



## Education in the time of COVID-19: Lessons from a school in Hong Kong



*Curtis J Jones, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee*

*April, 2020*

The transition to distance learning in Hong Kong began in early February, about two months before schools in the United States. As such, the experiences of Hong Kong schools making that transition provide a useful source of information for schools in the United States making that same transition now. Very little information is available about the impact of the transition to distance-learning as the result of a pandemic, and how educators, parents, and students experience it.

This report presents information gathered from Hong Kong International School (HKIS), which began their transition to distance learning in February. As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to stress community and school resources, this school engaged in an internal continuous improvement and monitoring process. While its data collection activities were intended to inform internal decisions, the lessons learned from these efforts may be of use to other schools struggling through their own transition to distance learning while simultaneously dealing with the impact of a pandemic in their community. The hope is that

this school's experiences will provide educators in the United States guidance for how to accomplish and sustain this extremely difficult task.

### KEY FINDINGS

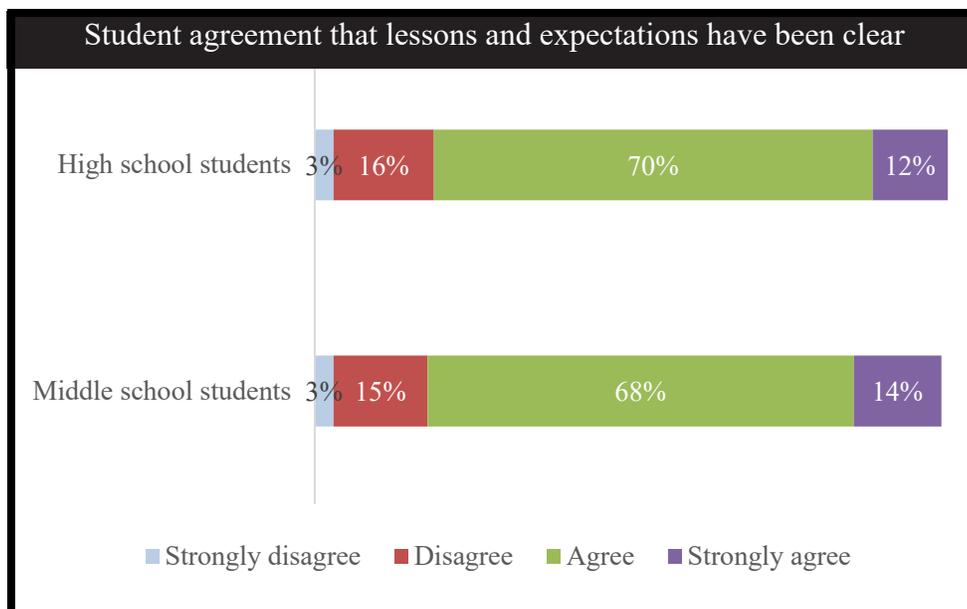
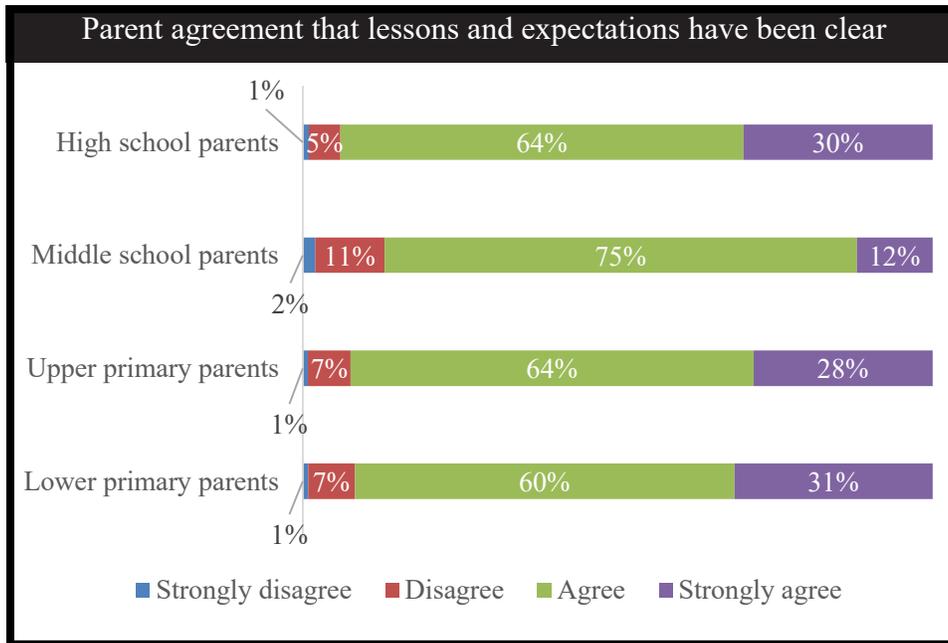
- HKIS designed an effective distance learning process, using a variety of tools to facilitate learning.
- As HKIS remained closed, over time students began to feel more socially isolated.
- Teachers experienced a great deal of stress, both related to the workload required to implement distance learning and concerns about the safety of their families.
- Ongoing and consistent communication throughout the transition has proven critical for its success and the well-being of employees. Parents, students, and employees have also appreciated opportunities to share their experiences with HKIS administration.
- Teachers with children face a daunting task of both continuing their work as a teacher AND leading the home schooling of their children.
- Most teachers felt their instructional skills have improved as a result of the switch to distance learning.



