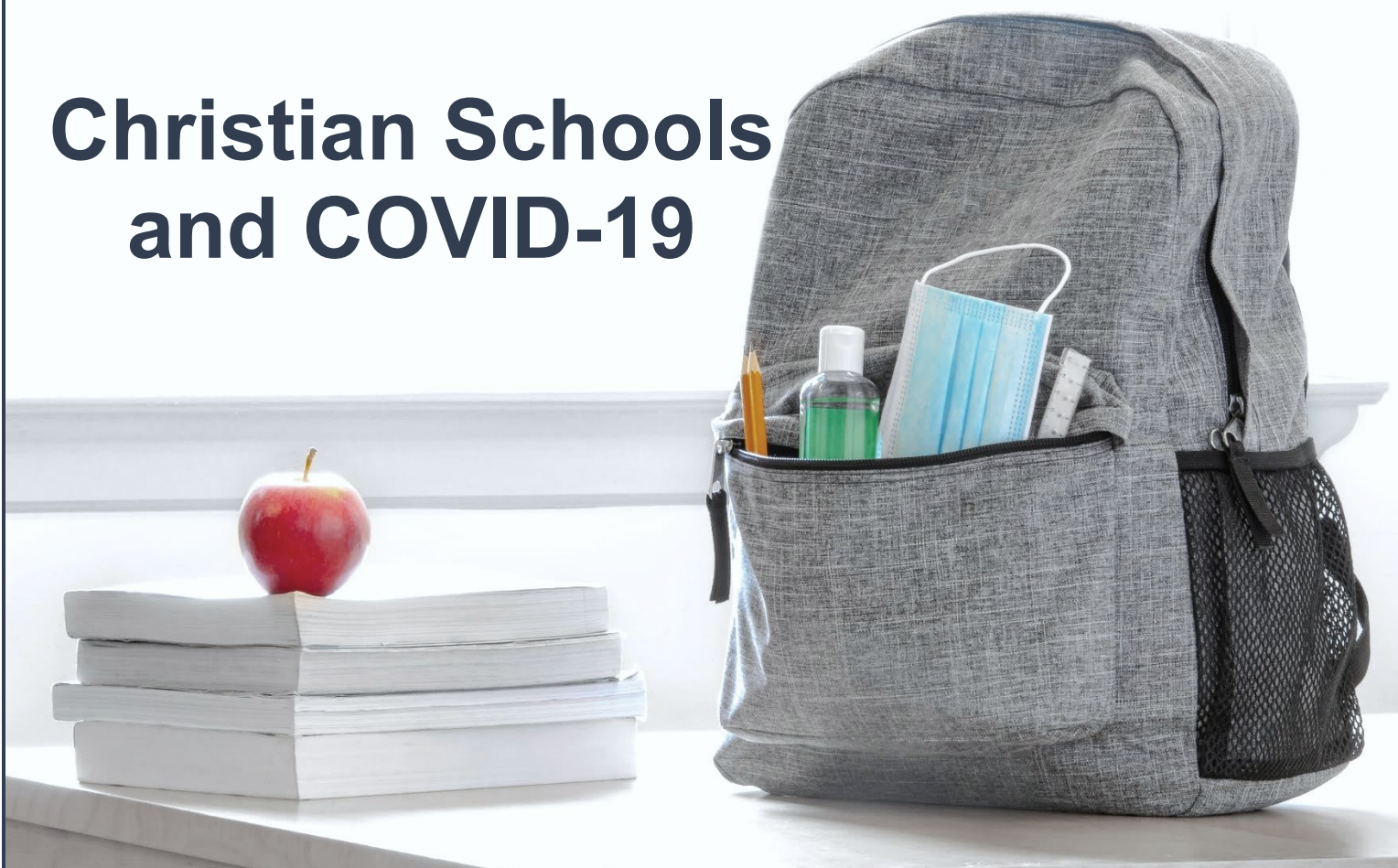


Christian Schools and COVID-19



2020-2021 School Year Profile



DECEMBER 2020—ACSI Research
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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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.

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Overview

The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) serves over 2,300 member schools in the United States and another 5,500 abroad, as well as supports close to 25,000 schools around the globe through its various services. In an effort to understand the responses of member schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, ACSI Research conducted two surveys of U.S. schools, first in late April 2020 and again in July 2020. Findings from these surveys pointed to the overall nimbleness and tenacity of Christian schools in responding to COVID, including pivoting to distance learning in the spring and planning for in-person reopening for the fall.

ACSI's third U.S. survey, conducted in mid-November 2020, captured data from the 2020-2021 school year on enrollment trends, COVID disruption, distance learning planning and discounts, COVID modifications to sports and other activities, special education and student support, and faculty well-



being (including schools' practices to support teachers this academic year). As with prior surveys, the current survey also asked participants to provide qualitative stories of their experiences, which are highlighted throughout this report.

With over 730 schools responding to the current survey, findings showed that the vast majority of Christian schools delivered on their promise to re-open in person and to do so safely and comprehensively. The current findings clearly

support those of earlier surveys, which suggest that Christian schools continue to respond nimbly and adapt creatively in the face of ongoing and unprecedented challenge to the educational sector. Along these lines, three themes (see pages 21-24) that characterize the 2020-2021 academic year for the Christian school sector are that schools are *delivering on their promises to families*, facing challenges in *caring for the school community*, and *looking (and learning) ahead* to a post-COVID future.

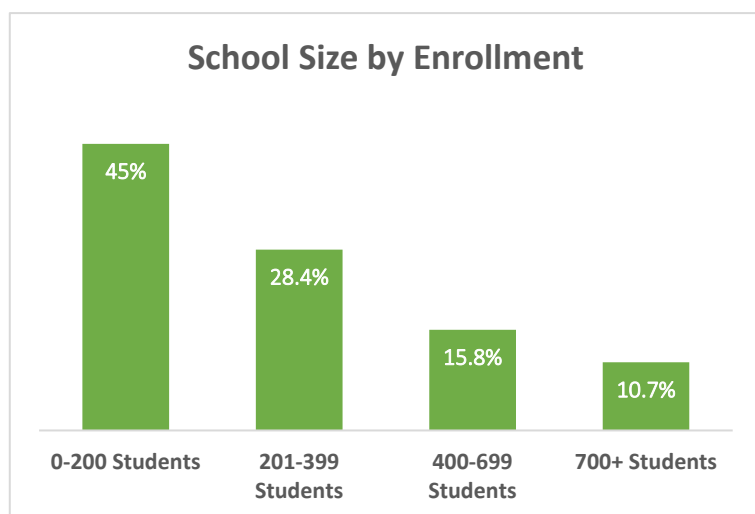
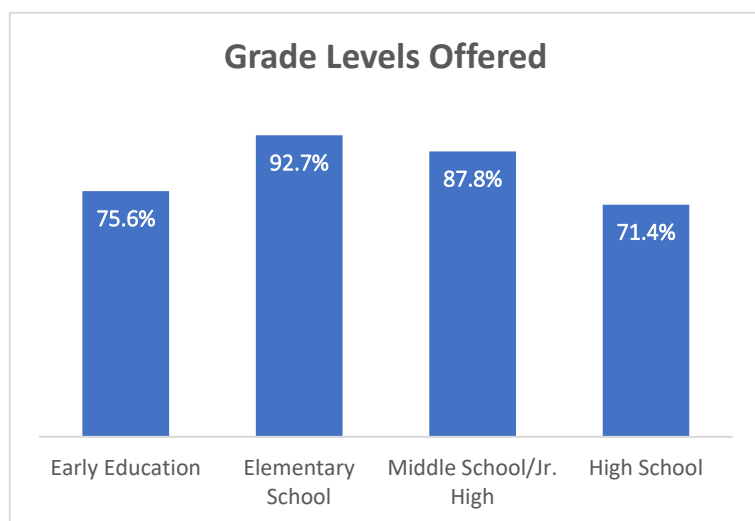
"We continue to be reminded that God is able to do exceedingly, abundantly more than we can think or imagine [Ephesians 3:20]. He has brought some lovely families to us that we would normally not have enrolled. I have connected with a group of PA Christian leaders through this pandemic and am grateful for the wisdom and encouragement I find with them. Our school community is stronger through this season. It is amazing to see how God is knitting us together through adversity."

—Eastern PA

Survey Demographics

In order to gauge how Christian schools are responding to ongoing COVID challenges, ACSI fielded a third survey electronically in mid-November 2020. All member schools in the United States were invited to participate via email. A total of 738 unique schools responded to the survey for a response rate of 32%.

Overall, the responding schools were fairly representative of ACSI membership across a number of demographic factors. This includes geographic distribution, with 27% of responding schools located in the Western U.S., 29% in the Central U.S., and 44% in the Eastern U.S. Schools were also representative in terms of school size (by enrollment) and grade levels offered (see charts below).*



“Our entire school community has become more adaptable and supportive in this time, and values even more the impact of in-person education.”

—Northern OH

“We have had a huge surge of enrollment, as parents are looking for an educational program that serves their children on campus. We consider it to be an honor and a privilege to serve the families in need at this time, and we hope to be able to share God’s love with them first and foremost.”

