

Surviving online learning handbook: what does COVID teach us about online learning in high schools?

by

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B.S., Kansas State University, 2012  
M.S., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2015

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
College of Education

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Manhattan, Kansas

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## **Abstract**

Unlike many disaster scenarios, there was no guidebook for school communities to consult as they wrestled with the ensuing fallout of a global pandemic. This emergency offered educational policy makers a rare opportunity to not only evaluate current attitudes towards online learning, but also discuss the realities and impacts of large-scale educational transitions from traditional classrooms to fully online environments—particularly in K-12 environments. The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of online learning within a high school learning community in response to their district’s implementation of online learning following the outbreak of COV-19 to help better inform and shape the future development and implementation of online learning opportunities.

This research is designed around a collective case study framework using semi-structured interviews and surveys of students, parents, teachers, and administrators in a midwestern suburban high school starting during the 4th quarter of the 2019-20 school year through the first semester of the 2020-21 school year. Data from these methods was compared and contrasted between cases and emergent themes were then interpreted alongside evidenced trends in recent research in online learning and concepts related to forced second-order change spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. These shared findings were then organized into suggested survival tips for schools to consider during future implementations of online learning.

Experiences from interviews and perceptions from surveys reveal a number of shared feelings in the learning community related to certain advantages and disadvantages of online environments, perceived higher workloads and anxiety, potential factors that help and inhibit success in online environments, and obstacles for students who rely on extra support services. All interest groups agreed that some students thrived in online environments, though many did

not. Ultimately, all interest groups largely agreed their overall perceptions of online learning improved over the course of implementation, and a majority of the school community wanted more online opportunities offered to students even when school returned back to normal.

Hopefully these findings convince educational leaders to reconsider the promising potential roles of online learning in K-12 settings as school communities inevitably transition back into classroom environments.

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# Chapter 1 - Introduction

## Background

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, a national emergency was declared the same day the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic. Within weeks, most public school buildings in the United States officially closed for the school year forcing many learning communities to consider carrying over their classroom courses to fully-online environments. This rather unprecedented consideration for immediate large-scale implementations of online learning quickly shifted a heavy focus on the current realities and future potential of online education.

Online education was already an increasingly relevant topic for learning communities as they considered its potential role for helping students reach more diverse learning goals (Gemin and Pape, 2017). Recent research and discussion had focused on natural advantages and disadvantages in online learning environments (Hurlbut, 2018), common issues for those involved in online learning programs (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago, 2017), best practices and strategies for developing and maintaining online learning programs (Arghode et al, 2017), whether online learning is (or can be) a feasible alternative to traditional learning (Blohm, 2017; Einfeld, 2016), and even how the development of online learning programs should be regulated (Stedrak and Rose, 2015).

The nature of the coronavirus outbreak posed an interesting reality for learning communities, as all people had to make due with dramatically differing and stressful circumstances. Ignoring the primary function of learning, everything surrounding the traditional school community including childcare, sports, clubs, and even school meals was thrown into a state of disarray. Although the implications of the outbreak should not be trivialized, the emergency offers educational policy makers a rare opportunity to not only evaluate current

attitudes towards online learning, but also discuss the realities and impacts of large-scale educational transitions from traditional classrooms to fully online environments—particularly in K-12 environments. By exploring the perceptions within one high school learning community as they transitioned into online environments, educational leaders and policy makers can better shape and inform future development and implementation of online learning opportunities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Online education is quickly becoming a necessary tool for helping more diverse learning communities reach their particular educational goals. By evaluating how online learning is being implemented and utilized, educational stakeholders and policy makers can apply these lessons to strengthen their personal transitions to online environments. Online learning environments have already proven to be a valuable tool for many learning communities with evidenced advantages over a traditional classroom in regard to greater access to meaningful learning opportunities (Thompson, 2011), flexibility in pursuit of learning targets (Edwards, 2017), and creative solutions to common issues faced by educational leaders and stakeholders—such as finding ways to deal with greater student numbers with smaller school budgets (Heafner et al, 2015). The outbreak of the coronavirus has offered up a new reason to consider online learning: it provides a means to continue progress towards educational goals when the school buildings or facilities are forced to close down.

That said, online education is still plagued with a variety of issues that interested parties need to be aware of as they consider greater implementation. Issues exist for students, parents, instructors, and broader educational leadership related to everything from awareness of and access to technology (Dolan, 2016), openness to online environments (Kebritchi et al, 2017),

skill and course readiness (Chernowsky, 2017; Kebritchi et al, 2017), cultural relevancy (Hannon and D’Netto, 2008), use of pedagogy and learning theories (Arghode et al, 2017), as well as general program development, funding, and regulation (Stedrak and Rose, 2015). These types of issues could manifest in any online learning program, but as the speed and intensity of transitions from traditional classrooms to online environments pickup (like they did after the outbreak of the coronavirus), there is even more reason to be conscious of the various ways a learning community might struggle.

Even with the wealth of evidenced issues, online environments have already proven to be a viable alternative to the traditional classroom, it just requires that the learning environment is appropriately designed for the realities and goals of the learning communities using it (Means, Toyama, Murphy, and Baki, 2013; Shacar and Nuemann, 2010; Wu, 2015). Regardless of comparisons, the fact remains that more students are using online learning programs every year, and there is no reason to expect that trend to stall (Allen and Seaman, 2006). In short, it’s safe to assert online learning is already working for many learning communities, and it’s fair to argue it could work for even more if it is implemented with careful attention to common issues and best practices (Kebritchi et al, 2017).

The extreme circumstances brought on by the coronavirus present a rare opportunity to examine how different interest groups perceive both the realities of online learning and the process by which it is implemented. Considering the context of the COV-19 pandemic, there is also an opportunity to look more specifically at the impacts of “second-order” change in respect to online learning, which is more likely to cause issues for learning communities (Waters and Cameron, 2007). By exploring, comparing, and discussing the various perceptions of one

district's implementation of online learning during the coronavirus outbreak, this research strives to help inform and shape future online learning opportunities.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of online learning within a high school learning community in response to their district's implementation of online learning beginning around the fourth quarter of the 2019-2020 school year following the outbreak of the COV-19 virus to help better inform and shape the future development and implementation of online learning opportunities.

### **Research Questions**

This research is founded on two central questions:

1. How did the forced transition to online environments due to the coronavirus outbreak impact perceptions of online learning within learning communities?
2. What themes emerge within the experiences and perceptions of the learning community that could help guide the future development and implementation of online learning opportunities?

### **Definition of Terms**

#### ***Online Learning Program***

This paper defines online learning programs as any general learning program designed to allow for students to discover and apply content towards learning objectives using a platform that

can be accessed outside the traditional classroom. In a discussion over online learning programs, this definition aims to include various types of hybrid-learning models that allow students to work towards learning objectives in a traditional classroom (or face-to-face) setting in conjunction with a web-based platform. This paper holds that *any* use of a web-based platform qualifies as “online learning” so long as it is designed in a way that students can progress towards learning targets without direct teacher input or regular attendance in a classroom. One particular challenge to this definition would hold that various face-to-face programs may use devices (like tablets and laptops) or platforms such as “Google Classroom” or “Schoology” to supplement progress towards learning goals without really differentiating between a traditional setting. Rather than comparing the nuances between these programs this research assumes that learning in an online environment is fundamentally the same as learning in any learning environment (Picciano, 2017). Given that best practices are similar in online and classroom environments (Kebritchi et al, 2017), the difference is applying learning theories and pedagogy in ways that work in an online environment (Arghode, Brieger, and McLean, 2017).

### ***Learning Community***

This research defines a learning community as a community organized within an official educational boundary that share a direct and fundamental responsibility for preparing students for life after high school—specifically students, parents, teachers, and administrators, which will serve as the overlying organization for the cases in this study. This definition blends qualities of DeFour’s (2004) “Professional Learning Communities” and qualities of Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner’s (2015) “Communities of Practice” with Epstein and Salinas’s (2004) views of family involvement to create a more generalized district learning community that will serve as

the focus of this study. The final ingredient utilizes elements of Goodwin and Cameron's (2015) "Purposeful Communities," which adds a layer of responsibility from leadership (in this case, administrators), to provide the clear direction and support necessary to enact deeper and more fundamental change in learning communities.

Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (2015) define a Communities of Practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do [...] as they interact regularly" (pg. 1). Their definitions are designed with educators in mind but ignore other interest groups with important educationally related responsibilities (notably, parents). Instead, Epstein and Salinas (2004) call for a focus on a "school learning community" that involves parents and members of the community (through community activities and sponsorships) (pg. 12). For the context of this study, that inclusion is simplified to just "parents," based on more direct links to student success (Avendano and Cho, 2020). Lastly, Goodwin and Cameron's (2015) argue for school leaders to develop "Purposeful Communities," emphasizing the development and support of clear expectations, shared commitment, focused resource management, and a dedication to positive attitudes (pg. 75-78). This helps emphasize the responsibilities administrators have in developing positive relationships and systems connecting the other members of the learning community (students, parents, and teachers).

### ***Second-Order Change***

"Fundamental" or "discontinuous" change enacted from the top-down with limited control from participating interest groups (Waters and Cameron, 2007). In the context of the COV-19 pandemic, school learning communities were forced to implement immediate (and extreme) changes to their learning programs and support services. Waters and Cameron (2007)

identified eleven responsibilities correlated with leadership in the context of second order change, which will serve as a reference point for perceptions within the learning community in this study (pg. 12-14).

## **Methodological Framework**

This research is designed around a collective case study framework using multiple methods to examine each case. The selected cases include students, parents, teachers, and administrators organized within one midwestern suburban high school learning community who were active for the 2019-2020 school year. Each case was examined over the course of the fourth quarter of the 2019-20 school year to the end of first semester of the 2020-21 school year using two different methods of data collection for cross-referencing potential themes: phased semi-structured interviews and surveys sent to students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Data from these methods was compared and contrasted between cases and emergent themes were then interpreted alongside evidenced trends in recent research in online learning and concepts related to forced second-order change spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Case studies are ideal for examinations of people and issues over shorter periods of time to discover more “causal links in settings where cause-and-effect relationships are complicated and not readily known, [for example in] school reform” (Hays, 2014, pg. 218). Collective case studies are useful for studying variation between particular cases, which when compared and contrasted, allows for more compelling interpretations and more stable findings (Merriam, 2015, pg. 40). Although case studies often avoid an objective of generalizability (Hays, 2014), the participants within this study have been selected with attention to how they represent broader interest groups in learning communities across the United States. By incorporating common



themes present in research related to transitions to online learning (Kebritchi et al, 2017) and change theory (Waters and Cameron, 2007), aspects of generalizability should be possible for educators and related stakeholders interested in future implementations of online learning (Hays, 2014). Overall, case studies “have proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, for evaluating programs, and for informing policy,” and a focus on recent transitions to online learning provide opportunities for insight into all three. (Merriam, 2015, pg. 41).

## **Procedures**

The high school of focus for this study is in a well-regarded midwestern school district, which notably provides all students with laptops. That said, the high school represented in this study compares much less favorably to state averages than the district as a whole (publicschoolreview.com). The school serves around 1500 students with a student-teacher ratio of 15-1. For the 2018-19 school year, the school posted a graduation rate of 84% with a 24% proficiency rating in math and 34% in reading—all ranking in the bottom 50% for high schools in the state. On the other hand, the diversity of the school ranks within the top 20% for the state, with 57% of students categorized as white, 28% Hispanic, 8% black, 2% Asian, and 5% categorized as two or more races. Other notable statistics include 35% of students eligible for free lunch, and 11% eligible for reduced lunch. These stats position the school directly around national averages (nationalreportcard.gov). The school provides an interesting balance of diversity, academic performance, and incorporation of technology that should provide an increasingly valuable blueprint to consider for learning communities interested in implementing online learning opportunities.

The cases selected for study include students, parents, teachers, and administrators with a direct educational responsibility during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years. Traditional enrollment spans from 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade. Within the selected population, each case is defined with the following parameters in mind. Students will consist of any students currently enrolled in at least 3 classroom courses (this excludes courses the district offers online) required for graduation as organized within the 4 traditional subject areas offered by the district—math, science, English, and Social Studies. Parents will include any primary guardian responsible for at least one current student who qualifies under the stipulations above. Teachers must teach at least one class required for graduation within those four traditional subject areas. Administrators will be defined as principals and related associate principals listed in the school’s directory during the transition to online learning in the 2019-20 school year. These parameters make for cases utilizing the district’s 1-1 laptop with common curriculums and shared expectations for all students.

This research works towards answering how different groups within the learning community perceived online learning throughout the district’s forced transition to online environments following the outbreak of the coronavirus through two different mechanisms: phased semi-structured interviews and surveys. These two methods provide different lenses for evaluating data related to the research questions, while also overlapping enough to aid in drawing interpretations shared among the different cases within the study. Although differences between cases will be important to highlight, it is the shared experiences among different interest groups that likely provide the best direction for future implementations of online learning.

The phased semi-structured interviews aim to highlight personal experiences related to the implementation of online learning and explore how perceptions of online learning change over time. Four to seven participants were selected within each case and interviewed three times

between the start of the fourth quarter of the 2019-20 school year into the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. Experiences detailed in interviews were organized into an overarching narrative representing the learning community as whole, followed by specific stories selected that showcase significant findings important for educational leaders to consider when considering implementing online learning opportunities.

School wide surveys were sent out to potential candidates within each case towards the end of the first semester of the 2020-21 school year. The timing of these surveys served as an opportunity for participants to reflect on the district's implementation process. All four cases responded to the same survey to allow for more shared interpretations of the data that might relate to the learning community as a whole. Related questions for each include how comfortable groups felt about online learning before the forced transition, how groups felt supported throughout the implementation process, issues and best practices groups experienced with online environments, how groups perceived the relative strengths and weaknesses of online environments compared to the traditional classroom, and how the implementation process impacted their desire for future online learning opportunities. Data from these surveys were presented highlighting average responses from the overall learning community and each individual interest group. Selected open responses from each interest group were also included to highlight both extreme and neutral perspectives and organized from most positive to most negative.

Coding was inspired by recent research in online learning and followed careful consideration of data from interviews and surveys. Coding between methods followed the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser and Strauss, 1968): starting with individual themes, building to shared themes, incorporating trends recent research, before finally constructing

interpretations. Together, these two methods provide ample means of cross-referencing each case that can then be analyzed and interpreted to create potential shared perceptions of online learning and how it was implemented in the district during the COV-19 outbreak.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The methodology utilized in this research is designed with consideration of two theoretical perspectives: interpretivism and change theory. Interpretivists work to breakdown cultural and historical perspectives in order to create a more individualized understanding of an idea or process (Bhattacharya, 2017, pg. 59). From an interpretivist's lense, the methodology is designed to compare and contrast multiple perspectives within and outside the selected cases to establish not only how different interest groups (students, parents, teachers, and administrators) perceived their forced transition into online environments, but also the learning community as a whole.

From this lense, I have means to relate to potential experiences; both as a student who utilized online learning as a means of reaching my particular learning goals (especially throughout my undergraduate and graduate education), and as an educator (and member of the learning community) who would like to see more quality online opportunities offered to students in ways to help them better reach their own learning goals. In short, this research treats every personal journey during the transition to online learning (including my own) as an important page of a greater story. This story stands to tell a more complete tale if each journey is properly framed within the cultural and historical contexts which shaped it.

One important consideration for the use of interpretivism is that the interpretation of data inevitably leads to more questions than concrete answers for how the learning community

perceived their transition to online learning, or what lessons we might learn from those perspectives. This research treats the nature of truth as something that is “socially constructed” through the careful use and descriptions of multiple and diverse perspectives (Butin, 2010, pg. 59). This research focuses on just one high school learning community organized into four cases. Each case represents different individuals selected to showcase their own unique experiences related to their particular circumstances, goals, and challenges. Within each experience, there is surely a lesson of value that can help strengthen progress towards goals within the learning community. This research is designed to weave these experiences together to reveal a clearer image of perceptions, with more lessons to learn from. The truth, in this respect, is not necessarily designed to be decided by this research, but instead by the learning communities and stakeholders interested in increasing online opportunities

Lastly, this research is designed around Waters and Cameron’s (2007) and Fullan’s (2001) concepts of change theory related to educational settings alongside Ellsworth’s (2000) general considerations for change, and Ha’s (2014) implications of unplanned change. This study particularly highlights the concepts of Waters and Cameron’s (2007) “first order change,” defined as “incremental” or “continuous” types of change, and “second order change,” defined as “fundamental” or “discontinuous.” Waters and Cameron (2007) also utilize Fullan’s (2001) ideas towards an “implementation dip,” which argued that second-order change is more likely associated with “new knowledge and skills that challenge prevailing norms, or conflict with personal values,” and therefore often leads to more negative perceptions as impacted parties adjust (pg. 13). Based on how quickly school communities transitioned into a new learning environment, the implications of change theory become even more valuable given the evidenced

issues faced by students, parents, teachers, and administrators working with online learning (discussed in Chapter 2).

Interpreting aspects of change theory also necessitates the consideration for broader impacts of change in educational system. Ellsworth (2000), in his survey of change models, argues that proper implementations of change require careful strategy (pg. 24-25). Ellsworth (2000) utilized the change communication model alongside elements of classical change theories to argue that proper change requires careful interventions within both specific components of a system as well as the collective system as it is designed (pg. 33).

In this study, one might consider the relative components that make up the school learning community's educational "system." At a local level there are at least components that represent each interest group (students, parents, teachers, administrators), working within shared school-wide, and even district-wide systems. Beyond that one must even include state-wide, and even federal components that are actively responding to new pressures brought on by the COVID pandemic. Ellsworth (2000) argues that in order to maximize the potential impact of change, "innovations must be undertaken to ensure that changes within one component of the system are supported and reinforced by changes in interdependent components" (pg. 33). During the pandemic, innovations within and across these components were understandably stressed and disjointed, making it even more difficult to properly implement changes within the school's educational system--likely adding even more stress to relationships related to Waters and Cameron's (2007) second-order change.

Similarly, Ha (2014) argues that change is an inevitable process that, when inappropriately implemented, threatens to exaggerate both existing and potential issues within a system (pg. 5). To optimally manage change, Ha (2014) maintains that implementations must

consider both the physical components of change, like the technology and skills needed for success in a system, and the social components related to the feelings and emotions of members within a system (pg. 10).

Ha (2014) also discusses the differences between planned change as a deliberate incremental process and unplanned change as “reactive response to pressures caused by alterations in the internal and external conditions” (pg. 23). The pandemic clearly created new pressures for school communities to adopt to. Some of these new pressures emerged from external federal and state agencies, while others emerged internally from families and educators. Ha (2014) adds that planned change models often neglect the nuance of contextual pressures that invariably can impact all components within a system (pg. 32-33).

In response, Ha (2014) discusses Dunphy’s and Stake’s (1993) Contingency Model that can apply for either planned or unplanned change scenarios (pg. 33). The Contingency Model works to understand change within a specific context, which may not be applicable in other environmental situations. The model organizes potential change approaches into different scales of change and types of management while working under the assumption that both may be modified alongside emerging contextual situations (Ha, 2014, pg. 33).

Ideally, school leaders would have at least some time to develop and implement change using an appropriate model, and Ha (2014) outlines a five-step model for sustainable change that applies to both planned and unplanned situations (pg. 35-44). First, Ha (2014) recommends building a team to oversee changes that includes multiple perspectives from appropriate interest groups and members. Second, the team needs to identify the most pertinent problems and focus resources on ways that will best improve conditions within selected components of a system. Third, the team should begin implementing changes with consideration for leadership, funding,

empowerment of stakeholders, and at least some measurable short-term outcomes that will help reinforce the broader implementation process. Fourth, the team should evaluate the change process and review progress towards outcomes to help identify any potentially needed interventions. Lastly, the team needs to find ways of stabilizing and reinforcing new approaches and behaviors from the change effort through the use of strategies such as modeling, training, feedback loops, and proper funding. These five steps provide even more ways of interpreting the district's implementation of online learning alongside Waters and Cameron's (2007) evidenced realities of second-order change.

With Waters and Cameron's (2007) and Ha's (2014) contributions in mind, this study will assert an additional consideration for the potential impact of "forced change," defined in this research as second-order change enacted in unplanned or emergency situations. The coronavirus inevitably forced educational leaders to implement "second order change" to close the 2019-2020 school year. The changes implemented were both sudden, and (assumedly) temporary, and therefore fit well within the frameworks offered by Waters and Cameron (2007), Fullan (2001), Ellsworth (2000) and Ha (2014). That said, schools did not necessarily enact this change willingly, and to that effect the notion of forced change is applied alongside it. This mostly insignificant shift in terminology is necessary to highlight the extreme nature presented by the coronavirus outbreak, and it allows for a fairer evaluation and discussion of the acting interest groups within the learning community. It would be irresponsible to compare emergency-oriented scenarios of change, especially enacted on larger scales, to regular second-order or unplanned change that might happen for more ordinary issues, like those related to student achievement or discipline. Ultimately, the general concepts and consequences of second-order and unplanned change outlined by Waters and Cameron (2007) and Ha (2014), Ellsworth's (2000) implications



of broader change in complex systems, and Ha's five step model for sustainable change (2014), all provide valuable references to help interpret themes and experiences that will likely emerge throughout the district's implementation of online learning.

## **Significance**

As more families and schools look to online learning opportunities to help reach their particular learning goals, more research is desperately needed to help inform interested participants and policy makers. In the field of online learning for K-12 environments, research exists for snapshots of individual programs, particular ability levels, and specific interest groups, but the "depth of scholarship is still relatively shallow" (Arnesen, Hveem, Short, West and Barbour, 2019). This research helps provide much needed insight into how broader K-12 learning communities perceive (and work with) online environments. Each case within this collective case study helps shed light on how different (yet connected) interest groups are dealing with transitions to online learning environments, but it is the shared themes within the greater learning community which may prove most valuable for shaping future online learning opportunities.

This study ideally represents a foundation for broader interpretations of online learning in the context of broader implementations that hasn't been possible before the unique circumstance brought on by the COV-19 pandemic. Alone, this study is little more than a collection of stories covering online learning organized around the greater community. Together with the guidance of known issues and best practices, and the consideration of potential reforms, this research can provide a blueprint for more meaningful discussions about how greater learning communities might use online learning to help meet their particular educational goals.

## **Subjectivity**

Although each case, studied under two different mechanisms will allow for a rich and informative story, a case study is still only as reliable as it's storyteller (Merriam, 2015). I have been a member of the learning community focused in this study for over seven years, and this allows me to approach this study not only as an interested researcher, but as an impacted professional and member. The potential for my own bias and stress related to the district's implementation plan are of course a concern for the trustworthiness of this study, but my personal connection to the learning community also provides me a rare opportunity to really explore and interpret the potential evolution of perception from multiple perspectives. One could argue, there is no one better suited to understand the nuanced implications of an event on a community than a fellow member (Bhattacharya, 2017). That said, my personal relationships and connections to the learning community are something I have been careful to monitor throughout this study to avoid the danger of leading responses or shaping perceptions.

## **Limitations**

Case studies are limited in respect to “reliability, validity, and generalizability” (Merriam, 2015). There is no way to take the bias out of storytelling, and to that effect, there will always be a concern for how I have selected cases, collected and analyzed data, and formed interpretations and conclusions. I have done my best to describe and showcase the specific means by which I organized and carried out my research. Although I have made great efforts to design this research in ways that are reasonably repeatable, reliable, and trustworthy, compromises were most

definitely made to help myself manage the scope of research. Again, I have done my best to detail those compromises in the chapters that follow.

The design of this study also involves some obvious limitations in respect to generalizability that are not so easy to control. This study only involves one midwestern suburban school learning community, and although the population within this school is arguably more generalizable than its characteristics could suggest, it is likely differences in perceptions and experiences would manifest if this study included more school communities in more diverse areas. This school also benefits from a district 1-1 laptop initiative that may not be feasible or appropriate for particular school communities. Lastly, the individual participants within each case have been chosen with some respect to the story that they have to share. Even within the same school, it is possible that different participants (at least for the interviews and focus groups) could significantly change the data collected and the nature of the stories shared. Lastly, although the nature of this research was in some ways only possible because of the COV-19 pandemic, the context of the pandemic is clearly a limitation for broader interpretations from it. It is possible that perceptions of online learning within the learning community would be much different in the context of less dire and desperate circumstances.

At the same time, the context of the pandemic may be more of a gift than a curse. Applying negative relationships associated with second-order change (Cameron and Waters, 2007), on top of the negative environmental stressors of the pandemic (and one might also note other comparatively dramatic stressors like the 2020 election), there is arguably more reason to focus on potential positive perceptions. In short, although the environmental context is a serious limitation that is hardly repeatable in future studies, it also helps reinforce any positive findings.

If people like something even when there's every reason in the world they shouldn't, that's likely a theme that is worth more attention.

Furthermore, by using multiple cases, each analyzed through three data collection methods, this research aims to overcome many of these noted limitations. Ultimately, this research is presented as transparently as possible to allow interested researchers and learning communities to judge for themselves whether the findings and interpretations from this study can help guide their potential developments and implementations of online learning.

## **Organization**

The following chapters follow a traditional dissertation organization for educational subjects (Butin, 2010). Chapter 2 consists of a literature review over current trends in online learning and implementation. Chapter 3 details the methodological framework and instruments used for data collection in the collective case study. Chapter 4 tells the overarching story found within interviews, with special emphasis on participants with notable experiences to share, while also covering survey results. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in interviews and surveys to create survival tips for implementations of online learning reinforced by recent research in online learning. Lastly, Chapter 6 serves as a reflection and discussion on implications of the study, making an argument for continued support for future online opportunities in high school settings.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

In respect to online education, no event has afforded researchers such a raw and encompassing look into the realities of online learning for K-12 school communities like the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of the 2019-20 school year. The uncertainty surrounding the COV-19 pandemic forced many school buildings to close down in March, which left school communities scrambling to address student learning for the rest of the school year. Some schools simply ended the school year in response to the pandemic, but others had the resources to try something rather unprecedented: fully online learning in a K-12 public setting. By exploring how learning communities transitioned from education designed for the traditional classroom into fully online environments, educational leaders and stakeholders can help better inform and shape the development of online learning opportunities in the future.

### Topic

Online learning can be a tricky arena to navigate. There are fully online schools; there are fully online programs within traditional school buildings; there are hybrid models which balance work in the classroom with work outside of it; there are even teachers who utilize online learning opportunities without ever distinguishing their work from their classroom (Germin and Pape, 2017, p. 9). This paper defines online learning programs as any general learning program designed to allow for students to discover and apply content towards learning objectives using a platform that can be accessed outside the traditional classroom. In a discussion over online learning programs, this definition aims to include various types of hybrid-learning models that allow students to work towards learning objectives in a traditional classroom (or face-to-face) setting in conjunction with a web-based platform. This paper holds that *any* use of a web-based platform qualifies as “online learning” so long as it is designed in a way that students can

progress towards learning targets without direct teacher input or regular attendance in a classroom.

One particular challenge to this definition would hold that various face-to-face programs may use devices (like tablets and laptops) or platforms such as “Google Classroom” or “Schoology” to supplement progress towards learning goals without really differentiating between a traditional setting. It’s more than fair to question how researchers can even adequately compare the different models, but maybe these comparisons miss the point. While developing a framework for online learning, Picciano (2017) argues that “online education evolved as a subset of learning in general rather than a subset of distance learning” (p. 187). In other words, the learning environment does not change the fundamentals of how we learn. This research builds upon the foundation set forth by Arghode, Brieger, and McLean (2017), who argue that because online learning “presents [different] challenges [from] face-to-face instruction, [it] requires different pedagogical principles” (p. 593). This does not mean we need to reinvent the wheel for online learning, we just need to ensure the wheel is appropriately equipped for navigating an online environment.

Thankfully, many of the answers to the challenges presented in online environments are already in front of us. Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago (2017) argue “overarching best practices for instruction are similar for both online and face-to-face courses [which include] peer-to-peer interaction, active student engagement in learning, emphasis on practice and student effort, personalization to the individual student, variety, and emphasis on higher thought processes” (p. 13-14). To that effect, any discussion for improving online learning is fundamentally similar to any discussion improving learning in general. The difference is applying (and supporting) the nature of learning to online environments. With that in mind, this

research focuses on the perceptions within one high school learning community (defined to include students, parents, teachers, and administrators) to ask how different groups have perceived their transition into online learning environments. The overarching similarities and differences among these perceptions should serve as a resource for educational leaders and stakeholders to inform future development and implementation of online programs.

## **Context**

The development of modern online learning programs can be linked back to the greater availability of the internet in the 1990s (Germin and Pape, 2017, p. 58). Two types of online programs emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s which helped popularize online educational opportunities: state virtual schools in the southeastern and midwestern United States, and private online schools developed by companies like K12 Inc. and Connections Academy (Germin and Pape, 2017, pg. 8). In regard to privatized online education, some companies (like K12 Inc.) focused on building their own separate online programs, while others like E2020 (now known as Edgenuity), developed their curriculum for traditional schools (Germin and Pape, 2017, p. 8). Today, online education has evolved into three basic models: supplemental programs, fully online programs, and blended learning programs (Germin and Pape, 2017 p. 9). In those programs, the Evergreen Education Group (2017) state that millions of students are taking supplemental online classes, hundreds of thousands attend full-time online schools, and while the number of students involved in blended learning environments is currently unknown, many of the same companies involved in fully online schools provide various forms of blended learning opportunities, and countless teachers utilize some form of online resources in their classrooms today (p. 9).

As online learning programs have evolved, demand for online learning has steadily increased—and this growth is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. In a report tied to public universities, Allen and Seaman (2017) showed that “over 6 million students [or 29.7%] took at least one distance course [up 3.9% from the year before],” and “14.4% of students took only distance courses” (Allen and Seaman, 2017, p. 3). In K-12 settings, Connections Academy (2015) showed the number of students in the United States taking part in some type of online or blended program had risen 80% between 2010 to 2014 at that time involving over 2.7 million students (connectionsacademy.com). Similarly, Market Research Reports, Inc. (2016) forecasts the e-learning market to grow around 15% a year between 2016 and 2020 as more interest groups utilize online learning to “overcome the shortfalls of the current education system” (p. 2). These reports showcase that the online learning market is not only growing due to increased demand, but that current programs offered by vendors and suppliers are not satisfying stakeholder expectations. This demand naturally pushes school communities to consider how online learning might further their own educational goals.

In the context of increased demand and an ever-developing market for online learning, more schools are taking up the task of developing their own online curriculum. Generally, districts began supplying online learning services to “[retain more control of offerings, build expertise and comfort among staff, and better manage costs] (Germin and Pape, 2017, p. 47). Some districts, like the Mesa Distance Learning Program in Arizona, have even developed to provide services to students outside their district (though still within state) at fees with which typical suppliers can’t compete (Germin and Pape, 2017, p. 47). This indicates an opportunity for learning communities to evaluate for themselves how online education might help them reach their own particular learning targets.



One of the more interesting trends today involves school districts using their own professional staff to develop online courses using in-house and online digital content proctored through online Learning Management Systems such as Schoology, Canvas, and Moodle (Lugar, 2017, p. 2). Although teacher training and readiness for the creation and delivering of online programs remains a pressing issue, universities (like Boise State) have already started to include online educational preparation in their undergraduate teaching programs, showcasing an important vision for the future of education (Lugar, 2017, p. 3).

With more local learning communities getting involved as suppliers of online education, state government agencies have increasingly acted to “[oversee and administer online learning]” (Germin and Pape, 2017, p. 50). Government involvement greatly varies from state to state, but generally works to approve online programs, provide information and direction to interested students, provide support and professional development to teachers, oversee virtual schools operating within the state, and manage the collection and reporting of data to interested stakeholders (Evergreen Education Group, 2017, p. 50). Some states, like Texas, Florida, Minnesota, and Washington have developed fairly intricate (although varied) laws for oversight of online education, although others, like California have left control of online learning to local districts. As of 2015, “forty-eight states provide funding specific to K-12 online education” although the source and oversight of that funding differs from state to state (Stedrak and Rose, 2015, p. 40).

The complexities revolving around development and regulation of online programs have pushed other entities to throw themselves in the mix. For example, the Maryland Longitudinal Data System called for the inclusion of online education data in their system so that they could provide greater information and research that can help better direct future policy and

development, and properly inform state decision makers (Croninger, Mao, Stapleton, and Woolley, 2015, p. 2). The idea that fifty different states are effectively figuring out how to handle online education in drastically different ways has raised the question for greater federal oversight to ensure cooperative reform or protect potential student access to online programs. Stedrak and Rose (2015) raise the question for whether it is time to alter the emphasis of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) to “expanding educational opportunity through online learning” (p. 41). On the surface, online learning has evolved into a complex peg still underutilized in the greater educational machine. The implication is much simpler: online learning has a greater role to play, and it’s time we emphasize developing it.

### **Significance**

The situation forced on by the COV-19 pandemic presented a rare opportunity for K-12 schools to consider the potential of online learning for their respective communities. As schools transitioned into fully online programs, issues immediately surfaced related to students, parents, teachers, administrators, and by extension, greater educational stakeholders. At the same time, the potential for online programs to provide a fresh and different solution to common issues faced by members of the school community was ever present. Although there is a greater body of research for higher education and adult learning settings, relatively little research is available for broader K-12 settings. Researchers have long attempted to compare realities of online, blended, and face-to-face learning. Researchers have long debated potential strengths and weaknesses of online programs for different interest groups in a school community. In the wake of the COV-19 pandemic, there are now literally thousands of school communities with stories to share. This study is designed to tell just one.

