HARFORD COUNTY
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

EVALUATING THE EXPERIENCE OF STAKEHOLDERS* DURING COVID-19

FOCUS GROUP KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

STAKEHOLDERS INCLUDE: TEACHERS, PRINCIPALS, STAFF, STUDENTS AND PARENTS/GUARDIANS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, CONT.

- **Elementary Principal Focus Group Facilitators:**
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- **Elementary Principal Focus Group Team Members:**
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- **Secondary Principal Focus Group Facilitators:**
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  - *Central office included staff members who perform operational and instructional duties **including but not limited to** school nurses, custodial service coordinators, IT staff, HR staff, transportation staff, special education staff, budget staff, safety and security staff, Pupil Personnel Workers (PPW), curriculum specialists, coordinators, instructional coaches, content specialists, assistant supervisors, and supervisors, etc.*
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- **A special thank you for the work and expertise of the following people who provided invaluable support:**
  - Stephanie Wall, *Graphic Design/Technical Specialist*, who helped with the design/layout of this report.
  - Lindsay Bilodeau, *Communications Specialist*, who assisted with the edits of this research report.
  - Researchers from Hanover, a third-party research firm, who provided a separate unbiased analysis and research assistance in carrying out this project and in publishing this report.

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INTRODUCTION

In January 2021, Harford County Public Schools (HCPS) conducted virtual focus groups about Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and the 2020-21 school year, focusing on understanding what went well with district operations during the pandemic, lessons learned, and priorities for planning for a return to in-person learning.

The Superintendent of Schools, Sean Bulson, and his leadership team used a focus group method to bring together virtually a demographically diverse group of stakeholders to participate in a guided discussion on the implementation of educational programs, services, or concepts. The HCPS facilitators or moderators led a 30-90-minute discussion within the groups to gather helpful information and feedback. The HCPS focus groups were administered separately to teachers, principals, central office staff, students, and parents. Members of these focus groups discussed topics related to virtual and hybrid instruction, special education, Learning Support Centers, and other key topics.

The HCPS Office of Research and Program Evaluation worked with focus group facilitators, HCPS staff and external researchers to review and synthesize the meeting minutes from the focus groups, summaries of survey results and follow-up surveys, and raw survey data for educators (teachers, principals), central office staff, students and parents. As part of this review and analysis, the researchers and the team identified key themes the District can use to evaluate and improve district operations, teaching and learning, and its Continuity of Learning Plan.

This report presents key findings and recommendations from the analyses of the data, and information received from the focus groups stakeholders (students, teachers, principals, parents, and central office staff members). The following research questions guided the analysis of the focus group information and data:

Research Questions

- **What did HCPS do well during the COVID-19 pandemic?**
- **What do stakeholders perceive as the lessons during COVID-19?**
- **What do HCPS stakeholders perceive as the needs related to return to in-person learning?**

In this report, focus group comments are organized into categories, including virtual learning, hybrid instruction, and in-person learning planning, and incorporated additional categories based on observed trends. In a small number of cases, Illogical student responses are excluded from the analysis. Additionally, in this report, we reproduced quotes (notes provided/taken by facilitators) nearly verbatim but made edits to correct typos when needed.

This report contains six (6) sections:

Section I: Key Findings — All Stakeholders
Presents common trends among all focus groups regarding what went well, lessons learned, and planning forward.

Section II: Key Findings — Educators
Reviews educators notes, including principals and teachers regarding what went well, lessons learned, and planning forward.

Section III: Key Findings – Central Office Staff
Reviews the comments provided by central office staff members regarding what went well, lessons learned, and planning forward.

Section IV: Key Findings — Students
Reviews the student comments regarding what went well and planning forward.

Section V: Key Findings — Parents
Reviews parents' comments regarding what went well, lessons learned, and planning forward.

Section VI: Sample Quotes
Presents sample quotes by theme for each stakeholder group on what went well, lessons learned, and planning forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings included in this report supports the following five (5) recommendations to help improve teaching and learning for all students, the effectiveness of district operations, and the HCPS Continuity of Learning Plan.

I. Share the focus group feedback with the community to share what went well, lessons learned and to highlight how HCPS will address the areas of need identified by all the focus group members.
- These needs include but are not limited to improved training on virtual platforms, transparent communication, and prioritized supports for special student populations (special education).

II. Continue to identify evidence-based practices and/or successful instructional strategies used by peer school districts to inform the HCPS district's reopening and Continuity of Learning Plan.
- Leverage existing strengths in HCPS operations, as identified by focus group participants, and incorporate new approaches to address the stakeholder concerns.

III. Continue providing virtual options for students moving into next year and beyond.
- Other stakeholders and parents in particular noted that they want HCPS to provide them with instructional delivery options that allow them to decide what is best for their children.

IV. Consider permanent implementation of some of the best practices used during COVID-19 operations.
- These practices include but are not limited to the option for more public recognition for teachers and staff, more opportunities for parents and other stakeholders to participate in focus groups.
- HCPS should consider reviewing or enhancing its current telework practice to provide appropriate guidance to principals and supervisors to effectively continue the practices of allowing school-based and central office staff to:
    - *Participate in virtual professional development and/or staff meeting whenever possible.*
    - *Work remotely or from home in "whole or in part" when feasible, in the event of emergency such as weather, and/or based on pre-determined essential job functions.*

V. HCPS leadership must continue to seek a balance between consistency and flexibility in certain circumstances.
- The findings of this report indicate that our focus group stakeholders desire consistency related to policies, protocols, communication, etc. However, all stakeholders do not always agree on what to do.

SECTION I: KEY FINDINGS
ALL STAKEHOLDERS

This section presents common trends among all focus groups regarding what went well, lessons learned, and planning forward. Stakeholders include all teachers, principals, central office staff, students, and parents who participated in the focus groups.

WHAT WENT WELL

Support for Students and Families

Stakeholders highlighted the support and engagement of their colleagues, students, and families as a positive aspect of the 2020-21 school year. Some also described the focus on supporting students and families as a driving force for their work.

- Central office staff commended all staff members' commitment to students and families and flexibility to meet the needs of students and achieve a common goal during unprecedented times.
- Both principals and central office staff highlighted the tremendous work of staff across a range of departments and roles to support students, including teachers and technology, transportation, and food and nutrition staff.
- Parents valued having virtual education to keep their children safe from COVID-19 transmission and HCPS' efforts to minimize risks during hybrid instruction.

Virtual Instruction Successes

Many stakeholders highlighted the successes of virtual instruction, despite the logistical challenges that this learning format presented.

- Students valued classes that allowed more interaction with their peers, such as the use of virtual games. Students also valued wellness activities embedded in class that allow them to take a break from the screen.
- Parents valued the positive impact of virtual instruction on their engagement with their children's education and communication with teachers. Parents also observed virtual instruction benefiting their children's independence and sense of responsibility and computer skills.
- Parents also valued having the opportunity to have a more active role in their children's' education, having first-hand information of what their children are learning.
- Central office staff highlighted the team's capacity to adapt quickly to virtual education, including training teachers and meeting all technological needs under pressure and tight timelines. They particularly noted the important role and work of technology staff to distribute devices and help adapt to virtual instruction.

Collaboration and Teamwork

Teachers, principals, and central office staff all commended the collaboration and teamwork that went into planning for and adapting to the changing needs of students and staff during the 2020-21 school year.

- Educators (elementary and secondary teachers and principals) noted collaboration across areas and the team's quick capacity to adjust to virtual education, highlighting teachers' engagement.
- Central office staff highlighted the teamwork and collaboration across and within departments to accommodate the shift to virtual learning, including the work of transportation, technology, and food and nutrition staff members.
- Stakeholders appreciated the clear and consistent internal communication around COVID-19 protocols and the effective partnership between HCPS and the Health Department.

COVID-19 Protocols

Many educators highlighted the emphasis on using metrics to guide planning; parents emphasized the need to keep students safe from COVID-19 transmission.

