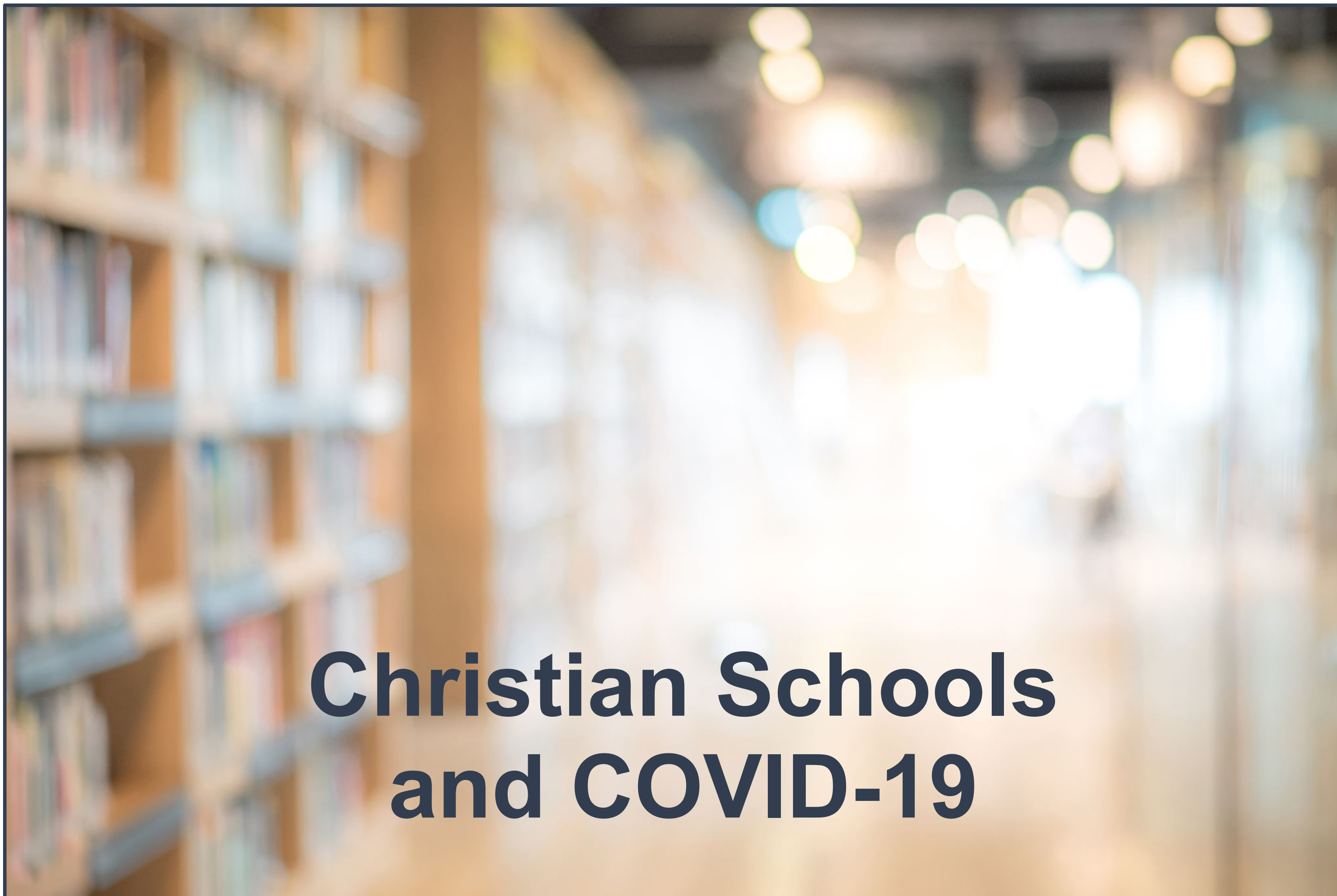


Christian Schools and COVID-19

Reopening Plans and Fall 2020 Outlook

ACSI

AUGUST 2020—ACSI Research
Lynn E. Swaner
Charlotte Marshall Powell

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lynn E. Swaner, EdD is ACSI's Chief Strategy and Innovation Officer. Prior to joining ACSI, she served as a Christian school administrator, graduate professor of education, and academic researcher.

Charlotte Marshall Powell, PhD is ACSI's Senior Researcher. Prior to joining ACSI, she served as a professor of psychology and academic researcher.

ABOUT ACSI

ACSI exists to strengthen Christian schools and equip Christian educators worldwide as they prepare students academically and inspire students to become devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

CONTACT

For inquiries regarding this research report, contact research@acsi.org.

Please cite as: Swaner, L.E. and C. Marshall Powell. 2020. *Christian Schools and COVID-19: Reopening Plans and Fall 2020 Outlook.* Colorado Springs, CO: Association of Christian Schools International.

Table of Contents

Overview................................ 3

Survey Demographics................ 4

Reopening Plans..................... 5

Influences on Planning.............. 6

COVID-19 Modifications.......... 7
- Scheduling.......................... 7
- Space Usage........................ 7
- Health and Safety.................. 8
- Programs and Events............ 9
- Student Transportation............ 9
- Special Education................ 10

Staffing Impact....................... 11

Financial Impact...................... 12
- Enrollment.......................... 12
- Operating Budget................. 13
- Technology Upgrades............ 13
- Tuition Discounts................. 13
- Financial Aid...................... 14
- CARES Act Participation.......... 14
- Fundraising........................ 14

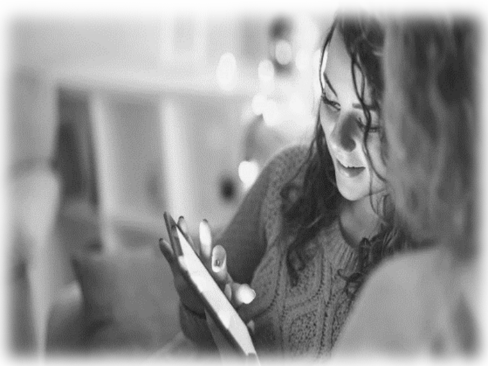
Discussion............................. 15

ACSI Resources....................... 19

Overview

The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) serves over 2,300 member Christian schools in the United States and another 5,500 members abroad, as well as supports close to 25,000 schools around the globe through its various services. Just like schools from all sectors across the globe, ACSI schools were significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020. In an effort to understand the responses of member schools during this time, ACSI Research conducted a survey of U.S. schools in late April 2020. The report on survey findings, *Christian Schools and COVID-19: Responding Nimbly, Planning for the Future*, shared real-time data that pointed to the overall nimbleness and tenacity of Christian schools in responding to COVID-19.

