



THE
PAST FOUNDATION

RemotEDx Listening Tour Final Report, Volume I

July 2021



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Research

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What we've heard...

"For some students this has been wildly successful in ways we didn't anticipate."

(Educator Listening Session, Spring 2021)

"Being at home, I didn't have to wait on the rest of the class to finish. I could move on to my next assignment which was really nice and it gave me more free time to work on my own independent projects."

(Student Listening Session, Spring 2021)

"I am a part-time homeschool teacher. That's my second job now."

(Parent Listening Session, Spring 2021)

RemotEDx: Ohio Listening Tour Final Report, Volume I

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Ohio Listening Tour: Informing the Future of Education

Final Report

July 2021

Executive Summary:

The RemotEDx Ohio Listening Tour was designed to collect feedback from students, families and educators about teaching and learning during the pandemic. Nearly 2000 stakeholders from 69 Ohio counties (78% of Ohio counties) engaged in the Listening Tour through social media, taking online or onsite surveys, or participating in virtual or onsite focus groups. Stakeholders who experienced a full range of educational models responded to questions about what worked, what didn't work, what strategies helped them overcome challenges, and what they'd like to see moving education forward post-pandemic.

This report summarizes data collected by the PAST Foundation in the spring of 2021, and includes high-level takeaways and outcomes distilled from hearing about stakeholder experiences. Education during the pandemic was challenging for those with resources, and even more so for those without. The pandemic exposed inequities and exacerbated the struggles of Ohio's most vulnerable students and families, and attention is given to the needs of this population throughout this report.

Experiences shared by students, parents, and educators were across the board. What was seen as a benefit to some was identified as a challenge by others. However, three key impact factors have emerged and can help inform educational policy in Ohio: *Equity*, *Mental Health Concerns*, and *Learning Models*. Equity with regard to connectivity, access to resources, and the ability to create a safe and supportive learning environment was identified as a challenge across all stakeholder groups. With both the stress of life during the pandemic and the social isolation, student mental health, especially for those in vulnerable student populations, appeared as a huge concern for parents and educators. Finally, the choice of learning models surfaced as a factor in stakeholder perceptions of what is needed for a successful school year.

General trends related to stakeholder experience with education during COVID-19 and outcomes include positives and negatives of the same aspects. Parents are more engaged in their children's education. They feel more informed about their children's learning processes, and have a greater appreciation for educators and the educational system. Parents also felt they were too frequently thrust into the role of educator, and many felt unqualified. Educators established better communication with parents, and welcomed their participation in supporting student learning, but at the same time some educators felt that parents overstepped their bounds, and impeded learning by doing their children's school work. Zoom and screen fatigue were identified as challenges, yet platforms such as Zoom and Google Meets are seen as a mode of communication worth continuing post-pandemic.

Those teaching and learning remotely developed a variety of strategies to support student learning. It was difficult to find balance between home, life, and work, compelling educators, parents, and students to construct boundaries using space and time management. Forming COVID "bubbles" and "learning pods"



helped reduce the impact of social and intellectual isolation; it also provided a support network for parents working from home while students were learning from home. Educators teaching in all learning models reported that access to resources, support, and training were crucial for preparing them to work with students during the 2020-21 school year. Professional development identified as helpful includes training with technical skills, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and pedagogy for engaging students with remote learning.

After schools closed in March 2020, two workgroups of educators partnered with Ohio Department of Education to discuss next steps toward the future of education, and created *Next Steps: Principles of Policy for Consideration*, a document outlining key aspects of the workgroup discussions. Most of these policies resonate with the needs of stakeholders who shared their experiences during the Ohio Listening Tour. This report concludes with an alignment of Listening Tour findings with policies regarding Equity, Local Decision Making & Flexibility, and Teacher Capacity Considerations. Equity policies focus on addressing the inequities of online access, digital literacy skills, and quality standards for online options. Local Decision Making & Flexibility policies recognizes the importance of schools and districts having the ability to make decisions based on what makes sense for their locales, and having the flexibility for meeting individual student needs. Policy regarding Teacher Capacity Considerations applies to educator's ability to work in online and in-person learning models, staffing needs, and professional development that delivers engaging online education.

"Grace" was used by educators and parents to describe what was needed to get through a taxing school year. Frustrated by pandemic-related changes in education, educators, students, and families did their best to get through with empathy, tenacity and resilience.

*"Teaching during a pandemic has really cemented to me my staff's indomitable nature."
(Educator Listening Session, Spring 2021)*

Organization of the Report

This report contains a summarization of data collected by the PAST Foundation in the spring of 2021 for the RemotEDx Ohio Listening Tour, and includes high-level takeaways and outcomes distilled from hearing about the experiences of students, parents and educators with teaching and learning during COVID-19. Education during the pandemic was challenging for those with resources, and even more so for those without. The pandemic exposed inequities and exacerbated the struggles of Ohio's most vulnerable students and families. For this reason, particular attention is given to the needs of this population throughout this report.

In addition to providing background on the scope of the project for future readers, a brief summary of the PAST Foundation's research methodology and recruitment strategies is included. The principal section of this report is a discussion of the data collected through focus groups and surveys over a three-month period. Stakeholder experience varied, and what was seen as a benefit by some was sometimes seen as a challenge by others. Despite this fact, several impact factors have been identified that can help inform educational policy in Ohio: *Equity*, *Mental Health Concerns*, and *Learning Models*. Each of these impact factors are explored in their own subsection of the *Overview of Findings*. Also included in the *Overview* are more general trends related to stakeholder experience and outcomes, which are outlined in *Outcomes of Teaching and Learning During the Pandemic*. The final section of the *Overview of Findings* describes the strategies employed by educators, families and students to overcome the challenges they encountered during the 2020-21 school year.

