REPAIR THE FRACTURES:
ADDRESSING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SCHOOLS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Focus of Our Study

COVID-19 has brought abrupt and dramatic changes to the delivery of public school education across the U.S. Our study is among the first to document the experiences of teachers and leaders during COVID-19. Through interviews, surveys, and observations, we detail the changes that teachers and leaders experienced COVID-19. We also consider how schools as organizations have been impacted.

Our Approach

The data were collected as part of a longitudinal four-year study of high schools in Texas that began prior to the pandemic, in 2019. For this report, we focus on data collected during the pandemic, between June 2020 and February 2021. During this period, we conducted 33 interviews, 35 hours of observation, and collected 844 surveys in Fall 2020 (with response rates between 46% and 92%, averaging 82%), across four high schools.

Key Findings

- School leaders faced intense stress and time demands due to managing the logistics of responding to COVID-19 (e.g., health and safety, class assignment and coverage).

- Teachers experienced instructional challenges with hybrid learning; had strained relationships with fellow teachers, students and families; struggled to engage students and saw high rates of student absences; had insufficient time, low morale, and high anxiety.

- Leaders also reported strained relationships with existing teachers, and difficulty building relationships with new teachers.

- Given the burdens and stress placed on teachers, many questioned their commitment to the profession. Some left due to the school or district's handling of COVID, while others planned to leave next year.

- Our findings indicate that schools, as organizations, were stressed significantly by the pandemic, as routines were upended, relationships strained, and roles and systems were thrown into chaos.

Recommendations

Our study illustrates the way in which the pandemic has created intense stress on teachers, leaders, and entire schools as organizations. We urge policymakers to invest in rebuilding relationships within schools, which are critical organizational resources that sustain school improvement efforts, help students learn, and retain educators. Toward these goals, our key recommendations for district, state, and federal policymakers planning COVID relief aid include:

- **A focus on rebuilding and strengthening relationships within schools** between teachers, and between teachers and leaders

- **Added supports for school leaders** who will shoulder the work of rebuilding after the pandemic

- **Intense supports for students** whose depth of "learning loss" is likely extensive, but will take time to assess and support

- **Reimagining accountability policies** to account for the long-term learning and professional disruptions that schools have experienced

- **Rebuilding and strengthening family-school relationships** to improve communication and trust

- **Strong, targeted incentives for teacher retention** including both monetary and non-pecuniary supports to prevent large-scale staff turnover

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COVID-19 brought dramatic changes to public education across the U.S. In March of 2020, at the onset of the pandemic, schools across the country abruptly shuttered their doors and pivoted quickly to remote learning for the remainder of the 2019–2020 academic year. In the absence of federal guidance, each state adopted its own mandates for school reopening in the fall. As a result, today, in some states, school buildings still remain closed, offering only online education; in others, schools are open or partially open, adopting a "hybrid" model.

As we mark the first anniversary of the pandemic, we know little about the experiences of teachers and leaders during this time, particularly in states where schools are open, or partially open, for in-person learning. What information does exist consists either of surveys or journalistic reports, though this is in part because there has been little time for research to emerge.

In this report, we share our emerging findings about teachers and school leaders' experiences during COVID-19, drawn from in-depth interviews and surveys of staff in high schools in Texas, a state that has required the reopening of school buildings to provide in-person instruction to families who opt for that delivery model. Most schools are thus currently offering hybrid (mix of in-person and virtual) instruction. Our research team has been in a unique position to document how teachers and school leaders have experienced COVID-19 because, prior to the pandemic, we had already been conducting in-depth research in high schools for a study focused on school improvement. In response to the pandemic, we quickly pivoted our study to focus on how COVID-19 influenced our schools.

Our research documents how, in addition to the stress on individual leaders and teachers, the pandemic has placed immense stress on entire schools as organizations. Based on our findings, we describe supports that will be needed to restore and rebuild schools after the pandemic, and to help them improve going forward.

Our Study

This report is based on data collected for an ongoing study of four high schools in Texas, which began in fall of 2019. We focused on four campuses that were high-poverty and served large proportions of students of color. The focus of our study, which is funded by the Spencer Foundation, was not originally related to the pandemic: the goal has been to examine how teacher turnover influences high schools' efforts to improve in math and English.

When the pandemic hit, we shifted our study to focus on how teachers and leaders in the schools we had been studying described the impact of the pandemic, and how the pandemic reshaped organizational practices, routines, and relationships. In this report, we focus on the data we collected starting a few months into the pandemic, between June 2020 and February 2021. During this period, we conducted 33 interviews, 35 hours of observation, and collected 844 surveys (41 administrators, 608 teachers, and 195 other staff members). Survey response rates ranged from 46%-92% across campuses, with an average response rate of 82%. We analyzed our qualitative data to examine how COVID-19 influenced the working lives of teachers and school leaders, including teacher relationships, organizational structures and routines, and school improvement efforts. In this report, we share findings from our interviews and observations, and descriptive results from the survey data.

COVID-19 Context in Texas

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools in Texas were ordered to close by an Executive Order from Governor Abbott on March 17, 2020. At the time, there had been close to 60 confirmed cases in the state of Texas. Although this order originally enforced a two-week shutdown, it included language noting a longer closure period was possible depending on infection rates and other local metrics. As confirmed daily cases rose into the hundreds, Gov. Abbott decided to keep schools closed for in-person instruction for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year.

