



Year-End Connect Day 2020 Final Report Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

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Introduction

On the last day of school for the 2019-20 school year, teachers and students at 40 schools across the District participated in a Year-End Connect event whereby the teachers and students engaged in virtual class meetings using the Microsoft Teams platform. The goal of the event was to allow students and teachers to have closure at the end of the school year after it was disrupted by the spread of COVID-19. Additionally, the event was used as an opportunity to gather information from teachers and students about some of the hurdles the District could face next fall if remote instruction and learning are necessary.

This report presents findings about teacher and student experiences that were gathered from three different sources after the event occurred: a teacher survey completed by teachers who participated in the Year-End Connect event, a student survey administered to participating students, and a teacher focus group whose participants were also teachers who engaged in the Year-End Connect event. The first two sections present the findings for the teacher and student surveys, respectively. The final section presents the report of the teacher focus group. The report concludes with a section that highlights commonalities across the three different sources of data.

Responses to the teacher and student surveys were solicited in a similar manner.¹ Online surveys were created for teachers and students and the links were sent to all teacher and all students who were active on Microsoft Teams on the last day of school, May 22, 2020. In addition, all principals at the participating schools were sent the links and were asked to forward them to their teachers and students who participated in the event. The survey for students was available in both English and Spanish. Teachers and students were asked to respond to the survey within a week of receiving the survey link. Two hundred twenty-five (225) teachers from 17 schools and 65 students from nine schools participated in the survey.

¹ Information on the recruitment of teachers participating in the focus group is detailed in the focus group section which begins on page 22 of this report.

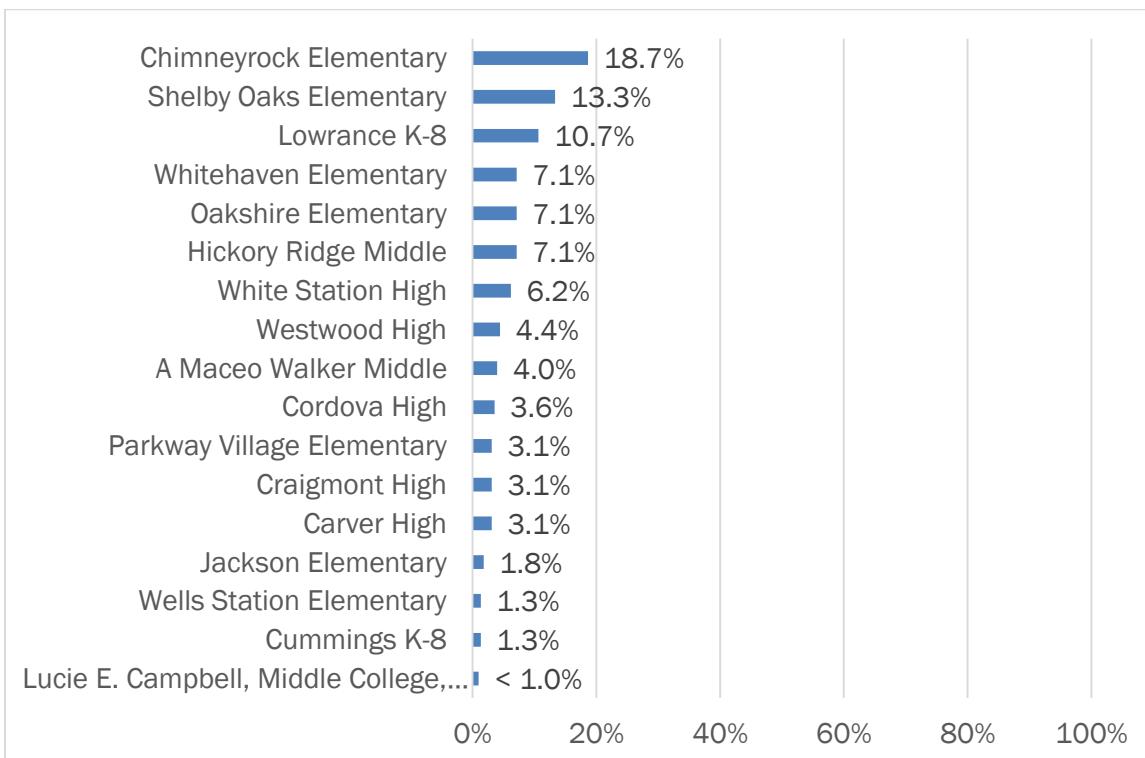


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Teacher Survey Findings

Figure 1 identifies the home schools of participating teachers. Most teach at Chimneyrock Elementary (18.7%), Shelby Oaks Elementary (13.3%), and Lowrance K-8 (10.7%) schools.

Figure 1. Participating Schools

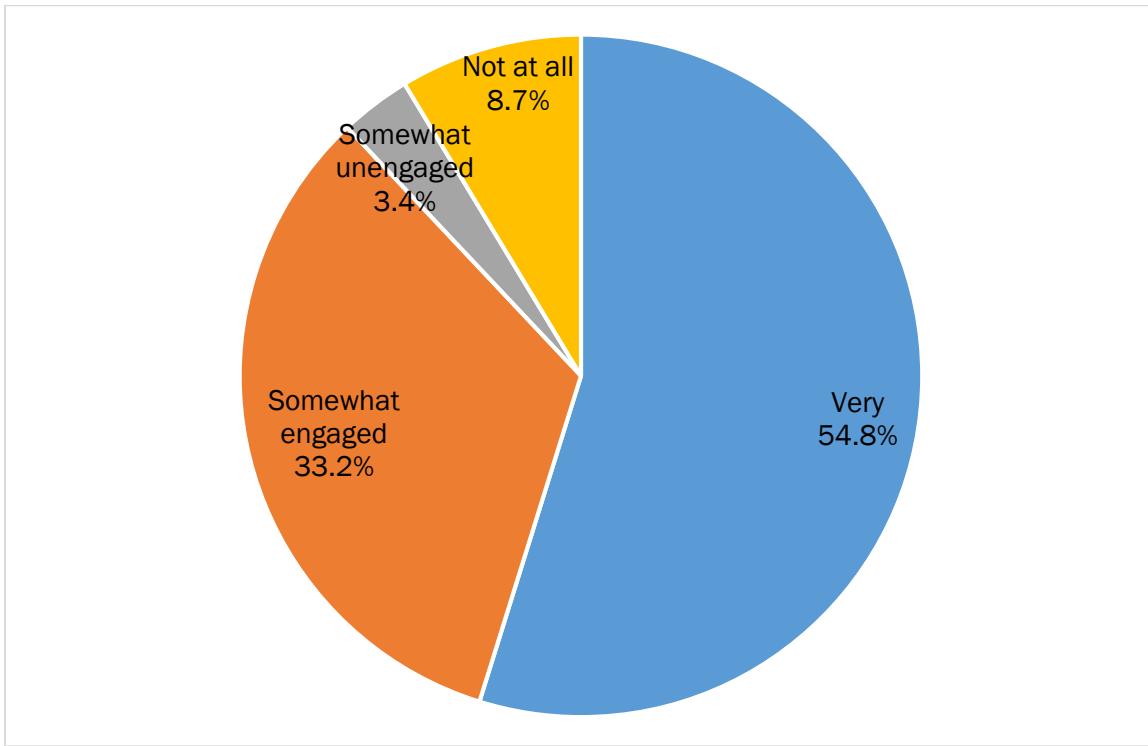




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Teachers reported that 1,913 students participated. Figure 2 shows teachers' perceptions of students' level of engagement.

Figure 2. Student Engagement

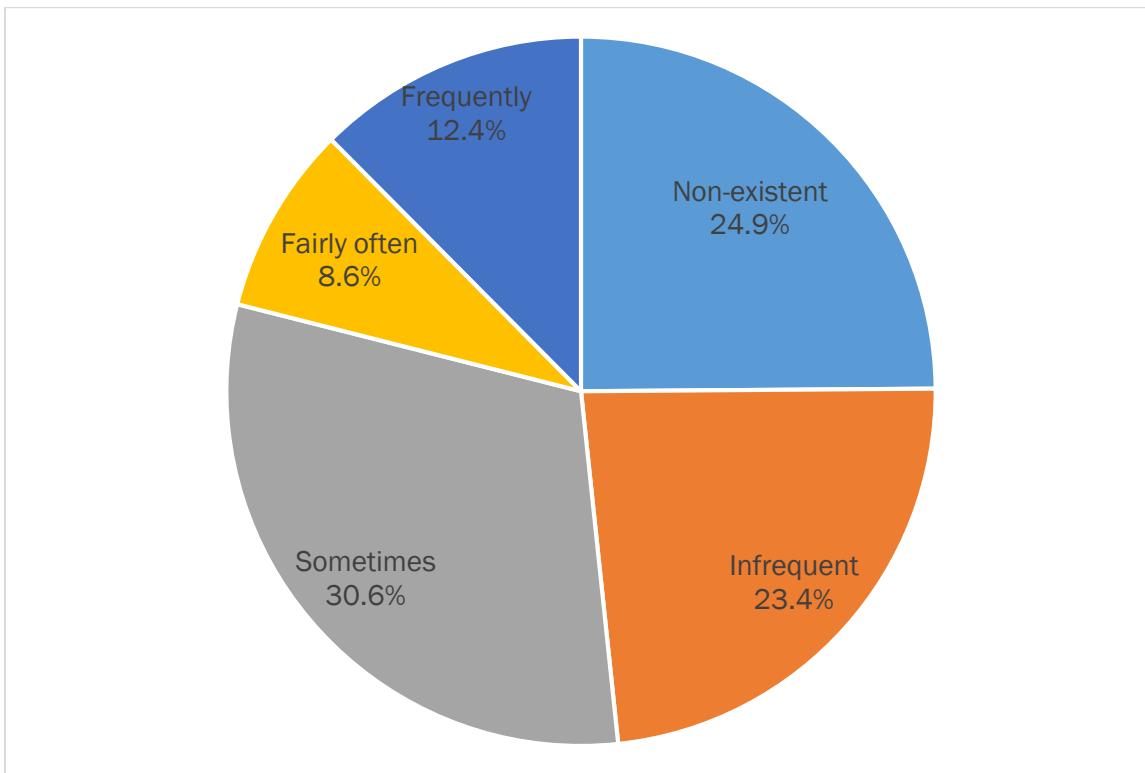




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When asked about technical issues, 21% of teachers reported experiencing problems fairly often or frequently, while one-quarter reported experiencing no technical issues.

Figure 3. Technical Issues

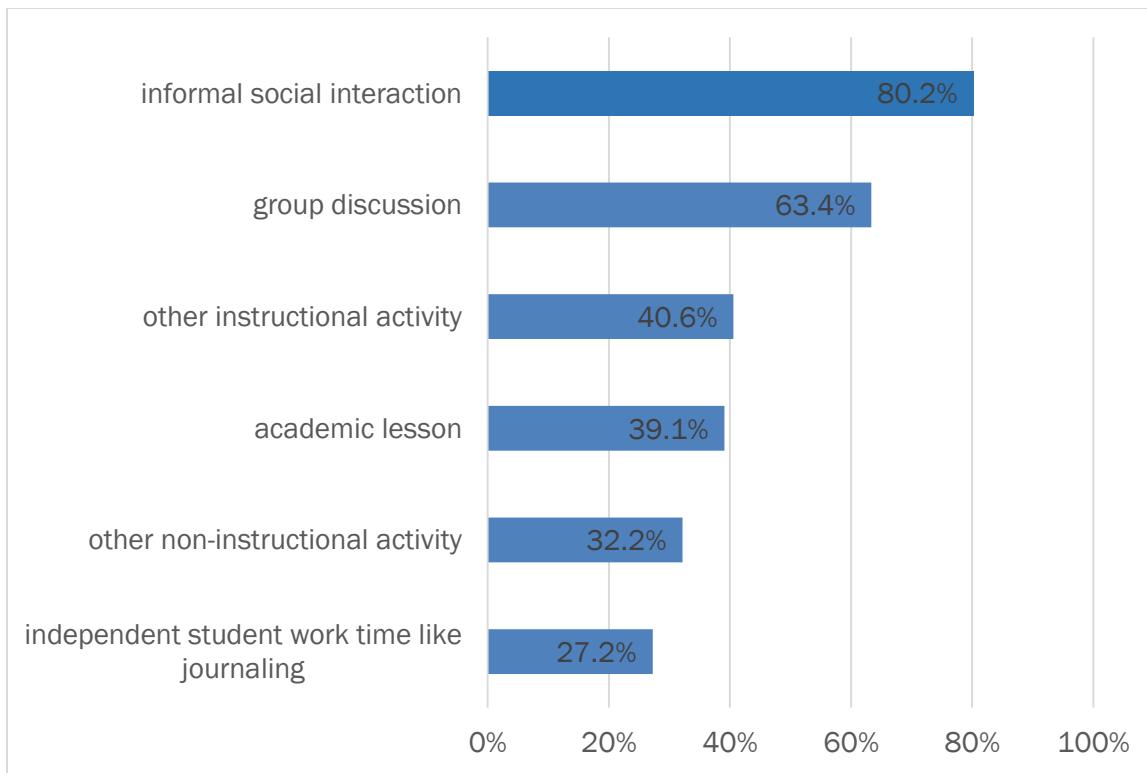




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Figure 4 presents the type of activities that took place. Most teachers reported engaging in informal social interactions with their students (80.2%) and group discussions (63.4%).

