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AMERICANS' VIEWS ON K-12 EDUCATION WHEN SCHOOLS ARE CLOSED

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AMERICANS' VIEWS ON K-12 EDUCATION WHEN SCHOOLS ARE CLOSED

1. Why study attitudes towards schooling during the coronavirus outbreak?

In response to the coronavirus outbreak, 45 states and the District of Columbia have ordered or recommended school building closures for the rest of the 2019/2020 academic year. This unprecedented disruption may curtail the academic development and social and emotional well-being of America's children and youth. Recent surveys of parents have documented the ways in which US schoolchildren are being educated during the coronavirus outbreak, showing a growing percentage of parents who say their child is learning remotely through a school-sponsored online distance learning program (from 65% to 83%).¹

In most communities, the transition to online distance learning has been rocky. Few districts were well-prepared for the possibility of long-term school closures, and the challenges of having teachers engage with students remotely. The academic and social features of the classroom may not transfer easily to schooling at home. It is possible that children's academic learning may suffer, and that they may struggle with managing and expressing their emotions and their relationships with others. The digital divide—differences among families of different economic standing in technology resources at home—coupled with differences in parents' ability to monitor their children's schooling while at home may amplify this possibility.

In addition, the outbreak, and the state and local "shelter-in-place" restrictions that followed, has disrupted family relations, with many households facing prolonged periods of no work and reduced income. These challenges too may influence children's well-being and socio-emotional development.

This survey focuses on American views of the possible impact of the coronavirus outbreak on schoolchildren and the role of teachers during the coronavirus outbreak.

2. A majority of Americans are concerned about the negative impact of the coronavirus outbreak on children and youth.

Slightly more than three-quarters of respondents (77%) say they are very or somewhat concerned about a negative impact on the academic learning of schoolchildren. And seven-in-ten respondents (72%) say they are very or somewhat concerned about a negative impact on the social and emotional development of schoolchildren (Figure 2.1). Most respondents are equally concerned about possible negative impacts on students' academic learning and social and emotional development, with 67% reporting that they are very or somewhat concerned about negative impacts on both academic learning and social and emotional development. Only

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/307754/parents-say-child-learning-remotely.aspx>

5% report that they are not at all concerned that the coronavirus outbreak will have a negative impact on both students' academic learning and their social and emotional development.

In the analyses that follow, we focus on those respondents who report being very concerned that the coronavirus will have a negative impact on students' academic learning or their social and emotional development. A total of 35% of our respondents report being very concerned about a negative impact on one of these two domains.

Respondents' concerns about the impact of the coronavirus on children and youth vary across different background characteristics (see Figure 2.2)²:

1. **Blacks and Asian Americans are more concerned about the impact of the coronavirus outbreak than other racial/ethnic groups.** Half (50%) of Blacks and 42% of Asian Americans say they are very concerned about the impact on either academic learning or social and emotional development. Conversely, only 30% of white respondents are very concerned about the negative consequences for students.
2. **The elderly are less concerned about the negative impact of the coronavirus outbreak on children than are other age groups.** Just one in four (27%) of those 65 years of age or older are very concerned about negative effects on students. Conversely, respondents between the ages of 25 and 44 were more likely than others to be concerned, with 39% reporting being very concerned about negative effects.
3. **Respondents with a four-year college degree are more concerned about the impact of the coronavirus outbreak.** Nearly one-half (44%) say they are very concerned about the impact on students' academic learning or social and emotional development, compared to less than a third (30%) of respondents without a four-year degree.
4. **Respondents who live in high-income households are more concerned about the impact of the coronavirus outbreak.** About half (46%) of those with a household income of \$100,000 per year or more report that they are very concerned about the impact of the outbreak on either students' academic learning or their social and emotional development. Conversely, those in households making less than \$30,000 per year are much less likely to report high levels of concern, as just three in ten (28%) do so.
5. **Those who describe themselves as liberals are more likely to report high levels of concern than individuals who characterize themselves as politically moderate or conservative.** Fewer than one-third (31%) of moderates are highly concerned, whereas 44% of liberals are. Conservatives are situated in between these two other groups, with 32% reporting a high level of concern about negative effects on either students' academic learning or their social and emotional development.

