

The Student and Curriculum-Related Needs of Special Education Instructors During the Pandemic

Introduction

With the onset of the pandemic, teachers find themselves managing significant change. Their traditional responsibilities have expanded to include new instructional modalities as well as an increase in the academic and support needs of students. Mainstream media assert that teacher job demands have increased and morphed. This study sought to explore those assumptions. Of interest were:

- teacher perceptions about job demand changes
- insights into the student and parent focused demands that might have impacted teacher job demands
- identification of supports that could help the teacher during the pandemic regardless of teacher perceptions of changes in job demands.

It is expected that study results could provide direction for the ongoing support of teachers and assist with meeting student and parent needs during and post pandemic. Additionally, this research potentially serves as a pilot study for the further exploration of Wisconsin teacher work demands within the context of a specific district or school.

Literature Review

In an effort to keep this report manageable in size, a distinct literature review section is not offered. Rather, the basics of related literature are noted in the *Results and Discussion* section.

Methods

Participants

The sample population consisted of certified Wisconsin teachers included on an email list maintained by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). These teachers also taught students with observable or documented mental health challenges during the pandemic (N=63). The full email list contained an undisclosed number of teachers and nonteachers interested in receiving information about special education from DPI. All list members received email invitations to participate in the study. However, not all members met sample population criteria.

As a result of an inability to segment the email list pre-distribution of survey, respondent culling occurred post data collection. The collection of demographic data focused on population characteristics particularly relevant to the study such as teacher certification. (See Appendix A for details.) One-hundred and fifty-three surveys were returned. Sixty-three met sample population criteria.

Survey

Survey instrument creation began with four semi-structured telephone interviews of Wisconsin middle and high school teachers. A convenience sample of interviewees included one male and three females. The number of years of teaching experience ranged from four to more than 20. Instructors embodied a blend of public and private school backgrounds, sometimes varied within one career. Inductive thematic analysis of telephone interviews and best practices defined by Fink (2013) guided the creation of an online questionnaire. The mixed methods instrument included 20 open ended or multiple response questions. Eleven to fourteen response options were provided for each question. Restrictions were placed on the number of selections that could be made (3).

Analysis

Data were gathered over two weeks in October of 2020. Collection and analysis utilized best practices defined by Leedy and Ormrod (2010). Invitations and a hyperlink for participation in the study were distributed by DPI to an unknown number of DPI email list members. As a result, response rate is unknown. The completion rate was 79% with an average completion time of 5.5 minutes. This researcher and a University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee graduate assistant performed an inductive thematic analysis. The process began with independent coding, progressing to consensus building. Due to the similarities in theme identification by the researcher and assistant, consensus was easily derived. Should disagreements have occurred, a university professor of psychology was prepared to join the meeting. This was not necessary. Multiple response questions yielded frequency data. Cochran's Q and McNemar's Test with Bonferroni adjustments were calculated with IBM SPSS version 25. As a result of the large number of available response options (11-14) for multiple response questions, the range of percentages of statistically similar frequencies was large. This was a result of the structure of the instrument and was anticipated. Incomplete surveys were included in the analysis.

Results and Discussion

This study sought to examine changes in demands on teachers during the pandemic, if any, by surveying certified Wisconsin instructors who taught students with mental health challenges. The research explored teacher perceptions, identified related student and parent focused issues, and outlined teacher identified supports that would be helpful to teachers, students, and parents.

Job Demands

When asked to describe the change or lack of change of teacher demands from pre-pandemic to during the pandemic, 2% of all sample population participants noted decreased demands, 14% asserted that demands remained constant, and 3% indicated that demand assessments were impossible due to a lack of student attendance. The majority of survey participants (81%) noted that job demands had increased. These results align with the predominant 2020-2021 media message that teachers are working longer hours (Goldstein & Shapiro, 2020). Of particular interest are the two population sub-groupings that totaled more than 10% of the sample population, namely the groupings of *demands remained constant* and *demands increased*.

Constant

Of the teachers who indicated that their work demands remained constant, 100% stated that at least some of the specifics of those demands changed. The implication is that any new or increased job requirements during the pandemic were countered by a decrease of responsibilities typically assumed during non-pandemic times. However, these responses did not coincide with information gathered from another question. When respondents were asked, “How has your work to teach/support students changed, if at all, during the pandemic?” the responses focused on demand increases. Participants did not identify any factors that would result in a decrease of responsibilities. The lack of balanced responses from participants is curious perhaps indicating an issue with question validity, lack of generalizability of responses from a small sub-grouping (n=9), or the tendency for people to focus on actions yet to be taken versus those already completed (Anderson, 2016). This absence of data highlights the need for additional research. A more detailed exploration of the experiences of this group may provide insight into the facilitation of balanced change for teachers and schools.

