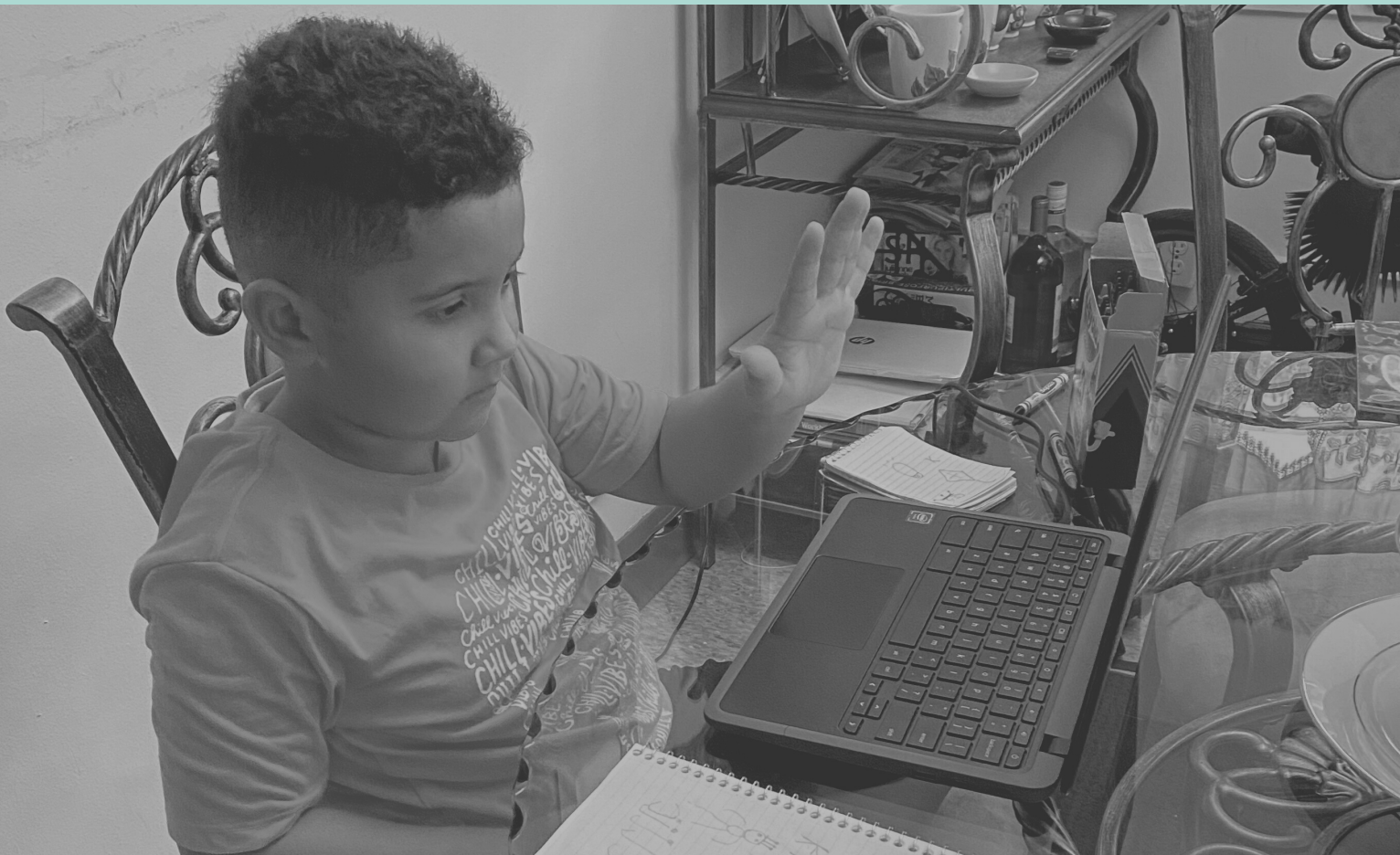




worcester education justice alliance

WORCESTER PARENT RESEARCH ON REMOTE LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



September 2020

CONTENTS

executive summary	02
introduction	04
methodology	05
data & results	08
recommendations	28

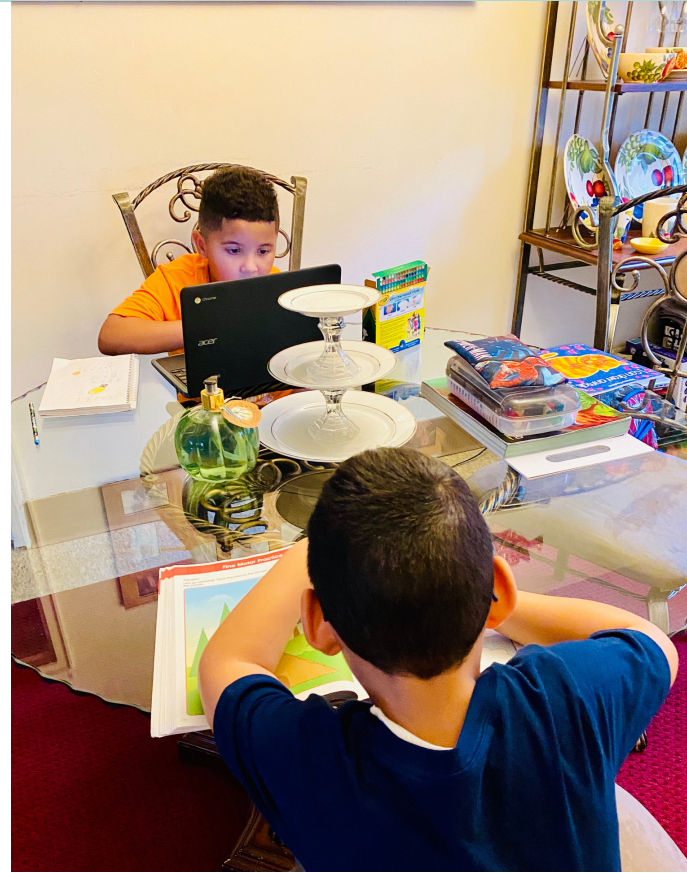
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During this unprecedented pandemic, schools had the difficult task of needing to redesign education instantaneously. Unfortunately, the experience of Worcester's working families when schools closed in-person education and support in the spring 2020 semester was challenging in many ways and they did not feel that they had sufficient support from schools and the district. Educators who had formed a community support group after schools were forced to close realized the deep need for the community voices reflecting on the challenges of remote learning to be heard by district administrators to ensure that the longer-term education plan to be implemented meets the needs of all students, including those for whom the current educational system does not serve. Parents/guardians, educators, students, and