² In this brief we only present patterns that are statistical significance ($p < .05$).

- 6. Respondents living in urban communities are more concerned about the impact of the coronavirus outbreak than respondents living in suburban or rural communities.** One-half of urban-dwellers (50%) say they are very concerned about impacts on either academic learning or social and emotional development. In contrast, fewer than one-third (30%) of those living in suburbs or towns express high levels of concern, and just one in four (26%) living in rural or farm areas do so.

We also examined the extent to which higher levels of personal experience with the coronavirus outbreak or with children is associated with concerns about the impact on children and youth. In general, respondents with more personal experience expressed higher levels of concern about the potential impact of the outbreak on students' academic learning or their social and emotional development.

- 7. Parents of school-aged children are much more likely to be highly concerned than respondents who do not have a school-aged child.** About one-third (31%) of our sample indicated that they were parents of school-aged children. Of these, slightly more than four in ten (43%) were very concerned about the negative effects of the outbreak on students' academic learning or their social and emotional development. In contrast, just three in ten, or 31%, of non-parents were very concerned.
- 8. Respondents who have been following the news about the coronavirus outbreak closely are more likely to be very concerned about negative impacts on students.** About half (48%) of survey respondents said that they have been following the news very closely, and one-half (48%) of these were very concerned about negative impacts on students. Respondents who reported following the news fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely all were much less likely to be very concerned about the potential impact on children and youth, with the percentages ranging from 24% to 15%.
- 9. Respondents with direct experience with the coronavirus are more concerned about negative consequences.** Although we did not ask respondents if they had been diagnosed with Covid-19, or suspected that they had had the virus, we did ask if they had any close friends or relatives who are or who have been sick with the coronavirus. We also asked respondents if they had any close friends or relatives who have died from the coronavirus.³ Of those who had a friend or relative who had died, six in ten, or 60%, were very concerned about negative effects of the outbreak on either students' academic learning or social and emotional development. Two in five, or 41%, of those with a friend or relative who had become sick were very concerned. In contrast, less than one-third (31%) of those who do not have a close friend or relative who has been sick with the coronavirus are highly concerned about negative consequences for students.

³ In our sample, 7% of respondents indicated that they had a close friend or relative who had died from the coronavirus, and an additional 16% had a close friend or relative who had been sick with the virus.

3. Americans support teachers prioritizing students' feelings and emotional well-being over developing their academic skills and knowledge.

To gauge public support for different approaches to teaching during the coronavirus outbreak, the survey asked respondents to express their views on a spectrum between two opposing statements: (A) While schools are closed, teachers should emphasize developing students' academic skills and knowledge, even if that means paying less attention to their feelings and emotional well-being, and (B) While schools are closed, teachers should emphasize students' feelings and emotional well-being, even if that means paying less attention to developing their academic skills and knowledge. Respondents used a slider to locate their opinion on a scale ranging from 0 (an extreme preference for Statement A, emphasizing students' academic skills and knowledge), to 10 (an extreme preference for Statement B, emphasizing students' feelings and emotional well-being). We classified responses of 0 through 3 as support for Statement A, and responses of 7 through 10 as support for Statement B. Responses of 4 through 6 leaned in neither direction.

Figure 3.1 shows the distribution of opinions towards these statements about what teachers should do while schools are closed. One-half of respondents (50%) support statement B, prioritizing students' feelings and emotional well-being over their academic skills and knowledge. Less than a third of respondents (32%) support statement A, emphasizing students' academic skills and knowledge over students' feelings and emotional well-being. The rest, about one in five (19%), were in the middle, leaning neither toward statement A nor statement B.

Respondents' support for these two statements, and their differing emphases, are presented in Figure 3.2. The figures show the percentages of respondents supporting statement B, an emphasis on feelings and emotional well-being, on the left-hand side of the figure, and those supporting statement A, an emphasis on academic skills and knowledge, on the right-hand side (the middle group is not presented for ease of comparison.)

