



STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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The below report summarizes the findings of a focus group study. Oversimplified, the difference between a qualitative focus group and a quantitative survey is that qualitative methodologies are for exploration and discovery and quantitative methodologies are for measurement.

Unlike a telephone interview where questions are read in a rigidly predetermined order and responses are categorized on the spot, the focus group moderator goes into the discussion with only a list of topics to be covered. In preparing the discussion guide, the moderator worked with the South Carolina Department of Education to identify and prioritize the most important issues that could be sufficiently covered in a roughly one and a half hour discussion.

When recruiting participants, the South Carolina Department of Education reached out to individuals who had already expressed an interest in being involved in AccelerateED. In light of the current environment, the focus groups were conducted online.

ACCELERATE EDUCATION: THE PERSPECTIVE OF PARENTS AND TEACHERS

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

This report summarizes the findings of a focus group study conducted on behalf of the South Carolina Department of Education. The focus groups were conducted to gain a better understanding of:

- > How remote learning is going and how it could be improved
- > How to get students get caught up
- > Priorities around reopening

A total of four focus groups were conducted:

- > Two among parents of students (May 12th)
- > Two among teachers (May 13th)

KEY FINDINGS

With education, there has never been a one size fits all solution and the current environment has only magnified this issue. As the Department of Education looks at reopening, there isn't a single solution that works for everyone. Parents and teachers both recognize the need to get back to school, but equally recognize the need to balance this desire with health and safety. To this end, findings identify a general openness and understanding about the difficulty and complexity of the situation and a recognition that finding a solution will require some patience.

The focus groups gathered input from two very important, but also two very different audiences. As such, findings from the focus groups identify some similarities and some differences between the two audiences.

First, the similarities. Both audiences tend to feel:

- > Students are falling behind with remote learning

While this pertains to all types of students, remote learning has been particularly difficult for those without internet access, elementary students, students with special needs and/or students whose home environment is not conducive to this type of learning environment, etc.

- > Remote learning needs to remain an option for some moving forward

Despite some of the shortfalls of remote learning, some feel it is the right option for them and their children. While some parents are concerned about healthy children becoming ill, this concern is particularly strong among parents whose children are immunosuppressed and/or have special needs.

- > A common and consistent use of technology platforms will make online learning more efficient



Both parents and teachers agree that the fewer platforms used the better. Further, it was suggested that online tutorials on how to use the various platforms would be helpful.

> Split or partial schedules would be problematic

Although some felt this could work at the high school level, there were serious concerns around how it would work for elementary and middle school students. The feeling among teachers is that daycares would not be able to handle it and that many elementary and middle school students are too young to be left at home alone. Working parents noted that, in many cases, a split or partial schedule would interfere with their need and ability to work and would not resolve their daycare issues.

> There is some concern about social and emotional issues resulting from the pandemic

This concern was voiced more strongly among teachers than parents, suggesting it is an issue for some students, but perhaps not an across the board issue.

There are also some differences in positions between parents and teachers; and in some cases, the gap is fairly large. These include:

> Priorities for returning

Many parents are ready to return and feel getting students caught up should be the number one priority. Teachers are not opposed to returning but say proper health precautions is their number one priority.

> How we get students caught up and back on track

Parents were very supportive of the ideas for getting students caught up. From summer camps to starting early to adding days to spending more time in review, parents very much supported all of the ideas presented.

With the exception of summer camps, teachers expressed skepticism around some of these ideas. Starting early, adding days to the fall schedule and spending a dedicated amount of time in review were not viewed as being helpful for getting students back up to speed. Many were of the opinion, “how does five days replace five months of no classroom instruction?”

DETAILED FINDINGS AMONG PARENTS

While fraught with caveats, the general consensus among parents is to get back to school. Parents are appreciative of teachers and recognize that our teachers are trying their best. That being said, both parents and students are struggling with remote learning. While they provided suggestions for improvements – like better coordinating and minimizing the platforms teachers use and where information is housed and obtained – the bottom line is that, for many, parents are concerned their children are falling behind.

"I would like to see normalcy for kids. In the beginning of this we didn't know what was going to happen and we were getting a lot of different information. As I see my child at home – lacking interaction and not being a school setting – I just want to see some sort of normalcy back in his life."

"I don't think that can help with children not being around other kids and interacting with other kids. There is not a book we can give them to tell them that it will be ok. Kids need other kids."

"There is one thing that has to change – I can no longer give my kid 2 Advil in the morning and send him to the math test. If I get COVID, my kid can't go to school for 2+ weeks. We are talking about normal and consistent but we have to be realistic that consistency isn't going to be the same because we have to cater to these situations too."

