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The Impact of School Closures and Isolation on Parents in the US

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global event. Research demonstrates the impact the pandemic had on both parents and children regarding their mental health and learning abilities. The current study examined parents' experiences during the pandemic. This study had a particular focus on how changes to schooling impacted school experiences and social emotional experiences. The sample was comprised of parents whose children were in K-12 schooling and data was collected during Fall of 2020. The findings suggest that while there were several challenges, parents also reported some positive outcomes. This study serves as a foundation for future research to be conducted as long-term effects need to be examined. The study also provides a better understanding of the impacts that school closures have on children and adults. Limitations and future research are further discussed.

Keywords: schooling, COVID-19, isolation, parents' experiences, mental health

The Impact of School Closures and Isolation on Parents in the U.S.

COVID-19 had a drastic impact on people across the world and resulted in countries going into varying forms of lockdown, especially during earlier stages of the pandemic in 2020. Although the world has faced many pandemics in previous years (e.g., SARS pandemic of 2003, H1N1 pandemic of 2009), the extent and length of the quarantine experienced in the United States in the Spring and Summer of 2020, served as the longest and most intensive quarantine since 1918's Spanish Flu pandemic (Center of Disease Control, 2019). Although the intention of the worldwide quarantine and mass shut-downs were to slow the spread and protect nations from COVID-19, the intense degree and duration of isolation had detrimental psychological and social effects. Research conducted about the implications that quarantine had on individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic report distressing symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and suicide (Wang et al., 2021; Irman et al., 2020). The increasingly negative effects on the psychological well-being of individuals due to the COVID-19 global quarantine are related to findings from previous pandemics (Mazza et al., 2020).

While research on COVID-19 and its impact continue, it can be implied that much of its impact is associated with challenges and worsening mental health. In recent studies, parents have reported worsening mental health for themselves, specifically increased levels of anxiety and worry (de Lima et al., 2020; Gadermann et al., 2021). A growing concern of researchers is how these closures and parents' negative experiences may have led to negative outcomes for children (Lateef et al., 2021). Researchers have found that loss of childcare, increased parental distress, and parents' regulatory emotional self-efficacy can influence children's well-being (Morelli et al., 2020; Cusinato et al., 2020). Thus, adding increased pressures to parents as they navigate and support their children through these obstacles.

Another major concern many faced was the transition to remote learning, as it impacted the quality of education children received and limited their access to other resources. Multiple studies have concluded that the shift to remote learning resulted in a decrease in learning subjects such as math, reading, and spelling (Engzell et al., 2021; Tomasik et al., 2021). This research also reported that the learning loss was equivalent to one-fifth of the school year and individuals from lower socioeconomic status homes experienced a learning loss of up to 60% (Engzell et al., 2021). In the United States, 24.2 million children experienced their public schools closing during the pandemic (ages 5-11 years old; Christakis et al., 2020). Furthermore, research has documented learning losses in reading and math for students in the United States (Relyea et al., 2022; Mervosh, 2022). A *New York Times* article reported on data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which shows that students' reading and math skills after the pandemic dropped to levels seen 20 years ago (Mervosh, 2022). Additionally, data demonstrates that learning losses also highlight inequities in the United States as children of color and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds experienced the greatest loss in learning (Relyea et al., 2022; Mervosh, 2022). It is important to understand how the changes to schooling during the pandemic have affected children's educational outcomes.

In addition to educational needs being shifted and not as well attended to throughout the pandemic, the mental well-being of parents and children were drastically altered (Agnostinelli et al., 2022; Christakis et al., 2020; Cusinato et al., 2020). The effects of switching to remote learning and its negative impact on retention and students' access to education added to the detrimental effects of quarantine on parents and students (Garbe et al., 2020). Increases in negative bodily reactions (e.g., headaches, stomach aches) and psychological disorders have been a prominent outcome of past pandemics and continue to be intensified as the COVID-19

pandemic was the longest quarantine of the century (Wang et al., 2021). Additionally, Essler and colleagues (2021) found that reductions in parental strain from the peak of the pandemic to later stages in the pandemic was related to increases in child well-being and decreases in child problem behavior during that time. This suggests that parental well-being may play a role in children's well-being and behavior. Thus, understanding the effects of both parents and children during the pandemic is important to improve outcomes for both parents and children.

