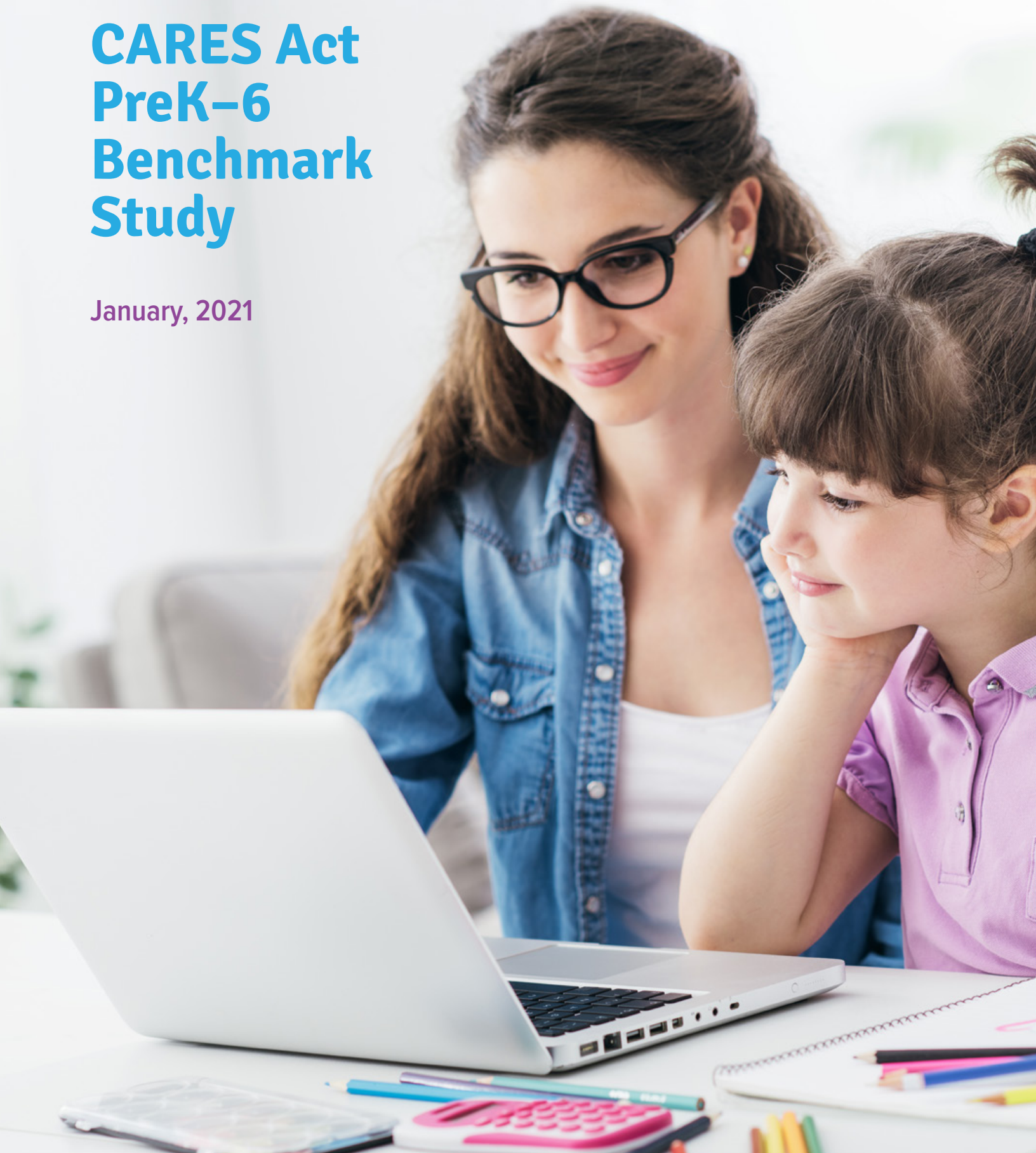


CARES Act PreK–6 Benchmark Study

January, 2021



Results Assessment for the Learning A-Z CARES Act PreK–6 Benchmark Study

One of the greatest challenges faced across the United States by educators and caregivers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is the crucial task of ensuring that children can continue to learn and grow, wherever their classroom may be. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES Act) Act was passed to provide time-sensitive, one-time funding in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, providing immediate support for Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and the communities they serve.

This white paper takes a look at how COVID-19 impacts learning communities, how CARES Act funding can help address distance learning challenges, and how products and services can best align with those dollars to provide direct support for our nation's children, now and in the future.

Survey data presented in this whitepaper is focused on assessing the resource needs and education challenges faced by PreK–6 schools and school districts before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, providing an opportunity for participants and readers to compare their experiences, practices, and outcomes.