- 1. Male respondents are more likely than females to support teachers prioritizing students' academic skills and knowledge.** Just one-quarter (23%) female respondents support prioritizing academic matters, in contrast to two-fifths (40%) of male respondents. Conversely, 55% of females support an emphasis on students' feelings and emotional well-being, compared to 45% of men. Both male and female respondents support a greater emphasis on feelings and emotional well-being than on the development of students' academic skills and knowledge while schools are closed.
- 2. Blacks and Latinx respondents are more likely than whites and Asian Americans to support teachers prioritizing students' feelings and emotional well-being.** Nearly six in ten (58%) of Black respondents and more than half (54%) of Latinx respondents support statement B, compared with 48% and 43% of Whites and Asian Americans, respectively.

Conversely, just over a third (35%) of White respondents support teachers prioritizing students' academic skills and knowledge, whereas only a quarter of Black and Latinx respondents (25% and 24%, respectively) do so.

3. **Younger adults are more likely than others to support teachers prioritizing students' feelings and emotional well-being during school closures. They also are less likely to support an emphasis on students' academic skills and knowledge.** Six in ten respondents age 18-24 (61%) and one-half (50%) of respondents age 25-44 support statement B. Fewer respondents age 45-64 or 65 and above support an emphasis on students' feelings and emotional well-being while schools are closed. There is much more support for teacher emphasis on students' feelings and emotional well-being than on academic skills and knowledge. The highest support for an academic focus is reported by respondents aged 65 or older, of whom 38% prioritize academic skills and knowledge. Only one in five (20%) of respondents aged 18 to 24 do so. For each age group, many more respondents favor a teacher emphasis on students' feelings and emotional well-being than an emphasis on developing students' academic skills and knowledge while schools are closed.
4. **Liberals and conservatives have different views about what teachers should prioritize while schools are closed.** Six in ten (60%) of respondents identifying themselves as liberals support a teacher emphasis on students' feelings and emotional well-being, compared to about two-fifths (43%) of those who identify as conservative, and one-half (50%) of self-described moderates. In contrast, two-fifths (42%) of conservatives prioritize academic skills and knowledge during school closure, considerably more than the 23% of liberals who do so. Even though conservative respondents are more likely to support a priority on academic skills and knowledge than liberal respondents, their support for teacher emphasis on students' feelings and emotional well-being is just as great.
5. **Respondents who have had more personal contact with the coronavirus are more likely to support an emphasis on students' feelings and emotional well-being.** More than half (56%) of those who say that a close friend or relative has died from the coronavirus prioritize students' emotions while schools are closed, as do 61% of those who know someone who has been sick from the coronavirus. Fewer than one-half (47%) of survey participants who do not know a close friend or relative afflicted by the coronavirus favor an emphasis on students' feelings and emotional well-being. Regardless of the level of personal contact with the coronavirus, there is much stronger support for a teacher emphasis on students' feelings and emotional well-being during school closure than on students' academic skills and knowledge.

4. Conclusion

With the closure of schools across the country as a response to the coronavirus pandemic, teachers, students and parents have all had to renegotiate their roles and responsibilities. The

transition from school to no school was swift and abrupt, and the consequences may not be understood for some time to come. Our analyses show that the vast majority of American adults are concerned that the coronavirus outbreak may have adverse effects on students' academic learning, their social and emotional development, or both. The greatest concerns are concentrated in particular segments of the population: Blacks, those with four-year college degrees, the wealthy, self-described liberals, and residents of big cities. The elderly, those with less education and income, and rural inhabitants show lower levels of concern.

Those who can reasonably be thought of as "in the know" about the potential impact of the coronavirus on elementary and secondary school students are more concerned about negative effects. Parents of school-aged children can see how their own children are responding to the disruption of familiar day-to-day routines. Those with friends or family who have fallen ill or died from the coronavirus have experienced the emotional toll first-hand.

