



The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on NC K-12 Educational Experiences:

Parents' Perspectives

Parents for Educational Freedom

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# **Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on NC K-12 Educational Experiences: Parents' Perspectives**

As the K-12 educational landscape shifts from year-to-year, education professions look at how large events can impact the experiences of students and families and how policy can address these changes. The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S. in the middle of students' spring semesters (late February through mid-March), sending many states into full lockdown. For education in North Carolina, this meant Governor Roy Cooper closed all NC K-12 public schools and instituted a stay-at-home order. School doors shut indefinitely and in-person instruction transitioned to new at-home methods. Many other school options—such as public charter schools, private schools, and homeschool co-ops—followed suit and adapted curricula to remote learning.

To better understand the transition of NC K-12 education instruction to distance learning as a result of COVID-19, Parents for Educational Freedom in NC (PEFNC) collected parent perspectives via a survey. Survey questions assessed parent expectations, experiences, and needs relating to their children's education. The survey opens a door for further advocacy on quality education options that serve the unique needs of students and their families as the field of education continues to change in the wake of COVID-19.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The sample of this study is comprised of parents and guardians of NC K-12 students. Participants were recruited via personal and professional social media (e.g. PEFNC personal staff Facebook posts, PEFNC Facebook posts, and PEFNC twitter posts) and email listservs from the PEFNC database. All participants consented to the study by volunteering with the option to



withdraw at any time without consequences (but without incentives for doing so). As a motivation to take part in the survey, all participants were entered into a lottery to win one of three \$100 gift cards from PEFNC. All participants were given a briefing for the purpose of the study and how the information will be used following the data collection. All data are protected in a secure database and no identifying information will be shared with the public.

The sample of 835 parents were largely from private schools (43.8%) and traditional public schools (37.3%), with the remaining being public charter school (14.6%) and home school parents (4.3%). Parents of elementary school students comprised 59.3% of participants, middle school parents 24.0%, and high school parents 16.7%. In addition to these demographics, participants were asked about their child's student sub-group membership: special education (16.6%), English language learners (1.7%), gifted and talented (11.9%), and free or reduced-price lunch (21.1%). Of the participants with children in private or home school, 62.7% are part of the Opportunity Scholarship Program, 7.2% receive a Children with Disabilities Grant, and 0.8% are Education Savings Account recipients.

## **Procedure**

A survey was used to research the education experience of parents and their children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were asked to answer the questionnaire with the child who had the most unique experience in mind. Multiple entries were permitted for families who have more than one school-age child in the household. The survey was divided into four sections: consent information, demographics questions, transition questions, and impact questions. Questions were created based off of EdChoice's Public Opinion Tracker's "Private School Survey on COVID-19" of NC families (2020), EVERYSCHOOL's "Parent Survey: Your Remote Learning Experience" of United States families (2020), and PEFNC's own internal base



of knowledge. The response types for these questions ranged from multiple choice, check-all-that-apply, Likert scales, and free-responses. Participants answered a maximum of 33 questions: three consent information questions, eight demographics questions, 17 transition questions, and five impact questions. All questions were non-optional, except those that were free response. These response types and the carefully considered set of questions aimed to gather a comprehensive look into how NC education options have addressed the COVID-19 pandemic and their impact on parents and children.

The survey was conducted fully online using Qualtrics, a survey program, accessible from each participant's personal computer, tablet, or smartphone device. The survey could be taken from an anonymous link sourced through the PEFNC website ([www.pefnc.org/survey](http://www.pefnc.org/survey)). Prior to beginning the question portion of the survey, participants were given consent information. By providing their name, zip code, email, and proceeding from this first portion, the participants agree to all that was explained in the consent information. The second portion contained demographic questions about what school type the child is enrolled in (traditional public, private, public charter, or home school), grade level (elementary, middle, or high school), and sub-group belonging (special education, English language learner, gifted and talented, free or reduced-price lunch, or none) as well as participants' standing on school choice as a part of education policy. Based on answers to school type, private school and home school participants were asked which school choice programs, if any, their child is a part (the Opportunity Scholarship Program, Children with Disabilities Grant, Education Savings Account, or none). If a recipient responded to having a child who is a part of a student sub-group, they were prompted with questions on how their school addressed the needs of their child before and after the transition.



