



The Impacts COVID-19 has on the Elementary School Setting: A Case Study of  
Belmont Central Elementary School

Senior Project

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## **Abstract**

A nationwide quarantine was issued in March of 2020 due to the outbreak of COVID-19. This halted in-person teaching for elementary schools and forced those students to finish the rest of the school year via online learning. The pandemic also impacted how elementary schools would operate for the 2020-2021 school year. This study was conducted to determine how COVID-19 impacted second-grade classrooms at Belmont Central Elementary School in Belmont, North Carolina. Surveys were distributed to second-grade teachers, the students in their classrooms, and those students' parents to identify how each subject group feels the 2020-2021 school year is going. This case study will allow a unique insight regarding how teachers, students, and parents view the successfulness of online learning, traditional in-person learning, and hybrid learning.

## **The Impacts COVID-19 has on the Elementary School Setting: A Case Study of Belmont Central Elementary School**

### **Introduction:**

The first case of COVID-19 hit the United States in January of 2020 and quickly became a nationwide pandemic in less than two months. To combat the spread of the deadly disease, many states jumped on implementing restrictions, such as restaurant closures and schools being put on indefinite hiatuses (Fantini et al., 2020). Elementary schools being put on hiatus was a cause for concern for many parents and teachers due to the vulnerability of such young students. Dovzhenko (2020) discussed that elementary schoolers are at a higher risk of falling behind in school if drastic changes to their educational formats are swiftly changed. This is mainly due to the lack of initiative when it comes to learning because study habits are not typically formed at such a young age. Elementary schoolers also rely heavily on their teachers for guidance and obtaining the knowledge necessary to excel in school (Dovzhenko, 2020). Eventually, all in-person instruction for elementary schools was canceled and schooling was moved to an all-online format. Even though this measure was taken to keep teachers, students, and parents safe from the spread of COVID-19, the consequences of that decision proved to be hard-hitting to all parties involved (Levinson et al., 2020).

Since the face-to-face interactions with teachers were put on halt, a huge problem many across the nation worried about revolved around elementary students falling behind in school because of the abrupt changes made to their learning environment. These worries were surrounded by the beliefs that children

were not learning as much from online learning compared to that of in-person learning (Wyse et al., 2020). It also puts a tremendous amount of pressure on teachers, principals, and other school officials to ensure students do not fall behind. This forced schools to implement new policies that not only make the future of the school setting a safe place for all students and faculty but one that is adapting to utilizing new technological advances for instructional purposes (Pollock, 2020). To make these new policies a reality, it became a necessity for current teachers to be trained and understand how to successfully teach and present digital lesson plans.

### **The 2020-2021 Academic School Year**

Many states and school boards across the nation had to quickly decide on how to move forward for the 2020-2021 academic school year. By August 2020, many parts of the United States started to slowly lift many of the restrictions and precautions put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Fantini et al., 2020). North Carolina outlined three possible options for how that school year was going to operate. The first option was Plan A (“Reopening of Schools: Operational Guidance and Information/Overview”, 2020). This option was the least restrictive and described as minimal social distancing required, which meant students could attend in-person instruction four to five days a week. The second option was Plan B. This option was described as moderate social distancing, which makes social distancing mandatory. By making social distancing mandatory, it meant limited occupancy in the school buildings and buses. Students under this option would attend school two days a week and engage in remote learning three days a week. The third option was Plan C. This option, described as remote learning only, would require all students to

take part in remote learning all week long. North Carolina's governor Roy Cooper announced in July 2020 that schools had the option of taking part in Plan B or Plan C. He made it clear Plan A was not going to be an option at the beginning of the school year; however, he did not rule out the possibility of it being enacted before the academic school year ended ("Reopening of Schools: Operational Guidance and Information/Overview, 2020).

In this study, Belmont Central Elementary School (BCE) was selected to be the location of obtaining subjects to survey how successful they felt the 2020-2021 school year was going. BCE is located in Belmont, North Carolina which is in Gaston County. BCE has approximately 724 students and 39 full-time teachers ("Belmont Central Elementary", 2019). Gaston County Schools chose to engage in Plan B for the start of the new school year. For this to happen, BCE split up classrooms into two groups, Cohort A and Cohort B. On Mondays and Tuesdays, Cohort A participated in face-to-face instruction with their teacher at BCE while Cohort B participated in remote learning. On Wednesdays, BCE was closed so the school could be sanitized and deep-cleaned to combat COVID-19. This meant both cohorts participated in remote learning. On Thursdays and Fridays, Cohort B participated in face-to-face instruction while Cohort A participated in remote learning.

