

6-2022

Mississippi's K-12 Emergency Online Learning Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Executive Summary of Research Findings

Kristin Javorsky
Mississippi State University, kj911@msstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/coe-publications>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Javorsky, Kristin, "Mississippi's K-12 Emergency Online Learning Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Executive Summary of Research Findings" (2022). *College of Education Publications and Scholarship*. 28. <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/coe-publications/28>

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education at Scholars Junction. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Education Publications and Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholars Junction. For more information, please contact scholcomm@msstate.libanswers.com.

Mississippi's K-12 Emergency Online Learning Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Executive Summary of Research Findings



Executive Summary

The Pandemic Problem

In early 2020, Mississippi schools were faced with an unprecedented public health emergency as the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the state. District superintendents were faced with epic decisions related to how long their school buildings could safely remain open, followed by dilemmas regarding how students could possibly continue learning if the academic year hadn't finished yet. As the pandemic wore on, administrators in every Mississippi school district were consumed with questions surrounding how to start a new school year in the midst of the ongoing global emergency. Special education directors and the special education teachers in the schools needed to figure out how they were going to ensure that K-12 students were getting the necessary educational and related services to which they were entitled when the opportunity for face-to-face contact was not guaranteed. Principals reached out to the families of all their students to ensure that every K-12 student had the means to participate in some form of learning as the new school year began, and then focused on ensuring their school would have adequate equipment, staffing, and training to be able to provide quality online instruction. Teachers were urgently tasked with upgrading their skill sets in a multitude of directions: implementing classroom health and safety protocols for in-person learning, combining a learning management system with a host of digital, audio, and visual resources to provide online instruction, and mastering new communication channels to reach and stay connected with the families of their students, with whom they might never get to meet in-person.

Mississippi's Response

Somehow, Mississippi's educators managed to find solutions and make all of this happen. As the pandemic still raged, the state's K-12 public school districts, special state schools, and charter schools were resolute in starting the 2020-2021 school year as planned. A mixture of on-site and remote instruction supported by a combination of leadership, emergency funding, and community partnerships ensured that teaching and learning was happening in schools across the state. The efforts of Mississippi's educational stakeholders were collaborative, innovative, and responsive, but at times they were also daunting, somewhat frustrating, and generally exhausting. Yet, throughout the emergency there remained a constant—the teachers continued to teach, and the students continued to learn.

What had made all this possible? The details and decisions behind this remarkable feat needed to be captured so that future emergencies could be met with the same level of determination and resolve, but with a much lower level of worry, stress, and uncertainty. In January 2021, funding for a statewide research study was provided through a grant from the Governor's Emergency Educational Response Fund. A team of educational researchers from Mississippi State University designed and conducted a series of phone and web-based surveys to be used with different educational stakeholders. Surveys and follow-up focus groups were conducted from March 2021 through August 2021 and reflect the efforts taken during the 2019-2020 and 2020-21 academic school years. The statewide superintendent's survey focused on exploring the district-level factors involved in responding to the pandemic, particularly related to providing emergency

online learning to help identify what worked best for Mississippi. The statewide special education director's survey was primarily concerned with how emergency online learning impacted special education, particularly in how Mississippi school districts were able to respond to the pandemic in ways that allowed special education services to continue. The statewide K-12 school principal's survey focused on the school-level factors involved in responding to the pandemic, particularly related to providing emergency online learning that could meet the needs of all students as well as supporting staff who were teaching online. Finally, the statewide K-12 teacher's survey sought to hear from general education and special education teachers across primary, middle, and high school grades regarding the multivariate impacts that a sudden shift to online teaching and learning had on their planning, instruction, assessment, and communications, as well as the overall wellbeing of Mississippi's students and teachers. Altogether, responses were gathered from 50 district superintendents, 23 special education directors, 62 school principals, and 801 general education and special education teachers, representing all four Congressional districts at each level. This executive summary provides a general overview of some of the most notable findings from this statewide study, with much more detail and depth provided in the full report. Furthermore, a series of research briefs and an online repository were also funded through this grant, and information about how to access these free resources is provided as well.

What Works for Mississippi, What Doesn't?

