



Distance Learning and Student Mental Health

Summary of Findings from Student and Parent/Guardian Survey

July 2020

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Research & Accountability Department

Acknowledgments

The HDSB would like to express its gratitude to all the students and parents/guardians for taking the time to provide thoughtful and meaningful feedback. The HDSB is also grateful to all educators and administrators who helped to inform students and parents/guardians of the opportunity to provide feedback.

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Introduction

On June 10th, 2020, the Halton District School Board (HDSB) launched the confidential and anonymous **Distance Learning and Mental Health Survey**. The survey invited students and parent(s)/guardian(s) to share feedback on their experience with distance education and student mental health, during the school closure due to COVID-19.

The purpose of the survey was to gather data to inform decision-making and planning for reopening schools in the fall 2020, as well as help HDSB prepare to support student mental health needs.

The link to the survey was emailed to HDSB parent(s)/guardian(s) and students through SchoolMessenger. The survey was also promoted through the HDSB social media channels ([Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#)) and [HDSB website](#), school websites and school social media pages.

Students, parent(s)/guardian(s) could access translated versions of the survey directly online by selecting the language of their choice from a drop-down menu. 11 languages were available: Arabic, Farsi, English, French, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Turkish and Urdu.

Anonymous feedback was gathered from June 10th, 2020 until July 3rd, 2020 for students, while for parent(s)/guardian(s) the deadline was extended to July 6th, 2020. Some respondents preferred to email their feedback either in addition to or as opposed to completing the survey.

Throughout this report, the term "parent" or "parents" will be used to denote parent(s)/guardian(s).

Survey Overview

Students and parents were invited to complete the Distance Learning and Mental Health survey online. Two versions of the survey were launched, one for students (with simplified language) and one for parents.

Both versions of the survey asked respondents to identify areas that they found to be helpful and challenging, while engaged in distance learning. For each choice, respondents could provide additional comments through the open-text boxes. The survey also asked respondents to comment on student mental health status throughout the period of school closure, to share main mental health concerns, coping strategies and knowledge of who to contact at their school, for support with mental health concerns. The last question asked respondents to share additional comments regarding distance learning, through an open text box.

Respondents were asked to identify the grade the student was currently in (e.g., elementary vs secondary panels), whether the student had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and/or special education needs, and/or whether the student was an English language learner.

The student survey consisted of two additional questions, one asked students to share learning tasks they enjoyed completing online, and the second question asked students to provide educators advice on how to best teach online.

In addition to, or as an alternative to the survey, respondents could also email their feedback directly to the Research department.

Analytical Plan

Respondents' feedback was analysed within a **constructive framework** so that the results could inform decision-making and planning, for ways to best support students, parents and educators. This involved conducting a literature review on best practices for supporting distance learning within a K-12 model.

Distance Learning within a pandemic context at the same scale of COVID-19 is unprecedented. It was therefore not possible to locate scientific research that described teaching and learning within a context similar to COVID-19. As well, most published articles on distance learning relate to post-secondary context and/or involve an adult population, or pertain to online learning confined to taking time limited courses of ones' choosing (e.g., completing extra courses, taking specialized or certificate courses, etc).

Nonetheless, several journal articles were found that related to K-12 population and online learning, though only one set out to identify **best practices** that support learning and teaching within a distance learning framework, with K-12 students. This report highlights best practices and recommendations derived from respondents' feedback and the article entitled ***Best practices in teaching K-12 online: Lessons learned from Michigan Virtual School teachers*** (DiPietro, Ferdig, Black & Preston, 2008).

Respondents' comments were assigned to topics of similar content, those topics were then mapped to best practices for teaching and learning and/or to recommendations made by respondents. To identify possible areas of differences in they ways in which students and parents experienced distance learning, data were analysed separately for: (a) elementary vs secondary students, (b) students with special education and/or (c) English language needs.

