



Prince George's County Public Schools

SURVEY RESULTS

DISTANCE LEARNING SURVEY— Fall 2020

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prince George’s County Public Schools (PGCPS) started the 2021 school year on August 31, 2020 with all students participating in distance learning. After five weeks, the Executive Cabinet wanted to check-in with students and families to see how they were doing. Toward that end, the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) was instructed to administer a survey to parents and students. Students in grades three through twelve received a link to the survey via their PGCPS e-mail accounts. The Office of Communications and Community Engagement invited parents to participate by sending a link to subscribers of the emergency alert list, as well as posting the link on social media, the PGCPS Distance Learning webpage and in the weekly newsletter, *Engage PGCPS*. The parent survey was available in English, Spanish and French. The survey administration window opened on October 5th and closed on October 18th. Response rates are shown in the table below.

	Possible # of Responses	Actual # of Responses	Response Rate
<i>Students</i>	100,483	4,672	5.6%
Elementary School (grades 3 – 5)	30,769	1,211	3.9%
Middle School (grades 6 – 8)	31,274	2,036	6.5%
High School (grades 9 – 12)	38,440	2,394	6.2%
<i>Parents</i>	89,043	10,972	12.3%

Communication

- Parents who responded to the survey indicated that the best way to stay in contact with them is through e-mail and text messages.
- They are generally satisfied with communication from the district. They reported a lower level of satisfaction with communication regarding accessing special education services or extra academic help.

Technology

- Most families are using district-issued devices for their students. Those that are not have a family computer, laptop or tablet for their students. Very few need to rely on smart phones to participate in distance learning.
- Nearly all families have an internet connection in their homes. Parents report that the connection is reliable and adequate at higher rates than students do. Those that do not have a home-based internet connection either use a district-issued mobile hotspot or go to someone else’s home to participate in distance learning.

Distance Learning Experiences

- Nearly 70% of parent respondents believe the distance learning services their students are receiving are at least “Good”, with more than one-quarter rating them as “Excellent”.
- Both parents and students are struggling with distance learning, while acknowledging everyone is doing their best in this difficult situation.
- Some things that are going well from the parents’ perspective include:
 - Having their students kept safe from the virus
 - Effective communication from teachers about learning expectations
 - Students participating in face-to-face lessons each day school is in session
 - The many digital resources available to parents to support their students’ learning
- Some difficulties parents have include:
 - Keeping their student engaged
 - Supervising multiple students in different grades with different schedules
 - Providing support for their special needs student
 - Managing working from home or outside the home while trying to keep on top of their students education
- Some things that students like about distance learning include:
 - Staying healthy/not worrying about getting sick at school
 - Being able to go over work at their own pace
 - Having the help and support of a parent when needed
- Some difficulties students have include:
 - Staying focused and interested in virtual classes
 - Problems with technology
 - Missing the social interaction with friends and teachers
 - Not really understanding the work and having trouble asking questions or connecting with their teachers
 - Having too much work, too many independent assignments
- Middle and high school students report having more adverse emotional issues due to distance learning than elementary school students do.

Returning to In-person Instruction

- More than two-thirds (68.1%) of parents who responded to the survey said they were uncomfortable returning their students to school for in-person instruction, while only about one-fifth (21.8%) said they were somewhat or very comfortable doing so.
- Their concerns include:
 - Keeping a medically vulnerable student or family member safe
 - The ability for the district to keep up with cleaning and sanitizing surfaces and poor air ventilation in school buildings, especially older ones
 - The ability for students to adhere to safety protocols such as mask-wearing
- Many parents expressed a desire to have the option to continue with all distance learning when schools begin to re-open.
- Parents also indicated that a transparent and comprehensive safety plan would need to be made public before they could decide whether to send their student back to school.

Limitations

- The survey was distributed electronically and respondents were not required to identify themselves.
- While distance learning has required families to become more digitally connected, some families were likely unaware of the survey or unable to participate.
- To broaden the pool of respondents, outreach at the school level is recommended.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Since the Governor of Maryland declared a state of emergency due to the Coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic that had begun to spread throughout the state more than seven months ago, Prince George’s County Public Schools (PGCPS) have been closed to in-person instruction. To gauge how families are handling distance learning and how they feel about returning to school buildings next semester, the PGCPS CEO and Executive Cabinet tasked the Office of Research and Evaluation with administering a survey to parents and students.