With the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year approaching, uncertainty remains about the impact of COVID-19 on school reopening. In July 2020, ACSI conducted a follow-up survey with all U.S. schools to gather data on their fall plans for instruction, including on-campus, blended, and distance learning options (see page 5 of this report); COVID-19 related modifications to scheduling, health and safety procedures, space usage, transportation, and schoolwide events (see pages 7-10); and financial and staffing considerations, including financial aid and discounts, enrollment and operating budget impacts, fundraising plans, technology upgrades, and CARES Act participation (see pages 11-14). As with the initial survey, the current survey also asked participants to provide qualitative stories of their experiences, which are highlighted throughout this report.



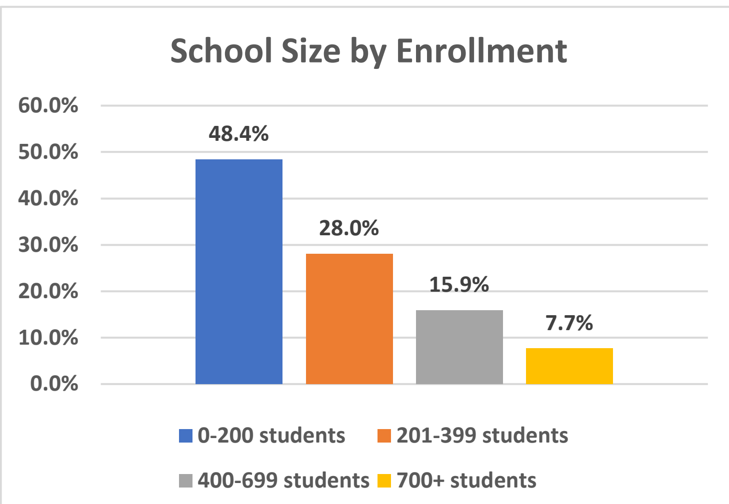
The current findings suggest that Christian schools are continuing to respond nimbly, adapt creatively, and work collaboratively in the face of ongoing challenge. Along these lines, three themes (see pages 15-18) that characterize the Fall 2020 outlook for the Christian school sector are that Christian schools are *open and ready for business*; are *delivering on their value proposition;* and will need to prioritize *financial sustainability* as they look to the future, likely now more than ever.

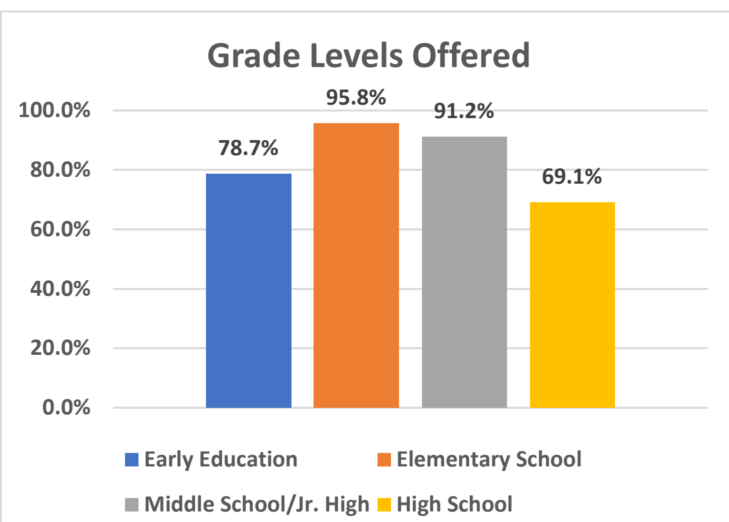
> *"We have been on a roller coaster all summer regarding plans to start school in the fall. Each time the plans have changed, our staff has not flinched. They reorganize, re-evaluate their programs, and move ahead without complaint. Our prayer life together has improved and provided much solace."*
>
> *—San Francisco Bay Area*

Survey Demographics

The survey was fielded electronically in late July 2020. All of ACSI's member schools in the United States were invited to participate via email. A total of 548 unique schools responded to the survey for a response rate of 30%.

Overall, the responding schools were fairly representative of ACSI membership across a number of demographic factors. This includes geographic distribution, with 25% of responding schools located in the Western U.S., 24% in the Central U.S., and 41% in the Eastern U.S. Respondents were also representative of ACSI membership in terms of school size (by enrollment) and grade levels offered (see charts below).*





"This experience has anchored the optimism of our staff and parents for this coming September. This year will look different, there may be challenges unseen and seen, but our mission, our vision remains unchanged and we are ready to welcome our students back."

—Northern New Jersey

"Our stakeholders have been very supportive and exited that we are holding to our core values. The support has been overwhelming."

—Columbus, OH suburbs

***NOTE**: Where percentages do not amount to 100 throughout the report, this is due to respondents' ability to select multiple options.

Reopening Plans

The survey asked about schools' *current* plans for reopening school at the point of administration (in late July). The **vast majority of schools (88.2%) plan for a physical reopening** of their campuses in the fall. The majority of schools with grades in the K-12 range (54%) were planning to offer **on-campus instruction with an option for distance learning** (e.g., in case of illness, health condition, or family preference). Over a quarter (26.8%) planned to offer **on-campus instruction only**. These data points, along with plans for blended learning, distance learning only, and school closure, as well as for schools not yet having identified a plan, are provided in the table below.

Reopening Option for Grades K-12	Percentage of Schools
Offer **on-campus instruction only.**	26.8%
Offer **on-campus instruction, with an option for distance learning** (e.g., in case of illness, health condition, or family preference).	54.3%
Offer **both on-campus instruction and distance learning**, in which all students will experience a blend of both in some way.	7.1%
Offer **distance learning only.**	3%
School is **closing permanently/not reopening** in the fall.	0.4%
Have **not identified a plan** at this time.	8.4%

