Results of the focus groups with parents about distance learning
July 2020

During the month of June, the Parent Organization Network (PON) facilitated 18 focus groups with 77 mothers from 11 districts in Los Angeles County, including:
• Hacienda-La Puente Unified School District
• Inglewood Unified School District
• Little Lake City School District
• Long Beach Unified School District
• Los Angeles Unified School District
• Los Nietos School District
• Lynwood Unified School District
• Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District
• Pasadena Unified School District
• Pomona Unified School District
• Whittier City School District

Demographic Data
• Race/Ethnicity: 68 (88%) Latinas, 9 (12%) African American
• Gender: 100% Female
• The group represented 139 children from kindergarten to 12th grade.
  o Grade level: 42% (58) Elementary, 31% (43) Middle school, 27% (38) High School
  o Programs: 19% (27) English learners, 22% (30) special education
• Active participants in school committees or community organizations: 64% (49)

Topics
1. Technology and technical support
2. Challenges, difficulties, obstacles
3. Positive aspects
4. Ability to help their children
5. Socio-emotional wellbeing
6. Special education
7. English learners

Findings
1. Technology and Technical Support
School districts supplied equipment (e.g., iPads, Chromebooks, hot spots) to the majority of students. They also provided free Internet service for two months with Spectrum. However, there are families that still need support, especially if they still do not have Internet access or if the equipment is not working as it should.

Barriers to connect to class:
1. Some districts did not have enough equipment for all the families;
2. Parents did not receive training to use the equipment, even when they requested it;
3. There were long wait times to receive service and repair with the schools and with the Internet or telephone companies;
4. In many cases, the Spectrum service worked well, but in general it is very slow and would freeze frequently.
5. The most underprivileged families were not able to get access to Internet because they did not have bank accounts or refused to sign a long term contract for two months of free Internet. There are areas where Spectrum is the only or the most reliable Internet provider, and the monthly cost is $49.99.

“I am grateful we were able to borrow the computers for all my children, because we are low income, and especially when you have two or three children at home, one is not enough. The problem is they didn’t teach us how to use it. It was like saying, ‘you’re going to war, here is your rifle. Now you decide if you want to use it, since you don’t know how to do that.’”
2. Challenges, Difficulties and Obstacles Regarding Instruction

We know that in order to achieve student success there needs to be communication and coordination among parents, teachers and students.

This past Spring families faced many challenges and obstacles during the transition to online learning. Some of the most mentioned themes included: changes in the school rules, communication with teachers and counselors, distance learning, adolescence, parents’ readiness, and the conditions at home.

CHALLENGES AT SCHOOL

Grading Guidelines
- Some teachers relaxed the expectations and requirements, while others gave too much work and were inflexible given the situation.
- The changes in grading guidelines had different negative repercussions in both students and parents. They usually affected student motivation and stress levels.
- There were some cases reported where teachers lowered students’ grades for not having connected, even though they had no access to equipment and/or the Internet. This affected some 12th graders since they were not able to complete graduation requirements.

“Sometimes our internet would stop and it took anywhere from 10-15 minutes to turn back on. The teacher did not accept that excuse either. Teachers should have a plan, but they should have some things common and consistent.”

Communication with Teachers and Counselors
There was a huge difference in the way teachers taught distance learning classes:
- Some teachers and counselors were willing and open to communicating with parents and students. Examples:
  - They received and answered to messages, calls and e-mails.
  - One teacher had a meeting over Zoom with the parents of her students.
  - Some teachers explained to parents how to enter and use the Portal.
  - Some counselors were keeping an eye out on student wellbeing: health, needs, services.
  - They communicated to parents the progress and attendance of students.
- There was no communication with many teachers.

“My experience was that I had a science and math teacher that started to communicate with me. We had a miscommunication on different materials. It was a mess. The other teacher did not even try she disregarded my problems.”

Observations:
- Language was a barrier for many parents.
- Most middle and high school teachers established communication with students but not with parents.
- Communication flowed better with the parents who have e-mail, but many parents do not have one.
Teaching
There was a huge difference in the way teachers taught distance learning classes:

- Many told parents they had little to no training in computer usage and that they did not feel comfortable with technology
- Many did not even show up due to contract reasons
- Other teachers said they also had to take care of their own children and receive online training

“Since I have many children they all experienced different things. Some of them met with a teacher, some of them didn’t. The ones in middle school met with about three teachers, the one in Elementary had a meeting everyday with their teacher at 11am. One child never met with anyone. It was never across the boards.”

