best routes for our students.”*

*“Our school doesn't have warm running water so therefore we use germ-x all day long but good hand washing with soap and water has been proven to be more effective. So I worry about us being able to keep everyone well.”*

#### **4. Teachers worry that students will face several significant challenges in the next academic year, including learning loss and mental health issues such as anxiety and trauma.**

If Mississippi schools reopen in August, students will have been out of school for nearly five months. Understandably, teachers are very concerned about the number of students who will enter their new grades and classrooms academically behind.<sup>9</sup> They are also concerned that this learning time will have a major impact on district and state policies for testing and accountability.

In addition to academic challenges, the months students have spent outside of the classrooms are likely having a significant impact on their social emotional and mental health. In several responses, teachers shared that their students are suffering from isolation, loss of their regular routines, food insecurity, and the cancellation of anticipated school events (sports, prom, graduation, etc...). Students are also suffering from the direct impact of COVID-19 itself. Many students have family members who have contracted, or even died, from the virus. More alarmingly, teachers are concerned about students who are currently living in harmful or even abusive (physical or mental) home environments.<sup>10</sup>

*“I am most concerned with their physical and emotional health. Most of my students live below the poverty line, so I am certain many of them are not receiving adequate nutrition. I am also concerned about their lack of support. My students had a safe place at school; their homes may not have that same feeling. As far as their education, most of my students do not have computers, tablets, etc. to be able to do online distance learning.”*

*“Some of my students are providing care for younger siblings while their mother or father is working; other students have limited internet access which is causing difficulties completing their online assignments. I have some students who have RNs as a parent and have been sent out of state to stay with another parent or family member.”*

*“Students miss the social aspect of school. It is hard for them to remain motivated without interactions with their teacher and classmates. Students are also struggling to get help if they don't understand a concept.”*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on feedback from teachers related to the technological, academic, and social emotional needs teachers and students will face in the upcoming school year, Teach Plus Mississippi recommends that local and state education policy makers take the following actions:

- 1. Mississippi must close the digital divide by ensuring that each teacher and student has access to high-speed internet, computers or similar devices, as well as the training and support needed to fully engage in virtual learning.**

Expanding internet access and providing devices to students and teachers is essential to virtual learning in the short term.<sup>11</sup> Closing the digital divide will also help to create new course offerings and other opportunities for students in the long-term. State policymakers should commit to investing state funds into expanded access to reliable internet and devices.

Mississippians also have a unique opportunity to advocate for increased federal funds to expand connectivity. A potential increase in federal E-Rate funds, which allow schools and libraries to increase internet access, must eventually be approved by the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, which is currently chaired by our Senior U.S. Senator. An investment in closing the digital divide can be used to upgrade our tech infrastructure, provide hotspots for students in remote areas, and to ensure that internet access is affordable for all Mississippi families.

- 2. Each Local Education Agency (LEA) should, with guidance from MDE, develop a detailed emergency virtual learning plan for students and teachers in case of another public health crisis or natural disaster.**

The teachers who responded to this survey hope that more guidance will be available if or when there needs to be a return to emergency virtual learning. This plan should include “clear, purposeful, and realistic expectations for teachers”.<sup>12</sup> This plan should include specific guidance for teachers in special education, career-technical education, and elective courses. There should also be clear and realistic expectations for assigning and grading student coursework.

In order to ensure that teachers and students can meet these expectations, they must receive adequate technology training and support. Parents should also receive consistent communication about student expectations, along with access to technical assistance while helping their children complete coursework.

- 3. Districts and MDE should amend testing and accountability policies and procedures to reflect the academic and social-emotional needs many students will bring when they return to school this fall.**

We recognize that school, district, and state-level testing is necessary to accurately measure the academic impact of the lost learning time, and to determine which interventions are necessary and effective. However, testing practices, and the accountability measures that follow, should be carefully revised to reflect the challenges brought about by this unprecedented set of circumstances.

Diagnostic testing should be provided for all students to measure their current level of proficiency. Resources should be available for whatever remediation will be necessary for students. Lastly, while MDE should continue to administer testing at the end of the 2020-21 school year, accountability measures should be appropriately revised or paused to address the reality that many students have had limited, if any, access to learning over the past five months.