—San Diego, CA

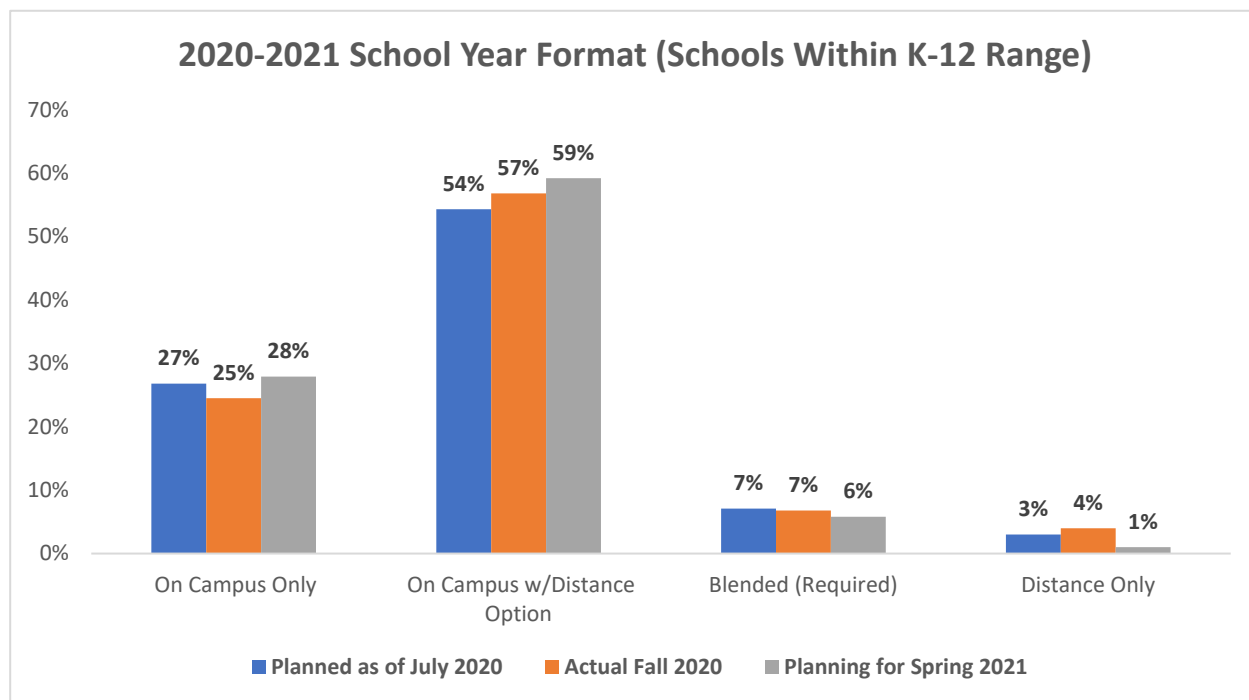
*NOTE: Where percentages do not amount to 100 throughout the report, this is due to respondents’ ability to select multiple options.

Reopening & Current Status

The survey asked about schools' *current* status at the point of administration (in mid-November). The **vast majority of schools (88%) with grade levels anywhere within the K-12 range were physically reopened**, with 24.5% offering on-campus instruction only, 56.8% offering on-campus instruction plus a distance learning option (e.g., in case of illness, health condition, or family preference), and 6.8% requiring all students to experience some form of blended learning (on-campus plus distance learning). Just 4% of schools continued to have their physical campuses closed, with only distance learning being offered.



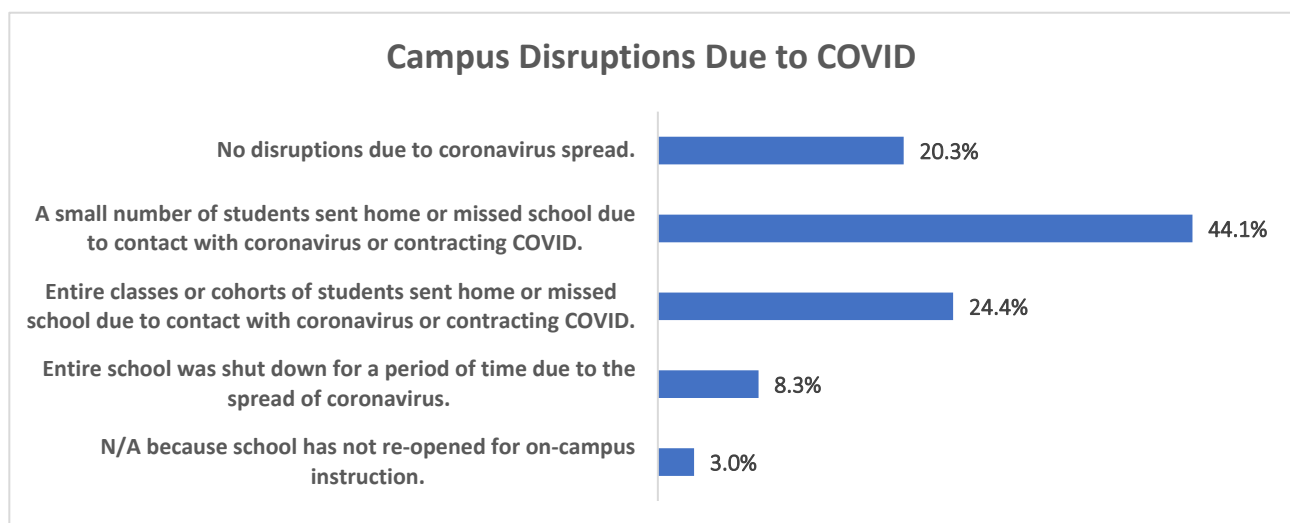
When compared with data from the July 2020 survey, these numbers remained within a margin of 2.5 percentage points, which suggests that most schools implemented their reopening plans as designed. And when asked about their plans for Spring 2021, most schools will continue with their current option(s) in place, though a slight shift toward on-campus instruction (with or without a distance learning option) can be observed in schools' planning (see chart below for comparisons).



A similar trend was observed for attached **early education** programs. The majority of those programs (68%) opened for on-campus instruction as usual, which was over 10 percentage points higher than originally planned in July 2020 (at 58.6%). This difference coincided with a 10-percentage point drop in schools opening with significant modifications (at 25%), as compared with 35.9% of schools that anticipated having to open with such modifications in July 2020. For Spring 2021, 73% of programs plan to be on campus as usual (an additional gain of 5 percentage points over Fall 2020), and 23% plan to be on campus but with scheduling modifications as noted (a decrease of 2 percentage points), again indicating a shift toward more on-campus instruction without scheduling modifications.

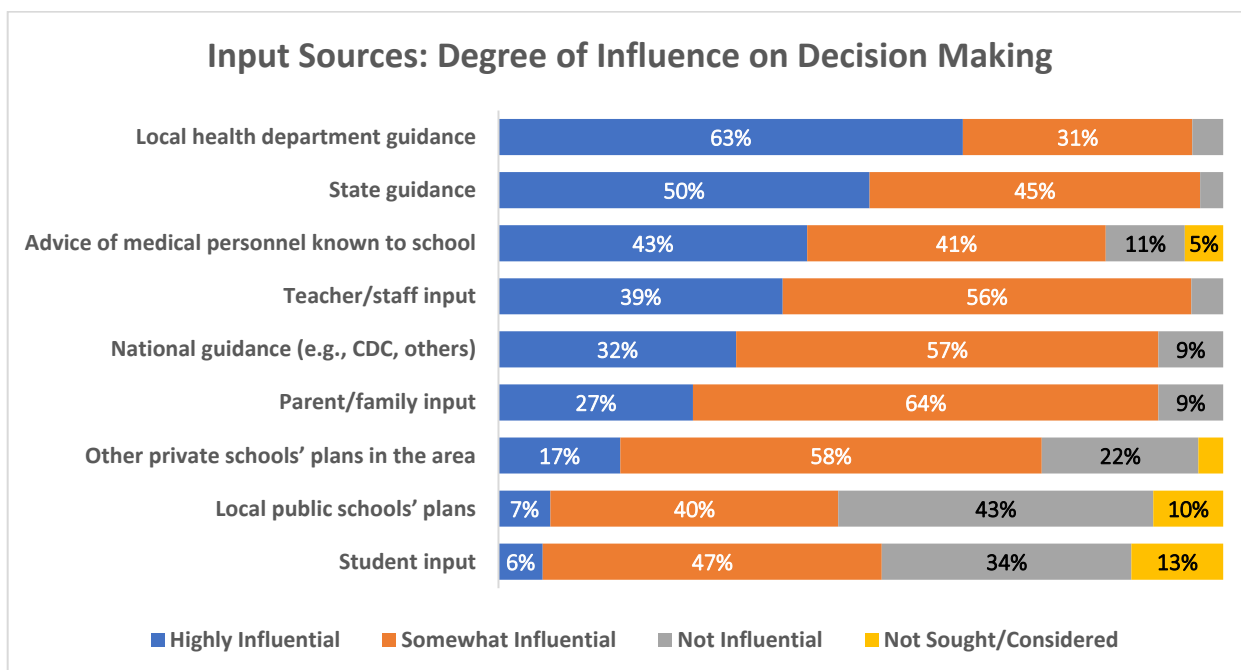
COVID Disruption

At the time of survey administration, a fifth of schools (20.3%) reported that they had experienced **no disruption** due to coronavirus spread in Fall 2020, while an additional 44% reported only experiencing a **small disruption** due to COVID (e.g., a small number of students were sent home or missed school). Nearly a quarter (24.4%) had experienced a **substantial disruption** (e.g., sending or keeping home entire classes or cohorts of students). Less than a tenth (8.3%) reported having to **shut down** the entire school for a period of time as a result of coronavirus spread.