Education in Ohio Moving Forward provides a brief discussion of the change in the tenor of conversations with stakeholders between February and May, as well as prevailing opinions shared by educators, families and students on continuing remote learning or aspects of remote learning post-pandemic. There is an element of commonality in the experiences shared in focus groups and surveys, and the findings of the RemotEDx Listening Tour are in keeping with what can be learned from news sources and in social media. There are few, if any, surprises here those who work in the field of education, including the two workgroups of educators who partnered with Ohio Department of Education to discuss next steps toward the future of education. This report continues with an alignment of Listening Tour findings with the policy document outlining key aspects of the workgroup discussions in *Next Steps: Principles of Policy for Consideration*, followed by a brief conclusion.

Background

The final few months of the 2019-2020 school year were reactive and chaotic, with school closures followed by remote re-openings finishing out the academic year. Districts scrambled to provide resources for educators and families. Summer 2020 found Ohio school districts struggling with decisions on moving forward for the 2020-2021 school year, balancing CDC COVID-19 safety recommendations with community and family needs. This resulted in a wide variety of educational models implemented across the state, including fully in-person, fully remote, hybrid, and concurrent offerings.

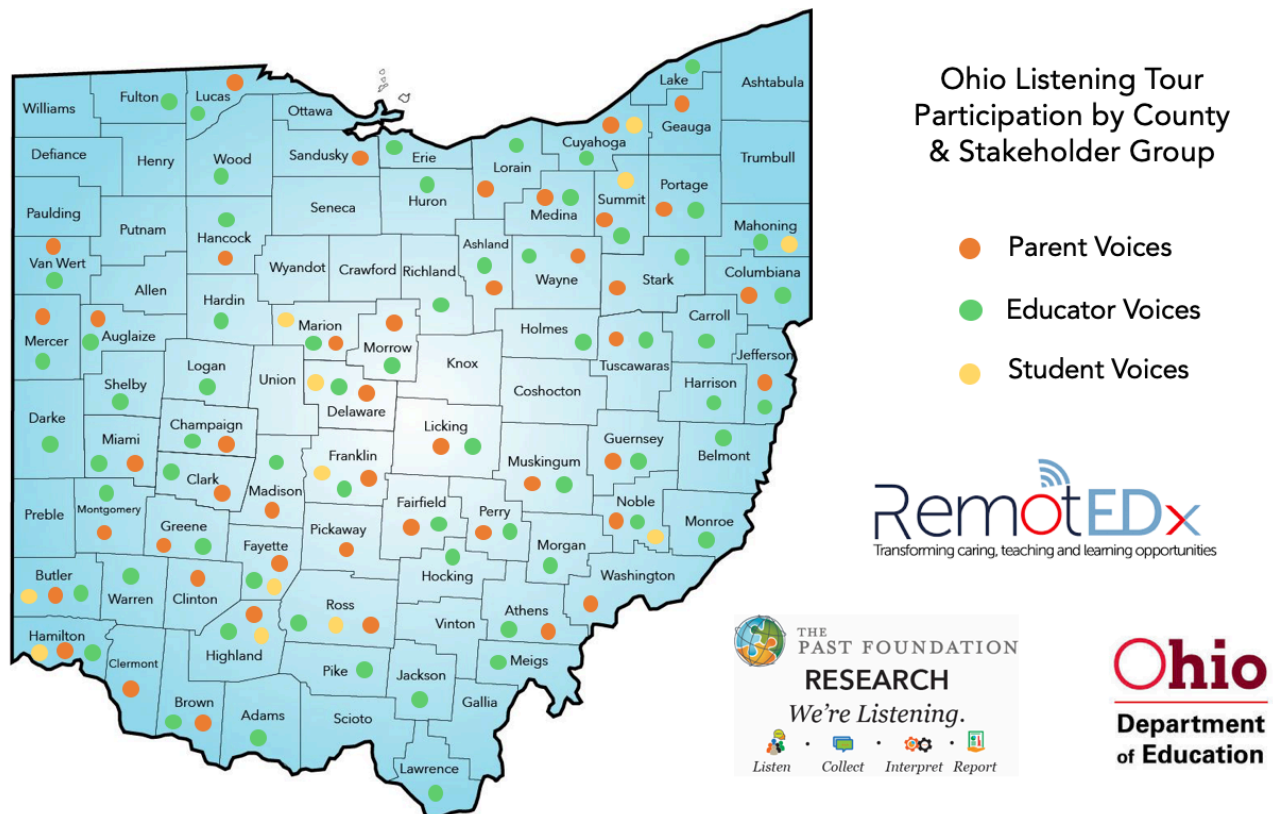
Districts had to consider a completely new aspect of safety protocols for staff and students while addressing community and family concerns. Educators had to be trained in new modalities and platforms, and the



support of vulnerable students needed to be taken in to account. How would children who receive free and reduced meals from schools be fed? How would parents and guardians who were unable to work from home make sure their children had a safe and supportive place to learn? How would families with limited resources access the internet? How would those who live in areas without connectivity support learning in their homes? As COVID-19 spread, districts across the state made plans to enable education to continue. As we are coming out the pandemic, it is time to consider the lessons learned and how they can shape the future of education in Ohio.

Conducted by the PAST Foundation, the RemotEDx Ohio Listening Tour was designed to collect feedback from students, families, and educators about teaching and learning during the pandemic. Nearly 2000 Ohio stakeholders from 69 counties (78% of counties in Ohio) engaged in the Listening Tour through social media, taking online or onsite surveys, or participating in virtual or onsite focus groups between February and May 2021. Stakeholders who experienced the full range of educational models responded to questions about what worked, what didn't work, what strategies helped them overcome challenges, and what they'd like to see in education moving forward post-pandemic (see Figure 1: Ohio Listening Tour Participation by County and Stakeholder Group Map).

Figure 1: Ohio Listening Tour Participation by County and Stakeholder Group Map.