Following these portions, recipients received a third portion of questions pertaining to the parent's experience and feelings around their child's transitions that occurred at their school option: description of the school's transition of instruction, concerns, feelings of preparation, access and provision of materials/resources, and school administration and educator communication. Recipients who answered "full closure" to the first question about the school's transition method skipped all questions about concerns, feelings of preparation, and access and provision of materials/resources. Participants were then sent to a final portion of the survey that included questions about school choice based on their COVID-19 education experiences ("If given the choice for the 2020-2021 school year, which educational setting would you choose?"), a free-response section to share more about their personal experience, and an opt-in question to follow discussions with PEFNC representatives. Concluding the Qualtrics survey, a thank you message was provided with a final explanation as to how their personal contribution will help the organization in its advocacy efforts.

### **Data Analysis**

In addressing the question "How did COVID-19 impact families and the educational experiences of their children," an analysis of the data collected was conducted to look for significant findings. The data was analyzed to find mode as the method of finding significance, seeing as mode is the best statistic for exemplifying the most common experience among students and their parent/guardians. Mode is represented in the form of percentages. Exceptionally high or low percentages as well as percentages that are above or below 50% (half of participants) or 33% (a third of participants) are reported as significant results that can be highlighted as a majority or minority experience. To better represent group experiences and differences between groups, the data is also analyzed by partitioning it by school type and grade



level. Some data were not broken down by school type considering Home school participants as not all questions applied to this population of participants. The findings were compiled in a concise summary of findings (see Results) and handed over to education researchers for their professional opinion on the survey and its results.

## **Results**

Almost half of the participants (48.5%) are concerned that their school has been unable to provide extracurricular and after-school activities/events. A third (30.6%) are concerned their school has had difficulty implementing instructional programs that continue to support their child's ability to learn. Traditional public school participants indicated the highest percentage of concern (44.3%) with their schools having difficulty implementing instructional programs that continue to support their child's ability to learn.

A large portion (57.9%) of participants felt very or somewhat prepared as a parent/guardian to transition their child to distance learning. Of the remaining participants, 40.3% felt not prepared or not prepared at all. Results show that charter (60.3%) and private (62.9%) school parents felt more prepared than public (48.2%) school parents. Home school parents felt the most prepared (84.4%), but this is likely due to their curriculum undergoing minimal changes. A large portion (69.6%) of participants felt their administration and teachers were prepared to transition to distance learning due to COVID-19, whereas 27.9% felt the administration and teachers were not prepared or not prepared at all. Private school parents (81.2%) felt their administration and teachers were more prepared than charter school (65.3%) and public school (60.3%) parents. These statistics show that parents generally feel that their administration and teachers were more prepared for distance learning than they are themselves.



The difficulty of managing their child's distance learning experience was reported as mostly being difficult or very difficult (57.4%). The management experience was more difficult for public school parents (64.9%) than charter school (57.0%) and private school parents (54.3%). The majority of home school parents (75.0%) reported the experience as easy or very easy to manage. Looking at participants of different grade levels, more elementary school parents (63.1%) found it difficult or very difficult than middle school (53.3%) and high school (43.8%) parents. This indicates that distance learning is more manageable for parents of children above 8th grade and/or in a home-school or private-school setting. A majority of parents indicated the experience required a moderate (38.3%) to a lot (36.8%) of them. More private school parents (43.1%) reported it required a lot of them than their public school (32.8%) and charter school (29.7%) counterparts. Elementary school parents reported the experience requiring the most of them (42.9% a lot, 17.4% too much) compared to other grade levels.

For the students themselves, most parents felt that the experience required a moderate (47.2%) to a lot (31.8%) of their child. Few parents felt it required too much (8.7%) or too little (4.7%) of their student. Public charter parents were the most to answer that they felt it was requiring too much of their child (12.4%). A majority of the participants (52.4%) indicated that socialization was being addressed not well or not well at all. A larger majority (59.7%) felt core academics was being addressed well or very well in their child's distance learning. Of those who felt it was addressed well, private school parents had the most confidence with 75.9% choosing well or very well, whereas only 56.2% of charter school and 42.0% of public school parents chose well or very well. Public school parents (34.1%) were the most to believe core academics were not being addressed well or at all. More than half of parents (55.8%) believe developing independence was being addressed well or very well. More home school parents (68.7%) felt it



was being addressed well or very well than private school (62.5%), charter school (55.4%), and public school (46.9%) parents.

