A Survey-based Review of SSD’s Distance Learning

During the CoVid-19 Closure

Department of Evaluation and Research
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The following review is based off survey feedback (n=10,379) from the following groups:

- Administrators (n=94)
- Teachers (SPED (n=1,458), CTE/ Courts Program (n=91))
- Families (n=8,423) and students (n=313)

It is important to note when responses are aggregated in the whole as a single percentage results are likely to be more representative of the dominant respondent group. In this case response rates are more heavily weighted towards West and South county school districts, where external barriers (i.e., food security, reliable housing/employment, SES, access to technology) may be less of a interfering factor to participation/engagement in distance learning (DL).

The experiences of the following groups needs to be better understood in order for instruction/service delivery to meet the needs of all students and families:

- Families without access to internet
- North county families
- Families of students with low-incidence disabilities
- Social workers
- Stronger student representation (*Note: the student response rate includes cases of parents answering on behalf of students, further weakening the already low rate of student representation)
**COMMUNICATION FROM LEADERSHIP**

Absence of direct communication
- Families expressed the need for one clear voice
- Staff felt district-wide processes/policies needed to be communicated to staff and families from the top (i.e., hold harmless policy)

Guidance needed for staff
- Communication on how to proceed
- Directives for the provision of related-services
- How-to support students with low-incidence disabilities through DL

Absence of consultation
- Administrator input was not sought, which could have informed how to better integrate with partner district plans, brought to light collaboration strategies already in place, provided insight on teachers'/students'/families' needs during the closure
- Staff voiced the need for leadership to act on survey feedback

**STAFF INFORMATION NEEDS**

Transparency
- There was no plan released from leadership
- Rationale for changing processes not always given
- No staged circulation of info to help parties support their stakeholders (i.e., administrators were not briefed in advance of teachers; teachers were unaware of communication parents had received)

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**FAMILY COMMUNICATION**

Volume of communication
- Families stated messaging came from multiple sources, leading to overwhelming amounts of information, and confusion over who to contact if they needed help
- Families received limited personalized contact (i.e., use of standardized/group emails) in a time where they indicated needing encouragement/check-in support
- Staff found the amount of communication families received negatively impacted the relationships built and led to a decrease in student/family engagement

Responsive support
- Administrators could not provide answers to teachers, which rendered teachers unable to provide clarity to families, or led to circulating conflicting information
- Communication from leadership was lacking empathy/out-of-touch with the workload and emotional demands staff were facing
- Policies/approaches used were not reflective of leadership trusting staff (i.e., clock on/off, firm tone)

Competing stressors/priorities
- The #1 barrier to participation cited by families was competing priorities (i.e., family stressors, work commitments, illness)
- Families with more than one child, children with multiple disabilities, or low income were often in crisis
- Materials assigned to students were unable to be completed independently, requiring a substantial amount of parental support

**COMMUNICATION**

63% of family and 79% of student respondents indicated that SSD teachers were in contact 2x/week or more

35% of administrators reported being able to support staff extremely well in addressing challenges in working with families, while 57% indicated somewhat well

63% of parents and 79% of students responded that SSD teachers were in contact 2x/week or more.
**THE PLAN**

A need for clear directives
- Families and staff perceived planning to be reactive rather than proactive, particularly when compared to partner districts
- Staff needed consistent and clear guidelines from the start with specific requirements outlined (i.e., minutes/days of instruction)
- The number/frequency of changes issued made directives outdated within days, creating animosity between staff, families, and teachers-administrators
- Staff noted variances between written and oral directives

Greater supports in place for staff
- District-wide training was needed on DLP implementation for teachers and administrators
- Staff appreciated video walkthroughs on completing new reporting requirements
- Unclear how to access support/get answers
- Unreasonable timeline to implement changes

Little perceived impact
- Staff and families felt DLPs were essentially an individualized plan for students with individualized plans
- Did not result in streamlining communication with families or making distance learning easier
- Staff indicated the district may have benefitted from differentiated plans for SSD schools vs. partner districts

**WORKLOAD**

Change in context created increased demands for teachers
- Struggled to balance IEPs, DLPs, weekly lesson plans, REDS, increased communication with families, as well as more meetings and paperwork than usual, while providing instruction to students
- Experienced challenges with converting traditional materials/content into activities that could be implemented online and/or without materials at home

Limited consideration for staff experience
- Upper level administration did not calculate the amount of time required to complete the tasks assigned (re: feasibility)
- Greater workload paired with no access to para assistance, all while staff were supporting their own children's learning at home
- Workload was more extreme than what partner district teachers faced
- DLPs and adapting instruction was time consuming, in addition to the added requirement of documenting everything done on a daily basis for each student served