As the 2020-21 school year approached, the state emphasized reopening schools for in-person learning. Following another Executive Order from Governor Abbott, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) was granted authority to create legal requirements for schools. On July 7th 2020, TEA released guidance for reopening schools, which required that schools offer on-campus instruction for every student whose parents requested it, with few exceptions.

Yet, by August, just as schools were set to reopen, a summer surge in COVID cases had hit Texas. Thus, the Governor allowed schools the option to start the school year virtually up to eight weeks. As a result, all four high schools we studied began the year virtually for between three to eight weeks. After this time, per the governor's order, the schools we studied offered in-person instruction for students whose families opted for it, while also offering online options for those who preferred to learn at home. As a result, most teachers in our schools reported that they were charged with both in-person and remote learning at the same time: during fall 2020, 71% of teachers in our study reported that they had a hybrid teaching assignment, or a mix of in-person and remote learning; 22% of teachers had remote-learning teaching assignments; and 6.7% of teachers taught fully in-person .

As pressure to reopen continued, in October, TEA announced a funding guarantee that would only be available to districts that offered in-person instruction. Additionally, TEA removed the ability

of local districts to make decisions regarding campus or district closures outside of an approved 5-day closure due to confirmed COVID-19 cases. Later, in October, they approved 14-day closures for schools that were unable to provide reasonable accommodations due to staff absences. Thus, as cases rose again, schools reopened and closed intermittently as COVID cases rose and declined. Our case study high schools each had brief closures, ranging from two to four weeks. In one district, these closures came in response to confirmed cases within the school, while others were in response to broader rates of COVID-19 in the community.

Experiences of COVID-19 on Campus

Our research this year gave us in-depth insights into how the work of teachers and leaders changed during COVID-19, as well as overall changes in the way schools operated as organizations. We detail our key themes and findings below.

Impact on School Leaders

The job of a school principal is, in normal times, highly stressful. As expected, our data revealed school leaders experienced significantly intensified job demands and added stress during the pandemic.

Stress of Managing Logistics. As noted, all schools in our study began virtually at the start of the year in August of 2020. In September of 2020, when schools were required to physically re-open and offer a mix of in-person and remote learning, administrators were forced to manage major logistical challenges. One of the most significant challenges they faced was managing the logistics of keeping students and teachers safe when they returned to school. To reduce the amount of contact amongst students, some of our campuses created classroom "pods," which consisted of grouping students with one teacher for an entire day. In the pods, the students would log on and learn remotely with their primary teachers; the teacher, meanwhile, would continue to teach their classes online. This strategy required extensive planning in terms of scheduling, teacher release time, and instruction.

By late fall, all four schools in our study adopted a more traditional schedule where students who chose in-person learning would rotate classrooms, but this plan required strict limits on attendance. To safely implement in-person learning, principals had to manage the health and safety of both students and staff. School leaders reported that, in this new environment, they feared making mistakes that could expose students or staff to COVID. One leader said they not only feared making a critical error around someone's health, but also losing their job as a result of that mistake.

As local COVID cases surged over late fall and winter, each of our districts made the decision to shut down our study's schools again, throwing all of the school's systems and processes into chaos

all over again. As one leader noted: "It's just, it's all moving so fast, and the way we're running school right now is different than the way we were running it at the start of the year. And it's just like there's probably been four different versions that we've run since the start of the year. And it's just all been in response to things that are bigger than what we can control." School leaders described the challenges of coping with the constant shifting between in-person and remote instruction, and the upheaval of schools' organizational systems in response to these changes.

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Strained Relationships with Teachers. School leaders also reported that, in the midst of managing the roll out of ever-changing processes and plans, they felt caught in the middle between mandates from the "top" and concerns from their teachers who were on the "front lines," who felt burdened by many of the new procedures around safety or attendance. Further, as teachers became increasingly stressed about COVID exposure, school leaders reported that they were often the target of this anxiety. In one school, teachers suspected that the district and school leaders were not being transparent about positive cases on campus. According to one leader, "There are some staff members who've been affected, who blame the district, or blame … I haven't experienced this personally, but I have seen it with some of my colleagues, of blaming the administrator personally for being exposed, or having to come to work, and potentially be exposed, that sort of thing. So, we absorb a lot of that. I think most people know that we're middle managers, and it's just out of your control, and understand that those things typically come from TEA [Texas Education Agency]. But emotions are high, and I think, sometimes some people forget that."

School leaders also reported difficulty communicating and building relationships with teachers. Even when school was in person, to keep social distancing requirements in place, faculty meetings were held virtually through Zoom or Google Meet. One leader noted that relationships with his teachers were more strained because he could not see them and interact with them informally. As a result, he has had to become much more intentional with his communication with them: "It's forced me also to improve my communication skills. Because again, I can't just come up to a teacher and have a casual conversation, just happenstance. I mean, I have to be intentional about everything that I do. I have to plan it out. I have to coordinate with them to even have a conversation. So, it's made me much more intentional in my actions."