Figure 4. Activities

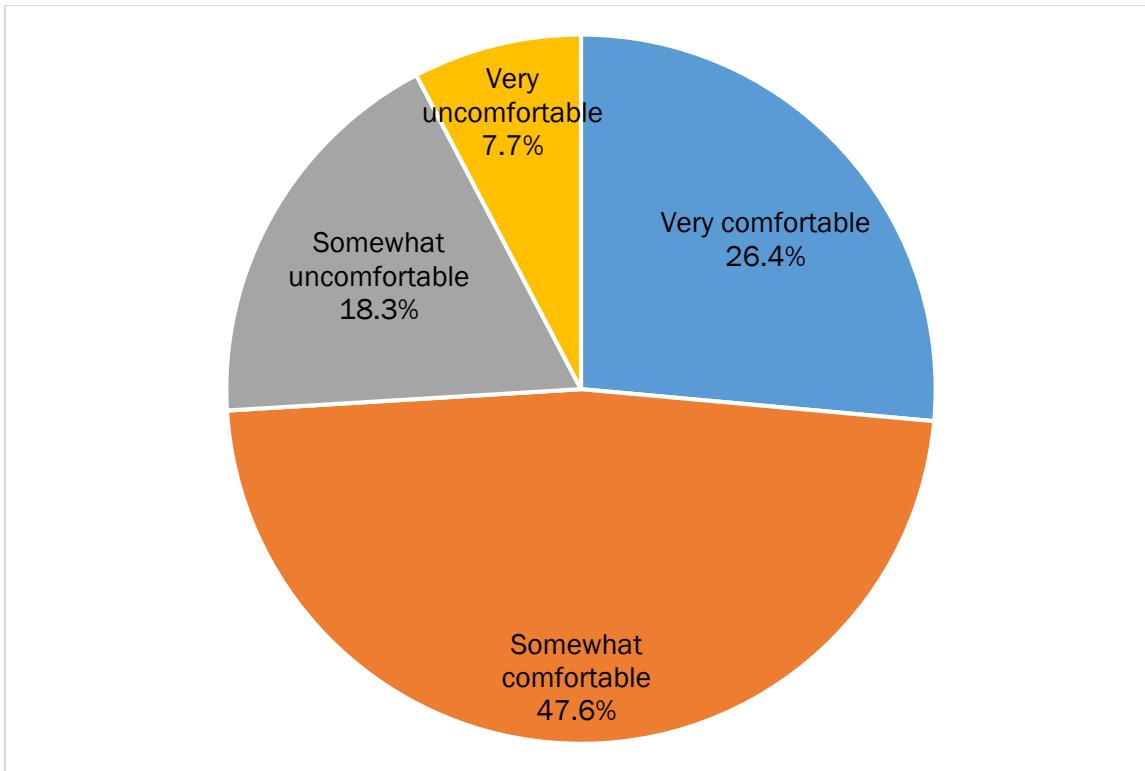




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Figures 5 and 6 show that although almost three-quarters of teachers reported that they were at least somewhat comfortable using technology, only 20.2% identified their level of experience with technology as advanced and 27.4% reported having an intermediate level of experience.

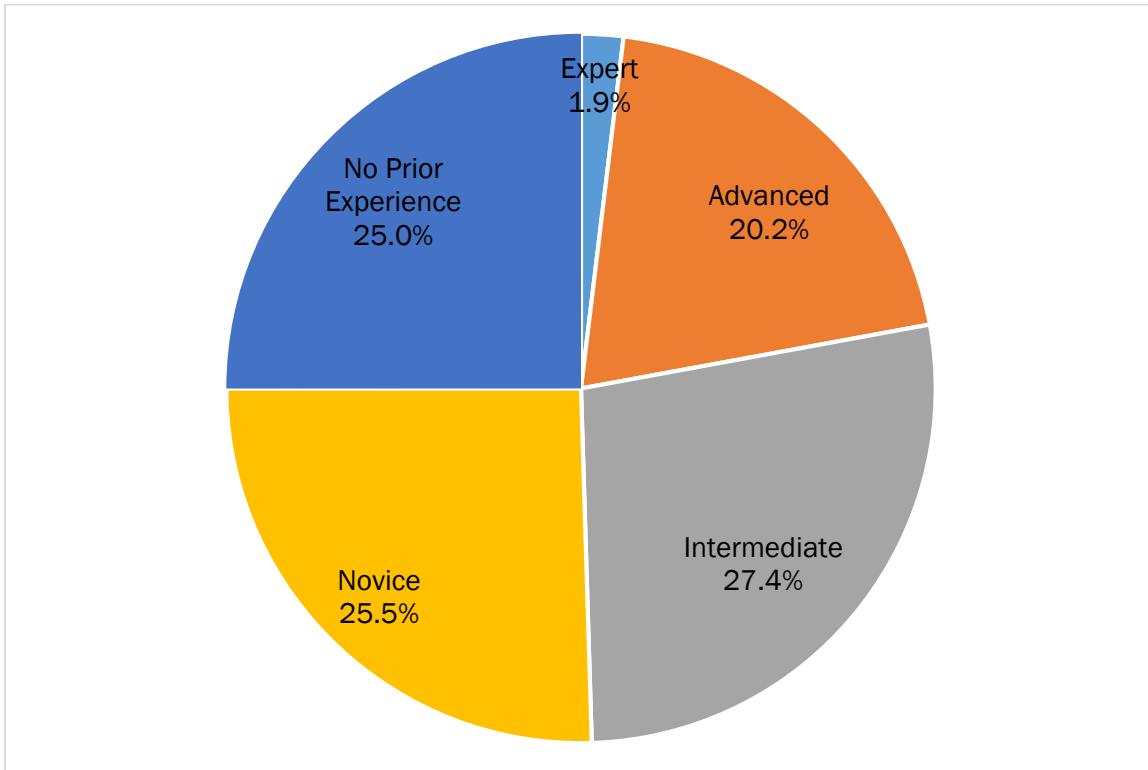
Figure 5. Level of Comfort with Technology





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Figure 6. Level of Experience

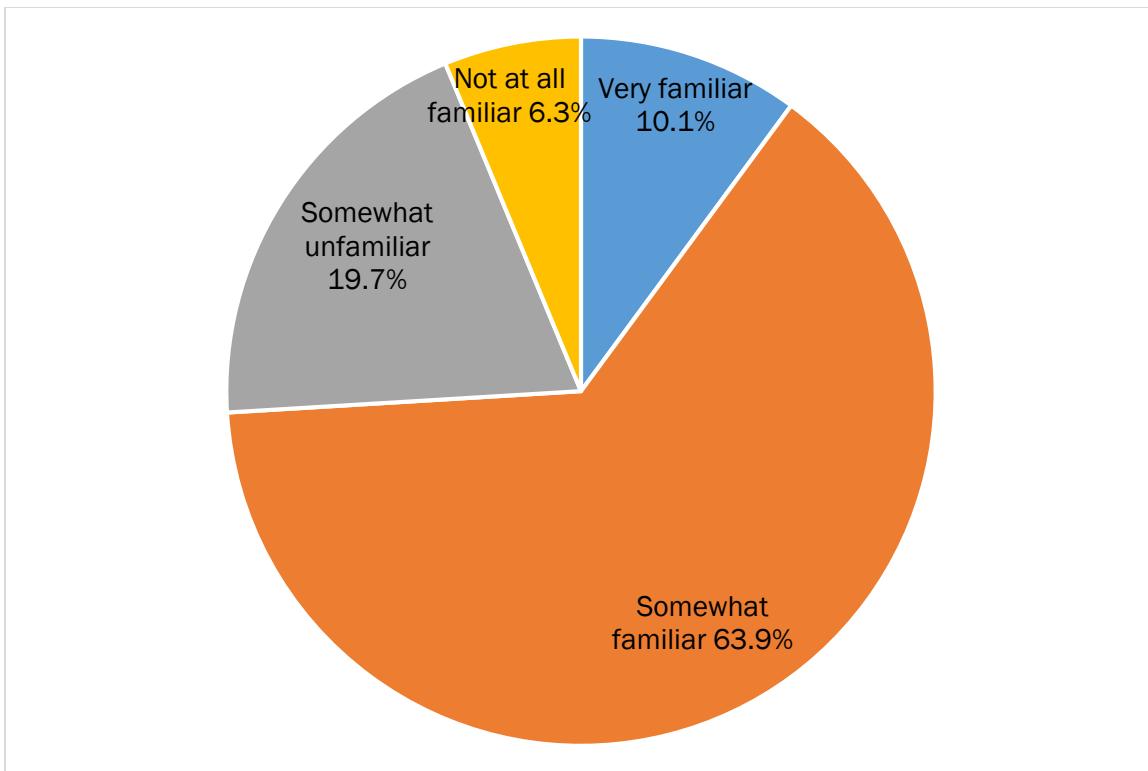




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Additionally, Figures 7 and 8 show that while most teachers reported that they were only somewhat familiar 63.9% with Microsoft Teams, 76.5% expressed that they were at least somewhat likely to use this platform in their daily instruction.

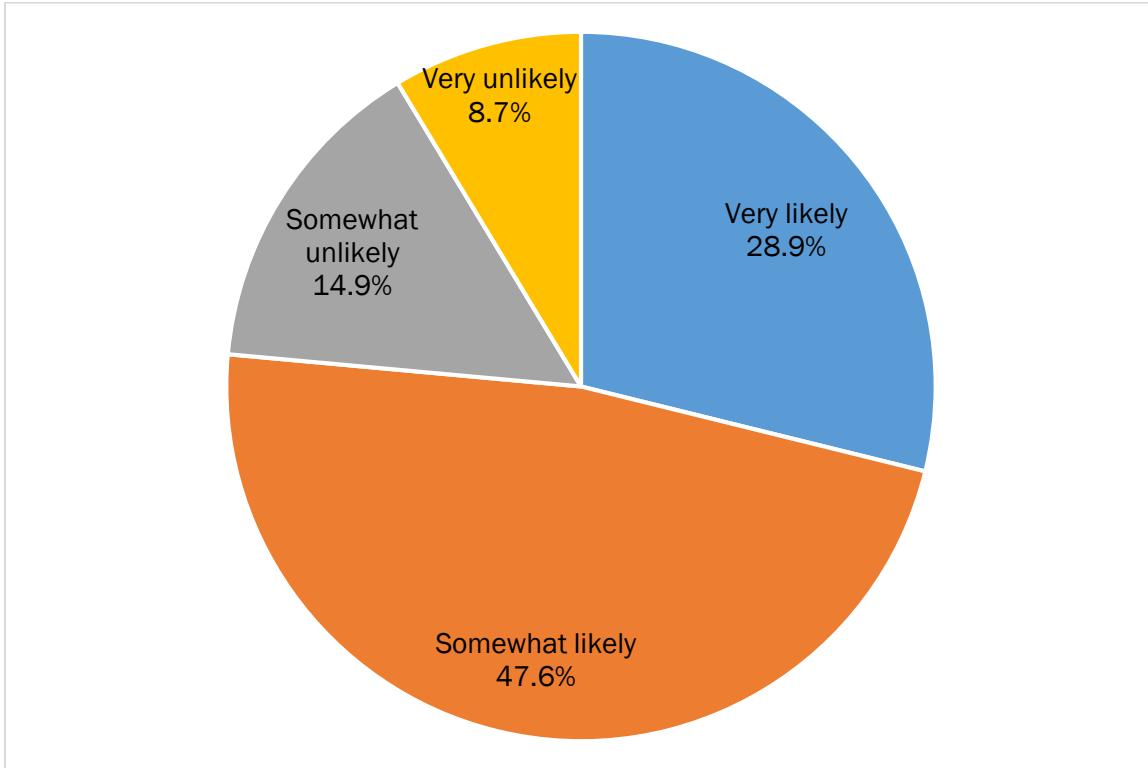
Figure 7. Familiarity with Microsoft Teams





