



(Reflects insights from research with a large public school system and secondary research)

Education is in a state of flux as school systems scramble to establish a remote learning model that effectively supports the students and families they serve, as well as, the staff and teachers they employ. There is much to learn from the struggles and successes from last spring. One key takeaway is that improvements are needed to enable a true learning environment that works for all.

Qualitative research in the form of 90-minute audio focus groups were conducted by MarketVision Research on July 13-15, 2020. The groups were separated according to role (staff and parent) and grade level, K-12. The staff groups included the grade/subject teachers, as well as special teachers and guidance counselors.



Reflecting on Last Spring

Covid has had a profound impact on education, catapulting everyone involved (students, teachers, parents and staff) into the uncharted world of virtual learning filled with unknowns and stressors.

While there is appreciation for the efforts of all, there were many frustrations and 'misses.' In a school setting there is a clear structure that aids learning. Upon shifting to in-home, the process became fuzzy with everyone scrambling to learn technology and figure out new ways of connecting, teaching, learning, assessing and communicating.

- 1 Lack of consistency and clarity in expectations and process
- 2 Challenge engaging students via an online format (online fatigue)
- 3 Difficulty with assessment and providing feedback
- 4 Lack of student accountability and inefficient system for tracking
- 5 Technology limitations and lack of training hinder learning
- 6 Negative impact on emotional and social health and well-being

Key challenges expressed by parents and teachers:

*"From what I have been told by others in the grade and at other schools, there was no consistency between classes within the school and no consistency between schools."
(Parent, Grade 3-5)*

*"Kids don't do assignments and then I'm tracking them down. I don't have their email so then have to email their parent and/or call them... such a time waster."
(Teacher, Grade 3-5)*

*"Kids at this age are self-conscious and don't feel comfortable staring into a camera, seeing themselves online and asking questions."
(Parent, Grade 6-8)*

*"Our teacher had to figure out the technology and applications as the weeks went on. It was not her area of strength or comfort."
(Parent, Grade 6-8)*

*"It was a waste of time because so little actual teaching was done. My child got live instruction for only 10 minutes, twice a week. They need more live interaction versus video."
(Parent, Grade K-2)*



Yet, it's also important to highlight the things that did work well.



Moments of Connection: Remote learning can lead to detachment from the student to the teacher and curriculum, so anything that provided *real connection time* between teachers, staff, and students was important, including things like morning messages, principal weekly zoom share outs, virtual school assemblies, teachers reading to younger students, book clubs, mystery guests, break-out sessions and team projects.



Tools and Resources to Manage: Teachers and staff utilized tools that support their daily schedules, from scheduling/tracking to educational platforms for class work, including tools like video apps (FlipGrid, Sceencast-O-Matic), educational platforms (SeeSaw, Schoology) and subject specific software and videos.

*"I thought the morning announcements were great. This was our way to start each day and it was a good way to feel connected to the school."
(Parent, Grade K-2)*

*"My son's teacher called him and me just to connect and that meant a lot to him."
(Parent, Grade 3-5)*

*"I sent a teacher an email at midnight and got an immediate response."
(Parent, Grade 3-5)*

*"Mixing in breakout sessions with the live teaching definitely made it more interesting and gave them the chance to connect more than just staring at the screen when the teacher lectured."
(Parent, Grade 9-12)*

*"I used my office hours for students to sign up just to chat, which some students really seemed to appreciate."
(Teacher, Grade 3-5)*



Concerns for Starting Back This Fall

Whether starting off virtually or in-person or some hybrid of both, there are higher expectations but also significant concerns, questions and high anxiety about how things will unfold. It is unsettling, in a time when everyone is yearning for certainty.



Parents:

How do I know if they are making progress? How can I manage work and help my child?



Students:

How can I connect with my friends? Do I need to learn this on my own?



Teachers:

How can I balance teaching and the heavy load of administrative tasks? How can I engage students? How can I assess and track their progress? How can I do all this and take care of my own kids at home?



Staff:

How can we best support learning and keep everyone safe? What is Plan B if there is an uptick of cases? How can we manage technology?



Key Takeaways and Considerations

Consistency and Structure is Essential

While remote learning is becoming more common in higher education, students in elementary, middle school, and high school require more direct education and in-person learning. They haven't yet mastered the fundamentals of education and need the socialization opportunities education provides in order to grow interpersonal and soft skills.

It's clear from the research that the structure of in-person education – the dedicated building space, the schedule, the expectations of staff and students, and the consistency in environment – provides a strong foundation from which to operate. It's also clear from research that 'remote learning' in the K-12 environment presents many challenges school systems will need to address to be effective.

1

How to engage students in this environment, which is especially challenging for those families with children in younger grades and with special needs.

One size doesn't fit all and customized solutions are needed. What works well for the more independent middle to high school students is not effective for elementary students or those with special needs who require more hands-on interaction. In situations in which both parents are working, this challenge is exacerbated as to how younger/special need students can not only learn but also be cared for throughout the day. Parents fear that their children will miss a year of learning and fall behind. In response, some are hiring tutors and joining forces with other families to set up their own 'at home' learning centers.

2

How to prevent deepening the divide between the high and low performing districts.

Where some school systems may already struggle to fully support the student, there is now the potential for those with income disparities, less supportive home environments, or in districts lacking the training or resources to provide instruction, to fall further behind in their educational pursuit. As additional responsibilities fall on the teacher, how do they manage?

3

How to integrate emotional/social development which can be minimized in a virtual world.

Even if staff is able to master the Instruction aspect of remote learning, it is only one part of the learning experience. Being on a screen all day at home can feel very isolating for students. Moments of connection matter. Whether it is the teacher with the whole class, 1:1 or students with each other in small breakout sessions, children need an outlet to express their emotions and thrive on interactions with each other and their teachers. These types of touch points draw students in and make them feel a part of their school community.



The Path Forward in this Virtual World

School systems are not all the same but there are a few key themes to consider as we chart a new path in remote learning.

The path forward begins by embracing the true spirit of learning that education is centered upon. That everyone involved (staff, teachers, parents and students) have to learn new ways to navigate through these unknowns. And while every school system and situation is unique, here are a few key themes that emerged to chart a new path in remote learning.

- **Establish a structure** that best mirrors the purpose of in-person instruction (hours, in-person online instruction, and a full schedule). In uncertain times – more consistency, clarity and structure is essential.
- **Invest resources** in technology and training to help teachers and families be better equipped to support learning needs for all, especially for those with resource limitations.
- **Streamline administrative tasks** so that teachers can focus on the core of teaching.
- **Engage the curiosity of** students with hands-on activities that extend beyond screen time.
- **Focus on the ‘whole student’** and all aspects of their development encompassing instruction and meaningful connection that help them to learn, grow and thrive.

