To: Lisa Olson, PhD - Superintendent, Whitnall Schools
From: Tony Frontier, PhD
Re: Synthesis of focus group data, descriptive results, recommendations for inquiry and action
Date: June 18, 2021

Attached is the synthesis of the focus groups that I conducted in April and May to understand perspectives from key stakeholders related to the district's response to supporting teaching and learning during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The process consisted of 16 focus groups (1 administrator group, 3 teacher groups, 9 student groups, 3 parent groups). The student and parent groups included participants representing all buildings and a variety of configurations of Distance Learning/In-Person, In-Person/Distance, and In-Person all year. Given the initial period of Distance Learning (March – June 2020), all participants had perspectives on the district's initial roll-out of distance learning amidst emergency safer-at-home orders, regardless of their modality of learning during the 2020-2021 school year.

I conducted each focus group. Audio for each focus group was recorded and, per-standard protocol, those interviews and the specific source of each quotation is held in confidence by the researcher. The process resulted in approximately 12 hours of recordings. I listened to each focus group's recording, which allowed me to take a second round of notes on my initial notes. Administrator and teacher focus groups were fully transcribed resulting in 55 pages of single spaced qualitative data. Student and parent groups were selectively transcribed, resulting in an additional 30 pages of transcribed data. A qualitative, constant-comparative coding method was utilized. Data were reduced to significant statements that exemplified each pattern and theme as aligned to four guiding questions related to each stakeholder group. Quotes that appear in this report were given light edits for semantics, clarity, and as much as possible, to ensure anonymity of participants. The essence of the main questions asked of each group were as follows:

- What challenges did you face in spring of 2020 to support teaching/learning?
- What challenges did you face in the last year to support teaching/learning?
- What went well in the last year to support teaching/learning?
- What have you learned to let go of, and take with you, to support teaching/learning?

As a qualitative researcher, my responsibility is to objectively describe the perceptions of others. Parameters I placed around my synthesis include the following:
- The emphasis of this report is on systems and broad perceptions, not individuals.
- The emphasis of this report is on teaching and learning; a public health expert would have asked different questions and would have been listening for different evidence.
- The emphasis of this report is on the challenges/responses to teaching and learning in the last 15 months. While there may be issues that are representative of other challenges experienced by the district prior to COVID, they were not the direct focus of this report.

There are limitations to the themes, summary statements, and quotes here. While I reached saturation (when I start to hear the same comments/sentiments over and over) among the individuals who participated, there are stakeholder groups who have important information to share (kids who fell of the radar last spring, parents who are often unresponsive…who in turn didn't respond to focus group invitations nor attend focus group meetings) whose voices are not present.

As you read this report, do not read from a place of judgment. The purpose isn't to give anyone evidence of who was "right or wrong" given the clarity of hind-sight. This report is best read through a lens of empathy and understanding. This document will help everyone see the incredible challenges faced, and effort put forth, in the last 15 months from a more holistic perspective. As you read each section, stand in the shoes of that stakeholder group, and strive to understand the challenges and complexities they faced as they also navigated the imbalance of the unknown throughout the pandemic.

It is clear to me that Whitnall successfully responded to the urgent challenges presented by the pandemic. Amidst these challenges, tremendous amounts of new learning have occurred. The opportunity this document presents is to affirm what was learned, and then support next efforts to strategically engage in dialogue and action related to important challenges revealed during the pandemic. To these ends, there are questions I ask at the end of this report that will be of assistance in addressing underlying challenges/opportunities that I believe will benefit the district's continuous improvement efforts as the district envisions a "new normal" that even more effectively aligns mission, vision, action, and opportunities for teaching and learning than existed prior to the pandemic.

Note: All bullet points are quotes from participants.

What challenges did you face in spring of 2020 to support teaching and learning?

In a rolling crisis, there are no easy answers

As the health crisis unfolded in real-time in March of 2020, it is easy to forget how little was known about what would happen next. A public health emergency was declared March 12. On March 25th, "Safer at Home" orders went into effect through April 25th. On April 16, "Safer at Home" orders were extended through May 26th and schools were to be closed for the remainder of the school year. This required all schools to make three rounds of contingency plans designed to reach different targets that had to be implemented in rapid succession.

- *We had to address the needs of SPED students, as well as requirements for meeting the instructional minutes, we also had to understand the access to technology and the capacity of parents to support students at home and find that balance for them.*
- *Everyone wanted the answer today (the first day of closure), like what are we supposed to do and not being able to do…Everybody was listening every minute of every day. (But)…it was like we're all on this big giant life raft all on the ocean and everybody's clutching with their fingernails on the edge (without anyone knowing exactly what would come next).*
- *We had our virtual learning hub, our website that we sent everything to and where everything went through, initially, and it was helpful because there was always a daily reminder, checklist, things to do, it was the one stop shop for a lot of things.*

Schedules and infrastructure had to be redesigned amidst unprecedented ambiguity

Given the realities of the crisis, schedules (when will teaching and learning occur) and infrastructure (how will teaching and learning occur and how will opportunities be made accessible) had to be designed concurrently. It is important to note that typically, when schools or districts engage in either types of these changes, they may spend years engaged in studying, designing, and implementing these processes. Throughout the process and implementation there are supporters and critics as well as leaders and laggards. These realities were compressed into three phases of the six-week time-window described above.

- *(We didn't know exactly where to set) terms of student expectations and how we can make sure students are following through with an environment that they never had to learn through before.*
- *(We had to figure out) the appropriate checks and balances, reaching out to families about the lack of their student engagement or how they're doing socially/emotionally, working with pupil services, (understanding health requirements) like what are the protocols…*

To ensure learning could occur virtually, resources had to be acquired, systems had to be put into place, and training & planning had to occur…virtually

Administrators and teachers had to respond to the crisis in a manner that ensured they continued to fulfill mission-based, and legally required, expectations for student learning. Not only did this capacity building, planning, and training have to occur across the three phases of the crisis as described above, it had to be done virtually. Administrators found themselves confronted with the realities of leading in a pandemic in a direct parallel to how teachers would soon find themselves confronting the realities of teaching in a pandemic.