The teachers who showed up:

- Most classes lacked structure
  - Most high school teachers dedicated their time to send videos, as well as research or exercises to their classes by email or the district app, but never held a virtual class with their students
  - In some middle schools and high schools the teachers told their students that online classes were not mandatory and many students resisted participating
  - Some teachers said that what mattered was handing in the homework and that it did not matter whether it was well done or not
  - Some K-12 teachers left homework to be turned in, but never reviewed it nor gave any feedback on whether it was done correctly, or whether the student had learned
  - There were some sessions were the students connected but the teacher did not show up

- Others were very prepared for their virtual classes and were very interested in student learning:
  - They set schedules for online classes and homework submission, grading it and giving a chance to correct it and learn
  - As a rule, they had a half hour class, they would let them work and remained online for questions or reviews
  - In general, they devoted Friday for social sharing with the group
  - However, few children connected to the online classes, and would turn off the camera and were not present
  - They worked with small groups of students to better cater to them, especially with the ones who lagged behind.
  - After the virtual session, the teacher gave the parents the chance to talk to her
  - The teachers provided resources for the children to learn

Frequency and Timing of Classes
In each district and even each school, the frequency and timing of distance classes varied according to the readiness of the teachers. There were districts where contract negotiations delayed teaching for several weeks. Another common denominator was that most used Fridays’ meetings for socializing with classmates or work in small groups to clarify doubts, art and music classes. The majority had PE class everyday with 30 minute videos.

Even though some schools met for longer or shorter time spans, on average, the students met as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TK &amp; Kindergarten</th>
<th>One hour for 4 days</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>One hour for 3 days</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>One hour for 2 days</td>
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<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Generally all classes were done by video filmed by the teachers with explanations and instructions for classwork</td>
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</table>
and homework. The work of the week was submitted on Fridays. It was reported that at the high school level, math classes were taught for an hour once a week.

“Out of the six teachers my son has in middle school, the English teacher was there only for 4 weeks, once a week for half an hour and then we never heard from her again. The math teacher was there once a week for an hour. The Spanish and history teacher is very dedicated and was there twice a week for an hour.”

“My daughters worked on their packages every day with me. But they were never collected, they never returned to school. I reviewed their work to make sure they were well done, but I know many moms do not have the education and ability to do that.”

THE STUDENTS

Elementary School Children:
- Many resisted online classes, they wanted to go back to school
- It was difficult to pay attention for such a long time in front of a screen

Middle and High School Students
- Adolescent age influenced their attitudes: “I know everything”, little motivation, rebelliousness, they don’t want their parents by their side
- Many resisted online classes, they wanted to go back to school

“One of the challenges my children faced was adapting to the situation, understanding that the new way of “going to school” was not optional, setting a new routine and that they had to deliver the homework at the times set by the teacher. And one problems with working over the Internet was homework delivery, because by doing everything from home, they felt it wasn’t mandatory turning it in.”

THE PARENTS

Parent Readiness
Some parents, especially at the elementary level, dedicated a lot of hours every day to do the homework with their children.

Observations about this process:
- Little to no knowledge of computers, platforms or apps, and that caused a lot of stress
- They were able to get support from older children or other people who were knowledgeable
- The language barrier did not allow them to help their children adequately
- Besides their own role as parents, they also assumed the role of teachers, computer techs, therapists, etc.
- 99% of parents do not know the grading standards

“We as parents have the willingness, capacity and abilities to teach our children, but we need guidance, training and school materials, and the time to sit routinely with them to do so”

“Not having clear standards and having homework just to get by was very distressing to me because my daughter was going to fall behind. My older children offered to help me, but we didn’t know the points we needed to cover.”

