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A Cultural Shift in Perceptions of Online Learning: Insights from Parents of Florida Virtual School Students

Mid-March 2020 is etched in the mind of many at Florida Virtual School (FLVS) and beyond as the beginning of the “COVID-19 Learning Period.” Many Kindergarten-12 families turned to FLVS for their online learning needs—some for the very first time, and some because of their past knowledge and experience with FLVS courses.

Change seemed to be all that educators, children, and families had come to expect with assurance. At FLVS, FLVS Flex and Global School had a combined 43.7 percent increase in course requests in November 2020 as compared to December 2019 enrollments. The FLVS Flex Kindergarten-5th grade level on its own increased enrollment by 104 percent. FLVS Full Time also saw a 99 percent increase in enrollments when compared to the previous school year, with a 262 percent change alone at the Kindergarten-5th grade level.

With new course enrollments, many parents faced overseeing their children’s online learning—and, for many, learning in general—at home for the first time. Some of these students came to FLVS because their school districts encouraged them to enroll in FLVS courses, or because they felt it was their best option in the face of the pandemic. Others’ experience with FLVS courses led them to place their trust in the high-quality curriculum and proven instructional model they had come to know and appreciate.

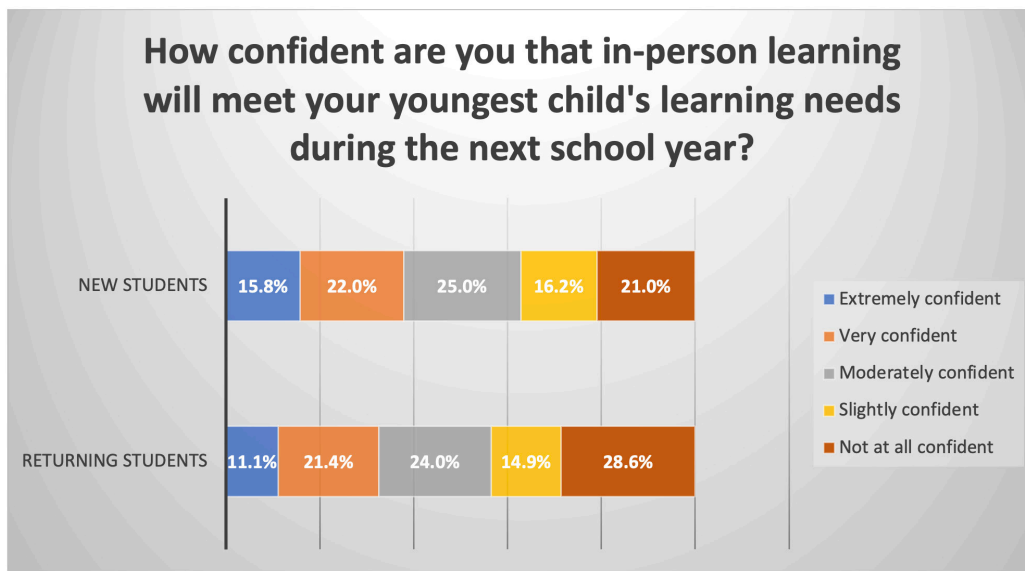
Survey Background and Purpose

The FLVS team surveyed parents of students who were enrolled currently or had completed enrollment during the period of March 15 through November 6, 2020, whether they were first-timers or had taken many FLVS courses. The sample included parents from the FLVS Global School, FLVS Flex, and FLVS Full Time student populations.

FLVS Global School serves students outside of the state of Florida. FLVS Flex and FLVS Full Time serve Florida students, with FLVS Flex offering flexible course schedules whether students take all or some of their courses with FLVS. FLVS Full Time courses function as students’ full-time schedule and FLVS is their school of record. This survey sought to learn from parents’ views of Kindergarten-12 education, particularly as the pandemic may have impacted those views, as well as considered how parents’ FLVS experiences influenced their plans to engage in additional online learning.