The Learning A-Z PreK–6 CARES Act Benchmark Study was conducted over the Fall and Winter of 2020. Its more than 1,700 participants represent a wide range of experiences in education, from teachers and instructional specialists to administrators.

Survey questions fell into 3 categories: **Access, Emotions and Perceptions**, and **CARES Act Resources**. These were the questions asked in the survey:

ACCESS

1. What type of internet access do your students have at home?
2. Do you have the digital resources you need to support students both remotely and in the classroom?
3. Has your school had to distribute books, supplies, or equipment for children to use at home for distance learning or independent study?

EMOTIONS AND PERCEPTION

4. How engaged are your students?
5. How skilled do you feel in providing distance learning?
6. Are you currently teaching from home?
7. What is your current state of mind?

CARES ACT RESOURCES

8. Have there been any school-level conversations about the use of CARES Act dollars to support instruction and/or professional development?
9. What are the most critical needs you plan on addressing with CARES Act dollars?

Summary of Results:

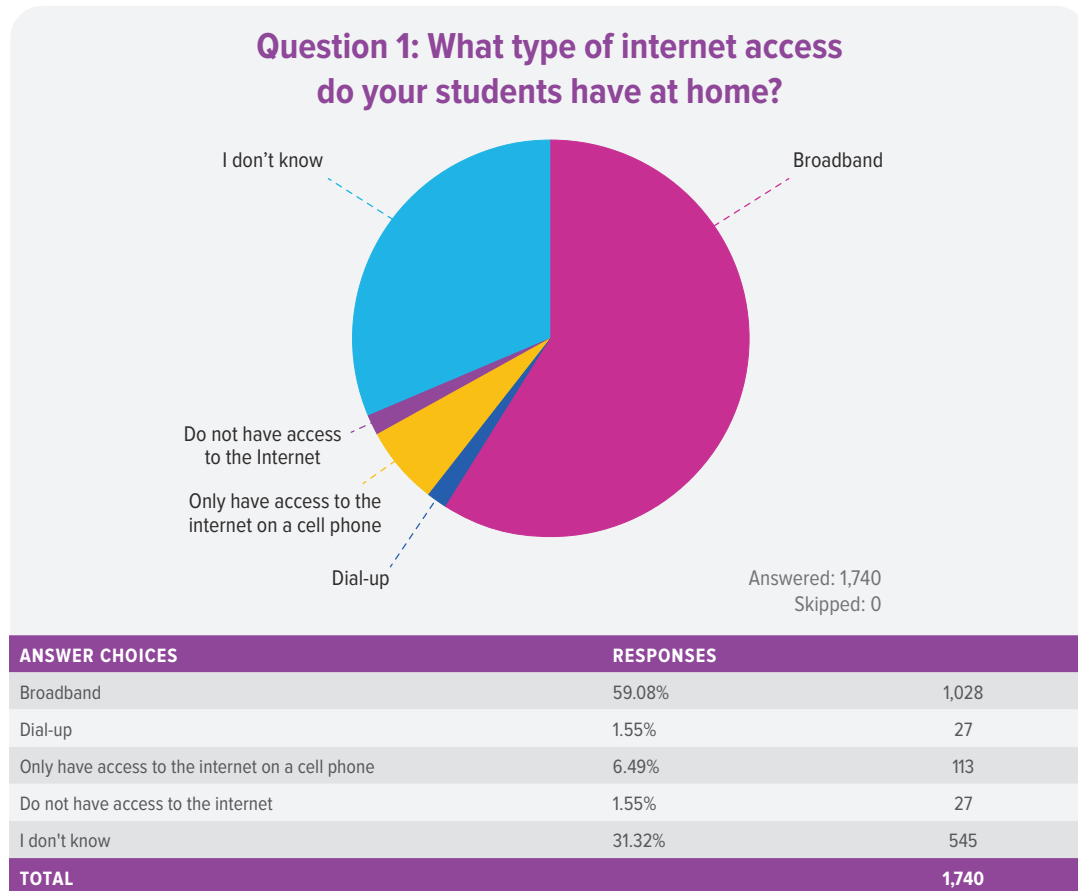
- Consistent with a broad range of surveys regarding **Access**, our survey results showed up to 33% of respondents saying their schools lack adequate resources necessary to participate in distance learning. A majority said they had access to basic internet resources, but nearly 40% felt the resources available were inadequate. Almost all reported their LEA had been responsible for distributing resources to families in their district.
- In our investigation of **Emotions and Perceptions**, survey respondents expressed stress and anxiety regarding their attempts at maintaining instructional integrity and managing their own feelings of inadequacy and frustration when teaching remotely.
- Issues with **Student Engagement** featured in the results. 35% of respondents reported high levels of engagement and over 50% reported a moderate amount, but 14% reported little to no engagement on the part of students. Consistent engagement, for a majority of students, is still not the dominant experience in most classrooms.
- Most participants were unaware of their LEAs efforts to strategically plan for the application of CARES Act dollars and/or the allocation of dollars to address their concerns. This finding is consistent with data demonstrating that large portions of the funds set aside for targeted support have still not been spent as of 2021. Educators must urgently review their needs and identify how to best spend these dollars.
- Regarding the application of CARES Act dollars, 18% believe that better internet service is essential, with an almost equal amount arguing for professional development, curriculum, and student services. Almost 30% responded that other resources were necessary. All such applications of CARES Act funding are allowable by the legislation.