- Educators valued HCPS' emphasis on metrics to guide planning and the clear communication of protocols. Educators also noted staff's efforts to comply with protocols.
- Elementary teachers indicated instances when they valued clear communication of protocols.
- Parents valued having virtual education to keep their children safe from COVID-19 transmission and HCPS' efforts to minimize risks during hybrid instruction.

LESSONS LEARNED

Need for Continued Growth and Improvement

Stakeholders recognize the need for continued growth and improvement in the delivery of both virtual and hybrid instruction, including necessary changes to specific policies and practices as well as the need for additional resources and supports for successful implementation and instruction.

- Teachers highlighted challenges related to virtual learning delivery, including low student engagement and motivation as well as barriers due to challenges with technology use.
- Educators noted the need to enhance professional development on effective virtual instruction, especially regarding the use of specific platforms. Educators also highlighted the need to invest in new systems that allow more teachers centralized control and real-time supervision during class and address issues with itslearning. However, some teachers also recognize that while itslearning has its challenges there are valued aspects and functionality of this Learning Management System.
- Secondary teachers noted that there is a concern that any new system should be able to input in the lessons they have worked on all year in itslearning. This needs to be a consideration, itslearning may not be optimal, but it does accomplish what secondary teachers need it to do absent the grading that they do not use.
- Central office staff focused on the need for continued work and investment to ensure that staff are able to successfully use and leverage instructional technology, including professional development to support staff as they work to evolve and optimize virtual instruction.
- All stakeholders noted the need to improve specific policies, such as homework, late work, and Flex Fridays. Students and parents expressed concerns about the purpose of homework and Flex Fridays.
- Educators suggested considering not having students come to school on Fridays to have teachers dedicate time to planning and professional development. Parents suggested using these days to provide additional student support.
- Parents' concerns regarding virtual instruction included the lack of opportunities for students to interact and engage in instruction and assessments. Parents also voiced concerns about the use of cameras during class, inconsistent schedules across levels, and the lack of personalized instruction due to class size.
- Generally, central office staff highlighted the need for ongoing adjustments and modifications to further refine and optimize both virtual and hybrid instructional models.

Strengthening of COVID-19 Protocols

Stakeholders see need for greater communication, clarity, and accountability around COVID-19 protocols.

- All stakeholders want accountability on following the COVID-19 protocols.
- Elementary teachers did indicate instances when they valued clear communication of protocols, but there were areas teachers identified a need for more consistent messaging from one department or school to another.
- Secondary teachers noted a lack of consistency in staff compliance and lack of oversight by building administrators.
- Elementary teachers shared there were some schools where student compliance was a concern with one of the primary influences being family beliefs that protocols were unnecessary.
- Central office staff also highlighted the need for greater accountability for COVID-19 protocols at both the individual and leadership levels.
- Parents expressed concerns about their children's mental health during the pandemic and noted that HCPS' COVID-19 policies should be more consistent.

Supporting Students' Needs

Stakeholders highlighted ongoing challenges and needs related to better supporting students now and during the transition to in-person instruction.

All Students

- All stakeholders highlighted ongoing needs related to supporting both student and staff social and emotional wellbeing and mental health during the process of returning to in-person instruction.
- Parents noted that students need more opportunities to socialize and for smaller group instruction to provide more personalized support.
- Parents also expressed challenges with scheduling that lead to difficulty in student engagement and ability to fully participate in instruction.
- Parents expressed concerns about their children's mental health and wellness during the pandemic.
- Central office staff recognized that the shift to virtual and hybrid instruction highlighted inequities in student access to instruction and that there are continued challenges to ensure that all students receive the same high-quality, personalized instruction regardless of learning format or situation.

Special Education

- Educators and parents both highlighted the need to provide, and prioritize, more in-person instruction to special education students.
- Central office staff similarly noted details related to providing in-person instruction for special education, in addition to increase communication around special education services and planning.
- Parents of children receiving special education services noted that HCPS should follow their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) more closely and keep them more informed about progress.

Specific Student Groups

- Several stakeholders, including parents and central office staff, expressed that in-person instruction should be prioritized for the youngest students.
- Central office staff also noted the importance of providing support for students without stable housing and students from families experiencing financial uncertainty.

PLANNING FORWARD

Policy and Priority Changes

Stakeholders highlighted several suggested changes to policies and priorities to be addressed moving forward. Common themes and suggestions are noted below.

- Educators expressed wanting more professional development to help teachers adjust to virtual instruction and online platforms, including having sessions with experts in these technologies.
- Secondary educators noted that professional development needs to be meaningful and led or guided by people with experience in virtual instruction.
- Educators noted the need to adopt new platforms that make virtual instruction easier and consistent across classes and compatible with Microsoft.
- Educators noted the need to enhance virtual instruction policies, including Flex Fridays, attendance, late work, and school hours.
- Students requested changes to the homework policy to improve its clarity and better support the virtual learning experience.
- Students would like to have more interaction opportunities and wellness activities during class.

Planning for Return to In-Person Instruction

Stakeholders view safety as a top priority for returning to in-person instruction and planning for this transition. They also see need for greater clarity and communication around the metrics and decision-making process for shifting to in-person instruction. All stakeholders noted that intentionally addressing the social and emotional wellbeing of students and staff will be key to the return to in-person instruction.

- Teachers value that metrics have remained the priority for reopening planning.
- Elementary teachers/Educators would be more comfortable with a return to in-person learning when the health department can articulate substantive reasons for the change or omission of metrics. Teachers are concerned the decision by the state of Maryland to drop the metrics was political and out of alignment with medical advice and protocols.
- Teachers would appreciate if the district can ensure that re-opening plans align with the recommendations of public health and medical professionals.
- Educators and parents noted the need to have a clear and consistent plan for school reopening. Both groups also highlighted that HCPS should improve communication with families regarding planning and avoid sudden changes.

- Parents noted that safety should be a priority in return planning, highlighting the need to establish protocols and reinforce compliance. However, parents expressed mixed opinions regarding mask policies, as they fear that masks may hinder their children's learning processes.

- With regard to the timing and metrics related to a return to in-person instruction, parents noted that HCPS should consider their opinion and learn from other states' school systems in their reopening plans. Parents also expressed concerns regarding the lack of clarity in the metrics guiding decision-making.

- While some parents want their children back in the classroom as soon as possible and are hesitant about HCPS' teachers' ability to provide hybrid instruction effectively, other parents want to continue with virtual instruction due to safety concerns. However, parents noted that they want HCPS to provide them with instructional delivery options that allow them to decide what is best for their children.

- Parents highlighted the importance of clear and consistent communication from the district around planning for return to in-person instruction and safety protocols.

- Educators and central office staff noted that HCPS should prioritize students who need in-person instruction the most and address any classroom capacity concerns to comply with social distance protocols. Secondary teachers said safety must be a priority.

- Educators and parents stressed that returning plans should consider providing additional student support for readaptation, especially to students who have fallen behind.

OTHER KEY THEMES/TOPICS

Changes/Requests from Elementary Teachers

The following are additional themes/topics reported by the elementary teacher focus group.

- Teacher workload and mental health: elementary teachers noted that one key aspect of this theme is some building administrators have been supportive, but some have been critical without providing clear expectations or solutions.

- Consistency from HR/Benefits with regard to information about leave.

- Expanding technology support for teachers and students.

SECTION II: KEY FINDINGS
EDUCATORS

This section reviews educators' (principals and teachers) notes, regarding what went well, lessons learned, and planning forward.

WHAT WENT WELL

Figure 2.1 illustrates the seven key themes of educator feedback regarding what went well developed in this section.

Figure 2.1: Educator Feedback on What Went Well

Virtual Instruction	Food and Nutrition	Learning Support Centers	Hybrid Planning and Instruction

Transportation	Special Education	COVID-19 Protocols

Virtual Instruction

- Secondary teachers appreciated the messaging from the Superintendent as it relates to slowing down, doing what is best for students, and creating a safe virtual space for students during a difficult time.
- Principals emphasized cross-school collaboration and teachers' engagement to adapt to virtual instruction, including peer observations and instructional practices sharing.

