



Christian Schools and COVID-19

Responding Nimble, Facing the Future



MAY 2020—ACSI Research
Lynn E. Swaner
Charlotte Marshall Powell





ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lynn E. Swaner, EdD is ACSI’s Chief Strategy and Innovation Officer. Prior to joining ACSI, she served as a Christian school administrator, graduate professor of education, and academic researcher.

Charlotte Marshall Powell, PhD is ACSI’s Senior Researcher. Prior to joining ACSI, she served as a professor of psychology and academic researcher.

ABOUT ACSI

ACSI exists to strengthen Christian schools and equip Christian educators worldwide as they prepare students academically and inspire students to become devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

CONTACT

For inquiries regarding this research report, contact research@acsi.org.

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Introduction

The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) serves over 2,300 member Christian schools in the United States and another 5,500 abroad. Just like schools from all sectors across the globe, ACSI schools were significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020. In the U.S., most public and private school campuses were closed by state mandate during the month of March—often with little to no advance notice. Across the country and the world, ACSI schools pivoted their instructional practices and business operations in the face of this new reality.



In an effort to understand the responses of member schools, ACSI Research conducted a survey of U.S. schools in late April 2020 (a separate survey and report for ACSI international schools is forthcoming). The U.S. survey collected real-time data on school closures, the transition to distance learning formats, current distance learning practices, and the financial impact of COVID-19. The survey also asked respondents about forecasting for the 2020-2021 school year, including enrollment projections, contingency budgets, and new distance learning opportunities being considered. The findings of the survey, as detailed in this report, point to the overall nimbleness and tenacity of Christian schools in responding to COVID-19. The findings also indicate the necessity of ongoing planning in the face of uncertainty for the next school year.

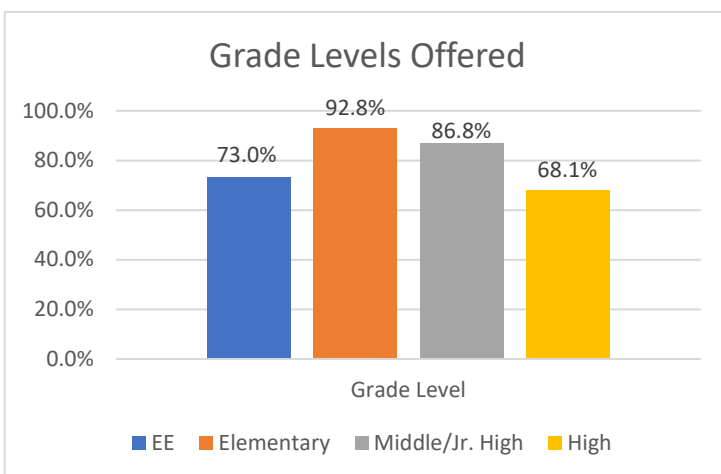
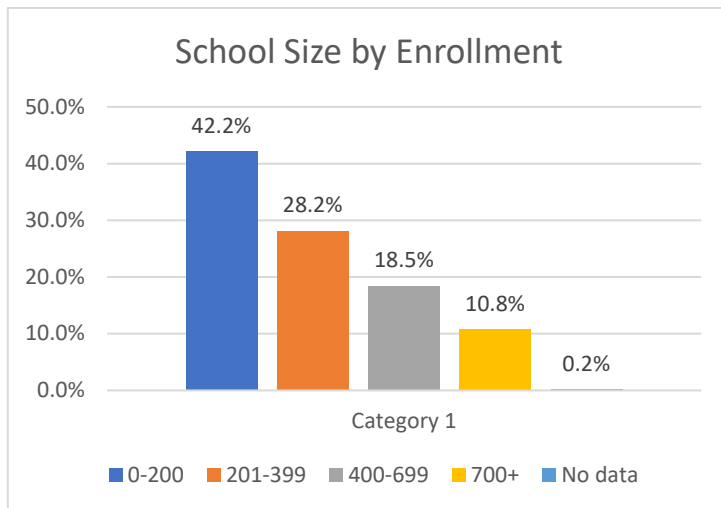
In addition to quantitative data, the survey also asked participants to provide qualitative stories of their schools' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hundreds of schools shared positive and often inspiring stories of how Christian school communities adapted and thrived in the face of crisis. This report provides highlighted quotes from these stories throughout, as they help to illustrate survey findings by sharing leaders' experiences "in their own words."

"This forced closure has highlighted our efforts to distinguish our school as Christian, both in distance learning, and our support for families and staff."
—Creek County, OK

Survey Demographics

The survey was fielded electronically in late April 2020. All of ACSI’s member schools in the United States were invited to participate via email. A total of 790 unique schools responded to the survey for a response rate of 42.4%. Respondents to the survey identified themselves as heads of school (63%), other school administrators (21%), or other staff or board members (16%).