Overall, responses to our 2020 survey demonstrate:

- a desire for educators to overcome learning gaps experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic
- a willingness on the part of educators to do the best they can with what they have and to try new approaches
- a concern for their own and their students' social-emotional health
- a hopefulness at the prospect of additional support and an interest in matching funding to needs
- an eagerness to continue to grow as educators and find new ways to meet student needs now and in the future
- an appreciation for the ways CARES Act dollars can profoundly improve the learning gaps exacerbated by the pandemic

PART 1: ACCESS

The first set of questions addresses issues related to communication and remote access, including bandwidth and material resources.



Almost 60% of respondents indicated that broadband services were somehow available to their students. However, more than one in ten said they had either no internet at all, or only had dial-up or phone-based internet access. One in three respondents said they didn't know what type of access was available; many of those students may have little to no access.

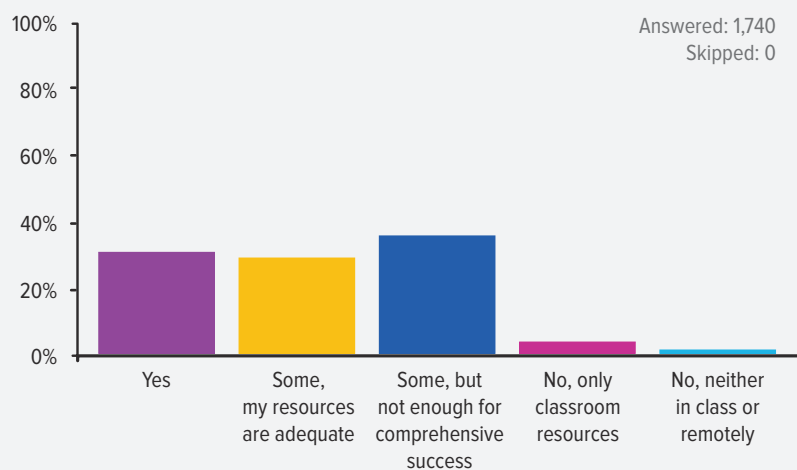
With so many students unable to participate in the most basic instruction when taught remotely, one in four students may be left behind before the school day even starts. The implications of this factor alone are staggering, and elements of the current legislation attempt to directly address this foundational learning gap.

[Polls](#)¹ show that a majority of America's students went to school entirely online last fall. Meanwhile, as a Common Sense [Media Report](#)² notes, "as many as 16 million students, or 30%, lack adequate internet access or devices for online learning. While this 'digital divide' separating students with access to resources from those without is a bipartisan concern, fiscal headwinds challenge states' capacity to bridge the divide on their own. Fortunately, a variety of funding streams through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES Act) Act are supporting states in providing students with the resources they need to engage in online learning."

The report goes on to observe that “this dilemma could be an opportunity, spawning a massive national push to get all kids connected in the way America brought electrical service to every corner of the country starting a century ago. Benefits would extend beyond the pandemic.”

Throughout the delivery of instruction, surveys should continue so steps can be taken to directly advocate for device, platform, or bandwidth concerns. Such baseline data can assist teachers in advocating for CARES Act-aligned funding to close these gaps.

Question 2: Do you have the digital resources you need to support students both remotely and in the classroom?

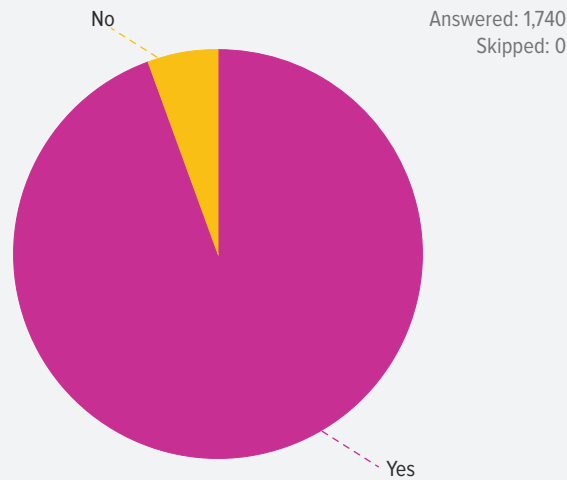


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	30.75%	535
Some, my resources are adequate	29.02%	505
Some, but not enough for comprehensive success	35.75%	622
No, only classroom resources	3.45%	60
No, either in class or remotely	1.03%	18
TOTAL		1,740

36% responded they had some, but not enough, digital resources for comprehensive success. Only 30% reported that they had the resources they needed. 5% said they had classroom-only resources or none at all. About two out of three felt their resources were inadequate or somewhat adequate, leaving only one third of all respondents saying they had the digital tools necessary to meet student needs.

