



Upended Learning:

Key Findings on the Impact of Remote Schooling

From the Cognia Innovation Lab

Introduction

In late winter of 2020, schools in the United States and across the globe were forced by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to shift from a familiar, face-to-face school environment to remote learning in a home setting. This sudden and unsettling shift upended well-established routines, plans, and expectations for the remainder of the school year.

From late April through the end of June 2020, Cognia™—the metro-Atlanta based education nonprofit that is the world's largest education improvement organization—conducted three separate surveys to identify how students, parents, and teachers were coping with the shift to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The surveys sought to identify the personal, academic, and emotional impact on each of these groups and on schooling.

This report presents findings with two goals: to provide evidence of reactions during early 2020, and to provide context for suggestions for a second year of online learning during the ongoing pandemic.

The surveys were conducted by Cognia's Innovation Lab. Established in 2019, the Innovation Lab is an incubator of new initiatives, tools, and services that strengthen the continuous improvement efforts of the 36,000 schools and districts from the United States and 85 countries that make up Cognia's network.

Survey samples

A total of 74,116 individuals responded to the surveys—38,739 students, 32,487 parents, and 2,094 teachers from the United States and 22 other countries. The U.S. sample (which comprised 79% of the respondents), included students, parents, and teachers from 335 schools in 35 states.

Figure 1. Survey sample sizes

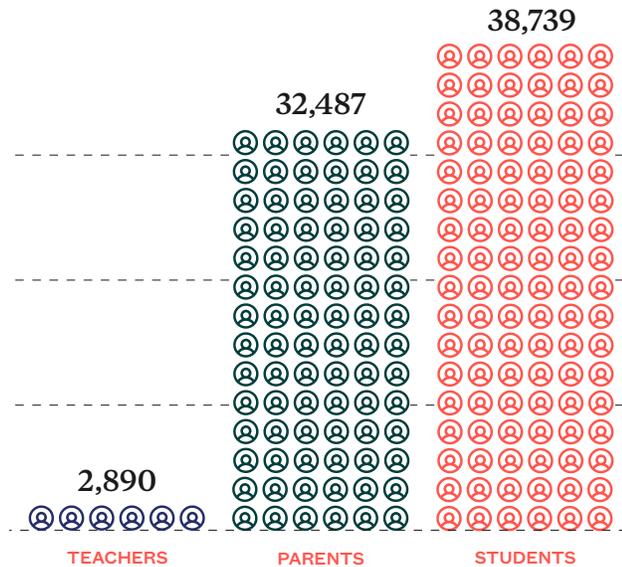
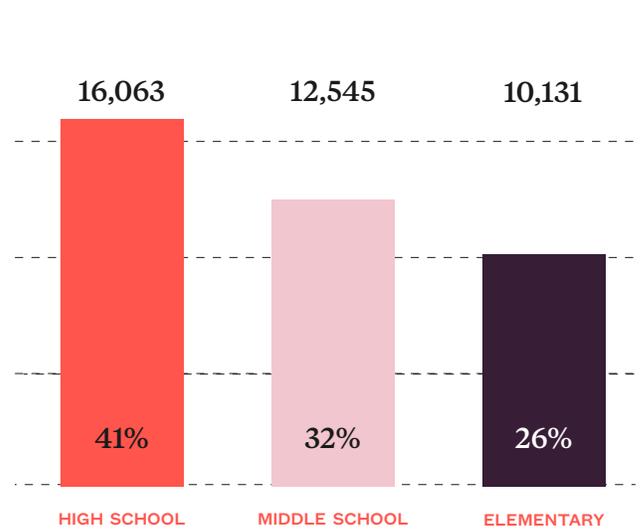


Figure 2. Distribution of student respondents by school level



Insights from the data

This report examines the academic, social, and personal impacts of the shift to online learning, and reveals significant concerns about the rigor of school, the burden placed on teachers, students' isolation and lack of regular routines, younger children's reliance on parents, and the disturbing technology gap that left too many students without adequate access to schooling.

