



We're All Teachers Now: Remote Learning During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This study examined educational experiences of families under COVID and their schooling decisions in the 2021 school year. Results from a survey of 1743 parents indicate most schools provided educational resources ranging from hardcopy packets to live online instruction. Parents were generally positive about the experience. Parents in private and charter schools reported a more positive experience than those in traditional public schools. Only a small percentage of respondents said they were going to homeschool in fall 2020, but more than a third planned to send their child to a virtual school out of concern about their child's health.

KEYWORDS

COVID

This study examines the experiences and perspectives of parents and families with remote learning in spring 2020 during COVID-19 closures. For the latter part of the 2020 school year, parents had the primary responsibility of teaching their children at home. This presented parents with the opportunity to observe and evaluate (a) what their children were learning, (b) the ability and willingness of schools to provide educational resources to families, and (c) other educational options.

This experience at remote learning may have confirmed parents' reliance on the neighborhood school, while for others it may have compelled them to consider other options. Since we are writing in August 2020, this is one of the first studies to systematically examine the educational experiences of families under COVID and what that may mean for schooling decisions in the 2020–2021 school year and beyond.

Background

How schools responded

When schools began closing in mid-March, teachers and administrators rushed to create educational content through hundreds of thousands of paper packets and online lessons (Blume, Kohli, Xia, & Esquivel, 2020; Crain, 2020; Keane,

2020). One common, although not exclusive, approach was sending students weekly assignments at the beginning of each week. Students would then work independently or with a parent, seeking help from teachers during office hours if they had questions (Koh, 2020). Teachers became “advisers” and maintained contact through video chats or over the telephone (Keane, 2020; Koh, 2020).

The implementation of such initiatives was uneven, as illustrated by two adjacent districts in Milwaukee (Richards, 2020). Nicolet High School, a single-school district with about 1,000 students, created an online learning system in a matter of days and worked to secure necessary hot spots for students and staff. Next door the Whitefish Bay School District, which enrolls around 3,000 students, took a month to create a virtual learning plan drawing numerous complaints from parents.

Inconsistent possession of or access to technology was a part of the uneven implementation (Crutchfield & Londberg, 2020). Moving to online instruction often required schools to ensure families had devices – laptops or tablets – and even internet access. Duval County Public Schools in Florida, for example, distributed 3,500 hotspots and 37,000 laptops (Bloch, 2020). The Jacksonville, Florida, school district estimated more than 27,000 students needed laptops (Bloch, 2020), and the Miami school district provided students 90,000 devices and 11,000 hotspots (Richards, 2020). Los Angeles Unified, purchased 200,000 computers for students and contracted with Verizon to connect households to the internet for free. A California state partnership with Google provided free Wi-Fi to 100,000 households (Blume et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, acquiring technology and internet access reportedly proved difficult for many parents. Some estimated, for example, 200,000 California households lacked devices to participate in virtual instruction (Koh, 2020). States provided funds for internet hot spots, but extreme demand left store shelves empty and families waiting weeks to get online. Even if technology was available, some families struggled to gain permission from their landlords to install the necessary equipment (Blume et al., 2020). Students unable to access internet at home sat outside businesses with free wifi to do homework (Bloch, 2020). And some districts reportedly failed to deliver needed devices out of fear the mere distribution would facilitate spread of the virus (Crutchfield & Londberg, 2020).

The uneven implementation of at-home learning extended beyond technology. One survey of parents found only around a third of families received resources from their schools, such as lessons or curricular materials (Park & Winchester, 2020). Some schools required students to sign into learning platforms daily and graded students’ work, while others checked in with students only periodically and gave all students As on their assignments (Richards, 2020). Still others elected not to provide any online classes but provided families with resources at the district website (Needles, 2020).

For schools providing organized instruction, the offerings took many forms: live video lessons, recorded lectures, one-on-one support over the phone, or feedback delivered through an online platform (Gross & Opalka, 2020; Richards, 2020). In a study of school district responses to COVID-19, Malkus, Christensen, and Schurz (2020) found one in five schools were in districts that offered rigorous remote instruction. Perfunctory remote instruction was more common, with 40% of schools falling into this category. The remaining schools offered moderate packages of remote instruction.

Some districts offered synchronous, online classes mimicking the classroom experience, but most students saw their teachers only for a few minutes a day or a week, and some not at all (Cavanagh, 2020; Davis, 2020). Many districts explicitly encouraged or expected teachers to make direct contact with their students. The most common method was e-mail communication. Other forms included web-based platforms, scheduled office hours, phone calls, and homework hotlines (Malkus et al., 2020). One survey of parents found less than half (47%) reported receiving “a lot” of information from their child’s school about resources and support available to them. More than 80% said they received information from their child’s school at least once a week, and more than half (54%) received information three times a week or more.

Much of the preceding came from contemporaneous reporting during the COVID school closures, but two research teams tracked school responses from March to May, with summary results available at the end of the school year. The first (Gross & Opalka, 2020) found the large majority of public districts tracked – 85% – made sure their students received some form of grade- and subject-specific curriculum in packets, assignments posted online, or guidance to complete segments of online learning software. Yet, just one in three districts expected teachers to provide instruction, track student engagement, or monitor academic progress for all students, leaving learning largely to chance or the diligence of parents.

The second (Malkus et al., 2020) found across most measures in the study, public schools ended the year by providing core educational services. Ninety-five percent provided meals to students, 66% provided devices, and 70% provided internet access to students at home. Almost all schools (97%) provided some form of remote instruction, most commonly asynchronous web-based platforms, followed by hardcopy instructional packets and then synchronous web-based classes. Many schools (67%) announced assignments were being graded, although the plurality graded only on completion. Finally, although almost two-thirds of schools expected student participation, less than a third established any mechanism for taking “attendance.”

What learning looked like at home

Had school districts monitored student engagement, they would have found children spent an average of 4.2 hours per weekday on school work, with 22%

of parents reporting their child spending less than one hour per weekday on school work (Park & Winchester, 2020). For their part, parents – mostly mothers – spent approximately 2.5 hours per weekday helping their children with school (Park & Winchester, 2020; Watson, 2020). For parents regularly at home, some structured the time, with daily schedules that included not only school work, but also chores, exercise, meals, and free time (Carter, 2020; Needles, 2020; Watson, 2020). Nonetheless, many media reports told of parents being overwhelmed. This was particularly so in families with multiple children spread widely across grades. One Pennsylvania mother of three children described the challenge of keeping track of four different school e-mail accounts and 12 Google livestreams, all while transitioning her job to home (Flaccus & Gecker, 2020).

Many parents, however, were not home during the day, which meant in families with siblings, older children cared for younger ones, making schoolwork difficult (AP, 2020a). In such circumstances, schoolwork was pushed to weekends or late in the evenings (AP, 2020a). In other cases, parents tapped informal networks of friends and family to create study groups of classmates doing remote learning together (Ovide, 2020). For students without adults at home and no peer support group, remote learning reportedly grew increasingly difficult (Blume et al., 2020; Crutchfield & Londberg, 2020).

Early on, some school districts appeared to exacerbate the situation by attempting to continue the curricula on the same pace as in school (Davis, 2020). Some students reported the workload was even greater than they had been used to in school (Bloch, 2020). Although 90% of families said they used school-provided resources (Park & Winchester, 2020), reports occasionally surfaced of schools assigning science experiments and art projects that required parents to go to stores in search of materials not commonly kept in homes (Davis, 2020).