B. Procedures, Sampling and Participation

Two survey instruments were developed and approved for distribution to begin on October 5, 2020. The Office of Communications distributed the parent surveys via text messages, social media posts, and placed links to the survey in the weekly newsletter and on the PGCPS website. Reminders notices were sent out on October 12th. Students in grades three through 12 received a link to the survey in their PGCPS e-mail accounts. To participate in the survey, respondents were asked to enter a student identification number, but it was not required so that anyone concerned about the privacy of their responses could feel comfortable participating. Parents could take the survey in English, Spanish or French. The student surveys were distributed in English.

Participation rates are calculated based on the number of invitees in each stakeholder group. Students in grades three through twelve were invited to participate along with all parents with children enrolled in PGCPS. Table 1 provides further details of participation.

Table 1–Survey Participation by stakeholder group

	Possible # of Responses	Actual # of Responses	Response Rate
<i>Students</i>	100,483	4,672	5.6%
Elementary School (grades 3 – 5)	30,769	1,211	3.9%
Middle School (grades 6 – 8)	31,274	2,036	6.5%
High School (grades 9 – 12)	38,440	2,394	6.2%
<i>Parents</i>	89,043	10,972	12.3%

A description of the student and parent participants based on their self-reported race or ethnicity is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2–Participants’ Race or Ethnicity

	Parents (n = 8,072)	ES Students (n = 744)	MS/HS Students (n = 3,022)
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.3%	0.4%	.3%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/OPI	3.4%	4.6%	3.6%
Black or African American	66.0%	58.6%	55.0%
Hispanic	21.4%	31.7%	37.0%
White	8.9%	4.7%	4.0%

Parents were asked to indicate if their student receives special education services, as outlined in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and/or if their student is an English language learner. The breakdown is shown in Table 3.

Table 3—Students’ Service Group Participation

	# of Respondents	Yes	No	Unsure
Does your student have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?	10,862	14.8%	72.6%	12.6%
Is your student an English language learner?	10,928	38.3%	58.3%	3.4%

Respondents indicated their grade level and the grade level of their students, which is shown in Table 4.

Table 4—Students’ Grade Levels

What grade are you/is your student in?	# of Respondents	Elementary Grades (Pre-K – 5)	Middle School (6 – 8)	High School (9 – 12)
Parents	10,972	48.4%	24.3%	27.3%
Students	5,637	21.5%	36.1%	42.5%

II. SURVEY FINDINGS

A. Communication

Throughout this nationwide crisis, effective communication has the capacity to ease the anxiety that can arise from not knowing what is happening or how to access the things you need for your family. Parents reported the best ways for them to receive information from the district in Table 5. Because this survey was distributed electronically, it follows that those who responded prefer electronic communication methods.

Table 5—Parents preferred method of receiving information

What are the best ways for you to receive information from PGCPs during distance learning?	N = 9,485
E-mail messages	37.1%
Text messages	28.1%
Direct contact from teachers	17.8%
Robocalls	12.2%
PGCPS website	3.3%
Social media posts	1.5%

During distance learning, families have to learn how to access the services and supplies their students need to fully participate in their education. Table 6 shows how parents rate the district’s effectiveness in communicating how to do so.

Table 6—Communication effectiveness

	# of Respondents	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Plans for distance learning	9,870	6.3%	17.2%	42.6%	33.9%
How to access technology for your student (device or mobile hotspot)	9,535	6.7%	16.7%	42.6%	34.0%
How to access special education services for your student	4,625	15.7%	23.8%	40.7%	19.8%
How to access meals for your student	6,621	6.9%	13.3%	40.2%	39.6%
How to access extra academic help for your student	8,544	18.2%	25.9%	36.8%	19.1%

B. Technology

To make distance learning successful, students and families need technology in the form of devices and digital communication capabilities in their homes. Since the pandemic required that the district close schools, PGCPS has distributed tens of thousands of devices to students to keep them connected to learning. The tables in this section display what students and families are using and doing to remain engaged in their education. Nearly 70% of parents said their student is using a district-issued device, as did more than three-fourths of student respondents. If they do not have a district-issued device, most students have a family-owned computer, laptop, or tablet that they can use. A small percentage of families indicated their students are using a smart phone to participate in distance learning. See Table 7.