To this end, there was a great deal of support for ideas to get students back up to speed. The parents who participated in our focus groups indicated strong support for summer learning programs or "camps" to help get students, particularly struggling learners, get caught up. There is also a strong desire to, if possible, have these camps or programs be in person. In fact, some parents said that if it's just more online/remote learning, their position is "no thank you."

- > Parents were very supportive of adding additional days to the 2020-2021 fall school calendar to help students get caught up.
- > There was strong support for spending extra time next year reviewing instruction provided during the current school closure.

The idea of partial or split schedules was met with some skepticism and concern. Some of the parents in the groups said a split or partial schedule would not alleviate their concerns about their jobs and daycare situations.

"There is no way I can wrap my head around how that (A-B scheduling) is going to work with elementary school"

"When I start looking at how A-B scheduling could work, how do I find childcare? It is already limited as is. Now you have a flood of demand and no supply. Then what happens? Then you wind up with daycares who are willing to take more than the recommended guidelines or community grouping of the kids to manage the situation. What about people who can't afford childcare? They will send them to grandma and grandpa's house and that is the population we are trying to protect."

"I had concerns when I heard about discussions about partial schedules or split schedules – it is not a practical solution for working families. I would not be able to work at all. The split option is not an option and I would have to find something else that works for our family."

At the same time, parents recognize that going back to school is easier said than done. They recognize that social distancing and wearing masks would be a serious challenge, especially for younger students. Some even felt that wearing masks could create an environment of fear.

"The other challenge is if we do actually have to try to enact some sort of social distancing at school - How do you social distance in younger grades? They grab you and hug you and I just don't see how you can make it work. I understand the things you can attempt to do but I don't think socially distancing in a kindergarten classroom is a realistic option."



“I hope we have bold leadership – somebody who will step in with common sense. Kids wearing masks is dangerous and I hope it won’t be considered. Somebody who is going to look at the data and decide what makes the most sense for the families and kids of SC.”

As mentioned previously, this is far from a “one size fits all” solution. In fact, in speaking with parents, some said they would be fine with some of their children returning, but not others. In other words, for some households, there is not a single viable solution.

While there are parents whose children are immunosuppressed and/or have special needs who feel it would not be safe to send their children back to school, there also are parents whose children don’t have special needs – they just don’t want to return because they are concerned about their children getting sick. To this end, and for a variety of reasons, remote learning needs to remain an option.

“I am not the voice of all of the special needs children in SC but there are a good amount of children who have compromised immune systems or underlying complications and it will be very scary for them to return to school until there is a medication or vaccination. We do have this time from May-August and I think it’s worth the state taking this time to figure out how these children will be serviced appropriately. While the primary concern will be the bulk of the students, we can’t forget about this minority population that won’t be able to return like the others and we have to make sure we catch these kids as well.”

“Parents know their kids and their concerns best. We just need to be careful in that the schools that kids are going back for the right reason. If the parents have the option to not send them, we might have some kids that are in real trouble at home and it is assumed their parents have chosen not to send them back.”

“We need to address truancy and attendance policies. What do we do if a parent or child gets sick and has to switch out to online learning? But we still need some sort of protocol to check in on these kids.”

DETAILED FINDINGS AMONG TEACHERS

While teachers tend to prioritize health precautions (PPEs, disinfectants, etc.) over getting students caught up, they certainly support and see the need to get students caught up and back in school. When asked about remote learning, teachers admit it has been a challenge and has certainly not served as a substitution for in-class instruction.

“There is no way to replicate what we do in the classroom with each other and what we do in final concerts and out in the community when we are at home.”

“Our school district does not have 1 to 1. There was a choice between paper packets and online and that has been a lot of chasing people down to see what they have done and if they have it done and ‘how can I help you?’ The art of teaching is not there right now. I feel more like a parole officer than a teacher.”

“IF we do blended learning, some at home and some in the school, how can we provide good services at the school level when we do get them there? We should start preparing how we integrate these services when we do get the children back.”



Like parents, teachers recognize the need to reduce the number of platforms being used and provide ways to get both parents and students more comfortable using the technology.

“Some co-workers are pushing websites that kids have never seen before. They are pushing kids to get accounts on sites they have never seen before. If a child or parents is going to need training on a new platform, we need to give it time.”

“If districts across SC did some tech tutorials like a parent tech tutorial for Google classroom and a student tech tutorial for Google classroom or maybe Quizlet so that parents are more familiar with the platforms, it might help make them more at ease.”

“We assume that kids are comfortable with technology but really they are not comfortable with things that they like. They are comfortable with Twitter and Instagram and Snapchat because they like those platforms. IF they are not comfortable with whatever new mediums are introduced, they aren't going to want to use them because they are scared to fail or don't want to look bad in front of their teacher. If we have somebody within the schools and districts that can help train these kids to feel comfortable, that would be good.”

