

# How Students with IEP's and their Teachers are Faring in Maine Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic



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## Executive Summary

### Why was this study conducted?

The goal of study was to better understand how instruction to students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) was delivered during remote learning this past spring and during the fall semester of the 2020-21 school year, and how these vulnerable students have been impacted. Research questions looked at special education teacher impressions of what was effective, the challenges in delivery of remote education, and how student academic progress was affected. Special education teachers and special education directors were also asked how to best help students who fell behind and what additional resources or supports they needed.

### What did we conclude overall from the study?

Only about a quarter of special education teachers said their schools' were using a traditional five-day a week in-person instructional arrangement in fall 2020. Hybrid instruction models, where students were in class two days per week and remote two or three days each week, were the most common method of instruction for most teachers' schools this fall. Almost all special education teachers reported that they had taught remotely this year. On a daily basis, most teachers were teaching both remote and in-person students, though not necessarily at the same time.

Unsurprisingly, teachers reported that most students' well-being and academic progress was lower than expected during emergency remote learning in the spring of 2020. However, special education teachers noted that this fall there were some students who were doing much better in remote learning than they had in traditional learning. They reported having students whose academic progress in school in the fall was greater than expected, and that these outnumbered the students who saw a decline in academic progress. Overall, students' well-being in the fall was similar to pre-pandemic.

The most commonly perceived benefits of remote learning for their students with an IEP were more individualized learning (47%, n=66), students feeling less social/peer pressure (44%, n=62), and parent/caregivers better understanding how their student learns (41%, n=58).

Students' academic progress was improved by district policies that promoted introducing new materials during spring learning and synchronous video instruction. Students were more likely to engage at least once and participate regularly when new learning was introduced. When districts expected students to engage in more learning time students put in more hours.

Instruction was adapted for student age. Elementary special education teachers estimated that 40% of their students were taught in-person. During remote learning, about half of teachers expected elementary students to spend two to four hours in synchronous learning. Only one teacher said elementary students were expected to spend four hours or more in synchronous

remote learning. The rest of the elementary teachers said their students were expected to spend less than two hours a day in synchronous remote learning. Elementary students were more likely than high school students to receive instructional packets as the primary mode of instruction last spring during school closures.

Special education teachers identified several issues that were interfering with student learning. Most all teachers reported that there was an increase in student in-person and remote school day absences. This occurred regardless of the mode of instruction for most students: fully in-person, hybrid or fully remote. Some students lacked attention or motivation to engage remote learning. All students not having an adult or caregiver to assist them was common occurrence for teachers. Almost all teachers had some families who were not responding to communication during remote learning. Remote rural areas had more families that lacked internet access for all students in the household. Across the state, forty percent of teachers that had students who lacked internet access reported that they had families that refused assistance such as wi-fi hot spots.

While most teachers agreed districts should consider summer school for students with IEPs that fell behind during remote learning, teachers were divided on whether districts should *consider* having students with IEPs who fell behind, repeat the academic grade year.

The vast majority of teachers felt that their workload increased this year. Three of four teachers felt it was *much heavier*. Teachers were divided on what type of assistance would best benefit them. Teachers for remote learning, a remote learning curriculum, additional Ed Techs, more technology support, increase social work supports and increased behavioral supports were all chosen by some teachers as supports that would be of value. Some teachers report that their districts have made attempts to hire additional staff especially Ed Techs but have not had applicants.

This year has been exceedingly challenging for students, families and teachers. At the time of writing in spring 2021, educators have been prioritized for vaccinations and there is hope for a return to more typical schooling in the 2021-22 school year, if not sooner. In the interim, schools have the unique opportunity (and challenge) to reflect upon what they have learned from this unplanned experience and do their best to integrate some of their innovations into ongoing practice. Some of these strategies are low or no-cost, but others—particularly the increased staffing levels that have been provided this year—would require a continuation of supplemental state and federal funds.

### **What methods were used to conduct this study, and how robust are the findings?**

Data was collected through two surveys of 500 special education teachers and a survey of special education directors. The survey of special education teachers oversampled from small town and rural school districts in northern and western Maine to ensure adequate representation from these educators. However, since there are proportionately fewer Maine students per teacher in rural areas, the *teacher* responses represented in this report are an underestimate of the circumstances of urban and suburban *students*.

The special education teacher response rates were 40% of teachers (n=176) on one survey and 38% of teachers (182) on the other survey. About half of the combined teachers (49%, n=152) identified their school's location as "small town" and another 20% as "rural" (n=63). This is roughly reflective of Maine demographics, in which 80% of all schools (enrolling about 50% of all Maine students) are in towns or rural locations. Suburban (17%, n=53) locations were

more common than city (13%, n=40) which also reflects the teacher sampling and Maine's demographics. About half of the teachers taught elementary students (49%, n=152). Just over a third of teachers taught in middle schools (38%, n=117) and high schools (36%, n=110). Eighty-four percent of special education teachers (274) taught some students with mild or moderate needs. For the fifty-one teachers who exclusively taught students with intense needs, forty (80%) had fewer than ten students. Overall, these responses were deemed adequately representative of Maine educators' experiences in the spring and fall of 2020.

## **How Students with IEP's and their Teachers are Faring in Maine Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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### **Background**

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the way most students are taught. School closures in the spring of 2020 were followed by summer school, which was virtual in some areas and physically distanced in other areas. In the fall of 2020, many schools re-opened in different formats from their traditional five-day a week in-person instructional schedule. Some schools remained fully remote for all, and in others families could opt for their child to be fully remote. Some schools split their students into smaller groups. In hybrid schools, students attended school two-days per week in person and three days remote. Yet other schools changed to a four-day a week instructional schedule, and some schools resumed a traditional five-day a week in-person instructional schedule. The effects of this massive educational disruption on students and teachers has been the subject of much public discussion and research this year. Schools are working diligently to develop plans to mitigate negative impacts; in some areas, educators have taken opposing positions on how to best proceed.

The immediate focus at the time of emergency school closures was on providing access to instruction for all students. Prior to the pandemic, the nationwide percentage of school-aged children without access to the internet was similar in rural and urban environments (13%). However, a national survey found that rural districts were less likely than urban districts to provide students with devices and hot spots after school closure in March 2020 (Opalka, Gable, Nicola & Ash, 2020). In Maine, concerns about internet access in remote areas predated the pandemic, and there was a concerted state Department of Education effort to help student households get adequate internet access. It is not known how many student households were unable or unwilling to secure internet access through these state programs, or the extent to which schools attempted to provide alternative modes of instruction to these students.

Schools adopted different policies around remote learning during the initial school closure as well as into this year. A review of Maine school district policies and communications during remote spring learning showed a focus on supporting the whole child. Many districts

adopted a “hold harmless” policy that supported emotional well-being as much or more than academic learning. Some districts outlined responsibilities of students, parents and teachers in a compact. Some educators felt students should not be expected to attend every class every day. (Biddle, Frankland, Crane, Sulinski & O’Neil, 2020) There is a strong basis in literature for these recommendations and actions of putting social-emotional learning ahead of academic learning. After Katrina, schools that put social-emotional well-being first, saw students were more likely to catch up. (Branstetter, 2020) There also is concern being expressed by child psychiatrists on how some children who have limited participation will readapt to school. This is especially a concern for children with social anxiety or separation anxiety. Psychiatrists feel exposure to anxiety producing situations is what builds coping skills and many students are not developing those skills during this school year (Petersen, 2021).

Other educators were concerned about learning losses especially among vulnerable populations. The learning losses that are perceived to be occurring during remote learning are not universal. School attendance is correlated with academic performance especially in the lower grades. During remote learning in spring, many students did not engage or disengaged during remote learning. Districts are reporting greater absence rates this fall and a higher proportion of failing grades. The gap between students may widen. The top tier of students is expected to make significant gains especially in reading. The greatest increase in proportion of failing grades was in low-income students, students with disabilities and students of color. The learning losses for some lower tier students may result in higher dropout rates. (Bazelon, 2020; Meckler & Natanson, 2020). Maine has a rural divide. Nationwide, rural districts were less likely than urban districts to expect teachers to provide academic instruction and monitor student progress. The lack of internet access by some students resulted in some rural school districts expecting teachers to record lectures on USB thumb drives, provide instructional packets and/or call students to provide instruction. (Opalka, Gable, Nicola & Ash, 2020) The expectations for student learning during the pandemic in Maine are unknown.

Inconsistent staffing may also contribute to learning disparities. The staffing problems faced by rural schools were worsened this year. Older workers and some teachers resigned due to health issues. Teachers and staff have been in quarantine either due to their own illness or due to close contact. Many substitutes are older retired individuals who did not work this year due to health issues. Educators feel that there are going to be significant gaps in student learning due to

staffing issues especially among students who already were struggling. They feel that children would not advance at a normal pace in an inconsistent environment (Feinberg, 2020).

Another factor that may contribute to the widening of the learning gap between students is the cost of technology and providing individualized instruction. Some learning software incorporates artificial intelligence algorithms that allow learning to be highly individualized. While the interest in learning apps was growing before the pandemic, there was an exponential growth in the use of learning apps last spring. Many companies made their products free to educators last spring. This allowed educators to become familiar with them. Now districts are being asked to pay licensing fees to use the apps. Schools are also recognizing the value of technology to reach outside the school walls. There is expected to be increased use of not just learning apps but of video conferencing in the schools. One area where Zoom conferencing may increase is in parent teacher conferences (Singer, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, some of the wealthy private schools had adopted a teaching format where the students listened to a short lecture then the teachers worked individually with their students (Bazelon, 2020). This appreciation of technology and individualized learning is coming at a time when administrative budgets are stressed by COVID-19 related costs.