- *We all felt like it was going to be 3 weeks or something and a shorter period of time that we had to work through.*

- *I remember being in the elementary school very logistically thinking "what technology were we going to get in the hands of students" we weren't really prepared with the 1:1 scenario and how are we going to try to make some of the logistical pieces work And we had to figure out the instructional pieces (especially for early primary students). How are we going to transfer face-to-face to the elementary, particularly younger kids like 4/5 year old's?*
- *(We were among the districts whose spring break aligned to the initial stay-at-home orders) which we really reaped the benefit compared to other districts that rolled out faster. Teachers were able to share the experiences that they had with their own kids at home who got to start sooner, and we were then able to do things like that and develop and adjust things as staff.*
- *There was an amazing amount of networking happening between districts.*

What challenges did you face in the last year to support teaching and learning?

Administrators sought to balance access and equity at the systems-level.
Administrators articulated values of access and equity when describing challenges they faced to ensuring there was a consistent, systemic approach to meeting mission-based, and legally required, expectations to ensure students would have the opportunity to learn.

- *We had more meetings than we ever had in order to build consistency. I felt as though we had never been so consistent, and teachers may have felt that way at some point too as we reflected, "wow we've never had such a vertical (curricular alignment conversation) as we're having now and in such a short time"*
- *"We have to make some choices here, we only have so much time we can't get to all of these things with the kids to make sure they're doing them" so certain things became more important than others on their priority list and I think even the art, gym, and music teachers were kind of like "we get it". They were still planning lessons and such, but they understood where they fell in terms of prioritization of parents.*
- *In the elementary schools, we had to make sure that we could meet (the needs for rigor and challenge) of students who had parents home during the day, didn't have parents home during the day, who were/weren't care givers, so structuring our instruction during our day to be in the format that kids and families could connect with teachers, not just between 7am -3pm*

Administrators sought to balance rigor/requirements and capacity/feasibility at the systems-level.
Administrators articulated the importance of balancing rigor & the need to meet curricular requirements with the capacity & feasibility of teachers to provide the necessary challenge and support to students so all students would have the opportunity to learn.

- *With special education students, my primary concern was what were the minutes that were in IEPs nd how were we going to be able to deliver those without being able to be in person? How do we keep track of what we were able or not-able to deliver?*
- *Teachers were always finding ways to be creative to make sure to get some of the engagement. As it came closer to summer became more and more challenging. But that was a lot of our staff meeting discussion- how to engage the disengaged.*

Administrators sought to balance consistency and flexibility for teachers, students, and parents.
Administrators articulated the challenge of developing, deploying, and communicating how limited time, resources, and capacity could be put in place across the system as related to the who, what, when, where, why, and how of schooling amidst the pandemic. Parents, teachers, and students were eager for answers to these questions. As these questions were answered, administrators sought to balance consistency and flexibility for all stakeholders in a manner that attempted to balance each group's varied academic and emotional needs.

- *I just felt like they were longing for some synchronous opportunities. I'm thinking like not mandatory pieces but the want/need to connect teachers to connect with the kids and the kid's with teachers was a strong hold just to do something.*

What went well in the last year to support teaching and learning?

Teachers and students were resilient
Administrators described the resiliency of teachers and students as they navigated uncharted waters and engaged in unprecedented change.

- *I think (the improvements made to on-line learning in the fall) really did speak to the effectiveness of the teachers that were in those roles and I think I'm still in awe that kindergarteners had learned to read over a screen, and that the capacity for those lower grades, especially those lower grades.*
- *I think that I was more skeptical about how on-line learning was going to work (In the 2020-21 full school year), how effective it was going to be, and I was surprised by the semester when parents had the option to change, how few made a change.*
- *We've all been through a lot. We have to remember how far everyone has come and how little teachers and students knew when this started about what was going to happen next and where we are now.*
- *We just had a PTO meeting saying how well we pivoted and how much better the instruction was and how much different it was than the previous year and I think just acknowledging the amount of work that went in at the director, principal, teacher level to make that amount of change in that short of time possible.*

Administrators acknowledged the importance of humility when implementing unprecedented change.
Administrators were not afraid to acknowledge when something wasn't working as intended, and adjust course to better align systems and resources to intended outcomes.

- *Communication obviously needed to be top down (In March of 2020) given the time period that we had, but we did have that wait period where we gathered as much information we could as a team to see what our best options were given our systems capacity.*
- *From the learning platforms we had and whether they were sufficient…if students had the technology they needed…the limits of our own computer networks…and how to move from in-person instruction to virtual instruction, a top-down approach was necessary in the sense that we had to get a lot of things done in a short period of time.*
- *As we (did the best we could with what information and resources we had) we were able to get feedback from teachers on what's working and not, and through that we took that feedback and during the summer we also used survey results from our community so moving forward, we knew what we clearly wanted and didn't want.*
- *It's important that we communicate that were all human so were going to make mistakes and if we do just say "I made a mistake" and we learn to move on.*

The board was responsive and supportive
Administrators appreciated the board's ability to be responsive and assertive in expending resources to address prioritized needs amidst a time of crisis in the interest of staffs', students', and the communities' needs for safety, teaching, and learning.

- *I'm just thankful (the board) supported us financially for the things that we needed to do. They saw that we had needs…and the board met them.*
- *Or feeling at the elementary level that we didn't have the same flexibility to do what you were doing at the middle level. (Rather than having elementary teachers do hybrid) we were able to hire new people.*

- *There was some serious financial output that happened for this year, and I think for the rest of the school year that really helped support our staff.*

What have you learned to let go of, and take with you, to support learning?

New capacity, in terms of both resources and skills, to support teaching and learning using technology was developed.
New technology was acquired and teachers learned new ways to support student learning through the use of new curricular/instructional approaches and with new technology.

