

# Teaching and Learning Through COVID-19 in Indiana

## Round 1 Focus Groups: Key Takeaways

### ABOUT OUR PROJECT

As the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to change and shift the educational landscape across Indiana, teachers have been on the frontier of navigating this new terrain. As classroom teachers and Teach Plus Policy Fellows, we wanted to better understand the impact of the pandemic on teacher retention, while offering educators the opportunity to share their opinions, insights, and experiences of teaching and learning during Covid. We wanted to know what has worked well and what needs to change in response to the lessons of the last year and a half.

To gauge this, we are holding a series of focus groups in the winter-spring 2021. Fifty-three Indiana teachers participated in our first round of focus groups to give their input on teacher mental health, job satisfaction, and their likelihood of remaining in the profession. In later focus groups we will delve into professional development, student progress, parent engagement, and administrative support. Below are our key takeaways from the first round of focus groups, with the full report coming later this summer to elevate trends discovered throughout the full project.

### ROUND 1 FOCUS GROUPS: KEY TAKEAWAYS

**Teachers appreciate some increased flexibility and the focus on whole child wellness. However, the additional responsibilities and stressors of this pandemic year have resulted in teachers struggling to meet the newly set expectations.**

- + Many teachers are taking on new responsibilities and are also expected to remain flexible in an ever-changing environment.
- + Among these new responsibilities are the implementation of new educational strategies to engage students across in-person, virtual, and hybrid models, recreating curriculum to accommodate the various models, working to maintain student attendance, serving as mental health advocates, and more.

*“It feels like we're being asked to do so much more than just teach. We are suddenly responsible for getting kids to come to class virtually, even though the only tools we have are calling parents... there is a sense of responsibility for their mental health. Pressure from administration over testing data has not diminished and continues to snowball.”*

**Throughout the pandemic, teachers, students, and families have demonstrated great adaptability and have made the most of a challenging situation. The continued need to constantly adapt is wearing down their resilience.**

- + Many teachers have identified positive ways in which their own practice has improved in reaction to this school year.
- + Improving technology skills, rebuilding curriculum, and providing more flexibility in grading are among the positives teachers shared.
- + However, the ongoing need to constantly adapt while learning and implementing new skills is wearing down teachers' resilience.

*“It can feel difficult at times because of the expectation to be able to be flexible and change any and everything at the drop of a hat. It can be frustrating with negative responses from parents and guardians when their child is doing their work, and you feel as if your hands are tied during virtual learning.”*

**Teachers appreciate that administrators and districts are discussing teacher mental health and support. Yet, they feel that resulting actions are often shallow and do not substantively change the environment for teachers to actually participate in self-care and take care of their mental health.**

- + Teachers continue to raise concern about the negative impact that isolation, disruption, and uncertainty are having on their students' abilities to learn and engage.
- + Teachers are also aware that their mental, emotional, and social health can have a significant influence on student learning and progress.
- + Teachers acknowledge and are grateful for the additional resources that are being utilized by school districts to ease their emotional and mental strain. However, many teachers also report very little support for these initiatives from their administration.

*“I think the administration is sensitive to the fragile mental health of many of its teachers. It's difficult when there's a wide spectrum of that fragility and a wide spectrum of what everyone needs. How do you serve everyone? What are reasonable expectations for teachers, and of administrators regarding mental health in this pandemic? I have no answers.”*