Table 7—Devices used in distance learning

Does your student/Do you have a PGCPs-issued device (Chromebook, iPad, tablet, laptop) to participate in distance learning? (N = 9,947)	Parents (n = 9,947)	ES Students (n = 1,296)	MS/HS Students (n = 4,342)
Yes	69.6%	79.9%	71.6%
No	30.0%	20.1%	28.4%
Unsure	0.4%		

If not a PGCPs-issued device, what does your student/what do you use to participate in distance learning?	Parents (n = 2,954)	ES Students (n = 255)	MS/HS Students (n = 1,234)
A family-owned computer, laptop or tablet	93.3%	87.4%	88.6%
A smart phone (such as an iPhone, Samsung Galaxy, Google phone, etc.)	2.7%	2.4%	6.8%
Other	4.0%	10.2%	4.6%

Undoubtedly, distributing devices to students has led to the vast majority of students having their own dedicated device to use for distance learning. Table 8 shows that more than 90% of parent respondents indicated that their students have a device that only they use to participate in their classes; a similar percentage of student respondents report the same thing. See Table 8. Still among, the small percentage of respondents that said family members are sharing a device, about one-fifth of students miss some class time as a result.

Table 8—Dedicated or shared device

Does your student/Do you have a dedicated device or must s/he/you share with other family members?	Parents (n = 9,858)	ES Students (n = 1,262)	MS/HS Students (n = 4,359)
Dedicated device	92.8%	85.8%	91.9%
Shared device	7.2%	14.2%	8.1%

If device is shared, does your student/do you miss face-to-face class time as a result?	Parents (n = 770)	ES Students (n = 211)	MS/HS Students (n = 428)
Yes	21.6%	20.4%	30.4%
No	78.4%	79.6%	69.6%

Regardless of whether students have a district-issued device, have a dedicated device or need to share one, without a high-speed internet connection in their homes, participating in distance learning is not always possible. Nearly all respondents indicated that they have an internet connection in their homes, and most said that connection was adequate and reliable. Parents reported better connectivity than students did, but overall, less than one percent of respondents said they had no internet connection in their homes. See Table 9.

Among those few respondents who reported not having a home-based internet connection, many have a district-issued mobile hotspot or they go to someone else’s home. See Table 10.

Table 9—Home internet connection quality

What is the quality of your home's internet connection?	Parents (n = 9,865)	ES Students (n = 1,265)	MS/HS Students (n = 4,350)
Our internet connection is adequate and reliable.	77.0%	50.7%	48.6%
We have an internet connection, but it is unreliable (connections drops or freezes regularly, audio goes out, etc.).	22.3%	48.3%	50.6%
We do not have internet connectivity in our home.	0.7%	1.0%	.9%

Table 10—Alternatives to home-based internet connection

If you do not have an internet connection in your home, how does your student/how do you access distance learning?	Parents (n = 72)	ES Students (n = 6)	MS/HS Students (n = 43)
We have a school district-issued mobile hotspot	26.4%		20.9%
We go to someone else's home	19.4%	83.3%	18.6%
We go to a school parking lot.	4.2%		4.7%
We go to a public place where there is free Wi-Fi (such as McDonald's or Starbucks).	1.4%	16.7%	2.3%
Other	48.6%		53.5%

C. Distance Learning Experiences

While distance learning has surely proved challenging for parents, students and educators, respondents indicate that they are striving to adapt to the new normal. Over 90% of parents who responded said their student participates in live distance learning sessions with teachers each day school is in session. A similar percentage said there is a dedicated space within the home that is free of distractions for their student to focus on learning. Approximately 80% of parents say they or another adult is available to supervise their student during the school day. Less than 50% of parents strongly agreed that their student is fully engaged in distance learning, but an additional 31.2% agreed somewhat. See Table 11.

While acknowledging that everyone is doing their best with this challenging situation, parents shared concerns about the amount of time their students are spending in front of screens.

It's too much screen time for kids per day! Too many hours every day with computers for so small kids. I am starting to be worried about his health spending so much time online day by day. Very difficult time for parents, when one of us needs to stop working, to be dedicated to distance learning with kids so many months. Teachers doing great job.

I'm concerned about the amount of screen time required for virtual learning, particularly for younger scholars. With the issues of potential eye strain and maintaining a good attention span, among other concerns, the required screen time for elementary students should be revamped to less hours.