When teachers and instructional support staff believe the tools they possess are inadequate, they are likely to also be less confident in their own instruction and to feel more frustrated or pessimistic about their performance and its efficacy. Studies have shown this can limit the impact of instruction and may result in lower performance among students, even those with adequate resources. When parents are included in remote instruction, if they don't feel confident in the resources at their disposal, their attitudes can also have a negative impact on engagement and performance outcomes.

Question 3: Has your school had to distribute books, supplies, or equipment for children to use at home for distance learning or independent study?



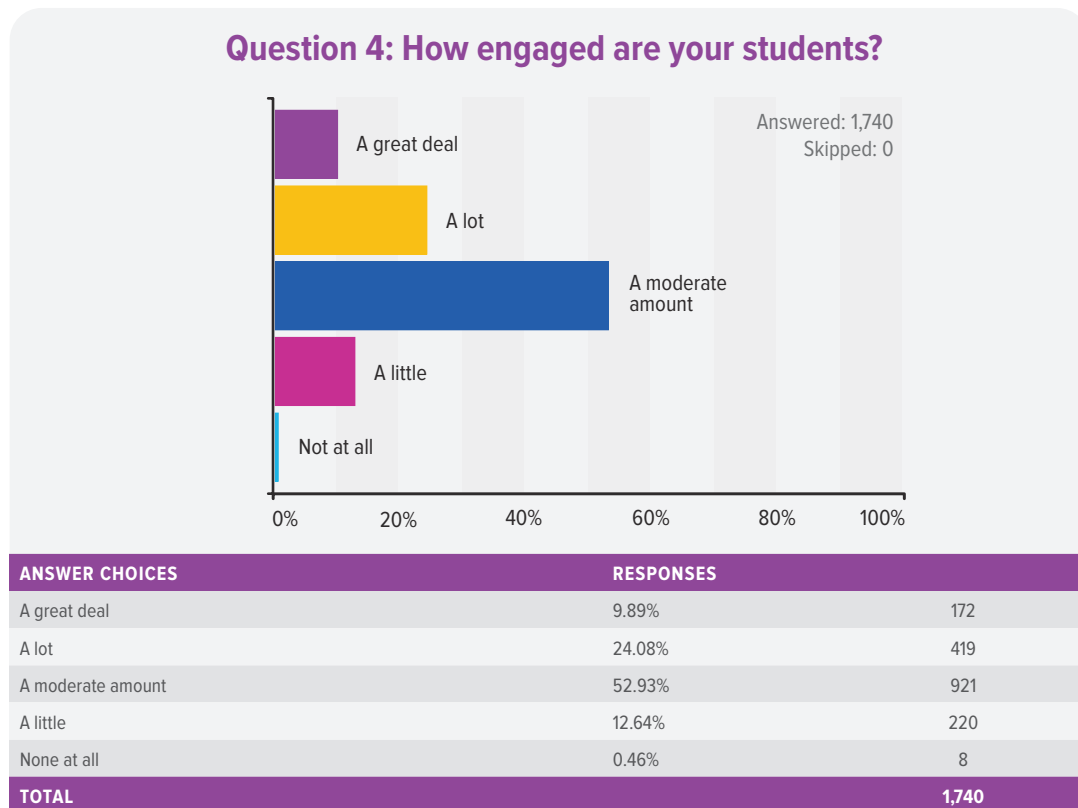
Our survey found 95% of respondents confirmed their LEA has a learning gap. In some communities as many as 100% of students required some degree of intervention.

Each state has multiple pathways to fund the purchasing and distribution of necessary materials to schools and families in support of distance learning. Districts, schools, and teachers can use CARES Act funds for 12 different scenarios. One of these scenarios align perfectly with purchasing products to support student learning.

Districts can purchase and distribute digital devices to students with CARES Act funds in most states. As of early 2021, Illinois, Maryland, North Carolina, and Tennessee are giving districts a collective \$212.5 million to purchase hardware for online learning. Other states are providing device and connectivity support directly to families. Alabama has allocated \$100 million for a public-private partnership, called Alabama Broadband Connectivity for Students, that provides vouchers for families to pay for equipment and high-speed internet service. Maine's Department of Education bought nearly 15,000 internet service contracts, most with Wi-Fi-enabled tablets that can be used as hotspots.

Part 2: EMOTIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had a direct impact on the physical health and wellness of populations worldwide, it has also had a major impact on our social-emotional wellness. This survey investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the emotions and perceptions of teachers, and on the social-emotional health of their students.