Respondent descriptors associated with increases appeared to be related to “figure[ing] things out” (Respondent CD-24.18.04). Factors included technology, social distancing, safety, and pandemic related classroom cleaning. Respondent CD-42.18.01 asserted that fast paced change was a complicating factor in her work, “Our role and how we teach is constantly changing at the drop of the hat depending on if we were in close contact or others around us were quarantined and we need too [sic] fill in.” The participant suggested that such rapid change can result in new responsibilities and tasks.

Although this population grouping had not noted an overall increase in job demands, they were asked to describe supports that might assist them with instructing students. Their responses focused on public attitude changes, resources, and policy/practice accommodations. Frustration with public and parent perceptions was noted as problematic by instructors. One teacher wrote, “[Others can assist me by] providing [a] positive look on teachers during this challenging time. [It is] difficult to continue working when the public is putting teachers down” (Respondent CD-09.19.03). In this instance the instructor sought acceptance and validation rather than task specific assistance, lending credence to the assertion later in this analysis that teacher mental health was relevant to quality instruction during the pandemic.

Resource requests included access to technology, budget for technology, onsite Covid-19 tests, and additional support from school social workers. Suggestions for teach supports included increases in allocated preparation time and decreases in the number of required minutes of student contact per day. Respondents explained that this was especially necessary because of the need to prepare virtual and in person lessons.

These same general issues arose in comments from teachers who noted an overall increase in work demands. The overlap may be an indicator that specific demand increases were

to be expected during the pandemic. Perhaps the difference between a consistent workload and an increased workload relates to the removal of responsibilities as much as it does to the addition of expectations. Additional research is warranted.

Increase

Eighty-one percent of the sample population noted an increase in work demands. This subpopulation is the focus of the remainder of the analysis and is referred to as the Increased Demands (ID) subpopulation (n=51). Unless otherwise stated, from this point forward the seemingly generic terms of *subpopulation, grouping, teacher, and instructor* reference only those participants who noted an increase in job demands.

Demographic: ID. Demographic information can be helpful in understanding data. This holds true for the ID subpopulation where relevant descriptors included a variety of factors. (See Appendix A.) More than 92% of ID teachers worked in public schools; 8% worked in private. A full 100% of ID respondents worked within special education; all were licensed teachers. The ID sample population represented Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, Northwest, and North Central Wisconsin as well as one tribe. Regions were defined by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (Region Information, n.d.).

Virtual Instruction: ID. More than 88% of ID teachers taught virtually during the pandemic. Alternatively, 11% of respondents did not teach virtually. (Note that profile percentages do not always total 100 due to rounding.) For the purposes of this study, *virtual instruction* incorporated two concepts defined within the recently enacted Wisconsin Act 185: 2019 (Fath et al., 2020): *virtual instruction* and *non-digital remote instruction*. The Act defines virtual instruction as “instruction provided through means of the internet if the pupils participating in and instructional staff providing the instruction are geographically remote from

each other” (Fath et al., 2020, p. 1). Non-digital remote instruction is defined as a process “where pupils participating in and instructional staff providing the instruction are geographically remote from each other [and engaging] through means other than virtual instruction” (Fath, et al., 2020, p. 2). Examples of non-digital remote instruction include the use of the telephone, hardcopy work packets, and DVDs. According to state legislation, *virtual instruction* and *non-digital remote instruction* are unique. Within this study, a distinction between the categories was not made.

Challenges

When asked for details about increases in job demands, the ID subpopulation clearly defined tasks and responsibilities. The majority of survey respondents noted that new and amplified expectations had not been easily implemented. Comments intimated that increases in work demands, especially demands that extended beyond the capacity of one teacher, were problematic. Three comments were an exception to this. Specifically, one teacher noted that some students “rock” virtual learning. Another indicated that teaching content via a virtual format was “great”. And finally, a third teacher enthusiastically asserted that virtual instruction was facilitating a shift in teaching emphasis. “If anything positive can come out of the pandemic/virtual learning, it’s that the focus can go back to looking at the child as a whole and recognize the importance of family engagement” (Respondent 32.30.00). Additional information would have been helpful in understanding the connection between the pandemic and the renewed focus on the whole child. However, this teacher did not elaborate on the comment.