# How well is distance learning going after two months?

## Most students and parents feel instruction has been clear.

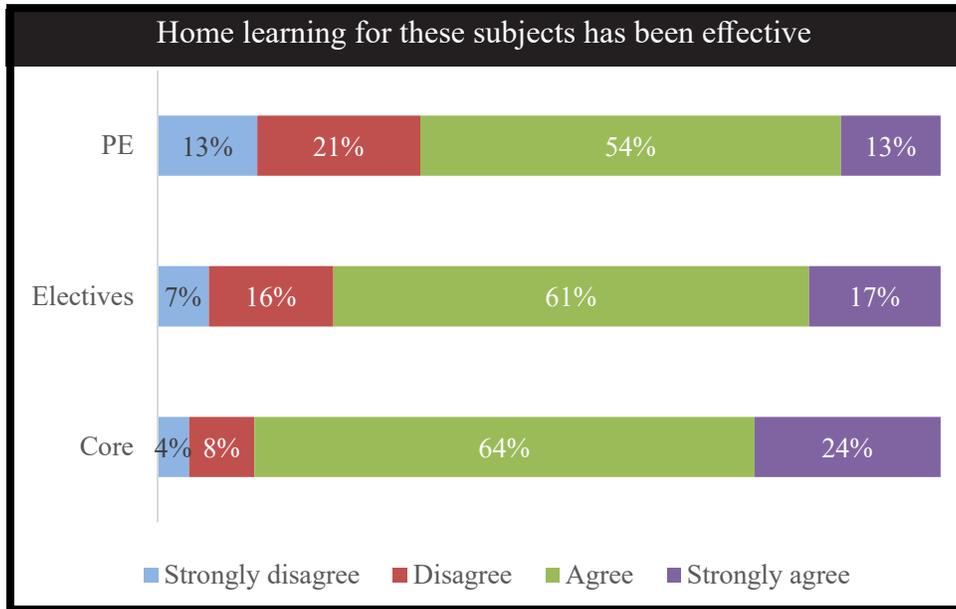
As HKIS developed and executed its distance learning system it needed to understand how the system was working for both students and parents. Surveys were used for this purpose. The results of both student and parent surveys show that they believe teachers are providing clear instruction over distance learning.