There is not a clear consensus on student academic learning or well-being this past year. While educators have worried about learning gaps widening, there is also some suggestion that they may have narrowed. Wealthier families with incomes over \$100,000 were more likely than families making less than \$50,000 to say there was a negative impact on their children's academic, social and emotional well-being (Toness, 2021). Some kids enjoyed and benefited from the time in remote learning. During the traditional school year, some kids find school traumatic. They feel ignored or admonished. Others feel bullied. They did not experience this during remote learning. Other students' grades and mental health suffered during this past year from lack of socialization (Bazelon, 2020; Toness, 2021). Well-being of school-aged children during the first two months of the pandemic was examined by questionnaire in a large Canadian study. This study was weighted to have the majority of children with mental diagnoses and/or neurodevelopmental disorders. Parent and child reports showed that 70% showed a worsening of anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, irritability, attention, and compulsive behavior but there was also 19-30% that showed an improvement in one of these areas. For most of these mental health areas, parents and children reported no change. Authors felt deterioration in these mental health

areas was associated with loss of structure and routine. Having greater stress from social isolation was associated with deterioration in mental health. The authors' recommendations were to increase socialization activities through recreation, recognition of milestone events and in-person school (Cost et. al., 2021). The Canadian study looked at the initial effects of the pandemic which may overstate the effect on depression and anxiety symptoms. In adults with depression or anxiety, the symptoms were the worst in the first few months of the pandemic then improved over time. Adults living with children initially had higher anxiety and depression scores than other adults, but showed the greatest improvement of scores over the 20 weeks that ended in July 2020 (Fancourt, Steptoe & Bu, 2021). For those who felt there was less stress during the pandemic and those who have adapted well to new routines, returning to normal routines may be difficult. Many adults are assessing how to make their work schedules less stressful (Rictel, 2021). There may be a related shift in the type of education parents feel is best for their children.

As with well-being, the outcomes of remote learning appear to be mixed. A survey of New York state parents showed that parents felt remote learning was successful. Parents of color were less likely to feel remote learning was successful for their children (Koh 2020). In Massachusetts study, a third of Latino parents and 30% of black parents felt their children did better in remote classrooms (Toness, 2021). Two companies that do standardized testing of elementary and middle school students, Renaissance Learning (STAR assessment) and NWEA, each put out reports on student tests scores this fall. There was not agreement on student progress during the pandemic. Both testing companies emphasized that results were not generalizable to all students or schools. There is concern that the most affected students, those who were chronically absent, were not tested (Kuhfeld, Tarasawa, Johnson, Ruzek, & Lewis, 2020; Renaissance Learning, 2020). It is not known how Maine students fared.

Summer school is a popular idea with most parents and educators (Toness, 2021). Experts are saying that summer school and tutoring can help students make up the lost learning but districts may struggle to pay for it. One district estimated it would cost \$2500 per student for summer school (Meckler & Natanson, 2020). Those not in favor of summer school note that students learn in non-traditional ways during the summer (Bazelon, 2020). The timing of trying to make up lost learning this summer while the pandemic is resolving has also been called into

question. When there has been too quick of a focus on academic remediation, students struggled (Branstetter, 2020).

Having students repeat a year is a highly controversial topic. This year there is some public support for students taking a “gap year” or repeating a grade. Grade retention has become a contentious issue within the education community with most educators opposing it. As a practice it peaked in the 1970s, decreased then increased in the 1990s and early 2000s. Some educators are so firm in their belief about the harm of grade retention that they believe part of pre-service teacher education should be developing an understanding of the negative consequences of grade retention and learning that the positive benefits are very short lived. (Young, Trujillo, Bruce, Pollard, Jones and Range, 2019).

Despite grade retention being a common practice little objective research has been done on it recently. Lights Retention Scale was first published in 1986. The fifth edition of this scale is currently being used by some districts. Lights Retention scale asks educators to assess multiple factors for students being considered for grade retention. Of particular relevance this year, the scale gives positive weighting toward retention for students who were absent more than 25 days. Factors favoring positive outcomes after retention include chronological age young compared to peers, small size, male students, lower grade level, immature behavior, parents involved with school, motivated student, and positive student attitude to retention (learning what they missed). Students with high intelligence (above 95%) and students with low intelligence do poorly with grade retention. Other factors that are associated with worse outcomes for retention rather than grade promotion include prior grade retention, disability, sibling in adjacent grade, involvement in many outside group activities, transiency (attending multiple schools), little English knowledge, emotional problems, and antisocial behavior. Most large databases do not contain information in most of these nineteen categories. One of the last studies looking at the validity of the Lights Retention Scale was in Canadian students in the 1990s. Overall students who were retained did poorly regardless of the Light’s retention scores (Westbury, 1999).

The research on grade retention of students has been mixed. The current research does not look at the individual factors listed by Light. Historically, retained students are more likely to have more academic difficulties, come from poorer backgrounds, be male or and non-white. Depending on the study, the social and academic effects of retention can be positive, neutral or negative. Study design affects the results of grade retention. When students are compared to

same age students, there is neutral or a negative effect on retained students. When the comparison is to same grade students, the effect on retained students switches to neutral effect or a positive effect. The timing of the study also matters as some retained students get caught in a struggle, succeed, then struggle path. Nationwide, the remediation strategies vary from repeating the grade with the same teacher, to requiring summer school and putting the student with a high-quality teacher. Most authors feel providing student supports is preferable to retention. If a student is retained they should receive additional supports post-retention (Allen, Chen, Willson & Hughes, 2009; Hwang & Cappella, 2018; Hughes, Chen, Thoemmes & Kwok, 2010; Marsh et al, 2017; Martin, 2009)

While the public has expressed support for grade retention, due to pandemic disruption, in June 2020, several large school superintendents said that they would not hold students back a grade due to their academic performance. This was part of the “hold harmless” approach to learning during the early pandemic. Nationwide this approach was highly supported by most district leaders and principals. Some of the researchers who have published grade retention studies that showed negative effects note that the COVID-19 pandemic may have created different circumstances (Schwartz, 2020). The grade retention policies within Maine districts have not been documented.

The role of the family in student learning has been coming to the forefront during the pandemic. Providing parent or caregiver training is another avenue to recover learning losses. In recent MEPRI reports, educators expressed concern that new teachers are not able to coach parents on setting schedules and routines (Fairman, Mills, Lech & Johnson, 2020). Child psychiatrists have emphasized the role of parents in healthy child development. Their recommendations are for families to create routine and structure, appreciate good behavior, and set realistic expectations. Children need to see failure as an option and appreciate the process of learning. (Petersen, 2021) In media reports, parents are seen as not engaging appropriately with remote learning. The most common problem is lack of adult involvement. With younger students, parents play a larger role in remote education. They may have to encourage their child to participate, mute and unmute their child, remind the child to focus on the lesson, and get needed materials for the lesson. In doing this, they learn how their child learns. The downside of parents engaging in their child’s learning, is a tendency for some parents to become too involved. Some are not allowing their child to process the material and think of the answer instead they are

telling the child the answers. Others are actively interfering in the class by telling the teacher how to teach. Others are sharing snippets of a class on social media. Teachers are trying to help parents learn how to support their children and set schedules when the parents will check in with the student. (Braff, 2020; Pendharkar, 2020) There are literacy and math specific programs that focus on helping parents learn how to work with elementary students. These programs have found when parents are taught skills and build confidence in their ability to help their child, the children make large gains. One reading program that has been used in populations where parents have low-levels of literacy teaches parents how to talk to their child about a book by looking at the pictures in the book and asking their child to describe the pictures, and predict what will happen. Parents were involved in teaching their children math by a tutor talking to the child and them over the phone (Rosenberg, 2020). The Council for Exceptional Children recommended that schools and districts provide family members and students training on tools used to direct and facilitate learning (2020). How Maine parents are interacting with the school and child is an important topic.

A final question in how the pandemic affected Maine students is “Will they return to Maine public schools next year?” Enrollments in Maine schools paralleled nationwide trends by showing a drop in enrolled students. Kindergarten enrollment was down this year due to parents feeling that they did not want their child learning remotely (Bazelon, 2020). The number of children who were being home schooled jumped dramatically in most states this year. In 2016 it represented 3% of students. As the school year progressed, even more parents switched to home schooling because they felt remote or hybrid learning was not working well for their family. It is unclear how many will continue with home schooling. (Bauerlein, 2021) How Maine special education enrollment will be affected is also not known. Enrollment has a significant impact on future budgets.

### **Methodology**

This report was compiled from data from three separate surveys. One survey was of special education directors and the remaining two surveys were of special education teachers. The surveys were conducted in order to explore a variety of issues related to the education of students with IEPs during the pandemic. The guiding questions were:

- How are students with IEPs faring during remote learning (spring 2020) and the current school year?
- What additional supports would benefit children who fall behind?
- What additional supports would benefit teachers?

Questions looked at how instruction was delivered in spring 2020 and in fall 2020 as well as director and teacher perceptions of how students responded to instruction in each time period. Teachers were asked to describe policies on presenting new academic material in spring 2020, how instruction was delivered in the spring, and how it currently is being delivered to students at the time of the survey in fall 2020. The teachers were asked to describe attendance, the expected time commitments and actual time spent in learning by students and their parents. Teachers were also asked to identify challenges faced by their students and themselves in the delivery of remote education. Special education directors were asked about district policies on in-person time, grade retention and extended year (summer) school.

### **Special Education Teachers.**

The Maine Department of Education database was used to identify public school special education teachers. School location was identified as “populated” or “rural”. Schools that were in central and southern Maine counties (Cumberland, Kennebec, Knox, Lincoln, Sagadahoc, Waldo and York) were classified as in populated counties. Schools that were along the I-95 corridor (Lewiston, Auburn, Hampden, Bangor, Brewer) were also considered to be in a populated area. The other schools in Northern and Western Maine counties were considered to be rural. Teachers at Maine’s virtual schools (Maine Connections and Maine Virtual academy were considered rural).

