Student Reflections on Schooling During COVID-19

Student-Led Research Project Explores Effects of the Pandemic on Students and Schooling

Children First IDRA Transforming Education

By Jacqueline Campos, Monica Cruz, Alejo Peña Soto, Fatimah Rasul, Ana Ramón

September 2021

Contents

Introduction 2
Meet the Research Team 3
Methodology 4
Results – Effects of the Pandemic on Students 5
Three out of four students reported struggling with mental wellness issues 5
Students carried additional burdens due to virtual learning 6
Students faced pressure to maintain their education while also managing responsibilities outside of the classroom 7
Recommendations 8
Protect and Equip Students for Success 8
Closing 9
Appendix 10
Appendix A: K-12 Student Experiences Before COVID-19 11
Stop harmful discipline practices in schools 11
Appendix B: Equity in Education: Peer-to-Peer Survey Questions 12

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Introduction

During the summer and fall of 2020, four high school and college students led a participatory action research project to collect insights from our peers about the impact of COVID-19 on students and how the pandemic has worsened or changed the challenges young people face in school. The project focused on elevating the voices of the most impacted – families and students – in school reopening planning and policymaking.

"I have family members in the hospital, and schoolwork is a stress that is hard to deal with especially because of the increased workload."
– *Student survey respondent*

The project stemmed from IDRA's new partnership with Seek Common Ground, which launched its COVID-19 Recovery Action Accelerator in 2020 to support state and community-based organizations pursuing equitable and sustainable education policies and experiences. IDRA announced in September 2020 the student team: Jacqueline Campos, Monica Cruz, Alejo Peña Soto and Fatimah Rasul. IDRA trained and supported us as we developed, distributed and analyzed surveys about the needs of families and students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

IDRA staff experts in policy, advocacy, community engagement, demography, and qualitative and quantitative research, lead virtual training sessions with our student team on the historical underpinnings of educational and other systemic inequities, advocacy strategies, participatory action research, and survey development. The survey findings led to recommendations for school leaders and policymakers, driven by the needs and voices of families, students and educators.

We decided to focus on four main categories in our survey questions: education equity, home stressors and at-home learning. We chose these categories to reflect the current state of education and the existing equity barriers students experience in our own schools, including before the pandemic.

We developed our survey and began distributing it in September 2020. We interviewed 120 of our peers, analyzed the survey results, and developed multi-level policy solutions to address the major problems that were identified. Driven by the principles of participatory action research, the results of the survey will inform a comprehensive, community-led COVID-19 response, uplifting student voices that are so critical in the challenging times ahead. The key findings of the research include:

"My lowest low has come, I'm struggling to come out of it, and I'm trying to make teachers and my guardians understand my situation."
– *Student survey respondent*

- Three out of four students reported struggling with mental wellness issues.
- Students carried additional burdens, including, poor Internet connectivity, social isolation, and insufficient opportunities to take mental and physical breaks from classes, due to virtual learning.
- Students face pressure to maintain their education while also managing responsibilities like assisting their families, holding jobs and dealing with healthcare needs outside of the classroom.

As the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to increased structural and learning divisions within the education system, voices of students affected by the crisis must be central in all decision-making processes. The survey results described in this report clearly show that COVID-19 has created new challenges and exacerbated existing issues in students' schools.

Meet the Research Team

The student research team members are Jacqueline Campos, Monica Cruz, Alejo Peña Soto and Fatimah Rasul.

“I am excited to be a part of this initiative, as I believe it will allow for student-led change within our community,” said Jacqueline Campos.

“I believe that, with these surveys, we have the opportunity to gather important data that can hopefully help our communities in San Antonio,” Alejo Peña Alejo said.

IDRA President & CEO, Celina Moreno, J.D., said: “The leadership of Monica, Fatimah, Jackie and Alejo was instrumental in the success of this project. Their engagement created a process to ensure students are centered in IDRA’s policy work moving forward. IDRA is dedicated to supporting the student researchers to advocate for their policy recommendations in their local communities and on the state level.”

