

INTRODUCTION

Schools and districts across Indiana have been working hard to navigate a safe return for students and staff as they respond to the ongoing challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. They have approached the return to school in a variety of ways, including fully virtually, in a hybrid fashion, or completely in person, as they continue to learn and adjust. Teachers are on the frontlines of this continuous adjustment as they navigate shifting COVID-19 plans and challenges with their students and families. Elevating and centering their voices and experiences is critical as districts continue their work on local plan development and implementation.

Teach Plus is a national nonprofit that empowers teachers to lead improvements in educational policy and practice. Over the course of the past several months, we listened to Hoosier educators to better understand the challenges facing them and their students, and their ideas on ways to better respond to the ongoing crisis. In this memo, we present the findings from our research and the recommendations for districts as they continue to meet the rising needs of students and families and the educators who support them.

METHODOLOGY

In June 2020, Indiana educators from across the state began analysis of 20 district reentry plans across the state. Inspired by the teacher insights from the 2020 Teach Plus report, [Barriers to Bridges: Teacher Perspectives on Accelerating Learning, Leadership, and Innovation in the Pandemic](#), they wanted to better understand how the district plans varied.¹ Using the report's "look-fors" framework, they analyzed how each plan addressed the autonomy to develop innovative teaching solutions; professional development plans for teachers; and SEL and mental health resources for students, families, and teachers. (For the complete list of look-fors, see Appendix.) While many of the reentry plans the teachers reviewed have since been updated and continue to be refined, together the reentry plan analysis and the Indiana-specific focus group data provide valuable insights into the Indiana school districts' approach to teaching and learning for the 2020-21 school year.

In addition to the reentry plan analysis, Teach Plus held focus groups with Indiana teachers to get their perspectives on teaching and learning; student and teacher mental health and social and emotional learning resources in schools; and how schools can emerge stronger from this crisis. Focus groups participants of 50 educators came from diverse school settings, subject teaching, and years of experience.



Findings

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the traditional role of a teacher, broadening the expectations to include skills and competencies from social-emotional learning to technical support and resulting in time and capacity shortages and burnout among educators.
2. The abrupt transition to a virtual learning environment has reaffirmed teachers' essential roles as connectors who support students and families and engage the wider school community.
3. Schools are struggling to navigate and formally adjust to the informally expanded roles of teachers and are relying on teachers' creativity and innovation to help meet the moment.

Recommendations

1. School and district leaders should provide teachers with adequate resources and create time in their regular schedules for professional development that addresses both the immediate and long-term needs driven by COVID-19.
2. District and state leaders should support teachers' mental health by providing better access and more financial support for educators wanting to connect to mental health professionals.
3. School and district leaders should take the opportunity to reimagine school, putting in place a teacher task force in schools and districts to brainstorm, vet, and implement innovative ideas and capture best practice and lessons learned in order to better meet students' needs.

FINDINGS

- 1. The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the traditional role of a teacher, broadening the expectations to include skills and competencies from social emotional learning to technical support and resulting in time and capacity shortages and burnout among educators.**

While teachers have always gone the extra mile to meet their students' needs, the coronavirus pandemic amplified this reality in an unprecedented manner. In spring 2020, teachers took on an extensive number of additional responsibilities including broader student emotional support, technical support, and facilitating curriculum outside their disciplines, all while engaging students in learning. While teachers have long asked for meaningful, high quality professional development to help improve key skills, the pandemic has exacerbated the need for long-term support while underscoring the immediate needs. In the focus groups we hosted, educators reflected that spring 2020 especially spotlighted the need for professional development on virtual instruction and providing social and emotional support for students.

To better support teachers as they help students and families navigate the disruptions caused by coronavirus, it is imperative that school and district leaders not only provide opportunities for quality, relevant professional development, but that they carve out time for teachers to participate in these meaningful opportunities.