Overall, the responding schools were representative of ACSI membership across a number of demographic factors. This includes geographic distribution, with 32% of responding schools located in the Western U.S., 30% in the Central U.S., and 38% in the Eastern U.S. Respondents were also fairly representative of ACSI membership in terms of school size (by enrollment) and grade levels offered (see charts below).*



“Teachers have done a remarkable job of adjusting to a previously unknown method of delivering education with great passion, flexibility, and care. Parents have been overwhelmingly happy. Most importantly, we have kept the focus on the spiritual as a core distinctive of who we are as a Christian school.”
—Orange County, CA

*NOTE: Where percentages do not amount to 100 throughout the report, this is due to respondents’ ability to select multiple options.

School Closures

At the time of the survey administration in late April, the physical campuses of over 98% of schools with elementary, middle, and/or high school grades were closed. Where these schools reported also having an early education program, 89% of those programs were physically closed.

The survey also asked how many instructional days schools missed due to physical closures (not counting holidays or planned breaks), with the goal of gauging how quickly member schools pivoted to distance learning. Across all levels, approximately one third of schools missed no instructional days due to campus closures; nearly two-thirds missed less than three instructional days; and nearly four out of five schools missed less than five instructional days (disaggregated by grade levels, below).

Grade Levels	No days missed	Missed less than 3 days	Missed less than 5 days
Early Education	29.6%	52.2%	69.5%
Elementary	36.8%	64.5%	82.5%
Middle School	36%	66.8%	85.1%
High School	35.1%	65.7%	86.5%
Average	34.4%	62.3%	80.9%

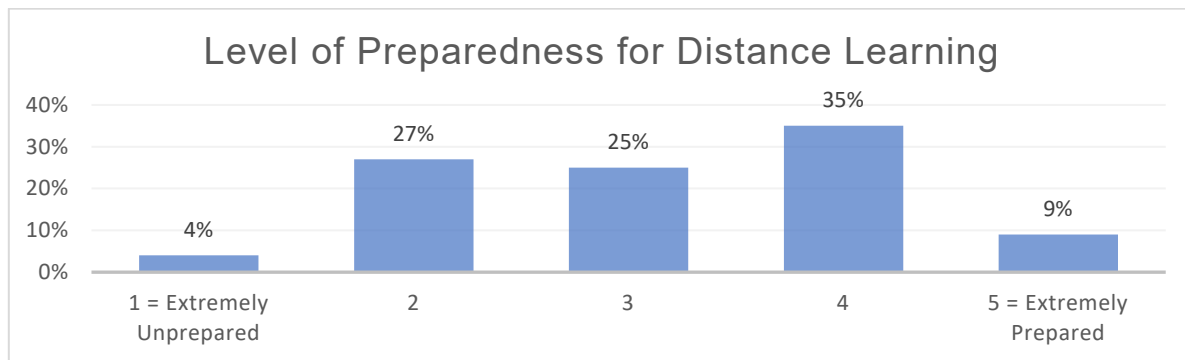


“Private Christian schools must be nimble and ready to change quickly... We spent one day in training for online education and were off and running. No school in our area was prepared—taking them at least another week to come up with a plan. The adaptability, diligence, and commitment of our people has been a tremendous public relations win for Christian schooling.”

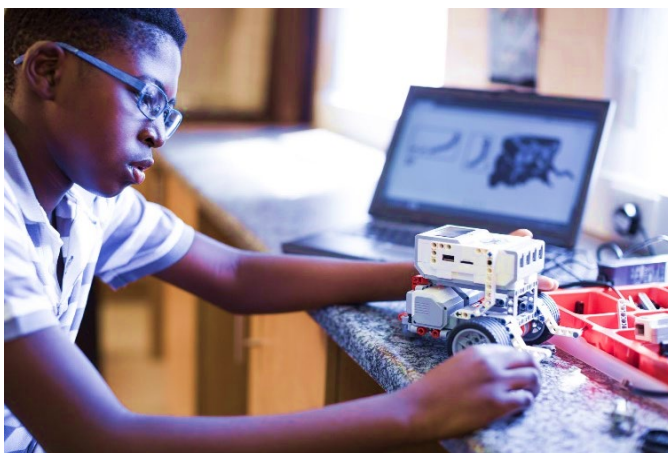
—Richland County, OH

Distance Learning: Preparedness

A number of survey questions were designed to gauge schools' preparedness for the transition to distance learning. This included self-report by respondents of their level of preparedness, from extremely *unprepared* to extremely *prepared*. The majority of respondents reported being either prepared or extremely prepared (total of 44%) for the transition to distance learning; an additional 25% described their school as neither prepared nor unprepared; and 31% reported their school was either unprepared or extremely unprepared for distance learning (below).