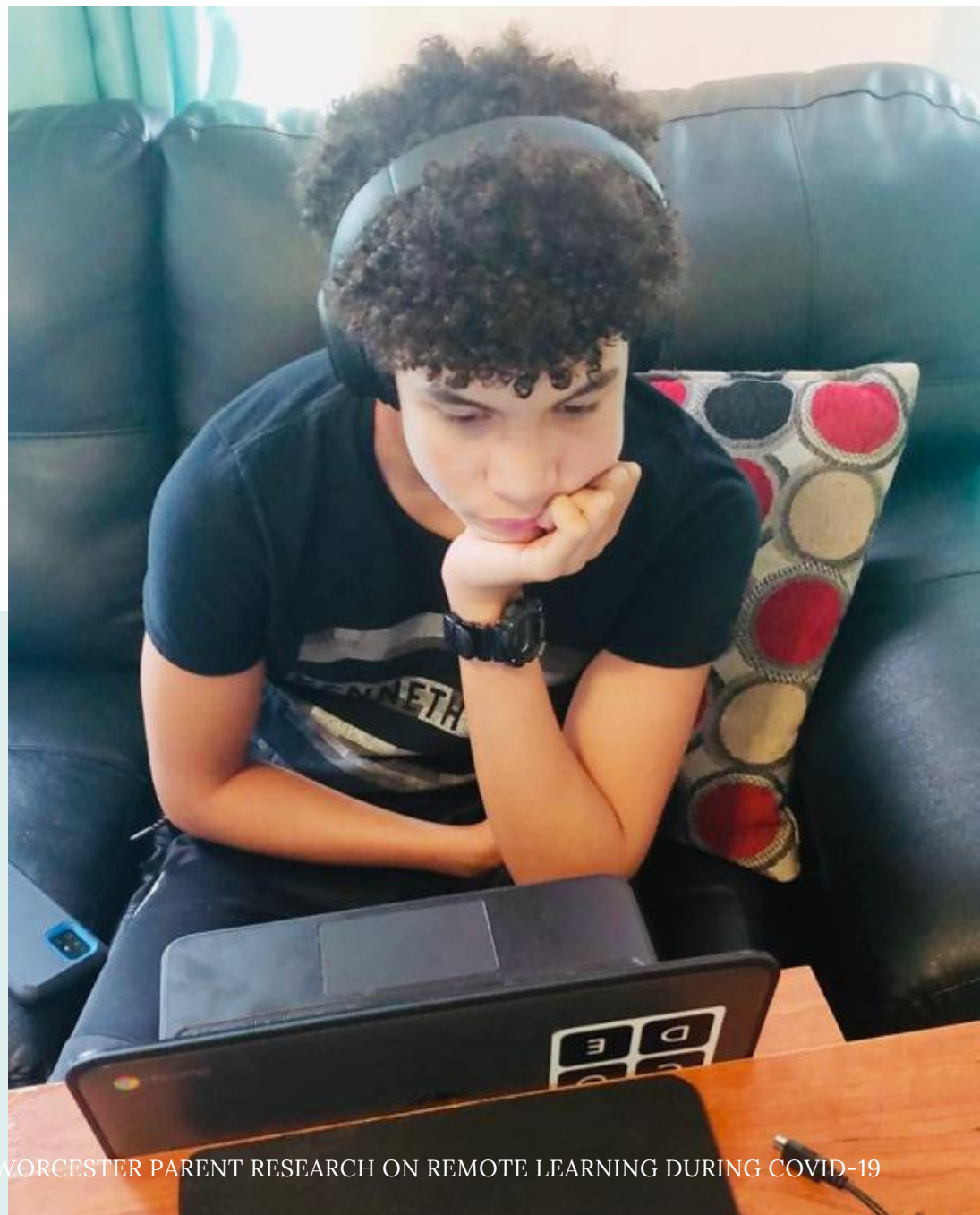


community organizers collaborated to conduct an online survey and six focus group sessions centering the experiences of working families in Worcester.

These challenges can be summarized in four major themes: household challenges, communication challenges, mental and emotional well-being concerns, and remote learning challenges. Household challenges encompassed scheduling concerns and the impacts of the abrupt change in routine for students, and housing and economic insecurity. Communication challenges included inconsistent and ineffective communication from schools and the district with a simultaneous lack of channels for communication and feedback from parents/guardians to schools and the district. Concerns about mental and emotional well-being included challenges facing the health and mental health of students and families, and concerns of safety, fear, and the risks of COVID-19. Remote learning concerns comprised challenges with technology, unplanned and unorganized curriculum, lack of district and school support for students with special needs and IEPs, and concerns about plans for fall school reopening.

Parents/guardians, educators, and students are calling for creative engagement for learning over the rote/traditional educational models that are challenging or impossible for students in this remote pandemic environment. We present a list of concrete recommendations for the district based on our analysis in order to address the challenges and concerns reported by working parents and families in Worcester. These recommendations include improvements to communication, an emphasis on addressing housing and economic needs in order to better support students' learning, working with parents/guardians to schedule remote learning in ways that mitigate the impacts of parent/guardian work schedules on learning, increasing technology support for remote learning, acknowledging the impacts of systemic inequalities, and providing clear, effective, and ongoing support for teachers/educators.

We are eager to continue these discussions and share our experiences with WPS if the district is open to listening and applying our feedback in order to create the most effective and supportive learning environment for **all** of Worcester's students.



INTRODUCTION

The Worcester Education Justice Alliance (WEJA) is students, parents, educators, school staff, and community members standing together, working to create more just and equitable public schools in Worcester. WEJA, the Parents Union of Massachusetts (PUMA), the Worcester Parent Action Group, YOU, Inc., and the Student Member Support Committee through EAW collaborated in various configurations to collect the qualitative and quantitative data analyzed in this report.

WEJA was closely monitoring the implementation of the remote learning programs in Worcester Public Schools (WPS) that have been in place due to the school's closures caused by COVID-19. WEJA held meetings with parents who had the opportunity to share their experiences and challenges with remote learning, express their needs and concerns about the pandemic, and discuss the upcoming school year. For the first time parents and educators were able to come together organically to have intimate conversations about their schooling experience without being under the microscope of the WPS.

With the city of Worcester moving forward with plans for the Fall 2020 reopening, it is important to have stakeholders—parents, teachers, students—at the table when making important decisions. However, that has not happened. For the sake of preserving the integrity of the struggles and stories related to the sudden switch from classroom to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, WEJA thought it essential to document the challenges families faced and shine a light on any positive experiences to build on as we plan for the future. We are concerned that the inequalities in access to educational resources along with the new reality for parents having to teach and work from home have added to the existing educational gaps, further compromising the futures of our community's already marginalized children. Now is the time to revisit our strategies and utilize the data collected for the implementation of future plans ensuring equal and equitable education for all as well as hold the WPS accountable to serve **all** of Worcester's students and families.



METHODOLOGY

During this unprecedented pandemic, schools had the difficult task of needing to redesign education instantaneously. Educators who had formed a community support group after COVID forced schools to close realized the deep need for the community voices reflecting on remote learning to be heard by district administrators to ensure that the longer-term education plan to be implemented met the needs of all students, including those for whom the current educational system does not serve.