- *We only had 1:1 technology down to 5th grade (t the end of last year) and now we're 1:1 down to 2nd grade.*
- *When some of the on-line learners returned in the fall, l was impressed with the tech skills of those first graders who had been distant had learned because we combined some in person kids with kids who were returning in the classroom, and you could see how the on-line learners were much better than their in-person peers who weren't using those programs or technology pieces as often.*
- *A positive was bringing on board the Canvas system much more quickly than if it wasn't a pandemic and then how quickly capacity started to build with our staff in their ability to use that tool.*
- *Teachers really supported one another, they were training their peers to get up to speed-giving them tips, tricks, and things like that. So, teachers really banded together on that.*

Teachers demonstrated their capacity to be flexible and innovative.
Many teachers consistently demonstrated the ability to adapt to challenges and find innovative ways to help students learn.

- *Teachers noticed, and quickly tried to adapt to how in some situations the kid who was sort of nowhere in the physical classroom was engaged online and some of the high-achievers in person kids were nowhere to be seen online. There was an awareness that "maybe I was really only delivering to part of my population in person and now I'm only delivering to part of my population [virtually]" was very interesting.*
- *(There were productive changes we made quickly that) I definitely never felt we'd be able to do.*
- *The pandemic forced us into something and I don't think we take enough time like we're doing today to think about how much change can happen in so little time. And so yeah, the capacity of the staff to make so much change and do such a good job with it.*
- *I am impressed with creativity. (Teachers would think of something they wanted to do) and ask what does that look like in a pandemic? "Hey could we do this…" and I'm like "sure!' So, I think there's been more capacity the ideas come from a lot of different sources to solve problems.*
- *So, I think our teachers have always had the instructional piece of how they do the lesson, but the use of assessments and formative assessment in an ongoing way, I feel like that has really been developed and I don't want that to stop.*

Teachers

Note: All bullet points are quotes from participants.

What challenges did you face in the spring of 2020 to support students, teaching and learning?

The paradox of needing answers, plans and parameters - and freedom and flexibility - amidst a crisis was a source of stress for teachers.

Teachers described the urgency of wanting to know "the plan" and the how it would be implemented at a systems level. And, as those questions were answered, some teachers wanted to know how they would have the time, freedom and flexibility to put those plans in place. This need for balance – and the challenges organizations faced in creating a balance between these competing needs - was endemic of all individuals and organizations amidst the pandemic.

- *So that became a challenge just because we had to all of the sudden work with different materials.*
- *And then because we were online, parents would question how do you do this assignment? Or how do we use this technology? Like we became this mediator for parents as well, or just them talking about how difficult it was to be online, it was just a lot of confusion with everything going on.*
- *How are we going to develop, revise, redesign materials to fit a digital platform and address all of the learning targets? And coping with and learning through real time changes and challenges…just dealing with all of the changes and challenges and how to teach in that environment.*
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What challenges did you face to support teaching and learning in the last year?

Teachers navigated, and implemented, change through a historically stressful time amidst an incredibly steep learning curve

Teachers described the challenge of implementing new systems and structures within exceedingly tight windows of time, while tending to their own needs for health/safety and learning how to work from home.

- *We were kind of teaching everybody at the same time including ourselves. Another thing that was brought up was how to support some differentiated instructional practices that were in place.*
- *There was some balancing… how much instructional time vs social/emotional time we needed as we met with the kids or as we designed different things for them to be doing.*
- *We talked about concern around teaching the curriculum to fidelity… should we continue with the curriculum?*
- *We had to ensure that all students were able to access resources and offering support to all students that had difficulty with understanding.*
- *Not all had students to appropriate technology even though it was an option to check it out, or not everybody knew how to use it.*
- *It was a difficult meeting the student/family emotional needs and feeling like you needed to be available to them all hours of the day, but also balancing our own needs at the time to address our own social/emotional needs.*
- *We talked about being developmentally appropriate for young children, it was really difficult doing it for K4, K5, 1st grade. Our entire teaching world was turned upside down in an instant, I mean the whole world was, we went into survival mode basically.*

Teachers sought to find balance of structure and autonomy support from administrators.

Teachers, particularly in upper grades, described the challenges of finding balance among consistency and uniformity to implement a systems-level approach to support all students and their learning, with the desire for the flexibility to make decisions about student work-load and necessary levels of academic rigor.

- *We had that extension for break and while I think the intention of that was to give us time to prep and give the administration time to process through what we were going to do, I think that was extremely stressful for the students at times, like the unknown of what was going to happen when we came back and the communication with the parents was very limited, so I know for me and others that was very stressful.*
- *There were long periods of nothing and just waiting and then a very cramped rigid timeline of how we had to pump things out (once stay-at-home order was put into place).*
- *It was all new technology for teachers, students, parents, and it was super steep learning curve initially, I mean just trying to figure that out and how to best go about it.*
- *One of the things that kept coming back to my group was how people felt micromanaged.*

Teachers grappled with the urgent, and important, challenges of student agency in the absence of traditional systems of accountability.
Teachers described the realities of student motivation to take initiative, plan how to use their time, and take ownership of learning when in-person classroom management strategies, teacher-directed organizational strategies, and traditional consequences related to disciplinary measures or academic accountability could no longer be levered.

- *And I know one idea we had floating around for 8th grade at the start of the year is kind of this ideal graduate of skills you should have at the end of the year, because I feel like a lot of skills like time management skills are something that we could teach the kids.*
- *We talked about the fact that we control so much of (student's) functioning in the classroom as teachers that we take all the agency out and away from the students*
- *I think something with a large group of kids that struggled with virtual learning was accountability. And I think it was both kids recognizing that there wasn't going to be a whole lot of accountability and taking advantage of that… and then I don't know what the other half of that would be.*

Teachers grappled with the urgent, and important, challenges of student engagement in the absence of traditional systems of in-person instruction.
Teachers noted how easily and readily many students could shift to a mode of passive compliance – or complete disengagement – once on-line learning began.

