Defining a "New Normal" for Post-Pandemic Schooling:

Learning from Families' Experiences

Abstract

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, school systems have been urged to learn from the challenges of the last year and emerge into a "new normal". Drawing on survey responses from families in one urban school district, this article begins to unpack what the elements of that improved system might be. Through their responses, families shared that remote learning introduced a number of adaptations and innovations that mitigated long-standing issues presented by the traditional framework of in-person schooling. Their perspectives reveal the potential for a system that is more transparent, flexible, and accessible for both students and families.

Background

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic upended school systems across the United States - an exogenous shock that forced state and local agencies to respond in extraordinary ways. Virtually overnight, educators were forced to dramatically reimagine the nature of teaching, learning, and the structure of public education (Banwo, et al., 2020). Schools closed their doors, requiring teachers, students, and families to adapt to a new ecology of remote Zoom classrooms. The four walls and five days bounding traditional understandings of "school" were stripped away and education was refashioned as a thing that could happen anywhere and anytime.

During this exceptional school year, educators worked tirelessly to adapt to the crisis, stabilize and improve remote learning practices, and plan for the system's eventual recovery. The rapid transformation of the system brought many of the challenges and inequities of the pre-pandemic status quo into sharp relief, with leaders vowing that, when the time came, the system could not simply resume the "old normal" (Hill & Jochim, 2020; Partnership for Resilience, 2020; St. George, et al., 2021). Defining what a "new" normal might entail, however, has been challenging. The relatively scant evidence that is available indicates that response to the pandemic was highly variable from context to context (Hubbard, Mackey, & Supovitz, 2020; Lieberman, 2020). While that variability presents a significant opportunity to learn, pandemic-related disruptions have limited the ability of researchers and practitioners to systematically understand which adaptations were beneficial, which were not, and what smart bets schools and districts might make moving forward.

We would be remiss, however, if we lost the opportunity presented by this moment to examine the structures and practices that define our schools and learn from a rare occasion in which some taken-for-granted aspects of "normal" were forced to change. Doing so may require us to move faster than the strongest empirical research will permit. The cessation of COVID-19 has heralded a strong counterbalance to calls for reform - an understandable desire for normalcy and stability in the wake of a tremendously challenging time. Absent clear "right" answers, systems will need to

look to localized forms of evidence to identify the promising innovations that might define a post-pandemic "new normal".

Uncovering a "New Normal"

In the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD), we worked diligently throughout the pandemic to understand how the shifts that we made impacted families - what was working, for whom, and where we needed to pivot to best support the community. This included the administration of surveys to our families each quarter, asking a number of questions regarding their experiences with remote learning. As part of our final survey for the 2020-2021 academic year, we asked parents to respond to an open-ended question framed to help us understand what a path forward from this exceptional year might look like: "Is there anything about your child's school experience that was new this year because of COVID-19 and Virtual Learning that you hope your school and MMSD will continue for the future?".

Analysis of the thousands of responses that we received revealed three key elements that families appreciated about the transition to remote learning: opening doors and empowering families, creating more responsive and flexible learning environments, and learning beyond the schoolhouse walls. Each of these themes frames what our families might desire in a "new" normal - one that learns from the best of what our educators were able to accomplish during the pandemic. Common among them is a core idea: that in the future, school might be something that conforms more closely to families, rather than the other way around.

Opening Doors and Empowering Families

While the traditional school building provides a number of benefits, its walls may also act as a barrier, limiting the degree to which families can be full participants in students' educational experiences. One family member described their previous experience with our schools as a "black box", explaining that "my kid walks in and out, and I really don't know what happens or how to support. This is different from daycare, where I knew the teachers and community and got a chance to swing by the classroom when I picked [my child] up." Other family members echoed this sentiment - that prior to the shift to remote learning, school was something that happened in a place that was outside of their purview.

The advent of the pandemic - and the district's transition to remote operation - had the benefit of rendering the traditionally opaque walls of the schoolhouse more transparent than ever before. The district adopted several tools and practices that opened new flows of information for families. These included the use of course management systems that provided easy access to calendars, assignments, and grades. Alongside those systems, teachers expanded the degree to which they routinely contacted families and provided status updates. The virtual environment also eased a number of barriers that family members traditionally faced in accessing information and feedback on their students' learning. Zoom conferences eliminated the need, for example, for family members to travel to school sites to converse with teachers.