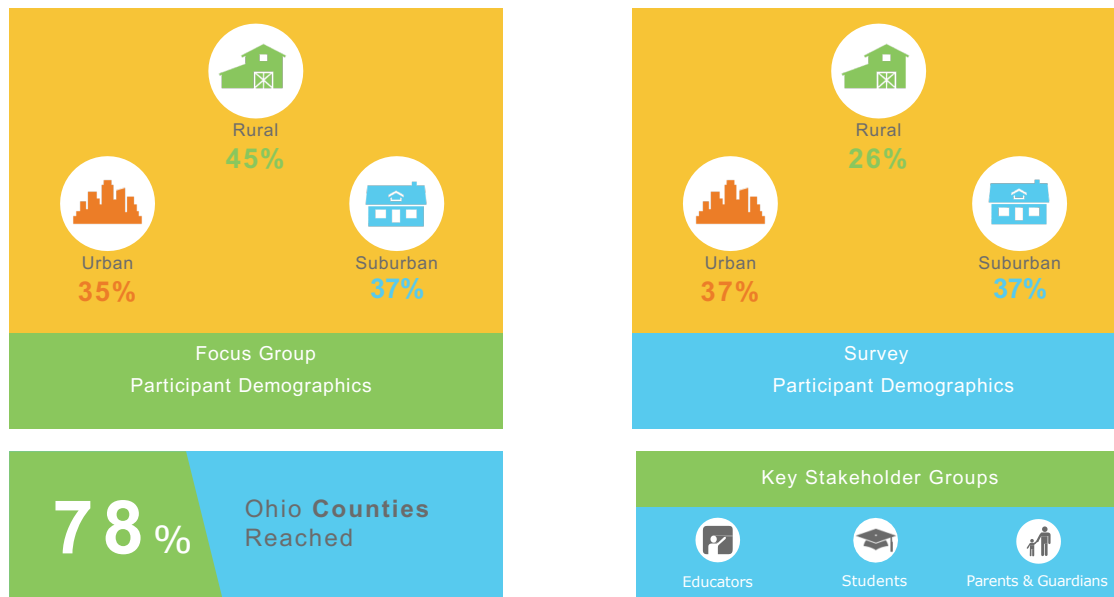
Methodology & Recruitment

A strong foundation in ethnographic research combined with two decades of experience working in education in Ohio provided the PAST Foundation with a platform to conduct the Listening Tour with stakeholders across the state including educators, families, and students that benefit from Ohio educational resources. Between mid-January and mid-February 2021, PAST recruited and trained college interns to assist with data collection, developed focus groups and survey questions with input from the RemotEDx Listening Tour Advisory Team (see *Appendix A: Ohio Listening Tour Question Sets*), designed an interface where stakeholders could sign up for sessions and the Advisory could track progress, and developed outreach materials for recruitment. Strategies for recruitment included directed emails throughout the PAST Foundation network, phone calls to community partners, school districts, and Education Service Centers (ESCs), as well as a social media campaign that reached more than 100,000 Ohio residents. More detail on PAST's research methodology and recruitment strategies can be found in *Appendix B: PAST Foundation Research: RemotEDx Ohio Listening Tour Summary of Work* and *Appendix C: Ohio Listening Tour Interim Report Narrative*.

An assumption was made at the outset of the Listening Tour that education during the pandemic would be impacted by geography, and the research design included recruiting and identifying stakeholders as rural, urban and suburban. Focus groups included voices from rural (45%), urban (35%), and suburban (37%) students, families, and educators with some focus groups consisting of multiple demographics. Surveys also include data from rural (26%), urban (37%), and suburban (37%) educators and families (see Figure 2: Stakeholder Demographics Infographic). It became apparent early on in data collection that these demographic designations were not as important as one would have thought. Connectivity, among other issues, was a challenge across the board. Another supposition made at the outset of research involved pandemic-related barriers to education for vulnerable populations, including students with food and housing insecurity, special education needs, foster care situations, those in the juvenile justice system, LGBTQ+, and English Language Learners (ELL). Unsurprisingly, issues of equity in education were exacerbated by the pandemic, with attendance and access to mental health support identified as prevailing concerns.

Figure 2: Stakeholder Demographics Infographic.

Who participated?



Reaching stakeholders during a pandemic when people are isolated and experiencing “COVID fatigue” was challenging, especially when recruiting across the digital divide. Those without access to internet and devices were unable to sign-up and participate in listening sessions and therefore unable to answer questions posed in an online survey. Over the course of the tour, the PAST Foundation Listening Tour team pursued a variety of strategies including phone calls, emails, and flyers sent to community resource providers, as well as requests to conduct onsite surveys or focus groups with those accessing social services and community resources. While COVID protocols prevented onsite sessions and surveys in many locations throughout the spring of 2021, there were community centers, food pantries, after-care sites, and Ohio Department of Jobs & Family Services locales that allowed onsite surveying (11% of the total surveys administered were conducted in-person onsite).

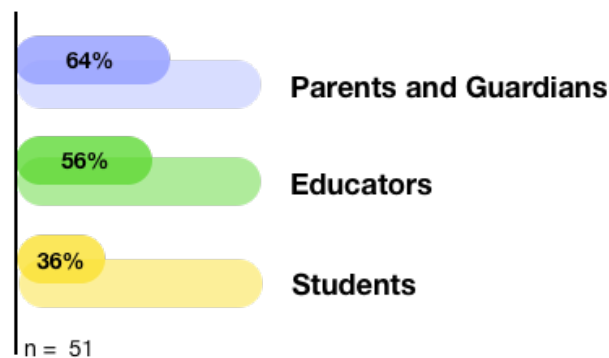
“I think the fatigue of COVID-19 from both the parent side and an educator side is so real...”
(Parent Listening Session, Spring 2021)

Experience with education during the pandemic for the most vulnerable students and families was primarily collected through proxy data. PAST was able to learn from educators and social service providers who work directly with vulnerable student populations, including staff from a large urban school district who provide support for homeless and ELL students, community mentors in another urban school district, ESC Family & Community Liaisons who work with urban, suburban and rural districts and families throughout Ohio, and their community partners.

Few families who participated in surveys shared sensitive issues, such as food and housing insecurity. Half of the educator survey respondents (50%) indicated an awareness of vulnerable populations in their school communities. Of the focus groups conducted with students, educators, and families, more than half (55%) included data from or about vulnerable student populations.