Teachers asserted that increased work expectations negatively impacted teacher health and their ability to effectively instruct and support students in a changing pandemic environment. As one respondent noted, stress levels increased. “All of the small things that must be done add

up to a great deal of stress on top of the actually [sic] teaching part” (Respondent 37.15.05).

Another indicated the same, “Teachers are exhausted... [from] all the anxiety and stress we are dealing with” (Respondent 50.15.06).

The mental health of instructors began to deteriorate, negatively impacting work. “[The] deterioration of my own mental health – makes it more difficult to maintain my patience and support students when I am not able to care for myself” (Respondent 38.08.04). There were comments that selfcare needed to become a priority. “In order for teachers to provide more, they also need to deal with their own mental health, and that is tough right now” (Respondent 01.01.01).

Also problematic were extended and more intense workdays.

[Pandemic changes include] added responsibilities (rolling out EE for the first year), added IEP paperwork, added documentation, such as attendance/absences, added prep time to meet the needs of my students’ IEPs virtually. All of these = hours upon hours of extra work” (Respondent 07.08.02).

Note: EE is an abbreviation for the Wisconsin Educator Effectiveness System.

Burnout was cited by Respondent 17.10.05. “[The] amount of time it takes to plan has impacted my ability to do the actual work: support students, increase engagement, phone calls to families, navigating tech issues for students and families. I am burnt out already.”

Some participants went as far as quantifying the duration of their workdays. “...doing all paperwork and planning and documenting and contacting families before or after work = 12+ hour work days” (Respondent 21.09.05). She noted this was unsustainable.

The survey asked participants to view challenges within the structure of two categories: student related and parent related issues. Respondent answers often overlapped.

Student related

Teachers were instructed to select the three most impactful student related factors that influenced the increases in the teacher's job demands. Participants received a list of 12 options in a multiple response question. (For a list of all options see Appendix B.) The three most frequently selected included:

- *Supports for student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals (71% frequency)*
- *Deterioration of student's academic performance including assignment completion (56% frequency)*
- *Insufficient access to technology including devices and internet services (statistically similar to 56%)*

Goals. Teachers were fairly unified (71%) in their sentiment that *supporting student's IEP goals* played a significant role in the increase in demands of their work. This relatively high frequency of agreement may be explained in part by the fact that 100% of sample population participants taught in special education. Because special education teachers are responsible for implementing IEP plans, and because IEP goals form a portion of all IEPs, it is reasonable to assert that this task is of primary interest to teachers. Additionally, special education tends to be closely monitored by the state of Wisconsin. In May of 2020, after the start of the pandemic, DPI distributed a bulletin stating that students with disabilities are to continue to be provided “services specified in each student's individualized education program (IEP) to the greatest extent possible” (Information Update Bulletin 20.01, 2020, para.1). The bulletin elaborated on prior communications and issued the directive that student progress be maintained at pre pandemic levels. When asked for general comments about job demands, one teacher noted this issue specifically.

“The most difficult part [of my work during the pandemic] is the expectations [sic] placed on me to move my students with special needs forward academically, with no regard to the fact that they still have been out of school for 6 months and are having trouble emotionally, physically, and academically with all of the changes” (Respondent 42.07.12).

Increases in state required paperwork for students enrolled in special education also surfaced as a challenge. A respondent indicated that the mandates regarding student progress and paperwork were both significant and concerning.

“Adding more and more IEP documentation is also [negatively] impacting our effectiveness, as it is taking time away from doing the actual work. I understand that there has to be certain forms filled out, but there are more and more documents being added” (Respondent 10.05).

Participants asserted that although an increase in paperwork was intended to ensure high standards of excellence, the actual impact of this requirement was a decrease in teacher capacity to focus on student education and support. Teachers requested the refocusing of school and district expectations by reducing or eliminating paperwork requirements.

Academics. Another impactful student related issue was *a decrease in student academic performance including assignment completion*. Teachers described the nature of their difficulties in guiding and improving child/youth performance. Regarding younger students, instructors expressed a sense of helplessness as they struggled to find ways to adapt in-class hands-on learning experiences to the virtual environment. Teachers of students of all ages noted a decreased ability to control the attendance or engagement of students in a virtual environment, factors that frequently influenced progress in school.

“For students who are E-learning, it is difficult to teach with the rigor and consistency that existed when they [the students] attended in person. They [the students] now have the ability to walk away from the computer, they log in to online sessions late or skip sessions altogether” (Respondent 36.09.23).

