

Considering Cultural Shifts and Perceptions of Virtual Education: **INSIGHTS FROM PARENTS OF FLORIDA VIRTUAL SCHOOL STUDENTS**

Cultural shifts make themselves apparent in many ways as we all witnessed in the daily life shifts in common norms, thoughts, and actions of 2020. Masks have not only become a fashion staple, but a common gift; crowd anxiety is palpable, and hand sanitizer can be found in bins and shelves of every store. Language has changed as phrases like “unprecedented times,” “new normal,” and “uncharted waters” have become cliché. Seeing people hug without hesitation in movies makes the heart long for (or cringe at?) what once was, and children’s storybooks depict characters with their faces covered to help the younger generation adjust.



Each of these factors has had both hidden and obvious impacts on the world of education. Parents have seen these impacts firsthand as their roles have expanded, in many cases, to take on the previous roles school played in their children’s lives.

Background

Florida Virtual School (FLVS) has been offering high-quality online learning to students for 24 years. Across the state and nation, the pandemic propelled parents and their children of varying experiences with online schooling into taking one or many courses with FLVS. They joined the normal way of work for FLVS as they built their own “new normal” with their home shifting to a place of work and school.

Florida Virtual School Flex and Global schools combined saw an increase of 43.7 percent more course requests when compared to December 2019 enrollments. This increase meant many students across the state of Florida and beyond were experiencing online courses for the first time, and many parents were therefore overseeing online learning for the first time.

At the FLVS Flex Kindergarten-5th grade level alone, FLVS saw an enrollment increase of 104 percent. FLVS Full Time also saw dramatic increases in enrollments, a 99 percent change overall when compared to the previous school year, with a 262 percent change at the Kindergarten-5th grade level. These vast changes led the FLVS team to develop a survey that would help to understand perspectives of parents FLVS was serving so that they might learn how to serve them better.

Purpose

In the first weeks of November 2020, the FLVS Research team deployed the survey to parents of students who were enrolled currently or had completed courses since March 15, 2020, the date etched in history to mark school closures and population quarantine.

The survey sought to determine whether and how parents' views of Kindergarten-12 education have shifted due to the pandemic, as well as how their experiences with FLVS impacted their plans for engaging in future online learning with FLVS. Its sample included parents from the FLVS Global School, FLVS Flex, and FLVS Full Time student populations. FLVS Global School serves students outside of the state of Florida. FLVS Flex and FLVS Full Time serve Florida students, with FLVS Flex offering flexible course schedules whether students take all or some of their courses with FLVS. FLVS Full Time courses function as students' full-time schedule and FLVS is their school of record.