In April 2020, WEJA and our collaborators set out to record this community voice. We used a mixed methods approach that combined a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews of Worcester families.

The survey, conducted online between April 20–May 25, 2020, asked parents to identify their families' unmet needs in nine different categories during the COVID-19 stay-at-home order. The survey was available in four languages and there were over 125 responses. Nelly Medina, PUMA's parent organizer, in collaboration with Worcester Community Connections of YOU, inc. and other community partners distributed the survey and recruited participants online



using random sampling to ensure that responses came from a wide-range of families. Quantitative data was analyzed using frequency and percentage distributions, and qualitative short-responses from the survey were grouped by themes.

The qualitative interviews were conducted over video conference between May-August 2020 in the form of open-ended focus group discussions between parents and between educators. These discussions were conducted in English and Spanish, and there were a total of 54 participants. It was important to us that parents feel comfortable sharing their honest feedback despite a power dynamic that could potentially exist between them and teachers. In order to help establish trust in the agreed plan to uplift community voices while maintaining anonymity, educators planned to create small focus groups with open ended questions so that parents could feel respected, listened-to, and heard. We convened four educator teacher sessions and three parent discussion sessions with no more than fifteen participants each, and prepared a few open-ended questions to spark discussion and feedback. We took detailed notes during the discussion, including direct quotes, themes, questions, and requests. Then, we categorized the topics addressed in each discussion, and grouped responses in these topics by theme.

Finally, we combined corresponding results from the quantitative analysis and the qualitative data review. This helped us to find common themes and topics in the overall data set, and to enhance our data analysis through deep, descriptive narrative. The results were four major themes of experiences, plus six categories of recommendations to present to the Worcester Public School district to implement for a better experience for **all** Worcester families during the 2020-2021 academic year.





Das Lesen hat mich immer geliebt und ist ein wichtiger Bestandteil meines Lebens. Ich habe immer gerne gelesen und ich habe immer gerne gelesen.

Ich habe immer gerne gelesen und ich habe immer gerne gelesen.

DATA & RESULTS

Major themes from the data set:

1. household challenges
2. communication challenges
3. mental and emotional well-being concerns
4. remote learning challenges



HOUSEHOLD CHALLENGES

schedule & routine

Parents/guardians consistently reported difficulty in juggling their families' schedules with their children's academic schedules. Often their students' academic schedules conflicted with the parent/guardians' work and childcare schedules. They stressed how difficult it was to manage both parent/guardians' work responsibilities and their children's academic needs. Families were forced to either leave their jobs, ask family members to help with childcare, or had to both work and watch their children simultaneously or other unappealing options. All the options were undesirable, inconvenient, and costly.

One focus group reports:

We work at night, and work during the day at home. We need to sleep, but we have family commitments, too.

Remote learning schedules might not work with parents/guardians who are not available due to work or are unable to help their student with learning.

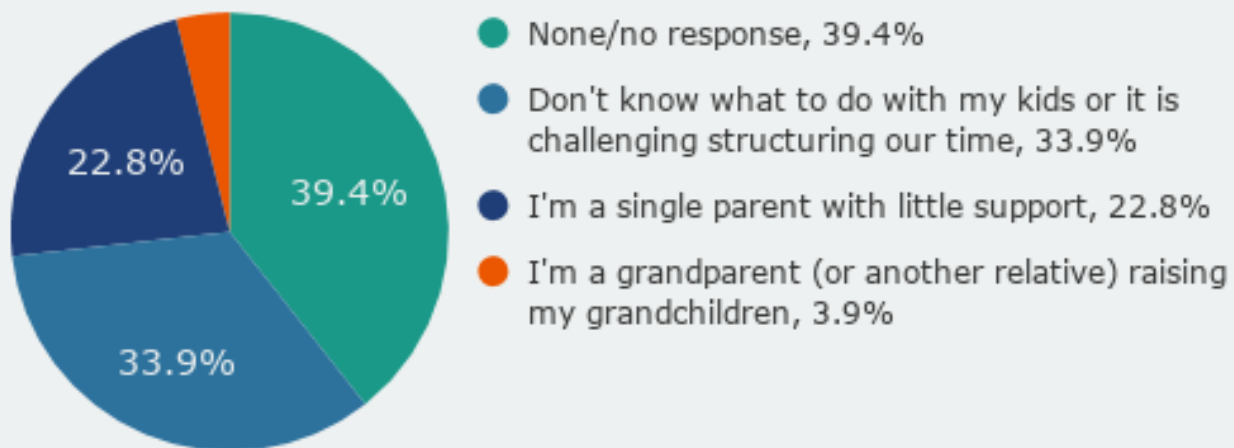


Parents **most frequently reported parenting challenges with structuring the family's time (33.9%)** and having little support as a single parent (22.8%). One parent reports:

*"I feel like it's a very tough time not only for parents but for kids because **they are so confused as to why they're not doing their normal routine** that we have worked so hard to get these kids into."*

Parenting Needs

What are your family's unmet needs at this time?



Parents also noted that the disruption to their children's routines was unsettling for the family and their children, resulting in temper tantrums, sadness, frustration, and often unwillingness to complete academic work and responsibilities. Many students were unwilling to attend the zoom classes or complete their academic work due to lack of motivation and accountability. Another focus group reports:

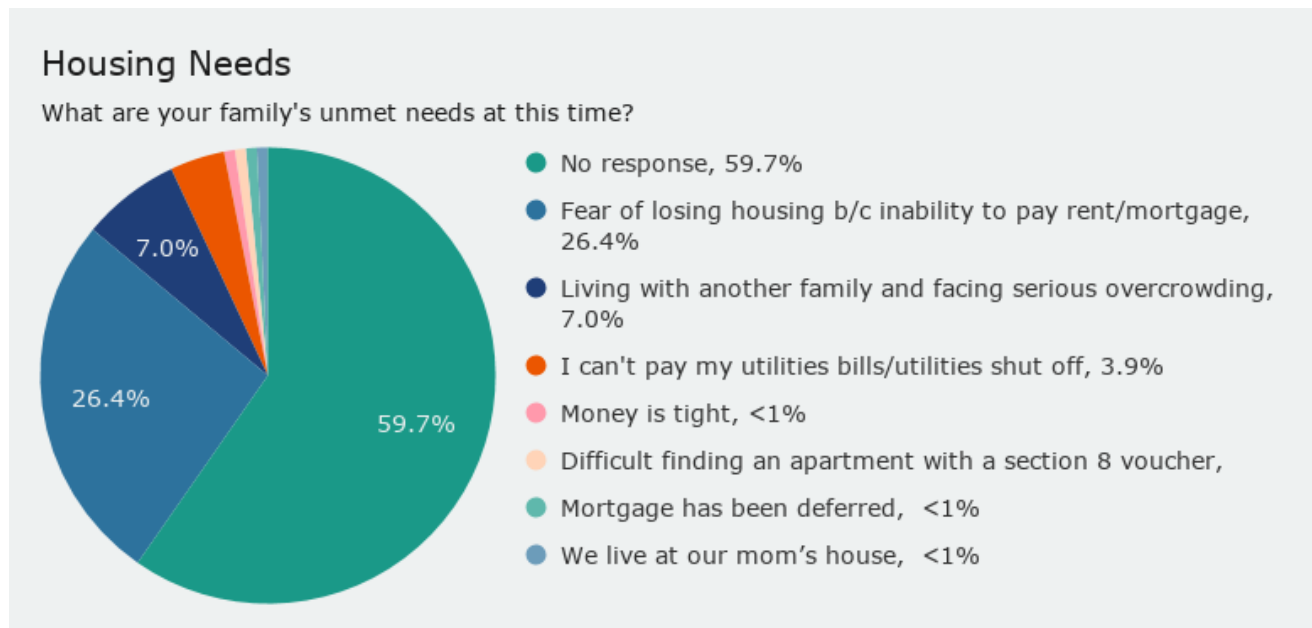
The parent in charge of childcare was not the listened-to parent, or the parent would give up if the child did not listen/comply.