In addition to self-rating their school's preparedness, the survey asked respondents about their school's usage of distance learning tools *prior* to COVID-19 closures. The survey found that 83% of schools had utilized at least one distance learning tool/method prior to COVID-19, while 17% reported never using any distance learning tools/methods before. A listing of the most commonly utilized tools/methods prior to COVID-19 is provided below.



Tools/Methods Used **Prior** to COVID-19

- Google Classroom (58.3%)
- Web-Based Applications/Programs (43.2%)
- Learning Management System (24.9%)
- Online Curriculum Providers (20.2%)
- Videoconferencing (19.9%)
- Other Platforms/Resources (20.6%)

Distance Learning: Practices

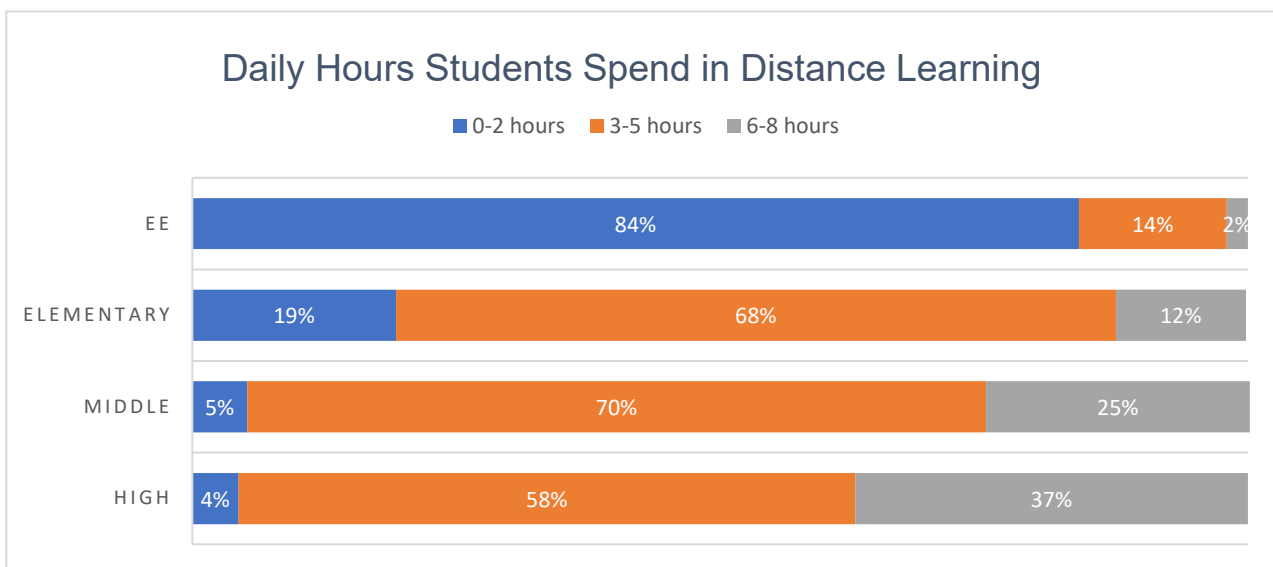
Survey respondents provided data on their distance learning practices while their physical campuses are closed due to COVID-19. Specifically, the survey requested information on the number of hours students spend in distance learning, distance learning tools/methods, the subjects offered, special education and student support services, and feedback mechanisms.

“We have come through as a team and made giant strides to continue the academic education online at all levels. Accountability, testing, grades, and personal connection have all seen continuity from in-school to online.”

—Southern Virginia

Distance Learning Hours

The number of hours students spend engaging in distance learning varied by grade level (early education, elementary, middle school, and high school). The data show a clear upward trend in the number of hours per day spent in distance learning, as grade levels progressed. For example, just 2% of early education programs and 12% of elementary grades had students spending between six and eight hours per day in distance learning, whereas the percentage of schools engaging students for that length of time increases to 25% for middle school and 37% for high school (below). This finding suggests that the younger the student, the more involved parents (or other adults or older siblings) will need to be in providing instruction for children at home.



Distance Learning Tools/Methods

The survey asked respondents to identify the distance learning tools/methods in use across the grade levels offered at their schools (early education, elementary, middle, and high school). Across all levels, *teacher-recorded videos*, *Zoom or other videoconferencing tools*, and *Google Classroom* were among the top five distance learning tools/methods for instruction. Additional approaches included project or problem based learning, student collaboration, and web-based services (e.g., Khan Academy, Rosetta Stone). The most frequently cited tools/methods by grade levels are listed below.