- *Making sure that the students were doing the work that was expected, how do you connect with the students? Seesaws took hours to check because it was asynchronous.*
- *Specialists are saying "what should we be putting out there?" and the parents are thinking "that's the least of our worries" and meanwhile the specialists are sitting looking at 400 phy.ed. videos.*
- *I feel a lot of students who struggled in-person actually thrived more in the virtual environment and I don't know if its because it was less distraction and then I feel there were some students who were normally excellent students who just dropped off and we didn't really hear from them. So, it was just interesting how that dynamic worked itself out.*
- *The 2 weeks that we had to go virtual this year… the kids were way better prepared for it than those who just weren't able to come back for the rest of the year.*
- *I've realized how many kids really love being in school. You hear them complaining "I don't want to get up early, I don't want to do this, I have this math test" but they were dying to come back. And then then they're quarantined they hate it and are so happy to come back. How can we capitalize that and how can we not make school after a week boring and a place they don't want to be?*

Teachers sought to find balance among academic rigor, feasibility, and equity.
Teachers described a pull among expectations and/or their intent to hold high expectations for all students to ensure academic rigor in a manner that was actually feasible given structural limitations of on-line learning…while acknowledging the need to ensure there were equitable opportunities for all students to learn.

- *I think that stress of the unknown for all of us was just extra taxing. And as teachers we're inherent planners, we plan for everything and I think just to not have a plan was extremely anxiety inducing.*
- *Making sure our curriculum was accessible, equitable and fair, assessment and feedback- that was a challenge. Again, feeling like you were always on- checking emails, doing this late at night, just never being able to turn off.*
- *(The exhaustion of) feeling like you were always on - checking emails, doing this late at night, just never being able to turn it off. And parents just not understanding and wanting (more).*
- *We had numerous meets all week long that were supporting the instruction in small groups like groups of 8 or 10 students and we actually had some really good participation for some of those last couple weeks of school. So I felt it was a success but also a ton of work for those teachers to put that together.*
- *We really had to synthesize what we were going to do because we were only teaching 2 lessons a week as opposed to 5 so we really had to cut down and prioritize what was important*

Teachers sought to support students' socio-emotional needs virtually. In the spring of 2020, teachers found that for many students these needs transcended their needs of academic press and cognitive rigor.
Teachers sought to respond to their students' socio-emotional needs amidst the isolation and anxiety of a global pandemic.

- *We really worked hard to try and create some positive school experiences… like whole school community work with social/emotional stuff and they met regularly too with any children that needed that connection.*
- *I had lots of ah-ha's that is so crucial to develop and maintain relationships with both students and families. I mean we knew it, but it reiterated how important it is. And to do that both in person and for those families that are distant learners. Also that our basic needs need to be met before learning can occur.*
- *Kids were (logging on) to have breakfast with you and introduce their brother and they really had that need to connect so we tried to focus on that.*
- *I had students that were awesome students that school was their way of functioning and that was their identity and they're high achievers and all of the sudden their world - and how they succeed - was taken away and I actually had to report a few of them because I was so afraid of their mental well-being*
- *I think the majority of our office hour time if I'm being honest was just talking to kids. They would just pop in (to on-line office hours) and you could just talk about life- it wouldn't even have to be social studies related.*

What went well in the last year to support teaching and learning?
Teachers noticed – and were often surprised by – how resilient students were amidst so much complexity and change.
Teachers noticed the many ways that students were resilient and appropriately engaged or compliant in ways that were sometimes surprising or unexpected.

- *I think there were some students that really came out of their shell and thrived in the new environment. It was interesting to see that this could really work for some kids.*
- *I feel like in the past couple years learner agency and getting them to be more independent has been something we've been working towards.*
- *Well that was part of it one of the benefits of Canvas is that they could record and put it on and then keep that group moving.*

- *(I've appreciated) more digital copies of work. So, less relying heavily on paper/pencil. Having it collected online where students couldn't lose packets or essays and things like that (has been easier).*
- *I'm seeing several of them who produced fabulous work for whom school social life wasn't necessarily their cup of tea and who were just perfectly fine and happy to work at their own pace and do what they need to do. I've seen such growth from some of them but I was amazed myself. I knew that the student was capable, but I was really just wowed by what they were able to do on their own.*
- *I think we're learning that we can use a lot of this virtual, just the technology, the google meets, those kinds of things. That those can still be a very good tool in certain circumstances, pandemic or no pandemic*

Technology takes time to learn/build resources…but there are big payoffs.
Teachers were put into an incredibly difficult position – they had to urgently learn new systems, schedules, strategies, and technology…in a manner that required them to replace traditional ways of teaching, assessing, and collaborating…but the investment reaps important dividends. Once these tools have been put into place, they can be utilized for future courses/lessons, and can be accessed by students to support re-teaching and remediation.

- *I think some things in Canvas aren't logical but the things that are logical are phenomenal. I feel like the weekly agenda which takes a long time to make but is outstanding for kids who are in quarantine, who are absent, who are here, who are not.*
- *I feel like having everything integrated and being able to be housed in one place, to be able to integrate and keep it on there has helped kids which is why I think it went so much better in November. The kids know the structure of Canvas, we all have stuff in the same place (they can be copied into next years courses) and that consistency across the staff I think is helpful for the kids.*
- *And I think what was helpful is kids before we had to go on that 2-week quarantine they were used to always seeing those daily agendas and running through them in class.*
- *Having some of the pre-recorded lessons was a good idea because then we could go back and watch them again.*

What have you learned to let go of, and take with you, to support learning?

Teachers discovered efficiencies and built capacity to improve their expertise to meet student's needs.
There were a wide range of strategies, systems, and resources that teachers realized they can let go of, or have brought forward to support their ability to meet students' learning needs.

