

Navigating the Texas Pandemic Recovery:

Teacher Recommendations for a New Normal



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is highlighting and exacerbating existing inequities while creating new ones across institutions nationwide. The Texas education system has not been spared the experience. Teachers' responsibilities have grown exponentially while their preparation time has been effectively reduced because of new, pandemic-related school, district, and state requirements. Students have struggled to connect with teachers due to limited broadband accessibility while simultaneously dealing with pandemic-related anxiety and trauma. Nevertheless, we must continue to educate all children to ensure a prosperous future for them, their families, and their communities.

With the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, the nation-at-large is looking forward to a return to normal. However, teachers are envisioning a new kind of normal: Our increased responsibilities and adaptations have spurred aspirations for a reimagined education system as we remain committed to improving education for Texas students.

We are a diverse group of 50 demonstrably-effective Texas teachers committed to effectuating change in education policy by advocating on our students' behalf. As Teach Plus Policy Fellows, we sought to explore how schools and districts could utilize lessons learned from an unrelenting pandemic to positively impact post-pandemic education practices. With that goal in mind, we facilitated focus groups and asked participant teachers about four topics related to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic: e-learning, social-emotional learning, education funding, and innovation in education.

Findings

1. Teachers believe statewide broadband connectivity is essential for effective e-learning and need additional support to successfully plan and deliver hybrid instruction to ensure the success of all students.
2. Teachers need more professional support, training, and resources to ensure students' social and emotional health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.
3. Teachers are experiencing pandemic-related funding shortages and worry that the pandemic will have long-lasting adverse effects on future school funding.
4. Teachers believe there is great potential in utilizing technology post-pandemic but need additional training and support.

Recommendations

1. Establish statewide, high-quality, high-speed connectivity by investing in broadband infrastructure.
2. Support students' and teachers' social, emotional, and mental health needs by providing access to more campus-based professionals and high-quality training.
3. Protect statewide education funding by maintaining House Bill 3 in its entirety.
4. Encourage innovation in instructional and school design by incentivizing utilization of Senate Bill 1882.

METHODOLOGY

The focus groups, engaging 123 Texas teachers from elementary (44%), middle (31%), and high schools (20%) in urban (67%), suburban (23%), and rural (7%) districts across the state, explored the challenges of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant teachers addressed the following questions:

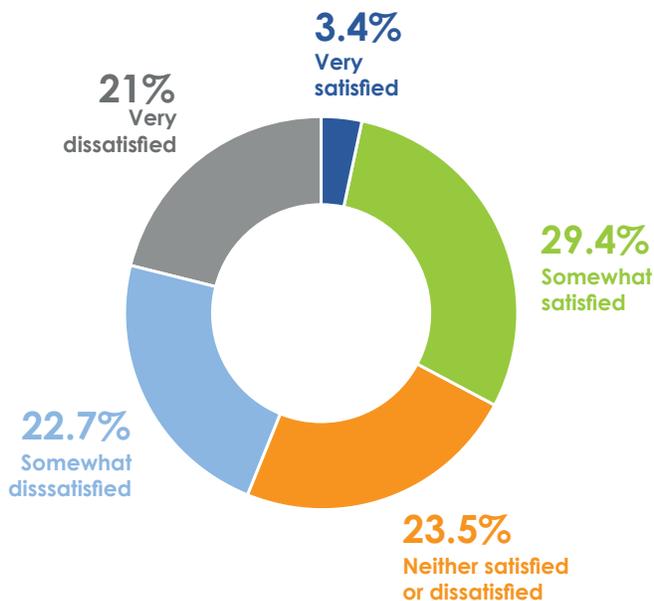
1. What recommendations do you have to make e-learning more effective for students in your school or district?
2. What recommendations do you have for how your school or district can better meet the social and emotional and mental health needs of your students?
3. When compared to the 2019-20 school year, has your school experienced a change in funding or funding needs?
4. If so, how have these changes impacted your classroom?
5. What practices, solutions, or innovations would you recommend to improve your school or district after the pandemic?

After facilitating focus groups, we aggregated and analyzed participant responses to gather frequently occurring themes and insights. Afterward, we synthesized the findings to create actionable recommendations for Texas policymakers.

FINDINGS

1. **Teachers believe statewide broadband connectivity is essential for effective e-learning and need additional support to successfully plan and deliver hybrid instruction to ensure the success of all students.**

How satisfied are you with your school district's response?