The Current Study

The current study aimed to focus on parents' life experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, how learning and school closures impacted their experiences. This study was exploratory in nature, so there were no hypotheses about the outcomes. Because of the novelty of the pandemic, the researchers wanted to survey parents about their experiences to foster a better understanding. We hope to better understand the effects that the pandemic and schooling changes have on individuals and to learn about the experiences many faced. Additionally, find ways to provide help and support to those in need as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the event of future pandemics and periods of isolation.

Method

Participants

The current study recruited parents with school aged children (K-12). Participants were recruited through emails and social media. Information and links to the survey conducted were emailed to schools, posted on personal social media pages, and parents group pages related to the population being studied. There were initially 127 participants, however a participant with a European zip code was excluded, as this did not meet inclusion criteria of being from the U.S. The final sample consisted of 126 parents ($N = 127$) with children in K-12 grade in the U.S.

Demographic information was self-reported by participants (shown in Table 1). Reports were based upon valid responses, therefore missing data, “unknown,” and “refuse to report” answers were excluded.

Of the sample, 75.4% was female, 6.3% male, and 18.03% is unknown, as the participants did not provide this demographic information. The study's participants consisted of 76.2% Caucasian (White), 3.2% Hispanic/Latino, 0.8% African American, 0.8% Pacific Islander, and 19% of the participants did not provide information on their race/ethnicity. Participant's education level included 15.1% with a high school degree, 2.4% with an associate degree, 4.8% with a bachelor's degree, 8.7% with a master's degree, 29.4% hold a doctorate degree, 22.2% reported other, and 17.4% did not respond to this demographic information. Upon observation of participants that reported their household income, majority have between a middle to high household income. With most of the sample having a total annual household income of \$200,000 or higher (16.6%), followed by 13.5% earning between \$50,000 – 74,000, 11.1% between \$100,000- 124,000, 8.7% between \$125,000 – 149,000, 7.9% between \$75,000- 99,000, 5.6% between \$30,000- 49,000, 4.0% between \$150,000-174,000, 4.0% between \$175,000- 199,000, and 4.0% earning less than \$30,000. Figure 1 shows more information on participants' schooling, pre- and post-pandemic. As shown in the Figure 1, there was a shift from in person schooling prior to the pandemic to more remote or hybrid schooling during the pandemic (i.e., Fall 2020).

Measures

Participants completed an online survey through Qualtrics. Before beginning the survey, participants were provided a consent form (for parents and/or guardians) and an assent form (for

children) which included information about the study, benefits and risks, and contact information for the researchers and local Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Procedure

After obtaining consent from the parent and/or guardian and assent from the child, the participants completed a survey which asked about various aspects of their experience during the pandemic. The survey had no time limit. On average, parents took approximately 30 minutes to complete the survey. The survey consisted of carefully designed questions focusing on schooling situation and parents' general mental well-being. Participants were asked questions including their current and past schooling situation, changes/mandates related to the pandemic (e.g., does your child wear masks to school, have to social distance), support from teachers/school (e.g., does my child's teacher help when needed/my child's school provides help with technology), emotional responses and experiences (e.g., I feel hopeless/happy/stressed), concerns about COVID (e.g., I worry about COVID-19), demographic questions, and questions about their family's work and financial situation. Several open-ended questions were also asked regarding both the best and worst parts of school at the current time.

Results

We began our analyses by running several descriptive statistics. Table 2 reports some of the descriptive statistics. Many of the responses fell in the middle of the response scale, but parents reported lower than average scores on feeling lonely and seeing their friends, while they reported greater than average scores on feeling overwhelmed and experiencing increased stress levels since the pandemic started. They also reported higher than average scores for "My child feels safe." As seen in Figure 1, the majority of our sample participated in remote or hybrid

learning during the Fall of 2020 semester, while the majority of participants had children enrolled in in-person learning prior to the pandemic.