## **Problem Statement**

The purpose of this research is to explore perceptions of online education within a high school learning community following the implementation of online learning for the fourth quarter of the 2019-2020 school year in response to the outbreak of COV-19, to help better inform and shape the future development and implementation of online learning opportunities in high school settings. This research is founded on two central questions: 1) How did interest groups within the school community (students, parents, teachers, and administrators) perceive the transition from education designed for the traditional classroom to education designed for online environments? 2) What suggestions do stakeholders within a greater district learning community (students, parents, teachers, and administrators) have regarding the future development and implementation of online learning opportunities?

## **Organization of Literature Review**

In order to help set the stage for interpretation and discussion over how the high school learning community of focus transitioned from classroom learning to online learning, the following research has been organized to address the following questions: 1) What are the potential strengths and weaknesses of online learning? 2) How have programs designed for online environments compared to programs designed for blended and traditional classroom environments? 3) With those implications in mind: how should an appropriate school learning community be defined for online environments? 4) What are the unique realities of online learning for students, parents, teachers, administrators, and broader stakeholders? 5) Lastly, in the context of forced transitions from the COV-19 pandemic: what realities of change theory likely impacted perceptions of online learning (and related performance in new online programs)?

### ***What are the Potential Strengths of Online Learning?***

Recent research reveals a number of ways online learning can be used to bolster potential learning goals within a school community. Thompson (2011), in her discussions with teachers on potential benefits and challenges with online learning, reported online education “provides expanded access to advanced level coursework, [and] opens up opportunities for new modes of learning [with fewer limitations of traditional classrooms]” (p. 38). Thompson (2011) adds that online environments can actually offer students more than a traditional classroom with more time to reflect, more freedom to be honest, and more responsible for their own learning (p. 38). Edwards (2017) in his action research developing a mentor program for an online charter school adds that online education also offers many students access to quality learning that wouldn’t be possible otherwise (p. 6). In her survey questions to high school students enrolled in at least one online class, Gilbert (2015) found that students did indeed appreciate greater access to internet resources and the flexibility and independence “to work at their own pace” (p. 23).

From a broader stakeholder’s standpoint, Heafner, Hartshorne, and Petty (2015) in their literature review regarding the effectiveness of online education (in K-12 settings) show online learning is increasingly viewed as a way of “[innovating practices and integrating contemporary technologies], while also addressing increasing class sizes, shrinking budgets, and growing student populations” (p. x) Furthermore, Heafner et al (2015) reveal administrators see a great potential role for “improving graduation rates, credit recovery, building connections for students to their future [...] and differentiating instruction” (p. x). In short, online learning offers natural advantages that not only can further the goals of students, but also the goals of the broader educational system.

### ***What are the Potential Weaknesses of Online Learning?***

Recent research also reveals a number of ways online learning might not be the ideal way of bolstering potential learning goals within a school community. In her same study mentioned above, Gilbert (2015) also found that not all her high school students surveyed had access to “reliable internet at home” and therefore had to complete coursework either at school or at a public library (p. 23). Students also reported feelings of “[isolation from less interaction, genuine conversation, and timely feedback—all further compounded by the lack of face-to-face help from the instructor]” (Gilbert, 2015, p. 23). Edwards (2017) too conveyed that many students still feel “lost” in an educational model not designed for their learning styles or cultural background (p. 6).

Another fundamental weakness of online learning relates to its recency in the context of modern education—it is constantly dealing with issues one might compare to growing pains. Issues exist for students, instructors, and even stakeholders, related to everything from awareness of and access to technology (Dolan, 2016), openness to online environments (Kebritchi et al, 2017), skill and course readiness (Chernowsky, 2017; Kebritchi et al, 2017), cultural relevance (Hannon and D’Netto, 2008), use of pedagogy and learning theories (Arghode et al, 2017), as well as general program development, funding, and regulation (Stedrak and Rose, 2015). These types of issues could manifest in any online learning program, but as the speed and intensity of educational transitions from traditional classrooms to online environments pickup (as they did after the outbreak of the coronavirus), there is even more reason to be conscious of the various ways a learning community might struggle to capitalize on the potential advantages of online learning.

### ***How do online programs compare to blended and traditional classroom models?***

Although the implications of learning are similar for all learning programs (Arghode et al, 2017; Kebritchi et al, 2017; Picciano, 2017), many studies have at least compared perceptions or outcomes between fully online, blended, and traditional classroom models. One can ultimately find evidence that speaks to every possible stance for how the models compare. Even in its state over a decade ago, Allen and Seaman (2006) show in their report over online education in the United States that “by an increasing margin, most chief academic officers believe that the quality of online instruction is equal to or superior to that of face-to-face learning” (p. 3). In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education identified 51 independent effects (44 from higher education programs and 7 being from K-12 programs) between 1996 and 2008 which compared online learning to face-to-face instruction. The report found that: “[1) students who participated in mostly online classes performed better in a selected course compared to students who took the course in a traditional setting; (2) blended learning resulted in better student performance compared to both traditional and purely online settings; (3) students who reported more time on tasks also reported more benefit from online courses compared to students in traditional settings; and (4) online learning formats were effective for a variety of content areas and learner characteristics]” (Hurlbut, 2018, p. 249).

In their analysis of the Department of Education’s 2009 report, Means, Toyama, Murphy, and Baki (2013) maintain that online learning has been just as effective as traditional learning, while blended learning has been even more effective (p. 35). Another comparison study over course delivery methods similarly found that students in online settings outperformed students in traditional settings (Shacar and Nuemann, 2010, p. 318-334). Wu (2015), in his meta-analysis of 12 studies (between 2013-2014) comparing student learning in online and blended settings to traditional settings found that students taking online or hybrid courses generally performed

[similarly to] their peers in face-to-face sections.” (sr.ithaka.org). These reports, over the course of almost a decade reveal an important truth, online learning models (particularly blended programs) *can* work for at least some students—and arguably better than the traditional classroom model.

Excitement aside, there is also plenty of evidence that traditional classrooms might be better for many (if not most students) than online programs—at least in their present state. In her comparison study of education achievement between 16 online high schools and 16 similar traditional high schools in Arizona, Blohm (2017) found that traditional schools significantly outperformed online schools in both reading and math scores on the AIMS test each of the 3 years studied (p. 70). Blohm (2017) furthermore used her data to “[call] into question the validity of online high schools and how they are currently managed and accredited [at least in Arizona—the focus state studied]” (p. 70). This showcases a potentially obvious side point, that poorly designed online programs shouldn’t be expected to help anyone compared to a properly designed educational experience. There is also an important subpoint, how can we ensure online programs are offering students a quality of learning we deem necessary for credit and graduation requirements?

Einfeld (2016), in his evaluation of key stakeholders at a liberal arts college, found that educators believed “moving a degree entirely online would undermine the essential nature and core purposes of a liberal arts education” (p. 1-2). This issue is compounded by the fact many instructors are simply uninterested or unmotivated to teach online and current teacher education programs have yet to fully embrace or prepare future teachers for the challenges of online education (Kebritchi et al, 2017, p. 16-18). If teachers don’t believe online learning can measure up (even if they are just skeptical it might not) one can assume other members of the learning

community feel similarly—though more research is still needed on the matter (Borup et al, 2019).

Ultimately, the research suggests online programs *can* measure up to traditional programs (potentially even outperform them), but the reality is many still do *not*. This answer serves as both an opportunity and a warning. Online learning programs, properly designed, should serve as a great alternative for at least some students to help many learning communities reach their particular educational goals. Poorly designed, online learning programs are just a superficial way of pushing students through school, which will inevitably result in friction later in their education or in their career.

### ***How Should the School Learning Community be Defined for Online Environments?***

There are two ideas which necessitate a brief reevaluation of learning communities in online environments. First, there are differences between an online and classroom environment, and that requires new pedagogical considerations (Arghode et al, 2017). The second, is that the idea behind best practices in classroom environments will likely hold true in online environments too (Kebritchi et al, 2017). Again, the notion is not to reinvent the wheel, but more to make sure we equip the right wheel for the job. To that effect, this study utilizes a definition of a learning community which blends notable best practices into one more ideal for responsibilities in online environments.

This research defines a learning community as a community organized within an official educational boundary that share a direct and fundamental responsibility for preparing students for life after high school—specifically students, parents, teachers, and administrators. This definition blends qualities of DeFour’s (2004) “Professional Learning Communities” and qualities of Etienne and Wenger-Trayner’s (2015) “Communities of Practice” with Epstein and



Salinas's (2004) views of family involvement to create a more generalized district learning community that will serve as the focus of this study. The final ingredient utilizes elements of Goodwin and Cameron's (2015) "Purposeful Communities," which adds a layer of responsibility from leadership (in this case, administrators), to provide the clear direction and support necessary to enact deeper and more fundamental change in learning communities.

DeFour argued that a learning community has three goals—ensuring students learn, collaboration, and a "focus on results" (ascd.org). Etienne and Wenger-Trayner (1991) defined a Communities of Practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do [...] as they interact regularly" (pg. 1). Their definitions are designed with educators in mind but ignore other interest groups with important educationally-related responsibilities (notably, parents). Instead, Epstein and Salinas (2004) call for a focus on a "school learning community" that involves parents and members of the community (through community activities and sponsorships) (pg. 12). This study simplifies that involvement to just parents, who particularly have more responsibilities for their children in online environments (Borup, 2016); Henderson, 2018). In the context of greater membership in a learning community, increased parental involvement has shown to increase maintenance and generalization of skills taught in home environments, improve parent-child relationships, and decrease parent stress (Avendano and Cho, 2020, pg. 259). Lastly, Goodwin and Cameron's (2015) argue for school leaders to develop "Purposeful Communities," emphasizing the development and support of clear expectations, shared commitment, focused resource management, and a dedication to positive attitudes (pg. 75-78). Goodwin and Cameron (2015) argue that school principals are arguably the most important player in shaping school culture, and therefore must develop tools and

frameworks that allow for the school community to better understand and fulfil their roles (pg. 77).

To that effect, the rest of this literature review is broken down into sections pertaining to the realities each interest group (students, parents, teachers, and administrators) face in online environments, with additional attention to realities related to the forced transition to online environments from the COV-19 pandemic.

### ***What are the Realities of Online Learning for Students?***

For students, Kebritchi et al (2017) found that students often come into online environments with diverse expectations for course work, feedback, and communication, and therefore online programs need to have clear “course rules and policies [set] at the beginning of the course” (p. 8). Similarly, learners come into online environments with varied levels of readiness. Kebritchi et al (2017) argued many learners simply lack the “learning styles and skills required to participate in online courses” and thus will need help developing those skills if they are to be successful in any potential online programs (p. 8-9). Chernowsky (2017), in her study regarding college student readiness, found that “students benefit from some type of orientation to online learning, practice using a learning management system familiarizes students to the online learning environment, and students feel more secure within the learning environment when supported by a readily available course facilitator” (p. i). In other words, if an institution is serious about implementing online learning, they need to take careful steps to prepare potential students for expected challenges and readily support them throughout the entirety of the course.

Another big issue in online programs is fostering and utilizing students’ identity. Kebritchi et al (2017) warn that learners can “feel isolated and disconnected in online courses, which may affect learning, [and thus the course must work to build] a shared sense of belonging,

purpose, and norms (p. 9-10). Komininou's (2018) study of an e-learning program in Greece found that "the degree of interaction between [students in the program] greatly [impacted] their performance in an online environment" (p. 150). She maintains that social interactions are "very important for creating a positive climate that enhances the cohesion of the learning community with better learning outcomes" (p. 151). Fostering student identity and allowing for students to feel comfortable are even more important given the bigger issue of student participation in online courses.

Student participation is one the most widely researched issues in online education. Kebritchi et al (2017) show that students can participate in online education in many different ways and warn against assessment centered on "quantity or length of their online postings" (p. 10). Kebritchi et al (2017) suggest that online courses should incorporate more diverse ways of gauging participation, which include accounting for duration students interact with content and utilizing more audio and video mediums to enhance "online text discussion [and] community building" (p. 11). Humber (2018), through her study of online student engagement, advocates for "discussion forums, a variety of diverse activities, video-recorded lectures, and regular communication through frequent announcements and instructor feedback" to increase student motivation and engagement (p. 119). Darrow-Magras (2015), in her research over students' online experience, advocates for "peer support networks to promote student persistence" and showcased the potential for learning partnerships to "[promote self-efficacy]" (p. 202). Student participation, in essence, cannot be assumed to happen naturally or easily in an online environment—it must be fostered in different ways to help spur and engage diverse learners.

### ***What are the Realities of Online Learning for Parents?***

It would be fair to argue that the research focusing on the parental side of online programs is lacking in the context of K-12 online education. That said, if one views parental involvement as an element of best practice in teaching and learning (Epstein and Salinas, 2004), then there is assumedly an important role for parents to play. Current research has at least started to explore how parents feel about online programs for their students, and the potential importance of parental involvement in K-12 settings.

In an exploratory study involving American and Canadian parents living in Saudi Arabia, Lackey (2019) found that parents felt full-time online education was “a viable option for K-12 education, [though not necessarily for their own children].” (pg. i). This reveals at least a similar degree of excitement and caution towards online learning as other groups within the learning community. That said, it also shows that parents often look to online school with a more particular motivation (social or behavioral issues, gifted and special needs, credit retention, involvement in specialized sports, artistic, or faith groups) compared to other forms of education (pg. 86).

In respect to parental involvement in online settings, Henderson (2018), using survey data from online K-12 charter schools, argues that parents often have to embrace more responsibility than other parents in order to ensure students are successful given unique challenges in online environments (pg. 86). Gil, Walsh, Wulsin, Matulewicz, Severn, and Grau (2015), found that over half of online charter schools expected parents to participate in training. Interestingly, Henderson (2018) found the strongest perception of parent-teacher relationships in online charter programs at the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade level rather than in the elementary years, which is the opposite of what studies find in traditional settings (pg. 87). This could reveal a greater need for parental involvement in online settings to help students navigate the evidenced issues students face in

online programs, though much more attention is naturally needed on the subject. Henderson (2018) recommends incorporating training and tools to help teachers make stronger relationships with parents, which would fit alongside any best practice advice as method of increasing student engagement and achievement (pg. 93).

If parents are needed to hold more responsibilities in online learning environments, it becomes even more important for educators to build and support meaningful relationships to help parents fulfil their responsibilities. Avendano and Cho (2020) recommend “coaching” parents to help them develop the skills needed to support their children’s education (pg. 259). Avendano and Cho (2020) also advocate for collaboration and feedback with parents to involve them in setting and supporting important educational goals (pg. 258-259). Both of these strategies serve as a baseline for building and maintaining a higher parental involvement in school, which becomes increasingly important for online environments.

### ***What are the Realities of Online Learning for Teachers?***

The research shows that instructors too have a lot they can change to both better prepare themselves and their students for success in online education. Kebritchi et al (2017) found the transition from face-to-face to online courses, time management, and teaching styles, all carry potential issues for students’ learning in online environments.

The most basic issue with online education stems from teachers transitioning into online environments with little to no experience. Sandhoff (2018), in her study involving new adjunct online instructors, shows that newer adjunct faculty experienced anxiety from little time to prepare and a lack of clear expectations or guidelines (p. ii). Kebritchi et al (2017) found that “it takes faculty two times as long to prepare and teach online [compared to] face-to-face, thus spending more time per student to facilitate the class” (p. 19). In addition to a lack of time to

prepare, Kebritchi et al (2017) shows that newer online teachers report facing heavier workloads and technological issues (p. 16). The very nature of online communication poses unfamiliar problems for teachers as many struggle with content delivery and student engagement “due to lack of visual and face-to-face contact with their students” (Kebritchi et al, 2017, p. 17) Teachers also have to adjust from being “[performers” in face-to-face settings to “guides” who adjust the delivery of content to the needs of their online environment]” (Kebritchi et al, 2017, p. 16). Transitioning to online instruction has proven to be a tough task for many educators.

It should also be noted there are still educators hesitant to embrace online education as a substitute for face-to-face learning. Einfeld (2016), in his evaluation of key stakeholders at a liberal arts college found that educators believed “moving a degree entirely online would undermine the essential nature and core purposes of a liberal arts education” (p. 1-2). This issue is compounded by the fact many instructors are simply uninterested or unmotivated to teach online and current teacher education programs have yet to fully embrace or prepare future teachers for the challenges of online education (Kebritchi et al, 2017, p. 16-18) That said, teacher’s attitudes and motivations are not an insurmountable hurdle. Reyna (2016), in his study over the implementation of an e-learning officer at the University of Western Sydney, found that “high quality learning design, empowerment of staff to experiment, staff development via workshops and one-on-one support, development of resources for academics to facilitate online teaching and learning, training of students in the use of technological tools, and strong focus on their learning experience monitored by reflection and research [increased staff morale and led to an openness and enthusiasm towards change]” (p. 101). If instructors are allowed more time and flexibility to adjust to online education, it is fair to expect their attitudes and motivation will vastly improve.

Given the challenges of transitioning to online education, it is imperative that instructors receive adequate training to best prepare them from online environments. Fine (2017), in her study over high school faculty perceptions of a fine arts online program, strongly advocates for the use of mentor programs, and school-wide professional development and support initiatives to support teachers transitioning to online environments. Kebritchi et al (2017), too, advocates for the use of observations that allow newer instructors to learn best practices from their more experienced peers (p. 20).

Communication cannot be taken for granted in an online environment and thus Kebritchi et al (2017) stresses for the use of interaction software which can provide students with a “personal touch” to keep them comfortable and engaged in an online environment (p. 19-20). Kebritchi et al (2017) adds that effective online instruction requires extra time and effort to create a safe learning environment built on communication, feedback, and deeper level questions, which allow students to “feel valued and [...] share their ideas” as members of a greater community (p. 20-21). Kebritchi et al (2017) recommends “staying organized and checking in with students” as regularly as possible, along with providing resources like FAQs, which can give students immediate feedback to important and common questions (p. 21). In other words, a lot of strife instructors face in online education can be mitigated with proper frontloading and design.

Even instructors’ teaching styles have shown to impact the effectiveness of online learning programs. Kebritchi et al (2017) argues “the instructor is the single most important factor in determining student success in an online class” (p. 19). Effective online teaching practices are essentially derived from common best practices in traditional classrooms centered on “the expectation of interaction both between faculty and students and students and their peers,

[in addition to] effective communication [and] timely feedback” Kebritchi et al, 2017, p. 19). Evidence has shown that “classroom based pedagogical framework[s] can be a comprehensive tool for directing pedagogical improvement in online learning” (Preieto-Rodriguez et al, 2016, p. 37). Arghode et al (2019) and Picciano (2016) call for more implementations of learning theories and teaching frameworks into online course design. Donna Miller (2011), in her analysis of basic learning styles likewise advocates teachers should “flex [between learning theories] for maximum benefits and maintains that “because students vary in [learning styles], educators must make adjustments in their curriculum designs” (p. 39).

Moving away from teaching practices, the actual content presented within online environments need to be carefully reevaluated. Kebritchi et al (2017) show that most online instructors “teach with predefined content” and therefore “face the issue of lack of empowerment” (p. 11). Just as students may feel uncomfortable or isolated in an online setting, instructors too are not always well prepared, or willing, to adjust their materials and strategies to an online setting (Kebritchi et al, 2017, p. 11-12). As such, Kebritchi et al (2017) recommend providing additional incentives such as a “flexible schedule [or] decreased workload and release time” to provide more motivation for instructors to train and prepare their content for an online setting (p. 12). A basic fix to lacking content is thus allowing teachers more time and flexibility to actually shape and create their content for their students.

Another issue related to online content is the use (or more often, the lack of use) of multimedia content such as videos, games, and...video games. Kebritchi et al (2017) stress that using multimedia does not always add value for students and that instructors need to think first on how potential multimedia “will add to the learning activity” (p. 13). That said, the use of multimedia has shown to enhance student engagement and allow students important flexibility to



reach learning goals without direct intervention from the instructor (Kebritchi et al, 2017, p. 13). Reyna (2016) confirmed implementing “technological tools, such as slidecasts, Google Docs, digital video and blogs [...] translated into an enhanced learning experience [for students taking online classes]” at Western Sydney University (p. 101). The more approaches students are provided to master learning targets, the more teachers can expect their students to do so without needing more of their time and effort.

Similarly, general instructional strategies for online environments which best help students succeed have been a major question for research in online education. Kebritchi et al (2017) argues “overarching best practices for instruction are similar for both online and face-to-face courses [which include] peer-to-peer interaction, active student engagement in learning, emphasis on practice and student effort, personalization to the individual student, variety, and emphasis on higher thought processes” (p. 13-14). Kebritchi et al (2017), thus, advocate for a “combination of collaborative activities, reflective activities, clear assessment criteria, and integration of technology” to better help students reach learning targets (p. 13). Varied approaches will naturally allow diverse learners more opportunities to relate to and master content.

Research has also focused on how to better develop content for online environments. Kebritchi et al (2017) stress for clarity in course trajectory and content presentation which must be aligned to learning objectives to help students both better understand and reach desired learning targets (p. 14). Kebritchi et al (2017) also calls for the use of formative assessments, which can serve as a way to both “support learning [and] keep students engaged” (p. 14). Again, content must be designed to communicate to students exactly what is expected of them, and some type of initial feedback (when possible) is important to both gauge student progress and

communicate progress towards learning goals. The more direction and feedback students are provided, the less likely they are to need additional time and resources from instructors—who as shown earlier, often feel overloaded in online environments.

Another major concern is the lack of attention for students with special needs or disabilities in online environments. Smith, Basham, Rice, and Carter Jr. (2016) show that not only do special education teachers need refined and unique skills to fulfill their responsibilities in online environments, but most special education teachers are also not currently getting that training (p. 171). Smith et al (2016) recommend more collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers working in online environments. Again, time and training are needed if more students are expected to succeed in online environments.

One last concern is that teachers are not necessarily getting *any* training for online environments. Henderson (2018) found that only 1.3% to 4.1% of teacher preparation programs currently prepared educators for alternative settings to the classroom. Although best practices should translate, there are clear differences in online settings that teachers need be aware of, and design around, to give students better chances at success in online environments. This impacts everything from relationships with students and parents, to lesson planning, and feedback loops.

### ***What are the Realities of Online learning for Administrators?***

The realities of online learning for administration are a little more nuanced. In some ways they serve as a bridge between the different members of the learning community, and that comes with responsibilities that relate to students, teachers, and parents. Goodwin and Cameron (2015) argue that school culture starts with leadership, and therefore administrators are arguably the most important player in shaping it (pg. 77). Administrators must be aware of the realities faced by all members of their greater learning community, and to that effect, it would be redundant to

repeat most of the implications discussed above. That said the research (above) clearly suggests that administrators should expect all members of the learning community to experience issues in online learning environments. This holds even more weight for transitions from traditional environments into new online programs when considering the implications of change in educational settings (Waters and Cameron, 2007).

Especially in the context of transition, administrators should be wary of general hesitation and skepticism about online learning among educators (Einfeld, 2016) and the various struggles faced by teachers reshaping their courses for online environments (Kebritchi et al, 2017). These issues could easily compound and create more animosity among teachers—which would only extend into more members of the learning community. Sharp (2017), in his case study over online K-12 charter administrators found a big need for “personalized ongoing transition training” for newly hired teachers (pg. 93). Sharp (2017) recommended continuous personalized training programs for teachers but cautioned that more research was needed on how that should look (pg. 95). Avendano and Cho (2020) call for increased training and support to parents, which involves including them in for feedback and discussions over educational goals (pg. 258-559). All in all, administrators would be wise to expect resistance in transitions to online learning and need to ensure adequate support systems for students, parents, and teachers.

### ***What are the Realities of Online Learning Related to Change Theory?***

The concept and nature of change is also an important element of this study. The context of the COV-19 pandemic clearly pushed school communities to adopt rather unprecedented changes towards online learning over short periods of time. That level of change undoubtedly impacted perceptions of online learning (as well as the ultimate effectiveness of programs which transitioned into online environments), and therefore has implications worth exploring. Without

ignoring implications of broader change theories, this study particularly utilizes the concepts of “first order change,” defined as “incremental” or “continuous” types of change, and “second order change,” defined as “fundamental” or “discontinuous” (Waters and Cameron, 2007).

Waters and Cameron (2007) assert, using meta-analysis from leadership studies, that school-level leadership is of the largest indicators of student achievement, leading them to safely understate that “leadership makes a difference” (pg. 3). Waters and Cameron (2007) maintain that second-order change (compared to first-order change) is more likely to cause issues related to “fragmentation of staff, clarity of learning goals, communication within the learning community, control over daily operations, and feelings of insecurity related to a lack of predictability” (pg. 13). Waters and Cameron (2007) also include Fullan’s (2001) ideas towards an “implementation dip,” which argued that second-order change is more likely associated with “new knowledge and skills that challenge prevailing norms, or conflict with personal values,” and therefore often leads to more negative perceptions as impacted parties adjust (pg. 13). Based on how quickly school communities transitioned into a new learning environment, the implications of second-order change become even more valuable given the evidenced issues faced by students, parents, teachers, and administrators working with online learning (discussed above).

Based on Waters and Cameron’s (2007) and Fullan’s (2001) contributions, this study will utilize an original concept termed “forced change”, defined in this research as second-order change enacted in emergency situations. The coronavirus inevitably forced educational leaders to implement “second order change” to close the 2019-2020 school year. The changes implemented were both sudden, and (assumedly) temporary, and therefore fit well within the framework offered by Waters and Cameron and Fullan. That said, schools did not necessarily enact this

change willingly, and to that effect the term forced change is used instead. This mostly insignificant shift in terminology is necessary to highlight the extreme nature presented by the coronavirus outbreak, and it allows for a fairer evaluation and discussion of the acting interest groups within the learning community. It would be irresponsible to compare emergency-oriented scenarios of change, especially enacted on larger scales, to regular second-order change that might happen for more ordinary issues, like those related to student achievement or discipline. That said, the general concepts and consequences of second-order change outlined by Waters and Cameron are still valuable and will be used as references for themes and experiences that will likely emerge throughout the district's implementation of online learning.

Ultimately, Waters and Cameron (2007) identified 21 statistically significant responsibilities of leadership related to change that will serve as reference points for perceptions within the learning community. Interestingly, all 21 responsibilities were found to indicate a positive relationship with first-order change, but it is the relationship of these responsibilities to second-order change that will be of focus for this study. Of the 21 responsibilities, only eleven had a statistically significant relationship to second-order change—seven of these indicated a positive correlation and four indicated a negative relationship.

The seven responsibilities indicating a positive relationship to second-order change consisted of curricular knowledge, flexibility, agent of change, ideals and beliefs, monitoring and evaluation, intellectual stimulation and optimization. The four responsibilities indicating a negative relationship to second-order change consisted of culture, communication, input, and order (Waters and Cameron, 2007, pg. 12). Waters and Cameron stress (2007) that these negative relationships do not suggest that utilizing certain responsibilities (like fostering culture) have negative impacts, but that certain responsibilities are likely harder to “fulfill [...] when leading

changes with second-order implications for stakeholders” (pg. 13-14). These eleven responsibilities will help guide the coding and interpretation of data from the learning communities in this study.

The implications of these eleven responsibilities are reinforced by Ellsworth (2000) and Ha (2014). Ellsworth (2000), in his survey of change models argues that proper implementations of change require careful strategy (pg. 24-25). Ellsworth (2000) utilized the change communication model alongside elements of classical change theories to argue that proper change requires careful interventions within both specific components of a system as well as the collective system as it is designed (pg. 33). Ellsworth (2000) maintains that in order to maximize the potential impact of change, “innovations must be undertaken to ensure that changes within one component of the system are supported and reinforced by changes in interdependent components” (pg. 33). During the pandemic, innovations within and across these components were understandably stressed and disjointed, making it even more difficult to properly implement changes within the school’s educational system--likely adding even more stress to relationships related to Waters and Cameron’s (2007) second-order change.

Similarly, Ha (2014) argues that change is an inevitable process that, when inappropriately implemented, threatens to exaggerate both existing and potential issues within a system (pg. 5). To optimally manage change, Ha (2014) maintains that implementations must consider both the physical components of change, like the technology and skills needed for success in a system, and the social components related to the feelings and emotions of members within a system (pg. 10).

Ha (2014) also discusses the differences between planned change as a deliberate incremental process and unplanned change as “reactive response to pressures caused by

alterations in the internal and external conditions” (pg. 23). The pandemic clearly created new pressures for school communities to adopt to. Some of these new pressures emerged from external federal and state agencies, while others emerged internally from families and educators. Ha (2014) adds that planned change models often neglect the nuance of contextual pressures that invariably can impact all components within a system (pg. 32-33).

In response, Ha (2014) discusses Dunphy’s and Stake’s (1993) Contingency Model that can apply for either planned or unplanned change scenarios (pg. 33). The Contingency Model works to understand change within a specific context, which may not be applicable in other environmental situations. The model organizes potential change approaches into different scales of change and types of management while working under the assumption that both may be modified alongside emerging contextual situations (Ha, 2014, pg. 33).

Ideally, school leaders would have at least some time to develop and implement change using an appropriate model, and Ha (2014) outlines a five-step model for sustainable change that applies to both planned and unplanned situations (pg. 35-44). First, Ha (2014) recommends building a team to oversee changes that includes multiple perspectives from appropriate interest groups and members. Second, the team needs to identify the most pertinent problems and focus resources on ways that will best improve conditions within selected components of a system. Third, the team should begin implementing changes with consideration for leadership, funding, empowerment of stakeholders, and at least some measurable short-term outcomes that will help reinforce the broader implementation process. Fourth, the team should evaluate the change process and review progress towards outcomes to help identify any potentially needed interventions. Lastly, the team needs to find ways of stabilizing and reinforcing new approaches and behaviors from the change effort through the use of strategies such as modeling, training,

feedback loops, and proper funding. These five steps provide even more ways of interpreting the district's implementation of online learning alongside Waters and Cameron's (2007) evidenced realities of second-order change.

Ultimately, the general concepts and consequences of second-order and unplanned change outlined by Waters and Cameron (2007), Ha (2014), Ellsworth's (2000) implications of broader change in complex systems, and Ha's five step model for sustainable change (2014) all provide valuable references to help interpret themes and experiences that will likely emerge throughout the district's implementation of online learning.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research is to explore perceptions of online education within a high school learning community following an unprecedented implementation of online learning in response to the COV-19 pandemic. This research is designed to make use of evidenced issues, best practices, and ideas for reform to help interpret how shared experiences within the learning community can better inform and shape the future development and implementation of online learning opportunities in high school settings. In respect to the current availability of research pertaining to online education in K-12 settings, this research stands to provide a rare blueprint for potential educators and policymakers interested in expanding online learning opportunities to help meet their particular educational goals.



## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of online learning within a greater school learning community in response to their district's implementation of online learning beginning around the fourth quarter of the 2019-2020 school year following the outbreak of the COV-19 virus to help better inform and shape the future development and implementation of online learning opportunities.

### **Research Questions**

This research is founded on two central questions:

1. How did the forced transition to online environments due to the coronavirus outbreak impact perceptions of online learning for learning communities?
2. What themes emerge within the experiences and perceptions of the learning community that could help guide the future development and implementation of online learning opportunities (with particular attention to change-theory)?

### **Methodology: Collective Case Study**

This research is designed around a collective case study framework using multiple methods to examine each case. The selected cases include students, parents, teachers, and administrators organized within one midwestern suburban high school learning community who were active for the 2019-2020 school year. Each case will be examined over the course of the fourth quarter of the 2019-20 school year into the first semester of the 2020-21 school year using two different methods of data collection for cross-referencing potential themes: phased semi-structured interviews, and surveys. Data from these methods will be compared and contrasted

between cases and emergent themes will then be interpreted with particular attention to concepts related to change theory.

Case studies are ideal for examinations of people and issues over shorter periods of time to discover more “causal links in settings where cause-and-effect relationships are complicated and not readily known, [for example in] school reform” (Hays, 2014, pg. 218). Case studies allow researchers to look closely within each case to “uncover new and unusual interactions, [...] interpretations, and cause-and-effect connections” (Hays, 2014, pg. 218-219). Collective case studies are useful for studying variation between particular cases, which when compared and contrasted, allows for more compelling interpretations and more stable findings (Merriam, 2015, pg. 40). Although case studies often avoid an objective of generalizability (Hays, 2014), the cases within this study have been selected with attention to how they represent broader school learning communities across the United States. By incorporating common themes present in research related to transitions to online learning (Kebritchi et al, 2017) and change theory (Waters and Cameron, 2007), aspects of generalizability should be possible for educators and related stakeholders interested in future implementations of online learning (Hays, 2014). Overall, case studies “have proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, for evaluating programs, and for informing policy,” and a focus on recent transitions to online learning provide opportunities for insight into all three (Merriam, 2015, pg. 41).

## **Research Design**

### ***Site Selection***

The high school of focus is in many ways an ideal candidate for case studies centered on the implementation of online learning based on student makeup and performance measures which compare similarly to national averages (nationalreportcard.gov). It is a part of a well-

regarded school district (ranked in the low #700s out of 10,782 high schools on niche.com) that serves over 27,000 students and employs over 4300 staff—making it the third largest district in its state. Although scoring higher marks overall, the district looks fairly average in many national metrics (including around 60<sup>th</sup> percentile for college readiness, reading and math scores, and overall student diversity on globalreportcard.org). The district also importantly has offered each high school student a laptop they get to take home and utilize to complete their coursework dating back to 2013, which indicates the district was at least reasonably equipped for any potential shifts towards online learning. Although this initiative serves as a limitation of generalizability for schools who cannot supply all students with similar technology, one could argue that 1-1 laptop or tablet initiatives are already widely present in most U.S. school districts—and are continually identified as a necessity for education in the wake of the COV-19 pandemic (Rauf, edweek.org).