### **Methodology:**

Surveys were created and administered to four second-grade teachers, the second-grade students in their classrooms, and the students' parents at BCE. None of the surveys asked for the participant's name as this study was designed to be conducted in the most anonymous way possible. The second-grade teacher survey

consisted of seven short-answer questions regarding the status of the 2020-2021 academic school year. Questions were asked about the positive and negative aspects of teaching in the Plan B option, how teacher's workload has either stayed the same or changed this school year, whether they would make any specific changes to the current school year, and how well their students are adapting to wearing masks. The surveys were formatted on a Google Form and emailed to the teachers to complete.

The second-grade parent survey consisted of five questions along with the option to add any additional comments they wished to share. Those questions revolved around parents' views of all three plans for North Carolina schools, the successfulness of their child this school year, how well they think BCE handled the pandemic, and how well they think their child adapted to wearing a mask. The surveys were formatted on a Google Form and the second-grade teachers emailed them out to the parents. This increased anonymity for those who chose to partake in the survey.

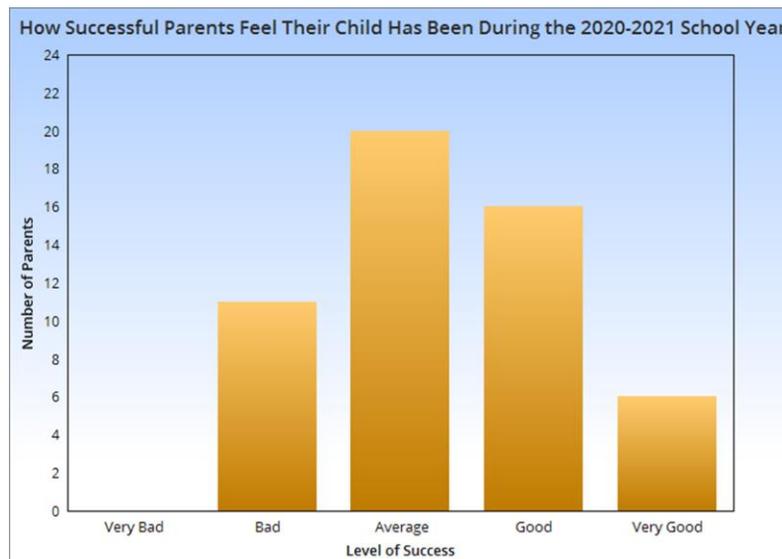
The second-grade student survey consisted of six questions. The questions asked about how students enjoyed their in-person and virtual remote learning days, the difficulty of online learning, the restrictions associated with Plan B, and how well they are enjoying the current school year. The survey was distributed to students as a hard-copy questionnaire on days they engaged in face-to-face instruction. Their teachers passed the survey out to the children and collected their answers once completed.

### **Results:**

The second-grade teacher survey showed the most positive attribute of

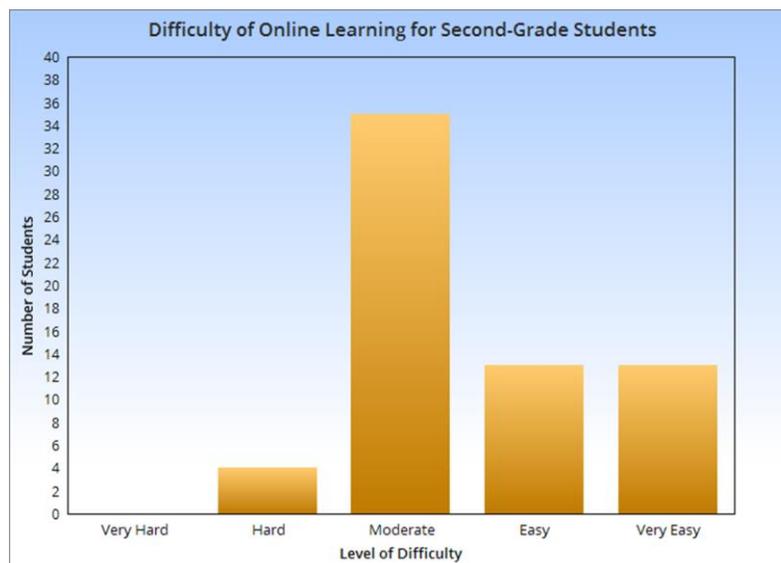
teaching in the Plan B option was the smaller class sizes. The teachers really enjoyed having around ten students in the class at one time because it allowed them to give more individual attention and develop better bonds with the students. The worst part of teaching in Plan B, and what proved to be the most challenging part of this school year for the teachers, was learning new technological tools without the proper training. They felt the county's administration wanted them to learn new technological systems yet did not give instructors adequate time to learn and master the tools. That is also part of the reason the teachers feel their workload has increased significantly this school year because now they are having to plan both virtual and in-person lessons. Constant changes from the Gaston County School's administration posed a challenge as well. While the county's administration is having to update the school system to accurately reflect and adjust to the constant changing COVID-19 conditions, it was hard for the teachers to adapt and continuously change gears. When asked how well their students have adapted to wearing masks in school, they praised the children and felt they adapted very well.

