

Uncharted Instruction: Georgia Educators Adapting to COVID-19 School Closures Executive Summary

The COVID-19 virus has disrupted the lives of Georgia students, teachers and families. On March 16, Gov. Brian Kemp issued an executive order temporarily closing all schools and postsecondary institutions in the state to stem the rapid spread of the virus. Kemp subsequently closed schools for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year to protect the health of Georgians. Georgia's pre-K-12 educators pivoted quickly to provide instruction and support to students and parents across the state through remote learning experiences. PAGE conducted a survey to capture and understand the experiences of Georgia educators during the initial days of the school closure. Responses from over 15,300 educators make clear they are striving to maintain contact with their students and nurture their academic growth. Educators are doing so in difficult circumstances that challenge them and the students and families they serve.

Initial findings fall into two categories: remote learning and how educators are responding to the changes spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Remote Learning:

- Is a complex process that requires new skills of educators and expanded resources
- Can foster inequities
- Engages students unevenly
- Relies on high levels of parent engagement

Educator Responses Reveal:

- Deep commitment to students
- Strain of current circumstances
- Concerns about safety and job security

Key Findings

Remote Learning

More than 93 percent of educators report that their districts have shifted to online instruction. Some educators report a smooth transition to this instructional format while many others have experienced bumps.

- Teachers need support to successfully transition to remote instruction. More than 20 percent of Georgia teachers said their greatest challenge with online instruction is converting lesson plans.

“It happened so suddenly that I need more instruction on how to implement online instruction and create assignments.”

- Many Georgia students face barriers to online learning including lack of internet access or devices. While a challenge across the state, this is more common in high-poverty districts. Online instruction also does not align well with the needs of some students, including special education students, those in pre-K through second grade, and students who are learning English.
- Some students are not participating in online learning even when there are no technology barriers. They are caring for siblings, working, or sharing devices with siblings and parents. Other students simply are disengaged.
- Parent support is critical for the success of online learning, but many struggle to provide that support. Many parents are working and unavailable. They may not understand the technology districts are using or the instructional content. Still others have language barriers or are grappling with employment and financial concerns.

37%
of GA teachers
say lack of internet
access is
greatest online
learning challenge

Educator Responses

Georgia educators embraced remote instruction, striving to provide content to and maintain connections with their students. They are reaching out to students and parents to check in and monitor progress. Over a quarter dug into their own pockets to purchase supplies and materials to support remote instruction. Their dedication is evident.

- Educators in districts across Georgia are providing meals to students, sending instructional packets home to students without online access, and continuing to offer counseling and social work assistance.
- Educators' concern for their students reaches beyond academics. Food insecurity is a top worry, especially for older students. Educators also flagged child care, transportation, mental health counseling and health care as key concerns.
- Re-opening schools emerged as a key question for many educators. They expressed concern about opening schools prematurely and without clear health safety protocols for the COVID-19 virus.
- Educators noted job security and income as points of concern due to the economic effects of the virus.

“Most of my students come from families of hard-working folks, many of whom work hourly and will not be getting paid. I worry about my families not having access to quality food, medicine, health services, and child care both during and after this COVID-19 pandemic.”

Georgia educators' initial reflections on the school closures point to strengths to celebrate and considerations to examine and address. One urgent consideration is ensuring that all students can reliably access online learning. Other areas to review include professional learning for educators, a process to vet and disseminate high-quality online tools, and appropriate strategies and tools for students with additional needs and those in early grades.