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Figure 8. Likelihood of Using Teams

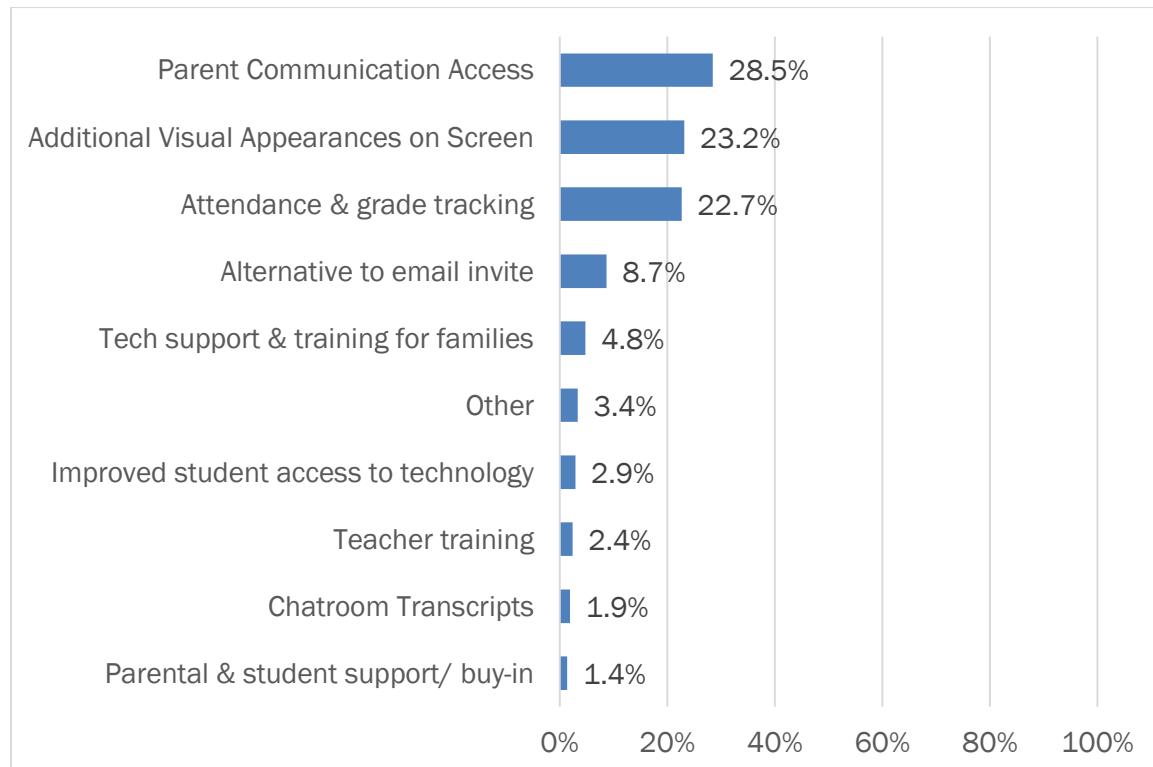




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As shown in Figure 9, the main needs teachers identified for a successful virtual rollout included the ability to communicate with parents (28.5%), to see more students on screen simultaneously (23.2%), and attendance and grade tracking in PowerSchool (22.7%). Some teachers (8.7%) requested an alternative way to notify/invite students to sessions besides their school email, which students rarely check. Teachers also expressed that families need technical support and training for using the platform (4.8%). Specifically, teachers reported that parents and students had difficulty accessing and navigating the platform, expressing the need for clearer instructions, including Spanish instructions, and expressed concern regarding ease of use for students with disabilities. For the “other” category, each of the following comprise 1.0% or fewer responses: ability to post lessons on platform, easier connection, teletherapy, and tailored training based on discipline, grades, and attendance.

Figure 9. Needs for a Successful Virtual Rollout

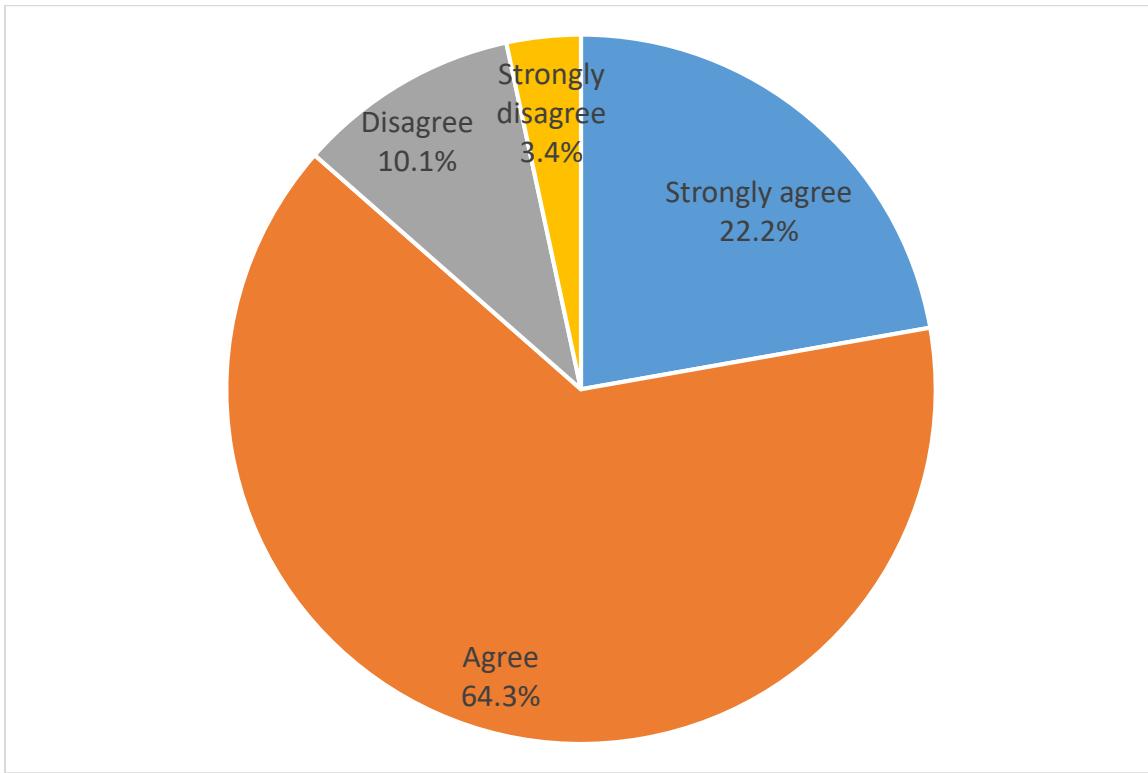




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Figure 10 shows that most teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the training/resources provided for learning were useful/helpful.

Figure 10. Usefulness of Microsoft Teams Training

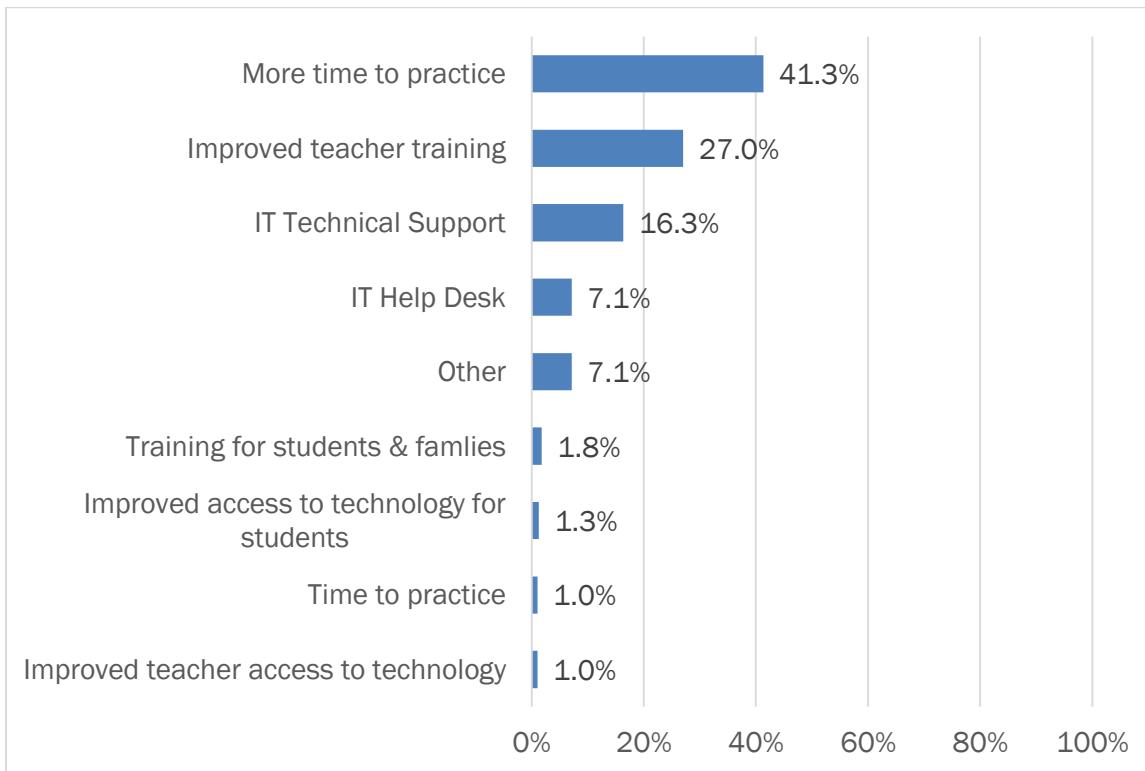




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Teachers were asked about the additional support/resources needed to provide an optimal online learning experience for their students. Figure 11 presents the identified themes.

Figure 11. Needed Additional Support/Resources



"It is difficult to make sure that the student was engaged during the lesson. Need examples or time to practice on how to best implement a virtual lesson."

"Proper equipment and internet access to perform the task effectively."

"Handbooks/manuals for a resource, experts who can answer our questions, and the ability to add options we need - delete a chat entry, take attendance."

