

MASSACHUSETTS JOBS WITH JUSTICE (JWJ) &
PARENTS UNION OF MASSACHUSETTS (PUMA)

WORKING FAMILIES ON SCHOOL & LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



SEPTEMBER 2020

WHO WE ARE

MASSACHUSETTS JOBS WITH JUSTICE (Mass JwJ)

Massachusetts JwJ is a coalition of labor, faith, and student organizations working together to build unity and support for the struggles of working people. Our mission is to defend working people's standard of living, fight for job security, protect our right to organize, and support contract campaigns and strikes. JwJ opposes racism, sexism, ageism, and homophobia and will actively support struggles against any form of discrimination. JwJ is part of a national support network for workers' rights and believes that government should provide progressively financed public education, affordable housing, health care, and social services.

www.massjwj.net
375 Centre Street
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130
617-524-8778



THE WRITER: ASHLEY TARBET DESTEFANO

Ashley is an activist-scholar and lifelong resident of Massachusetts. She is a proud graduate of the Brockton Public Schools system and is currently an MA candidate in critical ethnic and community studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Ashley has worked alongside JwJ for several years, and continues her commitment working in solidarity towards a world without cages, borders, and a managing/owning class, where all people care for one another and have the support and resources they need to thrive.



PARENTS UNION OF MASSACHUSETTS (PUMA)

PUMA is a state-wide grassroots advocacy group created by parents and for parents of K-12 students in Massachusetts. We fight for Education equity and Public School reformation. Our vision is to establish a community, comprised of past and current educators, parents, and all other child care givers and providers; to stand in unison in the commitment to the long-term academic and social success of ALL students; to support equitable and fully funded schools which are responsive to parent input and student feedback; and to help create full access to an education which is individually, developmentally, and culturally appropriate for all students.

www.parentsunionma.org
375 Centre Street
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130
973-680-2737



ABOUT THIS REPORT

Massachusetts Jobs With Justice (JwJ) and the Parents Union of Massachusetts (PUMA) conducted a confidential survey of working parents, guardians, caregivers, and families to help inform the plans for fall teaching and learning, to ensure it is shaped by our experiences, and to protect the health of school staff, teachers, and students. Participants were asked questions about their family's remote learning experiences in the spring, and their thoughts and concerns regarding school reopening plans for the fall.

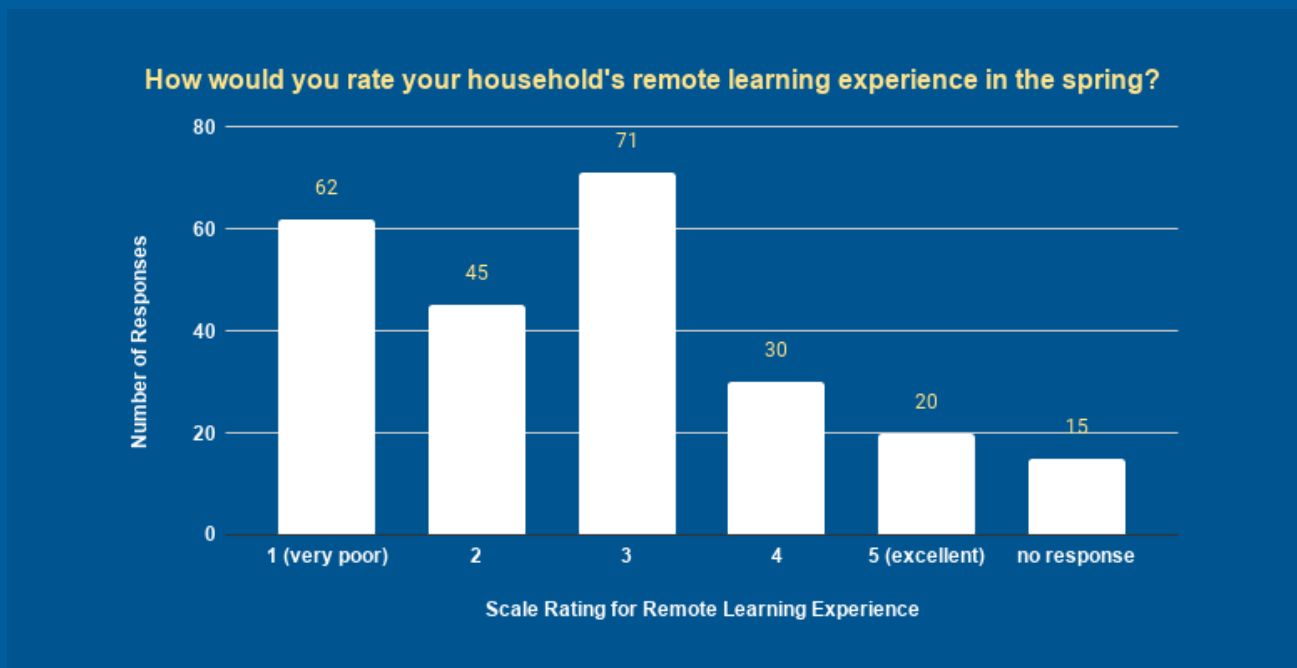
This survey was available in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, and was conducted over the course of 12 days in August 2020. There were over 250 responses.

Respondents' children attend school in 116 different districts (including private, charter, and religious) and 233 different schools in Massachusetts. More than 50% of respondents have children between the ages of 6-13 years old, and more than 92% reported having between 1-3 children in their household. Residents from 114 different Massachusetts cities/towns or Boston neighborhoods responded to the survey. Cambridge and Worcester reported the most responses, followed by Chicopee and Springfield. Additionally, respondents self-identified affiliations with at least 17 different unions and 39 different organizations/employers.

This report details the results and responses from this August 2020 survey.

