

BACKGROUND

In May 2020, Teach Plus New Mexico shared findings from our March 2020 survey with the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED). We conducted a [survey](#)¹ with more than 500 teacher respondents to learn more about their experiences related to teaching during school building closures and found the following:

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.
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."
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.
4. New Mexico's teachers are using a variety of activities to engage their students while school buildings are closed.
5. Teachers are concerned about their social and emotional well-being during this time.

As a follow-up to this work, Teach Plus partnered with the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) and surveyed more than 3,000 teachers and administrators to learn more about their overall experience related to distance teaching and their preferences for back-to-school learning.

Findings

1. Although the majority of teachers felt that their school implemented distance learning effectively, only about half found it a positive experience.
2. Teachers identified technology access and training, student participation, and lack of accountability as barriers to distance learning. At the same time, teachers saw increased engagement from students who have previously disengaged in-class and identified family support among the positive experiences of distance learning.
3. Teachers' preferences vary in regards to the in-person and distance learning options for the 2020-2021 school year.
4. In order to feel safe, supported, and prepared to return to school buildings, teachers need clear and consistent guidelines, safety/sanitation equipment, and quality school cleanliness.

Recommendations

In an effort to develop a quality system and partnership with educators across the state, we recommend that state leaders:

1. Continue to engage with educational stakeholders to provide timely communication, resources for altered teaching plans, and on-going training.
2. Develop a plan for accountability that outlines expectations around student participation and learning.
3. Provide timely and detailed communication to educators related to health/safety, expectations, and changes during COVID-19.
4. Ensure teachers have access to safety/sanitation equipment that can be used throughout the school day and provide public information related to school cleanliness and safety plans.

METHODOLOGY

In May-June 2020, we surveyed 3,089 New Mexico teachers and administrators about their overall experiences related to distance teaching and their preferences for back to school learning, in order to:

- + Determine the challenges and highlights of distance learning.
- + Understand more about their overall experience related to distance learning.
- + Determine preferences for starting the next academic year.

To address these questions, Teach Plus New Mexico and the New Mexico Public Education Department distributed a survey through New Mexico's educator networks. The respondents are all current teachers and administrators at district or charter schools in the state. Ninety percent of the 3,089 respondents are currently at public school districts while ten percent are at public charter schools across New Mexico. Overall, respondents reported teaching in 81 public school districts and 67 charter schools. Sixty-seven percent report working in a Title I school.

FINDINGS

- 1. Although the majority of teachers felt that their school implemented distance learning effectively, only about half found it a positive experience.**

Schools across New Mexico began the implementation of their local plan for distance learning in March 2020, continuing through the end of the school year. Although distance learning was largely a new experience for educators, a majority of the respondents – 72 percent – indicated they “strongly agreed” or “somewhat agreed” that distance learning at their school was implemented effectively.² Implementation of distance learning at the end of the school year rather than the beginning possibly contributed to this since teachers and students had already established expectations and relationships, and engaged in learning together for most of the school year. The respondents that disagreed pointed out that their students lacked access to proper technology and noted the difficulty in engaging students outside of the classroom.

"The majority of the students responded well to online learning, Google meets, and tutoring hours. Students were able to acquire new skills quickly to accommodate the new expectations. Parents were also more responsive than usual and more engaged in their kids' learning."

"Some of the positives for me were already implementing a web based tool, like Canvas, for delivery of instruction. This allowed me to prepare effective curriculum-based assignments for students. Our district also set up Remind accounts for all teachers that were easily accessible through Clever. This was a key piece in communication with students and parents."

However, while teachers found the implementation of distance learning effective overall, only fifty-three percent of respondents found their experience very or somewhat positive.³ Various factors including lack of planning time and knowledge of technology, and stress related to COVID-19 may have contributed to distance learning being a challenge for many educators.

"Lack of student engagement, some students never turning in any assignments and parents not holding them accountable, too many emails, lack of cohesive guidelines and expectations of teachers and students, some students didn't have good internet or place to work quietly, being on the computer so much caused me to get severe migraines and back aches, little proper training for distant teaching-we basically had to 'learn as you go'."

2. Teachers identified technology access and training, student participation, and lack of accountability as barriers to distance learning. At the same time, teachers saw increased engagement from students who have previously disengaged in-class and identified family support among the positive experiences of distance learning.