Not surprisingly, some frustrated and exhausted parents chose to disconnect entirely for the remainder of the school year (Flaccus & Gecker, 2020), including teachers and college professors (Cavanagh & Fox, 2020; Weiner, 2020). Instead of schooling at home, their children watched TV, played video and board games, cooked and baked, cleaned and sewed, read, and pursued their own interests (AP, 2020a; Carter, 2020; Cavanagh & Fox, 2020; Koh, 2020; Weiner, 2020). One enterprising father even taught his son how to short stocks (Das, 2020).

These are, of course, general, anecdotal descriptions. The most significant differences appeared to be based on the type of school families attended. Many private schools, freed from red tape and populated with digitally savvy families, pivoted more easily to remote learning (Richards, 2020). In Tacoma, Washington, for example, public schools chose not to provide active remote learning, instead posting and distributing resources that included activity packets and links to additional learning tools (Needles, 2020).

Meanwhile, Charles Wright Academy, a private school in Tacoma, shifted to a remote learning platform that included both asynchronous work and synchronous classes.

One study (Common Sense Media/SurveyMonkey, 2020) compared the remote learning activities of teens in public versus private schools and found stark differences illustrated in Table 1. Private school students more often were in contact with teachers, attended online classes, and used technology to connect with the school. In a different study, when asked about class attendance, 47% of public school students said they had not attended a class, compared with just 18% of private school students (Kamenetz, 2020a).

Assessing the experience

In the final assessment, remote learning in spring 2020 received decidedly mixed reviews (Hamilton, 2020). Although large percentages of parents professed to feeling prepared to help their children (EdChoice, 2020; Education Trust-West, 2020), 52% agreed the experience was harder than they expected (Park & Winchester, 2020). Moreover, a large majority expressed concern about providing productive learning at home (Baldassare, Bonner, Dykman, & Lawler, 2020). Media anecdotes frequently reported parents feeling overwhelmed and inadequate (Bloch, 2020), including university professors (AP, 2020a), college presidents (Strauss, 2020), and Hollywood celebrities (Newcomb, 2020).

According to some, schools performed poorly (Henderson, 2020), with remote learning declared an “utter failure” (DeMarche, 2020). By mid-May, many school districts ended early, “giving up” on “cumbersome” remote learning (Strassel, 2020). As the spring months wore on, student participation declined (Bloch, 2020) as students struggled with technology and found home environments not optimal for learning (Blume et al., 2020; Davis, 2020; Koh, 2020). One survey taken in May reported more than two-thirds of parents

Table 1. Differences in learning activities between public and private school students.

	Public	Private
Connecting with their teacher		
... once a day or more	31%	66%
... a few times a day	15%	33%
... once an hour or more	2%	14%
... less than once a week	28%	4%
Having a dedicated space where they can do schoolwork at home	71%	67%
Attended an online or virtual class	53%	82%
Using e-mail to stay connected to school	68%	78%
Using a learning management system to stay connected to school	50%	65%
Using video chat or videoconferencing to stay connected to school	39%	88%
Using texts to stay connected to school	33%	33%
Using social media to stay connected to school	26%	23%
Using messenger apps to stay connected to school	21%	24%
Using phone calls to stay connected to school	19%	15%

were concerned about their children falling behind, and almost the same percentage feared it would affect their educational success for longer than a year (Koh, 2020). “A lot of parents were disillusioned with what they saw over the last 120 days,” said Luis Huerta, a professor of education and public policy at Teachers College at Columbia University. “They felt the level of instruction was not up to par and that schools dropped the ball during the transition” (Ali, 2020).

Conversely, other evidence suggested parents were satisfied with their schools’ performance. One survey found 57% of parents agreed their child’s remote schooling worked better than expected (Park & Winchester, 2020). Another reported more than 90% of parents approved of how schools handled closures (Baldassare et al., 2020), and still another found more than 80% of parents believed their schools were doing a good or excellent job (Education Trust-West, 2020). In a *USA Today/Ipsos* poll (Education Trust-West, 2020), more than 70% of parents approved of their schools’ efforts, and more than 60% believed their schools prepared their children well for remote learning.

Of course, the most revealing assessment may be what parents elected to do for fall 2020. Some authors predicted the schooling at home experience would compel parents to choose different options for their children. McDonald (2020) asserted, “we may be on the brink of a massive educational reset.” Henderson (2020) opined, “Get ready. A school renaissance is coming.” By that Henderson meant increased school choice, specifically more homeschooling and lower enrollment in public schools.

Yet, signals from parents did not clearly point to a “renaissance.” Some polls showed most parents were going to send their children back to their neighborhood schools (Chua, DeJonckheere, Reeves, Tribble, & Prosser, 2020). Only small percentages planned to hold their children out, mostly due to concern for the health of someone in their homes (Chua et al., 2020; Gallegos, 2020). Other sources suggested the number of students not returning to neighborhood schools was going to be greater. School officials in Alabama, for example, expressed belief that 15% to 20% of parents would not send their children to traditional schools (Crain, 2020). After surveys from parents showed greater preferences for virtual learning, some school officials around the country began preparing fully online options (Belsha, 2020). At the end of May, Crain (2020) reported seven states were already planning to offer full-time virtual school, and school districts with pre-existing virtual schools were seeing a surge of enrollment.

Interest in homeschooling also appeared to spike. Homeschooling organizations reported unprecedented numbers of contacts from parents seeking advice and resources (Ali, 2020; Bethencourt, 2020; Goree, 2020; Kamenetz, 2020b). Estimates of families that would homeschool during in 2020–2021 ranged from 40% to 60% (Lardieri, 2020; Schultz, 2020; USA Today/Ipsos, 2020), and some predicted 1% to 2% of those would continue homeschooling even after the pandemic (Ali, 2020).

Throughout summer 2020, homeschool pods emerged as an option. Based on micro-schools or homeschool coops, pods would operate with a small group of children consistently schooling together in a home (Picchi, 2020). Parents would lead instruction in some (Lisickis, 2020), while in others teachers or tutors hired by participating families would lead (Courtney, 2020; Kamenetz, 2020b; Picchi, 2020). Although critics pointed to inequities created by such pods (Bastian, 2020) – more affluent families can afford such schooling – parents concerned about their children’s education and health and their own employment longevity appeared unmoved by such concerns (Picchi, 2020).

Of course, these projections were largely published in early summer 2020. Results from our research are based on a survey of parents administered in August 2020, making them a bit more accurate. Moreover, aside from a few exceptions (Gross & Opalka, 2020; Malkus et al., 2020; Park & Winchester, 2020), much of the narrative above came from contemporaneous media reporting throughout spring 2020, not systematic research. Thus, our findings are among the first to systematically examine families’ experiences and assessments during COVID remote learning. Much more research on the educational implications of COVID-19 will be forthcoming. Studies like ours will help provide the context necessary to understand and interpret that future research.

Methods

Our study was guided by five primary questions:

- (1) What access did parents and students have to resources provided by the school?
- (2) What forms did remote learning take?
- (3) What was the engagement of parents and students with remote learning?
- (4) What were parent perceptions of the effectiveness of their at-home schooling experience?
- (5) What were parents planning to do for schooling options in 2020–2021?

Data

Answers to these questions were based on survey data we collected from a sample of 1743 parents (representing 3,414 children) across the United States. A professional polling firm (Technometrica) administered the survey, which we created, online during the first two weeks of August 2020. The survey included 44 mostly closed-ended questions about the resources families had during at-home schooling, how children spent their day, how much time was spent on schoolwork, communication with school, assessment of the experience, plans for the 2021 school year, and basic demographics.