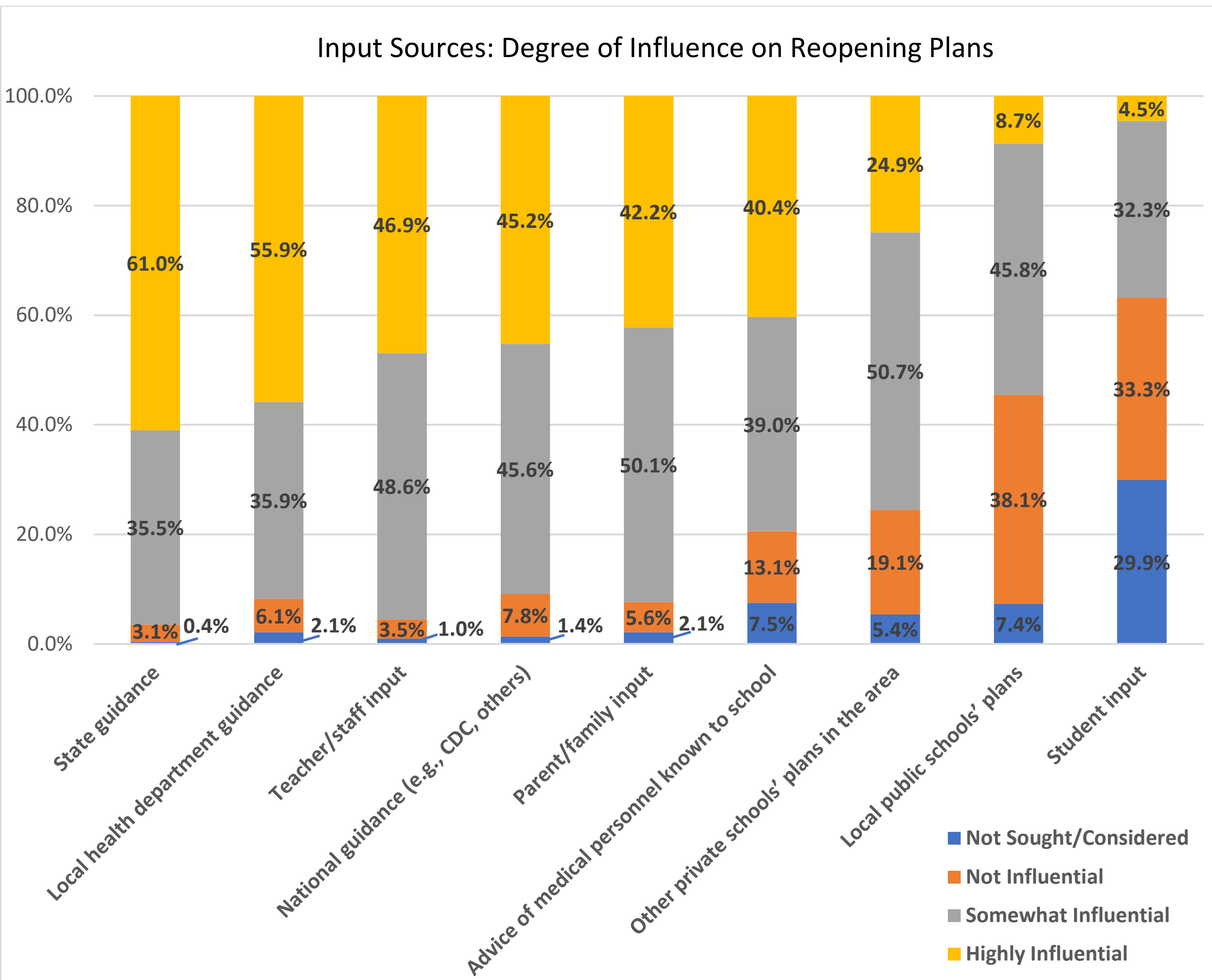
At the time of the survey administration, 66% of schools indicated that their current plan had been *finalized*, whereas 34% of schools had not finalized their current plan. Of those that had finalized their plans, 81% had communicated those plans to school families. When asked about their timeline for reopening, 18% of schools indicated they planned to delay the start of the school year, while the majority (82%) were planning an on-time opening.

For schools with attached **early education programs**, the majority of those programs (58.6%) were slated to open for on-campus instruction as usual. An additional third (35.9%) of early education programs were planning to be open, but with significant modifications (such as changes to scheduling, number of classes, etc.) due to COVID-19.

Influences on Planning

In order to better understand schools' planning processes, the survey asked respondents to describe the preferences of school parents in terms of a physical return to campus. The majority of respondents (54.7%) indicated that ***almost all* parents desired their students to return to campus**. Just over an additional third (35.2%) reported that *most* parents preferred a return to campus. An additional 8.2% indicated that parents were split on the issue of returning to campus, and less than 2% reported that most parents did not desire a physical return to campus.

The survey also asked about the influence of various input sources in schools' formulation of reopening plans, as reported in the graph below. **State guidance, health department guidance, and teacher/staff and parent input** were reported as the most influential, whereas student input was least influential (qualitative comments indicated most schools did not seek student input).

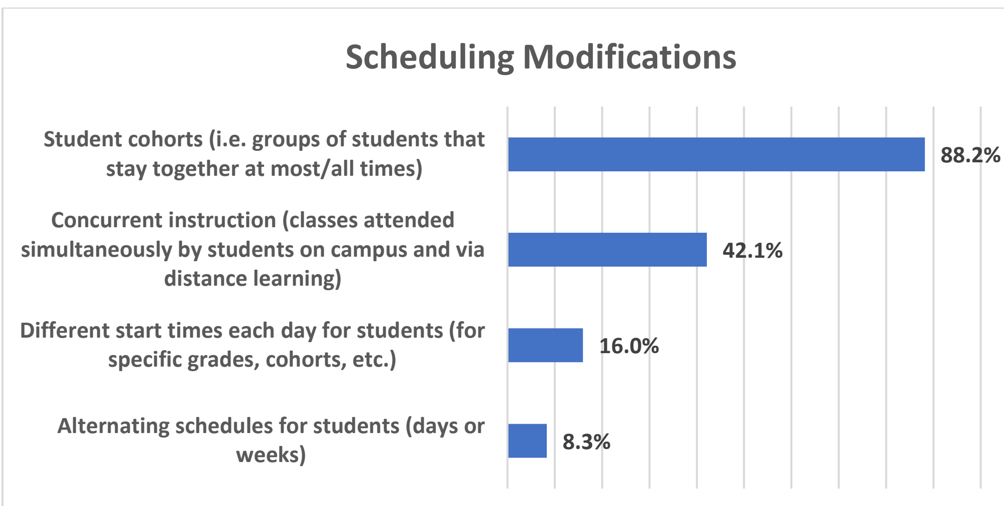


COVID-19 Modifications

Survey respondents provided data on modifications to scheduling, health and safety, space usage, programs and events, district transportation, special education and student support, and testing.