School leaders noted it was especially hard to build relationships with new teachers on campus, because the small interpersonal moments of interaction did not happen anymore: "I find it really hard to build relationships with them because typically we'd be doing that within a PLC [professional learning communities] or within a group staff meeting in person where you're just saying,

'Hi, how are you? How are the kids? How's your new house coming along?' And I just felt like it's those small moments where you build trust and you build capacity within your relationship has been really hard to do this year."

Impact on Teachers

Prior to the pandemic, teachers experienced high levels of job-related stress, and this year (similar to principals) teachers reported that their stresses increased significantly. In our interviews and surveys, we heard of numerous work and personal challenges that teachers faced in this new, often chaotic, academic year: teachers described instructional challenges, issues with student engagement and attendance, and anxieties around COVID-19 and balancing increased work responsibilities.

Instructional Challenges with Hybrid Learning. One key challenge that teachers reported this year was effectively delivering instruction in hybrid mode (with some kids physically present in the classroom while others in the same class period were learning online, at home.) While the majority of teachers felt at least somewhat supported in implementing fully remote learning, they felt far less prepared to manage hybrid instruction: one-fifth of teachers said that they were "not at all prepared" for this task. Our survey reports indicate that 60% of teachers were concerned about their ability to perform their job. "It's exhausting in a different way than in previous years," as one teacher said. Another teacher described it as "emotional and stressful" and having "never worked so hard in their life or given so much of themselves." One math teacher noted that what they were doing was not truly "hybrid": "We don't do hybrid. We don't walk around and teach the people in class, and then the students who are at home watch on a camera. That's not really the way it works, because the vast majority of our students are virtual. I have some classes where I have a single in-person learner. I have 24 students who are supposed to be connecting from home, a single person in class. So, I teach the same way I have all year long. I teach into the computer." At the same time, some teachers spoke about the benefits of being nudged to become more proficient with technology and planned to incorporate some of the things they learned in the future. One teacher described how the "pandemic has forced the modernization of education" and "hopes it will be beneficial for all students, even post-pandemic."

Struggles with Student Engagement and Attendance. Across our schools, teachers reported significant challenges with student engagement and attendance. Many teachers reported difficulties getting students to log-on from home. In our surveys, 79% of teachers reported low student attendance was a "very serious" or "extremely serious" issue. (See Figure 1.) Teachers said they were often unable to reach a subset of their students who were not showing up for remote instruction, and contacting parents was often difficult, particularly with parents whose first language was not English.

Figure 1

How serious of an obstacle do you find
low student attendance?

How serious of an obstacle do you find
low student engagement?
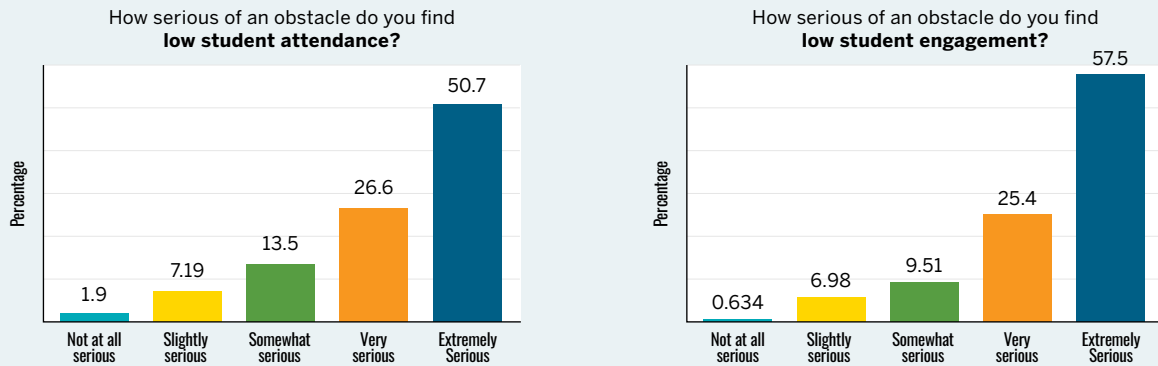
Teachers also reported significant problems with student engagement for those who were 'showing up' in some format. Some teachers reported that some students would log in on Zoom but they kept their cameras off, and thus teachers weren't sure if they were engaging. In the surveys, 84% of teachers reported that low student engagement was a "very" or "extremely serious" issue. This created pressures on teachers who sought to assess student learning. As one teacher said, "I don't know what they know. The screen's not on. I can't see eyeballs. How do we know they're doing things? If we ask them to read something, how do we know that they're reading? If we want them to listen, how do we know that they're listening? These cues that you look for when you teach…I'm not directly connected to my kids, and I have no sense of if they're actually with me."

Many teachers explained that they understood that the lack of student engagement stemmed, at least in part, from the pressures that students were experiencing during the pandemic. Teachers shared heart-breaking stories of the many students who lost parents and other family members to COVID, causing significant mental health struggles. Further, teachers reported that some students had unstable internet connections and that many students were working full-time to help their parents financially. According to one math teacher, "We had a lot of kids that were working, augmenting the family's income because mom got laid off, dad got laid off. We've seen a lot of that." Many teachers also said students had trouble engaging in school because they were responsible for the supervision of their younger siblings who were themselves learning remotely.