Social and Emotional Support

As a result of COVID-19, Indiana students are facing traumatic events like hunger, abuse, and isolation and are returning to school experiencing higher levels of trauma than ever before. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is defined as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”² In recent years, there has been wide acknowledgement of the importance of SEL and teachers have been requesting more professional development on this topic, often establishing supports and interventions of their own in the face of inadequate staffing and resources.³ Educators, who interact with their students daily, know firsthand that the disruption caused by the pandemic amplified the need to better support student mental and emotional wellbeing. In our Indiana focus groups, 84 percent of participants responded that they ‘are more concerned about their students’ mental health when compared to a “typical” school year.’⁴ Additionally, one third, or 34 percent, of the participants felt that their school or district is not very well or not at all well prepared to tend to the SEL needs of their students.⁵

Although teachers, schools, and districts recognize the need to focus on SEL, many initial district reentry plans had no concrete steps to obtain and implement a robust SEL curriculum. Based on our analysis, 55 percent (11 of the 20) of the districts in Indiana recognize the need for SEL implementation in their reentry plans. However, only 20 percent of the districts had some form of SEL lessons taking place according to their plans in the summer. School districts without plans to provide adequate resources such as SEL curriculum or lessons are leaving it to teachers to fill these gaps, adding to their already-overflowing plate. Teachers are requesting professional development on how to respond to students in crisis, trauma-informed education, equity-based strategies and methods, and diversity training to support their students.⁶

Technology Support

COVID-19 forced educators to transition to teaching in a virtual setting overnight. This left many teachers scrambling to adjust their own instruction while at the same time trying to help their students and families navigate the unexpected transition—an ongoing challenge as schools have returned this fall. With limited engagement and inequities in students’ access to digital learning, teachers have had to become tech experts, training students and their families in an effort to make learning accessible for all. In our focus groups, educators asked questions such as, “What policies and procedures do we put in place in virtual learning? How [do we] use safety cautions and procedures in a virtual classroom? How do we give agency to students in their digital education?”⁷ Districts must consider these questions carefully as schools continue to balance in-person and virtual learning under the threat of COVID-19.⁸ One focus group participant explained, “Hands down, technology needs to be at the forefront of PD this year. School websites need to be updated and made more user friendly, and the parents, students, and teachers need to be trained on whatever digital platform the school is using to deploy lessons.”⁹

In addition to SEL and technology support, teachers have stepped up to meet the needs of their students and families in a variety of other ways, including providing virtual and remote supports for English Language Learners (ELL), support for special education (SPED) students, as well as physical support in the forms of meal and school supply delivery. As school communities continue to navigate toward a new

normal, the role of educators and the expectations placed on them need to remain at the forefront of all decisions. Educators are passionate professionals who deserve reasonable working conditions and clear, reasonable expectations of their capacity.

2. The abrupt transition to a virtual learning environment has reaffirmed teachers' essential roles as connectors who support students and families and engage the wider school community.

The coronavirus pandemic has further highlighted educators' role as community connectors, and parents and community members have seen firsthand the critical role teachers play in students' lives. When analyzing how school reentry plans can best support families to become partners in their children's learning, many focus group participants pointed to connecting with families through virtual orientation, open houses, and parent-teacher conferences prior to the start of school. While some reentry plans named support for families overall, the details were often lacking, thus creating more questions for educators. Several teachers noted that while they were aware of initiatives to inform and train families at their schools, these strategies were not laid out in the districts' reentry plans that they analyzed. When plans do not explicitly lay out how a district will move a priority named in a plan, the responsibilities often fall on the teachers to navigate the implementation. Districts and schools who fail to engage with families leave teachers at the frontlines directly fielding questions and troubleshooting without structural support.

Because teachers are often the ones with established student and parent relationships, they have played a critical role in communicating with families and in determining how families are trained and supported with educational resources. Online, teachers have ramped up their usage of platforms such as TalkingPoints, ClassDojo Messaging, and RemindMe in addition to texting, calling, and emailing to stay engaged. TalkingPoints has reported a tenfold increase in demand by new teachers and families, while ClassDojo saw more than 100 million translations in one week, five times more than usual.¹⁰ Upon our review of district plans and in interactions with educators, however, we found that districts often did not provide teachers with adequate resources and capacity to support this new set of responsibilities.

3. Schools are struggling to navigate and formally adjust to the informally expanded roles of teachers and are relying on teachers' creativity and innovation to help meet the moment.

When instruction abruptly transitioned to remote, many districts found themselves relying on teachers to provide more than the traditional instruction, deferring to their experience and ingenuity to continue to teach and keep their students engaged. One teacher in our focus groups explained that since schools have closed and reopened, teachers have more autonomy to develop innovative teaching solutions. Many teachers adjusted by giving students more ownership over their learning, requiring an innovative shift in teaching pedagogy. While most district plans included a districtwide Learning Management System (LMS) as well as a list of approved and vetted educational resources, the plans did not mention how schools can support teachers' roles as facilitators, helping students develop more critical thinking skills and agency as learners.