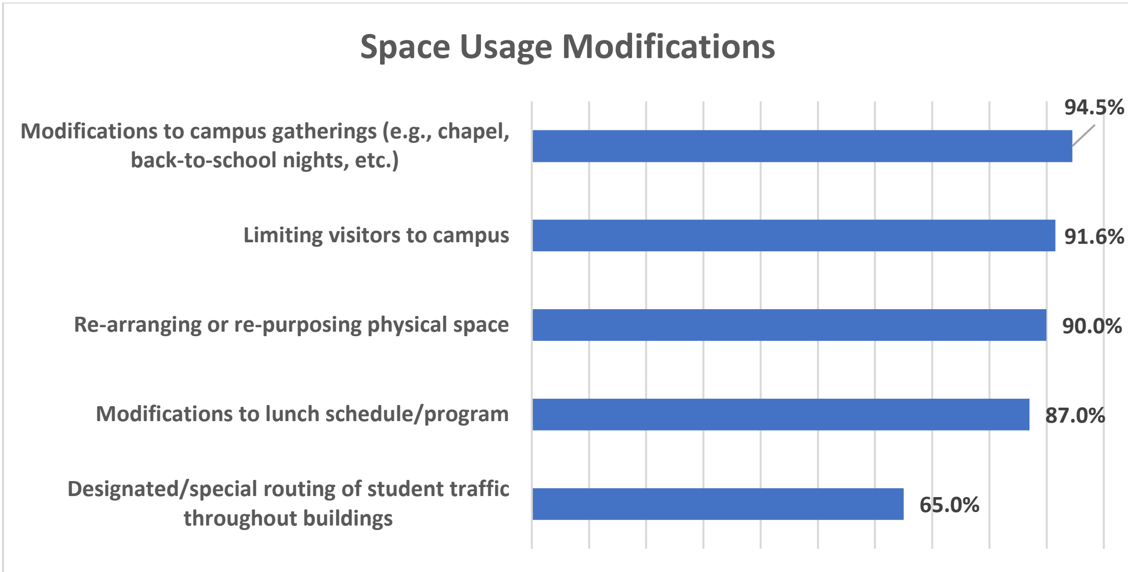
Scheduling

Christian schools responding to the survey planned a number of COVID-19-related modifications to the school schedule in their plans for reopening (see chart below). The most frequently cited were **student cohorts,** in which students stay together at most or all times during the day (88.2% of schools); **concurrent instruction**, in which classes are attended simultaneously by students on campus and via distance learning (42.1%); **different start times** each day for specific grades or cohorts of students (16%); and **alternating day or week schedules** for students (8.3%).



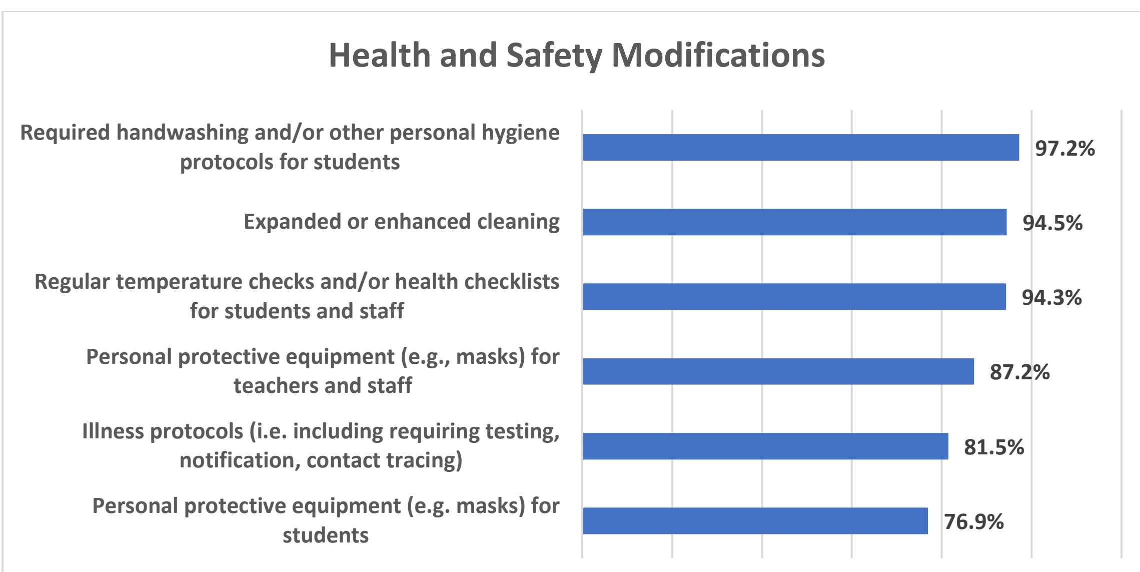
Space Usage

A number of modifications to space usage were featured in Christian schools' plans to reopen school (see chart on the following page). The most frequently cited were modifications to **campus gatherings,** such as chapels, back-to-school nights, etc. (94.5% of schools); **limiting visitors** to campus (91.6%); **re-arranging or re-purposing** physical space (90%); modifications to the **lunch schedule/program** (87%); and designated/special **routing of student traffic** through buildings (65%).



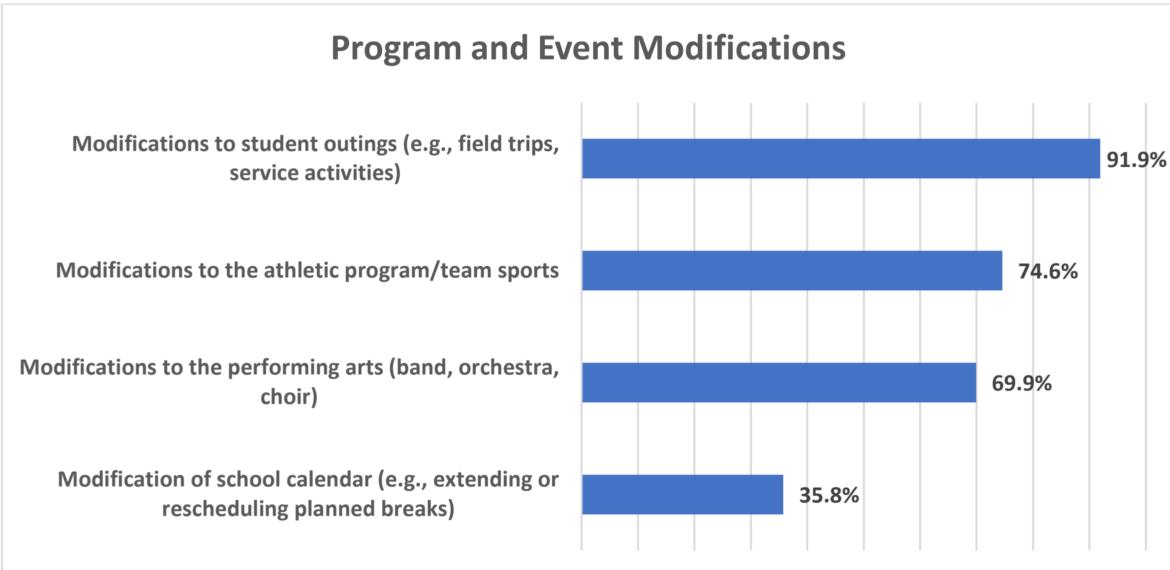
Health and Safety

A number of modifications to health and safety procedures were reported by schools in their reopening plans (see chart below). Close to all schools (97.2%) planned to **require handwashing** and/or other personal hygiene protocols, as well as **expand or enhance cleaning** (94.5%) and require **regular temperature checks and/or health checklists** for students and staff (94.3%). **Illness protocols** (i.e. requiring testing, notification, and contact tracing) were also planned by 81.5% of responding schools. And in terms of **personal protective equipment** (e.g., masks), 87.2% of schools were planning use of PPE for teachers and staff, and 76.9% for students.



Programs and Events

Schools reported a number of different modifications to programs and events at their campuses (see chart below). These included modifications to **student outings** like field trips and service activities (91.9%); to the **athletic program and/or team sports** (74.6%); to the **performing arts,** including band, orchestra, and choir (69.9%); and to the **school calendar,** i.e. by extending or rescheduling planned breaks (35.8%).