We present data and insights on these themes on the following pages.

Students busy but not challenged

In the transition from familiar, face-to-face school environments to remote learning from home in early 2020, students were subject to more assignments and schoolwork, but academic activities were less challenging than before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of rigor fueled anxiety among students and parents about student preparation to advance in school and their readiness for work and future learning.

The vast majority of students (80%) reported having more work to do (40% every day, 40% some days) in a remote setting compared to the previous face-to-face setting. Also, elementary school students were three to four times more likely (66%) to say that most of the time, teachers gave them work that helped them learn than high school students (15%) and middle school students (20%).

The teacher survey reveals that teachers typically focused on preparing instructional activities and assignments for students, and had other significant new responsibilities. During remote learning, most teachers (70%) reported spending more time preparing instructional activities than they did for activities in face-to-face classrooms.

The responses show that while students reported having more work, they felt that assignments were generally easier. Two-thirds of parents (67%), six in ten students (67%), and almost all teachers (94%) said that assignments were either “new and easy” or “something already learned [or taught].”

Parents and students alike indicated that they experienced anxiety about whether students would be fully prepared for the next grade or for college and work. Many parent respondents (57%) reported they were worried or sometimes worried about student preparation moving forward. Similarly, 6 in 10 students (61%) said that on most days or on some days, they were worried about not being prepared for school the next year. High school (67%) and middle school students (63%) were more likely to say that on most days or some days they were worried about their preparation, compared to students in elementary school (54%).

On the other hand, teachers did not express a similar concern. A large majority of teachers (82%) expressed confidence that most of the time, their instruction helps prepare students for the coming year.