Problems with screen-fatigue can be compounded when a child has special needs that cannot be met in a distance-learning environment.

Informing teachers of students with 504 Plans and making sure they're being used effectively during this time. The time sitting in front of a device every day is a lot. We can't teach our

children that sitting in front of the iPad, PS4, Xbox, etc for long periods is unhealthy then turn around and make them sit in front of a laptop all day everyday.

Table 11–Perceptions of Distance Learning, Parents

	# of Respondents	Strongly disagree	Disagree somewhat	Agree somewhat	Strongly agree
My student's teacher has effectively communicated learning expectations.	9,180	6.2%	6.3%	29.6%	57.9%
I understand how my student's work will be graded.	9,092	7.0%	8.5%	32.4%	52.1%
I understand how my student's attendance will be recorded.	9,182	5.9%	5.8%	23.4%	65.0%
My student participates in live (face-to-face) distance learning sessions with teachers each day school is in session.	9,275	4.9%	2.8%	13.9%	78.3%
I believe my student is fully engaged in the learning process.	9,318	8.4%	10.8%	31.2%	49.6%
My student has the support s/he needs at home to complete the assigned work.	9,289	5.8%	6.5%	19.9%	67.7%
I or another adult in the home is able to supervise my student as needed during class time.	9,232	9.5%	9.1%	21.3%	60.1%
My student has a dedicated space in our home, without distractions, to focus on learning.	9,322	4.9%	4.5%	17.8%	72.8%

Parents also expressed difficulties with assisting multiple children at the same time, problems with conflicting schedules of students in different grade levels and distractions posed by the other children and families in the class.

It's hard to monitor the elementary school kids because they don't have regular, specific break times, and they really should. The middle/high school kids have designated breaks. The younger kids get breaks when the teachers say they can have them, but they vary in when they are and how long they last. As a parent with several kids to keep track of, it's hard to know when my younger ones are on a real break and what time they need to be back from.

My main issue with distance learning is the distractions during the sessions from the other children, their parents or background. Some parents assume that because they have access to the live session they can interrupt the lesson to ask the teacher a question or to chastise their child.

I as a parent have to help more than I expected with my children’s independent study assignments. This does not take into account that parents are working full time home. It ends up becoming a huge load of homework requiring a lot of parental support.

Overall, nearly 70% of parent respondents believe the distance learning services their students are receiving are at least good with more than one-quarter rating them as excellent. Still 30% of respondents rated them as fair or poor. See Table 12.

Table 12–Quality of Distance Learning Services

# of Respondents	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
9,422	8.1%	22.6%	42.6%	26.7%

For the most part, parents are pleased with the district’s efforts to keep their students and families safe while providing them with the educational services their students need. Here are some comments in their own words:

So far things are working well within the PGCPs distance-learning system. My child is learning and participating. This is the best alternative for all and as long as these schools are being supported by all communications' Company we should be ok. Safety first and foremost!

It is getting better as of this time and getting used to it. My children safety is most important to me and having them at home making me more comfortable.

I am very pleased that PG county was able to execute the distance learning program throughout the county with only minor challenges. My child’s teachers were able to problem solve and work through challenges as they came up. Things have run very smooth over the past few weeks.

I feel the staff are doing the best they can. I appreciate their ability to engage the students.

Overall, it s going much better than I expected for my child. I know that teachers are putting in a lot of extra time and effort. I think the live instructions has been extremely important, and would prefer to keep live instruction through the year.

It has improved from the 3rd and 4th quarter last school year.

Honestly, I feel like all of the teachers are doing a great job. It is just proving to be extremely difficult for my son to retain what is learned this way. It is hard for him to focus, but we are doing our best and will continue to do our best.

While parents have had to adjust to life with children at home instead of in school buildings, students have also had to make major adjustments to how they engage in their own learning. See Table 13.

Table 13–Student perceptions of distance learning

	Elementary Students		Middle/High School Students	
	# of Respondents	Agree	# of Respondents	Agree
I can do my schoolwork without much help from my teachers or parents.	1,078	66.0%	3,880	73.4%
I am learning just as well from online teaching as I was before school closed	1,082	50.2%	3,892	31.2%
I have the support I need at home to complete my assignments.	1,064	85.4%	3,756	77.3%
I have a parent or another adult at home with me while I am in my online classes.	1,093	84.1%	3,835	77.0%
I have a parent or another adult at home to make sure I log on to school each day.	1,098	90.5%	3,831	82.9%
I have my own space at home to focus on learning.	1,113	84.7%	3,934	82.0%

Most student respondents report that they are not learning as well as they did when they were participating in in-person instruction. Approximately one-half of the elementary school-aged respondents indicated that distance learning was as good as in-person instruction, but less than one-third of middle and high school students feel the same way.