The Conditions at Home
- Most homes have very limited space and students don’t have a specific place where to work and study comfortably.
- Noise and interruptions at home (many people at home due to unemployment, dogs barking, little siblings crying, adults talking, music others were listening, etc.) were major distractors to learning.
- In many homes with more than two students, remote classes were at the same time and this caused:
- Lack of silence that affected concentration
- Split parent attention in a way that was inefficient for all
  - For many working parents it was impossible to support their children learning at home
  - For most parents it was difficult to set schedules, routines and manage time
  - For working mothers it was especially difficult to tend adequately to their children’s education

“It was exhausting, I was physically and emotionally drained. After working 8 hours at a restaurant, I’d get home to cook dinner, feed them, get them to bathe and would sit to do homework at 7 pm, and we created a learning hour routine. It was complicated at first, but we did it little by little.”

3. Positive Actions by Educators

The School Districts
- They provided food, clothing, cleaning supplies, etc. for student families and whoever needed them
- They provided emotional wellbeing workshops about stress management, anxiety and depression.

“For being something unexpected, the district did a good job. Starting from zero, they implemented a study program, they pulled forward a platform, we had support from the teachers so the children would be more present. And we are grateful for that, their effort was very good.”

“For communication with the district and the school played an important role. They kept us informed about what was happening and how everything was going to work and the apps they were going to use. The Parent Portal was updated every week, showing their grades, the projects that were done or not done. The information on

food banks for school children was extended to the community.”

The Principals
- The role of the principal was very important job, motivating teachers, students and parents to work together and establishing good communication and information
- The principal made personal calls to the students homes to look after them

“The principal of my elementary school called weekly with messages for all parents and responded immediately to emails.”

“My son’s glasses broke and I went to the school to ask the principal for a coupon for new ones, and he gave it to me.”

The Teachers
- The teachers took extra time with students and parents to explain to them, guide them how to use the apps and platforms, and help them move forward
- Classes ended and teachers continued meeting with students over the summer, doing readings, writing stories, practicing math; in particular with the ones who fell behind
- The teachers made appointments with the parents after the virtual session with the children
- The teachers graded the homework, finding the errors so that students would correct them. They sent links so the students could redo it correctly.
- Teachers asked students if they needed food, computers and if we were healthy
- Teachers gave parents samples of daily schedules at home for students, from waking to bed time
- One music teacher would give virtual concerts to his students

“I told the teacher my son wasn’t understanding math. The teacher stayed 40 minutes after the meeting to explain to him in person. If he missed a homework, she would notify me immediately.”
“The music teacher would teach them melodies over Zoom. And he would have his entire family play instruments and share with his students. He united the students. It was relaxing and motivating for them.”

4. Parents’ Capacity to Help Their Children

About 95% of parents do not feel capable to support their children academically due to: language, academic levels and technology. However, 100% feel the drive, capacity and ability to do so, but ask for and need guidance and training.

“All parents supported their children creating environments conducive to learning:

- Having a clean, calm, quiet and adequate space for studying
- Setting a disciplined weekly schedule for the remote classes and keeping an eye on the times
- Motivating them to study, attend all their classes and finish their homework
- Sitting next to them during the virtual classes to support them and learn with them
- Asking if they needed help in order to ask for help (from siblings or teachers)

“We made daily routines to better leverage time. When they didn’t have classes, we reviewed the portal together to see what the assignments were, we read together and shared the content of our books. I was forced to learn technology.”

All parents supported their children by nurturing them with food and love, and tried to provide structure, even though this became difficult with so many changes:

- Cooking delicious and balanced meals
- Setting daily study and recreation routines (e.g., exercise, yoga or meditation)
- Cooking recipes together, planting vegetables, movie nights, family table games
- Talking and sharing experiences, current situations

“We have invented different types of bread, we painted shirts, we cooked together, baked cupcakes, they now make their own beds, they do the dishes, reading.”

