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Parents' Feelings about School Re-opening during COVID-19: Survey Results from Northeast Indiana

Health Services and Informatics Research Group

7-24-2020

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This report reflects the analysis and interpretation by the team listed above and does not necessarily express the views of Parkview Health and/or other partnering organizations.

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Objective:

Assess concerns and attitudes related to child(ren)’s return to school amid the COVID-19 pandemic among parents in Northeast Indiana.

Method:

An online survey was created and deployed from July 2 to July 20, 2020. Respondents received an invitation to participate in the survey from school districts, Parkview Sports Medicine, parent-teacher organizations, and via social media. Respondents were 18 years or older and had one or more children under 18 years in their household. A total of 9472 responses were collected; 9035 respondents met inclusion criteria. Five zip codes in Northeast Indiana accounted for 58.3% of all surveys (see Figure 1). Descriptive statistics were calculated, and open-ended responses summarized.

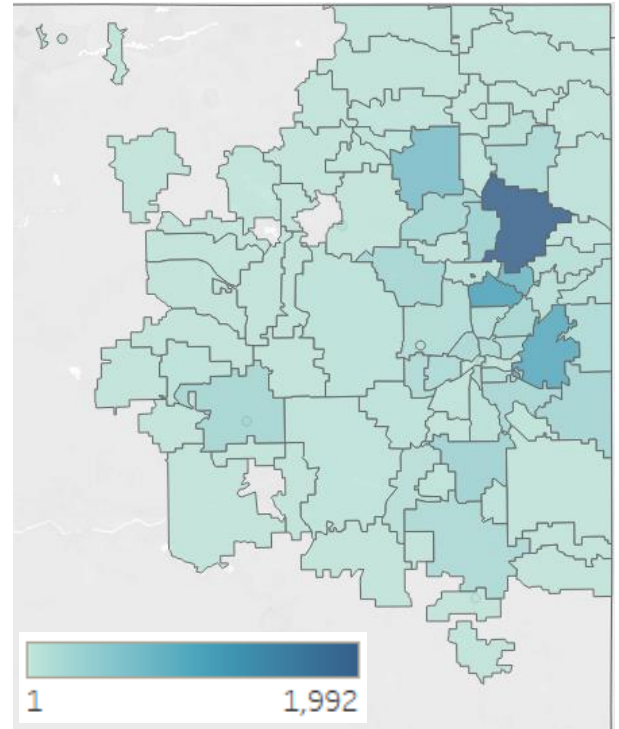


Figure 1. Survey responses by zip code in Indiana

Results:

Sample Demographics

The modal age of respondents was 35-44 years (49.16%) and majority of respondents were White (86.08%, see Table 1). Respondents represented 165 zip codes (99% of zip codes in Indiana). Of respondents, 33.60% (3036/9035) indicated at least one household member was at increased risk of complications related to COVID-19 due to underlying conditions.

Table 1. Sample demographics (n=9035)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
<i>Age (years)</i>		
18-24	64	0.71
25-34	1872	20.72
35-44	4441	49.16
45-54	2266	25.09
55-64	321	3.55
65-74	64	0.71
75 or older	5	0.06
<i>Racial Category</i>		
American Indian	12	0.13
Asian	74	0.82
Black	162	1.79

Hispanic	208	2.3
Multiracial/Other	353	3.91
Pacific Islander	5	0.06
White	7777	86.08
Declined	444	4.91
<i>Number of children age 18 or younger in household</i>		
1	2491	27.59
2	3615	40.04
3 or more	2922	32.37
<i>Household member with increased risk for complications with COVID-19</i>		
Respondent	1395	15.44
Spouse/partner	923	10.22
Child(ren)	1089	12.05
Other household member	601	6.65
<i>County</i>		
Allen, IN	4300	49.37
DeKalb, IN	1725	19.8
Noble, IN	1148	13.18
Wabash, IN	311	3.57
Wells, IN	691	7.93
Whitley, IN	278	3.19
All other counties***	257	2.95

***Note: All other counties had fewer than 65 respondents each (Adams, IN; Defiance, OH; Huntington, IN; Kosciusko, IN; LaGrange, IN; Paulding, OH; Steuben, IN; Van Wert, OH; or Other)

As shown in Table 2, 56.95% (5125/8999) of respondents had at least one child in elementary school, 36.38% (3274/8999) had one or more in middle school, and 47.75% (4297/8999) had one or more in high school.