Influences on Decision Making

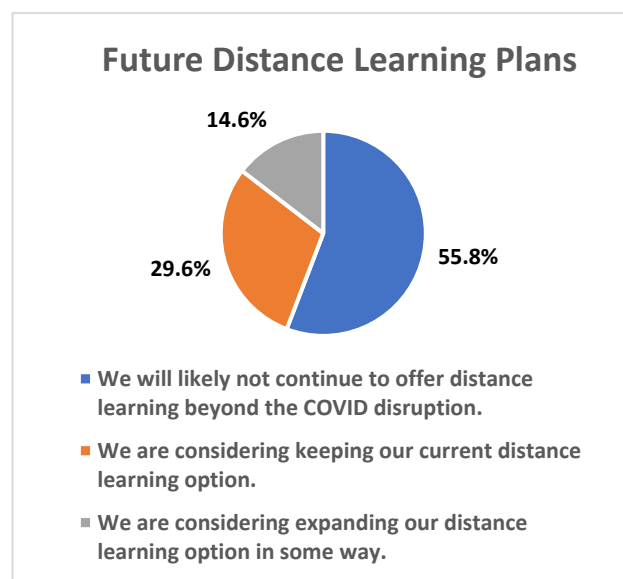
In order to better understand schools' planning processes, the survey also asked about the influence of various input sources in ongoing decision making related to COVID, as reported in the graph below. **Local health department guidance, state guidance, and advice of medical personnel known to the school** were reported as the most influential (see chart on next page).



This finding suggests that schools are taking health-related guidelines and advice into the strongest consideration as they make decisions for their students, faculty and staff, and school communities.

Distance Learning Planning

The current survey also asked about schools' plans for their distance learning programs in 2021-2022 (assuming an abatement of COVID for next school year). Of those schools with distance learning options currently in place, 55.8% of schools plan to **discontinue their distance learning options** beyond COVID, while 44% plan to either **keep distance learning** options in place (29.6%) or **expand them** in some way (14.6%). (See chart at right.)



“Multiple students have chosen e-learning for a short time due to family travel needs or health needs (COVID-related and not COVID-related). The e-learning option has opened a world of possibilities that did not exist before COVID.”

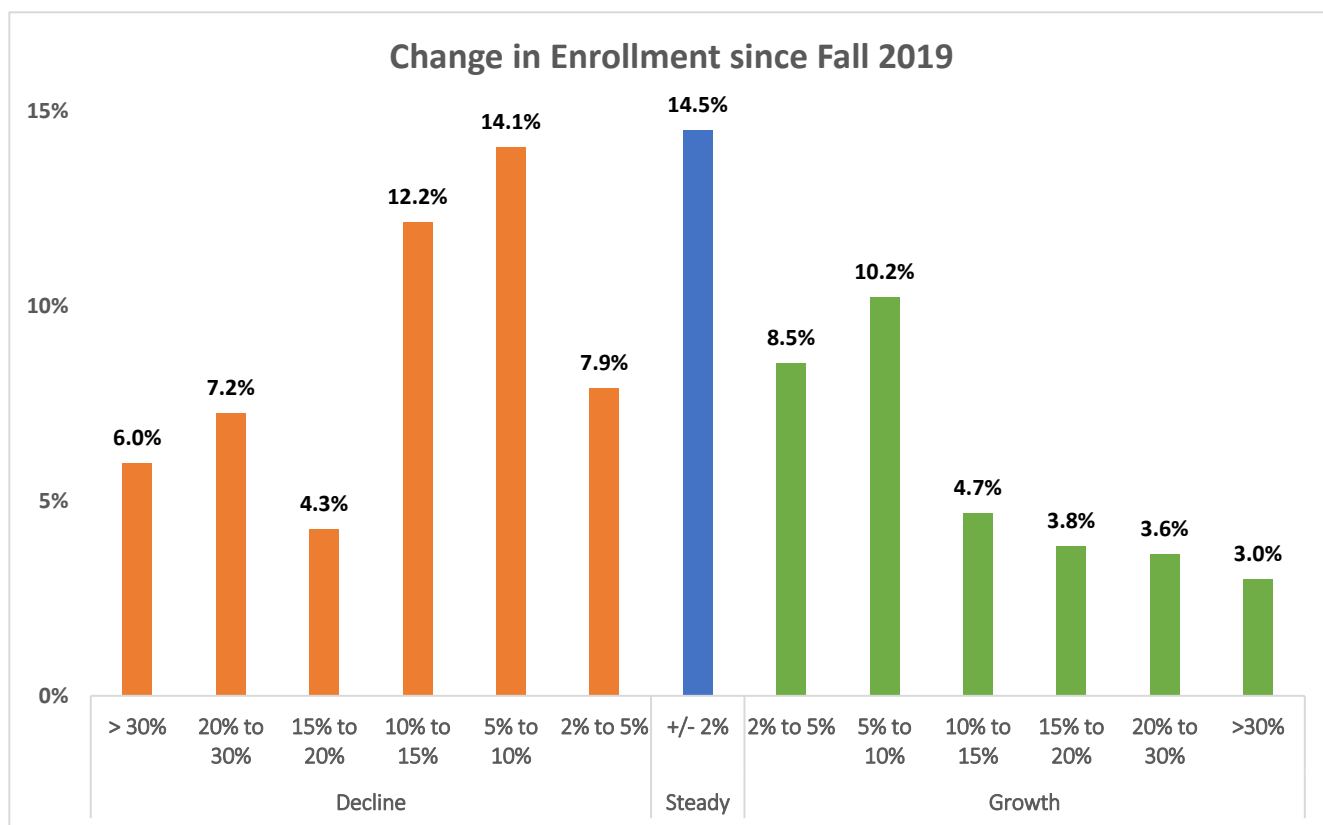
—Columbus, OH

Enrollment Trends

The survey asked respondents to report their enrollment numbers at four data points: start of Fall 2019; end of Spring 2020; start of Fall 2020; and at the administration of the survey (in November 2020). A number of analyses were conducted to generate a robust picture of enrollment trends among Christian schools through the COVID disruption, as shared below.

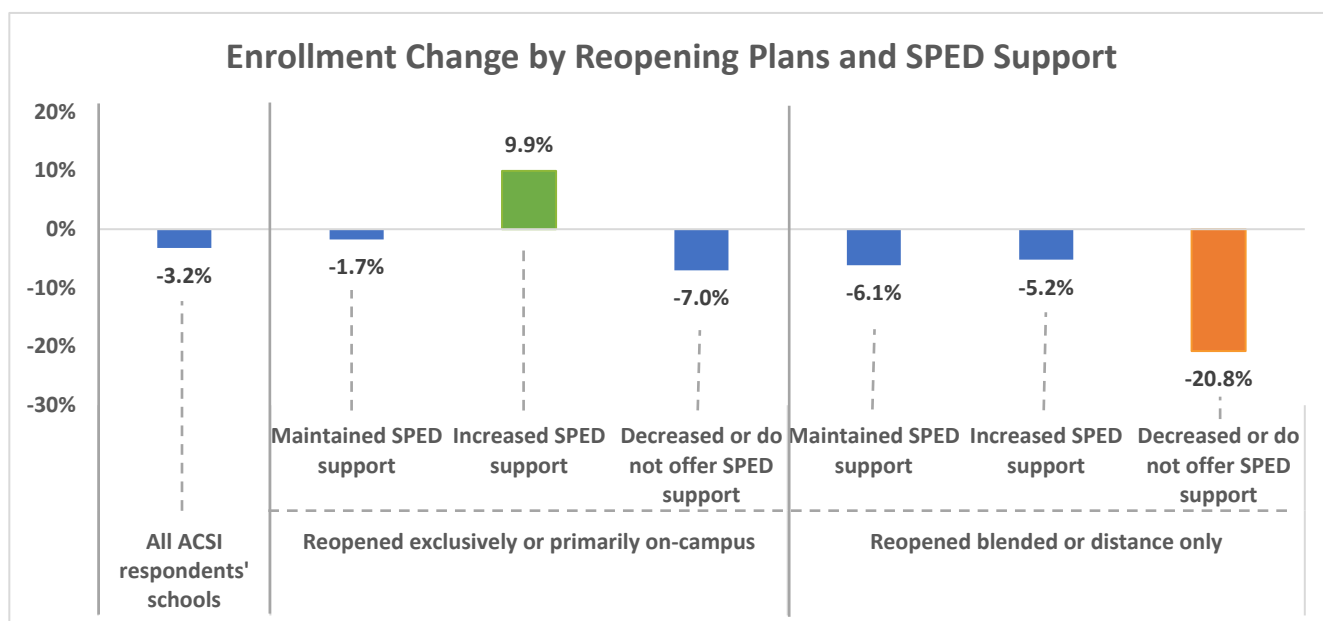
Overall Enrollment Trends

On average, schools experienced a **3.2% decline in enrollment** from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020. However, this number does not depict the wide variability across schools. Specifically, only a slight majority of schools (**51.7%**) indicated that enrollment for Fall 2020 declined as compared with Fall 2019, with the most frequently reported range of decline between 5%-10%. A **third of schools (33.8%) reported an increase in enrollment** from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020, with the most frequently reported range of enrollment gain between 5%-10%. Finally, **14.5% of schools reported that their enrollment remained steady** (within $\pm 2\%$) from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 (see chart below).