Insufficient Time. A significant theme in our interviews was the added time that teachers had to spend on numerous tasks in the new hybrid instructional model. Teachers reported that it took extra time to modify their curriculum and/or create new materials for students for remote learning. Teachers also struggled to have materials available for students who did not have a steady internet connection. Almost 80% of teachers reported finding time to plan to be "somewhat" or more serious of an issue.
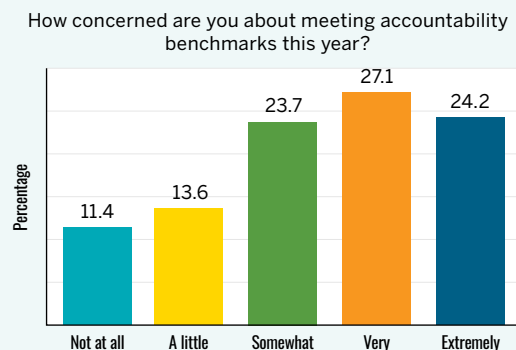
Another significant addition to teachers' responsibilities was the additional work hours they spent keeping track of attendance. The absence of specific guidance at the state level left districts and

campuses to create their own mechanisms for outreach and attendance. In one school, teachers had to take attendance for the same students multiple times per day. Teachers also found themselves spending extra time tracking down students who did not show up for online or in-person learning, and communicating with their parents. With attendance, teachers have felt the brunt of this work, and they cited their "frustration by excessive paperwork and record keeping."

Some teachers alluded to experiencing burnout as a result of this extra time investment and these added responsibilities. One teacher described being constantly in "survival mode," investing 80 to 100 hours per week, and working late during evenings and weekends. Another teacher said their workday ended at 10pm, and others described working after their own children went to bed. Those who taught remotely experienced "blurred lines between work and home."

In light of these challenges, teachers also shared that they were concerned about their ability to meet state accountability expectations. The state did not let schools know that they were not going to be subject to A–F accountability ratings until December 2020, although as of this writing students are still held accountable for passing tests to graduate. Many teachers thus sought to be strategic in their instruction, focusing only on the "core" things students needed to know, and many shared that their goals for the year were just to "survive." The majority of teachers were "very" or "extremely" concerned about meeting accountability benchmarks, when we surveyed them in October-November. (See Figure 2.) The changes to the basic organizational functioning of schools, delivery of instruction, and changing accountability policy created increases in workload and uncertainty.

Figure 2

How concerned are you about meeting accountability benchmarks this year?

Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Very	Extremely
11.4	13.6	23.7	27.1	24.2

Percentage

Low Morale and High Anxiety. In light of all these strains, teachers reported that morale has suffered. One teacher said, "I've heard some people say that their love for teaching is diminishing, with how difficult it's becoming to teach remotely while teaching their class in person and juggling all of that. And I think morale… Everyone's very frustrated and overwhelmed."

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Teachers also expressed anxiety around maintaining their health. Our survey found that 70% of teachers were either "very" or "extremely" concerned about staying safe and healthy at work as their schools transitioned to in-person learning. Some teachers have also shared feeling conflicted, even terrified, about safeguarding their personal health while returning to school for in-person instruction. 85% of our survey respondents were worried about their own health or getting others sick.

At the same time, teachers reported having difficulty balancing work with personal lives. 64% of teachers reported concerns about life balance issues such as caring for family members while keeping up with their responsibilities at school, and 59% were concerned about their mental health, reporting feeling anxious and depressed (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Are you concerned about
life balance issues such as caring for family members while keeping up with school?

36% No   64% Yes

Are you concerned about
emotional issues, such as feeling anxious or depressed?

40% No   60% Yes
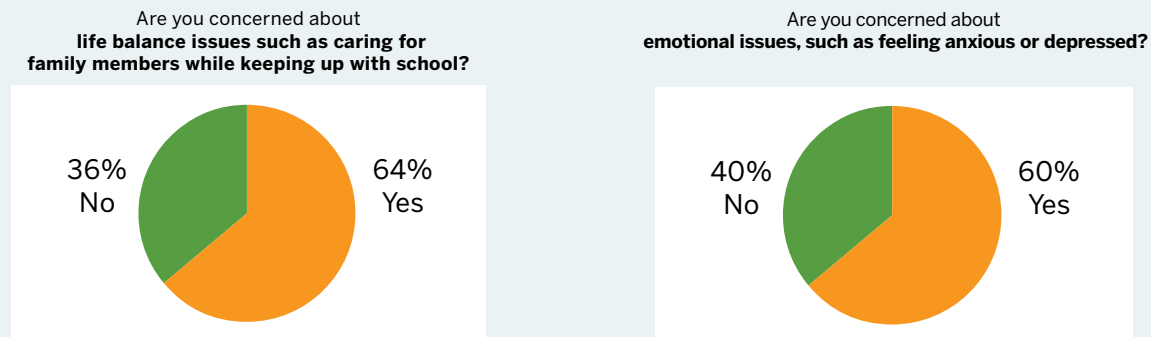
Some teachers felt as though they were "political pawns." One teacher said: "Right now it just very much feels like we are kind of political pawns.