Several correlational analyses were run to compare outcome variables. While some outcomes demonstrated positive or reassuring outcomes and others were more negative. For parents that reported greater support from their child's school, they also reported that their children enjoyed school more ($r = .53, p < .001$), felt more confident that they could learn the material ($r = .60, p < .001$), enjoyed what they were learning ($r = .59, p < .001$), met more new friends ($r = .37, p < .001$), and that the coursework was easier for their children ($r = .21, p = .02$). This demonstrates the importance of school support for children's success during these periods of isolation. Additionally, the more parents that reported "my child feels confident in their ability to learn in this current environment (i.e., online, in person, hybrid)," the less stressful they report schooling was for them ($r = -.44, p < .001$). Thus, a positive learning environment is associated with lower stress levels for the parents. Parents that reported greater agreement with the statement "I find it hard to adjust to the changes due to COVID-19" also reported greater agreement with the statements "It is hard for my child to learn in school this year" ($r = .28, p = .003$) and "My child's schooling is stressful for me right now" ($r = .26, p = .004$), and less agreement with "I feel confident that my child can learn material for this school year" ($r = -.20, p = .03$).

The sample represents a population of high socioeconomic status, however, there is still evidence of potential relationships between financial resources and parents' experience of the pandemic. Specifically, parents who reported greater agreement with the statement "I am in a good financial position right now" reported greater agreement with the statement "I am confident that my child will be prepared for the next grade" ($r = .22, p = .02$), suggesting that families with

greater financial resources are more confident in their children's academic success.

Additionally, parents that reported greater agreement with the statement "I am in a good financial position right now" reported *lower* agreement with the statement "I am worried about my child's ability to learn during the pandemic" ($r = -.19, p = .04$), suggesting that parents with greater financial resources are also less worried about their children's academic success.

Together, these findings suggest that families with greater economic resources may be able to shelter from or overcome potential educational hurdles that arise from remote learning.

Qualitative Data

Open-ended questions from the study were also analyzed. The coding scheme focused on 11 different categories that were deemed as relevant experiences that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on. Coding entailed research assistants assigning open-ended responses to a theme(s) that was present in the participant's response. The themes and categories were determined prior to review of the data and further refined in a group meeting. The categories focused on four broad concepts: school, family, social/political, and ambiguous responses (see Appendix A for categories and definitions). Two coders coded each question, and any discrepancies were resolved by a third coder (57% were agreed upon by the initial two coders). Tables 3 and 4 show the percentage of responses that fell into each category for each question.

As shown in Table 3, parents report that their children experienced the biggest challenges in the categories of school/academics, social, and mandates/regulations. For parents, they also reported the most challenges within the domain of school/academics. Parents discussed that it was difficult to navigate the new schooling experiences they were facing. Many people were experiencing virtual or hybrid learning situations for the first time. Parents had to learn how to

adapt and assist children with logging onto virtual sessions and getting adjusted to a completely different daytime routine compared to the beginning of 2019.

Parents also reported troubles with work/finances and family/homelife. These two issues intersected as parents struggled with balancing their work and home life. Parents had to navigate continuing to go to work in person or adjust to remote work. Children participating in remote schooling added in an additional variable. Parents now had an additional responsibility of taking care of their children during working hours. The parents also had to make sure that their children completed school assignments and attended class, all while making sure they completed their own work responsibilities.

When asked what some of the best parts of the pandemic were, parents reported school/academic and social as the best parts. Parents also included home/family life as well, such as being a part of their children's learning or spending more time together. When asked what some of the greatest sources of stress were at the current moment, parents reported that isolation due to lack of socialization and restrictions in place from COVID-19 mandates were sources contributing to a great deal of stress.

Teachers and Technology

As seen in the qualitative data, when reporting the best parts of the pandemic, parents reported school/academics as the top category. We found that participants generally felt supported by their teachers (shown in Figure 2). One-way teachers can provide more support is by helping with technological needs that arise from hybrid or remote learning environments. Figure 3 demonstrates how both parents and their children, experienced problems with technology. Together, this data suggests that while families had difficulty with navigating technology, they did experience support from their teacher. Access to and support with

technology may be important factors for students' success and comfort with learning when participating in remote schooling. When teachers provide technology support, it may help to lessen the stressors that parents experience as they navigate unfamiliar educational platforms. This is further supported by the parents' responses to open ended questions where they reported difficulties with technology (refer to Table 3).

Discussion

The goal of the current study was to examine the effects of schooling related changes and the pandemic on parents' experiences and well-being. Qualitative data was gathered on their experiences. A theme highlighted in the data, was that even among a sample of parents predominantly with a higher socioeconomic status, they are reporting challenges in schooling resulting from the pandemic. Parents reported higher than average scores for feeling overwhelmed and having increased stress since the beginning of the pandemic.