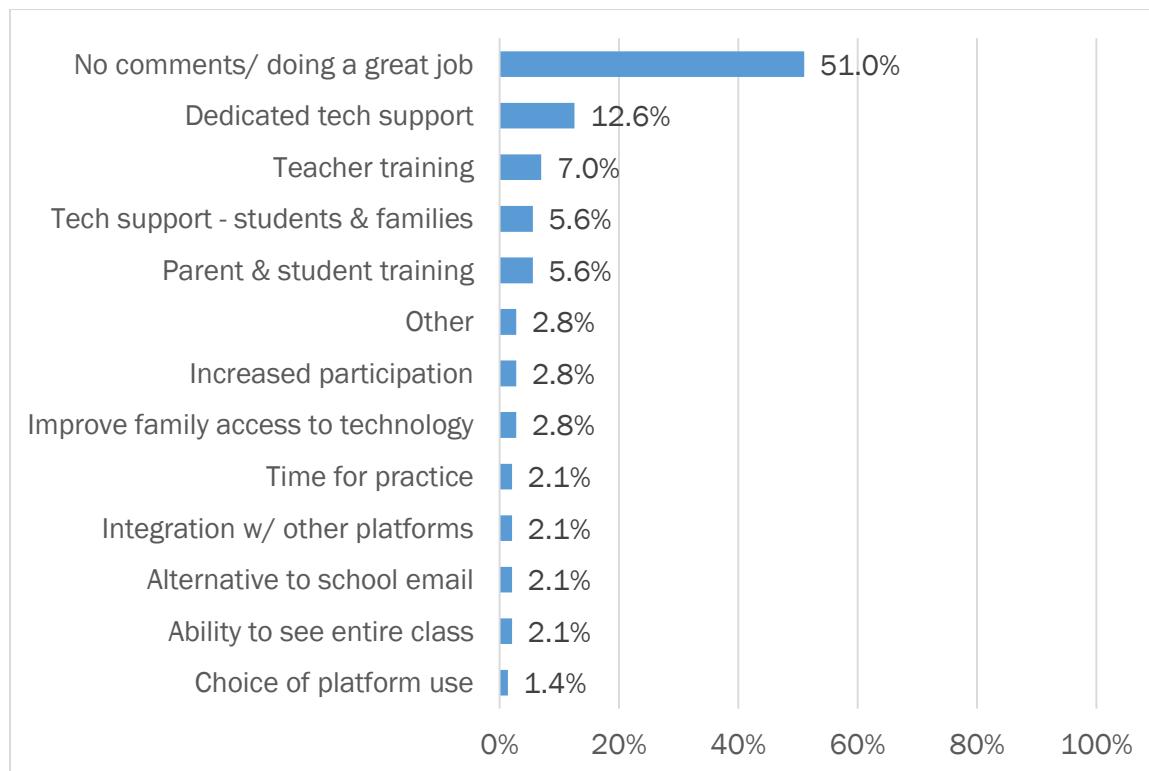
"I am having a much more difficult time learning how to set up a Class in TEAMS I am easily distracted and find it very difficult to maintain focus for 1.5 hours in a Virtual, majority lecture/demonstration-based format with SO MUCH material to cover at one time. To best accommodate my learning style, I would appreciate at least three one-one, in-person, interactive tutorial sessions (of course I will wear my mask and gloves). Then, I would need to extend that same type of learning experience to my students and (to some) of their parents, given the difficulty that the parents had with me trying to tell them, over the phone, how to access TEAMS on their phones."



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When asked about the comments, questions, or suggestions for IT, Figure 12 shows the emerging themes. More than half of the respondents expressed that they were satisfied, felt IT was doing a great job, or had no comments. Approximately 13% of responses centered around a desire for dedicated technical support for teachers. Seven percent expressed the need for more teacher training. Recommendations included providing hands-on training, more detailed instructions, and lessons on individualized strategies and techniques. Approximately 6% of responses focused on providing technical support and training for students and families, such as assistance logging on and connecting, as well as establishing regulations and best practices. When making other recommendations, fewer than 1% of each of the responses included the following: surveying parents to assess needs, developing virtual training options, and focusing on the unique needs of students with disabilities. Three percent of teachers requested strategies for recruiting more students. Another key point was finding ways for families to have consistent Internet service and the devices needed for all students in the household to participate (2.8%).

Figure 12. Comments, Questions, or Suggestions for IT



"It would be helpful to be able to receive permission on a case by case basis to download updates, needed programs, etc., if we will not be able to put in tickets."

"If giving a math lesson, is there a way I can write something on the screen instead of having to get a whiteboard and dry erase marker and prop it up."

"Maybe there should be a most frequently asked questions page or trouble shooting tips page."

"We need a power point that could show us how to create different things in the platform."



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"There are too many steps to login for students and parents that are not computer literate."

"Maybe create a PD for kids and parents that involves appropriate settings, norms, helping the parents and scholars to understand there are still rules that must be followed for instruction, lighting, materials to be on hand (like a classroom supply list), etc. Just limiting the background noise and parents NOT dropping in to give "household" instructions. Also, I think earphones for every child would block a lot of the minor distractions that didn't involve an adult."

"My biggest concern about this experience is the availability of the students for this lesson. 4 out of 19 isn't a good turnout, and I don't know the reasons behind why so few turned out."

"They may have the internet, but do their childcare providers? Do they have enough devices? One computer per family may not be enough."

"Students need access to computers and the internet. Teachers need to be able to see multiple students at one time for monitoring during lessons."



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Student Survey Findings

Sixty-five (65) students completed the survey following the year-end connect event with their teacher. Sixty-three (63) surveys were completed in English and two surveys were completed in Spanish. Twenty-eight (28) surveys came from students in grades 1-5 at seven elementary or K-8 schools. Thirty-seven (37) surveys came from students in grades 6-10 at four middle, K-8, or high schools.

About one-quarter of all students indicated they had problems connecting with their teacher.

Figure 1. It was easy for me to connect with my teacher on the computer for the class meeting.

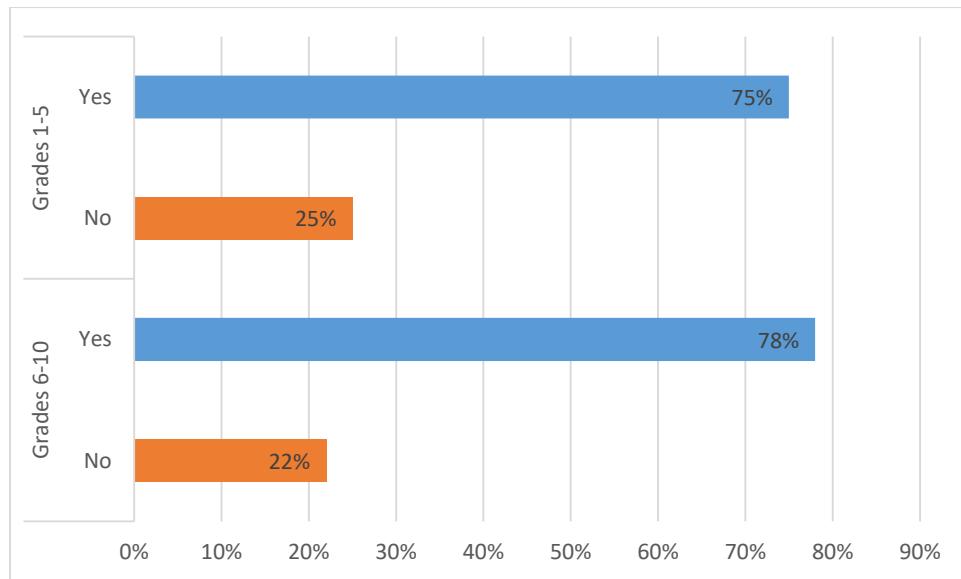
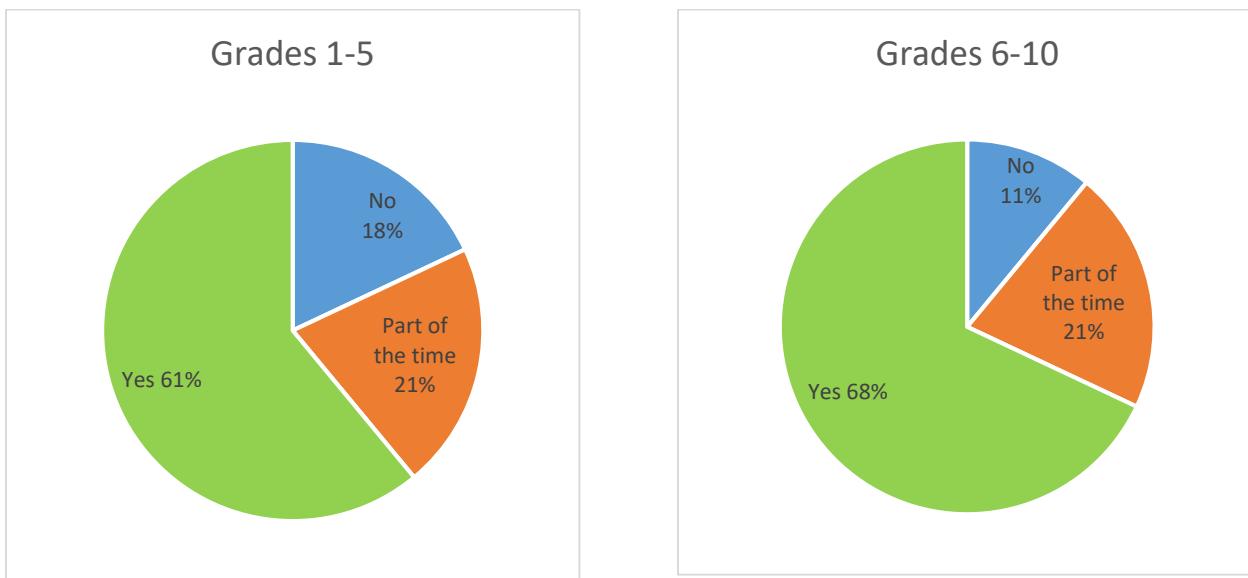


Figure 2 shows that over 30% of students had difficulty at least part of the time figuring out what to do on the computer to be part of the class meeting.

Figure 2. It was easy for me to figure out what to do on the computer to be part of the class meeting.





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Figures 3 and 4 address how easy it was for students to see and hear their teacher during the class meeting. Elementary school students reported more difficulties at least part of the time compared to middle or high school students.

Figure 3. It was easy for me to see my teacher on the computer.

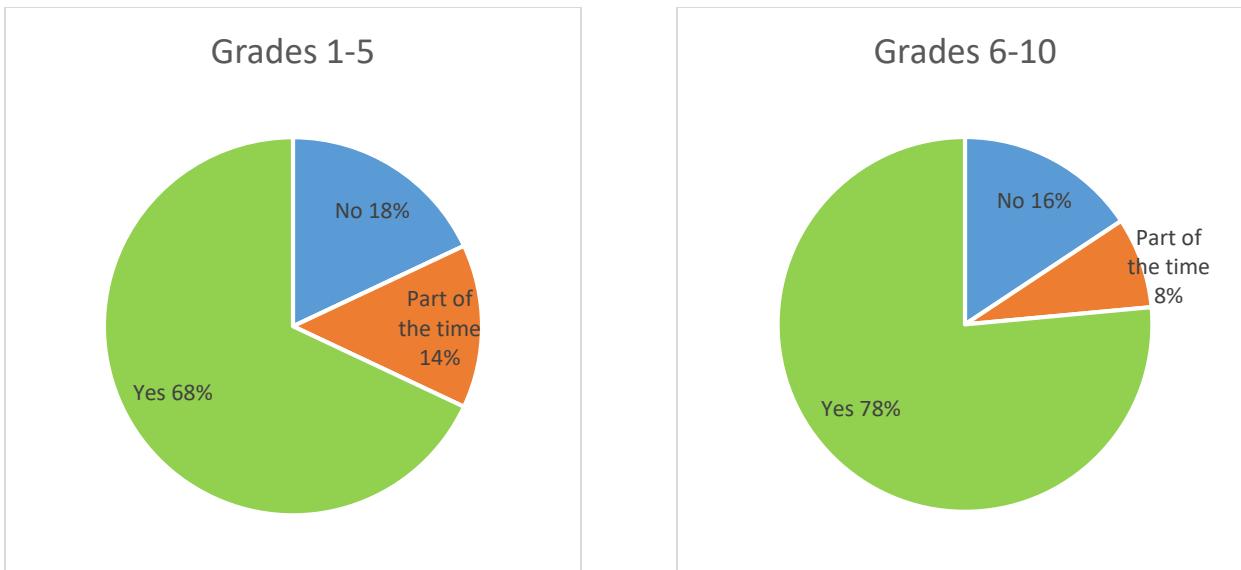
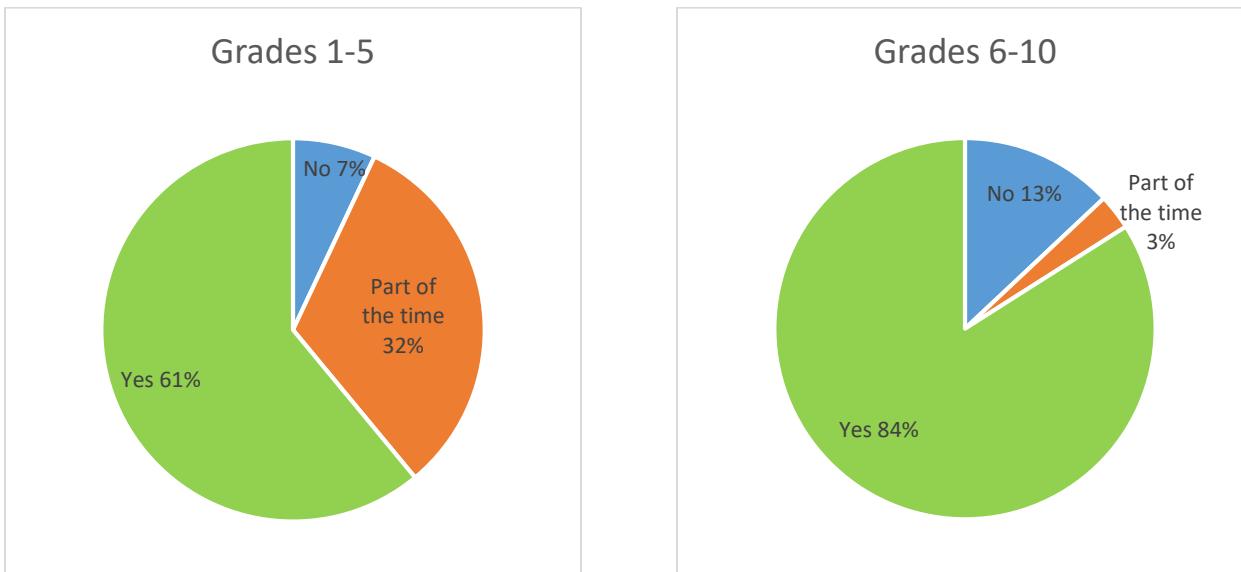


Figure 4. It was easy for me to hear my teacher on the computer.