In the directory, 1,429 special education teachers worked at schools in populated areas. Rural schools employed 625 special education teachers. Since more School Administrative Units are in rural schools, an over sampling of rural schools was done. Two-hundred-fifty rural special education teachers and 250 special education teachers working in populated area schools were sent an email invitation to take a confidential online survey. They were sent two additional reminders to complete the survey. There were 442 valid email addresses. The response rate was 40% (176 teachers)

As part of another MEPRI project, an additional 500 special education teachers were surveyed. This panel consisted of 300 rural teachers and 200 teachers from populated areas. The same protocol, sending an email invitation to take a confidential online survey followed by two additional reminders to complete the survey, was followed. The response rate on this survey was 38% (182 teachers of 476 teachers with a valid email address). This separate survey included some items that are included in the current report, in order to maximize the amount of input on these overarching questions about impacts on learners.

Teachers were asked to describe their school characteristics. When asked if their schools were located in city (urban), suburban, small town or remote rural, eighteen teachers—fifteen of whom only worked in one school—selected more than one categorization. The most urban classification was used for these teachers. Some teachers indicated that their school was located in more than one county. The email addresses along with the teachers description of their schools' grade levels was used to identify the county where these schools were located.

### **Special Education Directors.**

The Maine Department of Education database was used to obtain contact information for all special education directors (n=145) and assistant special education directors (n= 60). In mid-February, an email invitation to participate in an anonymous survey was sent to them. The following week, Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities (MADSEC) emailed the anonymous survey link to members. Reminder emails were sent to special education directors and assistant special education directors. A total of 97 surveys were completed. Based on the MDOE mailing list of 205 contacts, the response rate was 47%.

### **Respondent characteristics.**

Schools were located in all counties. Most teachers identified their location as “small town” (49%, n=152). Remote rural (20%, n=63) and suburban (17%, n=53) locations were more common than city (13%, n=40), which may reflect the weighted sampling. No sample weighting was done with directors. Most directors also identified their districts schools primarily being small town (52%, n=41) or remote rural (24%, n=19). A quarter of directors said their districts were city (16%, n=13) or suburban (8%, n=6) About half of the teachers taught elementary students (49%, n=152). Just over a third of teachers taught in middle schools (38%, n=117) and

high schools (36%, n=110). Twenty percent of teachers (n=61) taught students in more than one school type.

Most teachers had no previous experience with remote teaching (96%, n=327). Forty percent (n=136) had been teaching sixteen or more years. Teachers in their first or second year accounted for eleven percent (n=39) of the sample.

## Findings

### Caseloads and Range of Student Needs

Special education directors oversaw programs with as few as six students with IEPs to slightly over 1,000 students with IEPs. A quarter of the directors (27%, n=26) had programs with less than fifty students with IEPs. Eleven percent of directors (11) had more than 500 students with IEPs. Teachers reported their caseload ranging from 0 to 239 students with a median of 15. Teachers varied in the types of student needs they served in their roles. Fifty-two percent of special education teachers (n=171) taught only students with mild or moderate needs, and the remaining 48% taught at least some students with intense needs. “Mild” needs includes students in the regular classroom placement category (80% or more of the time), and “moderate” refers to students typically considered in a “resource room placement” category (in a regular classroom 40% to 79% of time). Students with “intense needs” are typically in a self-contained classroom and spend less than 40% of time in a regular classroom placement, or have dedicated adult support in a regular classroom placement. Caseloads were lower for the fifty-one teachers who exclusively taught students with intense needs; forty (80%) had fewer than ten students.

**Table 1. Range of Student Special Education Needs Served**

	Percent	Number of Responses
<b>Mild to Moderate Needs</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>171</b>
Mild needs only	8%	27
Moderate needs only	17%	55
Mild needs & Moderate needs	27%	89
<b>Moderate to Intense Needs</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>84</b>
Moderate needs & Intense needs	10%	33
Intense needs only	16%	51
<b>Mild, Moderate, &amp; Intense needs</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>70</b>
N/A; Testing, administrative role only	1%	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>328</b>

Special education teachers were next asked what services their students with intense needs received. Ninety percent selected speech therapy. Just over three-quarters of teachers (77%, n=118) had intense needs students receiving physical therapy or occupational therapy. Behavioral interventions or supports that were not full-time (75%, n=118) were more common than full-time behavioral support (51%, n=78) among teachers' intense needs students. Thirty-one percent of teachers said their students had other dedicated one-to-one adult support such as an interpreter or health aide. One in seven teachers (14%, n=22) had intense needs students that received nursing services. Sixty percent of teachers reported that some of their students had functional life skill services.

### **Remote Teaching Arrangements & Expectations for Student Participation**

Most teachers reported that they had taught remotely this year (92%, n=330). Those that had not taught remotely had students of all need levels and were located in all areas of the state. There were a higher percentage (11%, n=16) of small-town teachers who had not taught remotely than city (5%, n=2), suburban (2%, n=1) or remote rural teachers (6%, n=4). A third of all the teachers (33%, n=102) reported that their school had gone fully remote at some point this fall prior to November. A higher percentage of remote rural teachers (48%, n=30) reported their schools going fully remote. Over half of the teachers who taught in western Maine (56%, n=49) reported that their school had gone fully remote at some point this fall.

This school year, the most common instructional arrangement reported by teachers (51%, n=71) was hybrid instruction that was in-person two days per week and remote for two or three days per week. In city schools (74%, n=14) and suburban schools (71%, n=15) about three of four schools were hybrid for most students. Most directors also reported that their districts were providing hybrid instruction (47%, n=35) or instruction in-person for younger students with hybrid and/or fully remote instruction for older students (12%, n=9). Three directors (4%), all from districts with less than 500 students, said most students in their district were fully remote. Four teachers said most students in their schools were fully remote at the beginning of the school year. This was the least common option at the start of the school year. We are aware of several schools that were remote at the start of the school year. These include fully online programs: Maine Connections Academy and Maine Virtual Academy. The Indian Island schools were fully remote. Caribou Community School opened remotely due to construction delays. Some larger

districts had teachers that taught fully online. Teachers from other districts reported delayed school openings.

Table 2 shows the school schedules for most students (with or without IEPs) by locale. The traditional school arrangement of most students attending school in-person five-days per week was reported by a quarter of teachers (26%, n=39) and a quarter of directors (28%, n=21). A shortened in-person four-day school week was reported by thirteen percent of teachers (n=20) and nine percent of directors (n=7). In-person instruction four or five days a week was most common in small towns (44%, n=32) and remote rural schools (49%, n=18). Schools with four or more day per week in-person instruction were less common in cities (21%, n=4) and suburbs (24%, n=5). Half the districts with fewer than five hundred students (50%, n=14) and half the districts with between 501 and 999 students (50%, n=6) offered four or five day per week in-person instruction. Only 20% of districts with more than 1000 students had most of their students in-person four or five days a week. Full time, four or five day per week, in-person instruction was more common in Northern (47%, n=26) and Central (44%, n=8) schools than in Southern (30%, n=9) or Western (34%, n=16) schools.

**Table 2. School schedule for most students (with or without IEPs) by locale**

	Number of schools	Fully remote	In-person 2 days/wk, remote 2-3 days/wk (Hybrid)	Younger students In-person, older hybrid	In-person, 4 days per week	In-person, 5 days per week
City or Urban	19	5%	74%	0%	16%	5%
Suburban	21	0%	71%	5%	10%	14%
Small town	73	4%	42%	10%	11%	33%
Remote rural	37	0%	46%	5%	19%	30%
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>26%</b>

Three-quarters of directors in districts with hybrid or remote learning (82%, n=41) indicated their districts had flexible policies that allowed some students with IEPs to receive more in-person instructional time than other students. Only two districts with more than 500 students (6%) did not have this policy. Of the ten districts with 500 or fewer students, only three (30%) had more in-person instructional time for some students with IEPs.

Teachers were also asked to estimate the percentage of their students with IEPs that were in each instructional arrangement. This fall, most special education teachers (87%, n=285) taught students both in-person and remotely. Ten percent (n=32) reported that they taught all their students in-person. There were ten teachers (3%) who said all of their students were fully remote. Across all special education teachers, about one in five students with IEPs were fully remote. As may be seen in Table 3, teachers that taught exclusively at the elementary level reported a higher percentage of their students (39%) taught fully in-person. The mean percentage of students that were taught fully in-person decreased to 22% at the high school level. The mean percentage of students in a hybrid arrangement increased from 43% in elementary to 56% at the high school level. The mean percentage of students taught in each instructional setting did not vary by the intensity of student needs with the exception of teachers who taught only high needs students (who showed a higher percentage of students being taught in-person (44%) than any grade level). There were fewer high needs students taught in a hybrid arrangement (37%).

**Table 3. Mean percentage of students in each learning situation by grade**

	<b>In-person</b> for all instruction and services	<b>Hybrid</b> (Mix of remote and in-person)	<b>Fully remote</b> (at home) for all instruction and services
Elementary (N=111)	39%	43%	18%
Middle level (N=59)	29%	51%	20%
High School (N=74)	22%	56%	22%

In fall 2020 most teachers used more than one method to teach students remotely. Table 4 shows methods used by special education teachers to provide remote instruction. Four out of five teachers that taught students remotely said that they had one-on-one interactions with a student who was remote. About two-thirds of teachers (62%, n=194) provided asynchronous remote instruction. The least common method of teaching students remotely, group interactions where some students are remote and some are in-person, was used by half of the teachers (50%, n=158). During hybrid instruction, teaching in-person students simultaneously with remote students was more common at the high school level (73%, n=24) than at the middle school level (23%, n=3) or elementary level (24%, n=6). Teachers that taught only students with intense special education needs used all of the possible remote instruction styles. There was not a

variation by geographic area in the percentage of teachers that taught remote and in-person students simultaneously.