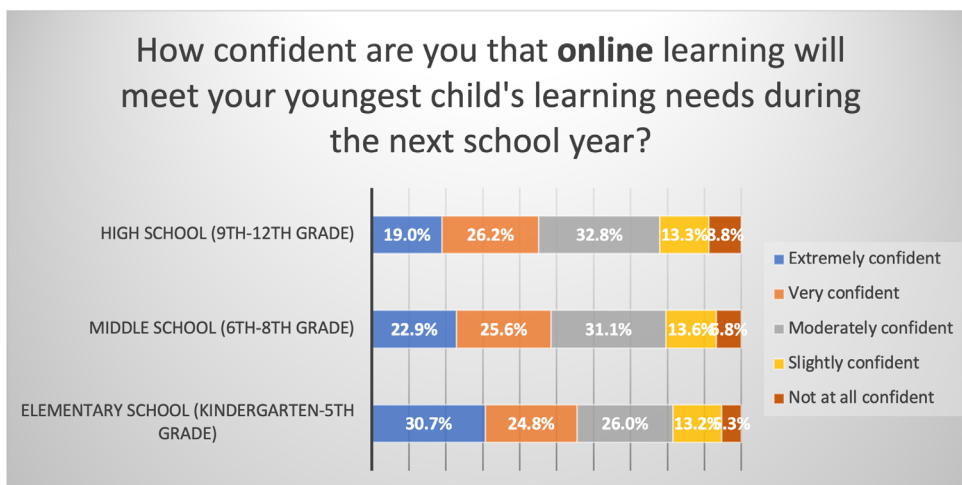
Survey Method

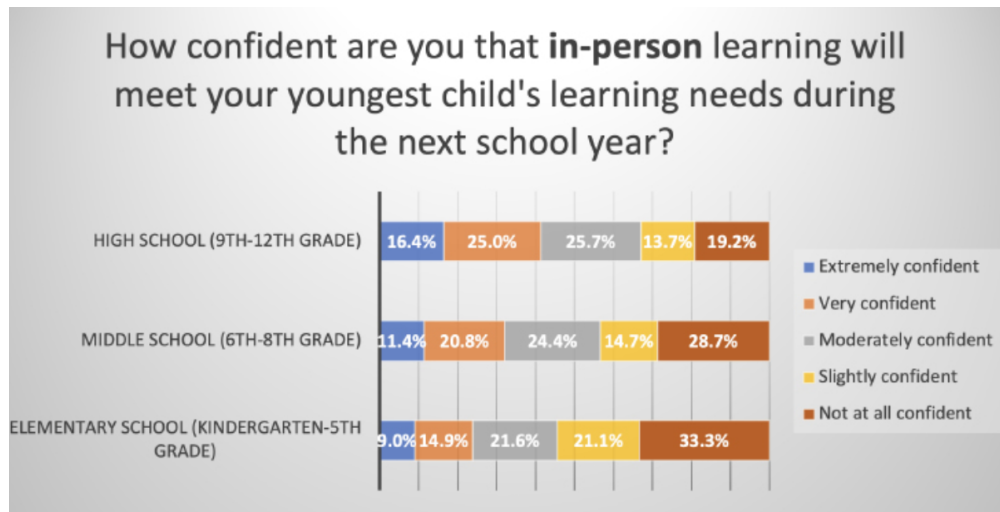
The 22-question survey was composed of six demographic questions, two school history questions, five questions on parent concerns and levels of confidence associated with their children's education, and nine questions on parent perspectives of their role in schooling and schooling in general (see appendix for survey questions). The research team developed the questions by modifying questions from several existing parent surveys that had been developed by trusted researchers. Question types included Likert ratings, single- and multi-select multiple choice, and short answer responses.

Findings and Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many families to online learning for the first time which offered a unique opportunity for families to reflect on the role of online learning and its future for education. Of those invited, 2,441 parents/guardians completed all questions of the survey. Statistical analyses of responses as well as thematic analysis of open responses revealed important insights about parents' levels of confidence in online education and their concerns for the future.

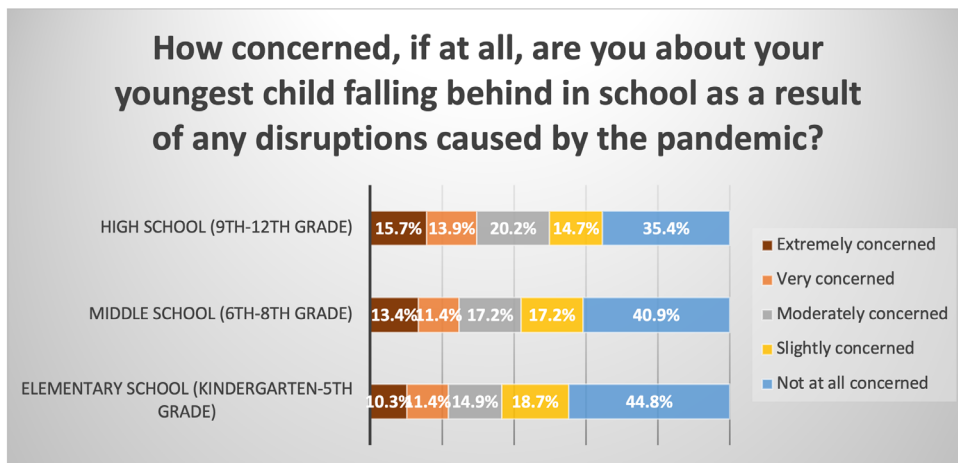
Finding 1: FLVS parents are generally confident online learning will continue to play a role in children's future education. Across grade levels and FLVS schools, 65 percent of parents expect online education to be a part of their child's future. Furthermore, parents expressed higher confidence that online learning, rather than in-person, would meet their youngest child's learning needs during the next school year. Parents of younger children indicated the highest confidence in online learning and lowest in in-person learning overall (see figures below).