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Figures 5 and 6 address how well students could understand and focus on what their teacher was saying during the class meeting. About 65% of elementary school students and 75% of middle or high school students reported they were able to do both.

Figure 5. I was able to understand what my teacher was saying in the class meeting.

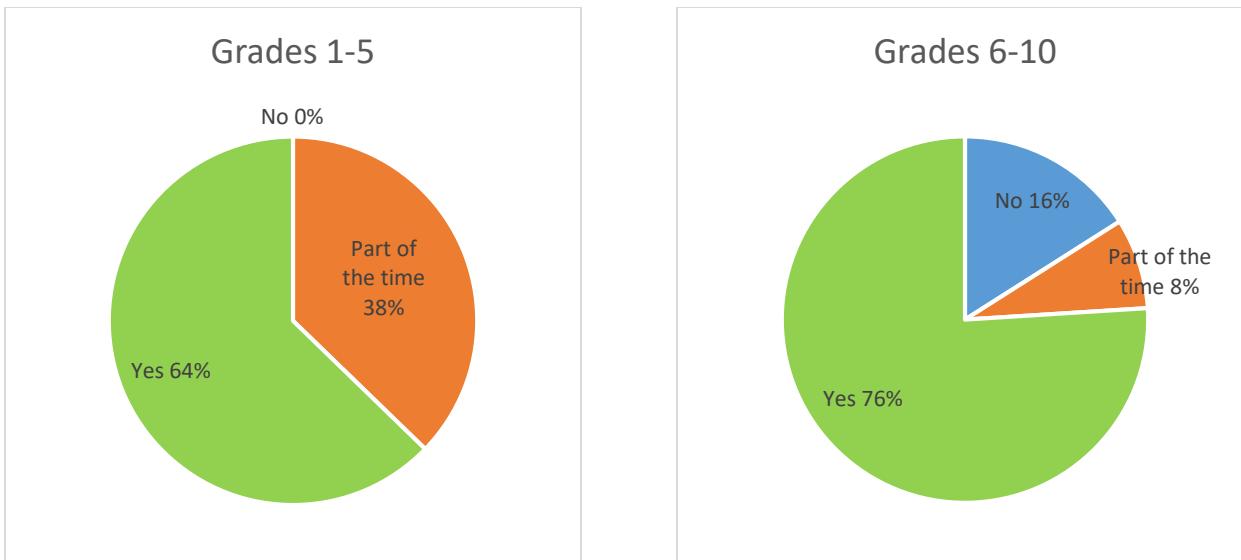
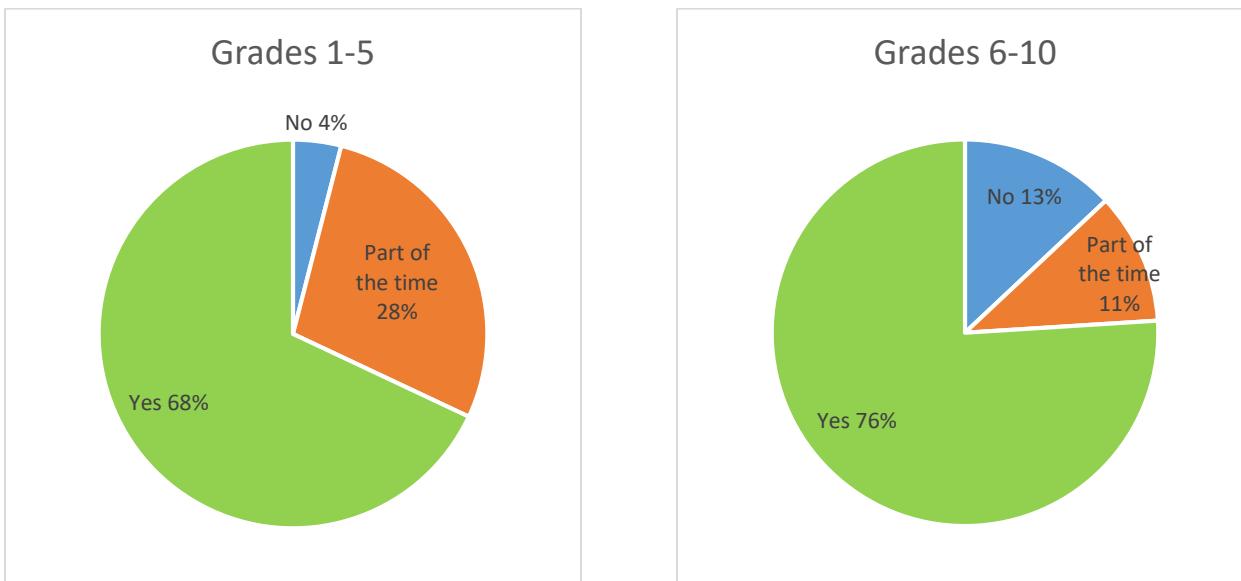


Figure 6. It was easy for me to focus on what my teacher was saying in the class meeting.





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Figure 7 shows that 10% of elementary school students reported not being able to see and hear their classmates, while almost 20% of middle or high school students reported such.

Figure 7. I could see and hear my classmates on the computer.

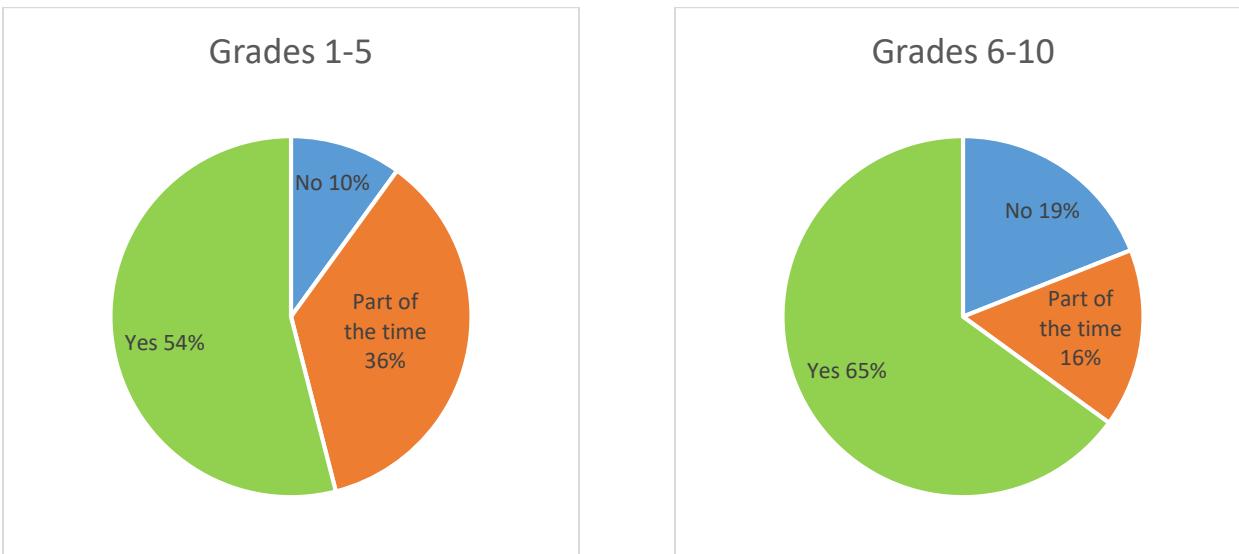
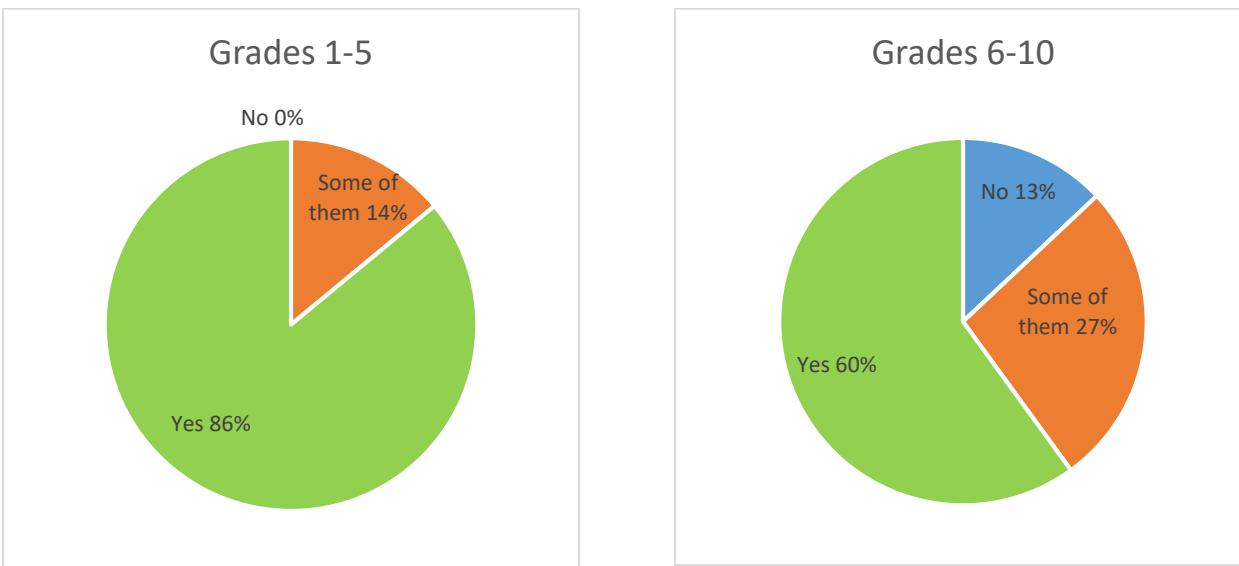


Figure 8 shows that all elementary school students reported liking all or some of the activities they did during the class meeting, whereas 13% of middle or high school students did not like the activities.

Figure 8. I liked the activities our class did on the computer.

