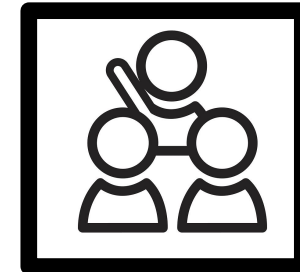
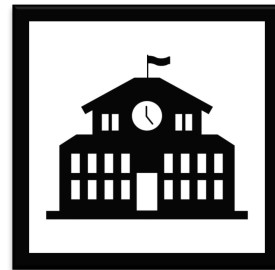


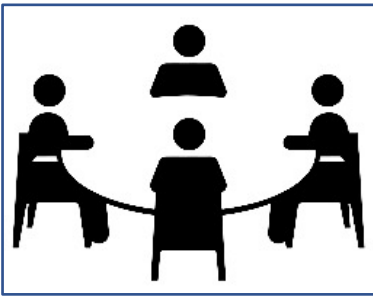


# Lessons Learned and Opportunities for Continuous Improvement to Support Teaching and Learning:

## Stakeholders' Perceptions of Whitnall's Response to the Global Pandemic



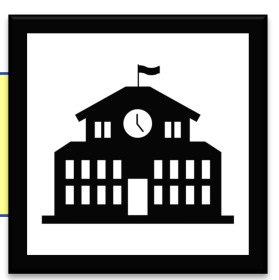
Tony Frontier, PhD  
Educational Researcher and Author  
Associate Professor of Leadership Studies; Cardinal Stritch University  
CESA1 Consultant



## Purpose of the Research

- **Purpose:** Gather and synthesize perceptions among key stakeholder groups related to Whitnall's response to the pandemic as related to organizational capacity for effective teaching and students' learning needs.
- **Process:** 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.
- **Time-Frame:** Data were collected in April/May of 2021
- **Main questions for each focus group:**
  - 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?
- **Parameters:**
  - 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 to describe the challenges/responses/opportunities for teaching and learning in the last 15 months and to discern strategic areas for focused inquiry to build organizational capacity for teaching and learning.

# Administrators' Perceptions



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

- ***In a rolling crisis, there are no easy answers***
- ***Schedules and infrastructure had to be redesigned amidst unprecedented ambiguity***
- ***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***

## 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, rigor/requirements, capacity/feasibility, and consistency/flexibility***

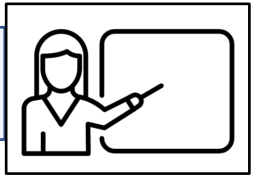
## What went well in the last year to support teaching and learning?

- ***Teachers and students were resilient***
  - *“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.”*
- ***Administrators acknowledged the importance of humility when implementing unprecedented change.***
  - *“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.”*
- ***The board was responsive and supportive***

## 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.***
  - *“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.”*
- ***Teachers demonstrated their capacity to be flexible and innovative.***
  - *“(There were productive changes we made quickly that) I definitely never felt we’d be able to do.”*

# Teachers' Perceptions



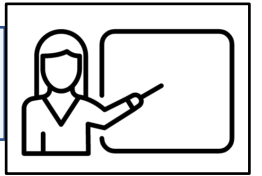
**What challenges did you face in the spring of 2020 to support students, teaching and learning?**

- **The paradox of needing answers, plans and parameters - and freedom and flexibility - amidst a crisis was a source of stress for teachers.**
  - *“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...how to teach in that environment.”*

**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.**
  - *“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”.*
- **Teachers grappled with the urgent, and important, challenges of student agency in the absence of traditional systems of accountability.**
  - *“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.”*
- **Teachers grappled with the urgent, and important, challenges of student engagement in the absence of traditional systems of in-person instruction.**
  - *“(But...) 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.”*
- **Teachers sought to find balance among academic rigor, feasibility, and equity.**
  - *“Making sure our curriculum was accessible, equitable and fair, assessment and feedback- that was a challenge.”*
  - *“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.**
  - *“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.”*
  - *“Kids were (logging on) to have breakfast with you and introduce their brother and they really had that need to connect....”*