- *Something to let go of, no teacher should ever be asked to teach both "the room and the zoom" at the same time. (You can't serve both groups of learners effectively – they both get a diluted experience).*
- *We need to give people gratitude and grace for what we were experiencing - living, working, and all of that during this unprecedented time and this trauma. Despite all of that, we've continued to persevere, have great determination to teach during this and all come together which was a very brave thing to do, so kudos to all of us.*
- *Some students who just aren't brave enough to raise their hand in class really came out of their shell in the virtual space.*
- *Our online (parent-teacher) conferences this year actually worked out really well and there was a really good show out for parents, and they were all on time!*
- *One of the things that came up for us along with that is having that soft start at the beginning of the school year …people really liked that.*
- *Smaller class sizes have been a real positive. We can get together in smaller groups, we can explore different avenues of whatever it is we're exploring, and the atmosphere is just…it's just a smaller class. Even having 5 fewer students is huge. Developing those relationships, you can go more in-depth with a smaller group of kids.*

- *The perspective of kids and what their life looks like and what their home situation looks like. In a year, students are keeping track of 17 teachers doing things 7 different ways and even though were supposed to be consistent in reality we weren't, so having kids try to manage their home and their siblings and keeping track of these social/emotional needs and keeping track of the difference of all of us [teachers] I think was eye-opening for all of us.*
- *Better attendance with virtual IEP's this year- parents are showing up. It's easier for them to just log into a meeting than having to come to the school.*
- *To concentrate on what was the most important you get down to the most nitty gritty of our standards.*
- *And it's always good to be flexible. Sometimes kids want pencil and paper or like we always do, get up and move around. So just being flexible and not just having a single lesson with all this screen time.*
- *…If we want to really offer flexibility for those kids that would rather work at their own pace but still need the structure, why don't we have the structures in place for them? That they can come in 2-3 times a week and check in with a teacher, work at their own pace in their classroom or at home, whatever have you.*
- *Maintain that 1:1 technology with students.*

Note: All bullet points are quotes from participants.

What challenges did you face in the spring of 2020 to support your learning?

Students realized how virtual learning is very different from in-person learning.
Many students in the focus groups struggled with a lack of interaction and engagement amidst the isolation of remote learning. There was also consensus that expectations and opportunities for virtual learning were much better in the fall of 2020.

- *I liked when we had meets when our teachers could check in with us and see how our lives were going, but we didn't have a way to ask questions and we didn't get to see how we should do work. Normally in a classroom we have an example or something, but now it was just 'you're on your own'.*
- *I noticed from last year's virtual to this year it was much more like a regular school day. It was structured so you knew you had to be on, and get things done by a certain time, and teachers stayed on-line so it was better to ask questions.*
- *When sitting at a screen all day, I'd just get more and more tired.*

Students realized how learning at home is very different from learning at school.
Some students struggled with complexities at home to successfully engage in remote learning. These included distractions (TV, the internet, videogames), lack of adequate technology (older versions, slow downloads), at-home distractions or limitations (siblings & pets as distractors, internet band-width consumed by other at-home family members), and lack of structure (time management, establishing a routine).

- *We only had meetings a couple times a week but I liked when I had time with my teachers. I have a younger brother at home and I needed to help him with his work at home but also do mine because my parents were at work. So I had to figure out when I could do my work and help him with his.*
- *You could see everyone's home so there wasn't a sense of privacy there. They wouldn't let us have (virtual) backgrounds, so you would see everything and my siblings would run around behind me so it was hard for me to learn that way.*
- *There's something about being home that just feels like you don't have to do the work.*

Students missed their friends.
The most frequent response to the question about what challenges students faced in the spring of 2020 was that students missed their friends.

- *Seeing everyone and being able to talk to my friends. You realize that once you go virtual, you can't just see your friends. You have to plan ahead to even talk to them.*
- *"Its been difficult because during in-person school you have breaks where you actually get to talk to your friends, but in virtual, you go to the meet, you listen to the teacher, you don't get to talk to your friends and then the meet ends and you leave."*
- *"I think teachers should host more Google Meets for fun and social stuff for the virtual students this year." (MS virtual learner)*

Some students expressed concern about lack of rigor
Some students in the focus groups expressed a desire for more rigor and higher expectations. They felt these challenges were exacerbated last spring.

- *I liked that I got to decide when I'd do my work because I had a lot of free time, but that also came with a lot of boredom.*
- *I flew through everything so fast and I had hours of the day left with basically nothing to do (Spring of 2020).*
- *I learned less (in spring of 2020). We were just kind of getting used to the whole on-line thing so teachers had us doing less stuff to get us used to on-line learning because it was a whole new thing.*
- *I had to learn how to manage virtually. If I had a problem or something working on my assignments I had to figure it out myself or find a way to ask someone.*

What challenges did you face to support your learning in the last year?

Students realized the importance of classroom discussions and the need to ask questions of their teachers.
Many students who participated in the focus groups described the challenges of not being able to, or not wanting to, ask questions of their teachers. Many students are much more comfortable asking questions one-on-one, and opted not to ask when they could have. Instead, they let the question pass, asked another student, or messaged their teacher after the lesson.

- *"We got a lot of work but it was just on paper, and if I had questions I'd ask my mom. When we'd have a call it was hard to ask questions because other students were talking and I am a shy person. So sometimes it was just hard to figure out what to do.*
- *"I missed getting the time to talk to my friends. Because it's not like we could have a special meet with just them, we were just online with everybody else. If you didn't have their contacts or a cell phone there is no way to talk to them. I missed having that freedom during the school day where you get to have your own space in the school and that kind of shows how you see yourself. I missed my teachers being able to watch me get my work done and I missed the hands-on things.*
- *Now that I'm back in person I feel like it's less stressful because there are teachers who area always around and you can ask them questions.*

Students found busy work even more frustrating than usual.
Many students who participated in the focus groups described the frustration they felt with having to do busy work to fulfill obligations in some classes. This was particularly frustrating when the work was received/given a grade, but without feedback.

- *When you are at school and you have an hour to do your work, you make it take an hour to do that work. But when you are given the same assignment at home, you can pace yourself differently and if its easy you can rush through it to get it done or take your time if needed…Sometimes I felt like 'Let's get this through as quickly as I can so I can take a nap' but it's nice to have the choice to do that.*
- *A year ago March teachers were just posting daily assignments on our google classroom and we all thought of that as a good temporary solution for the two weeks we'd expected to be out of school for, but because it went on for two more months, it got very repetitive and very boring.*

Students emphasized that having technology is only part of the equation; when technology is slow, learning stops.
Some students who participated in the focus groups described situations where the technology they had was out of date, software wouldn't work appropriately, or upload/download times were so slow that lessons couldn't continue.