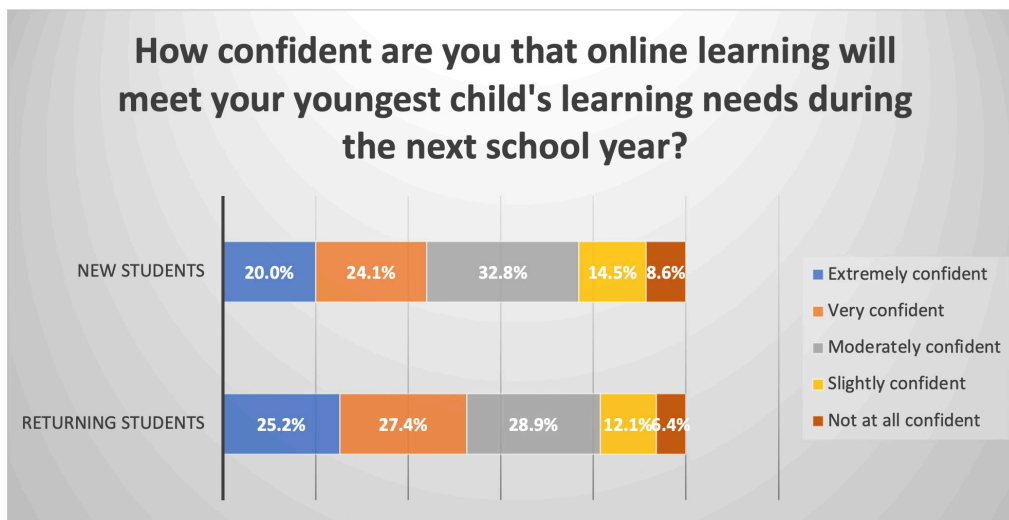
Figures 1 and 2 below convey respondents' confidence, whether their children were new to FLVS or returning FLVS students. In Figure 1, a combination of "Extremely Confident" and "Very Confident" indicates those families that were new to FLVS showed 5.3 percentage points more confidence that *in-person learning* would meet their youngest child's learning needs in the next school year.

Figure 1: In-Person Learning Confidence



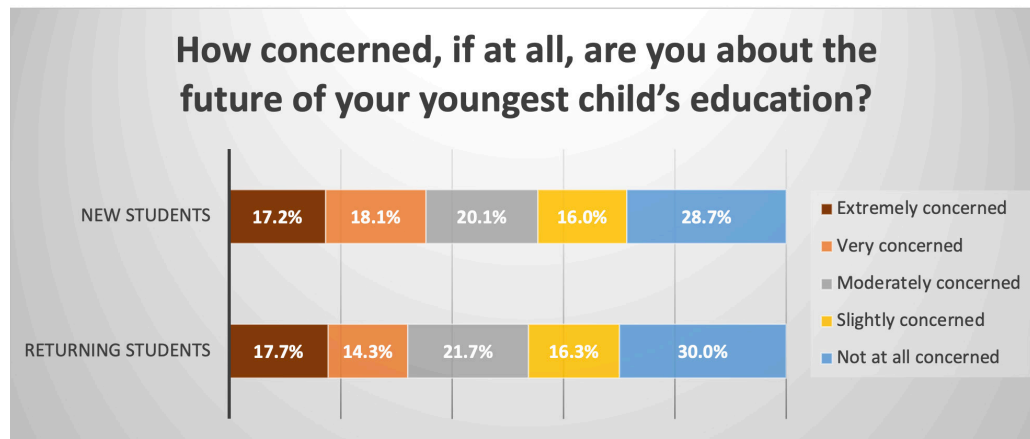
The following question considered parents' confidence in online learning in the coming school year. Respondents whose families had returned to FLVS were 8.5 percentage points more confident in *online learning* meeting their youngest children's learning needs. These findings suggest that those with more online learning experience pre-pandemic had more confidence in online learning.

Figure 2: Online Learning Confidence



Parents of students who were new to FLVS and returning to FLVS responded similarly to the question that asked how concerned they were about the future of their youngest child’s education. The numbers of respondents who indicated extreme concern illuminate the stress many experienced with the educational shift the pandemic elicited. Parents with previous FLVS learning experiences, however, indicated the least concern (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Concern with Future of Education



Sentiment Analysis

This summary considers insights FLVS parents and guardians offered regarding their levels of confidence and concern with their children’s online education experiences. Google’s dictionary defines sentiment analysis as “the process of computationally identifying and categorizing opinions expressed in a piece of text [...] to determine whether the writer’s attitude is [...] positive, negative, or neutral.” FLVS strives to learn from the sentiments these stakeholders offered during this time of cultural shifts and norm reconstruction. Our goal is to meet Kindergarten-12 online education needs in the state of Florida and beyond.

