

## INTRODUCTION

On March 27, Governor Lujan Grisham announced that school buildings statewide would close for the remainder of the school year, to mitigate the risk of community spread of COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> Educational communities were required to make drastic changes to their normal practices and systems. The New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) has provided guidance to districts associated with the expectation of engagement for staff. Teaching can take place via telework, video/teleconferencing, and limited work at the school building controlled circumstances. There is also an expectation that teachers should participate in activities that support student well-being and learning.

The NMPED is looking to teachers to learn more about the work and effectiveness of their activities during this unprecedented time. In an effort to better understand how changes and related guidelines are affecting teachers and their students, Teach Plus New Mexico created and distributed a survey to educators across the state. Providing feedback to the NMPED in the early stages of this new, temporary norm will allow state leaders to continue to support and make adjustments that best meet the needs of all our students and teachers.

## Findings

- Finding 1.** While more than half of New Mexico's educators understand what is expected of them and believe they have the resources they need to meet expectations, additional resources would be helpful.
- Finding 2.** Only about half of the teachers believe the level of their district's expectation of them while school buildings are closed is "about right."
- Finding 3.** Overall, teachers believe communication from their districts and the state about how students, teachers, and school are impacted by COVID-19 has been effective.
- Finding 4.** New Mexico teachers are using a variety of activities to engage their students while school buildings are closed.
- Finding 5.** Teachers are concerned about their social and emotional well-being during this time.

## We recommend that NMPED take the following actions:

1. Update guidance to districts that would allow teachers to access materials/ resources located in classrooms at least once each month (April/May), in compliance with state orders related to group size and social distancing; clearly define minimal and maximum efforts related to activities outlined in the local Continuous Learning Plans (CLP); and include a plan to support and evaluate the social and emotional well-being of teachers and other staff.
2. Work with districts and educational organizations to determine types of training currently available for teachers on virtual/off-site learning, support training development, and communicate with teachers statewide about available opportunities.
3. Include teachers as priority stakeholders when developing timely, effective communications.
4. Develop a system that identifies best practices and activity ideas related to student-teacher and peer collaboration during off-site learning.

## METHODOLOGY

In March 2020, we surveyed 550 New Mexico teachers about their experiences with guidelines and requirements for COVID-19-related education. Our goal was 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 New Mexico distributed a survey through New Mexico's educator networks. The respondents are all current teachers at district or charter schools in the state. Ninety-four percent of the 550 teachers who responded are currently teaching in public school districts while six percent are in public charter schools across New Mexico. Overall, respondents reported teaching in 57 public school districts and 16 charter schools. Twenty-four percent of respondents reported teaching in high schools, 16 percent in middle schools, seven percent in K-8 schools, 45 percent in elementary schools, one percent in pre-school settings, and seven percent in other school settings. Seventy percent report teaching in a Title I school.

# FINDINGS

## 1. While more than half of New Mexico's educators understand what is expected of them and believe they have the resources they need to meet expectations, additional resources would be helpful.

The NMPED has created specific guidelines for educators and student learning during this time. Districts have the flexibility to create a CLP, outlining their specific plans to educate students, which requires approval from the NMPED. Seventy-three percent of the survey's respondents indicated that they either strongly or somewhat agreed that they understood what was expected of them during building closures.<sup>2</sup> However, a third of responding teachers say they don't have what they need to do their job.<sup>3</sup> As plans are developed and implemented, the needs of teachers should be considered. When teachers were asked what additional resources they needed, the following themes emerged:<sup>4</sup>

- + Access to supplies from their classroom or resources to purchase supplies/tools that will support learning outside the classroom.
- + Training for teachers including virtual platforms and online curriculum.
- + More technology and internet services for students to participate in virtual learning opportunities.

Although the CLPs may differ by district, many teachers identified similar needs to enhance their ability to better support their students.

*"I am in need of strong training in the use of Google Classroom, Zoom, and other online platforms for communicating with my students and fellow teachers. I feel totally inadequate and am having difficulty figuring out how to set up the Google classroom, manage student work, etc. This is very frustrating."*

## 2. Only about half of the teachers believe the level of their district's expectation of them while school buildings are closed is "about right."

The NMPED provided districts with a list of activities that could be used to engage educators. Teachers participated in activities that facilitated direct contact with their students and in instructional activities. Eighty-five percent of teachers in our survey were establishing contact with families. This contact included efforts to obtain information to better prepare for future instruction and ways to support student needs. Educators also worked on academic planning, with 80 percent of teachers using their time to work on activities associated with student learning.<sup>5</sup> Participation in the other suggested activities varied.

The NMPED offered guidance to districts related to "meaningfully engaging teachers," but specific expectations of work were given by districts. With the flexibility for district leaders to decide locally, teachers felt differently about the level of expectation of their work:<sup>6</sup>

- + Nineteen percent felt the expectations were “too much.”
- + Fifty-six percent felt the expectations were “about right.”
- + Four percent felt the expectations were “too little.”
- + Twenty percent were “unsure.”