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And I know people who live in other states and a lot of those other states…the schools can close." She added that in other states, governors had prioritized teachers for the vaccine, but not in Texas: "And then in Texas, it's schools can't close and we're going to take teachers off of the 1B list [for vaccines]…I think just having access to a vaccine would alleviate a lot of stress and anxiety over just being here in person." (In early March, under federal guidance, teachers in Texas became eligible to receive vaccines.) Similarly, one administrator commented: "A politician on one side

of his mouth is telling you, don't have groups of larger than 10, but then you're telling people to get kids back into school where the average class size, and especially in urban areas is what, 28 students per class? In this building, I have probably [many thousands of] people. That is a super spreader waiting to happen."
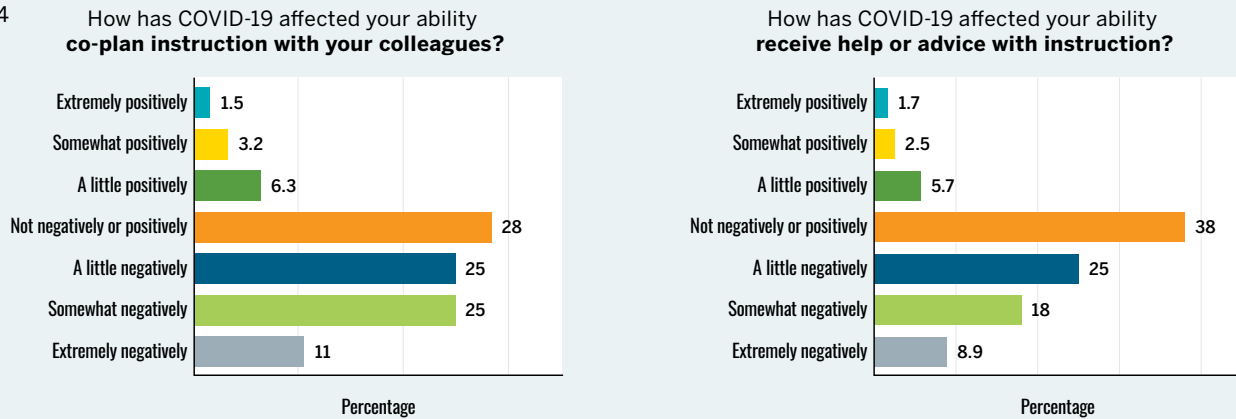
Many teachers also reported feeling dispensable during the political debate about reopening schools. One teacher expressed their anger at how politicians have handled the discussion: "You saw protests of people saying, 'Well, we want businesses open.' Well, then businesses open, and then they said, 'Well, wait a minute. We need someone to watch our kids.' And that's suddenly when the school opening argument came out. And then you started hearing, 'It's perfectly safe in schools,' which obviously… I just feel like it's not an argument about… It's not really about safety or quality of education. I mean, that is an issue. But I think the primary reason for us having to go back is to appeal to that crowd that wants childcare so people can work."

Strained Relationships with Fellow Teachers. We asked teachers how their relationships with colleagues changed this year. On the one hand, we heard that teachers' prior close connections with their immediate colleagues (i.e., those in their professional learning communities, or PLCs) have been a key source of support during this challenging year. A teacher commented on the growing closeness with their PLC team this year: "It's made us grow and lean on each other a lot more, because social interaction in general has gone way the heck down this year. So, I really do cherish the relationships I have with my colleagues. That helps a lot."

Yet, teachers also reported challenges with planning for instruction with colleagues during COVID. Most teams transitioned their meetings to Zoom or Google Meets, which created some difficulties in communication, though, over time, we heard that this got smoother. This difficulty in planning with colleagues was reflected in our survey results. A majority of teachers reported that COVID had negatively impacted their ability to co-plan instruction with their colleagues, but COVID did not have as much of an impact on their ability to receive advice or help with instruction from their peers (See Figure 4).

Teachers also reported that COVID had a negative impact on their informal, interpersonal relationships with colleagues, which is an important aspect of relationship building. One teacher noted: " I mean, for example, my co-teacher, I literally haven't laid eyes on her since March. And obviously she's at home because of her medical exemption, but the fact that I haven't seen somebody that I work with every day for the last three years is deflating."

Figure 4

How has COVID-19 affected your ability
co-plan instruction with your colleagues?

	Percentage
Extremely positively	1.5
Somewhat positively	3.2
A little positively	6.3
Not negatively or positively	28
A little negatively	25
Somewhat negatively	25
Extremely negatively	11

How has COVID-19 affected your ability
receive help or advice with instruction?