- *If the connection is not good for band you could be with them for the first few measures but then the sound would cut out and then you wouldn't know what measure they were on and you just had to not play.*
- *One of the hardest parts on the google meets was teachers would be like "Ok, go onto Canvas and I'll give you 30 seconds to open your assignment" but the Chromebooks…its really hard to do that. It would take 2 or 3 minutes to download stuff that should take a few seconds….Some people their wi-fi simply cannot even have the cameras on….sometimes I had to use my own computer because I could not rely on my Chromebook. But for other people who don't have other devices, that causes a big problem.*
- *Sometimes teachers would have us go into other Google Meets (for chatrooms) by my computer wouldn't let me do both.*

Students acknowledged that having a common content management system is only part of the equation; when there is inconsistency in how a CMS is used, it creates ambiguity.
Students in the focus groups described a brief learning curve for Canvas, but once they learned it, they appreciate how it can be used to be sure work has been completed. However, students expressed concerns about inconsistency in how teachers use pages/modules. This makes it difficult for students to use this resource efficiently.

- *Everything on Canvas depends on the teacher some just use the assignment tabs, some just use the module tabs, so it really depends on the teacher.*
- *Canvas organizes my assignments more so its way easier for me to know what I need to do, but some of the tabs are hidden so in some classes I can't find stuff. But I think Canvas is easier (than Google) because it gives me a list of the things I need to do for each class.*
- *I like that on Canvas I can see what things I am missing and when I have to turn things in.*

What went well in the last year to support your learning?

Students appreciated their teacher's efforts to adapt in a challenging situation last spring and noticed significant improvements in distance learning in the fall.

Students appreciated efforts teachers made to facilitate learning in new ways; students were well aware that there were challenges beyond any one person's control and saw their teachers adapt to new and different ways of teaching.

- *This year we're doing more assignments that we have to engage more like projects, but last year we were just doing plain sheets of assignments every day. (online learner, Fall 2020)*
- *"It was better prepared (online learner, 2020-2021), we had classes at the time we had them in person…It was cool because I could do group projects. It was just better because I had more stuff to do and could do more learning.*
- *Each teacher tried to put their own solutions in, but in some classes it certainly worked better than others. In one class I got to upload videos of myself answering questions, and that was really useful because it allowed me to talk some… The assignments that were most helpful were the ones that weren't just typing in answers and providing some variety.*
- *When we went online for like two weeks during the quarantine this fall it was definitely better, it was more structured. There was no structure during spring of last year. It was definitely better.*

Students appreciate consistency in how expectations are communicated, but want variety in how they are taught and how they can show what they've learned.
Students in the focus groups described how they appreciate consistency from teachers in communicating expectations and assignments. However, students also appreciate being taught in a variety of different ways and having the opportunity to do different types of assignments/projects and to show their understanding in a variety of ways.

- *I appreciate the time teachers take to make the in-person assignments possible for the distance learners. Like in science we got to make our own city…my teacher actually put together bags of stuff that we needed and gave us the stuff so we wouldn't miss out on what the in-person students were doing and that was really helpful. "*
- *I wish we had different assignments and have more unique assignments that were more unique and fun than just reading documents and doing worksheets and stuff like that…I wish they would change it up and do somethings that are different.*
- *Things are more organized now. Something my teachers have started doing is being a lot more prepped long term to have a few units worth of things planned and that is really helpful to know what is coming so I can prep for it.*

Absent structured time, many students learned to create a structure that works for them.
Many students in the focus groups who participated in distance learning this past year noted that they struggled with time management in the spring of 2020, but they developed skills and strategies to manage time and be more independent.

- *"Sometimes I'd study things or look at other assignments if I was at my computer and finished work early and I never really did that before."*
- *"Me and my sister have to decide who is doing virtual learning in which room, so you have to plan ahead if you need something in the other room. But then someone would come in my room while I was in a class. It's not like at school where everyone is focused on the same thing."*
- *I learned how to do more self-motivation.*
- *I agree it was hard to focus, but I liked the freedom of being able to do the assignments and then have the rest of the day. That was my motivation to get my work done.*

What did you learn in the last year because of the pandemic?
Despite the challenges of the pandemic, students found unexpected opportunities to learn.
These unexpected opportunities ranged from learning how to manage time, pick up new hobbies, learn new ways to use technology, become proficient in keyboarding, and be more assertive about seeking out teachers to ask questions**.**

- *I had more time to play sports, shoot baskets and throw the football around."*
- *"I did a lot of reading and other stuff. School used to take up my whole day but now with virtual I have just a couple hours of my day taken up….so I'd do art projects and I started running."*
- *I definitely know my way around my computer more. There was a lot of stuff we learned or had to figure out on our own -like how to change certain settings.*
- *I started riding my bike a lot more…I started playing tennis and I usually don't play sports….my friends and I played softball.*

Note: All bullet points are quotes from participants.

What challenges did you face in the spring of 2020 to support your child's learning?

Parents empathized with their children...and with teachers and administrators.
As parents saw their own work and lives disrupted due to the pandemic, they acknowledged that schools would also face significant, and unique challenges.

- *This was an impossible situation; there were no perfect solutions. Last spring when my daughter was in upper elementary, and I understood teachers had to throw that together I thought it was excellent.*
- *Everybody made the best of it and did the best they could.*
- *I will say that the Learning Dashboard has been wonderful. We checked it three times a week. I was shocked that kids weren't spreading COVID.*
- *I am so relieved Whitnall didn't do a virtual model where the classroom teacher would teach the virtual kids at home and the in person kids at the same time. That would have been unfair to everyone…Its kind of like you are looking into a window and I can't imagine that would work for the virtual kids, the in-person kids, or for the teacher it would be a nightmare.*
- *We had some technology issues, like things wouldn't load. While it was frustrating, it wasn't bad, it was normal like things we experience at work.*
- *I appreciate that the district took the time to figure things out rather than just rushing in to this whole virtual learning scenario. I really feel like across the board staff did a great job of helping these kids along.*

Students and families have tremendous differences in needs, resources, and capacity.
Families and households are complex. Whether talking about parent's work schedules, access to resources, unique familial medical situations, or students under the same roof who require greater levels of academic challenge than their peers or students who require greater levels of academic support, different families had dramatically different concerns and needs in the first months of the pandemic.