## How well is distance learning going after two months?

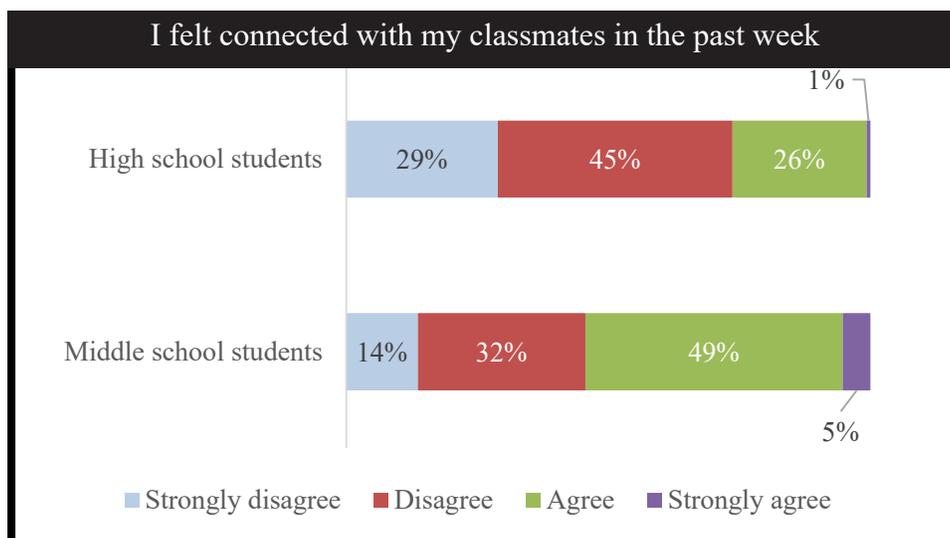
### Most students reported instruction has been effective.

While students largely agree that Core subject instruction has been effective, not surprisingly, fewer agree that instruction in electives or in physical education (PE) has been effective. Roughly 1/3 of students did not think distance learning instruction in PE was effective. It has been a challenge to find innovative ways to deliver instruction in physical education since students are unable to access fitness facilities. Electives such as art or music have also been more of a challenge to implement through distance learning.



### Students feel less connected to their classmates.

Not surprisingly, considering travel restrictions, a large percentage of students reported not feeling connected to their classmates in the last week. This was especially true for high school students. Quality peer interactions protect students from feelings of depression and anxiety (La Greca & Harrison, 2005). Thus, as school closures continue, students are at an increased risk of feeling isolated and being emotional impacted by the circumstances.