Figure 3. Novelty and difficulty of assignments

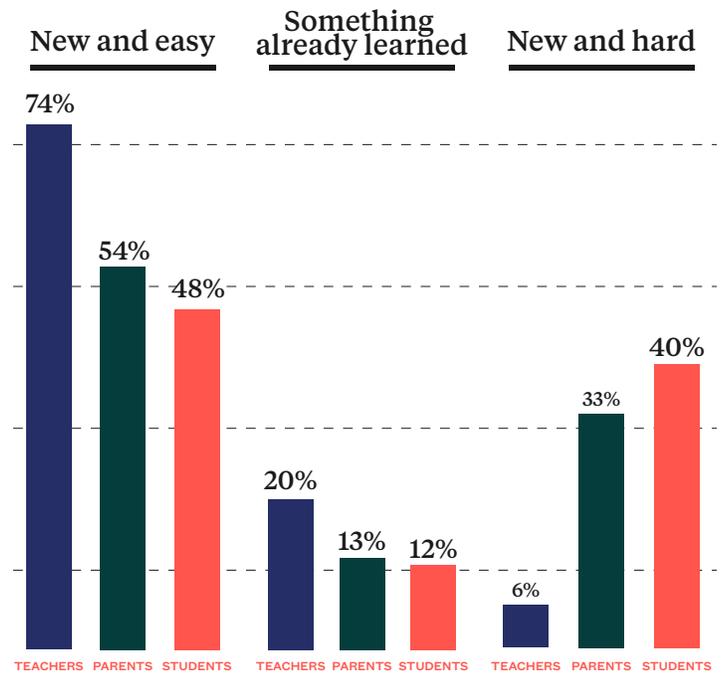


Figure 4. Concern about preparedness

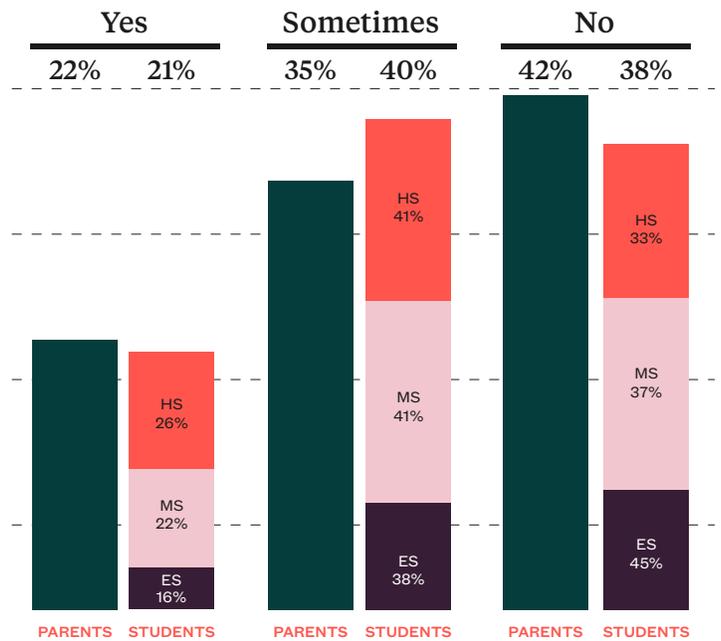
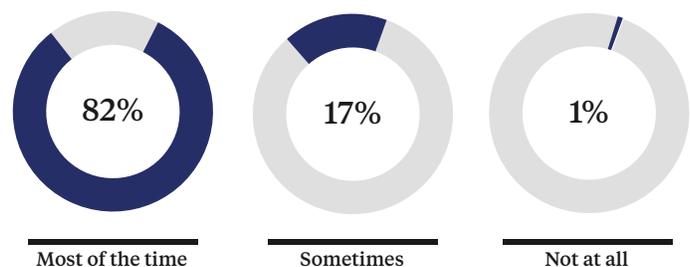


Figure 5. Teachers' confidence in preparing students



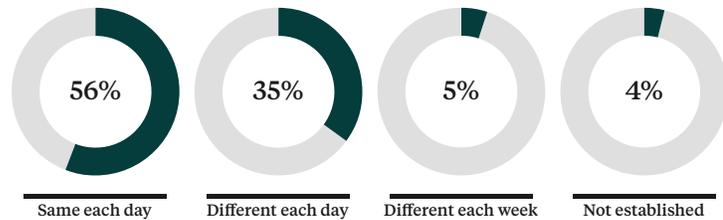
Students isolated, lack regular routines

Evidence from the report suggests that students and parents regard an optimal learning environment as one where students collaborate and interact, whether with a group of peers, someone at home, the teacher, or another person for face-to-face instruction. The survey results indicate that young people felt that their environment was not optimal for them, because they lacked the opportunity to collaborate and interact with others. Students felt lonely, missed their friends, and were cut off from consistent learning routines that help them remain motivated, engaged, and focused on learning.

Although the percentage of students who reported needing interaction decreased as student age increased, about two-thirds of all students desired some degree of interaction with someone when learning. Similarly, the vast majority of students (71%) and parents (80%) agreed that students felt lonely most days or some days, and the majority of students (68 percent) reported missing school most or some days (26 percent “most,” 42 percent “some”). Most students (9 in 10) said that they wished they had said goodbye to their classmates and teachers (62 percent most of the time, 28 percent sometimes).

Additionally, more than 4 in 10 parents (44%) reported that their child(ren) did not have consistent learning routines. These regular classroom procedures—from teachers greeting students, to time spent setting expectations, to well-entrenched group learning practices—help maintain order, reduce student anxiety, and encourage students to remain motivated, engaged, and focused on learning.

Figure 6. Parents’ view of student routines



Younger students sought help at home

Younger students relied more heavily on someone at home for help than did older, more independent students. The survey results indicate that, as one might expect, the burden on parents with students in elementary school was much higher than on parents with older students.

When needing support with assignments, elementary students reported first seeking help from someone at home (74%), a teacher (20%) or friends (6%). On average, high school students reported first seeking help from a friend (40%), my teacher (15%), someone at home (14%), or online resources (3%). In fact, elementary students were almost twice as likely to lean on someone at home for support with their assignments than all students (43% vs. 23%) and high school students were about four times less likely to look for support at home than students on average (6% vs. 23%). Similarly, more high school students (54%) than elementary (29%) and middle school students (45%) preferred learning independently.