REMOTE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The majority of households surveyed reported a moderate to very poor experience with remote learning in spring 2020. Overall, more than 70% of respondents rated their household's remote learning experience this spring from 1 (very poor) to 3 (moderate), with respondents most frequently rating it a 3 (29.2%). Very few respondents rated their experience with remote learning this spring as excellent (8.23%) or good (12.35%).



CHALLENGES & BARRIERS

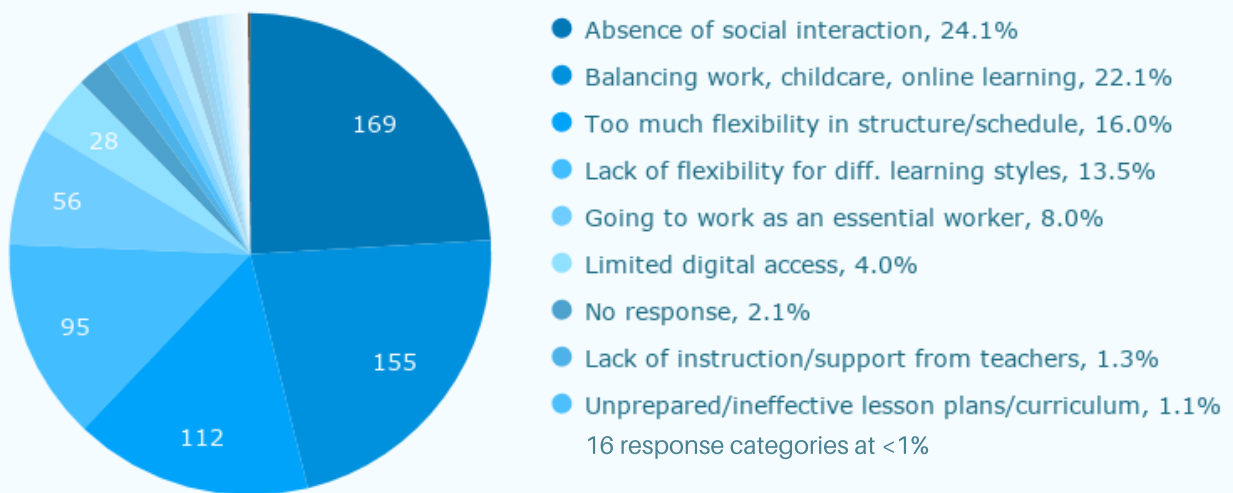
Families reported many challenges to a successful remote learning experience that can be addressed in the fall opening plans in Massachusetts. **The most frequently reported obstacles are:**

- absence of social interaction (24.1%)
- juggling working from home with managing online learning (22.1%)
- too much flexibility in structure and schedule (16%)
- lack of flexibility for various learning styles (13.5%)

One respondent reported their challenges, which were echoed by several others:

“[I was] unable to work at home and simultaneously supervise [my child’s school] work. Infrequent [sic] communication from teachers to parents about student work.”

What were the obstacles you and your child(ren) faced that made remote learning more difficult?



Another parent who is also a teacher reported navigating a unique challenge:

“teaching my own students and having virtual meetings with them while trying to supervise and help my own kids with their school work.”

Respondents who are caregivers of students with special needs and English language learners identified additional barriers for their children. **The most frequently reported challenges for these students with special needs are:**

- inadequate services, accommodations, support for child's needs (21.1%)
- lack of support, tools, and instructions in remote learning (15.5%)
- lack of structure and routine for independent learning (12%)

One respondent reported that there were:

“no special education supports during remote learning without my extreme activism.”

Another reported the specific challenge of inadequate support regarding IEPs:

“Isolation. We never get the support we need in ideal circumstances. With [COVID], by mid April, there was none. Only support from [the district] required parent initiation. Support did not correspond with IEP needs for [my grandson].”

A third respondent reported:

“The district did not provide any services. I was expected to be teacher, [special education] teacher, OT [occupational therapist], and SLP [speech language pathologist] providing all services. They only provided materials and ‘office hours.’ OT and SLP providers were told they were not allowed to provide direct services. Timelines were not upheld and outside reports were ignored. No data was collected by the district during the closure and our complaints about regression were ignored.”

The most frequently reported challenges for English language learners are:

- inadequate adaptation of school work to a digital platform (50%)
- challenges with completing school work (33.33%)
- the school not listening to parent needs/preferences (16.7%)

One respondent reported their family's experience was:

“very difficult. Paper assignments needed to be emailed and done by pencil.”

Another respondent reported the challenges remote learning posed for the student and the parents:

“No individualization, shared devices. No attempt to understand needs of parents or tech help. The computer eventually provided blocked YouTube which is [where] most of the content was placed. No tech follow up. My child had to wait for my work day to end so that he could go on the internet with adult supervision.”

These are troubling reports that demonstrate that the needs of our most impacted community members are not at the center of our school districts' plans for remote learning.

SCHOOL MEALS

Another challenge that the spring closure of schools posed to families was that of **obtaining or replacing meals provided by the schools**. Of the 50% of respondents that reported on how their district shifted to providing meals after schools went remote, **the majority (76.8%) reported that their districts set up meal pick-up times**, but 34.8% of respondents did not need/use it, **12.5% were unable access the pick-ups they needed**, and only 8% shared that the pick-ups worked well for their family. About 21% of families did not specify whether these pick-up times worked for them.

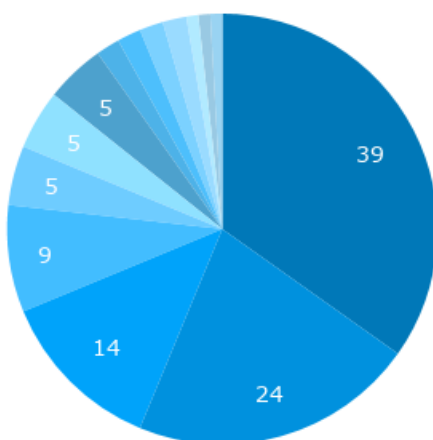
The respondents that could not access the meal pick-ups they needed shared some of their obstacles:

“The school was on the list, but when we went it wasn’t clear where to go. The sign was on the door, we rang the doorbell but there was no answer. We checked the side door but nothing.”