Parents and educators of special needs students were represented in surveys and focus groups, and their experiences are included in the collected data. Survey data showed 37% of parents online and onsite have children receiving special education services while the focus groups showed 57%. Among the educators, 13% of survey respondents identified as special education teachers and 16% of those in focus groups identified as working in special education (see Figure 3: Percentage of Listening Sessions that included perspectives from Vulnerable Populations).

Figure 3: Percentage of Listening Sessions that included perspectives from Vulnerable Populations.



*Percentage of Listening Sessions
that included perspectives from
Vulnerable Populations.*



Sample Set

Large amounts of data were collected over three months of the Listening Tour through focus groups and surveys. An interim report was submitted on March 31, 2021, and four sets of focus group, bulleted reports were sent to the Listening Tour Advisory Team between February and April. The Advisory Team was provided with an online portal to track survey numbers, onsite survey data, and the schedule of Listening Sessions by stakeholder groups. Bulleted reports were drafted for all Listening Tour sessions, and the entire collection can be located in *Appendix D: RemotEDx Listening Tour Focus Group Bulleted Reports*. Survey data is available in *Appendix E: Ohio Listening Tour Survey Graphics*. Visit *Appendix F: In Their Own Words* to read direct quotes from stakeholders.

Data collection ended May 21, 2021, and the PAST Foundation Research Team then focused on coding survey and focus group materials using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software to inform this final report. Please note, in discussions of survey data, the percentages refer to the number of survey respondents who answered the questions at issue. In reporting on focus group data, the percentages below refer to the number of focus group sessions where these topics were discussed and not the number of people who shared these viewpoints.

- 1969 stakeholders engaged in the Ohio Listening Tour between mid-February to mid-June 2021
- The Ohio Listening Tour heard from educators, students, and parents from nearly 80% of the counties in Ohio
 - 69 counties are represented (78%)
- Stakeholders engaging through Social Media (n=931)
 - 69 virtual and onsite Listening Sessions (focus groups)
 - 31 Educator Listening Sessions (n=330)
 - 16 Student Listening Sessions (n=125)
 - 22 Parent and Guardian Listening Sessions (n=203)
- Surveys
 - 180 Parent/Guardian online surveys
 - 157 Educator online surveys
 - 43 Parent/Guardian onsite surveys at community resource centers

Overview of Findings

Stakeholder response to education during COVID-19 varied tremendously, influenced by learning styles, technical skills, receptiveness to new modalities, platforms and applications. While there is a spectrum of experience ranging from the perception that students lost an entire year or more of learning to students have stayed on track, there are some clear trends that have emerged to help inform educational policy in Ohio (see Figure 4: Impact Factors with Remote Education).

Impact Factors

Equity



Connectivity

Data suggests connectivity is the biggest factor for inequity in education. It was identified as a challenge by all stakeholder groups in almost half (49%) of the focus groups.



Student Responsibilities

Students who had to take care of younger siblings, earn money to help support their families, and share devices and hotspots struggled to find time and space to learn.



Access to Resources

Parents with access to resources and armed with knowledge of how to identify and locate resources, had a greater ability to support their children's learning. Educators reported taking on the financial burden incurred by upgrading connectivity and buying and sending materials to students.



Vulnerable Populations

Supporting vulnerable student populations became even more problematic during the pandemic. Without touchpoints and in-person connections, educators had trouble "finding" them and communicating with students and their families (ELL).



Special Education Needs

Lack of consistent scheduling and communication was taxing for students with special needs, and parents struggled with supporting their child.

Mental Health



Student Social Isolation

In nearly three-quarters of student focus groups (71%), students discussed feeling socially isolated.



Student Intellectual Isolation

In nearly two-thirds of student focus groups (64%), students commented on feeling isolated intellectually.



Life Balance

In almost half of the educator focus groups (40%), and more than half of parent focus groups (57%), stakeholders discussed their struggles with finding a work/life balance.



Educator Mental Health

In nearly one-quarter of the educator focus groups (24%), educators spoke about their personal mental health concerns.



Parent Mental Health

In over three-quarters of parent focus groups (79%), parents reported high levels of stress, frustration and anxiety.



Fully Remote

Minimal learning loss was reported from fully remote districts who used summer 2020 to identify quality learning platforms and curriculum, train staff in working with students remotely, and identify supports for parents.



Fully In-Person

Students, educators and parents from rural districts shared they were grateful to have been able to be fully in-person, and educators reported minimal to no learning loss.

Learning Models



Concurrent Teaching

Educators said it was difficult to divide their attention while teaching, and the students coming in remotely shared they felt overlooked or forgotten.



Hybrid

Educators shared they were able to cover less content given the amount of time they had with their students, and students stated that it was difficult to get answers to questions during the days they were not in the classroom.



Virtual Learning Platform

Most students who engaged in these platforms found them lacking.

Local Decision Making & Flexibility



Equity

- Data suggests connectivity is the biggest factor for inequity in education. Connectivity was identified as a challenge by educators, students and families in almost half (49%) of the focus groups conducted. In an open-ended survey question regarding challenges, some parents (13%) and educators (12%) discussed connectivity issues as well.
 - Across rural, urban and suburban areas students and educators had to travel for internet service. Many rural stakeholders reported driving 20-30 miles to teach and learn in parking lots with bus hotspots. Those who could paid high fees to boost internet speeds in order to teach and learn. Some stakeholders in urban areas accessed the internet in library and fast-food restaurant parking lots. School districts provided hotspots in the regions participating in the Listening Tour, but they weren't consistently effective, and often unable to support multiple users at the same location.
 - Lack of connectivity had a huge impact on attendance, leading to the involvement of truancy officers in tracking down "missing" students. In remote learning situations, students without connectivity were often provided with paper work-packets, and communication with teachers was limited to phone calls after school hours.