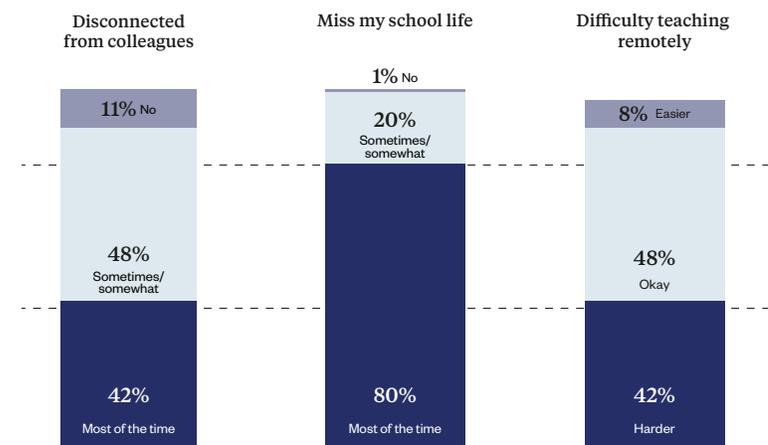
Most parents adapted to their added role without difficulty; nearly two-thirds overall (63%) said that helping their child(ren) with his or her schoolwork has been “okay for me” or easier than they expected. Nearly 4 in 10 (38%) said that it was harder than they expected.

Toll on teachers

Parents and students reported that teachers were a constant presence in the lives of young people and cared about their students. From teachers’ points of view, although fewer than half found remote instruction harder than they expected, virtually all responded that to some extent they had to learn new skills, felt disconnected from colleagues, and missed their students’ participation in school events.

About 42 percent of teachers surveyed said that teaching remotely was harder than expected and 98 percent agreed that they had to learn new skills (77 percent agree, 21 percent somewhat agree.) While teachers frequently connected with students and families, teachers reported feeling cut off from the workplace and their peers. Almost all teachers indicated they missed their school life (99%), felt disconnected from colleagues (90%), and missed their students’ participation in school events (96%).

Figure 7. Teachers feeling disconnected



Teachers' connection with students

The survey indicates a common perspective across all groups on how much time teachers spent connecting with students. Students, parents, and teachers reported similar perceptions of the extent to which teachers checked in on students' progress and needs. Parents and students were appreciative of how teachers responded to their needs, made themselves available, cared about students, and checked on student progress.

More than 9 in 10 students (93%) said that their teachers checked on them to make sure they had everything they need to learn (53% most of the time, 40% some of the time). Nearly the same percentage of teachers (88%) noted that they checked on their students' progress daily (57%) or several times a week (31%).

Nearly all parents (96%) agreed that teachers cared about their child(ren) while students were learning remotely from home (77% agreed, 19% sometimes agreed). Similarly, 95% of students responded that teachers care about them (73% agreed, 22 percent sometimes agreed).

Meanwhile, virtually all parents (97%) said that teachers and school leaders made themselves available for conversations when it was convenient for families (71% most of the time, 26% sometimes).

Teachers also noted that families were responsive to their communications (48% most of the time, 39% sometimes).

In the context of connection and communication, some 92 percent of parents also said that they had much greater appreciation or gained some appreciation for what educators do (57 percent greater, 35 percent some) based on their child(ren)'s experience learning from home.

By the same token, teachers noted that school leaders and administrators did a good job providing information, guidance, and support. Almost all teachers agreed that their administration provided them with direction that supported best practices for remote instruction (93%) and communicated information to them in a thorough manner (95%).