Food and Nutrition

- At meal distribution centers, principals noted that staff worked together as a team, were committed to their roles, and communicated effectively with one another.
- They also noted the positive impact of establishing drive-through distribution models, converting gyms to cafeteria spaces, and eliminating the need for children to enter PIN numbers to help expedite distribution.

Learning Support Centers (LSCs)

- Principals highlighted the Human Resources department's efforts to hire staff for the Learning Support Centers (LSC). Stakeholders also noted that the positive results of data collection to identify students who need the LSC.

Hybrid Planning and Instruction

- Teachers believe their teaching skills have improved as a result of the pandemic. Teachers also expressed appreciation for Flex Fridays.
- Principals noted the work of school administrators and teachers to articulate the hybrid instruction plan, highlighting the tiered entry process and the teachers' ability to balancing all needs. Principals and teachers valued in-person relationships with students through hybrid instruction.
- Principals emphasized the team's collaboration and communication efforts to provide hybrid instruction to elementary students during the Fall. Principals highlighted LSC assistant's role to help teachers in managing online and virtual students.
- Educators in general stressed that the open and transparent communication was essential for forward thinking, streamlining, and problem-solving during planning.

Transportation

- Principals highlighted the ability of the transportation team to respond quickly and meet the needs of the district, including keeping the buses running, handling break downs, and collaborating with materials distribution.
- Stakeholders also stressed drivers were well prepared and demonstrated quick adaptation to all protocols and procedures.

Special Education

- Principals emphasized the work of special education staff to conduct successful IEP meetings online and increasing parents' attendance. Stakeholders noted the efforts to prioritize students with IEP into LSC planning and to distribute computers for special education para-educators.

COVID-19 Protocols

- Principals found a beneficial change from the approach of sending an entire cohort home to an investigation approach for specific close contact identification when someone had COVID-19 symptoms at school. Principals also noted that "custodians have done a tremendous job maintaining the school buildings."
- Teachers valued HCPS' emphasis on metrics to guide planning and reopening.
- Principals commended staff, including nurses and custodians, for ensuring that buildings were clean and safe.
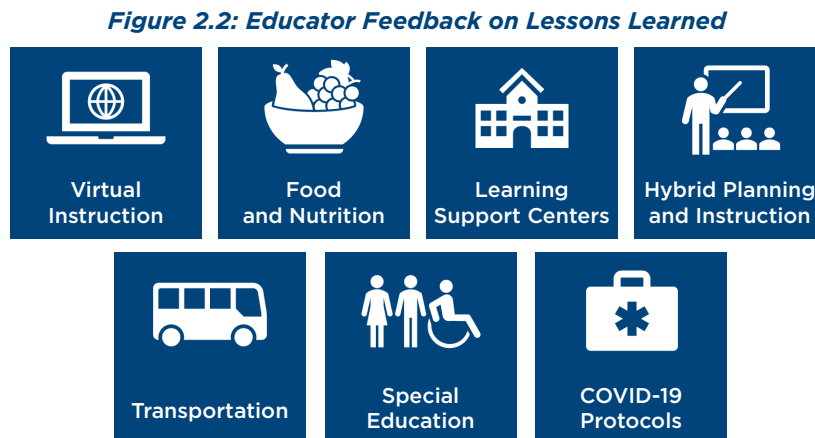
SECTION II: KEY FINDINGS
EDUCATORS, CONT.

LESSONS LEARNED

Figure 2.2 illustrates the seven key themes of educator feedback regarding lessons learned developed in this section.

Figure 2.2: Educator Feedback on Lessons Learned

Virtual Instruction · Food and Nutrition · Learning Support Centers · Hybrid Planning and Instruction · Transportation · Special Education · COVID-19 Protocols

Virtual Instruction

- Principals emphasized the need to establish late work and attendance policies and educate parents on their role in virtual learning. Principals also highlighted the need to train students and parents in the use of itslearning.

- Teachers highlighted the need to establish homework policies based on student ability, adopt late work acceptance policies and new policies to keep students accountable. Teachers also stressed the need to address technology compatibility issues with Microsoft, particularly regarding Chromebooks and itslearning.

- Teachers highlight challenges with student engagement, including how to engage students that do not use cameras and those with low motivation to participate in virtual instruction. Teachers also suggest professional development around engagement strategies.

- Some teachers struggled with technology integration and compatibility on both the student end and for their own work to deliver instruction virtually. Teachers suggest that students also need more training to use their devices and more guidance for how to troubleshoot and access technology help when needed.

- Stakeholders also highlighted professional development needs for teachers to provide virtual instruction and allowing more flexibility with pacing for teachers regarding instruction, planning, and professional learning.

Food and Nutrition

- Principals noted that lunch and pick-up schedules impacted academic schedules and considered extending lunch breaks to help screen fatigue. Principals also highlighted concerns about space availability to provide lunch following social distance measures once more students enroll in the hybrid model.

Learning Support Centers (LSCs)

- Principals noted that LSCs should serve students with the greatest needs. Therefore, the district should have a better assessment system to identify which students genuinely benefit from this service. Stakeholders also highlighted the need to communicate LSC's goals to help parents get a better understanding of the purpose of this model and avoid confusion with hybrid learning.
- Regarding Secondary Fall LSC integration, stakeholders highlighted the need to establish criteria to select students and explain goals to avoid student withdrawal.

Hybrid Planning and Instruction

- Teachers described challenges in the delivery of hybrid instruction – in-person and remote instruction at the same time – leading to increased stress and anxiety and discouragement in their ability to meet the needs of all of their students. Some encouraged administrators to visit classrooms to gain a more complete understanding of the practical and logistical challenges around hybrid instruction.
- Some principals emphasized the lack of consistency during survey design and analysis. For instance, "surveys included unclear wording and lacked purpose/intent" and "our first set up students were actually based on the original survey and not first responders. Did we really capture the right children with our first survey?"
- Principals emphasized the need to support teachers to deliver effective instruction in hybrid models through professional development and best practices sharing. Stakeholders also suggested having additional support during hybrid instruction, such as LSC proctors.
- Regarding Fall hybrid instruction at the elementary level, principals also highlighted the need to support teachers in adjusting to this model and considering treating groups across elementary school differently.
- Principals also emphasized the need to restructure the Friday plan and consider not having students come to school so that teachers can dedicate that time for planning or professional development.

Transportation

- Principals highlighted the need to have up-to-date transportation lists and enough buses to re-enter the hybrid model. For instance, "NHHS and NHMS are unable to accommodate transportation for a 50 percent return without significant additional buses."

COVID-19 Protocols

- Principals emphasized the need to address staff safety concerns and establishing attendance protocols.
- Principals and teachers highlighted the need to practice protocols better and keep staff and students accountable, especially those not following the protocols.
- Teachers valued that metrics have remained the priority for reopening planning. For example, elementary teachers would be more comfortable with a return to in-person learning when the health department can articulate a substantive reason for the change or omission of metrics and ensure that re-opening plans align with the recommendations of public health and medical professionals.
- Teachers noted a lack of consistently in student and staff compliance with COVID-19 protocols and lack of oversight by school administrators.

PLANNING FORWARD

Figure 2.3 illustrates the four key themes of educator feedback regarding planning forward developed in this section.

Figure 2.3: Educator Feedback on Planning Forward

Virtual Instruction	Special Education	Organizational Culture	Return Planning

Virtual Instruction

- Teachers highlighted the need to increase and strengthen professional development (PD) programs through expanding offerings and bringing in technology experts. Teachers emphasized technology as one of the main topics to consider for professional development. For instance, "I think it is the need for more PD. I have had maybe two tech problems all year that I could not fix for students, because Instructional Tech is something that I really like and know a lot about. We need teachers trained in the tech. But, for some, that could be weeks of full-time training over the summer to get there. And it needs to be paid."

- Teachers also noted the need to have more platforms that allow teachers to supervise students' work in real-time and monitor students' devices, such as DESMOS, PearDeck, and Microsoft online documents. Teachers also suggested "using TAC to take attendance in each class."