Another important aspect found in the data was that parents and their children feel supported by both their schools and teachers. This finding has important implications, as parents who reported feeling supported by their children's school also reported that their children enjoyed school more and were meeting new friends at school. A recent study by Goldhaber and colleagues (2022) highlights the learning losses that children have experienced during the pandemic, but they do not report the level of support as a possible mediator or moderator of these outcomes. However, they do report on the disparities of race and socioeconomic status, which can be attributed to access to or support with technology. Although, support from the school and teachers seems to be an important factor that should be considered when trying to understand the impacts of school closures and isolation on both parents' and children's well-being and learning.

While our findings along with previous researchers (e.g., Egan et al., 2021; Patrick et al., 2020; de Lima et al., 2020; Gadermann et al., 2021) demonstrate the challenges and negative experiences that people had during the pandemic, we also believe it is important to highlight some of the positive outcomes. Parents did report their experiences on some of the positive aspects. Children who were able to attend in-person classes enjoyed seeing their friends and not being on Zoom. Parents enjoyed time spent with their children and being an active part of their schooling (i.e., knowing what is going on in school).

Limitations

The current study has limitations that need to be further addressed. First, the sample is primarily from a more privileged background; potentially skewing the results by painting a picture of the effects of the pandemic on those with more resources. Related to the previous point and ones below, our sample was also primarily White and female, limiting the generalizability as the sample is not representative of the entire U.S. population. Additionally, our study was performed online; therefore, participants had to have access to technology to participate in the survey. Participants also needed both time and energy to take the survey. We suspect that people who were really struggling during the Fall of 2020 were not able or willing to complete the study. It is important to consider who would be at greatest risk for negative outcomes associated with the closures, health concerns, access to health care, and many other issues related to the pandemic. Particularly with respect to academics, more current data is emerging that low socioeconomic status and racial minorities are at risk for falling behind (Goldhaber et al., 2022).

Another limitation of this study was that we did not have any baseline data; we did not collect data from people prior to the school closures to gain an understanding of baseline responses on these measures. It is impossible to know if this data represents increased or

decreased responses or feelings from before the pandemic. However, we have continued to collect data on some of these same measures to track how parents experienced the pandemic and to identify any changes in these measures over time. We hope that other researchers will also continue to study the ongoing and future impacts of this pandemic on children and parents. Finally, we were unable to assess children's academic performance through grades or standardized measures of academic performance. As noted earlier, other researchers (e.g., Goldhaber et al., 2022) are tracking children's performance during this pandemic to identify the impacts it has on academic performance.

Future Directions

Further research needs to be conducted to study the impact of school closures and isolation periods on other aspects of children's development, including social skills, resiliency, and mental health. We hope that future research can include a more representative sample in terms of gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Also, researchers need to continue to study the impact of the closures on parents' well-being. The pandemic has been an experience unlike any other for many individuals. Our data combined with others suggest that school closures and isolation have been challenging for many, however some have found positive experiences embedded in this time as well. Parents and children struggled with remote learning, balancing work/life challenges (for parents), and being away from school. Upon analyzation of the positive experiences reported, the pandemic allowed parents to be more involved in their children's schooling and spend more time together as a family.

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Table 1*Demographic Characteristics*

Variable	Parents (<i>n</i> =126)
Gender (n and %)	
Male	8 (6.3)
Female	95 (75.4)
Missing	22 (17.5)
Unknown	1 (.8)
Race (n and %)	
African American	1 (0.8)
Asian	0 (0)
Caucasian	96 (76.2)
Hispanic	4 (3.2)
Pacific Islander,	1 (0.8)
American Indian	- -
Other	0 (0)
Prefer Not to Say	2 (1.6)
Missing	22 (17.4)
Education (n and %)**	
High School	19 (15.1)
Associate Degree	3 (2.4)

Bachelor's Degree	6	(4.8)
Master's Degree	11	(8.7)
Doctorate	37	(29.4)
Other	28	(22.2)
Missing	22	(17.4)
Income (n and %)		
Less than \$30,000	5	(4.0)
\$30,000 - \$49,000	7	(5.6)
\$50,000 - \$74,000	17	(13.5)
\$75,000 - \$99,000	10	(7.9)
\$100,000 - \$124,000	14	(11.1)
\$125,000 - \$149,000	11	(8.7)
\$150,000 - \$174,000	5	(4.0)
\$175,000 - \$199,000	5	(4.0)
\$200,000 or Higher	21	(16.6)
Prefer Not To Say	5	(4.0)
Missing	26	(20.6)
Grade (n and %)		
Kindergarten	28	(22.2)
1st	9	(7.1)
2nd	18	(14.3)
3rd	10	(7.9)
4th	8	(6.3)

5th	9	(7.1)
6th	12	(9.5)
7th	13	(10.3)
8th	8	(6.3)
9th	7	(5.6)
10th	3	(2.4)
11th	1	(0.8)
12th	0	(0)

* Indicates the grade level of the child (parents completed the survey for the child).

