TEACHERS AND TEACHING IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC:

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH CAROLINA'S POLICY LEADERS

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A PARTNERSHIP OF

INDEPENDENT RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In Fall 2019, the University of South Carolina launched ALL4SC – an effort to galvanize *all of its assets as a Research 1 institution* to support high-need PK-12 schools and prototype a coherent, birth to career (or Zero-to-Workforce) education system for our state.

Our study: In early June 2020, in collaboration with the South Carolina Education Association, the Palmetto State Teachers Association and the SC Department of Education, a UofSC research team surveyed every South Carolina teacher. Within a week over 12,000 responded (~25% of the state's teaching workforce, yielding a very large sample). During the last week of June, we conducted in-depth focus group interviews with a group of 75 teachers from across the state who varied in teaching experience and high v. low poverty and urban and rural contexts.

Our questions focused on: (1) interactions with students, (2) strategies and tools for remote teaching, (3) access and comfort with online learning, (4) changes in instruction and use of time, (5) sources of guidance and support, (6) cause of and adjustments to stress, and (7) lessons learned and innovations for the future.

In this report (Part 1), we point to key policy issues surfaced by the data. A second report (Part 2) will focus more on practice as schools re-open in the fall. Our technical report, including a comprehensive presentation of our survey data and methods can be found here

LESSSONS FROM TEACHERS

COVID-19 has turned everyone's life upside-down — including anyone involved in public schooling — students and parents as well as the administrators and teachers who serve them. Since mid-March, when schools closed in efforts to contain the virus, teachers across the globe turned to remote teaching. Since then the debates over when and how to reopen schools have accelerated. South Carolina is no exception. With guidance created by the state's AccelerateEd Task Force, school districts are releasing plans for how to best return to, what many are calling, the new normal of schooling.

Everyone wants students to return to school as soon and as safely as possible. There is no precise playbook for doing so, albeit top performing nations, such as Finland, Singapore, and Estonia, had already invested in their teaching professions

in ways that made the shift to distance learning more effective. Most importantly, as we later note, these top performing school systems had developed e-platforms for teachers to use, as well as established teaching networks where their expertise can be shared.

In these uncertain times one thing is clear: If we are going to better serve the students and families of South Carolina, we need to learn from those who work most closely with them — teachers.

This report captures the experiences and insights from over 12,000 of our state's teachers. Drawing on both a survey and in-depth interviews, we learned a great deal from them and what it was like to teach under adverse conditions.

Our findings are organized by five themes.

1. ***Teachers' commitment to students and their profession.*** Teachers are *most concerned* about the well-being of their students. Our survey was conducted in late May into the first week of June, 2020. At that time, over 9 in 10 teachers who responded to our survey had planned to return to teaching in the fall.[1]
2. ***Stress over their students and adjustments to remote teaching.*** Teachers are most stressed about their students' social and emotional health and learning loss, in addition to their own safety and what they should be doing now to prepare for next year.
3. ***Barriers to reaching and teaching students***. Teachers went to major lengths to support students during the school closures. However, major barriers stood in their way — especially for those who taught in high-poverty schools, and those who worked with elementary students, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners.
4. ***A whirlwind of new demands in teaching and learning.*** Teachers had to take on many new, complex tasks as they shifted to remote teaching. Some were successful; others struggled. Most needed a lot more support as others found new ways to collaborate with each other in serving students and their families.
5. ***Important lessons for the return to schooling***. The challenges teachers faced this spring also spurred ideas about innovations in parent and family engagement, student-centered learning, curriculum, and teacher leadership. We explore each of these five themes next, followed by a set of recommendations for policymakers and practitioners to consider in the return to school.

Teachers' commitment to students and their profession

Three words capture teachers' response to the rapid shift to remote teaching: *Commitment to students*. In each of the focus group interviews, teachers talked about how much they "miss their students" and "struggle in not seeing them." Teachers, in both the surveys and interviews, consistently spoke to their "fear" that their students would be set back emotionally as well as academically.

> "
> *Home life was not good for many students. They struggled. Having to be home was hard, and not having a teacher to be there for them was so difficult. They needed a lot of emotional support.*
> "

On June 23rd and 25th, we interviewed 76 teachers who were nominated by The SCEA, the PSTA, and the SCDE, based on criteria established by the research team. The teachers interviewed were from every county in the state, with levels of experience ranging from novice teachers with 0-3 years experience to veteran teachers with more than 24 years in education. The research team made sure to select participants from various racial backgrounds that represent the educators of South Carolina, across grades PK – 12, with a mix of core subjects and related arts courses. (See more details in Appendix A).

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[1]As this report is being released in late July, we cannot say for certain of the same response in regards to teachers' intention to return to teach when schools reopen.

In the spring, the vast majority of teachers turned to an array of different tools and platforms to get the job done — first to reach students and care for them, and second to figure out how to best continue their instruction. Many teachers reported working long hours to meet the needs of students, albeit we do not have detailed survey data on the variation in their exact hours on the job during the pandemic.

When asked where they obtained resources to provide course content for remote instruction, **81 percent of teachers indicated creating their own resources** – although many teachers (51%) identified their district (51%) and schools (44%) as a resource.

As they honored their commitment to educating our state's children, many teachers were often confounded by the vast array of e-learning options, given little guidance on what to use, coupled with too many complexities of emergency teaching to handle on their own. One teacher, experienced, National Board Certified, and skilled in using technology, said it plainly, "It was like being a first-year teacher all over again."

Teachers, with many of them imparting praise for the support they received from administrators, got a great deal done. By the time we surveyed and interviewed them they were quite tired, but also energized by what they learned. They talked about the innovations they employed and had many ideas for moving forward. Teachers expressed a great deal about the stress they experienced once schools closed, while also pointing to the many successes they had. However, they made it clear the conditions that need to be in place to ensure more effective remote teaching and hybrid learning. As one teacher said:

> *Any success that we had occurred because of the relationships we already established with students. Our fear for next year is not having those relationships with students and families. We are worrying now about how to build relationships over a computer.*

The 12,000 South Carolina teachers who responded to our survey are dedicated to their profession and service to children and families. On the survey, we asked teachers if they were planning to return to the classroom this fall. Virtually everyone — 94 percent — reported *yes*. And of the very few who said they would not return, only 1 in 4 indicated that the experience of teaching during the pandemic had a significant influence on their decision. A group of teachers told us:

> *"We did not want to let the students down. We did not want to let the school district down. We did not want to keep students from progressing."*

South Carolina teachers' commitment to students, families, and public education was made clear in many ways. They wanted to return to school and the face-to-face teaching they miss deeply. For example, our survey queried teachers about sources of work-related stress they experienced during COVID-19 school closures. As we explore in the next section, the *number 1 stressor* was the well-being of their students.