# Teachers' Perceptions



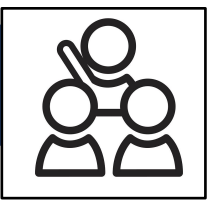
## **What went well in the last year to support teaching and learning?**

- **Teachers noticed – and were often surprised by – how resilient students were amidst so much complexity and change.**
  - *“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.**
  - *“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.”*
  - *“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?**

- *“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.”*

# Students' Perceptions



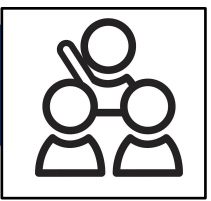
## What challenges did you face in the spring of 2020 to support your learning?

- **Students realized how virtual learning is very different from in-person learning.**
  - *“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.**
  - *“There’s something about being home that just feels like you don’t have to do the work.”*
- **Students missed their friends.**
  - *“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.”*
- **Some students expressed concern about lack of rigor**
  - *“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.**
  - *“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.**
- **Students emphasized that having technology is only part of the equation; when technology is slow, learning stops.**
  - *“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.”*
- **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.**
  - *“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....I like that on Canvas I can see what things I am missing and when I have to turn things in.”*

# Students' Perceptions



## 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.**
  - *"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.*
  - *"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.**
  - *"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.**
  - *"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.**
  - *"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."*



# Parents/Guardians' Perceptions



## 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.**
  - *"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."*
- **Students and families have tremendous differences in needs, resources, and capacity.**
  - *Synthesis: Parents described students who need more challenge, need more support, social issues, academic issues, special education needs, medically-fragile 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 & family's needs.*

## 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.**
  - *"I (excitedly) became my primary student's full-time tutor."*
  - *"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 (school work)."*

## 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.**
  - *"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."*
  - *"My students definitely learned time management. It definitely made them more responsible."*
- **Clear communication, consistent practices, and fidelity in application of policies, are valued and appreciated by parents.**
  - *"I feel like our district handled things well. The communicated as much as they could. They handled it fairly. 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 learning?

- **Despite the challenges of the pandemic, parents found unexpected opportunities and efficiencies.**
  - *"I hope they continue to have the option to do parent teacher conferences via Zoom was fantastic...and Canvas."*



# Importance/Urgency Priority Matrix

		Urgency	
		Highly Urgent	Low Urgency
Importance	Highly Important	High Importance/Highly Urgent  <b>CRISIS</b>  The Organization's Response to the Pandemic	High Importance/Low Urgency  <b>STRATEGIC IMPROVEMENT</b>  Continuous Improvement from what the Pandemic Revealed about the Organization
	Low Importance	Low Importance/Highly Urgent	Low Importance/Low Urgency

# Importance/Urgency Priority Matrix

		Urgency	
		Highly Urgent	Low Urgency
Importance	Highly Important	<p><b>High Importance/Highly Urgent</b></p> <p>Whitnall Schools responded effectively to the complexity and urgency of the slow-rolling <b>crisis</b> caused by the pandemic to support teaching and learning. Administration was responsive, teachers were nimble, resources were mobilized, options were given to students and families, efficiencies were sought, changes were made, capacity was improved as additional information/resources became available.</p>	<p><b>High Importance/Low Urgency</b></p> <p>Whitnall Schools are well-positioned to engage in on-going <b>strategic improvement</b> based on a number important strengths and opportunities for growth that were revealed through the pandemic.</p> <p>These opportunities are less apparent because they are less urgent and will be missed by many organizations. However, they are strategically important because they provide areas of focus for continued organizational learning and growth.</p>
	Low Urgency	Low Importance/Highly Urgent	Low Importance/Low Urgency



# Strategic Questions - Organizational Capacity

## *Questions related to important challenges/opportunities to develop 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?
- 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 - Supporting Student 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?
- ...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?
- ...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?
- ...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?
- ...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?