“I had to work and couldn’t pickup meals in the allotted time slot.”

“I have no vehicle and the only way to get provided lunches was to drive there with no access to transportation.”

How did your district shift to passing out school breakfast or lunch? Did this work for your family?



- District set up meal pick-ups but we didn't need/use it, 34.8%
- Pick up meals/food at specified locations/times, 21.4%
- **District set up pick-ups but we were unable to get access we needed, 12.5%**
- Pick up meals/food at specified locations/times and it worked well for our family, 8.0%
- We were able to provide our own meals, 4.5%
- **The P-EBT benefit was helpful for my family, 4.5%**
- District did not provide meals after school went remote, 4.5%
- Pick-up and delivery options of food were available, 1.8%
- Food pick-ups were helpful, but scheduled during online learning time, 1.8%
- 5 more
- 5 response categories at <1%

About 4.5% of districts where respondents' children attend school did not provide meals after schools closed, and another 4.5% shared that the P-EBT benefits were helpful to their families.

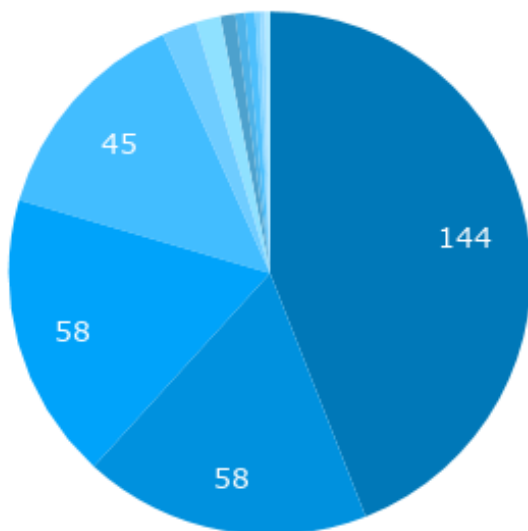
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING REMOTE LEARNING

Respondents also provided recommendations for technology supports that would make remote learning easier for their families. More than 86% of respondents chose to report an answer. Of those responses, **the most frequently reported supports needed to make remote learning easier for students and their families include:**



- user-friendly and streamlined platforms/apps (44%)
- a laptop (17.7%)
- WiFi hotspot (17.7%)
- instruction for parents/students on how to use the technology (2.1%)

What technology support would you need to make



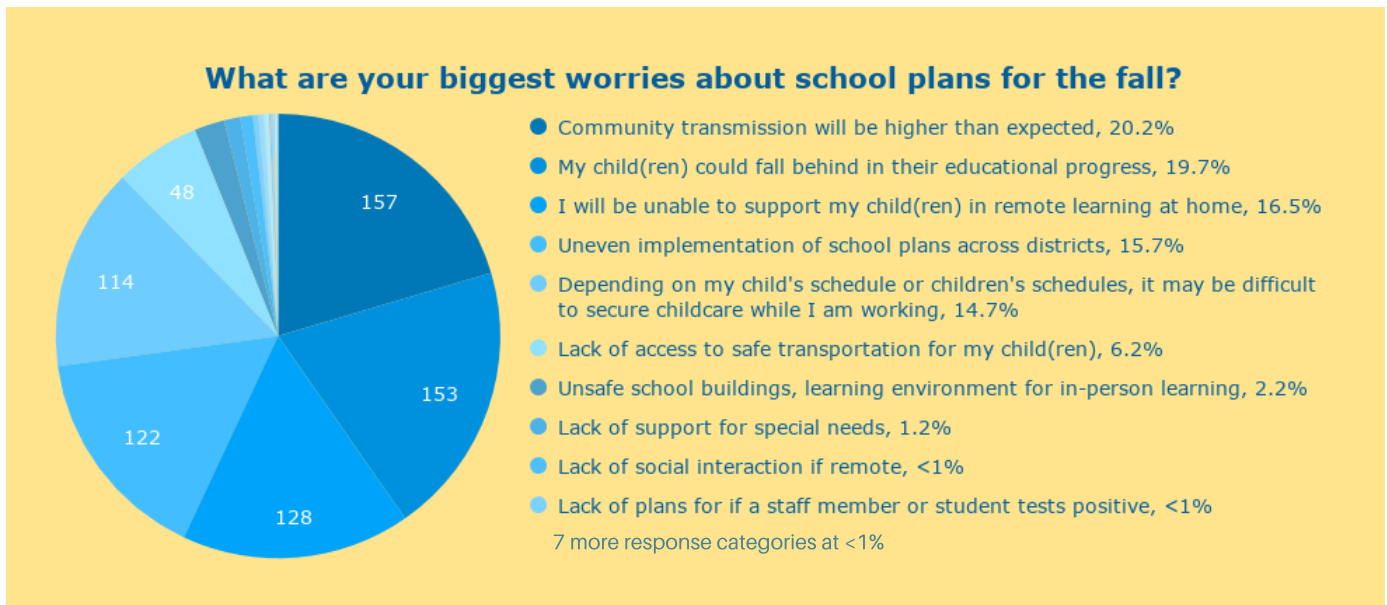
- User-friendly and streamlined platforms/apps, 44.0%
- Laptop, 17.7%
- WiFi Hotspot, 17.7%
- No response, 13.8%
- Technology instruction/support from school, 2.1%
- None, 1.5%
- Help from school with scheduling of remote classes, <1%
- Printer, <1%
- Financial help with affording internet, <1%
- VPN, <1%
- 2 response categories at <1%

FALL SCHOOL RE-OPENING

Respondents also reported many concerns, challenges, and hopes for the fall opening of schools. **Only 52.5% of respondents report that they know about and that their district had been communicative about the plans for fall school opening.**

The most frequently reported **concerns about the fall opening of schools** are:

- higher-than-expected community transmission (20.2%)
- students falling behind in educational progress (19.7%)
- being unable to support remote learning at home (16.5%)
- uneven implementation of school plans across districts (15.7%)
- securing childcare while parents are working (14.7%)



One respondent reported a common challenge:

“How can any parent work or work from home but ensure that their child/children are staying focused with remote learning?”