Alejo Pena Soto stated: “As someone who comes from the same zip code as many of those who participated in our survey, it is extremely painful to see how other students are being impacted. It is scary to see how visible the disconnect between state, city and district leaders, and the communities they serve. The unfortunate reality that became clear with this survey is that the inequities Texas students face in their education have simply been exacerbated by this pandemic. That being said, I am extremely hopeful that our findings will help visualize these inequities for leadership across the state and that students will receive the resources they deserve. I’m extremely proud of the work we’ve done and our commitment to centering student voice at every step of the process. I hope the work we’ve produced is evidence that students, parents, teachers, staff and every person impacted by the decisions those in charge make have the power to create the change they want to see.

Monica Cruz stated: “During the first few stages of building the survey questions, going about absences was really important for us. We knew as a collective whole, that administration was not always going to be understanding of certain situations that many students face. Students have their own responsibilities to handle outside of school, such as being a caretaker, having a job, or even dealing with mental health issues. It was nice to be able to hear the students’ side of the story behind their numbers of absences. We were able to see that 35.8% of respondents reported having faced truancy or discipline issues for health reasons.

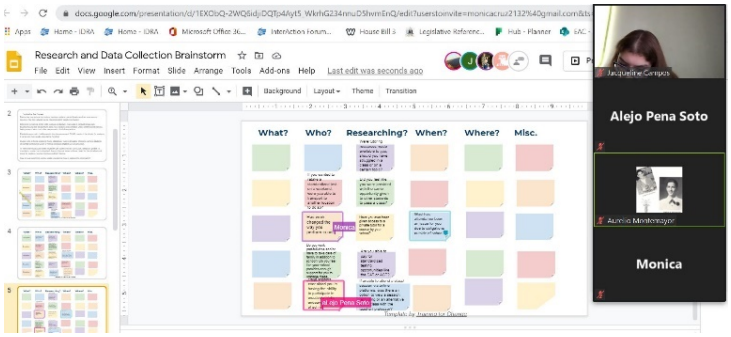
At the time of the research, Jacqueline Campos attended Young Women’s Leadership Academy in San Antonio ISD, Monica Cruz attended Texas State University, Alejo Peña Soto attended Thomas Jefferson High School in San Antonio ISD, and Fatimah Rasul attended Byron P. Steele High School in Schertz-Cibolo-Universal City ISD. Co-author Ana Ramón is IDRA’s deputy director of advocacy, who support the students in this project.

Methodology

Before beginning the survey-building process and led by a “near-peer” IDRA research fellow, we learned about research and how to develop questions and design surveys. We formulated the themes of our research and conducted the survey questions. While the IDRA research team provided feedback to us, we made all final decisions about the survey.

We created and tested our online survey form and techniques to make the survey more accessible to the individuals taking them. We set a goal of getting 100 responses. We distributed the survey in September and October 2020 through our individual networks, such as classmates and school organizations, with permission where applicable. We did not collect responses from family members and close friends.

Our student research team exceeded our goal and generated completed 120 surveys. Respondents ranged in from 11th grade to college freshmen and live in 28 zip codes in the San Antonio area. High school student respondents primarily attended schools in Northside ISD, San Antonio ISD and Schertz-Cibolo ISD. Out of the survey respondents, 95 are female, 23 are male, and four students are non-binary or chose not to identify a gender.



Results – Effects of the Pandemic on Students

A priority of ours was to capture the impact of COVID-19 in our schools and learn more about existing barriers encountered in the classroom. Along with IDRA's research and evaluation team, we helped filter qualitative data to find trends in each of the categories.

Three out of four students reported struggling with mental wellness issues

An issue that become more apparent throughout the survey and analysis was the mental wellness support needs of the respondents. Many felt overwhelmed and stressed while trying to maintain their education. We asked students how COVID-19 has affected their mental or physical health. We pulled from their personal experiences with mental wellness and included questions on how COVID-19 has affected both physical and mental health, teacher expectation if they were ill, and generally if students were struggling with mental illness.

In their elaborations on the COVID-19 health question, students mentioned isolation, disruption of routines, and motivation as concerns during the outbreak of the pandemic. They associated these with their mental wellness and additional concerns about their physical health.

75% of the students reported having struggled with mental wellness issues.

Here are comments from a few respondents:

> "I feel so incredibly alone and unmotivated to keep waking up."

> "I felt isolated and unmotivated constantly and online school became overwhelming."

> "I don't really talk to any of my friends anymore and I feel extremely lonely, I have breakdowns more often now, and every other day I feel awful about myself."