Additionally, teachers lamented that meeting the emotional health needs of students overshadowed the instructor’s work to assist the child/youth with academics. “I spend more time focusing on [the students’] mental health than academic goals – and I worry because then students aren’t making the gains we would like to see” (Respondent 12.09.13). In this case, a lengthened work day appeared inadequate in allowing for sufficient one-on-one time with the child/youth. Additionally, the virtual venue and technology deficiencies appeared to compound academic struggles.

Technology: Student. The importance of technology became apparent with the identification of the third most impactful student related issue: electronic devices and services. Governor Ever’s Emergency Order 1 for statewide school closures issued in March of 2020 immediately thrust technology to the forefront of education necessities. Most schools became virtual despite a lack of infrastructure for distribution of devices and accessible technology support. Teachers found themselves adding technology instruction and support to their list of current responsibilities.

As mentioned, a majority of teachers indicated that they taught virtually during the pandemic. This likely was a relatively new phenomenon for districts and a novel experience for many teachers. To explain, most pre-pandemic virtual public school instruction occurred through the 48 virtual charter schools in existence in Wisconsin (Kremer, 2019). Although other public schools occasionally offered a class virtually, these schools typically did not offer an entire

online program. As indicated in the 2020 Department of Public Instruction Survey (Fath et. al, 2020) and referenced in a Wisconsin Public Radio broadcast (Fox, 2021) 408 of the 421 Wisconsin public schools transitioned to virtual or non-digital remote instruction during the pandemic.

Although Wisconsin State Statute PI 8.01, 2(k) (n.d.) indicates that computer literacy must be a part of the curriculum in grades K-12, the requirement does not dictate that students have their own devices nor that internet availability exist. However, as the Wisconsin schools became increasingly dependent on virtual instruction due to the pandemic, the accessibility of these tools took on growing importance.

Punitive Systems. Of note was a response option that was not selected by anyone, *new or increased [student] interactions with punitive systems such as juvenile justice systems, manifest hearings, or other.* Comments from survey respondents did not specifically address this topic. It is reasonable to assume that because students were often housebound during the pandemic and therefore less likely to negatively interact with external environments, undesirable behaviors many not have occurred or may have gone unnoticed. Virtual instruction limited teacher monitoring of student behavior including attendance. Parental supervision of student attendance and behavior was not ideal. Traditional punitive tools were not implemented or were not necessary to assist with behavior changes. Teacher comments supported the contention that the pandemic resulted in a lack of interactions with students. “[My biggest difficulties as I seek to teach and support children with emotional/behavioral mental health challenges during the pandemic is], attendance problems” (Respondent 13.09.03). Phrased differently, a comment read, “[My biggest difficulty is a] lack of access to kids. Families unable to help younger children connect” (Respondent 24.09.10). Virtual instruction also played a role in the lack of student

engagement. “[My biggest challenge is that students] now have the ability to walk away from the computer, they log in to online sessions late or skip sessions altogether” (Respondent 42.09.23).

The lack of selection of the multiple response option concerning punitive systems is not necessarily reflective of youth engagement or lack of engagement with punitive systems. Rather, it is an indication that whatever the level of student involvement with these systems, this situation was not one of the three most important factors that increased teacher work demands.

Parent related

Teachers selected the three most important parent related factors that influenced the increase in the teacher’s work demands to support children with mental health challenges during the pandemic. Survey respondents received a list of 11 options. (See Appendix C for a complete list.) The most frequently selected at 61.36% each included:

- *Technology challenges including access and basic understanding by parents*
- *Parent disengagement including non-responsiveness to teacher requests*
- *Parent challenges with balancing work responsibilities and student’s needs for supervision and assistance with school work.*

Technology: Parent. As previously mentioned, technology was also one of the most frequently selected responses concerning student related issues. The technology challenges for students and parents were similar in that both were impacted by difficulties related to a lack of devices and internet services. Parents, in particular, appeared to struggle with insufficient skills. This difference between the technology issues of students and parents originally surfaced during the presurvey-creation telephone interviews that guided the creation of the instrument. This information helped to hone survey response options which specifically noted parent skills as a

technology issue. The online survey comments from responders confirmed the sentiments expressed in the telephone interviews.

One teacher in particular indicated that the effective use of technology required parental involvement. She felt that assistance in this area was important and would make a difference. “[I could use] liaisons with parent(s) to help with follow up. Help them [the parents] set up tech... If we could have someone there to help ‘set up school’ [technology] at their house... maybe that would get them to feel more engaged” (Respondent 17.10.11).