Table 2. Number of children in household by school level (n=8999)

Number of children, n(%)	School Level			
	Preschool	Elementary	Middle	High
0	7752 (86.14)	3874 (43.05)	5725 (63.62)	4702 (52.25)
1	1126 (12.51)	3097 (34.41)	2806 (31.18)	3205 (35.62)
2	111 (1.23)	1652 (18.36)	400 (4.44)	940 (10.45)
3 or more	10 (0.11)	376 (4.18)	68 (0.76)	152 (1.69)

Note: Percentages calculated by column totals

Perceived Negative Impact of COVID-19 on Children

Negative effects on children due to COVID-19 restrictions or guidelines were endorsed by 22.18% (1703/7679) of respondents for mental health, 2.01% (154/7679) for physical health only, 17.96% (1379/7679) for both effects. Meanwhile, 57.86% (4443/7679) reported neither negative effect.

Type of School Child Attended and Will Now Attend

Respondents specified the type(s) of school (private, public, homeschool) their child or children attended in the 2019-2020 school year: 1420 had a child in private school, 7723 in public school, and 197 homeschooled. Additionally, respondents indicated what type of schools they planned to send their child(ren) to for the 2020-2021 school year: 1368 planned on private, 7370 planned on public, and 779 planned on homeschooling. The majority (93.94%, 7255/7723) with a child or children that had attended public school in 2019-2020 term planned for their child(ren) to attend public school in 2020-2021 term. Similarly, 87.89% (1248/1420) that had attended private school in 2019-2020 term planned for their child(ren) to attend private school in 2020-2021 term. Interestingly, 7.59% (642/8459) respondents indicated that their child or children were not homeschooled in 2019-2020 term but planned on homeschooling for 2020-2021 term, a 226% increase.

Current Level of Following COVID-19 Precautions

Respondents specified the frequency with which their child(ren) followed precautions for mitigating COVID-19 transmission (see Table 3). Interestingly, 30.32% (2345/7734) of parents reported their children wear masks 'always or almost always' in indoor public places; and, 18.79% (1453/7734) of parents reported their children 'never' wear masks in indoor public places. In contrast, 12.06% (936/7758) of parents reported their children wear masks 'always or almost always' in outdoor public places; and, 38.14% (2959/7758) of parents reported their children 'never' wear masks in outdoor public places. Handwashing after leaving public spaces was nearly equally reported as 'always or almost always' for outdoors (48.82%, 3796/7775) and indoors (50.50%, 3906/7734).

Table 3. Parent reported frequency of child's precautions for mitigating COVID-19 transmission in outdoor and indoor public spaces

Child's precautions in public, n(%)	n	Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always or Almost always	Not Applicable
<i>Outdoor public spaces</i>							
Mask	7758	2959 (38.14)	1617 (20.84)	1372 (17.68)	554 (7.14)	936 (12.06)	320 (4.12)
Maintain 6 feet distance	7775	428 (5.50)	969 (12.46)	2095 (26.95)	2047 (26.33)	1962 (25.23)	274 (3.52)

Clean hands after leaving	7775	143 (1.84)	423 (5.44)	1200 (15.43)	1952 (25.11)	3796 (48.82)	261 (3.36)
Touch face	7767	200 (2.57)	1571 (20.23)	3512 (45.22)	1713 (22.05)	528 (6.80)	243 (3.13)
<i>Indoor public spaces</i>							
Mask	7734	1453 (18.79)	1216 (15.72)	1516 (19.60)	820 (10.60)	2345 (30.32)	384 (4.97)
Maintain 6 feet distance	7737	286 (3.70)	679 (8.78)	1805 (23.33)	2269 (29.33)	2337 (30.21)	361 (4.67)
Clean hands after leaving	7734	140 (1.81)	389 (5.03)	1264 (16.34)	1681 (21.74)	3906 (50.50)	354 (4.58)
Touch face	7724	303 (3.92)	1718 (22.24)	3455 (44.73)	1412 (18.28)	493 (6.38)	343 (4.44)