*"The biggest challenge that we had...with teaching remotely is that...digital divide...everybody doesn't have great internet, everybody doesn't have...an awesome device."
(Educator Listening Session, Spring 2021)*

- Students who had to take care of younger siblings, earn money to help support their families, share devices and hotspots with other students in their home struggled to find time and space to learn. The pandemic caused job loss across the nation, and some students found work or increased work hours to help provide for their households. These students found themselves trying to balance responsibilities in the home and schoolwork with their jobs. Understanding teachers were a great asset to these students, and the flexibility of some of the learning models made work and school possible for several of these students with access to recorded lessons and online learning platforms.

*"Providing that grace wherever we can has meant a lot to students and families."
(Educator Listening Session, Spring 2021)*



- Parents with access to resources, and armed with knowledge on how to identify and locate resources, had a greater ability to support their children's learning. These parents were able to feed their children, fill learning gaps, provide learning support by hiring tutors, upgrade internet and devices, arrange for counseling and medication, and often had the availability to support student learning in real-time at home, as well as organize learning and social "bubbles." This access by no means helped these parents avoid stress and mental health concerns for themselves and their children, but it did provide educational advantages for their students.

*"If somebody's lights were out, then...they can't be virtual...you can't be remote [if] your lights are cutoff."
(Educator Listening Session, Spring 2021)*

- Access to resources was an issue for many educators, who reported taking on the financial burden incurred by upgrading connectivity, buying and sending materials to students, and so forth. Many teachers kept in touch with their students by mailing cards to their homes throughout the school year in an effort to keep lines of communication open, as well as lift students' spirits. The majority of educators reported having to upgrade internet connectivity at their home, and for some in rural districts with limited wireless suppliers, the cost of upgrading was prohibitive. One rural elementary educator shared that her monthly internet cost rose to nearly \$200 per month, and was still insufficient to support teaching from home.
- Supporting vulnerable student populations became even more problematic during the pandemic.
 - Without touchpoints and in-person connections with educators and community support systems (including homeless, LGBTQ+, unaccompanied minors, etc.), those who work closely with these students, such as social services, had trouble "finding" them. The director of a program for urban homeless students shared that staff, who in the previous school year worked with over 3000 homeless students, was only able to locate about 1000 of them during the 2020-21 school year.
 - New immigrants and English Language Learner (ELL) student populations, as well as the educators who work with them, had additional challenges with education during the pandemic. Communicating with students and their families without the non-verbal visual cues relied on with face-to-face interactions was often a daunting proposition. It was difficult to arrange for translators and those who were able to make do using Google Translate identified it as a stop-gap measure.



"The majority of my kids are ESL students...so we have another [challenge] to overcome [in] just communicating that the basic levels, so it was...compromised in the virtual environment." (Educator Listening Session, Spring 2021)

- Special needs students and their families faced additional learning challenges during the pandemic. Lack of consistent scheduling and consistent communication was very taxing for many students, and many parents who weren't available to support learning at home had to hire tutors or aides at considerable personal expense. Several parents stated their special needs students required someone to sit by their side for the entire school day. One parent working from home shared that she woke up at 4am to attend to her own work until the school day started, then supported her child until her spouse could take over in the afternoon so she could return to her own work.
 - Parents often had to lobby with their district to schedule consistent check-ins and support from intervention staff for their children.
 - While there was some state funding available for tutors of students with IEPs, learning about, applying for, and meeting criteria for the Learning Aid Ohio grants presented a number of hurdles many parents could not overcome.

Mental Health Concerns

Stakeholders from all groups reported behavioral and mental health issues among students across the state. Educators and parents shared the impact of increased stress and anxiety on their own well-being.

- Student mental health has been a prevalent concern in all stakeholder groups. Stemming from social and intellectual isolation, stress, depression, feelings of failure and frustration, among other factors, many parents and students shared openly about depressive and dangerous behaviors, which in some cases led to self-harm and suicide. Families with resources were able to access medication and counseling services, however vulnerable student populations were largely unable to navigate social services and connect to counselors. Even with support and guidance from Family & Community Liaisons, counselors and social workers were overtaxed and often unable to help.
 - Student observations on their mental health status:
 - In almost half of the student focus groups (43%), students discussed feeling stressed and overwhelmed.
 - In nearly two-thirds of student focus groups (64%), students commented on feeling isolated intellectually.
 - In nearly three-quarters of student focus groups (71%), students discussed feeling socially isolated.
 - Educator observations on student mental health:
 - In nearly one-quarter of the educator focus groups (24%), educators expressed concern over student mental health and lack of social engagement.



- Parent observations on student mental health:
 - In nearly three-quarters of the parent focus groups (71%), parents discussed the impact of social isolation on their children's mental health.
 - In nearly two-thirds of the parent focus groups (64%), parents shared their concerns about the impact of intellectual isolation on their children's mental health.
- Educators reported high levels of stress, frustration, and depression as an outcome of trying to adapt to changing protocols, learning models, and the needs of students and their families. Balancing pressures in their own lives (keeping their family safe, supporting their own children's learning, dealing with household necessities, etc.) with meeting student learning goals led many educators to seek support from colleagues, counselors, and stress-relieving activities. Whether they were teaching remotely or in-person, many found it difficult to draw the line between home life and work life, responding to communication from students and parents at all hours of the day, night and over the weekend.
 - In nearly one-quarter of the educator focus groups (24%), educators spoke about their mental health.
 - In almost half of the educator focus groups (40%), educators discussed their struggle with finding a work/life balance.

"One of the things [that] has been most challenging as a leader this year has been managing emotions of the staff. There has been an inordinate amount of anxiety...that anxiety has manifested in very real ways in terms of how they interact with peers...[and] their comfort coming into the building." (Educator Listening Session, Spring 2021)

- Parents reported high levels of stress, frustration and anxiety. Those working outside the home struggled with supporting and facilitating their children's learning at home. Parents who were able to work from home had to find time to attend to their own work, supervise their children's learning, maintain their households, and help their children cope with the lack of social interaction, "too much screen time," and troubled emotional states.
 - In more than half of the parent focus groups (57%), parents spoke about their struggle with finding a work/life balance, and of having a disrupted family balance.