Before COVID-19, educators typically assessed student engagement utilizing real-time techniques like student self-reporting, teacher notes, and in-class observational measures (running records or time-on-task embedded assessments). These methods work for in-person learning environments where student participation and connectivity is visually evident.

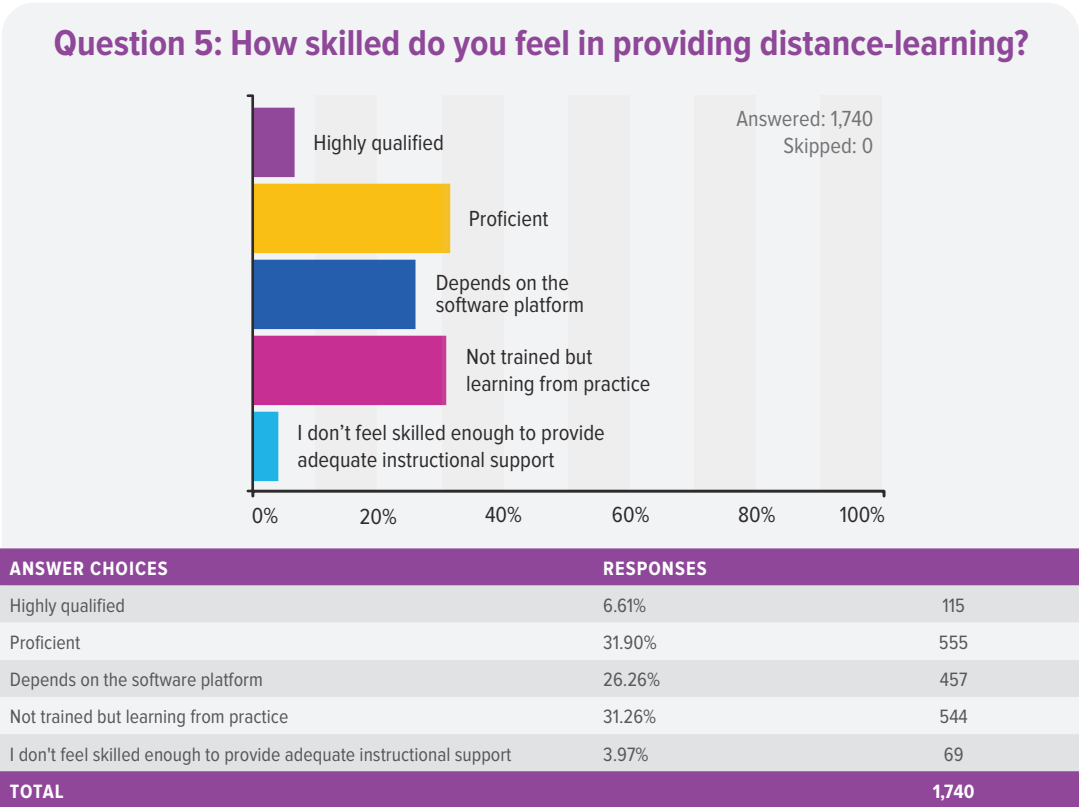
With so much virtual instruction delivered through learning management systems either synchronously or asynchronously, teachers have to engage students — and evaluate their engagement — with a heavily limited ability to observe their students or objectively measure their level of engagement.

Slightly more than half of our respondents reported that their students were moderately engaged. It's been generally accepted that while engagement may commonly be moderate, deeper and more consistent engagement should hopefully follow when both teachers and students have more practice with the new distance learning model.

13% described students as only a little engaged. 1% said students were not engaged at all. Isolating the reasons for lack of engagement will be critical in establishing intervention and support strategies.

With 10% highly engaged and 24% engaged a lot, there may be a silver lining. This [article in EdWeek](#)³ offers a look at how distance learning has been rewarding and empowering for some students and their families. It's important to remember: in one form or another, distance learning is here to stay. A positive attitude about its many beneficial aspects can help create solutions for those struggling with engagement.

Many students have lost as much as [a year's worth of learning](#)⁴ – and the issues with engagement observed in the survey may suggest that in addition to problems related to unavailable tools and new environments, students struggle with long stretches of screen-time.