To ensure a representative sample by school type, we stratified based on traditional public school (TPS; 84%), private school (10%), and charter school (6%) using a quota system built into the survey. Throughout, respondents were prompted to answer substantive questions while focusing on their youngest child in a given school type. That child was used to fill school type quotas. For example, if a parent reported having three children in charter schools, the parent was asked to focus on the youngest of those. So the unit of analysis was a parent/guardian answering on behalf or thinking of a specific child. Similar to other research in which parents are asked to think about a particular child when answering survey questions (Carpenter & Winters, 2015), the “youngest child” approach was used to focus respondents’ attention on a particular school and child when answering questions. Many of the questions asked about school responses and resources, amount of time a child spent on schoolwork, and the like. Without focusing on a specific child, respondents with multiple children would answer questions by trying to “average” across schools and children, struggle to know how to answer, or simply skip questions. Prompting respondents to think of a particular child, therefore, reduces “noisy” and/or missing data.

Table 2 presents the sex, race/ethnicity, education levels, and household incomes of respondents. The majority were white females. More than 50% held at least a college degree. Slightly more than 60% reported household incomes of greater than 50,000 USD. Additionally, respondents’ mean age was 39 ($sd = 9$), and the mean number of children per respondent was two ($sd = 1.2$). Almost 76% of respondents were married.

When compared to national population statistics (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2018, 2020, n.d.), the sample composition is similar in some respects but different in others. Substantially more of the respondents were women, and education levels were somewhat higher in the sample. A greater percentage of the sample was White, but differences in income between the sample and the national population were small.

Disaggregated by school type, there were differences among these characteristics. As Table 2 illustrates, TPS respondents were more often female than those responding about charters and private schools. Charter and private school respondents reported higher education levels and higher household incomes. Differences in respondent age were trivial, but those in charters (mean = 3.0, $SD = 1.6$) reported having more children than those in TPS (mean = 1.9, $SD = 1.1$) and private schools (mean = 2.0, $SD = 1.4$). A greater percentage of private school respondents (96%) also reported being married, as compared to those in charters (84%) and TPS (73%).

Table 3 includes the employment status of respondents and their spouses. A little more than half of respondents were working full time when data were collected. The next largest percentage (18%) classified themselves as homemakers. A little more than 60% of their spouses were working full time. Equal percentages of respondents and spouses were working part-time (10%).

Table 2. Sex, race/ethnicity, education levels, and household income of respondents by school type.

	Charter	Private	TPS	Total	National Population
Sex					
Male	59%	66%	23%	29%	49%
Female	41%	34%	77%	71%	51%
Race/Ethnicity					
White	68%	82%	75%	75%	60%
Black	6%	4%	8%	7%	13%
Asian	6%	6%	5%	5%	6%
Native American	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%
Other	0%	0%	1%	1%	1%
Hispanic	20%	8%	11%	11%	19%
Education Level					
Some high school	2%	0%	3%	3%	7%
High school graduate	10%	5%	21%	19%	28%
Some college	9%	8%	25%	23%	28%
College graduate	26%	16%	28%	26%	21%
Some graduate courses	5%	2%	3%	3%	NA
Graduate/Professional degree	50%	69%	20%	27%	12%
Household Income					
Under \$20,000	9%	1%	13%	11%	15%
Between \$20,000 and \$30,000	8%	2%	13%	11%	9%
Between \$30,000 and \$40,000	3%	5%	10%	9%	9%
Between \$40,000 and \$50,000	5%	3%	8%	7%	8%
Between \$50,000 and \$75,000	13%	12%	19%	18%	17%
Between \$75,000 and \$100,000	12%	11%	14%	14%	13%
Between \$100,000 and \$200,000	34%	48%	18%	22%	22%
Between \$200,000 and \$250,000	8%	12%	3%	5%	9%
Over \$250,000	8%	6%	2%	3%	
Not sure	1%	1%	1%	1%	NA

Table 3. Respondent and spouse employment status.

	Respondent	Spouse
Employed full-time	54	64
Employed part-time	10	10
Unemployed and currently looking for work	6	4
Unemployed and not currently looking for work	2	3
Student	1	0
Retired	2	3
Homemaker	18	9
Self-employed	4	3
Unable to work	3	2

Analysis

We analyzed data with descriptive statistics (e.g., means and frequencies) using sample weights so the sample reflected the population based on respondent race/ethnicity and region of the country. We did not apply inferential statistical tests, instead choosing only a descriptive approach for this article. In subsequent products we will be applying statistical testing in more sophisticated analyses to examine differences across a number of community and respondent characteristics. For some questions we disaggregated results by school type and by parental work status. As discussed above, contemporaneous reports often showed differences in remote learning by school type.

Media stories also commonly highlighted the struggles of working parents in coordinating remote learning with work responsibilities. Therefore, we explored whether systematic differences existed consistent with the media reporting from spring 2020.

Limitations

Like any study, ours is not without limitations. First, as Table 2 illustrates, the sample may skew more toward women and people who have higher education levels. Moreover, the percentages of personal characteristics are not always equal based on school type. Sample weights applied during analyses address some but not all these differences. Second, by necessity, parents were instructed to answer questions thinking of their youngest child in a certain school type. This may result in responses more representative of children in younger grade levels.

Results

We begin by describing the experiences of families with at-home schooling. This is followed by an assessment by parents and finally results on what families planned for the 2020–2021 school year.

The experiences of parents and students

After schools closed in March, 82% of participants reported their schools eventually developed some type of remote learning (see Figure 1). Ten percent reported schools canceled classes and provided no remote learning, with the remainder resuming or continuing classes until the end of the school year. For families in schools canceling classes and providing no resources, most students (49%) spent their time primarily watching TV and playing games. Only 28% engaged in a learning program created by parents. The remainder worked around the house, worked for pay, or pursued other interests.

The responses of schools by type of school were not, however, consistent. Charter schools compared to the other school types were less likely to provide remote learning and more likely to cancel in-person classes and provide no at-home learning. Charters compared to the other school types were also somewhat more likely to continue in-person classes. Although this pattern in charter schools may seem inconsistent, Figure 1 illustrates the distributions by school type. Greater than 90% of TPS and private school families either did remote learning or no formal learning at all. That left only small percentages that continued in person. Among charter parents, however, a smaller percentage participated in remote learning, leaving a comparatively greater number

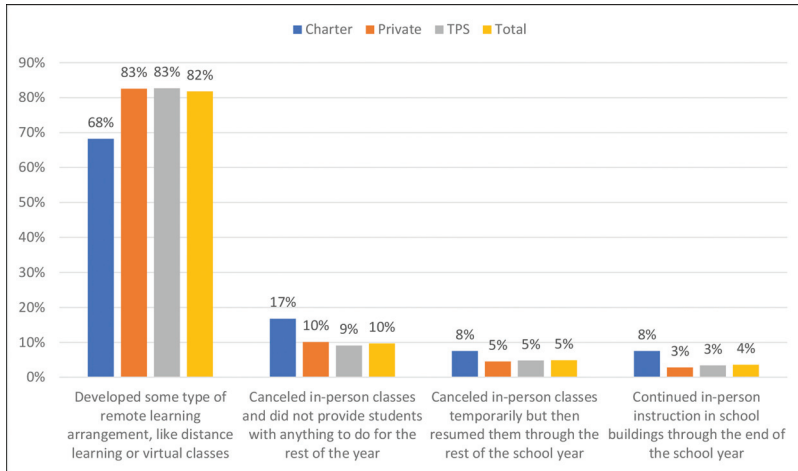


Figure 1. How schools responded to COVID-19.

of families distributed across the other options of no remote learning or continuing in person.