Teachers identified a variety of barriers to distance learning.⁴ Technology use has varied across districts and even within school buildings, and access to technology for each student and use of technology for implementation of teaching/learning has not been consistent. Some districts and schools have had limited access to the actual technological devices and to the internet, or may have these resources but lack the training and understanding of how to use these tools in a distance learning environment. Any one of these scenarios presented its own set of challenges for the teachers on the frontlines with students.

"Many of my students either had no access to a computer/internet, lost their access, had limited access, or were not proficient with the technology. All of this had a serious, negative impact on student educational opportunities."

During the transition to distance learning, the state gave districts the flexibility to determine the use of student grades. Many districts opted to a pass/fail system and did not require the tracking of attendance or participation in effort to not penalize students for not having access to resources and to not overwhelm them during this time. Strategies and systems that would have been used to monitor and support student learning may also have been unavailable during this time.

"Student accountability. The students knew they didn't really have to complete the work, as they would "pass" on to the next grade even without doing the work."

At the same time, teachers in our survey pointed to some positive experiences during distance learning.⁵ Some students who normally struggled with in-class learning seemed to excel in virtual learning environments. The flexibility, use of technology,

and lessened social pressure created an environment for these students to become more engaged.

“Many students engaged with online lessons that allowed flexibility and could be done on “their time.” Some students who did not engage in class prior to schools closing were more engaged during distance learning.”

Teachers who used technology and online platforms as part of their normal instruction ramped up the use of such tools during distance learning. Programs like Google Classroom allowed teachers to organize various subjects and projects into different folders, with links for educational videos and assignments for practice. Students could use these programs or their school email accounts to communicate with their teachers. Parents and teachers used apps like ClassDojo to communicate with each other, especially with younger children.

“Students have had the opportunity to explore technology a little more independently & I think they enjoyed that aspect. Also, I got to use my tech skills to help my colleagues navigate their new environment.”

COVID-19 distance learning environment called for a deeper partnership between teachers and families to support student learning. Appreciation and support from families have increased during this time. Increased communication for planning, implementation, and monitoring likely increased for many teachers and families. As a result, a deeper gratitude for teachers emerged.

“The parents of students who participated in distance learning took an active role in their child’s education. It improved my relationship with those families.”

3. Teachers’ preferences vary in regards to the in-person and distance learning options for the 2020-2021 school year.

As the New Mexico School Re-entry Task Force and state leaders continue to develop plans for the 2020-2021 school year, educators are divided on which back-to-school options they prefer. Respondents indicated their support for the following options for beginning the 2020-2021 school year ⁶ as follows:

- + Regular schedules with in-person learning: 37 percent
- + Hybrid schedule with in-person and distance learning: 35 percent
- + All distance learning: 15 percent
- + Unsure: 6 percent
- + Other/Write-In: 8 percent

The differences in opinions for school re-entry could be rooted in the quality and implementation of their district’s learning plan and the number of COVID-19 cases within their community.

“We would need a strong supply of Clorox wipes and hand sanitizer, face shields (face masks are ineffective for teaching phonics), and most importantly frequent and timely communication from the NMPED about what is happening.”

“I would want only contact with a small group of people, the same people, daily, for a shortened amount of time. I propose a half day schedule for kindergarteners with only 10-12 students in the morning and the same in the afternoon.”

"I'm not sure, but I do feel that teacher safety is not being taken into consideration. I don't want teachers to lose their jobs or choose to leave because they fear for their health for themselves and their families. Maybe we should continue distance learning until there is a vaccine."

4. In order to feel safe, supported, and prepared to return to school buildings, teachers need clear and consistent guidelines, safety/sanitation equipment, and quality school cleanliness.

The pandemic has created an environment of deep uncertainty and has increased the focus on safety for students and staff.⁷ Teachers want to have a clear understanding of the guidelines that will be implemented in school buildings. Having early, consistent, and detailed explanations of such guidelines will ensure teachers and parents are informed and ready to support implementation.

"I think we would need clear guidelines on how to screen students AND staff for illness, and what needs to change in our classrooms to make sure that we are keeping each other safe. I would need instructions on what the state/district expects of teachers in terms of sanitizing, etc."

