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## Access to Students and Parents and Levels of Preparedness of Educators during the COVID-19 Emergency Transition to e-Learning

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### Abstract

In response to the COVID-19 school closures and the emergency transition to eLearning, faculty at Chicago State University organized a series of nine professional development webinars centered on the subject of eLearning. 3,428 educators attended the nine webinars. This study consisted of an exploratory research reporting on the participants' answers to the polls questions administered during the webinars, in an attempt to identify levels of preparedness of educators during the COVID-19 Emergency Transition to eLearning and their access to students and parents. The study revealed low levels of preparedness in relation to teaching remotely in general, teaching students with disabilities in particular, and using technology tools. The study also revealed challenges of educators reaching students and parents. The study concludes with a number of recommendations to address these identified challenges.

### Introduction

COVID-19 has disrupted educational systems around the world. In attempts to contain the spread of the pandemic, countries including the United States, responded with widespread closures of schools as part of social distancing policies (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). However, the US education system was not built to deal with such extended shutdowns (Dorn et al., 2020). Teachers, administrators, and parents have worked hard to keep learning alive; nevertheless, these efforts were not likely to provide the quality of education that is delivered in the classroom (Dorn et al., 2020). Online learning has been an overwhelming response to these closures and a game changer in the way pedagogy is conducted (Mulenga & Marban, 2020). Most governments played catch-up to the exponential spread of COVID-19, so institutions had very little time to prepare for a remote-teaching regime (Daniel, 2020). Educators were forced to shift to an online mode of teaching overnight (Dhawan, 2020). The fast shift to eLearning, at an untested and unprecedented scale (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020) created a state of chaos and confusion among many educational teams as schools and districts had very little time to prepare for a remote-teaching regime (Daniel, 2020). The best-trained educators in the nation expressed their struggles with the emergency transition to remote learning (Cross & Polk, 2018). There was a significant challenge to transform a design that was originally conceived for onsite teaching to an online setting. The optimal solution would have been to completely redesign and rethink activities, structure, and relations between teachers and students, but time did not permit such restructuring; the entire digital infrastructure was under an unusual pressure (Jandrić, 2020). Educators faced aggressive multifaceted challenges to overcome their lack of preparedness to teach online. In response to the efforts of "suspending classes without suspending teaching", they struggled to offer distance learning and adapt to the unique challenges the pandemic posed (Song et. al, 2020). In this forced educational experiment, educators had to navigate fluctuating schedules, new methods of keeping students engaged and confronting challenges of the technological haves versus have-nots (Shakya et. al, 2020). Attention needed to be directed to the provision of resources that showed teachers how they could make virtual engagement and instruction effective and to train them in remote-learning best practices (Dorn et al., 2020). Hence, there was a dire national need to support educators in their transition to eLearning. On March 13, 2020, Illinois Governor JB Pritzker ordered the closure of all public and private school buildings in Illinois for two weeks as a reaction to growing concerns about the spread of Covid-19. The order was extended in April, effectively shutting down school buildings for the rest of the academic year. Educators across Illinois found themselves scrambling to ramp up a remote learning program to salvage the rest of the school year.

Faculty members at Chicago State University saw the imminent need for guidance among educators and rose to the occasion. They organized a series of nine educational webinars centered on the theme of eLearning. For a

period of nine consecutive weeks, every Thursday morning, from April until June 2020, an average of 650 educators and school professionals joined the webinars presented and coordinated by the university's faculty members. The webinars were free of charge and offered one continuing professional development credit for live attendance. Keeping the focus on eLearning, the weekly themes covered special education, various technology platforms, early childhood, reading and literacy, partnering with parents and stress management. The webinars' polls provided information related to the level of educators' preparedness during the COVID-19 emergency transition to eLearning and the difficulty accessing students and parents. This exploratory research helps identify levels of preparedness and access at the onset of the pandemic and suggests recommendations amidst the scarce literature focused on educators' difficulties during these unprecedented times.