**4. State resources must be provided to Mississippi's public schools to address the social-emotional and mental health challenges that will likely impact a significant number of students upon their return to school.**

Schools must be aware that many students may return to school having experienced anxiety, depression, and trauma. With support from MDE and available local service providers, schools should ensure that all students have access to needed therapy and counseling services, either in-house or in partnership with local providers.

Teachers will also need training on trauma-informed instruction practices to be able to identify and address the many ways the social-emotional impacts of this pandemic may manifest itself in the classroom setting. It must also be noted that teachers themselves have also been affected by this pandemic and may also need access to therapy and counseling services.

## CONCLUSION

COVID-19 will continue to have a dramatic impact on Mississippi's teachers and students for the foreseeable future. The global pandemic has exposed persistent examples of inequity, such as limited access to technology, funding, and basic necessities. This public health crisis has also presented a host of new challenges to our public schools, such as the ability to transition to virtual learning, while also laying bare the academic, social emotional, and mental health needs of students.

Our state and districts must take steps to ensure that schools can better navigate current and future disruptions in in-person learning. First, we must ensure that each public school can meet basic infrastructure necessities, including access to internet and technology. Schools should also develop, with assistance, plans to effectively transition to virtual learning, adjust testing and accountability procedures, and meet whatever needs students bring with them to the classroom.

With the ongoing pandemic, along with the constant possibility of natural disasters, it's very difficult to predict when and where the next disruption of learning will take place. However, we must be prepared to do so and ensure that students can continue to learn in a safe and supportive environment. Teach Plus Mississippi and our team of teacher leaders look forward to working with Mississippi policy makers to bring the best solutions to the table to the benefit of all of our students.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "As Reeves shuts schools, some teachers worry about sustaining distance learning." Mississippi Today, 14 April 2020 <https://mississippitoday.org/2020/04/14/as-reeves-shutters-schools-some-teachers-worry-about-sustaining-distance-learning/>
- <sup>2</sup> Question: "Communication efforts about how students, teachers, and schools are impacted by COVID-19 have been effective." Responses: (n=2453) "Strongly agree" (43.7 percent), "Somewhat agree" (42.2 percent), "Somewhat disagree" (9.4 percent), "Strongly disagree" (3.1 percent), "Unsure" (1.6 percent). Results may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.
- <sup>3</sup> Question: "I understand what is expected of me related to work duties while school buildings are closed." Responses: (n=2460) "Strongly agree" (64.2 percent), "Somewhat agree" (28.6 percent), "Somewhat disagree" (4.8 percent), "Strongly disagree" (1.9 percent), "Unsure" (0.5 percent).
- <sup>4</sup> Question: "I have the tools and resources I need to do my job while school buildings are closed." Responses: (n=2456) "Strongly agree" (45.9 percent), "Somewhat agree" (36.7 percent), "Somewhat disagree" (10.7 percent), "Strongly disagree" (6.4 percent), "Unsure" (0.4 percent).
- <sup>5</sup> Question: "The following are examples of ways teachers can be engaging with students while schools are closed. Please check all activities that your school is providing for students while school buildings are closed. Please check all that apply:" Responses: (n = 2462) "Students are engaged in virtual learning through online programs/assignments." (87.2 percent), "Students are engaged in virtual learning through teacher led instruction." (48.7 percent), "Students have been given packets or paper-based lessons and activities." (87.9 percent), "Students have been directed to online resources." (89.1 percent), "Students have been engaged in virtual, or non-in-person activities to engage with one another." (45.4 percent).
- <sup>6</sup> Question: "What additional resources would be helpful while school buildings are closed?" Open-ended response question.
- <sup>7</sup> Question: "What are your students experiencing? What challenges are they facing?" Open-ended response question.
- <sup>8</sup> Question: "What are the biggest concerns for your fellow teachers and students when they return in the fall?" Open-ended response question.
- <sup>9</sup> See Endnote 8.
- <sup>10</sup> See Endnote 7.
- <sup>11</sup> Question: "What are your recommendations for state and district leaders as they prepare for students to return?" Open-ended response question.
- <sup>12</sup> Question: "What would you change in terms of expectations?" Open-ended response question.