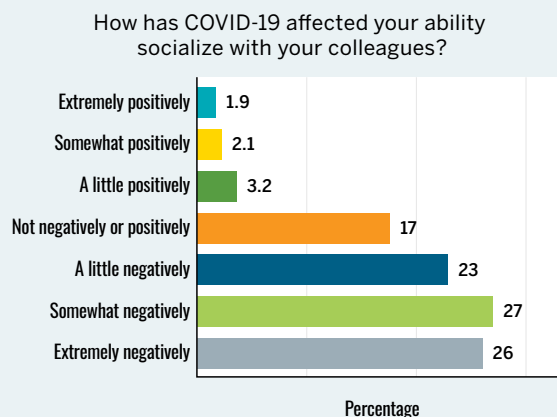|	Percentage
Extremely positively	1.7
Somewhat positively	2.5
A little positively	5.7
Not negatively or positively	38
A little negatively	25
Somewhat negatively	18
Extremely negatively	8.9

Teachers reported that the relationships that suffered the most were with teachers who were outside of their small professional groups, or PLCs, such as teachers who were in other departments, or who were physically located in other parts of the school. Teachers who taught in-person, on campus, noted that they rarely left their classroom or hallway due to COVID protocols and thus didn't see many other teachers very regularly any more. For example, when asked about how COVID has impacted relationships with teachers outside of their PLC, a teacher replied:

> *I think it has a little bit, because like my really good circle of friends, most of them teach here, and I used to see them all the time in the hallways, or we'd come have lunch, I'd go up there, they'd go down here, and we don't really do that anymore. I try to stay in my room as much as possible, so I don't interact with a lot of people. That's what everyone does. It's not like, "Oh, let's go get lunch" or, "Oh, let's go have lunch or let's sit in a workroom." We don't really do that. So, it's just changed us socially. We still text and talk and stuff like that, but everything has moved to either virtual video chats or texting and phone calls like that.*

Our survey data show these patterns more broadly: 76% of teachers reported that COVID had a negative impact on their ability to socialize with their colleagues. (See Figure 5)
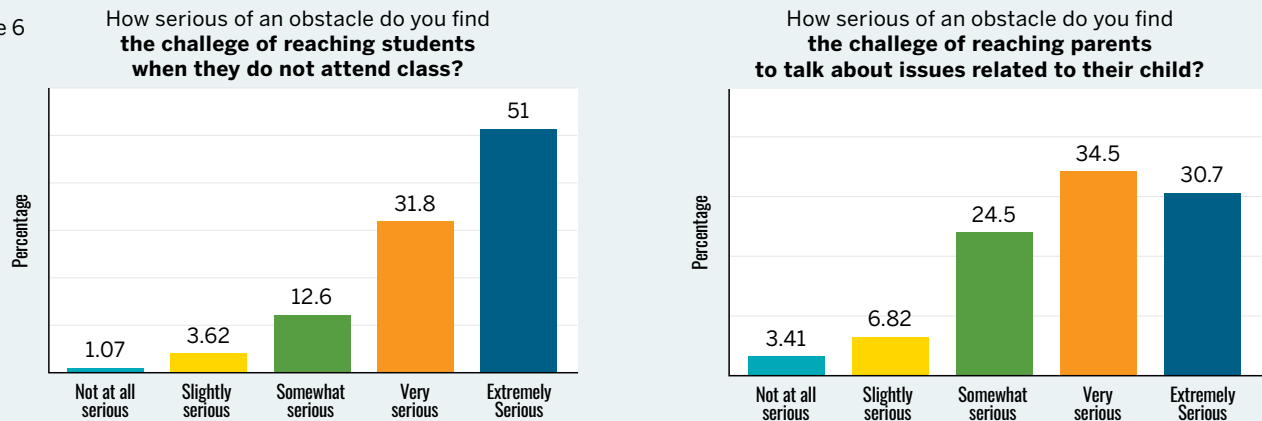
Figure 5

How has COVID-19 affected your ability
socialize with your colleagues?

	Percentage
Extremely positively	1.9
Somewhat positively	2.1
A little positively	3.2
Not negatively or positively	17
A little negatively	23
Somewhat negatively	27
Extremely negatively	26

Weaker Relationships with Students and Families. We also heard that the pandemic impacted relationships between staff and students. The "high fives" and "fist bumps"—the brief physical connections that were, to educators, an important part of building relationships —were gone. One teacher noted: "We really had to eliminate that. We walk in one way in hallways, massive separation between students, things that we just aren't accustomed to. That's been an adjustment."

As noted earlier, it was difficult to assess whether students were learning, especially with cameras off (which teachers noted could be due to connectivity issues), and teachers reported that often, it was difficult to motivate students. For those students who were struggling, teachers sought to reach out to parents, but found it was often hard to connect, especially across language differences for families whose children were English Language Learners. The vast majority (over 80%) of teachers said it was a major obstacle to try and reach students when they did not attend class, and a majority said that reaching parents was a very or extremely serious issue (See Figure 6). In some ways, these challenges existed prior to the pandemic, but the inadequate communications and trust between schools and families was revealed during this time.
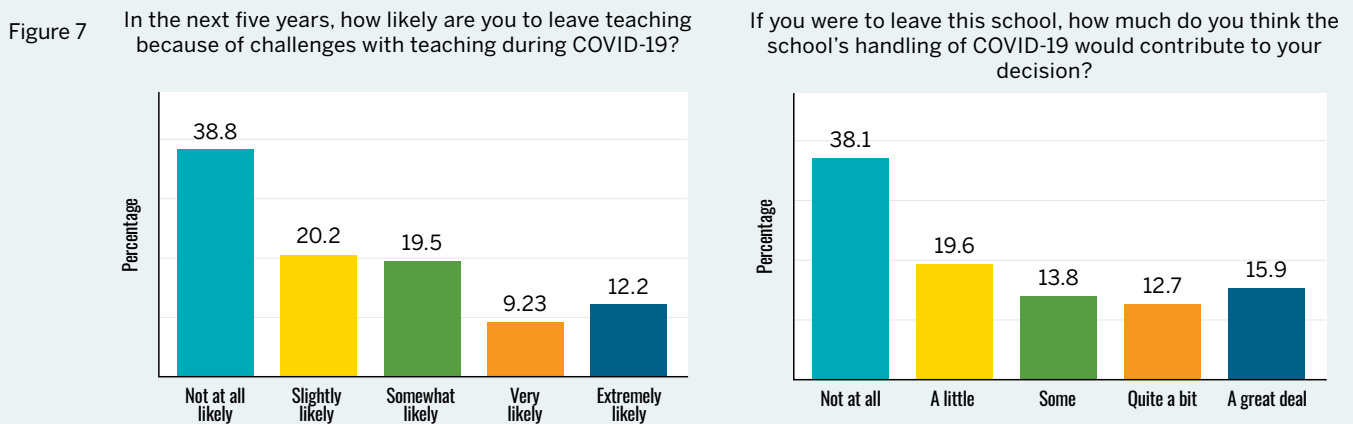
Figure 6