The high school represented in this study is one of five traditional high schools in its district—and it compares much less favorably to state averages than the district as a whole (publicschoolreview.com). The school serves around 1500 students with a student-teacher ratio of 15-1. For the 2018-19 school year, the school posted a graduation rate of 84% with a 24% proficiency rating in math and 34% in reading—all ranking in the bottom 50% for high schools in the state. On the other hand, the diversity of the school ranks within the top 20% for the state, with 57% of students categorized as white, 28% Hispanic, 8% black, 2% Asian, and 5% categorized as two or more races. Other notable statistics include 35% of students eligible for free lunch, and 11% eligible for reduced lunch. These stats position the school directly around national averages (nationalreportcard.org). The school provides a rare balance of diversity, academic performance, and incorporation of technology that should provide an increasingly

valuable blueprint to consider for learning communities interested in implementing online learning opportunities.

Following the COV-19 outbreak, the district made a few key decisions (with the interests of their learning community in mind) for their implementation of online learning for the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2019-20 school year that will be of notable focus for the study. Firstly, the district stipulated that all 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter grades (which run into the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter for a cumulative semester grade) could not go down, and that 4<sup>th</sup> quarter learning opportunities should be offered to help students bring grades up. Second, the district prohibited attendance keeping. If teachers wanted to hold a class with the expectation of student attendance, they needed to do so at the same time as their class would normally meet during the school day, and they needed to provide students 24-hour notice. Thirdly, the district recommended that teachers make themselves available online for at least one hour of each school day for general help and questions on schoolwork, but they discouraged any one-on-one meetings through traditional channels with students unless recorded to protect both students and teachers from potential misconduct. Lastly, the district maintained that any teachers teaching the same class should be offering similar learning opportunities for students interested in raising grades.

Before the start of the first semester of the 2020-21 school year, the district announced some important changes. Online class schedules would not mirror the regular school day with all seven classes (and an eighth period seminar) happening at the same times they would in the classroom. A new Learning Management System (LMS) was implemented that all classes had to utilize, giving students, parents, and teachers a single place to monitor for schoolwork. Lastly, grades and attendance guidelines were returned to normal, and students were expected to be in each class every day.

Leading up to the first semester of the 2020-21 school year, the district also allowed families to choose their preferred learning environment in an effort to please those who were concerned about safety and health risks in schools during a pandemic. Roughly 40% of families chose fully remote settings at this particular school, while 60% chose “as much in-person as possible.” Ideally, these in-person families were signing up for a hybrid model that included half of the students going to school each day (divided alphabetically by last name to keep families together). Due to the state and county guidelines from the pandemic, this hybrid model would not begin until close to the end of the first quarter, and it would only last around a month of school, meaning for the majority of the semester the entire school was in full remote learning.

### ***Case Selection***

This collective case study focuses on responses to the implementation of online learning within one greater high school learning community, defined as a community organized within an official educational boundary that share a direct and fundamental responsibility for preparing students for life after high school—specifically students, parents, teachers, and administrators. This definition blends qualities of DeFour’s (2004) “Professional Learning Communities,” and qualities of Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner’s (2015) “Communities of Practice,” with Epstein and Salinas’s (2004) views of family involvement to create a more inclusive district learning community needed in online environments (Gil et al, 2015; Henderson, 2018). The final ingredient utilizes elements of Goodwin and Cameron’s (2015) “Purposeful Communities,” which adds a layer of responsibility from leadership (in this case, administrators), to provide the clear direction and support necessary to enact deeper and more fundamental change in learning communities—such as in the context of immediate transitions from traditional classroom learning to fully online environments.

Three cases selected in this study (students, teachers, and administrators) fit well within all four of these different interpretations of learning communities, as they all ideally share concerns for student learning, and should be interacting regularly for ideas on how to improve it. The last case, parents, draws particular inspiration from Epstein and Salinas's (2004) attention to parenting and learning from home, to help "students succeed in school" (pg. 17). The concept of increased parental involvement in schools has not only been shown to increase student learning (Avendano and Cho, 2020), but is also even more necessary for ensuring student success in the face of unique issues present online environments (Gil et al, 2015; Henderson, 2018). The cases selected are designed to include Epstein and Salinas's attention to parenting and learning from home but draw the line at including volunteers or broader members of the community. This compromise helps maintain a focus on the professional responsibilities inherent in traditional definitions of learning communities (like DeFour's), while also extending a connection to an interest group (parents) who have evidenced impacts on student learning (as shown by Epstein and Salinas).

### ***Participant Selection***

Within this greater school learning community, this collective case study focuses just on members with a direct responsibility for students attending the high school of focus for the 2019-20 school year. Traditional enrollment spans from 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade. Within the selected population, each case is defined with the following parameters in mind. Students will consist of any students currently enrolled in at least 3 classroom courses (this excludes courses the district offers online) required for graduation as organized within the 4 traditional subject areas offered by the district—math, science, English, and Social Studies. Parents will include any primary guardian responsible for at least one current student who qualifies under the stipulations above. Teachers

must teach at least one class required for graduation within those four traditional subject areas. Administrators will be defined as principals and related associate principals listed in the school's directory during the transition to online learning in the 2019-20 school year. These parameters make for cases utilizing the district's 1-1 laptop with common curriculums and shared expectations for all students.

Although these chosen stipulations risk narrowing the possible sample size available for surveys and interviews, they also allow for a more nuanced insight into the realities and impacts of classes that are of primary concern for graduation, and also organized with the expectation that the class will be taught in a classroom. A compromise is made to exclude electives and nontraditional classroom environments so that greater attention is made to the situations which provide a clearer contrast between expectations and experiences as a result of the COV-19 pandemic.

### ***Membership Role***

I have been a member of the greater district community for most of my life (starting in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade) and a member of the school learning community for the past six years as a full-time teacher. This allows me to approach this research from multiple positions: as an interested researcher, an impacted professional, and a long-term member of the learning community. Each position affords me different ways of connecting with the school learning community to gauge, interpret, and discuss the implications from multiple perspectives of the district's forced online learning response to the situation brought on by the coronavirus.

The potential for my own bias and stress related to the district's implementation plan are of course a concern for the trustworthiness of this study, but my personal connection to the learning community also provides me a rare opportunity to really explore and interpret the

potential evolution of perception from multiple perspectives. One could argue, there is no one better suited to understand the nuanced implications of an event on a community than a fellow member (Bhattacharya, 2017). That said, my personal relationships and connections to the learning community are something I have to be careful to monitor throughout this study to avoid the danger of leading responses or shaping perceptions.

### ***Duration of Study***

Collection of data for this study began in April around the beginning 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of the 2019-20 school year and continued into the first semester of the 2020-21 school year.

**Table 3-1: Timeline of Study**

March, 2020	Schools officially closed down. Remote learning continued for 4th quarter.
Late May, 2020	School ended. Round 1 of Interviews began.
June and July, 2020	Round 2 of Interviews began.
Late August, 2020	Training and preparation began for the 2020-21 school year. Start of school pushed back until mid-September. Staff prepared for potential hybrid and online settings.
September 8th, 2020	School began in fully online settings.
Late September-Late October, 2020	Round 3 of interviews began during the middle of the first quarter.
Middle of October-Middle of November, 2020	Hybrid setting was introduced before being shut down again in response to rising COVID rates.
Early December 2020-Early January, 2021	Survey was spread to students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Round 4 of Interviews commenced.
January 22 <sup>nd</sup> , 2021	End of first semester.

### **Data Collection Methods**



This research works towards answering how different groups within the learning community perceived online learning throughout the district's forced transition to online environments following the outbreak of the coronavirus through two different mechanisms: phased semi-structured interviews and surveys. These two methods provide slightly different lenses for evaluating data related to the research questions, while also overlapping enough to aid in drawing interpretations shared among the different cases within the study. Although differences between cases will be important to highlight, it is the shared experiences among different interest groups that might provide the best direction for future implementations of online learning.

### ***Phased Semi-Structured Interviews***

The phased semi-structured interviews aim to highlight personal experiences related to the implementation of online learning and explore how perceptions of online learning change over time. Interviews are ideal ways to discuss “thoughts, opinions, perspectives, or descriptions of specific experiences,”—and this research stands to benefit from each of these elements (deMarris, 2014, pg. 54). Four to seven participants were selected within each case and interviewed four times between the start of the fourth quarter of the 2019-20 school year into the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. Both “unique-case” and “reputation-case” selection is utilized alongside my professional connections within the school community to find candidates that showcase unique realities within the learning community (deMarris 2014, pg. 60). Potential candidates will be prioritized based on how their experiences offer insight related to cultural diversity, socioeconomic status, academic achievement, and unique family circumstances. Although this section process does little to eliminate bias throughout the interview process, the

intended goal is to simply find participants with different backgrounds and experiences who have valuable stories to tell.

The first of four interviews were conducted towards the beginning of online instruction towards the end of the fourth quarter (May 2020), the second sometime around the end of the school year (June and July), the third during the beginning of the following school year (September and October), and the fourth towards the end of the first semester (December and January). These interviews were conducted remotely and recorded through conferencing software. All participants were given pseudonyms as a means of protecting their identity.

The semi-structured interviews were designed with some elements of phenomenology to highlight “everyday human experience[s] in close, detailed ways” (deMarris, 2014, pg. 56). Questions were designed to allow participants to elaborate on their level of preparation for online environments, their perception of the implementation process and their perceived level of support, issues and best practices they experienced, what they felt was helpful and not helpful throughout the forced implementation process, and how the implementation process impacted their views about online education, individually, and as it compared traditional classroom education at the end of the school year. Coding and analysis of themes from interviews will follow with careful attention to evidenced issues pertaining to online education (Kebritchi et al, 2017) and concepts related to second-order change (Waters and Cameron’s, 2007). The phasing of the three interviews allows for some evaluation of how potential themes for each case evolved over time.

### ***School-Wide Surveys***

School wide surveys were sent out to potential candidates within each case towards the end of the first semester of 2020-21 school year. The survey was open for about 3 weeks starting

in mid-December. The timing of these surveys serves as an opportunity for participants to reflect on the district's implementation process. To that effect, survey questions are constructed with both correlational and experimental elements to gather general descriptive data pertaining to perceptions of online learning (guided by evidenced trends in the literature review), but also determine how interest groups felt about potential online learning opportunities in the future.

The surveys were designed and distributed with careful attention to the “four cornerstones” of survey error—coverage, sampling, nonresponse, and measurement (Dillman, Smith, and Christian, 2014, pg. 3). Survey questions were workshopped by both the head of research in the district and approved by the school principal. The dissemination of surveys was aided by the school principal to help reach teachers and parents, and other teachers in the building to help reach students.

All four cases will respond to the same survey to allow for more shared interpretations of the data that might relate to the learning community as a whole. Related questions for each include how comfortable groups felt about online learning before the forced transition, how groups felt supported throughout the implementation process, issues and best practices groups experienced with online environments, how groups perceived the relative strengths and weaknesses of online environments compared to the traditional classroom, and how the implementation process impacted their views about future online learning opportunities. Using guidelines from Dillman et al (2014), the majority of survey questions (aside from demographics) will be constructed in a closed-ended format using a Likert item rating scale to simplify the cognitive load for each group and provide a clearer “holistic” message related to the research questions (pg. 164).

Again, data from surveys will be analyzed with careful attention to evidenced issues pertaining to online education (Kebritchi et al, 2017) and concepts related to second-order change (Waters and Cameron's, 2007). Analysis will help describe broader levels of perceptions within cases of online learning and how it was impacted after implementation. Data will then be compared and contrasted with emerging themes from interviews, to help shape the framework for the last method in the case study: the focus groups.

Coding between methods followed the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser and Strauss, 1968): starting with individual themes, building to shared themes, incorporating trends recent research, before finally constructing interpretations. Together, these three methods provide ample triangulation for each case that can then be analyzed and interpreted to create potential shared perceptions of online learning and how it was implemented in the district during the COV-19 outbreak.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

Data from each instrument has been coded and analyzed using first and second-cycle elemental methods, which are “primary approaches to qualitative data analysis” (Saldaña, 2014, pg. 97). This research utilized a first-cycle strategy of structural and initial coding, which was further organized using a second-cycle strategy of concept and longitudinal coding to help organize data for interpretation. Structural coding was utilized to serve as a foundation for likely themes in data analysis that are ideal for interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2014, pg. 97). Structural codes were formulated prior to any data collection using evidenced issues in online learning related to students, educators, and administrators. Broad themes expected to be shared among cases included both issues and best practices related to openness for online learning, readiness for online programs, motivation and participation in online environments, cultural relevance of

course materials, use of learning strategies, communication and feedback, and overall student progress and performance (Kebritchi et al, 2017).

Separate structural codes were also created based on evidenced trends related to second-order change. Waters and Cameron (2007) found seven responsibilities of leaders indicating a positive relationship to second-order change consisting of curricular knowledge, flexibility, agent of change, ideals and beliefs, monitoring and evaluation, intellectual stimulation and optimization (pg. 12). They also found four responsibilities indicating a negative relationship to second-order change consisted of culture, communication, input, and order (Waters and Cameron, 2007, pg. 12). These eleven responsibilities were utilized separately from the themes related to issues and best practices in online learning to help provide two means of data interpretation that help answer both research questions.

After the two branches of structural coding, initial codes were organized in spreadsheets as a more open-ended approach to discover similarities and differences within and between cases (while also analyzing how these trends appeared and evolved over time). Initial coding is ideal for studies using a “wide variety of data forms” (Saldaña, 2014, pg. 115). Initial coding provided a third potential branch of themes that could be utilized for data interpretation. These themes were then cross referenced with the prior structural themes related to issues and best practices in online learning and change theory. Together, these coding branches highlighted particular themes shared among prior research and initial data collection that could be used for concept coding between different collection methods and cases. Themes included strengths, weaknesses, issues, best practices, needs and expectations for students, parents, teachers, and administrators in online environments, comparisons between online and traditional environments, future

outlook, and interest level to participate in future online opportunities. The creation of these themes served as a first-cycle coding checkpoint.

Second-cycle coding utilized both concept and longitudinal coding to create more overarching themes for deeper analysis between cases. Concept coding is ideal for taking smaller pieces of data to help build a “bigger picture” for general understanding (Saldaña, 2014, pg. 119). Given the overall research questions pertain to the school learning community as a whole, concept coding was utilized to help organize data into overarching themes shared across the different data sources and cases. Ideally, data from this study will help inform future implementations of online learning. Concept coding helps provide snapshots of themes relevant for the greater school learning community that could be more useful for policy-making considerations. These themes were organized into survival tips for implementations of online learning.

Longitudinal coding is more appropriate for understanding data as it evolves overtime (Saldaña, 2014, pg. 236). Given the implementation process for transition to online learning was both immediate and rather extreme (given the circumstances of the pandemic), it was assumed that perceptions within the learning community of the implementation process would change over time. Longitudinal coding was used to highlight when particular themes emerged throughout the transitions to online learning as a means of interpreting how implementation affected cases over time. Longitudinal themes ultimately coincided with the school calendar and were the basis for the organization of the narrative interpretation of interviews. That structure began during the abrupt transition to online learning during the 4th quarter, the summer after 4th quarter as changes were announced for the upcoming school year, impressions during the first quarter, and the end of the semester. Overall, the evolution of perceptions should again prove

valuable for learning communities interested in implementing online learning opportunities as means of prioritizing what interest groups may need immediately in transition versus later on.

### **Data Representation**

Data was collected and interpreted with the goal of helping foster more appropriate implementations of online learning for more high school students. Genuine pursuit of this goal requires just as much attention to the issues faced by the cases within the learning community--and their perceived weaknesses of online learning environments--as best practices and perceived strengths. Ideal implementation plans will surely differ between learning communities, and therefore the data has been interpreted with careful attention to the contexts of the COV-19 pandemic as well as the contexts described by participants within the learning community. To that effect, the data and interpretations of them have been provided to ensure as much transparency as the outlined participant protections allow. Some data does not fit cleanly into potential themes or related interpretation and discussion such as certain survey questions, and particularly the open-ended responses in surveys. Most of this data is presented anyway in respect to transparency.

### **Reciprocity and Ethics**

Given the nature of the design of this study, and my personal connection to the learning community, data was collected and interpreted with a careful eye towards how participants might benefit from findings. In particular, the semi-structured interviews and focus-groups served as powerful personal reflections for participants to evaluate what was working for them, and what was not. Although I did my best to separate my own thoughts and feelings from participants, I also moved forward in data collection with the idea of helping participants rather than simply

observing or interviewing them. If a question was posed to me, I did not shy away from answering, or providing guidance for online environments based on themes I was familiar with in prior research. Although there are no notable examples where I lead participants to thoughts or conclusions, I certainly wasn't a perfect fly on the wall either. I justify this potential transgression with the notion that this research was always designed with the goal of helping more students benefit from online learning. If I saw an obvious opportunity to support a participant in a way that would not threaten the integrity of their feelings and perceptions, I did so.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

Three central elements related to the design of this study could be of concern in respect to trustworthiness and rigor: my implicit goal of fostering more quality online learning opportunities for high school students, my close connection to the learning community being studied, and my inexperience as a professional researcher. To help protect against my implicit goals related to the study, I have made it a central priority of this study to focus on issues faced by the learning community in their transitions to online learning. These issues, at least by themselves, are big factors to avoid implementing more online programs. If these issues are not addressed in implementations of online learning, then the goal of creating quality online learning opportunities is not really achievable. To that effect, an intended goal of data interpretation is to first identify prominent issues faced in transitions to online learning, and then consider ways to address them using prior research and experiences explored in the study. It is more than possible many learning communities are simply not ready for broader transitions to online learning, and I very much interpret the data with that potential reality in mind.



In respect to my close connection to the learning community, I have designed the study in a way which spins my implicit bias as a strength. Because of my close connections in the community, I have been able to highlight participants with interesting and valuable perspectives to consider. These chosen stories by themselves do little to appropriately represent the learning community as a whole, and thus multiple instruments have been utilized in each case to provide multiple lenses of finding issues, best practices, and shared themes experienced and described by the learning community. Again, data has been interpreted with the notion that no idea is really powerful in a vacuum, and if an idea or theme is not supported outside of its direct data source, I am careful to make that transparent.

Lastly, my inexperience as a professional researcher is likely the greatest concern in respect to the trustworthiness of this study. As a graduate student, I certainly grew as a researcher during the time of this study. Although there were no glaring mistakes made along the way, I at times include my own experiences and actions to ensure transparency in data collection and interpretation. That said, I have made it an extreme priority to network with professionals within my supervising community for every step in this study. Everything within research design, methodology, and data analysis has been reviewed, and at times reworked, to ensure quality standards of research have been addressed and maintained.

## Chapter 4 - Results

### One School's Story

Unlike many disaster scenarios, there was no guidebook for school communities to consult as they wrestled with the ensuing fallout of a global pandemic. Entire countries, much less school buildings, were forced to close down to mitigate the increasing spread of COVID-19 leaving many communities scrambling for survival. Reflecting on the past year for one midwestern school community brings to mind a “roller coaster” as the principal put it. Sufficient to say, the ride provided plenty of gut-dropping scares, but not without some proper excitement along the way.

### *The Chain Lift: Preparing for Remote Learning*

Recalling when the school officially closed down in late March, one associate principal recalled an aura of “fear” and “chaos.” The community wanted answers, “but the truth was we didn’t have many,” a fellow Associate Principal admitted. “We were playing a new game, but we didn’t know the parameters,” the first lamented. “We’ll survive,” another associate principal asserted, but “what worries me [is that many of our kids’] struggles will be amplified.” Ms. Alison, a Special Education teacher echoed that sentiment. She recalls feeling “very anxious” and “afraid online learning [could not] provide what many families need and expect” from school.

A timely week off for Spring Break gave the district important time to mull over options. On the Friday before school was supposed to resume, the district finally announced the fourth quarter would continue remotely with students using their school-provided laptops and the purchase of a remote conferencing platform. 3rd quarter grades were frozen from dropping, but any 4th quarter assignments could raise them up. Class schedules were now open to teacher

discretion, although the district recommended they try and align them to class times. Student attendance was optional. The district also required teachers be available for one hour of online office hours so students had opportunities for extra support. The school then extended Spring Break an extra week to let teachers prepare for a fourth quarter of remote learning. “I felt complete dread,” Ms. Richards, one of the school’s most celebrated teachers, recalls. Her eyes hinting that was somehow an understatement.

Given so many fundamental changes, teachers felt anything but prepared for the ensuing fourth quarter, but they more than acknowledge the dire circumstances. It was an “extreme situation,” with no “clear guidelines” from the state or beyond, Mr. Sherbert, a science teacher remarked. He believed the district did the right thing to error on the sides of “latitude” for families, bringing up concerns of WIFI access and childcare. Ms. Alison agreed that flexibility in the spirit of equity was necessary. “We are in a pandemic,” she declared. Discussions reveal universal support for the district’s cautious approach to a mostly new mode of learning in an unprecedented time. Associate Principal Miner explained the district had to wrestle with “drastic differences [even within individual school communities]”, and district leadership truly did their best to be “mindful of equity”. There was no “blueprint” to follow, he maintained. That said, the district’s cautious approach would not come without significant drawbacks.

As teachers were scrambling to prepare for a 4th quarter of remote learning, families were struggling with their own pressures. I was “shocked at the speed of implementation” one parent remarked. “[As a parent, it was tough], but as a former teacher, I would have lost my mind!” she proclaimed. Parents all complained in some form of issues related to too many emails, “back-and-forth” decision-making, lack of structure, and overall “stress” and “confusion”. Another parent recalled one video the district released that didn’t even work. “It

was impossible to keep up with!” one parent complained. Students voiced similar frustration feeling “lost” and “confused.” Students also complained of too many emails, and a lack of “structure” or “routine.” “I was really nervous,” one student admitted. “Definitely more stressed,” another student agreed.

### ***The Ride Begins: Saving the 4th Quarter***

Once the 4th quarter was underway, some nerves settled down, while many more were shaken up. The overall perception of learning online was definitely negative. Looking back, Mr. Mores, a math teacher who specializes in instruction for English Language Learners (ELL), called the 4th quarter a “disaster,” and there were plenty of objective ways it was. Everyone interviewed had something negative to say about a lack of structure and direction. Students felt lost, and one complained that he spent as much time trying to figure out what he was supposed to work on as he did actually work. One student argued it was “hard to keep track” of seven different class schedules, which might be the understatement of the study for a fifteen-year-old. Emails were universally critiqued. Some teachers sent too many, others did not send enough. Students and parents all agreed it was very difficult to stay up to date. Feelings of anxiety and stress were often discussed. To make matters worse, tech-related issues were experienced by all participants. Students and teachers experienced lagging and dropped online class meetings, unstable and slow WIFI (two parents had to make sure they were not using the internet when their student needed it for class), bugged laptops or programs, and one student even had to get a new laptop. No one had nice things to say about the district wide tech-support, which was universally criticized for being slow to respond to new tickets. Students also voiced extreme issues with the district’s VPN security software which often blocked educational resources, videos, and assignments from teachers. “I HATE the VPN,” one student asserted.

These negative factors only add to more fundamental issues experienced during online learning. Teachers reported only seeing a small percentage of their students. Of the few students who did show up, most had their screens turned off and their voices muted. Mr. Mores experienced a “complete lack of engagement.” “I expected low participation,” Ms. Melder, a social studies teacher recalled, “but not THIS low.” “It felt like a joke,” she maintained. Mr. Richards agreed, noting that although participation started out well enough, it wasn’t long before “students stopped showing up.” Teachers reported that it was challenging to lesson plan given lack of structure and incentives. Ms. Allison argued that it became much harder to “PLC” and collaborate. All teachers alluded to needing more support relating to something like shared resources or training for online environments. Even as the initial rush settled down, Ms. Melder added that it was hard to “identify and save” the students who needed more help because so many were not consistently showing up.” “How can you figure out what they need, or even what they like, when they just aren’t there?” Ms. Melder questioned.

Stories from students add important weight to what teachers were experiencing. All students reported a complete lack of social engagement and subsequent motivation. “No one ever talked,” one student claimed. Students also complained of increased “busy-work,” and increasingly redundant learning targets. “I had to take a week off from science [because we were going back to cover stuff from first semester],” one student admitted. Students (and parents) all complained about the multitude of websites, logins, and passwords they were supposed to keep track of. “It was all over the place,” another student remarked. Some students clearly understood that their teachers would need time to adjust to new online environments, but that did little to help their own transitions. “It just wasn’t effective for me,” one student asserted. Students also remarked that some classes seemed to work better for them than others online, though their

reasons given were typically tied more to personal learning (or teaching) styles as opposed to content. Classes with heavy hands-on elements like band, foods, and lab-related science were common sources of complaints though. Maybe it's best surmised as one student put it: "some classes just sucked."

Parents saw the situation similarly, complaining of "inconsistent communication," and "unclear deadlines." One parent called it "impossible to follow." Parents universally voiced feelings of confusion and anxiety. One parent questioned teacher accountability, believing there wasn't enough constructive class time, and argued office hours didn't "feel like a real learning opportunity." Parents were frustrated at lack of social participation and engagement. "Where are the discussions? What are teachers doing?!" one parent asked. "I didn't see enough feedback," another parent added. All parents felt that students were not learning to the degree they would have been in the classroom. "It felt like a waste of time," one parent asserted. Another parent agreed that he couldn't help but feel it was a "waste of a quarter." Two parents questioned broader family support. "I had to kick my son in the butt," one parent asserted. "I had to email all his teachers," the other added. They both acknowledged forms of privilege in their experiences. "But I'm able to work from home," one parent admitted. "I worry about other kids," she added. A different parent spoke from the opposite perspective having to deal with work and school during most of the time her son would be learning. "I can't keep tabs on him," she asserted. Even working from home one parent remarked "it was a lot of work," to reinforce learning during the day. Another parent with three children in three different schools lamented the experience was "deflating."

Ms. Allison, a special education teacher, was quick to question the larger fundamental issues: "Why were students not trying" she wondered, "why were things not working?" She

wanted to see more specific data about what families (and teachers) were going through. Teachers universally agreed there was too much flexibility and a lack of broader academic incentives. “As soon as students understood their grades could not go down, they checked out,” Ms. Richards asserted. It felt “impossible to build culture” Mr. Mores added. Even with students who needed the 4th quarter to pass, teachers found issues with students misleading, even lying to their parents. All teachers complained it was harder to reach families and build relationships.

These issues seem to stack for students who rely on greater support services. Mr. Mores argued that online was a “terrible experience” for his English-Language-Learners who no longer benefited from social and language cues. One student, who receives support for a learning disability, felt “less comfortable” without his usual para in some of his classes. Ms. Allison noted that learning is impossible when basic needs are not met and maintained “basic needs are just harder to address online.” Ms. Melder similarly argued that students “don’t care what you know until they know how much they care,” and felt it was “almost impossible” to reach ideal levels of trust. Ms. Richards too argued that students “who did not feel safe” online just “gave up.” “Somethings missing,” Ms. Allison remarked, “it felt like we failed some kids.” To be fair, the transition to online learning absolutely did.

Pushing aside the overwhelming negative perceptions reveals a healthy amount of positive feelings to consider. As one administrator was quick to point out, one understated positive is that “learning did actually continue.” In the chaotic pit of a pandemic, the schools overly flexible incentives did lead to less overall failures as students brought up their grades. One parent agreed, saying she was “really happy” at what the district was able to accomplish given the circumstances. Many teachers and administrators also believed that the experience helped them grow as educators, and a handful referenced a larger “toolbox” that will help them reach

learners in the future. Teachers also acknowledged less overall participation allowed them more 1-1 time with students and stronger individual feedback. In general, all interest groups reported positives associated with “greater flexibility” in online environments ranging from less wasted class time, greater individualized differentiation and ownership of learning, use of creative apps and online resources, and even more time to sleep (which was actually stressed more by parents than students).

Maybe most interesting is that all interest groups found potential ways online learning opportunities could help strengthen broader educational opportunities. Everyone saw areas to build on, and most were quick to point out the inherent flaw in “optional” learning for most high school students. “If there was more structure,” one parent started; “If there was a clear schedule,” another added, most thought classes would have gone better. Some teachers, like Ms. Richards, adopted their lesson design in creative ways to spur greater engagement. She used movie, music, and literature reviews paired with class discussions, “anything to get kids excited.” Mr. Sherbert found labs for his science classes that students could use everyday household items. He also started using more socially-minded questions of the day to get kids talking, “even if it was just in the chat box.” Teachers in particular all saw areas they improved on for teaching in online environments. Administrators all noticed exciting areas of growth too. “We asked [teachers] to be flexible, try new things, and they busted their tails,” one administrator remarked.

Last, but not least, all interest groups agreed that at least some students benefited from online learning. Most were quick to stress the word *some*, but even the harshest critics of the 4th quarter had students in mind who benefited from online learning more than the regular classroom. Teachers and administrators noted that self-motivated students or students with proper supports often took advantage of flexibility in online environments. All interest groups



believed that some “introverts” might feel safer and more relaxed at home than at school. Ms. Allison noted that even some students in Special Education “thrived,” though she was quick to bring up potential issues related to privilege and equity that she felt allowed for them to thrive. In fact, one student and parent on Ms. Allison’s caseload were quick to argue she was one of the most important reasons for their success online. In short, some students were able to make the best of their online learning environment (either through academic motivation or external support), and one student interviewed went as far to say that “I kind of liked it.”

### ***Getting Back in Line: Transitioning to a New School Year***

As the 4th quarter closed, everyone hoped the following school year might start back in school buildings. That hope was mostly dashed by late June, as school communities began to plan for another school year either fully online, or at least partially online. Big changes announced included a return to regular grading practices, a new centralized Learning Management System (which all classes would now utilize), a more traditional school schedule (classes would follow the same structure as if they were still in school), and more general tech-related improvement (notably more hotspots available and more web conferencing services). Lastly, given the context of the pandemic, the school also allowed students to choose a learning preference (either completely online or “as much in-person as possible”) that would hold for the entire first semester. Around 40% of students ended up choosing to be “remote only” for that semester. In general, these changes (and perhaps more time to settle down after a wild 4th quarter) had led to noticeably more optimism about online learning--though all interviewees would have preferred coming back into classrooms.

All interest groups agreed that a more traditional grading practice and schedule were in the best interest of students, even if it sacrificed some of the inherent flexibility that many

appreciated during 4th quarter. Parents in particular were most excited about the scheduling change, and one argued it made it a lot easier to “plan their day,” while another added that it would allow them to be more available to “support.” Administrators were excited about a unified LMS system, although all acknowledged training teachers for it was going to be “serious challenge”. All teachers voiced concerns about the shift to a new LMS which ranged from feeling “stressed” about yet another serious change, to pessimism that the effort to switch was even “worth the costs.” One teacher rationalized “I would feel better if I knew for sure we would still be using it in five years.” Despite resistance, all teachers conceded that a single and unified LMS system was in the best interest of students and parents.

All interest groups also explained ways they were more prepared for the incoming challenges for the next school year. Teachers and administrators both referenced more awareness and readiness for unique responsibilities online. One parent had adjusted all of their kids’ learning spaces. Two parents had upgraded their home WIFI. One student had reorganized their room on their own to “eliminate distractions.” One student explained he felt better just knowing that online “could actually work,” and that he “could do it.” Another student, who relied on academic support services, felt better knowing that his needs could be met online and knew ways to get help from his teachers.

Lastly, all interest groups agreed that the district’s plan to offer families choice in opting completely into online learning was for the best, although at least one parent and teacher believed it would have been easier to keep everyone in the same system. Administrators also voiced a number of concerns related to scheduling. One administrator explained that it essentially required creating two complex master schedules (instead of one) and that different

students would now have teachers from other schools to fill online rosters. “It was a NIGHTMARE!” he declared while (mostly) laughing.

This newfound optimism does not necessarily outweigh the same sources of pessimism from the 4th quarter. One parent added that over the summer they kept hearing more and more “horror stories” regarding engagement and attendance. Two teachers proclaimed stress related to still not knowing what online “looks like.” One teacher questioned whether the 4th quarter set too “dangerous [of a] precedent” for students which might lead to rising levels of apathy. Another teacher wondered if “40% of our students opted for online because they thought they wouldn't have to do anything.” One parent was still worried about a lack of “teacher accountability” from online teachers. Students and parents also complained again of “confusing” emails and “back and forth” policies. Students in particular were most concerned about tech-related improvements. Two questioned if anything had been done to improve the VPN. Most students were also emotionally deflated about the prospect of another semester online. One student said he missed seeing his friends and he'd be “sulking,” while another student said they were “pretty bummed.” Another student believed that the idea of going online again “just doesn't seem real.” “I really want to go back to school,” he said.

Fears also arguably worsened (or at least cemented) for students who rely on academic or social support services. Multiple Administrators pointed out complexities regarding support services and “equity.” Although administrators felt good about getting computers and hotspots to families in need, they noted that some families were harder to track down online. One noted that it was harder to become “aware” of students' socioeconomic or emotional issues in general. He maintained, “if we don't hear that someone has a problem, it's pretty much impossible to solve.”

Ms. Allison, as a special education teacher, also emphasized she was “scared the most important barriers [regarding equity] have not been addressed” although she acknowledged how complicated addressing those barriers can be. In fact, members of every group voiced concerns related to equity. Students were aware of friends that had busy or distracting homes. Parents empathized with how hard it would be to support students if they couldn’t work from home. Teachers understood that some of their students were more or less responsible for their siblings while their parents worked. “I know of at least three students who had to get jobs,” one teacher remarked.

### ***Round 2: Fight (or Flight)?***

Once school officially started in early September (being delayed a couple of weeks to allow the district more time to prepare), overall perceptions notably improved. A more structured schedule, a singular Learning Management System (LMS), and normalized academic incentives were universally praised by interest groups. Although all interest groups acknowledged aspects of growing pains, especially in respect to issues related to workload, there was clear agreement that online learning had become more “organized.” Multiple students advocated that they felt “so much better” about online learning within the first two months of the first quarter. Another argued he “probably would have failed” without the changes implemented from 4th quarter. One parent remarked that it “felt like school again.” “I actually think this can work,” another parent admitted.