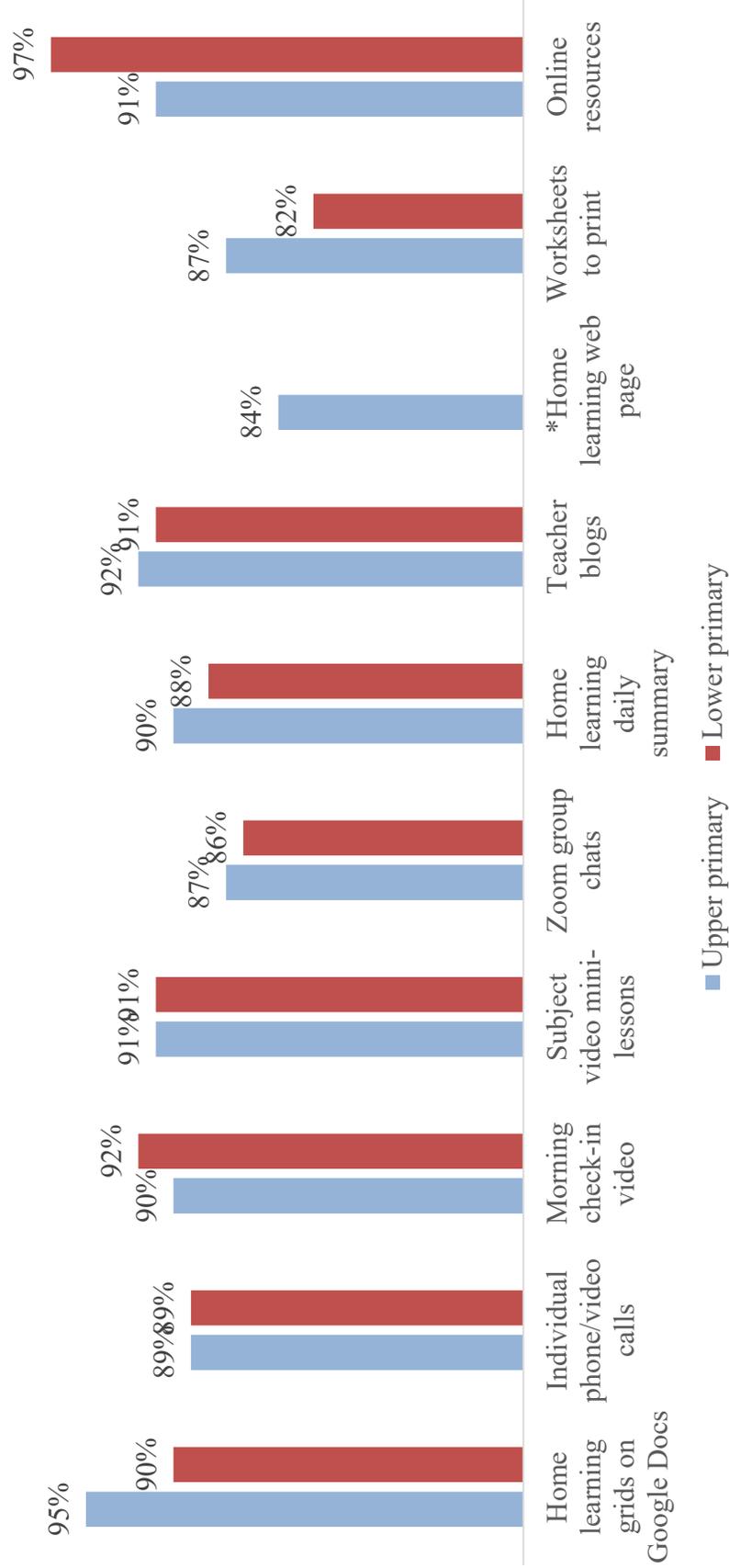


## How well is distance learning going after two months?

### Primary parents have appreciated the variety of distance learning tools provided to them to help facilitate their students' learning.

HKIS developed a number of resources for students and parents to help facilitate distance learning. These were developed with input from parents and students. HKIS understood the importance of maintaining communication with families throughout the pandemic and switch to distance learning. Surveys were a necessary tool for accomplishing this. Partially because parents have been involved in providing feedback from the beginning, the great majority reported the resources provided to them have been useful.

The percent of parents who have agreed or strongly agreed the following resources were useful in the past week



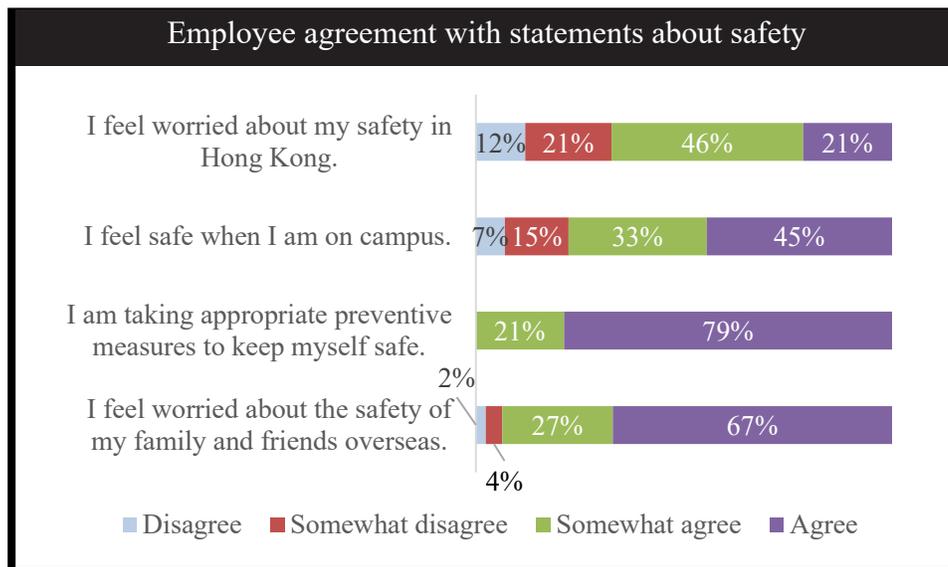
\* not asked of lower primary parents

## How have HKIS employees experienced the COVID-19 crisis?

The potential of distance learning to continue student development with as little disruption as possible relies on the skills, capacity, and well-being of the educators responsible for implementing it. HKIS administrators understood that the move to distance learning and the COVID-19 crisis were taking their toll on their employees. Therefore, at the end of March they decided to survey their employees about their well-being and how they could be better supported.