Note: Percentages calculated from row totals

Child Difficulty Maintaining COVID-19 Precautions at School

As shown in Table 4, parents expected children to have difficulty maintaining precautions against COVID-19 transmission. About half of middle school students (50.84%, 1757/3368) and 70% (3759/5264) of elementary students were expected to have difficulty wearing a mask. Also, at least half of respondents noted that it would be difficult for their child (of any age) to maintain distance from others, however physical distancing was especially likely to be perceived as difficult for those in preschool and elementary school.

Table 4. Parent reported child difficulty maintaining precautions for mitigating COVID-19 transmission during a typical school day by school level

Precaution, n(%)	School Level			
	Preschool (n=1281)	Elementary (n=5264)	Middle (n=3368)	High (n=4473)
Mask	1126 (75.67)	3759 (69.96)	1757 (50.84)	2012 (44.45)
Maintain 6 feet distance	1149 (76.14)	3939 (73.20)	2012 (57.52)	2334 (51.26)
Clean hands after leaving	617 (42.06)	1780 (33.25)	863 (25.01)	1011 (22.35)
Touch face	1168 (91.18)	3859 (73.31)	1762 (52.32)	1820 (40.69)

Note: Percentages calculated from column totals

Parental Concerns for the 2020-2021 School Year

Table 5 displays responses for parental concerns for the 2020-2021 school year. As shown, 46.28% (3593/7763) of respondents were 'very concerned' about *quality of educational opportunities*. Interestingly, responses for *school will be fully open* were split, 29.97% (2320/7740) reported being 'very concerned' and 29.63% (2293/7740) reported 'not at all concerned'. (See Figure 2 in the Appendix A for graphical depiction.)

Table 5. Parental concerns related to COVID-19 for the 2020-2021 school term

Concern	n	Very concerned	Moderately concerned	Somewhat concerned	Not at all concerned
Quality of educational opportunities	7763	3593 (46.28)	1968 (25.35)	1503 (19.36)	699 (9.00)
My child having limited interaction with teachers and other children while at school	7759	3391 (43.70)	2072 (26.70)	1631 (21.02)	665 (8.57)
Gym class, sports or other extracurricular activities like band and theatre	7761	3374 (43.47)	1782 (22.96)	1514 (19.51)	1091 (14.06)
Teachers or staff contracting COVID-19	7752	3217 (41.50)	1699 (21.92)	2025 (26.12)	811 (10.46)
School will only be online	7761	3168 (40.82)	1395 (17.97)	1460 (18.81)	1738 (22.39)
My other family members or myself contracting COVID-19	7761	2961 (38.15)	1498 (19.30)	2035 (26.22)	1267 (16.33)
My child/ren contracting COVID-19	7761	2950 (38.01)	1457 (18.77)	2130 (27.44)	1224 (15.77)
Child anxiety related to school precautions	7758	2829 (36.47)	1858 (23.95)	1825 (23.52)	1246 (16.06)
Cleanliness of school and buses	7748	2665 (34.40)	1390 (17.94)	1814 (23.41)	1879 (24.25)
Bus transportation and children sitting close to each other on the bus	7565	2463 (32.56)	1006 (13.30)	1273 (16.83)	2823 (37.32)
School or child's classroom closing with very little notice	7751	2459 (31.72)	1515 (19.55)	1714 (22.11)	2063 (26.62)
School will be fully open	7740	2320 (29.97)	1338 (17.29)	1789 (23.11)	2293 (29.63)

Note: Percentages calculated from row totals

Problems if School or Child's Classroom Closed Due to Outbreak

Additionally, respondents were asked to anticipate what problems they would experience if their child's school closed due to an outbreak: 22.20% (1690/7613) expected problems with childcare, 36.80% (2817/7654) problems with work commitments, 29.09% (2180/7495) problems with partner's work commitments, 48.01% (3697/7701) problem with managing child's remote learning, and 16.29% (1238/7601) problem with internet / computer access for child's learning.