*Students fought with parents/guardians and **refused to do their academic work** or attend zoom class meetings.*

housing insecurity

Parents/guardians also reported several concerns directly related to housing insecurity. They **most frequently reported a fear of losing housing because of their inability to pay their rent or mortgage (26.4%)**.

Parents/guardians also reported overcrowding living situations (7.0%) and an inability to pay utility bills or utilities already shut off (3.9%).



One respondent shared their experience with housing challenges:

*"I've boosted my credit score, I work full time hours as a patient care associate and still not able to rent an apartment in order to provide security and prevent health hazards for my family. **I am told over and over that my income is not enough. I've applied for housing and I've been number 47 on the list for almost a year.** I am afraid that my mother's landlord can appear at any moment and remove me and my children from the residence because we are not on the lease and cannot be. **There's currently 9 people in a two bedroom apartment.** Me and my three children, my mom, my little brother, his girl friend and their son and also my little sister who is now back from college due to COVID -19. **I keep trying but nothing seems enough.**"*

economic insecurity

Additionally, parents/guardians reported several concerns directly related to economic insecurity. They most frequently reported job or work hours loss due to COVID (20.6%). Parents/guardians also report needing support applying for unemployment or other public benefits (7.1%) or looking for a job while staying safe (6.4%).

Two respondents reported their challenges with finances and employment:

*"It is so stressful to stay at home for a long time. The money we got from unemployment benefits is **not enough as compared to what we got when we worked.**"*

*"People on workman's comp such as myself need financial help. **I am only getting 60% of my income** and as you know workman's comp is a month behind in sending us our checks so we are in debt. Using credit cards to survive. \$40,000 in credit card debt. A car that's not going to pass inspection. Need financial help!"*

Finance/Employment Needs

What are your family's unmet needs at this time?

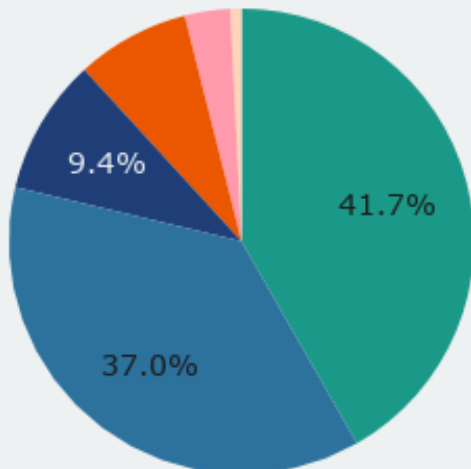




Several basic needs unmet due to financial challenges and general obstacles presented by COVID-19 were reported in the survey. Parents/guardians most frequently reported that they are in need of **hygiene and cleaning supplies (41.7%)**, they don't know how or where to look for help (9.5%), and that they are in need of food (7.9%).

Basic Needs

What are your family's unmet needs at this time?



- Hygiene/cleaning supplies, 41.7%
- None/no response, 37.0%
- I don't know how or where to look for help, 9.5%
- Food, 7.9%
- Transportation to food/supplies, 3.2%
- Additional school curriculum, <1%

COMMUNICATION

Communication was a challenging aspect of last year's school closure. Parents noted that there were too many channels of communication making it confusing and frustrating to get information. Multiple teachers were contacting parents/guardians using email, phone calls, google classroom, and other communication platforms. In addition there were Superintendent connect-ed phone calls, Worcester Public Schools (WPS) website changes, and WPS School Committee notifications. District directives often were last minute and did not give families adequate time or instruction to make adjustments or "know how to do it." Parents/guardians expressed their disappointment that there was no avenue for communication to the district. Despite many ways for the district to communicate to families, there were few methods for communicating to the district. Our focus groups reported:



*We did not hear from our child's teachers until **April or June** [schools closed in March]. There is **not enough teacher outreach, contact, or feedback** on completed work.*

*There was a **survey from the district that didn't allow for comments in enough places**. One parent filled out the survey stating she was willing to be contacted but was never contacted by the district. Another parent volunteered to be on a committee but was never contacted. Educators were not allowed to fill out the survey at all. **The attitude of the survey was, "tell us we did a good job."***

*It was **disrespectful** of the Superintendent to say we are doing great when **nobody was doing great**. There is frustration with the administration and disconnect between the district and parents' concerns.*

Teachers were not receiving communication from the district. They were getting their news from the Worcester Telegram & Gazette.

*Communication was coming from everywhere. Better to have **one source or channel of communication**.*

Parents/guardians were also given an opportunity to share what they believe support between families and the district should look like moving forward. For parents/guardians, this looks like a participatory planning process with diverse WPS parents and families and honest conversations with stakeholders while becoming open and willing to try a variety of ideas. One parent requested to have special education teachers participate in these discussions to ensure diverse student needs are being met. Families requested resource packets and instructions on how to complete assignments to ensure access to continued learning between live classroom sessions. Lastly, parents expressed fear of reaching out to the district to ask questions and requested that more open, trusting, and comfortable outlets for parent/guardian feedback be available, such as a social media page. Our focus groups report:

Hold a town hall event with the Superintendent and make sure a diverse group of WPS parents and families can and feel safe to attend. This needs to be before school starts because we have these concerns now.

The district needs to have honest conversations with all stakeholders and be willing to try different ideas. The district needs to have a better and more organized plan for instruction than last year's, such as providing packets for students to work on at home when they aren't attending an in-person class, or having teachers provide videos for instruction on how to complete the at-home school assignments.

WPS needs a disaster plan for situations like COVID-10. Other industries have disaster plans and have for a number of years. Why doesn't WPS?