Of particular interest in this quote is the teacher identified link between technology and engagement. Engagement, or disengagement, was an emphasis in teacher commentary in general.

Disengagement. The frequency of selection of *parent disengagement including non-responsiveness to teacher requests* totaled 61%. (See Appendix C.) Respondent 03.09.08 captured this sentiment, “[The most difficult part of my job is] engaging students on virtual weeks [and a] lack of parental involvement [engagement].” Respondent 26.09.34 indicated that, “with limited in person and virtual access, and responses from parents [engagement], the students are struggling to make connections.” Parental engagement is a well-known protective factor and is strongly correlated with student success. During the pandemic, when virtual instruction and home environment became even more central to education, teachers noted that parental engagement appeared to take on increasing importance. However, according to instructors, parental accountability and engagement with the schools appeared to be negatively influenced by pandemic related factors such as a shift in parental work situations and settings. School expectations of parents appeared to expand while parental capacity for responsibility

management had already been maximized. Engagement at schools had become increasingly compromised as the pressures to balance multiple tasks compiled for parents and teachers.

Balance. Teachers noted that balancing work responsibilities and student's needs was problematic for parents. They indicated that in a virtual setting the importance of the home environment to a student's progress increased. Parents also needed to be able to engage with the student when virtual interaction was ineffective.

Maltreatment. One multiple response option was not selected by any respondent, *child maltreatment or family interactions with Child Protective Services (CPS)*, meaning that the factor was not among the top three most important issues in increased demands. Despite a frequency of zero, a number of respondents answered open ended questions with concerns related to student safety and the teacher's ability to appropriately monitor situations virtually. These written comments appeared to go counter to the sentiment reflected by a frequency of zero.

Teachers stated that the biggest difficulty in supporting students was related to crisis and safety. "[I'm] feeling as though I [can't] help our students in crisis. I feel helpless" (Respondent 16.09.16). "[I don't know] that they are OK when not in school" (Respondent 28.9.28). One instructor expressed uncertainty about their own ability to recognize indicators for mobilizing outside support. "I feel ill-equipped to know at what point an expert should be called in to intervene and provide the family/child with resources" (Respondent 19.09.13).

Teacher uncertainty about student safety does not support nor diminish the recent claims that child maltreatment is likely on the rise during the pandemic (Griffith, 2020). The Center for Disease Control (CDC) states that stressors related to public health emergencies increase the risk for child abuse and neglect (Griffith, 2020). Swedo, Idaikkadar, and Leemis (2020) confirmed

aspects of this assertion, indicating that although the frequency of reported child abuse decreased during the pandemic the severity of abuse increased. Teacher survey responses did not diminish the validity of these statements but instead offered descriptors of the relationship of child maltreatment to the level of increased job demands of instructors. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to assert that the previously mentioned *decreased ability to assess student safety during the pandemic* would likely result in a decrease in reporting of abuse. In other words, it is feasible that a decrease in direct student interactions with teachers could partially account for the study results from Swedo, et al. (2000).

A review of responses regarding parent focused issues delineated that multiple factors influenced an increase in teacher workload. However, even as teachers' identified challenges they also identified potential solutions. These interventions are reviewed next.

Teacher Selected Supports

After identifying student and parent related challenges that impacted work demands, teachers were directed to select the three supports that would be most helpful to the instructor in managing job increases and educating students with mental health challenges. Survey participants received a list of 14 support options in the form of a multiple response choices. (For a list of all options see Appendix D.) The three most frequently selected included:

- *Work with students and parents to develop at home plans in support of Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals (49% frequency)*
- *Assist students and parents in adjusting to the changing demands of school (44% frequency)*
- *Provide basic technology instruction to students and parents (42% frequency)*

A comparison of the three most important student and parent issues previously identified to the three most frequently selected supports/interventions revealed compatibility between issues and the teachers' proposed interventions. Selections related directly or indirectly to virtual instruction. This is, perhaps, not surprising given the likelihood that virtual instruction was a new endeavor for many. However, requested supports were also applicable to a new pandemic friendly classroom environment, indicating that a number of requested supports will continue to be relevant after a large-scale return to the classroom.

Themes and Categories

In addition to selecting supports from a list of options provided in a multiple response question, teachers described interventions. Analysis revealed three themes: interventions related to virtual instruction, administrative actions, and supporter mobilization. Each contained multiple categories.

Inductive thematic analysis focuses on the diversity of responses as opposed to the frequency. As such, the number of respondents describing a similar idea is not particularly relevant and therefore is not a focus of this summary. Of importance is the diversity of ideas from teachers, ideas that had/have the potential to make a difference.