### **The vast majority of HKIS employees expressed concerns about their safety in Hong Kong and the safety of their friends and families overseas.**

Employees were asked four questions about their perceptions of safety on school campus and in Hong Kong more generally. The results, presented in Figure 1, indicate that the vast majority of employees are concerned about their safety in Hong Kong and the safety of their friends and family overseas. Most also indicated they felt at least somewhat safe when on campus, however 22% either somewhat disagreed or disagreed that they felt safe on campus.



Employees were asked a follow-up question about whether they believed HKIS had taken appropriate actions to keep them safe. While 72% felt the school had at least mostly taken the appropriate actions to keep employees safe, employees who did not answer “Yes” to the question were asked “What specific action(s) could the school take to make you feel safer?”. 131 employees answered this question. The most common theme, mentioned by 62 of the 131 employees who answered the question, was that the school should not ask employees to return to campus until the crisis has passed. In response to evolving government guidance, there have been attempts to get employees to come back to campus. As the crisis evolved, however, this never materialized. Each attempt caused some amount of fear and stress among employees. Clear and consistent communication was the second most common suggestion, mentioned by 31 employees. Most often the need for consistent communication revolved around the confusion of whether they would be required to return to campus. As one respondent suggested:

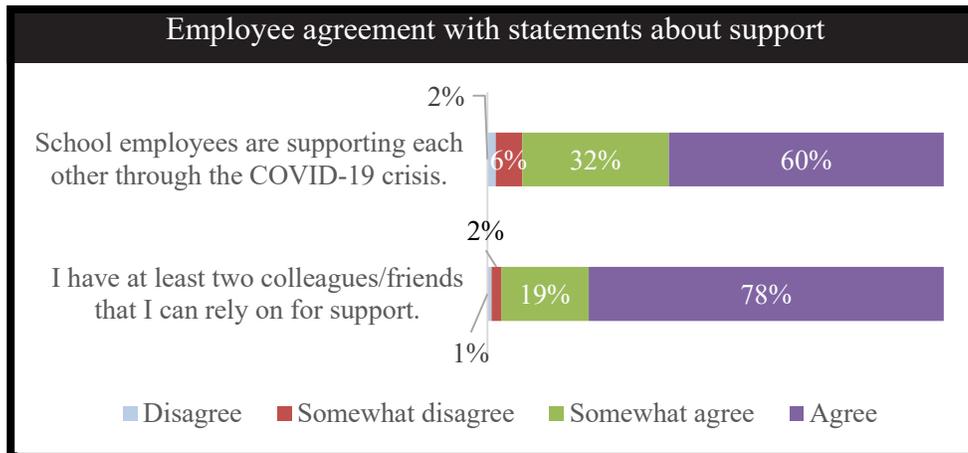
## How have HKIS employees experienced the COVID-19 crisis?

*“To not ask faculty to return to work on campus before it’s safe to do so! It caused a great deal of stress to hear we would be expected to return to work on campus with full-time hours when the city was still experiencing uncertainty. It seemed unreasonable to expect us to commute through the city each day while teaching full course loads online, just to get us back working inside the building.”*

*“Consistency in whether people can or cannot work from campus for teaching and meetings. Mentioning that teachers should work from home but then stating that teachers can access/teach from their classroom is a mixed message. Not requiring face to face meetings.”*