Findings and Implications

The survey results showed that participants were overall confident in online learning meeting their youngest child’s education needs in the upcoming year (please refer to Cultural Shifts in Online Education - part 1 report). Of the 2,441 total survey responses, 1,480 participants completed the subsequent open-ended request for an explanation of their confidence.

For this report, the sentiment analysis included the level of confidence respondents chose on the survey question that asked *How confident are you that online education will meet your youngest child’s learning needs?* (Likert style answer choices: Extremely, Very, Moderately, Slightly, Not at all confident), and the open-ended question that elicited an explanation of the level of confidence participants chose.

Reading and categorizing responses unveiled five themes among the sentiments that detailed respondents’ confidence with their child’s online education (see Table 1):

Table 1: Sentiment Analysis Themes and Descriptions

| Theme | Description |
|----------------------|--|
| Study Habits | Students can focus more on their studies with fewer distractions than in-person school. |
| Curriculum | Course content is challenging for students, yet easy to understand, highly engaging, and flexible. |
| Classroom Experience | Students have an individualized classroom experience that is self-paced and accessible to diverse learners. |
| Health/Wellbeing | Although parents felt students have less frequent social interaction with online school, they appreciated less worry about Covid-19 and enjoyed the highly engaged teachers and flexible schedule. |
| Parent Involvement | FLVS promotes strong parent-teacher partnerships. |

The themes in Table 1 are in the order of prevalence. Most participants commented on the first three pillars of online education tying to their confidence: students’ Study Habits, the robustness of FLVS Curriculum, and students’ classroom experiences online. While these three occurred most frequently across the analysis, many participants discussed students’ Health and Wellbeing as well, with some comments also reflecting Parent Involvement being important to students’ online learning experiences. These themes offered important insight into participants’ experiences with FLVS online education.

Study Habits

Taken together, the comments in the Study Habits category within the sentiment analysis can be summarized in three sub-theme statements associated with respondents’ confidence in online school: fewer distractions alongside promoting self-discipline, individual attention, and frequent communication for students and their families. See Table 2 for quote examples from survey responses.

Table 2: Sub-Theme Statements and Supporting Quotes

| Sub-Theme | Supporting Quotes from Survey Respondents |
|--|--|
| Online school teaches students discipline and offers fewer distractions so that students learning may thrive. | <i>I feel that my child is getting a quality education with online learning. He is focused and disciplined to study and complete all tasks. His online teachers provide all the learning resources for him.</i> |
| Online school offers individual attention. | <i>Compared to traditional B&M [brick-and-mortar] on-site learning he gets more attention and resources, not just the teacher in the classroom.</i> |
| Online school offers frequent communication with and support from instructors, as well as pacing that matches student needs. | <i>I am extremely confident with my child’s on-line education experience since he continues to thrive as he is being challenged and is doing exceptionally well. He is very engaged and has no issues with participation or communicating with his instructors. The pace is another advantage and he is very content with this virtual platform.</i> |

Curriculum

Although some of these sentiments also overlapped with other themes, the Curriculum theme reflects parents' sentiments that the rigorous curriculum provided valuable learning opportunities for students, flexibility for students and families, and a focused learning platform.

Table 3: Sub-Theme Statements and Supporting Quotes

| Sub-Theme | Supporting Quotes from Survey Respondents |
|---|---|
| Teachers communicate and the learning opportunities are both plentiful and valuable. | <i>FLVS teachers promote much more positivity and that contributes to a positive attitude about learning.</i> |
| Flexibility is part of everything FLVS does to serve diverse learners across its courses. | <i>We've found the online curriculum to be more rigorous than in person. We're able to work with her ADHD instead of against it. She has all the time she needs to complete her assignments and her creativity has really flourished. We couldn't be happier with our virtual choice.</i> |
| Distractions from the curriculum are minimal. | <i>She is not distracted by other classmates with the online education as she was being in the classroom with other kids.</i> |

Classroom Experience

A synthesis of the statements that this theme captured are depicted in Table 4 below. Respondents reported that FLVS offers students unique extracurricular and coursework opportunities, while also keeping students keenly focused on their learning.