Although the themes identified through open-ended questions were not weighted, they did offer some confirmation that insights obtained through the pre-survey creation telephone interviews were valid. To explain: First, the teacher-selected supports and the previously identified student and parent related needs were compatible, suggesting consistent perceptions of the issue and solution dilemmas confronted by instructors. (Given that the multiple response options were developed, in part, through telephone interviews, compatibility was likely but not

certain. See Appendices B-D.) Second, multiple response offerings and selections were further validated by teacher defined supports.

In an effort to diversify a pending list of support options, teachers were asked, “*Please share your own ideas regarding ways in which others can support you in your work to teach/support families during the pandemic. In other words, how can others make a difference for you?*” It was expected that most ideas would venture beyond those provided in the multiple response questions. Teachers tended to provide two types of responses. One was a description with examples. The other focused on the details of a specific intervention. Both were relevant for the inductive thematic analysis.

The study culminated in the identification of three themes supplemented by a list of specific suggestions. It yielded a menu of task options for those interested in lending support to students, parents, and teachers during the pandemic.

Virtual Instruction

As previously noted, virtual instruction appeared to drive issues and interventions. Even so, teachers were not united in their endorsement of this teaching methodology. Some indicated a clear preference for in person instruction during the pandemic. In these instances, generated ideas were often relevant for both virtual and nonvirtual environments. Such ideas were categorized under the alternative headings of administrative action or supporter mobilization. Those acknowledging the need for, or the current reality of, virtual instruction requested supports. Interests in professional development included guidelines for providing rigorous instruction, customization of teaching for a variety of learning styles, and practical solutions for online classroom management. Some teachers requested access to recorded training sessions in

order to allow for learning on demand. Schedule adjustments were suggested in order to allow for training during the school day.

Teachers expressed uncertainty about the logistics of and capacity for meeting the one-on-one instruction needs of students while also conducting virtual classes. Technology related requests included the provision of immediately accessible technology supports during the school day. Technology devices were sometimes noted as deficient, absent, or outdated. Respondents noted that some schools did not provide substitute teachers for virtual classes even when the absences were pandemic related. This led to multiple difficulties related to student growth and teacher success. It was suggested that non-certified teachers equipped with on-line lesson plans from certified teachers assume substitute duties.

A number of the virtual instruction challenges may have been exacerbated by the need to quickly implement a new program. Requests for improved training and equipment are likely to remain as long as virtual instruction is a reality. After an appropriate amount of spin-up time, it is reasonable to expect that the intensity of related needs will decrease.

Should the schools revert completely to in-class learning, it is possible that the outlined needs and interventions will continue. The state requires computer competency to be a component of education. The challenges connected with the pandemic simply highlighted areas for improvement with current curriculum. Given this, a number of the interventions already described will become relevant for in-school instruction as well.

Administrative Action

Teachers described a variety of support options in which implementation would require the involvement of school administration. Subcategories included *decreased extraneous expectations of teachers in order to allow for a greater focus on the education of students,*

validation of teachers in both traditional and creative ways in order to improve morale, and investment in teacher safety and health. Subcategories included the postponement of the implementation of the Educator Effectiveness Program (E.E.), a continuous improvement strategy (The Wi Educator Effectiveness System, n.d.); procurement of mental health services for struggling instructors; and the facilitation of listening sessions between administrators and teachers. (See Appendix E for details.)

Other administrative issues and requests related to transparency. Some teachers noted that traditional supports such as teachers' aides were not available during the pandemic. Teachers wondered why these supports were missing and how the budgeted funds were being used. Additionally, information about the use of monies from the CARES Act was not consistently available across the state, leading to frustration and anger among the teachers. Though not specifically mentioned by a teacher, a logical invention includes the sharing of itemized budgets and actual expenditures as well as a question-and-answer session for staff.

The multiplicity of teacher-defined recommendations affords options for administrators searching to support students, parents, and teachers. (See Appendix E for details.) Recommendations included systems changes, an often time consuming endeavor requiring the coordination of multiple constituents. Related requests such as the modification of special education assessment requirements or Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) are unlikely to occur quickly, if at all. The list of Administration Actions included opportunities that can be relatively easily embraced such as budget transparency or procurement of additional personal protective equipment (PPE). Of primary importance is a review of the list by local administrators.