### **Most employees have felt supported by other employees and by their family and friends.**

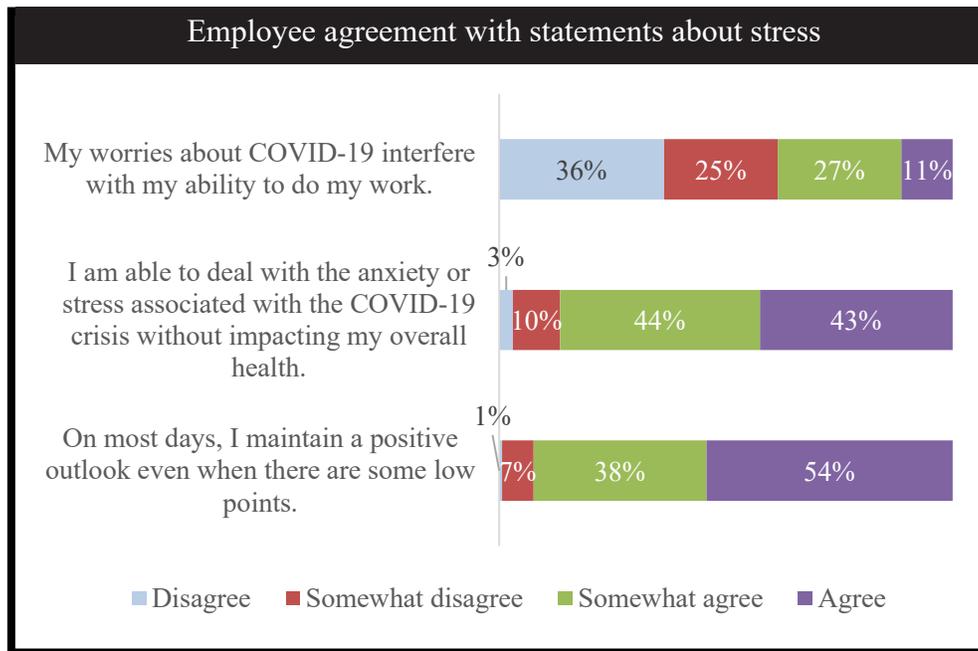
Considering the Hong Kong government continues to extend stay-at-home orders, staff are at an increasing risk of feeling socially isolated. Reflecting an understanding that social support is critical for the long-term well-being of employees (Russell, Altmaier, & Van Velzen, 1987) and critical for helping staff make it through this crisis, employees were asked two questions about their support among other school staff and within their personal life. Nearly all at least somewhat agreed employees supported each other and they had access to family and friends to provide them support.



### **Most employees reported they were able to manage their stress well.**

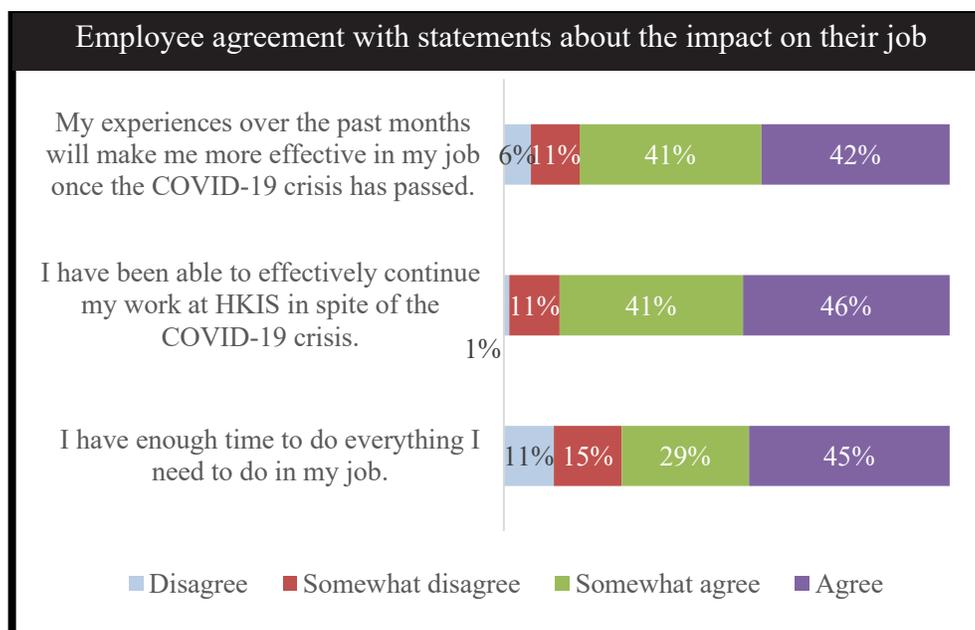
There is no doubt the COVID-19 crisis is hugely stressful. However, most employees suggested they were able to manage that stress effectively. That said, many employees did at least somewhat agree with the statement that their worries interfered with their ability to do their job. While no data are available to determine if employee stress has interfered more with their work over time, it seems likely that the impact of stress will continue to compound over time until the COVID-19 crisis is resolved.