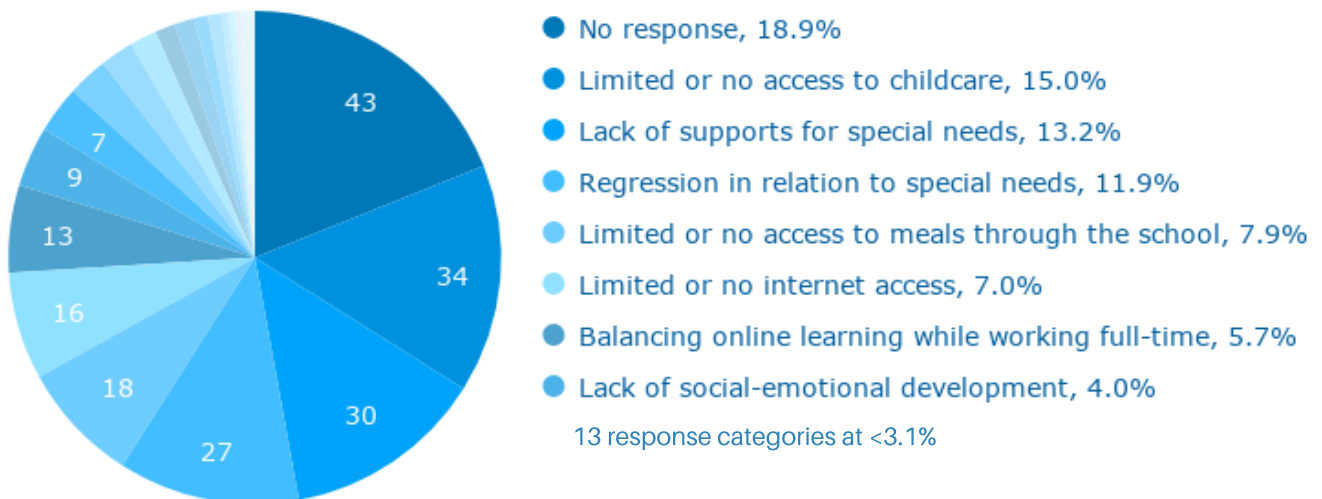
Another respondent elaborated on the challenges of meeting the special needs of students during this time:

“Continued failure to legally implement IEP’s as evident during prior remote learning; SPED services not placed as number one, but Secondary per the Superintendent.”

In fact, a **majority of respondents (78.5%) report that continuing remote learning in the fall will present further challenges for their family.** Only 2.6% of respondents reported facing no challenges with remote learning. The **most frequently reported of these challenges** are:

- limited or no access to childcare (15.0%)
- lack of supports for students with special needs (13.2%)
- regression in relation to special needs (11.9%)
- limited or no access to meals through the school (7.9%)
- limited or no internet access (7.0%)
- balancing full-time work with supporting students' online learning (5.7%)

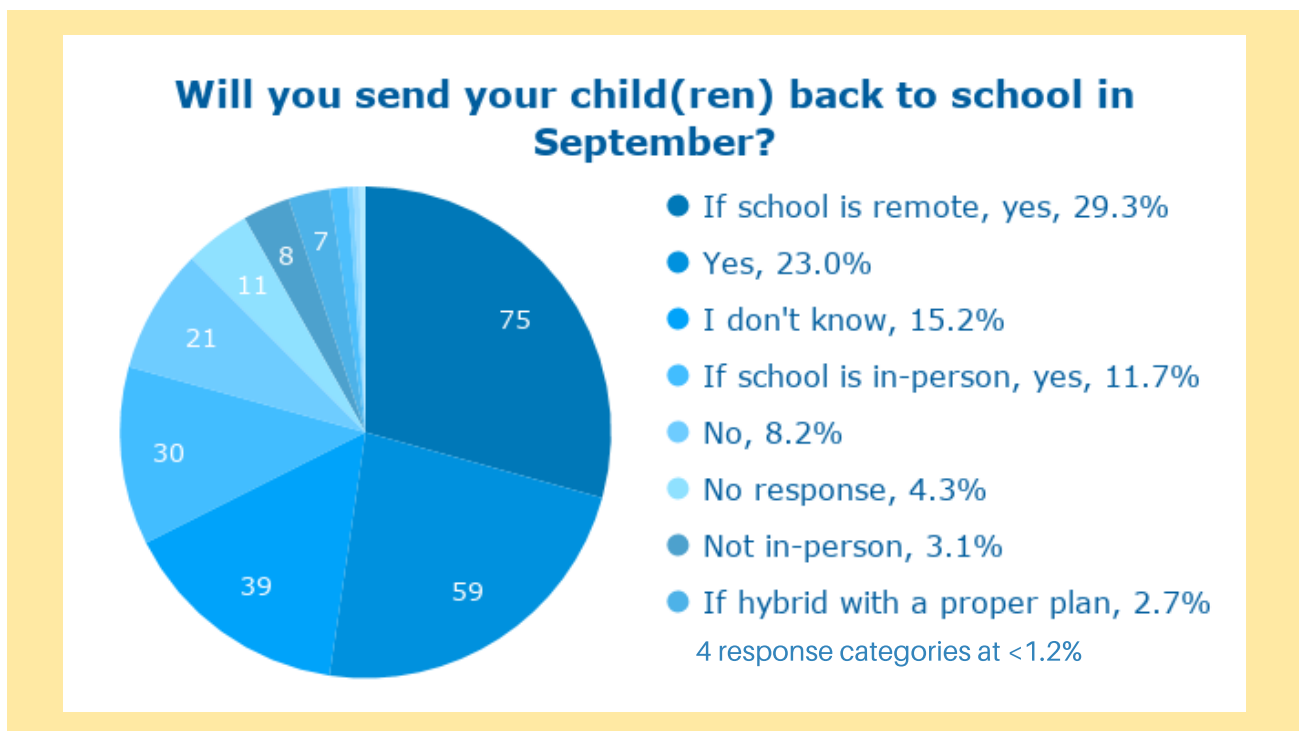
What challenges will you face if school continues to be remote in the fall or at some point during the coming year?