Learning Models

Stakeholders experienced a wide variety of learning models over the course of the year, including hybrid, blended, concurrent, fully remote, and fully in-person. Based on stakeholder comments, it is reasonable to draw the conclusion that models with the most success in terms of meeting learning outcomes and maintaining mental health were structured and consistent in the delivery (i.e. fully in-person or fully remote).



- Administrators in one urban K-8 school system made the decision during the summer of 2020 to be *fully remote* for the entire 20/21 school year. The timing allowed them to identify quality learning platforms and curriculum, and train staff to work with students remotely. Parents received training to support their students using provided devices, pick-up locations for breakfast and lunch were identified, learning pods were arranged with the city, and both messaging and scheduling was consistent throughout the academic year. In an April 2021 interview, the directors for this school system commented that learning loss for the year was minimal, and student retention in a highly mobile population showed improvement from previous (pre-pandemic) years.
- Several rural districts decided at the outset to be *fully in-person* for the school year, responding to community sentiment as well as lack of internet connectivity and wireless network infrastructure. Local Boards of Health provided support in contact tracing and recommended COVID compliant protocols. Families were given the option to be remote depending on their preference and connectivity, and while some students were required to be remote for quarantine purposes, most preferred to attend in-person school. Students, educators, and parents from several rural districts around the state shared that they were grateful to have been able to be fully in-person, and educators reported minimal to no learning loss.

*"We were able to supply our kids with instruction five days a week. It didn't stop for [our] grade...we've been here the entire year and we've seen growth with our kids."
(Educator Listening Session, Spring 2021)*

- Students, educators, and parents from districts with *concurrent* models reported many challenges this school year. Some districts offered the option for students to be fully remote or fully in-person, and educators were frequently put in the position of having to attend to students in the classroom and those attending virtually at the same time. Educators said it was difficult to divide their attention while teaching, and the students coming in remotely shared they felt overlooked or forgotten.
 - In-person learners found it frustrating when class was derailed by tech issues around virtual learning, and perceived remote students had an advantage, as they could "cheat" on tests by accessing answers without the teacher catching them.
 - On the plus side, some teachers concerned over the possibility of remote students cheating revamped assessments to be less about memorization, requiring students to be thoughtful problem solvers.
 - Remote learners felt overlooked and found it difficult to participate in discussions, ask questions, and felt in-person learners had an advantage with direct real-time access to teachers during class time.



- Students, educators and parents from districts with *hybrid* models shared issues related to this model. Educators felt they were able to cover less content given the amount of time they had with their students, and it was hard to get momentum with learning opportunities. Students stated that it was difficult to get answers to questions during the days they were not in the classroom. In a similar position to those in a fully remote model, parents working outside the home had to make arrangements for younger students to be supervised in their learning, and keep older students on track.
- Many districts offered packaged Virtual Learning Platforms as options for families who chose to keep their children at home. Most students who engaged in these platforms found them lacking. While some students appreciated the opportunity to be self-paced, several commented they felt they were teaching themselves, and often had to seek out supplemental materials to fully understand what they were learning, such as Khan Academy. Students described these platforms as testing heavy, with little recourse to engage with educators and ask questions. Educators in their districts were unable to provide much support, stating issues with curriculum alignment.

Outcomes of Teaching and Learning During the Pandemic

General trends emerged as stakeholders reported on their experience with education during the pandemic through focus groups and surveys.

- In over half of the *Parent* focus groups (57%), parents spoke about feeling more connected to and informed about children's education and learning process.
 - Many parents reported they now have a deeper understanding of how their children learn, and a renewed appreciation for educators. Overall, parents were grateful for the opportunities to connect with educators remotely, ranging from one-on-one meetings with teachers to community-wide meetings with school administrators.

*"Now parents have to get involved. Now they are more into what their kids are doing."
(Parent Listening Session, Spring 2021)*

- *Parents and Educators* commented on the benefits of holding virtual meetings, and educators indicated they plan to continue offering the option of remote meetings post-pandemic to avoid transportation and childcare issues that can impact scheduling.
 - In nearly two-thirds of the educator focus groups (60%), educators discussed their appreciation of virtual modes of communication with parents.
 - In over one-third of the parent focus groups (36%), parents discussed the comfort and convenience of attending meetings with educators remotely.



- In nearly half of the *Parent* focus groups (43%), parents shared they found themselves in the role of educator.
 - In nearly one-quarter of the parent focus groups (21%), parents commented on feeling they had to fill gaps in learning, and were unprepared and unqualified to do so.
 - Several educators reported parents were doing their children's schoolwork.
- In over one-third of the *Parent* focus groups (36%), parents spoke about the benefits of enjoying more "family time" with having their children learning from home during the pandemic, provided they had the option of working from home and the resources to sustain it.
 - Other aspects of learning from home appreciated by parents include not having to deal with transportation issues or commute time, eating lunches together, taking family outings, etc.
- *Parents and Educators* experienced a learning curve with using new platforms and applications and many required guidance and training.
 - Many stakeholders reported struggling with managing online learning platforms and applications. Most districts who participated in the Listening Sessions provided professional development for educators, and many held formal and informal training sessions for parents. Students, unsurprisingly, required little upskilling. In fact, students frequently served as a resource for educators and parents in learning and managing new platforms and applications.

*"More of a cooperative and collaborative relationship
[between students and teachers] is really coming through
here."*

(Educator Listening Session, Spring 2021)

- Remote teaching and learning helped stakeholders identify their skills and limitations.
 - In nearly two-thirds of the *Student* focus groups (64%), students discussed how they found it harder to learn without in-person demonstrations and the ability to easily ask teachers questions during class time or in between classes. In almost half of the student focus groups (43%), some participating students observed they thrived as independent learners, and appreciated working at their own pace.