*“I am very concerned that the expectations are broad (and minimal) and many districts across the state may not provide the same effort. I worry about our state’s students falling further behind. I believe the state should mandate more, not give local control.”*

### **3. Overall, teachers believe communication from their districts and the state about how students, teachers, and school are impacted by COVID-19 has been effective.**

Requirements and expectations have changed throughout this past month due to circumstances related to COVID-19. This was exacerbated by the spring break, which could have impacted normal modes of communication for teachers. As district and state leaders have made efforts to communicate with a variety of stakeholder groups, approximately 25 percent of educators in our survey felt these were not effective. According to our survey:

- + Seventy-four percent of teachers strongly or somewhat agree that communication from their district has been effective.<sup>7</sup>
- + Sixty-nine percent of teachers strongly or somewhat agree that communication from the NMPED has been effective.<sup>8</sup>

Because one teacher impacts the lives of many students, communication must be effective for all teachers across the state.

*“Communicate expectations; Allow flexibility, time to collaborate with grade level teams, ask for feedback from teachers, create a platform where teachers can share ideas and get support.”*

### **4. New Mexico teachers are using a variety of activities to engage their students while school buildings are closed.**

As students across the state embark on new learning activities, we have found that most teachers are using a blended learning approach which includes online and paper-based activities. The following indicates current practices for teachers engaging students in learning (note: respondents could identify more than one form of engagement):<sup>9</sup>

- + Seventy-four percent of teachers have used virtual learning through online programs/assignments.
- + Fifty-seven percent of teachers have given packets or paper-based lessons and activities.
- + Eighty-one percent of teachers have directed students to online resources.
- + Fifty-one percent of teachers have engaged students in virtual learning through teacher-led instruction.
- + Thirty-four percent of teachers have engaged students in virtual, or non-in-person activities to engage with one another.

*“We have a multitude of venues trying to reach students each and every way possible.”*

While students have received activities and assignments that are both online and paper-based, most activities do not include opportunities for students to engage with their peers in their learning. Statewide orders related to COVID-19 limit the opportunity for in-person collaboration. Lack of access to technology, or current structures to activities limit the opportunity for students to connect through additional platforms. Only 34 percent of teachers indicated that their schools are providing opportunities for students to engage with one another in their learning.<sup>9</sup> Limited access to their peers is a major change from their normal expectation of school and may be challenging for some students, affecting their mental health.

*“Online classes or check-ins with teachers and counselors, webinars that allow students to ask questions and make comments, virtual activities that classes can do together and leave comments in a place like Google Classroom would support learning.”*

## **5. Teachers are concerned about their social and emotional well-being during this time.**

Teachers are working with their students and leaders in a new way and their knowledge, experience, and confidence in these efforts vary. Many teachers are also facing similar challenges to other parents as they work from home supporting their own families and share concerns of COVID-19.<sup>10</sup> Many teachers are feeling the added stress from their expectations as a teacher, parent, or caregiver.

*“I think teacher wellness is being neglected, while we direct our entire focus on the fact that our students are not in schools, students require daily meals, etc. Many teachers have challenges with mental health, and I think the schools being closed is a huge adjustment for the teachers, getting into a new routine, not being in the classroom, having new expectations thrown at us and changed every week, and lack of communication.”*

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Based on feedback from teachers related to current implementation of learning plans and their needs to be more effective, Teach Plus recommends that the NMPED take the following actions:**

**Recommendation 1: Update guidance to districts that would allow teachers to access materials/resources located in classrooms at least once each month (April/May), in compliance with state orders related to group size and social distancing; clearly define minimal and maximum efforts related to activities outlined in the local Continuous Learning Plans (CLP); and include a plan to support and evaluate the social and emotional well-being of teachers and other staff.**

As teachers embark on a new way of teaching, they will likely adjust their lessons along the way. These adjustments may require the use of additional or different items. Teachers will need to access resources, tools, and other materials from their schools and classrooms as they continue to support student learning from outside the classroom walls. We recommend state leaders shift guidance to districts to establish a safe plan to support physical retrieval of materials from the school site. This will help maximize the effectiveness of teaching and learning during this time.

In an effort to meet the needs of their local communities, districts' plans may vary widely. The NMPED has created a list of suggested activities related to teacher engagement. We recommend that the follow-up to this includes a measure outlining the minimal through maximum level of expectation, including time spent. The addition of minimal and maximum expectations will help to ensure more consistency among districts and will help prevent under- or overwhelming teachers.

Early CLPs focused on the education and well-being of students. As those plans begin to be implemented across the state, we must ensure additional stakeholders are being considered and supported. As a next step, districts should develop a basic plan to ensure school and district leaders are aware of and supportive of the social and emotional well-being of teachers and other staff. Plans could include a short interview that is conducted with staff on a weekly basis or a system for staff to reach out to leaders when needing support.