Examples of how parents supported children’s education in elementary school:

- Reading routines, silently and in pairs, asking reading comprehension questions
- Reviewing the multiplication tables and basic math concepts
- Searching for help on YouTube, Google
- Verifying homework is complete
- Writing poems, stories
- Storytelling
- Making flash cards to study

Examples for middle school & high school:

- Geography contests
- Supporting in Spanish classes
- Monitoring parent portals to check student attendance, progress, homework and activities
- Insisting on communicating with teachers and counselors
- Giving them more confidence at this level

5. Socio-emotional Wellbeing

COVID-19 has impacted the socio-emotional wellbeing of many parents and students. Most reported the following symptoms:

Emotions

- Fear of contagion and going out since it is a “synonym of death”.
- Angst, stress, anxiety and depression, extreme frustration and sadness
Behaviors
- Increased dependence on electronic devices, news on social media and TV
- Lack of sleep and real rest
- Poor self-care measures
- Eating disorders, eating too much or lack of hunger, which caused weight loss and gain
- Aggressiveness, which harmed family relationships

Differences
Parents reported the emotions they have felt during the pandemic and the behaviors they have seen in their children due to spending so much time at home.

Parent emotions
- Parents felt guilty when they sensed they were passing on the fear and angst to their families
- Many are at high risk because of their age and/or pre-existing conditions
- Working parents feel a terrible fear of infecting their family
- Many are worried over the household finances and unemployment
- Others worry over their children falling behind in school
- Most felt lonely, abandoned, isolated
- Others felt powerless

“I don’t think my little ones felt too resentful, but it was hard with my teenage daughter. She got depressed being locked inside all day. She missed her friends so much, seeing them and talking to them. This affected my husband and I quite a bit, because we saw her depressed and stressed. It made us feel tense and worried. My daughter spoke to her teacher and she got help from the school counselor. And then they spoke with me to ask for my authorization to refer her to a therapist and they are helping her with that as well through Zoom.”

Strengths
Mothers have found a way to be strong and not give up when participating or practicing in the following activities:
- Serving and working with and for the community
- Reflecting and concluding that...
  - “If I am well, my children are well”
  - They can make changes
  - They are resilient
- Practicing their faith at their church
- Participating in support groups through Zoom
- Playing and sharing in family
- Getting well informed responsibly
- Searching for and receiving professional help

  “I would have loved to have a support group to be able to vent, speak and listen to others who are going through the same; that would have been so helpful. Expressing myself, being heard, getting focused on something positive, getting advice, helping each other... I did not have that.”

6. Special Education

Participants reported that in some school districts and individual schools this group of students was the least attended to in the distance learning process. In general, the special education teachers for these students did not communicate with parents, in spite of
having sent emails. There was a total suspension of services and non-fulfillment of IEPs. Mothers are expecting to claim compensatory services and integration therapies in the new school year.

Some teachers tried to provide remote group therapies or classes, but did not work too well. The classes did not have a lot of structure or organization and there were many distractors: everyone talking at the same time, etc. Autistic children covered their ears due to the intense noise. The problems of behavior, anxiety, nerves, stress, and disorientation escalated because of the lack of services and support, changes in routine, etc. And the teachers would “invite them” or give them the option to withdraw from the sessions.

Having an online IEP was catastrophic. So many violations were committed. I had an IEP by Zoom. It was the three-year one where they talked about the psycho-academic evaluations of my daughter. There was no translation from a party free of conflict of interests with the school. A resource teacher from there provided it, when the IEP is a legal document. The general education teacher was not present, they had me deal with the coordinator instead. My daughter is changing schools and is going to high school. I had so many questions to ask and I was not able to. And they still asked me if I was going to sign it, to which I responded asking if they were kidding me.”

In the districts where the service was acceptable, the staff did as follows:

✓ There was constant communication and the IEPs were signed and respected
  ▪ The therapists often times served as a bridge between the school, the teachers and the parents, in order to establish communication and streamline the services

✓ Some teachers and therapists were in communication (weekly individual sessions and sometimes daily by Zoom, phone, email, text messages) with parents to review the achievement of goals, provide explanations and instructions to continue the work at home or for the next day assignment.

✓ They provided therapies by Zoom or phone, including reading groups that worked well

✓ The parents who were allowed to be present during therapy had an easier time doing the therapy with the students, while arrangements were being made for the therapy situation

“My 4-year old son has speech problems. His therapist called me and provided the speech therapy through Zoom. We continued with the goals that had been set already.”

“I received text messages and e-mails. I have access to speak to his teacher and behavior therapist during the five-day workweek. I have 30-minute meetings with his speech therapist and behavior therapist throughout the entire week. Without asking me anything, they sent me a hotspot and a Chromebook, and they were delivered at home.”