Stress over their students and adjustments to remote teaching

Well over half of South Carolina's teachers report that they were "adjusted" or "well adjusted" to remote teaching and learning. (See Figure 1). Our interviews revealed, more often than not, that they did so by relying on their colleagues. For example, one teacher said, "We had to learn together….We are all learning new skills, and that has helped." Another said:

As teachers we monitor and adjust. This is what we do on a daily basis. We adjust.

Others recognized administrators who "helped them connect with students" and expressed concerned about their stress. They also pointed to and praised counselors who worked with them to address their students with "many mental health needs."

On the other hand, not all teachers had the support they needed. One said:

> *I was mostly stressed by my school administration as they micro-managed us. We had to redo successful things so that they could check a box. Paperwork seemed more important to them.*

In fact, 44 percent of the state's teachers reported they were not, or were only somewhat adjusted. Their anxiety and worry were serious. As the survey revealed, teachers' primary work-related stress was concern for their students' well-being (See Figure 2).

Which of the following best describes your adjustment to remote teaching and learning?

■ Not adjusted ■ Somewhat adjusted ■ Adjusted ■ Well adjusted

| 7% | 37% | 36% | 20% |
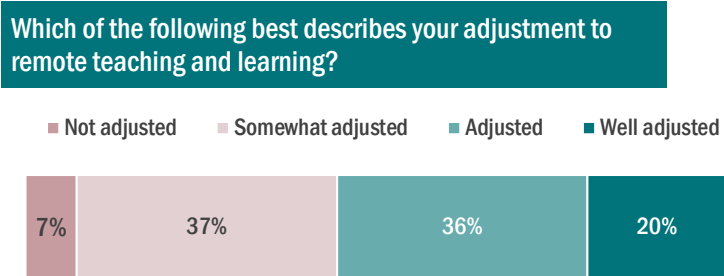
Figure 1: Adjustment to remote teaching. Self-report of teacher adjustment to remote teaching from March to June 2020

For each of the following potential sources of work-related stress, indicate the level of stress that you are currently experiencing during COVID-19 school closures. (% of educators in each category; "Not applicable" responses are not included in the calculation

■ No stress ■ Mild stress ■ Moderate stress ■ High stress ■ Not applicable

	No stress	Mild stress	Moderate stress	High stress	Not applicable
Concern for the well-being of students	4	16	31	49	0
Concern about the reopening of schools	13	21	28	38	1
Change from in-person to remote teaching and learning	12	29	34	25	1
New remote teaching and learning expenses (e.g.,...	28	29	24	20	5

Figure 2: Sources of work-related stress. Self-report of teacher work-related stress from March to June 2020.

Teachers were concerned about learning loss, but they appeared to be even more concerned about their social-emotional needs. One teacher said:

> *I could not support their social emotional needs. Being able to help them academically was hard, but the relationship piece was even harder. Our students lost the relationship (with teachers and their peers). Many of them were not eating. Their emotional state was a big problem. We could not assess their needs because of the absence of non-verbal cues we can see (when we are in school together).*
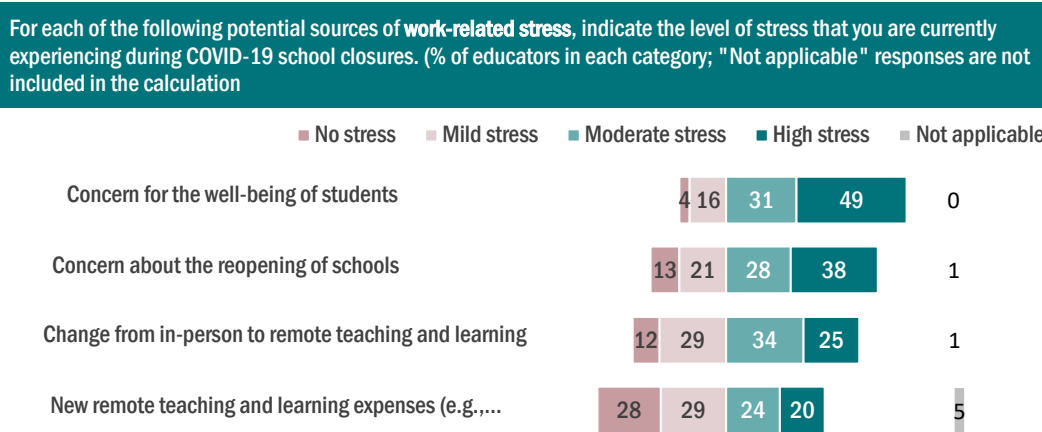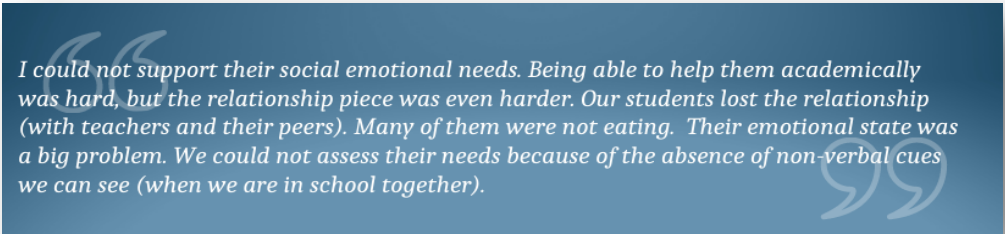
Another teacher noted:

> **Social-emotional learning was most important. Students began getting scared and depressed. Students were struggling because they could not see their friends and could not connect.**

Regarding concern for the well-being of students, educators from high poverty districts were more likely to report high stress than those from low poverty districts (56% v 47%), elementary school teachers were more likely to report high stress than secondary school teachers (54% v 45%), and special education teachers were more likely to report high stress than general education teachers (54% v 48%).