Teachers by no means felt confident in their abilities to manage online classrooms, but it was clear they had grown a lot over the course of one quarter. The biggest lesson learned in the first few weeks related to workload. Teachers were scrambling to transfer lessons not only for online environments, but into a new LMS system. Teachers all relayed some notion of trying to

do too much, which they acknowledged negatively impacted their students. Administrators did not exactly aid in this initial scramble by emphasizing the importance of having classes well organized and structured (requiring a common “home-page” and collection of resources for each class) after only three real days of flexible training for the new LMS. “We only have one first impression,” the Principal stressed. Lack of proper training was a common complaint among teachers, but at least two administrators acknowledged there wasn’t going to be “an easy way to address it.” “Damned if we do,” one administrator began, before arguing the admin-team agreed flexibility would be better for teachers over more standardized training sessions. All members of the community recalled examples of “anxiety” and “burnout” in those first few weeks of school. “It was just hard work”, one teacher began, “I mean, really HARD.”

That said, administrators quickly adjusted to workload concerns and began emphasizing a focus on essential standards. “They’re busting their butt!” one administrator started; “We are very appreciative of that, but we need them to keep trying; keep learning,” he maintained. “Less-is-more” became a common phrase echoed by administrators and teachers, and all teachers agreed it was an important trait for student success in online environments. Mr. Sherbert was quick to admit, “I was guilty of doing too much,” and he started to balance assignments so that there was less overall work for students to keep track of. Although Mr. Mores was clearly feeling some burnout, he acknowledged that a lot of the work was “front-loaded.” “Once you get things set up,” he started, a lot of the work “takes care of itself.” He referenced self-graded assignments and more learning-related apps he had built into his math classes that often take care of themselves once students turn them in.

All interest groups eventually came around to support the move to a singular LMS. Teachers were adamant that more training and support would have been nice, but as Mr. Sherbert

acknowledged, “it was just going to take time to get used to.” All teachers agreed that the move to unified LMS was in the best interest of students. Students and parents definitely agreed. “It’s nice having everything in one place,” one student said. “Much less confusing,” another student added. “I’m still getting used to it,” one student began, “but I definitely think it’s way better than [the two other LMS services] we used last year.” “I hated it at first,” one student began, “but now I actually really like it.” Parents were less invested, and some still had lingering complaints related to notifications and access but agreed it “was a move in the right direction” as one parent put it. “It just looks a lot more organized,” another parent asserted.

Teachers and students also both advocated for any type of activities that spurred social engagement and conversation. Multiple students brought up class introductions, like a silly “question of the day” which revolved around using the chat box to get students talking. Two students brought up a “bring-your-pet-to-class day,” which proved to be one of their more memorable online experiences. One student recalled having to find and show off funny items in their home to start class. “You didn’t even have to participate,” he explained, “but almost everyone did because it was actually fun.” Mr. Mores remarked that one of his favorite experiences was just “talking to my seminar kids about nothing.” Notably less fun, but still popular was the use of “breakout rooms” (web-conferencing sub-rooms) for students to work alone or with others. Although many students found them “awkward,” most felt they offered a more engaging class experience. One student found himself asking for one in almost every class because it allowed him to “actually talk and work with people.” Teachers really loved the breakout rooms. Ms. Allison recalled they allowed her to more easily “drop in and out” to help her students with 1-1 support, “maybe even more so than I could do in a regular classroom.” Ms.

Melder used them for self and group progress checks and conferences. “In some ways it’s easier than in a classroom,” she maintained.

Another shared positive came in respect to individualized feedback, and 1-1 time between teachers and students. There were multiple ways teachers made themselves available for more focused instruction. All teachers interviewed remarked that they were available for the entire allotted class times (short breaks aside), but they often let students leave the “conference” room or provided them a breakout room to work on their own. Teachers remarked that it allowed students to drop in and out for help and feedback. Students in breakout rooms were able to electronically “raise their hand” to ask for the teacher to join them. Although not all students used work time responsibly, teachers maintained this freed up their time and energy to help students. Many students found the process effective. “I like that my teachers are just there when I need them,” one student said. One student, who relied on academic support services, said online made it easy to double back for “questions” and “get help” from his teachers. Another agreed, and argued it was “probably easier” to get help than in the classroom.

These feelings often were shared with respect to greater flexibility in online environments. Even with a traditional bell schedule, students, teachers, and even administrators all agreed online environments afforded them more flexibility in taking care of their responsibilities. Multiple teachers remarked that the flow of online classes afforded them more opportunities to take care of their professional responsibilities (like grading), and even more personal responsibilities. “I actually have time to just go to the bathroom,” one teacher proclaimed. Students also felt like online afforded them more downtime in between their academic responsibilities. One student said online classes afforded them more opportunities to “manage their time” and “get stuff out of the way.” One parent was happy that her son could just

“settle down and watch a short episode on Netflix” if they had a longer break towards the end of the class. One parent even remarked that it allowed her son to help “do the dishes.” One parent acknowledged online classes “made the morning a lot less stressful.” Another was “happy my kids get to sleep in a little more.” Administrators too all admitted they had more free time to handle some of their more traditional responsibilities, notably student support paperwork, due to far less discipline issues online. One student went as far to say “I probably save around two hours each day” taking classes online. To be sure, all interest groups found more time in between the daily school grind.

Reflecting on the numerous reasons for more positive attitudes and experiences adds important gravity to the most important issue that remains after a dramatic new ride with online learning: most participants still wanted back in the classroom. Biggest concerns shared by all groups revolved around lack of social interactions, peer-to-peer support, and teacher-student relationships, lower academic engagement and grades, issues with technology, deteriorating emotional health, and even physical concerns associated with increased screen time and higher workloads. Although there was acknowledgement by many participants that these issues could (and probably would) get better as the school transitioned into the second semester, the fact remained, as one student put it, “it just didn’t feel natural.”

Students and parents had plenty to complain about in respect to the issues mentioned above, but it must be noted that all participants were at least making things work within a very new and stressful context. Teachers and administrators, however, talked much more in depth about more pressing issues of the students who were not. “Some of my classes I don’t see or hear from anybody,” one teacher complained. “I have to beg to even get responses in the chat box,” another teacher admitted. “No faces, mics muted, no interactions,” another teacher claimed. “I



feel like I'm working harder than ever and getting nothing back," Mr. Sherbert added. Students validate these experiences. "No one talks," one student complained. "It's really awkward," another student admitted. "I don't want to be the only one who talks!" one student shouted. One parent even complained that her son was being unfairly targeted by at least one teacher because her son goes out of his way to engage. "He's not your pet!?" she shouted. "Make other students participate!"

Lack of engagement may even hint at deeper issues. All teachers admitted they know many of their students just log in but are not actually "in class." "What even is attendance!?" one teacher shouted. "Some kids are impossible to track down, one teacher began." "I even have one kid that literally leaves in the middle of class for work!" he complained. He goes on to explain he asked the student once if his mom knew he was leaving school for work, and replied, "yeah...she hates it." "What do you do with that!?" he questioned, laughing. The district policy was that students only had to show up to the web conference to be counted present (akin to a student sleeping in class). "We know attendance is an issue," one administrator admitted, but he explained that those policies are really shaped by the state. "State and federal guidelines really are not designed for online learning," another administrator added. "It makes things really hard," he maintained.

Perhaps the most important identifiable problem is that all groups felt there was a lack of meaningful relationships, not only between students, but between students and teachers, and even just between teachers. Teachers and administrators in particular stressed how much harder it is to build relationships online. One teacher had missed the entire first quarter on maternity leave and argued her biggest fear was "getting to know [her] students." She heard how stressed many teachers were in class. "I'm still scared to pronounce some names," one teacher admitted."

“I need to find more ways to connect,” another teacher acknowledged. Ms. Allison pointed out that many students in special education were really struggling with fewer (and different) “social cues.” “I don’t know a single freshman,” one administrator said, only partly-joking. “I mean, how can we get to know students if they aren’t in trouble and they don’t play a sport?” another administrator pointed out. Ms. Richards, one of the livelier teachers you will ever find, let her teacher-guard down for just a second in regard to her issues building relationships online: “it’s exhausting” she said, as her face dropped.

Teachers also voiced concerns of less effective relationships within their departments. Most teachers complained about not seeing their peers. One was particularly sad her department “was no longer eating lunch together,” but teachers acknowledged that was more a reflection of distancing for the pandemic. A lack of PLC-time (dedicate time for teachers to collaborate) was a more specific complaint. The district had moved PLC time from a late-start day that no longer existed in the schedule to one day after-school (arguing it provided teachers the most flexibility in a time where they were already stressed). All teachers agreed that it led to an overall decrease in collaboration. One teacher complained that her PLC was much less “constructive”. Another teacher was a part of multiple PLCs and argued that at least one “was not very productive.” One teacher admitted that they didn’t even have “real” PLC time anymore. All teachers wished they had more dedicated time to collect and share resources, especially in a time where they were transferring all of their content into online environments (and a new LMS).

These issues led directly to the most important identifiable impact teachers and administrators were wrestling with: student performance. When asked to consider negative impacts of online learning, one administrator immediately replied, “More kids are failing than ever.” Another administrator explained that often it’s more revealing to look at how many

students have one or two Fs (instead of overall Fs), before adding, “way more students are getting at least one F.” Teachers tell the same story. “Definitely more Fs,” one teacher acknowledged. Another teacher explained that some students are doing well, but most have slipped. A different teacher claimed they either have “As, or Ds and Fs.” Ms. Allison noted that teacher stress was “trickling down to students,” and students’ experiences validate that. One student was sad that “some of [his] friends have given up.” One student told a story of one teacher who put the whole class’s grades up (without names), “almost everyone had Fs!” he proclaimed. Looking towards the end of the semester, most groups were optimistic some of these issues could improve, but as one administrator pointed out, “there seems to be some misalignment.” The Principal put it simply enough, “we have some work to do,” he admitted. “But we are working,” another administrator added. Another administrator’s face recoiled as he spoke, “It’s cheesy, but we have to stay positive.”

### ***Through the Top Hat: Closing the Book on First Semester***

As the first semester drew to a close, too little had changed for most members of the learning community to feel good about the entire process. Positive and negative perceptions largely stayed consistent, but it was the lack of progress in key areas (social interactions, relationships, and failing student performance) that clearly weighed on peoples’ minds. One administrator referred to the end of the semester as “purgatory,” arguing the school felt “trapped in a cycle we don’t want to be in.” Administrators largely agreed. The Principal couldn’t help but be frustrated at what he called “lingering issues.” One administrator argued “kids had taken a step back” and maintained for many students, their struggles had been “exasperated.” Another administrator argued it was clear “only offering online school is not the right answer [for most kids].”

All administrators and teachers discussed issues related to equity. In fact, most parents and students did too. Mr. Mores, a math teacher who typically works with lower-level students, again emphasized how hard this semester had been for his English-Language-Learners, and students receiving academic supports, but Ms. Allison, who consistently emphasized issues in respect to her students in Special Education, was quick to argue that the issues go well beyond typical “umbrellas.” She acknowledged plenty of potential negative factors (like the pandemic), but maintained the reality was “far too many students failed to adapt.” Ms. Melder, agreed, arguing failures were “not purely socioeconomic.” Ms. Richards believed too many students felt “unsafe” or “uncomfortable” learning online. They had “no chance” she maintained.

It’s worth considering that the end of the semester is always a stressful period at our school, as more students than not are scrambling to raise grades (with far too many in danger of failing). This semester was more stressful than ever. One administrator noted (the Friday before finals week) that usually around 10% of students are failing “more than one class.” Now he maintained it was closer to around 30%. “We’d love to get that down to 20% next week,” he admitted. “There’s just no historical precedent for this,” he said with his eyes dropping. Ms. Melder, a social studies teacher, estimated that most students’ grades dropped by “about 10%.” “A lot more have just given up than usual,” she maintained. Mr. Sherbert argued that he felt he normally could “save” a good portion of failing students when they are in the classroom, but “they were impossible to track down online.”

One key change worth discussing during the second quarter was the addition of a “hybrid” schedule for the 60% of families which opted into the “as much in-school as possible” option from the beginning of the school year. The school split that 60% into two groups based on the alphabet (keeping siblings together). This allowed students to be in each class at least one

day a week at the cost of less overall instruction time. Fridays stayed the same, being a remote-only day with students reporting to all their classes for 50 minutes. Ultimately, resurging COVID rates (and new related health guidelines) made hybrid a short experiment (lasting roughly a month from late October to November). That said, it was long enough of an experiment for the community to establish some feelings.

Overall, most agreed it provided its fair share of inconveniences, but it was clear that at least some members were happy to see each other again. It's telling that no teachers or administrators went as far to say they preferred Hybrid to online-only learning, but both groups identified students they felt benefited from it. Mr. Sherbert argued that even one month of hybrid helped him "catch some students back up." During online, "I got nothing," he started, and once they were coming back in the classroom, "I got a few students going again. "Then, once we went back online...nothing." One administrator argued that hybrid definitely helped some kids "form connections" with teachers. He also noted school "felt more natural" with kids in the building. Although students shared some frustrations with less overall instruction time, many genuinely appreciated being back in a classroom. "It was nice to see my friends and teachers again," one student said. "I like seeing faces," another student admitted.

Perhaps the biggest issue with hybrid was more contextually related to the pandemic. All administrators worried about how another new model of learning would impact teacher stress and workloads. Two parents were also concerned that hybrid provided too much downtime for the half of students who were not in class. "What exactly are they supposed to be doing?" one asked. One teacher complained of being "pushed back and forth." Another teacher argued that it was "detrimental" for their students "comfort and stability." "We finally get going [online] then they pull the carpet out!" she cried. One administrator argued he would have "preferred to stick

to one model.” “It’s very hard for teachers to manage both,” another administrator admitted. The last month of the semester (including finals) proceeded online.

Lastly, it’s important to recognize the rise of anxiety felt by most participants. You could see it on everyone’s face. One administrator acknowledged that there had been a significant rise in “mental health support requests,” and “self-harm situations.” He maintained they used to help with counseling recommendations 3-5 times a semester, “but now it’s 1-2 times a week.” One teacher admitted they’ve had a lot more trouble sleeping this semester. One parent brought up her son’s recent battle with anxiety and depression, which she believed was related to her son wanting to help his classmates and teachers. “We’re struggling to help him accept that he can’t help everyone.” Her son was feeling much better by the time of our interview, but he wouldn’t completely give up on the idea there was more he could do to help. One administrator pointed out it’s much trickier to identify students’ needs (and therefore help address them online). He brought up a scenario where a student wears the same sweatshirt three days in a row. “In school we can go up to that kid and make sure they don’t need some clothes, but online we just have no idea,” he argued.

The overwhelmingly negative feelings towards the end of the semester are important to emphasize, especially as they come off the heels of remarkably better perceptions during the first quarter. The biggest issues members had with online learning simply did not improve enough, and in some ways got worse. That said, there were plenty of bright spots associated with online learning that deserve recognition, and within the shadow of overwhelming negativity, these spots arguably shine even brighter. All interest groups still found positive things to say about the innate flexibility afforded in online environments. Teachers and students agreed that online environments made it easier to incorporate more resources. All interest groups also agreed that

overall organization and quality of instruction improved over time. Most teachers and students believed that online allowed for more individualized feedback and instructional time. Ms. Allison even argued that online environments were better suited for “discretely handling private concerns” in class. Two parents liked how it allowed them more opportunities to engage and discuss with what their children were learning in class. Last of all, most participants were grateful that online allowed for educational opportunities to continue in the face of a pandemic. “It was the best option we had,” one administrator argued, “and we know it can be better.”

This idea of improvement is something that deserves recognition too. The lack of social interactions and the difficulty of relationship building were two of the most prominent issues identified by all interest groups, but there were notable ways that students and teachers were finding better ways of doing both. It is also worth mentioning that two administrators and three teachers identified online relationship building as something they both needed more training on. Many students (and teachers) really grew to appreciate breakout rooms. Many acknowledged they could be “awkward,” and students complained that not everyone contributes, but the same could be said for groups in classrooms too. Over time, one student found himself finding “breakout groups” in almost every class where he would regularly socialize while he worked. This particular student was in one of my classes and it was refreshing to check on his group to find them all smiling and laughing (while also turning in all their work). Another student acknowledged having some good friend groups in a couple of classes really helped him enjoy school again. “It helps a lot,” he admitted.

Three teachers also showed new and exciting ways they had been able to form relationships with their students. One teacher used individual breakout room conferences each week, which forced “most [of her students] to actually admit they needed help.” Another teacher

referenced how hard he was working to reinforce positive social behavior in class. “I would write down every time someone talked, even if it were just an emoji [or something in the chat box], and I’d make sure to tell them after class that I appreciated it,” he explained. “If they actually had their screen on, I’d make a big deal about in class,” he continued. “Now I have 7-8 kids with screens on in some classes!” he said, his face beaming. One teacher even went so far to write postcards to every single one of her students over a fall break. She estimated each one took her about 5-10 minutes including her set-up for postage, but “it was so worth it.” She started getting all of these different messages in the chat box. “Kids were saying hello to me each morning, and to have a good day at the end of class,” she continued. “It made me feel like I was finally doing something right.” One teacher believed that relationships weren’t “impossible,” online, but argued “just different.” He acknowledged it might “take more work,” but the impact is the same, “students definitely start to care more about learning,” he added.

Lastly, two related ideas give some reasons for more optimism: all participants agreed that at least some students do better in online environments than in the regular classroom, and *almost* all participants (19/22) believed online should have a bigger role in broader educational systems moving forward (with the other 3 being more indifferent than opposed). Although many participants acknowledged there’s no defining characteristics for success (or even joy) in online environments, all interest groups brought up characteristics related to “self-motivation,” responsibility,” or being “introverted.” The reverse of these characteristics, particularly “laziness,” or “apathy” were typically associated with failure in online environments. Concepts related to “equity” were also brought up by all interest groups as big concerns for student success.



Almost all participants also argued they believed online learning should have a bigger role in future educational systems. Students and parents both agreed online learning opportunities provided students more ways to reach their learning goals. Even without the consideration of hybrid environments, all but two students said they would consider taking online classes in conjunction with their regular classes if it was an option. One student, who was adamant she did not like online learning, admitted she “might actually take one or two [classes],” and she referenced her math class where she feels more comfortable learning at her “own pace.” Another student said she’d actually prefer to have more online classes than regular, and she referenced her science class as one she’d prefer to take in-person. All but one parent said they would support their students taking online classes alongside their classroom classes. One parent added that more options can only be a good thing, “as long as it does not take away from school activities.”

Teachers all supported the inclusion of more online opportunities alongside traditional classroom opportunities. Teachers agreed with students and parents that more options could only benefit students, though many added that was only if it did not “take away from classroom opportunities.” All teachers were even open to the prospect of teaching them, even as soon as the next school year, granted some mentioned that depended on “incentives”, and one teacher was clear it would “never be [her] first choice.” One teacher said she’d prefer to teach as many as three of her six classes online because she liked the “flexibility and balance” while also letting her “see kids in class.” Another teacher went as far to say that she’d be open to online but would prefer it to be “all or none” of her courses because it “requires different planning.”

Three of four administrators welcomed the idea of online learning, while the fourth was adamant that he needed to see more “data before [he] could support the use of school resources.”

To be fair, all administrators pointed out issues with providing more online opportunities. Two mentioned how difficult they are to organize, with particular emphasis on class schedules and teacher placements. All administrators argued the transition to online learning led to added stress and anxiety for students, parents, and teachers. One called balancing online schedules with the in-person schedules a “nightmare,” maintaining it required the schools in the district to collaborate to make it work. “Doing both is complicated.” another administrator added. One of the more supportive administrators of online learning opportunities was also clear to argue that “only offering online is not the right answer.” “Some students need the classroom,” he maintained.

That said, all four administrators agreed that online opportunities deserved more attention. Even the administrator who was more hesitant about future development argued it was “worth exploring how the two [online and traditional] worlds combine.” There were also clear indications of “missed opportunities,” or ways administrators felt online could have been better. “I wish we had taken this opportunity to break more free from the brick-and-mortar approach [to education,]” one administrator admitted. Three of the four administrators were excited about the prospect of afternoon or night classes. Two brought up the possibility of more “vocational” opportunities and “internships.” One administrator argued online environments not only “offer more opportunities for kids,” but also helps students work around “certain schedule conflicts,” and allows more kids to “take ownership of their learning.”

Looking at grades before finals week, one administrator had admitted he would “love” for the number of students failing “more than one class” to drop from 30% down to 20%. At the end of the semester, the number of students failing “more than one class” ended up being 22.5% (just 2.5% worse than his wishes). At the end of the first semester last year, he reported 11.1% of

students had failed more than one class. “So approximately 10% shift in that category” he maintained. This number was estimated by two teachers as well when they discussed their overall grades for the semester.

That number can be viewed from two different lenses. On one hand, this suggests that the school learning community significantly struggled transitioning into online learning. More students failed; plain and simple. “I’m afraid of a ripple effect,” one administrator admitted. “Will the state lower graduation requirements, will there be a COVID-rule?” he questioned. If not, schools will have a lot of students needing to repeat classes, surely adding stress to already noted scheduling and workload concerns.

On the other hand, this number suggests some reasons for optimism. Even during a pandemic, which forced the community into a rollercoaster of extreme and different learning situations, only 10% more students failed more than one class. Would that number improve as teachers and students became more comfortable and proficient in online environments? Would that number improve if the transition to online learning was not forced by a pandemic? Would that number improve if more online opportunities were offered in conjunction with regular classroom opportunities? Obviously, these interviews cannot answer those questions, but that doesn’t mean they are not worth asking. To repeat one administrator, “we know [online] can get better.”

### **Exit Through the Giftshop: Snapshots from the Rollercoaster**

A staple of any great amusement park ride includes the opportunity to purchase a picture of yourself at the most exciting (and often scary) part. The following selections include the most powerful stories shared by participants highlighting their unique experiences with online

learning. These stories, at least by themselves, don't necessarily justify any particular action or policy in respect to online learning in K-12 environments. Instead, these stories help reveal the multi-faceted truths of how online learning can impact different individuals.

***“She likes it!” (A Student’s Perspective)***

Sally was an 11th grade honors student. She’s highly independent and self-motivated. Not only is she a member of “six or seven” after-school groups, but she’s also pursuing a special International Baccalaureate diploma (which is barely even possible at our school because it requires so many different classes only offered once a year--in fact the entire program is no longer offered to students because of the unrealistic demand constraints on class schedules). Her parents are very supportive, but they actually rely on her to keep them up to date. “I had to check their emails during the summer so I knew what was going on,” she recalled. Sally’s parents were not interested in participating in the study (which almost pushed me to look for another participant group), but Sally was determined, thinking it was “important” people knew what students were going through.

I actually had Sally as a student during the 4th quarter of last year when the pandemic officially forced us online. She was later recommended to me for this study by another teacher when I was specifically looking for potential students who were having difficulty adjusting to online. In many ways she was the perfect fit. Despite needing to prepare for an Advanced Placement course, she was having trouble finding motivation to come to class (especially without proper incentives during the 4th quarter). She was keeping up with some of our reviews, which was still more than most students, but generally she was doing everything on her own. During our first interview (in May), she explained she had no online experience and was not at all aware our school even offered online opportunities (like most students and parents interviewed). She

mentioned having issues with motivation, social interactions, and “not learning as much as she was supposed to.” She would go on to narrowly fail her Advanced Placement test in my class. During our second interview a month later claimed she “was not excited” for school to start. “I hated online,” she maintained.

By the middle of the first quarter Sally had changed her tune. She referenced the unified LMS and more traditional class schedules had helped with organization. She also believed that both herself and her teachers were getting more comfortable with online environments. “It gets easier,” she said. “I had to stick with it,” she maintained. Above all she appreciated the flexibility of online environments. “I was able to take control of my own time more,” she said. In class she felt more “limited” at times being stuck in a fixed environment, but online she had more freedom to manage her responsibilities. She even argued she was able to see and talk to friends just as much. “We text and facetime in between class,” she said. It was “different,” she acknowledged, “but possible.” When I tried to ask her if she found it interesting that she had such a dramatic change in opinion, she laughed more than I’d ever seen the entire past year. “I don’t know, I actually like it now!”

Unlike many participants, Sally maintained this changed attitude into the end of the semester. Her grades were up, her responsibilities all taken care of. As many teachers and administrators had alluded to, she was one of those students who was “thriving” with online learning. Her attitudes in many ways had even improved. She argued that she actually had more 1-1 time with teachers. She was able to drop in and out of their classes when she needed help. “It’s almost easier than the classroom,” she claimed. She also found she preferred working at home. “In my room, by myself, I can just focus,” she added. She even was still maintaining good social time with her friends, though she admitted, “things were different.”

Sally was not without some complaints. Some teachers were not as efficient as others. She mentioned some teachers gave “too much busy work.” She also stressed it was important for teachers to “stay positive.” “They’re getting rundown, and it shows,” she added. She argued that in some ways she felt like her workload had increased, but “maybe that was because of honors classes.” She was frustrated at tech-related issues, particularly dropouts and the VPN, which really “disrupted” her productivity. Sally also believed that some classes did not work as well as online, referencing labs in science. She also admitted that some students probably wouldn’t feel the same way as her. “You have to be motivated and responsible,” she maintained. She also felt some students would probably need more direct “social time.” She also referenced potential issues related to equity, arguing that you need a “solid home setting,” and she understood “some kids don’t have that.”

Ultimately, Sally’s experience speaks to the potential of online learning for students, a potential that even students are not always aware of. Sally had a number of key characteristics that naturally put her in a position to be successful, in particular her motivation, independence, and determination. Another teacher in the building joked one day that he just let Sally run one of his classes, adding “she’s more responsible than I’ll ever be.” To be fair, Sally is not your typical student, and educational leaders probably shouldn’t design a system *around* her needs. That said, designing a system that keeps students like Sally empowered is important too. Sally acknowledged that the classroom is important to her, but the prospect of mixing and matching online and classroom courses was exciting. She brought up the idea of taking extra night classes or college prep classes. She argued in an ideal world, she’d probably take 5 classes online, and 3 in person. When I brought up that was one more class than the school currently offered, she smirked. “Well, if I had the time.”

### *Can I Really Do This? (A Student's Perspective)*

Marcus was in 10th grade. As a student with autism, he was actually on Ms. Allison's caseload. I met Marcus the year before due to sponsoring the school's Chess Club, and he had joined for more social opportunities after school. It took him a while to open up, but after a couple sessions, Marcus never stopped talking. He was very opinionated, with an endearing dramatic flair, but he was also innately reflective and open-minded, well beyond his years. On my end, I wasn't the best Chess Club sponsor. I often tried to use the weekly hour and a half session to get my work done, so he would often try and coerce me into his ridiculous debates. He loved history, and knew I taught American and European history, so he eventually found ways to get my attention. "I know Hitler was really bad, but could we call him a good leader?" he asked, avoiding direct eye contact. My glare said enough, "OK, what about Napoleon?" he tried again.

Ms. Allison had put him and his mom on my radar for my study as a student who was making the best of the dreaded 4th quarter, and I reminded her that I already had a good rapport with him from Chess Club. In our first interview in June, he had many negative things to say about online learning, but acknowledged he was finding ways of making it work. His biggest complaint revolved around tech issues and the VPN, but he also didn't like the lack of social engagement or how some classes were organized. Lastly, Marcus admitted that he missed his personal para that used to accompany him in some classes. That support was no longer possible online as the district cut back on hourly staff. What he did appreciate though was more time for 1-1 feedback and questions with his teachers. Both he and mom were very appreciative of Ms. Allison's support. They were also hopeful that there would be more "structure" next school year if they had to be online. "Treat it like normal school," he pleaded. That said, he was dreading any return to online. "I really want to be in class," he added.

He ended up taking one honors class that next year, my European History class. Obviously, he loved history, but was nervous about the workload. I reassured him and Ms. Allison that we would be able to make it work. At the time, I expected to have to modify a lot of the workload to accommodate his needs, I never expected he would be one of my best (and I must admit, favorite) students. Marcus and his mom both appreciated the new changes implemented. He argued things were “more streamlined,” and that general class structure was “so much better.” He was frustrated at having to learn a new LMS but hinted that it was growing on him. “It can definitely do a lot more,” he admitted. Above all, Marcus felt that online allowed him to more easily get the help he needed each hour. “I usually stay in class, or ask for a breakout room,” he said. In my class, he used them almost every day, and although supporting him often required a ton of 1-1 time, it’s worth noting I never had to modify any assignments and his work was always among the best I’d grade.

His success though did not translate to the same feelings as Sally though, and even by the end of the semester, he would never come to “like” learning online. Tech issues were his most unique complaint compared to other participants. All interest groups acknowledged tech issues, but most agreed tech-related issues improved over time. Marcus wasn’t willing to give them up, “I HATE the VPN,” he still asserted neat the end of the quarter (with his trademark dramatic flair). Mom quickly backed him up though. “It’s really annoying when assignments, or links don’t work,” she said.

Marcus also complained of lacking social interactions. “No one talks!” he cried. He recalled that he used to always have his screen on, and he tried to always speak during class. Now, he felt “awkward.” “I don’t want to be the only person talking,” he added. In class, I would often stipulate that someone other than Marcus had to answer, but even that frustrated him a



little. “Then you just have this looonnnng awkward silence,” he maintained. Marcus even admitted that he used to get dressed up for school, but with the lack of social engagement he questioned, “What’s the point?” Overtime, some degree of what Marcus called awkwardness became apparent. He still talked in class to answer questions but preferred the anonymity of private texts in the chat box. “Can we get a breakout room?” he’d ask. Once he felt secure, he’d instantly open back up to that same Marcus I got to know in Chess Club.

Ms. Allison consistently stressed that many of her students on her caseload struggled online. She “hated to generalize [students in special education],” but she was worried that students who relied on academic and social supports would struggle to “get what they need.” Mr. Mores often emphasized similar concerns for his students who relied on more supports. Marcus’s experience does not invalidate those concerns, but it does show that even students with special and particular needs *can* be successful *if their needs are met*.

To be fair, Marcus often takes up the majority of my open feedback time. Part of that is an inherent drawback of his overly reflective nature. He worried a lot, and he was still learning to make due without a personal para support (at least one support Ms. Allison now felt he no longer needed). I sometimes purposely brush aside his questions and force him to trust himself. I tell him if there’s a problem we can always go back and fix it. “Just read this real quick,” he sometimes retorts, and pastes a paragraph in the chat box for me to look over. “I didn’t really do the analysis section [in the writing guide],” he adds. “Dude, you wrote like four sentences discussing context [in the section above], you’re doing it right!” I almost scream back.

Ultimately, Marcus’s story is one of victory. He even admits “online is better in some ways.” Properly supported he is a superstar online student, but even still he is adamant, “it’s not for me.” He called the classroom his “comfort zone,” and although he admits he can find it

online, he maintains, “it’s just not the same.” I asked him if he’d ever consider taking a class online if it was best for his schedule, and he quickly turned it down, “no, I prefer the classroom.” His mom added that she would definitely support him taking classes online, “since he’s been so successful.” They both agreed more online opportunities would only help more students. That said, a school must also be mindful that even students who *can* make it work, prefer something different. Maybe Marcus is wrong; maybe online is actually better for him in ways he doesn’t appreciate yet--as Sally came to believe. Perhaps schools should consider that offering more online opportunities will benefit more students than even students realize for themselves. At the same time, it is a potential injustice not to provide students with the types of learning they want, even if they can make something else work.

### ***Concerning Equity (A Parent’s Perspective)***

Tay was the mother of three children in three different schools. There was Marcus in high school, another child in middle school, and even a child in elementary school. She had little experience with online, but she had been working from home over the past few years. She also was currently taking college classes which had been moved to online due to the pandemic. Like most parents, Tay found lots of reasons to stress fulfilling her own responsibilities as a parent, a worker, and even a student during the pandemic. Tay also mentioned that her partner had to travel a lot for work, so many of these responsibilities fell disproportionately on her shoulders.

Tay brought up a number of key issues that educators need to be mindful of when they design online learning opportunities. For starters, Tay noted that her son in middle school needed constant support and reinforcement to stay engaged online. “It was so hard for him.” She was adamant that if she couldn’t have worked from home there was “no way I could’ve done it.” She

understood many families couldn't afford that luxury. Tay also remarked that when her whole family would use the internet, it would often slow or shut down. It became such a problem that Tay ended up upgrading their internet--another luxury many families wouldn't be able to afford.

Tay also shared her son's disdain for broader tech-related issues, but with many more important layers of reasoning. She was angry at how often links or even complete assignments would be broken. Do teachers even check them!?" she cried. I noted that unfortunately, teacher and student access were treated differently. She rightly charged that was "problematic."

"Teachers need to check that students can access their links before they post them," she added. "I would have to type in links on my phone for my two sons [in elementary and middle school]," she maintained. "What did kids do who didn't have their parents there? What if they don't have an extra phone they can use? I was lucky my work was flexible," she explained. Both her and Marcus agreed that tech-related issues often were so frustrating that they just took a break. Within the realm of tech-related issues, Tay was also very concerned about "screen time," arguing all of her sons were probably glued to a screen for 8-10 hours a day just for school.

Lastly, Tay complained about general lack of transparency with grade updates and missing work. When she checked grades, she would "get on" her sons about their missing work, and they would always claim "I turned that in," or "it just needs to be graded." Some teachers, she added, take a lot longer to update classwork. She acknowledged, she more than understands the delay, "especially if the work was late," but noted the reality was she had no means of reinforcing their learning if she doesn't actually know what's been turned in. "I can email them," she started, but sometimes won't hear back until the notion of reinforcement has lost its weight. She recommended that teachers regularly reach out for poor grades or missing work, or else parents are "powerless" to help.