The remote learning schools provided took the form of instructors teaching live through a video platform (59.8%) and/or providing students software or pre-recorded videos (59.2%). Half of parents also reported receiving paper packets, worksheets, or books. Among schools providing remote learning, it varied by school type (see Figure 2). Private schools more often provided real-time, online learning and were least likely to provide hardcopy materials. Charters more than TPS also provided real-time and video learning.

Given how much remote learning depended on technology, access to devices (laptops/tablets) was particularly important. As it turns out, such access was nearly ubiquitous, with 94% of families reporting access (TPS = 93%, private = 98%, charter = 100%). For almost a third of those families, however, their schools provided the devices, with TPS most often distributing devices (TPS = 34%, private = 16%, charter = 29%). Relatedly, 84% of families described their internet access as reliable or very reliable (TPS = 81%, private = 96%, charter = 96%). Most families (95%) paid for their own internet, but when schools provided internet, charter schools more frequently did so than the other school types (TPS = 3%, private = 5%, charter = 18%).

Remote learning was most often semi-structured, with weekly assignments and occasional communication with the school (see Figure 3). A quarter of respondents said remote learning was highly structured with daily assignments, and somewhat less than that said it was mostly unstructured. The structure of remote learning differed by school type, with private and charter schools more often than TPS requiring daily assignments and frequent communication with teachers. Conversely, families in TPS more often worked in semi- or unstructured environments.

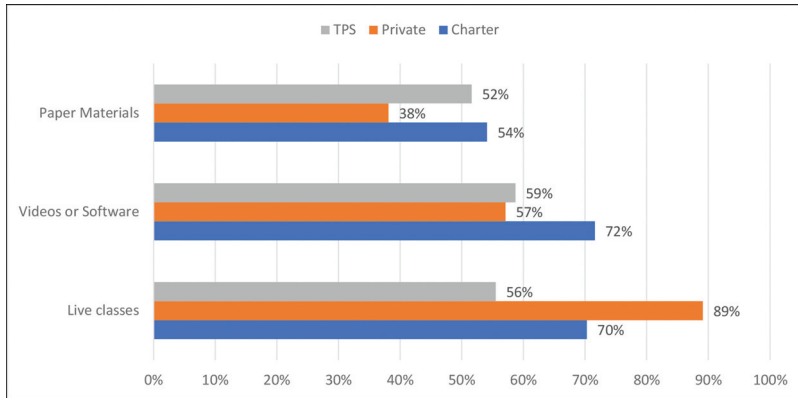


Figure 2. Types of remote learning by school type.

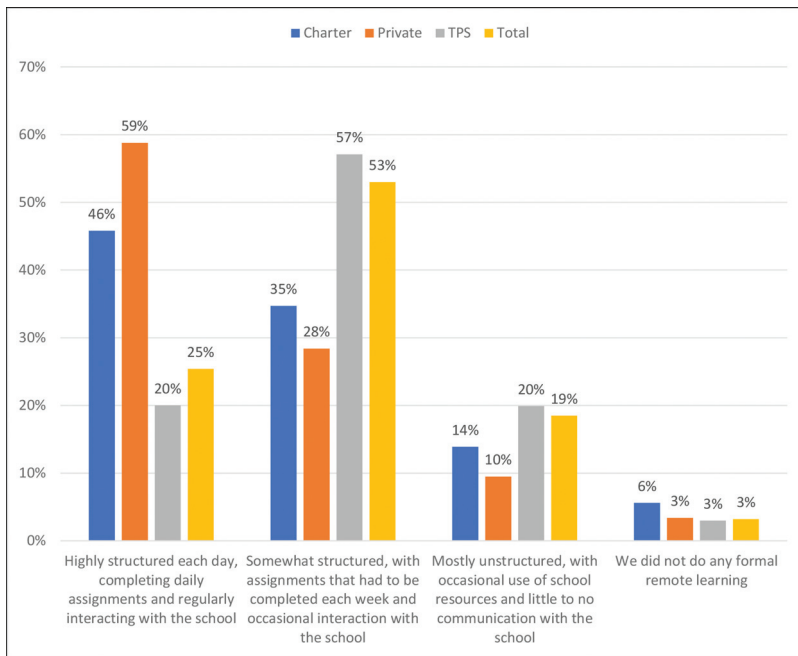


Figure 3. Parents' descriptions of the structure of remote learning.

Communication between teachers and students most often occurred at least a few times per week, and for almost 30% of families, it happened daily (see Figure 4). Given the differences by school type in the format of remote learning, it is not surprising that differences in communication were large, with charter and private schools communicating more frequently with students than TPS. Notably, 14% of TPS participants reported communication occurred less than once a week or rarely.

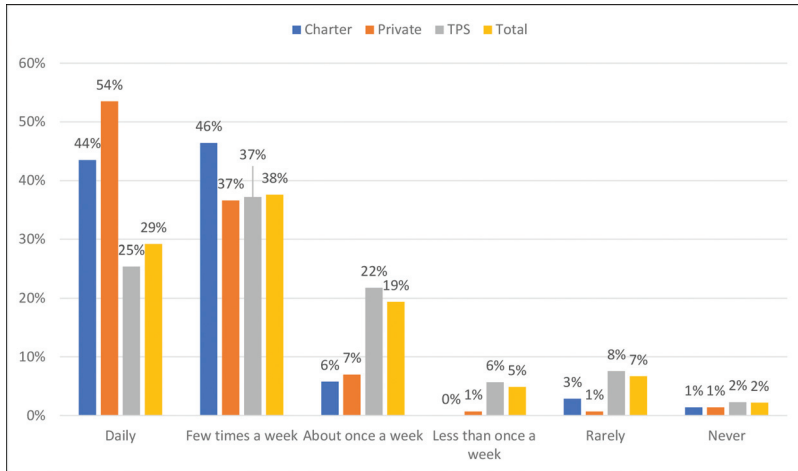


Figure 4. Frequency of communications between teachers and students.

During remote learning, schools also had varying expectations of students. Overall, a little more than one-third of parents reported assignments were graded and played an important role in the final grade for the year (see Figure 5). That differed substantially, however, by school type. Seventy-seven percent and 65% of charter and private school parents respectively reported that expectation, compared to 32% of TPS parents. Conversely, only small percentages of charter and private school parents said assignments were not graded, but more than one fifth of TPS parents said that was the case in their schools.