MENTAL & EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

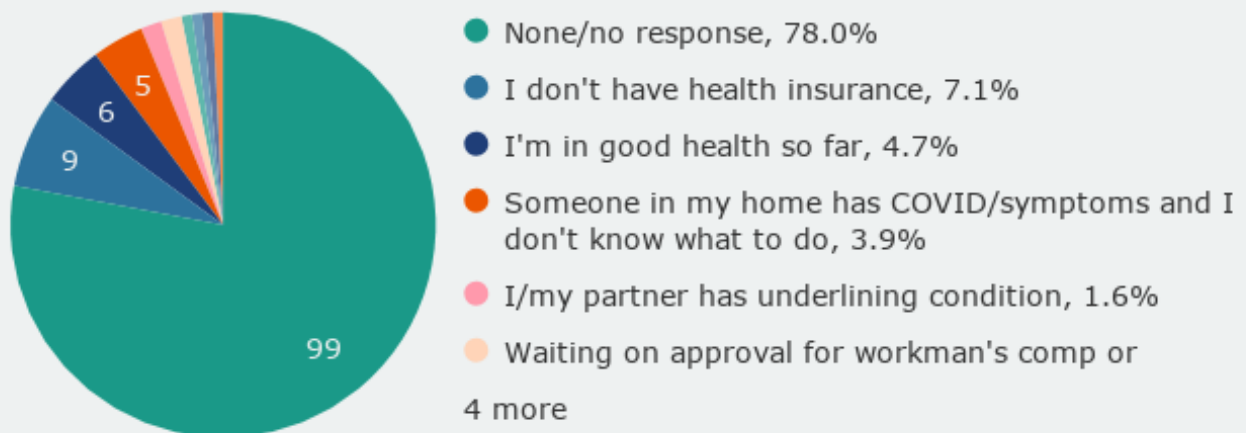
Another important theme in responses from parents/guardians centered on concerns about mental and emotional well-being for students and their families.

health & mental health

Parents **most frequently reported not having health insurance (7.1%)**, while 4.7% of respondents reported being in good health so far. Additionally, some parents reported that someone in their home has COVID-19 or symptoms and are unsure of what to do (3.9%).

Health Needs

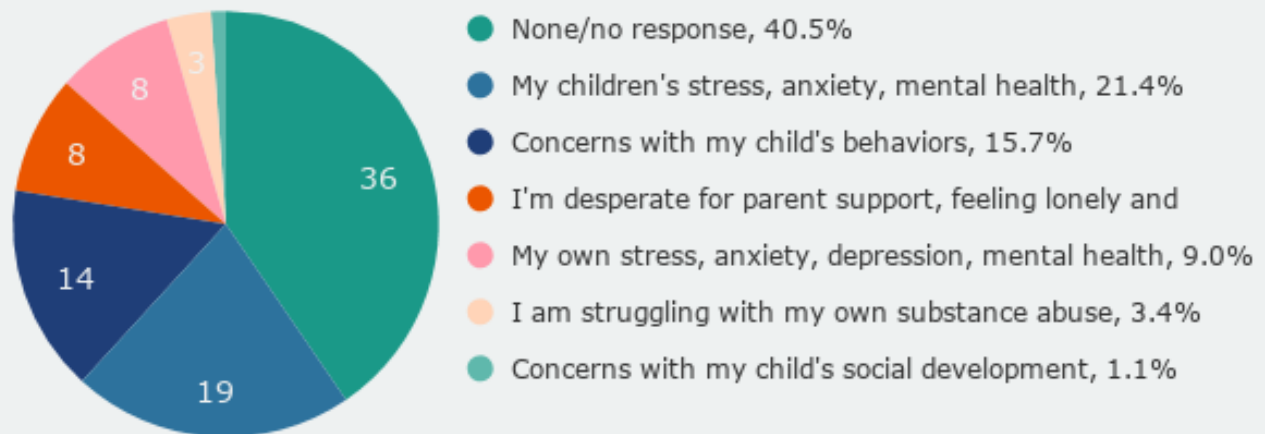
What are your family's unmet needs at this time?



Parents also **most frequently reported concerns about their children's stress, anxiety, and mental health (21.4%)** and with their children's behaviors related to anxiety or mental health (15.7%). Additionally, parents report their own feelings of loneliness and isolation (9.0%) and concerns about their own stress, anxiety, depression, and mental health (9.0%).

Anxiety and Mental Health Needs

What are your family's unmet needs at this time?



Some respondents shared their personal experiences or their children's experiences with health and mental health during this time:

*"I have **2 immune compromised people** in my house. My child and mother."*

*"Waiting on Mass Health changes to be reviewed,
struggling with wait of response."*

*"It's very stressful not being to leave only for supplies and food, not having my kid go outside and enjoy himself sucks. He's been locked in the house for so long. Hopefully this ends soon because **my anxiety and depression ain't good.**"*

*"It is challenging trying to maintain a job while
my kids feel alone and isolated."*

*"My daughter is very social; I am **worried about her social development** with all this. She was doing daily zoom 'meetings' with friends but the other girls have gotten bored."*

safety

Fewer than 25 respondents reported safety concerns for their families. The most frequently reported safety concerns for respondents are **fearing for their safety because of another member of their household (4.7%)** and fear of leaving the home because of COVID-19 (2.4%).

Safety Needs

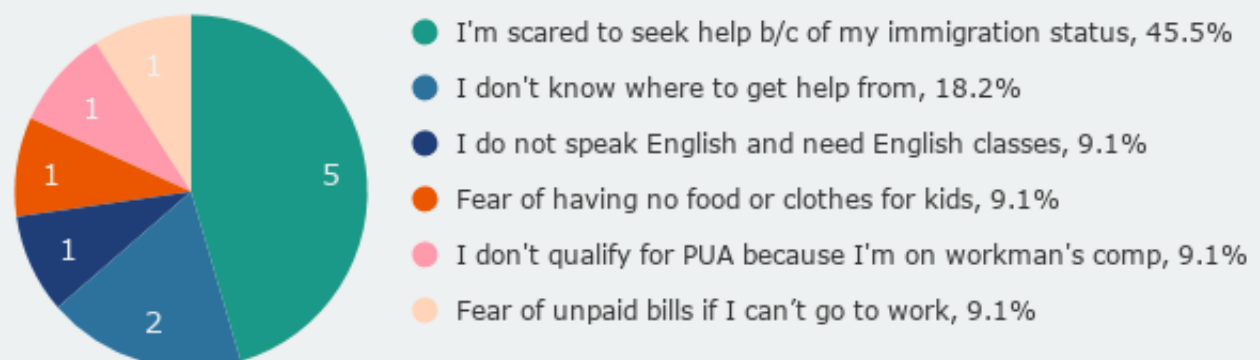
What are your family's unmet needs at this time?



Eleven respondents reported additional safety and well-being needs. **Parents/ guardians most frequently reported being scared to seek help because of their immigration status (45.5% of 11 respondents)**, and not knowing where to get help from (18.2% of 11 respondents).