The statewide study centered on five key aspects of how Mississippi dealt with emergency online teaching and learning: finances and resources, instructional delivery models, special student populations, communication efforts, and unresolved challenges.

Finances and Resources

Health and safety took precedence over finances when making decisions, according to district superintendents. Two-thirds reported re-allocating funding to make things work, which one-fourth of superintendents classified as *quite complicated*. More than half of all superintendents said they had applied for additional funding, and almost unanimously some portion of the funds was earmarked for online learning. Applying for initial additional funding was generally considered *not that complicated* but requesting additional funding further into the pandemic was rated *somewhat complicated* by more than half of all superintendents. Local school boards and school staff were the strongest influences related to a superintendent's financial decision-making, with school staff being heavily involved in making recommendations and school boards being seen as a primary source of support. At the state level, Mississippi Department of Education was viewed as a good source of financial recommendations and almost all superintendents said they also turned to their peers in other school districts for recommendations. One-third of superintendents said that receiving special funds during the emergency was *slower to much slower* than the wait time for normal funding disbursements, indicating this was an area in which Mississippi could improve. On a positive note, special education directors did not view financial issues as having prevented their school district from offering online special education services. Furthermore, more than half of the directors said their school district had received at least one form of support for online learning from a community partner. This same finding was echoed by the K-12 principals. Community partnerships that bolstered district resources were also

highlighted by superintendents, with about one-fourth of them reporting donations of technology equipment and approximately half of the districts identifying donations of internet access through wireless hotspots. Donations of internet access by their community partners was reported by more than half of K-12 principals as well.

Instructional Delivery Models

At the onset of the pandemic, the most common effort toward continued student learning was providing pre-printed learning packets for the student to complete at home, and possibly return them to the school. High schools were more likely than primary or middle grades to also attempt to hold some online learning through synchronous sessions with the classroom teacher. At the start of the 2021 school year, districts considered additional possible instructional models including both synchronous and asynchronous online learning options. Almost all of the surveyed superintendents reported offering at least one form of an online delivery model, with 80% attempting a hybrid blend of online learning and in-person instruction. As the school year continued, the use of pre-printed packets and asynchronous online learning dropped dramatically, as these methods were generally viewed as less effective by all stakeholders. Use of the hybrid model across the state steadily decreased as the year went on, although the reasons for this were uncertain. Superintendents rated the purely online instructional model as having been more successful for their district than the hybrid model, but not all stakeholders held the same views. Many special education directors preferred the hybrid version to purely online models due to easier implementation and less negative impact on their students' social-emotional health. Most K-12 principals and teachers also felt that the hybrid model was superior due to the elements of teacher-student interaction they saw as vital to student mental health, and the more successful communication patterns with families using a hybrid model versus those in the online-only model. Despite divergent views on the hybrid model, every surveyed group still rated in-person learning as the superior learning option for their students, when compared to any version of online instruction they had used in their schools.

Of course, during a health emergency it was not possible for all Mississippi students to attend school in person, even if the option was available through their school. While most K-12 teachers said they had little to no control over being assigned to teach online, some were involved in selecting an LMS and many were involved in identifying high-quality instructional resources, both of which are presented in more detail in the full report. Both general and special education teachers incorporated multiple organizational scaffolds and learning supports into the online learning environment, which they also attributed to improving their students' achievement. They experimented with numerous approaches to providing feedback in online contexts and adapted their assessment and grading procedures to maximum student outcomes, most notably through the use of flexible due dates and allowing resubmissions of previously completed work. Although there were many findings related to what did work for different grade levels and student populations, which are shared in much greater detail in the full report, an important finding of what did not work was related to student well-being. K-12 principals, special education directors, general education teachers and special education teachers all agreed that online learning under extended emergency circumstances had made a negative impact on the social-emotional health of their students. They believed that students who had participated in-person learning either full-time or through the hybrid model had benefitted from the teacher-

student interactions that supported their mental health, while those in the 100% online model had not been able to experience this and were most negatively affected. At the high school level, teachers also observed that students using online learning expressed more confusion over what they should do following graduation. Special education teachers attempting to provide transition services to those high school students with IEPs about to graduate expressed frustration at the lack of effectiveness with online delivery, likely amplifying those feelings of confusion further.