Like Marcus, there were layers of self-doubt Tay shared throughout the experience. As the stress mounted Tay admitted she sometimes had to just take personal days. “I felt like a bad parent,” she continued. She noted she would often “vent with her friends” and other parents about their issues with online school. “I always felt like I should be doing more to help my kids.” Tay deserves a tremendous amount of credit for helping all three of her students make the best of online learning, but she’s quick to admit she’s worried that her son in middle school didn’t learn what he needed--and learned what he would have in a classroom.

Ultimately, Tay’s story reveals a number of very concerning issues. Calling Tay a literal hero for her family still might sell her efforts short, yet even then, she doesn’t feel good about it. She still believes that online learning is an important tool, and that “lots more students stand to benefit from online,” but her story shows many ways that students (and families) might struggle to succeed. She wouldn’t outrightly admit it, but many parents could not have succeeded in her shoes. One must also consider the privileges Tay is quick to acknowledge for herself. She could work from home. She was able to afford better internet. She had extra devices she could let her kids use. She even had friends with other students she could vent to. If Tay “felt like a bad parent,” one can only imagine what other parents might feel, or how other parents might react--particularly if they are without some of the important privileges Tay could afford.

### ***Are You Winning, Son? (A Parent’s Perspective)***

Kathy is (at least on paper) your average parent. Her son, Erik, an 11th grader, is very much an average student at our school. He is smart and resourceful, but he struggles to apply himself for academics. Kathy has no real experience with online learning, but just started taking college classes which were forced online due to the pandemic. She currently works from home but admits that her workload combined with school make it very hard to “monitor” her son. Even

still, Kathy is very active in her son's education, and relays how difficult it is to keep him "focused." Her biggest fear is that Erik will "blow things off and not learn how to be responsible for himself before he graduates [next year]". I had Erik as a sophomore in European History and can confirm that Erik does little to ease his mom's fears. He scraped by doing the absolute minimum, too often "multitasking," in his words, and failed to take advantage of a basic honors incentive in the class which rewards students with an extra grade point for Bs and above. Erik settled for a C. During our first interview in July before school would start again after the initial 4th quarter transition, Kathy was confident "he can't do it online." Interestingly, Erik disagreed, believing in some ways it "could be better than normal schools."

Kathy and Erik's experiences are arguably most valuable to highlight from a shared perspective, but I can't help but feel Kathy is more suited as the storyteller. She was very detailed in many of her critiques and suggestions in ways other parents vaguely hinted at. She would often help push her son to engage and discuss how he felt about throughout our interviews. Erik himself admitted he sometimes can be too "lazy," but often disagreed with how his mom would try and support him. One interesting exchange involved Kathy admitting she installed cameras to watch her son's screen during class, because he was always "watching YouTube." Erik insisted he "mostly" did so during his free time, but I can at least validate that he was often watching YouTube during instruction in my class. As an outsider, Kathy's approach to support could feel uncomfortable, but listening to their exchanges, she's not without a good deal of justifications. He's a challenging student to keep focused, and she feels that challenge has been amplified online.

By the time of our first interview, a number of changes had already been announced including the new LMS, traditional schedule, and grading incentives. The more specific details

of these changes were still relatively unknown to both of them. They both complained about “too many emails,” and “confusing” back-and forth information. Kathy spoke of being “worn-out,” and “frustrated,” from the district’s implementation of online learning, though she appreciated having a choice that allowed for “as much in school as possible.” They would ultimately choose that option, though Erik at least made an argument to go online.

Part of the reason Erik wanted online could be spun against him. He really liked the flexibility, but he also admitted he felt it “was easier.” Kathy questioned if he was “really even working” during the 4th quarter and was “worried he was learning a lot less.” Kathy also questioned teacher workload, arguing she “rarely heard from teachers,” and knew Erik wasn’t doing as much schoolwork. “Accountability” and equivalency” were big focal points for her on both sides of the teacher-student dynamic.

Once the new school year got started, both felt better about online learning, but Kathy still felt “lost,” about all of the new changes and generally more “stressed.” She was frustrated with “too much information” from the district, and “too little communication” from teachers. Erik agreed that the whole process was “confusing.” Erik was notably more positive about his experience, citing improvement from teachers, and more structured class schedules. Erik admitted he “hated [the new LMS] at first,” but had begun to like it. Both complained of tech-related issues. From Erik’s perspective, they made focusing that much more difficult, and from Kathy’s perspective, it made learning that much “harder to reinforce.” They both also were concerned about less social interactions and peer support. Both notably agreed that online learning was better for some students, though they disagreed on whether it was better for Erik. “I prefer it, it feels easier,” Erik said. “Well, is that because you’re doing less work?” Kathy asked.

Towards the end of the first quarter, perceptions had mostly stayed the same. Kathy admitted that by second quarter she had “given up” trying to keep up with school emails or even email updates from LMS. “The emails don’t even tell you the grade,” she complained, maintaining it was “ridiculous” how hard it was just to see what score he got on an assignment, much less “keep up with what’s been turned in.” Kathy was quick to point out that Erik’s grades had slipped, though he wasn’t failing anything. Erik had responded that online was “hard,” and “new,” and argued that he could use more “understanding” from his mom. This brought up a discussion about why Erik “liked online,” and whether he still felt “it was easier.” Erik maintained that in many ways it still was. He felt like he had more “control” over his time. Mom added that she did like he could “help with the dishes” in between classwork. They both also appreciated that Erik was able to sleep in a bit more.

When Kathy confronted Erik more about lower grades, Erik responded that class was “different”. He mentioned he had trouble remembering “what class he should be in.” He often felt “confused” at what he was supposed to do in class. He brought up the lack of social participation. I asked if he was getting 1-1 support and making use of work time. He admitted he “could do better” to take advantage of those opportunities, but importantly stressed that those opportunities didn’t “feel inviting” to him. He also brought up that things like breakout rooms, and group projects “were awkward,” adding that sometimes “no one talked.” Kathy related to those feelings in her own online classes. She added that group projects can be really “annoying.” She recommended teachers use strategies like “3-minute individual meetings”, and “open-question time.” Erik mostly agreed and stressed that students “really have to feel welcomed.” I asked how teachers can better welcome students, and Erik wasn’t totally sure. I asked if teachers

should force more 1-1 conferences and Erik admitted that might be necessary to get students like himself to engage.

Ultimately, Kathy and Erik's story highlights an often-ignored demographic: for lack of a better term, your "average" family. Erik is smart, but has trouble applying himself. Kathy is very involved but frustrated with her son's lack of motivation. Kathy clearly would benefit from more concise and clear information from the district. Both Kathy and Erik recommended weekly or bi-weekly emails from teachers, ideally with schedules and big assignment deadlines that would help both know what "needs to get done." Both saw room for online learning to improve, and they agreed some students would benefit more from it, but they also eventually came to the conclusion that it wasn't best for Erik (even it took until the waning moments of our last interview). Both were also the only student and parent to feel indifferent about future online opportunities. Kathy was the first to say, "I don't really care [for more online opportunities]," and Erik agreed saying "it might be better to focus on other things."

Maybe most important, the idea emerged that educators have to go out of their way to make students like Erik (who we should note was NOT failing his classes like many other students), feel comfortable to participate and engage. Doing so may require the use of more deliberate, structured support. If the average family is struggling, the notion might also lead to more concerning issues of equity. Would Erik be better off if Kathy wasn't as involved? What if Kathy couldn't work from home? Is the difference between a student like Erik and one that's failing a dedicated parent like Kathy? I wouldn't want to bet on Erik's success without his mom's support.

***Struggling Star Players (A Teacher's Perspective)***



Ms. Richards is arguably the most celebrated teacher at school (with more than a few distinguished awards), and yet online was not a positive experience for her. Towards the end of the 4th quarter, she was “stressed,” about lack of engagement and participation. “I feel like I was not successful,” she admitted. The summer allowed her more time to “reflect and prepare,” for at least another semester of online learning, but she still had fears related to “equity” and “privilege,” and believed that “some student needs couldn’t be addressed online.” Even still, Ms. Richards never stopped trying to meet those needs. Over the summer, she was preparing more “fun videos and TikToks.” “Anything to get kids excited,” she says. She recalled sending postcards to every one of her graduating seniors to “let them know I care.” As the next semester approached, she admitted that she “welcomes online learning,” and thinks “it will get better,” it was just “hard work.”

The new school year (with new important changes from the district) led to a noticeably more up-beat attitude from Ms. Richards, though there were still big issues that had her attention. She admitted the new LMS was “hard,” but it was growing on her. She argued one-stop-shop resources were “important for families.” She was finding new ways of engaging her students with breakout rooms and chats. She was finding more free time and flexibility in online classes, and felt it was “pushing” her to “try new things.” She also believed it provided her more time for 1-1 interactions and feedback to students.

The lingering issues though would push into the 4th quarter. She argued online interactions often felt “artificial.” She complained of lack of overall engagement and superficial attendance. “There are deep rooted issues online,” she argued. Thankfully, Ms. Richards is a teacher you can trust to combat them, the problem was, even she didn’t feel like she was winning. “It’s exhausting to deal with social issues online,” she admitted. She felt the school

needed more training and resources for how to build and maintain relationships online. “We need to see more examples of what [online learning] should like,” she said.

During our last interview I could see that Ms. Richards was visibly more stressed and tired. She noted she was “working too hard” and that she sometimes didn’t leave school until 10:30 at night, nor get to sleep until 2:00 in the morning. She complained of the district’s “back and forth” learning models for many of her classes (going between hybrid and remote) and maintained it was “stressing students out.” “You cannot learn when you don’t feel safe and stable,” she added. I don’t think she meant for that statement to apply to her, but in many ways it did.

In this moment, Ms. Richards brought up another concern regarding race in online environments. She is one of the few teachers of color in the district, and she admitted people of color “have more things to worry about in [online learning].” She felt that with so much of learning being either recorded or accessible to more audiences, teachers of color “are more likely to get criticized for pushing an agenda.”

She recalled one situation where a parent was angry at how her child responded to her own self-reflective assignment where she chose to talk about equity. She mentioned a different parent referred to her as “girl.” She admitted that she can’t necessarily prove anything with these stories, but that they just “feel racially driven.” She doubted if other teachers were criticized to the same degree. I can at least add that I certainly am not.

She referenced contacting her department following the divisive 2020 election for guidance on resources. “I saw all these articles and guidelines for what teachers ‘have’ to be discussing with their students, and I thought to myself there’s no way parents would let *me* get away with it.” Ms. Richards added that these realities force her to spend more energy protecting

herself than most teachers. She saves all her emails with parents. She records conversations with parents. “I keep little notes for talking points so that I don’t say anything that will ruffle feathers,” she said. “You have to collect evidence; you have to be more ready to defend yourself,” she explains.

In addition to this added pressure, she also felt that teachers of color in predominantly white school districts are more at risk for “feelings of isolation.” She references less constructive PLCs but maintains that most resources and training “don’t really cover my perspectives, or the issues I deal with.” She adds that support often feels like it’s “mostly from white perceptions for white teachers.” She recommended that the district work harder to form partnerships with other districts who have more teacher diversity. “We need to see and hear different stories, experiences; we need to observe other teachers,” she adds.

Even with these feelings, Ms. Richards still hasn’t given up on online learning. “Most things have gotten better,” she adds. She references a couple students who really benefit from online learning and enjoy the “freedom and flexibility to get things done.” She also believes that online learning “is not going to go away.” “It keeps evolving, and we have to evolve with it,” she maintains. She “would love” to see more support for online opportunities, she’s even open to teaching them, but stresses “they need to be done right.” “There are so many serious issues to address,” she says.

Ultimately, Ms. Richards was hesitant to argue that issues related to race are the most important to discuss in online environments, but at a minimum she feels they *can be* in conjunction with other issues related to equity. Students, parents, teachers, and administrators all referenced issues related to isolation in online environments. Multiple parents brought up discussions with other parents as ways of navigating the challenges involved with transitions to

online learning. One parent in particular argued her time with other parents was critical for her mental well-being. Ms. Richards raises the concern that risks of isolation may be higher for not only teachers of color in online environments, but potentially students, parents, and administrators too (especially in predominantly white school districts). If one of the school's best teachers is struggling with race-related stress and pressure, there's good reason to believe others are too. This also brings another layer of potential stress learning communities need to be more aware of.

### ***Eyes Towards the Future: An Administrator's Perspective***

Mr. Stein had been a teacher for 10 years and an administrator for 9. He had enjoyed aspects of online learning as an adult and was currently working towards his doctorate in an online-only format. He even went as far to argue his alma mater was "saved" through online enrollment, suggesting there were lots of ways online learning could help forward learning goals for public schools.

With these characteristics in mind, it shouldn't surprise anyone that Mr. Stein sees a lot of ways online learning can better serve students in the future, but he is not blind to the many issues he (and his staff) experienced during the transition to online learning. His son is actually a student at our school with a learning disability and it provides him an important outlet to understand the nuanced issues that both students and teachers were struggling with. During every interview, his mind consistently jumped to issues related to equity. He was worried about identifying students who need academic and social support. He was empathetic towards larger and more stressful workloads. He referenced the idea of some teachers balancing one section of a class online and another in hybrid, "I would've hated to do that," he admits. He was frustrated

with lack of social participation and academic engagement. As these stressors build, Mr. Stein reflects more as a leader, “we just were not prepared; we had to learn on the way.”

The most important issue to Mr. Stein involved relationship building and engagement. He was clear that both teachers and administrators need more “all around training” in respect to relationships in online environments. He argued, “teachers know the content, but they need help adjusting it online in ways that help students get engaged.” He kept falling back to the word “tough,” as he wrestled to describe the struggle of his school community. “Everyone’s working hard, but we need them to not give up; keep trying new things,” he asserts.

At the end of the day, Mr. Stein is still proud of what the community accomplished. “Necessity is the mother of invention,” he started, explaining the difficult realities of the pandemic. “We had to make it work, and for the most part, we did,” he maintained. He conveyed the importance of “less is more” in online education. He thought most teachers did well to dial things back to what the district called “priority standards,” which were basic levels of understanding all students should leave a classroom with. He relays that some students actually “thrived” over the past year, and some felt “safer” learning at home than they do at school. It proved to be “a viable option,” he asserts.

That said, Mr. Stein’s most interesting admission is that he felt the district “missed an opportunity” to really experiment with online environments and move away from a “brick and mortar approach” to education. Mr. Stein identified a number of ways online learning could help further educational goals. He brought up the idea of night school and argued it might be a popular idea for students and teachers. “You know I bet lots of teachers might like the idea of teaching 3-10[pm],” he added. He imagined new vocational opportunities where students spend their regular school time working an internship and use online classes to handle their traditional

academic requirements. He questioned why “universities have adjusted, but not public schools?” “Some schools only exist because of online opportunities,” he adds. He wondered what the demand might be for “full virtual schools” in the district. He was excited at the idea of students mixing and matching their courses between online and classroom opportunities. “I’m kind of the ideas man on the team,” he says with a smile.

Mr. Stein reveals a number of fascinating alternatives to consider as schools increasingly approach online learning. If one holds, as most did, that there is room for improvement in online environments, and that students and educators are likely to get stronger and more comfortable with online learning as they use it, these alternatives become even more attractive. Even then, Mr. Stein pumps his own brakes. He is clear that “only offering online is not the right answer” for most students, and “doing both [online and regular learning opportunities] is complicated, he adds.” He expects there are plenty of budget and scheduling concerns. He even suggests that school districts need more help and flexibility at the state and federal levels. “[Another Administrator] is always raining on my parade,” he admits, raising another smile.

### **Survey Says!?**

In conjunction with interviews, a short 10 question survey was sent out to students, parents, teachers, and administrators at our school to help corroborate potential findings from interviews. This survey was developed and administered in November (between the third and fourth interviews) using initial codes from interview data. The school community includes a little less than 1500 students (with each one having at least one primary guardian, though it’s safe to assume most would have two), 94 teachers, and 5 administrators (4 associate principals and the athletic director). The survey was spread to students through different teachers in their seminar period, parents through a weekly school update email, and teachers through school-wide emails

(administrators were not directly asked to fill out the survey, though three did anyway). In total, 491 members responded including 287 students, 114 parents, 83 teachers, and 3 administrators. I was humbled to see that 83/94 teachers at our school responded to the survey, which further showcases their endearing dedication to their learning community. It should be noted that 4 of 5 administrators participated in interviews, and 3 of 5 responded to the survey. Their survey data is really only included as a reference point alongside their interview data.

**Table 4-1: Survey Demographics**

	Student	Total #'s	Parent or Guardian		Teacher		Administrator	
White	67.25%	193	83.33%	95	86.75%	72	66.67%	2
Black or African American	11.15%	32	2.63%	3	3.61%	3	0.00%	0
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	25.09%	72	9.65%	11	3.61%	3	33.33%	1
Asian	3.48%	10	1.75%	2	2.41%	2	0.00%	0
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.70%	2	0.88%	1	2.41%	2	0.00%	0
Middle Eastern or Northern African	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.35%	1	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0
Other	2.09%	6	0.00%	0	3.61%	3	0.00%	0
Prefer not to answer	1.74%	5	5.26%	6	2.41%	2	0.00%	0

**Results**

The results (posted below) are potentially most useful presented alone. To help connect the results to perceptions, mean, standard deviation, and variance are reported for the overall

learning community and each interest group separately. A mean of 3.00 would indicate the average response was neutral (“neither agree nor disagree”). Lower scores than 3.00 indicate increasingly positive perceptions (“strongly agree” and “agree”). Higher scores than 3.00 indicate increasingly negative perceptions (“strongly disagree and disagree”).

**Table 4-2: Question 1-I feel better today about online/remote learning at [school] than I did during the 4th quarter of the 2019-2020 school year.**

	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
Overall	2.02	1.19	1.42	488
Student	2.17	1.23	1.50	288
Parent or Guardian	2.07	1.25	1.57	113
Teacher	1.47	0.77	0.59	83
Administrator	1.67	0.47	0.22	3

For question one, the overall learning community overwhelmingly agreed (2.02) they felt better about online learning by the end of the semester than they did during the initial implementation of online learning during the 4th quarter. Teachers agreed the most (1.47), and students agreed the least (2.17).

**Table 4-3: Question 2-At least some students at [school] learn better in an online/remote setting than in a traditional classroom.**

	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
Overall	2.32	1.19	1.42	488
Student	2.33	1.13	1.28	287



Parent or Guardian	2.49	1.29	1.65	114
Teacher	2.05	1.04	1.08	83
Administrator	2.33	0.47	0.22	3

For question two, the overall learning community largely agreed (2.32) “at least some students” learn better in online environments than in a classroom. Teachers agreed the most (2.05), and parents agreed the least (2.49).

**Table 4-4: Question 3-At least some classes offered at [school] work better in an online/remote setting than in a traditional classroom.**

	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
Overall	2.87	1.25	1.57	487
Student	2.79	1.29	1.66	287
Parent or Guardian	3.18	1.28	1.64	114
Teacher	2.76	1.05	1.11	82
Administrator	3.00	0.82	0.67	3

For question three, the overall learning community slightly agreed (2.87) “at least some classes” work better in online environments than in a classroom. Teachers agreed the most (2.76), while parents actually disagreed (3.18).

**Table 4-5: Question 4-All classes at [school] should be organized around the same Learning Management Software (For example, all classes used Canvas this year).**

	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
Overall	1.73	.96	.92	487

Student	1.77	0.98	0.96	287
Parent or Guardian	1.67	0.90	0.80	113
Teacher	1.67	0.96	0.92	83
Administrator	1.00	0.00	0.00	3

For question four, the overall learning community overwhelmingly agreed (1.73) that all classes should be organized around the same LMS. All three administrators “strongly agreed.” Teachers and parents agreed the most (1.67), and students agreed the least (1.77).

**Table 4-6: Question 5-Online/remote classes should still follow the traditional in-person meeting schedule (just like they did this current year).**

	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
Overall	2.38	1.19	1.42	488
Student	2.45	1.12	1.25	287
Parent or Guardian	2.11	1.25	1.55	114
Teacher	2.53	1.29	1.67	83
Administrator	2.67	0.94	0.89	3

For question five, the overall learning community largely agreed (2.38) online classes should utilize the same traditional schedule as in-person classes followed. Parents agreed the most (2.11), and (not counting the three administrators), teachers agreed the least (2.53).

**Table 4-7: Question 6-Daily attendance should be required of students in online/remote classes the same as it is for in-person classes.**

	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
Overall	2.06	1.18	1.40	488
Student	2.30	1.19	1.41	286
Parent or Guardian	1.62	1.14	1.30	113
Teacher	1.83	1.05	1.10	83
Administrator	2.00	0.00	0.00	3

For question six, the overall learning community strongly agreed (2.06) daily attendance should be required in online classes like it for classroom classes. Parents agreed the most (1.62), and students agreed the least (2.30).

**Table 4-8: Question 7-Students who rely on academic support services can expect to do as well in online/remote settings as they would in a traditional classroom. (Academic support services include tutoring and classwork accommodations extended to students with learning disabilities or students who do speak English at their primary language).**

	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
Overall	3.44	1.24	1.55	487
Student	3.18	1.23	1.52	287
Parent or Guardian	3.81	1.19	1.41	113
Teacher	3.83	1.15	1.32	83
Administrator	3.67	0.47	0.22	3

For question seven, the overall learning community disagreed (3.44) students who rely on academic support services can expect to do as well in online classes as they would in regular classes. Teachers disagreed the most (3.83), and students disagreed the least (3.18).

**Table 4-9: Question 8-Students who rely on social support services can expect to do as well in online/remote settings as they would in a traditional classroom. (Social support services include free and reduced lunch and school counseling programs for students who qualify based on socioeconomic status or evidenced need).**

	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
Overall	3.50	1.20	1.44	488
Student	3.24	1.17	1.36	287
Parent or Guardian	3.92	1.21	1.48	114
Teacher	3.83	1.06	1.13	83
Administrator	3.33	0.47	0.22	3

For question eight, the overall learning community largely disagreed (3.50) students who rely on social support services can expect to do as well in online classes as they would in regular classes. Parents disagreed the most (3.92), and students disagreed the least (3.24).

**Table 4-10: Question 9-I want online/remote class options offered to students at [school] even when school returns back to normal.**

	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
Overall	2.63	1.36	1.86	487
Student	2.59	1.31	1.70	287
Parent or Guardian	2.88	1.46	2.14	113
Teacher	2.40	1.36	1.85	83
Administrator	3.00	0.82	0.67	3

For question nine, the overall learning community agreed (2.63) they wanted online class options offered to students whenever school went back to normal. Teachers agreed the most

(2.40), and parents barely agreed (2.88). The three administrators were divided (3.00). Given the direct implications of this question, the responses were further broken down for each answer choice below in Table 4-11.

**Table 4-11: Question 9 Perception Breakdown**

	Student		Parent or Guardian		Teacher		Administrator	
Strongly Agree	26%	75	23%	26	35%	29	0%	0
Somewhat Agree	24%	68	24%	27	25%	21	33%	1
Neither Agree or Disagree	27%	77	17%	19	16%	13	33%	1
Somewhat Disagree	11%	33	15%	17	13%	11	33%	1
Strongly Disagree	12%	34	21%	24	11%	9	0%	0

These percentages show that 51% of students wanted online opportunities offered versus only 23% who did not. Similarly, 60% of teachers wanted online opportunities offered versus only 24% who did not. Even the more neutral parents saw 47% supporting more online opportunities versus 36% against. These numbers suggest the majority of the learning community wants more online options offered to them, even when schools return back to normal.

**Table 4-12: Question 10-I want hybrid class options offered to students at [school] even when school returns back to normal.**

	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
Overall	2.88	1.43	2.04	488
Student	2.48	1.31	1.71	287
Parent or Guardian	3.22	1.37	1.89	114

Teacher	3.73	1.38	1.91	83
Administrator	3.33	1.70	2.89	3

For question ten, the overall learning community was divided (2.88) on if they wanted hybrid class options offered to students whenever school went back to normal. Students agreed (2.48), but all other three groups disagreed, with teachers disagreeing the most (3.73).

### **Choice Words: Notable Open Responses by Interest Groups**

Out of 493 participants, 143 provided open responses regarding their feelings about online learning. I've selected the ten most notable responses from each group (students, parents, and teachers--I also include the sole response from one of the three administrators) in an attempt to highlight the spectrum of perceptions within the study. They are organized from most positive to most negative with careful consideration to highlight both extreme and neutral perspectives. Although no responses necessarily stand out as important evidence by themselves, there were similar responses within and between interest groups. Ultimately, responses were prioritized which related to broader themes from interviews and surveys. Responses which were heavily focused on the context of COVID were left out. Notable themes in responses related to advantages and disadvantages of online environments, factors for success, and perceived issues or difficulties. Responses are copied exactly as they were submitted.

#### ***Selections from Students***

-i love it because it gives me more freedom to learn on my own and take my time with things.

-It's been great for me so far. I have had better grades than I have ever had before.

-Since starting school online My grades have been amazing compared to years past. Online school is self paced and theres not the feeling of a rush to turn certain things in like I would feel while in person.

I really enjoyed online learning for my senior year. It got challenging at times but who doesn't love a good challenge every now and then. If I wasn't graduating this year, I'd love to do remote learning again, just under better circumstances.

-It personally works great for me but I understand I'm an outlier in this situation.

-Ofc I miss the school environment but I also really like online learning!

-I feel like, even after the pandemic is over, it would be a good idea to continue offering online options; I've heard that some students have been thriving under the online model. That being said, I don't personally care for it. I dislike not being able to speak to teachers in person, and it takes away my main social outlet.

-I definitely prefer to be in person. It is easier for me to do my work and know what I need to do.

-It was very rushed and teachers need to give us a break. They're still trying to act like this is normal school and that we have the time to be doing 8 assignments a day. For example I don't have time to get stuff done when I have to get a job to help with income for our family, my priorities are not school and teachers do not understand that. I want an education but I also want a roof over my head so if teachers could stop assuming that remote should be easier for us that would be highly appreciated :)

-Being some one that is in band and in hands on classes such as automotive and woodshop its really sucked being online. The first couple weeks were not too bad since we were doing book work and safety test which was normal. The longer the year went on it got worse and worse, not being able to do what you signed up for sucked. Not being able to learn hands on skills that I will actually use after high school and not just questions in a book that i got right. Its really disappointing. Not being able to play an actual instrment with a whole band/drumline and just playing through a computer only hearing yourself sucked.

--I [was] only A's and B's in person now I'm failing 4 classes. I think that speaks for itself..

***From parents***

-After all the fits & starts, we found that everything with online learning worked very well for my student. For the FIRST TIME, he made above a 4.0 and did not miss any days! I don't know what percentage of students improved their attendance and grades via online. Thank you!!

-Online learning had been the best thing for my son. Last year he barely passed most of his classes, this year he has all A's and a B. I'd keep him in the hybrid setting if I could.

-My daughter has been thriving in online classes. I was very surprised at how much she enjoys it.

-Online learning has worked well to an extent with my student. However, I am an at home parent and can monitor my student. I do feel he benefits in an actual classroom because he can engage with the teacher better. I am not a huge fan of the hybrid model. It's leaves my student with two days of doing pretty much nothing.

-My child has excelled online, as he does when in school, but I know not all kids are like him. He's also an only child who has seen his self employed parents work from home his entire life, so he understands structure and staying on task by taking initiative.

-First, a quick bit of background- just in case that influences your interpretation of the following input. My daughter suffers from depression, anxiety and panic attacks. Although hesitant, she went into online learning with an open mind. After a few weeks, she discovered t\$hat it wasn't so bad. She was so excited soon after when able to actually enter the school building and see her peers in person. The anxiety and depression got the best of her when everything changed again and online learning was implemented again. All of this was enough havoc for her that the doctor changed her psych meds. Now that she's adjusted to the med change, in person is coming back. Overall, in person is preferred and a positive learning experience. Online turned out to be something she could do, didn't hate and was able to learn successfully. So for us, the issue causing grief is switching back and forth. We realize that COVID is running the show and no person can predict what is going to happen next as far as the # of cases, etc. Thank you for the opportunity to express our issues with the learning situation during these challenging



times. I do hope that you will share your findings from this with school administration after you've compiled all the data. Have a wonderful day!

-I take on-line Master's courses so I totally appreciate the value of on-line learning. My student at [school] however, did not do as well as he did when he attended in-person. But having the option for some students is beneficial.

-Online learning has been ruff not only on my children but also on myself. but i will say teachers have reached out and are making the effort on helping students . one thing that really gets me is the attendance i don;t know how many calls i have gotten regarding my kids not in a class and they have been in the class but the teacher missed them on count or what but i don't think that it should count against them.

-The kids need to get back in the classrooms. The students including the teachers need to be held accountable for being present and able to teach/learn. My student had a very difficult time learning from home and it was very disappointing to see not all teachers stayed online the whole class period. Even more disappointing when one teacher made the comment that grades were final a week before the end of the semester so she could spend time with her family.

-Online education can be very successfully. Unfortunately, the classes I have audited during my students day are very unimpressive. Teachers spend more time asking about their day then about teaching or helping students. A virtual classroom should work exactly as in person classroom. Students should be expected to dress, show themselves on camera, and everyone including teachers should remain online for the entire class time. Very disappointed in the way many of the classes were held.

### ***From Teachers***

-Personally, I have gotten to learn more about my students with online learning than in person, which has built for a better relationship with many.

-I have developed some stronger connections with some of my students online than I would have through in person. I have had more time to ask them to tell me about themselves instead of rushing to get all the curriculum taught.

-I am incredibly impressed with how much and how flexible both the teachers and students (and administrators) are while we work to engage students meaningfully. There is quite a lot of good, authentic learning occurring.

-As an introverted teacher, I have quite enjoyed the elements of remote learning. I feel that I am a better teaching in remote. I have a chance to work in a space that is comfortable to me, and I am able to connect with students that are also comfortable being at home. It is easier for me to focus on my work in remote learning as I have less to worry about in terms of making sure that I pack a lunch and have all my things. Working from home allows me to be set up and ready to go as soon as I have my kids dropped off at daycare. I get more done and feel less negative or down about the work day. I am hopeful that the future of education does more to maintain elements of remote learning for the student that benefitted from it. It certainly hasn't been best for everyone, but so many introverted learners are thriving.

-I think [the district] should have an online/remote high school available to its students; think of it as a high school without walls. Students, for whatever reason, could take one or more of their classes remotely. There are MANY things that I have learned to do this year that I will continue to do even when students return to the classroom.

-One size rarely fits anyone, let alone everyone. It is time we give students the option of in-person, all remote, virtual, and hybrid course structures. BTW, virtual would not require daily attendance and could be self paced whereas all-remote would be more traditional structure but at home. For remote and virtual we do need to require participation (and possibly camera usage at times).

-I think if you look at the number of families that chose remote -- and the number of families who took their kids out of the school district to use a remote school that was already in place ([like in another district]), you see there is a need. We don't have a huge amount of school "family" here -- partially due to

socioeconomic influences, so there is no need for kids to be here around peers. They prefer to work from home. The district would be smart if they would figure out how to do remote learning for those who prefer it.

-There are a lot of benefits to the online learning system, but it does need to be adjusted. Students should have to have cameras on, you have no idea if they are in the room or have left the house. For student's not turning in or doing work then they should be returned to in-person classes. The student's who are doing well with this format should be allowed to continue with it.

-Online learning requires more follow up with students---especially encouragement. Some do well with this model but I feel that is a minority of students. It is hard to judge their well being on-line, especially when you do not see faces---can't read expressions or body language. If on-line is offered by the district then students should have to have cameras on. Many log in and walk away. It takes more effort to poll and ask questions to make sure the students are still there. Hybrid is difficult in that you have to have a mask on---any students that are absent for their in person hour, you are asked to let them log in your webex--that makes it difficult for them to understand you through a mask. There is also not enough contact time with Hybrid. North has done an outstanding job given the circumstances. With that said school should be all students in person(when safe) or all remote. or all remote.

-I feel that online learning as been incredibly difficult for our beginning and intermediate ELL students. It is difficult for them to understand what is expected of them during class because of internet issues and WebEx cutting in and out so they aren't able to hear what the teacher and other students are saying. It is difficult for them to get help after school or during seminar if their assignments are locked or if there are not clear written instructions and an example in the assignment. All teachers using Canvas has been beneficial in helping them understand where to locate assignments. Unfortunately, overall I feel like our ELL students benefit much more from in person instruction because they can hear the entire lesson without the teacher cutting out and teacher can walk around and see when they don't understand something instead of assuming that they don't care about school or have left the WebEx on and walked away from the computer, which is what I have heard from some teachers when I have reached out to

them for support. I think it is especially important for teachers to remember that our ELL students are learning English in addition to Canvas and the content and due to income inequities their internet is not as reliable as it may be for their wealthier peers.

### ***From Administration***

-Covid has been a rough virus. I am lucky to be home with my student at times when learning online. Some parents do not have this option and has been tough on Students not having a supporter close to help them with their assignments. Some do good and some have just failed all year. Sad...

### **Conclusion**

Experiences from interviews and perceptions from surveys reveal a number of shared feelings regarding online learning. Shared findings across perspectives include: some individuals thrived in online environments, while many did not. All interest groups reported higher workloads related to learning responsibilities. All interest groups reported higher rates of stress and anxiety in online environments. All interest groups acknowledge certain advantages in online environments related to flexibility and more relaxed social pressure. All interest groups acknowledge certain disadvantages in online learning related to increased distractions and lacking social interactions. All interest groups agreed that factors including student motivation and parental support were likely indicators of success in online environments, while factors related to equity and readiness were likely indicators of struggles. The community largely agreed that students who rely on extra support services are more likely to struggle in online environments. All interest groups believed that perceptions of online learning improved over time, though interviews indicate perceptions did not necessarily improve in respect to certain issues experienced in online learning between the middle and end of first semester. Of note, around 10% more students reportedly failed more than one class.