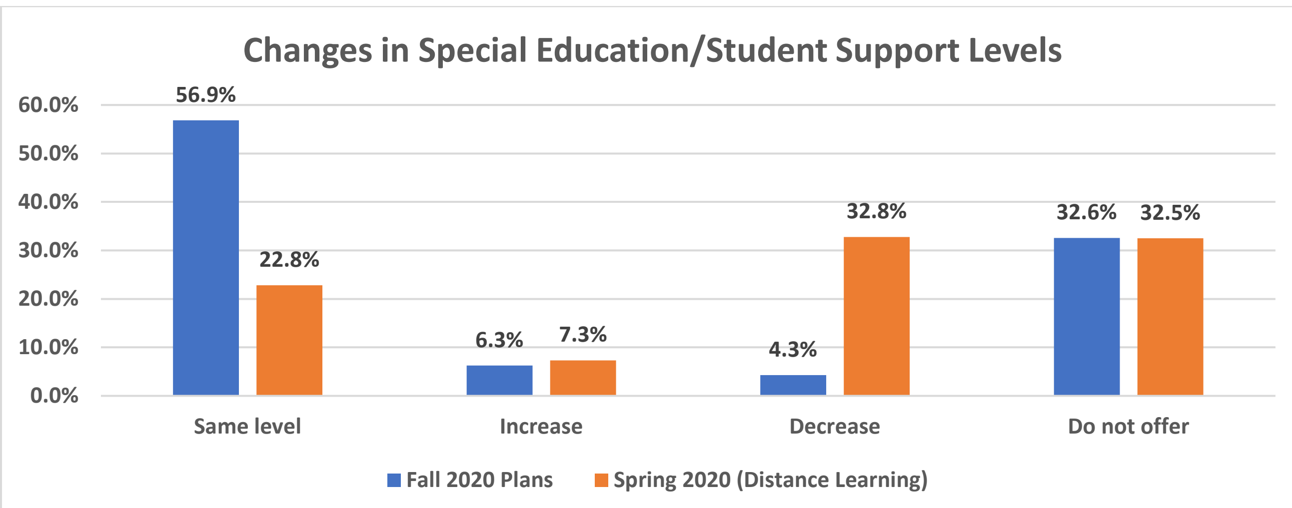


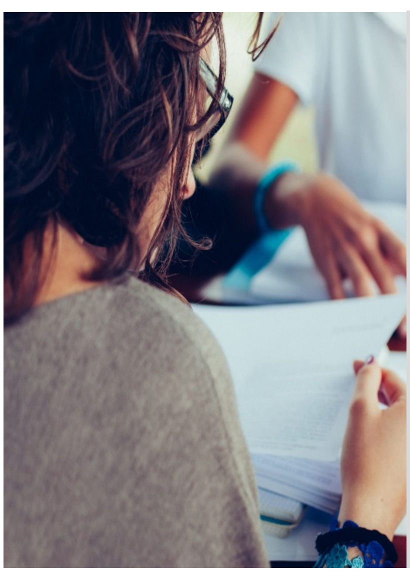
Student Transportation

Over two-thirds (69.3%) of responding schools indicated that their students **did not receive or use district-provided transportation**. The remaining 30.7% reported a **mixed picture of district transportation plans**, with 13.2% reporting that some or all of students' districts *will* be providing busing, 12% reporting that districts had *not yet* announced their plans, 3% reporting that some or all districts *refuse* to provide busing, and 2.6% of schools reporting a *mix of district decisions* to provide or not provide busing. Out of all responding schools, only 3% indicated they would **arrange or otherwise provide alternate transportation** should districts not provide busing to students.

Special Education and Student Support

The current survey asked participants about the availability of special education and student support services in their Fall 2020 plans. The same question was also asked on the previous survey, regarding services during distance learning in Spring 2020. The majority of schools (56.9%) reported planning to **offer the “same” level of support** as pre-COVID-19 for Fall 2020; this is up significantly from Spring 2020, when only 22.8% of schools held services steady at the same level, whereas 32.8% reported decreasing levels of support during the spring (see chart below). This suggests that special education and student support services may be returning to “normal” for this fall at those schools which offer them (notably, nearly a third of schools do not offer such services).



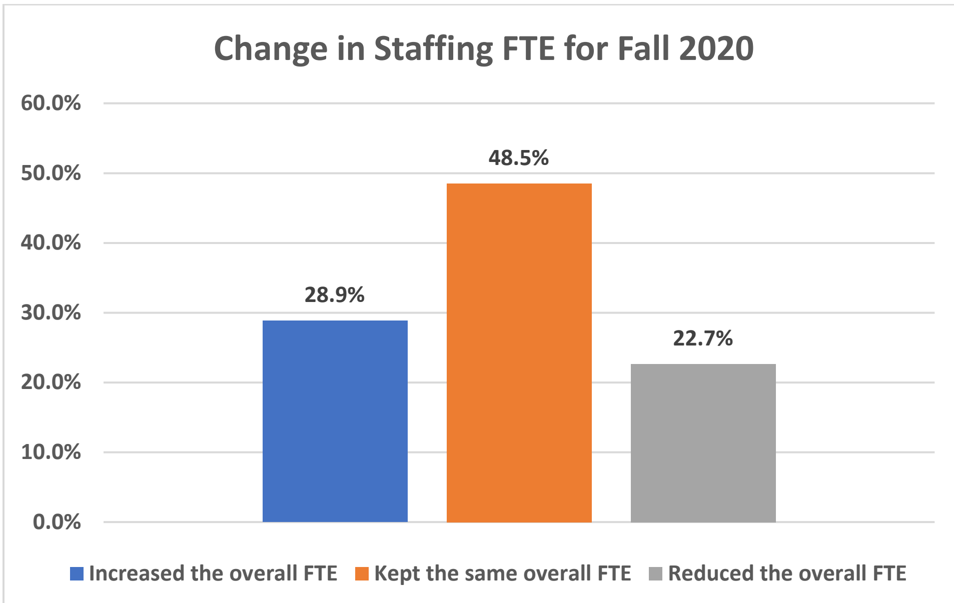


“The vast majority of our parents and students desire to get back to school routine. We have a few families who are hesitant to re-enter the on-campus school scene, and through positive discussion we have built a model that allows for a student to attend a live filming of the classroom while staying home. This kind of collaboration is what the body of Christ is all about! And it speaks volumes to the value held by many families for Christian education as a priority.”

—Central Pennsylvania

Staffing Impact

The survey asked schools about the impact of COVID-19 on their staffing levels as they plan for the 2020-2021 school year. Schools most frequently reported that they are **keeping the same overall FTE** for the coming year (48.5% of schools), while 28.9% reported an increase in overall FTE and 22.7% reported a decrease in FTE (chart below).