## **Methodology**

The primary objective of this study was to analyze data collected from the webinar and identify levels of educators' preparedness and access to students and parents during their transition to eLearning. Considering that many schools did not reopen in fall 2020 and continue with their eLearning plans (due to a new surge of COVID-19 infections), it is important to recognize how prepared educators are to face the obstacles of eLearning and to determine the appropriate resources and interventions to aid school's strategic planning for the upcoming school year. The significance of the study resides in reporting the voice of educators in their eLearning experiences as a new learning and teaching landscape was established due to school closures. The study intended to answer the following research question: What were the levels of educators' preparedness during the COVID-19 emergency transition to eLearning and what was their level of access to students and parents?

## **Participants**

Participants were targeted via the university's compiled list of email addresses, which included education professionals. Weekly emails announcing the upcoming webinars were sent via the GoToWebinar platform. Interested participants completed and submitted a brief registration upon which they received the link for the live session. Two follow-up reminders were sent: the first a day prior to the webinar's broadcast and the second an hour before the start time.

The total number of individual participants in the nine webinars was 3,428. 83% of participants worked at a very large urban school district, 1% in Charter Schools, 1% in Private or Parochial Schools, 5% in a Suburban School District and 10% in Other. Participants were special education teachers (early childhood and K-12), preschool and elementary teachers, middle and high school teachers, specialty teachers, speech pathologists, school social workers, school nurses, administrators, paraprofessionals, school psychologists and librarians.

## **Data Collection & Analysis**

Data was collected through Polls: Each webinar had a number of polls where participants engaged by answering multiple choice questions related to the topic presented. The polls were individually created and tailored for the content of each webinar. The study used descriptive data from the polls to interpret educators' level of preparedness and access to students and parents during their transition to eLearning.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **How Prepared Were Educators to Teach Remotely/Online?**

When participants were asked via a poll question how prepared they felt to teach remotely/online, 63% responded that they were little to not prepared at all, 9% responded that they were not sure, 27% felt somewhat prepared and only 2% reported feeling very well prepared, as shown in Figure 1.

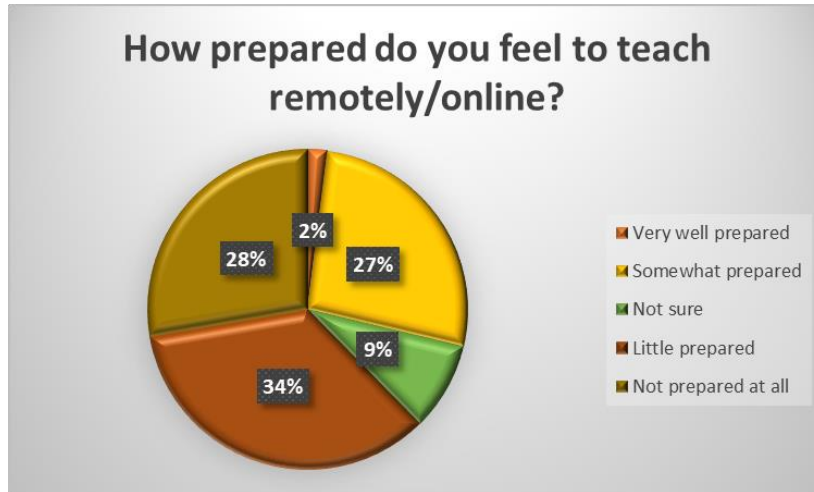


Figure 1. How Prepared Do You Feel to Teach Remotely/Online?

School closures due to COVID-19 forced all levels of educational institutions to put emergency remote teaching into practice, which slightly differs from distance or online learning. Distance education is an interdisciplinary field that has evolved over time and that has served well in responding to learning needs and in guiding open educational practices (Bozkurt, 2019a; 2019b; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). What is currently being done, emergency remote teaching should be considered a temporary solution to an immediate problem (Golden, 2020).

Although there are some studies of schools employing emergency learning during a pandemic such as the flu, they are mostly concentrated on small cases and for a limited period of time (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). They do not come close to the magnitude of today’s crisis with COVID-19. As educators navigate uncharted waters, challenges with professional development in relation to eLearning were inevitable, especially with the abrupt transition to eLearning across the world (UNESCO, 2020a, 2020b) and not only in the United States.

**How Prepared Were Educators to Teach Students with Severe Disabilities Remotely/Online?**

When asked how prepared they felt to teach students with severe disabilities remotely/online, 69% answered they felt little to not prepared at all, 12% were not sure, 18% felt prepared and only 1% felt very well prepared, as shown in Figure 2.