- Teachers highlighted the opportunity to modify some policies to optimize the school experiences, such as attendance, late work, and school hours policies.

Special Education

- Stakeholders also noted that when considering accelerating a returning plan, the district should provide consistency for students with special needs and avoid creating confusion for parents and students.

Organizational Culture

- Teachers valued the appreciation shown by the central office. For instance, "teachers appreciate the shout out given periodically to them via HCPS newsletter 411." Teachers expressed their wish to enhance and continue with these practices.

Return Planning

- Educators value safety as a top priority for returning to in-person instruction. Teachers, in particular, are anxious about putting their families at risk.

- If metrics change or improve, principals noted that return planning should prioritize students who need in-person instruction the most, provide additional support and equipment to teachers to provide hybrid instruction, and addressing potential capacity issues in classrooms and the cafeteria.

- Teachers highlighted the opportunity to expand virtual instruction in further planning. For instance, a teacher noted, "Perhaps we have seen the end of the snow day, which matters because we can determine the beginning and end of the school year." Another teacher mentioned that "AP or college classes can be offered virtually instead of students attending a separate institution."

SECTION III: KEY FINDINGS
CENTRAL OFFICE STAFF

This section reviews notes from central office staff focus groups regarding what went well, lessons learned, and planning forward. Central office included staff members who perform operational and instructional duties **including but not limited to** school nurses, custodial service coordinators, IT staff, HR staff, transportation staff, special education staff, budget staff, safety and security staff, Pupil Personnel Workers (PPW), curriculum specialists, coordinators, instructional coaches, content specialists, assistant supervisors, and supervisors, etc.

WHAT WENT WELL

Figure 3.1 illustrates the seven key themes of educator feedback regarding what went well developed in this section.

Figure 3.1: Central Office Staff Feedback on What Went Well

Virtual Instruction

- Central office staff highlighted the team's capacity to adapt quickly to virtual education, including training teachers and meeting all technological needs under pressure and tight timelines. They particularly noted the important role and work of technology staff to distribute devises and help adapt to virtual instruction.

Food and Nutrition

- Central office staff value the positive and efficient communication, teamwork, and logistical planning that went into food distribution.
- Food and Nutrition staff were praised for their commitment and work to ensure that students received meals.

Learning Support Centers (LSCs)

- Central office staff noted the positive outcomes and impacts from the LSCs, including benefits to employees, families, and individual students. They attributed the success of the LSCs to the "all hands on deck" planning and work to bring together staff and work towards a common and meaningful goal.
- Regarding the Secondary Fall LSC, central office staff underscored the importance of flexible scheduling and grouping students based in part on familiarity with one another.

Hybrid Planning and Instruction

- Central office staff highlighted the forward thinking, collaborative planning that took place in the summer to plan for the 2020-21 school year as an example of positive, solutions-oriented teamwork among various departments and groups in the district.
- Central office staff highlighted teachers' ability to balance tasks and build skills to offer a successful hybrid learning experience for students.
- Central office staff also valued hybrid instruction in providing options for both in-person and virtual learning for families to meet their needs and preferences.
- For elementary school hybrid instruction in particular, central office staff highlighted positive student and staff experiences as well as strong collaboration and planning to ensure success. This success is attributed to strong collaboration, communication, and innovation.

Transportation

- Central office staff highlighted the ability of the transportation team to respond quickly and meet the needs of the district, including keeping the buses running, handling break downs, and collaborating with materials distribution. The transportation department showed immense flexibility and teamwork to meet the shifting needs of the district and students.

Special Education

- Central office staff emphasized the work of special education staff to conduct successful IEP meetings online and increasing parents' attendance, reflecting special education staff members' commitment to supporting students.

COVID-19 Protocols

- Central office staff appreciated clear communication and consistent protocols and highlighted the importance and effectiveness of the HCPS partnership with the Health Department.
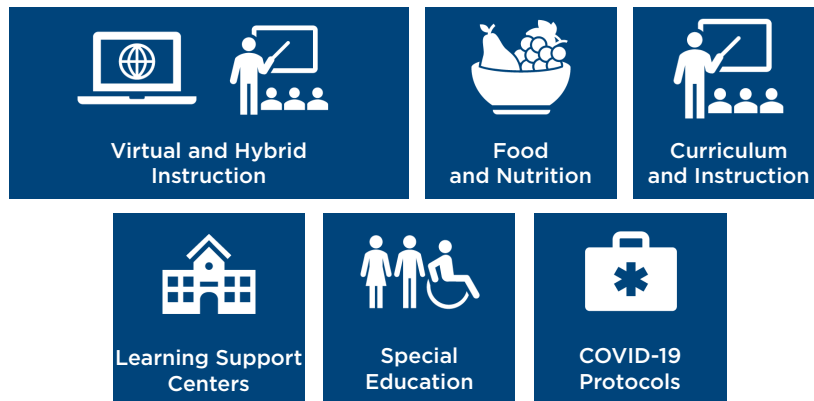
LESSONS LEARNED

Figure 3.2 illustrates the six key themes of central office staff feedback regarding lessons learned developed in this section.

Figure 3.2: Central Office Staff Feedback on Lessons Learned

Virtual and Hybrid Instruction

Food and Nutrition

Curriculum and Instruction

Learning Support Centers

Special Education

COVID-19 Protocols

Virtual and Hybrid Instruction

- Generally, central office staff highlighted the need for ongoing adjustments and modifications to further refine and optimize both virtual and hybrid instructional models. Some provided specific suggestions, such as focusing on reducing the amount of stationary screen time required of students in virtual instruction and providing greater opportunities for peer engagement and socialization.

- Central office staff highlighted the need for continued work and investment to ensure that staff are able to successfully use and leverage instructional technology, this includes ongoing questions and discussions around the best learning platforms and tools (e.g., itslearning, Microsoft Teams) as well as the necessary technology and resources for students to be successful in virtual learning.

- Central office staff highlighted the need to invest in both technology and professional development. These investments should prioritize a new platform that allows teachers to manage video, audio, chat functions, and follow up with students struggling with virtual learning. Central office staff also noted the need to streamline itslearning.

- Central office staff considered that the lack of understanding of logistical details impacted the development of the hybrid instructional plan. The staff also highlighted that the abrupt abandonment of hybrid instruction caused hardship for families and staff.

- Central office staff recognized that the shift to virtual and hybrid instruction highlighted inequities in student access to instruction and that there are continued challenges to ensure that all students receive the same high-quality, personalized instruction regardless of learning format or situation.

Curriculum and Instruction

- Central office staff cited a need for continued professional development to support instructional staff, requiring investment in time to develop and for teachers to participate in professional development. Professional development topics ranged from student engagement strategies to grading and assessment to instructional pacing.

- Central office staff see need for greater time and thought around instructional pacing and planning, including providing teachers with both greater guidance as well as flexibility to adapt to the needs of their students and account for the appropriate amount and pace of content in virtual and hybrid learning environments.

Food and Nutrition

- Central office staff highlight some ongoing challenges with food distribution related to lunch and meal pick-up scheduling, the ability to accommodate for last-minute changes, and managing potential disruptions in the supply chain.

Learning Support Centers (LSCs)

- Central office staff suggested that there are some challenges with LSC logistics and balancing against other priorities. For example, some sites needed modifications in order to accomodate special education students. Staffing emerged as a key challenge for LSC planning as well, with some noting mis-matches between staffing and student enrollment at times.

Special Education

- Central office staff highlighted the need for a specific strategic plan for special education that considers providing enough in-person learning opportunities safely.
- Some central office staff highlighted challenges related to special education, including schools' ability to provide sufficient in-person learning when needed and internal communication on planning for special education services as well as communication about IDLP and IEP processes.