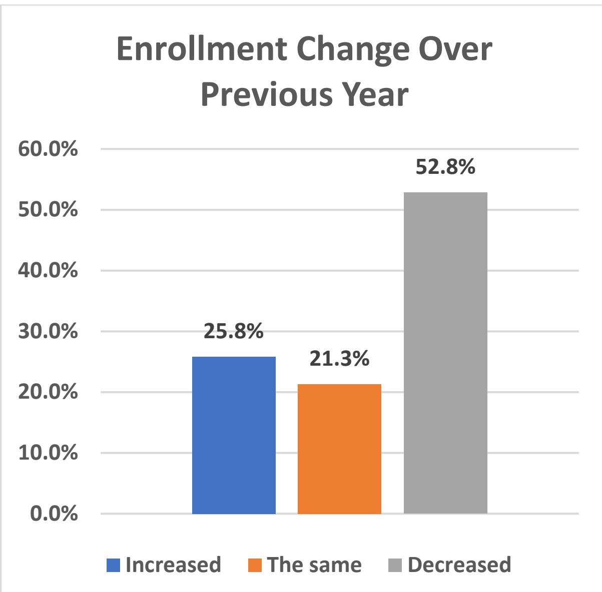
The survey also inquired about schools' expectations for teachers and staff to return physically to campus, and whether and how employees might be allowed to work from home. A majority of schools (62.1%) indicated they are **requiring all teachers and staff to return** to work on campus when it is open. An additional 22.5% reported that while they expect all teachers and staff to return, they will **allow those with documented medical or health concerns** to work from home (e.g., via distance learning). The remaining 15.4% reported that they will also work with teachers and staff **who are uncomfortable returning to campus** to allow them to work from home.

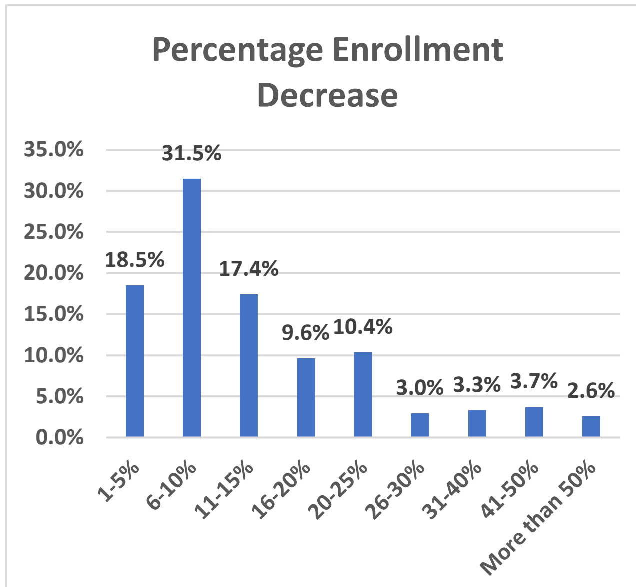
Financial Impact

The survey gauged a number of financial metrics and COVID-19 related financial impacts, including enrollment and operating budget changes, technology investments and upgrades, tuition discounts and financial aid, CARES Act participation, and fundraising.

Enrollment Changes

Just over half of schools (52.8%) reported decreased enrollment for Fall 2020 (chart left), with the most frequently cited range of enrollment decrease being 6-10% (chart right).



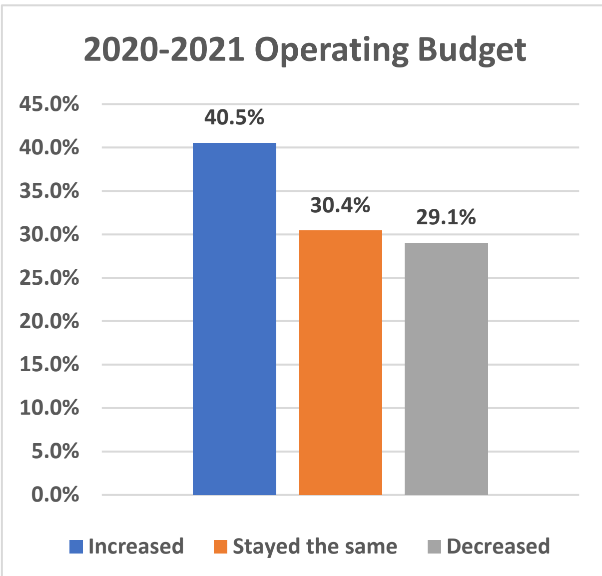


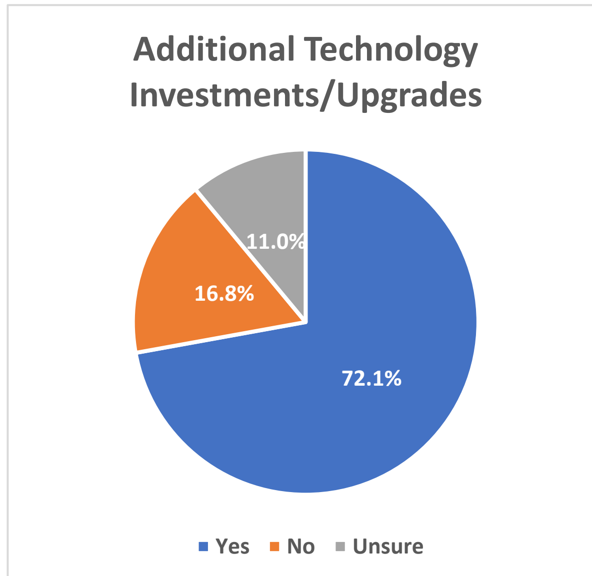
For those schools who reported increases in enrollment, many provided qualitative data that indicated the following reasons for those increases: lower classroom sizes; local public schools not providing in-person learning for Fall 2020; and nimble transition of Christian schools to distance learning in Spring 2020. These schools also reported increases in admissions inquiries and wait lists.

> *"Good will come of this time, if we but look for it. Our teachers have grown in their ability to leverage technology to enhance instruction. Our students have become flexible and more independent; these are the exact character habits that will be needed in their future. Our leadership team has had to wrestle with hard issues and come closer together as a result. We have seen God at work in our midst."*
>
> *—Milwaukee, WI suburbs*

Changes in Operating Budget

Schools most frequently reported that their operating budgets (40.5%) have **increased** for 2020-2021 (chart below left). Although the survey did not gather data on the reasons for this increase, it is possible that additional **technology investments and upgrades**—which were planned by over two-thirds of schools (chart below right)—are a contributing factor behind budget increases.





Tuition Discounts

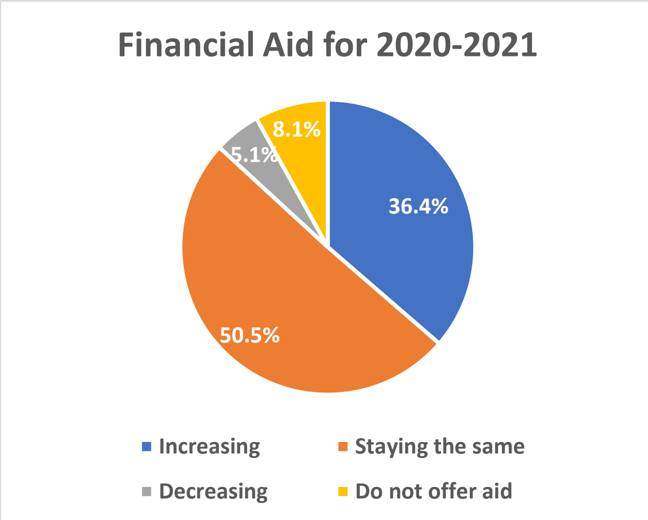
The vast majority of schools reported that they **are not offering tuition discounts** for either on-campus instruction (86.1%) or distance learning (73.1%). A slightly higher number of schools (11.2%) *will* offer a discount for distance-learning than for on-campus learning (9.8%) in the fall.

