

EDUCATOR PERSPECTIVE:

How in-person school closures have impacted educators across Southern Nevada and their thoughts on what to consider for the future.

With the closing of school buildings in Nevada on March 13, 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, the education system transitioned to distance learning over a single weekend. Along with the rest of the nation, educators in Nevada charted new teaching and learning territory at an unprecedented scale. Teach Plus Nevada Teaching Policy Fellows and Opportunity 180 heard from Southern Nevada educators to understand how in-person school closures and the transition to distance learning impacted classroom practices. Additionally, educators shared what they believe should be prioritized by district and state policy makers as planning for the future of school unfolds.

Outlined below are the themes that emerged from the input of over 70 Southern Nevada educators through focus groups and written responses. In addition to identifying key themes this report also highlights direct quotes from educators. Express confidentiality was assured to participants, therefore selected quotes have been anonymized. **Note: the views expressed in this report are those of the participating educators, and do not necessarily reflect the views of Teach Plus or Opportunity 180.**

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Distance Learning Experiences

Initial Transition

“The pandemic has given my students the ‘out of sight, out of mind’ mentality as opposed to the ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder’ frame of mind.”

Based on what was shared, many educators felt unprepared for the abrupt transition from traditional in-person learning to distance learning. They attributed their lack of preparedness to three themes:

→ Communication

- ◆ Challenges reaching students via phone, email, and other remote tactics.
- ◆ Initial lack of clear expectations for connecting with students, including for what purpose and how often.
- ◆ Information about district policy updates related to distance learning and attendance that was shared with schools, educators, and families through multiple communication channels was disparate.

→ Expediency

- ◆ Participating educators from CCSD specifically cited the delay between schools closing and the rollout of distance learning guidance by the district. Some felt the one-week lag between in-person school and remote communication and distance learning expectations to school staff diminished their opportunity to establish clear expectations with their students from the start. For middle and high school students specifically, this set the tone to treat the time away from school buildings as a break, rather than a time for at-home learning.

→ Access to technology

- ◆ The deployment of devices to students, access to adequate internet, and fluency with online learning platforms for both kids and educators created considerable barriers to entry to effective distance learning. Difficulties reaching students were compounded by wide-spread access barriers.

Some educators did report a relatively smooth transition to distance learning with their students. For educators who felt the most prepared, two common themes emerged:

→ Prior incorporation of online-learning tools

- ◆ Educators who had already been incorporating some form of digital learning in the classroom prior to the pandemic felt they and their students were better prepared to navigate a shift to online learning exclusively.

→ Strong relationships

- ◆ Teachers who had established strong relationships with the students and their families had less difficulty getting and staying in contact with students throughout the closure.

Supporting Students' Social Emotional and Academic Needs

"[Social emotional support] has been the best part. Talking with students...maybe we go around the chat and they say one nice thing about someone else, or check in about their hopes and dreams -- what scares you about this time, what do you miss most, what do you look forward to? That has been my favorite part."

Acknowledging the potential hardships students are experiencing, many educators increased their focus on the social emotional needs of students. In some cases, teachers were also providing support to families to connect with food, internet, and other basic needs. Participating educators cited three main factors that influenced their ability to support their students academically:

- Professional Development & Training
 - ◆ Many teachers had little to no training on the complexities of transitioning lessons online or using online platforms.
- Relationships
 - ◆ Teachers who had established strong, trusting, relationships with their students and families felt more confident continuing to teach at a distance.
- Accountability
 - ◆ The perceived apathy of students once they learned that assignments were not "mandatory" diminished their interest in distance learning.
 - ◆ Lack of clear or inconsistent expectations set by principals for educators regarding engagement with students.

Returning to School

Lessons Learned

"I've had students unable to participate in my scheduled calls due to work conflicts, completely fair. But at the same time we need to maintain rigor. How do we encourage self-directed learning?"

Almost all participating educators agreed that distance learning cannot fully replace in-person school. They also agreed that intensive, evidence based professional development in distance learning is necessary. Absent formal training, educators were able to glean some lessons-learned from their experience, informing new tactics they will be integrating into their practice in the future:

- Incorporate more intentional methods of social emotional learning for students.
- Focus on relationship building with students **and** families, including establishing clear methods of communication at the outset of the school year.
- Prioritize training students and families to use online platforms such as Google Classroom.
- Integrate online learning into in-person school settings in order to ease transitions for future building closures.

Addressing Learning Loss

"I think it will take commitment, discipline, and taking the time lost in their education seriously."

When considering the loss of traditional in-person learning time, there was disagreement among participating educators regarding the severity of potential learning losses and the strategies by which to address those gaps.

Some shared that an extended school day with a high emphasis on data-driven instruction will provide the opportunity for students to build skills in order to master both missed content and new grade-level material. Multiple educators also suggested more intentional communication with fellow teachers across grades and schools to ensure "vertical alignment", or continuity, between curricula covered from one grade to the next.

Others contended that there is no feasible way to deliver instruction on what students missed while also covering the standards for their current grade. They argue the best course of action is to move forward with their grade level material as usual and fill holes in knowledge as needed.

Policy Implications

District Policy

“Do not sacrifice authentic learning experiences for quick technological fixes.”

Educators established that they believe the number one priority for district leadership, school boards, and committees planning for the reopening of schools should be the health and safety of the entire school community. They believe these decisions should be made proactively and in conjunction with teachers as well as the community at large. Additionally, participating educators suggested the following priority areas be explored or addressed, with kids at the center of each decision:

- Inequities in access to technology, including ensuring that each student has access to a device and adequate internet.
- Distance learning professional development tailored to each segment of the school community, including families. For teachers, provide a system for teacher-led professional development.
- Streamlined communications that reach teachers in a timely manner.
- Ensure accountability for student success exists for teachers, students, and families beyond attendance.

Statewide Policy

“I think a clear, standards-based grading system needs to be developed if we will be asked to engage in assessment in a distance learning format. There is too much subjectivity in how teachers grade. If we are clearly measuring mastery of standards it allows students a clear sense of what they need to show and it allows teachers to clearly measure student progress.”

Educators also shared their ideas for budget-neutral statewide policy changes that should be explored and considered in conjunction with all stakeholders:

- Public access to adequate internet
- Expand the Nevada Educator Performance Framework to address distance learning
- Ensure school accountability mechanisms, such as the Nevada School Performance Framework, or star rating system, are reflective of distance learning
- Explore alternative compositions for the Board of Trustees, specifically to include at least one teacher

More than anything, educators are hopeful. They find hope in their colleagues coming together to support each other. They find hope in their students' resilience and new-found appreciation for seeing their friends and teachers in-person. They find hope in the opportunity to rethink how we prepare students for college and career, and to take part in the evolution of learning.

“Remember that our duty to our community is to help students learn and to provide reasonable assurance to the community of that learning; this should be our mission and our compass.”

Methodology Note: Focus groups were conducted and written input was collected by Opportunity 180 and Teach Plus Nevada Teaching Policy Fellows between May 13, 2020 and May 20, 2020. Participants included elementary, middle, and high school core subject and elective subject teachers, special education teachers, and learning strategists. Inquiries can be directed to patricia@opportunity180.org.