



Returning to School Survey Results of Parents' thoughts on Fall of 2020

Distributed by: Maine Parent Federation and Autism Society of Maine
Results Analysis: Maine Developmental Disabilities Council



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Introduction

The Maine Developmental Disabilities Council is pleased to release this analysis of a survey developed in response to family concerns regarding access to education. This is the third in a series of COVID-era surveys conducted to help us understand the experiences and concerns of individuals with developmental disabilities and their families during this difficult time. The first of the analyses addressed access to in-home services by children and their families. The results of this survey seem to reflect the community at large - a minority does not believe it will be safe to return to in-person learning in the foreseeable future, a minority would prefer school to resume as usual and the majority is concerned about balancing risk and access to education. This survey also suggests that families are stressed by the significant differences (by school) in communication, provision of education, access to special education, and access to ancillary services.

Description of respondents

173 parents of children and youth in Maine responded to the survey. 30% of respondents were from Cumberland County. Kennebec (14%), Androscoggin (12%), and York (10%) were also well represented. The remaining respondents represented all the other Maine counties, with Lincoln county being the least represented with only 1 respondent. There was also 1 respondent from Out of State.

Description of survey and analysis

The survey was distributed via Facebook and listserv by Maine Parent Federation and the Autism Society of Maine. These two organizations offer statewide information, referral, and advocacy for families to gain information about raising a child with disabilities. Because of the makeup of the organizations, it can be reasonably assumed that most, if not all, of the families who answered the survey have children with some kind of special need.

The survey contained questions in multiple formats including Likert Scale, Multiple Choice, and Qualitative/Open questions. Questions were evaluated from individual county, county grouping based on community transmission¹, and statewide results. A theme analysis was conducted on the qualitative replies.

¹ Community Transmission of COVID-19 at the time this data was analyzed and the report drafted existed in four Counties, Cumberland, Androscoggin, Penobscot, and York. Data was analyzed grouping these four counties where COVID-19 is the most prevalent, at the time of the report.

Executive Summary/Impressions

If there is one take-away from the responses to this survey, it is that schools should communicate and work with families on the plan to transition back to school this fall - whether that be in a modified in-person structure, virtual school only, or a combination of both. Just as important, families need to have the opportunity to provide feedback to the proposed plan before it is finalized. This period of COVID-19 has made the teacher/parent partnership even more critical in the successful education of our Maine children and youth.

70% of respondents rated their concern level as moderate or higher regarding sending their child back to school in September. Similarly, 70% of all respondents are moderately to extremely concerned about their child's progress both academically and socially. In general, most want to find a strategy for the fall. That said, 20-30% of people's opinions landed on one extreme or the other. Some want schools to open up normally, while others expressed that under no circumstances would they consider sending their child back because it will not be safe. No statistically relevant difference in concern levels existed between individual counties or groupings of counties by community transmission.

"I'm especially concerned about the lack of social opportunities. By the same token, it is really important that we stay separate. I just wish there were more opportunities for kids to zoom and work together."

As for what people are concerned about, by far parents were most concerned about exposure to COVID in the fall (42%, n=173). It is clear that families are balancing that fear with their concern about social development and academic regression. Increased challenging behaviors were noted but some respondents expressed concern that while the behaviors were okay at home currently, they would increase upon return to school.

85% of respondents did believe that some type of in-person modified school was possible where social distancing was balanced with a degree of virtual learning to minimize contact with others. However, only 28% indicated that they needed an in-person option. Most did believe that with additional support they could make virtual learning work. There is clear documentation that some families are concerned that social distancing might not be enforceable in the school setting.

Families clearly need better/consistent/continued contact and instruction between teacher and student and between the teacher and parent to assist in individualized learning plans to support families guiding their children through virtual education. The way teachers interact with students is different with families assisting in the delivery of instruction. Where before teachers could work directly with students, for distance / remote learning structures to work teachers, families, and students need to work in consort. Families expressed a hope that teachers would assist them in overseeing the education that their child was getting so that the family did not have to make things up for themselves.

"How is social distancing possible in crowded schools? They pack kids in rooms like sardines. And kids play together closely to begin with"

Results: (173 Respondents)

Question 2: On a scale of 1-5, (1 being least concerned, 5 being most concerned) how do you feel your child is progressing on their education? (Likert Scale)

n=173	
1. Not at all Concerned	7%
2. Slightly Concerned	25%
3. Moderately Concerned	24%
4. Very Concerned	27%
5. Extremely Concerned	19%

Themes

66 people added additional comments. The most common concern was regarding regression (29%) while others reported that their children are doing well (27%). Many expressed that they were finding supporting their child at home difficult (20%), and in a similar tone – but slightly different theme, a higher involvement of communication between the teacher and parent was desired (18%). Below is a table that lists all themes that at least 10% mentioned in their comments.