Teachers discussed specific concerns that our survey did not surface. These include trying to find and work with foster and homeless children as well as students suffering from depression.

Teachers talked about the stress they experienced because of the lack of time to respond to remote learning. Others lamented the lack of clarity from administrators as well as increase in what they thought was needless documentation. One said, "Teaching was not difficult, but the paperwork to prove what they were doing was the most stressful."

Some teachers we interviewed were at a loss as to how to motivate their students. This lack of success was a source of stress as well as frustration.

Along with frustrations teachers reported, the interviews surfaced a number of powerful examples of how teachers found success in remote teaching. However, they were not without their own stress. As one teacher said, "Even when we did well at the end of the day most educators, parents, and students were overwhelmed by the experience."

Educating my child/childrenEducating my child/childrenOur survey also posed questions about sources of personal stress. Close to one-half of the state's teachers reported educating (56%) and caring (45%) for their own child/children, as well as taking care of someone considered to be in a high-risk category for COVID-19 (54%) as sources of stress. In addition, almost 2 in 5 teachers identified being stressed about having a second job and the potential changes in their personal finances (see Figure 3).

For each of the following potential sources of **personal stress**, indicate the level of stress that you are currently experiencing during COVID-19 school closures.
(% of educators in each category; "Not applicable" responses are not included in the calculation of the stress level percentages)

■ No stress   ■ Mild stress   ■ Moderate stress   ■ High stress   ■ Not applicable

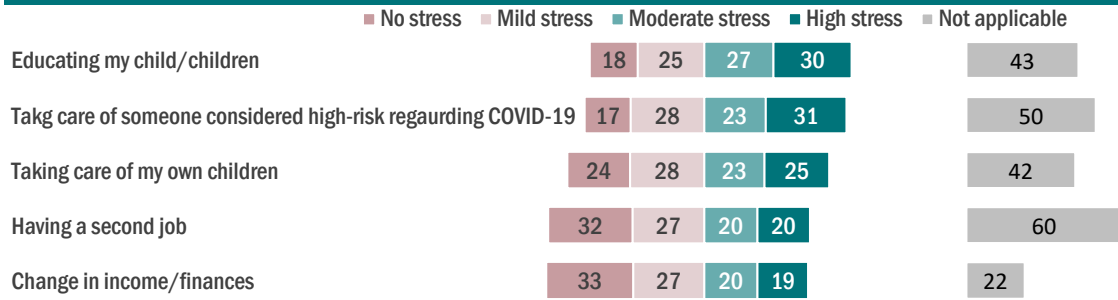|	No stress	Mild stress	Moderate stress	High stress	Not applicable
Educating my child/children	18	25	27	30	43
Takg care of someone considered high-risk regaurding COVID-19	17	28	23	31	50
Taking care of my own children	24	28	23	25	42
Having a second job	32	27	20	20	60
Change in income/finances	33	27	20	19	22

Figure 3: Sources of personal stress. Teacher self report of areas of personal stress from March to June 2020.

For teachers, the second most prominent source of stress was the re-opening of schools. One teacher said, "I am looking forward to returning to school face to face, but I am extremely concerned about health and safety." In mid-July, when plans to reopen South Carolina schools were being decided, the state's COVID-19 cases were continuing to spike. Along with this, national news had just reported that three Arizona teachers contracted the virus while teaching summer school — despite the fact that all "wore masks and gloves, used hand sanitizer and socially distanced, but still got sick." One of them died.

A number of teachers we interviewed continued to reach out to us (via email). In doing so we learned more of their grave concerns about the health risks associated with returning to school, especially those who taught in high poverty districts (74% v 61%). One teacher wrote to the research team on July 13th inquiring when this report would be released:

I am asking for haste, in gratitude for what you are working to do, as lives are at stake.

Concerns about safety weighed heavily on teachers as they sought to reach and teach their students in the spring. In our late June interviews, many reported they were worried about the return to school. Teachers were determined to support their students, and they used many tools and strategies to do so, though not always successfully. Many barriers got in their way. We turn to these matters next.

Barriers to reaching and teaching students

During the COVID-19 forced school closures, South Carolina teachers and administrators had difficulty reaching students. A recent news report indicated that once schools closed in March, about 16,000 students could not be reached. Our survey asked teachers to estimate the percentage of students they attempted to teach but were unable to contact. Our survey reached almost 12,000 teachers, of which three-fourths (over 8,900 teachers) responded they were able to contact at least 86 percent of their students. This was further underscored in our interviews, as teachers told us of the many ways in which they tried to reach their students. There is no doubt many teachers tried but did *not* succeed in reaching some proportion of their student.

As shown in Figure 4, about one-half of the teachers reported they interacted with their students almost every day — and another 42% reported they were able to do so weekly. Our survey revealed several facts:

- Core academic teachers (53% v 41%) and those who teach general education (51% v 42%) were more successful in reaching their students almost daily than their colleagues who taught non-core classes and special education

- Teachers teaching in the highest versus lowest poverty (39% v 53%), and in rural districts versus urban ones (38% v 53%) were less likely to interact with students daily.

Since your school closed due to COVID-19, how often have you interacted with your students?

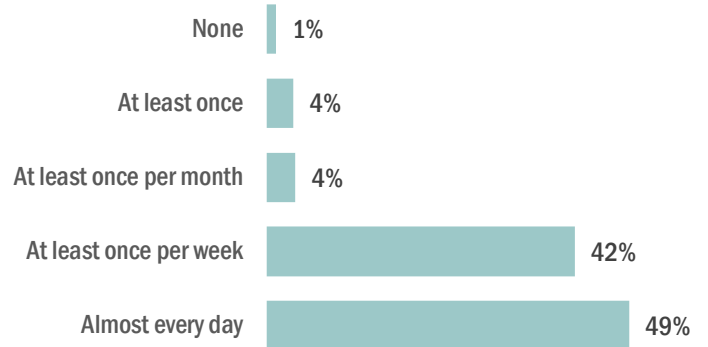|	
None	1%
At least once	4%
At least once per month	4%
At least once per week	42%
Almost every day	49%

Figure 4: Interaction with students. Teacher self-report detailing how often they were able to interact with students from March to June 2020.