Teachers in our focus groups are not satisfied with school and district responses to e-learning challenges.¹ They reported a lack of reliable technology and connectivity when asked to share the most significant e-learning challenges in their schools and districts. Additional hybrid teaching responsibilities assigned without the benefit of increased planning time made these challenges even more daunting.

TECHNOLOGY AND CONNECTIVITY

The pandemic has spotlighted pre-existing inequalities in the availability of reliable broadband internet across Texas, and the disproportionate impact on low-income and rural families is glaringly evident. According to a recent report conducted by Digital Texas, at the onset of the

pandemic, 3.1 million K-12 Texas students did not have access to broadband or an adequate learning device. After a frenzied fall effort to remedy the problem, 2.5 million K-12 Texas students still lack in-home broadband sufficient for learning.²

Most teachers in our focus groups reported that their districts distributed learning devices and hotspots to meet e-learning needs.³ In some cases, these resources were insufficient to meet e-learning expectations. Teachers in our focus groups made clear that merely distributing low-bandwidth hotspots is not a long-term solution, as many digital learning programs require a high-speed connection.

“Reliable electronic devices were not available since the very beginning. Now that most of the kids have one, reliable internet is an issue for some students ... I am not tech-savvy, so trying to teach while trying to solve tech issues for kids has been extremely challenging.” -Elementary Teacher, Urban District

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools and districts have attempted to make distance learning accessible but teachers' focus group responses suggest that a more concerted effort is necessary to provide all Texas students the technology and connectivity they need.

HYBRID INSTRUCTION

Our focus group respondents emphasized that teachers who are employing a hybrid teaching model, where they are simultaneously delivering instruction for online and in-person learners, struggle to meet increased teaching responsibilities without the benefit of additional planning time.

“Converting normal lesson plans to an e-learning platform is extremely time consuming and requires double the planning. Providing equitable lessons for both groups of students feels almost impossible.” -Elementary ELAR and Social Studies Teacher, Urban District

After resolving any hybrid teaching time constraint issues on their own, teachers must additionally contend with a lack of support in delivering instruction and are forced to make the impossible choice of where to focus their attention. As a result, instructional quality suffers as educators attempt to meet their in-person and online students' needs simultaneously. As one teacher expressed, “In-person students need me 100% and so do online kids and that is a mathematical impossibility.” (Multiage Elementary Teacher, Urban Charter District)

Although hybrid teaching reduces the number of students in physical classrooms, teachers' focus group responses reveal a host of challenges, including the demands of lesson plan conversion and reduced effectiveness caused by delivering instruction through two mediums.

2. Teachers need more professional support, training, and resources to ensure students' social and emotional health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Teachers in our focus groups feel unqualified to handle the unprecedented trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Nearly all of them underscored the critical need for training, counseling, and dedicated time when asked how the school and district could better support both staff and students' mental health needs. Recognizing a massive shortage of mental health professionals on their campuses, some teachers would ask the district for additional training while others would ask for additional mental health professionals. Teachers shared that many counselors are required to fulfill multiple roles at their schools such as testing coordinators, student

schedulers, and college admissions consultants, reducing their capacity and effectiveness in supporting students' mental health needs.

"We need more mental health professionals on campuses because at the end of the day, I am a teacher and not a counselor, and I don't always know how to help and do not want to be responsible for making things worse." -Dual Language Elementary Teacher, Urban District

In addition to more mental health professionals in schools, teachers in our focus groups want more training for themselves. They are eager for culturally specific, trauma-informed training with strategies and techniques they can immediately bring to their classrooms to better support their students. Equipping teachers with these skills has the additional benefit of increasing their school counselors' capacity by triaging students' needs.

"We need better trauma-informed instruction training that really addresses the needs of students and how to help them in these unprecedented situations. The training needs to be more than a checkbox for the district to say they did the training." -Career and Technology High School Teacher, Urban District

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were calling for more mental health professionals in schools, but their focus group responses indicate the need for high-quality training is now greater than ever if we are to adequately support students experiencing unparalleled levels of anxiety and trauma.