Teacher concessions needed
- Less paperwork and to-do tasks from admin
- Streamlined work processes from leadership (i.e., take some things off their plate)
- Role for paras to help ease the workload
- The majority of teachers (90%+ SPED, 82% CTE/Courts Program) found the automatization of several reporting processes to be helpful

**PARTNER DISTRICT COLLABORATION**

Changes implemented by SSD thwarted collaborative arrangements made with partner districts
- Administrators indicated collaborative approaches had already been sorted out with partner districts, SSD’s plans were rolled out weeks later without accounting for what was already taking place
- Teachers and administrators expressed a desire to continue following what their partner district was doing

Lack of coordination between SSD and partner district staff resulted in:
- Conflicting meeting/instruction times
- No alignment between SSD and gen. ed. instructional content
- Gen. ed. materials were not adapted for skill level and related SSD support was not provided, leaving parents to research modifications
- Inconsistent platforms/software used
- County-wide staff struggled to keep up with the different directives across districts

Course content and materials were not integrated
- Families/students indicated some students were receiving two sets of activities (SSD and gen. ed.) contributing to an overwhelming workload
- Families were unclear as to whether students could opt-out of certain gen. ed. assignments

**PROCESS**

30% of administrators reported feeling very supported in the distance learning plan roll-out; most (47%) felt somewhat supported

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RESOURCES

Limited student access to:
- Computers/internet/printers
- Assistive technology

Limited staff access to:
- Ring Central
- District laptops (paras)

Limited contact/communication
- Staff were unable to reach student/families
- Teachers were unable to obtain consent for distance learning

Limited access to instruction
- Teachers and administrators expressed concern that there were no DLPs specifically for students who lacked access to technology (i.e., resourcing, alternative instructional mediums/packets)
- Families without the required technologies also indicated limited access to transportation to pick-up instructional resources

49% of SPED teachers surveyed listed technology concerns (computer/internet) as a barrier to student/family engagement

Household Computer and Internet Use Population Estimates, by Geographic Feature Unified School District
Source: US Census Bureau American Community Survey (2018 5-year estimate)
Staff were new to delivering virtual instruction
- Challenged with needing to provide tech support while trying to teach
- Lacked experience in modifying materials for online instruction
- Unsure of best practices for online learning

Staff with varying levels of tech literacy
- Parents and teachers were uncomfortable/unfamiliar with using technology or particular software
- Teachers were unsure of district-approved online resources

Families and students were overwhelmed by the lack of uniformity
- Too many platforms in use
- Different teachers using different resources
- Information was spread across multiple forums making it difficult to find the info needed and/or to stay up-to-date

Technology/software incompatible
- (with) Partner district platforms
- Site accessibility on Chromebooks
- Assistive technology did not work with Google forms
- Teachers circulated non-modifiable student worksheets (PDF), requiring access to a printer

Tech issues
- There were some staff concerns over access to reliable student data, however 88% of SPED teachers reported that information pulled from Phoenix was accurate
- Staff with the same names were getting information for other students
- Teachers needed a way for service providers to input their info into the DLPs (i.e. Phoenix)
- Parents complained about being unable to access students’ accounts/messages received from staff
- Families received Zoom and website links that did not work; students required system permissions to access work

25% of administrators strongly agreed they had adequate resources to support teachers with the process, while 56% somewhat agreed
Lack of preparation
- Staff found adapting to delivering instruction online in absence of formal training challenging
- Limited time to prepare virtual lessons/materials
- More check-ins with 1st year teachers needed
- Teachers lacked the opportunity to collaborate and share virtual instruction best practices with their colleagues/access sample lessons and formats
- Teacher-level staff struggled to collect accurate data, particularly on goals that did not translate well to a homeschool setting

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Content
- While many families acknowledged teachers did the best they could considering the circumstances, there was a general sense that students' learning was not advancing (i.e., mainly focused on review, busy work, limited subjects covered, academic intervention programs not administered)
- Teachers admitted struggling to create instruction consistent with what was being learned in class

Structure
- Families and students experienced confusion/stress in the absence of: a schedule to follow, consistent meeting/instruction times; lesson plans with learning goals; routine work
- Families felt that teachers were relying too heavily on worksheets in lieu of direct instruction, expecting more exposure to live and recorded video lessons
- Overall families felt the workload was reasonable (89%), however there was some interest in self-pacing options