COVID-19 Protocols

- Central office staff highlighted a need for greater accountability for adherence to COVID-19 protocols, including for individual accountability for those that willfully do not follow protocols and leadership accountability for the rollout of protocols at each school and office site. However, they also recognize that certain situations, jobs, and groups are less able to adhere to COVID-19 protocols than others (e.g., young students, sites with limited space).
- Central office staff suggested that there could be more done to ensure that COVID-19 protocols are universally understood and are clearly and consistently communicated.

PLANNING FORWARD

Figure 3.3 illustrates the three key themes of central office staff feedback regarding planning forward developed in this section.

Figure 3.3: Educator Feedback on Planning Forward

Special Education	Organizational Culture	Return Planning

Return Planning

- Central office staff prioritized planning for expanded return to in-person learning for special education and grades K-2 in particular. They believe that "the youngest need to be in the classroom the most for learning, socialization, and childcare issues for parents."
- Central office staff also view the most vulnerable students, such as those experiencing poverty and homelessness, as a priority for support and return to school.
- Central office staff highlighted the need to set clear returning guidelines and communicate them consistently to staff and families.
- Central office staff also noted the importance of providing additional support for students to adjust to in-person instruction, such as summer opportunities or school orientation, especially for those falling behind.

Special Education

- Central office staff noted that a returning plan for special education students is critical due to accountability and potential litigation, "keeping in mind the need to provide IEP services and avoid the need for compensatory service." They view expanded return to in-person instruction for special education students as a top priority.

Organizational Culture

- Central office staff noted their desire to continue with virtual processes and work from home practices even after the pandemic. For instance, a person commented that "working from home had a stigma at HCPS previously, and I hope this perception has changed forever and that HCPS instills flexibility into jobs that are not 100 percent in-person essential," and another staff member highlighted that "The electronic approvals is definitely a process that should continue once the pandemic is over."
- Many central office staff members (operational side) noted that the fast pivoting or timing for plans was not conducive to the work needed.
- Working beyond capacity with tight deadlines and public scrutiny was a theme for central office focus group.

SECTION IV: KEY FINDINGS
STUDENTS

This section reviews the student comments. Due to the students' limited feedback as compared to feedback from other focus groups, responses were categorized in what went well and planning forward.

WHAT WENT WELL

Figure 4.1 illustrates the two key themes of student feedback regarding what went well with their virtual education experience developed in this section.

Figure 4.1: Student Feedback on What Went Well

Class Interaction

- Students valued classes that allowed more interaction with the teacher and their peers. For instance, a student noted that "it helps when other students are engaged when you are in breakout groups, and other students talk," and another student commented that "[I] like live classes because I can ask questions."
- Students noted that incorporating virtual games improved interaction in class. For instance, "my teacher created a jeopardy game online and used the itslearning chat feature for the teams to communicate."

Wellness

- Students valued wellness activities that helped them get a break from screen time. For instance, students shared that "at the beginning of my science class for like five minutes we bring pets into the camera and just talk and it's fun and gets me engaged into the class more!" and "Kinesthetic learning. Never paid attention to economics more than when [the] teacher had one minute of physical exercise before [class]."

PLANNING FORWARD

Figure 4.2 illustrates the three key themes of student feedback regarding planning forward developed in this section.

Figure 4.2: Student Feedback on Planning Forward

Class Interaction	Wellness	Homework

Class Interaction

- Students highlighted that increasing interaction opportunities during class and schoolwork, even at asynchronous courses, can enhance their virtual learning experience. For instance, a student noted, "if I am the only person in class participating, I almost carry the discussion, and it is very frustrating." Another student commented, "more interactive lessons (i.e., interactive, labs, projects, posters)."

Wellness

- Students noted that having more breaks and wellness activities that give them time off the screen can improve their virtual learning experience. For instance, "[I] need to spend more time off the screen. Teachers need to reinforce getting off! Reinforce doing non-digital activities."

Homework

- Students' comments suggest that enhancing the homework policy would improve their virtual learning experience. For instance, a student noted that "most work isn't "homework." They don't give us enough time, so we have to do it as homework." Another student commented that "homework policy can't assign mandatory homework unless for extra credit (i.e., can only help your grade)."
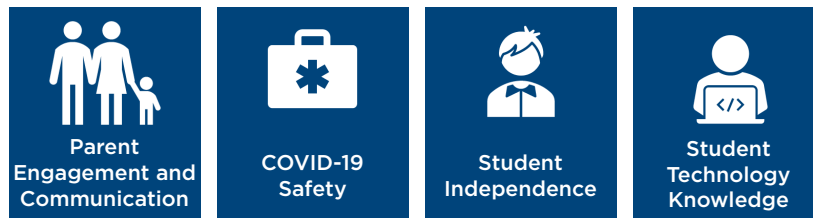
SECTION V: KEY FINDINGS
PARENTS

This section reviews parents' comments regarding what went well, lessons learned, and planning forward.

WHAT WENT WELL

Figure 5.1 illustrates the four key themes of parent feedback regarding what went well developed in this section

Figure 5.1: Parent Feedback on What Went Well

| Parent Engagement and Communication | COVID-19 Safety | Student Independence | Student Technology Knowledge |

Parent Engagement and Communication

• Parents valued having the opportunity to have a more active role in their child's education, having first-hand information of what their children are learning. For instance, a parent commented that she was able to identify a learning disability in her child and go through the IEP process.

• Parents valued the positive impact of virtual instruction in their communication with teachers. Parents highlighted teacher's willingness to have discussions over Teams and provide additional help to students. For instance, a parent noted, "I have excellent communication with the teacher and have loved having this opportunity." Another parent mentioned having "consistent and effective communication with his [child's] teacher."

COVID-19 Safety

• Parents appreciated having virtual learning to keep their children safe from COVID-19 transmission. A parent noted, "it has been nice to have my 11th grader home safely in my home."

• A parent highlighted concerns with the district's safety measures during hybrid education and the impact on students' continuity of learning. "During the hybrid model, teachers and students were always being sent home for being sick, even for a runny nose."

Student Independence

• Parents noted that virtual learning has a positive impact on their child's sense of independence and responsibility. For instance, "my child logs in without having to be reminded" and "student gaining responsibility for own education, learning how to self-advocate."

Student Technology Knowledge

• Parents emphasized the positive impact of virtual learning on their child's computer skills. For instance, "my son has become more computer literate in terms of navigating Microsoft Office, itslearning, and all of the platforms used by HCPS."
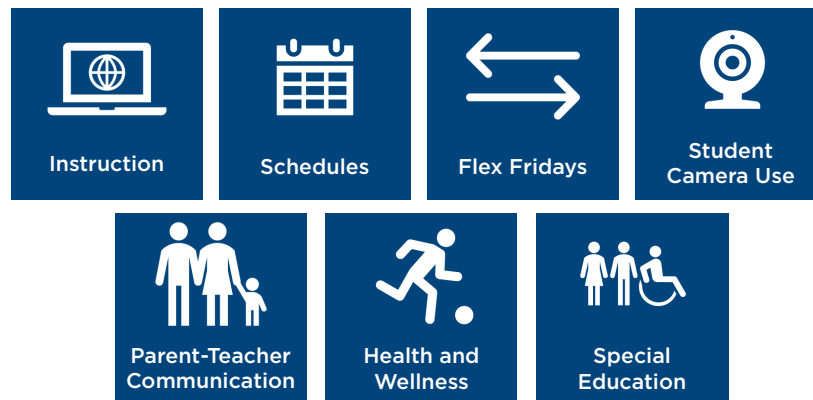
SECTION V: KEY FINDINGS
PARENTS, CONT.

LESSONS LEARNED

Figure 5.2 illustrates the seven key themes of parent feedback regarding lessons learned developed in this section.

Figure 5.2: Parent Feedback on Lessons Learned

| Instruction | Schedules | Flex Fridays | Student Camera Use |
| Parent-Teacher Communication | Health and Wellness | Special Education |

Instruction

- Parents highlighted the need to have smaller groups to provide more personalized instruction. "It was recommended that smaller groups be formed. Some classes are too large to adequately teach virtually, and it is easier to miss a student who may be struggling when you are looking at a class of 30 online."