Concerns	N=66%
Regression	29%
Doing Well	27%
Difficulty supporting child learning at home	20%
Lack of communication/support from school teacher	18%
Child's needs are not being met	12%
Appreciative of school staff	11%
Maintained but no progress	10%

Concern about Education - Voices

"Parents are not school teachers and did not go to school to receive an education degree. Education on line is not even remotely sufficient. Kids are distracted and not engaged to a degree that meets their needs while on line. I have several children, some with special needs and in several grades. I'm not even sure that what they should know at this point in time."

"We are working with our kids on a daily basis and adding classes, activities, and projects to enhance what the school assigns."

"I'm concerned he won't be ready for next grade. Do we hold him back?"

"We're able to keep him doing work at home, probably at least maintaining skills. He tends to do well academically with assistance at school, so as long as parents are able to help at home. We're doing OK."

Question 3: On a scale of 1-5 (1 being least concerned, 5 being most concerned) how do you feel about sending your child to school in September 2020?

n=173	
1. Not at all Concerned	9%
2. Slightly Concerned	21%
3. Moderately Concerned	28%
4. Very Concerned	22%
5. Extremely Concerned	20%

County Analysis

Answers were broken down by county to see if there was a shift in concern levels depending on where one lives. 71% of respondents from counties with community spread of COVID-19 (Penobscot, Androscoggin, Cumberland, and York n=103) noted that their level of concern was at moderately or higher while of all other respondents (n=72), 68% expressed that they were equally concerned. This implies that regardless of what County respondents live in, there is general agreement about concern levels.

Themes

While only 48 people shared additional comments, the themes were extremely consistent. 52% of those respondents stated that it would not be safe in September and they did not plan to send their child back to school. In contrast, the next significant theme was from 31% of respondents that wanted to send their children back. 19% shared that they were worried about transitioning back. Many wrote about being concerned about the school’s ability to ensure appropriate social distancing while others worried about the effects of social distancing. Some noted that they hadn’t yet heard a plan from their school and were worried about how their child will do. Would their child be able to socially distance? Would behaviors increase at school because of the new practices? Still others thought that the academic and social regression was more concerning than the risk of contracting COVID-19. 13% of respondents believed it was simply too soon to tell whether schools would be safe in September. Finally, 10% said that their concerns could be mitigated with appropriate social distancing such as modified school programs with significantly smaller class sizes.

“I am concerned that school will reopen and then close abruptly like it did and his behavior then will be unpredictable”

“We have immediate family members who are at high risk to die from the virus”

Question 4 *What is your top concern with your child returning to school? Add other concerns in the comment section. (Respondents were only allowed to choose one option.)*

#1 Concern Returning to School	N=173
Exposure to COVID 19	42%
Academic Regression	19%
Social Regression	19%
Increased Behaviors	15%
No Concerns	5%

By far parents were most concerned about exposure to COVID in the fall (42%) but a significant group was also very concerned about social regression (19%) and/or academic regression (19%). 15% were concerned about increased behaviors but the interpretation of that question was not consistent. The comments indicated that there were increased behaviors at home, but many times the comments also indicated that parents were worried that while behaviors were okay at home, they would increase upon return to school.

County Analysis

Respondents from every county reported COVID-19 as their top concern. No significant difference in levels of concern were evident.

Themes

Below is a table that lists all themes that at least 10% mentioned in their “other” comments. Top choices were omitted because they are represented in the above pole.

Other Concern Returning to School	N=63
Social Regression	44%
Increased Behaviors	38%
Academic Regression	33%
COVID 19	19%
Transitioning back to a new school or back to existing school	12%

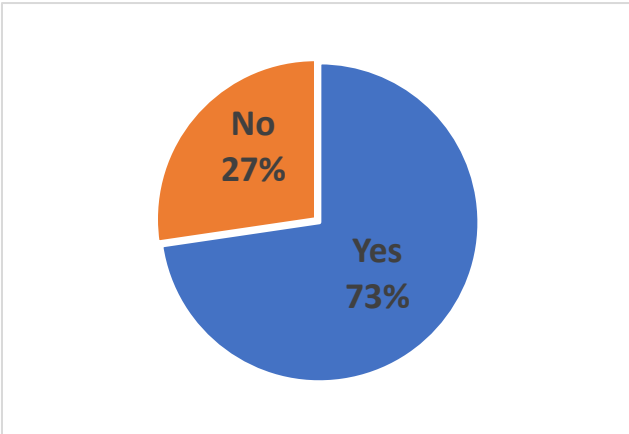
“My child's behavior has decreased to the point of not seeing much of anything going wrong since there has been no school contact. Which leaves me to believe that the school it's not on top of their bullying, or harassment of the children that tend to get picked on. ”

Question 5: When schools re-open would you prefer to maintain social distancing until COVID 19 is under control?