Enrollment Trends by Reopening Scenario*

Schools that **reopened exclusively or primarily on campus in Fall 2020 fared favorably** (with an average loss of 2.2% of enrollment) compared to those that reopened with distance learning only or with a blended on-campus and virtual instruction for all-students (with an average loss of 9.6%). Notably, the combination of **opening on campus and increasing support for special education (SPED) students was particularly meaningful**, with schools that did both seeing enrollment growth of 9.9%. In contrast, schools that reopened with blended or distance-only instruction and decreased SPED support declined in enrollment by over 20% (see chart below).

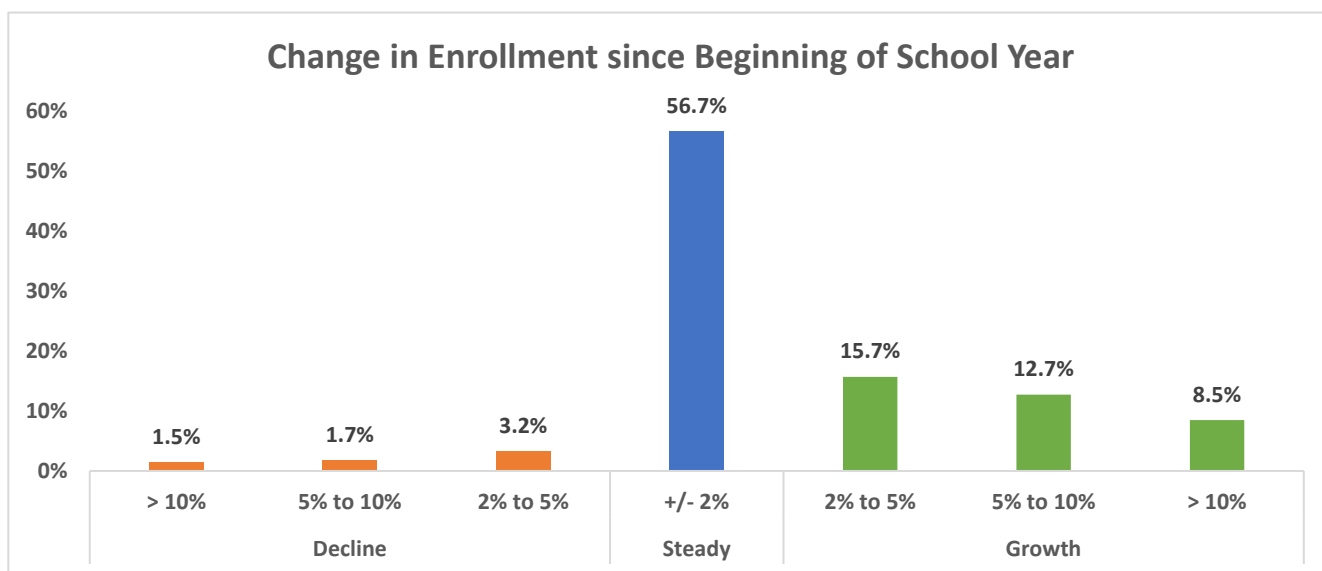


*It should be noted that findings regarding differing enrollment by reopening scenario are correlational in nature; therefore causality cannot be inferred.

Enrollment Changes from Fall Reopening to Present

Enrollment numbers since the beginning of the school year present a more stable, even favorable, picture. The majority of respondents (56.7%) indicated that **enrollments have held steady** within a margin of $\pm 2\%$ since reopening for the fall semester, while **over a third of schools (36.9%) reported seeing enrollment growth** since the beginning of the school year (see chart on next page).





Just as in earlier surveys, for those schools that 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; value of Christian school community and caring teachers; and nimble transition of Christian schools to distance learning in Spring 2020.

“We have gained 35-40 new students whose parents state they have considered our school before but didn't realize how much we have to offer until this year. They made the decision when other schools were not allowing in-person instruction, but now say they would never leave!”

—Huntsville, AL suburbs

“We have had unchurched families enroll in response to COVID who have been incredibly grateful for the love, inclusion, and support of our students and staff. One family couldn't believe that his daughter's class was praying for their sick neighbor.”

—Boulder, CO suburbs

“Many students have enrolled from the public schools because we are offering in-person instruction... The personalized instruction we are able to provide, and greater teacher/student interaction because of small class sizes, is really bringing out the best in some of these students who have struggled in other settings. It is a blessing to serve them and their families and have a unique opportunity to share the gospel!”

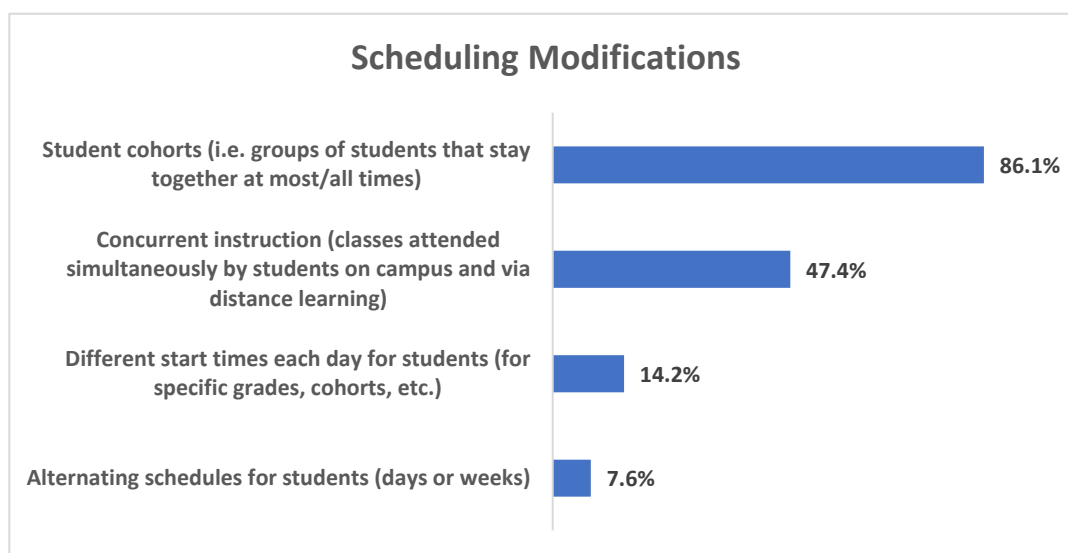
—Southern OR

COVID Modifications

Survey respondents provided data on modifications to scheduling, health and safety, space usage, and student activities. In addition, respondents indicated whether these modifications would continue or be adjusted into Spring 2020.

Scheduling

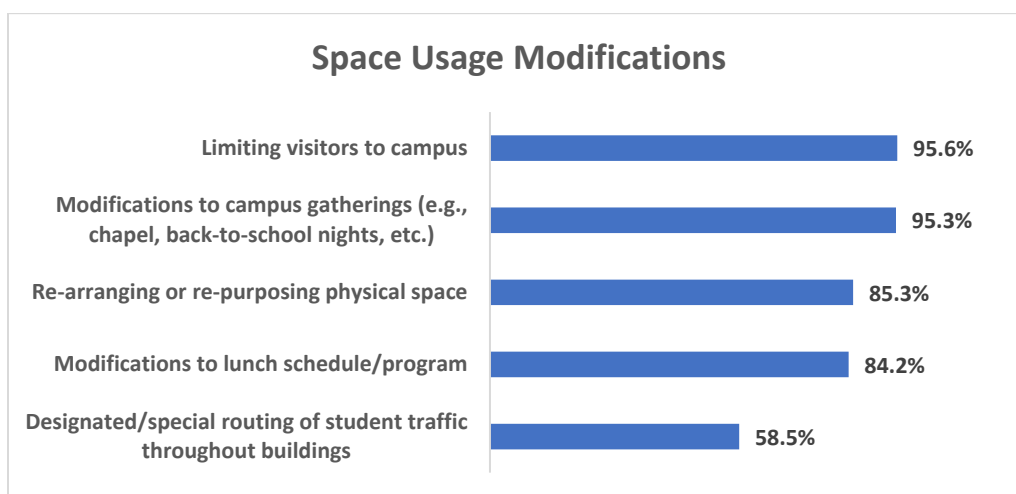
Christian schools responding to the survey planned a number of COVID-19-related modifications to the school schedule in use for Fall 2020 (see chart below). The most frequently cited were **student cohorts**, in which students stay together at most or all times during the day (86.1% of schools); **concurrent instruction**, in which classes are attended simultaneously by students on campus and via distance learning (47.4%); **different start times** each day for specific grades or cohorts of students (14.2%); and **alternating day or week schedules** for students (7.6%). These percentages were similar to those reported by schools in July 2020 as part of their reopening plans (+/- 5%).