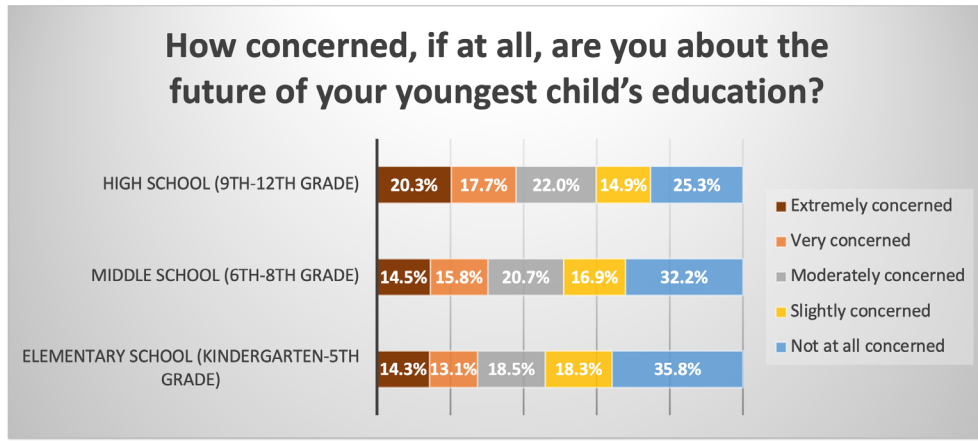


Many parents offered detailed explanations of their confidence. One commented their child “thrived online with her education and really enjoyed it,” while another indicated extreme confidence because their child has “blossomed in education with online classes and is doing better grade wise than ever before.” Several echoed these sentiments in addition to expressing confidence in FLVS for offering dependable curriculum, excellent teachers, and the ability for their children to work at a pace that is best for them.

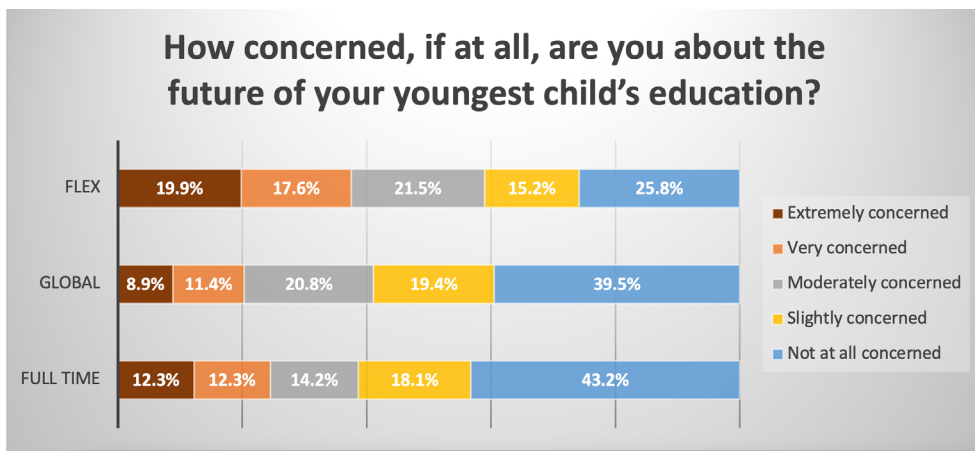
Finding 2: Parents of FLVS students felt little concern that their children would fall behind in school due to pandemic disruptions. Across FLVS schools and grade levels Kindergarten-12, parents indicated little concern that children would fall behind in school due to pandemic disruptions, with elementary parents showing the least concern. One parent commented their child has “excelled online and continues to do so [and] I’m not worried at all with the online choice.”



