Summary of Online Education Feedback Pre K – Grade 5 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 pre-kindergarten through fifth grade.

The Respondents. With respect to teachers, the SRC received feedback from 174 teachers who taught in elementary schools. About three-quarters of the teachers in the sample had taught for more than 10 years and 83% 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, slightly less than half (49%) were at least somewhat satisfied with the academic progress of their students during that portion of the academic year.

A total of 203 parents with children in Pre K – Grade 5 provided feedback to the SRC about their experiences during the spring 2020 distance learning period. They were overwhelmingly female (72%), well-educated (58% had at least a 4-year college degree), fairly affluent (46% reported household incomes of $100,000 or more), and mostly from suburban (41%) or rural (42%) areas of the state.

Effective Instructional Approaches. A majority 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, though significantly higher proportions of teachers felt individual chats were effective (91%) than parents (75%). The second most effective approach for teachers was group online discussions (83% rated as effective), but a significantly lower proportion of parents felt that way (57%). For parents, the second most effective instructional approach was paper assignments prepared by teachers for retrieval by the family (70% rated as effective). Teachers rated the effectiveness of almost all approaches as more effective than parents rated them.

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 elementary education majors should be exposed to more online learning software options and instructed in best practices in terms of use of those technology options and in terms of communicating with their students, the parents of those students, and administrators. Many comments received from the parents of elementary school students also talked about the appropriate use of instructional technologies. Many parents stressed the need for teachers to make one-on-one connections with their young children and a desire to be kept in the loop in terms of expectations and due dates. The challenges of trying to learn at a distance, away from the classroom environment with its structure and socialization benefits was particularly challenging for elementary school-aged students.