Summary of Online Education Feedback Grade 6 – Grade 8 Parents and Teachers

In the fall of 2020, the Survey Research Center (SRC) at the University of Wisconsin at River Falls conducted a survey of teachers and parents that was sponsored by the Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership. The goal of this research was to explore what worked and what didn’t when the COVID-19 pandemic forced Wisconsin schools to rapidly move to online instruction. This document briefly summarizes results for middle school-aged students.

The Respondents. With respect to teachers, the SRC received feedback from 100 teachers who taught in middle schools. A large majority (72%) of the teachers in the sample had taught for more than 10 years and 77% taught in public schools. While a large majority (84%) were at least somewhat satisfied with the decision to move to online instruction in March of 2020, nearly half (48%) were at least somewhat dissatisfied with the academic progress of their students during that portion of the academic year and one-third were at least somewhat dissatisfied with the support they received from the parents of their students.

A total of 122 parents with children in Grades 6 – 8 provided feedback to the SRC about their experiences during the spring 2020 distance learning period. A majority were female (58%), well-educated (54% had at least a 4-year college degree), fairly affluent (69% reported household incomes of $75,000 or more), and mostly from suburban (42%) or rural (39%) areas.

Effective Instructional Approaches. About half or more of both teachers and parents felt that all of the instructional methods about which we asked worked at least somewhat well, including individual and group online chats, recorded messages/lectures, emailed or mailed assignments and paper assignments prepared by the teacher and picked up by parents/students. Individual online chats were rated as the most effective approach by both teachers and parents. However, compared to parents, a significantly higher proportion of teachers felt individual chats were effective (95% vs. 80% of parents). The second most effective approach for teachers was recorded video lectures (82% rated as effective) and the third most effective was online group discussions (78%). Parents rated online group discussions as the second most effective (78%), with recorded lectures third (75% effective). A significantly lower proportion of teachers felt paper assignments they prepared for retrieval by the family were effective (49%) compared to parents (67%).

Suggestions for Colleges of Education. Both parents and teachers were asked what might be done to make future emergencies requiring the move to online instruction a better one. Teachers said that aspiring middle school teachers should be exposed to more online learning software options. Middle school teachers felt understanding how distance education technologies can be used to engage parents and students is critical. A number of comments received from the parents of middle school students called for more synchronous online instruction to boost student engagement and interactions with teachers and other students. A number of parents of middle schoolers also mentioned technological challenges such as a poor internet connection or software that crashed as additional challenges their children faced during this time.