Perhaps because the social and emotional fabric of so many families is being stretched by the coronavirus outbreak, Americans show a clear preference for whatever teaching is able to take place while schools are closed to prioritize students' feelings and emotional well-being, even if that means diminished attention to the traditional academic trappings of school. Even those who identify as conservative, often thought of as the staunchest defenders of the school's mission to transmit academic knowledge, lean towards a priority on students' emotions in this moment of crisis and upheaval.

We see a particularly high concern for students' feelings and emotional well-being among women, Black and Latinx respondents, the young, self-described liberals, and those who know people who have fallen ill or succumbed to Covid-19. For every group we examined, more respondents supported a teacher emphasis on students' feelings and emotional well-being during school closures than an emphasis on students' academic skills and knowledge.

The respondents' preferences reveal that many Americans value the social connections that students forge with their teachers and their fellow students, and the ways in which school closures stemming from the coronavirus outbreak have disrupted those connections. As many adults struggle to make sense of the rapidly-changing landscape, it would not be surprising for them to project their own fears and anxieties onto the young, who have fewer and less-developed mechanisms to cope with fears of the unknown. There can be no guarantee that the prioritization of students' emotional well-being while schools are closed will continue once they reopen and a new equilibrium is reached. For now, however, our survey results show just how much we count on schools to help young people grow and flourish academically and socially, and just how much is at stake when they are unable to function as we expect them to. This is consistent with our earlier research on support for community schools and an approach to teaching that looks beyond students' current academic performance to all aspects of their well-being.

5. Methodology

Results are based on online survey conducted April 26 – May 8, 2020 among a national sample of 1,459 adults 18 year of age or older using the Qualtrics Panel. Qualtrics, a marketing research firm, partners with a variety of online panel providers to supply a nationally representative sample. The sample is compiled using overall demographic quotas based on census percentages for representation (i.e., age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, and census region). To allow greater power for analysis, we over-sampled people who identify as Black, Asian and Pacific Islander, and/or Latinx. The sample is weighted to represent the U.S. adult population living in households or group quarters. For socio-demographic composition of the sample see Technical Note 20-00 (available on <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/thepublicmatters/>).

The survey included several quality assurance measures, including attention checks and a speed check. Attention checks asked respondents to mark a specific answer. Respondents who failed one or more of these checks were removed from the final sample.

Most of the survey items were developed by the research team and colleagues at Teachers College. Other survey items were adapted from the General Social Survey (GSS), Gallup and Pew. The survey also included a detailed battery of survey items on sociodemographic characteristics. In addition to close-ended items, the survey asked several open-ended questions, allowing respondents to contextualized and explain their responses in greater detail.

All surveys are subject to various forms of error. One form is sampling error: the variation in results that is attributable to chance in which members of a population are randomly selected to participate in the survey. For percentages based on the entire sample, the approximate margin of error is +/- 3.2%. For subgroups, the margin of error is larger. For example, the margin of error for Black respondents is approximately +/- 9.0%.

Variables used in this brief:

1. Concerns about negative impacts of the coronavirus. The survey asked respondents two questions: (a) How concerned are you that the coronavirus outbreak will have a negative impact on the academic learning of children and youth in your community? And (b) How concerned are you that the coronavirus outbreak will have a negative impact on the social and emotional development of children and youth in your community? Responses are on a 4-point scale: 1 = not at all concerned, 2 = not very concerned, 3 = somewhat concerned, and 4 = very concerned.
2. Support for teachers prioritizing students' feelings and emotional well-being and developing their academic skills and knowledge. The survey presented two statements: "Statement A: While schools are closed, teachers should emphasize developing students' academic skills and knowledge, even if that means paying less attention to their feelings and emotional well-being," and "Statement B: While schools are closed, teachers should emphasize students' feelings and emotional well-being, even if that means paying less attention to developing their academic skills and knowledge." Then, the survey asked respondents: "Which statement comes closest to your views? Please

slide the pointer to the position along the line that best describes your views.” The slider went from 0 (closest to statement A) to 10 (closest to statement B). We recoded the data from the slider into three categories: 0-3 as support for statement A, 4-6 as neutral, and 7-10 as support for statement B.