Collecting Teacher Input

With districts approaching the reentry of students in widely varied ways, the process for collecting teacher input to inform these approaches has also varied widely with some collecting no insight from teachers and others creating intentional opportunities for teacher feedback. While sometimes lacking explicitly laid-out detail regarding teachers' voice in the decision-making process of reentry, a good number of the district plans we analyzed did make some effort to seek teacher input while schools were closed or once a plan was established.

The most popular tool named to collect teacher input was an online survey; about one third of the districts we analyzed used online surveys to collect teacher feedback. Other methods included educator focus groups, teacher task force, and collaboration with local teachers' unions, with about one third of the districts we reviewed engaging their union leadership to seek teachers' voice. For instance, one district created a districtwide task force made up of school-level union leaders from each school. Finally, in other districts, school board members held virtual sessions and fielded emails from teachers. While teachers named these as opportunities either formally or informally created in the district to incorporate their input, some educators we spoke with did not feel it was enough and the process to finalize the plan felt rushed without enough input from teachers. Schools should grow from this experience and include teacher voice since they are increasingly relying on teachers to be innovative with student engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. School and district leaders should provide teachers with adequate resources and create time in their regular schedules for professional development that addresses both the immediate and long-term needs driven by COVID-19.**

While it is commendable that the state, districts, and partners have made resources and training available, it is equally important to carve out time for teachers to allow for such learning.¹¹ This will be especially critical as schools continue to balance in-person and virtual learning. Moving forward in this new normal, schools should take the time to assess these structural shifts to allow for more collaboration, as well as staff learning and training. Effective professional development, whether it be SEL or technology related, must be sustainable for the long term. Current statewide policies related to instructional time create obstacles for schools to have all teachers participate in professional development. Indiana Code (IC) 20-30-2-3 currently stipulates that a school corporation shall conduct at least 180 student instructional days during each school year with an instructional day being construed as "at least 5 hours for grades 1-6 and 6 hours for grades 7-12" according to the Department of Education.¹² This requirement stifles the power of districts to adapt to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. To better serve students and educators, the legislature should revise this requirement to allow districts more flexibility in creating their master schedules, not only in response to the health crisis, but as a means of continuing to support teachers and their development past the pandemic. Some districts have created virtual days for teachers to plan and engage in professional development. Let's not lose some of these innovative practices as we move forward.

As financial hardships for districts loom, rethinking and modernizing instructional time requirements would help districts have less expense yet grow professionally through COVID-19-related reforms. Some resources already exist to support this work. For example, [IDOE's Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Wellness webpage](#) provides ample resources such as professional development videos, curriculum dedicated to teacher mental health, and various toolkits. However, often it is the obstacles of time and money that prevent broader uptake. Modernizing instructional time policy would help to mitigate these.

2. District and state leaders should support teachers' mental health by providing better access and more financial support for educators wanting to connect to mental healthcare professionals.

As seen in our research, educators have taken on expanded roles that can stretch them physically, mentally, and emotionally. A number of reentry plans we reviewed outlined the availability of resources to support the mental health needs of teachers such as counseling and wellness services for staff. Recent studies have found that 93 percent of elementary school teachers and 94 percent of middle school teachers experience high stress, even prior to COVID-19.¹³ The Senate Enrolled Act 246 requires all Indiana school corporations to enter into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with a community mental health center or a provider that is state-certified or licensed to provide mental or behavioral health services to students.¹⁴ To better support teachers, we recommend expanding these services to school staff as well. "In a [recent teacher survey](#) by Hart Research Associates and the American Federation of Teachers, half of all respondents indicated that they, or someone in their household, qualify as high-risk for contracting COVID-19 due to an underlying condition, and 76 percent are worried about getting infected with the coronavirus at school. The findings of this nationally representative survey underscore a major pressure point for teachers and staff as schools continue to consider their in-person options."¹⁵

In our research, we found that some districts noted access to local wellness centers, services provided by insurance companies, and districtwide adult SEL training in their plans. However, if a district is relying on insurance benefits alone, it might not be able to meet the needs of those who do not elect health benefits. Such districts should establish community partnerships that allow all employees to participate regardless if they are on the district's insurance plan. Additionally, administration is often unable to make direct recommendations to staff for use of these resources, but fellow teachers are well positioned to remind each other that these resources are available. Districts' HR departments should disseminate information about mental health resources in their communications and reiterate these in school-level conversations.

3. School and district leaders should take the opportunity to reimagine school, putting in place a teacher task force in schools and districts to brainstorm, vet, and implement innovative ideas and capture best practices and lessons learned in order to better meet students' needs.