> "Isolation and the constant fear of getting my family sick has dramatically increased my anxiety and depression and has made me lose all motivation to pursue anything in life."

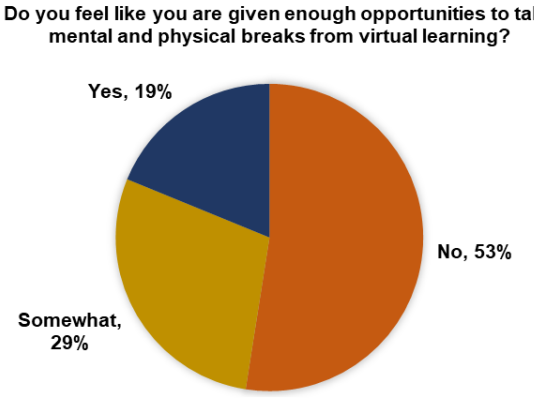
> "It's so hard to keep up with everything going on. I feel trapped, and my anxiety has gotten worse."

> "I haven't gotten diagnosed or gone to the doctor about anything, but I feel bored and sad and cry a lot of the time now and just feel like I'm drowning at school."

> "I haven't been talking to friends or family as much, I stay in my room a lot, I don't eat enough, and everything is crazy."

"I don't really talk to any of my friends anymore and I feel extremely lonely, I have breakdowns more often now, and every other day I feel awful about myself."

– *Student survey respondent*



Students carried additional burdens due to virtual learning

Our student research team included several questions on how virtual learning has impacted how students interact with the education system. We asked open-ended questions designed to capture our peers' sentiments based on their personal experiences at home and with new virtual learning environments. Responding students shared their experiences of connectivity issues, increasing homework and family obligations that led students to feel stressors from every angle.

We included questions about how workloads have changed during COVID-19, how attendance has been affected during the pandemic, and multiple questions about changes to their daily school routines. Using our experiences, we hoped to learn how our peers' education and well-being were being affected during the outbreak of the pandemic.

Feelings of being behind and the inability to catch up was only made worse by Internet connectivity issues. Consistently, students cited lack of access to the Internet as reasons students fell behind or were not able to connect with their teachers.

- **More stress at home:** 71.4% of respondents consider online learning as contributing more stress than regular school did.
- **Homework during virtual learning:** 49.2% of respondents report having issues with turning in homework.
- **Connectivity issues & Internet concerns:** 47.5% of respondents report experiencing technology or Internet issues. Most (79%) said their school district would or has assisted them in accessing quality Internet.

The respondents indicated that online learning was more stressful than regular school.

> "I am constantly on a laptop and my eyesight becomes strained throughout the day. Sometimes I'll get headaches from this as well. I often forget to eat, although I have asynchronous time where I could go and eat a small snack, often my teachers don't respect the asynchronous session."

> "The teachers increased workload and it is super stress inducing. Sometimes I do not have the proper resources and then I feel shamed by my teachers, so in the end I'm sad."

> "More work and no hands on learning."

> "I don't ask as many questions like I would if I was in person. I think many teachers think that because we are home, we just do nothing all day. That's not the case at all. I still have my extracurricular activities, my family, and my mental health to attend to."

"There is often no separation from my school life and my home life. I'm always mentally thinking about the next assignment I have due and it keeps me up at night and increases my stress and anxiety."
– *Student survey respondent*

Students faced pressure to maintain their education while also managing responsibilities outside of the classroom

Our student researcher team wanted to gain an understanding of what was being asked of students during their everyday lives both before and during the pandemic. They found that many of their peers face enormous pressure to maintain their education while also holding jobs and helping their families.

The survey results are a stark reminder that students do not have singular roles in their households but often have multiple responsibilities outside of the classroom.

22% of respondents report attendance as an issue due to obligations outside of school

> "I sometimes get called in earlier than I should into work and that leads me to miss school or the last few periods of school."

> "Sometimes being off camera is helpful along with helping my little kiddos with their school as I'm listening through my air pods."

> "I have family members in the hospital, and schoolwork is a stress that is hard to deal with especially because of the increased workload."

Other respondents described how they manage school and home responsibilities or that they only are able to deal with schoolwork.

> "My family respects my school time and tries to encourage me to learn."

> "Sometimes, I do take care of my sister, but attendance hasn't been an issue."