In looking toward Spring 2020, 84.5% of schools reported that they anticipate these modifications to **stay about the same**, 9.8% will **reduce or otherwise scale back** these modifications, 4% will **add to or somehow extend** these modifications, and 1.5% are planning to **eliminate** them entirely.

Space Usage

A number of modifications to space usage were in use by Christian schools during Fall 2020 (see chart below). The most frequently cited were **limiting visitors** to campus (95.6%); modifications to **campus gatherings** (95.3%); **rearranging or repurposing** physical space (85.3%); modifications to the **lunch schedule/program** (84.2%); and designated/special **routing of student traffic** through buildings (58.5%). These percentages were again fairly similar to those reported by schools in July 2020 as part of their reopening plans (+/- 5%).



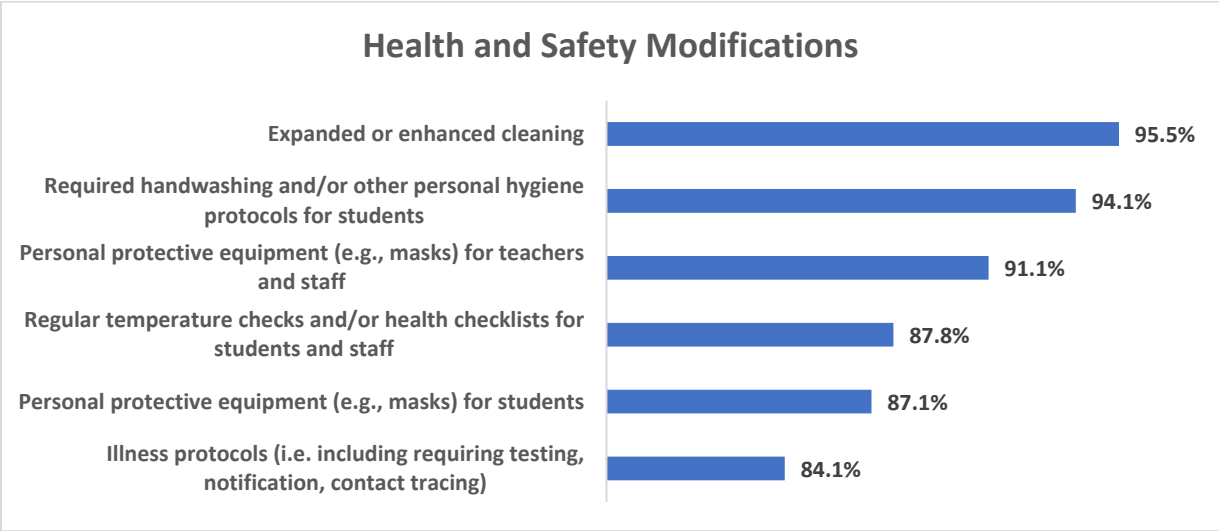
In looking toward Spring 2020, 85% of schools reported that they anticipate these modifications **to stay about the same**, 11.5% will **reduce or otherwise scale back** these modifications, 2.8% will **add to or somehow extend** these modifications, and less than one percent are planning to **eliminate** them entirely.

“Something we hear regularly from students, parents and staff is that everyone is so happy that we put in place effective safety protocols and opened for in-person instruction. Even with all of the changes in our daily routines that keep our learning cohorts separated from each other, there is a strong sense of community, that we are in this together.” —Gaithersburg, MD

“We have been greatly blessed by a school community that loves and cares for one another. One of the biggest blessings is the patience and understanding that the parents have exercised as we have had to shift from face-to-face learning to distance learning in some grades/divisions during the semester.” —Wichita, KS

Health and Safety

A number of modifications to health and safety procedures were reported by schools as being in use during Fall 2020 (see chart below). Close to all schools are conducting **expanded or enhanced cleaning** (95.5%) and **require handwashing** and/or other personal hygiene protocols (94.1%). **Regular temperature checks and/or health checklists** were in use for students and staff (87.8%), as were **illness protocols** (i.e. requiring testing, notification, and contact tracing) at 84.1% of responding schools. In terms of **personal protective equipment** (e.g., masks), 91.1% of schools required use of PPE for teachers and staff, and 87.1% for students. Percentages were again similar to those reported by schools in July 2020 as part of reopening plans (+/- 5%), *with the exception of mask usage for students*, which jumped from 76.9% of schools planning to require masks for students, to 87.1% of schools requiring them (for a gain of 10.2%).



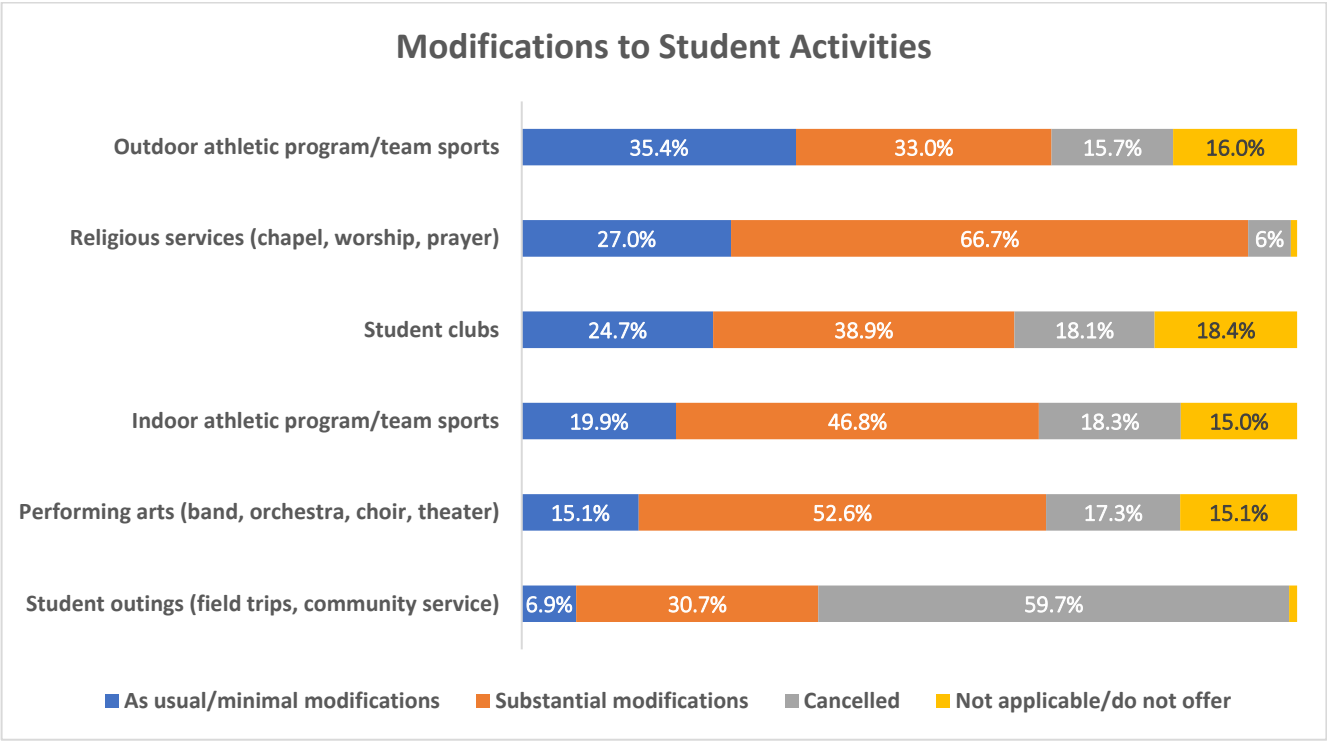
In looking toward Spring 2020, 86% of schools reported that they anticipate these modifications to **stay about the same**, 10.4% will **reduce or otherwise scale back** these modifications, 3.3% will **add to or somehow extend** these modifications, and less than 1% plan to **eliminate** them completely.

“Our morning health checks in the parking lot have become a favorite part of our day. Greeting each student by name and saying hello to parents has been a wonderful way to start our day. The Lord took a situation that logistically I was dreading and He flipped it so that it has become a highlight of our day. God is good all the time.”

—Santa Barbara County, CA

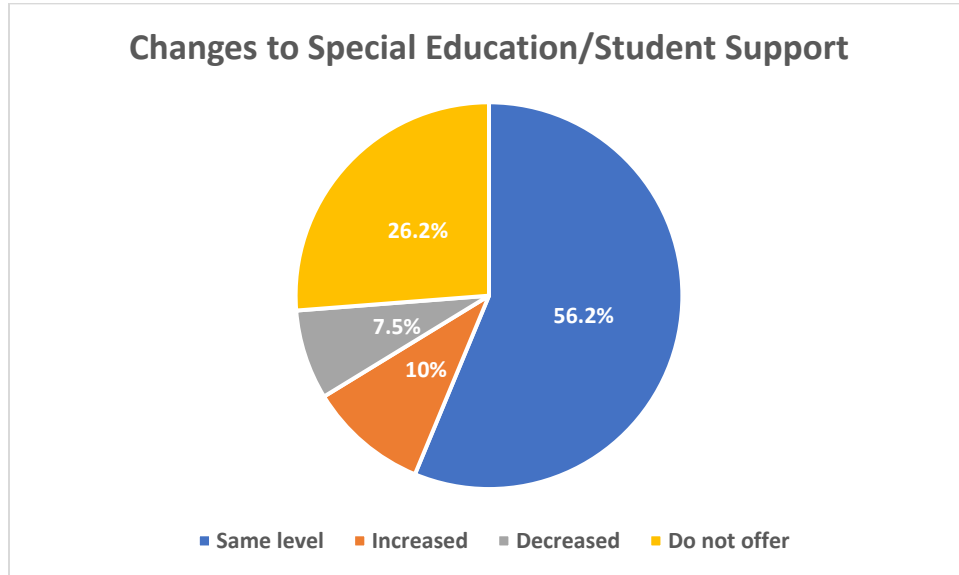
Student Activities

The survey asked schools to report the degree of modifications for a range of student activities (see chart below). **Religious services** (chapel, worship, prayer) were the least likely to be cancelled of all student activities (just 5.5% of schools), but also the most frequently modified in substantial ways (at two-thirds of schools). Over two-thirds of schools continued to offer **athletic programs/team sports**, but with significantly more substantial modifications for indoor sports. The same was true for **performing arts** as well as **student clubs** (held at two-thirds of schools, but with significant modifications at half and a third of schools, respectively). Out of all activities, **student outings** (field trips, community service) were most likely to be cancelled (at nearly 60% of schools).