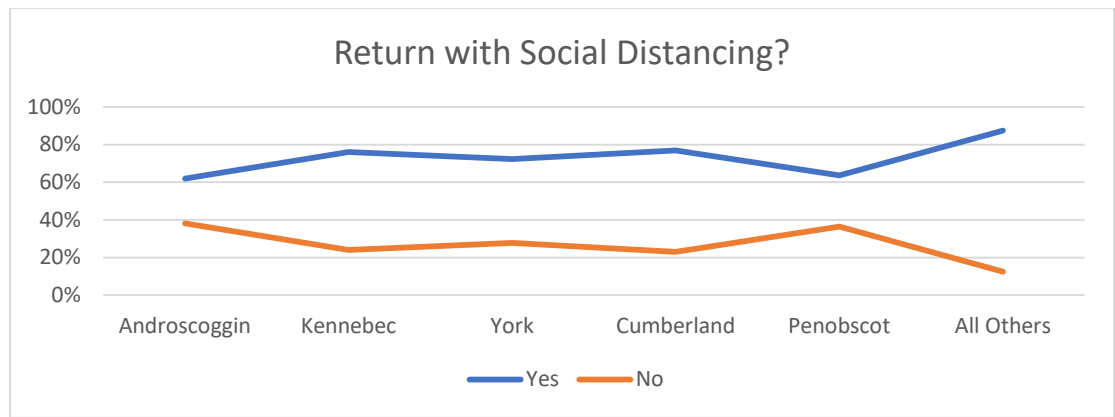
73% of respondents stated that if in-person school resumed in September they would want social distancing. Many of the 27% who stated “no” they did not want social distancing simply wanted school to start again although some did choose “no” and state that they did not believe it would be safe at all.

“Nobody knows when that will be and children are almost completely not impacted by the virus they are however hugely impacted by not being in school”

“Absolutely, because of the high-risk nature of our son's mom he really cannot go back to school if social distancing is not enforced”



County Analysis



All individual counties answered, between 62 and 88%, yes, they would like to see social distancing with school returning. High levels of the “yes” response did not correlate with whether they respondent lived in a county experiencing community transmission of the virus or not.

Themes

Relatively few (41) respondents chose to elaborate on whether or not they wished social distancing to occur when school resumed in September. But among those who did comment the most common

comment (22%) was social distancing would only be safe depending on the size of the classroom and / or the type of modified program. Concern was expressed further when 17% responded that they would only send their child to school if social distancing is enforced. Below is a table that lists all themes that at least 10% mentioned in their comments

If school returns should social distancing?	N=41
Depends on the size of the classroom and/or modified program	22%
Only if Social Distancing is enforced	17%
Follow the CDC Recommendations	15%
I will send my children whenever schools open	15%
And ensure child social development progress	12%
AND other preventative measures like handwashing/masks	10%
Too soon to tell	10%

Question 6: How would you prefer social distancing to look like? (Respondents could check all that applied)

How would you prefer social distancing to look like? respondents,	Respondents n=173	Answers n=231
Other (66)	35%	29%
All students return at the same time with a district social distancing plan	31%	23%
Every other day – half the students for one full day and the other half of students on the next full day	31%	23%
Split day – half of students in the morning and the other half in the afternoon	17%	13%
Each grade attends once per week and the rest of the week is virtual	17%	13%

Social Distancing: Voices

“Getting children together at school in any fashion is reckless.”

“All virtual with live classes and kids visible to teachers but muted except when appropriate for discussion. And special needs students having extra sessions daily to keep students on track and help with homework.”

“I think that some parents, not necessarily myself, have proven that their children are able to do virtual learning and I believe that schools should look at that and see what each parent / family needs for education purposes.”

“All of these are not great choices. Just go back to how it was! The more stress you put on parents – the more it will reflect and pass onto the kids. Just go back to “normal.”

County Analysis

When examining answers between Counties that experience community transition (Androscoggin, Cumberland, Penobscot, and York n=102) and all other County respondents (n=71) there was a slight variation in preference on how social distancing should look. Removing “Other” from the answers the largest subset of answers (31% n=102) from Counties that have community transition was for Every Other Day – half the students for one full day and the other half of students on the next full day. These respondents were clear that finding a way to make classroom smaller was a priority to them. Counties that did not have community transmission (34% n=71) preferred all students going to school at the same time with a social distancing plan.