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics for Parent Data*

Item	N	Mean	SD
<i>Scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (2)</i>			
Our school supports our child's learning in this environment.	116	4.12	0.93
I find it hard to adjust to the changes due to COVID-19.	117	3.50	1.03
Since the start of the pandemic (March 2020), my time with friends has increased.	117	1.50	0.96
I am in a good financial position right now.	117	3.77	1.17
My stress level has increased since the start of the pandemic.	117	4.50	0.75
I follow all recommended health precautions...	115	4.65	0.64
My child feels confident in their ability to learn in this current environment.	117	3.61	1.27
<i>Scale from never (1) to all of the time (2)</i>			
I feel lonely.	111	2.86	1.03
I feel happy.	111	3.61	0.56
I feel overwhelmed.	111	3.68	0.80
I feel isolated.	111	3.13	0.90
I feel safe from COVID-19.	110	3.34	0.93
I worry about my child's health.	111	3.09	1.08

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I worry about my child's schooling.	111	3.38	1.03
My child feels safe.	112	4.38	0.63
My child feels worried.	108	2.80	0.82
My child worries about their family.	108	2.50	0.91

Table 3*Percentage of Participants Reporting Current Problems as the Hardest Parts of Schooling*

Categories	*Parent Problems (%)	**Child Problems (%)
School/Academics	60.32	53.17
Learning Disabilities	4.76	1.59
Technology Difficulties	10.32	7.94
Commuting to School	0.79	0
Commuting for Family	0	0
Family/Home Life	19.05	1.59
Motivating Child/Emotions	18.25	10.32
Mandates/Regulations	15.87	11.11
Politics	0	0
Social	11.11	45.24
Work/Finances	24.6	1.59

Ambiguous	0	1.59
No Response	16.67	19.05

* Indicates issues that the parents experienced.

** Indicates issues that the children experienced (reported by their parents).

Table 4*Percentage of Participants Reporting Current Experiences as the Best Parts of Schooling*

Categories	*Parent Experiences (%)	**Child Experiences (%)
School/Academics	56.35	56.35
Learning Disabilities	0	0.79
Technology Difficulties	0	3.17
Commuting to School	11.9	0.79
Commuting for Family	0	0
Family/Home Life	24.6	15.87
Motivating Child/Emotions	3.17	6.35
Mandates/Regulations	7.94	0.79
Politics	0	0
Social	3.97	19.84
Work/Finances	3.97	0.79

Ambiguous	0.79	6.35
No Response	22.22	21.43

*Anecdotes of parent's experiences.

** Anecdotes for children's experiences (reported by their parents).

Figure 1

Schooling Situation Before and During the Pandemic (Reported by Parents)