Figure 2.1: How concerned are you that the coronavirus outbreak will have a negative impact on ____ of children and youth in your community?

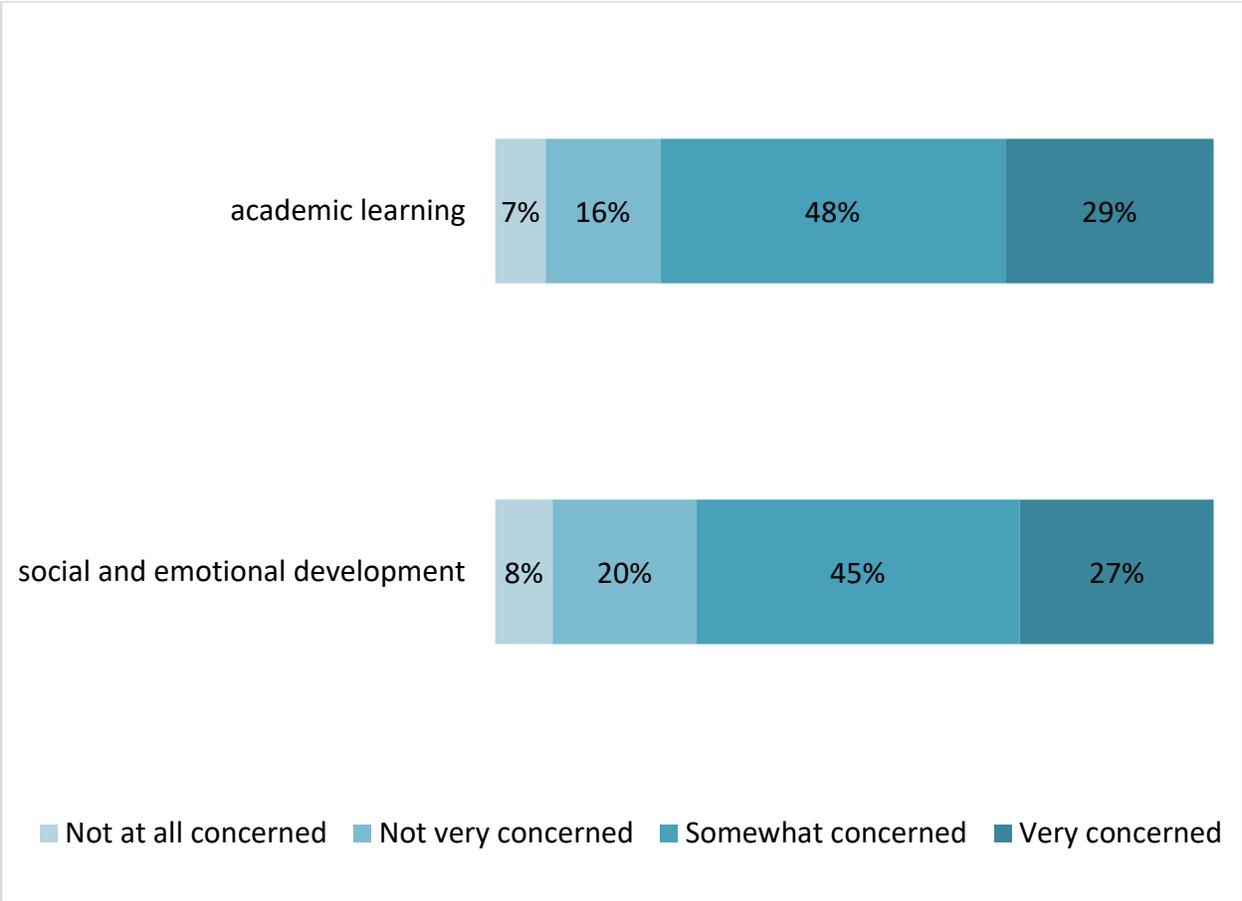


Figure 2.2: Percent Very Concerned about Negative Effects of Coronavirus Outbreak on Student Academic Learning or Social/Emotional Development, by Demographic Characteristics