Furthermore, the **majority of respondents are very concerned (52.4%) about balancing their child's schedule/responsibilities for online learning with their own work schedule**, and more than 50% of respondents are very concerned (40.9%) or concerned (10.0%) about balancing multiple children's schedules/responsibilities for online learning with their own schedule.

SAFETY CONCERNS

At the time of the survey in August 2020, almost 45% of respondents would not send their children back to school if they had been reopened then, but more than one third (35.9%) are willing to send their children back to school in September, especially if safety measures are taken.



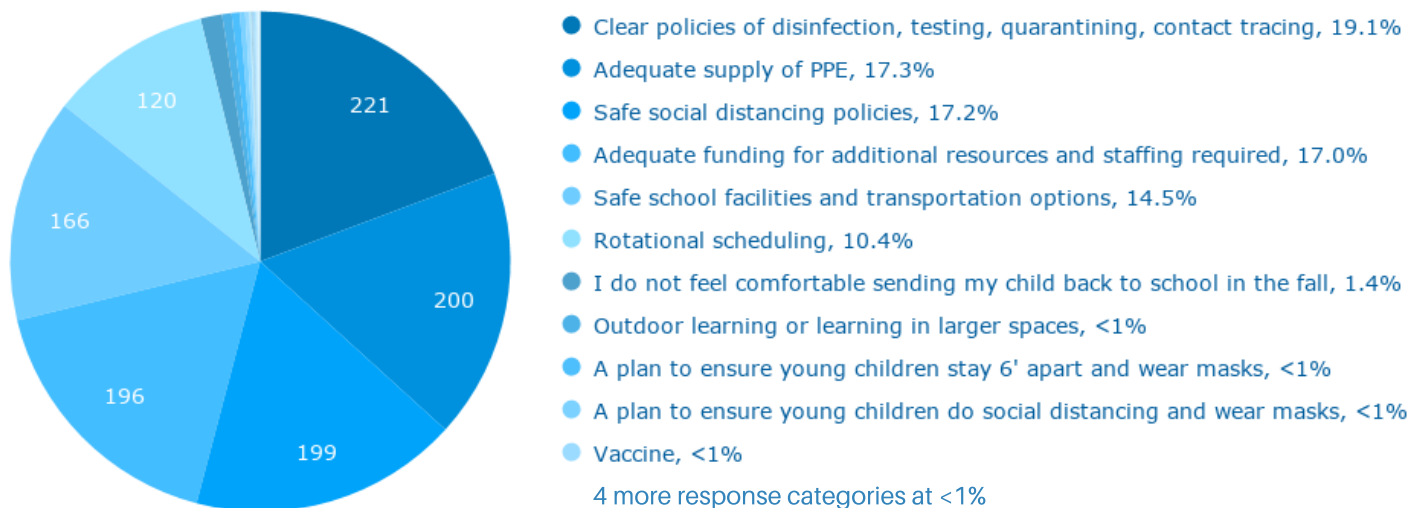
However, the majority of respondents (53%) report a **high level of concern around health and safety if they send their children back to school in September**, and only 10.4% of respondents have a low level of concern.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HEALTH & SAFETY

To address their concerns, respondents reported several **precautions they would like to see in place before they feel comfortable sending their children back to school**. The most frequently reported desired school safety precautions are:

- clear policies of disinfection/testing/quarantining/contact tracing (19.1%)
- adequate supply of PPE (17.3%)
- safe social distancing policies (17.2%)
- adequate funding for additional resources and required staffing (17.0%)
- safe school facilities and transportation options (14.5%)
- rotational scheduling (10.4%)

If schools reopen for in-person instruction, what precautions would you like to see in place before you feel comfortable sending your child back to school?

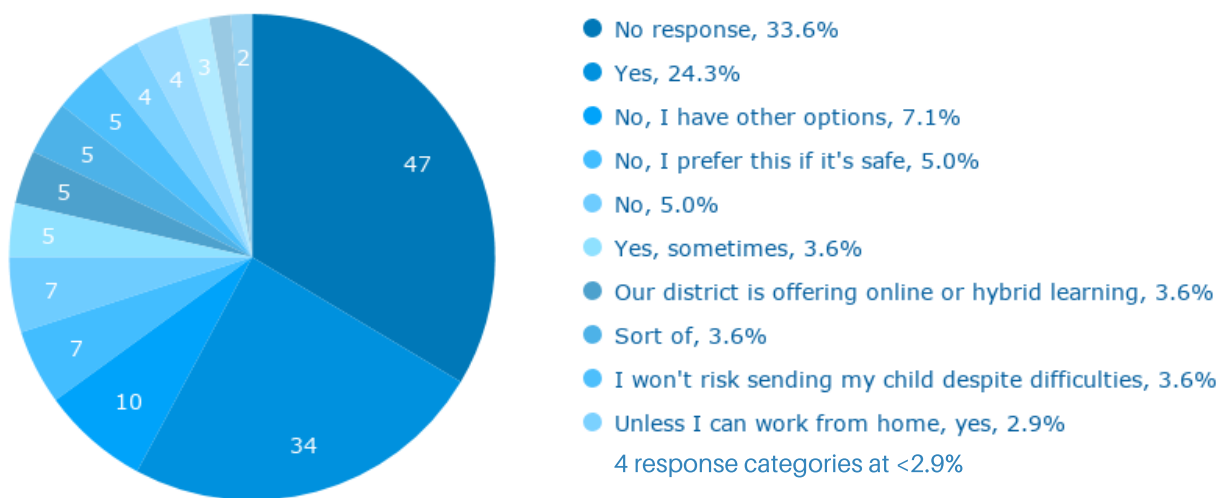


Additionally, more than 70% of respondents are not aware of how their school plans to monitor air quality, while only 7.7% are aware, 2.1% state that their school has no plan, and 3.4% know their school's plan and believe that it is insufficient. **Therefore, in addition to taking further safety measures before reopening schools, communication between school districts and families about these actions needs to be thorough and more effective.**