Although custodians and staff will be working hard to keep school buildings clean and safe during the pandemic, teachers have identified the need to have access to equipment and supplies that they can use during the day. Having immediate access to these items will help ensure a clean and safe classroom environment throughout the day for students and teachers.

"Personal protective equipment (PPE), supplies for students to be safe, technology for students to take home, availability of sanitation stations and materials."

Teachers and staff are depending on quality and regular cleaning of classrooms and school buildings in order to feel safe to work within the buildings. Providing cleaning schedules and description of school sanitation may improve the feeling of student and staff safety.

"I want to know that buildings were cleaned and that enhanced cleaning will continue regularly all year."

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to engage with educational stakeholders to provide timely communication, resources for altered teaching plans, and ongoing training.

As state and district leaders develop, implement, and monitor learning plans, educational stakeholders from across the state need opportunities to continue to provide input and give feedback. Classroom teachers and school administrators work directly with students and their families each day and are essential partners in this work. Eliciting voices from the field will help to ensure best practices are documented and shared and specific concerns are identified and addressed.

2. Develop a plan for accountability that outlines expectations around student participation and learning.

Student participation in distance learning has varied and many teachers believe the lack of accountability and/or consequences have contributed to the lack of participation. A robust accountability plan will help set expectations and clarify opportunities and consequences for learning and support for all students across grade levels and the state. The development of and implementation of an accountability plan should also include the district and school strategies to support students faced with additional challenges during COVID such as family health issues, food or housing insecurity, etc.

3. Provide timely and detailed communication to educators related to health/safety, expectations, and changes during COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an environment where data, information, and procedures have changed drastically. Communication is key in order to connect stakeholder groups and develop effective systems. Acquiring information too late is a challenge in the partnership between the state and teachers and teachers and parents. Educators should remain a valued stakeholder as information is dispersed to the public.

4. Ensure teachers have access to safety/sanitation equipment that can be used throughout the school day.

Although classrooms and school buildings will likely have regular deep cleaning each day, teachers should have access to supplies to help limit the spread of the virus and keep classrooms safe. Even with guidelines in place, having students and teachers work in a classroom setting will require extra precautions. Sanitizer, disinfectant wipes, and other safety items should be available for daily use and should not be at the expense of the classroom teacher.

CONCLUSION

Teachers have provided voice and insight to teaching and learning during COVID-19, helping to identify specific areas for improvement while highlighting successes during distance learning. These teachers are looking for solutions to move students, staff, and families forward during uncertain times. We call upon our state leaders to ensure that these essential stakeholders continue to be valued partners as we work together to ensure every child in New Mexico has access to quality learning during COVID-19 and beyond.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Teach Plus. (2020). Teacher and Student Engagement During COVID-19: Recommendations from Teach Plus New Mexico Policy Fellows. 21 Retrieved from <https://teachplus.org/news-events/publications/teacher-and-student-engagement-during-covid-19-recommendations-teach-plus>
- ² Question: "To what degree do you agree with the following statement, 'Distance learning in my school was implemented effectively.'" Responses: (n = 3,086) "Strongly agree" (21.2 percent), "Somewhat agree" (50.9 percent), "Somewhat disagree" (14.7 percent), "Strongly disagree" (11.6 percent), "Unsure" (1.6 percent). Results may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.
- ³ Question: "How would you characterize your experiences with distance learning since school buildings have been closed? Responses: (n=3,085) "Very positive" (12.7 percent), "Somewhat positive" (39.9 percent), "Somewhat negative" (23.2 percent), "Very negative" (6.9 percent), "Neither positive or negative" (17.2 percent).
- ⁴ Question: "What problems or barriers have you faced with distance learning, if any?" Open-ended response question.
- ⁵ Question: "What have been some of your positive experiences with distance learning, if any?" Open-ended question.
- ⁶ Question: "As NMPED and school and district leaders consider various options for what the start of school looks like for the 2020-21 school year, which of the following would be your preference with regards to the potential in-person and distance learning options?" Responses: (n=3,085) "Regular schedules with in-person learning" (37.1 percent), "Hybrid schedule with in-person and distance learning" (34.6 percent), "All distance learning" (14.6 percent), "Unsure" (6.3 percent), "Other-Write In" (7.5 percent).
- ⁷ Question: "What do you need to feel safe, supported, and prepared in order to return to teaching in school buildings ?" Open-ended question.