Parents' Most Pressing Question Related to Children Returning to School

Respondents had the option to enter *their most pressing question relating to children returning to school*. Half of respondents wrote in a question (50.44%, 4557/9035). The primary issues related to the following.

- 1) **Safety of returning to school.** Parents expressed concerns over the safety and health of their child and/or adults in the school, with some wondering how now is any different than when schools closed or than other public events or gatherings, many of which are still canceled or very limited.
- 2) **COVID-19 spread in school and to household members.** Parents wondered what schools plans will actually look like day-to-day for managing the spread of the virus, how schools will monitor students and staff for the illness, what quarantining and isolation will look like, what will trigger shut downs, what will happen if the virus is brought by the child home or to an at-risk family member or when the parent works with at-risk populations, and so forth.
- 3) **COVID-19 mitigation guidelines in school.** Parents expressed concerns about mask wearing (whether it will be mandatory, is it actually effective, displeasure with children being required to wear masks, difficulty breathing in a mask), physical / social distancing (how can 3 to 6 feet of distance be maintained, troubles getting children to maintain this), how schools will manage and enforce their guidelines (children will constantly get in trouble; how will schools practically monitor and enforce all of the hand washing, cleaning, distancing, etc.), cleaning procedures (what will the procedures look like, are these chemicals safe, will schools have sufficient cleaning supplies).
- 4) **School schedule and instructional modality (in-person and remote).** Parents were concerned about what the school schedule and instruction will actually look like, what e-learning options would be available, how different types of school schedules could impact their families and work schedules, and so forth.
- 5) **Impacts on education and learning.** Parents were concerned about the quality of education and learning experiences children will have, including things such as students already being behind from last year, whether the mitigation guidelines and adjusted school schedules/modalities will negatively impact the quality of instruction and learning, expressions of how remote learning did not go well for their child last time, negative

impacts on special education needs, how to maintain consistency between in-person and remote learning, whether school will end up looking more like a prison, and so forth.

- 6) **Mental health concerns.** Parents were concerned over the potential impacts on children's mental health, expressing concerns over the elimination of or changes to recess or in-school play, whether social needs are being met, the potential spread of and focus on fear and anxiety, how to assist children and staff with anxiety and feeling safe, long-term impacts on mental health, mental health of those children who suffered and had no access to peers during remote learning, and so forth.

Conclusions:

The current sample represented a wide range of respondents with children at varying school levels across 165 zip codes. One-third of respondents had a household member with increased risk of complications due to COVID-19, with 12% of households having a child with increased risk of complications. Respondents indicated that children had been practicing physical distancing in indoor public spaces more often than wearing masks. However, they expected that physical distancing would be more difficult than wearing masks at school, with handwashing being the least difficult precaution for children. More than half of respondents (58%) reported that their child(ren) had not experienced any negative effects on physical health or mental health due to COVID-19 restrictions or guidelines. Unfortunately, about 40% reported negative effects on child's mental health due to COVID-19 restrictions or guidelines.

Primarily, respondents were concerned that COVID-19 safety precautions would impact *quality of education*. When anticipating problems related to another school closure, about half of respondents expected difficulty managing their child's remote learning. In open-ended comments, respondents mentioned issues related to feeling safe returning to school, COVID transmission mitigation practices at school, and a need to know whether students would be returning to school in-person and any deviation from a daily schedule. Taken together, findings reflect the extent to which individual factors shape a household's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus creating wide ranging perspectives on children returning to school. However, several opportunities emerged for providing accurate information about risks, plans, and safeguards to reduce COVID-19 spread.

APPENDIX A

Figure 2. Parental concerns related to COVID-19 for the 2020-2021 school term