*"When we started doing online, I realized I liked it a lot more
and I wish I had done it a lot sooner because I kind of like
going at a go-go-go pace and [getting] it all done so then I
can do whatever I want for the rest of the day."*

(Student Listening Session, Spring 2021)



- Some *Students* shared that direct virtual instruction for 45 minutes or more is exhausting and causes learning fatigue and disengagement.
- In almost one-third of *Educator* focus groups (28%), educators spoke about how they found it difficult to teach without providing in-person demonstrations and the ability to easily check on student work in real-time.
- In more than three-quarters of *Educator* focus groups (80%), educators commented on how excited they were about the opportunity to embrace new teaching strategies and find engaging online resources and activities.

*"The number of tech tools that I have personally learned how to use and helped my students learn how to use that we can carry on into face-to-face learning, that has been amazing."
(Educator Listening Session, Spring 2021)*

- *Educators, Parents and Students* found teaching and learning remotely made it difficult to separate the boundaries of school and home.
 - All stakeholders reported finding it challenging to find a balance for work/home/school life.
 - Educators struggled with being accessible to students and parents outside of school hours while maintaining boundaries, creating an impact on educator mental health.

*"You have a home life and you have your school life and it's all just mixed together and it really sucks because you [have to] figure out which one's more important."
(Student Listening Session, Spring 2021)*

- In nearly one-third of *Parent* focus groups (29%), parents shared that remote education can be "safe space" for their children in terms of physical (not exposed to COVID-19) and mental (not getting bullied) health.
 - The lack of social interaction created a huge impact on student well-being, however for some students who experienced bullying behaviors, learning remotely provided a respite. This was commented on by parents of special needs students as well as mainstream learners.
 - Additional behavioral outcomes from various learning situations include teachers observing fewer outward incidences of bullying or ostracizing behaviors. Some educators attributed this to fewer students in the building. Several students noted that after returning to in-person



school in late spring 2021 students were “nicer” to each other than in the past. Social divisions seemed less important than previously, especially with middle and high school students.

- In almost half of the *student* focus groups (43%), students graduating from high school spoke on how they felt a lack of support and empathy from their schools, overall communities, and college admission offices.
 - Students graduating in 2021, as opposed to those graduating in 2020, expressed frustration with the lack of empathy for their situation (e.g., missing prom 2 years in a row, not having politicians and celebrities congratulate them for graduating, no community parades or banners.
 - Some seniors shared that their college plans have been impacted. They are competing with 2020 graduates who may have taken a “gap” year for spots in university programs and scholarships.

Effective Strategies

During listening sessions and in surveys, stakeholders shared the strategies they employed to get through challenges faced with education during the pandemic.

- *Parents and Students* discussed dedicating space in their homes for learning, when possible.
 - Stakeholders in urban districts with access to learning pods, appreciated having a space where students could go on a daily basis to access meals, connectivity, and remote learning while under adult supervision.
 - High school students found themselves trying to attend class and do homework from their beds, and had to make a concerted effort to relocate in order to focus on learning.
- *Students and Educators* coped by establishing boundaries between school and personal time.
 - Some *Educators* set a time where they would be unavailable to students and parents.
 - *Students* were mindful to allocate time to explore personal interests.
 - *Parents* assigned household chores and responsibilities to their children, giving them the opportunity to have “real-life” experiences.
- *Parents* with capacity and work flexibility were able to partner with friends and relatives to share student supervision responsibilities with each other (i.e., students learn with friends, rotating households).
- Stakeholders shared that keeping calendars, managing time, and having organizational skills were critical for keeping things on track.
 - For *Educators*, this included posting weekly schedules where students can plan out their work for the week.



"[In Google Classroom] it's nice that you can list your assignments. You have all your assignments listed and then if they're absent that day, they can get [them]."
(Educator Listening Session, Spring 2021)

- For *Parents*, this included determining internet access for multiple users, use of devices, and helping their children manage their time.
- For *Students*, this included balancing their time for independent work with other interests.
- Having social interaction with peers helped stakeholders feel connected.
 - Many *Students and Parents* reported the benefits of having learning bubbles, scheduling online game time, and outdoor activities with friends when possible.
 - *Educators* greatly benefited from collaborating with other teachers, sharing best practices, strategies, and applications.

"It has brought our capacity to share these best practices across our district in ways we wouldn't have before."
(Educator Listening Session, Spring 2021)

- *Educators* reported that access to resources, support, and training were crucial for preparing them to work with students during the 2020-21 school year.
 - Technical: training with online skills, using apps and learning platforms.
 - Whole child: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Inclusivity Professional Development.
 - Pedagogy: Engaging students in meaningful experiential learning via remote learning.

Education in Ohio Moving Forward

When the Listening Tour started hearing from stakeholders in February 2021, parents most notably were anxious to share their frustrations with education during the pandemic, and their sense that student needs weren't being met. Educators were overwhelmed, and largely unavailable to participate in focus groups in the first few weeks of data collection. In March, when many districts went to in-person learning, the tenor of feedback from stakeholders was underscored by gratitude in being back in the building. By late May, when data collection ended, it was clear that stakeholders were glad to see the end of the 2020-21 school year, and were hoping to be back to "normal" for fall 2021. It was an enormous undertaking to teach and learn during the COVID-19 pandemic, and everyone was ready to move on. Some said they wanted things to go back to the "way it used to be," but most Listening Tour participants acknowledged there were aspects they would like to incorporate moving forward. Parents, educators, and students appreciated using technology in new ways to communicate and learn, and almost all educator participants were planning to incorporate technology into their classrooms in some form. Student participants welcomed using more technology in their education, and want to see this practice continue moving forward.



While most educators, students, and families participating in the Ohio Listening Tour indicated a preference for in-person learning, nearly all stakeholders would like to see remote options be available for students that prefer learning remotely. It is reasonable to infer from the data that some family situations would benefit from the flexibility and access to learning provided by remote learning opportunities. Those with physical and mental health issues, housing insecurity, mobility, and safety concerns may welcome the option to attend school in another location. This would allow homeless families who find themselves “couch surfing” to access learning for their students, provided they have connectivity and devices. One Ohio family with housing insecurity was able to keep their child in school when they moved out of state to live with relatives during the 2020-21 school year. Many parents and educators would like to see remote learning available as an avenue for making up missed class time caused by illness, attending appointments, dealing with transportation issues, and weather-related school closings.