Supporter Mobilization

A common denominator of many of the teacher-requested supports was the integration of various constituents in the education process. Traditionally, classroom teachers can access aides, tutors, volunteers, substitute teachers, and formal special education staff such as occupational therapists. However, survey respondents noted that accessibility to these people during the pandemic ranged from limited-to-nonexistent regardless of teaching venue (virtual or in-school). Teachers maintained that the need for such supports did not diminish during the pandemic. In some instances, especially as students struggled to adjust, there was an increased need for one-on-one interactions. It was proffered that an aide, assistant, or tutor could meet this need even as teacher capacity had already been reached.

Additionally, responses indicated that teacher and student mental health needs were greater than available care. Identification of outside services and then the hands-on facilitation of the attainment of services was another needed teacher support.

Instructors also suggested the engagement of professional specialists to assist with education and care. One teacher wrote about the need for a professional to develop back-to-the-classroom transition plans for students with special needs, plans that would benefit from insights beyond those of a certified special education instructor.

Parent engagement and mobilization surfaced as important issues. It is known that parent engagement with the school is correlated with student success. Pre-pandemic efforts to encourage engagement included programs offered through Wisconsin Statewide Parent-Educator Initiative and Birth-to-Three Programs. Although some programs continued during the pandemic, teachers noted a decrease in parent involvement at a time when an increase was particularly important. It was noted that activities required to engage parents could not necessarily be provided by the teacher who was already working at capacity. In fact, there was

no recommendation by any respondent as to who might be an appropriate constituent to implement changes. Recommended activities included pro-active check ins with families regarding the family situation and child progress in school, on-line parent support groups for those in need of emotional support, parental instruction on the basics of virtual meetings for small groups, and the facilitation of parent developed strategies for adjusting to changes in school demands. Although teachers did not offer a recommendation as to the category of constituent best suited to these tasks (aid, tutor, volunteer, other) the importance of increasing parent engagement was voiced.

Summary

This study explored changes in job demands from pre-pandemic (pre-March 2020) to during the pandemic (March-October, 2020) of Wisconsin certified instructors teaching students with mental health challenges. The majority of survey sample respondents indicated that job demands had increased and that the increases were problematic for teachers and students. The instructors noted personal exhaustion and their own deteriorating mental health as challenges. The ramifications of this included a decreased capacity to assist students. Teachers selected student related and parent related issues that increased job demands. Then they selected multiple means by which others could begin to address the issues. Many of the identified challenges and interventions appeared related to virtual instruction and the spin-up process of a new modality. Teachers requested professional development as well as the mobilization of supporters to virtually engage students and parents. Because the pandemic likely resulted in lost academic progress, and because parent engagement decreased, it is expected that the needs for student, parent, and teacher supports will continue beyond the conclusion of the pandemic. A menu of teacher-defined interventions found in Appendix E facilitates school and community member

review of tasks that could make a difference. The menu also provides direction for future research.

The study embraced best research practices defined by Fink (2013) and Leedy and Ormrod (2010) and combined thematic and quantitative analyses including Cochran's Q and McNemar's Test with Bonferroni adjustment. Limitations included a small sample and subpopulation sample size of 63 and 51 respectively, raising questions about generalizability. Additionally, due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, causal relationships were not formally assessed. The perception survey allowed for the respondents' beliefs about causation to be accepted as reality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study provides insights into teachers' experiences with instructing and supporting children with mental health challenges during the pandemic. Student and parent related issues were identified and teacher-defined supports were assembled. Appendix E is, perhaps, the most important component of the study, a list of the means by which school and community members can make a difference in support of education during and post-pandemic. The menu of items in Appendix E may help to focus future research. It also provides instruction for the practical application of findings and the means to continue with the never-ending endeavor to improve education.

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Appendix A

Table 1

*A profile comparison of the sample population and the Increased Demands (ID) subpopulation**

Characteristic Category	Characteristic	Sample Population	ID Subpopulation
Grade			
	Birth-Three	8%	8%
	K4-1	56%	53%
	2-5	58%	55%
	6-8	38%	37%
	9-12	25%	27%
	Other**	20%	20%
Category that best describes the Wisconsin schools currently supported by the respondent			
	Public – Charter	6%	8%
	Public – Magnet	2%	2%
	Public - All Other	94%	92%
	Tribal	2%	2%
	Private – any type	11%	8%
	Other**	2%	2%
State region in which the respondent supports students			
	Southwest	11%	9%
	Northwest	6%	6%
	North Central	14%	16%
	Northeast	23%	24%
	Southeast	39%	39%
	Other***	6%	6%
Experience with virtual instruction of students during the 2020-2021 academic year			
	Yes	89%	88%
	No	6%	8%
	Other [#]	5%	4%
Employment capacity as a licensed teacher			
	School administrator as well as licensed teacher	8%	10%
	Licensed teacher	91%	90%
Employment capacity within special education			
	Special education administrator	9%	10%
	Special education teacher	81%	83%
	Special education support staff	12%	10%