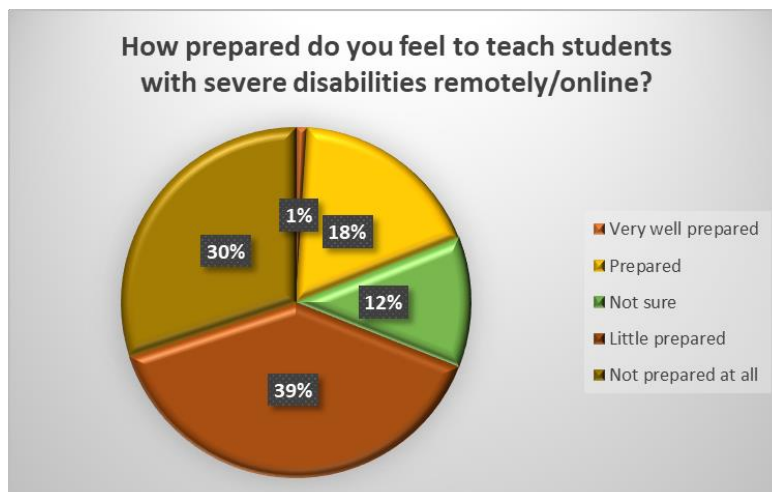


Figure 2. How Prepared Do You Feel to Teach Students with Severe Disabilities Remotely/Online?

From the moment school buildings closed in the United States, vulnerable populations including ELL and diverse learners have been in the spotlight (WHO, 2020). COVID-19 disrupted their access to service provision, to therapy, to ongoing assessment, evaluation, to service delivery. Many educators felt that there were no virtual programs that could replace all the services their students received when they attended a brick-and-mortar

school. The fast shift to eLearning created a state of chaos and confusion among many educational teams as schools and districts had very little time to prepare for a remote-teaching regime (Daniel, 2020). Furthermore, the impact of educational disruptions caused by school closures is reported to be more severe for disadvantaged children (UNESCO, 2020). Educators are now on the frontlines for addressing the widening of inequalities in education of their vulnerable students (Doyle, 2020).

### **How Prepared Were Educators to Use Technology to Teach Remotely/Online?**

Since the start of the pandemic, the educational technology landscape shifted more rapidly than ever seen before. Large-scale, national efforts to utilize technology in support of remote learning, distance education and online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and evolved quickly. Many organizations rapidly tried to curate and make available related information, as well as share guidance and documentation that they themselves generated (World Bank, 2020). Still, nearly the entire American education system had to move online with "little to no preparation." Nobody was fully prepared, not the educators, the parents or the students (Schaffhauser, 2020). In the rush to put together emergency online programs, confusion reigned and tech-driven remote learning created considerable frustrations for educators (Bushweller, 2020).

The study revealed challenges related to educator’s digital literacy. When asked through a poll question “How prepared do you feel to use the tools we are highlighting today for remote/online learning?” 37% responded that they felt little to not prepared at all, 18% were not sure, 41% felt somewhat prepared and only 4% felt very well prepared, as shown in Figure 3. (The tools the poll question was referring to were Class Dojo, Khan Academy and ScreencastO’matic).

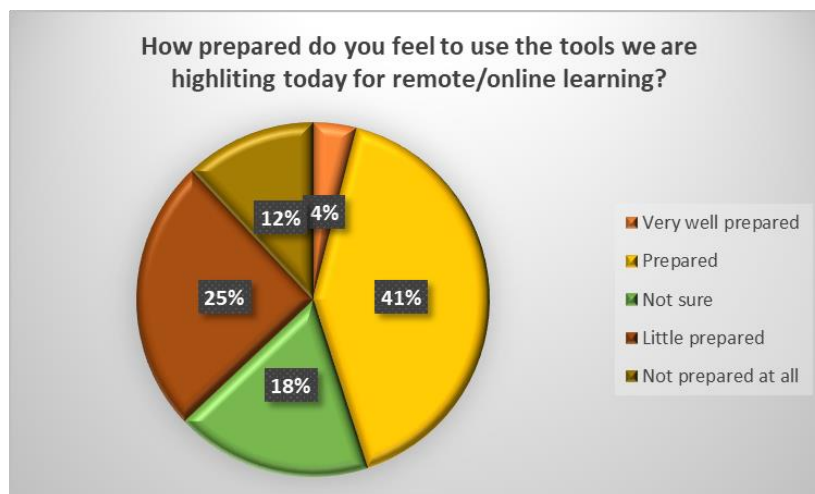


Figure 3. How Prepared Do You Feel to Use the Tools We Are Highlighting Today for Remote/Online Learning?