Even when teachers reported being able to consistently reach students, this did not always translate into students completing assigned work. Teachers explained the indelible link between caring for students and staying on track to cover the curriculum. In many ways the focus was *basic needs before anything else*. This gives some explanation, though only in part, to the difficulty in getting students to complete their assignments.

What percentage of your students have completed assignments since your school closed due to COVID-19?

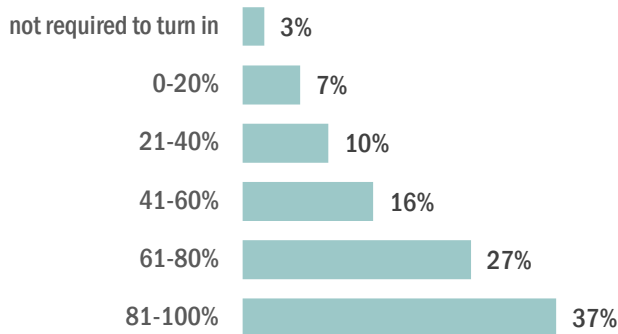|	
not required to turn in	3%
0-20%	7%
21-40%	10%
41-60%	16%
61-80%	27%
81-100%	37%

Figure 5: Student assignment completion. Teachers approximated what percentage of students completed work assigned during virtual learning March to June 2020.

Our survey found that only about 2 in 5 teachers (37%) reported that their students completed at least 80 percent of their academic assignments (Figure 5).

Teachers in the highest poverty districts (29% v 38%) and those who taught special education (28% v 39%) had the most difficulty in having their assignments turned in. However, as one teacher said, "Even when assignments were completed the lack of engagement was troubling to me."

There appeared to be two root causes for reduced engagement. First, some teachers talked about the *lack of student accountability.* They pointed to the lack of clarity in whether assignments would be counted towards student grades. As one teacher noted, "Many did not do the work because they figured out they could not fail." In

other cases, teachers felt they "could not make sure" their students showed up for online lessons and video conferencing.

Second, for most teachers, the lack of student engagement was related to many out-of-school factors besetting children and their families. A report assembled by the SC Department of Education revealed a number of reasons why students were not engaged - they had to work or take care of younger siblings and they had to move to another location because their parents lost their jobs. In our interviews, South Carolina teachers talked about the many different efforts to reach students, but they were confounded by three very specific barriers regarding technology, home life, and communications.

The technology divide. In our interviews, some teachers, particularly those who taught in South Carolina's rural districts, described to us how almost 80 percent of their students did not have internet access at home. And even if students had access to cell service or broadband at home, it did not translate into access to learning.

One teacher told us of a student she served:

> **This one family had internet access through only mom's cell phone – which had to be shared among 6 children.**

As revealed in Figure 6, the majority of South Carolina's teachers agreed that their students had access to hardware (68%), software (67%), had internet at home (58%), and were comfortable using digital tools to learn (56%). ***However, over 4 in 10 teachers reported that their students did NOT have access to internet or were comfortable using digital tools at home.***

Indicate your level of agreement to the following statements regarding **your students' access and comfort** to participate in online learning, even if you are not currently conducting online instruction.
(% of educators in each category; "I don't know" responses are not included in the calculation of the agreement percentages)

■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree ■ I don't know

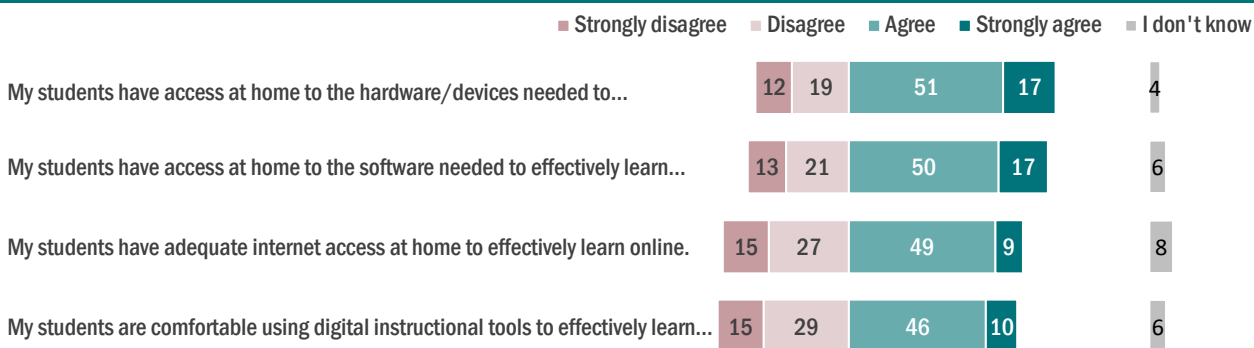| Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know
My students have access at home to the hardware/devices needed to...	12	19	51	17	4
My students have access at home to the software needed to effectively learn...	13	21	50	17	6
My students have adequate internet access at home to effectively learn online.	15	27	49	9	8
My students are comfortable using digital instructional tools to effectively learn...	15	29	46	10	6

Figure 6: Student access of technology. Teachers provided their estimation of student access to and comfort with technological devices and applications during school closures from March to June 2020.

Elementary (47% v 64%) and special education (43% v 59%) teachers were less likely to agree that their students were comfortable using digital tools. Our interviews offered insight. One elementary school teacher noted, "some schools did not let our youngest students take their computers home."

A special education teacher told us that only 2 of her 7 students had a device. Another noted, "our special needs students require supports beyond the technologies that we have."

Teachers made it clear to us that the technological divide was not just about the broadband. A teacher pointed out, "Many students had to stay at their grandparents' homes, and technology support was even less likely to be available." Another told us, "We had parents who could not even help their children with logging in to their computer."

The technology divide led to the student engagement divide. If students did not have internet access, their districts turned to paper packets to support learning at home. Our survey revealed that 31 percent of the state's teachers sometimes or often used paper packets prepared by their districts. And 41 percent indicated that they relied on packets they made themselves. Our survey found that these tools proved to be the least effective (see Figure 7).