**Table 4. Methods special education teachers used to provide remote instruction.**

	Percentage using method of instruction	Number of Teachers
One-on-one interaction where the student is remote	83%	262
Asynchronous remote instruction (teacher assigns work that students complete on their own time)	62%	194
Group interactions where all students are remote	58%	181
Group interactions where some students are remote and some are in-person	50%	158
Total	100%	314

Most teachers reported that during remote learning this fall their students were expected to participate in individual learning sessions (85%, n=125), submit assignments for feedback (84%, n=124) and participate in therapy sessions that are included in their IEPs (82%, n=121). One teacher said that her students were required to meet weekly with a teacher or counselor to check-on their academic progress and well-being. No teacher said that there were no expectations for their students. Table 5 shows a breakdown of teacher expectation for 2020-21.

**Table 5. Expectations for remote learning participation for students with IEPs this school year (2020-21)**

	Percent	Frequency
Students participate in individual learning sessions	85%	125
Students submit assignments for feedback	84%	124
Participate in therapy sessions that are included in their IEP	82%	121
Students log into synchronous classes	78%	114
Students submit assignments that were graded	68%	100
Students watch video classes (asynchronous)	45%	66
No expectations, learning is guided but not required	0%	0
Total	100%	147

One of the concerns about remote learning has been the amount of time younger children are expected to spend in front of their computer screens doing synchronous learning activities. Teachers were asked a series of questions about time expectations for students and actual time

spent by students and parents in remote learning. Only one elementary teacher reported most their students were expected to spend more than four hours in synchronous learning activities. About half of elementary school teachers (48%, n=23) said their students were expected to spend two to four hours on synchronous learning. During remote learning, two-thirds of teachers (66%, n= 27) said two hours or more of synchronous learning was expected of most of their students. This group included teachers (39%, n=16) that said that four or more hours of synchronous learning was expected of most their students and teachers (27%, n=11) that said two to four hours of synchronous learning was expected of their students.

In schools that had lower time expectations of students, such as participating less than an hour a day or only a few days a week, more teachers reported that most of their students with IEPs did not participate in remote education. When schools expected more hours of learning, most students spent more time learning. Table 6 compares student participation levels with teacher expected participation levels. About half of the teachers (53%, n=77) reported that their students were expected to spend two to four hours in remote learning. They felt most of these students (73%, n=56) spent at least an hour a day on remote learning activities. When teachers expected students put in four hours a day on learning, 81% put in two hours or more on learning. When teachers expected students to put in two hours or less on learning, 86% of students spent two hours or less on learning. There were only eight teachers (6%) that said that remote students were expected to participate less than daily (several days a week).

**Table 6. Engagement: Expected remote student learning time compared to actual time most students participated in learning.**

Expected Participation Level	Number	Actual Participation Level			
		Did not participate on a regular basis	One to several days per week	Daily, two hours or less	Daily, more than 2 hours
Daily, 2 hours or less, or Less than daily	30	10%	23%	53%	13%
Daily, more than 2 hours up to 4 hours	77	3%	13%	42%	43%
Daily, more than 4 hours	38	3%	5%	11%	82%
<b>Total</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>47%</b>

Table 7 shows ways in which teachers used tools and strategies to increase student engagement during remote learning. Student sharing of positive events in their lives (76%, n=105), allotting time for student conversation (65%, n=91) and positive behavioral supports (71%, n=98) were used by many teachers. Incentives and rewards, such as videos and game time were used by some teachers (41%, n=57) to motivate students. Additionally, teachers used software that they felt increased engagement or mindfulness. Taking attendance was also used to increase engagement. Project based learning (22%, n=31) and resilience training (19%, n=27) were not used by as many teachers to increase engagement during remote learning.

**Table 7. Tools and strategies used to encourage remote student learning**

	Percent Utilizing Tool/Strategy	Number of Teachers
Encouraged sharing of positive events in their lives	76%	105
Positive behavioral supports	71%	98
Allotting time for student conversation during synchronous video class time	65%	91
Student choice (including Choice Boards)	43%	60
Incentives / rewards	41%	57
Project based learning	22%	31
Resilience/ Grit teaching	19%	27
Other	6%	9
Total	100%	139

### **Student Attendance**

While public school enrollment was down overall, special education directors for the most part felt special education enrollment in their district was unchanged (62%, n=49). Slightly more directors felt their district special enrollment increased (22%, n=17) than decreased (16%, n=13) from pre-pandemic levels. Although the numbers of directors in remote rural areas reporting a change in enrollment was small, a larger percentage (32% n=6) reported a decline in special education enrollment (see Table 8).

**Table 8. Change in Special Education Enrollment from Pre-Pandemic, by locale**

	Number of respondents	Enrollment increased	Enrollment stayed about the same	Enrollment decreased
City or Suburban	19	26%	63%	11%
Small town	41	24%	63%	12%
Remote rural	19	11%	58%	32%
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>16%</b>

Absenteeism has long been a concern for students with IEPs. This year, teachers felt there was an increase in both in-person and remote learning absences for most of their students. An increase in in-person absences and remote absences was seen regardless of the learning format for most students this school year. Tables 9 and 10 show changes in In-person and remote student absences by instructional format. Overall, 77% of teachers (n=95) felt that in-person absences increased for most of their students. Only six teachers (5%) felt in-person absences decreased. In schools that were in-person for most students, 67% of teachers (n=35) reported in-person absences increased this school year and 60% of these teachers felt remote learning absences increased this school year for most students. More teachers in schools where most students were remote or in hybrid learning, reported in-person absences (83%, n=60) and remote learning absences (81%, n=66) increased for most students. Increase or decrease in student attendance did not vary by locale.

**Table 9. Change in In-person student absences for most students by instructional format**

Format	Decrease in Absences	No change	Increase in Absences	Number of Responses
Hybrid (In-person 2 days per week, remote 2-3 days per week)	3%	14%	83%	63
In-person for younger students, hybrid for older students	0%	11%	89%	9
In-person 4 days per week	16%	21%	63%	19
In-person 5 days per week	3%	27%	70%	33
<b>Overall (all formats)</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>124</b>

**Table 10. Change in Remote student absences for most students by instructional format**

Format	Decrease in absences	No change	Increase in absences	Number of Responses
Fully remote	0%	0%	100%	4
Hybrid (In-person 2 days per week, remote 2-3 days per week)	9%	11%	80%	70
In-person for younger students, hybrid for older students	0%	14%	86%	7
In-person, 4 days per week	14%	36%	50%	14
In-person, 5 days per week	3%	31%	66%	29
<b>Overall (all formats)</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>124</b>

Directors reported taking steps to re-engage absent students with IEPs. Only two directors (2%) said they did not take steps to contact students who were absent. Most began with teacher email or phone contact (94%, n=89). The next step of social worker or administrator phone calls or emails was taken by 88% of districts (n=84). Two-thirds of directors (68%, n=65) said that they had reported students with IEPs to DHS due to chronic absences. In addition to the present choices, directors could choose to write-in other actions. Sixteen directors (17%) said their districts also dealt with absences in IEP meetings. Three said they increased student in-person time when absences were an issue.

Some feel that home visits by school personnel may have increased this year but in some districts they were stopped due to COVID19 precautions. In our survey home visits were done in many districts. Over a quarter of directors (28%, n=27) said their teachers made home visits to chronically absent students. Over half the districts (55%, n=52) said home visits were made by social workers or administrators.

Directors were presented with a list of actions they said their district had taken this school year and asked to identify which actions had been successful in improving absences. Table 11 on the next page shows the actions taken and the perceived success of those actions. While there were 95 directors indicating their districts had taken actions to re-engage students, just 72 (76%) indicated that at least one option was successful in improving attendance. Success of an action was based on the number of directors (72) answering this question. Teachers' actions were successful in reducing absences in about half of the districts (53%, n=37). Actions taken by individuals other than the teacher were successful in about two of three districts. These include social worker or administrator phone call or email (68%, n=45), social worker or administrator

home visit (69%, n=27), school resource officer contact (58%, n=21), and school report to DHS (62%, n=31).

**Table 11. Success of actions taken to decrease student absences.**

Action taken	Number taking action	Percentage reporting action was effective
Teacher phone call or email	70	53%
Social worker or administrator phone call or email	66	68%
School report to DHS	50	62%
Social worker or administrator home visit	39	69%
School resource officer contact	36	58%
Teacher home visit	21	29%
Total	72	--

In an open-ended question, a few of the directors commented on the issue of student absences. Several mentioned the frustration of trying to engage students and families during remote learning. They felt they were up against on-line gaming and other activities. Students could just log off at will. Even when fulltime in-person learning was offered, some parents signed their children up for remote learning believing attendance would not be required since it was not required in the spring remote learning period. IEP meetings were helpful in dealing with some student absences. One district had success in returning those who were chronically absent for remote learning back to an in-person situation. Directors also said that there is no consequence to families when a student is chronically absent. One mentioned a possible \$250 fine. Several felt schools are being asked to enforce truancy laws without any authority. Directors feel that schools need better DHS and “DA” support to get students to attend school regularly.

### **Student Outcomes**

Table 12 breaks down standardized assessments collected in grades PK-8. Special Education directors reported most of their districts (88%, n=68) were testing all of their students with a standardized test such as NWEA. Several districts were using more than one test or testing protocol. Only four directors (5%) reported that their district has not done standardized testing of

students this year. Three of these non-testing districts had most students in a hybrid or in-person learning structure. The most often used testing protocol was NWEA administered to all students (62%, n=51). Five additional districts administered NWEA to selected students. There was not a difference in geographic area or locale between districts that used NWEA and those that did not use NWEA.