*Percentages do not necessarily total 100 due to rounding and the respondent's ability to select more than one response

**Other: a blend of multiple grade ranges or a hospital

***Other: Fond du Lac, Dane, or La Crosse County

[#]Hybrid instruction or a virtual student who did not attend

APPENDIX E

Teacher Identified Supports

A collection of teacher described supports to assist the teacher in addressing increased work demands during the pandemic. (This list does not include options provided on the related multiple response question.)

Virtual Instruction

- Improve teacher access to technology and provide on-demand technology support during the day.
-

Administrative Action

Connect with the administration

- Decrease expectations from teachers to allow for a greater focus on the education of student.
 - Postpone the implementation of Wisconsin EE in part because this is a new requirement. Under the circumstances, one year postponement is reasonable.
 - Postpone IEP assessments and re-evaluations until after the pandemic, in part because the quality of these assessments is currently decreased due to venue. Additionally, attendance is poor and the related workload is too intense. Alternatively, provide increased flexibility with the IEP process such as extended deadlines and partial testing.
 - Postpone all standardized tests and mandatory assessments.
 - Eliminate new paperwork related to attendance
 - Decrease teacher caseloads and class size to account for increased demands during the pandemic.
 - Decrease teacher responsibilities which currently include technology support of the student and parent, difficult online IEP assessments and reviews, assorted documentation, planning twice the number of lesson (virtual and in-person), meeting basic needs, and continuing to provide the same level of excellence afforded pre-pandemic.
- Validate teachers to improve morale
 - Help the administration to understand the stress level of teachers during the pandemic especially as related to the seemingly-small things that must be done.
 - Ask the district and administrators to regularly check-in with teachers and confirm the value of each individual instructor.
 - Pay teachers more for the significant increase in time commitment. Add hazard pay.
 - Explain the specifics of the use of funding from the Cares Act. This will assist with building trust.
- Invest in teacher safety and health
 - Meet requests for air-purifiers, vented classrooms/classrooms with windows, plexiglass, and sufficient amounts of PPEs.
 - Provide a list of mental health contacts for teachers to use themselves. Ask the school to find free services or pay for these services
 - Find additional resources for teachers who are experiencing personal problems during the pandemic
 - Allow teachers to say that they are “not OK.”
- Prepare. Ask experts to create specific plans to address the regression of student social skills during the pandemic. This is often outside the teacher’s area of expertise.

Support Mobilization

- **Provide teacher supports for working closely with students**
 - Mobilize others to assist students

- Mobilize the classroom aides and tutors that existed pre-pandemic. The pandemic has not reduced the need for these supports even though the teaching venue may have changed. Hire new supports when necessary
 - Help assistants to increase student engagement especially in a virtual and hybrid environment. Focus on those students not attending classes.
 - Help to engage students
 - Find more time for each teacher to meet each child's needs. Consider delegating some of the teacher's responsibilities, decreasing work loads, or assigning smaller class sizes
- **Provide teacher supports for working closely with parents**
 - Help to engage parents
 - Assist parents to engage their student in school.
 - Fortify in-home capacity for securing student attendance, assignment completion, attendance at one-on-one support sessions, and online access.
 - Help families to develop plans for supporting the IEP goals within the home.
 - Assist family is addressing mental, emotional, and physical needs of the student. Provide a list of community resources, especially mental health resources, that can be accessed during the pandemic. Offer information about signs that a student might need outside support during the pandemic.
 - Meet parent needs that are impacting the student's education.
 - Address the family needs from a wholistic perspective: emotional, behavioral, mental, educational, physical, etc.
 - Offer detailed direction on how to meet basic needs.
 - Develop parent technology skills related to virtual instruction.
 - Provide an online support group for parents.
 - Provide specific directions to parents for securing basic needs
 - Regularly and proactively check-in with family about well-being
 - Promote parental engagement especially including responses to school communications.
 - Adjust parent expectations for teachers through education about virtual instruction, teacher empathy regarding balancing work demands and the education of their own child, etc. Help parents to understand all that teachers do.
 - Give teachers more time to develop relationships with parents so that teachers can guide parents.
- **Engage unlicensed teachers to act as substitute teachers during the pandemic. Provide virtual and hybrid lesson plans to these instructors**