Participation or “attendance” in remote learning also varied by school type. Overall, 79% of parents said schools required their child’s

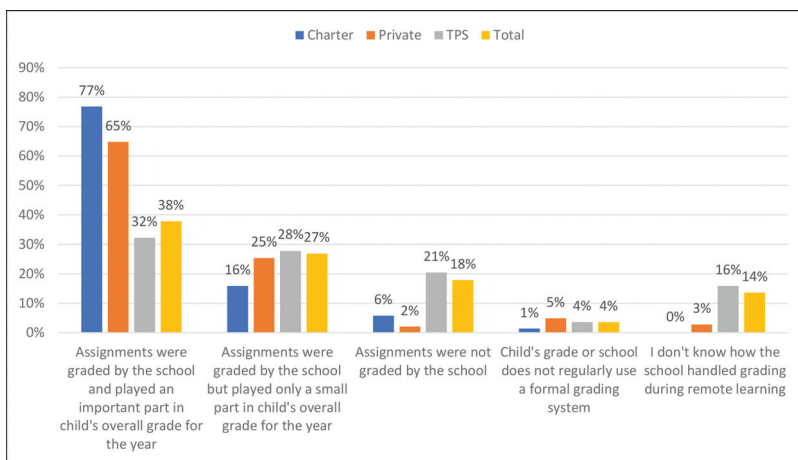


Figure 5. Expectations during remote learning.

participation. By school type, 93% of charter and 91% of private-school parents reported mandatory participation compared to 77% of TPS parents. Although required, schools did not always closely monitor participation. Sixty-one percent of parents said their school actively tracked participation, with charters (87%) and private schools (85%) actively tracking more than TPS (57%).

During remote learning, mothers most often assumed the responsibility for managing or helping their children (59%), but almost 30% of the time mothers and fathers managed the responsibility equally. Parents spent about 2.5 hours per day helping with schoolwork; children spent about an hour more each day in remote learning. Parents most often (67%) characterized their engagement as heavily involved daily (see Figure 6). For those less involved than that, 45% said work responsibilities consumed their attention, but 43% said their child did not want help.

When parental involvement was disaggregated by work status, the results were predictable (see Figure 7). More parents who were not working more often reported heavy, daily involvement as compared to those working. The difference between those working part time and those working full time, however, was marginal.

Part of parental involvement included communicating with schools. That communication most often occurred through e-mail, particularly for TPS and private schools (see Figure 8). Charter and private school parents also frequently communicated with schools through video conferencing, but TPS parents did so significantly less often. Charter schools also appeared to use online methods such as school websites, mobile apps, and online portals more often than the other school types.

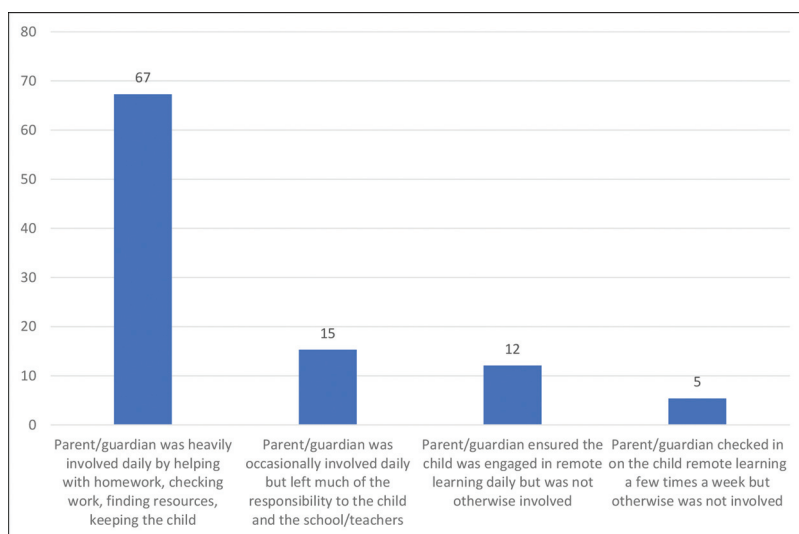


Figure 6. Level of parental involvement in remote learning.

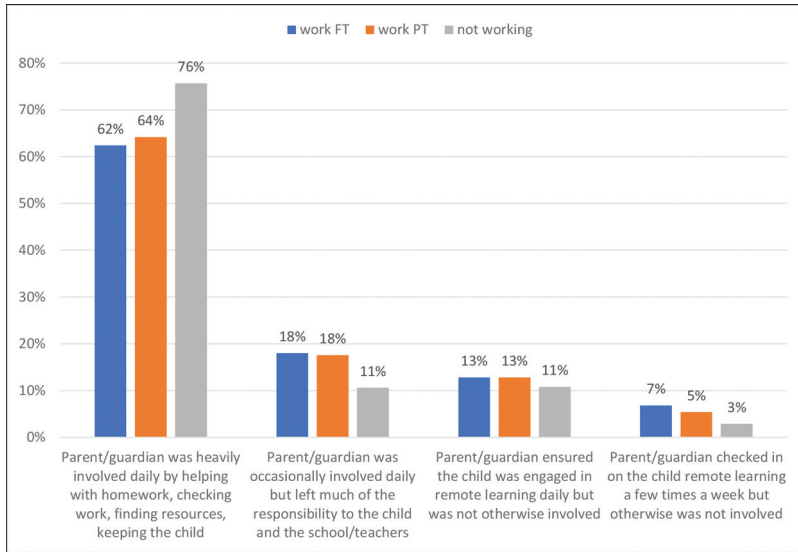


Figure 7. Level of parental involvement in remote learning by parent work status.

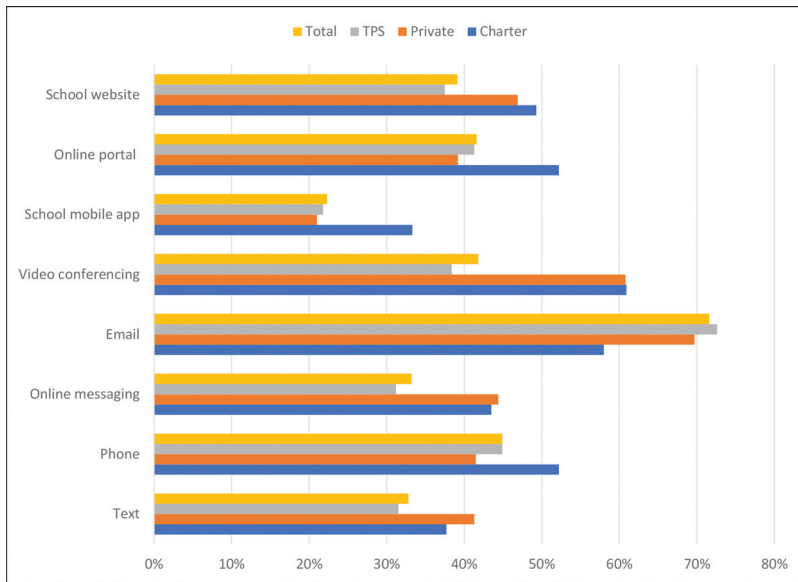


Figure 8. Types of communication between parents and schools.

Parents’ assessment of the experience

Two common themes in media reporting in spring 2020 were (a) how difficult parents found at-home schooling and (b) the chaotic and inconsistent response by schools. Our survey results, however, tell a different story.

First, parents reported feeling, on average, somewhat prepared to help with remote learning (see Figure 9). Differences by school type showed charter and private school parents felt more prepared than those in TPS schools.

Parental assessments of their schools' responses were, on the whole, positive (see Figure 10). Across a list of resources provided by schools, parents consistently rated them as at least helpful and sometimes approaching very helpful. None were rated as unhelpful. When disaggregated by school type, parents in charter and private schools compared to those in TPS consistently rated the resources as more helpful.

When disaggregated by work status, those working full time tended to find the resources more helpful than those working part time or those not working (see Figure 11). Exceptions included "clear expectations for daily/weekly schoolwork" and "regular access to your child's teachers." For both items, those working full time found the resources less helpful, as compared to those working part time or not working. It should be noted, however, the range of all these differences was between 4.8 and 5.4, in other words, not substantial.