In response to COVID-19, schools and districts now have the opportunity to reenvision the educational system to meet their students' specific needs. For example, rural districts facing a limited broadband connectivity need more time to train teachers on virtual instruction to better support remote learning. Such districts must rethink their school year based on their needs. Currently, Indiana requires schools to hold

180 instructional days each year. The Indiana State Board of Education has the ability to approve a waiver, and some of the rural districts are leveraging such waivers by requesting to measure instructional time in hours rather than days.¹⁶ We encourage other districts to exercise flexibility and creativity in this way. A recent CREDO report examining the varying levels of learning losses for students recommends that conventional models of classroom-based instruction will not work and instead suggests new approaches may be needed to ensure high-quality instruction is available in all settings.¹⁷

For example, if a school has noticed that a significant population of their students are thriving in a virtual learning setting, schools should continue making this option available for students even when the pandemic ends. If dedicating a full day to professional learning communities to meet these professional development opportunities best serves the district's needs, they should restructure the work week or month to make time for PLCs and PDs.

Districts and schools should empower teachers to meet the challenges of teaching and learning as these arise, identify solutions, and lead the change management process with their peers. Teacher voice is essential as teachers are uniquely qualified to understand and envision how schools can best serve children. While some district plans highlighted teachers' role in their reopening strategies, other reentry plans noted no official reentry committee including educators. We recommend including teachers on reentry task forces, committees, and advisory panels that meet regularly. A teacher in our focus groups put it this way: "Don't plan something that you want, then ask teachers to OK it. See the expertise of teachers as valuable part of the planning process."¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and its various disruptions and challenges has created unprecedented challenges for the entire educational system. Teachers have stepped up to meet the needs of their students both academically and emotionally. It is imperative that as we move forward in this unusual year of instruction, we work to better define the role of a teacher in this context. Teachers' insights into the classroom are invaluable in continuing to build the new normal and drive the success of our students and families. The pandemic presents an opportunity to rethink and transform schools to better meet the needs of students. We must use this opportunity to leverage teacher voice and restructure schools to empower teacher leadership and innovation. Our students' and communities' success depend on it.

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Appendix

Between June and August 2020, Indiana Policy Alumni and Indiana Teacher Network came together to analyze a total of 20 different reentry plans from Indiana school districts. They reviewed each plan using the look-fors generated from the Teach Plus report, [Barriers to Bridges: Teacher Perspectives on Accelerating Learning, Leadership, and Innovation in the Pandemic](#). The look-fors are:

1. If teachers need it, do they have access to high-quality professional development to improve online or hybrid instruction, including how to deliver instruction and engage students?
2. Are teachers authentically included in the decision-making process?
3. Are schools taking appropriate steps to ensure student and staff safety?

4. Is students' SEL supported by teachers who have received high quality professional development and are there sufficient school resources, including counselors or social workers, to address students' mental health needs?
5. Are there intentional plans to recognize and support the mental health needs of teachers?
6. Are families being trained and provided support on relevant educational resources that will enable them to be equal partners in their children's learning?
7. Are SEL and mental health resources and materials for families accessible, in terms of language, technology access, and availability?
8. Do teachers have the autonomy and opportunities to develop innovative teaching solutions?
9. How are innovative teaching practices identified, recognized, evaluated, supported, and grown?

ENDNOTES

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- ² The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). (2020) *What is SEL?* <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>
- ³ Lee, L., (November 26, 2019) Lacking Training, Teachers Develop Their Own SEL Solutions. *Edutopia*. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/lacking-training-teachers-develop-their-own-sel-solutions>
- ⁴ Question: "When compared to a "typical" school year, how are you feeling about your students' mental health?" Responses (n=50): "I am more concerned about my students' mental health" (84%), "I have the same level of concern about my students' mental health" (14%), "I am less concerned about my students' mental health" (0%), "Unsure" (2%)
- ⁵ 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?" Response (n=50): "Very well" (4%), "Somewhat well" (56%), "Not very well" (26%), "Not well at all" (8%), "Unsure" (6%)
- ⁶ 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
- ⁷ See endnote 6
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- ¹³ Herman, K. C., Hickmon-Rosa, J., & Reinke, W. M. (2018). Empirically Derived Profiles of Teacher Stress, Burnout, Self-Efficacy, and Coping and Associated Student Outcomes. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 20(2), 90–100. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1098300717732066>
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- ¹⁸ See endnote 1