> "I've just had to figure out and push through whatever was happening to me to attend class and get my work done."

> "I don't have many other obligations. I dedicate every single hour of the week to school."

> "Well for starters, I've never had a job. And secondly, without exaggeration, I don't do anything else besides schoolwork."

Students described ways their teachers made lessons accessible for students who had to miss class, such as video recordings, posting slides and notes, and providing tutoring times.

"I have family members in the hospital, and schoolwork is a stress that is hard to deal with especially because of the increased workload."
– *Student survey respondent*

Recommendations

Upon analysis of the data, there were some major themes that began to take shape. Reflected in both the personal stories shared and information gathered, it is clear students struggle with the effects of emerging mental wellness and stress from remote learning. We worked with IDRA to compile a set of local and state policy recommendations to address the challenges students identified in the survey.

COVID-19 Protections for Students

State-level and school and district recommendations:

- Create comprehensive procedures for students who contract COVID-19 to maintain their physical and mental wellbeing.
- Allow for more opportunities for mental health and physical breaks during virtual learning.
- Ensure students, educators, family, expert and community input are included during the process of fully reopening schools.
- Create policies with social, emotional and psychological well-being of our students in mind. Working to alleviate added stressors and help students with ongoing transitions in the education system.
- Set up excused absence policies for students who are caregiving for ill family members or loved ones.
- Ensure students and families are involved in school district processes for identifying appropriate uses of federal emergency relief funds.

Protect and Equip Students for Success

State-level recommendations:

- Ensure provisions related to reliable Internet access for students and schools are explicitly included in any state broadband legislation.
- Require that schools meet the recommended student-to-mental health professional ratios (including counselors and social workers).
- Provide resources and funding for school districts and the students they serve and avoid prematurely forcing students back into the classroom or punishing them if they are unable to attend due to extenuating circumstances.
- Require school districts to develop family and student engagement plans that strengthen relationships and invest in students' social-emotional and academic success.

School and district recommendations:

- Review curriculum workloads and the adjustments districts and schools made in response to COVID-19 realities. Make appropriate adjustments and work with students on addressing workloads and reducing the amount of time spent on homework.
- Ensure families of students with disabilities or who need assistance are aware of individualized education programs (IEPs) and 504 plans that can offer formal help for K-12 students who are struggling in school. Help families navigate the process for setting up an IEP or 504 plan for their student.
- Provide teachers and school personnel training on signs of students who are in crisis or dealing with mental health concerns.

Closing

Working with other students for students has been one of my most rewarding experiences and emphasizes how important projects like this are. I think that results aside, the work we conducted can serve as a model for what data collection should look like; having those impacted by the data being observed collect said data.

Our next phase is to take these results and act upon them along, helping center and uplift student voices throughout the process of education policy on every level of power.

Student researcher Alejo Pena Soto, said, “I'm extremely excited to see how the results of our survey help educators and those that influence Texas education make better-informed decisions regarding how students and families are treated in schools.”

This project was possible with the generous support of the Seek Common Ground Community-led COVID-19 Recovery Action Accelerator. Seek Common Ground, a national education advocacy idea incubator and facilitator, designed this Action Accelerator to support the efforts of 12 community-facing groups from across the nation to execute short-term, high-impact projects to elevate the voices of families, students, and educators on the twin scourges of the pandemic and systemic racism. It was through this support that were able to create a space for students to be a part of the policy process and will only strengthen our classrooms and communities.

If you have any questions about the details of this report or would like additional information, please reach out to Ana Ramón at ana.ramon@idra.org.

Appendix

Appendix A: K-12 Student Experiences Before COVID-19

In addition to examining the effects of the pandemic on students, we decided to get student input about school discipline and equity concerns. Our focus consisted of learning how our peers experienced discipline in schools and attendance policies. We asked questions about dress code violations, truancy in schools, and law enforcement involvement in discipline.

Some of the respondents shared their personal experiences including being sent to in-school suspension in the second grade for "being disruptive" and another student receiving in-school suspension for wearing leggings. The students emphasized that discipline regarding dress code policies was common: **48% reported having been punished at least once for a dress code violation prior to COVID-19.**

The survey results emphasized that schools usually do not offer alternatives to exclusionary discipline. **When asked if a form of restorative justice was offered in place of traditional punishments, only 11% of students replied yes**.