Similarly, when parents rated the effectiveness of communications between the school and them, the various methods were rated as effective and sometimes approaching very effective (see Figure 12). For almost all methods of communication, charter schools were perceived as most effective, followed by private schools and then TPS. One notable exception was the use of texts, where charter schools were not perceived as effective as the other two school types.

In response to a series of summary statements, parents likewise appeared sanguine, although with some exceptions (see Figure 13). Overall, parents agreed their children had sufficient resources and materials and believed they and their children were connected to their teachers. They also somewhat

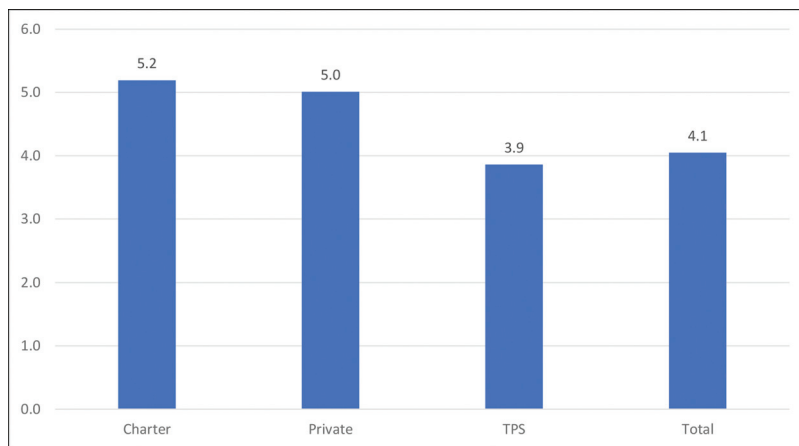


Figure 9. How prepared parents felt to help with remote learning. Scale: 1 = very unprepared, 2 = unprepared, 3 = somewhat unprepared, 4 = somewhat prepared, 5 = prepared, 6 = very prepared

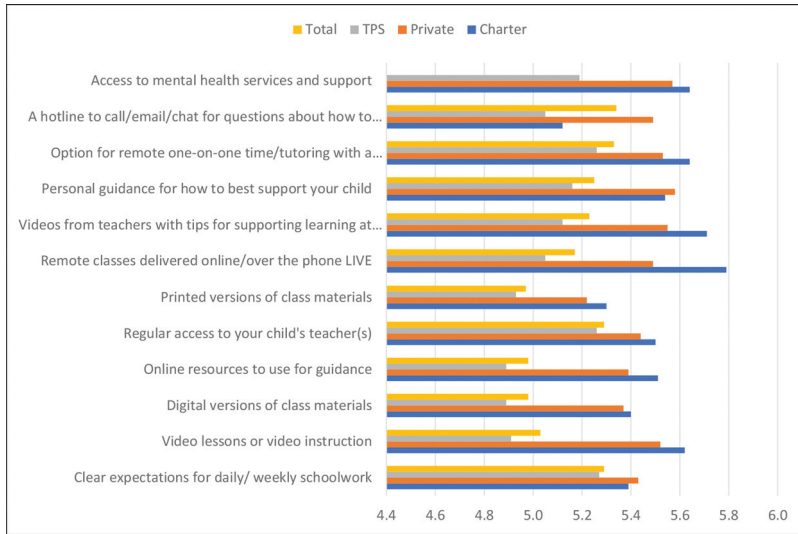


Figure 10. How helpful parents found resources provided by schools. Scale: 1 = useless, 2 = barely helpful, 3 = somewhat unhelpful, 4 = somewhat helpful, 5 = helpful, 6 = very helpful

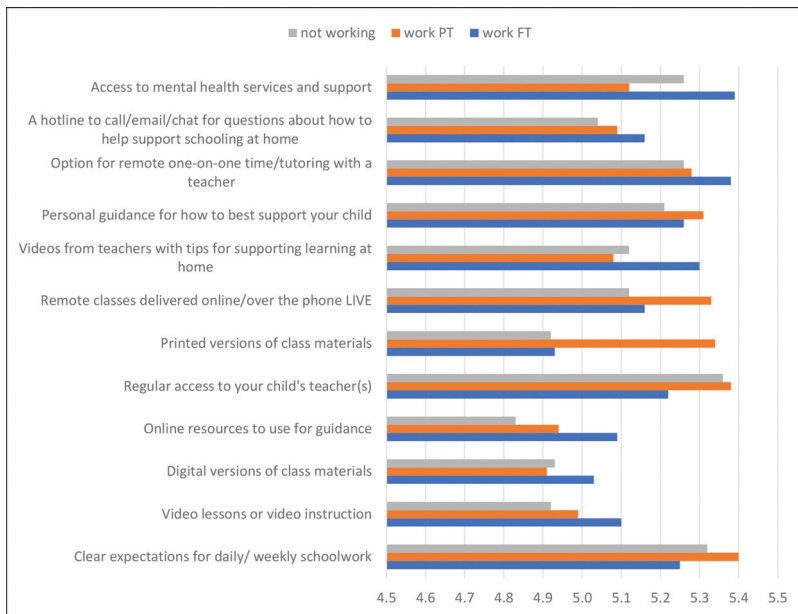


Figure 11. How helpful parents found resources provided by schools disaggregated by respondent work status. Scale: 1 = useless, 2 = barely helpful, 3 = somewhat unhelpful, 4 = somewhat helpful, 5 = helpful, 6 = very helpful

agreed children were able to use the technology easily and the schools provided effective remote learning. At the same time, parents agreed remote learning required too much of them and their children and were concerned the experience caused their children to fall behind.

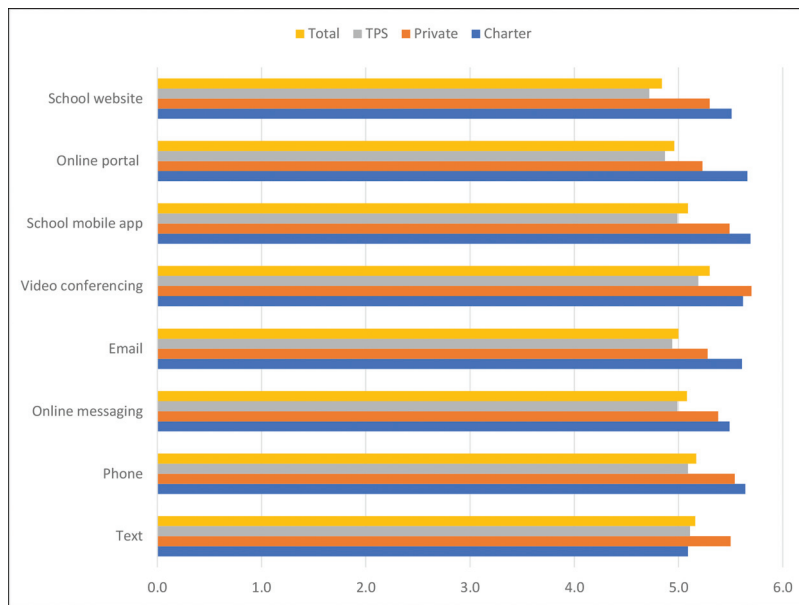


Figure 12. Effectiveness of communication between schools and parents by school type. Scale: 1 = very ineffective, 2 = ineffective, 3 = somewhat ineffective, 4 = somewhat effective, 5 = effective, 6 = very effective

When disaggregated by school type, a clear trend is evident, wherein charter parents agreed more strongly with the summary statements followed by private school parents and then those in TPS. This means, for example, charter parents expressed stronger agreement that their children possessed sufficient resources and materials, but they also more strongly believed the experience left their children behind academically. In other words, charter parent responses were more polarized in that they more likely agreed with positive summary statements listed in Figure 13, but also were more likely to agree with the negative ones.