How serious of an obstacle do you find **the challenge of reaching students when they do not attend class?**

How serious of an obstacle do you find **the challenge of reaching parents to talk about issues related to their child?**

Questioning Their Commitment to the Profession. Many of our schools saw lower rates of turnover between spring and fall of 2020. However, our data illustrated a potential for significant turnover in the coming years. In particular, there were three issues we noted related to turnover. First, COVID did drive some teachers to leave due to health concerns: there were in each school, a handful of teachers or key staff who left this year due to COVID. These had a significant impact. One teacher said, "Well, one of our colleagues, he had a health condition, and our district didn't quite have the policy flexibility to allow him to continue teaching, so he was forced to resign… And so, in addition to the actual principle of the thing, the fact is, now we have to cover his six classes… So, it was a mess." Teachers who left midyear were not always replaced, due to a lack of qualified teachers in the pool. Schools operated with shortages of staff, and substitute teachers were largely unavailable, all of which created more strain on teachers.

Second, there were several teachers who had initially planned to leave their campus this year, but stayed on this year due to financial uncertainty, and were planning to leave next year. Teachers said they did not feel a pandemic and recession was a time to, as one teacher put it, "rock the boat." One teacher said, "COVID steered people into staying on the job because we didn't want to be job-searching in the middle of a global pandemic." They continued, "I would have been gone last year, if not for COVID."

Third, there were teachers who planned to leave, not because of COVID itself, but because of their school's handling of COVID or because of the stress of teaching during COVID. As our survey data show, 20% of teachers said they were very or extremely likely to leave next year due to the challenges of teaching during COVID. Further, more than 18% of teachers also reported that, if they did leave, their school's handling of COVID would contribute to their decision to leave (See Figure 7). One teacher, describing the low morale on their campus, said: "Last year, no COVID, nothing, … we counted about half the department was planning on leaving, okay? So, you're talking 10, 12 or so folks. I think if anything, this pressure on us, solidified, in your head, if you were on the fence, oh you know which way you're leaning now, right?" As one assistant principal suggested, we may not see the impact of COVID on turnover for another year, but turnover is likely to be high because teachers were made to feel "expendable" this year.

Figure 7

In the next five years, how likely are you to leave teaching because of challenges with teaching during COVID-19?

If you were to leave this school, how much do you think the school's handling of COVID-19 would contribute to your decision?

Prior to the pandemic, each of our schools already had relatively high teacher turnover rates, which suggests that this impending turnover could have significant negative impacts on schools, particularly during a time of teacher shortages.

Conclusion: Repairing Organizational Damage to Schools from the Pandemic

Our study provides key insights into the stress and difficulties experienced by administrators, teachers, students and parents during the pandemic. Yet, our findings also indicate that schools, as organizations, were stressed significantly by the pandemic.

Organizations rely on stable and developed systems, structures, shared goals, relationships, and routines to function. However, these systems and routines were upended and thrown into chaos as schools were forced to pivot abruptly to remote learning in March of 2020. This shift created significant challenges and a need to create many new systems, including technology, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and student tracking and supports. As routines changed, along with policy requirements, so did staff members' roles and responsibilities. School leaders took on new roles in terms of decision making around online learning management systems, health issues, communications, and even tasks such as contact tracing. On top of an already arduous schedule, leaders' time became consumed by COVID related issues. Furthermore, COVID-19 put tremendous stress on teachers, and put stress on relationships among everyone on campus.

Our research therefore sheds light on an overlooked dimension of COVID-19's impact on schools: the damage to the school's organizational functioning, including its routines, relationships, and structures. This strain was particularly acute in our campuses, which served communities that already suffered from the strain of prior disinvestment by states, faced high accountability pressures, and served marginalized communities.

> Schools will need a profound level of resources to rebuild relationships, systems, and processes, and consider how to move forward.