Although there were strong feelings on all sides of most issues, open responses from teachers were particularly more positive than other interest groups in respect to the potential for online learning and the desire for more online learning opportunities. Broader surveys suggested that teachers were the most supportive of online opportunities continuing to be offered when school returned back to normal (mean of 2.40). Students were the next most supportive group (mean of 2.59), while parents were closer to neutral (2.88). This suggests parents face more stress related to shouldering more responsibilities for their children in online environments.

That said, the reality remains, many students and teachers clearly view online learning as a viable alternative to the classroom. Some students and teachers even prefer it. This only adds to broader survey responses, which showed over half of the learning community wants online options even when school returns to normal.

## Chapter 5 - Discussion

### Reflecting with Purpose: If You Build It, They Will Come

The purpose of this research was to help better inform and shape the future development and implementation of online learning opportunities. In respect to K-12 environments, this is still a quickly evolving reality (Connections Academy, 2015; Market Research Reports, Inc, 2016). Two notable findings were supported by both interviewees' experiences and the broader community's perceptions in the survey: people agree that online learning has an important role to play in the future of educational opportunities, and people are ready for them *now*. 19/22 people interviewed believed online learning should have a bigger role in education (and it should be noted the other three could be categorized more as indifferent). Many even shared exciting ideas for how it could help provide students with more opportunities, including vocational internships, night school, and more individualized student schedules. Prior research suggests that these participants were not alone in their visions of the future (Heafner et al, 2015; Thompson, 2011).

Adding weight to this vision is the notion that many in the school wanted more online opportunities offered even when school returns to normal (with a mean score of 2.63). This particular question warranted a closer look at perceptions. Although parents were not *as* enthused, 47% indicated they wanted online opportunities offered versus only 37% who did not. Teachers were the most excited with 60% favoring more online offerings versus only 24% who did not. Students were relatively more neutral than teachers, but even fewer actually indicated they did not want more online opportunities with 50% favoring and 23% against.

These results are directly in line with prior research and even what many in interviews suggested: although online is clearly not best for *all* (Dolan, 2016; Gilbert, 2015), nor should it be approached as the "only" learning option, *it does work for many*. It offers more students more

opportunities to take ownership of their own learning goals, and some of these opportunities may not be possible in traditional classroom environments (Edwards, 2017; Heafner et al, 2015; Thompson, 2011).

Administrators were a bit more hesitant of this potential. They stressed caution in respect to scheduling, funding, and one in particular wanted more data about how many students would and could utilize new online opportunities. These are all fair reasons to be hesitant, but all administrators also admitted online offered something different to students, something that some students “thrived” with. 5/7 students admitted they’d consider taking online classes as a part of their normal schedule. One story reveals that students themselves might not even realize they want it. All 5 teachers were at least open to the idea of teaching online (though maybe not as their first choice). All interest groups agreed (and further validated by survey perceptions) that they were getting better and more comfortable in online environments. The potential is plain to see in every facet of this study, and it would be a waste to see online opportunities fade away because of hesitation. One might wonder how perceptions could change if schools were not forced into such an untimely and extreme transition.

### **Guided Reading: Considering Prior Research**

Before discussing the potential implications within the interview participants’ experiences and broader survey perceptions, it is important to reflect on the prior research which inspired and guided the exploration of the school learning community’s journey into online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Suggested findings and trends from others’ experiences with online learning environments (and broader change theories) were utilized as general reference points for what the community would likely encounter and feel throughout their journey. These same reference points are also valuable to both reinforce and weaken

potential findings throughout the study. More directly, all of the research below, would in some form or another relate to explaining experiences detailed in interviews and perceptions found in the school-wide survey.

Prior research suggests perceived strengths and weaknesses of online learning environments. Strengths included expanded access to learning opportunities which might not be possible otherwise (Thompson, 2011; Edwards, 2017), learning environments which cater more to related qualities of freedom, flexibility, independence, and responsibility (Thompson, 2011; Gilbert, 2015), while also providing educational leaders with more options to address systemic issues related to larger populations and class sizes, credit recovery and graduation, and overall tighter school budgets (Heafner et al, 2015). Weaknesses included potential issues of equity and access to appropriate technology (Gilbert, 2015), feelings of isolation related to lack of social interactions and direct feedback (Gilbert, 2015) and issues with content and skill familiarity related to cultural relevance (Edwards, 2017).

Another inherent weakness also includes the reality of growing pains for all interest groups. Issues exist for students, instructors, and even stakeholders, related to everything from awareness of and access to technology (Dolan, 2016), openness to online environments (Kebritchi et al, 2017), skill and course readiness (Chernowsky, 2017; Kebritchi et al, 2017), cultural relevancy (Hannon and D'Netto, 2008), use of pedagogy and learning theories (Arghode et al, 2017), as well as general program development, funding, and regulation (Stedrak and Rose, 2015).

Prior research suggests a number of evidenced issues and potential solutions to problems each interest group would face throughout the study that were often driving points of discussion in interviews. For students, there are evidenced issues related to expectations and readiness for



online environments which suggest the need for clear policies and structure (Kebritchi et al, 2017). Since many students will need help developing skills for success in online environments, some researchers have suggested orientation and feedback programs (Chernowsky, 2017; Kebritchi et al, 2017). Students also struggle with less social interactions and related isolation in online environments and researchers suggest committing to learning strategies (like discussion boards) which allow for broader peer interaction and support and development of student identities online (Darrow-Magras, 2015; Humber, 2018; Kebritchi et al, 2017; Komninou, 2018).

For parents, research suggests that their involvement in student learning is a key indicator for success in online environments (Epstein and Salinas, 2004; Henderson, 2018), but they may need help properly supporting their students (Gil et al, 2015). Research suggests schools develop programs to help parents through coaching opportunities, collaborative policies, and feedback loops so they can better support important learning goals (Adendano and Chu, 2020). Interestingly, research also suggests parents seem to agree that online learning is a “viable option” for full time learning but are hesitant to agree it can be for their own children (Lackey, 2019).

For teachers, research showcases that they often struggle with issues related to readiness and lack of experience in online environments, content transfer and higher workloads, and lack of social interactions and feedback (Kebritchi et al, 2017). Research also reveals that perceived issues in online environments create added stress and anxiety (Sandhoff, 2018) and even a fundamental openness and motivation to teaching in online environments (Einfeld, 2016). Given many evidenced issues for teachers, research therefore emphasizes ample training and staff development, mentor programs, and peer support networks (Fine, 2017; Kebritchi et al, 2017; Reyna, 2016) to help teachers not only redevelop and refine content, but also find new content

and develop new strategies to use in online courses (Kebritchi et al, 2017). Teachers may also need help learning and implementing learning theories that are more suitable for online environments (Arghode et al, 2019; Miller, 2011). Some researchers suggest implementing more structured learning frameworks to guide teachers throughout new transitions into online environments (Arghode et al, 2019; Picciano, 2016). Lastly, research shows that most teachers-- even special education teachers-- are unprepared for helping students with special needs in online environments and will therefore need more training and general collaboration between special and general education departments (Smith et al, 2016).

For Administrators, research clearly shows perceived issues with responding to the particular and plentiful needs of students, parents, and teachers in online environments (Kebritchi et al, 2017). Research also suggests that administrators not only struggle with their own openness and readiness for online environments (Einfeld, 2016), they also might need more training to help them meet all of the varying degrees of needs in their school community (Sharp, 2017). There is also the implicit pressure and responsibility of being in charge, which can lead to their own feelings of stress and anxiety (Goodwin and Cameron, 2015; Waters and Cameron, 2017).

Lastly the context of the social and political environment during the course of the study is important to acknowledge with related implications of change theory as schools were forced to transition to online learning. In late March of 2020, the school community was officially forced to close. One week later an entirely new mode of learning was pushed on administrators and teachers--and a week later subsequently pushed on students and parents. Official state lockdowns lasted towards the end of the school year, and official masking restrictions and social distance recommendations defined the summer and would last for the entirety of the upcoming school semester (and likely the whole school year). Couple the context of the pandemic with an

emotionally charged and divisive political atmosphere ripe with racial tension, protests, one of the more dramatic elections in recent memory, electoral uncertainty, and even a historical second impeachment. Life was uniquely difficult and stressful for most during the study.

This only adds weight to the implications of change schools were forced to implement as they transitioned into online environments. This type of forced, “second-order,” or “unplanned” change in schools is associated with greater staff stress and division, disjointed communication, unclear goals and methods, lack of control over professional responsibilities, and related fear and insecurity (Ellsworth, 2000; Ha, 2014; Waters and Cameron, 2007). In general, this type of forced change also necessitates the development of new ideas and skills that can be difficult to process and even “conflict with personal values.” (Fullan, 2001; Waters and Cameron, 2007). These stressors typically compound within and across components of a system innately leading to less productivity and progress towards goals (Ellsworth, 2000).

To combat “second-order” change, Waters and Cameron (2007) stress for helping provide members with 11 particular qualities associated with smoother transitions including curricular knowledge, flexibility, agent of change, ideals and beliefs, monitoring and evaluation, intellectual stimulation and optimization, culture, communication, input, and order (pg. 12). Of those eleven qualities, Waters and Cameron (2007) argue the last four (culture, communication, input, and order) are the hardest to responsibly satisfy (pg. 12).

These responsibilities serve as an excellent—albeit rough—report card for perceived positive and negative experiences of members of the learning community. Within this report card, we might also consider Ellsworth’s (2000) advocacy for proper strategy in change efforts to help combat the complicated ripple effects of stress that spread between specific components within a system almost certainly working against the system as a whole. For an example of such

a plan, we make look to Ha's (2014) five step plan for sustainable change. In this study, there was no clear overarching action plan interest groups were aware of, and understandably so given the never-before-seen realities of the pandemic. All interest groups voiced aspects of disjointed experiences between themselves and others, and there was notable fog of stress that continually settled on the school community throughout the implementation process.

These decidedly negative realities add important weight to interpretations from interview experiences and survey responses. For example, if a group felt negatively about something (like lack of social interactions), we can consider what responsibilities of change were potentially unfulfilled (like building appropriate culture in online environments or developing clear plans of change appropriate for each interest group) to help us establish the realities of social interactions in online environments, and if an intervention could have helped. More importantly, although the nature of change and the environmental contexts taking place during the study will not necessarily invalidate negative perceptions, we could argue that they do strengthen positive perceptions. If things went badly when times were rough, we should expect more negative perceptions. If things went well when times were rough, there is a good chance we have something more substantial to build on.

Altogether, this body of research helps make sense of lessons educators can learn from this school's journey through online learning. Results are organized in the spirit of a survival guide as a not-so-subtle nod to how many participants felt trying to keep themselves afloat during their rollercoaster ride of learning online through the pandemic.

### **Surviving Online Learning (SOL): Suggested Practices for Implementing Online Learning**

***SOL Tip 1: Stay Positive :)***

From a leadership perspective, it was clear that administrators got worn down and stressed from the pressure of keeping the community afloat--like a lifeguard taking in water as they perform a rescue. One of the most common things administrators advocated for from students, parents, and teachers could be simplified into grace and perseverance. One administrator's face recoiled as he spoke about lowering staff morale, "It's cheesy, but we have to stay positive."

One cannot separate the context of the pandemic from perceptions over online learning during this study, but that does not change the overall results: most people were not happy about the implementation of online learning. Complaints covered every potential topic imaginable related to confusing communication, tech-related issues, higher workload concerns, lack of social engagement and participation, falling student performance, and even mental health concerns--which are in tune with evidence from prior studies (Chernowsky, 2017; Dolan, 2016; Edwards, 2017; Gilbert, 2015; Kebritchi et al, 2017). One idea that deserves more attention though is how these negative perceptions can stack.

Teachers acknowledged that less social engagement and participation compelled them to create more assignments, which subsequently gave them more assignments to grade and higher workloads, and now more stress and anxiety working in online environments. Students admitted that more assignments led to more busy work and higher workloads, and overall a decrease in motivation for school. These are compounding issues, and similar arguments could be made for all of these evidenced issues. If perceptions are not appropriately supported, in line with the responsibilities of communication and flexibility during times of change, then it will quickly lead to a deterioration of culture--one of the hardest responsibilities of change to fulfill (Waters and Cameron, 2007).

A deterioration in culture is apparent throughout the study, in lines with expected stressors rippling across the varied components of the school community (Ellsworth, 2000). One student recalled a teacher showing the whole class's grades on the projector. "Everyone was failing!" he cried. This teacher was surely suffering from his own anxiety. We can assume he was experiencing lacking social engagement and participation, just as all interest groups reported. We can assume he had more students failing than he was used to, just as all teachers and administrators reported. And now, he unintentionally pushes his own anxiety on to his students, who then feel more pressure and stress from all of these interluding factors.

This particular student who told the story ends up battling depression that semester. Administrators reported exponential increases in mental health issues and requests for social support services across the school population. This is a big deal. A school community must find ways to build a positive cultural atmosphere in online environments or risk exasperating well documented issues in online learning.

There are many positive perceptions indicated by participants in interviews and survey responses to build on. The overall school community strongly agreed their overall perceptions got better (mean of 2.02), and most participants acknowledged greater organization, improved teaching and learning strategies, and less tech-related issues by the end of the semester. The overall community even agreed they wanted more online opportunities when school returned back to normal (mean of 2.63). The context of the pandemic surely did no favors in respect to positive perspectives, but perhaps the greater underlying issue is related to one the more difficult responsibilities to manage during change: culture (Waters and Cameron, 2007). The question then becomes: how can schools work to improve it in online environments? More attention to the specific needs within each interest group would have been a useful start (Ellsworth, 2000).

Ideally, a more organized approach to change needed to be developed that more clearly created cohesion across the interest groups, though that is much easier said than done (Ha, 2014).

***SOL Tip 2: Don't Forget to have Fun!***

I can't help but empathize with my administrator's recoil when he admits his cheesy advice to "stay positive," but results from the study indicate a need to double down: having "fun" may be more important in an online environment than it is in a classroom. Research suggests both students and teachers will struggle with readiness, engagement, and motivation (Chernowsky, 2017; Kebritchi et al, 2017), and that these issues can lead to greater feelings of isolation and anxiety (Einfeld, 2016; Sandhoff, 2018). Experiences from interviews suggest that these issues can negatively compound creating more stress and anxiety for all members of the school community. Prior research suggests the use of more socially minded strategies like online discussion boards and group projects to allow for students to have more opportunities for social engagement and peer support (Darrow-Magras, 2015; Humber, 2018; Kebritchi et al, 2017; Komninou, 2018). Greater social engagement is arguably an important tip to the iceberg. If students are more engaged, that helps alleviate a chief concern echoed by all teachers and administrators related to lacking participation, which in turn helps address falling student performance. As Ellsworth (2000) argues, all of the individual components within a system are also very interdependent.

All students and teachers interviewed seemed to identify socially minded and "fun" activities as their most memorable. One student brought up "bring-a-pet-to-class" day in multiple interviews when pressed for effective learning strategies. Another student brought up similar "questions-of-the-day" activities using the chat box. Another student brought up an activity where they had to find objects around the house to introduce themselves. Teachers answered

similarly. “Anything to get kids excited,” one teacher remarked. Another teacher brought up questions-of-the-day. One teacher brought up sharing favorite music and movies. One teacher admitted their favorite part of the day was just talking to students in his study hall “about nothing.”

This is an important line of agreement: students and teachers portrayed more value in actual social engagement than they did in traditional coursework. Teachers and administrators all brought up one teacher who had been highlighted across the school who took her students on a virtual field trip for an elective class. Students and teachers clearly saw value in breakout rooms for group work, discussions and projects. Yet, nothing stuck out to students and teachers as much as simple fun that helped them break free from the evident stressors they were dealing with in online environments. A school community would be wise to take a step back and consider how a bit of refocus on fun may help many students actually focus on learning--and if students are learning, it's likely many other stressors felt by administrators, teachers, and even parents are a little easier to manage too. These reflections provide clear opportunities for more communication and input among and across the components of the learning community, which would go a long way in mitigating stress and improving school culture (Ellsworth, 2000; Waters and Cameron, 2007).

***SOL Tip 3: “Less is More.”***

Issues related to workload quickly became apparent to all interest groups during the more official implementation of online learning at the start of the new school year. Multiple teachers alluded to feeling overwhelmed with content preparation and transfer for online environments consistent with findings in previous research (Kebritchi et al, 2017; Sandhoff, 2018). Multiple students also attested to rising teacher stress levels, which often led to more “busy work,” and



higher student workloads. Subsequently, students also felt more stressed and anxious, also consistent with previous findings for students in online environments (Kebritchi et al, 2017). Parents too acknowledged higher workloads and related stress levels from their children, showcasing a communal agreement related to higher workloads and stress levels.

From a leadership perspective, administrators unintentionally contributed to these higher workloads to stress levels by emphasizing the importance of “first impressions.” This created a tense cultural environment where teachers and families complained about lacking communication and input (related to three of the four hardest responsibilities of change). Of course, as administrators all acknowledged, they too were learning on the go. Teachers admitted that the flexibility of online environments, paired with lacking social engagement, innately pressured them to try and fill up class time with more structured activities. Students countered most of these activities felt like “busy work,” and overtime made them feel less likely to engage at all. Another indicator of rippling stressors among and across components (Ellsworth, 2000).

Administrators quickly advocated for teachers to dial back instructional activities to alleviate workload concerns. The philosophy was echoed by every administrator and most teachers: “less is more.” All participants (except for one parent) agreed. Administrators recommended teachers refocus their curriculum on what the district had termed “priority standards,” which were baseline skills district organized groups believed all students should learn by the end of a class.

The specifics of potential priority standards are less important than their nature: giving students clear and manageable goals is a best practice for any learning environments (Arghode et al, 2019). These clear and manageable goals can also help alleviate teacher stress and confusion as they create and redesign content for online environments (Arghode et al, 2019; Kebritchi et al,

2017). Refined focus on priority standards could also be viewed as an important step towards more organized teaching frameworks (Picciano, 2016) while also helping satisfy responsibilities of change related to curricular knowledge and optimization (Waters and Cameron, 2007).

Although some students continued to complain about higher workloads in some classes, most students admitted their workloads had improved by the end of the semester overall.

#### ***SOL Tip 4: Emphasize Support and Feedback!***

Research suggests that students often struggle with fewer 1-1 support and feedback opportunities in online environments (Gilbert, 2015). An ironic finding in interviews was that most teachers and students found *more* time for 1-1 support and feedback than in traditional classrooms. One student who relied on academic support services was surprised at how easy it was for him to check-in with teachers and utilize breakout rooms for individual help. Multiple students appreciated how they could bounce in and out of class during work time when they had questions.

All teachers found ways that made it easier to provide 1-1 support to students in online environments than it could be in a traditional classroom. Ms. Allison used breakout rooms to bounce between helping students on her caseload quicker than was possible in a classroom. Ms. Melder also used individual breakout rooms for quick conferences with every student so she had an idea of who would need more help. All teachers relayed that some students felt safer conveying concerns or asking questions in the chat box. Ms. Allison even argued the chatbox was more appropriate for handling more delicate classroom situations.

If both students and teachers were finding more opportunities for 1-1 support and feedback, it must be asked: why were so many students failing? Erik's story revealed an

interesting dynamic. Although he acknowledged there were technically more opportunities for support and feedback, he argued it didn't feel "natural," or "inviting." Erik believed teachers need to go farther out of their way to help students like him that might not want to ask for help, or might not feel comfortable asking. His mother immediately pointed out how problematic his thought process was, but that doesn't change the reality: some students just don't feel like asking for help online (Erik suggested at least two reasons related to motivation and comfortability).

In order to help work against that reality, Erik suggested teachers are more direct in their offering of support. Interestingly, Ms. Melder actually used forced-breakout rooms, and Erik agreed similar strategies would likely be necessary to get him to open up for help. Teachers acknowledged this reality to an extent describing that many of their students would immediately drop out during work time. Multiple administrators pointed to student motivation as a big problem, and research has identified student motivation as a central factor for success in online environments (Kebritichi et al, 2017).

The deeper issue that Erik's story suggests is that students are not just potentially unmotivated to work, they're also unmotivated to get support. This relates to two of the most difficult responsibilities of second order change of culture and communication (Waters and Cameron, 2007). Not only does the notion of support and feedback have to be open and accessible, it has to *feel* inviting. Erik's story suggests teachers might have to go out of their way to *force* students to engage in support and feedback opportunities, or else they might just give up. These concerns become even more paramount for students who rely on extra academic or social supports anyway. Ms. Melder's 1-1 conferences seem to satisfy that requirement without damaging the responsibility of positive culture in an online environment. Similarly, Ms. Allison would require many of her students to work with her during study hall hours. If students are not

responsible enough to get help, the fact remains a direct teacher intervention might be their last hope.

***SOL Tip 5: Some Students Need (a lot) More!***

Survey perceptions revealed an important potential issue educators must consider: the community agreed that students who rely on any support services should not expect the same level of success in online environments as they do in a classroom. Specifically, teachers and parents strongly disagreed (means of 3.83 and 3.81 respectively) that students who rely on academic support could expect to be as successful online (while students were interestingly more neutral with a mean score of 3.18). The community was even more adamant that students who rely on social support services could expect to do as well online (with means of 3.83 for teachers, 3.92 for parents, and 3.24 for students).

These perceptions are echoed in interviews by all administrators, teachers, and even many parents and students. Ms. Allison naturally focused on students in her caseload, pointing to issues her students were having with feeling comfortable enough to engage. Mr. Mores was adamant that his students who were still learning english were not getting the support they needed to really understand Math. One might recall that Marcus, a student with special needs, was largely successful because of his almost irritating commitment to 1-1 attention. If issues already exist for students feeling comfortable taking advantage of feedback and support, it's not hard to see why many participants were so worried about students who rely on special needs.

These concerns can be extended for students in less than equitable circumstances. Administrators consistently brought up issues related to equity. Part of the problem is that students' needs are even hard to identify, much less address online. One administrator used an example being able to help a student with some extra clothes after seeing them in the same

sweatshirt three days in a row. Ms. Allison pointed out that learning can only take place when basic needs are met, and “basic needs are just harder to address online.”

This is an issue that needs a lot more attention in future research. Teachers suggested more up-to-date resources on student information, but it was clear administrators need more ways of collecting it for themselves, much less sharing that with teachers. It’s possible that online environments are not naturally constructive environments for students who rely on extra support services. One might point to Marcus’s success as a counterexample, and the premise of 1-1 support does provide at least one potential way of helping students with special needs, but he also showcases other indicators for potential success online in self-motivation and parental support. Regardless, without a stronger action plan in place for students might need more support services, educational leaders should expect rippling stressors to eventually impact teachers doubling back to provide more support, and students getting stuck in between (Ellsworth, 2000; Ha, 2014).

### ***SOL Tip 6: Messaging Tech-Support...***

Recent research suggests challenges related both to equitable access to online technology and more nuanced awareness of how to best use it for learning (Dolan, 2016; Kebritchi et al, 2017). Most participants referenced perceived dangers of these issues, and some specific stories showcase reasons for concern. Two parents reported having to upgrade WIFI in order for them to reliably work from home while students were learning. Both parents acknowledged that some families might not be able to afford that luxury.

One teacher argued that many of her students don’t actually know how to use their computer, and it’s safe to assume some degree of prior access to laptops would be necessary for students to be ready for online learning. Recent research suggests orientation programs and peer-

support networks to help students combat issues related to readiness in online environments (Chernowsky, 2017; Kebritchi et al, 2017). If a school is serious about online learning, some level of orientation is likely a necessity to help combat issues related to access and readiness. Both students and teachers reported they got better overtime in respect to tech-related skills and comfortability, but teachers and administrators also reported students just gave up in the face of difficulties. Even two teachers argued they would have liked more hands-on training to help get used to the new LMS.

Interestingly, all administrators reported that although tech-related issues were a constant battle for all interest groups, they did significantly lessen overtime. Administrators even believed that they did a great job combating issues of access through the use of hotspots, arguing they provided them to at least all families that asked for them, and even some families that didn't quite qualify for them because they had extra to spare. One administrator admitted that some families surely slid through the cracks, but also maintained that there wasn't a lot they could do without families reaching out, or someone else reporting an issue.

Listening to other interest groups' perceptions paints a different picture of tech-related issues, but it's possible that speaks more to the feelings of a fundamental issue making learning impossible. Teachers and students complained about lagging and dropped classes. Students and parents complained about broken and blocked links. All students complained about the VPN security software on laptops.

At the very least, it must be acknowledged that tech-related issues are debilitating in an online environment. Multiple students admitted that something like a dropped class or a broken link were annoying enough to stop working. One parent agreed, arguing that it should be the

teacher's job to make sure links are working, which was problematic given teachers and students had different tech restrictions through the VPN.

Students and parents shared a general consensus that something needed to be done with the VPN, though at least two parents were nervous about students misusing the internet if there were no restrictions. One parent countered that they can just look up anything on their phone. Perhaps a system that notifies administrators and parents of potentially hazardous content would be a fitting compromise so that students are never blocked from resources they need to actually participate and learn in class.

These realities bring to mind the difficult responsibility of order in second-order change (Waters and Cameron, 2007). Just one tech-related issue was enough for participants to feel lost and agitated. The related stress stuck with participants beyond the actual experience and negatively impacted their experiences with future classes and assignments (Ellsworth, 2000). Perhaps this is a lose-lose battle for a learning community, as one cannot reliably expect to eliminate tech-related issues, but these experiences showcase how important it is for implementations teams to set aside key resources to handle tech-related issues in a timely matter (Ha, 2014).

### ***SOL Tip 7: Communication Breakdown***

Like tech-related issues, the consistency and quality of communication was a heavily criticized component of the implementation of online learning. Communication is one of the most difficult responsibilities of change to manage (Waters and Cameron, 2007), so it is in some ways a losing battle. Some participants believed there was too much communication from both district leaders and teachers, and some believed there was not enough. Most students, parents, and teachers had negative perceptions about district communication and guidelines. Even

administrators admitted that their information and directives were changing faster than they could keep up with. It must be noted that the context of the pandemic surely didn't help satisfy an already difficult responsibility during change.

That said, perspectives from interviews offered a number of different ideas that are easily organized into recommendations and best practices for communication. Overarching information from the district should be well organized and manageable. The lesson of "Less is more," applies here. Parents and teachers also requested more organized "one-stop-shop" resource guides where interest groups can easily access important information when they are ready. Most parents reported giving up on district emails by the middle of the first semester because they no longer felt productive, and often led to more feelings of confusion. One Spanish-speaking parent also liked when the district provided updates in Spanish, which is an important consideration for learning communities with populations that speak languages other than English. Administrators also felt like the nature of district communication was out of their control.

At least for bigger school districts, giving schools more control over important district information might be worth considering to help work against issues related to consistency. Ensuring that district information and school information do not overlap would also be important to prevent families from feeling overwhelmed. Districts should also consider that some students have to be responsible for keeping their parents in the loop for school-related information. Some parents in this study would surely not be up to date if it were not for students receiving the same information as their parents.

Regarding teacher communications, parents desired some level of communication (most preferred email) which outlines general class schedules, important assignments, and notable deadlines. Parents didn't necessarily agree on how often teachers send updates (anywhere from



every week to once a month), but they did advocate for consistency. Some parents even admitted that the flow of information would vary from class to class. A nice compromise that all parents accepted involved class updates about every 2 weeks.

Students requested a bit more information and more regularly. Weekly updates that included the schedule, learning targets, major assignments, and deadlines were largely recommended. Many students appreciated when teachers had clear and organized weekly schedules posted on their LMS pages. A clear schedule posted was more important than weekly updates for some students, and many reported feeling lost and overwhelmed when teachers did not provide one.

Ultimately, communication is not an issue that a learning community can take for granted. If anything, learning communities should expect issues in respect to communication all the way from overall district levels, down to individual teachers. Providing organized resource pages is likely better than longer or multiple email chains for all interest groups. Letting school administrators handle the release of important information may be preferable to help them feel more in control. Lastly, teachers need to prioritize consistent class updates to parents around every two weeks, and at least more organized and detailed weekly schedules for students.

Like tech-related issues, the stressors from communication breakdowns clearly reverberated through all interest groups in the learning community (Ellsworth, 2000). Like tech-related issues, there are many aspects that will be hard to satisfy for everybody, but perhaps providing more means of feedback loops, as outlined in Ha's (2014) fifth step of his model for sustainable change, could help provide more input and order for disgruntled members, which are notably difficult responsibilities of change to address alongside communication (Waters and Cameron, 2007).

***SOL Tip 8: Relationships, Relationships, Relationships!***

Recent studies continue to assert the importance of student-teacher relationships, and stronger relationships are linked both to more positive and less negative outcomes in school (Quin, 2017). Research also suggests this holds true for online environments, though students and teachers both face unique challenges in forming them due to less face-to-face opportunities (Kebtritchi et al, 2017). All teachers and administrators agreed that building relationships online was more difficult. One teacher felt that they had to work much harder for less direct results. Another teacher described it as “exhausting.” One teacher explained that “students don’t care about what you know unless they know how much you care,” before arguing that it was much harder to show that level of empathy online. Another teacher similarly argued it was harder to satisfy the basic needs students require before learning is possible online.

Administrators were well aware of teachers’ struggles, but two added that even they were struggling to maintain stronger relationships with teachers in online environments. All administrators acknowledged teachers needed more training and resources to help them build meaningful relationships online. Two administrators believed they needed their own training and resources to better help teachers. The Principal acknowledged that it was harder to help teachers as instructional leaders when administrators were still learning best practices in online environments too.

Struggles aside, teachers did find meaningful ways of building relationships, it just took more time and effort than they were used to in the classroom. One teacher kept track of students who participated in class or turned their cameras on and made sure to let them know in the chat box and later in emails that he appreciated their participation and engagement. After a while he

noticed substantially more students were turning their screens on for class. Another teacher went as far to send postcards to students over fall break and it led to more students saying hello and goodbye to her in the chat box and even some sticking around after class just to talk. One teacher used individual conferences and argued it helped her form the more meaningful relationships necessary to push students to get their work done.

It is important that learning communities are attentive to supporting both sides of the most important relationship in education. Recent studies suggest teachers need more training to help them develop more meaningful relationships with students (Fine, 2017; Kebritchi et al, 2017; Reyna, 2016). Studies also suggest students need orientation programs and more sophisticated support networks to help them engage with other students and teachers (Chernowsky, 2017; Kebritchi et al, 2017). Doing either, much less both, is easier said than done, especially given its relationship to the difficult responsibilities of change in culture and communication (Waters and Cameron, 2007), but perhaps there is another underutilized ingredient in the student-teacher relationship that deserves more attention: parents.

Research has long suggested that parental involvement is key indicator of success in school (Epstein and Salinas, 2004), but recent studies suggest that parental support is even more critical for success in online environments (Henderson, 2018). Like students and teachers, research shows that parents need more support and training to fulfill this need (Gil et al, 2015). Recommendations include the developing programs to help parents through coaching opportunities, collaborative policies, and feedback loops so they can better support important learning goals (Adendano and Chu, 2020). These recommendations are in line with supporting the more difficult responsibilities of change in culture, communication, and input (Waters and

Cameron, 2007) while also supporting specific components of the learning community (Ellsworth, 2000), and reinforcing expected behavior during change (Ha, 2014).

To best support students in online environments, learning communities need to ensure that teachers, students, and parents are not only individually prepared to handle their responsibilities, but also working together to reinforce student learning goals. Many participants in all interest groups acknowledged that online environments did not feel as naturally inviting for communication, and therefore it is imperative that additional measures are taken to create an inviting learning environment and foster positive learning culture to help students engage. As many students admitted, if they don't feel comfortable, they might not even try.

### ***SOL Tip 9: Structured Settlement***

The balance between flexibility and structure was a contentious issue between the initial implementation of online learning to end 4th quarter and the upcoming school year. Most groups acknowledged plenty of benefits of openness in online programs, but without proper structure and incentives, the majority of students were not making use of it. Steve Dinney, an expert in business management, suggests that providing structure does not have to come at the cost of freedom and creativity. He references a seemingly infinite universe founded on less than 100 atoms, western music composed of 12 notes, and western literature written from 26 letters (Dinney, 2011, Forbes.com). The school community's experiences and perceptions suggest more natural structures are important to recognize in online programs too.

When many participants (and even leading researchers) reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of online learning they often first acknowledge the innate freedom and flexibility afforded in online environments. This freedom was universally described as a gift for responsible and self-motivated students, and a curse for just about anyone else, and prior research confirms

that some students often struggle with the freedom and flexibility in online environments (Kebritchi et al, 2017).

The good news is that schools can provide important structure for all students without sacrificing important freedom and flexibility for those responsible enough to make use of it. For evidence, one can look directly at participants' perceptions before and after major organizational changes were implemented during the summer of the 2020-21 school year. Every single participant acknowledged that a traditional class schedule and unified Learning Management System (LMS) were in the best interest of the greater learning community. To be fair, some students and teachers had some initial complaints about getting used to a new LMS, but everyone came around to appreciate it, and many actually came to like it better than anything they used before. Survey responses too suggested strong support for a unified LMS (mean of 1.73) and traditional classroom schedule for online classes (mean of 2.38).

It is worth considering where "natural" structures could exist in a learning community to build on. For this particular district, they simply took their exact classroom schedule and applied it to their online classes. Students were already accustomed to not only being in classes during these times, but also being in (and transitioning to) the same amount of classes. This helped satisfy one of the four most difficult responsibilities of second-order change, order. Students (and teachers) always knew at least 2 important concepts related to their duties--when and where learning would take place.