- Parents noted the need to give students more opportunities to socialize and highlighted the teacher's role in leading these opportunities. For instance, a parent commented that "students do not know how to make friends virtually or connect. Do not make this "extra" though; try to embed it into instruction."

- Parents also stressed the need to tailor lessons "to fit a virtual learning environment" and "providing an instructional assistant in the elementary classes so that students can go into break out groups with another adult if extra help is needed too so when the teacher is working with a small group."

- Parents also noted that having more homework can be beneficial for students, especially "for students who chose and are in magnet and advanced placement programs."

- Parents expressed concerns about "their children getting too much asynchronous instruction" because teachers attended meetings. Parents suggested "scheduling meetings during planning or after school."

- Parents want to know more about assessments during virtual instruction. Specifically, parents want to know "what assessments are being administered, what the assessments measure, how to read results of the assessments and where their child is performing on the assessment versus expectations (i.e., regarding Envision Math and istation)."

- Parents highlighted the need for more clear assessment and report cards.

Schedules

- Parents stressed that having different schedules is challenging for families with multiple children at home. Therefore, parents noted that having the same schedule across grades would be beneficial, especially for lunch breaks. A parent noted that the "schedule was great when all levels were on the same lunch schedule, the return to hybrid changed that lunch schedule and has greatly limited families."

- Parents also raised concerns regarding the difficulty to keep their children engaged with schedules with many breaks. For instance, "young children are constantly on and off [the] computer with frequent breaks, while parents understand [the] need for breaks, it is difficult to get them to return to screen repeatedly after [a] break."

Flex Fridays

- Parents noted the need to enhance the Flex Friday policy. Parents mentioned that the district should "change to live instruction day, [parents] feel Flex Fridays are being used as a "dump" day, a day to finish up everything the teacher did not get finished during the week." Parents also noted that Flex Fridays should have a "system wide consistency of time to post assignments."
- Parents also suggested using Fridays to provide tutoring and enrichment opportunities for students.

Student Camera Use

- Parents welcomed the use of cameras on to help students' socialization. However, while some parents favor "[providing] extra credit to students that turn their cameras on," other parents were "concerned about this being attached to grades."

Parent-Teacher Communication

- Parents noted that they would like to receive more communication regarding their child's academic performance, especially when a student falls behind. Parents mentioned that "we need better tools to inform the parents of poor student behavior, such as not attending or not paying attention."
- Parents also indicated wanting to have more consistent and clear communication from school and district administrators. Parents "would like to see more HCPS Focus Groups, such as this one."

Health and Wellness

- Parents expressed concerns about their child's mental health during the pandemic. A participant shared that her "child has lost enthusiasm for school," and others mentioned, "students are on more medication during virtual learning for anxiety."
- Parents also noted their desire to see more consistency in future decisions and policies.

Special Education

- Parents with children with special education services would like to have their "IEPs followed more closely" and be informed of progress.
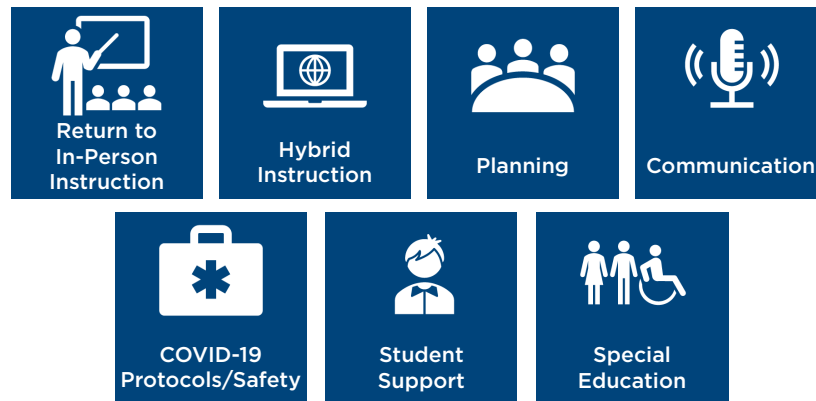
PLANNING FORWARD

Figure 5.3 illustrates the seven key themes of parent feedback regarding planning forward developed in this section.

Figure 5.3: Parent Feedback on Planning Forward

Return to In-Person Instruction | Hybrid Instruction | Planning | Communication

COVID-19 Protocols/Safety | Student Support | Special Education

Return to In-Person Instruction

- Parents noted that the district should have a plan to have children back to in-person instruction as soon as possible. Parents commented that "Going back fully in person is possible. Private schools are doing it" and that "there should be an "option to get kids back in school for those who really need it."

- Some parents support a full in-person instruction instead of a hybrid model. For instance, a parent commented that "if students return, it needs to be 100 percent, not hybrid," and other commented that "one day/week return is not worthwhile, created weekly traumatic separation events for younger learners."

Hybrid Instruction

- Parents highlighted the need to provide parents with more options through establishing hybrid instruction. "It was said by all that keeping virtual an option for families is important. Each family needs to be able to weigh their risks to the benefits of in-person learning for as long as the pandemic endures. Some expressed that this should be an option until all our population has accessibility to the vaccine."

- However, some parents expressed concerns regarding the ability of teachers to provide hybrid instruction. For instance, "It is ridiculous to ask teachers to do both types of teaching simultaneously."

Planning

- Parents noted that the district should have a clear and consistent plan and avoid sudden changes that create confusion. For instance, parents said, "once there is a plan, stick with it" and "we need a solid plan that will not change."

- Parents want the district to consider their opinion through surveys. "Ask parents opinions. Send a clear survey about what they would like hybrid, full in school, virtual." Parents also suggested that the district should "survey staff to determine how many staff members would like to go back to school" to make informed decisions.

- Parents suggested that the district should learn from other peers. "See what is working elsewhere. Other systems have exclusive online teachers and in-person teachers."

SECTION V: KEY FINDINGS
PARENTS, CONT.

Communication

- Parents highlighted the need to receive clear and consistent communication from the district. Parents "feel as though in the beginning communication was constant and consistent, but it has trailed off."

- Parents noted the need to receive detailed communication regarding the district's plan moving forward. "Families would like the plans and protocols clearly laid out for them to see. They want to know the ins and outs of how it will work in the classroom. They want to see how the desks will be spaced, and the halls navigated. They want to know who will be cleaning what and when."

- Parents also stressed that the district should improve communication channels. "Social media is not an appropriate outlet. Contact via email/phone at the same time social media announcements are made."

COVID-19 Protocols/Safety

- Parents noted safety protocols for a return to in-person instruction. For instance, including "using common areas like the library and gym to get more students into the building," "ensuring CDC guidelines are being met upon opening, student capacity [that] allows for six-feet distance," and "offering weekly COVID-19 testing to teachers."

- Some parents expressed that they would consider sending their children back to school only after all family members and school staff get vaccinated. For instance, "more people need to be vaccinated before a return to in-person learning is feasible."

- Parents expressed concerns regarding the lack of compliance with safety protocols. For instance, parents are "concerned that masks will not be worn consistently among older students." Conversely, some parents are concerned that masks would deter their children's ability to learn and communicate with others. For instance, "one parent said that if masks are required, they will not be sending their child back. Special circumstances for this family make the child's inability to see the teacher's mouth moving and facial expressions a hindrance to their learning ability."

Student Support

- Parents highlighted the need for individualized support to meet the needs of each student, such as tutoring. Parents "felt each child will need to be evaluated to determine where the gaps in learning are and to determine what tutoring may be needed."

Special Education

- Parents noted that in-person instruction planning should prioritize students with special education services. For instance, "the youngest kids and special needs kids, like it was at the start of the year. My kindergartners are both autistic and ADHD, and virtual learning from home does not work for them."

SECTION VI: SAMPLE QUOTES

This section presents sample quotes by theme for each stakeholder group on what went well, lessons learned, and planning forward.