ALTERNATIVES TO IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION

Some families feel like they have no options when it comes to the school reopening plans. When asked if they felt they have no viable option but to send their children back to school, 24.3% said yes, while only 5% said no, and only 7.1% said they have other options, while 3.6% of respondents would refuse to risk sending their child to school in-person regardless of the challenges it would face for them.

Do you feel like you have no viable options but to send your child(ren) back to school?



One respondent reported:

"I would like to send my child back to school but want it to be [in] the safest manner possible."

Other respondents shared why they felt it was their only viable option:

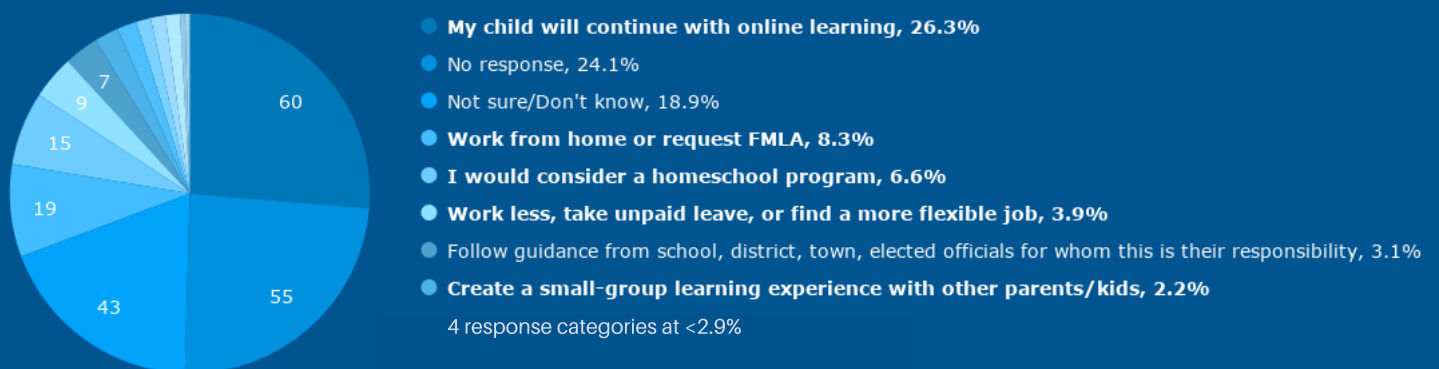
- *"Yes due to limited family being in the area to help with childcare."*
- *"Yes [my child wants] to go back or stay back in 8th grade so she can learn. She [learned] nothing in the spring."*
- *"Yes, otherwise [my child's] schooling essentially stops. I don't know how we would home-school and work full time. She needs structure even if it is remote learning and some structure is provided by teachers/staff."*
- *"Yes because of [my child's] special needs."*

When asked for their alternative plan if respondents chose not to send their children back to school in September (or if schools close during the year), **26.3% of respondents said their child would continue with online learning**, while **18.9% are not sure or do not yet have a plan**.

Of respondents that would need to make a plan for staying home with their children to support their online learning:

- 37.3% would work from home or request Family Medical Leave
- 17.6% would have to work less, take unpaid leave, or find a more flexible job
- 29.4% would consider homeschool programs

If you don't send your child(ren) back in September or if schools close during the school year, what is your plan?



Moreover, 2.2% of respondents would **create alternative, small-group pod or homeschool learning experiences with other parents and children**.

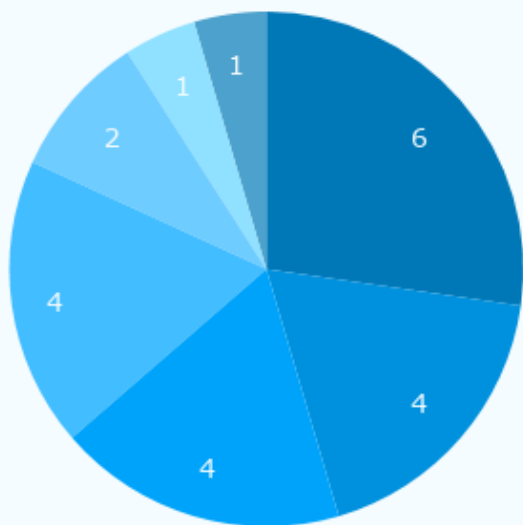
COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCES

In addition to elementary and secondary education, college and university experiences are also being impacted by the COVID pandemic. **Twenty-two respondents reported that they or someone in their family/household is attending a college or university.** Of those 22 respondents, the following reported attending a college/university in the fall:

- my child/grandchild is attending, 27.3%
- I am attending, 18.2%
- my partner/spouse is attending, 18.2%
- I work/teach at a university or college, 18.2%

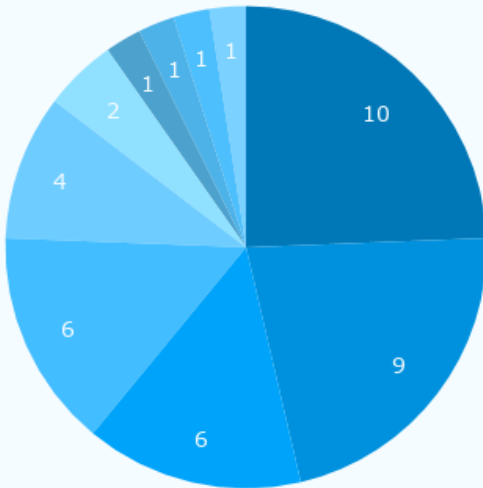
An additional 18.2% of respondents report working/teaching at a college/university in the fall, and **9.1% report having second thoughts about attending college right now because of COVID.**

Are you or someone in your family attending a college or university?