It is important to also consider that even with more structure, students and teachers found ample means of providing freedom and flexibility, which also happens to be an important responsibility of change, and a natural strength in online environments (Thompson, 2011; Gilbert, 2015). Some teachers used open breakout rooms where students could request their own

workspace, some used more formal breakout rooms where students were automatically put into breakout rooms. Some students would stay in class and get direct help with teachers, some would work completely on their own, and some would even bounce in and out. Ultimately, teachers and students relied on a fixed structure to help them create more appropriate aspects of flexibility that would benefit ALL students, rather than just the responsible and self-motivated.

Lastly, school communities should consider how online opportunities can co-exist with classroom ones. Although administrators pointed out notable obstacles related to balancing funding and scheduling, nearly all participants saw ways online learning could help further their own learning goals. Most parents and students liked the idea of including online options alongside classroom schedules. One student liked the idea of taking extra classes, and even classes outside the normal school day. Administrators in particular saw the potential for stronger vocational internships, night classes, and more friendly scheduling options for students. All teachers were open to teaching online classes, though admittedly for most it was not their first choice. Two teachers in particular thought they'd actually prefer to teach up to three online classes (out of their normal six). All teachers admitted certain incentives would help make teaching online learning opportunities even more attractive (even if it might never be the first choice).

Research suggests many educators see similar potential for online learning (Heafner et al, 2015). Although there are plenty of evidenced issues the community found in their experiences with online learning that would need to be addressed, one must consider the context of implementation during the study. Given all the negative stressors—and how they often spread across components within a system (Ellsworth) and contexts of forced change (Ha, 2014; Waters and Cameron, 2007), it is likely that future online opportunities would both keep improving, but

also be implemented under less invasive conditions. Surveys suggested over half of the learning community wanted future online learning opportunities and based on interview experiences we might add that those perceptions might even be more favorable for schedules that included both online and classroom options.

Put simply, imagine if students could take the classes they wanted online, while also keeping the classes they wanted in person. Classes could operate within the traditional school day for students who preferred that structure, and certain classes could be available outside those hours given appropriate demand. Some students could opt for vocational internships that operated during normal working hours and fulfill their other academic requirements in online or night classes. As one administrator put it, online provides a lot of ways of moving beyond the “brick and mortar” approach.

All four administrators acknowledged the potential for online opportunities to help further learning related goals, and research suggests many school leaders believe online learning opportunities can help reduce class sizes, provide greater scheduling flexibility for students, and help students with both credit recovery and advanced learning opportunities (Heafner et al, 2015; Gemin and Pape, 2017). All four also admitted this is much easier said than done, and it would certainly be a challenge for learning communities to implement. That said, future implementations would likely go much smoother without the context of a pandemic forcing all students and teachers to fully transition to online learning over the course of two weeks. One might consider how much the district was able to improve over just two months while most cities were in lockdown. It’s fair to assume future implementations of online opportunities would benefit greatly without the pressure of a pandemic, and more directly without all interest groups being *forced* into them.

Balancing all of these factors necessitates a fully-fledged plan for change if one wants to avoid the stressors of second-order and unplanned change (Ellsworth, 2000; Ha, 2014; Waters and Cameron (2007). For many reasons, such a plan was not overly realistic during the pandemic. Ha's (2014) five step model for sustainable change would be a solid referencing point for future implementations. Satisfying the first step would involve creating a team to oversee change with members from the broader interest groups (students, parents, teachers, administrators, and broader educational leaders). Step two would require the team to identifying the learning community's most pressing needs akin to a cost-benefit analysis. The third step would need to create properly resourced structures to oversee actual implementation such as school and department leadership teams, family and student support groups, and teacher trainings. Each structure ideally would have a realistic and measurable short term goal to create a sense of progress during the change process. From there, steps four and five would largely be responsible for review and reinforcement of short and long-term goals from the change team and subsequent change structures.

A five-step plan, similar to Ha's (2014) would go a long way in providing proper buy-in and support for the various components of a school's system as discussed by Ellsworth (2000), while also satisfying the various responsibilities of leadership—notably culture, communication, input, and order—that are most difficult to address during second-order change (Waters and Cameron, 2007).

***SOL Tip 10: Prepare for What You Can't Know!***

Experiences from interviews detail a few specific concerns which may hint at more fundamental and unrecognized issues in online learning. All interest groups acknowledged instances of inequitable realities that serve as obstacles to learning in online environments. Many



families needed WIFI hotspots. Two parents had to upgrade their own WIFI. Multiple students and parents reorganized their living spaces to help eliminate distractions and facilitate online learning. Some students had to take care of their siblings. Some students had jobs. Students, parents, and teachers all brought up support systems that included peers and friends. One student participant utilized private mental health services, and administrators reported exponentially more social support requests. These potential stressors are both specific to their respective members and yet interrelated to the learning community working to address them (Ellsworth, 2000).

One participant, being one of few teachers of color in the district, brought up race related concerns. She felt teachers of color, especially in predominantly white school districts, are in greater danger of isolation and criticism in online environments. She recalled at least two instances over the course of the study where she felt unfairly targeted by parents due to her race and noted a number of lesson suggestions that were not realistic for teachers who were not white. Perceptions aside, she recommends that districts work more to bring in and collaborate with outside groups and diverse perspectives to help combat issues related to race and equity. Recent research reveals online environments often struggle to incorporate multicultural content and cater to diverse learning styles (Kebritichi et al, 2017).

One must also consider the more intensive needs of students who rely on academic and social support services. Multiple teachers referenced greater issues in online environments for students who speak a primary language other than English and students with learning disabilities. One special education teacher experienced numerous ways students on her caseload struggled with fewer social interactions and social cues. Even the success story of one student participant

with a learning disability showcases the need for intensive individual support. These concerns were further validated in broader survey responses by all interest groups.

There are so many different needs across different interest groups that deserve consideration as learning communities implement more online opportunities. Experiences from interviews suggest that students must feel comfortable to engage and participate in online learning, and fostering that comfort is likely harder in online environments than in the classroom. It's possible proper support from parents, teachers, and administrators relates to their comfort too. If any one piece of this puzzle is missing, learning communities can expect a decline in student engagement which in this learning community only compounded into more stress and anxiety for all groups involved (Ellsworth, 2000).

Suggestions to alleviate these potential issues in online environments range from orientations, focused training, and broader support networks for all interest groups—which are all also potential facets of support and reinforcement in step five of Ha's (2014) plan for sustainable change. Learning communities would be wise to build around natural structures their population might expect or be accustomed to in learning environments. Administrators and teachers need to commit to consistent and organized communication routines. Teachers need to prioritize strong teacher-student relationships, and parental support (and training) may be a more important element online than in the classroom for building successful relationships and learning goals with students. Teachers need to ensure students have intensive feedback and 1-1 support opportunities, and likely need to go out of their way to help students feel comfortable enough to engage. If the reported rise in student failures over the course of this study are any indication, at least some students (and parents, teachers, and administrators) could use all the help they can get.

That said, one must also consider the reality that over half of the learning community wanted online learning options even when school returned to normal. Teachers were most supportive (mean of 2.40) while parents were the least supportive (mean of 2.88). Although it's easier said than done, more online learning options could provide different interest groups with important flexibility to progress their individual learning goals. Potential benefits of online options (Heafner et al, 2015), could in turn free up resources in learning communities to help provide more intensive supports to students who need it.

**Table 5-1: What will go wrong and how to make it work**

<b>What Will Go Wrong in Online Learning...</b>	<b>And How to Make it Work!</b>
<b>Students and teachers won't feel comfortable in online environments.</b>	<p><b>Stay positive, have fun!</b></p> <p>School leaders must set appropriate expectations based on the severity of change. No matter the expectations, focus on an important positive: people grow more comfortable (and successful) in online environments overtime!</p> <p><b>Maintain appropriate structures!</b></p> <p>Implement environmental structures the school community is already familiar with. Class schedules, attendance expectations, and grading policies don't have to change—unless the community needs them to!</p> <p><b>Utilize socially-minded activities!</b></p> <p>Activities like discussions, chat-box games, and group projects can help build class cohesion and foster inviting classroom culture.</p>

	<p><b>Take a break?</b></p> <p>Consider if you can spare five to ten minutes of traditional instruction to focus on classroom relationships—key indicators for success in online environments.</p>
<p><b>Students and teachers will struggle to adjust to workloads in online environments.</b></p>	<p><b>Less is more!</b></p> <p>School leaders should help develop priority standards for every class that help simplify classroom goals as much as possible. Teachers might consider utilizing a backwards-design philosophy to ask what skills and knowledge to ALL students NEED to know when they are done with a class. Prioritize classroom activities that move students towards those learning targets; consider dropping any activities that do not.</p> <p><b>Collaborate!</b></p> <p>School leaders must set-aside a clear time for teachers to develop and share resources based on priority standards. Within that timeframe, ensure that teachers have as much flexibility as possible to utilize according to their own professional needs.</p> <p><b>Be Flexible!</b></p> <p>Provide students options in reaching learning targets appropriate to their environmental context. Consider flexible deadlines and optional differentiated mediums for assignments. Ensure that school and classroom policies are equitable to all families.</p>

<p><b>Many students will need extra classroom supports, especially students who already rely on academic or social services.</b></p>	<p><b>Be available!</b></p> <p>Ensure students have plenty of opportunities for support. Be available for questions and feedback during active class time AND potential work time.</p> <p><b>Reach out!</b></p> <p>Communicate to students when it is appropriate to get help in and outside class. Many students feel less comfortable online, so you have to go out of your way to offer support opportunities to students who you might expect need it.</p> <p><b>Be prepared!</b></p> <p>Students with learning disabilities, students who are still learning English, and even students with specific learning styles are all likely to face additional challenges in online environments. School leaders must ensure teachers are preprepared to provide students with appropriate supports.</p>
<p><b>Some students will struggle to engage and participate resulting in lower student performance.</b></p>	<p><b>Relationships!</b></p> <p>Even online, relationships are still the most significant indicator for success in a classroom. Both teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships are important to cultivate in an online classroom.</p> <p><b>Bridges go two-ways!</b></p> <p>Given many students don't feel comfortable in an online environment, it is imperative that teachers work to extend bridges of support however possible.</p> <p>Individual conferences, socially-minded activities, and</p>

	<p>quality feedback loops are all great ways of engaging WITH students.</p> <p><b>Include parents too!</b></p> <p>Parental involvement is arguably more important in an online environment than it is in the classroom. Parents and guardians have even more reasons to feel out-of-place in an online environment, and therefore school leaders and teachers must work to help them feel included. Consistent communication and feedback loops are key means of engaging WITH parents and guardians to help them understand how they can help.</p>
<p><b>Technology will fail and students and teachers will hate it.</b></p>	<p><b>Invest in appropriate infrastructure!</b></p> <p>Any online environment is only as reliable as it's technology. School leaders must ensure technology is properly and reliably provided. WIFI will drop, laptops will breakdown, resources will be blocked, and the community needs mechanisms to address expected issues.</p> <p><b>How much security is too much security?</b></p> <p>Technological security—notably VPNs—are divisive issues. More security means more disruptions of learning, which can be debilitating for students and teachers already working hard to adjust to new environments. Consider cutting or adjusting redundant security measures. Perhaps the VPN could just warn students of potentially inappropriate sites and notify parents and administrators? This would ensure that</p>

	<p>actual learning resources are never blocked getting in the way of student learning.</p>
<p><b>Families will complain of too much and too little communication.</b></p>	<p><b>Be clear and consistent!</b></p> <p>Although no one quite agrees on ideal qualities (and quantities) of communication, most members want some level of clarity and consistency. Less is more applies for most general emails. School leaders should organize communication in ways that allow families to easily find answers to their most common questions, without overbearing their email inboxes. Reference links and informational sites are common suggestions.</p> <p><b>Cater to both students and parents!</b></p> <p>Most students requested some type of weekly schedule that outlines important activities and assignments.</p> <p>Most parents want some type of bi-weekly or monthly update with the most important assignments and upcoming due dates. It is important to offer feedback loops to both parties to accommodate more specific needs.</p>
<p><b>Online implementation will feel like a hopeless chaotic mess.</b></p>	<p><b>What's the plan?</b></p> <p>Change is complicated and change in educational settings is no exception. Before school leaders can even consider HOW they will change, they must commit to WHAT they will change based on their ideal goals and available resources.</p> <p><b>Who's leading the team(s)?</b></p>

A proper implementation team should include a variety of perspectives from major groups in the learning community. The team should involve members from these major groups to properly ascertain what each group needs throughout the change process. It's likely that multiple teams will be needed for more severe implementations. These should be organized by membership or specific function to help spur related buy-in from broader community members.

**Consider key issues and solutions!**

Once a team is in place, they can start diagnosing potential problems for implementation and potential solutions. The most important problems and solutions should be organized based around realistic funding and available resources.

**Set some (measurable) goals!**

Short and long-term goals are both important to set to help guide the implementation process. These goals should be both measurable and realistically obtainable. A few short-term goals should be emphasized to help the team(s) feel productive.

**Review, Reflect, and Reinforce!**

As implementation begins, it is imperative that the implementation teams take time to review progress towards goals and reflect on how facets of the implementation can be adjusted to better meet the needs to the community. It is important to consider



	<p>how the needs of members could change throughout implementation and thus new goals might need to be developed. Lastly, leaders must ensure that the process is appropriately funded and reinforced throughout the whole implementation, or risk potential stalls and resistance.</p>
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## Chapter 6 - Conclusion and Implications

Unlike many disaster scenarios, there was no guidebook for school communities to consult as they wrestled with the ensuing fallout of a global pandemic. Entire countries, much less school buildings, were forced to close down to mitigate the increasing spread of COVID-19 leaving many communities scrambling for survival.

The nature of the coronavirus outbreak posed an interesting reality for learning communities, as all people had to make due with dramatically differing and stressful circumstances. Ignoring the primary function of learning, everything surrounding the traditional school community including childcare, sports, clubs, and even school meals was thrown into a state of disarray. Although the implications of the pandemic should not be trivialized, the emergency offers educational policy makers a rare opportunity to not only evaluate current attitudes towards online learning, but also discuss the realities and impacts of large-scale educational transitions from traditional classrooms to fully online environments—particularly in K-12 environments. By exploring the perceptions within one high school learning community as they transitioned into online environments, educational leaders and policy makers can better shape and inform future development and implementation of online learning opportunities.

### **Problem**

Online education is quickly becoming a necessary tool for helping more diverse learning communities reach their particular educational goals. Although research has suggested many notable benefits and advantages in online environments, important issues still need to be identified and addressed for students, parents, teachers, and administrators. One potential fear illuminated by this study is that those issues, further exacerbated by the environmental contexts of the pandemic, might push broader learning communities to ignore the positive potential of

online learning opportunities in favor of the traditional opportunities they are comfortable with. By evaluating the perceptions of one learning community's implementation of online learning, educational stakeholders and policy makers can better ascertain whether providing online opportunities might actually help reassert their particular learning goals as communities reflect and rebuild from the realities of the pandemic.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of online learning within a high school learning community in response to their district's implementation of online learning beginning around the fourth quarter of the 2019-2020 school year following the outbreak of the COV-19 virus to help better inform and shape the future development and implementation of online learning opportunities. This research is founded on two central questions:

1. How did the forced transition to online environments due to the coronavirus outbreak impact perceptions of online learning within learning communities?
2. What themes emerge within the experiences and perceptions of the learning community that could help guide the future development and implementation of online learning opportunities?

This research is designed around a collective case study framework using multiple methods to examine each case. The selected cases include students, parents, teachers, and administrators organized within one prominent midwestern suburban high school learning community who were active for the 2019-2020 school year. Each case was examined over the course of the fourth quarter of the 2019-20 school year to the end of first semester of the 2020-21 school year using two different methods of data collection for cross-referencing potential themes:

phased semi-structured interviews and surveys sent to students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Data from these methods was compared and contrasted between cases and emergent themes were then interpreted alongside evidenced trends in recent research in online learning and concepts related to forced second-order and unplanned change spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The phased semi-structured interviews aim to highlight personal experiences related to the implementation of online learning and explore how perceptions of online learning change over time. Four to seven participants were selected within each case and interviewed three times between the start of the fourth quarter of the 2019-20 school year into the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. Experiences detailed in interviews were organized into an overarching narrative representing the learning community as whole, followed by specific stories selected that showcase significant findings important for educational leaders to consider when considering implementing online learning opportunities.

School wide surveys were sent out to potential candidates within each case towards the end of the first semester of the 2020-21 school year. The timing of these surveys served as an opportunity for participants to reflect on the district's implementation process. All four cases responded to the same survey to allow for more shared interpretations of the data that might relate to the learning community as a whole. Related questions for each include how comfortable groups felt about online learning before the forced transition, how groups felt supported throughout the implementation process, issues and best practices groups experienced with online environments, how groups perceived the relative strengths and weaknesses of online environments compared to the traditional classroom, and how the implementation process impacted their desire for future online learning opportunities. Data from these surveys were

presented highlighting average responses from the overall learning community and each individual interest group. Selected open-responses from each interest group were also included to highlight both extreme and neutral perspectives, and organized from most positive to most negative.

Coding was inspired by recent research in online learning, and followed careful consideration of data from interviews and surveys. Coding between methods followed the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser and Strauss, 1968): starting with individual themes, building to shared themes, incorporating trends recent research, before finally constructing interpretations. Together, these two methods provide ample means of cross-referencing each case that can then be analyzed and interpreted to create potential shared perceptions of online learning and how it was implemented in the district during the COV-19 outbreak.

The methodology utilized in this research is designed with consideration of two theoretical perspectives: interpretivism and change theory. From an interpretivist's lense, the methodology is designed to compare and contrast multiple perspectives within and outside the selected cases to establish not only how different interest groups (students, parents, teachers, and administrators) perceived their forced transition into online environments, but also the learning community as a whole.

With respect to change theory, this research utilized the concepts of second-order and unplanned change which is associated with greater staff stress and division, disjointed communication, unclear goals and methods, lack of control over professional responsibilities, and related fear and insecurity (Ha, 2014; Waters and Cameron, 2007). That said, schools did not necessarily enact this change willingly, and to that effect the notion of "forced change" is considered alongside it to highlight the extreme nature presented by the coronavirus outbreak,

and it allows for a fairer evaluation and discussion of the acting interest groups within the learning community. These stressors innately disrupt the effectiveness of change implementations which subsequently result in less productivity and progress towards overall educational goals, and therefore this research expected more negative perceptions than might otherwise exist under more normalized circumstances (Ellsworth, 2000).

## **Results**

Experiences from interviews and perceptions from surveys reveal a number of shared feelings regarding online learning. Shared findings across perspectives include: some individuals thrived in online environments, while many did not. All interest groups reported higher workloads related to learning responsibilities. All interest groups reported higher rates of stress and anxiety in online environments. All interest groups acknowledge certain advantages in online environments related to flexibility and more relaxed social pressure. All interest groups acknowledge certain disadvantages in online learning related to increased distractions and lacking social interactions. All interest groups agreed that factors including student motivation and parental support were likely indicators of success in online environments, while factors related to equity and readiness were likely indicators of struggles. The community largely agreed that students who rely on extra support services are more likely to struggle in online environments. All interest groups believed that perceptions of online learning improved over time, though interviews indicate perceptions did not necessarily improve in respect to certain issues experienced in online learning between the middle and end of first semester. Of note, around 10% more students reportedly failed more than one class compared to the first semester of the last school year.

Although there were strong feelings on all sides of most issues, open responses from teachers were particularly more positive than other interest groups in respect to the potential for online learning and the desire for more online learning opportunities. Broader surveys suggested that teachers were the most supportive of online opportunities continuing to be offered when school returned back to normal (mean of 2.40). Students were the next most supportive group (mean of 2.59), while parents were closer to neutral (2.88). This suggests parents face more stress related to shouldering more responsibilities for their children in online environments.

That said, the reality remains, many students and teachers clearly view online learning as a viable alternative to the classroom. Some students and teachers even prefer it. This only adds to broader survey responses, which showed a majority of the learning community wants online options even when school returns to normal.

## **Discussion**

Results were organized and discussed alongside prior research and considerations of change theory in the spirit of a survival guide--a not-so-subtle nod to how many participants felt trying to keep themselves afloat during their rollercoaster ride of learning online through the pandemic. This survival guide is inherently necessary given the findings from interviews and surveys which reveal over half of the community wants more online opportunities even when school returns back to normal. The 10 tips for surviving online learning are designed to be utilized as emerging best practices for learning communities in future implementations of online learning opportunities.

Survival tips for future implementations include fostering a positive and encouraging culture to combat expected hardships and issues members will face in online environments, implementing “fun” lessons that help spur lacking social engagement and participation in online

environments, prioritizing content around essential standards to help combat against higher workloads and busy work, emphasizing support, individual feedback, and relationships in online environments, providing appropriate tech-related support and infrastructure that will not inhibit or discourage learning, providing clear and consistent communication to students and parents that include regular updates and class schedules, designing appropriate structures in online environments the learning community can relate to that help members further their learning goals, and being mindful of students and families who will likely need more support in online environments in respect to particular needs and potential inequitable situations.

## **Implications**

The results and related interpretations from this study are increasingly relevant given the evident demand from the community for future online learning opportunities. The context of forced change as a result of the pandemic did little to help inspire positive perceptions, and yet even still, the community found plenty of aspects of online learning to appreciate.

To be fair, findings from this study do not invalidate the numerous evidenced issues in online learning, but they do suggest two important reasons for excitement over future online opportunities: 1) Perceptions of online learning improved overtime, and all interest groups found ways they grew more comfortable with online environments over the course of implementation. 2) Even with issues, many participants liked online learning, some even preferred it, and the community demands more online opportunities.

One potential fear illuminated in this study is that learning communities might ignore the promising potential of online environments due to the related stressors experienced throughout an intense and challenging implementation. This fear has plenty of justifications. All interest groups agree that online learning is not for everyone, and it's likely not a realistic learning option



for many, if not most students, as it's currently available. Success in online environments was still at least perceived as related to factors of readiness, motivation, and support that cannot be assumed as a reality for many families. One must also consider the school of focus already had a 1-1 laptop initiative in place for many years which innately afforded all interest groups with more preparation for broader online implementations than a community could otherwise assume. The fact of 10% more students failing more than one class is also a hard pill to swallow, and only adds pressure that will likely burden the community for at least the next school year (and maybe beyond).

That said, against the many layers of adversity, so many in the community still persevered in online learning. It's challenging to spin an additional 10% of students failing more than one class into a positive but results from this study provide room for optimism. Given all of the negative factors happening alongside the study, one might be happy with only an additional 10% of students failing more than one class. In fact, one administrator put the goalposts there himself. Toward the end of the semester, he would have "loved" for only 20% of students to be failing more than one class, and the results only fell a hair short (22.5%). For reference, 11.1% of students failed more than one class the first semester of 2019.

If we accept online learning wasn't a realistic option for many students, that 10% starts to look a lot better, even if it still *feels* awful. Would outcomes improve if implementation of online opportunities were not coinciding with a pandemic? What if members were not *forced* into it?

In many ways, the many notable positive perceptions shine a lot brighter when one truly considers the gravity of the nightmare the learning community had to overcome. Other educational leaders and stakeholders should be mindful of what lessons they can appropriately apply to their own communities. This study reveals plenty of foundations to help build new

online learning programs and even more ways to help improve existing online learning programs.

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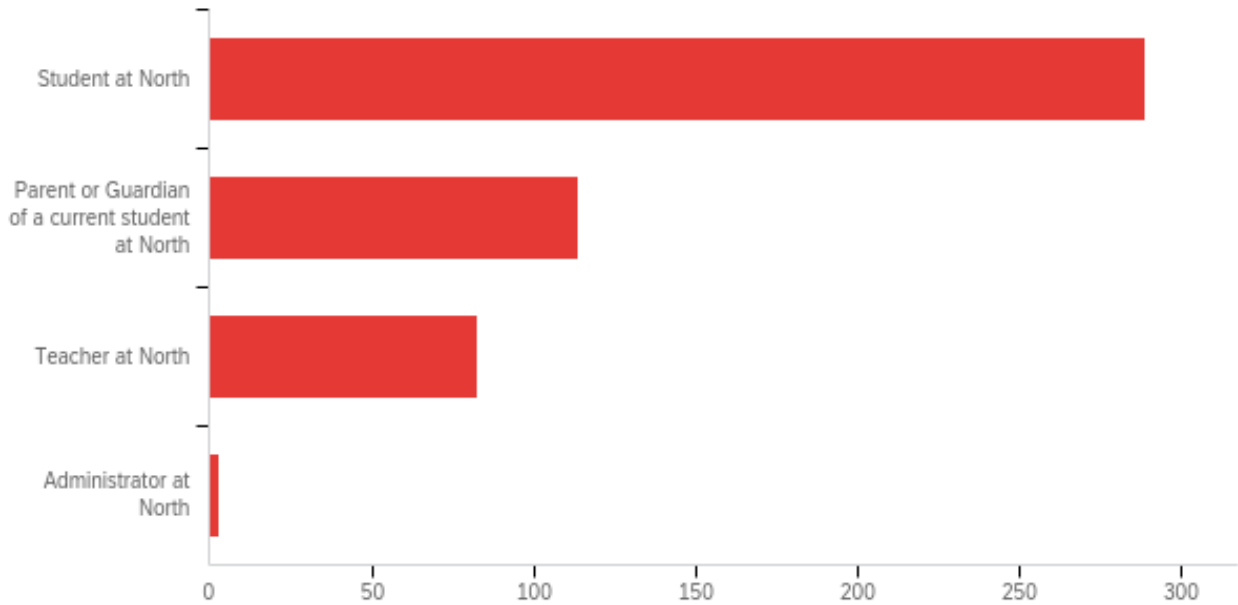
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## Appendix A - Survey Data: Fixed Responses

Q8 - Identify your role at [School] for the 2020-2021 School Year (you may choose more than one).



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Student	59.10%	289
2	Parent or Guardian	23.31%	114
3	Teacher	16.97%	83
4	Administrator	0.61%	3
	Total	100%	489



**Q7 - I would describe myself as (you may choose more than one):**

#	Answer	%	Count
1	White	68.11%	361
2	Black or African American	7.36%	39
3	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	16.60%	88
4	Asian	2.64%	14
5	American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.94%	5
6	Middle Eastern or Northern African	0.00%	0
7	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.19%	1
8	Other	1.70%	9
9	Prefer not to answer	2.45%	13
	Total	100%	530

#	Question	Student at North		Parent or Guardian of a current student at North		Teacher at North		Administrator at North	
1	White	60.12%	193	80.51%	95	82.76%	72	66.67%	2
2	Black or African American	9.97%	32	2.54%	3	3.45%	3	0.00%	0
3	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	22.43%	72	9.32%	11	3.45%	3	33.33%	1
4	Asian	3.12%	10	1.69%	2	2.30%	2	0.00%	0
5	American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.62%	2	0.85%	1	2.30%	2	0.00%	0
6	Middle Eastern or Northern African	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0
7	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.31%	1	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0
8	Other	1.87%	6	0.00%	0	3.45%	3	0.00%	0
9	Prefer not to answer	1.56%	5	5.08%	6	2.30%	2	0.00%	0
	Total	Total	321	Total	118	Total	87	Total	3

**Q2 - For the following statements, please consider how you feel about online learning as it was offered at [school] for the first semester of the 2020-21 school year.**

1. I feel better today about online/remote learning at North than I did during the 4th quarter of the 2019-2020 school year.

#	Question	Student at North		Parent or Guardian of a current student at North		Teacher at North		Administrator at North	
1	Strongly Agree	36.11%	104	40.71%	46	63.86%	53	33.33%	1
2	Somewhat Agree	34.72%	100	36.28%	41	30.12%	25	66.67%	2
3	Neither Agree nor Disagree	12.50%	36	7.96%	9	2.41%	2	0.00%	0
4	Somewhat Disagree	9.03%	26	5.31%	6	2.41%	2	0.00%	0
5	Strongly Disagree	7.64%	22	9.73%	11	1.20%	1	0.00%	0
	Total	Total	288	Total	113	Total	83	Total	3

2. At least some students at North learn better in an online/remote setting than in a traditional classroom.

#	Question	Student at North		Parent or Guardian of a current student at North		Teacher at North		Administrator at North	
1	Strongly Agree	25.78%	74	28.07%	32	33.73%	28	0.00%	0
2	Somewhat Agree	37.63%	108	26.32%	30	42.17%	35	66.67%	2
3	Neither Agree nor Disagree	19.86%	57	24.56%	28	13.25%	11	33.33%	1
4	Somewhat Disagree	11.50%	33	10.53%	12	7.23%	6	0.00%	0
5	Strongly Disagree	5.23%	15	10.53%	12	3.61%	3	0.00%	0
	Total	Total	287	Total	114	Total	83	Total	3

3. At least some classes offered at North work better in an online/remote setting than in a traditional classroom.

#	Question	Student at North		Parent or Guardian of a current student at North		Teacher at North		Administrator at North	
1	Strongly Agree	16.72%	48	10.53%	12	13.41%	11	0.00%	0
2	Somewhat Agree	31.71%	91	22.81%	26	24.39%	20	33.33%	1
3	Neither Agree nor Disagree	21.60%	62	24.56%	28	41.46%	34	33.33%	1
4	Somewhat Disagree	16.03%	46	21.93%	25	14.63%	12	33.33%	1
5	Strongly Disagree	13.94%	40	20.18%	23	6.10%	5	0.00%	0
	Total	Total	287	Total	114	Total	82	Total	3

4. All classes at North should be organized around the same Learning Management Software (For example, all classes used Canvas this year).

#	Question	Student at North		Parent or Guardian of a current student at North		Teacher at North		Administrator at North	
1	Strongly Agree	50.87%	146	55.75%	63	56.63%	47	100.00%	3
2	Somewhat Agree	29.97%	86	26.55%	30	28.92%	24	0.00%	0
3	Neither Agree nor Disagree	12.89%	37	13.27%	15	6.02%	5	0.00%	0
4	Somewhat Disagree	3.83%	11	3.54%	4	7.23%	6	0.00%	0
5	Strongly Disagree	2.44%	7	0.88%	1	1.20%	1	0.00%	0
	Total	Total	287	Total	113	Total	83	Total	3

5. Online/remote classes should still follow the traditional in-person meeting schedule (just like they did this current year).

#	Question	Student at North		Parent or Guardian of a current student at North		Teacher at North		Administrator at North	
1	Strongly Agree	23.69%	68	43.86%	50	26.51%	22	0.00%	0
2	Somewhat Agree	29.27%	84	25.44%	29	30.12%	25	66.67%	2
3	Neither Agree nor Disagree	31.01%	89	12.28%	14	15.66%	13	0.00%	0
4	Somewhat Disagree	10.80%	31	13.16%	15	19.28%	16	33.33%	1
5	Strongly Disagree	5.23%	15	5.26%	6	8.43%	7	0.00%	0
	Total	Total	287	Total	114	Total	83	Total	3

6. Daily attendance should be required of students in online/remote classes the same as it is for in-person classes.

#	Question	Student at North		Parent or Guardian of a current student at North		Teacher at North		Administrator at North	
1	Strongly Agree	29.72%	85	69.91%	79	50.60%	42	0.00%	0
2	Somewhat Agree	33.57%	96	15.04%	17	28.92%	24	100.00%	3
3	Neither Agree nor Disagree	20.98%	60	2.65%	3	8.43%	7	0.00%	0
4	Somewhat Disagree	8.39%	24	7.96%	9	10.84%	9	0.00%	0
5	Strongly Disagree	7.34%	21	4.42%	5	1.20%	1	0.00%	0
	Total	Total	286	Total	113	Total	83	Total	3

7. Students who rely on academic support services can expect to do as well in online/remote settings as they would in a traditional classroom. (Academic support services include tutoring and classwork accommodations extended to students with learning disabilities or students who do not speak English as a primary language).

#	Question	Student at North		Parent or Guardian of a current student at North		Teacher at North		Administrator at North	
1	Strongly Agree	11.50%	33	6.19%	7	3.61%	3	0.00%	0
2	Somewhat Agree	17.42%	50	8.85%	10	13.25%	11	0.00%	0
3	Neither Agree nor Disagree	28.57%	82	17.70%	20	14.46%	12	33.33%	1
4	Somewhat Disagree	26.13%	75	31.86%	36	33.73%	28	66.67%	2
5	Strongly Disagree	16.38%	47	35.40%	40	34.94%	29	0.00%	0
	Total	Total	287	Total	113	Total	83	Total	3

8. Students who rely on social support services can expect to do as well in online/remote settings as they would in a traditional classroom. (Social support services include free and reduced lunch and school counseling programs for students who qualify based on socioeconomic status or evidenced need).