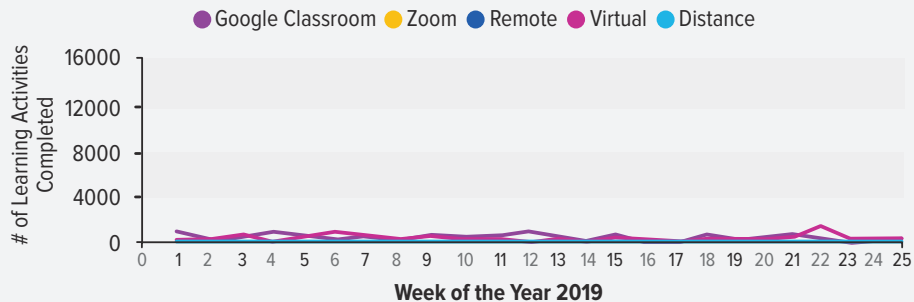


Well over half of respondents indicated that they do not feel confident providing distance learning, either due to unfamiliarity with software (27%) or lack of training (31%), but only 4% said they didn't feel skilled enough to provide adequate instructional support. 31% said while they hadn't taken formal training, they were learning from practice. While 32% considered themselves proficient, only 7% said they were highly qualified to provide distance learning.

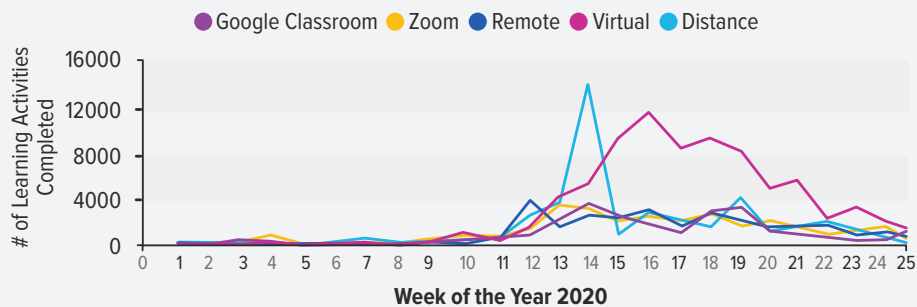
This is a serious problem, likely to result in lost instructional time and a decrease in efficacy. However, Frontline Research & Learning Institute found in [this report](#)⁵ that even prior to the pandemic, existing practices were inadequate and not up to new federal standards.

32% of our respondents said their professional development was primarily the result of their own initiative. [Frontline Research & Learning Institute](#)⁶ also looked at how teachers were gaining digital and remote learning skills, and found “teachers actively sought out learning opportunities and taught themselves.”

Completed PD Activities with Keywords Relating to Remote Learning Topics (2019)



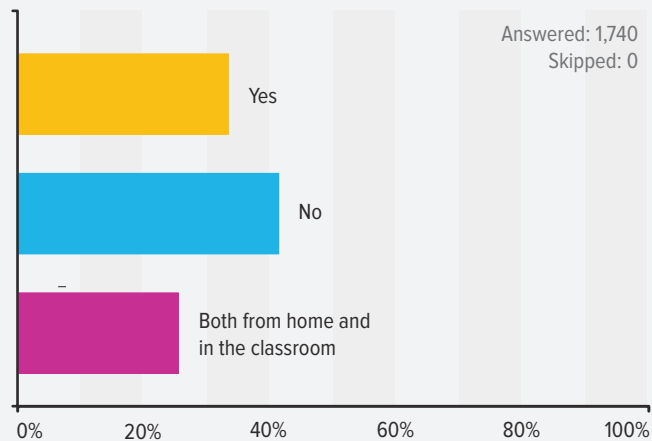
Completed PD Activities with Keywords Relating to Remote Learning Topics (2020)



But when examining trends over time, Frontline reports: “research shows that when organizations support their employees in professional development, those employees are far more likely to pursue such learning. In 2013, the National Center for Education Statistics surveyed lower secondary education teachers around the world. In the U.S., over 95% of respondents said they took some type of professional development over the prior 12 months. But when asked if they had done so without any institutional support, that number dropped to just 1.7%.”

As this data suggests, leaving training up to teachers is not enough. CARES Act dollars are specifically targeted at closing this learning gap.

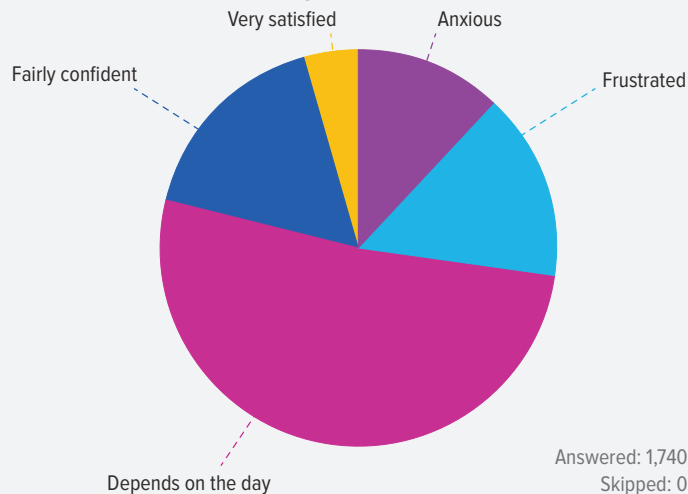
Question 6: Are you currently teaching from home?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	33.33%	580
No	41.32%	719
Both from home and in the classroom	25.34%	441
TOTAL		1,740

Most teachers are either working from home or from both school and home. 33% said they were teaching from home. 25% said they were teaching from both school and home. 42% reported they are currently not teaching from home. We expect these trends to change as we compare this year's survey to subsequent benchmark studies, but we expect remote learning to continue and hybrid/blended models to be adopted as the norm.