The effectiveness you perceive the strategy or tool has in delivering instruction
(% of educators in each category; "Not applicable" responses are not included in the calculation of the effectiveness)

Legend: Not effective · Somewhat effective · Effective · Very effective · Not applicable

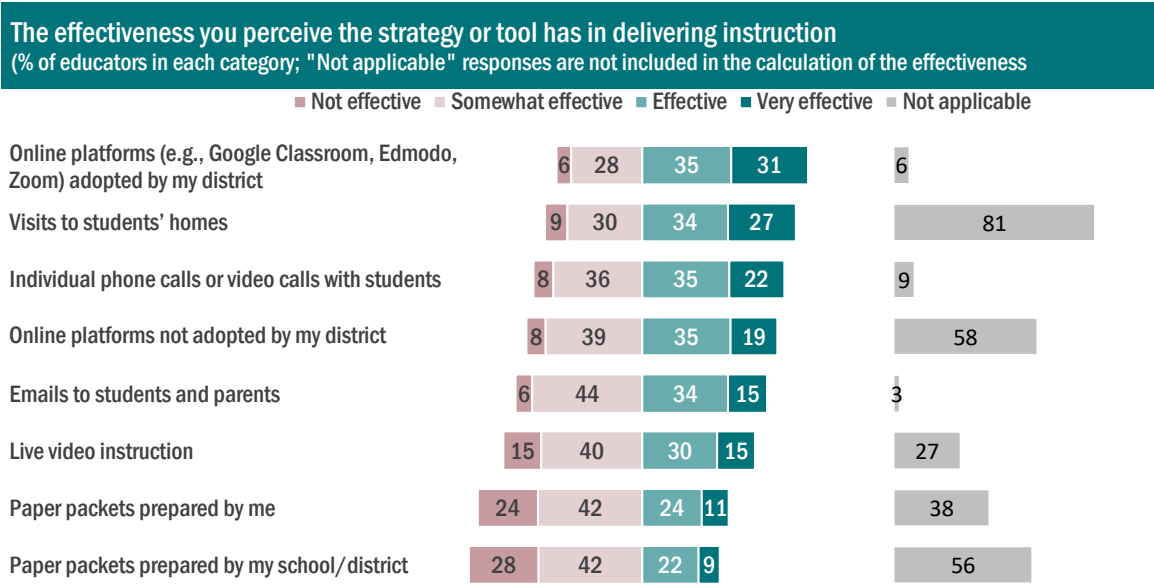| Tool	Not effective	Somewhat effective	Effective	Very effective	Not applicable
Online platforms (e.g., Google Classroom, Edmodo, Zoom) adopted by my district	6	28	35	31	6
Visits to students' homes	9	30	34	27	81
Individual phone calls or video calls with students	8	36	35	22	9
Online platforms not adopted by my district	8	39	35	19	58
Emails to students and parents	6	44	34	15	3
Live video instruction	15	40	30	15	27
Paper packets prepared by me	24	42	24	11	38
Paper packets prepared by my school/district	28	42	22	9	56

Figure 7: Effectiveness of remote learning tools. Respondents estimated the effectiveness of tools and strategies to engage students during remote learning from March to June 2020.

In one focus group we learned:

> *It was not like kindergarten students could magically write sentences when their parents had the paper packets. The parents did the best they could do, but they are not professional educators like we are. And 111 pages in the packet was overwhelming. It was too much too fast.*

The home support divide. One teacher talked about how many parents "just did not know how to help their children with the technologies that we did have." Another teacher pointed out, "our parents just were not familiar with the apps and websites we were using." And for many students, especially those who live in high poverty communities, parental support for learning at home was difficult at best. "I had many students whose parents had 2-3 jobs to make ends meet," a teacher

noted. Another reported, "No one was home to give that extra push." In one focus group teachers summarized it this way:

> *Many students reported feeling isolated. Teachers made many mental health referrals. Academically, the students completed the assignments but did not engage well during the meetings. Many students just needed and wanted to chat and connect with the teacher and their peers. It was not about the work. They did the best they could*.

We learned from several teachers of the grave difficulty of reaching parents who were struggling in dealing with the economic and emotional fallout from the pandemic. As one teacher said, "Some parents did not respond to emails and phone calls until the last week of school." A high school teacher told us:

> *It was very hard to get parents on the phone and get them to respond. It was very frustrating. I think I had 135 students who did not do anything or much despite repeated contact.*

One group of teachers told us:

> *There were barriers for multiple kids in the family – the well-rounded kids survived. All the rest were unable to access the materials. Some students were babysitting their younger siblings at home and were not able to attend to their own work. At the end zoom meetings and packages for all kids became overwhelming.*

The communication divide. Teachers lamented the difficulties in communicating with students and parents. Contact information was not accurate. Some teachers talked about their students moving from place to place. Another said, "We just could not find our homeless students." Still another said:

> *Many of my students' phones were disconnected. We even traveled to their houses to check in on them, but even if we were able to contact them, most still struggled to do the work.*

Some teachers (and their administrators) had success in reaching parents through new technologies, and in doing so, talked about how they need to use these tools, such as Remind or ParentSquare, in new forms of family engagement. Others, however, pointed to the need to establish better ways to create and maintain accurate contact information for the parents of the students they teach. Some districts just did not have these systems in place. For teachers, effective communications were, and will be, the key to the return to schooling. In considering next year, one teacher said:

> *I need to know what the 2020-2021 school year will look like. I've had so many difficulties contacting parents, and having students participate in their learning. We need to work more closely with parents in order for their children to learn at home.*

As teachers confronted the challenge of reaching, and engaging their students, they also had to face new demands in teaching and learning that both challenged them and fueled new ideas about schooling in the future.

A whirlwind of new demands in teaching and learning

The school closures and shift to remote teaching forced teachers to engage in new tasks, many of which constrained their capacity to effectively reach and teach students. Teachers relied heavily on emails and online platforms (e.g., Google Classroom, Edmodo, Zoom) adopted by their districts to deliver instruction during the school closures. Platforms, home visits, and one-on-one calls and video conferences were deemed most effective. The use of paper packets was deemed least effective. The interviews revealed a vast array of platforms and apps that teachers used. Some of these tools seemed to be effective; others were not. (See our technical report for more details regarding strategies and tools and their perceived effectiveness.) However, one thing seemed certain: Most wanted more guidance and support in using e-tools with the new demands in teaching and learning. As one teacher noted:

> *I need professional development on integrating technology in the daily classroom. It goes without out saying, one to one classroom technology is a must. For me I need to work on a blended classroom setup, utilizing technology in a meaningful way. I need a clear understanding of how we are to "do school" logistically.*

The survey posed a series of questions regarding the amount of time teachers spent on certain tasks prior to the pandemic. Teachers reported spending *more (or much more) time* communicating with parents (74%), holding office hours (65%), learning how to use technology (55%), completing paperwork (46%), and preparing lessons (41%). On the other hand, they reported *spending less (or much less) time* on direct teaching (78%) and attending required professional development (48%).