Digital Literacy is a heterogeneous concept (Tomczyk, 2020). Educators across the nation differ in their levels of digital proficiency. The inevitable transition to eLearning due to school closures and its subsequent necessity to use technology in support of remote learning highlighted the need to address educators’ digital literacy in a more systematic way. As comments show, some educators described themselves as not being “tech savvy” and lacked digital confidence; some expressed their fear of this new shift due to inexperience.

### **What Percentage of Students Have Educators been able to reach?**

When asked through a poll question “What percentage of students were you able to reach so far?”, 26% of participants responded that they were able to reach 76-100% of their students; 22% were able to reach 51-75% of their students, 21% were able to reach 26-50% of their students and 30% were able to reach 0-25% of their students, as shown if Figure 4. These results are an indication that almost 50% of educators were only able to reach 50% of students.

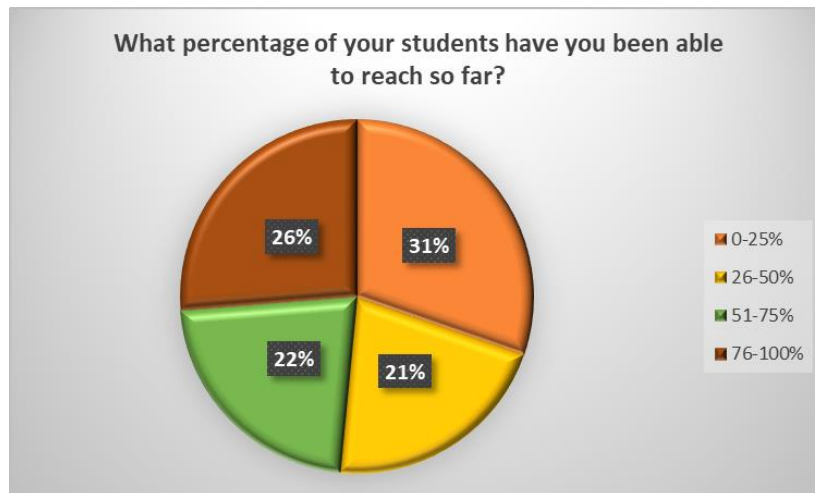


Figure 4. What Percentage of Your Students Have You Been able to reach so far?

Another poll question asked participants “What percentage of your students have access to a device and internet? 37% of participants responded that 76%-100% of their students had access to a device and internet, 29% responded that 51-75% of their students had access to a device and internet; 22% responded that 26-50% of their students had access to a device and internet and 12% responded that 0-25% of their students had access to a device and internet, as shown in Figure 5. The results indicate that 34% of participating educators had to find ways to reach up to 50% of their students for their lack of access to a device and Internet.

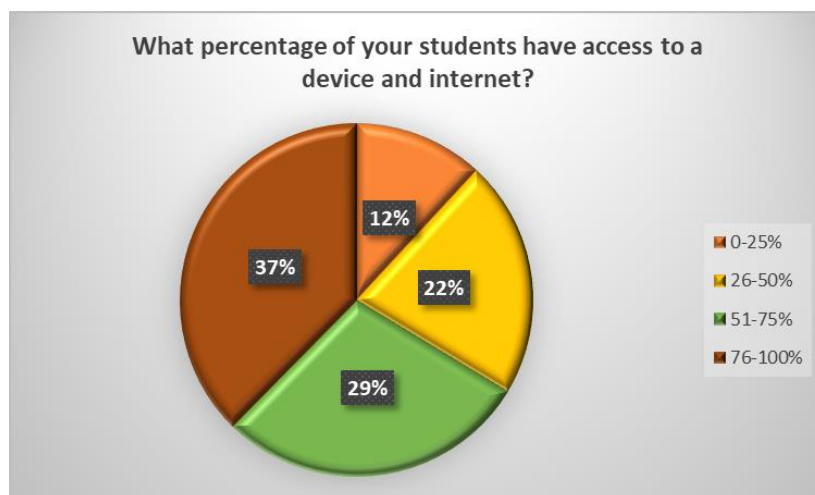


Figure 5. What Percentage of Your Students Have Access to a Device and Internet?