Access
- The amount of time spent receiving support paled in comparison to the amount of minutes received at school
- Families were troubled by no/limited access to Transition, SNAP, therapies (i.e., speech therapy)
- Families and students wanted more 1:1/tutoring support made available

Virtual instruction was not suitable for all students
- Parents and staff acknowledged challenges with engagement faced by students who typically struggle with an online format (i.e., motor skills, ADHD, Autism, cognitive delay, behaviors)
- Staff grappled with how to administer hands-on content virtually (i.e., VSP, OT/PT)
- Parents and students found content provided was not always at the right level (i.e., too basic or beyond the student's abilities) which resulted in students losing interest
- Parents complained about the concentrated use of text-based exercises/lessons for their children who have a reading disability

Modifications
- Assignments provided were at one-level only and did not account for modifications/variations in skill levels
- Parents were charged with modifying materials for their children
- Students had difficulty managing flow of information/organizing their assigned tasks

Absence of accountability mechanisms
- Parents were not always aware of what their child had been assigned/submitted, and therefore struggled to hold them accountable
- All survey groups stated the hold harmless policy left little incentive for students to complete work, as such teachers felt frustrated by prepared lessons going unused
- Families/teachers indicated a need to limit the amount of optional participation/assignments

~90% of family respondents felt activities were appropriate and accessible to their child

Level of parent/guardian involvement required
- Level of parental assistance required was not feasible for families, which left teachers challenged to create meaningful activities at a higher independence level than would be required in the classroom
- Parents were left to administer therapies to their children based on info packets received
- 46% of SPED and 64% of CTE/Courts Program teachers found it easy to work with students and families during the closure

36% of SPED and 22% of CTE/Courts Program teachers cited students/parents inability to support the delivery method as the reason for poor engagement

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**DIRECT SUPPORT**

Direct interaction with teacher
- Need more teacher-led instruction through live/video sessions
- Have teachers host live sessions for students to ask follow-up questions
- Opportunity to meet 1:1 with teachers for extra help

Tools/format
- Access to graphic organizers and visual aids like in class
- Assistance with pacing (i.e., breaking down assignments)
- Provide support during test taking

Equip parents to provide help
- Train parents on how to help students with their school work

**ENGGING LESSONS**

Staff capacity
- Teachers struggled with technology/teaching online

Boring lessons
- Too much repetition
- Not interactive
- Desire for more learning games
- Students indicated learning more easily through hands-on approaches and were hoping for similar opportunities through DL
- Activities were not relevant (i.e., did not align with coursework)

90% of students surveyed felt supported by the district during distance learning

**DISENGAGEMENT**

Format
- Too much screen time/hard to stay on task
- Difficult to stay on track with no routine
- Too many distractions at home/challenging to have no separation between home and school life
- Too many links and different technology platforms
- While teachers reported high levels of student disengagement, among the small sample of students surveyed 84% felt activities were appropriate for their learning level and style

Too challenging
- Students who received assignments from SSD and gen. ed. found the workload to be overwhelming, however 89% of students surveyed felt the workload was either somewhat or extremely reasonable
- Assignments were too difficult
- Needed too much help assistance which was not always available
- Did not understand the material

Accountability
- Unsure of what to do or where to find things
- Not incentivized to complete work since it did not count towards a final grade

**ENGAGEMENT**

Informed by student feedback

Many special education teachers reported that a substantial proportion of students failed to engage in learning during the closure. CTE and Courts teachers were more likely to report that students were engaged.
Changes Made Based on Recommendations

• **Communication**
  - Improved communication with staff and families through centralized messaging through emails and website and town hall meetings
  - Developed guidance documents for SSD and crosswalked these with partner district guidance

• **Process**
  - Feedback used to improve the processes as well as the guidance documents and training videos were created to support staff with the process
  - Clear definitions of responsibilities were provided in guidance documents including utilizing paras to provide individualized supports
  - Directors were partners with the partner districts in planning the guidance and return to school plans
Changes Made Based on Recommendations continued

• **Access**
  • Working to ensure students and staff have access to technology including computers and hotspots in order to access and support instruction

• **Technology**
  • Created various training modules and videos to support staff and families and posted them to the website for easy access

• **Instruction**
  • Expectations for instruction provided in the guidance document – guided by the IEP and made visible through the distance learning plans
  • Expectations and supports available on the website to assist with universals and best practices for a virtual environment and family communication
  • Lessons provided in other forms for students whose learning required physical materials
  • Office Hours are available for students and families to access teachers for additional supports