Table 4: Sub-Theme Statements and Supporting Quotes

| Sub-Theme | Supporting Quotes from Survey Respondents |
|--|--|
| FLVS offers many unique opportunities. | <i>She has more opportunity through FLVS than her brick and mortar school offered – Spanish, clubs, science & SS – she is getting much more from FLVS.</i> |
| With online learning, there is more time to focus on learning than in face-to-face learning. | <i>He is spending more time reading and learning.</i> |
| FLVS offers rigorous, high-quality curriculum that is facilitated by exceptional professional educators who focus on the individual student. | <i>Online education, when delivered properly, is equally successful when compared to a classroom setting. In some ways, online education can be advantageous by allowing the student to work at their own pace (whether ahead or slower than normal pace) and also removes distractions or disruptions often present in a brick and mortar school.</i> |

Health/Wellbeing

Whether families came to FLVS because of the pandemic or due to other circumstances, their confidence tied closely to their assurance that their children were experiencing high quality education alongside positive interactions with teachers and a safe learning environment.

Table 5: Sub-Theme Statements and Supporting Quotes

| Sub-Theme | Supporting Quotes from Survey Respondents |
|--|--|
| Online education does not lack educational quality or healthy student connections with teachers. | <i>Our experience with FLVS has shown me that my kids can get a great education and have a good connection to a caring, involved teacher.</i> |
| Students do not face the same types of social pressures in online school. | <i>In person, my children experienced bullying...online bullying doesn't really happen and teachers actually try to help students understand the material.</i> |
| FLVS provides an educational experience that is less stressful for parents and students, especially during a pandemic. | <i>I am so happy that we switched over to FLVS Flex. We don't have to worry about [Covid-19] cases, social distancing, masks...My children are still getting a great education without the stress!</i> |

Parent Involvement

Respondents emphasized that parents and teachers work together to ensure student success in their online courses.

Table 6: Sub-Theme Statements and Supporting Quotes

| Sub-Theme | Supporting Quotes from Survey Respondents |
|---|---|
| Parents partner with FLVS teachers to guide student learning. | <i>I think my son is learning better than ever with Florida Virtual in 6th grade. I study the lessons and then review them with him and teach him anything he doesn't understand. My only concern is if I can continue to learn and be able to teach him along with the lessons [...] I have been pleasantly surprised by the teachers at FLVS in how they reach out to him on a weekly basis [...] to give him a friendly boost to kick it up a notch. Love FLVS!!!!</i> |
| Parent involvement and teacher partnership are valuable components of online learner support. | <i>His teachers are so helpful and communicative; in FLVS we have constant contact more than we ever did in a brick and mortar school.</i> |
| Students of online learning benefit from having parent support at home. | <i>My kids really need me at home.</i> |

Closing Thoughts

A study of the impact of the pandemic on Early Childhood Education and beyond emphasized family engagement in school, issues of equity in education, and a need for restructuring thinking about educators' roles alongside the many stressors the teaching and learning shifts elicited for many (Barnett, Grafwallner & Weisenfeld, 2021). Likewise, this sentiment analysis illuminated parents' experiences in important ways. Despite the many educational obstacles the pandemic created, the themes, sub-themes, and direct quotes in this study reflect bright spots in families' confidence in online learning. As schools and districts move forward from this pivotal year in education, these insights unveil notable aspects of the cultural shifts in views of online education that will undoubtedly influence the field in coming years.

References

Florida Virtual School, Cultural Shift in Education Parent Survey Results, November 2020

W. Steven Barnett, Rolf Grafwallner & Georgette G. Weisenfeld (2021) Corona pandemic in the United States shapes new normal for young children and their families, European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 29:1, 109-124, DOI: 10.1080/1350293X.2021.1872670