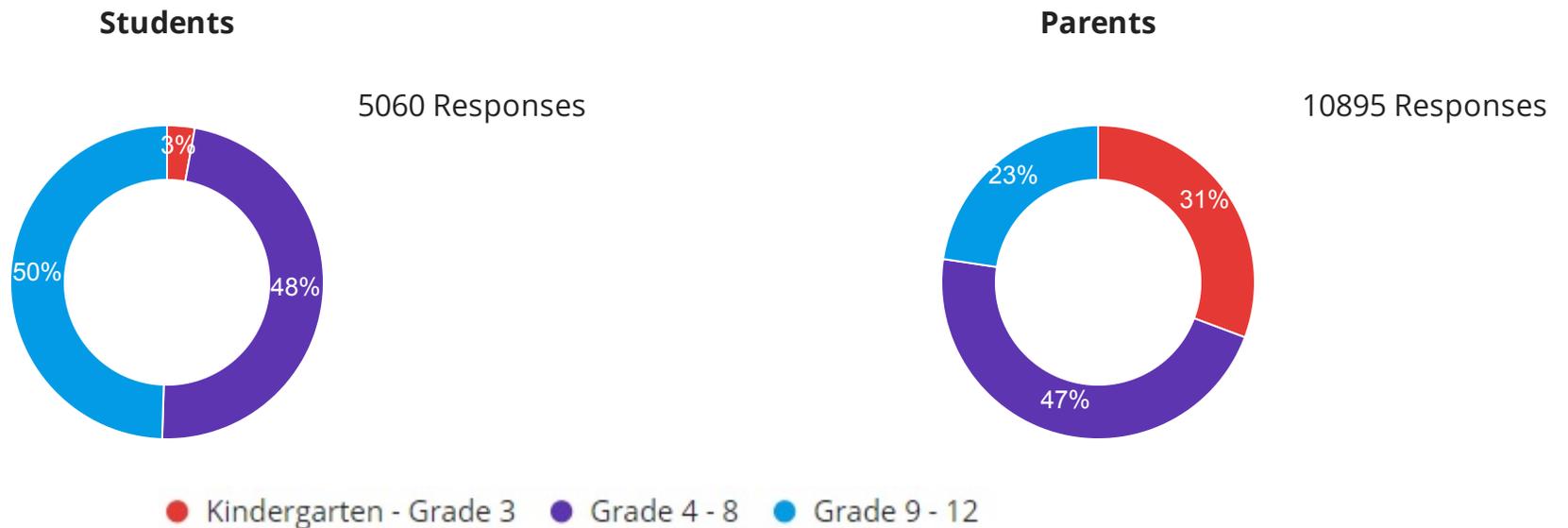
DEMOGRAPHICS

DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of **16,261** responses were received, of which 5,233 were from students and 11,028 from parents/guardians. As shown below, for students, the majority of responses were received from Grade 9-12 students (50%), followed by 48% in Grade 4-8 while 3% were from Kindergarten to Grade 3 students*.

47% of parents respondents indicated having children in Grade 4-8, 31% in Kindergarten to Grade 3 and 23% in Grade 9-12.

STUDENTS' GRADE



*Across all graphs, due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%.

Region

The distribution of responses across Halton geographic regions was similar for students and parents. Specifically, the majority of responses were received from Oakville region (46% students, 38% parents), followed by Burlington (27% students, 32% parents), followed by Milton (19% students and parents) while 8% and 11% of responses were from the Halton Hills students and parents, respectively.

STUDENTS' SCHOOL LOCATION



English Language Learners (ELL)

Throughout this report, students who are English Language Learners are referred to as "ELL Students". Students and parents were asked to indicate students' level of English proficiency. It is noteworthy that a small sample of students chose to answer this question (966 of 5,233 of students who participated in the survey), while 10,875 of 11,028 parents responded. 93% of students and parents chose the statement "Speak(s) English with no difficulty", the remaining 7% of students and parents chose the following options:

- Beginning to learn English (less than 1%, N=4 for students, N= 47 for parents)
- Knows a little bit of English (1%, N=5 for students, N=87 for parents)
- Comfortable speaking English in most cases (6%, N=59 for students, N=612 for parents)

When asked if they received English language support during distance learning, 43% stated "Yes", 43% stated "No" and 13% stated "Unsure" (data not displayed). When asked if they had experienced difficulties with distance learning because of their English knowledge, 20% of students stated they had experienced difficulties, while 69% stated "No" and 11% were "Unsure". Additional results for this population are highlighted throughout the report.

STUDENTS

Have you experienced difficulties with Distance Learning because of your level of English knowledge?