**Table 12. Standardized assessments collected this year in prekindergarten through grade 8.**

	Percent of respondents	Number of respondents
None -- no standardized assessments have been conducted so far this year	5%	4
NWEA, administered to ALL students in the participating grade levels	62%	51
Kindergarten special education screening	49%	40
Other academic benchmark / universal screening (e.g. STAR, AIMSweb) administered to ALL students in a grade	48%	39
Preschool special education screening (for public preK programs)	40%	33
Progress monitoring or screening tests administered only to SELECTED students within a grade	39%	32
NWEA, administered to SELECTED students	13%	11
Other	12%	10
Total	100%	82

For students with an IEP, there are concerns about increased learning losses from changes made during the pandemic but as may be seen in Table 13 below, there are also reports of students who are doing better this year. Special Education directors were asked what percentage of their students with IEPs had performed better this academic year than they would have been expected to perform in a typical academic year. The most common answer was between one and ten percent of students performed better this year (38%, n=30). Eighteen percent of directors (n=14) said more than a quarter of their students with an IEP performed better than expected this school year. Seven of the thirteen directors who said none of their students with an IEP performed better than expected were in districts where most students were attending school five days per week. Excluding districts that were operating in the traditional five day in-person

format, the percentage of students performing better than expected this year did not vary by district size, area of the state or locale.

**Table 13. Percentage of students with an IEP who performed better this year than they would have been expected to perform in a typical year.**

	Percent of Respondents	Number of Respondents
None; all have performed the same or worse than expected this year	17%	13*
1 to 10%	38%	30
11% to 25%	27%	21
26% to 50%	17%	13
More than 50%	1%	1
Total		78

*\*7 of these schools have most students in five days per week for in-person learning (i.e., learning format is similar to pre-pandemic)*

Teachers’ perspectives on their students’ academic progress and well-being during the year was sought. To get a clearer picture of how students with an IEP are faring during the pandemic, different questions were asked on the two separate special education teacher surveys. One survey asked about how students with IEPs fared during remote learning. The second survey asked about how students fared last spring (during emergency school closures) and in the fall of this school year, when schools used a variety of formats (in-person, remote, and hybrid).

In the first survey, when teachers were asked about how students fared during remote learning compared to their usual academic progress, about a third of teachers (31%, n=48) felt most all students experienced a decline compared to their usual academic progress. The majority of teachers (59%, n=92) felt during remote learning, the number of students experiencing a decline in their progress was greater than the number of students experiencing an improvement. However, two-thirds of teachers (61%, n=96) noted that during remote learning there were some students who experienced an improvement compared to their usual progress. Eight percent of teachers (n=13) were unsure of how their students fared during remote learning. In the second survey, teachers were asked separate questions about how students fared academically. First, they were asked how students fared during spring remote learning, then they were asked how their students fared in the fall semester. In the spring during remote learning, 66% of teachers (n=105) felt most all students or more students experienced a decline than experienced an

improvement compared to their usual progress and eight percent (n=12) felt more students experienced improvement compared to their usual progress or most students experienced and improvement compared to their usual progress. In the fall, the situation was reversed. Twenty-two percent of teachers (n=36) felt most all students or more students experienced a decline than experienced an improvement. About half of the teachers (48%, n=75) felt more students were experiencing an improvement compared to their usual progress or most students experienced an improvement compared to their usual progress.

**Table 14. Compared to their academic progress in a typical year, how are your students with IEPs faring so far in Fall 2020?**

	Percent	Frequency
Most all are experiencing a decline compared to their typical progress	11%	18
More are experiencing a decline than experiencing an improvement	11%	18
About equal numbers experiencing a decline as experiencing an improvement	26%	41
More are experiencing an improvement than a decline	42%	66
Most all are experiencing an improvement compared to their typical progress	6%	9
I am not sure how most of my students' learning was affected, or N/A	4%	7
Total	100%	159

Teachers in each survey were also asked slightly different questions about students' well-being. Their responses are reflected in Table 15. In the first survey, over half of the teachers (62%, n=97) reported that during remote learning most of their students' well-being was worse than usual and only five percent (n=8) felt their students' well-being was improved compared to usual. Nineteen teachers (12%) were not sure how their students' well-being was affected. The second group of teachers was asked about their students' well-being *this fall* compared to their usual well-being. Thirty-seven percent (n=58) felt this fall most students experienced a decline or more students experienced a decline compared to an improvement. About a quarter of teachers (24%, n=38) reported their students' well-being was improved this fall compared to their usual well-being.

**Table 15. How is your students' overall well-being during the Fall 2020 semester compared a typical school year?**

	Percent	Number of responses
Most all are experiencing a decline	11%	17
More are experiencing a decline than experiencing an improvement	26%	41
About equal numbers experiencing a decline as experiencing an improvement	33%	53
More are experiencing an improvement than a decline	17%	27
Most are experiencing an improvement	7%	11
I am not sure how most of my students' well-being is being affected	6%	10
Total	100%	159

**Who does well with remote learning?** Educators felt there were some students who made more academic progress than usual during remote learning. They also identified that there were some students whose well-being was improved during remote learning. One teacher said

*“Remote learning has shifted the abilities of the students. Some students have risen and done far better than when they were in school. I think regular in-school anxiety levels and distractions are a massive difficulty for all students. We spend huge amounts of time trying to pull students attention to their work and it usually is a fruitless attempt.”*

Both special education directors and special education teachers were asked a multiple choice question on what are characteristics of students that do better with remote learning than in-person learning. The question wording did not specially limit this question to students with an IEP. Teachers wrote in social anxiety; it was then included as a multiple choice item on the director survey. The order that the choices were presented to teacher and directors was inverted. The teacher choices began with involved parent or caregiver and ended with specific diagnoses. The multiple choices for directors began with diagnoses and ended with parent or caregiver. Table 16 shows a breakdown of characteristics as reported by teachers and directors. The majority of special education directors (75%) and special education teachers (86%) identified having an involved parent or caregiver as a factor in students that did better with remote learning. Social anxiety was identified by three-quarters of directors (73%) as a characteristic of students that do better with remote learning. The directors also identified behavioral challenges and poor social emotional functioning as characteristics of students that do better with remote learning. Higher executive function and older age were identified by directors and teachers.

**Table 16. Characteristics of students of who do better with remote learning than in-person instruction.**

	Directors (n=81)	Teachers (n=158)
Involved parent/caregiver	75%	86%
Social anxiety*	73%	--
Behavioral challenges	35%	8%
Poor social emotional functioning	33%	15%
Older students	30%	33%
Higher level of executive functioning	22%	67%
Behavioral health provider in home	16%	11%
Autism	15%	11%
ADHD	14%	7%
Female gender*	6%	--
Slow processing speed	5%	6%
Younger students	4%	3%
Lower level of executive functioning	2%	2%
Male gender*	1%	--
None, I have not seen any students do better with remote learning	7%	8%
Total	100%	100%

\* Included as a multiple-choice option only on the director survey

In addition to student factors that contribute to positive outcomes with remote learning, teacher responses were used to identify policies that correlated with more students doing well during remote learning. When districts expected students to spend more time in remote learning their academic performance was better than in districts that had lower expectations. In schools with higher time expectations for students of two hours or more daily, 17% of teachers (n=19) felt most students experienced an improvement in academic progress compared to their typical progress or more students experienced an improvement than a decline. This level of improvement was only seen by two teachers in schools that expected one to two hours of student learning time and not in schools that expected less than an hour of learning. The percentage of teachers feeling more students experienced a decline from their typical progress than experienced an improvement was lower in schools that expected students to spend two hours or more on learning daily (55%, n=63) than in schools that expected remote students to spend two hours or less each day on learning (73%, n=22).

## Positive Learning Outcomes in Fall 2020

Special education directors were asked what went well this fall. In open-ended comments, several directors felt the smaller class sizes they had this year benefitted students. One felt so strongly about the benefits seen with smaller class sizes, that they suggested more funding be given to school districts that have less than ten students in first grade and kindergarten classes. Directors felt there were fewer behavioral problems this year. They noted that remote instruction helped some students with socio-emotional challenges concentrate on academics. With remote learning, schools had more contact with families and got a better understanding of students' home environments. With Zoom IEP meetings, there was better parent participation in some districts. When asked to comment about the positive things they saw this school year, some directors did not note any positives, but reiterated their belief that it was better to have students in-person.

Directors were also asked to comment on the effectiveness of different supports that their districts provided students this year. Ratings of effectiveness of the additional services to support students appear in Table 17. Almost all directors felt smaller class sizes and more individual instruction was effective. Half of the directors felt smaller class sizes (51%, n= 41) and more individual instruction was *highly effective* (51%, n= 41). There were nine special education directors that felt class sizes did not change. Most districts did not add more tutors (59%), revise IEPs to add more services (61%) or increase the number of students that attended summer school this past summer (68%). The districts that added these supports felt they had medium to low effectiveness. Fifty-seven percent of directors (n=41) said their districts increased behavioral support and/or counseling services this year but only five directors (7%) felt this was a *highly effective* support.

**Table 17. The effectiveness of additional services to support students with IEPs this year.**

	Number Implementing	Percent Rating Highly effective	Percent Rating Medium effect	Percent Rating Low effectiveness
More individual instruction	74	55%	42%	3%
Smaller class sizes	71	58%	42%	0%
Increased behavioral, counseling services	41	12%	54%	34%
Added more tutors outside of scheduled instructional time	29	28%	52%	21%
Revised IEPs to add more services	28	7%	61%	32%
Increased the number of students who attended summer school or extended year programs this past summer	23	17%	48%	35%

### **Benefits of Remote Learning this Fall**

While directors were asked about over-all instruction this fall, teachers were asked specifically about remote learning benefits and challenges this fall. Ninety-four percent of teachers (n=131) identified at least one benefit of remote learning. The most commonly perceived benefits of remote learning for their students with an IEP were more individualized learning (47%, n=66), students feeling less social/peer pressure (44%, n=62), and parent/caregivers better understanding how their student learns (41%, n=58). All choices are shown below in Table 18. Three teachers wrote in benefits which were increased sleep, smaller class sizes when they were in-person, and fewer distractions during the day such as assemblies, and field trips.