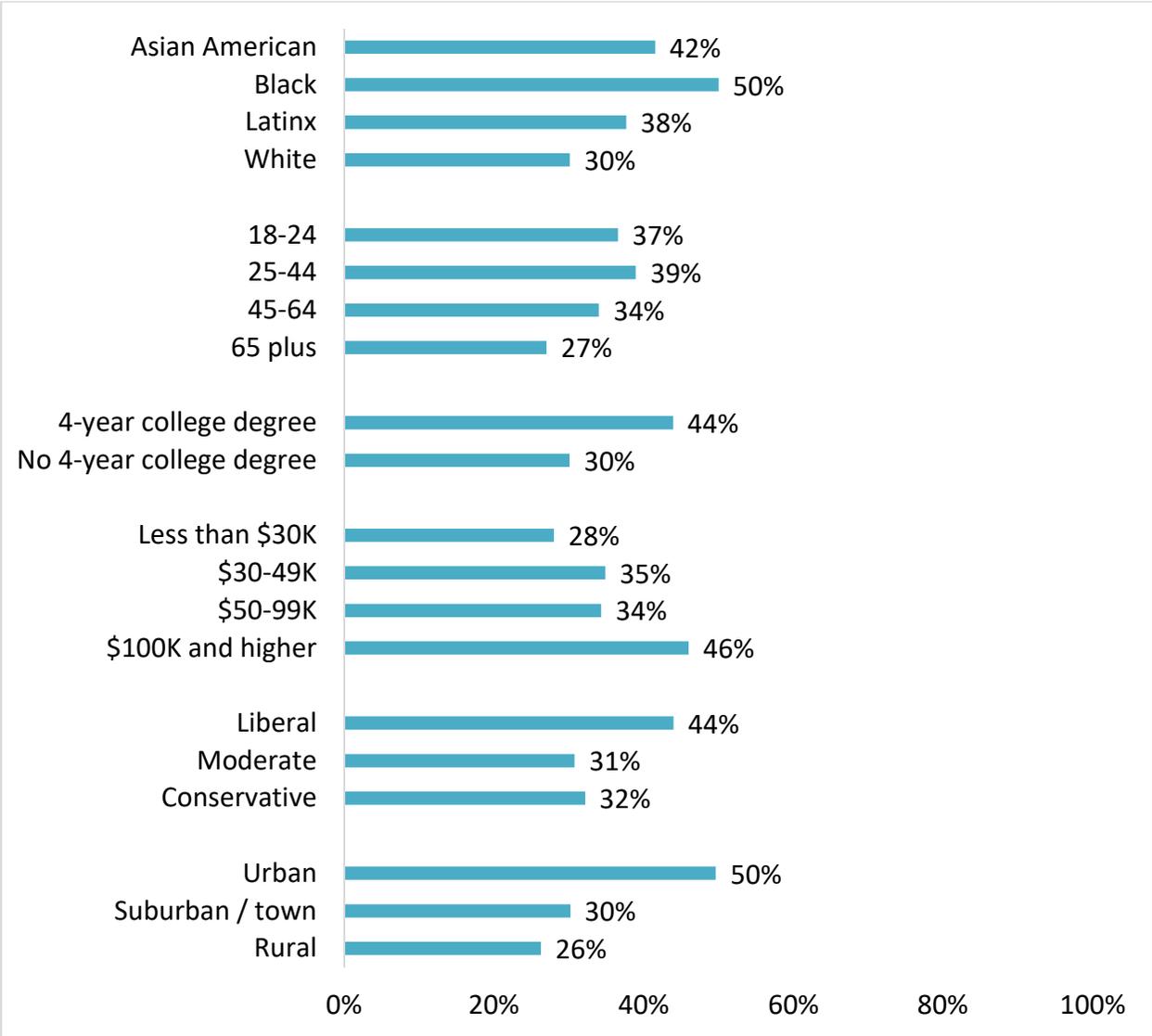


Figure 2.3: Percent Very Concerned about Negative Effects of Coronavirus Outbreak on Student Academic Learning or Social/Emotional Development, by Respondent Experiences