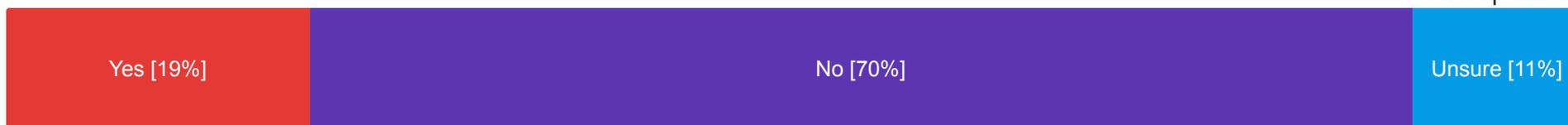
494 Responses



With regard to parents, when asked if their child received English language support during distance learning, 19% stated "Yes", 70% stated "No" and 11% stated "Unsure". When asked if they had experienced difficulties with distance learning because of their English knowledge, 27% stated they had experienced difficulties, while 60% stated "No" and 12% were "Unsure".

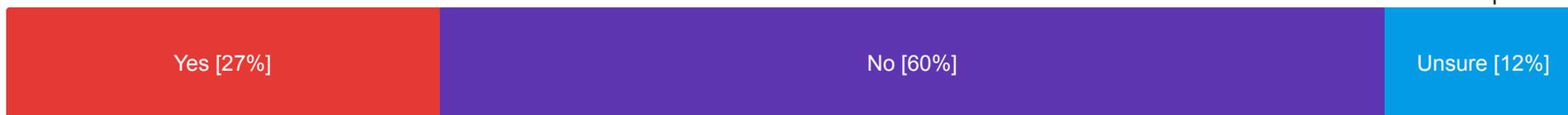
Has your child received English Language support during Distance Learning?*

743 Responses



Has your child experienced difficulties with Distance Learning because of their level of English knowledge?*

746 Responses



Parents and students accessed the following resources to support students' English Language Learning needs (listed in order of frequency):*

- Classroom Educator
- English as Second Language (ESL) teacher
- Interpretive Services
- Youth Settlement Specialist

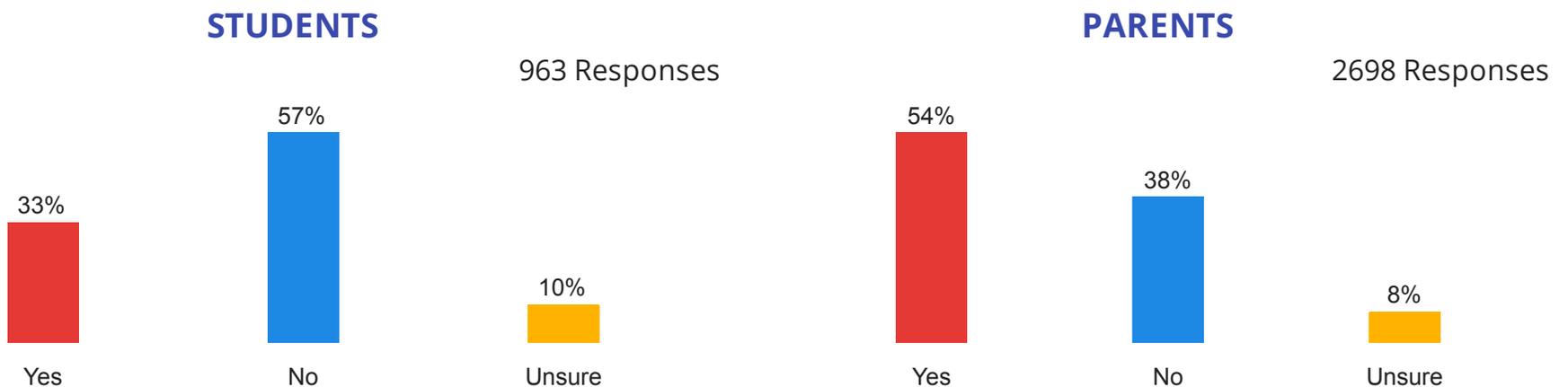
*This question was presented only to respondents who identified that their child was an English language learner.