7. English Learners

The majority noted that service was precarious: Many did not receive any additional services or support for learning English. Others received homework, but in English, with no support. And they were not asked to return it for completion or correction. Some students received some services during the last 2 weeks of the school year. Only one participant out of 27 (4%) reported that the teacher would stay after the Zoom class with additional support for the ELs.
"I saw that after my daughter’s Zoom class, the teacher would stay with the EL group and taught them giving them additional support until she had answered each question from every single child."

**Observation:** parents with children in special education were a lot more informed about their rights, about the plan for their children and they were aware when their children were not receiving the necessary supports. The parents of English learner students did not report the same level of examples and experience on the matter. We assume they did not have the same understanding of the process, their role in it and the strategies to support their students.

**Recommendations**

*To improve distance learning*

**Parents:** Enforce federal and state policies that acknowledge parents as part of student education. Eliminate racism and discrimination in order to be able to work as a team to support our children.

**Equity:** Institute equity in procedures, programs, health and safety strategies for return to classes and distance learning, taking into account the convenience and needs of children:
- Living in small homes with a lot of people around them
- Who are homeless
- Without a place to study
- With working parents
- That need to stay home due to health conditions or special needs

**Technical support:** Provide technical support services at a school site, making it the location for computer exchange or repair.

**Materials:** Provide students with the basic materials they need to work at home with online learning

**Teachers:** Lay out a leveling process to support teachers in setting expectations

**Accountability:** Set minimum and adequate standards, including for English learners and special education

**Investments:**
- Counselors for students
- Bilingual teachers and/or interpreters
- Teachers that represent the diversity of the student body
- Training for principals, teachers and counselors (school staff) on:
  - Objectives to engage parents (communication, strategies, progress, accessibility)
  - Technology
  - Best practices for virtual classes (creative and motivating)
  - Empathy and cultural and socio-emotional sensibility
- Materials for students at home

**Learn from programs with best practices**

Parents advise observing two programs as examples of models for distance learning because their children obtained good results.

**Migrant Education Program serving Bell, Norwalk and La Puente**

These programs set afternoon schedules, with a specific time for each math and English teacher. Classes were interactive, leaving homework that would be graded and returned the following day, and they worked on the mistakes and deficiencies.

**Citrus College PAGE Program in Glendora, which serves families in Pomona**

This is a summer program focused on math for middle and high school students. It ran Monday through Friday for an hour and a half. Teachers used personal and interactive techniques that children were willing to learn and practice. Children did not like missing class.
“Have teachers always be in communication with parents, showing enthusiasm and preparation for teaching, having them focused on the children, not just covering requirements. Provide them with training in using strategies where the children learn, focus and become interested in learning.”

**Do this with us, not to us**

“Have the schools create a place where students can express their needs, about what is expected of them and their families, without judging them, silencing them or forcing them into a system.”

**Recommendations to train parents to support students at home**

**Family Engagement:** For this new school year, parents want two-way communication in order to learn how children are starting off, academic standards as well as attendance and grading regulations. They also want to be able to communicate (feedback loops) and see adaptations to academic programs when the rules don’t work for their children.

**Training:**

- In technology, digital platforms and apps
- Mental health resources.
- Support for building and setting routines and schedules to maximize time management at home
- Academic standards and goals for the school year

**Clear expectations:** Clarify the role of parents in distance learning

**Special education:**

- Having clear grade standards with specific activities to achieve them and training about it.

- Inclusion of the parents in the therapies for special needs children so they can apply them at home

**English learners:**

- Having clear goals with specific activities in order to be able to advance.
- Training parents on their role, their rights, the goals and activities for reclassification.

**Support groups:** Setting socio-emotional support groups for students and parents.

“I hope next year there are changes. Parents need a guide. And for the little ones they need a place to focus. The rules need to be laid out. [The high school my child attends] had a different schedule. I hope the principals, and everyone really takes something away from everything”.

**Next Steps:**

- Advocating for more supports in the education of our children and partnering with parents.
- We will do online surveys and focus groups with middle and high school students. The results will be available in August and September.