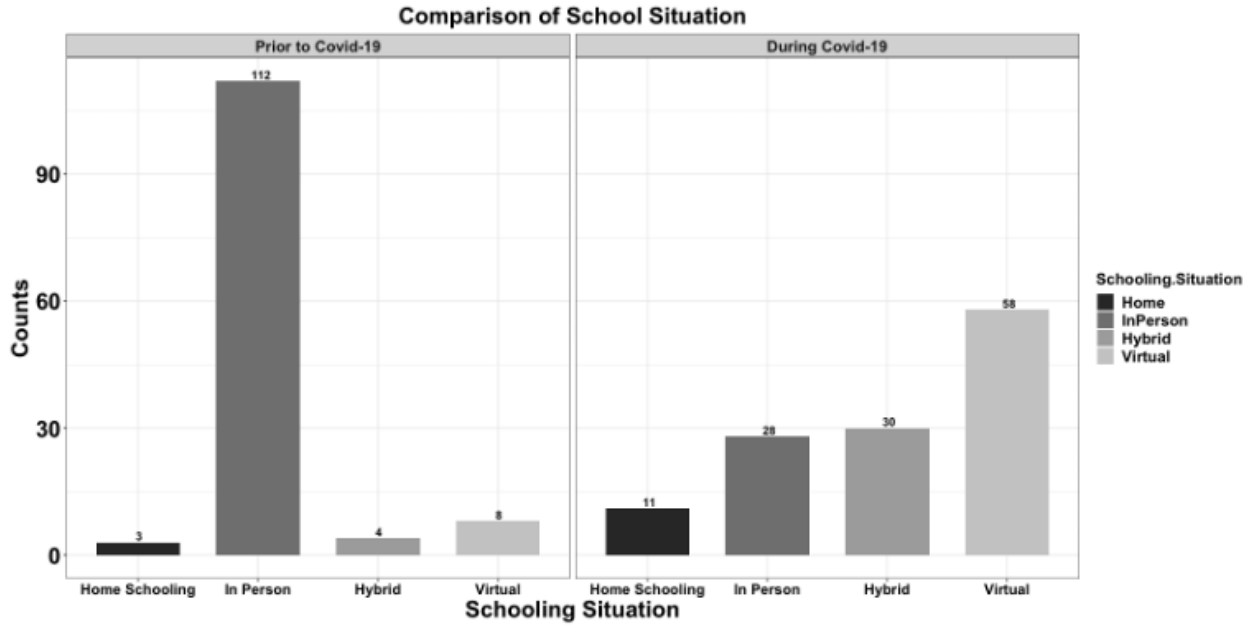


Figure 2

Technology Support from the Teacher (Reported by Parents)

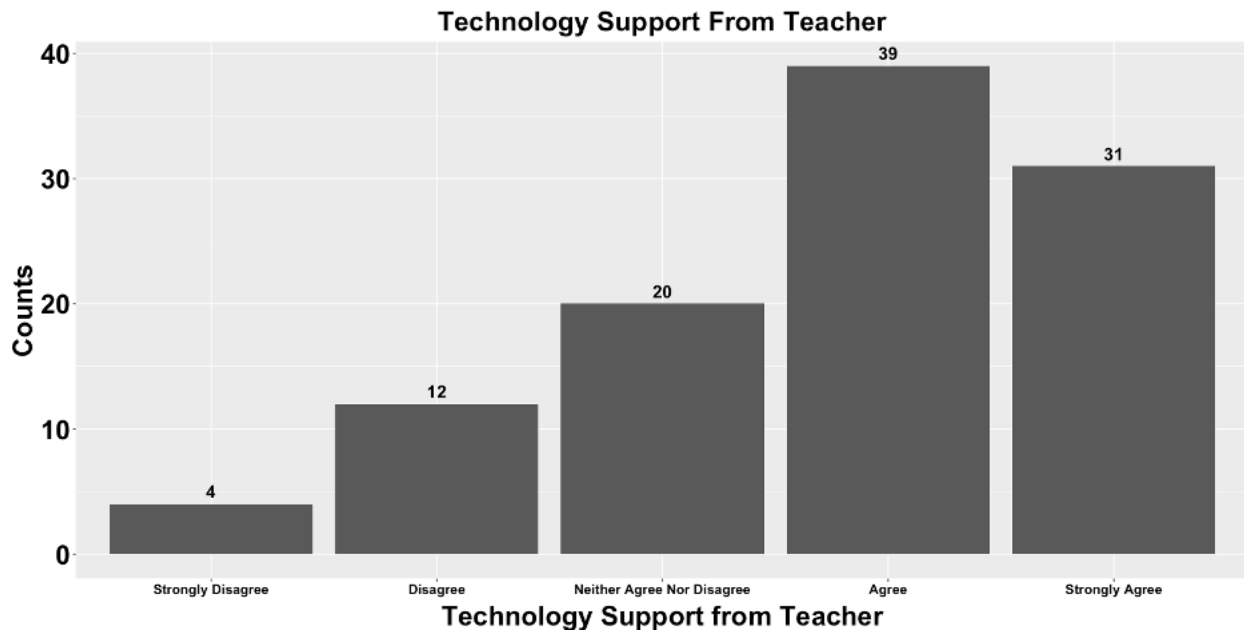
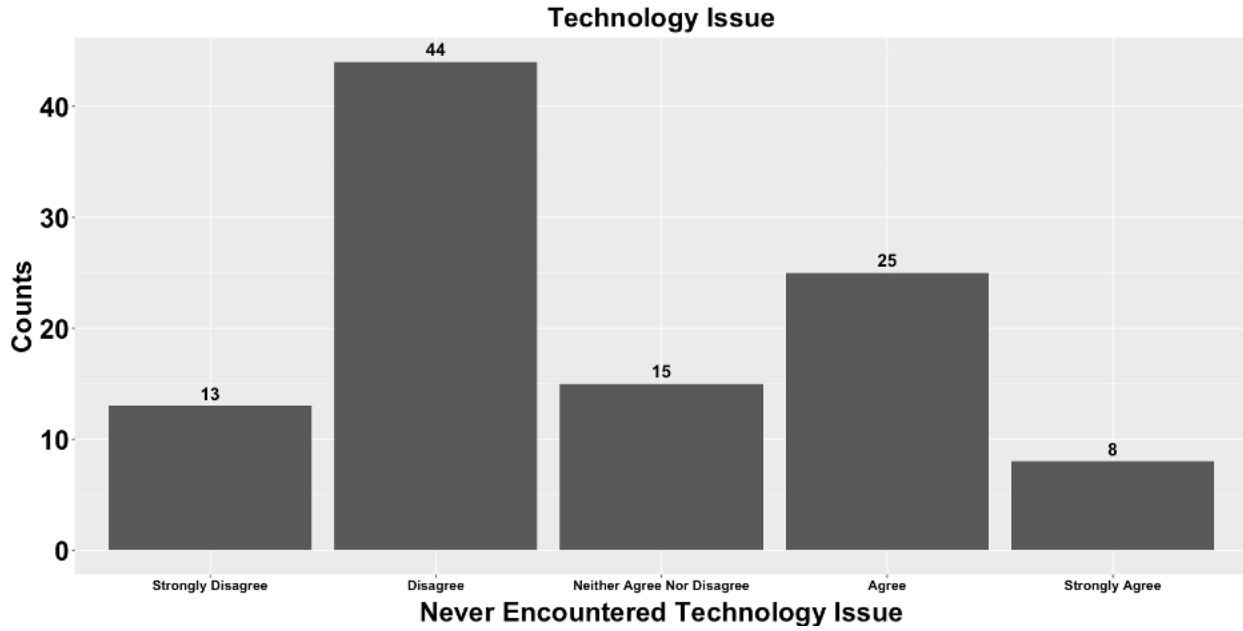