Students with Special Education Needs

968 students reported having special education needs and/or an Individual Education Plan (IEP). 29% stated (data not shown) that they received help while learning online, while 51% stated "No" and 20% indicated being "Unsure". As shown below, 33% of students reported having had difficulties learning online because of their special education needs, while 57% and 10% stated "No" and "Unsure", respectively.

With regard to parents, 25% stated (data not shown) they had a child with special education needs and/or an Individual Education Plan (IEP), while 73% and 2% stated "No" and "Unsure", respectively. As shown below, 54% stated their child had difficulties learning online due to their special education needs, while 38% and 8% stated "No" and "Unsure", respectively.

Difficulties learning online because of special education needs



When asked what was helpful to students with special education needs while learning online, students and parents responded in the same manner by listing the following resources which are presented in order of frequency in which the options were endorsed by respondents: (1) Classroom Educator, (2) Special Education Teacher, and (3) Educational Assistant. Additional results for this population are highlighted throughout the report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Purpose

The Halton District School Board's (HDSB) confidential and anonymous Distance Learning and Mental Health Survey invited students and parents to share feedback on their experience with distance education and student mental health, during the school closure due to COVID-19. The purpose of the survey was to gather data to inform decision-making and planning for reopening schools in the fall 2020, as well as help HDSB prepare to support student mental health needs.

Key Findings

Following is a high-level summary of key findings of respondents' feedback on distance learning, and a review of best practices/recommendations for teaching and learning within a distance education framework.

Educator Presence and Instructional Time

- Students and parents desire an **increase in direct instruction** by educators, through synchronous, or asynchronous mediums (e.g., Google Meeting, pre-recorded video lessons), including an **increase in differentiated instruction** for students with special education and/or English language needs. Parents do not wish to take on the role of educators in providing instruction for their child on a full-time basis, and recognize that educators have specialized curriculum and pedagogical knowledge that is greatly beneficial to students.

Learning Tasks and Expectations

- Students and parents would welcome an **increase in consistency** in receiving: (1) daily/weekly outlines, (2) grading rubrics, and (3) communication around learning expectations and instructions to learning tasks. This perspective was shared by parents of students with special education and/or English language needs.
- Students and parents would welcome a **consistent approach** to accessing educators' feedback that is prompt, constructive and meaningful.

Communication, Community and Differentiated Support

- Parents appreciated educators' direction on how to support student learning at home. Parents, and in particular those of students with special education needs would welcome **enhanced communication** regarding all learning expectations (e.g., where to find assigned work, due dates, etc.).
- Students missed the **personal interaction** with their peers, socially and academically. Parents also shared this perspective, particularly for parents of children with special education and/or English language needs.
- Social interaction is also particularly important for grade 9-12 students. These students shared that their mental health changed for the worse during the school closure. Students described being in touch with friends as a main coping strategy.

Workload and Flexibility

- Parents would welcome **assigned learning tasks** that: (a) are differentiated based on student needs, (b) do not require materials not ordinarily found at home, or (c) that require specialized skill set that not all parents might have.
- Secondary students found it difficult to manage **competing due dates** across the various subjects. Students appreciated tools provided by educators, such as **organizers and schedulers**, which helped them to organize and prioritize their work, and stay on track with their learning.
- **Flexibility in schedules** supported students and parents in: (a) managing access to devices across multiple family members, (b) limited internet connectivity, (c) helped parents support their child's learning and mental health, and (d) manage family competing demands (e.g., employment, child care) thereby decreasing stress.

Technology and Education Platform

- Respondents would welcome the **greater use of a single distance learning platform** to increase instructional time, provide live or pre-recorded lessons, opportunities for social interaction with peers, to assign tasks, submit completed work and access feedback.
- Parents would support **professional development** initiatives for educators so that they can learn additional strategies on how to **organize and use the platform optimally** in order to support student learning.
- Students and parents described finding posted work as a major area of concern. Respondents would welcome **consistency in approach and timing** of where and when work is posted.