**Figure 1**



The second-grade parent survey had 53 respondents. When asked whether they liked the Plan B option North Carolina came up with, 64.2% said Yes, 20.8% said No, and 15.1% were indifferent. The results also showed 83% of parents preferred Plan B over Plan C. Responses varied when parents were asked how successful they feel their child has been during the 2020-2021 school year. 41.5% said they felt their child performed above average this year, 37.7% felt their child performed average, and 20.8% felt their child performed below average this year (See Figure 1). An overwhelming 96.2% of respondents approved how BCE handled the COVID-19 pandemic. 88.7% of parents say their child has no issues with wearing a mask in school while 11.4% say their child does not like wearing them and actively complains about it. Many parents said they would prefer for their children to partake in Plan A and return to in-person learning for the next school year. Additional comments made by parents indicate that it has been difficult making their second-grader sit still in front of a computer for hours on end.

**Figure 2**



65 students participated in the second-grade student survey. 75.4% of students preferred their face-to-face learning days over their online days and 30.8% of students said they did not like virtual remote learning at all. When asked how difficult online learning was for them, 6.2% found it hard, 53.8% found it moderately difficult, and 40% found it either easy or very easy (see Figure 2). Overall, 69.2% of students are enjoying the 2020-2021 school year. Many students said the best part of the school year was being able to see their teachers and friends again.

**Conclusion:**

The findings of this case study gave valuable insight on how second-grade teachers, students, and parents viewed the successfulness of new, modified learning styles due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers felt the smaller class sizes proved to be a positive aspect of teaching in-person during the pandemic. Teachers also felt pressured to quickly learn and implement new technology changes to their classrooms. Constant administrative changes also proved to be difficult at times for teachers. The second-grade parents appeared to be concerned about the success of their children with virtual remote learning. Over half of the second-grade students found at least some difficulties with online learning. Only a quarter of students preferred online learning over in-person instruction. The one thing all three subject groups agreed on was their want for face-to-face learning to commence full-time. Teachers believe this type of instruction will engage the students in course work more and be good for their mental health. Parents are ready for a normal in-person learning environment because they feel their children will perform better

academically. Students strongly prefer face-to-face learning over virtual learning, and indicated they are ready to be back physically in the classroom five days a week. These children miss hanging out with their friends and seeing their teacher everyday.

The desire to return to in-person teaching five days a week requires a certain set of precautions to continue to fight against COVID-19. For the 2020-2021 academic school year, BCE uses Wednesdays to completely sanitize and clean the school to kill any germs associated with COVID-19. If schools continue to practice good hygiene techniques, such as cleaning and sanitizing, at the end of each school day when things return to normal, it will reduce the risk of having to fully close schools even if some children or faculty contract the coronavirus (Walger et al., 2020). According to Governor Roy Cooper, North Carolina can start lifting all mask mandates and other restrictions completely once herd immunity is reached (Smoot, 2021). Mecklenburg County health experts said for herd immunity to be achieved, between 70% to 85% of North Carolinians need to be vaccinated. Once those percentages are reached, it will inhibit the spread of COVID-19 which will provide protection for individuals who choose or are unable to receive the vaccine. As of May 2021, 40.1% of North Carolinians were vaccinated so there is still room to go until coronavirus restrictions are completely lifted (Smoot, 2021). Once herd immunity is finally reached and restrictions are completely lifted, the possibility of appeasing teachers', students', and parents' desire of returning to a normal in-person school year may be a realistic possibility.

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