The document *Next Steps: Principles of Policy for Consideration* was developed by educators who partnered with the Ohio Department of Education to consider how to respond to the inequities exposed by the unexpected shift in education during the pandemic. Most of these policies resonate with the needs of stakeholders who shared their experiences during the Ohio Listening Tour. Many of the key policy principles in the ODE document are highlighted below, along with corresponding stakeholder input that relates to that topic.

*“COVID-19 should make school districts look into their policies, their ways of doing things, their way of [thinking] if [things] are equitable or...fair for everyone.”
(Parent Listening Session, Spring 2021)*

Equity

- **Online Access:** Inadequate devices, lack of devices and/or of connectivity, inadequate connectivity, and the costs of connectivity were identified by all Listening Tour stakeholders as a factor barring access to education, creating inequities across all geographic areas of Ohio. Rural districts were heavily impacted by lack of connectivity, with some participating districts citing up to 40% of their school populations lacking access to the internet. Suburban and urban districts were not exempt from issues of connectivity, and district-provided hot spots were often unable to support learning from home.
- **Digital Literacy Skills:** Several educators and parents reported their lack of familiarity with learning platforms and devices among the challenges they encountered during remote teaching and learning. Many districts provided training to their educators, and several provided instructional materials and training sessions for parents. Educators comfortable with learning platforms and using technology to create content were frustrated by the remedial training offered, and would welcome learning more advanced strategies.



- **Quality Standards:** Online options (Virtual Learning Platforms) selected by some of the districts to use during the 2020-21 school year were a source of frustration for Listening Tour stakeholders. Students (and their parents) felt unsupported, and blamed falling grades and lack of learning on the rigidity of the learning platform, and its focus on testing. With limited opportunities to ask questions and interact with teachers directly, students felt they had to teach themselves. Educators expressed concern with bridging knowledge gaps when students return to school.

Local Decision Making & Flexibility

Two of the “Four Principles of Policy Additions or Revisions” outlined in *Next Steps: Principles of Policy for Consideration* focus on recognizing the importance of schools and districts having the ability to make decisions based on what makes sense for their locales, and having the flexibility for meeting individual student needs.

- **Local Decision Making:** Learning models adopted by districts for the 2020-21 school year were largely informed by community input. Many districts conducted surveys and held virtual “town hall meetings” to discuss options, answer questions, and identify learning needs. For most rural districts, responding to community needs meant the only option was to be fully in-person for the school year. Rural educators, parents, and students expressed gratitude for this decision. One urban school system surveyed parents in the community and reached a decision to be fully remote for the school year. Districts who selected hybrid models were mindful of community needs as they planned for the 2020-201 school year.
- **Flexibility:** Having the flexibility to make decisions at the local level is important to meeting individual student needs moving forward, and can provide more opportunities for vulnerable student populations in particular. An educator working with homeless students expressed frustration with the inflexibility of in-person attendance requirements instituted in March. This educator spoke about a high school senior whose grades and attendance record with remote learning showed great improvement after moving from one Ohio city to another to live with relatives. This student was able to remain in their designated school district and attend classes while safely residing with family in another city, yet risked not graduating because they were unable to attend in-person classes in that district.

Teacher Capacity Considerations

Included among the policies outlined in “Considerations for Practice” in *Next Steps: Principles of Policy for Consideration* are those that relate to teacher capacity for working with online and in-person learning models, staffing needs, and educator professional development with delivering engaging online education.

- **Guidelines for In-Person and Online Education:** Educators in concurrent teaching models were overwhelmed, and felt that student engagement was challenging to achieve. It was difficult to see student work for those coming in remotely, and it was hard to divide attention between those in the classroom and those coming in remotely. Educators who had classroom support, such as an aide, were able to set up systems for addressing remote students’ questions, however it was unusual for a



teacher to have an aide. With outbreaks of COVID-19 and quarantined staff, many districts struggled to find available substitutes let alone provide classroom aides.

- **Staffing Levels:** Educators in districts that were able to assign teaching staff dedicated to working with only remote instruction, as opposed to hybrid or concurrent, reported lower stress and an increased ability to meet learning goals.
- **Professional Development:** Many educators shared their frustration with the lack of student engagement in online instruction, and would benefit from professional development focused on best practices. Those with time and energy turned to social media to identify engaging and educational online activities with fairly positive results, and went on to share these resources with their colleagues.
 - Data indicates that providing additional training with online teaching for educators who work with special needs and ELL students would be highly beneficial to these vulnerable student populations.
 - Several educators mentioned their struggle with recording classes while keeping students out of the video in order to avoid issues of legality. Clarity and communication of the guidelines for educators when preparing recorded materials will ensure they respect student privacy and are mindful of security concerns.

Conclusion

There is no question that the pandemic upended our society. The largest impact on teaching and learning was found in the Challenges, yet there were some silver linings to be found. Some educators saw the 2020-21 school year as an exciting opportunity to grow their skills and be creative, and many were able to identify deficiencies they need to remedy in their skills with technology and the importance of incorporating technology into their teaching practices. Among the positive outcomes noted by stakeholders are an increased student ownership of learning, the development of independent learners, and students who were able to recognize how they learn best. Based on the data collected, it is reasonable to conclude there is an opportunity here to incorporate flexibility to amplify good personalized student learning.

*"People will know where [school districts] messed up and they are taking notice."
(Parent Listening Session, Spring 2021)*

Parents have a deeper appreciation for educators and an understanding of how their children learn, and with these new perspectives parents are poised to be more engaged in advocating for changes in the educational system. The lessons learned from the data collected in the Ohio Listening Tour underscore the policy considerations developed by the ODE working groups, and should provide support for making changes to benefit Ohio's students. Clarity of purpose, communication with stakeholders around options and resources, and empathy for what all stakeholders experienced during the pandemic will help move the process forward.