In analyzing the survey responses, we found that: (1) teachers in the highest poverty districts spent less time preparing lessons; (2) more experienced and elementary school teachers spent more time learning how to use technology; (3) special education teachers spent more time on paperwork. The interviews surfaced a number of explanations. For example, teachers in the highest poverty schools had to spend more time finding and caring for students. Elementary teachers were more likely to struggle with technology, especially given that many of the e-tools they used were not conducive for at home learning. Special education students were even more difficult to serve with available online technologies - as a result, their teachers were required to document how they tried to reach and teach them.

Researchers have documented how teachers' working conditions, and the lack of time they have to learn from their colleagues, influence both their retention and school performance. Teaching in the

midst of the pandemic made teaching that much more intense and teachers struggled to find the time they needed for all the new tasks that had to be tackled. During one focus group interview, some teachers reported working around 8-9 hours a day, while others reported working up 12 to 14 hours. Some teachers tried to keep office hours, but had difficulty balancing their professional and home lives (especially if they had school age children they needed to care for as well as help educate). "It was difficult to manage our time," one teacher noted. Another said, "it was hard not to be accessible from 7am to 12 midnight." Still another pointed out, "parents did not respect our time." Others were pressed by new time constraints posed by the availability and accessibility of their students over which they had little control.

The survey also posed a series of questions regarding the amount of time teachers spent on certain pedagogical practice compared to before the school closures (see Figure 8). Teachers reported more time was spent on e-tools and software, along with locating and using resources outside of their school or district.

Indicate the relative amount of time you spend engaging in the following practices compared to before COVID-19 school closures.(% of educators in each category; "Not applicable" responses are not included in the calculation)

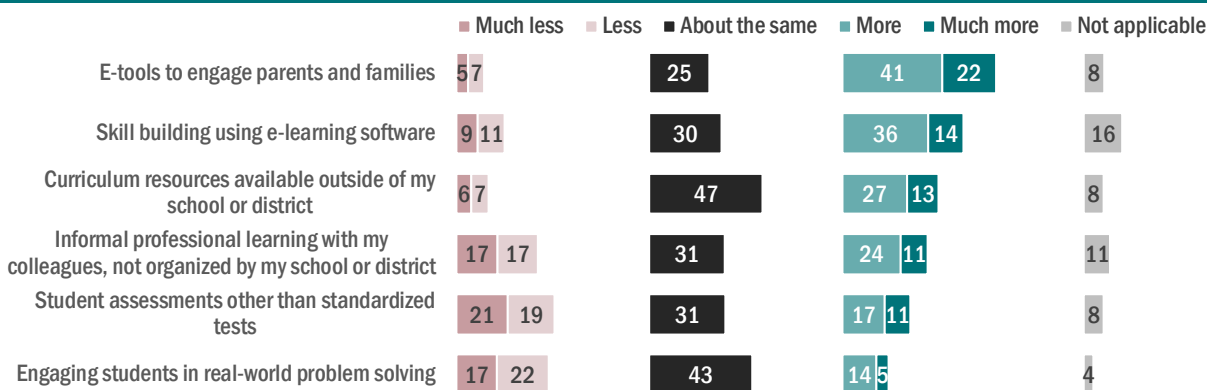|	Much less	Less	About the same	More	Much more	Not applicable
E-tools to engage parents and families	5	7	25	41	22	8
Skill building using e-learning software	9	11	30	36	14	16
Curriculum resources available outside of my school or district	6	7	47	27	13	8
Informal professional learning with my colleagues, not organized by my school or district	17	17	31	24	11	11
Student assessments other than standardized tests	21	19	31	17	11	8
Engaging students in real-world problem solving	17	22	43	14	5	4

Figure 8: Time spent on pedagogical practices. Respondents indicated the amount of time spent on their pedagogical practices during remote learning from March to June 2020.

However, looking more carefully, three data points stand out as educators and policymakers consider lessons learned from their quick shift to remote teaching:

- While about 28 percent of the state's teachers spent more time on non-standardized student assessments; 40 percent spent less time on them;
- While about 20 percent of the state's teachers spent more time on engaging students in real world problem-solving; 39 percent spent less time doing so; and
- About the same percentage of teachers spent more (35%) or less (34%) time on informal professional learning.

In addition, rural teachers were less likely to draw on curriculum resources available outside of their school or district (37% v 41%) and engage in informal professional learning with their colleagues (31% v 37%). Our interviews revealed that rural teachers, who mostly worked in much smaller

schools, had fewer colleagues in their same grade level or subject with whom they could collaborate.

We explore these and other lessons learned next.

Important lessons for the return to schooling

Our interviews were designed to identity both practical next steps as well as more informed education policy through a better understanding of the teachers' experience.

First, South Carolina teachers are looking to policymakers to make sure that students and those who teach and serve them can *return to schools safely*. As we write this report in mid-July, South Carolina has more than 74,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and over 1,200 deaths. Our state's teaching workforce is deeply committed to their students, but teachers are concerned about the health of their students as well as themselves and other educators. Many serve students in small classrooms, where social distancing can be almost impossible.

Second, teachers are eager to find solutions to address the out-of-school factors that made remote teaching so difficult. It is well known that in South Carolina, 1 in 4 families with children live in poverty and 193,000 households (and 2 in 5 rural homes) do not have reliable internet access. Each of these out-of-school factors impact deeply on students' opportunities to learn from home. Teachers are ready to work with policymakers in finding solutions to these serious problems.

Third, teachers' experiences with remote teaching led them to discover innovations for a new normal of schooling that could accelerate student learning in the future. Their insights were anchored in four areas: parent and family engagement, student-centered, hands-on learning, a renewed curriculum, and teacher leadership.