**Access to Students: the Digital Divide.** The internet is a necessary element in allowing all students to access online learning materials and digital platforms with educational content. However, even in rich countries such as the US where internet connectivity is all but universal and there is little gap in access, and where efforts are focusing on ensuring that all students have access to the internet, the COVID-19 crisis has exposed the threat of the digital divide (Moreno & Gortazar, 2020). It has been established by now that the poorest and most vulnerable members of society are being hit the hardest, by both the pandemic and the response (Guterres, 2020). For many vulnerable students, the school might be the only place to use digital technology (OECD, 2010). As a result, one of the major consequences of this digital divide is the unavailability of educational opportunities for many of them (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). The study showed that some educators felt challenged to reach some of their students, which prevented them from learning online due to limited access.

#### What Percentage of Parents were Educators able to reach?

One of the poll questions asked participants “What percentage of parents were you able to reach?” 17% of participants responded that they were able to reach 100% of their students’ parents; 39% responded that they



were able to reach 75% of their students’ parents; 22% responded that they were able to reach 50% of their students’ parents and 22% responded that they were able to reach 25% or less, as shown in Figure 6. The results indicate that 44% of educators were facing challenges to communicate with up to 50% of their students’ parents.

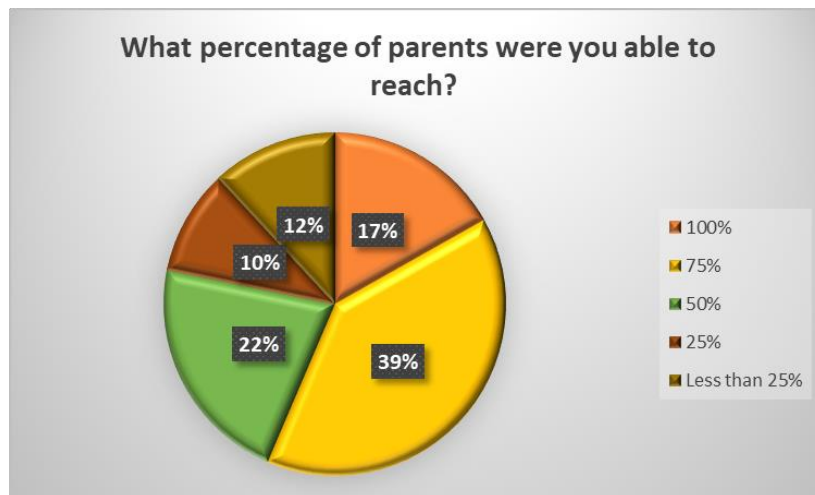


Figure 6. What Percentage of Parents Were You able to reach?

Another poll question asked participants “What technology platform are you primarily using to communicate with parents?” 26% of participants reported using the phone to communicate with parents; 31% communicated via email, only 35% via Teleconferencing (Zoom & Google Meets), and 8% via other, as shown in Figure 7. The results imply that educators are actively trying to reach and communicate with parents via any available means.