Question 7: What is your current state of mind?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Anxious	12.07%	210
Frustrated	15.23%	265
Depends on the day	51.72%	900
Fairly confident	16.78%	292
Very satisfied	4.20%	73
TOTAL		1,740

A majority of respondents, nearly 80%, said they were anxious, frustrated, or “depends on day.” 17% responded that they were only fairly confident. Less than 5% reported they were very satisfied.

A report from [Teach for America](#)⁸ cites Dr. Richard Shadick: “Over the past eight months, teachers have been valiantly struggling to ensure that their students are getting the best education possible given the current challenges. Like others, teachers have been fearful, anxious, stressed, and exhausted by the pandemic.”

In our survey, we found that to be true. However, at least 20% expressed some degree of confidence, which is hopeful. Self-care is essential during this time, and CARES Act dollars can be used to provide additional professional support opportunities in order to gain skills, develop strategies, and access toolkits for more successful remote practices, which can help alleviate stress and reduce triggers.

Part 3: CARES ACT RESOURCES

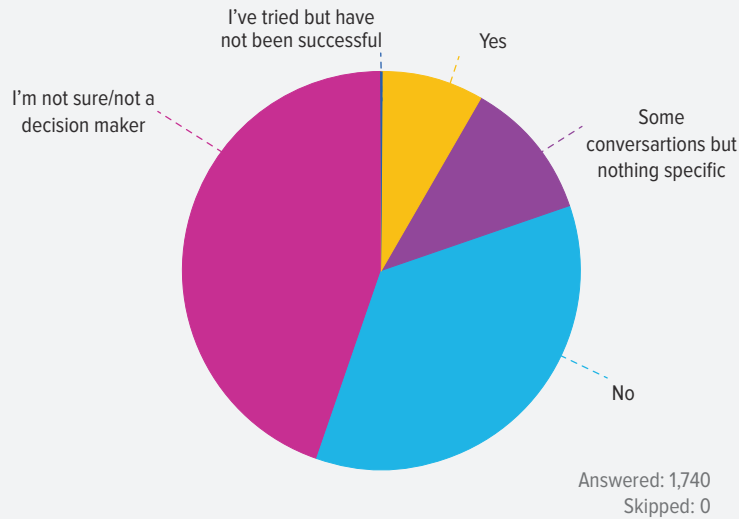
The CARES Act earmarks \$30.7 billion under an Education Stabilization Fund for states to spend on education, including \$13.2 billion for the Elementary and Secondary School Education Relief Fund and \$14 billion for Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund. Another \$3 billion goes to the Governors Emergency Education Relief Fund, which governors can use for “significantly impacted” school districts or higher education institutions.

The U.S. Education Department has released estimates of how much money each state should receive, ranging from \$32 million in stabilization funding for K–12 education in Wyoming to \$1.6 billion in California. Under the governor's discretionary funding, New York will have \$164 million to spend, while Rhode Island will have around \$9 million.

The CARES Act money has begun flowing to the states and must be spent by September 2022. In a letter to the U.S. Education Department, governors pushed to get the dollars quickly and asked for “maximum flexibility” in how to spend it. The money flows to districts that have received Title I dollars in the past but is not technically Title I money and is governed by different rules.

We asked educators two questions to better understand the level of awareness of the use of CARES Act funds within their school/district and the level of activity related to the application for and use of those funds.

Question 8: Have there been any school-level conversations about the use of CARES Act dollars to support instruction and/or professional development?

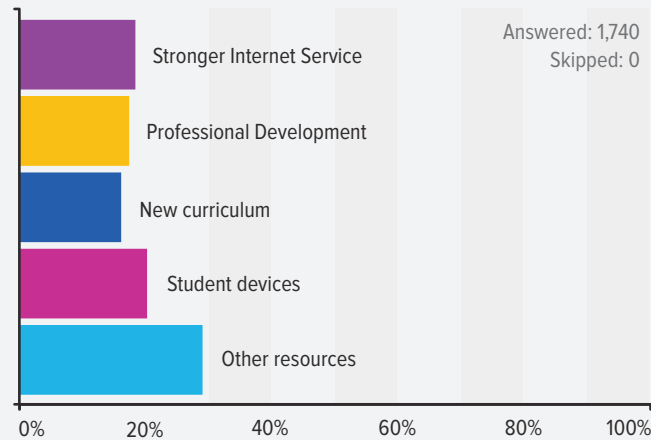


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	8.33%	145
Some conversations but nothing specific	11.32%	197
No	35.52%	618
I'm not sure/not a decision maker	44.31%	771
I've tried but have not been successful	0.52%	9
TOTAL		1,740

44% of respondents answered: “I’m not sure/not a decision maker.” 36% said: “no.” Combined, 80% said they were either unaware of or not involved in conversations about the use of dollars directly related to their performance.