"During this uncertain time, we have been so blessed. People have donated to the school financially and stepped up to scholarship students whose families could no longer afford tuition. We went into this time of COVID very worried about our budget and our future, but we have so many positive things come out of it that we have amazing hope for the future."

—Twin Falls area, Idaho

"We are seeing many new inquiries and commitments from new families. God has provided for us, even in the middle of all the chaos…In November/December we were struggling greatly in our finances. We went from 'how are we going to survive financially this school year' to ending the school year in the positive [with] increased enrollment for the next year."

—Western Pennsylvania

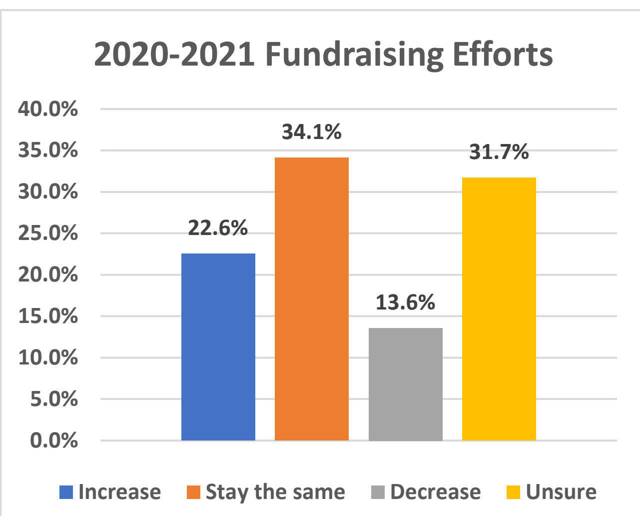


Financial Aid

A majority of schools (50.5%) reported that financial aid levels were staying the same as compared to the previous year, while over a third (36.4%) indicated plans to increase financial aid for 2020-2021. Another 5.1% of schools were decreasing aid, while 8.1% of schools reported not offering financial aid (chart left).

CARES Act Participation

At the time of the survey, a strong majority of schools (83.7%) indicated they had received funds through the Payroll Protection Program of the CARES Act. Close to half of schools (46.2%) also reported participation in Equitable Services programs through the CARES Act, with another 28.2% not participating and 25.6% unsure about their participation.



Fundraising Efforts

Just over a third of schools (34.1%) reported that their fundraising efforts would remain at the same level as previous years, while approximately another third (31.7%) indicated they were unsure of their plans with regard to changes in fundraising efforts. The remaining schools indicated their efforts would either increase (22.6%) or decrease (13.6%) this year (chart left).

Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative survey data revealed three emerging themes which, taken together, characterize the Fall 2020 outlook for Christian schools and their reopening plans. These are: 1) Christian schools are *open and ready for business*; 2) Christian schools are *delivering on their value proposition*; and 3) Christian schools will need to prioritize *financial sustainability* as they look to the future—likely now more than ever.

Open and Ready for Business

The Spring 2020 survey found that, overall, ACSI member schools responded nimbly to closures of their physical campuses due to COVID-19. Across all levels (early education through high school), approximately a third of schools missed zero instructional days, with two-thirds missing less than three days, and four out of five schools missing less than five. Moreover, the vast majority of schools continued to offer a substantial portion of their curriculum online.

The current survey shows that Christian schools continue to adjust nimbly to ongoing challenges posed by COVID-19 for Fall 2020, with a **clear majority planning for a physical (88.2%) and on-time (82%) return to campus.** These plans are highly responsive to the desire of families, with close to 90% of schools reporting that almost all or most families desire a physical return to campus. Even with a physical return planned, nearly two-thirds (61.4%) of schools are offering a distance learning option or component, which signals schools' ongoing commitment to remaining nimble and planning for contingencies in the face of COVID-19 related uncertainty.

Importantly, the data suggest that schools' plans have been developed thoughtfully, with careful consideration of state and health department guidance as well as input from staff and families. This is evident in schools' planned use of handwashing and personal hygiene protocols (97.2% of schools), expanded or enhanced cleaning (97.2%), modifications to campus gatherings (94.5%) and student outings like field trips (91.9%), limitations on visitors to campus (91.6%), re-arrangement or re-purposing of physical space (90%), and use of student cohorts (88.2%)—to name a few of the modifications most frequently cited by schools as part of their reopening plans.

Delivering on their Value Proposition

Qualitative data collected through the survey indicated that while most Christian schools will be open and ready for business in the fall, local schools in other sectors have mostly moved to distance learning or are limiting the number of days students are physically on campus. Many Christian schools responding to the survey reported an uptick in admissions inquiries and new enrollments by families who were attracted to Christian schools' readiness for an in-person return in the fall.

These findings suggest that Christian schools' value proposition related to providing a high-quality educational experience has been made clearer to the public through the challenges of COVID-19. Delivering on that value proposition has likely been aided by the smaller size of most Christian schools, their flexibility in staffing and scheduling, and their overall responsiveness and accountability to families as private schools. For Christian schools, reopening school—and doing so effectively and safely—is not optional, but essential to the children and families they serve.

Moreover, a significant part of Christian schools' value proposition is the strength of Christian community, as confirmed by the findings of the Cardus Education Survey (2018).[1] ACSI's Spring 2020 survey found that two-thirds of schools were providing emergency financial assistance to families in need as a result of COVID-19 impacts, and the current survey data suggests that this greater level of support is continuing into the fall—with over a third (36.4%) of schools *increasing* financial aid to families, and just over half of schools (50.5%) holding financial aid levels steady. Qualitative data from both surveys showed that not only are schools providing financial assistance, but also other school families are financially helping those in their school community who have been negatively impacted by COVID-19. This demonstrates the ways in which Christian communities genuinely care for each other and work to actualize Jesus's promise: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:25 NIV).

> *"Our parents are excited for students to be on campus, five days a week, even with masks/shields and social distancing. Local public schools are only two days a week on campus. We are blessed by increased enrollment this year—higher than it's been in over ten years."*
>
> *—Washington State*

[1] The CES found that graduates of Protestant schools reported a higher quality of relationships within their school communities. See: Cardus. 2018. *Perceptions of High School Experience and Preparedness for Life. 2018 Cardus Education Survey Report*. Available at: https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/cardus-education-survey-2018-perceptions-of-high-school-experience-and-preparedness-for-life/.