- My child/grandchild is attending, 27.3%
- I am attending, 18.2%
- My partner or spouse is attending, 18.2%
- I work/teach at a university/college, 18.2%
- I was planning to attend/enroll, but the COVID situation has me rethinking it, 9.1%
- A family member is attending remotely, 4.5%
- Someone in my home is attending, 4.5%

Are you or your family struggling with the cost of college or student debt?



- We currently have student debt, 24.4%
- We are planning to take on student debt, 22%
- We are currently having difficulty paying tuition, 14.6%
- Not pursuing higher education b/c of high costs and/or possible debt, 14.6%
- We will be unable to pay tuition in the future, 9.8%
- We are okay with paying our tuition, 4.9%
- Having difficulty paying tuition for my child's specialized school, 2.6%
- Congress needs to relieve student debt, 2.6%
- Would like to continue our education but are in debt, 2.4%
- My public school failed to prepare me to succeed in college, 2.4%

An additional 41 people (16.1%) responded to the question: Are you or your family struggling with the cost of college or student debt? Of those 41 respondents, the **most frequently reported experiences with student debt were:**

- currently have debt, 24.4%
- planning to take on student debt, 22%
- currently struggling to pay tuition, 14.6%

An additional 14.6% are not pursuing higher education because of high costs and/or possible debt.

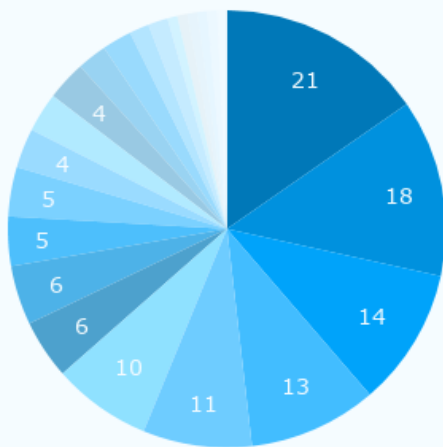


QUESTIONS FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS, SUPERINTENDENTS, AND DESE

Lastly, each respondent had an open-ended opportunity to share what questions they would have for their elected officials about the school reopening plans. The responses were varied and personal and were grouped into 23 themed categories. The **five most frequently reported question themes that respondents have for their elected officials, superintendents, and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)** are:

- How are you planning to support families financially, emotionally, with resources, etc.? (15.3%)
- How are you planning for safety in our schools? (13.1%)
- Can you mandate all schools to go online for the fall/until a vaccine is available? (10.2%)
- Have you explored all alternative options to traditional classrooms? (9.5%)
- How do you plan to support students with special needs or IEPs in their learning? (8.0%)

What questions do you have for our Governor, legislature, elected officials, and Superintendent about the re-opening of schools?



- How are you planning to support families?, 15.3%
- How are you planning for safety in our schools?, 13.1%
- Can you mandate all schools to go online until a vaccine is available?, 10.2%
- Have you explored all alternative options to traditional classrooms?, 9.5%
- How do you plan to support students with special needs or IEPs?, 8.0%
- How are you planning to financially support our schools?, 7.3%
- We should have a plan for our schools to reopen in September, 4.4%
- How are you even considering in-person learning?, 4.4%
- Can you issue consistent guidelines and strategies for schools statewide?, 3.6%
- 14 response categories at <2.9%

ADDITIONAL DATA

CITIES/TOWNS OF RESPONDENTS

Abington	Everett	Newton
Agawam	Fall River	North Brookfield
Amesbury	Falmouth	Northampton
Amherst	Fitchburg	Palmer
Arlington	Framingham	Paxton
Athol	Franklin	Peabody
Attleboro	Gardner	Pittsfield
Auburn	Greenfield	Plainville
Belmont	Groveland	Plaistow
Berkley	Hamilton	Plymouth
Bolton	Hampstead	Quincy
Boston	Hanover	Randolph
Bourne	Harvard	Reading
Bridgewater	Haverhill	Rockland
Brighton	Hingham	Rutland
Brockton	Holbrook	Saugus
Brookline	Holland	Shirley
Cambridge	Jamaica Plain	Shrewsbury
Canyon Country	Lakeville	Somerset
Cape Cod	Lawrence	Somerville
Carver	Lee	Springfield
Charlton	Leeds	Sudbury
Chelmsford	Lowell	Taunton
Chelsea	Ludlow	Townsend
Chicopee	Lynn	Walpole
Dalton	Malden	Waltham
Dartmouth	Manchester	Watertown
Dedham	Mansfield	West Boylston
Dennis	Marshfield	West Newbury
Dighton	Mashpee	West Springfield
Dorchester	Mattapan	Westborough
Douglas	Mattapoissett	Westford
Dover	Medford	Weymouth
Dracut	Medway	Wilmington
Duxbury	Melrose	Winchester
East Longmeadow	Methuen	Woburn
East Providence	Natick	Worcester
Easthampton	New Bedford	

ADDITIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS OF RESPONDENTS

Amherst Regional
 Ayer
 Barnstable
 Beverly
 Bridgewater/Raynham
 Bristol/Plymouth
 Central Berkshire Regional
 Chapter 766
 Capitol Region Education Council
 Dennis Yarmouth
 Diocese of Fall River
 Dighton-Rehoboth
 Dudley-Charlton
 Franklin County
 Freetown/Lakeville
 Granby Public Schools
 Hamilton Wenham
 Hampden-Wilbraham Regional
 Hampshire County
 Holyoke Public Schools
 Holyoke Charter School
 Ipswich
 Leominster
 Lowell
 Manchester Essex Regional
 Narragansett
 Nashoba
 North Middlesex
 Pentucket RSD
 Santa Clarita
 Spencer/East Brookfield
 Tantasqua Union 61
 Timberlane Regional
 Triton Regional
 Westfield
 Weston

ADDITIONAL DATA

COMPLETE LIST OF QUESTIONS FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS, SUPERINTENDENTS, AND DESE

# of Resp.	% of Resp.	Questions/Responses
21	15.3%	How are you planning to support families?
18	13.1%	How are you planning for safety in our schools?
14	10.2%	Can you mandate all schools to go online until a vaccine is available?
13	9.5%	Have you explored all alternative options to traditional classrooms?
11	8.0%	How do you plan to support students with special needs or IEPs?
10	7.3%	How are you planning to financially support our schools?
6	4.4%	We should have a plan for our schools to reopen in September
6	4.4%	How are you even considering in-person learning?
5	3.6%	Can you issue consistent guidelines and strategies for schools statewide?
5	3.6%	Decision-makers needs to be more transparent
4	2.9%	Why haven't you prioritized getting our schools ready and safe?
4	2.9%	What exactly IS the plan to reopen?
4	2.9%	How will you ensure that children are learning as they should?
3	2.2%	What is the plan for if/when someone in the school tests positive?
3	2.2%	Will you continue to allow remote work and pandemic unemployment?
2	1.5%	Are your decisions for the fall politically motivated?
2	1.5%	Why do families have to fight for something that is already their right?
1	<1%	Why aren't essential workers receiving hazard pay?
1	<1%	Have you considered the impacts of the fall plan on my child's mental health?
1	<1%	Are you considering the voices and needs of the most impacted members of our communities?
1	<1%	What can you do to improve COVID test processing times?
1	<1%	Will you allow local communities to make their own decisions about reopening?
1	<1%	Can you forgive all educator student loans?

MASSACHUSETTS JOBS WITH JUSTICE

STATEMENT ON REOPENING SCHOOL IN THE FALL

We at Massachusetts Jobs with Justice, one of the state's leading voices for workers' rights, believe that students, educators, and staff can not, and should not have to, go back to the classroom until it is safe to do so. This belief stems from the understanding that sending children back to school physically, whether fully in-school or via a hybrid model, is dangerous not only for educators but for other school staff, students, their families, and the general public.

The extreme arguments we see coming from some— that educators only care about their own health and not the needs of students and their working caregivers, and conversely that working caregivers only want in-school learning to resume so they can begin to work again— is divisive and unhelpful. The real argument and more nuanced issue at hand is that decision-makers are not listening to working people, especially working mothers, caregivers and womxn educators, who are underpaid and often perform additional unpaid domestic labor at home.

We also know that those making reopening decisions are not listening to working families of color, the very people at the center of not one, but two public health crises— COVID-19, and the deep racial inequity that exists in our school systems and society at large. Going back to inadequately funded, unsafe schools should not be the only option for anyone, especially for Black and Latino/a/x students whom society fails at oppressively high rates, both in education and in COVID health outcomes.

Additionally, our state and federal government has let us down. Most residents of Massachusetts struggle to find adequate PPE, testing, and health care, and when it is found, they struggle to afford it. We at Mass JwJ are not confident in our state and federal leaders' ability to fully fund and adequately staff our children's schools, and carry out necessary safety measures, like providing PPE, ventilating rooms, and distancing staff and students.

The reality is, in less than a month, students, educators, and school staff are expected to return to schools, despite the fact that there has been almost no call for input from or communication with families on what their district plan will be. Working families, including educators and school staff, are exhausted and overworked, and have no idea what September and beyond will look like. They are tired of living in uncertainty. We all want the stability of school schedules and before- and after-school programs back, and we know many families rely on schools for food, shelter, and health care, but again— forcing workers and children into a dangerous situation should not be the only option.

Right now is an opportunity to reimagine our schools and create a more equitable education system for our students, especially students of color. We know that to achieve this goal districts must listen to the stakeholders— students, working parents and caregivers, school staff, and educators. These people hold the unique solution to the question of reopening, and deserve to have their expert opinions recognized to ensure we have safe, healthy schools, jobs, workplaces, and communities with justice in September and beyond.





THANK YOU TO OUR SURVEY AND OUTREACH COLLABORATORS:

Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA)
509 SEIU (Service Employees International Union)
Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance (MEJA)
PUMA (Parents Union of Massachusetts)

Thank you to our team and volunteers who prepared and edited the survey, translated it to Spanish and Portuguese, analyzed the data, and put together this report. Thank you to the families who took the time to fill out our survey. We hope this survey and report share the experiences of working parents, families, and caregivers as they navigated emergency school closures, virtual learning, their work and their children's school schedules, and more. In addition, working families have either continued to work and put themselves and their families at risk as essential workers, or they have lost their jobs or are lacking security in their jobs, a predictable schedule, and income. They face mounting rent and mortgage debt, insecurity in food access, and little to no communication or clarity from Governor Baker, DESE the Department of Education, elected officials, or Superintendents on what September and beyond could look like. Proposals and plans on school re-opening need to start in collaboration with families, particularly Black and brown families, immigrant families, and families with children with special needs. We hope this report amplifies working families' voices, concerns, and demands for the public schools our children and communities deserve.



Massachusetts Jobs With Justice
375 Centre Street
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130
617-524-8778
www.massjwj.net

Parents Union of Massachusetts
375 Centre Street
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130
973-680-2737
www.parentsunionma.org