**Recommendation 2: Work with districts and educational organizations to determine types of training currently available for teachers on virtual/off-site learning, support training development, and communicate with teachers statewide about available opportunities.**

The levels of understanding and effectiveness in using technology, creating distance learning plans, and online programs vary among teachers. There are currently a variety of resources and training being offered by both in and out-of-state groups. However, this information can be overwhelming to teachers, adding to the stress of these challenging times. NMPED should assist in the organization, development, and sharing of training opportunities that will help meet the individualized needs of educators across the state.

**Recommendation 3: Include teachers as a priority stakeholders when developing timely, effective communications.**

Teachers want to be a valued member of the educational partnership, especially during these challenging times. Many teachers become aware of educational updates related to COVID-19 during news conferences along with other community members. Having access to information earlier, along with superintendents, school board members, and other educational groups, will ensure that teachers' perspectives are counted alongside other educational professionals and key stakeholders. Early access to information will also help teachers answer questions from parents and community members.

**Recommendation 4: Develop a system that identifies best practices and activity ideas related to student-teacher and peer collaboration during off-site learning.**

Teachers have already demonstrated the ability to act quickly under challenging circumstances to develop a variety of learning plans for students, but they can and want to do much more. They are truly the experts who best know our students. State and district leaders need to assist teachers in organizing and sharing best practices, such as lessons that allow for students to connect better with their teacher and other students. Teachers are developing great ideas in real time, but they need a system to organize, share, and support them. NMPED can help with developing and launching such a system.

## CONCLUSION

In this challenging time, we call on state leaders to rely on educator feedback and ideas as they make decisions that affect student learning. Educators are on the front lines of implementing state and district COVID-19 plans for their students. With strong, continued partnership with our teachers, we can provide quality learning in a supportive environment for New Mexico's teachers and students during this time and beyond.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “New Mexico schools closed for duration of school year in continued fight against COVID-19.” KOAT 7 Action News 27 March 2020 <https://www.koat.com/article/ped-says-theyll-extend-school-closure/31945896>
- <sup>2</sup> Question: “I understand what is expected of me related to work duties while school buildings are closed.” Responses: (n=547) “Strongly agree” (30.4 percent), “Somewhat agree” (43.0 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (12.4 percent), “Strongly disagree” (11.5 percent), “Unsure” (2.7 percent).
- <sup>3</sup> Question: “I have the tools and resources I need to do my job while school buildings are closed.” Responses: (n=548) “Strongly agree” (21.0 percent), “Somewhat agree” (44.5 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (17.2 percent), “Strongly disagree” (15.9 percent), “Unsure” (1.5percent).
- <sup>4</sup> Question: “What additional resources would you find most helpful while school buildings are closed?” Open-ended response question.
- <sup>5</sup> Question: “The New Mexico Public Education Department has suggested that teachers and educational assistants can be engaged in several activities while school buildings are closed. These activities include, but are not limited to, the following list. Which have you been doing while school buildings are closed?” Responses: (n = 550) “Academic planning” (80.2 percent), “Curriculum development and review” (47.3 percent), “Lesson planning” (76.2 percent), “Virtual student instruction” (55.1 percent), “PLC meetings” (68.6 percent), “Room preparation” (12.2 percent), “Parent/family communication” (85.5 percent), “Collaboration between special education and general education educators” (50.9 percent), “Staffing school or district call centers” (10.6 percent), “Data review and analysis” (24.4 percent), “Completion of mandatory trainings” (37.1 percent), “Grant writing” (4.0 percent).
- <sup>6</sup> Question: “Do you feel that your school or district’s expectations of you while your school building is closed is too much, about right or too little?” Responses: (n=548) “About right” (56.4 percent), “Too little” (4.2 percent), “Too much” (19.2 percent), “Unsure” (20.3 percent).
- <sup>7</sup> Question: “Communication efforts from my district or school network about how students, teachers, and schools are impacted by COVID-19 has been effective.” Responses: (n=547) “Strongly agree” (35.7 percent), “Somewhat agree” (38.2 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (12.1 percent), “Strongly disagree” (12.6 percent), “Unsure” (1.5 percent).
- <sup>8</sup> Question: “Communication efforts from NMPED about how students, teachers, and schools are impacted by COVID-19 has been effective.” Responses: (n=546) “Strongly agree” (26.6 percent), “Somewhat agree” (42.7 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (17.4 percent), “Strongly disagree” (10.3 percent), “Unsure” (3.1 percent).
- <sup>9</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.” Responses: (n= 550) “Students are engaged in virtual learning through online programs/assignments” (74.0 percent), “Students are engaged in virtual learning through teacher led instruction” (50.7 percent), “Students have been given packets or paper-based lessons and activities” (56.7 percent), “Student have been directed to online resources” (81.5 percent), “Students have been engaged in virtual, or non-in-person activities to engage with one another” (34.4 percent).
- <sup>10</sup> Question: “Is there anything else you’d like to share about what you are experiencing with school, district, and state leaders during this time?” Open-ended response question.