Special Student Populations

While special education directors reported finding solutions for some of the issues surrounding online special education services, both they and their special education teachers were dissatisfied with online progress monitoring and attempts to provide transition planning online, generally rating them as *not that effective*. Approximately half of these educators also assigned the highest negative rating of *very difficult* to providing related services (speech, physical, and occupational therapy). However, special education directors and K-12 teachers had very positive feelings toward the outcomes from holding virtual IEP meetings.

More than half of K-12 teachers said they received no additional support to help them teach their online EL learners, and only 14% had participated in any professional development related to the topic. Both principals and district superintendents said that online learning had been less effective in serving English language learners and saw a need for more resources and training. In looking for what worked on their own, K-12 teachers reported that the most helpful accommodation for their EL learners had been translation software or tools. Other successful efforts included using videos and additional visuals, using synchronous online instruction with a single student, coordinating with the EL teacher, and contacting families to learn more about their child.

Communication Efforts

Educators at every level experimented with many different communication methods during the extended emergency. The average superintendent in the statewide study was using a combination of six different communication methods in attempts to reach their constituents. Commonly used methods included social media, automated voice calls, automated text messaging services, mass emails, postal mail, video calls, newspaper and radio announcements, announcements through the LMS, printed newsletters, individual visits from social workers or truancy officers, and home visits. Of these, social media posts and text messages were viewed as the most productive methods for reaching students and their families. For special education directors, use of social media, automated voice calls, and school website postings were essentially unanimous, with text-messaging services and emails not far behind. Similar to their superintendents, these directors most commonly found social media posts and text messages to be the most effective. The story was different at the school level, however. The average K-12 principal in this study was using a combination of seven different communication methods to keep their school community informed, with announcements through the school's LMS and on the school website being used universally. Approximately 90% or more principals also reported utilizing a text message service, social media posts, automated voice calls, and emails to families, and about three-fourths of principals also sent out postal mail. Using the communication tools inside their LMS and

posting on social media received the highest number of votes from principals for being the most effective methods. About half of all principals said that communicating with families using a 100% online instructional model was *much more difficult*. K-12 teachers were primarily focused on communicating with students and families and used an average of three different methods, although those methods varied depending on the grade levels in which they worked. Primary grades and middle grades teachers preferred text messages, emails, and voice calls, in that order, to successfully reach the families of their students. High school teachers found the most success when using emails through the LMS and automated text messages to reach their students directly.

Regarding incoming communications, superintendents shared they found state-level information channels to be the most useful in helping them navigate the pandemic circumstances, but information was not always shared as consistently as they felt was needed. They saw local-level information channels as flowing more consistently, but not always carrying the most useful information. At the school level, K-12 teachers who wrote positive comments about their administration's efforts to directly communicate with them about emergency measures were much less likely to report that the pandemic had a strong negative effect on their own emotional well-being, than teachers who felt that their administration's communication efforts had been lacking.

Unresolved Challenges

Education stakeholders at every level stated that lack of internet access was a persistent challenge that remained a critical barrier to online learning, even with the temporary donations of wireless internet access by community partners. Superintendents said it impacted which instructional delivery models their school district was able to offer as part of the return to school for their students. Special education directors said it reduced the ability to provide required special education and related services to students who needed them when their families did not have the capability to access them remotely. Principals reaffirmed lack of internet access was highly problematic and also raised issues of online student absenteeism and the difficulties that many families had in successfully adopting and using online learning models, both of which would be obvious likely outcomes for students of families with only limited or intermittent internet access. Even K-12 teachers felt the effects, as lack of access in their own homes made it more difficult for them to prepare for effective instruction during the school day.

Approximately half of surveyed superintendents viewed sufficient professional development for their teachers and staff to be an ongoing challenge, a concern which was cited in tandem with a lack of adequate staffing for online instruction. This sense of having insufficient training to provide effective online instruction was also felt by many K-12 teachers, who said they wanted more training on how to keep students engaged during online instruction. Connected to student engagement, principals identified low student attendance in online learning as their largest unresolved challenge.