**Table 18. Benefits of remote learning seen in any of their students who are at least partially remote this school year.**

	Percent	Number of responses
Students are able to do more individualized learning	47%	66
Students feeling less social/peer pressure	44%	62
Parent/caregivers better understand how their student learns	41%	58
Parent/caregivers better understand academic goals	24%	33
Some students are more likely to speak up in class	23%	32
Parents/caregivers are better able to assist students with learning	13%	18
Students are better able to integrate their learning into daily activities	11%	16
Parents/caregivers are better able to assist students with therapy	2%	3
Other	2%	3
Nothing is going well for any of my students with an IEP	6%	9
Total	--	140

### **Challenges of Remote Learning this Fall**

The challenges of remote learning have been discussed in the popular press and news media. Half of teachers felt at least one of their students had inadequate internet access. One in seven teachers had at least one student whose household lacked enough internet devices for all students. One sample of teachers was asked how many families lacked internet access. Only two teachers felt this was the situation for most students. Forty-seven percent of teachers felt that few to some of their student families were unable to connect to the internet. This was more common in rural areas with 73% of teachers reporting that they had student families that were not able to connect to the internet. Southern Maine had 43% of teachers with student families that could not connect to the internet while approximately 50% of teachers in others areas reported this challenge. Teachers who reported that they had student families that lacked enough devices or internet service, were asked if they had families that refused assistance such as Wi-Fi hot spots. About 40% of these teachers felt that they had one or more student families that refused assistance in connecting to the internet.

**Table 19. The number of student families who are unable to connect all students to the internet during remote learning this school year.**

	Percent	Number of responses
Most student families are unable to connect all students to the internet	1%	2
Some student families are unable to connect all students to the internet	25%	36
Few student families are unable to connect all students to the internet	22%	31
No student families are unable to connect all students to the internet	45%	65
I do not know	6%	9

**Table 20. The number of families with inadequate devices or internet service that refuse resources or assistance offered by the school (such as Wi-Fi hotspots)**

	Percent	Number of responses
All parents/caregivers did	2%	2
Most parents/caregivers did	1%	1
Some parents/caregivers did	11%	10
Few parents/caregivers did	26%	23
No parents/caregivers did	59%	52

A bigger challenge faced by teachers than internet connectivity was lack of engagement by students and their families. Just one in six teachers (16%, n=46) did not report that lack of attention or motivation to engage remote learning was a challenge for their students. Academic challenges faced by partially remote students may be seen in Table 21. Two hundred fifty teachers (84%) reported lack of motivation to engage was a challenge for their students. Four of five teachers (79%, n=234) reported that not having an adult or caregiver to assist the student was a challenge for at least one of their students. Teachers noted that some disabilities that their students have, visual impairments (6%, n=17) and auditory impairments (5%, n=14) presented a challenge. Teachers also wrote in that some students were non-verbal or had slow processing speed, which presented a challenge to remote learning. One teacher said at least one student lacked a quiet place to learn.

**Table 21. Academic challenges faced by at least one of their students who are at least partially remote this school year.**

	Percent	Number of teachers
Lack of attention or motivation to engage in remote learning independently	84%	250
No adult (parent/caregiver, BHP) available to assist	79%	234
Inadequate skill or knowledge to manage technology independently	66%	195
Inadequate internet access	66%	196
Inadequate number of devices for all students in the household	14%	41
Visual impairments	6%	17
Auditory impairments	5%	14
Other	5%	14
None that I know about	2%	5
Total	--	296

When teachers were asked what social emotional challenges were faced by students who are partially remote a lack of structure and routine in the home was listed by almost all teachers (93%, n=131). The majority of teachers' classes had students facing the challenges of insufficient emotional support (65%, n=91), absent parent or caregiver (57%, n=81) and responsibility for younger children (57%, n=80). Half of teachers (48%, n=68) said food insecurity was an issue for at least one of their students. Most teachers did not have any students with unstable housing, household members with substance abuse or domestic violence occurring within the home. Less than a third of teachers reported that at least one of their students had an unstable housing situation (33%, n=47), a household member with substance abuse (30%, n=43) and domestic violence occurring within the home (18%, n=26). Additional social challenges teachers mentioned included parent interfering in learning, lack of student physical activity, and the students' inability to comprehend what the pandemic is.

An additional question was asked about what challenges teachers faced in communicating with student parents and caregivers. Five out of six teachers (84%, n=117) had at least one student family not responding to communications. Sixty-three percent of teachers had students with parent or caregivers who were not able to assist students or respond to teacher communications during the normal school day. Parent and caregiver characteristics that were

seen as communication challenges to teachers are low levels of caregiver technical literacy (64%, n=89), caregiver literacy (33%, n=46), and non-English speaking caregivers (9%, n=13). Internet connectivity was again noted in this question. Over a third of teachers (39%, n=54) said their student caregivers lack of home devices or adequate home internet services presented a communications challenge. Ten percent (n=14) said teachers or Ed techs lack of devices or adequate home internet service presented a communications challenge.

### **Strategies that worked**

Teachers were asked an open-ended question on what worked for them. They emphasized developing relationships with parents and caregivers. They felt making home calls, communicating in multiple ways with families, and setting weekly check-ins with each student family were crucial for successful remote learning. Teachers gave students supplies that they use at school such as cards for eye gaze responses and other manipulatives then trained families on how to best use them with their student. Teachers also felt it was important to maintain their individual relationships with each student and facilitate conversation between students.

Setting schedules and routines for in-person and remote learning was what many teachers felt was needed in remote learning. Some gave examples of checklists that students were to complete and show to their teachers and parents. Teachers provided structure for students to systematically keep track of their work. Others set clear expectations for learning times. One teacher said their students were expected to dress for class each day.

Other teachers felt strategies that they used during the in-person classroom were key to successful remote learning. Several said they devoted more in-person learning time to helping students master technology. They gave instructional packets that mirrored what they were doing online. Teachers adjusted their lessons to “teach what is important”. Several mentioned specific software programs and others noted the plethora of information for remote learning available on the internet.

### **Parent Roles**

Parents and caregivers were identified in several previous questions as being beneficial to student learning. Teachers were asked to gauge how much time most of their students’ parents or caregivers spent actively assisting their students with remote learning. As may be seen in Table 22, in the upper grades, parental involvement was less. About half as many elementary teachers

(19%, n=12) as high school teachers (41%, n=16) said most of their parents and caregivers did not assist their students on a regular basis. More elementary teachers (19%, n=9) than high school teachers (13%, n=14) said most parents or caregivers spent more than two hours daily helping their child with learning activities. When comparisons were done by the percentage of parents with a high school education or less, there was not a difference in the hours most parents spent helping their children.

**Table 22. Estimated time most parents spent assisting students with learning by grade level**

	Did not participate on regular basis	One to several days per week participation	Daily, two hours or less	Daily, more than 2 hours up to 4 hours	Total
Elementary	19%	21%	42%	19%	48
Middle level	35%	22%	30%	13%	23
High school	41%	18%	36%	5%	39
Total	30%	20%	37%	13%	110

### Comparison to Spring 2020

Most of the teachers had the same teaching assignment (59%, n=89) as last spring. When the pandemic began last spring, one in five teachers (19%, n=47) said their district policy was to continue introducing new material as previously planned. About half of the teachers (47%, n=119) were in districts that initially reviewed previously taught material, and then began introducing new material. Over a third of teachers (35%, n=87) said their districts did not introduce new material to students. Twelve teachers (5%) said they did not provide instruction to students after schools closed last spring. Nine of these teachers that did not provide instruction this spring (75%), reported that their district policy provided guidance on the material covered in academic instruction. City and suburban school special education teachers (12%, n=9) were more likely than small town and rural special education teachers (2%, n=3) to say that they did not provide instruction to their students after school closure last spring. The teachers that did not provide instruction taught at all grade levels but were concentrated in larger schools. Two-thirds (67%, n=8) were in schools with more than 400 students. As the survey sample was weighted toward small town and rural schools, this may under represent the percentage of special education teachers who did not provide academic instruction last spring.

About half of the teachers (n=119) said that instruction in the spring was primarily done by synchronous, interactive, video classes. This was the most common means of providing instruction at all school grade levels. A third (34%, n=86) said their primary method of instruction last spring was instructional packets. Using instructional packets as the primary instruction method was more common in elementary grades (40%, n=36) than in middle school (18%, n=8) and high school (30%, n=18). Seventeen percent of teachers (n=34) said their primary means of instruction last spring was asynchronous video lectures. When the district policy was to only review previously taught materials, teachers were as likely to use instructional packets (42%, n=33) than synchronous video classes (36%, n=28) as their primary mode of instruction.

Table 23 shows the extent of student engagement in remote learning in the spring. During the spring all teacher respondents felt at least a few students engaged once. The majority of teachers (59%, n=52) felt most or all students engaged at least once. When the primary method of instruction was synchronous interactive video classes, 71% of teachers (n=24) said most or all of their students engaged at least once. When teachers used instructional packets as their primary mode of instruction, 48% of these teachers (n=18) said most or all of their students engaged at least once. About a third of teachers said that most or all of their students maintained regular attendance and participation during the spring. Based on mode of instruction, there was not a significant difference in the percentage of teachers reporting regular attendance and participation.