Table 14 shows the extent to which students feel they have access to school supports and are experiencing supportive relationships.

Table 14–Student supports and relationships

Elementary Students	# of Respondents	No/Never	Not really	Sometimes	Yes/Always
I can always ask my teachers questions if I don't understand something.	1,049	2.3%	7.2%	31.6%	58.8%
I know how to contact my school counselor if needed.	962	16.2%	22.3%	9.9%	51.6%
I know how to get help from school if my computer doesn't work.	947	15.6%	20.7%	16.3%	47.4%
There is at least one grown-up I know who I can talk to about my feelings and problems.	1,015	6.7%	5.3%	14.2%	73.8%
I know my teachers care about me.	946	3.8%	4.3%	13.1%	78.8%
I am able to see kids my age to have fun.	991	9.4%	16.9%	26.2%	47.5%

Table 14 (cont.)—Student supports and relationships

Middle/High School Students	# of Respondents	Disagree a lot	Disagree a little	Agree a little	Agree a lot
I can connect with my teachers if I have questions about what they are teaching.	3,556	7.3%	14.5%	33.4%	44.9%
I know how to contact my school counselor if needed.	3,488	13.2%	11.9%	22.2%	52.7%
I know how to get help from school if my computer doesn't work.	3,324	18.9%	19.0%	25.0%	37.0%
There is at least one adult in my life who I can talk to about my feelings and problems.	3,438	15.2%	10.1%	20.7%	54.0%
I know my teachers care about me.	3,127	12.1%	15.2%	33.9%	38.8%
I find ways to safely interact with my friends.	3,348	9.5%	7.0%	25.2%	58.3%

The items in Table 15 reveal how student respondents are feeling emotionally while they are experiencing distance learning.

Table 15—Students' Social/Emotional Health

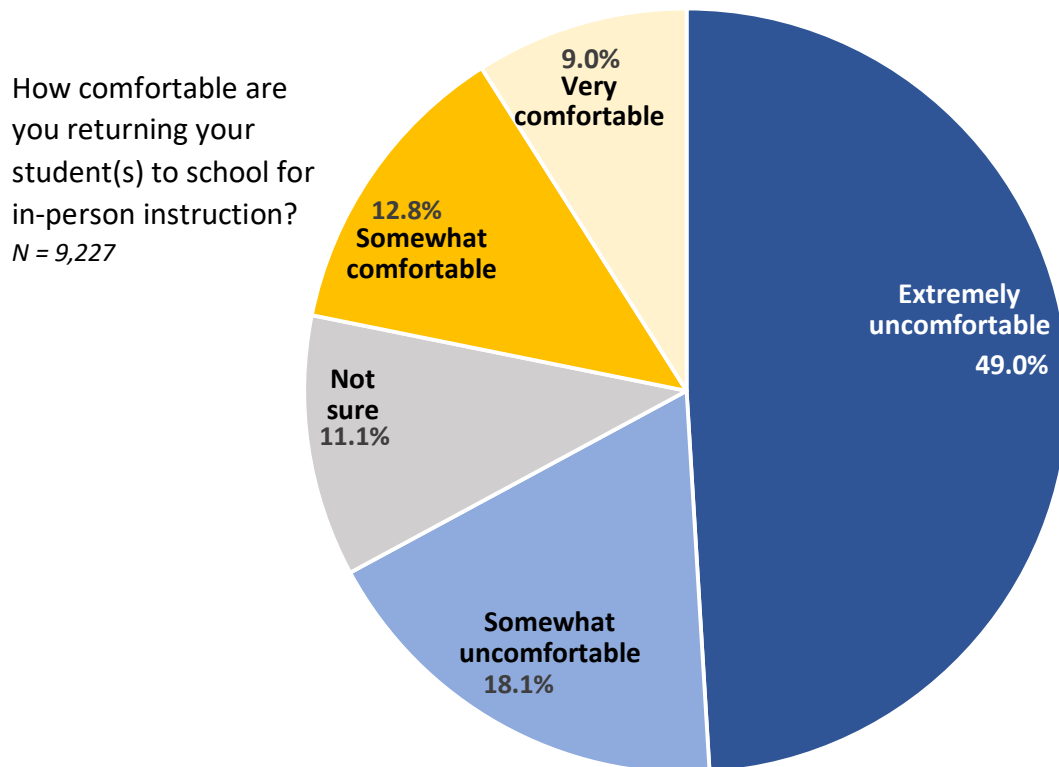
Elementary Students	# of Respondents	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
I feel happy learning while at home.	1,044	15.0%	36.8%	27.7%	20.5%
I feel sad that I cannot see my friends as much.	1,045	10.1%	32.2%	22.4%	35.3%
I feel lonely.	991	48.3%	30.9%	8.7%	12.1%
I feel stressed or anxious being at home all the time.	1,041	36.6%	33.2%	13.6%	16.5%
Middle/High School Students	# of Respondents	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
I feel happy learning while at home.	3,556	7.3%	14.5%	33.4%	44.9%
I feel sad that I cannot see my friends as much.	3,488	13.2%	11.9%	22.2%	52.7%
I feel lonely.	3,324	18.9%	19.0%	25.0%	37.0%
I feel stressed or anxious being at home all the time.	3,438	15.2%	10.1%	20.7%	54.0%