Parent and family engagement: Teachers were successful with remote teaching, in part because, by March, they had developed strong relationships with students and their families. The school closures led them to find and use new technologies to stay connected to students and their

families. In one focus group, a teacher pointed out, "In our school we really used social media effectively to get parents involved and communicate with them about their children's progress."

The interviews surfaced teachers' thinking about how much different parent and family engagement needs to look if schools move to a more hybrid or remote model of teaching and learning. As one teacher said:

> *Much more needs to be done to understand and develop relationships with new students and parents if we go to a virtual school setting.*

Other teachers said parents need to be trained and supported in learning to use new technologies for school-home connections and "get those applications for free." The discussion of these issues led teachers to consider how the pandemic pushed them to gather, as best they could, more

comprehensive data on the whole child — the academic as well as the social and emotional health. One teacher said bluntly, "We need new ways to assemble data on each child." Another pointed out, "We need more ways for social workers and teachers to work together." In one of the focus groups, a teacher reminded everyone that not all schools have social workers, and even those that do need more coordination among those employed by the district as well as the Department of Social Services.

Student-centered, hands-on learning. Some teachers were able to engage students throughout the school closures due in large part to the personalized and project-based learning routines they already had established in their classrooms. In many ways, teachers talked about how the school closures and less emphasis on high-stakes testing led them to focus more the goals of the Profile of the SC Graduate and its focus on real world learning and anytime-and-anywhere instruction.

One teacher noted:

> *I used content that was provided through packets and online lessons, but what seemed the best for students was to use videos and build off personalized learning experiences. They were used for hands-on teaching and helping them finding answers on their own.*

Another teacher, who has worked with the SCDE's Office of Personalized Learning, noted:

> *For those of us who have been engaged in more personalized learning, with all students having an iPad, learning happened…I conferenced twice a day with students, and only 4 out of 40 did not contribute.*

Another teacher said:

> *I had an amazing experience as I was able to get in touch with all 106 of my students and noticed that a good majority grew in their time online. Some did better with online learning than in their classrooms.*

It was these teachers who found more success in using a variety of e-tools, but only if their students had both the experience in leading their own learning as well as supports at home. Nevertheless, as one teacher said, "Distance Learning has to become second nature to us. Get us a real plan!"

A renewed curriculum. The school closures, and the subsequent need to slow down the pace of curriculum coverage, offered opportunities to think about what was most essential for students to learn. Teachers talked about what South Carolina's schools needed, as one teacher noted, "fewer standards and deeper learning." Teachers brought to the forefront the need for less testing and more teacher assessments. They also raised the issues of more grade/subject *looping* to allow teachers to work with the same students over several years. As one teacher noted, "we must know students better." Others began thinking of ways to more strategically educate students and parents at the same time. A teacher told us:
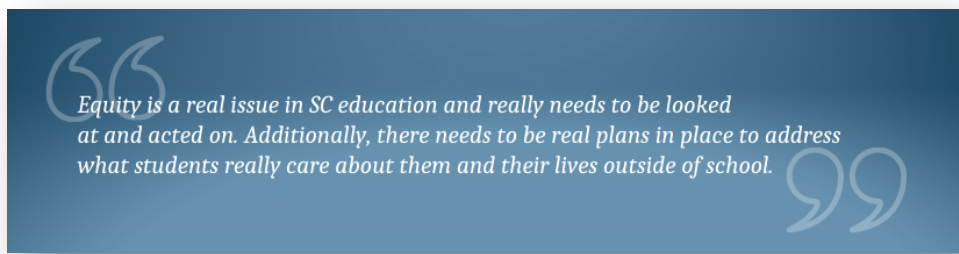
Going forward, I would like to make sure that my parents understand and can use the technologies we use in the classroom. I envision mornings face to face with my students and then (other times of the day) when they can participate in an eLearning experience with their parents, practicing the skills that each individual child needs to develop.

As other teachers projected the need to move to a hybrid model of face-to-face and online learning, one classroom practitioner pointed out the need for a three-part strategy:

First, we need teacher support with a resource bank for K-12 teaching and learning. Second, we need better guidelines for student grading that is realistic. Third, we need more virtual communities of teachers across district such as this (focus group) for group problem-solving.

Finally, for most teachers, remote teaching surfaced the need for more trauma informed curriculum. During school closures, the technological tools that teachers used were insufficient for them to meet the social and emotional needs of their students. Disconnected from their students, teachers told us about their students who had over the last several months experienced trauma from tornadoes, illnesses and deaths in their families, parents who lost their jobs, and exposure to widespread racial injustices. Teachers, as they reflected on the impact and opportunities of the pandemic, talked about how their students need to feel more connected to a school curriculum that honors their story and background. One teacher said:

> *Equity is a real issue in SC education and really needs to be looked at and acted on. Additionally, there needs to be real plans in place to address what students really care about them and their lives outside of school.*

New forms of teacher leadership. Teachers were clear their schools were not ready for remote teaching. They discussed investments in new forms of professional learning to better use new technologies. They also talked about how "master teachers might be helpful (with release time) to supplement with online/hybrid teaching." Teachers saw the need for more planning from their districts to accelerate student-centered learning and streamline the curriculum. As one teacher said:

Moving forward, teachers in South Carolina need more support to carry out their students' best interests and motivate them through authentic teaching and learning.

For them, building a more personalized approach to learning required more time for teachers to work and plan together as teams. Teachers also called for better use of each other's expertise and strengths — both inside their schools, across the district, and state.
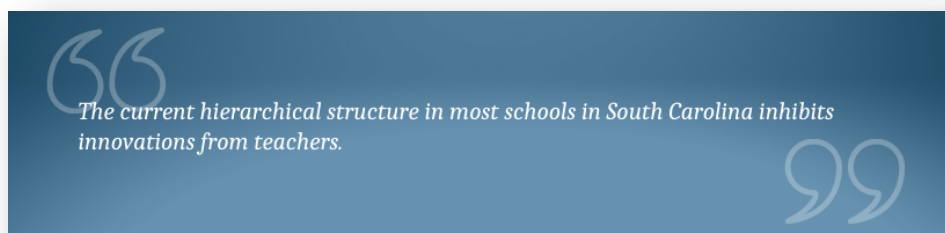
It was a lot because every school was creating new work; even though there was a district platform where people could share their work. Everyone was in different places in terms of the pacing guide and it was hard to use resources even if they were available.