While improvements to remote learning can be made that will help some parents and students, there are also students for whom remote learning simply does not work well. Teachers voiced concerns that the shift from classroom to remote learning has exacerbated the challenges of providing instruction to struggling learners. Whether its limited or no access to the internet, limited resources (one laptop for three children), a home environment that is not conducive to learning, or any number of other reasons, there are many students who are struggling and falling behind with remote learning.

“We are typically a district of poverty. We have students who live in mansions and some whose parents have been laid off or are in foster care. This is truly showing the haves and have notes. So subject wise and socio-economic wise, it is all very telling.”

“I have a kid who is having to work and some kids who are babysitting their siblings. They really are trying but are on different schedules and are only using their cell phones. I have to be ok with giving them more time.”

“We are trying to problem solve these individual students – there is not a one size fits all. We have to take into consideration the Tier Three students who don't have parents at home or don't have access to internet or might be battling with mental wellness. The differentiation happening across the state is amazing.”

“I saw, in the beginning, a trend where all of my students who were actively participating. Even students who were already engaged a little bit but not your full participators in the classroom setting were still engaged at that point. With every week, I have seen a decline in participation. I teach high school so once they hear that their minimum is a 50 or a 70 for doing work, their level of interest in completing assignments goes down. They are now playing the calculation game to see what they need to do to get by.”

As the discussion shifted to the future, teachers expressed skepticism over some of the ideas presented for getting students caught up. While true, it is important to understand their reasons for feeling this way. In large part, teachers do not believe that starting early or adding a few extra days is going to make up for the months students have not had access to in-person classroom instruction. Nor do they feel that a



prescribed period of review is necessary, as teachers say they already include a review period, coupled with an assessment of their students to understand where the students are academically so they can meet them at that level.

“Adding days would not be academic. It would be about re-adjusting kids and getting them acclimated.”

“Extra days added in the new school year would be an extra week to get an orientation out of the way or parent conferences, but it wouldn’t serve as more than that.”

“If you are talking about adding 5 days to catch children up, that’s not going to do it. Maybe it can be used to advance kids in technology so they are comfortable if we are out of school again.”

“If we do add those days in the beginning, most of the focus in elementary would be about how to keep their hands clean and the new process of doing things.”

Like parents, teachers feel that a solution that involves split or partial schedules presents problems for daycares and working parents.

“If you are asking parents to do a split schedule and take kids to school MWF, are they going to daycare on the other days? Essentially, you are pushing the healthy liability from the school system to the daycare. And when school closes, most daycares close. I don’t know how you get around that. Same with half days.”

“Childcare is definitely a concern with a split schedule. If that is something that is going to happen, it needs to be announced as soon as possible so that arrangements can be made. Even if we find we don’t need it, I would rather be able to plan just in case.”

Teachers are more open to summer camps than the other ideas presented. Like the parents we spoke with, teachers voiced a preference for the summer camps to be in-person if possible. They coupled this preference with the need for appropriate health and safety precautions to be in place.

“We should only provide summer programs if it is safe. I think the safety for both the students and the teacher should be the number one concern. Virtual school during summer for elementary students will not be effective unless we find a way to make it more play-based.”

One idea for getting students up to speed that came up in both teacher groups is waiving some of the required testing. When brought up, there was virtually unanimous support.

“We wouldn’t need those 5 days if we could get a waiver on standardized testing this year. We are going to be dealing with ‘summer slide’ to the extreme and if we could take away even some of the standardized testing that we have to give in the spring, those are days that can be spent on instruction. Unfortunately, what is going to happen is – across the board – if we have standardized testing this year, our scores are going to plummet. We are going to spend the first part of the year playing catch up yet still expected for our kids to succeed at the same level.”



“We really need to think about food service and how many grade levels are allowed in the cafeteria at the same time. Are you going to serve the same thing every day? Are you going to provide disposable utensils? There is so much to think about.”

All this being said, one of the most striking takeaways is the resilience and confidence of teachers in their ability to get students caught up. Concerns about health aside, there was very much a “we have this” attitude among the teachers we spoke with. Teachers are confident that when the time comes, they will be ready to get their students caught up.

CONCLUSION

Like everything else – going out to eat, getting together with friends, going shopping, etc. – there is a desire to get back to our old routines and ways of doing things and getting back to school is no exception. Also, like everything else, people need to feel they are getting back to normal safely. To this end, a return to school must be met with an assurance that the Department of Education is doing everything it can to minimize the risk of exposure.

There is clearly not a one size fits all solution. However, findings identify a general openness and understanding about the difficulty and complexity of the situation and a recognition that finding a solution will require some patience.