- *Synthesis: (Quotes are synthesized here to ensure anonymity of specific situations in individual's households) Parents cited students who need more challenge, need more support, social issues, academic issues, special education needs, medically fragile family members, immunocompromised family members, multi-generation households, unique work situations, etc. that speak to the challenges and complexities of the factors different families weighed in balancing their children's academic, health, and socio-emotional needs with their families capacity to do what was best for each child.*

What challenges did you face in the last year to support your child's learning?

Challenges - from how to engage in virtual learning to factors related to making decisions about modality of learning - varied tremendously from household to household and child to child.
Parents in the focus groups described a wide range of unique challenges their learners faced as they navigated social, academic, and logistical realities of their own work and their students' schooling during the pandemic.

- *We struggled with the decision to keep them home in the fall. We were initially disappointed Whitnall didn't go with a hybrid model. The reason we really wanted that is we wanted some in person for our elementary/MS kids for mental health reasons. We were taken aback when Whitnall went for five days because a lot of districts didn't do that.*
- *My middle elementary student was struggling because the on-line class was big and she was really struggling to get what she needed. There just wasn't enough individual time.*

- *My middle elementary student was on pretty much all day and she did pretty well with it. She liked the live meets a lot – that was helpful, that was more energizing than in the spring when it wasn't live at all for us. But after a while we had to go for a walk every day. We had to just move because that's a lot of time on the screen for the kids.*
- *My early elementary student would be either on meets or doing the work pretty much all day, he was in front of the screen until like 3:00 and that was a lot for him. Although we did have Friday catch up day which gave him a bit of a break….He had a very good teacher who has high expectations, he learned a lot.*
- *My youngest one (primary), she can't focus for too long at a time, so we'd work and take a break, and work and take a break. It's been spread out to be just about all day. Sometimes after dinner we have to go back and do more things and then I said we have to stop the other areas and just focus on reading and math.*
- *The first day (of a family working, and learning, from home) all of us were on the computer the same day and our network crashed. We literally had a schedule of who could be on when so we wouldn't have too many people on wi-fi at the same time.*

"A nice problem to have" some parents became their primary student's full-time tutor
Some parents who typically don't work outside of the home, or parents with flexible schedules during the pandemic, embraced distance learning as an opportunity to support their primary-grade learner's academic growth.

- *I was glad I was home because I was 100% with my primary elementary student. My middle schooler could pretty much do it by himself, although he only had about 3 hours of work each day. My upper elementary student had quite a bit and that was pretty intense.*
- *My early primary learner, that was very hands-on for me. We had the luxury of keeping them home and I'm a former teacher and we took advantage of that because we could. I basically spent the whole morning with him and that was about half the day. It was the best I thought we could do.*

What went well in the last year in your efforts to support your child's learning?

Parents noticed the effort put forth by teachers and administrators to meet each child's needs.
Given the variability in values and needs among different households, parents in these focus groups were largely pleased with the opportunities, resources, communication, and attention given to their students from teachers and administrators.

- *There was a learning curve of how to use the computer and how to use Google Meet and that, but even that they figured it out pretty quickly. I know the early primary would do a lot of hand signals and thumbs up so they wouldn't have to unmute. I thought they did a really good job.*
- *You could tell in the fall with the virtual the teachers had a lot more training and were more prepared for how to do this.*
- *It was positive. I brag to my family how well this has gone considering how hard this has been.*
- *Special education teachers have been incredibly helpful.*
- *Most of the teachers were good about giving the kids a little bit of grace, but not across the board. I appreciate that the teachers were learning how to navigate this with them, I appreciate that.*
- *My students definitely learned time management. It definitely made them more responsible. They knew they wouldn't see their teacher tin 3rd hour tomorrow. They had to send that teacher an e-mail and initiate asking those questions.*

Clear communication, consistent practices, and fidelity in application of policies, are valued and appreciated by parents.
At all times, but particularly in times of crisis, parents appreciate clear communication and consistency in implementation of structures/schedules/resources to help them help their students across multiple schools, grade-levels, and dozens of teachers.

- *I was worried about how my early primary student might do wearing a mask all day long, but he's completely unaware of it. I really think that the kids are pretty amazing, and the teachers are for supporting that and I'm guessing parents at home to for being positive about it and creating that culture that "It's just what we do".*
- *I'd ask my kids, does everybody wear their masks? And she said "Yea" and the teachers a great about reminding kids about it, but I appreciate that the teachers have just taken the stance that "this is what we do." We've had other activities that my kids participate in and…it comes from the top down and kids just see this as normal now.*
- *I was talking to a friend (who was the opposite of me; he child went virtual this semester while my child is back) and because the high school is using so many different programs that its very confusing (Edmentum, Wisconsin Virtual Academy) if she'd known things were going to be such a mess, she would have kept them in person.*
- *I feel like our district handled things well. The communicated as much as they could. They handled it fairly. I'm so glad they gave families the options of in-person or distance. I wish we didn't have to deal with this, but we did.*

What do you hope teachers/the school district let go of, continue to do, next year to support your child's learning?

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, parents found unexpected opportunities and efficiencies.
These unexpected opportunities ranged from noticing improved communication, the usability of Canvas, better appreciating the challenges teachers face each day, and engaging in online meetings and conferences.