Mental Health Concerns

- A higher percentage of secondary students reported that their mental health **changed for the worse** during the school closure, relative to their elementary counterparts. For some students the change was new while for others it was a worsening of pre-existing mental health concerns. This pattern was corroborated by parent ratings.
- Across elementary and secondary, parents and students described the same student **mental health concerns**, these included: (a) Loneliness and missing friends, (b) Feelings of sadness, depression, anxiety and anger, (c) Feeling stressed and overwhelmed, (d) Boredom, (e) Fear and (f) Sleep difficulties.
- Parents also noted an increase in behavioural issues such as acting out, increase in hyperactivity and overall compliance difficulties.
- Parents of students with special education and/or English language needs shared strong concerns over the **lack of socialization and the isolation** from students' peer group as detrimental to their children's overall well-being.

Coping Strategies

- Students and parents differed in the extent to which they endorsed certain coping strategies and whether certain strategies were identified as beneficial. For students, the most frequent **coping strategies** were: (a) Interacting with friends and family, (b) playing sports, (c) being outdoors, (d) playing video games and (e) engaging with hobbies. Students also shared that class-meet ups with educators and their classmates were beneficial, both for social and learning purposes.
- For parents, the top **coping strategies** were: (a) maintaining healthy habits (e.g., eating well, exercise, interaction with family) and (b) implementing a home schedule. Parents also noted the benefits to their children of receiving additional mental health and learning support (e.g., SERT, guidance counselors, therapist).
- When asked if respondents have an **adult at their school** who they can reach out to for mental health support, roughly a third of parents and students replied "Yes", across all grades, while the majority selected the "Unsure" or "No" option (combined).

Best Practices and Recommendations

Following is a list of research-based best practices and student and parent recommendations for providing teaching and learning within a distance education model.

Students' success is supported by educators who take an active role in establishing a consistent and active presence online.

- Helpful strategies include: (1) establishing consistent communication with students, (2) developing deep knowledge of student needs and interests, (3) using student voice to guide instruction, (4) facilitating classroom discussions on a regular and predictable basis, and (5) providing feedback to completed work that is prompt, meaningful and constructive .

Educators facilitate and foster a sense of community among students, parents and educators.

- Educators provide an online space for the development of relationships among students and their peers, educators and students, and parents and educators. This includes interactions related to learning and non-learning content.
- Educators use multiple channels of communication to establish and maintain educator contact with students and parents, and choose tools that are accessible and preferred by students and parents.
- Parents and students are made aware of who to contact at the school to receive support around mental health and well-being.

Educators provide flexibility within a supportive and proactive context.

- Educators provide students flexibility to choose when and how to learn but simultaneously encourage frequent and consistent communication so that concerns over workload and due dates, task difficulty, scheduling and competing demands, and learning needs can be communicated and addressed in a timely fashion.
- Educators proactively monitor student progress and engagement closely, and intervene promptly when reasons for concerns arise, including students who might be feeling over-extended or under-stimulated.

Instructional design that is organized and structured in predictable and streamlined ways supports student motivation to engage with the course content.

- Educators have the capacity to use and organize distance learning platform(s) optimally so that students and parents can effortlessly engage with the platform to access: (a) instructional time (synchronously or asynchronously), (b) opportunities for social interaction with peers, (c) assigned learning tasks, (d) educator feedback and (e) submit completed work.
- Educators communicate and implement a consistent approach of where and when learning tasks and feedback is posted and use a differentiated model so that parents of, and student with special education and/or English language needs do not experience barriers when interacting with the platform. This includes ensuring integration with assistive technology tools.

Educators know what technology tools are available, their benefit to instruction and learning, and are skillful in their use in ways that maximize student engagement and achievement.

- Teachers base their decisions around integration of technology on their content knowledge, their knowledge of students and curriculum expectations.
- When deciding which tool to use and for what purpose, the content of the learning and student need must be at the forefront. When choosing to integrate technology tools in one's practice, it is helpful to identify the specific learning goals that using the tools will support as well as making clear linkages to curriculum expectations.
- Educators carefully consider and assess students' access to the internet and technology requirements for using specific web-based tools and streaming media.
- Successful integration of distance learning tools with assistive technology is key for student success.
- For younger students (Kindergarten to Grade 3) and for some students with special education and/or English language needs, navigating technology might pose great difficulty. Student learning can be supported by providing tools to parents, increasing parental capacity and providing a simple approach to access learning tasks. Modified and adapted material that does not depend on technology may also be required in certain circumstances.