Figure 8. Reported frequency of teacher-student check-ins

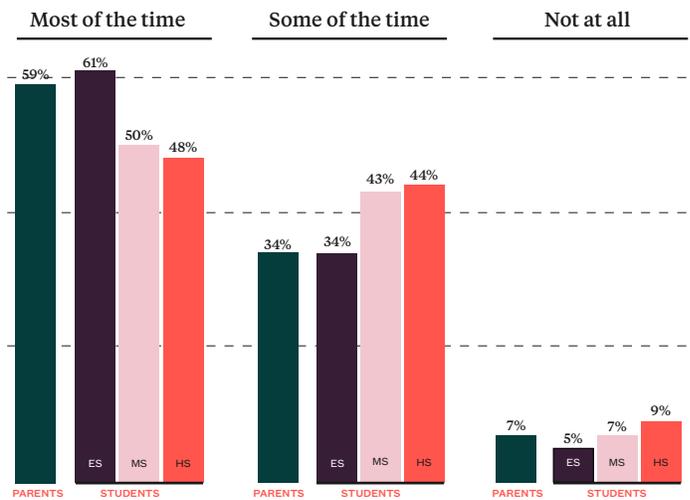


Figure 9. Teachers' report of frequency of check-ins

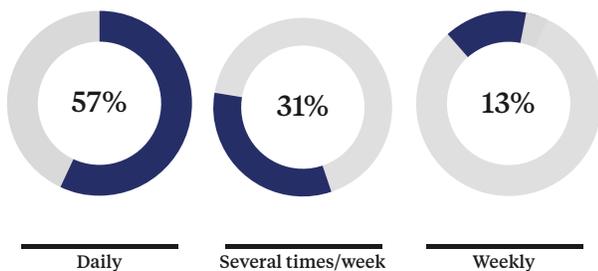
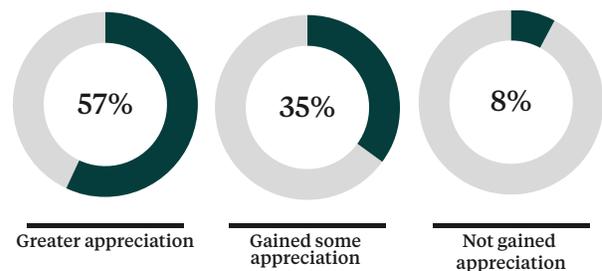


Figure 10. Appreciation for educators

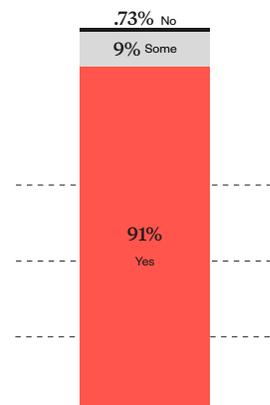


Technology gap

The shift to remote learning has placed an immediate emphasis on students having electronic devices, such as laptops or tablets, and access to high-speed internet connectivity or mobile hotspots.

Averaged across school levels, ten percent of students reported having "some" or "no" access to needed technology, which is clearly unacceptable—a structural inequity if even one student in a classroom does not have equal access to equitable educational opportunities.

Figure 11. Access to needed technology



Implications: Where do we go from here?

The results from these surveys provide a context for addressing crucial challenges in the second year of online learning resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the challenges identified by the response data are already being discussed and addressed. However, several issues emerge from this data, including concerns about lack of rigor and routines, equity, and the need to address the increased demand on teacher time. In addition to generating assignments, communicating with parents and families, and adapting to a new learning environment, teachers are addressing social and emotional needs of students and providing guidance to parents who are supervising their children's schooling. Teachers also must use new strategies to maintain connections with their mentors and teams.

Based on its experience in 36,000 schools in the United States and 85 other countries, Cognia has drawn from these findings implications that states, school districts, and schools should consider as they continue to adapt to broadscale online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Specifically, the implications call on schools to address “four Rs”—rigor, routines, relationships, and resources. Important concerns about advancing equity and supporting teachers—fundamental needs identified in this report—span all four of these areas, and suggestions to address these concerns are included in each of the sections below.