## How have HKIS employees experienced the COVID-19 crisis?



### Most employees reported they remained effective in their job in spite of the stress and work burden.

Employees were asked three questions about their ability to continue their work at a high level of effectiveness during the crisis. Most (83%) at least somewhat agreed that they were able to continue being effective in their work. Reflecting the challenge of switching to distance learning, somewhat fewer at least somewhat agreed they had enough time to do their job (74%). Most also indicated they expect to be more effective after the crisis has passed (83%). The switch to distance learning was a huge challenge for many employees. However, employees have largely met this challenge. After the COVID-19 crisis is resolved, future students are likely to benefit from their newly acquired skills.



## How have HKIS employees experienced the COVID-19 crisis?

The final question in the survey asked employees to share what they would like HKIS to know about their experiences adapting to the COVID-19 crisis and how the school could better support them. 160 employees answered this question. Their responses provide important information for the school to use moving forward. Topics covered by responses were diverse and often multi-faceted. There were some common themes mentioned in the responses. Many focused on some of the same topics mentioned in the previous open-ended question about safety, with 20 further emphasizing the importance of working from home and 24 suggesting the importance of clear and consistent communication from leadership. However, many new themes also emerged from their responses.

### **The switch to distance learning required an enormous amount of work to implement and sustain.**

The most common experience, shared by 32 employees, was around the idea that the switch to distance learning has required a huge amount of work. As the crisis continues, it is unclear how well teachers will be able to maintain the level of work. The concern is that more and more teachers will reach a state of exhaustion and experience burn-out (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

*“There has been acknowledgement that creating a high-quality online learning experience takes a great deal of time but there hasn’t been any extra time provided. Working 12 hour days plus 6-10 hours each weekend has been the norm. Doing this in the early stages was possible, but as we get through week 8 with mounting concerns about the wellness of loved ones here and abroad and the physical effects of stress make this unsustainable.”*

*“I think that classroom teachers have a lot put on them right now and are working well beyond normal working hours.”*

### **Performing their job under the stress caused by the COVID-19 crisis has been very difficult.**

27 employees shared how stressful this experience has been, both related to their work and their families.

*“While the virus itself continues to be a grave concern, an even more stressing concern and thought process from the very first case in Hong Kong has been, “What will it look like for my children if my family were to be quarantined?” “How will my children respond to being placed or sent to a government quarantine site?” “What will it look like in a public hospital if one of my children or family members falls ill to Covid-19?” “Will the government hospital staff separate me from my children?”*

*“Emotionally, the stress is starting to reach me. It’s not the stress I imagine one must feel living through an open war, but the slow burning stress that feels OKish most of the time, but suddenly appears and creates intense moments of anxiety. Days go by where I’m plodding along hoping for it to be over, and then a single hour of fear strikes. That’s been really hard.”*

## How have HKIS employees experienced the COVID-19 crisis?

### **Employees who are also parents face an extremely difficult situation having to both meet work requirements while also supporting the education of their own children.**

There is no easy answer to how to best support teachers with children. Distance learning in itself requires teachers commit more time and energy to their instruction, while also leaning heavily on parents to home teach. Thus, teachers with their own children are stretched extremely thin. The school attempted to address this by using teaching assistants to work with children of teachers but with new restrictions in place, this is no longer possible.

*“I am struggling to teach AND teach my own kids at home. It is not a situation that can (Not) go long term.”*

*“Timings and workloads are unrealistic to work from home with two employees in different divisions with children in a third division. Schedules are not coordinated. Requirements to do our job means our children cannot do their Zoom calls because of the lack of devices, internet strength, and ability to supervise.”*

### **Schools should consider the impact of their decisions on the well-being of their employees**

22 employees shared that their school should make decisions with more consideration of the needs and health of its employees. The school felt such an urgency to design and implement a strong distance learning system that they did not check on the well-being of their employees until nearly two months had passed. This made some employees feel that their needs were less important to the school. That the school was surveying them now was viewed positively. Employees were appreciative of being provided the opportunity to share their experiences.