Teachers realized how stark the differences are between online instruction and face-to-face teaching — and no one teacher can do it all. As one teacher said:

Our professional learning community did well together. We found it important to work as a team to help each other problem solve and adjust. Some were better at some things than others.

Another teacher noted: "Can we use student teachers and pair them with teams of teachers and support them through the wise use of technology?" And still another pointed out: "We are all having to face the same issues, and we need more time to learn from each other."

During the school closures, some teachers found the time to learn from each other. However, it is more likely to be a result of serendipity than strategy. Teachers called for more opportunities to learn from each other. For many this meant more autonomy in the classroom and more opportunities to lead. The survey revealed that the majority of teachers reported their school/district gave them autonomy to make instructional decisions during COVID-19 school closures. However, those who taught in high poverty (74% v 82%) and rural schools (78% v 81%) were less likely to experience autonomy to make decisions they believe were needed. The kind of professional development that teachers sought demanded that they lead their own learning. One teacher said clearly:

> *The current hierarchical structure in most schools in South Carolina inhibits innovations from teachers.*

Recommendations

Our investigation into the teaching experiences of South Carolina's teachers in the midst of the pandemic made several things very clear to us. Teachers have a deep commitment to their profession. They are worried about students and a safe return to school, which they want to happen ASAP. A vast array of efforts were made to reach and teach students, with the most difficulties experienced by those who work with our state's most vulnerable young people. All of this was compounded by the turbulence in the move to crisis teaching and learning. There were many lessons learned, with clear hope for a transformed and more equitable system of public education.

The teachers of South Carolina offered much insight, which this report only captures in part. More can and should be learned from them. Reviewing mounds of spreadsheets and printouts from

12,000 surveys as well as transcripts and careful analyses of interviews with 76 teachers, we offer these five recommendations.

1. **Eliminate the technology divide.** The pandemic has made the technology divide in South Carolina more painfully clear to policymakers and the general public. It is time for the State to *invest in the internet for everyone*. This means not just broadband access in every community and home, but also the supports needed for every student to be able to use what are now the essential tools of learning.

2. **Accelerate the development of a Learning Management System.** Too many teachers had to reinvent lessons by themselves or in small grade level teams. Teachers had success with some platforms, but too many needed more support in how to consistently use of them. The SCDE, in its 2020-24 Educational Technology Plan, has made this case clear, as well as the strategies needed to develop a statewide learning management system to connect teachers and students. It is time to fund and accelerate its implementation

3. **Invest in professional learning networks for and by teachers.** Top performing nations routinely invest in a variety of teacher networks to support the spread of teaching expertise. However, rural communities have fewer numbers of teachers whose expertise can be spread. The State needs to invest in teacher-led professional learning that allows classroom teachers opportunity to assist each other within and across districts.

4. **Rethink the roles of teachers as leaders**. Remote teaching worked, in large part, when teachers relied on each other and had a system in place to utilize each other's strengths. The State needs to invest, like top performing nations (see box), in a system of leadership from the classroom and opportunities — time, training and supports — for teachers to teach and lead.

5. **Fund and support cross-sector collaboration to serve the whole child.** The pandemic, as well as new research, has made clear that schools alone cannot do the job of reaching and teaching every child. Community schooling is spreading nationally — and it is time for South Carolina to fund school-based social workers and nurses as well as cross-sector collaboration strategies with the Department of Social Services, Department of Health and Environmental Control, and other local and state agencies that support children.

> **How top performing nations were ready for the pandemic:** In Singapore, teams of teachers, working with Ministry of Education had already created the digital resources they needed with its Student Learning Space. Beginning in 2015, Finland created a network of "tutor-teachers" to serve as mentors for their peers they can readily learn from each other, including a focus on jointly develop new solutions for technologically-fueled teaching and learning. The Finns has funded the network so there is one *tutor* for every 21 teachers. Estonia already had established leadership roles and a platform for teachers, with expertise in using technology can help their peers, which includes an advice hotline .

The good news is that South Carolina has several pieces of the puzzle to accelerate an effective response to teaching and learning in both the midst — and the aftermath — of a pandemic. One of the state's greatest assets is its teachers. It is time to draw on their experiences and insights to ensure all young people are well served now and in the future. Teachers want to be part of the solution in creating the public education system every child deserves. As one teacher told us.

> *Teaching this spring really showed the inequity in the education system in both our schools and in our districts. The traditional way of doing things is not sufficient enough for our students. Teachers need to be at the decision-making table as we improve our way of teaching and learning.*

Appendix A: Overview of Focus Group Methods

Our focus group sample of 76 teachers represented a wide array of grade levels, subjects, years of experience, and ethnicity. Teachers in our survey served students from grades Pk-3rd (3), K-3rd (14), 4th-5th (19), 6th-8th (21) and 9th-12th (17). Participants taught Avid (2), English Language Arts (18), Career Tech (5), Social Studies (10), Math (13), Science (12), and Exceptional Children (8). Many reported teaching across multiple subjects and grade levels. Of those that provided demographic information, 33 teachers were Black or African American, 17 listed their race as Caucasian, and 1 as Latino. Finally, our team considered years of experience as a key demographic to consider for participants. The years of experience ranged from 0-3 years (4) to those with more than 24 years (13). Other reported experience levels were 4-7 years (7), 8-15 years (28), and 16-24 years (15).

The interviews took place on June 23 and 25 for approximately 90 minutes. Teachers were randomly assigned to groups of four to eight and were asked questions around three themes to help the research team better understand the survey results: the lived experiences of teachers and students, stressors and coping abilities for teachers, and lessons learned from this experience that could inform a return to school in the fall. All interviews were transcribed, generating over 30 pages of notes and quotes. We established an initial coding scheme to tag each comment or quote (e.g., stress, support, barrier,) and then organized each based on themes (or "categories") as conceptual labels placed on discrete happenings, events, and other instances of phenomena. We then looked for repetitions, similarities and differences between and among the groups, which surfaced the five themes used for this analysis and reporting.