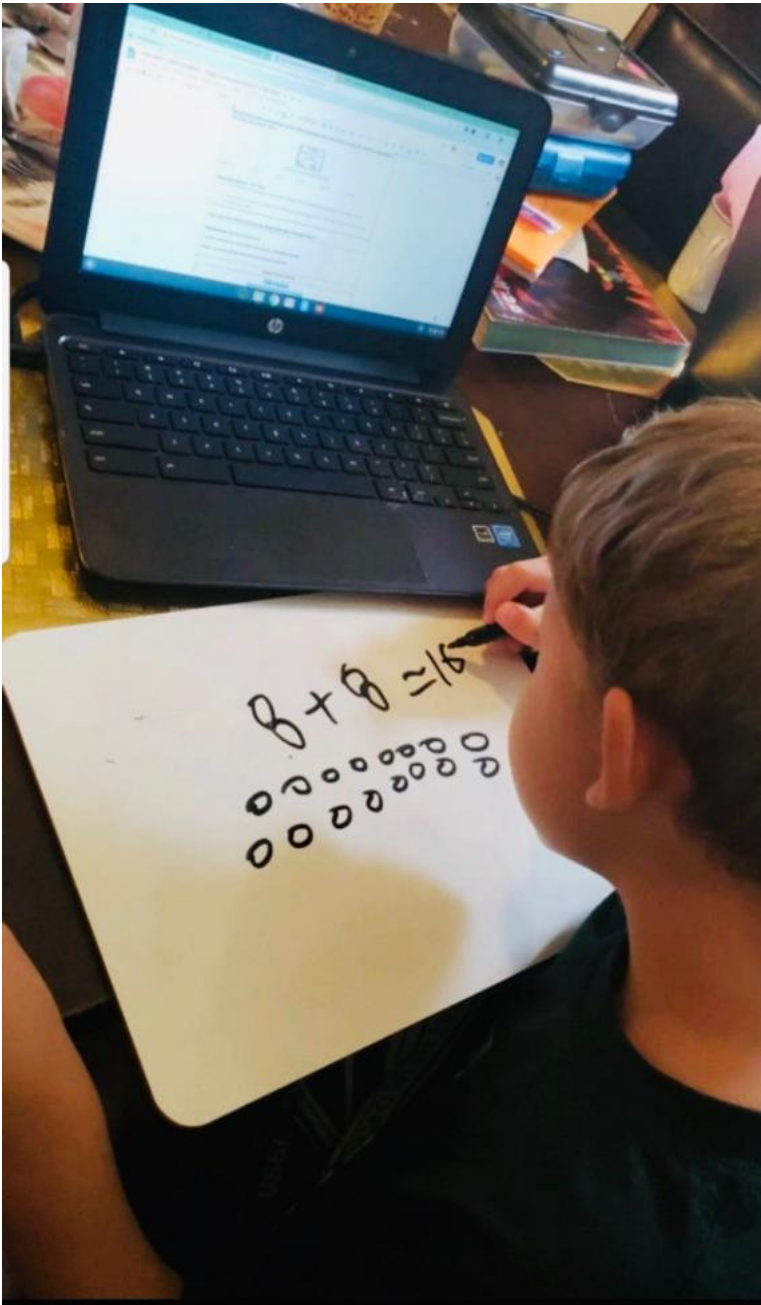
Other Needs

What are your family's unmet needs at this time? (11 responses)



fear & risk

Some parents are facing immediate fears or risks, while others are only starting to feel the long-term impacts of loss of income. Fear of risk of exposure to COVID is high for parents who have no choice but to work:



*“I’m pregnant and working and **can not take time to stay home and prevent potentially exposing my family** without using the time I will need for maternity leave.”*

For those that have already lost their jobs, the struggle is making ends meet:

*“It is so stressful to stay at home for a long time. The money we got from **unemployment benefits is not enough** as compared to what we got when we worked.”*

And some are fighting against landlords illegally filing for evictions:

*“My partner lost his job so we are **struggling with paying rent. We are already behind** and they already requested for us to be at court.”*



how are you feeling?

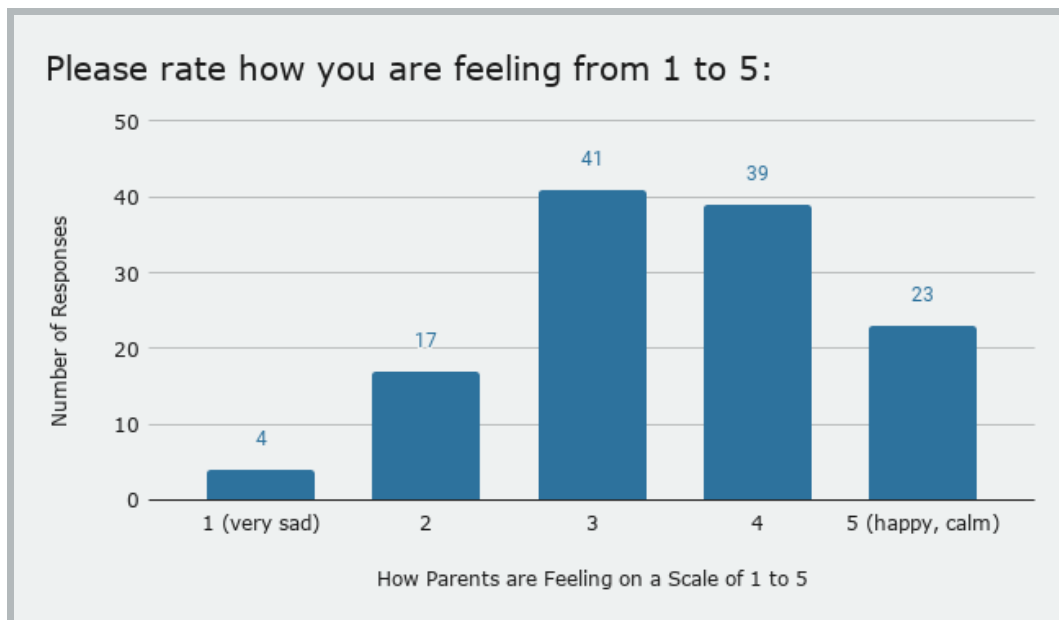
Despite these challenging circumstances, respondents also report on average being somewhat happy. The survey asked parents to express their feelings on a scale from 1 (very sad) to 5 (happy and calm). Most respondents rated feeling a 3 (moderate) or 4 (somewhat happy) on this scale. Some reasons for this may include an increase in time spent together as a family, and strong support within communities. One parent states:

“I love being home with my daughter. I have always wanted a taste of being a stay-at-home mother/ to homeschool but could not justify doing so with finances being what they are.

I wish spending ample time with my child could last forever.”