And 26.5% of respondents reported the involvement of law enforcement with disciplinary issues at their schools prior to COVID-19.

As one of the student researchers, Alejo Pena Soto, noted: "What has been very sad to see is that the students who experienced the forms of discipline most frequently prior to COVID-19 are the same students who are now experiencing the most adverse effects of learning during a pandemic. Furthermore, the statements students gave regarding their experiences being disciplined show how schools can operate in a way that goes against the core principle that schools should be safe spaces for students. It is even more worrying when schools are frequently being portrayed to parents and students amidst the pandemic as sanctuaries when the environments present in them reveal otherwise."

Stop harmful discipline practices in schools

State-level recommendations:

- Support students to create a comprehensive student bill of rights regarding access to a safe learning environment.
- Require schools meet the recommended student-to-mental health professional ratios (including counselors and social workers)
- Create policies to help support students who were unable to engage with schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Stop punitive truancy measures. Focus instead on instituting restorative practices around attendance, engagement and school climate that will help promote student success.

School and district recommendations:

- Protect students from gender and racial bias reflected in dress code policies and practices. End harmful policies instituted in student codes of conduct.
- Support student social emotional learning.
- Use restorative justice rather than traditional punitive punishment.
- Provide support for students in all phases of the remote-learning process. Do not penalize students how have weak or no broadband Internet access that keeps them from being able to turn in homework or from attending a class.
- Provide resources and institutional support for parent support specialists and other family liaisons to facilitate meaningful and authentic contact with all students and families.

Appendix B: Equity in Education: Peer-to-Peer Survey Questions

Please help us gather information on the impact of COVID-19 on your education. This survey asks questions about Internet access, distance learning, and how COVID-19 is affecting your learning. Your answers will help us determine the best way to assist you. If you have any questions about the survey please email Ana Ramon, Deputy Director of Policy and Advocacy at ana.ramon@idra.org (mailto:ana.ramon@idra.org)

** Required*

Tell us a little about you and how COVID-19 has impacted your social well-being.

1. Email Address (optional)

2. State of Residence

3. City of Residence

4. What is Your Zip Code?*

5. Gender*
   - Female
   - Male
   - Non-binary
   - Prefer not to say

6. What is your current grade level? *
   - 9th Grade
   - 10th Grade
   - 11th Grade
   - 12th Grade
   - College: Freshman
   - College: Sophomore
   - College: Junior
   - College: Senior

7. Which creative outlets previously made available through school or other programs has COVID limited? (check all that apply) *
   - Sports
   - Fine Arts
   - Band
   - Choir
   - Orchestra
   - Dance
   - Theater
   - Student Council
   - School Sponsored Clubs
   - Color Guard
   - Other

8. Do you have access to healthcare? *
   - Yes
   - No

9. If you answered yes, is your Healthcare affordable?*
   - Yes
   - No
   - Other

10. Do you have access to one of the following devices with Internet capability? *
   - Laptop
   - Desktop Computer
   - Tablet
   - Smart Phone
   - Other

11. If yes, do you have a device with internet, how many people utilize the device(s) in your household for either work or school purposes? *

12. Is your productivity with online learning hindered by a lack of specific resources or applications not provided by your school? (examples: calculators, annotated extensions, multilingual materials, textbooks, printers) *
   - Yes
   - No
   - Other

13. If you answered yes, what resources or applications do you need to improve your productivity? *

14. At school did you have access to menstrual hygiene products? *
   - Yes
   - No
   - Maybe

15. If menstrual hygiene products are not offered at your school is it more difficult for you to access these products? *
   - yes
   - no
   - I'd rather not say
   - Other

16. Do you have access to meals at home? *
   - Yes
   - No
   - I'd rather not say
   - Other

17. If you responded yes to the previous question, do the meals your household prepare for you fit your dietary needs? (examples: allergies, religious, nutritious, etc.) *

18. If you answered no to the previous question, are you able to access nutrition through your local school district or community organization? *
   - Yes
   - No
   - I'd rather not say

Tell us a little about the discipline in your school

19. Has law enforcement ever been involved with your discipline at school?
Yes
No

20. Were extracurricular activities taken away from you due to “discipline” issues?
Yes
No
Other

21. Were extracurricular activities taken away from you due to attendance issues?
Yes
No
Other

22. If you answered yes, maybe or other in the previous questions please explain your answer.

23. Was your eligibility to pass to the next grade level threatened due to your absences?
Yes
No
Maybe

24. Have you or your family ever experienced a fine as a form of punishment for a school related issue? (examples: parking, court orders/fees, etc.)
Yes
No
Maybe