- *(To let go of) I know that they (admin) knows this, but I was frustrated at the thought they my kids couldn't come back in person when I wanted them too because I thought that they needed it so much. It made our heads spin and that was really frustrating. We took it at face value that they would do their best…If they would have to have stayed virtual that would have been really hard.*
- *I hope they continue to have the option to do parent teacher conferences via Zoom was fantastic. Usually my husband has to leave work and we have other kids to bring and instead we just hoped on and were able to have a nice conversation with teachers.*
- *I appreciate Canvas for being notified on the spot if a student doesn't turn something in or their grades. On the flip side, it's very hard to look at on your phone. Also, not every teacher is putting things in there, so I get a notification that something is missing but it turns out that the teacher just didn't enter the grade in there….I hope that over time as staff is more comfortable they'll use it more and get better.*

Synthesis – General Comments About Urgent and Important Responses to System-Wide Challenges

Individuals and organizations seek stasis; the balancing point of comfort between effort and results. Just as we are unaware of our heart-rate or breathing-rate when we are in a state of calm, individuals are often unaware of the underlying systems that support organizational stasis as they navigate the status quo. To these ends, the pandemic was analogous to a stress test during a comprehensive physical. The stress revealed imbalances within the system that had gone unnoticed or were unexamined. A physical stress test is objective and prescriptive; well-established criteria are used to determine whether the components of one's pulmonary or respiratory system are, or are not, in *balance.* Based on these objective measures a physician may declare the need for emergency care to correct urgent needs. Or, the physician may note less urgent, but still critically important, imbalances that should be addressed to ensure those underlying issues are strategically addressed to ensure the system works effectively and efficiently into the future.

Most organizations actively addressed the urgent, tangible, components that were identified as *out of balance* during this pandemic-related stress test. They allocated the resources (the funds, training, technology, staff) that were identified and prescribed to correct imbalances during the urgency of the crisis to establish a new status quo so teachers could deliver, and students could receive, instruction. For these organizations, surviving the urgency of the pandemic was the criterion for success. However, this criterion alone fails to acknowledge and address other important imbalances that may have been revealed.

In contrast to the response of most organizations, *learning organizations* will acknowledge the lessons learned during the urgency of the pandemic *and* strive to understand and address the less urgent, but more important, imbalances that may have been revealed. These challenges cannot be resolved through an operational memo or a purchase order. These imbalances lay at the core of how the organization's values, beliefs, efforts, and capacity are aligned, or misaligned, to ensure the organization can efficiently and effectively achieve its mission.

Synthesis – Affirming Whitnall's Urgent Response, and Inquiry to Guide Important Next Efforts

Based on my synthesis of the focus groups, Whitnall Schools effectively met the urgent challenges presented by the pandemic. Despite the ambiguity, complexity and urgency of the changes necessitated under the safer-at-home orders in the spring of 2020, decisions were made and resources were mobilized by district leadership to balance the safety of students, staff, and the community while maintaining access to educational opportunities for students. More importantly, the Whitnall staff and board of education put policies and procedures in place during the summer of 2020 to ensure families had choices, instructional resources could be acquired, and necessary improvements in delivering on-line learning could be implemented when schools re-opened in the fall of 2020. In only a few months, the district was agile enough to learn from the urgent challenges presented in the spring and implement changes to create/provide access to more productive environments for teaching and learning in the fall than had been provided in the spring.

Drawing on the medical analogy above, Whitnall's staff and board are to be commended for having effectively identified and responded to the *urgent issues* revealed during the initial stress test, and then prescribing & following a course of treatment to bring systems for supporting teaching and learning into balance throughout the urgency of the pandemic.

What I believe the district should do next is address the *important issues* that were revealed through the imbalances caused by the pandemic. Most organizations will be complacent and accept the resolution of urgent challenges of the past as evidence of not needing to address important opportunities for growth that may have been revealed. Based on my synthesis of the focus group data, I believe there are a number of competing values that are worthy of on-going inquiry and dialogue. Strategically addressing how to balance these values will help the district determine if next efforts to align mission, vision, action, and opportunities for teaching and learning should be to "return to normal" or, to draw on what has been revealed and learned from the pandemic to articulate and establish a "new normal". To these ends, I offer the following strategic questions to help staff explore, understand, and address tension among important values revealed through the pandemic.

Strategic questions: Important challenges/opportunities related to supporting and developing organizational capacity

- What is the ideal balance between collaborative decision making and top-down decision making during times of standard operation? During times of crisis? What are the intended outcomes when these are appropriately balanced? What are the unintended consequences when these are out of balance in either direction?

- What is the ideal balance between providing autonomy/independence to teachers and ensuring systems-level clarity for students and families? What are the intended outcomes when these are appropriately balanced? What are the unintended consequences when these are out of balance in either direction?

- What changes occurred amidst the urgency of the pandemic that are worth holding onto in order to advance important/strategic goals as you transition back to 'the new normal'.

- What changes occurred amidst the urgency of the pandemic that you didn't think were possible – or you thought would take years to implement? What insights does this offer about the organization's capacity to engage in change?

- Are there crisis/contingency plans related to communication protocols, 'chain of command', public health, public safety, distribution of resources, etc. that should be reviewed or put into place based on specific challenges faced during the pandemic?

Strategic questions: Important challenges/opportunities related to supporting and developing each child's learning

- What is the ideal balance between academic rigor and providing necessary levels of support? What are the intended outcomes, and unintended consequences, when these are out of balance – in either direction – for the majority of students? Students who require rigor beyond the norm? Students who require support beyond the norm?

- What is the ideal balance between providing all children with the opportunity to learn and providing equitable learning opportunities for each child? What are the intended outcomes when these are appropriately balanced? What are the unintended consequences when these are out of balance in either direction?

- What is the ideal balance between individualizing opportunities for each child to learn and the limits of teacher's/the organization's capacity to manage complexity? What are the intended outcomes when these are appropriately balanced? What are the unintended consequences when these are out of balance in either direction?

- What is the ideal balance between each teacher's autonomy to establish and communicate priorities for course/unit/lessons and each child's capacity to navigate complexity? What are the intended outcomes when these are appropriately balanced? What are the unintended consequences when these are out of balance in either direction?

- What is the ideal balance between providing students with clear expectations for behavior/processes while in school and supporting/developing their autonomy and independence as active agents in managing their own behavior/taking initiative to pursue their own learning? What are the intended outcomes when these are appropriately balanced? What are the unintended consequences when these are out of balance in either direction?