Responded “Other”	N=66
No plan is safe	18%
School returns to normal	12%
Special Education kids go back 1:1	11%
Focused staff support to ensure handwashing, social distancing is complied with	9%
Don’t know	8%
Childcare needs to be in the plan	6%
Half days, with parent choice	6%
Mixed virtual/social distancing for those that it works – continue virtual learning – others go back to school with social distancing	6%
Alternative subjects or activities different days of week per grade	5%
Once a week in person, per grade, social distancing scheduled for first ½ of the school year	5%
Depends on size of school	3%
Every other day so staff can clean	3%
Home visits with virtual learning	3%
Closely follow CDC Guidance	2%
Later start time	2%
Reduced class size	2%
No transportation offered	2%

**Question 7: If schools continued virtually learning, what do you need?
(Respondents could only pick 1 option.)**

	N=173
Other	31%
Some type of in-person option	28%
Parent/teacher conference for a unique learning plan	23%
Access to learning packets	12%
Virtual access (technology and/or internet)	6%

Theme: 53 respondents answered other. The most common desire was to have continued contact and instruction between teacher and student. The next need was assistance with a teacher to develop an at home learning plan that included consistent teacher/parent check ins. Families wanted teachers to assist in the overseeing of the education so that they did not have to make things up for themselves. Below are all of the other themed responses.

Other	N=53
Continued contact/instruction between teacher and student	28%
Consistent teacher check ins between teacher and parent to coordinate individualized home learning plans	25%
Learning packets for each class with individualized work	19%
In person learning (modified with some virtual component)	15%
Just go back to school	13%
Graded work/Reward for doing work	11%
Childcare!	9%
Paper materials not online	9%
Continue like now, needs are getting met	8%
In person OT/SP/PT (therapies)	6%
Real virtual classes	6%
Special education support (virtually or otherwise)	6%
Community / Work opportunities for youth in transition	4%
Need to limit internet for student	4%
Breaks during the day	2%
Small group peer learning online	2%

Virtual Learning: Voices

Continued contact with the teachers including a weekly zoom check in with me, the teacher and the child

Needs interaction with learning instead of computer screen

Some type of reward for actually doing online classes. My child would rather play on his phone or with friends then do school work

I would very much love learning packets and a parent/teacher conference so I can be guided and help put into place a good education plan for my son that I can implement at home if school begins with a half or an every-other-day option. In-person would be great, too but the others are more important to me.

If we continue with virtual learning, there needs to be district instruction through virtual learning as an option.

Question 8: How would you like to learn about our district’s transition plan? (Could only select one answer)

	N=173
Email	67%
Zoom	35%
Phone Call	11%
Google Classroom	1%

Theme:

32 respondents provided additional feedback, 63% of which was to provide the transition plan in multiple ways. The rest of the comments requested that they are included in providing feedback about a proposed plan.

Question 9: During virtual learning, has your child had access to any of the following services? (Virtual Classrooms, Specially Designed Instruction, Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy, 1:1 online teacher/ed tech support)

Unfortunately, there was a flaw in the survey design as there was nowhere to select “none.” There were many comments that stated that they had to select something to move on, which wasn’t true. Because of that, the responses have been discarded. Similarly, because there was no way to truly know if the comments truly represented the whole, no thematic analysis was done. Below is a sample of comments on the next page.

Question 10-12: Have you participated in an IEP meeting? Yes/No

Unfortunately, these questions (10-12) also had to be discarded from this report. Question 10 asked if families had participated in an IEP meeting but did not specify during COVID-19 so it is unclear if the answers are relevant.

Samples of comments from Question #9: *During virtual learning, has your child had access to any of the following services? (Virtual Classrooms, Specially Designed Instruction, Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy, 1:1 online teacher/ed tech support)*

"Nothing. The school did check with me and we are OK with this. Our need isn't great and we can pick up that slack at home"

"Social thinking and group counseling sessions"

"No services just materials sent home. Would like service over internet just like telemedicine"

"We have participated in some of these. They are NOT sufficient. The kids are generally distracted and have a lot of difficulty staying engaged."

"They have offered links for PT and OT for my special needs daughter, but she will not do the exercises for me. They sent her some video links and workbooks, but when I get home from the hospital, I have to complete all my paperwork for the day. Unfortunately, I just don't have a lot of time to provide the intense one-on-one assistance that she needs. I don't know if we have actually been offered ST, which is a problem in working remotely, as her speech intelligibility has declined. Luckily, the home behavioral health aid we applied for one and a half years ago, just started working with my daughter 2 weeks ago. This is a big help for our family."

"Nothing offered to give my son extra help. The teachers would check with your google docs see what you have to do. As a parent, I couldn't understand most of the school work."

"Our district has tried to accommodate our daughter but she is not able to regularly participate in virtual school"

"School is trying, but too hard for our son to learn virtually"

"We received emails, videos, packets, but my child needs speech and OT with in person ed tech AT SCHOOL!!"