Parents most often heard from school administration staff about transition efforts one or a few times a week (58.8%) with the next most common frequency of communication being daily (18.4%). The majority of public school parents heard from their administration a few times a week (31.1%) or once a week (34.7%), but they were also the most to never hear from their administration (6.6%). The majority of charter school parents heard from their admin once a week (28.1%) or less than once a week (27.3%). The majority of private school parents heard from their admin a few times a week (33.0%) or once a week (26.3%), but they most to hear from their admin daily (24.4%). Email is the most common source of communications from administration to families (89.4%), and public school families were the most to report receiving phone calls (52.1%).

Teachers most often hosted meetings with students a few times a week (28.3%) with daily (25.9%) being the second most common frequency of teacher-student meetings. Private school children got the most daily videos (34.4%) compared to public school children (19.3%) and charter school children (17.4%). Confidence that their child is prepared for the next grade was mostly reported as feeling their child is somewhat prepared (47.2%) or very prepared (43.8%). However, 8.6% believe their child is not prepared to go to the next grade and 1.4% believe their child will not progress to the next grade. Home school parents feel the most confidence (71.9% very prepared) compared to private school (53.5%), charter school (39.7%), and public school (28.5%) parents.

We asked families if they received additional services from their school (e.g. special education, English language learner, gifted and talented, and free or reduced-price lunch



programs). Of the participants with special education children, 91.5% said their school normally provides specialized support for their child's unique needs. On the contrary, only 33.1% of them felt as though their child's needs were continued to be met at the same level of support during distance learning. By comparison, 23.5% of public school parents, 33.3% of charter school parents, 45.0% of private school parents, and 57.1% of home school parents felt that support for their special needs child was being met at the same level. While private school and home school were not negatively impacted related to free and reduced-price lunch programs, 45.2% of public school parents and 37.9% of charter school parents felt as though their food security needs were not being met.

Of these children who have a need for additional support and who are a part of school-choice programs, Education Savings Account children receive the most normal support (100%) followed by Children with Disabilities Grant children (91.9%) and Opportunity Scholarship Program children (86.4%). Across all choice programs, continued support for children who need it is lacked in distance learning (Education Savings Account 0%, Children with Disabilities Grant 21.9%, Opportunity Scholarship Program 22.6%). Low-income parents with special needs students enrolled in private schools believe that their child's needs are continuing to be met at the same level of support. They answered "yes" to this questions at 63% and "no" at 38%, whereas overall, parents answered 33% "yes" and 67% "no." Students receiving Children with Disabilities Grants are on par with parents overall, stating that 37% felt their child's needs are continuing to be met at the same level of support during remote instruction compared with 63% who said no. Education Savings Account parents were the most dissatisfied with 100% stating that their children were not receiving the same level of instruction.



A large majority of participants agree or strongly agree (76.8%) that they have become more aware of education policy as a result of COVID-19. These participants are comprised of 78.8% of public school parents, 78.7% of private school parents, 68.8% of charter school parents, and 66.7% of home school parents. A large majority also agree (25.6%) or strongly agree (67.8%) that they feel more inclined to support laws and policies that give parents school choice (93.4% total). Across all school types, parents strongly agree (54.0% public school, 66.4% charter school, 77.6% private school, and 91.7% home school). When asked if they believe NC gives them the opportunity of school choice, 66.7% said yes. Taking into account where their children attend school, 51.8% in public school said yes compared to 67.3% in charter school, 72.7% in home school, and 77.5% in private school. However, the group with the largest response of “unsure” was public school (24.4%).

If given the choice at the beginning of the current year (2019-2020), public school parents most often chose public school (60.2%) to attend, followed by private school (24.8%), charter school (9.1%) and home school (5.8%). Charter school parents chose charter school most (79.4%) followed by private school (14.0%), home school (4.7%), and public school (1.9%). Private school parents most often chose private school (97.4%) followed by public school (1.4%), charter school (0.8%), and home school (0.3%). Homeschool parents most often chose home school (84.8%) followed by private school (12.1%) and public school (3.0%). When also asked if distance learning during COVID-19 has encouraged parents to consider a different school option, 32.6% agreed and 37.6% disagreed. While disagreement is the leading answer, 29.8% were neutral or unsure, showing that the participants were evenly spread on the matter. Public and charter school parents tended to agree more than disagree that they are encouraged to consider different options (39.55%, 37.70%). Private school parents disagreed more than agreed