Special Education & Student Support

The current survey asked participants about the availability of special education and student support services. The same question was also asked on the previous survey regarding services during distance learning in Spring 2020. The majority of schools (56.2%) reported **offering the “same” level of support** as pre-COVID-19 for Fall 2020, while 10% had **increased** services and 7.5% **decreased**. Just over a quarter of schools (26.2%) report that they do not offer special education or student support services.



As mentioned earlier in this report, notably, the combination of opening on campus and increasing support for special education students was particularly meaningful. Schools that did both saw enrollment growth of 9.9%. In contrast, those that reopened with blended or distance-only instruction and decreased SPED support declined in enrollment by over 20%.

“Many of our local schools are not offering in-person instruction. We have been able to teach five full days in-person and our enrollment has increased substantially. One family that enrolled their first and fifth grader would have never considered Christian school before, but the daughter was struggling with remote learning. Her mom enrolled her and went out the next day to buy her a Bible. Her daughter comes home every day telling her family about the Bible stories she is learning. The mom is so thankful for not only the education she is receiving in-person, but the spiritual knowledge her daughter is gaining.”

—Cherry Hill, NJ

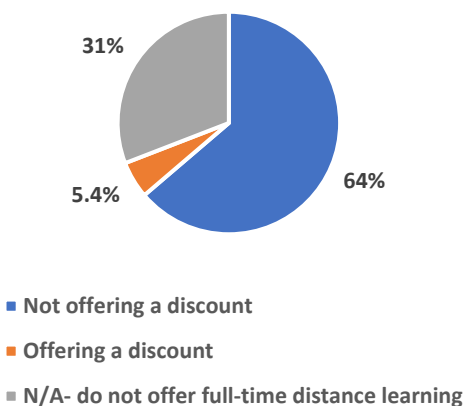
Financial Impact

In addition to enrollment change (discussed in the first section of this report), the current survey gauged the COVID-related financial responses of schools, specifically in the areas of tuition discounts and fundraising efforts.

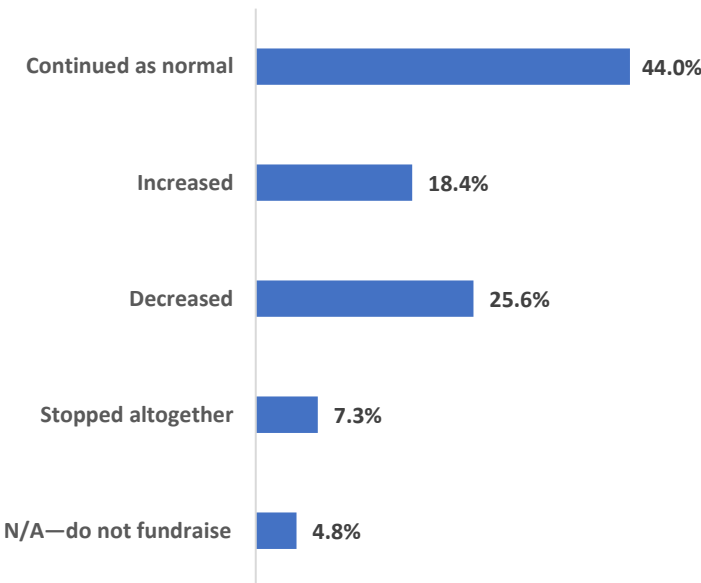
Tuition Discounts

The majority of schools (64%) reported that they **are not offering tuition discounts** for a full-time distance learning option. In contrast, just 5.4% of schools indicated they are offering a discount for a full-time distance learning option, with the average discount across those schools at 30% off tuition. An additional 31% of schools indicated they did not offer a full-time distance learning option at all.

Discounts for Full-Time Distance Learning Option



2020-2021 Fundraising Efforts

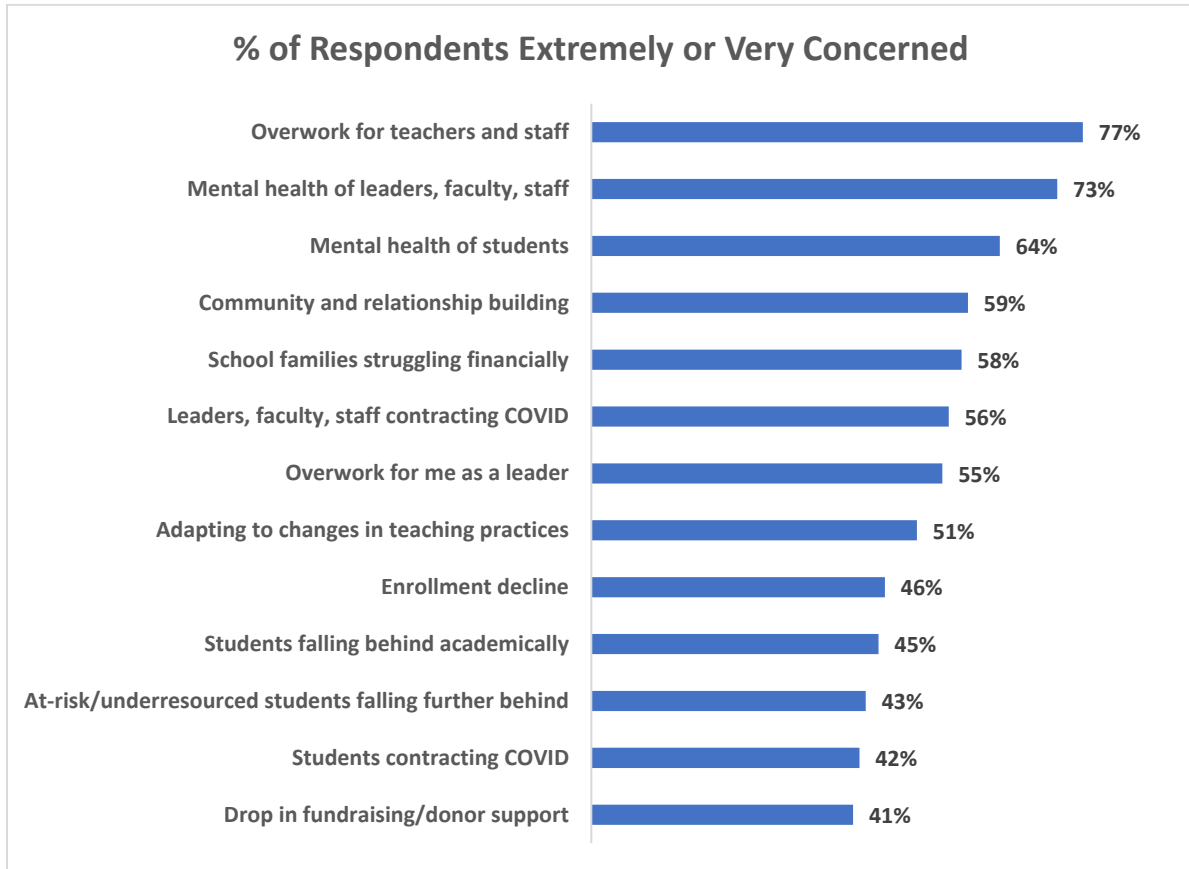


Fundraising Efforts

Nearly half of schools (44%) **continued their fundraising efforts** as normal during the current academic year. A quarter (25.6%) reported that fundraising efforts have **decreased** and 7.3% of schools **halted** their efforts altogether. An additional 18.4% of schools **increased** their efforts this year. When asked to identify the top three needs they would raise with a potential donor, schools most frequently identified financial support for the **school's operating budget or programs** (83.3%), **financial aid** for families (81.7% of schools), and **financial support** for teachers and staff (65.2%).