A similar trend is evident when the summary statements are disaggregated by respondent work status (see Figure 14). Those working full time were more likely to express stronger agreement across all the statements – positive and negative – as compared to those working part time or not working. Conversely, those not working often, although not always, reported less agreement across the statements.

In an overall assessment, we asked parents how satisfied they were with the remote learning experience. On average, parents said they were somewhat satisfied (Scale: 1 = very satisfied, 2 = satisfied, 3 = somewhat satisfied, 4 = somewhat unsatisfied, 5 = unsatisfied, 6 = very unsatisfied), although response varied by school type. Those in charter schools expressed greater satisfaction, followed by private-school parents and then those in TPS. When disaggregated by respondent work status, those working full time reported

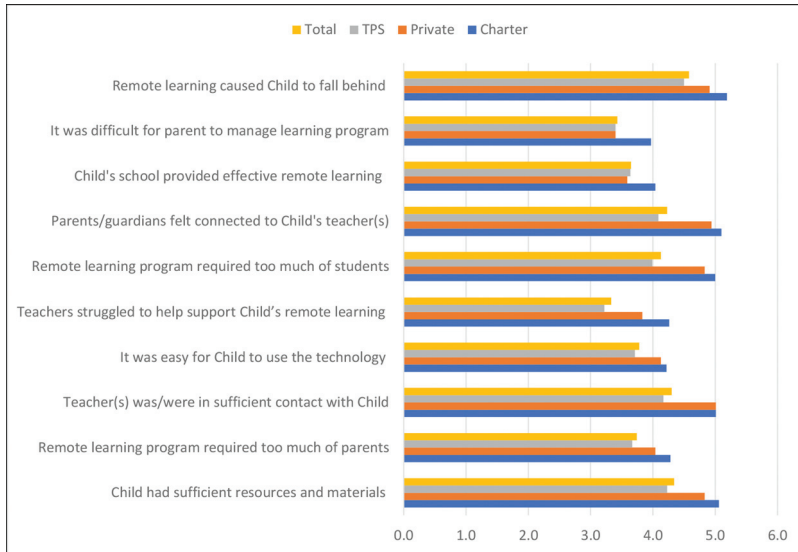


Figure 13. Summary statements about remote learning by school type. Scale: 1 = disagree strongly, 2 = disagree, 3 = disagree somewhat, 4 = agree somewhat, 5 = agree, 6 = strongly agree

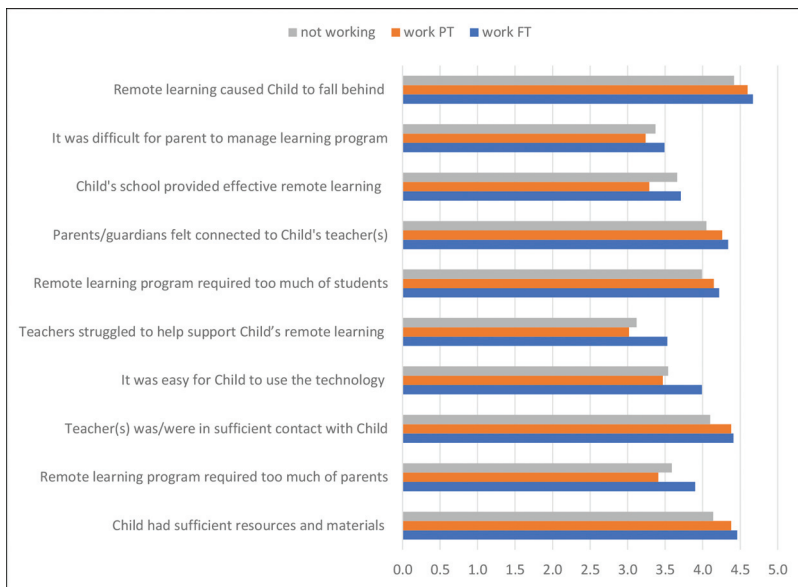


Figure 14. Summary statements about remote learning by respondent work status. Scale: 1 = disagree strongly, 2 = disagree, 3 = disagree somewhat, 4 = agree somewhat, 5 = agree, 6 = strongly agree

the greatest satisfaction, followed by those working part time and then those not working.

Yet, when asked about their plans for the 2020–2021 school year, charter parents appeared less committed to remain in a charter school (see Figure 15).

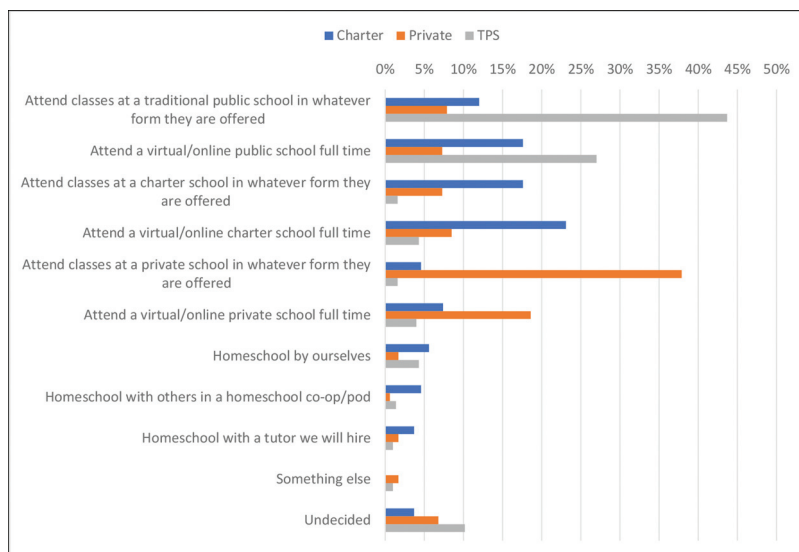


Figure 15. School plans for the 2020–2021 school year.

Instead, TPS parents seemed to express a stronger preference to remain in the same sector. Charter school parents more than those in the other two sectors planned to homeschool in some form. On average, 47% of parents planned to send their children to traditional schools however they operated, 36% were going to send their children to virtual schools, and 7% planned to homeschool in some fashion.

Finally, for those who planned to attend a virtual school or homeschool, we asked the reason for that decision. The results were predictable. Eighty-seven percent expressed concern for the health of their children or someone in their homes if the children were to become infected. Seven percent said their children would receive a better education that way, and only 5% expressed concern about managing work and childcare.

Discussion and conclusion

This study surveyed 1,743 parents in traditional public, charter, and private schools across the United States in August 2020. We asked about what schooling at home looked like for their families, what educational resources schools offered, parents' assessment of the experience, and their plans for the 2020–2021 school year.

We found the vast majority of schools provided educational resources ranging from hardcopy packets and worksheets to live online instruction. Schools sometimes provided laptops and even internet service for those who needed it. For their part, students and parents – mostly mothers – spent an average of 3.5 and 2.5 hours a day, respectively, working through assignments

and materials provided by schools. Teachers maintained frequent contact with families through various methods including e-mail, texting, video meetings, web portals, and phone calls. Despite the grim real-time descriptions of schooling at home that dominated the media in spring 2020, parents we surveyed were generally positive about the experience.