EDUCATORS AND CENTRAL OFFICE STAFF

*Figure 6.1: Educator and Central Office Staff Sample Quotes on **WHAT WENT WELL.***

THEME	SAMPLE QUOTES
Virtual Instruction	• "Individual teachers are providing supports to their peers and improving instruction. Instructional Strategies were quickly developed to engage students in the virtual classroom."
Food and Nutrition	• "The distribution center staff provided tremendous support for the distribution of meal kits for the students, in addition to continuing to perform their day to day tasks, all while remaining COVID-19 free by following the established by HCPS guidelines that were in alignment with the state and other local health experts."
Hybrid Planning and Instruction	• "In preparation for a return, there was collaboration between departments that previously did not work closely together (example – Health Services & Operations)." • "Teachers demonstrated their abilities to juggle and accomplish more than they may have thought they could." • "Students that did not have internet access could attend to learn in person."
Learning Support Centers (LSC)	• "Human Resources hiring push to provide enough/extra Assistants in LSC's to have two staff in each room (even though we had to eventually have only one staff in Grades 4 and 5 the intent was there)."
Transportation	• "Very positive impressions of Transportations ability to problem-solve, communicate, and meet the needs of the district. Able to pivot on impressive timetables. This team showed a positive attitude, flexibility, and competency."
Special Education	• "Special educators have been amazing. One on one meetings and services are being managed."
COVID-19 Protocols	• "Clear and concise communication on protocols, operational status, and expectations was great. Flow charts really helped layout following COVID procedures well for people not involved in the day-to-day work."

SECTION VI: SAMPLE QUOTES, CONT.

*Figure 6.2: Educator and Central Office Staff Sample Quotes on **LESSONS LEARNED.***

THEME	SAMPLE QUOTES
Virtual Instruction	• "We should continue momentum and advocate further for technology funding." • "Ideas around communicating clear expectations to families around their role in virtual learning. (i.e., allowing student to complete assignments independently, not interrupting virtual learning during instructional time, inappropriate language or visuals in the background, and appropriate learning spaces for children)." • "Struggle with Flex Friday being seen as a day off, and not a school/workday. Many teachers are spending that time reaching out to students to try and support students who are not completing work." • "Teachers needed to be given a content map and pacing; and then let loose to teach the content after they had some professional learning around virtual delivery styles."
Food and Nutrition	• "We learned that the community depends on our F&N programs for their children, and this should be stressed when advocating for future funding."
Hybrid Planning and Instruction	• "The "original hybrid plan" did not include Learning Support Centers. With the quick pivot to the Learning Support Center model, the ability of the school system to hire/assign the needed staff to support the LSC's was a challenge. The food and nutrition staff as well as the Transportation Bus Staff that were reassigned to support the LSC's had to adjust quickly. This had implications for staffing, payroll, benefits and various other operational functions. Allowing for more in depth conversations and stakeholder feedback for reassigned staff and new staff would have allowed for the logistical challenges to be addressed in advance as well as more time for training." • "Extremely difficult for teachers to engage students online and in-person simultaneously. Identifying best practices for hybrid engagement." • "More Professional Learning, which equips teachers for what this type of learning looks like. Strategies for using tools like webcams; but also strategies to engage all learners. Teachers need support with how to use the Chromebooks so they can assist families and students. Thinking about supports for gradual return to school, focusing on the social-emotional states of students and meeting their needs. Refresh meeting norms for everyone."
Learning Support Centers (LSC)	• "Parents struggled to understand the disbandment of LSC and student transition to hybrid model/in-person learning. They continued to request LSC well into the implementation of the hybrid model/in-person learning."

THEME	SAMPLE QUOTES
Transportation	• "NHHS and NHMS are unable to accommodate transportation for a 50 percent return without significant additional buses. Pick up for symptomatic students with little or no parental support."
Special Education	• "Some regional programs were not fully staffed when the hybrid model started; this was a safety concern in some areas."
COVID-19 Protocols	• "Need accountability for employees who sign-in their health attestation falsely, don't sign-in, don't follow the COVID protocols, or for those who willfully ignore the safety of others. (Note: This was repeated in many ways, by many staff in each group)." • "Procedures for students in crisis, additional six-feet markings in hallways for student on floor."

*Figure 6.3: Educator and Central Office Staff Sample Quotes on **PLANNING FORWARD.***

THEME	SAMPLE QUOTES
Virtual Instruction	• "I would like to see HCPS vet certain programs like DESMOS or PearDeck that teachers can incorporate into their lessons. These programs would allow me to watch my students work in real-time and as a whole group. Monitoring student work through the assignment's mode is tedious since you have to go in and out of each student. It would be almost impossible for me to efficiently review and comment on each student's work." • "This could really be the chance to question why we do the things we do - school hours, school days, policies on attendance and late work, etc. Are there really still compelling reasons or is it just the way that we have always done things?"
Special Education	• "Whether or not metrics change, take the importance of consistency for students with special needs into consideration (back and forth between home and school if metrics aren't stable can sabotage progress and create anxiety, which in turn, can cause significant unsafe behaviors)."
Organizational Culture	• "Teachers feel valued when administrators acknowledge the incredible efforts of teachers in our current instructional context. Everything from recognition in a newsletter to finding ways to minimize required meetings help teachers to feel their leaders understand our commitment". • "Just seeing an email from principals or central office with the name of a teacher being recognized is enough for them to feel valued." • "Teachers feel appreciated when they see recognition in the 411". • "working from home had a stigma at HCPS previously, and I hope this perception has changed forever and that HCPS instills flexibility into jobs that are not 100 percent in-person essential" • "The electronic approvals is definitely a process that should continue once the pandemic is over."

THEME	SAMPLE QUOTES
Return Planning	• "Maintain clear guidelines regarding return to in-person (as stated previously 5 percent or less than 15 per 100,00) with one week of planning for return." • "K-2 Expanded Return: Important for socialization, modeling, and development." • "Can we return transition grades (6, 9 and maybe 12) with the elementary hybrid model as well?" • "Would it be to our benefit to invite the students that haven't shown up at all or very minimally during virtual learning as a small group to return pre-hybrid?" • "We told families that we would resume where we left off. We need to honor that commitment." • "Extra hands in classrooms to help. Teachers said they appreciated the help, as they were teaching children in person and online at the same time. " • "Until the six feet distancing is lifted, capacity in rooms and cafeterias is going to be an issue." • "Our Grades 3-5 need to get into school quickly. It was unfortunate that they only had a couple of days in school before the shutdown." • "Students that have not attended to instruction, our most struggling students, and primary grade students should be enrolled in summer school if HCPS can offer it and mandatory, if possible." • "When we go back, allow schools to use discretion who can come in first, not just default to who was in when we left off."

SECTION VI: SAMPLE QUOTES, CONT.

STUDENTS

*Figure 6.4: Student Sample Quotes on **WHAT WENT WELL.***

THEME	SAMPLE QUOTES
Class Interaction	• "I like it when other people actually talk and in classes where I know 99.0 percent of the class and have a chill teacher; we joke around have fun." • "Interactive whiteboard, padlet, everyone can do own work on screen, lots of student interaction." • "Kids love when they hear "WE'RE PLAYING A GAME": Gimkit, Among Us (fun game), Factile, Quizlet, Quizizz- powerups where you can redo question, Battle Royale, Blooket"
Wellness	• "Gym gives offline activities (i.e., psychology, picture project.)" • "Trains before school then charged up for virtual learning." • "Stretches/exercises before class wakes you up and gets you focused for the class." • "[*Teacher name withheld*] really uses his Flex Friday assignment to get us outside and have fun to get us away from the screens." • "It helps tremendously to have brain breaks and is scientifically proven to boost motivation, productivity, and endurance."

*Figure 6.5: Student Sample Quotes on **PLANNING FORWARD.***

THEME	SAMPLE QUOTES
Class Interaction	• "If I have a high grade, give me something interactive with my classmates." • "If I have a certain high grade in my class, I won't do the work. I'll work on something else. Interactive (not break out rooms)."
Wellness	• "I am wishing they gave my classmates and I more time. We only get five minutes in between each class, and that doesn't help me to get everything ready." • "[Virtual learning] needs to have classes broken up. Too much straight writing. Need time to move."
Homework	• "Teachers have to rethink how to teach. Teachers should rethink the value of assignments. Online learning takes a lot of personal responsibility."