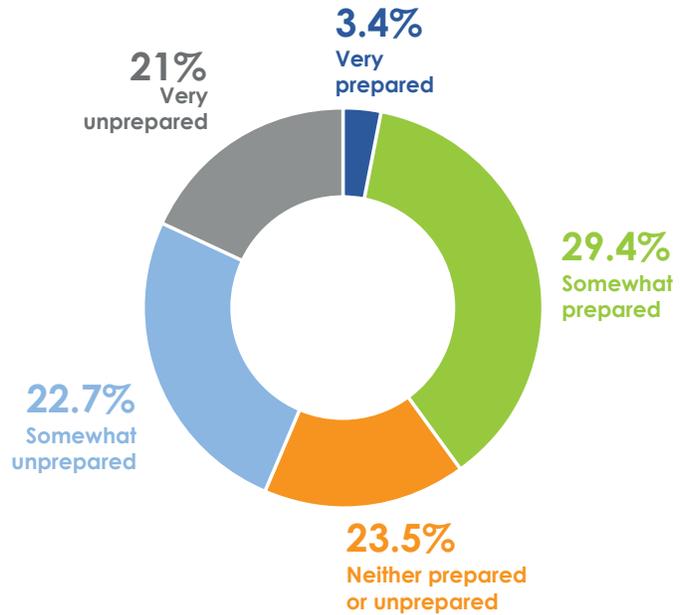
3. Teachers are experiencing pandemic-related funding shortages and worry that the pandemic will have long-lasting adverse effects on future school funding.

Teachers in our focus groups overwhelmingly report a rise in funding needs and a decline in funding availability for non-pandemic related expenditures when asked how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their classrooms.

"Because we didn't have enough funding to hire more classroom teachers, they absorbed 2/3 intervention specialists who do critical work to work with struggling students and to document progress of interventions that are used for recommendations for 504 and/or SPED. We are missing critical work on our campus that helps identify students with learning differences." -Elementary Intervention Teacher, Urban District

As districts and schools struggle to address safety, technology, and other COVID-19 pandemic-related expenses, teachers are spending their own money purchasing boards, manipulatives, printers, and desks to set up classrooms in their homes. In several cases, teachers report that their administrations have explicitly told them there is no money for materials. These funding shortages affect teachers across the instructional delivery spectrum.

How prepared do you feel to address student trauma and associated mental health challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?



One teacher who returned to the classroom responded, “From before when I was teaching, the need for funds is much greater. I need to provide my students with supplies and I just don’t have the means to right now. The supplies are needed at a more individual level now.” (Middle School Teacher, Urban District)

Another teacher who is still teaching remotely emphasized, “I do know that I’ve had to buy programs that my students can use online during this time. I was told that those programs I needed for my students could not be purchased through the school’s funding.” (Dual Language Elementary Teacher, Urban District)

In light of this reality, teachers also report concerns about future school funding and job security, especially since student attendance rates have fallen drastically. Focus group respondents also mentioned eliminated stipends and halted pay raises as contributing to the uncertainty surrounding the future as they contemplate their roles within education after the pandemic.

*“Teacher pay-raises were left out of discussion and some stipends were taken away. I know that the more kids we lose the more probability of teachers losing their jobs.”
-Reading Intervention Teacher, Suburban District*

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted individual school and district budgets at varying levels, teachers’ focus group responses collectively demonstrate reduced funding availability for non-pandemic expenditures such as class materials and teacher pay and broadly shared feelings of uncertainty surrounding the future of education and the teaching profession.

4. Teachers believe there is great potential in utilizing technology post-pandemic but need additional training and support.

Teachers we spoke with repeatedly mentioned increased access to technology for students and more effective utilization of technology by teachers when asked about practices, solutions, or innovations they want to take from the COVID-19 pandemic into the future to improve education. They are eager to learn more about available technology and use it more effectively to support English Language Learners, special education students, suspended students, and others with more unique circumstances like chronic illnesses and outside responsibilities.

“Educational technology skills have definitely improved, training and practice in this area should continue.” -Middle School Science Teacher, Urban District)

Additionally, many teachers noted the potential to redesign schools based on technology and practices already being embraced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, they noted how some students have benefitted from distance-learning environments and that continued choice could improve student outcomes.

“Continue to make distance learning an option for our students. Some students with external responsibilities excel in this environment. Traditionally, however, distance or virtual learning is only used as a back-up when the student has fallen too far behind in the traditional model. It should be offered for more high-school students as a first-choice.” -High School English Teacher, Urban District

Taken together, teachers’ focus group responses indicate a clear desire to take advantage of newly developed skills and practices to expand options and improve outcomes for students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish statewide, high-quality, high-speed connectivity by investing in broadband infrastructure.