Rigor. Some parents, community members, and educators perceive online learning as less rigorous than face-to-face learning. But the shift to an online modality can emphasize personalized, problem-based, and interactive group learning and can accelerate a transition to using dynamic and relevant digital learning materials. Both these changes can help better engage students with rigorous content to meet high standards.

To meet this potential, teachers need support to shift from face-to-face instruction to approaches to instructional design and scheduling that are aligned with a remote learning environment. In a physical classroom, the teacher can move students around easily, group and regroup students in response to observable students' needs and behaviors, monitor students' engagement, and redirect off-task behavior. By contrast, students in online environments are rarely underfoot, as neither teachers nor students are going to spend eight hours a day on video conferencing.

Professional learning can help teachers learn to set expectations for students in everything from communications, benchmarks for success, and grading or feedback to response time, virtual office hours or attendance, and engagement. Adapting instructional strategies and differentiating instruction to the level of focus provided in a face-to-face classrooms can help teachers in two significant ways: to reduce quantity and increase quality of assignments, and to help meet the needs of underserved students, particularly the 40 percent of students who reported on the Cognia survey that assignments were new and difficult to complete. Teachers also need opportunities to exchange ideas and learn from one another, to meet all these challenges.

Routines. Some may perceive school routines as “add-on” activities that take time away from student engagement and inquiry, but on the contrary, routines are crucial to learning. They put students in motion towards self-directed learning and group learning, help set expectations, encourage students' focus, and create a structure for rigorous online instruction. Many teachers are finding ways to create new structure and routines that provide students stability and support. Education leaders and teachers need to specifically articulate and address the importance of routines among their instructional strategies and in conversation with parents. Routines should be used with consistency in classrooms, within grade-levels, and from one peer teacher to another. Schools need to pay special attention in elementary and middle school when students need more direct learning support than do independent, self-directed and self-reliant high school students.

Relationships. The shift to online learning has led to isolation of students and educators. The imposed distance requires stronger, different connections among students, educators, and parents/guardians, and between teachers and administrators. Schools must continue to emphasize peer learning and collaboration among teachers to help teachers feel connected to school and each other, and to support improved practice in online learning. Schools can further cultivate and expand the positive relationships teachers have established with students and parents by:

- Engaging both students and parents in the learning process
- Supporting teacher-to-teacher interaction
- Fostering the social-emotional well-being of students, parents, and teachers

Resources. As the pandemic has made clear, education institutions everywhere face challenges in assuring that all their teachers and students have access to needed technology to make digital learning possible. Even a small gap in technology access stands in the way of equitable opportunities for learners. This issue will not subside once the pandemic ends. It should be spurring immediate policy change and action.

While technology access must be addressed, schools also need adequate staffing and other resources. Teachers need training and support to make effective use of technology, teaching and learning supports, and assessment tools. Responsive support and adequate resources are more important than ever, given the expanded expectations of teachers' roles.

Methodology

Cognia developed and made available to its network of domestic and global schools three remote learning surveys that focused on understanding the sudden shift to remote schooling from the perspective of students, parents, and teachers. Each survey gathered information relating to four overarching aspects of remote learning: the Work, the Learning Environment, Well-being, and Technology. Cognia staggered the release dates for these surveys: The student and parent surveys both opened for responses on April 24, 2020, and the teacher survey opened for responses on May 25, 2020. Data were collected and analyzed for survey responses received as of June 30, 2020.

The findings are based on responses from 74,116 individuals from 23 different countries, representing 71 global institutions and 264 U.S. institutions. Seventy-nine percent of respondents were from the U.S., and the remaining 21% of respondents were from 22 other countries.

About Cognia

Cognia is a global nonprofit that has the knowledge to help schools improve. Cognia offers accreditation and certification, assessment, professional learning, and improvement services. The result of the merger of AdvancED and Measured Progress, Cognia was formed to bridge the gap between school evaluation and student assessment. We are the largest education improvement organization in the world and an undeniable force for enhancing schools, engaging students, and driving better outcomes for all. In 2020, the entities that came together to form Cognia mark 125 years of service to education. Find out more at cognia.org.