The data show that older students are struggling with their emotional health at far greater rates than elementary students are. Fifty-four percent of middle and high school student respondents report being anxious or stressed all the time compared with 16.5% of elementary grade respondents.

D. Returning to School

Overall, as difficult as distance learning is for their families, parent respondents report that they do not feel comfortable sending their students back to school buildings. See figure 1.

Figure 1—Comfort with returning to school

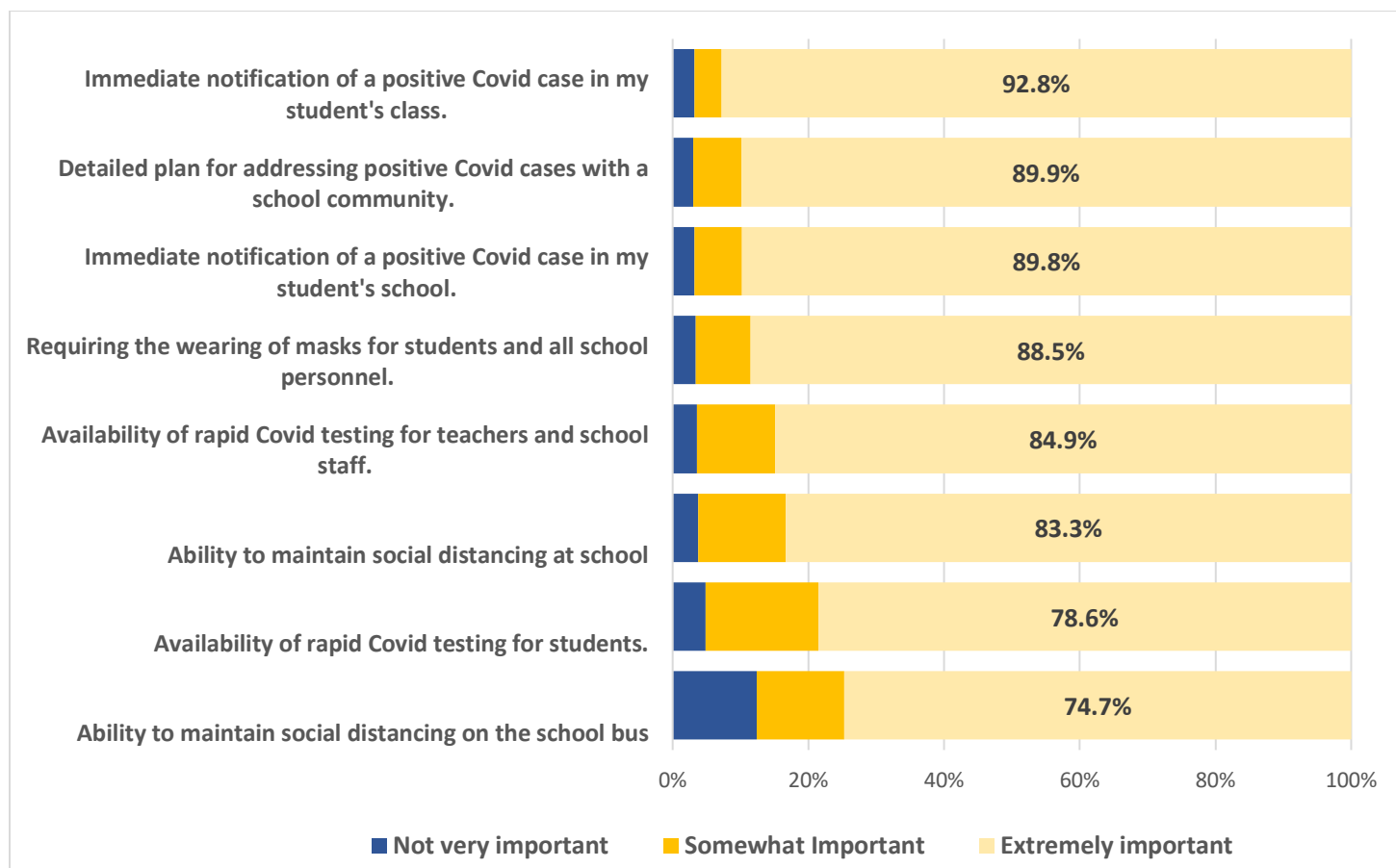


Nearly half of the parents responding to the survey reported that they are extremely uncomfortable with returning their students to school for in-person instruction, with another 18% indicating they are somewhat uncomfortable.

If schools were to re-open, the vast majority of parent respondents expressed that all the safety measures that could be implemented are extremely important. See figure 2. Many parents expressed the desire that even if schools do re-open, distance learning should remain an option for families who prefer it due to having a medically vulnerable student or family member.

Figure 2—Importance of safety measures for in-person instruction

If schools were to re-open, how important would each factor listed below be in making you feel more comfortable having your student(s) return to school for in-person instruction? *N* = 9,204



The safety of their students and family members is of great concern to parents who responded to the survey. Many indicated that their student or a family member is medically vulnerable. They believe the upcoming cold and flu-season will be an additional challenge. They are concerned students, especially young ones, cannot be expected to maintain distance and wear masks 100% of the time. Additionally, many questioned the efficacy of the air filtration systems in school buildings, particularly older ones. Parent respondents also questioned whether the cleaning and sanitizing of the buildings will be adequate.

My student has underlying health conditions. I am not comfortable, nor confident my child will be safe to return to school for in-person education. As a community, we are in no way prepared. I want everyone to be safe and healthy, not just the children.