Another shares that she’s doing okay for now:

*“I do have **support from my church members** praying and reaching out for help.”*



REMOTE LEARNING

A variety of challenges with remote learning were reported by parents/guardians, some a result of the scheduling conflicts, some resulting from the communication deficiencies, and others due to exacerbated inequalities that already existed in the district. The remote curriculum was unorganized and not well planned or supported, which meant that students and their parents often did not understand the assignments or lesson plans or were unable to complete them. Students also struggled with concentration during zoom meetings, and the “canned” curriculum was not as engaging as real-time teaching. Families also struggled with access to technology and/or the internet, but noted that having access to these tools was “a game-changer” for accessing assignments and instruction. Our focus groups report:

*Parents were not aware that their student had not turned in assignments until weeks later. Student had done the work, just **didn't know how to turn their assignments in online.***

*Not enough instruction from teachers. Parents were told to refer to google classroom, but **some teachers and many parents did not understand how to navigate google classroom.** Student work was lost, not completed, or students didn't log on.*

*Many assignments required “common household items” which many households do not usually have and maybe **cannot afford to purchase.** Items such as styrofoam cups, paper cups, string, rulers, etc.*

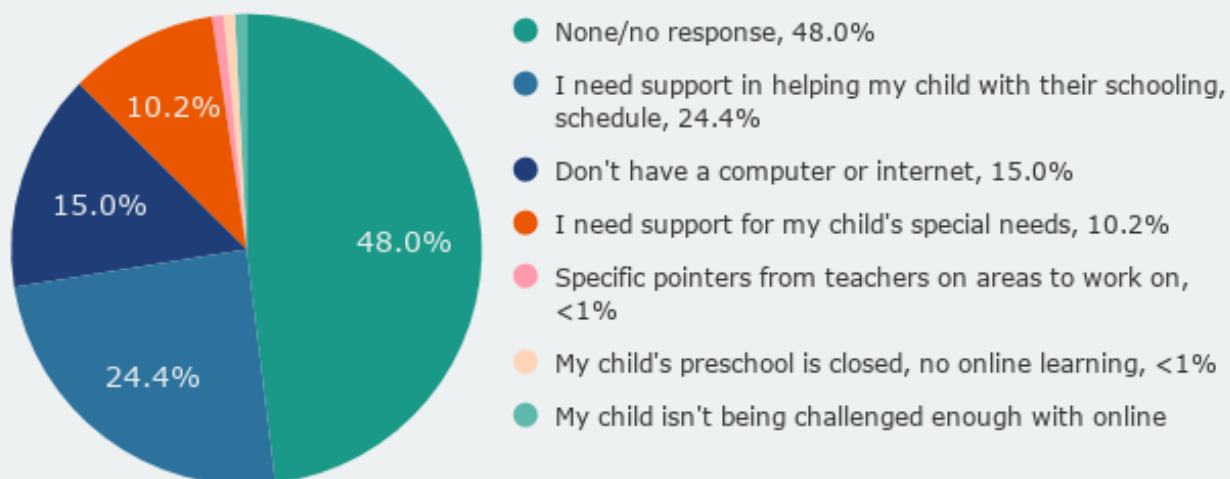
*For parents, it felt like homeschooling with teacher support. Some assignments **needed a lot of hand-holding for students to complete.***

*It seemed that the district didn't have a good plan on how to carry out instruction for the rest of the year. They **needed a better plan.***

Many participants reported concerning personal experiences with remote learning in the spring. Parents **most frequently reported needing support with their children's schooling and schedule (24.4%)**, not having access to a computer or the internet (15.0%), and needing support for their child's special needs (10.2%).

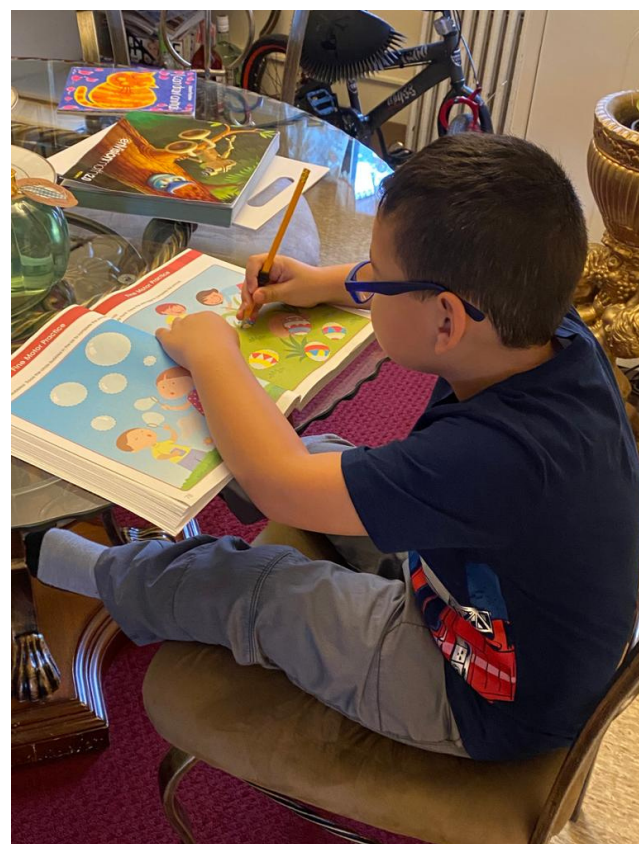
My Child's Educational Needs

What are your family's unmet needs at this time?



*"It is hard to have kids indoors 24/7. Maybe taking walks would/could help but I am not sure if that is allowed? **Access to on line classes is a pain; it is not fun to do it on a phone** with more than one student/child and in different grades! **Access to internet is another challenge!"***

"Difficult homeschooling, watching YouTube videos are interesting but not really teaching. Assignments are limited. Some apps on internet cost money."



Another respondent reported on the impracticality of relying on online learning for children of all ages:

*"It's hard to try to homeschool a preschool aged child while trying to work from home as well. **They aren't old enough to log onto a computer and complete their work independently.**"*

Additionally, students on IEPs were not receiving their mandated special needs services during school closures. One focus group reports:

*Students on IEPs were **not getting their mandated special needs services.** Never saw their special education teacher or **did when the parent complained about it.** A student was in the process of getting his IEP amended before the shutdown and **the process came to a halt** and never got his amended IEP.*

One parent exemplifies some of the challenges of online learning and the lack of support for her child's disability:

*"We are trying to work full time at home and oversee both of our children's schools. One child has Tourette [syndrome], which means that he needs extra help. **The school is communicating, but it is not all inclusive.** The reliance on google classroom to communicate with students means that I don't know what's happening. **The use of screens all of the time is not healthy for our children.** They are complaining of eye strain."*



fall reopening concerns

Concerns for this coming school year include keeping students and staff safe and healthy. There were doubts on whether the district could provide adequate PPE, cleaning and sanitation supplies, and adequately enforce the health protocols, like wearing a mask, hand washing, 3-6ft apart, etc. Parents/guardians were divided on whether they would pick the hybrid or 100% remote model of learning for the fall. They expressed concerns on both options. Childcare during and after school hours is a major concern. Many families relied on schools to provide care and supervision of their children during and after school hours, leaving many without childcare for this school year. Parents/guardians expressed their hesitancy and distrust of district leadership to keep students and staff safe and healthy for this school year. Our focus groups report:

*Keeping everyone healthy is most important. We have to think about **families who are taking care of elderly and high risk family members.***

***Parents and students won't comply with wearing masks** in and around schools, especially those who don't believe COVID-19 is real. It is also difficult for some students to wear masks, all of which will spread the virus to others.*

*Not sure what the Hybrid or Remote learning models will look like. Hard to make a choice when it is not clear what exactly they will consist of, who will be teaching them and what the curriculum will be and who will plan it. We have to make a choice between hybrid or remote but we **don't have enough information to make that choice.***

*We are concerned there will not be **wraparound care for young students when not in school or if we/parents have to go to work.***

Will next year's teacher be able to know my child enough for them to provide remote help? What if they don't know their particular learning struggles? What learning speed would the videos be tailored to? Will parents be given an opportunity to meet their child's teacher at the start of school?