SECTION VI: SAMPLE QUOTES, CONT.

PARENTS

*Figure 6.6: Parent Sample Quotes on **WHAT WENT WELL.***

THEME	SAMPLE QUOTES
Parent Engagement and Communication	• "Some Pre-K families expressed that it has been great to see firsthand what their students are learning, how they are working, and watching them grow. This is not something they would have been able to experience in a traditional school year." • "The ability of a parent to hear snippets of class and have a better understanding of what is really being learned day to day." • "My child's teachers have made every effort to engage my child and provide assistance and support. Specifically, [teacher names withheld] have been enthusiastic, creative, and supportive and have made virtual instruction as good as it can be with the resources they are provided." • "Majority of teachers who are so willing to go above and beyond during this difficult time. And those who are struggling is due to the content not being appropriate for online instruction. (Chemistry, PLTW). Believe me, they do their best to provide instruction, but the content needs to be delivered in a hands-on manner. [Teacher name withheld] sends weekly updates that are a lifesaver in AP Gov for my student. [Teacher name withheld] gives multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge in creative ways. Grades collected show the true effort of my student with a variety of ways to always better herself."
COVID-19 Safety	• "Appreciates the safety aspect of virtual learning." • "Having no concerns about COVID transmission via school."
Student Independence	• "My children had learned to make the best of a very difficult situation. [They have] become more resilient and flexible in their thinking." • "We have done pretty well with virtual learning. I don't think they are getting the same education, but I'd rather be safe during a pandemic. She can now work her way around a laptop and has learned to be in charge of her school schedule."
Student Technology Knowledge	• "Children are showing no fear towards computer issue, learning techniques to reboot and move on. They have a "it's not the end of the world" attitude." • "My child knows how to navigate a computer now." • "Kindergarten knows how to work computer better than parent, learned how to spell and recognize words and teacher's name."

*Figure 6.7: Parent Sample Quotes on **LESSONS LEARNED.***

THEME	SAMPLE QUOTES
Instruction	• "Perhaps breaking the class down to much smaller groups for significantly reduced periods of time." • "More opportunities for the kids to socialize with each other." • "Grade 1 curriculum taken straight from classroom to virtually, but how can it be more primary focused (i.e., not a lot of visuals, a lot of sitting, not a lot of repetition). Lessons may be able to be better tailored to fit a virtual learning environment." • "More opportunities for additional work that is well-matched to the tests." • "Parents want to know what the priorities are. Is it testing? They want the administration to be advocating for the removal of standardized testing so that we can prioritize learning." • "With respect to skills: How are children being assessed? itslearning tests are difficult for young learners."
Schedules	• "Having both students on the same lunch break would allow for a true break to play outside, leave our home for an hour, etc. The schedule from the early fall worked much better for our family." • "All grade levels should keep the same schedule to allow ease for families with multiple children on different levels." • "Have all students have the same lunch and break times- this could provide more opportunities for students to socialize in the neighborhood or with other siblings who may be on different school schedules. This could also make it easier on parents who have children in different grade levels and im prove mental health of students."
Flex Fridays	• "My children had learned to make the best of a very difficult situation. [They have] become more resilient and flexible in their thinking." • "We have done pretty well with virtual learning. I don't think they are getting the same education, but I'd rather be safe during a pandemic. She can now work her way around a laptop and has learned to be in charge of her school schedule."
Student Camera Use	• "Secondary schools should require students to keep cameras on. Teach them how to apply virtual backgrounds for privacy reasons."

THEME	SAMPLE QUOTES
Parent-Teacher Communication	• "One common recommendation amongst the parents was more communication between administrators, teachers, and families. They would like to see teachers reaching out to families more and getting a pulse on how the students are doing academically and with their mental health. They would like to see more communication when a student falls behind." • "itslearning needs a feature where students/parents can see what work is incomplete." • "Make sure that parents are informed of what is going on/assignments by copying them on the emails to their students."
Health and Wellness	• "Change of routine was not optimal for the students." • "Families take vacations requiring negative test as a policy." • "Consistency. Future decisions are the least disruptive to the students."
Special Education	• "A participant shared her child has an IEP. She would like to know how the IEP team will assess her child in first grade for their next IEP."

*Figure 6.8: Parent Sample Quotes on **PLANNING FORWARD.***

THEME	SAMPLE QUOTES
Return to In-Person Instruction	• "Some have said the emotional toll of virtual learning outweighs the physical health risk factors, and they would like to see their students return to in-person learning as soon as possible." • "Return students to in-person learning, parents want a choice (repeated several times)." • "Schools need to be opened because the relationships in the buildings are what motivate students; they are losing motivation. " • "Please keep available parental choice on whether to send their children back to in-person learning. Please keep Virtual Learning available. Please recognize that although some students are greatly impacted by the lack of in-person learning, that there are others who would be more impacted, stressed, paranoid and anxious if they had to return to the school environment."
Hybrid Instruction	• "Allow for at least a hybrid model. If they're in the building, they should not be on the computer. I'm less concerned with the 6ft distance but do agree with masks until folks are vaccinated (or have refused to vaccinate- I guess that's their choice) get them in person. Even a short day."
Planning	• "HCPS needs to tell us the plan for returning." • "Need a plan. This is affecting choices such as parents returning to work." • "Look at NY, Ohio, and Florida, rather than only Baltimore. Brainstorm with other states." • "If other counties are bypassing the state metrics, develop metrics that are realistic for Harford County with local numbers and utilize the latest Maryland safety guidance that was released in Jan 2021."

THEME	SAMPLE QUOTES
Communication	• "Parents would like to overall see more connection. There feels to be a disconnect in the community amongst many. There was a consistently made desire for more personal contact between the schools and families. They stated that making that connection and feeling heard is what they need most of all." • "Do not make last-minute decisions." • "Inform parents and families about the benchmarks and expectations on returning to school. " • "I asked a lot of questions when you were trying to open and when you briefly opened. None have been answered to date. As a parent, I have a right to know in detail how you are planning to clean and keep my child safe. Without those measures in place, I want to be allowed to continue virtual learning." • "When HCPS gives a plan, have parents and teachers help to write the plan. I have offered before, and it falls on deaf ears." • "Upon return, the parent's polls need to be better publicized, and their needs to be better follow up by schools to ensure schools have accurate data as to how many kids will be in the building. Reassess wording of the polls to ensure you have the most accurate numbers possible."
COVID-19 Protocols/ Safety	• "There were concerns about kids being able to communicate with their peers." • "Parents would like to see teachers supplied with clear masks and face shields so that students can see their mouths moving and their facial expressions." • "Another parent felt that more people need to be vaccinated before a return to in-person learning is feasible. They are concerned for the potential of an outbreak, and as much as they would like their child to experience in person schooling, if it is unsafe to do so, they do not believe it is wise." • "Utilize best practices from industries that have remained open during the pandemic and have demonstrated safety. Maximize the number of students that are in school by utilizing alternative spaces in the schools. Use out-of-the-box approach to get the kids back in school. Enforce all safety rules and involve parents if rules are not followed. Use outdoor spaces in the spring. Focus on kids that have fallen behind and get them in-person as soon as possible. Try to meet the needs of everyone. Work with the County government to use spaces/buildings that are currently unoccupied." • "Safety is foremost. Most have a low positivity rate."

THEME	SAMPLE QUOTES
Student Support	• "Parents felt each child will need to be evaluated to determine where the gaps in learning are and to determine what tutoring may be needed." • "Parents felt tutoring should be largely available and encouraged."
Special Education	• "How can the number of hours missed from the IEP and 504 plans be made up to ensure these students do not fall behind?"

Key Findings from HCPS Focus Groups
2020/2021

HARFORD COUNTY
PUBLIC SCHOOLS