As a result, families shared that they felt substantially more informed during remote learning. Far from the "black box" that they had experienced, one family member shared that "I actually got to see what my child is taught and how they are taught. [...] virtual learning opened my eyes to what's happening." Beyond simply feeling informed, families shared that this expanded access made them feel like a fuller participant in their students' learning. One explained, for example, that "I love being able to see what my child is working on at school! It helps us have conversations around whatever it is they are working on, and [to] reinforce those concepts at home. If there's

any way to continue receiving more substantial information about schoolwork, that would be awesome!"

Creating More Responsive and Flexible Environments

School walls, in addition to keeping people out, also function by creating a physical space inside which behavior and the processes of learning are standardized, regulated, and to which students must adapt. Conversely, remote learning allowed students and their families some new opportunities to mold the school experience to their individual needs.

The delivery of the instructional experience outside of the controlled physical environment enabled students to grab snacks, get up and move, find more comfortable positions, and sleep-in or take naps. Many family respondents noted that their students(s) benefitted from the ability to return to their learning after taking time to tend to their basic physical needs, in ways that may have been discouraged or considered disruptive in a typical classroom setting. One family respondent summarized, "[my student(s)] were able to lay on the floor if that helped them feel more comfortable, they were able to have trinkets or fidgets if useful to them, they had flexibility in movement that is not typically tolerated in a classroom. I think for many learners this helped them to focus and to refocus once attention was lost."

The virtual classroom and the introduction of asynchronous learning opportunities also meant that students no longer had to conform exclusively to the process and pace of their peers' learning. Family respondents noted that new practices such as recorded classes, asynchronous days, and common online course management systems and learning websites supported personalization of learning for their students. According to one parent, the asynchronous day implemented at their child's school provided a chance to not only "make up work [...] and stay on top of assignments" but also "engage in longer projects or more in-depth assignments." Other parents remarked that the remote or hybrid model allowed their students to build self-management and organization skills. One parent described that learning virtually "seemed to offer a sense of self-direction that could be built upon in years ahead," while another remarked that the virtual school day helped their student "learn how to pace themselves and take care of their physical and emotional needs."

Learning Beyond the Schoolhouse Walls

Finally, the transition to remote learning provided a glimpse of what schooling might look like if freed from confinement by the schoolhouse walls. Under the old normal, "school" was a thing that happened in a certain place and at a specific time, with families having to fit their lives around it. A "new normal", according to families, might be more responsive to the realities commonly facing families throughout the school year. Common across these responses was a desire for learning to be something more portable, more malleable, and more able to fit within the boundaries of families' lives, rather than the other way around.

Many families shared that they appreciated having a learning option that allowed for temporary absences. Even during normal times, families noted, some time away from the building was inevitable - for example, "when a child is either feeling a bit under the weather (so as to avoid transmission of illness, but not falling too far behind) or just feeling overwhelmed by their schedule or life stressors." Remote learning allowed students to absorb such moments without losing progress or creating obstacles to later success. Similarly, families noted that the old normal was not necessarily welcoming to students who weren't always comfortable fitting into the box constructed by the schoolhouse walls. One respondent shared, for instance, that "my child has [social] anxieties, and on the days when it is just too hard to get them motivated to go to school,

having an option to still learn virtually would be a big help". In each case, remote learning allowed for an educational experience more capable of meeting students where they were - both figuratively and literally - rather than forcing students to make a dichotomous choice between being present or not.

Transparent, Flexible, and Accessible

Overall, MMSD's families indicated that - despite the hardships of the pandemic and the transition to remote learning - there were some benefits to be gleaned from the rapid deconstruction of the "old normal". They pointed to a system, freed from the rigidity of the schoolhouse walls, that was more transparent, flexible and accessible. The transition to an online infrastructure for learning, however temporary, brought these elements of the educational experience to the forefront. While systems will inevitably return to in-person learning in the coming year, however, that does not necessarily mean that they need to recede back into the background. The continued use of online platforms and course management systems can maintain windows into the learning process for families. Similarly, schools can reconsider the design of learning environments, or policies that tightly constrain students' freedom of movement or activity. Finally, systems might explore ways in which remote learning options aren't simply tucked away for the next emergency, but instead become a supplement to traditional experiences that allow students to remain connected to their learning even when life might conspire to keep them apart.

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