

TEACHERS AND TEACHING IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC:

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH CAROLINA'S POLICY LEADERS

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South Carolina

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The 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). 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, high versus low poverty, and urban and rural contexts.

The Bottom Line

During the pandemic South Carolina's teachers took on new roles and tasks to reach and teach their students. They faced many barriers, and those that taught the state's most vulnerable students had more obstacles to overcome. Without sufficient supports, many teachers struggled. Others were able to find innovations with potential to transform teaching and learning — and are eager to work with policymakers to do so.

Five Themes

1. Teachers' hold a deep commitment to students and their profession.
2. Teachers' stress focused first on their students, and then their adjustments to remote teaching.
3. Teachers faced significant barriers to reaching and teaching students — lack of internet access, parents confounded by circumstances and who were difficult to engage, and inconsistent communications.
4. Teachers struggled with many of the new demands in teaching and learning, but also found new ways to collaborate with their colleagues.
5. Teachers faced many challenges but they also discovered innovations in parent and family engagement, student-centered learning, curriculum, and teacher leadership.

Seven Important Facts

1. Over 9 in 10 teachers, who responded to our survey in early June, *wanted* to return to teaching in the fall.
2. Over 50 percent of teachers reported they adjusted to remote teaching; although 44% indicated they had not or only somewhat adjusted.
3. About one-half of the teachers reported they interacted with their students almost every day — and another 42% were able to do so weekly;
4. Over 4 in 10 teachers reported that their students did NOT have access to internet or were comfortable using digital tools at home.
5. Teachers were most concerned about the well-being of their students — both their social emotional and academic, followed by the safety of their own safety in the return to schooling.
6. Teachers relied heavily on emails and online platforms adopted by their districts to deliver instruction during the school closures; and paper packets were deemed least effective.
7. Over 4 in 5 teachers turned to each other for resources they needed for remote teaching; they relied on district and schools' resources and people as well, but not nearly as much as themselves.

One Major Takeaway

On almost every issue that was raised, teachers who taught in high-poverty and rural schools, and those who worked with elementary students, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners faced many more challenges than their counterparts.



Three Illustrative Quotes

Even when we did well at the end of the day most educators, parents, and students were overwhelmed by the experience.

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.

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 transform our way of teaching and learning.

Recommendations

Our analysis of the teaching experiences of South Carolina’s teachers in the midst of the pandemic suggested 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 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 SC Department of Education, 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 classrooms 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.