#	Question	Student at North		Parent or Guardian of a current student at North		Teacher at North		Administrator at North	
1	Strongly Agree	9.06%	26	7.02%	8	2.41%	2	0.00%	0
2	Somewhat Agree	16.03%	46	7.02%	8	13.25%	11	0.00%	0
3	Neither Agree nor Disagree	32.06%	92	14.91%	17	12.05%	10	66.67%	2
4	Somewhat Disagree	27.18%	78	28.95%	33	43.37%	36	33.33%	1
5	Strongly Disagree	15.68%	45	42.11%	48	28.92%	24	0.00%	0
	Total	Total	287	Total	114	Total	83	Total	3

9. I want online/remote class options offered to students at North even when school returns back to normal.

#	Question	Student at North		Parent or Guardian of a current student at North		Teacher at North		Administrator at North	
1	Strongly Agree	26.13%	75	23.01%	26	34.94%	29	0.00%	0
2	Somewhat Agree	23.69%	68	23.89%	27	25.30%	21	33.33%	1
3	Neither Agree nor Disagree	26.83%	77	16.81%	19	15.66%	13	33.33%	1
4	Somewhat Disagree	11.50%	33	15.04%	17	13.25%	11	33.33%	1
5	Strongly Disagree	11.85%	34	21.24%	24	10.84%	9	0.00%	0
	Total	Total	287	Total	113	Total	83	Total	3

10. I want hybrid class options offered to students at North even when school returns back to normal.

#	Question	Student at North		Parent or Guardian of a current student at North		Teacher at North		Administrator at North	
1	Strongly Agree	29.27%	84	11.40%	13	7.23%	6	33.33%	1
2	Somewhat Agree	26.13%	75	25.44%	29	19.28%	16	0.00%	0
3	Neither Agree nor Disagree	22.65%	65	19.30%	22	10.84%	9	0.00%	0
4	Somewhat Disagree	11.15%	32	17.54%	20	18.07%	15	33.33%	1
5	Strongly Disagree	10.80%	31	26.32%	30	44.58%	37	33.33%	1
	Total	Total	287	Total	114	Total	83	Total	3

Question	Strongly Agree		Somewhat Agree		Neither Agree or Disagree		Somewhat Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total
1. I feel better today about online/remote learning at North than I did during the 4th quarter of the 2019-2020 school year.	42.01%	205	34.43%	168	9.63%	47	6.97%	34	6.97%	34	488
2. At least some students at North learn better in an online/remote setting than in a traditional classroom.	27.46%	134	35.86%	175	19.88%	97	10.66%	52	6.15%	30	488
3. At least some classes offered at North work better in an online/remote setting than in a traditional classroom.	14.58%	71	28.34%	138	26.08%	127	17.25%	84	13.76%	67	487
4. All classes at North should be organized around the same Learning Management Software (For example, all classes used Canvas this year).	53.39%	260	28.54%	139	11.91%	58	4.31%	21	1.85%	9	487
5. Online/remote classes should still follow the traditional in-person meeting schedule (just like they did this current year).	28.89%	141	28.69%	140	23.77%	116	12.91%	63	5.74%	28	488
6. Daily attendance should be required of students in online/remote classes the same as it is for in-person classes.	42.39%	206	29.01%	141	14.61%	71	8.44%	41	5.56%	27	486

7. Students who rely on academic support services can expect to do as well in online/remote settings as they would in a traditional classroom. (Academic support services include tutoring and classwork accommodations extended to students with learning disabilities or students who do not speak English as a primary language).	8.83%	43	14.78%	72	23.82%	116	28.75%	140	23.82%	116	487
8. Students who rely on social support services can expect to do as well in online/remote settings as they would in a traditional classroom. (Social support services include free and reduced lunch and school counseling programs for students who qualify based on socioeconomic status or evidenced need).	7.38%	36	13.52%	66	24.80%	121	30.33%	148	23.98%	117	488
9. I want online/remote class options offered to students at North even when school returns back to normal.	26.69%	130	23.82%	116	22.79%	111	12.73%	62	13.96%	68	487
10. I want hybrid class options offered to students at North even when school returns back to normal.	21.31%	104	24.39%	119	20.08%	98	13.73%	67	20.49%	100	488

Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1. I feel better today about online/remote learning at North than I did during the 4th quarter of the 2019-2020 school year.	1.00	5.00	2.02	1.19	1.42	488
2. At least some students at North learn better in an online/remote setting than in a traditional classroom.	1.00	5.00	2.32	1.16	1.35	488
3. At least some classes offered at North work better in an online/remote setting than in a traditional classroom.	1.00	5.00	2.87	1.25	1.57	487
4. All classes at North should be organized around the same Learning Management Software (For example, all classes used Canvas this year).	1.00	5.00	1.73	0.96	0.92	487
5. Online/remote classes should still follow the traditional in-person meeting schedule (just like they did this current year).	1.00	5.00	2.38	1.19	1.42	488
6. Daily attendance should be required of students in online/remote classes the same as it is for in-person classes.	1.00	5.00	2.06	1.18	1.40	486
7. Students who rely on academic support services can expect to do as well in online/remote settings as they would in a traditional classroom. (Academic support services include tutoring and classwork accommodations extended to students with learning disabilities or students who do not speak English as a primary language).	1.00	5.00	3.44	1.24	1.55	487
8. Students who rely on social support services can expect to do as well in online/remote settings as they would in a traditional classroom. (Social support services include free and reduced lunch and school counseling programs for students who qualify based on socioeconomic status or evidenced need).	1.00	5.00	3.50	1.20	1.44	488
9. I want online/remote class options offered to students at North even when school returns back to normal.	1.00	5.00	2.63	1.36	1.86	487
10. I want hybrid class options offered to students at North even when school returns back to normal.	1.00	5.00	2.88	1.43	2.04	488



## Appendix B - Survey Data: Open Responses

Q6 - Feel free to tell us anything else about your feelings for online learning at [School]!

Student at [School]

Feel free to tell us anything else about your feelings for online learning at [school]!

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Its the best school ever!!!

---

I didn't really like it

---

I only A's and B's in person now I'm failing 4 classes. I think that speaks for itself..

---

It was for sure harder online/remote than in person learning.

---

I didn't really understand the question but answered to the best of my knowledge.

---

I like online school but sometime it's very hard to gain motivation from online school.

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I think that teachers should keep their webex sessions open during the days we aren't required to attend them and on that not I think they should take attendance on those days through webex.

---

I feel as though a big fuss is made over online schooling through both teachers and students. Some love it because it gives them more time, while others hate it because they can't see face-to-face. Overall, options for going into school or staying home and doing it online I would deem more beneficial from a student's perspective.

---

i like the option to come in for only certain classes, i think it keeps us engaged if we are still able to go down to work with a teacher one day. especially in art classes

---

From personal experience I wouldn't recommend an all remote learning schedule, but rather remote classes spread out

---

I like online, hybrid, and fully in person, so I'm fine with whatever.

---

I definitely prefer to be in person. It is easier for me to do my work and know what I need to do.

---

I feel like some people can't learn online. Being in a work environment helps initiate motivation to do work.

---

i like online learning its a lot easier to go to class

---

i also feel we should be able to change a class thats not required if it is to hard for the student

---

I do like online learning but I don't think after this COVID situation there should still be classes online. The only reason we have classes online is to adjust to this situation.

---

North is the best school with great teachers

---

i love it because it gives me more freedom to learn on my own and take my time with things.

---

Thanks for all the hard work during this difficult and challenging year 😊

---

I hate it

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I believe going back to hybrid learning will turn out the same way it did last time: cases shooting to the sky. I think COVID-19 needs to be taken more seriously.

---

It personally works great for me but I understand I'm an outlier in this situation.



It was very rushed and teachers need to give us a break. They're still trying to act like this is normal school and that we have the time to be doing 8 assignments a day. For example I don't have time to get stuff done when I have to get a job to help with income for our family, my priorities are not school and teachers do not understand that. I want an education but I also want a roof over my head so if teachers could stop assuming that remote should be easier for us that would be highly appreciated :)

I feel like there are too many assignments happening on online school and it stresses me out

la dee da dee da

I really enjoyed online learning for my senior year. It got challenging at times but who doesn't love a good challenge every now and then. If I wasn't graduating this year, I'd love to do remote learning again, just under better circumstances. You're an awesome teacher Mr. Simmons.

Ofc I miss the school environment but I also really like online learning!

applying the non linear form of learning that is online learning to the linear schedule of normal school was an absolute mistake only done because people care more about things being normal then being effective or practical

hi

It's just hard to focus when other things are going on around you.

its harder to get and keep good grades while doing online because its still kinda new and stressful due to covid and you don't get as much help as in person and there are technical issues a lot to

It's been great for me so far. I have had better grades than I have ever had before.

It's been a pretty miserable experience, I don't think any school nation wide has really handled it well, but North's handling is truly abismal.

While There are certain benefits to a remote classroom setting there are clear disadvantages. The amount of content that is able to be covered is limited as well has the mental toll that both teachers and students are experiencing with a lack of social interaction. Everyone I observed or talked to has experienced some level of burn out with a remote learning platform.

In my opinion, I work a lot better when I am at school in-person.

The hybrid schedule works better for students taking regular or standard level classes. As an IB/AP student, it becomes a burden to only see your teachers once a week, knowing you have exams in the Spring that are still on schedule. I like the idea but I don't like the way it's implemented.

It has worked fairly well, but I think it would flow a lot more smoothly in an online model with a non-traditional school schedule and if online classes were more self-paced with a final deadline, similar to the Edgenuity classes.

I want to be in person as much as possible.

I like doing online learning a little bit more then in person.

I think different teaching styles work for different people, but personally, I find online learning very difficult due to so many distractions at home and that when students are assigned classwork and homework teachers don't realize it is all homework and it makes the workload feel much larger than they think.

Online school is nice but its not as good as in-person.

N/A

Remote was good.

It's significantly more stressful

n/a

Online school, personally, has been with one of the most challenging things for me this school year. Many kids with learning disabilities physically cannot work when it comes to online school. But on the other hand, going back to school could put many people at risk, and worsen the spread of COVID-19. Choosing between online and in person school is a difficult decision right now for many people.

Im going to be honest. i strongly dislike online learning. i feel like it could be better. personally i have been doing ok but i know people that have been heavily struggling. near the end of this semester has been really tough for me. but it is what we need to do to keep people safe. i just feel that we could be presenting it better and helping students more.

i just don't like learning online, beacuse i don't feel like get the real help i need

The Daily attendance is weird Because if were doing it at home we should be able to make are own time to do that stuff

Since starting school online My grades have been amazing compared to years past. Online school is self paced and theres not the feeling of a rush to turn certain things in like I would feel while in person.

I feel that we shouldn't be required to have our cameras on as long as we get our work done inside of class

N/A

Being some one that is in band and in hands on classes such as automotive and woodshop its really sucked being online. The first couple weeks were not too bad since we were doing book work and safety test which was normal. The longer the year went on it got worse and worse, not being able to do what you signed up for sucked. Not being able to learn hands on skills that I will auctually use after high school and not just questions in a book that i got right. Its really disappointing. Not being able to play an auctual instrmt with a whole band/drumline and just playing through a computer only hearing yourself sucked.

I like the concept of online learning but I think the execution of it could have been better. As a student, I feel like we are receiving a large amount of work to do while being all online. As a senior, it has been stressful for me not being in person and not being able to talk to counselors and college advisors about my future.

I feel like, even after the pandemic is over, it would be a good idea to continue offering online options; I've heard that some students have been thriving under the online model. That being said, I don't personally care for it. I dislike not being able to speak to teachers in person, and it takes away my main social outlet.

my kids miss being in the school buildings

I can't learn anything being at home. I have to much freedom and tend to not pay attention or even show up at class. I'm not a smart student I get Bs and Cs mostly but still I really on being social to be happy and learn better.

The teachers gave us more work to do then what we are used to.

The schedule we have currently whether online or hybrid does not work for IB or AP students in that it reduces instruction time and does not allow teachers to teach everything required for the test in an efficient manner

I feel as though it's a lot easier to do school online.

## Parent or Guardian of a current student at [School]

Feel free to tell us anything else about your feelings for online learning at [School]!

Online learning has worked well to an extent with my student. However, I am an at home parent and can monitor my student.I do feel he benefits in an actual classroom because he can engage with the teacher better. I am not a huge fan of the hybrid model. It's leaves my student with two days of doing pretty much nothing.

It feels scattered, like much time is being wasted during the student's non-attendance days. I agree it's good for the students to be back to in person days, but as it stands now, it seema half the week that could be spent with them learning, they are offline to accomdate the in-person learning. I don't feel this model is the best solution.

My child has excelled online, as he does when in school, but I know not all kids are like him. He's also an only child who has seen his self employed parents work from home his entire life, so he understands structure and staying on task by taking initiative.

My child say being on line felt like he was teaching himself most of the time.

After all the fits & starts, we found that everything with online learning worked very well for my student. For the FIRST TIME, he made above a 4.0 and did not miss any days! I don't know what percentage of students improved their attendance and grades via online. Thank you!!

Thanks for all the hard work during this difficult and challenging year 😊

The kids need to get back in the classrooms. The students including the teachers need to be held accountable for being present and able to teach/learn. My student had a very difficult time learning from home and it was very disappointing to see not all teachers stayed online the whole class period. Even more disappointing when one teacher made the comment that grades were final a week before the end of the semester so she could spend time with her family.

I found my child to have quite a bit of homework in the evenings, more than when class was in person. I am unsure if this is due to her lack of paying attention or sleeping during class. When I explain that this is my point of view she denies that this is the case. I'm not concerned as long as she gets her work done, it's just an observation. If class is done remotely, it seems to make sense that it would start later in the day, with statistics showing teens to be night owls, and the need of teens to need more sleep.

This year is a complete fail. Online does not work at ALL for my child. I have never been more disappointed in anything in my entire life.

The teachers have done an amazing job during a difficult time this year and in a district where the teaching conditions are abhorrent. If I had one suggestion, it would be to keep striving for building-wide consistency with how Canvas is used. The system works best when all instructors post assignments and plans in Canvas in advance of deadlines and post grades /missed work on the day assessments are due. I've taught high school before and believe assessments and plans should be set up and posted in advance for each semester. (But alas, in order to do that you need more free uninterrupted planning time and less fluffy "PD" etc.) As a family with a junior, we have yet to be able to do any sort of "look ahead" or complete "week at a glance." One challenge we faced In trying to mentor our child in time management was that teachers often didn't post assignments until after they were already due, so we had no recourse or advance knowledge to decline requests for socializing/gaming or rearrange our family activities to prioritize school. Teachers would get a lot more back up/ parent support to offset the upfront time investment and maximize the time-saving potential of Canvas, which I don't think is being realized right now. Also, the late work policy needs to be reconsidered if we are to prepare students for college and reinforce consequences for actions. I would really like to see firmer policies and consequences for late work but only if the instructors can post assignments, criteria, and deadlines well in advance so that parents can scaffold students' time management. All that said, though, the workload should also be revisited. There is easily 2-3 times more work than the college equivalents of each course my child has taken along with double the "in seat" time than the college schedule. In short, I would love to see less busywork, firmer deadlines, and a semester schedule for each class, just like college. Thanks for seeking parent input and best of luck with your research!

I have students in two different local high schools. I have to say the teachers at North have done an amazing job and are doing so much better than the teachers at my other child's (private) high school. North teachers truly care and are really trying their best. I appreciate that greatly.

My daughter has been thriving in online classes. I was very surprised at how much she enjoys it.

My daughter has succeeded in remote but was an a student before. I was happy to be able to keep my daughter at school because of the pandemic. If it hadn't been offered, I would have gone to homeschooling.

I expect my child to be in class. Not to be done by lunch time with no instruction. It is hard enough as an adult in college to learn online let alone these kids. You should average the amounts that grades fluctuated from previous years to gage your success.

Some student are better in remote , people learn on other ways better, many can focus , others are been bullin

Mr. Simmons; this "virtual nonsense" was absolute "death" for my daughter, Eva. She made a "charge at the end" of the semester. I'm amazed how well she did.

I take on-line Master's courses so I totally appreciate the value of on-line learning. My student at North, however, did not do as well as he did when he attended in-person. But having the option for some students is beneficial.

My children did not adjust to an online environment and their grades suffered. While I understand the district is not fully in control, the inconsistencies from class to class including how attendance is taken and how the curriculum is presented was challenging.

I believe honors students should be allowed to do more self-pacing both in-person and especially when doing online courses! I do appreciate the flexibility that online course could offer, but they were not fashioned this way often making us captive in our own homes.

Online education can be very successful. Unfortunately, the classes I have audited during my students' day are very unimpressive. Teachers spend more time asking about their day than about teaching or helping students. A virtual classroom should work exactly as in person classroom. Students should be expected to dress, show themselves on camera, and everyone including teachers should remain online for the entire class time. Very disappointed in the way many of the classes were held.

All of my students are struggling with getting assignments finished, keeping track of missing assignments, and getting help from the teachers. The environment and structure is different at home. There are too many distractions especially for those of us who have small children at home.

It was a big distraction for my daughter. So many other things to take her attention.

My intelligent child is a sophomore at North, and finds a lot of wasted hours at school. He gets his stuff done quicker than most; however, he does miss his friends. My older one is special needs, and has graduated from North and is attending KState. He is a child that would benefit more from being in the classroom than not.

For my two students at North, one has been relatively successful, and the other has seen his grades drop drastically. This has been mostly due to his inability to manage his time well by himself but mostly because the one thing that was tethering him to school has been taken away. His love of and involvement in music programs has been sharply curtailed leading to a drop in all interest in school. All my kids do better in person.

Online learning had been the best thing for my son. Last year he barely passed most of his classes, this year he has all A's and a B. I'd keep him in the hybrid setting if I could.

My son has done well with online learning and has kept his grades up but it is hard and he certainly doesn't like it. I feel like he is overwhelmingly isolated. I'm not sure of the real reason the kids had to go back to remote only but lack of school staffing seemed like a poor excuse when so many people are suffering unemployment.

My student has not really adapted well to online learning, even with close parent supervision, and I know the same applies to many others in the 16 and under age group. Realistically, online options are probably more productive for HS junior/seniors and beyond. In general, kids with more maturity and self-control will do better on-line. Maturity and self-control are not solely age dependent, but they are to some degree in most kids.

Look at how many students are failing due to remote learning. My child was a great student that learns with the teacher in the classroom...not online watching youtube videos. Living in fear...of a virus...that the recovery rate is 99.6% has crippled an entire generation. OPEN THE SCHOOLS...or hire teachers that aren't afraid. Look at the psychological damage being done...

The effectiveness of any model really depends on each student. I know people whose kids learn well in each of the different models. Hybrid has been my least favorite of the models due to lack of accountability on the home learning days.

I would love to see online/remote learning experience lead to expanding opportunities for students to take classes offered at other SMSD high schools when appropriate (e.g. language classes, math classes, lit classes)

I think that this helps with most learning styles, and it helps resolve some of the social issues such as most forms of bullying.

My student was fine but is also a high achiever. Even though my student is fine, in terms of SEL, in person wins over every time. Physically walking to classes, moving through an in person school, meeting friends for lunch, etc. are all essential, critical components to student wellness. Even though our teens can survive remote, the experience was dull compared to in person.

First, a quick bit of background- just in case that influences your interpretation of the following input. My daughter suffers from depression, anxiety and panic attacks. Although hesitant, she went into online learning with an open mind. After a few weeks, she discovered that it wasn't so bad. She was so excited soon after when able to actually enter the school building and see her peers in person. The anxiety and depression got the best of her when everything changed again and online learning was implemented again. All of this was enough havoc for her that the doctor changed her psych meds. Now that she's adjusted to the med change, in person is coming back. Overall, in person is preferred and a positive learning experience. Online turned out to be something she could do,

didn't hate and was able to learn successfully. So for us, the issue causing grief is switching back and forth. We realize that COVID is running the show and no person can predict what is going to happen next as far as the # of cases, etc. Thank you for the opportunity to express our issues with the learning situation during these challenging times. I do hope that you will share your findings from this with school administration after you've compiled all the data. Have a wonderful day!

My student does not do well in an online only setting. It has been a struggle completing assignments. There are also classes he would like to take, automotive tech, that I cannot imagine can be offered online so he will most likely be placed in a class he has no desire to take. I will say, it was nice to be able to change our selection at semester. My son chose hybrid in the fall, but was able to change to online only d/t a cancer diagnosis in our household. A great option considering the diagnosis, but a horrible one for his academic success. Specifically to North, most of his teachers are great at replying to emails, but there are a couple that do not reply at all. I will also say we love canvas, but the importing into Skyward is a disaster. The grades never match (even on import day) and my son has missing assignments in Skyward that have grades in Canvas. He even has 1 class that skyward shows a letter grade of an F but a percentage of 100 - baffling to say the least. Since Skyward is the official grading his GPA is lower, his college applications/acceptances will be affected

I believe online learning is a great option for some students. I also feel for some students it is catastrophic both academically and socially. While online learning has its advantages, the need for in person learning outweighs any benefit.

I feel it was not beneficial

Kids and teachers need to be in school.

I have two students and north. One LOVES online learning, one does not. I think the model works well for certain personalities and certainly works better for some classes. I appreciate that my student who has opted to remain remote, can still come up to school for selective electives.

Online learning was a strain on my child's emotional and social health.

I feel the level of instruction and the effort by students is far less when remote. I do feel, however, for some students who struggle for various reasons, remote learning is a valuable option.

The hybrid options this year have been awful. My child is getting more instruction being full remote vs hybrid. The weeks he was in the hybrid model were awful when it comes to classroom participation and teacher availability. (Please know that I am not frustrated with the teachers at all. This has absolutely nothing to do with their teaching ability. I am only frustrated with how the district handled the situation.)

I have watched both of my students struggle this year, even my honor-roll student, with the online model. I have seen classes being disrupted by many students home environments, and the focus of the class has not been what it would be in-person. These issues don't even begin to factor in the missing social aspect of school, and the consequences of this missing component.

As with all learning, administrators at all levels should be heavily weighting input from their instructors to build successful learning models.

I do commend the district and SMN for working hard to have a much better plan for the current school year and online learning. I really feel that the usage of Canvas and being consistent in that technology across all classes has been a great thing for students and parents. I have not liked the hybrid model when it has been in place. The two days where they are at home for asynchronous learning (not Friday) are reminiscent of 4th Quarter 2020 where they complete a little bit of work first thing in the morning for each of their classes and then are done for the day. I understand that the teachers have to teach the Group A or B kids live on those other two days so I know it is not their fault but I am just expressing my opinion. I much prefer either fully remote or fully in-person to the hybrid model.

My student has done well remote only but prefer when it is safe to go back to normal to send them to North and get the full high school experience.

I think the current school is going well for my student how is online only. He is very social, and I was concerned about him losing the communication with peers and teachers, but my sons teachers have been great at making the classes interactive and encouraging participation. It's going to be great to be back to in-person school, but this remote learning model has been a great alternative.

I don't think online works for all students. Students have to be mature, individually motivated and disciplined to be successful with online learning. I also think trying to make online classes the same format as onsite classes does not work. I wish online classes were more self-paced and self-exploratory with some check-ins and online discussions. I think the students may be more engaged if they could explore topics that interest them and things weren't so regimented. I think we just need to be more creative with how the online classes are taught. I'm personally frustrated because online classes were the worst of everything for my child. Too much work, no engagement, too regimented, and no social interactions. We should leverage online classes or hybrid classes for alternate learning styles as a lot of children including mine don't do great with the traditional learning model. It's outdated and needs to change. Let's leverage technology to offer kids alternative learning models that might actually engage them..

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Has been better than I expected

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I think that the online learning has worked well for "academic" classes, i.e. the basic - English, Math, Science. But, the classes that require more hands-on, like a lot of electives, are somewhat challenging. Obviously, the type of student is the main indicator of how well the learning works out, and there's only so much you can do about that.

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FYI - my son is a senior and my last one in the SMSD. My biggest concern with online/remote classes next year would be for academic progress (or lack thereof), socialization, mental health and even physical health. Academic - sure you can learn online, but there's so much more to learning than staring at a screen and talking on a microphone. Socialization - students are still LEARNING socialization skills through high school. Some are still learning how to APPLY those skills as they enter their junior and senior year of high school. This includes interaction with adults outside of their family, which happens in school with several adults throughout the day besides their teachers. Mental health - students taking online/remote, whether by their choice or their parents' choice, would be more isolated from their peers. This would be detrimental for those who are shy, have no friends, or are depressed. Only in extreme cases (such as bullying) should kids be allowed to attend school online/remote. Physical abuse - schools have the ability to notify authorities if they see signs of physical abuse. I don't have personal experience with this, but do remember a former classmate from junior high who was being physically abused by her stepmother. The school somehow found out she was being abused, reported it to the police, and the girl was removed from the home. She lived directly across the street from me. None of us in the neighborhood knew what was going on in that house until we saw the police show up. That story has nothing to do with Shawnee Mission North, but it has everything to do with why I feel, among other reasons listed, that online/remote learning isn't in a student's best interest. I don't care for hybrid because my son is getting instruction one day per week instead of three days per week. He may have to sign in on those other two days but for the most part, there's no accountability for what he is doing or working on when the teacher is instructing the other group. I still think it is a bad idea but if online/remote is to be offered in the future, my thoughts are that it only be offered to those students who have attained a certain GPA, IB/AP students, teacher recommendation and for students that have demonstrated they are mature enough to be independent and organized. Good luck!

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I think if they do remote in the future that it needs to be modeled just like the school schedule...All 7 periods every day versus them being in a class for almost 1 1/2 hrs. Kids lose their attention span sitting at home looking at a computer for that long.

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My student has done very well with online learning. I know lots have struggled, and some kids don't have the support they need at home for a variety of reasons. We are fortunate that one parent was able to reorganize their work schedule to be home 4 1/2 days a week during school hours, so that helped to keep our child on track and provide support. For all the kids that liked/did well, post-pandemic he would love to have the option to have some or all online classes, or a hybrid option. Because of the pandemic we chose full remote, but love the option if it were possible post-pandemic.

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My kids have done very well online. I think it has helped that they are both fairly introverted and used to using their computer to connect with their friends. I also think it helps that they have always been "A" students and have not ever struggled with school. For them, I think it has been good, they have had to learn how to organize their time and keep on top of school work with very little input from parents. Hopefully this will improve their college readiness.

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In person means so much for social development at this age, if done safely.

I don't enjoy it. Wish it was back to normal. My child likes remote but not hybrid but seems to do better with hybrid because she is one that will stay after school to get help when she doesn't understand and with online she doesn't seem to ask for it. But she doesn't like hybrid because of the day she isn't going.

For most students, in-person is far better than online. Moving forward, I guess it would help to have an online option for when students can't attend in person (sick but well enough to do school ie).

In my opinion remote learning is a disaster. Even my daughter who is smart, well rounded and takes 3 honors classes has found it hard to adapt. Canvas is not user friendly. It's confusing and every one of her teachers uses it differently, which means she has to get used to 7 different ways of looking at things. It's ridiculous! Teachers will dump a whole bunch of assignments at once so there will be 25 assignment in her to do list and that's very overwhelming to look at. It's like looking at a very long tunnel with a very small light at the end that you have crawl through to get to. There's also the fact that kids are home by themselves with cell phones and access to social media. This combination is dangerous and just adds to the stress and anxiety of both parents and students.

This is a really difficult season and has been handled as well as can be expected.

Online classes allowed for more flexibility - if a student finished classwork early, they can shift to work on other class work rather than just sitting and doing nothing in a standard classroom setting. Completion of assignments this year has been much higher, and grades about the same as prior years. Some classes (band, choir, theater, etc). Hybrid models give less face time with teachers and is the worst of the 3 learning models in my opinion. Students who have need (lack of internet or parental support at home, need special services) should be given priority option for in person services. Students who have less need for direct supervision should be allowed to proceed at their own pace and free up personnel for those who are more in need.

Canvas has made such a difference. Thanks!

Online learning has been ruff not only on my children but also on myself. but i will say teachers have reached out and are making the affort on helping students . one thing that really gets me is the attendence i don;t know how many calls i have gotten regarding my kids not in a class and they have been in the class but the teacher missed them on count or what but i don't think that it should count against them.

I think schools should be in person as soon as possible. As the vaccine becomes available to all, the school should then open up. Most students are struggling with online learning, and it does not compare to being in person.

For those students who have struggled being bullied, teased, or have felt insecure at school because of others, remote learning is a positive option. My son's grades have increased as a result of not having to worry about being bothered or teased by others at school.

Online learning at prevent a fake pandemic is unnecessary and is hard to deal with for some students who are in AP classes

Teacher at [School]

Feel free to tell us anything else about your feelings for online learning at [school]!

I feel that online learning as been incredibly difficult for our beginning and intermediate ELL students. It is difficult for them to understand what is expected of them during class because of internet issues and WebEx cutting in and out so they aren't able to hear what the teacher and other students are saying. It is difficult for them to get help after school or during seminar if their assignments are locked or if there are not clear written instructions and an example in the assignment. All teachers using Canvas has been beneficial in helping them understand where to locate assignments. Unfortunately, overall I feel like our ELL students benefit much more from in person instruction because they can hear the entire lesson without the teacher cutting out and teacher can walk around and see when they don't understand something instead of assuming that they don't care about school or have left the WebEx on and walked away from the computer, which is what I have heard from some teachers when I have reached out to them for support. I think it is especially important for teachers to remember that our ELL students are learning English in addition to Canvas and the content and due to income inequities their internet is not as reliable as it may be for their wealthier peers.

As an introverted teacher, I have quite enjoyed the elements of remote learning. I feel that I am a better teaching in remote. I have a chance to work in a space that is comfortable to me, and I am able to connect with students

that are also comfortable being at home. It is easier for me to focus on my work in remote learning as I have less to worry about in terms of making sure that I pack a lunch and have all my things. Working from home allows me to be set up and ready to go as soon as I have my kids dropped off at daycare. I get more done and feel less negative or down about the work day. I am hopeful that the future of education does more to maintain elements of remote learning for the student that benefitted from it. It certainly hasn't been best for everyone, but so many introverted learners are thriving.

Hybrid is horrid! Worst of both worlds. Hardly any contact with students. They do not complete work on their off days and it is chaos for me to plan for so many modes at the same time.

There are a lot of benefits to the online learning system, but it does need to be adjusted. Students should have to have cameras on, you have no idea if they are in the room or have left the house. For student's not turning in or doing work then they should be returned to in-person classes. The student's who are doing well with this format should be allowed to continue with it.

I have developed some stronger connections with some of my students online than I would have through in person. I have had more time to ask them to tell me about themselves instead of rushing to get all the curriculum taught.

Students with ADD/ADHD did significantly better with online learning probably due in part to having WAY fewer distractions and interruptions.

I think that, for remote learning, the block schedule is too long a time for students. I think that if we re-imagine remote learning, we should do much shorter class times combined with office hours for teachers. This would allow students to get instruction, work on their own, and if they need assistance from the teacher they can get it or the teacher can assign them a time to meet once or twice a week to review how students are doing in the class. It would make it more individualized and allow for more one on one time with students.

One size rarely fits anyone, let alone everyone. It is time we give students the option of in-person, all remote, virtual, and hybrid course structures. BTW, virtual would not require daily attendance and could be self paced whereas all-remote would be more traditional structure but at home. For remote and virtual we do need to require participation (and possibly camera usage at times)..

I think SMSD should have an online/remote high school available to its students; think of it as a high school without walls. Students, for whatever reason, could take one or more of their classes remotely. There are MANY things that I have learned to do this year that I will continue to do even when students return to the classroom.

I feel that that I have had a bobbydazzler of a time with online learning.

I think it has great potential and many teachers as well as students have found it to be a quite splendid option.

Online learning requires more follow up with students---especially encouragement. Some do well with this model but I feel that is a minority of students. It is hard to judge their well being on-line, especially when you do not see faces---can't read expressions or body language. If on-line is offered by the district then students should have to have cameras on. Many log in and walk away. It takes more effort to poll and ask questions to make sure the students are still there. Hybrid is difficult in that you have to have a mask on---any students that are absent for their in person hour, you are asked to let them log in your webex--that makes it difficult for them to understand you through a mask. There is also not enough contact time with Hybrid. North has done an outstanding job given the circumstances. With that said school should be all students in person(when safe) or all remote. or all remote.

Studio classes like Ceramics do not work well in a remote setting, but I'm making it work and I've learned a lot about teaching this semester.

I don't feel there is enough data to fully support the positive or negative impact of online learning. I do believe second semester being frozen was a mistake. Too many kids, I feel, thought this year was going to be the same and therefore are not passing classes.

There should be engagement and behavior expectations for learners, as well as high quality professional development in order to have successful online learning experiences.

Very difficult to incorporate aspects into online learning that would make it as effective as in-person, for most students.

I think if you look at the number of families that chose remote -- and the number of families who took their kids out of the school district to use a remote school that was already in place (Lawrence Public Schools, etc.), you see there is a need. We don't have a huge amount of school "family" here -- partially due to socioeconomic



influences, so there is no need for kids to be here around peers. They prefer to work from home. The district would be smart if they would figure out how to do remote learning for those who prefer it.

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showing up with the video on must be a requirement for the active teaching part of the class, at least for International Languages

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I think hybrid classes are not as effective with students as remote. Many students in hybrid came to class; however, they didn't go online during the off day. I am also concerned about expectations being lowered for students. Students realized that they didn't have to do anything to pass at the end of last year and I believe this has carried on with several students this school year.

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Personally, I have gotten to learn more about my students with online learning than in person, which has built for a better relationship with many.

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I am incredibly impressed with how much and how flexible both the teachers and students (and administrators) are while we work to engage students meaningfully. There is quite a lot of good, authentic learning occurring.

### Administrator at [School]

Feel free to tell us anything else about your feelings for online learning at [school]!

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Covid has been a rough virus. I am lucky to be home with my student at times when learning online. Some parents do not have this option and has been tough on Students not having a supporter close to help them with their assignments. Some do good and some have just failed all year. Sad...

## Appendix C - Semi-Structured Interview Template

**Participant:**

**Experience:**

**One sentence feeling:**

**Tell me about online learning:**

Possible Themes: fixed online schedule? Regular attendance? Grades? LMS / Canvas?  
Participation/Relationships/Screens and chat? Social interactions? PLCs?  
Work/transfer? Assignments and workload? Student jobs? Hybrid?

Online in one word?

Have feelings gotten better or worse overtime?

HYRBID?

How has online been Good:

How has online been Bad:

What do you need to be successful from yourself?

From students?

From parents?

From teachers?

From district/admin?

Can online be as effective for some students?

Who is struggling?

Do you want to see district invest more in online opportunities?

Would you want to take them / teach them?

## Appendix D - Interview Coding Template

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Name:	Interview 1: (Date)													
Experience:	Interview 2: (Date)													
Characteristics:	Interview 3: (Date)													
	Interview 4: (Date)													