Faculty & Staff Well-Being

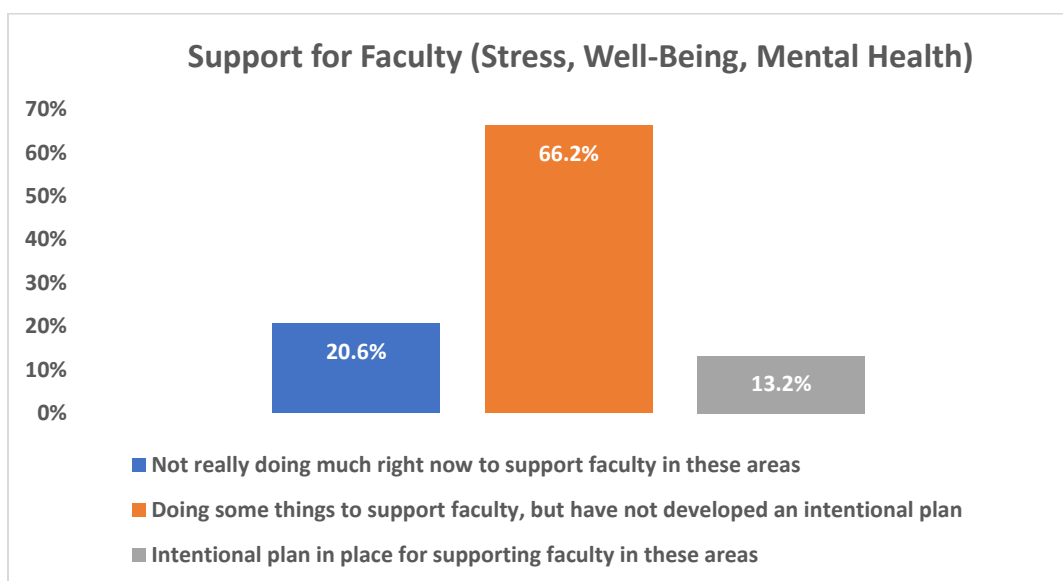
The current survey asked respondents to rate a number of COVID-related challenges in terms of level of concern (extremely, very, slightly, or not at all concerned). While all challenges listed were considered areas of concern by schools, the top challenges (those for which respondents were extremely or very concerned) are listed in the chart below.



The top three challenges posing the greatest concern for respondents pertained to **well-being**. The top two challenges were with regard to teachers, staff, and leaders (overwork at 77% and mental health at 73%), and the third was with regard to students (mental health at 64%). As noted, a range of financial, academic, and COVID-diagnosis concerns were also of significant concern to respondents; however, well-being rose to the top, particularly for the adults who work in schools.



In anticipation of these kinds of concerns, the survey asked respondents to indicate the degree to which they were **intentionally supporting faculty** in the areas of stress, well-being, and mental health (see chart below). One-fifth of schools (20.6%) reported that they are “**not really doing much**” to support faculty in these areas (see chart below). Two-thirds (66.2%) indicated that they are **doing some things** to support faculty, but have not developed an intentional plan. Finally, only 13.2% of schools had an **intentional plan in place** for supporting faculty in these areas.



These findings appear to reflect the overall concern regarding these areas of challenge in schools but also suggest that there is room for more intentional planning (e.g., putting a plan for faculty well-being in place) for most schools. The survey also included an open-ended question regarding strategies schools were utilizing to support faculty in these areas; six categories were identified through qualitative analysis (which are detailed on the following page, along with specific examples shared).

“It has been truly challenging and we have experienced significant turnover. Our teachers are very tired—but we have seen God work and renew us with new people and blessed us with growth. We see Him using COVID to push us toward teaching modalities, technology usage, and pedagogical shifts that would normally have taken years.”

—Southern CA

“One never knows the value of teamwork until you face days and months of an unknown enemy like COVID. Without the love and support of the Lord, family, and faculty I could not have survived these many months. How many times I had to say, ‘God, this burden is more than I can carry.’ ‘It’s not yours to carry’ came that still and gentle voice of the Lord (Philippians 2:5-11).”

—Northern CA

Staffing Support Provided

- ✓ Designated COVID liaison who handles communication with parents and guardians
- ✓ Professional counselors, social workers, pastoral staff, and others available to meet with faculty on campus
- ✓ Extra aides/volunteers to assist faculty with workload

Outside Resources Utilized

- ✓ Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provides free counseling
- ✓ Referrals to and/or allotment for counseling sessions
- ✓ Partnership with local hospital and wellness group

HR or Benefit Increases Made

- ✓ Bonus pay
- ✓ Raises given from increased enrollment
- ✓ Employee benevolence fund
- ✓ Additional personal and/or sick days added this year

Schedule Changes Implemented

- ✓ Extending days off around holidays
- ✓ Swapping PD days for “mental health” days
- ✓ Regularly scheduled half or full days for non-instructional time (e.g., extra planning or rest)
- ✓ Rotating staff schedules to provide time off
- ✓ Limiting or eliminating non-essential meetings
- ✓ Weekly individual check-ins with administrators

Professional Development (PD) and Group Support Offered

- ✓ Health and wellness classes held on campus
- ✓ Book study on teacher wellness
- ✓ Prayer partners
- ✓ Families “adopt” a classroom or teacher

Hospitality and Wellness “Perks” Provided

- ✓ Meals or coffee breaks provided by school and/or volunteers
- ✓ Remodeled teacher lounge to be COVID-safe and stocked with food
- ✓ Dress down days
- ✓ Wellness emphasis days
- ✓ Gift cards, baskets, or other “treats”



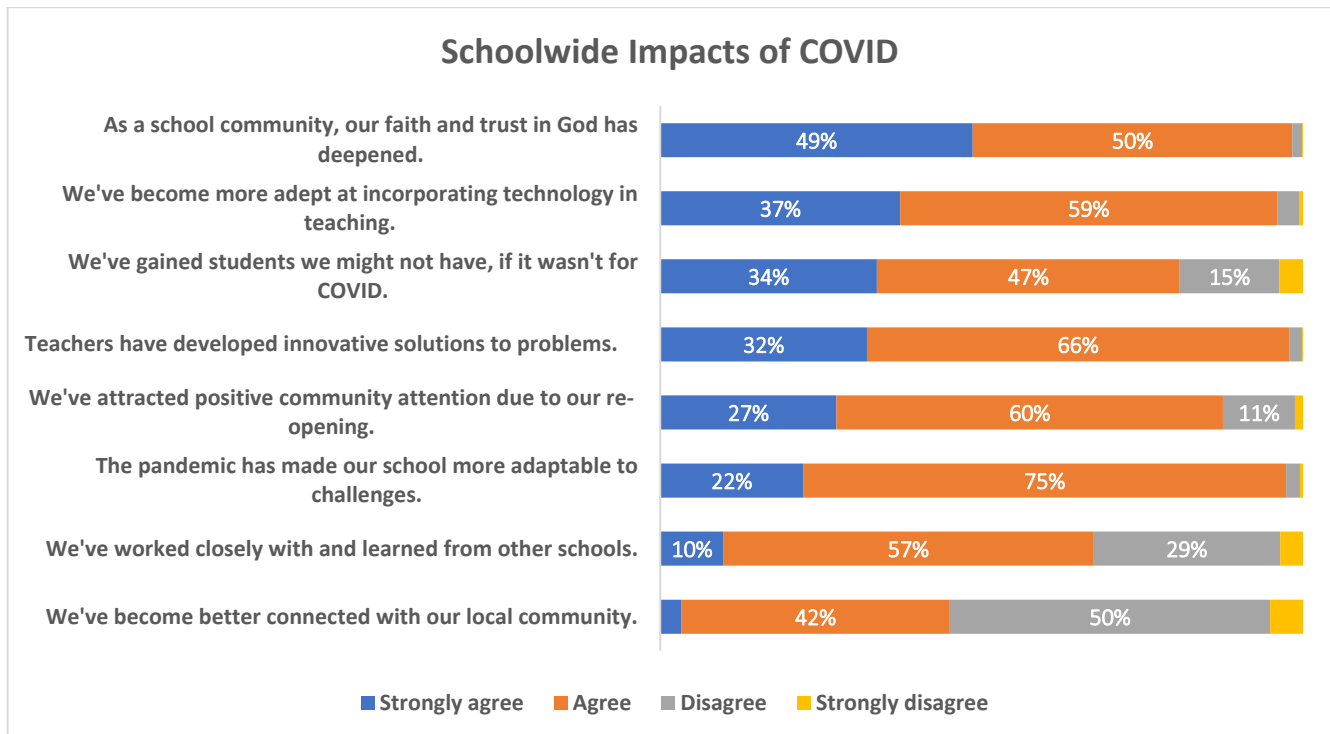
“We have reduced the number of meetings for our staff and provided more time for our staff to fellowship with one another, prayer time together and time for our staff to share their testimonies with each other. This has been extremely well received by our staff and caused them to become closer to one another.”

—Palm Beach County, FL

“We have reached out to smaller schools to check on the administrators to assist with supporting them so they can support their faculty and staff. We wanted them to know they are not alone in this.” —San Antonio, TX

Schoolwide Impacts

The survey also asked leaders to identify positive ways in which COVID challenges have been formative for their school communities (see chart below). Nearly all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the experience has **deepened their school community's faith and trust in God**, as well as helped them become more adept at **incorporating technology, engineering innovative solutions, and adapting to challenges**. From a community engagement standpoint, there have been some silver linings as well; four-fifths of respondents agree that their schools have **gained students** they would not have gained otherwise and that their reopening strategies have attracted **positive attention from the community**.