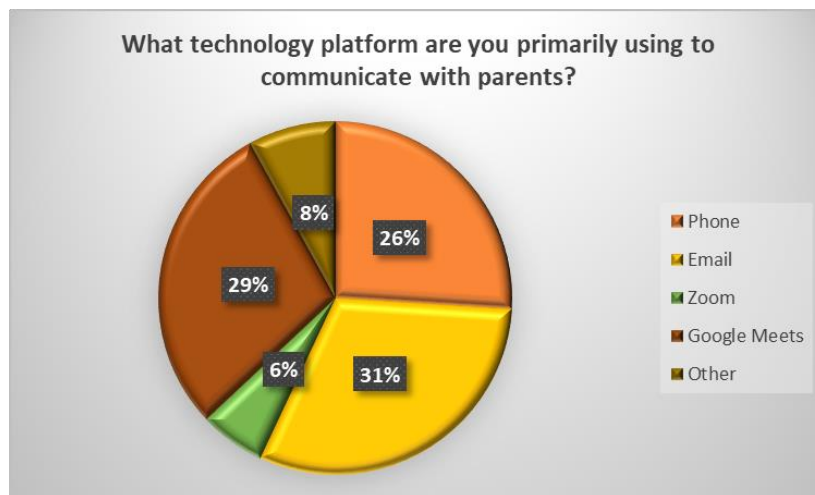


Figure 7. What Technology Platform are You Primarily Using to Communicate with Parents?

State recognized that that many families will not be able to access online options, and that schools needed to find non-digital alternatives (Reich et al., 2020). The pandemic illuminated dimensions of the limited access to internet of vulnerable populations and their lack of the technical knowhow to use the platforms adopted by the school districts. This study confirms the presence of a challenge in regards to educators accessing and communicating with parents. A deeper understanding of the layers of this challenge needs to be further explored.

Additionally, because of COVID-19, school closures have shifted education from the classroom to the home, and for the immediate future, the burden of education now falls largely on parents (Doyle, 2020). When the teacher is not physically present, students are more likely to face difficulties with organization, self-regulation, motivation, and understanding the learning material (Borup et al. 2015). Parental engagement becomes an immediate need but not necessarily an action, as many parents will not engage for a multitude of reasons that are beyond this study.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 turned everyone's life upside down. In the early stages of the pandemic, society was in the "hallucination phase" thinking that things would go back to "normal" in the fall. The new surges of infections across many states are proving that "normal" is currently far-fetched. While the American Association of Pediatrics is strongly advocating to have students physically present in schools in the fall, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) released strict recommendations for reopening, making it almost impossible for many schools to reopen. The absence of a unified national plan only adds additional layers of uncertainty and confusion about what's to come in the fall. The current challenges to the U.S. education system are unprecedented, but no matter the scenario, school districts need to address educators' challenges during this pandemic to optimize learning and attempt to recover any academic and cognitive losses that might have occurred during the initial chaos of the transition to eLearning. Today, stakeholders know much more than what they did back in March. School districts are relatively better equipped to address the various challenges encountered throughout this experiential phase of eLearning. Implications of the study suggest the need for states and school districts to create new emergency policies and plans to implement when natural disasters occur requiring immediate school closures. Similar disruptions to the education systems were recently witnessed during Hurricane Florence in 2018 and Hurricane Mathew in 2016, disrupting schooling for millions of students and teachers, specifically in North Carolina and Texas. Canon et al. studied 20 school districts in North Carolina and Texas that were affected by Hurricanes Matthew and Harvey and observed concurrent findings: when a natural disaster hits, schools often focus on a recovery plan that meets the immediate needs of students. Teachers' needs are not prioritized, leaving them to address personal and professional disruptions on their own (Canon et al., 2020).

The study identified challenges that educators faced in a period of nine weeks. As schools crest the wave of an initial transition to eLearning, more planning resources will need to be devoted to innovative approaches to not only remediate missed learning during the 2020-2021 academic year but also address educators' challenges. The study therefore recommends the following:

- In response to challenges related to professional development and resources, districts and schools need to consider staff preparation and training. Elearning platforms and apps should be properly re-introduced, in addition to training on how to effectively use them for instructional practice in the wake of the pandemic. Guidance for digital and non-digital options should be emphasized in addition to addressing the specific needs of ELL and Diverse Learners during school closures.
- Technology plans should place issues of equity at the center of eLearning design. The concept of equity here not only addresses the digital divide experienced by vulnerable students, but also the differing levels of digital literacies among US educators.
- Effective modes of communications should be put in place to reach "the unreachable". A communication system that takes into consideration connected and non-connected households should be put in place to offer regular and consistent ways for educators and parents to stay in touch about the students' progress.

On a final note, Zimmerman (2020) described what is happening as a great online learning experiment. It is an opportunity to test online pedagogy centric approaches and be prepared for the future.

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