25. Have you ever been punished for a dress code violation?
Yes
No
Maybe

26. Have you ever been required to miss class as a form of punishment? (examples: in- school suspension, out-of-school suspension, etc.)
Yes
No

27. If you answered yes, please share the form of punishment and why.

28. Have you had a form of restorative justice offered to you instead of traditional punishment? (as a form of discipline/ Restorative justice practices meaning opportunities where students are able to grow from their mistakes)
Yes
No
I don't know

29. Have you ever faced truancy (being absent without permission) or discipline issues due to your health (mental, physical, not applicable)?
Yes
No

Education Equity in Your School

30. Do school staff or administrators support you in pursuing opportunities available to you?
Yes
No
N/A

31. If yes, what support did they provide to you?

32. If no, how did they hinder you from pursuing the opportunities?

33. Were tutoring resources made available to you, should you have struggled in a class or on a certain topic?
Yes
No

34. How has schoolwork load changed as a result of COVID?
A great deal
Much
Somewhat
A little
Not at all

35. If you have a job, has an increased workload from online learning hindered your ability to fulfill work requirements?
A Great Deal
Much
Somewhat
A Little
Not at All

36. Has attendance been an issue for you due to obligations outside of school? (ex: family, work, healthcare, illness, care taking)
Yes
No

37. If you answered yes, to the previous question please explain your answer.

38. If you answered no to question 23, to the previous question please explain your answer.

39. If unable to attend a class/session via online platforms, was there an option to view a session recording or an alternative to the class with the teacher/ professor?
Yes
No
Not Sure

40. If you answered yes, to the previous question please explain the options presented.

Student and Home Stressors

41. How has COVID-19 affected your mental or physical health?

42. Have you ever struggled with mental health issues (stress, low self-esteem, anxiety, etc.)
Yes
No
Maybe
Other

43. Do teachers still expect you to complete work (virtually or in-person) when you or a family member that you take care of are sick?

44. Do you feel safe or welcomed in your at-home environment?

45. If no, has your school or community provided resources to help with your situation?

46. Do you or your family require financial assistance from the government as a result of COVID?
Yes
No

47. What additional stressors have you experienced as a result of the COVID outbreak?

48. Does online learning contribute more stress than regular school did?
Yes
No

49. If you answered yes to the previous question, please tell us why?

At Home Learning

50. Are teachers understanding when it comes to grading? (grace periods, longer timelines, due dates, technology/Internet issues)

51. Have you had any issues turning in homework?
Yes
No

52. If you responded yes to the previous question please tell us why?

53. Are you able to efficiently use the platforms that teachers are using for online schooling?
Yes
No

54. If you answered no to the previous question, please tell us why?

55. Have you experienced technology or Internet issues?
Yes
No
Sometimes

56. If yes, has this kept you from completing your work?

57. If needed, would/has your school provided you with a stable source of internet?
Yes
No

58. If needed, would/has your school district assisted you in your attempts to access quality internet?
Yes
No

59. How familiar are others in your home with the applications and platforms used in your school for online learning?

60. Do you feel like you are given enough opportunities to take mental and physical breaks from virtual learning?
Yes
No
Somewhat

Support Students who Receive Special Education Services

61. Have you or do you now receive any special education services?
Yes
No

62. Have schools addressed the needs of students who receive special education services?
(ex: reaching out, testing services, online adaption of services, etc.)
Yes
No

63. If you answered no to the previous question, please share your experience?

64. Do you or a family member with special needs have access to in-person learning assistance?
Yes
No

65. Have you or an immediate family member ever been subject to harmful disciplinary actions that failed to recognize your/their needs?

66. What resources has your school provided you and/or your family to help aid with the transition into online learning?

67. If yes, what resources has your school provided you and/or your family to help aid with the transition into online special education learning?

68. How would you rate your/your family member's transition into virtual learning as a special education student?
Easy
Somewhat Easy
Neutral
Difficult
Very Difficult

69. Are there any other services besides educational services that are no longer offered to you because of COVID-19/virtual learning?