Serving special student populations, including students struggling academically, English language learners, and students with IEP's was also a huge concern for school principals and was identified as still unresolved by multiple stakeholders. Despite their best efforts, the majority of

K-12 teachers reported that approximately half of the students in their class struggled with the academic content specifically because it was delivered online. These struggling students were reported by teachers at the primary, middle, and high school levels, and the issue was further complicated when the student was an EL learner or had an IEP. While Mississippi Department of Education has since added a guidance document for teaching online with English language learners and some resources to its website, extensive dissemination and subsequent understanding of these materials is still needed. For special education, the finding that most paraprofessionals were not included in professional development efforts related to online learning is problematic given that many were ultimately called upon to support students using online instructional models through helping to prepare learning materials and/or providing supplementary instruction alongside the certified special education teacher.

Finally, creating successful family-school partnerships for online learning took place on a steep learning curve for all parties involved, and knowledge of what works still needs to be sought. Almost unanimously, special education directors noted a lack in parents' ability to help facilitate a virtual learning environment, which in turn created significant challenges for service delivery. This was also identified as an ongoing issue by principals and teachers, who recognized that families with children in an online learning model required more communication effort, were harder to reach overall, and exhibited more difficulties trying to support their children with schoolwork than those families whose children used in-person learning.

Future Emergencies

Historically, pandemics are once-in-a-lifetime events and the extended building closures that Mississippi schools endured from 2019-2021 are unlikely to become a recurring phenomenon. While nothing in the future is certain, one important outcome of these experiences has been the recognition that the use of online learning in an emergency situation is a viable response for K-12 schools. While not ideal when compared to in-person learning, online learning does provide a means and methodology for ensuring that Mississippi's children benefit from the uninterrupted learning that leads to higher student achievement. Thus, every educational stakeholder has an important role they can play to help prepare the state so that future emergencies do not impede future learning.

Above all, Mississippi public policymakers need to make comprehensive internet connectivity a priority for the state. Just as they did during the COVID-19 emergency, policymakers should continue to have a simple and expedient funding process for school districts who experience an emergency that carries financial impacts. State level educational decisionmakers should also do their part to ensure that approvals for fund re-allocations and applications for additional funding are not complicated. At the state level, decisionmakers can also help by further refining a clear top-down emergency communication plan, promoting online learning resources for serving special student populations, and perhaps most importantly, exploring potential solutions to the chronic issue of student absenteeism in the online learning environment. Within Mississippi's individual school districts, administrators should further strengthen their emergency communication plans, use synchronous learning models where possible, and provide advance training to teachers, students, and families on a manageable set of online resources so that relying on them in emergency circumstance is not overly difficult. All of Mississippi's K-12

certified teachers and paraprofessionals should be proactive and take advantage of professional development opportunities related to synchronous online instruction. It is also important for teachers to avoid providing more than one type of instruction to different sets of students simultaneously, have opportunities to explicitly address student wellbeing, focus on the most effective methods for remote family communication, and to be clear in asking for support from their school administrators and community partners. In addition, stakeholders at every level should continue to build mutually beneficial community partnerships that can be leveraged to support online learning in an emergency.

Many additional findings from this statewide study as well as more detailed information regarding how the study itself was designed and conducted are explained in the full version of the report. Although gathering the voices of many different educational stakeholders did produce a clearer understanding of what worked for Mississippi during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2019-2021, it is important for all stakeholders to keep in mind that individual schools and districts will always need some level of autonomy to make the best decisions for the communities they serve. Being responsive to the needs of all K-12 students, teachers, administrators, and policy leaders who make decisions at the classroom, school, district, and state levels remains the key to making Mississippi's educational system robust, even in the face of an unpredictable emergency.

To access the full research report along with a series of research briefs and additional online resources related to Mississippi's response to emergency online teaching, please visit this free online repository at <https://guides.library.msstate.edu/c.php?g=1156773&p=8479156#s-lg-box-27378994>

To cite this work, please use the following citation:

Javorsky, K. (2022, June). *Mississippi's K-12 emergency online learning response to the COVID-19 pandemic: Executive summary of research findings*. Emergency online teaching—What works for Mississippi.

<https://guides.library.msstate.edu/c.php?g=1156773&p=8479156>

This work was supported by the Governor's Emergency Educational Response [grant number G00005574]