Figure 3

Issues with Technology (Reported by Parents)



Appendix A

Coding Scheme for the Open-Ended Questions

Categories	Definition
School/Academics	Any responses where subjects discuss school. i.e.) flexibility in schedules, increased involvement in child's learning, being able to attend school virtually or in person, zoom university, etc.
Learning Disabilities	Any responses that deal with parents managing children with learning disabilities. i.e.) having a hard time implementing accommodations at home, having to advocate for accessibility in virtual schooling.
Technology Difficulties	Anything relating to technical difficulties the subject may encounter. i.e.) trouble maneuvering new programs, Wi-Fi concerns.
Commuting to School	Any responses that discuss driving children to school.
Commuting for Family	Any responses that discuss commuting for their family.
Family/Home Life	Any responses where subjects discuss home or family life. i.e.) able to watch children develop more, spending more time together as a family, etc.
Motivating Child/Emotions	Any responses that have to do with parents motivating their children to do work or regulating their emotions. i.e.) having a hard time motivating children, having a hard time with children becoming more emotional.

<p>Mandates/Regulations</p>	<p>Any responses where subjects discuss COVID-19 procedures, regulations, laws, etc. or relating to COVID-19 itself. i.e.) increase in feeling of safety from COVID-19, happy that they do not have to wear masks, etc. This category will also include the general topic of “safety”, as in this context, safety is directly related to the prevention of contracting COVID-19.</p>
<p>Politics</p>	<p>Any responses that relate to politics, the current or new coming president, political parties, etc.</p>
<p>Social</p>	<p>Any responses relating to socialization. i.e.) happy to be face to face.</p>
<p>Work/Finances</p>	<p>Any responses that deal with parents balancing work or home responsibilities. i.e.) balancing a full-time job and also supporting their children in school, having to support children in school and also their husbands while maintaining the home.</p>
<p>Ambiguous</p>	<p>Responses that do not fit into any category.</p>
<p>No Response</p>	<p>Subject provided no response.</p>