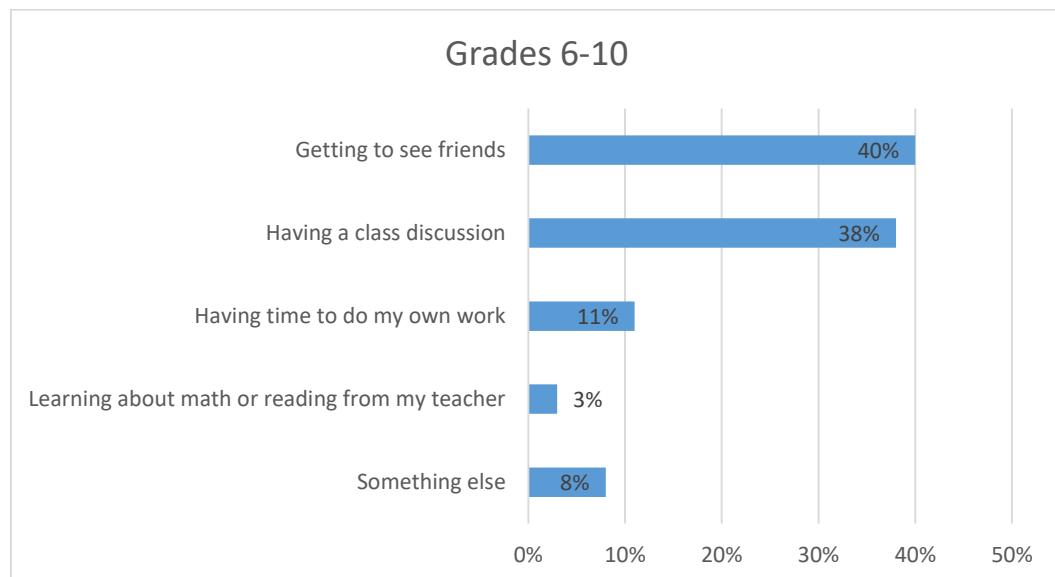
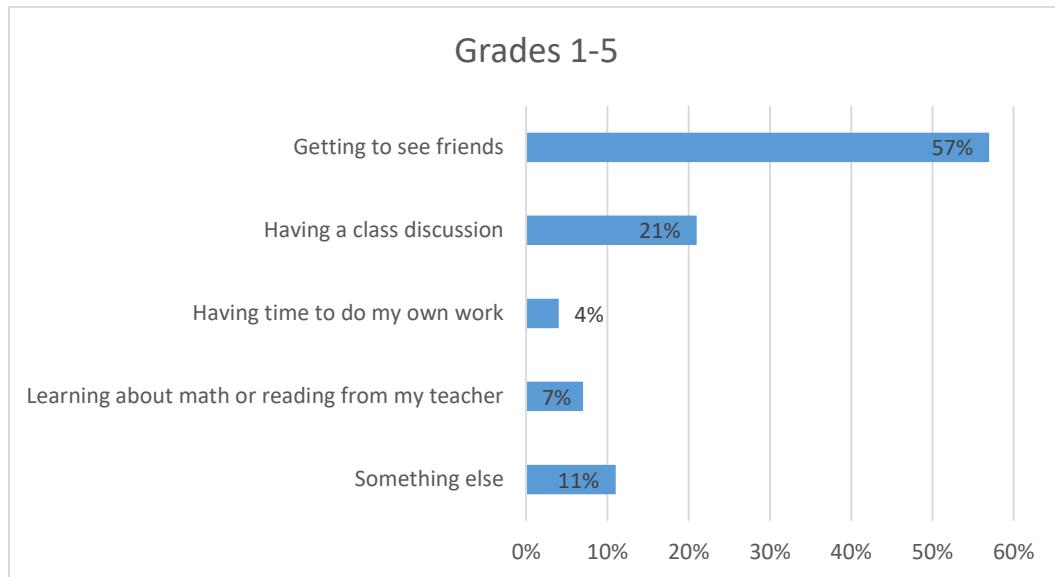




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Figure 9 displays students' choices for their favorite activity. Responses must be interpreted with caution, as the teacher survey found that not all teachers engaged in all activities during their class meetings. Elementary school students who selected "something else" indicated multiple activities as their favorite (e.g., "To see my friends and to do my work and to talk to my teacher") and a scavenger hunt. Students in grades 6-10 who selected that "something else" was their favorite activity said they enjoyed all, nothing, and a trivia game.

Figure 9. Please select your favorite activity you did in your class meeting.





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The last question on the survey asked students to list something that would make class meetings on the computer better. There were 25 elementary student responses. Themes centered around Technical Challenges (16%), Teams Platform Concerns (20%), Meeting Instructions and Logistics (12%) and Comments Regarding Participation (16%). The full list of student comments is below. It is apparent that parents or other adults helped students complete this question in some instances.

Please list something that would make class meetings on the computer better. (Grades 1-5)

Technical Challenges (16%)
Better internet service
Connection
Well sometimes the screens will be sideways so that would make it better if they turned normal.
If it was zoom, so I don't have to use my mom's phone because I couldn't fix it on computer.
Teams Platform Concerns (20%)
Different platform from Microsoft Teams, it is not user friendly nor classroom friendly, too difficult to share screens and still see people.
If it would show more than 4 people at a time on the screen of the Microsoft app.
If you could play games and join other people's games.
Muting everyone who is not talking
Noise canceling headphones
Meeting Instructions and Logistics (12%)
Agenda for the meeting ** Different times so siblings can all attend their meetings. Every grade at the same time does not support multi child homes.
More Directions
More instructions
Comments Regarding Participation (16%)
More kids joining
More students
More students participating.
If there were more students
General Positive Comments (16%)
Continue the meetings
It is better like it is.
It's easy and online
None. Great class
General Negative Comments (12%)
I don't like the computer.
I prefer in person classes
Seeing teacher and friends
Other Comments (8%)
How to take tests?
Sorry she missed it.



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Eighteen middle or high school students provided comments about how to make computer class meetings better. The themes that emerged in their responses were the same those identified for the elementary school students: Technical Challenges (11%), Teams Platform Concerns (17%), Meeting Instructions and Logistics (22%), and Comments Regarding Participation (22%). The full list of comments for students in grades 6-10 is below.

Please list something that would make class meetings on the computer better. (Grades 6-10)

Technical Challenges (11%)
Better quality
To not give online work, all people don't have internet at home
Teams Platform Concerns (17%)
Getting to submit your answer when on the call
If there is an activity being displayed, it would be nice to be able to be more interactive instead of just typing in the chat.
If we could see everybody it would be better
Meeting Instructions and Logistics (22%)
By letting everyone know at an earlier time
Could you make a Team on Microsoft Teams for all the freshman, and schedule a meeting for the next connection event? If you do what I suggested, the meeting would be much easier to access.
Make sure everyone understands.
Maybe when we're done with our activities we can play a game
Comments Regarding Participation (22%)
Probably having the whole class involved because only half the class was there.
That if there's meeting in the morning, to not have people doing other things that we wouldn't do on a regular school class. Like applying lotion, brushing teeth, etc.
If everybody joined
If everyone participated
General Positive Comments (22%)
Nothing really because everything on the call was good.
all good here ??
I don't know, it was pretty good as it was!
It was fine in my opinion
General Negative Comments (6%)
Going back to school.



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Teacher Focus Group

Key Findings

- Most of the teachers reported low student participation during the Year-End Connect event, as well as fairly low participation in school activities since the stay-at-home period began. Cited reasons include: connectivity problems, scheduling conflicts, the absence of a device with which to connect to the session, language barriers, and low interest or motivation.
- Teachers and students have experienced a lot of technical difficulties with Microsoft Teams. Some have been relatively minor, but some have been insurmountable hurdles that prevented lessons from occurring at all.
- Students were actively engaged when they were in small group sessions (of about 3–6 students), whereas student engagement tended to shut down in large group sessions.
- Teachers agreed that grades, attendance, and other accountability mechanisms will be necessary ingredients for engaging students in remote learning.
- Other recommended strategies for engaging students remotely included: socioemotional check-ins, incentives, competitive activities, cooperative activities, creativity, team-teaching, and presenting content in multiple ways.
- Teachers made a number of suggestions about how remote learning could be structured in the fall, but they asserted that one size would not fit all, especially for different age groups.
- They listed multiple reasons why replicating the regular school schedule online—i.e., meeting classes online everyday using the same schedule as regular school—would be disastrous.
- The general consensus of the group was that remote learning would have to be largely asynchronous, supplemented with some flexibly scheduled small-group meetings for discussions, check-ins, question-asking, and any necessary reteaching.
- One common remote-learning recommendation was for teachers to record themselves doing their normal lessons, and then post the videos for students to access at a time convenient for them.
- Teachers pointed out the need to establish rapport with their incoming students in the fall and discussed the difficulties of doing this remotely.
- Teachers' training experiences on how to use Teams have ranged from very good to very bad.
- Some teachers desire in-person training on Teams (with proper social distancing measures in place). Some would like an expert from Microsoft to conduct these trainings.
- Participants would like guidance on how to organize lessons in Teams; one participant provided some guidance and resources on this topic.
- Teachers feel that technical training is only part of the picture; they need training on best practices for remote teaching as well.
- Students need training on how to be an online student.
- Families need step-by-step instructions on accessing Teams and any other online platforms, and they need it in multiple formats and in multiple languages. Teachers suggested posting step-by-step videos, along with sending families hard-copy pictorials with students' personalized login credentials and steps for signing in.
- The teachers expressed a strong sense of urgency to get training and technical instructions out to families as soon as possible, so that they can be learning and troubleshooting access over the



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summer, rather than at the beginning of the school year, which would be chaotic and result in lost instructional time.

Introduction

To get a deeper understanding of participants' experiences during the District's 2020 Year-End Connect (YEC) event, as well as to get teachers' perspectives and ideas about possibilities for remote learning moving forward, the District tasked the Department of Research and Performance Management (RPM) with conducting a virtual focus group with teachers who had participated in the event. To solicit volunteers for the focus group, RPM sent emails to teachers at the 40 schools that were part of the YEC event. RPM also emailed principals of those schools to enlist their help in recruiting teachers to participate in the focus group. In the end, 10 teachers from eight schools participated: five elementary teachers, one middle school teacher, and four high school teachers.

The focus group took place virtually, using the Microsoft Teams platform—the same platform used for the YEC event. This made for an interesting situation, given that many of the questions were about the feasibility of using Teams for remote learning. Indeed, some minor technical difficulties arose during the focus group that underscored some of the issues teachers were discussing about the Teams platform. For instance, one teacher used her mobile phone to participate in the meeting. Whenever the facilitator spoke while that teacher's microphone was unmuted, it created a terrible feedback problem that made communication impossible. This was not a huge barrier; the facilitator simply tried to refrain from interjecting when that teacher was unmuted. If this had occurred with more than one participant, however, it could have seriously hampered the session. Teachers reported that many of their students have to join virtual sessions via mobile phone because of a dearth of other options in their households. Thus, if this feedback problem is prevalent with mobile-phone connections to Teams, it could end up being a significant hindrance to remote learning efforts that rely heavily on teacher-student interactions within that platform.

Another issue was that chat notifications from other teams beeped on the facilitator's computer throughout the session and could be heard by all the participants; the facilitator tried to disable those notifications to no avail. She asked the group for advice, and one teacher with impressive expertise in Teams said, "Every time I think I've done it, it doesn't happen." It was a bearable annoyance during the focus group, which consisted of teachers who were highly engaged in the topic. But incessant beeping could become an intolerable distraction during remote-learning sessions, especially for students who are struggling to understand the material or whose attention span is not very long.

The teachers participating in the focus group availed themselves of the Chat feature in Teams throughout the session, communicating with one another on various points and even sharing resources with one another. The facilitator told the teachers she could not monitor the chat and conduct the focus group at the same time, since it was her first *virtual* focus group, and her familiarity with Teams is beginner-to-moderate. The teachers said they understood, but that it was helpful to them to be able to communicate with one another that way. By the end of the session, the chat record was extensive and contained a lot of pertinent perspectives and information. Therefore, the facilitator used the chat posts as an additional source of data and incorporated the relevant information gleaned there into this report.

All in all, the teachers were grateful for the opportunity to share their perspectives on, experiences with, and ideas about remote learning, and they said they enjoyed getting to engage on the topic with other teachers from across the District. Indeed, teachers had so much to say that the focus



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group ran well over the allotted time, lasting about an hour and 45 minutes. But to make sure everyone had a chance to say everything they wanted to say, the facilitator offered teachers the opportunity to email additional thoughts afterwards. Two teachers sent emails, one of which contained further thoughts and the other of which was more of a technical resource on Teams that other teachers might find useful. The former served as additional data for the analysis presented in this report; the latter could serve as a resource for creating relevant Teams trainings moving forward.