**Table 23. The number of students who engaged at least once during remote learning in the spring.**

	Percent	Number of responses
Few students did	18%	16
Some students did	23%	20
Most students did	43%	38
All students did	16%	14
Total	100%	88

The district policy on introducing new material during remote learning last spring affected how many students engaged at least once and how many students participated regularly. Table 24 compares student engagement during remote learning with type of delivery of teaching materials. When the district adopted a policy of continuing to introduce new material as scheduled, 88% of teachers (n=15) said most or all of their students engaged at least once. Only

one teacher in these schools said few students engaged at least once. When the district policy was to only review previously taught materials, 36% of teachers (n=9) said most or all of their students engaged at least once and an equal number (36%, n=9) said few students engaged at least once. Most or all students participated regularly in over half of the teachers' classes (53%, n=9) when the district policy was to continue introducing new material as scheduled and in a quarter of teachers' classes (24%, n=6) when the policy was to review previously taught material only.

**Table 24. Spring district remote learning policy and number of students who engaged at least once during remote learning in the spring.**

	Few students engaged	Some students engaged	Most students engaged	All students engaged	Total
Review previously taught material only	36%	28%	24%	12%	22
Initially review previously taught material, then begin introducing new material	13%	24%	49%	13%	39
Continue introducing new material as planned	6%	6%	59%	29%	12
Total	18%	23%	44%	16%	87

**Table 25. Spring district remote learning policy and the number of students who maintained regular attendance and participation during remote learning in the spring.**

	Few students	Some students	Most students	All students	Total
Review previously taught material only	46%	29%	21%	4%	24
Initially review previously taught material, then begin introducing new material	31%	29%	38%	2%	45
Continue introducing new material as planned	12%	35%	47%	6%	17
Total	31%	30%	35%	3%	86

Two-thirds of all teachers reported that the majority of their students suffered academic learning losses during the spring school closures. However, those teachers who connected with students through synchronous video instruction were less likely to report declines in student

academic progress than those who taught using asynchronous video instruction or who did not provide instruction in the spring. Table 26 shows a breakdown of teacher perceptions of how students progressed academically in Spring 2020. There were a few teachers using instructional packets (8%, n=4) and synchronous video (10 %, n=8) who felt more students experienced an improvement than a decline. None of the thirty teachers using asynchronous video recordings or not teaching in the spring felt more students improved than declined.

**Table 26. How most students fared academically based on the primary method of instruction in the spring of 2020**

	Most all are experiencing a decline	More decline than improvement	About equal	More improvement than decline	I am not sure how most of my students' learning was affected, or N/A	Total Number
Synchronous (interactive) video classes	33%	25%	29%	10%	4%	80
Instructional packets	42%	33%	13%	8%	4%	48
Asynchronous video recordings	60%	15%	15%	0%	10%	20
Did not provide instruction in the spring	50%	30%	10%	0%	10%	10
Total	40%	27%	21%	8%	5%	158

Teachers indicated therapy was available to students during remote learning during the spring. Only three teachers (4%) answered this question as not applicable. Sixty-two percent of teachers said some or most of their students participated in therapy during the spring. One teacher said all students participated.

### **Other factors affecting outcomes**

While most students did not progress as expected during remote learning, there were students who progressed as expected or at an accelerated rate. In this section, environmental factors that might affect student progress were examined. As discussed earlier in the report, when teachers were asked how students fared during remote learning in the spring and remote learning, the over-all findings were higher expectations resulting in more students performing at or above projected learning in a normal school year. Students who were expected to spend more hours learning did. Students in synchronous interactive classes did better than students who had a

different primary method of instruction. When the district policy was to continue introducing new material, more students engaged with learning and stayed engaged.

No regional or geographic factor was clearly related to how most students fared academically. When student academic progress was looked at by the percentage of parents with a high school education or less, there was not a difference in how teachers felt students fared during remote learning or in the spring. There was not a difference between city, suburban, small town and remote rural students' academic progress. Compared to their expected progress, the academic progress of students in elementary, middle school and high school students was similar.

### **Supporting students who fall behind**

With many students not making their expected progress during remote learning and the increase in absences, the question of how school should help students recover lost learning time is an issue most districts are facing. Special education directors and special education teachers were asked their opinions about an extended school year (summer school) and having some students repeat a grade. They then were asked an open-ended question on how districts could best help students that fell behind.

Most teachers (78%, n=244) agreed districts should consider summer school for students with IEPs that fell behind during remote learning. In forty districts that had not had summer school in the past two summers (2020, 2019), the majority of teachers (63%, n=25) felt their district should consider summer school this year for students with an IEP who fell behind. Directors were in less agreement. Half of the directors (51%, n=41) agreed with a statement that extended school year or summer school should play a key role in their district's strategy for catching students up at the end of the year.

One idea that has been discussed is having students who did not attend school regularly or fell behind for other reasons, repeat the school year. Levels of director and Teacher agreement can be seen in Table 27. Teachers had mixed reactions to whether their district should consider this idea for students who fell behind. Fifteen percent of teachers (n=48) *strongly disagreed*, fourteen percent of teachers *neither agreed or disagreed* (n=43) and nine percent of teachers (n=30) *strongly agreed* that their district should consider holding back students who fell behind. Half of city teachers (50%, n=20) showed agreement that districts should consider holding students back while there was less agreement with holding students back in the other

locales; suburban (31%, n=16), small town (40%, n=61) and remote rural (36%, n=23). There was not a difference between elementary, middle school and high school teachers on whether or not districts should consider holding students back. Directors were asked if holding students back was a good option for some students. They were more opposed to the idea than teachers. Sixty-five percent (n=52) disagreed with the statement “holding back some students was a good option for some students”.

**Table 27. Agreement with “Districts should consider holding back students who fall behind in remote learning”**

	Directors n=80	Teachers n=316
Strongly disagree	30%	15%
Disagree	26%	18%
Somewhat disagree	9%	14%
Neither agree nor disagree	11%	14%
Somewhat agree	10%	19%
Agree	14%	11%
Strongly agree	0%	9%

Some teachers who disagreed with holding students back or having them attend summer school expressed the feelings in the open-ended answers. A few teachers noted that special education teachers work at the students’ level. One teacher wrote *“We work with the students where they are at. Every child in the world didn't get appropriate schooling for a duration of time. That's okay. We can teach where they are at, and see great progress.”* Other teachers suggested that making up for lost learning should occur over time, saying it may take years. While in a previously discussed survey question, teachers noted that some students were learning at an accelerated pace this fall, no teacher in the open-ended question mentioned accelerated learning gains occurring this fall. Some teachers felt holding students back or having them attend summer school was “punitive”.

Directors elaborated on their feelings about options of summer school and having students repeat a grade in the open-ended question. There were some strong opinions expressed. One director felt all students should attend school this summer” to provide much needed social interaction for students with disabilities”. Other directors raised concerns about extended school

year or summer school this year. Several noted that teachers and staff were burned out and did not want to work this summer. Another noted that attendance probably would not be good at summer school this year. This is based on low attendance this school year and historically lower summer attendance. Perception was important. Some directors also felt summer school and holding students back a year should not be used as punishment for attendance issues or a disability. One director said her district uses the Lights Retention Scale in decision-making. This scale factors in absences and discourages holding back students with a disability.

Special Education directors were asked about the decision-making process in their district for holding a prekindergarten to grade eight student back. Ten percent of special education directors said that their districts do not hold students back. Another twelve percent of directors said that they did not know their districts process. Only about half of the directors (47%, n=37) believed that parents could appeal a school’s decision about retention. A breakdown of roles and processes can be seen in Table 28.

**Table 28. The role of different parties in making the decision for a PK to Grade 8 student to repeat a grade in their district.**

	Percentage of Directors	Number of Directors
Parents are able to initiate process	74%	58
Teachers or staff are able to initiate process	69%	54
Parents can appeal a school's decision about grade retention	47%	37
Parents can make the retention decision with little to no input from the school	8%	6
School staff can make the retention decision with little to no input from the parent/ guardian	3%	2
Not applicable, my district does not have students repeat grades	10%	8
I do not know	12%	9
Total	100%	78

Table 29 shows that when special education directors were asked about anticipated enrollments in summer school, sixty percent (n=48) anticipated an increase in the number of

students participating this summer. About half as many directors, 29% (n=23), felt there would be an increase in the number of students repeating a grade next year.

**Table 29. Anticipated enrollments**

	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Total Number
I anticipate an increase in the number of students who participate in extended year or summer school programs this year.	60%	20%	20%	80
I anticipate an increase in the number of students who repeat a grade next year.	29%	25%	46%	80

Other options on how to help students that fell behind were suggested by teachers. One group of teachers felt that graduation standards needed to be adjusted. A specific suggestion was to give state diplomas when the student met lower standards than the district standard. A few said students should be able to “show what they learned”. Decreasing the unified arts requirement was another idea.

There was an element of frustration in some teachers’ comments. They felt families and students needed to be more accountable. Many teachers noted that the reasons students fell behind was lack of consistency and routine at home. Other teachers pinpointed the primary cause of learning loss was students not attending school. Mandating attendance and requiring family participation in learning contracts seemed necessary to them. Another group of teachers emphasized the importance of engaging the parents and caregivers in their students learning. They suggested workshops for parents that focused on helping their child learn.

Many teachers suggested that increasing the number of Ed Techs and providing tutors would help students make-up lost learning. After school programs, study halls, additional resource time and even online classes were suggestions for providing additional instruction to students who fell behind. One teacher thought high school students could work as tutors for younger students. The difficulty in filling Ed Tech positions was mentioned by several teachers. One said, *“More support staff are needed for one-to-one, individualized remote and on-site support. But at my school, there are one-to-one positions that are not filled. We, reportedly, are not getting applications.”* Teachers wondered if increasing Ed Tech pay would help the situation.