Although as of this writing schools and parents were still deciding about enrollment for the 2020–2021 school year, only a small percentage of respondents to our survey said they were going to homeschool, but more than a third planned to send their child to a virtual school. Of those who were going to homeschool or choose a virtual school, concern about their child's health was naturally the dominant motivation. Most respondents said they were going to send their children to their traditional public/charter/private school in whatever form the school opened – in person, hybrid, or completely online.

The positive opinions expressed by parents could reflect the sample composition. Those of greater means, two-parent households, and higher education levels may not have experienced the burdens of remote learning as profoundly as those in more challenging circumstances. We note, however, many of the survey questions focused on the actions and resources of the schools themselves. Parents were not simply evaluating their efficacy at remote learning; they were also reflecting on how their schools responded, and parents with children in private and charter schools report a more positive experience than those in traditional public schools. Those opinions are in no small part a measure of what schools did or did not do.

Additionally, given the circumstances, parents may have given schools the benefit of the doubt in the quality of the schools' responses. Indeed, this may help explain what appears to be contradictory findings – parents generally expressing satisfaction with their remote learning experience but also worry their children may have fallen behind academically. Recall other surveys indicated 57% of parents found remote learning worked better than expected (Park & Winchester, 2020). Thus, remote learning may have been better than anticipated, leading to a sense of satisfaction (i.e., relief), but not effective enough to allay concerns about their child's academic growth.

This may also explain differences by work status. Those working full time were consistently more sanguine about the resources provided by schools and the remote learning experience. Given the pressures on full time workers to manage work and home responsibilities, a better-than-anticipated experience may have produced higher satisfaction. Of course, these results may also interact with school type, where full time workers – who tend to report greater household incomes – may also send their children to private schools at greater rates. In future research, we intend to explore such relationships in greater detail.

What, then, is to be learned from these results? First, they suggest large scale change to schooling in the United States is technically possible. As Keane (2020) described, prior to the COVID-19 closures, the quantity and quality of

online instruction and even technology use in classrooms was uneven and mostly ad hoc. Questions persisted about whether widespread virtual education was possible (Horn & Staker, 2011). These results suggest it is. The circumstances were not optimal, with schools rushing to create remote learning programs in a matter of days and weeks, and the quality of the programming certainly would have been greater with more preparation time. But these results show that despite little time to prepare, inadequate resources, and no training, schools created programs with which parents were at least somewhat satisfied overall and elements of which they rated as helpful and effective. Indeed, given the circumstances, it is surprising schools did so well. If they could do so under these conditions, what more is possible under better circumstances?

Yet, possible and probable are not the same thing. To put it plainly, our data indicate the “educational renaissance” some soothsayers predicted will not occur (Henderson, 2020). When asked their plans for fall 2020, the percentage of parents choosing homeschooling was small, nothing close to the 40% to 60% predicted by some (Lardieri, 2020; Schultz, 2020; USA Today/Ipsos, 2020). Yes, a non-trivial percentage chose virtual schools, but primarily for health concerns, not for a better education. This strongly suggests when the pandemic wanes, many of those in virtual schools will return to their brick-and-mortar schools as before. In other words, the percentage of families choosing virtual schools for the 2020–2021 school year is comparably large but likely temporary. Moreover, popular articles throughout summer 2020 frequently announced “Interest in homeschooling has ‘exploded amid pandemic’” (AP, 2020b), provided homeschooling resources (Kenniston, 2020; Remadna, 2020), and featured stories about homeschool pods (Basu, 2020), but our results suggest this reflects a small minority of families.

To the extent parents will school at home, our results indicate they want someone else to lead it, hence the percentages of parents choosing virtual rather than homeschool. Recall, when schools canceled classes and provided no resources, most students spent their time on things other than schooling. Moreover, the results in Figure 15 show most TPS parents are remaining in a TPS.

Wholesale change to homeschooling and even virtual schooling in the long term is unlikely for one simple reason: Parents cannot or will not do it. As Horn and Staker (2011) observed,

Home and full-time virtual schooling requires significant parental involvement . . . The majority of students in America need school – or a supervised place to learn. Various societal stakeholders “hire” schools to do many things for their children, just one of which is learning. A custodial job – keeping children safe – is equally important for many.

They conclude, “home schooling and full-time virtual schooling will not substitute for mainstream schooling.” Our data suggest the same.

Of course, plans on the part of schools and parents were exceptionally fluid as the 2020–2021 school year began. Moreover, widespread coverage of possible teacher sick-outs (Cassell, Gaudiano, & Mays, 2020) and reports of positive COVID cases in schools accompanied by quarantines (deBruijn, 2020; Muller, 2020) likely exacerbated the unsettled circumstances. Parents could make last-minute flights to homeschooling to create a greater sense of certainty and stability for their children. Even if that happens, our data still suggest it will be a short-term move rather than a “massive educational reset” (McDonald, 2020). This assumes, of course, the pandemic and closure decisions do not continue indefinitely, and no other similar event transpires.

Second, the results likely illustrate the influence of markets on school performance. Throughout the results, and consistent with findings from earlier research (Common Sense Media/SurveyMonkey, 2020), private schools frequently appeared to be the most responsive, engaged, and innovative, followed by charters and then TPS. In the school choice literature, much ink has been spent debating the outcomes of public versus private schools (Krueger & Zhu, 2004; Miller & Moore, 1991), with choice opponents attributing superior private school outcomes to student differences (Pianta & Ansari, 2018). Here, however, there are no student outcomes. Differences are manifest in the schools themselves. Private schools more often chose to communicate with students, create real-time, online programs, and set higher expectations.

One may assert private schools were able to do so because of greater resources. Yet, most private schools in the United States are modest enterprises. The average student body is 150 students. Two-thirds are religious schools (Broughman, Kincl, & Peterson, 2019). The average tuition is 11,000 USD (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), a figure almost identical to (i.e., slightly less than) average per pupil expenditures in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Private schools operate with less bureaucracy than public schools, but the most relevant difference is that private schools operate in a market and TPS largely do not. Because enrollment is the lifeblood of private schools, they worked during COVID closures to retain students by operating more responsively and resourcefully than TPS, whose funding streams, although reduced, continued throughout the COVID-19 closures. When it comes to student outcomes, some of the differences between private and TPS do reflect differences in student populations, but these results suggest differences also likely reflect how the schools operate and the influence of markets on those operations.

TPS are not completely immune from competition. Reporting from late May, for example, described concerns among some Alabama district superintendents about losing students in fall 2020 to already-operational virtual schools in other districts (Crain, 2020). Concern was so acute, the state department of education pursued a statewide virtual school that would enroll children from any district

but – critically – allow the home districts to retain funding attached to the students (Crain, 2020; Sell, 2020). Of course, Alabama’s private schools will not be similarly relieved of market pressure, meaning they will continue to have to operate responsively and innovatively to retain students.

During spring 2020, the predictions of educational pundits became an echo chamber: “Teaching will never be the same” (Bolton, 2020), “Why schools will never be the same” (Keierleber, 2020), or “Homeschooling during the coronavirus pandemic could change education forever” (Broom, 2020). Whether the pandemic would be a watershed moment for educational change depended at least in part on the experiences and attitudes of parents. Our results suggest little permanent change will result from those experiences. The inertia of TPS appears able to withstand even a worldwide pandemic.

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