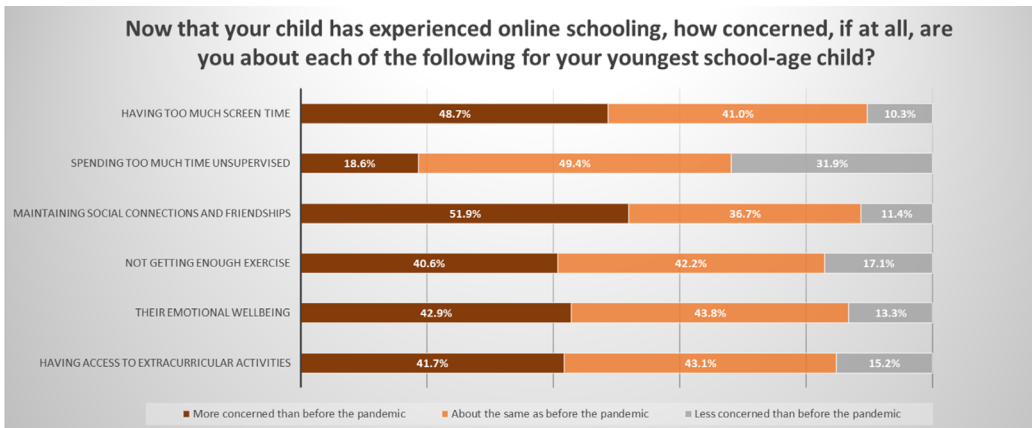
Finding 3: Most parents expressed little concern about the future of their youngest child’s education. The pandemic brought many uncertainties for all families, particularly those with school-aged children. Recognizing these many uncertainties, this survey sought to illuminate parents’ levels of concern with the future of their children’s education. Overwhelmingly, parents expressed very little concern, with parents of the younger grades again reporting less concern than those at the high school level. One parent stated the FLVS work is “rigorous and the teachers are great about keeping [the child] at pace.” Others noted an added benefit of online school is their children have less distractions and can reach out to teachers anytime problems arise.



Across FLVS schools, parents of students in FLVS Full Time indicated the least concern with their youngest child's education.



Finding 4: Parents showed concern for their children having infrequent social interaction with friends and experiencing too much screen time. While survey findings revealed overall confidence in online education meeting their children's educational needs during and after the pandemic, parents expressed concerns that were similar across grade levels as well. Parents expressed the most concern for their children maintaining social connections and friendships, with having too much screen time falling closely behind as a concern. One parent noted their family's use of "club sports and neighborhood play dates" to supplement the lack of "face-to-face social/emotional development a child would receive in brick/mortar." Another voiced concerns with their child missing out on in-person interaction that they feel they would better be able to supplement without the pandemic.



Final Thoughts

Taken together, this summary of findings reveals important insights into parent perceptions of online learning during a time when educators, students, and parents alike were recreating normalcy. Whether they came to FLVS during the months of March through November 2020 because their brick-and-mortar school closed its doors or because they had already chosen the online school path for their children pre-pandemic, parents reported overall confidence in FLVS online learning. Parents reported concerns not in the areas of online learning meeting their children's educational needs, but rather that their children were missing out on the social interaction and the time away from screens that they needed. Most parents reported they expect some, many, or all online classes in their youngest child's future, beyond the pandemic, an undeniable cultural shift in the field of online education.