There was not consensus among directors on how to best help students with IEPs who fell behind during remote learning. Fewer directors than teachers recommended letting students with IEPs who fell behind proceed at their own pace without providing additional supports to help them. One asked for help in getting students back to school or giving schools a positive way to let them go so “when they are ready to come back, even if they are 30 years old, they feel welcome and safe to do so.” One cautioned that intensifying learning in a session can increase anxiety and pressure on the student which are key contributors to student dysregulation and failure. Suggestions to help students that fell behind in remote learning also included a greater focus on social emotional learning and school wide Response to Intervention (RTI). One district is considering grouping students within a grade by ability. They envision a class of students below grade level that would receive additional supports, other classes at grade level and an accelerated class.

### **Supporting Teachers**

The vast majority of teachers (94%, n=148) felt that their workload increased this year. Three of four teachers (74%, n=117) felt it was *much heavier*. Teachers were asked to identify up to three tasks that contributed the most to their increased workload. Adapting lessons and learning materials for remote learning (91%, n=135) and time spent on technology set-up and use (84%, n=125) were tasks that were not previously part of teachers’ workload. Additionally teachers felt they had increased special education paperwork and administrative burdens (85%, n=126). Teachers felt they were spending more time communicating with parents and caregivers (84%, n=124). An additional task due to the pandemic was teaching and enforcing COVID19 precautions such as mask-wearing and social distancing (70%, n=113). Due to the perceived regional variation in mask wearing, this response was analyzed by locale and county. There was not a significant difference from city and suburbs to small town and rural areas or by county. The breakdown of responses is shown in Table 23. In addition to the survey selections, teachers wrote in some additional tasks. One mentioned there was a wider range of learner levels this school year after going remote this spring. Teachers had to train adult support personnel new to the classroom. They also trained Ed Techs for remote learning. One Ed Tech said she had been pulled to become a teacher this school year.

**Table 30. The three tasks that contributed the most to their teaching workload**

	Percent of teachers	Number of responses
Needing to adapt lessons or learning materials for remote instruction	91%	135
Increased special education paperwork / administrative burdens	85%	126
Time spent on technology set up and use	84%	125
Increased need to communicate with families or caregivers	84%	124
Teaching and enforcing COVID19 precautions (masking, social distancing, and hand-washing)	70%	103
Additional time needed to repeat instruction multiple times that I used to be able to deliver to several students at once	60%	89
Needing to adapt lessons or learning materials to a wider range of student learning levels due to missed instruction in the spring	55%	81
Increased time spent working with students on their social or emotional needs	53%	78
Increased staff meetings, including required professional development	46%	68
Increased time spent connecting students and families with resources, communicating with social workers and agencies, or other social supports	42%	62
Other	12%	18
Total	100%	148

Table 31 shows teacher choices when they were asked to identify what type of support would be most useful to them. They were asked to select up to three. There was not one specific type of support that the majority of teachers selected. The most common type of support teachers wanted was improved technology support for themselves, students and student families (43%, n=68). Two choices for additional educational staff were presented in the survey. One method was for Ed Techs that they would supervise and the other was for contract teachers that would handle remote learning students. About equal numbers of teachers wanted additional Ed Techs (34%, n=54) as wanted contract teachers for remote learning (30%, n=47). Twenty percent of teachers (n=32) wanted contracted support for remote learning curriculum. Additional behavioral/emotional supports (27%, n=42) and additional social worker supports for students and their families (20%, n=32) were desired by some teachers. Teachers also wanted Professional evaluation and professional growth (PE/PG) requirements relaxed (35%, n=55) and professional certification requirements relaxed (18%, n=28). Twenty-five teachers (16%)

indicated that they wanted increased protection against the virus. Eleven teachers selected access to high quality personal protective equipment, eleven others selected improved environmental working conditions and three teachers selected both of these supports. Several teachers wrote in that they wanted more “time”. Some defined this as more unscheduled time during the school day. Teachers also mentioned that they wanted a reduced caseload, adequate workspace, consistent legal counsel and guidelines on writing IEPs and better trained adult supports. One felt that some adult supports in their middle school were unable to do math and language arts at the middle school level.

**Table 31. The three supports that would be most useful to the teachers**

	Percent	Frequency
Improved technology support for myself, students and their families	43%	68
Relaxation of professional evaluation and professional growth requirements	35%	55
Additional educational technicians	34%	54
Contract teachers for remote instruction (teleservices)	30%	47
Additional behavioral/ emotional supports for students and their families	27%	42
Contracted support for curriculum for remote learners	20%	32
Additional social worker support for students and their families	20%	32
Relaxation of professional certification requirements	18%	28
Professional development	13%	21
Access to high quality personal protective equipment (PPE)	9%	14
Improved environmental working conditions (spacing, shields, ventilation)	9%	14
Increased access to therapies for students	5%	8
Other	10%	16
Total	100%	157

Even though teachers felt they were pressed for time and had increased administrative burdens, most teachers wanted professional development for remote learning. Only four percent of teachers (n=6) said they would not like additional support for professional learning this year. One said that they were being offered training through the department. The top choices for additional professional development for remote learning were increasing student engagement

(61%, n=96), and best practices for distance learning (49%, n=78). Teachers also wanted more information on remote learning student assessment (46%, n=72) and differentiated instruction (43%, n=68). Professional development on helping parents and caregivers establish routines and schedules (45%, n=71) and effective strategies for supporting their child (47%, n=75) were popular options. In the write-in comments, getting professional development on specific parent issues such as how to get parents not to interfere with the lessons, and getting socio-economic help for overwhelmed parents were mentioned.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

In this survey, about a quarter of teachers said most of their schools students were in a traditional five-day a week in-person instructional arrangement. However, the districts that were providing in-person instruction four or five days a week were mostly in small towns and remote rural areas. Because the sampling method for the surveys of special education teachers was chosen to ensure representation from small town and rural schools, this over-estimates the experiences of *students* in the traditional five day per week in-person instruction (since there are fewer students per teacher in small and rural schools).

Hybrid instruction—where students were in class two days per week and remote three days each week—was overall the most common method of instruction for most teachers' schools this fall. Most Special Education Directors for schools that were hybrid indicated that selected students with IEPs in their district received more in-person time than the default student schedule. However, smaller districts (i.e. those with fewer than 500 students) that were hybrid or fully remote were less likely to have more in-person time for students with IEPs than larger districts.

Almost all special education teachers reported that they had taught remotely this school year. On a daily basis, most special education teachers were teaching remote and in-person students.

Special education teachers reported that most students' well-being and academic progress was lower than expected during emergency remote learning in the spring. This fall, though, there were more students with IEPs whose academic progress in school was greater than expected than there were students who saw a decline in academic progress compared to a typical year. The average student well-being was similar to pre-pandemic.

Almost all Special Education Directors noted that there was a noteworthy percentage of students with IEPs doing *better* this school year than in typical school years. They attributed this to smaller class sizes and more individualized instruction.

Students' academic progress during remote learning was improved by district policies that promoted introducing new materials during spring learning and synchronous video instruction. Students were more likely to engage at least once and participate regularly when new learning was introduced. When districts expected students to engage for more time, students put in more hours.

In-person instruction was prioritized for younger students. Elementary special education teachers estimated that 40% of their students were taught in-person. During remote learning, about half of teachers expected elementary students to spend two to four hours in synchronous learning. Only one teacher said elementary students were expected to spend four hours or more in synchronous remote learning. The rest of the elementary teachers said their students were expected to spend less than two hours a day in synchronous remote learning. Elementary students were more likely than high school students to receive instructional packets as the primary mode of instruction last spring during school closures.

The most commonly perceived benefits of remote learning for their students with an IEP were more individualized learning (47%, n=66), students feeling less social/peer pressure (44%, n=62), and parent/caregivers better understanding how their student learns (41%, n=58). Special education teachers and directors noted that there are some students who are doing much better in remote learning than they had in traditional learning. Teachers and directors identified having involved parents was a key factor in students doing better in remote learning than in-person. Students with social anxiety and behavior problems were identified as ones that did better with remote learning.

Special education teachers identified several issues that were interfering with student learning. Parents were a key factor in student success. Most all teachers reported that there was an increase in student in-person and remote school day absences. This occurred regardless of the mode of instruction for most students: fully in-person, hybrid or fully remote. Some students lacked attention or motivation to engage remote learning. All students not having an adult or caregiver to assist them was common occurrence for teachers. Almost all teachers had some families who were not responding to communication during remote learning. Remote rural areas

had more families that lacked internet access for all students in the household. Across the state, forty percent of teachers that had students who lacked internet access reported that they had families that refused assistance such as Wi-Fi hot spots.

While most teachers agreed districts should consider summer school for students with IEPs that fell behind during remote learning, teachers were divided on whether districts should *consider* having students with IEPs who fell behind, repeat the academic grade year. Most special education directors disagreed with holding some students back a grade. Directors also raised concern about student participation in summer school this year. Directors also felt staffing for summer school this year would be difficult.

The vast majority of teachers felt that their workload increased this year. Three of four teachers felt it was *much heavier*. Teachers were divided on what type of assistance would best benefit them. Teachers for remote learning, a remote learning curriculum, additional Ed Techs, more technology support, increase social work supports and increased behavioral supports were all chosen by some teachers as supports that would be of value. Some teachers report that their districts have made attempts to hire additional staff, especially Ed Techs, but have not had applicants.

This year has been exceedingly challenging for students, families and teachers. At the time of writing in spring 2021, educators have been prioritized for vaccinations and there is hope for a return to more typical schooling in the 2021-22 school year, if not sooner. In the interim, schools have the unique opportunity (and challenge) to reflect upon what they have learned from this unplanned experience and do their best to integrate some of their innovations into ongoing practice. Some of these strategies are low or no-cost, but others—particularly the increased staffing levels that have been provided this year—would require a continuation of supplemental state and federal funds.

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