Schools will need a profound level of resources to rebuild relationships, systems, and processes, and consider how to move forward. Some policymakers have described the goal for education as a return to "normal," which during a time that is so challenging might sound appealing to many, particularly those families who attended well-resourced schools. Yet, even after the pandemic is over, COVID's impact on organizational functioning of schools will have longer-term implications for schools' ability to meet students' needs and to improve. The weakening of organizations may also drive teacher and leader turnover, which may weaken relationships and shared goals further, creating a vicious cycle. These organizational dimensions, often neglected in policy remedies, will need to be attended to in future policy in order to rebuild organizations and work towards school improvement.

Our findings thus suggest that a mere "return to normal" is not the answer. Our study illustrates the ways in which the pandemic has created intense stress on schools—stress that many may otherwise not recognize. The federal government has rightly prioritized increased funding to schools, which is needed for a deep and sustained investment in rebuilding schools and repairing the damage that has been done (a type of "Marshall Plan" for education). But we urge policymakers not to invest only in programs and services, but also to invest in building and rebuilding relationships within schools, which are critical organizational resources that sustain school improvement efforts, help students learn, and retain educators. While all schools may benefit

from such investment, given the "twin pandemics" of racial injustice and COVID-19, we argue that resources should be directed to schools serving high-poverty students and students of color, who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 due to systemic inequities in housing, health care, and the economy.

Toward these goals, our key recommendations for district, state, and federal policymakers planning COVID relief aid include:

- **A focus on rebuilding and strengthening relationships within schools**. Relationships are a source of organizational strength. Yet, in our schools, we saw the strain that the pandemic imposed on these relationships, which may impede schools' ability to emerge from this crisis. This fall, as in-person learning likely resumes, teachers will return to campus and many will have had little time interacting with peers beyond their PLC meetings or prior relationships. Administrators, too, will return with having had less time to build relationships with teachers. Thus, we recommend that districts and schools be provided with financial and technical resources to engage in a rebuilding of relationships between staff on campus. This could include hiring staff members who are specifically dedicated to strengthening relationships between teachers on campus, given that leadership teams will be focused on making academic improvements and the core work of teaching and learning. This also may mean allocating extra time (staff development days, or release periods) to engage in this work. Without an intentional focus on these repairs, schools will struggle as organizations to keep forward momentum when in-person learning resumes. Furthermore, building on what we noted were the strongest ties in schools during the pandemic, schools might allocate more planning periods to small groups, or professional learning communities in schools, to build on the strengths of those teams and their shared knowledge and professional expertise.

- **Added supports for school leaders**. Leaders were struggling to manage their ever-shifting roles, and their greatly expanded responsibilities, during the pandemic. When the pandemic is over, much rebuilding work will be on their shoulders: they will have the task of rebuilding relationships, modifying curriculum and instruction, and ensuring adequate student supports. Our work indicates that leaders will need additional support-whether in terms of additional administrative staff, or technical support—to help them fulfill these roles.

- **Intense supports for students**. While national reports warn of the large numbers of students who have missed instructional time, our data from teachers also sound alarm bells, indicating that there is a large proportion of students who have not been attending or engaging in school for an entire academic year. The true depth of these learning losses may not be known until students return, since teachers cannot assess learning for all of their students. Some students will be far behind, and others will be less 'behind' but the depth of their knowledge may be weaker. Teachers will need supports in assessing these learning needs, designing supports

and interventions, and resources to do so. This will require investment, as costs will include staffing extra class periods, extra tutoring services, and extra systems for monitoring student progress and learning and well-being in school. Students will have significant mental health issues from the trauma of the past year as well, and mental health supports will also be needed.

- **Reimagining accountability policies**. Related to our prior point about student learning, we also recommend putting accountability pressures on hold: a single year or two-year release from accountability pressures is not sufficient, as the pandemic will have long-lasting impacts that go beyond even the next academic year. These disruptions need to be accounted for in future assessments, and might prompt an opportunity to revisit the goals and aims of schooling and how policymakers should assess progress towards those goals.

- **Rebuilding and strengthening family-school relationships**. We also recommend that policymakers allocate funds to shore up school-family relationships. We heard of teachers struggling to reach parents, and frustrated that in addition to their role this burden fell upon them. This might indicate a need to deepen trust and build strong school-community ties. Thus, we call for investment for family outreach and communication, particularly bilingual specialists to help work with parent and families to get students the supports they need.

- **Strong, targeted incentives for teacher retention**. Our findings indicate that, after this year, teachers may be more likely to leave the profession, which is particularly alarming given that the schools we are studying serve large concentrations of historically marginalized students. States and districts will need to provide significant incentives for teachers to stay. In addition, teacher retention policies should also include non-pecuniary incentives like more flexible work schedules, etc.

Once schools open on a widespread basis after the most severe threats from COVID-19 are diminished, schools will not be able to go back to "business as usual" unless some of these (possibly hidden) issues are addressed. While the focus right now is, rightly so, on the costs and resources needed to reopen schools safely, COVID-19 has disrupted school organizations in ways that will have lingering effects, requiring significant investment well beyond this academic year. And, not all schools will be in the same position at that time; schools that were already under-resourced, in which underinvestment and staff turnover created organizational instability, will require deeper investments and repairs. There are competing visions of what future years might look like in schools, either going back to normal, the way things were before, which benefited those already privileged in society, or taking this immense disruption from the pandemic as an opportunity to reinvest and recommit to schools and their staff, and move towards a more equitable education system.

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