These results are typical. [Studies](#)⁹ show that allocation of CARES Act dollars has been slow to reach teachers and students. Overwhelmingly, educators feel very little has been done or is being done to formulate comprehensive strategic plans with input provided by all stakeholders.

Question 9: What are the most critical needs you plan on addressing with CARES Act dollars?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Stronger internet service	18.16%	316
Professional Development	17.18%	299
New curriculum	15.92%	277
Student devices	20.00%	348
Other resources	28.74%	500
TOTAL		1,740

The results seem to suggest that a plurality of needs should be addressed. 18% suggested stronger internet service as their top priority. 17% cited professional development as theirs. 16% believed new curriculum was most critical. 20% said student services. 28% described other resources.

If comprehensive strategic plans were crafted based on feedback from all stakeholders and front-line responders, this collective view could represent a balanced approach, and if implemented, LEAs could be greatly rewarded.

A Sample of Comments From our Respondents:

- *Lack of quality ready-made effective lessons. Our school system does not have professional staff leaders that create learning decks. We have to create everything, which is even more time consuming. Many teachers are skilled but do not have time.*
- *I teach in a Title 1 school and our children do not have any support at home.*
- *As a teacher I do not have access to CARES Act Dollars; this has not been discussed with teaching staff.*
- *Teaching virtually has been challenging. I teach students with special needs (ages 7-8). Some have full parental support throughout our day. Several have no support once an adult has gotten them to class. Raz Plus has been wonderful. My students have access to it 24/7. Several parents are making use of it more lately.*

- *I am not sure if our county has received CARES Act dollars, because instructors have not received resources*
- *My students vary with internet service; some have broadband, some have dial-up, and some have hotspots provided by the district. My internet was not strong enough to support a large class on Zoom effectively so I am using a hotspot and going to a different location than my home to teach. I will be teaching in person in one week.*
- *My school needs more computers for the children because we do not have 1-to-1 for distance learning. My school needs up-to-date curriculum that could be used for distance learning, because the curriculum we have is not even transferable to Google classroom or other formats. Distance learning has shed light on the big injustice in public school learning: the schools that have a lot and the schools that have a little.*

Conclusions and Key Takeaways

With any complex challenge, no one solution will address and fix while simultaneously crisis-managing such a diverse range of critical needs. Our sample of 1740 people involved in education produced results which reflect national trends and research from leading institutions. Certain patterns emerge:

- *Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers, students, and caregivers have been asked to do much with little, and in some cases, with no connectedness. Teachers and districts have rallied to increase access and improve delivery.*
- Some students and teachers have struggled, and many have found this crisis has exposed existing, often previously unaddressed, gaps in digital learning opportunities.
- Districts have largely been slow to act or coordinate with teachers and students on a consistent basis. Many feel the resources and skills necessary to adequately engage students is lacking.
- Many also feel uncertain about how dollars are being used or are unaware of conversations about solutions. Less than 1 out of 10 say they are aware of recent conversations at their LEA about the use of CARES Act dollars.
- Many educators are teaching themselves how to teach online, and a significant number feel unsuccessful or unsure of the success of their students. Up to half of respondents felt student engagement was either none, a little, or moderate.
- Many report high levels of stress. Only 5% reported they were very satisfied.
- For some, remote learning has been successful and beneficial, with 35% reporting high levels of student engagement.
- A small but significant number of teachers do feel successful and report high student engagement. 40% report they feel proficient or highly qualified in providing digital learning.
- Signs are very promising for further increasing and strengthening student engagement as practices and resources improve.

Note: Our survey does not discriminate between different groups or drill down into differentiating by age of student, etc. It is therefore recommended that when working with stakeholders these attributes are factored in.

We anticipate that many of these difficulties can and will improve as best practices are developed and refined, as problems with connectivity and student device access are addressed and solved, and as strategic plans for ongoing hybrid learning are made and implemented.

Having gained an awareness of funding opportunities, we hope many will continue to seek out resources to help guide their practice and ensure assistance goes where it's most needed.

To Learn More

We're here to help you plan your next steps. Explore our [website](#), where we've built a detailed guide to Bridging the Digital Learning Gap and curated a range of tools and guidance for aligning your needs with CARES Act dollars.

SOURCES:

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9. <https://www.edweek.org/education/schools-havent-spent-much-coronavirus-relief-money-from-congress-heres-why/2020/07>