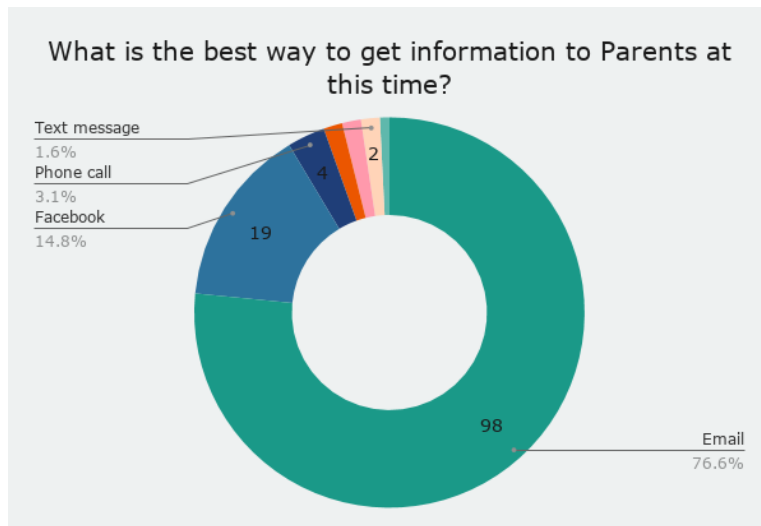
We are very frustrated that we haven't heard from the teachers or schools. We still need devices/internet, help with software, and someone to listen and reach out. We haven't been communicated with. We tried calling the schools and were told it would start sometime in September but we have no further information.



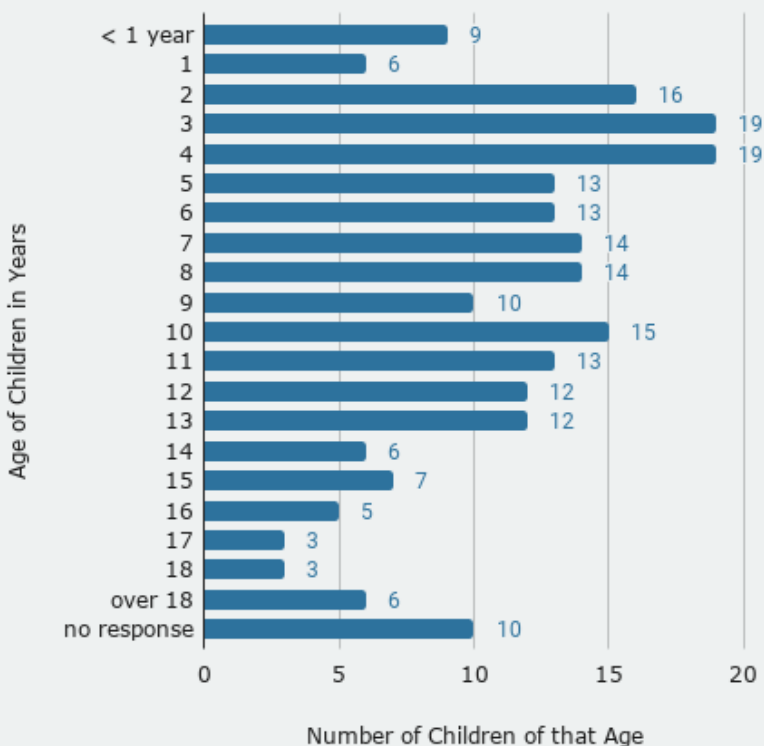
ADDITIONAL DATA

communication

The majority of respondents reported **email is the best way to communicate with them (76.6%)**, followed far behind by Facebook (14.8%) and phone call (3.1%).



What are the Ages of your Children?



demographics

The majority of respondents reported having **children between the ages of 3-10 years old**. The most frequently reported ages of children in this survey was 3 and 4 years old (19).

RECOMMENDATIONS



RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents and guardians of working families in Worcester reported several categories of concerning challenges with their remote learning experience and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic this year. In order to solve these issues, we must first acknowledge and understand them. Parents/guardians are eager to continue these discussions and share their experiences with WPS if the district is open to listening and applying their feedback in order to create the most effective and supportive learning environment for **all** of Worcester's students and their families.

As a result of our analysis of the focus group and survey findings, we present the following recommendations:

1. communication: listening and responding with seriousness

- Provide less frequent but more holistic communication through multiple mediums and in multiple languages.
- Organize consolidated and less frequent expectations for parents to have to coordinate transportation to a school to pick up supplies, curriculum materials, food, etc.

2. emphasis on housing and economic needs

- City and schools need a greater spirit of collaboration to more holistically and effectively address housing and economic issues.

3. balancing work and school schedules

- The district and individual schools should coordinate school schedules more effectively with working parents to ensure students are able to attend, be mentally present, and learn effectively during online classes.
- Families' schedules and lives are hectic/chaotic right now, and so the district and schools need to be a place of calmness, order, certainty, for families.

4. technology support for remote learning

- Provide a scheduled, multi-lingual hotline available in the seven primary languages.
- Provide scheduled and accessible in-person opportunities for tech support across the district to ensure all parents/guardians and students have a working knowledge of the technology used for remote learning.

5. attending to systemic inequalities

- Do not assume that difficulties with online learning are a result of abuse or neglect. Provide clear directives around these issues so that teachers can recognize systemic inequalities or other factors that may lead to a student missing class and be humane and forgiving in dealing with their students.

6. support for teachers/educators

- Provide clear guidance for teachers around discipline issues.
- Provide more support to teachers about how to implement these creative solutions in their remote classrooms. Have patience for teachers trying to figure out how to do this work well, and support them in being successful.
- Provide teachers with training on how to effectively utilize students' screen time and make the time engaging and compelling.
- Provide more consistency in communication to educators so that they can provide more consistent expectations for students and parents/guardians.

We are calling for creative engagement for learning over the rote/traditional educational models that are challenging or impossible for students in this remote pandemic environment. Parents, families, and educators need to be the ones at the table during discussions and decision-making processes to ensure their diverse and wide-ranging needs are met. We need to build a culture not based in fear and punishment, but one that sees motivation in creativity, support, engagement, and humanization, and we must do so together.



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