"We are a 1st year campus that has 100+ students enrolled in every grade K-12. God has opened this school at a time that goes against everything going on in the world around us... Opening a Christian school for all grades K-12 is unheard of. Doing all of this successfully during COVID is only possible by following God's lead." —Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, TX

"The COVID-19 era is a great time to be a leader. Why? There is no playbook to draw from or someone to talk with who has gone through a pandemic. The opportunity to lead, think in different ways, and trust God during a pandemic may only come once in a lifetime. My prayer is to be a COVID winner. With that said, it is more challenging and harder, but it is still a great time to lead and see what God will do." —Seattle, WA suburbs

Discussion

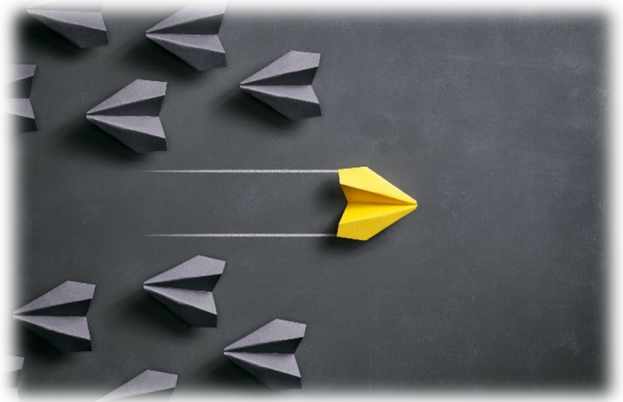
The quantitative and qualitative survey data from ACSI's third COVID survey revealed three themes that are insightful for understanding Christian schools' responses to COVID this academic year: Christian schools are **1) *delivering on their promises to families***, **2) *facing challenges in caring for the school community***, and **3) *looking (and learning) ahead toward a post-COVID future***.

Delivering on Their Promises

The current survey shows that Christian schools, by and large, delivered on their promises to open with in-person instruction for the 2020-2021 academic year (with 88% indicating this intent in July 2020, and the same percentage opening fully in-person or with some combination of in-person instruction and distance learning in Fall 2020). Importantly, the data suggest that schools' reopening plans were implemented with safety foremost in mind, with input from local health departments, state guidance, and advice of medical personnel ranking the highest influences on school decision-making. This was borne out in schools' use of a range of COVID modifications in the areas of health and safety, scheduling and student cohorts, expanded cleaning, space usage, and student activities, with over two-thirds reporting zero to minimal disruption from the spread of coronavirus in their school community.

At the same time as they worked to implement modifications to keep faculty, students, and their communities safe, schools also prioritized delivering as much of their academic and co-curricular programs with fidelity and to as many families as possible. This can be seen in the provision of a distance learning option by well over half of schools for those families who desire or need to take advantage of such an option due to illness, concern, or other factors. It also is evident in schools' commitment to continue student activities, even with significant modifications; this includes religious services like chapel and prayer (still offered by 93.7% of schools), as well as outdoor and indoor athletic programs/team sports, performing arts (band, choir, theater), and student clubs, all of which continue to be offered by over two-thirds of reporting schools.

With close to half of schools reporting increases in enrollment or holding steady from the previous year, over 80% of schools reporting they gained students they might not have if it wasn't for COVID, and over a third of schools reporting enrollment increases between the start of school in the fall and mid-November, it appears 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. 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, delivering on their promises to provide an in-person, high-quality, and well-rounded educational experience—and doing so effectively and safely—is not optional, but essential to the children and families they serve.

Caring for Community

The pressing need for Christian schools to care well for teachers and staff, students, families, and the school community during this academic year was evident in several findings of the survey. Out of all challenges posted by COVID, overwork for teachers and staff caused the greatest concern for respondents (reported by 77% as extremely or very concerning). This was followed closely by a related concern for the mental health of leaders, faculty, and staff (73%). Presumably in response to this concern, close to 80% of schools reported that they are supporting teacher well-being in some way, though only 13.2% have an intentional plan in place for doing so this year.

Care for students was also a need identified in the survey data. For example, the third top concern cited by respondents was the mental health of students (reported as extremely or very concerning by 64% of schools). In terms of special education and student support, two-thirds of schools reported either the same level or increased offerings for students during the current school year, as compared with previous years. While causality cannot be inferred, a statistically significant correlation was identified



for the combination of on-campus instruction and increasing support for special education students (with schools that did both seeing an enrollment growth of 9.9%, whereas those that reopened with blended or distance learning only and decreased SPED support declined in enrollment by over 20%).

Another top concern of respondents was school families struggling financially (reported as extremely or very concerning by 58% of schools). Financial aid for families was among the top needs that respondents indicated they would raise with a potential donor (at 81.7%). Concerns for families extended beyond finances to include community and relationship building (reported as extremely or very concerning by 59% of schools). However, 55% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they have become better connected with their local community during this year.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Christian schools are very cognizant of school community concerns regarding well-being, financial issues, and relationship building posed by COVID. While the majority of schools are addressing these issues in some way, the survey findings also suggest that there is room for growth. This is certainly understandable given the logistical challenges faced by the majority of schools in reopening in-person this year. However, as they move into the spring, leaders can consider

ways their schools can care more intentionally for the needs of educators, students, and school families and in doing so “bear one another’s burdens” as a community and as Scripture encourages (Galatians 6:2). Just as schools consider their sustainability in terms of finances, they also need to consider sustainability in terms of human capital and in light of the scriptural obligation to care well for others (see John 13:34-35, 1 John 3:17-18, Galatians 6:9-10, Matthew 25:40).

Finally, survey findings suggest that while Christian schools are distinguishing themselves by their distinctiveness and responsiveness during COVID, there is opportunity as a sector to connect with the larger community in missional ways. This can include broadening service activities beyond the school community to those who are unaffiliated with the school, for example by partnering with churches or community agencies to meet local needs. In doing so, Christian schools can even better let their “light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

Looking—and Learning—Ahead

As the spring approaches, data from the survey shows that a majority of schools will keep current practices in place, both in terms of instructional format (on campus, blended, and/or distance learning) and COVID-related modifications made for scheduling, space usage, and health and safety. This lack of a major shift in these areas suggests that for the most part, schools’ reopening plans have been sufficiently suited to operating within the COVID context. Of course, most schools’ planning does not stop at the end point of Spring 2020; rather, many leaders are already thinking toward a post-COVID future—hopefully to be actualized for the 2021-2022 school year.

For example, many school leaders are already considering post-COVID plans related to distance learning. Of those schools with distance learning options currently in place, 44% plan to either keep those options (29.6%) or expand them in some way (14.6%) beyond the pandemic. This is not the majority of schools, however, as over half (55.8%) indicated they are likely to discontinue their distance learning option after COVID. This is a curious finding, given that qualitative data from the survey suggested that distance learning had enabled many schools to enroll new students, as well as retain students who would have left the school without the option in place. While possible reasons may include insufficient staffing or expertise, a steep learning curve to transition from emergency distance learning to a high-quality offering, prohibitive cost in terms of technology investment, or concern about undermining the traditional brick-and-mortar financial model, more research is needed to understand why over half of schools are considering dropping distance learning post-COVID.



The question of what to do with existing distance learning options is just one of many facing schools in a post-COVID world. As a report from the Christensen Institute observed in late fall, “[T]here is an opportunity—and arguably an imperative—for schools to pursue lasting, positive change during this period of instability. It’s tempting to see crises as an inevitable harbinger of change. But innovations implemented in response to today’s crises aren’t guaranteed to last into tomorrow.”¹ For this reason, Christian schools must not just *look* ahead to a post-COVID future—they must also *learn* ahead.

In an article entitled “*Disruption, Disorientation, Disequilibrium... Now What?*”² Swaner, Beerens, and Ellefsen suggest that intentionality in learning from the pandemic will help schools “to not only become more resilient in the face of change, but also visualize new ways to fulfill [their] missions into the future.” The authors offer a set of reflection questions for leaders and their teams to this end:

- What new mindsets and skills are we developing as a school community (like flexibility, adaptiveness, and resilience), and how will we ensure we use—and not lose—these mindsets and skills in the future?
- What did we learn about student learning itself, and how we can better understand and meet the diverse and unique needs of students?
- What lessons about building and nurturing community did we learn from this experience? And if we can do those things while we were physically isolated, what is stopping us from doing them all the time?
- What unique value proposition(s) of Christian education manifested during this time of challenge, and how can we articulate that to current and prospective families?
- How did we develop new efficiencies in school management during this time of crisis, and how can we maintain and even improve upon these efficiencies in the future?
- What new vistas toward sustainability may be opening in terms of financial and revenue models, which the nimbleness forced by COVID may enable us to realize in practice?

Although the “tyranny of the COVID-urgent” continues to occupy school leaders and their teams, setting aside time to consider these and similar questions in 2021 will be crucial to learning ahead toward the post-COVID future.

¹ Waite, C. and T. Arnett. 2020. *Will Schools Change Forever?* San Francisco: The Christensen Institute, 3.

² Swaner, L., D. Beerens, and E. Ellefsen. 2020. Available at <https://blog.acsi.org/disruption-disorientation-disequilibrium>.

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 <https://www.acsi.org/home/covid-19/resources>.

Virtual Town Hall Meetings: Town Hall events are recorded and archived on the COVID-19 ACSI webpage. 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.

