Summary of Online Education Feedback Grade 9 – Grade 12 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 high school-aged students.

The Respondents. With respect to teachers, the SRC received feedback from 88 teachers who taught in high schools. A large majority (77%) of the teachers in the sample had taught for more than 10 years and 93% taught in public schools. While a large majority (83%) were at least somewhat satisfied with the decision to move to online instruction in March of 2020, more than half (54%) were at least somewhat dissatisfied with the academic progress of their students during that portion of the academic year and nearly one-third were at least somewhat dissatisfied with the support they received from the parents of their students.

A total of 141 parents with children in Grades 9 – 12 provided feedback to the SRC about their experiences during the spring 2020 distance learning period. A majority were female (61%), well-educated (44% had at least a 4-year college degree), fairly affluent (46% reported household incomes of $100,000 or more), and from suburban (39%) or rural (33%) 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. 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 (88% vs. 71% of parents). The second most effective approach for teachers was online group discussions (81%), which was rated significantly lower by parents (63% rated as effective). Teachers rated recorded lectures as the third most effective approach (80%) and, again, a significantly lower proportion of parents rated this option effective (60%). In all but one case, teachers rated the effectiveness of approaches higher than parents.

Suggestions for Colleges of Education. Both parents and teachers were asked what might be done to make responses to future emergencies requiring the move to online instruction more seamless. High school teachers, like middle school teachers, identified expanded technology training as the thing that would best prepare new teachers for situations that force schools to move from in-person to distance education. The challenge of engaging students in an online environment was another key theme from teachers. A number of parents of high school students called for more synchronous online instruction to boost student engagement and interactions with teachers and other students. Compared to parents with students in elementary or middle school, there was a somewhat lower proportion of concerns about technology among the parents of high schoolers, but poor student engagement in the online instructional environment was a common theme.