The discussion covered the successes and failures of the YEC event and of all the remote-learning activities that took place since the stay-at-home period began, as well as ideas about remote learning moving forward. This report presents the major themes arising from the discussion, organized into five areas: student participation in the YEC event, technological problems, engaging students in remote learning, formats for remote learning, and needed training and support.

Student Participation in Year-End Connect Day

Most of the teachers reported low attendance at their YEC event, citing several reasons, including: connectivity problems, scheduling conflicts, the absence of a device with which to connect to the session, language barriers, and low interest or motivation.

Schools implemented their YEC event in different ways. For instance, one teacher's high school organized sessions into grade-level teams and a few special-interest teams, such as world languages, choir, and ACT preparation. The special-interest sessions took place after the grade-level sessions so that students could participate in both if they wanted to. Every teacher was expected to fit into one team's session (either grade-level or special-interest). Thus, each event had multiple teachers and a large group of students. This teacher's event had eight or nine teachers and 43 students.

Another high school organized their sessions through homerooms; teachers without a homeroom were partnered with a homeroom teacher. Every homeroom teacher was given a socioemotional lesson to cover during their YEC session. All teachers participated except 12th-grade teachers, because seniors were busy with Advanced Placement testing. Plus, under normal circumstances, seniors would have already been out of school by the time the event took place.

Another high school teacher reported that his school selected certain teachers for the event, who were instructed to cover a lesson of their choice. Those teachers were asked to recruit participants from their homeroom first, followed by other students who were likely to be most responsive. Out of 50 invitations to students, he had only one taker for his session. He said it turned out to be a good session, because they could really dig into the material together.

One second-grade teacher said that at her school, homeroom teachers had YEC sessions, but specialists did not hold their own sessions. Only eight out of 42 students joined their grade-level session. She said she was very fortunate to have a very involved class this year, but given that the whole school was to participate during the same one hour, many of her students ceded their YEC access to their older siblings at the same school, since many families had only one device through which students could connect to the event. Parents also participated in the meeting—and in some cases were answering questions for their children. Also, siblings could be heard in the background in many cases.

Other teachers reporting their YEC event's participation included a kindergarten teacher who had only one student participate in her session, and a third-grade teacher who had about six students at hers. The third-grade teacher said that the parents of her English Learner (EL) students could not



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understand the directions for how to connect their children to the session, and that was the reason a number of her students were unable to participate, despite their efforts to do so.

Technological Problems

Nearly every teacher reported having technical difficulties with Microsoft Teams, either during the YEC event, during other remote-learning sessions, or both. Some of the issues were minor, but some were major—even to the point of preventing a lesson from taking place at all. This section illustrates some of the problems teachers and their students have experienced with the Teams platform.

A high school teacher said her school did not have extreme technical difficulties during the YEC event, because their IT person (Leslie Roberts) was in their school a lot last year trying to slowly transition them to Teams. But one thing her colleagues did not know was that multimedia components do not work well in the web browser version of Teams; it is therefore advisable to use the desktop application instead. (She said she can mute students better in the desktop app as opposed to the web browser version as well.) Thus, during the YEC event, she got calls and texts from people having trouble in other sessions, and some students in her own session reported that their siblings in other sessions could not get one thing or another to work. So she found herself troubleshooting for others while she and her students were working through their lesson. She therefore advised that if the District moves forward with Teams, it will be important to get the message out for people to use the desktop app instead of the web browser version.

One first-grade teacher experienced multiple technical issues during her YEC session. At first, the link she had sent out did not work, she thinks possibly because she failed to add a channel when she set up the meeting. A couple of students managed to get into the session by phone. However, a few parents contacted her saying they could not get in, and she spent the entire hour troubleshooting. After that discouraging experience, she did some practice sessions and tried again at the end of the week and still had trouble despite having added the channel before setting up the meeting. The problem this time was that parallel sessions ended up running, with some people in one session and others in another session. She was able to do the lesson with two students in one session, but there were two other students, along with their parents, waiting in the other session, and she had no idea they were there for a good part of the session. It turned out that a middle school sibling of one of her students had somehow created a group for the sibling using the same name as her (the teacher's) group. She had to call IT to get that group deleted.

A middle school teacher said a lot of her students told her they were blocked from joining Teams sessions. When they attempted to log in, they would get a message saying they were blocked. In fact, her school tried to use Teams when the quarantine first started, but had to pause on it, because so many people had trouble logging in. When she contacted IT about the problem, they told her that they could correct only 10 students at a time who were blocked. Out of the 10 they unblocked, only six students were able to log in, but not the other four. Once those six started to come to class, she tried to add others for the YEC event, and again, she had students who were blocked from logging in. They knew the login protocol by heart, because they accessed Clever and another platform the same way, with the same login information—so that was not the problem. They were getting a message saying they were blocked.

An elementary teacher said most of her students used their phones to access Teams, but they often encountered problems when trying to do so. They or their parents would call her asking her to walk them through the process, but she could not visualize the buttons they were describing on their



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screen and thus could not help them effectively. She described attempts to meet her students in Teams as “a revolving circle of frustration,” because she did not get good support from IT, her students were discouraged, and she would receive multiple calls requesting her to walk students or parents through the process, and she did not know how to help them. “It makes them not want to get on, because we can’t get past the sign-in.” Another teacher seconded this, saying she had had the same issues.

Other technical issues teachers reported included the following:

- Copying a link from Discovery Education to Teams worked well when posting a video to be merely viewed. But when trying to designate it as an assignment (so that students could submit answers back), one teacher reported that Teams would not allow her to click the final *Assign* button after she did all the precursors.
- One teacher reported that students can access items of various formats when using their personal device, but they cannot open PDFs on their school-issued device. She said her students are constantly requesting to have PDFs in Word or some other format because the PDFs will not open. She said her students encountered a lot of conflicts on their school-issued devices that simply do not make sense, this being one example. Since PDF is a very common (not to mention relatively harmless) file type, she wonders why students would not be able to open files of that format. She said the District needs to re-evaluate what permissions are set up for the students on the school-issued equipment.
- One teacher said that during her YEC event, she shared her screen with her group. At first she could see the chat on the side, but after doing something, could not see it anymore and could not get back to it without unsharing her screen. Not wanting to interrupt the lesson, she asked her co-teachers to let her know if there was a relevant question or comment on the chat that she needed to address. Another teacher said she had the same issue and got one of her students to monitor the chat for her.
- One teacher said that when her students called in on Teams, she could never get them on the same call. If she clicked on one student’s call, and then went to another student’s call, Teams would not allow her to integrate the calls so that everyone could communicate in the same call.
- Another teacher reported that she normally embeds links in her PowerPoint presentations to click on for multimedia content. But in Teams, whenever she would click on the hyperlink in the PowerPoint presentation on her screen, it would not show the multimedia content on the students’ screens; it just stayed on the PowerPoint screen for them (though the content would play on her own screen).

Student Engagement

Teachers had a number of ideas about how to keep students engaged in remote learning, and they also raised a lot of questions to consider. This section discusses what the teachers found to work well in engaging students remotely, along with what did not work so well.

Several teachers stressed the importance of doing a socioemotional check-in at the beginning of the session. One teacher had her students “Tell Me Something Good” about their lives (referencing the Chaka Khan song) to start off the lesson, which is normally something she does every Friday in the classroom setting.



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A few teachers recommended using competition as a mechanism to engage students. One reported high engagement in the YEC event for world languages at her school when they did cultural trivia, citing the competitive nature as the source of engagement and motivation for students. The teachers asked the questions and had the students give their responses in the Chat, and it seemed to work well.

Cooperation was also a recommendation for engaging students. One successful activity in the above-mentioned world-languages YEC session entailed a chart with foreign-language phrases (five language groups were represented in the session); students had to work together to match the phrases in the various languages. The teacher attributed the students' high participation in that activity to its cooperative nature.

Some teachers stressed the importance of being creative as a means of engaging students online. Incentives were also mentioned, such as the promise of a really great pizza party once school starts meeting in the building again. Awarding extra points for various activities was also cited as a motivator. Relatedly, multiple teachers noted a precipitous drop in remote-learning participation once the District announced that it would be for enrichment and not count towards students' grades. Teachers thus stressed that getting some sort of grade for participation would need to be part of the equation for getting students to engage in the sessions and the material.

And many teachers reported that small-group sessions were much more successful than their large-group sessions. One teacher said that in sessions with more than six students, students were less likely to turn on their camera and less likely to participate in discussion. But with groups of three to six, students would turn on their camera no matter their state (still in bed, fixing their hair, etc.) and participate in the discussion. Other teachers echoed this, saying that their students "shut down" in larger sessions but were very active in the smaller ones.

One participant, seconded by others, suggested that team-teaching could be a valuable format in the remote-learning environment, asserting that it had worked very well in her school's YEC event. During online sessions, one teacher could teach the lesson while another monitors the chat. If the same question comes up a lot, the teachers could go back and reteach that part of the lesson.

Finally, some teachers emphasized the importance of presenting content multiple ways, saying that simply offering up a canned video on a given topic (from Khan Academy or Discovery Education, for instance) will not suffice. Teachers discussed seeing examples of successful teaching videos in which District teachers used a whiteboard to teach their lessons, just as they would normally do in the classroom. Similarly, one teacher said that he invested some of his stimulus check in a \$99 overhead camera that plugs into his laptop, so that students can watch him work problems with pen and paper (no whiteboard needed).

Formats for Remote Learning

Many times during the focus group, teachers brought up their concerns over how remote learning would be structured if teachers and students have to begin the 2020–21 school year at home. They raised a lot of potential problems and questions to consider, many of them centered around the scheduling aspect of remote learning. As one teacher put it, "It's a little daunting to think that I'll need to spend seven hours [a day] as a teacher, but I have four elementary school children, and they're going to have to spend seven hours [a day] too."



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The general consensus of the group was that remote learning would have to be largely asynchronous, supplemented with some flexibly scheduled small-group meetings for discussions, check-ins, question-asking, and any necessary reteaching. There was also consensus that grades and accountability will have to be part of the process for remote learning to operate successfully.

Everyone seemed to agree that replicating the regular school schedule online—i.e., meeting classes online everyday using the same schedule as regular school—would be disastrous. They cited a host of problems that would preclude this from being a viable option, including the following:

- Many parents work outside the home during the day and cannot help their elementary children access online sessions. And even those working from home would not be available to help really young students in the way that they would need.
- Many students have school-age siblings who would also need to be online at the same time. With limited internet bandwidth, limited devices, and limited parent/guardian presence to facilitate online access, it would be impossible in many households to have multiple siblings attending online classes at the same time. The YEC event was a clear illustration of this.
- Meeting as a large group both quells student engagement and hampers teachers' ability to monitor it, so small group meetings are recommended over the class-size groupings of regular schooling.
- Younger students in particular have a short attention span and would not be able to be in front of a computer for protracted periods—especially while in the familiar environment of the home, where toys, food, and other distractions may be readily available.

Teachers made a number of suggestions about how remote learning could be structured in the fall, but they heartily agreed that one size would not fit all, especially for different age groups. But even from school to school or within the same school, teachers said, there needs to be a lot of flexibility in how remote learning is structured, because students' needs and families' situations vary so widely.

One teacher posted into the Chat an article from *Inside Higher Ed* that he said details about 15 different routes for schooling in the fall. He said that we will probably use the majority of them, “depending on the grade, on the school, on the home situation, on the requirements of the course, and so forth.”

Several participants asserted that teachers need to record themselves doing their normal lessons, and then post the videos for students to access at a time convenient for them. One advantage of doing this is that once a video is recorded, it can be used for multiple sections of the same subject—and used in future years as well. And it sidesteps the scheduling and technology problems of live streaming everything.

One teacher pointed out that “many school systems have simply emailed assignments every morning, due each afternoon. Teachers were present for office hours during the day.” Another teacher said she ended up doing that herself throughout the stay-at-home phase this school year.

In terms of scheduling small-group time, a couple of high school teachers said they offered students several time slots and allowed them to pick the one that worked best for them. Oftentimes, students' preferences were not during the traditional school day, but rather sometime between 3:30 and 5:00. Some elementary teachers agreed that they would likely need to meet their students online at nontraditional times, because many of their students' parents do not get home until after 6:00 in the evening, and their young students would need parental assistance to meet online.