(45.9%) and home school parents were mostly neutral/unsure (41.7%). Having experienced and reflected on the impacts of COVID-19 on education, if they had a choice for the coming school year, most public school parents still chose public school (56.6%) the most. Public school choice showed a -3.6% difference from before COVID-19, followed by private and charter school, which also showed a -3.3% difference, and home school, which saw a +10.2% difference. Charter school parents still chose public school (60.6%) the most. Charter school choice showed a -18.7% difference from before COVID-19, followed by +4% difference for private school, +5.5% for public school, and +9.2% for home school. Private school parents still chose private school (89.9%) the most. Private school choice showed a -7.5% difference from before COVID-19, followed by +1.1% difference for charter school, +1.9% for public school, and +4.6% for home school. Home school parents still chose home school (88.9%) the most. Home school choice showed a +4.1% difference from before COVID-19, followed by -3.8% difference for private school and -0.2% for public school. The only school type to see a positive gain across all participant school types was home school.

### **Returning to School Second Survey**

We conducted a follow-up survey in late June and early July. A total of 147 participants took this second survey to give their perspective on returning to school in the 2020-2021 year (17% of initial survey participants). No demographic questions were asked in this second survey thus there is no breakdown by school type or grade level.

More than half (67%) of the participants were satisfied or highly satisfied with the level of communication from their child's school regarding plans to re-open in the fall. In contrast, 47% disagree and only 25% agree/strongly agree that their school has a clear plan relating to the start of school and meeting family needs. This is unlike the initial survey where most participants



felt their administrators and school staff were very or somewhat prepared for the transition. Half of participants (51%) have been given the opportunity to share their preferences and concerns and 67% feel those voiced concerns have been addressed. In contrast, 33% disagree that those voiced concerns have been addressed. A similar trend is shown with the school's effort to address issues of concern that may arise when re-opening in the fall. Most participants disagree (35%) that the school has made an effort to address concerns that may arise with the re-opening of schools (23% strongly agree, 19% agree, 24% somewhat agree).

Participants were most concerned about health and safety (40%) when returning to school in the fall. Learning digitally if schools close again was the second largest concern among participants (22%) followed by learning effectively in socially distance classrooms (19%), and teachers closing learning gaps from missed time last year (i.e. 2020) (15%). The gaps and concern of digital learning parents may be referring to can be shown through their confidence in grade progression of their child after distance learning in the 2020 school term. In the first survey 47.2% of participants felt their child was somewhat prepared, 8.6% felt their child was not prepared, and 1.4% felt their child will not progress to the next grade. This suggests parents have a lowered confidence about how much and how well their child learning during distance learning. The most helpful thing participants felt a school can do is weekly updates from the school on procedures for navigating in-person return (29%).

Also from this second survey, 67% agree (strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree) and 34% disagree that they are looking forward to sending their children back to school in-person. Over half (60%) say they want a distance learning option until they can be sure of their child's safety. Participants prefer their child to be allowed to have class only online (36%) followed by a preference for hybrid (34%) and for returning to in-person instruction (30%). Looking to the



initial survey's results, we recall that 30.6% of participants were concerned that their school was having difficulty implementing instructional programs that continue to support their child's ability to learn and 57.4% felt that it was difficult or very difficult to manage the distance learning. This comparison suggests that while these old concerns and the new health/safety concerns, the population of parents with school aged children is evenly spread when considering the best option for the return to education in the Fall 2020.

Of those who participated in the follow-up survey, one-third (31%) are contemplating sending their child to a different school than the one they attended last year, with 69% not contemplating sending their child to a different school. The initial survey showed that across school types, 32% were encouraged, 38% were not encouraged, 30% were neutral or unsure if they were encouraged to consider different options. This question in the follow-up survey did not give an unsure/neutral option possibly contributing to a new trend in results. However, a majority of those who did indicate they are contemplating a change in school indicated that it is because home learning was beneficial to their child and they plan to continue homeschooling (19%). This reason was followed by 12% of participants are not satisfied with how their school plans to re-open in response to COVID-19, 12% were not satisfied with their school before COVID-19, 11% have had a financial change, 10% found another school that would better meet their child's needs, and 7% were not satisfied with how my school approached distance learning. This suggests that COVID-19's impact on education (whether that be finances, support from schools, or learning implementation) has resulted in some parents considering different options for their children's education.