*“We need to be able to rest, sleep, maintain our own sense of health, stability and wellbeing, so that we can keep going. Whether this is recognized or not, faculty are amazing professionals and we will do an excellent job, no matter what. The sad thing is that this may come at the expense of our own selves. Teachers are the front line workers of the school.”*

*“We have worked tirelessly to provide as much stability and consistency with our students as possible. I think admin has misjudged how important those things are for adults as well.”*

## Discussion

The experiences of one school in Hong Kong which started two months ago working to maintain a high quality education for their students in spite of disruptions to daily life caused by COVID-19, provides useful guidance for schools in the United States trying to adapt to COVID-19 now. This is a scary time for everyone and it is easy to be overwhelmed by the challenge ahead. That HKIS worked diligently and unyieldingly to provide as effective an education as is possible to their students is a credit to the leadership of the school and the professionalism of its educators. To be similarly successful, schools going through this process now must also have strong leadership that is supportive and understanding of the challenges facing their educators, students, and parents. They must also have strong learning teams that can work collaboratively to adapt their lessons to a distance learning environment.

While going through this process, schools must work to maintain two-way communication with parents, students, and teachers. HKIS has effectively used surveys through a continuous improvement process to monitor the effectiveness of instruction and to identify ways they could improve their support to parents and educators. One particular challenge facing HKIS that most schools in the United States are also facing is how best to support teachers who also have their own school-aged children. This challenge is more complex with younger children, who require more involvement from their parent.

No matter what a school does, there are going to be negative consequences to the learning and well-being of students. Distance learning is not an equal replacement for classroom learning. Effective instruction outside of core subject areas is particularly difficult to accomplish. Further, students are likely to feel isolated from their peers and will be unable to continue with other extracurricular activities they value.

If there is a silver lining in the COVID-19 crisis, it may be that educators are innovating how to best use online tools so that their students can continue to learn from home. Once the crisis has abated, and teachers and students are back in their classrooms, future students may benefit from the innovations of educators trying to maintain their students' education in the time of COVID-19.



## References

La Greca, A. & Harrison, H. (2005). Adolescent peer relations, friendships, and romantic relationships: Do they predict social anxiety and depression? *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 34 (1), 49-61.

Russell, D. W., Altmaier, E., & Van Velzen, D. (1987). Job-related stress, social support, and burnout among classroom teachers. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 72(2), 269.

Skaalvik, E. M. & Skaalvik, S. (2010). Teacher self-efficacy and teacher burnout: A study of relations. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(4), 1059-1069.

## Methods

A variety of data collection tools were used to gather an understanding of HKIS's transition to distance learning and its impact on the school. These included interviews with school leadership, surveys of staff, surveys of parents, and surveys of students. All surveys were offered both online and via paper and pencil. Surveys were anonymous to promote open and honest responses.

The student and parent surveys, administered in February, focused mostly on their perceptions of the quality of instruction and usefulness of digital tools provided to them. In this report, we present the results from the second survey administration completed by 981 parents and 686 middle and high school students.

The employee survey, administered at the end of March focused on their well-being. The survey included a mix of close and open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were thematically coded. A total of 343 employees participated in the survey, 303 online and 39 with paper and pencil. These included 180 teachers, 105 Other Support Staff, 17 Teaching Assistant Support Staff, 14 Administrators, and 27 who did not indicate their role.



Thank you to the following individuals for their helpful comments on drafts of this report:

Jen Bowser  
John Bowser  
Leon Gilman  
Steve Kimball  
Katharine Rainey

And thank you to Don Drake and Joy Okazaki for allowing others to learn from the efforts of Hong Kong International School to transition to distance-learning.

*Curtis Jones* is the Director of the Office of Socially Responsible Evaluation in Education at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee

For more information about this report please contact Curtis Jones at [jones554@uwm.edu](mailto:jones554@uwm.edu) or visit [www.uwm.edu/sreed](http://www.uwm.edu/sreed)

Note: An earlier version of this paper did not mention HKIS. HKIS was added after they decided to allow their school to be identified in the report.