As a parent I would feel more comfortable once everything is completely back to a normality country wide and knowing that all the precautions are taken all around as far as cleanings, testings for teachers and students etc

Are there enough county/state resources available to ensure a safe return to in-person learning? School transportation was a HUGE problem pre-pandemic. I am not confident that efforts and protocols required can be implemented seamlessly in our county. It's going to take a Herculean effort on all parts. Is PGCCPS up for and ready for the challenge?

PGCCPS is a large school system with many students. Social distancing? I can't imagine that. The schools in my area have portable classrooms outside for students to receive classes because of the overcrowding, this was way before the pandemic. Again, please continue to maintain the safety of all and continue to consider distance learning.

The "if schools were to re-open" survey is a non-starter for our family. I don't want our children going back until everyone has been vaccinated, full stop.

Parent respondents also want to know more about the re-opening plan before they can say if they would be comfortable returning their students to school.

A clearly defined plan that is well articulated to parents on how the county/school will ensure proper cleaning of its facilities is imperative before I can entertain the idea of sending my child back to school. Also, all of the above questions must be addressed and clearly explained before I could become somewhat comfortable with my child returning to the classroom.

A detailed plan of how the schools intend to keep children safe and the audits to ensure it is being done properly

III. LIMITATIONS

The data presented in this report show responses from parents and students who chose to participate in the survey. Because it was distributed digitally, the stakeholders that had the opportunity to participate were those who are most digitally connected. While distance learning has forced families to adapt to digital communications, some stakeholders were surely unaware of the survey or unable to participate. To more fully understand how families and students are handling distance learning and how they feel about returning to school buildings, more outreach is required. The outreach would likely be most effective from the school-level, because schools are closer to families than central office and school personnel know their communities better.