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A few of the elementary teachers were very concerned about the fact that parents were clearly answering questions on behalf of their children during online sessions (with cameras turned off). They insisted that there needs to be some way to prevent this from happening moving forward. One teacher mentioned that the Bartlett school district used Seesaw for elementary students, which records the students doing their work. She said several parents told her it worked well for them.

Teachers also wondered how attendance and tardies would be tracked for remote learning. They agreed that such information would be a vital first-order measure of student engagement and suggested that teachers and schools reach out to families of students who are not joining online sessions, so that they can figure out what the barriers are. In some cases, the solution may have to be physically mailing packets of material to those families every couple of weeks.

Another issue raised was the need to build rapport with students—and the difficulty of doing so without ever having met face to face. The COVID-19 crisis hit towards the end of this school year, when students and teachers knew each other well and rapport had been well established. But starting a new school year sight unseen will be a different story altogether. The kindergarten teacher in the group was especially concerned about this, as she begins each school year with a crop of students who do not yet know what school is. How to instill into young children the norms and expectations of schooling, purely through a computer screen, is a daunting task to contemplate.

Given its interactive capabilities, a platform like Teams could certainly serve an important function in helping to foster some degree of rapport among students and teachers at the beginning of a remote-start school year, as well as to support students' socioemotional learning. All in all, teachers agreed that Teams (or some other platform with interactive features) needs to be part of the remote-learning formula. But they argued that the real-time convening of students and teachers online should be a supplement and not the "be-all-end-all."

Training and Support Needs

Teachers had a lot to say about the training and support needed to make remote learning a successful venture. They discussed the Teams training they have had—some great, some truly terrible—and what sort of training they would like to receive moving forward. They also pointed out the need for student and parent training, which was something the facilitator had not even thought to ask about. This section summarizes the main points that teachers discussed in this topic area.

Teacher Training on Microsoft Teams

One teacher took some District trainings on Teams (which, incidentally, took place in Teams), and said, "It was a MESS, a MESS." She said the instructors did not know what they were doing, and it turned her off from trying other District trainings on Teams. "They were trying to teach us how to use Teams, and they didn't know how to use Teams to teach us how to use Teams. It was ineffective. We couldn't even get through the stuff." She said it was easier for her to just open up Teams and mess around and make mistakes and figure it out on her own. She ended up reading about Teams in Canvas, which was easier. But she had signed up for the District's real-time trainings, thinking they would be more helpful, with hands-on demos and the like—but the instructors could not even get the demos to work. "It was embarrassing."

She added that after the training, "We all kept getting every single email regarding the training, and the questions for the presenters, etc. The presenters could not figure out how to turn off the emails, and it was not an option for the participants to opt out of the emails. It was so amazingly frustrating.



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I ended up leaving the Teams. That was the only way to make the emails stop." Another teacher said she experienced the same email problem after her District Teams training.

Another teacher had a similar experience with her District Teams training. She said she did both Content Cadre and webinars. The former was "learn at your own pace," and this teacher said it was passable, but that it was difficult to read some of it because the font was too small. As for the webinars, there were multiple technical difficulties. For instance, someone had completely taken over one presenter's presentation, so the trainees had to wait for a very long time while she tried to figure out what was going on. Once the presenter finally regained control of her presentation:

She was talking, but we couldn't see what she was talking about. So it was a very frustrating webinar.... If you're the expert and you're having these difficulties and you're having a hard time troubleshooting them, then what's going to happen when these things start happening to us? So it's going to take a lot of training, [including]: if this happens, do this; if this happens, do this... [so that if we encounter these problems] we'll know what to do.

Based on such experiences with District trainings, some of the teachers said they would like the District to bring in an expert from Microsoft to conduct trainings for teachers. However, another teacher weighed in, saying "I went to a training last summer with a Microsoft presenter, and it was horrible. I wasted two days of my life... The best training I received was from Leslie Roberts here in the district. She's phenomenal." One thing that the teachers did agree on was that whoever conducts the training needs to be a true expert on Teams.

A few teachers said they would really like to receive their Teams training in person at the Technology Training Center (TTC), so that they can be hands-on and actually do the navigating in Teams while the presenter shows them how. One teacher said, "I know we're social distancing, but I would like to have support at the [TTC], even if we have to do one person to a table with our masks on, or whatever the case may be. That is going to help me better—hands on—than doing it virtually... If we can actually sit in a class session before we go back." Other teachers echoed these sentiments.

One teacher said she is fairly conversant with Teams, but she needs to know how to organize things to make it user-friendly for students (and parents). What she likes about Google Classroom and Canvas is that they let one organize items by units and modules. In order for asynchronous learning to work well, she said, it must be organized in a way that makes sense and is logical for people to navigate. The Teams expert of the group weighed in, saying that one of the Teams "gurus" he follows on YouTube recommends the following format for organizing lessons in Teams: the group is the classroom (one period), the general channel is everything students will need and use on a daily basis, and all the other channels are the lessons. So when students open Teams, they open right into the landing page and see Lesson 1, Lesson 2A, Lesson 2B, etc., as each channel represents one lesson. Once one period is all organized this way, it is easy to copy and paste it for the other periods of the same subject. The teacher said he is putting together a document on how to do this.

He also shared the links of the two Teams experts on YouTube he has learned a lot from:

1. Mr. Tompkins EdTech: <https://www.youtube.com/user/tcolcbsF> (the source of the above recommendation for organizing lessons in Teams)
2. Alice Keeler:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEb5fCozvrg&list=PLqa7N83LLptyHiUNirdFB11tacCLcvVpy&index=2>



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Other Teacher Training

Some teachers pointed out that merely getting trained on how to navigate a remote-learning platform is not enough to make them successful remote teachers. As one teacher said:

I really need best practices on remote online learning.... I know best practices in the classroom, and I can keep being trained on various technologies all day long—but those are platforms, they're not best strategies.... I need best strategies. But the thing, though, that I did do is I just started cold-calling like I would've in class. I said, 'I need three students. I need two boys and a girl. I need this...' for different discussion-point questions. And that helped. And then, once they realized that I was actually leading class like a normal class, they started jumping in. They started, like, low-key checking each other into the conversation. And so some of those normalcy pieces helped. But until we figure out what are best practices, it doesn't matter what we do online.

Other teachers concurred that training on best practices for remote learning at different ages would be necessary to make the remote-learning project a successful one. One teacher mentioned that there are a lot of resources on flipped classrooms, which should be very relevant and useful for the purely remote learning situation as well.

Student and Parent Training

The need for student and parent training was a popular topic of discussion, with teachers agreeing that such training would be crucial to make inclusive online learning a success. Without it, many students would get left out because of a lack of know-how for signing into and navigating the online platforms. While much of the discussion on this issue centered around technical training, some teachers talked about the need to train students on best practices for online students. As one teacher put it, “Social media norms they are used to don’t equate to MS Teams educational norms.” Another teacher elaborated on this theme:

Students have to be trained on how to be an online student. Because we keep assuming that if they have access to technology, they know how to be online learners. But it's not true. Like, you have to read more. I think about the number of students we push into Memphis Virtual School classes or online classes. Those kids will straight-up tell you they cheat nonstop—because no one has trained them on how to be an online student. They don't realize they're going to have to read and then do stuff with their reading, or that they may have to video themselves or whatever.

She went on to say she anticipates needing to spend a lot of time on this issue in the fall:

I did have decent engagement. I was really proud of my kids. But there are definitely some things that all of August is probably going to be for me, for remote learning. It's going to be how to be a good online student. Like, I probably won't even touch content until after Labor Day. Because I feel like that is so crucial. If I can't get that established in that first month, I'm going to lose way more instructional time throughout the year, trying to go back and fix things.

As for the technical aspects of remote learning, the teachers agreed that students and parents would need step-by-step instructions on accessing Teams and any other online platforms, and they would need it in multiple formats and in multiple languages. Parents and students first need to know where to go to find their District emails (Office.com), how to download the Microsoft Teams application, and how to sign in and do basic navigation in all the online platforms. Teachers suggested posting step-by-step videos, along with sending families hard-copy pictorials with students’ personalized login credentials and steps for signing in.



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The training videos would need to be prerecorded and vetted to make sure the instructions are 100% accurate. And teachers cautioned that if any live trainings were offered to parents (whether virtually or in person), they would have to be conducted by true experts “or we’re going to lose parents.”

In terms of needing instructional videos in multiple languages, the Teams expert of the group mentioned that in Teams one can create a video, which will be stored in Stream. Stream can translate what is said in English to any language and do closed captions as well. So the District may be able to use Teams to create videos and instructions in multiple languages, and individual teachers could do so as well.

Other Support Needs

The teachers expressed a strong sense of urgency to get training and technical instructions out to families as soon as possible, so that they can be learning and troubleshooting access over the summer, rather than at the beginning of the school year, which would be chaotic and result in a lot of lost instructional time. Thus, several teachers said that schools need their projected rosters now, along with good contact information for families. They also said it would be ideal if their students could be automatically loaded into Teams for them.

Participants listed a number of other things that would enable them to be more successful online teachers, including:

- A dedicated District expert for Teams
- Online access to textbooks
- Guidance on how to incorporate the learning plans for special education students, EL students, and RTI² students
- The ability to connect Teams to PowerTeacher, such that grades given on assignments in Teams automatically populate into PowerTeacher
- The ability to spend the \$200 classroom allowance on items for remote learning, such as an overhead camera or a whiteboard
- A list of what permissions the District has blocked in Teams

Finally, one teacher expressed her concerns over using Microsoft Teams, a business-oriented platform, as the District’s remote-learning platform. “We need a learning-management system that can house and do a lot of different things, that’s actually designed to do [remote teaching and learning].” She said that a lot of the technical problems students and teachers have encountered probably stem from the fact that the District is trying to use Teams as a makeshift learning system, when that is not what it was designed for. She said:

The district needs to invest in a true learning-management system.... Microsoft Teams is not a learning-management system. They are constantly trying to make themselves one, but at the end of the day, they aren't.... I'm incredibly concerned that we keep trying to use a business platform for educational purposes under the guise of making students more college and career ready.

This teacher and two others said they wished the District would enable high school students to access Canvas so that they could set up their courses in that platform, either instead of or in addition to Teams.



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Conclusion

In sum, the teachers participating in this focus group have clearly thought a lot about how remote learning should (and should not) be structured, and they articulated many ideas about what the District can do to support teachers and families in their remote-learning endeavors. Their experiences with remote teaching during the last few months of 2019–20, including the YEC event, helped inform their perspectives on what may lie ahead if there is a remote start to the 2020–21 school year. They raised a lot of important questions to consider and offered some promising solutions for some, but not all, of these. It is now up to District leaders to learn from these teachers' experiences and ideas to create thoughtful policy and provide crucial resources and support to teachers and families during this extraordinary time.

Common Themes

Each of the three data collection methods provided information from different respondents on the possibilities and challenges of using Microsoft Teams for remote instruction and learning in the fall. There were some common themes that emerged that will be highlighted here.

Respondents from all three sources (teacher survey, student survey, and teacher focus group) included the importance of addressing the following points to make remote instruction and learning successful in the fall:

- The need for reliable access to the internet and the devices required to participate, and the need to address technical challenges as they arise.
- Having the capacity to help users, especially families, with technological challenges related to accessing and effectively using Microsoft Teams.
- The need for detailed, step-by-step instructions to help users learn how to use the platform for instruction and learning.
- The need to have enough devices in the household so families with multiple students have what they need for all students to participate in lessons and complete assignments.
- The need to have engaged students/classmates participating in the lessons.

Additionally, when looking at just the teacher survey and the teacher focus group responses some common themes were evident from the two different response groups, including:

- The need for detailed Microsoft Teams training, presented in multiple formats, to ensure effective use of the platform for instruction.
- The need for IT personnel who are dedicated specifically to supporting Microsoft Teams for teachers throughout the year.
- The need for training on how to be an effective remote teacher, with some topics including individualized instruction; transferring hands-on lessons to remote formats; keeping students engaged and focused; organizing lessons; and ways to track attendance, tardies, and grades.
- The need for effective ways to communicate with parents and students, and for effective ways to notify students of sessions other than just District provided emails.