As schools transitioned to online-only and then hybrid models at different stages of the pandemic, the fundamental right to a public education became increasingly difficult for districts to provide and for students and families to access. Teachers want to see policies that guarantee internet availability and affordability.

“Every student should receive free unlimited data usage to make sure internet connectivity is not an issue.” -Middle School Math Teacher, Urban District

The state should invest in statewide high-quality, high-speed broadband connectivity to ensure equal access to education and eliminate inequities for all students, especially high-need student populations most disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it should collaborate with federal and local governments to provide funds for statewide broadband infrastructure focusing on rural areas and areas with low socioeconomic stability. Additionally, the state should establish a reimbursement program for teachers who acquired connectivity or increased their bandwidth to teach from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Investing in high-quality, high-speed broadband infrastructure will ensure that all Texas students have access to the public education the state is obligated to provide.

2. Support students' and teachers' social, emotional, and mental health needs by providing access to more campus-based professionals and high-quality training.

Before the pandemic, the need for additional mental health professionals in schools was already evident. Where mental health professionals are available, their effectiveness is compromised by countless administrative responsibilities. Without a singular focus, mental health professionals cannot adequately provide the care students need or the training and resources teachers need to support them.

The state should provide access to mental health professionals, high-quality training, and a social-emotional learning curriculum so teachers can best meet their students' needs. Districts and campuses should set explicitly articulated goals surrounding social-emotional learning. The state should provide accountability measures for the trauma-informed instruction training mandate.

Deteriorating mental health requires high-quality training and curriculum to meet the diverse needs of students from across Texas. Districts should move beyond mere compliance and encourage dialogue and engagement to meet students' needs and promote equity. Inadequate support for both teachers and students during this time could cause irreparable damage.

3. Protect statewide education funding by maintaining House Bill 3 in its entirety.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not just a physical threat to education in Texas. It has severely disrupted the lives, learning, and development of students across the state. House Bill 3 was a massive investment in the Texas education system passed with bipartisan support to promote equity and address learning gaps caused by antiquated funding formulas.⁵ Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the same inequities and learning gaps that the law set out to address.

The state should maintain House Bill 3 in its entirety without temporarily or otherwise pausing any allotments such as the Teacher Incentive Allotment to advance equity, address learning gaps caused by the pandemic, and offer stability to Texas schools. Additionally, the state should allocate pandemic-related funding to ensure that schools can safely and effectively function.

The educational impact of the COVID-19 pandemic requires an equally strong response as it is now more important than ever to adequately and completely fund education to ensure the future prosperity of Texas students and citizens.

4. Encourage innovation in instructional and school design by incentivizing utilization of Senate Bill 1882.

Traditional instructional delivery methods were upended as teachers, schools, and districts evolved to meet the demands of educating students during the COVID-19 pandemic. These adjustments, combined with an increased reliance on technology, have provided a glimpse of how education can be significantly improved post-pandemic.

District and campus leaders should take advantage of the unique circumstances and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to develop and implement instructional delivery and school design innovations to teach students more effectively. The state should incentivize innovation by encouraging districts to utilize Senate Bill 1882. When establishing new partnerships, we urge districts to listen to their communities and determine innovative solutions that meet their local needs and context. Finally, schools and districts should continue leveraging technology while providing additional training for teachers to become more skilled and effective.

CONCLUSION

School, district, and state responses to the devastating COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the potential for lasting change across the Texas educational landscape. Perturbed by the pandemic's negative impacts and inspired by their own adaptations, teachers have unequivocally demanded that education not return to normal if it includes historical and current inequities. Policymakers should take action to provide technology and connectivity, sufficient social, emotional, and mental health support, adequate and equitable funding, and continued innovation in instructional delivery and school design for the benefit of all Texas students, and by extension, all Texans.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Question: "How satisfied are you with your school or district's response?"

² Digital Texas. "Digital Connectivity In Today's Texas." December 31, 2020. Accessed at https://www.digitaltexas.org/digital_connectivity_in_todays_texas

³ Question: "How has your school or district responded to these challenges?"

⁴ Question: "How prepared do you feel to address student trauma and associated mental health challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?"

⁵ Texas Education Agency. "House Bill 3 Texas School Finance 86th Legislative Session." December 31, 2020. Accessed at <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/HB%203%20Master%20Deck%20Final.pdf>