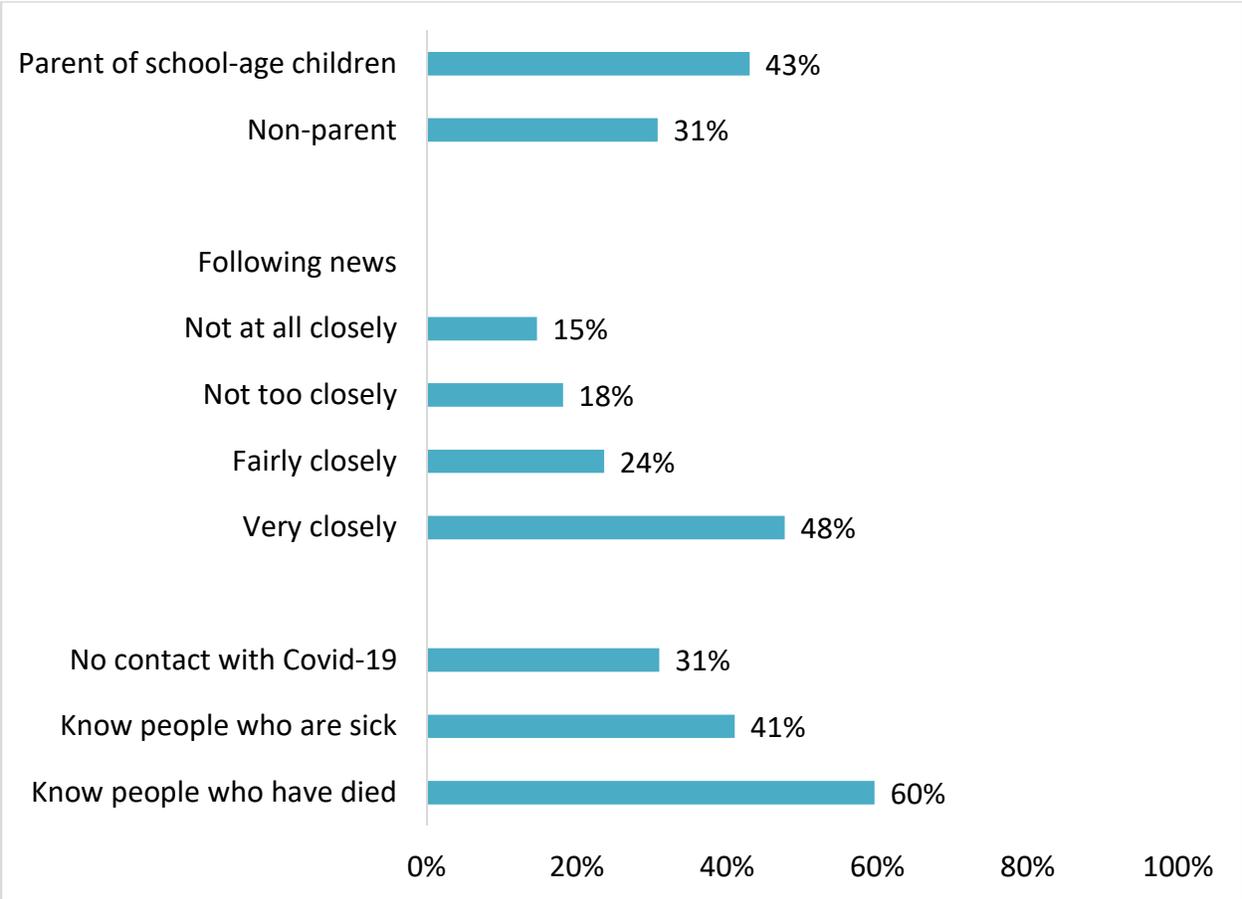
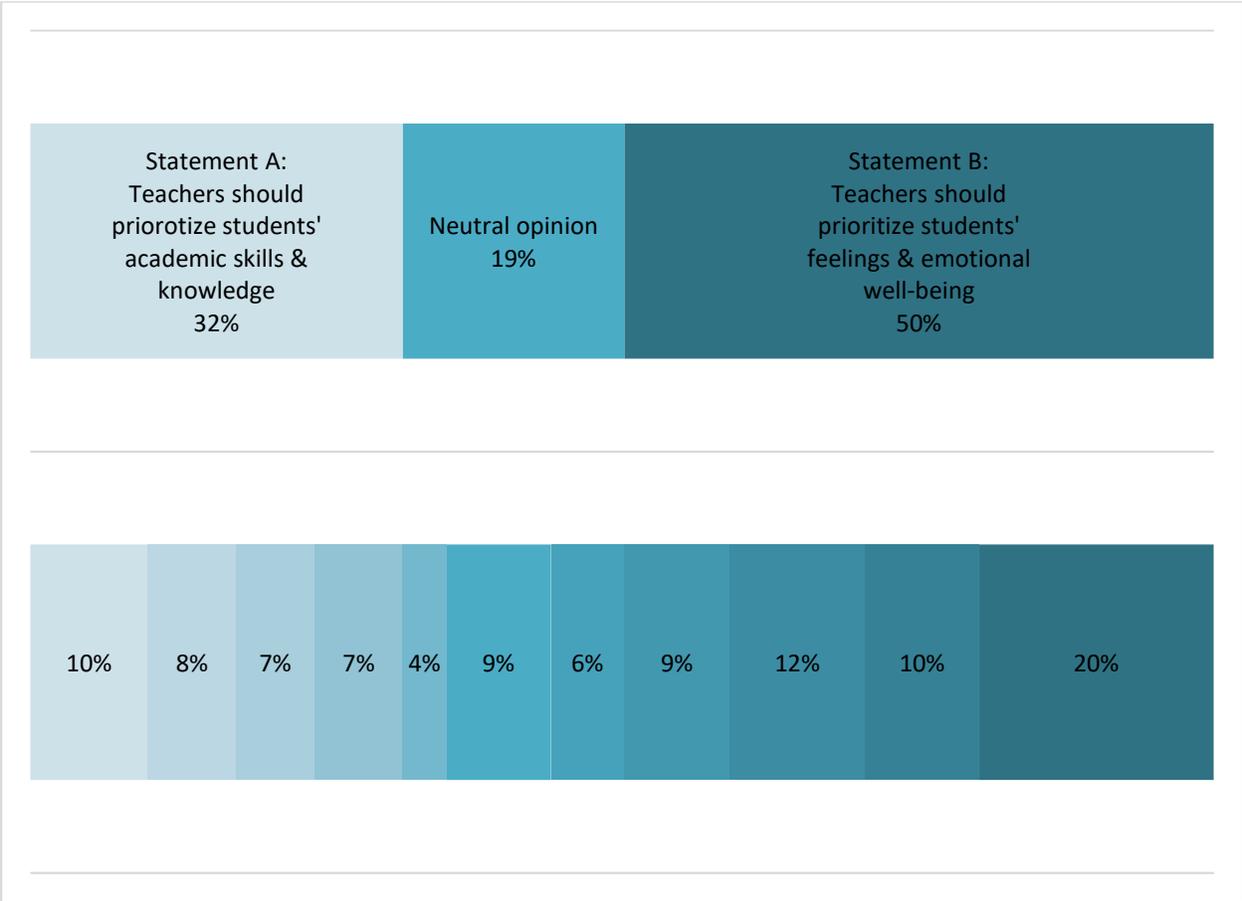


Figure 3.1: Support for teachers prioritizing students' feelings and emotional well-being and developing their academic skills and knowledge



Note: Statement A: While schools are closed, teachers should emphasize developing students' academic skills and knowledge, even if that means paying less attention to their feelings and emotional well-being; Statement B: While schools are closed, teachers should emphasize students' feelings and emotional well-being, even if that means paying less attention to developing their academic skills and knowledge.

Figure 3.2: Relative Emphasis on Students' Emotional Well-Being and Academic Skills, by Respondents' Characteristics