Prioritizing Financial Sustainability

The increase in enrollment at a quarter of Christian schools (25.8%) is heartening—especially given the qualitative data attributing much of that increase to schools' nimble response in reopening school as well as to their unique value proposition. However, this finding is tempered by aggregate data from the survey which suggest continued financial challenges lie ahead for many Christian schools.[2]

Specifically, the survey found that about half of schools (52.8%) are experiencing decreases in enrollment for the coming year, with 6-10% being the most frequently reported range of decrease (cited by 31.5% of schools). At the same time, 40.5% of schools saw their operating budget increase, while 30.4% stayed the same. When combined with the fact that over two-thirds (72.1%) of schools are planning for additional technology investments/upgrades, the data suggest that *schools' revenue in 2020-2021 is most likely to decline, while their operating expenses are most likely to increase*.

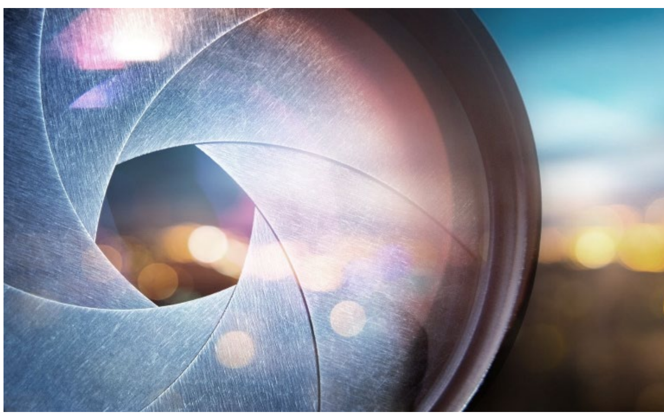
Again, looking at the data across all schools, this picture is further complicated by the likelihood that fundraising efforts will not be able to fill these gaps. This is because less than a quarter of schools (22.6%) report plans to increase fundraising efforts, while nearly half (47.7%) are staying the same level or are decreasing their efforts, and a staggering near-third (31.7%) do not have plans in place for fundraising as the new school year approaches. Although certainly the financial picture at the individual school level will vary, these sector-level findings suggest the importance of prioritizing financial sustainability in the months ahead.

Sound financial practices in budgeting, management, and fundraising are essential to school viability, regardless of market changes. However, in times of ongoing flux and uncertainty, schools' ability to thrive may increasingly depend on innovation and reaching new markets. Along these lines, data from the spring survey revealed that close to half of schools (48.6%) were considering

[2] It should be noted that less than a half-percent (0.4%) of schools reported they would close permanently this fall. This suggests that widespread closure of Christian schools is *not* occuring in the lead up to the 2020-2021 school year. However, there is reason to question the validity of this particular survey finding in light of the likelihood of self-selection bias (i.e. schools that are closing their doors may be less likely to participate in a survey on school reopenings).

added blended learning to their offerings, and over a third (35.4%) were considering offering a fully virtual program or programs as part of a hybrid model. Qualitative data from the two surveys indicated that some schools are also looking at efforts like merging with other Christian schools or programmatically supporting home-school groups or co-ops. These and similar approaches can increase access to Christian education, help develop new income streams, and foster collaboration and cost-sharing among schools.

Christian schools have been experiencing challenges to sustainability for more than a decade,[3,4] but COVID-19 is likely to accelerate and deepen schools' need to take significant steps toward rethinking and reimagining their financial models. Paradoxically, for Christian education to be sustained into the future, the way Christian education looks and functions will need to change. This is because sustainability does not mean finding a way to continue current practices into the future, as much as that might be preferred. Rather, sustainability means ensuring the school's *mission* continues into the future, which likely will require that Christian schools—and the financial models by which they operate—look different from the past or today. To this end, ACSI's new Sustainability Initiative, which fields in 2020-2021, will study the question of how schools move toward innovative models that lend themselves to missional sustainability, both during the uncertainty of COVID-19 and beyond. The findings from this research will be co-published with Cardus midyear.



"The current COVID circumstances have been the impetus for our school to begin the virtual school we have considered for several years, and many of our families are enrolling in the virtual option."

—Northern New Jersey

[3] In 2017, Barna and ACSI research mapped the ways in which the changing faith profile of parents and proliferation of educational options changed the market landscape for Christian schools. See: Barna and ACSI. 2017. *Multiple Choice: How Parents Sort Education Options in a Changing Market.* Colorado Springs, CO: ACSI.

[4] The 2019 Global Christian School Leadership Summit (GCSLS) drew over 1100 Christian education leaders from North America and across the world. Attendees were asked in the post event survey, "What do you think is the number one priority that Christian schools need to tackle right away?" Their top response was *enrollment and sustainability*. See: In Christ Communications. 2019. Landmark summit survey reveals encouraging signs for Christian school movement as leaders commit to innovate. 22 March 2019 press release. Available at: https://inchristcommunications.com/portfolio/landmark-summit-survey-reveals-encouraging-signs-for-christian-school-movement-as-leaders-commit-to-innovate/.

ACSI Resources

To support member schools and the Christian school community at large, ACSI has developed COVID-19 related offerings as well as pivoted existing efforts toward supporting schools during this challenging time. Resources listed below can be accessed by visiting **ACSI.org** and clicking on the "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Resources" bar at the top.

Virtual Town Hall Meetings: Town Hall events are recorded and archived on the coronavirus website. Early education Town Halls are offered as well. All Town Halls feature experts and a panel of school leaders who address pertinent topics, including:

- *What About Tuition? Quality Education During a Pandemic*
- *Keeping Your Promise: Solutions for Summative Assessments*
- *Adapt: Recruiting and Keeping Families in Uncertain Times*
- *Well-Being: Nurturing Your Community Amidst Isolation*
- *Finance Part 1: Budgeting for the Unknown*
- *Finance Part 2: Fundraising and Development During a Crisis*
- *Graduation Town Hall*
- *Innovate: The Changing Landscape of Christian Education*
- *COVID-19: Managing Anxiety and Grief During Uncertain Times*
- *Grow: Best Practices in Online Learning*
- *Kingdom Parenting Meets COVID-19: The Importance of Routines and Rituals*
- *Mission Possible: Assessing Summer and COVID-19 Academic Slide*
- *Maintaining Healthy Attachments with Children During a Crisis*
- *Back to School: What's Going to Be Different*
- *How COVID-19 is Affecting Christian Education Around the World*

Legal and Legislative Resources: ACSI's legal and government affairs team provides current, relevant information for Christian schools related to federal legislation, state laws and mandates, and legal considerations for schools. Live and recorded webinars, as well as important updates, are provided for free on the coronavirus resource page.

ACSI Community: ACSI members are invited to join peers and ACSI Leadership on ACSI's dynamic community platform to continue the conversations and collaborate with each other, as they work to meet the unique needs of their schools.

ACSI Blog: Weekly blogs feature experts and school leaders addressing COVID-19 topics related to school leadership, school growth, teaching and learning, community and culture, professional development, and encouragement for Christian school families. Read and subscribe at **blog.acsi.org**.