Early Education	Elementary	Middle School	High School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-recorded videos (45.3%) • Zoom or other videoconferencing (39.2%) • Other platform/resource (17.6%) • Google Classroom (11.6%) • Project or problem based learning (11.0%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-recorded videos (80.3%) • Zoom or other videoconferencing (78.7%) • Google Classroom (55.2%) • Project or problem based learning (42.1%) • Student collaboration (38.6%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zoom or other videoconferencing (75.1%) • Teacher-recorded videos (73.6%) • Google Classroom (63.1%) • Student collaboration (54%) • Project or problem based learning (50.6%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zoom or other videoconferencing (60%) • Teacher-recorded videos (57.8%) • Google Classroom (50.1%) • Student collaboration (46.3%) • Web-based services, e.g. Khan Academy, Rosetta Stone (36.1%)

“Our faculty has gained a significant amount of useful tools and skills that will make our product even better in the future.”

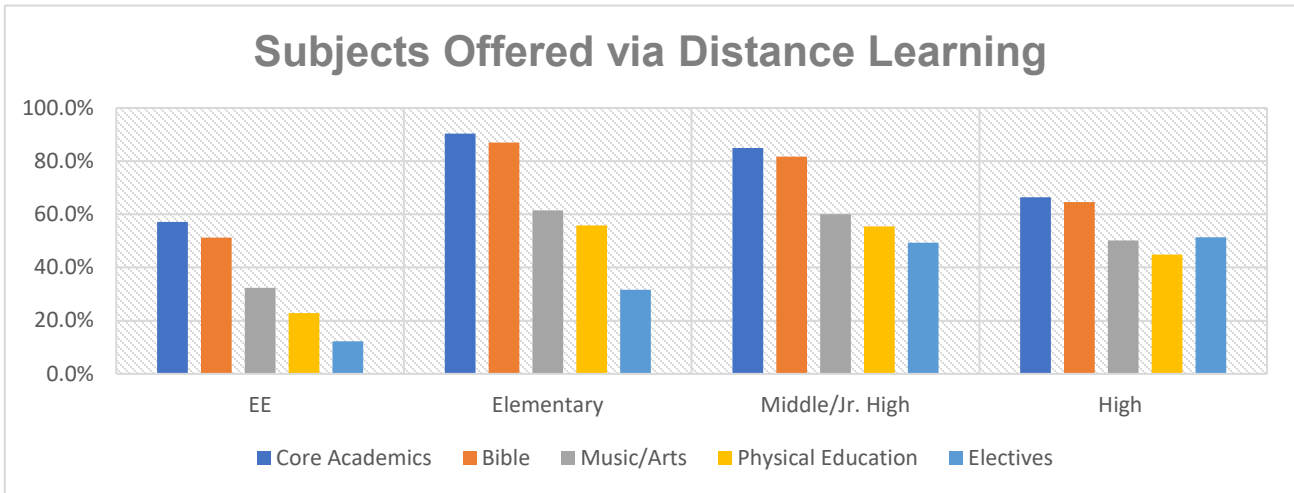
—McClellan County, IL

“Our teachers are learning so much about alternative ways to deliver content—we are going to be stronger and more agile in the end!”

—Gwinnett County, GA

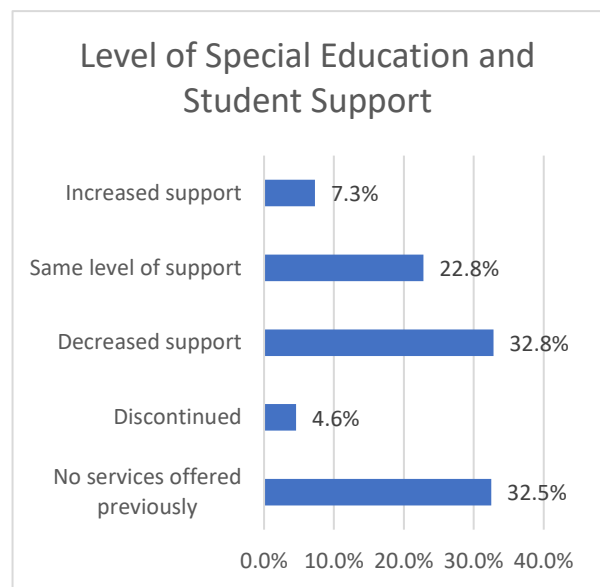
Subjects Offered

Across all grade levels, the subjects most frequently offered via distance learning were (in descending order of frequency): core academics; Bible; music/arts; physical education; and electives. Only at the high school level were electives offered with greater frequency than physical education. Percentages of schools offering these specific subjects are shown below.



Special Education/Student Support

The survey asked participants about the availability of special education and student support services during distance learning (chart right). These services were most frequently being offered at a *decreased* level of support (32.8%). A smaller percentage of schools offered services at the *same* level of support (22.8%), at a *higher* level of support (7.3%), or *discontinued* services altogether (4.6%). A further 32.5% of schools indicated they did not offer these services prior to COVID-19 (chart right).

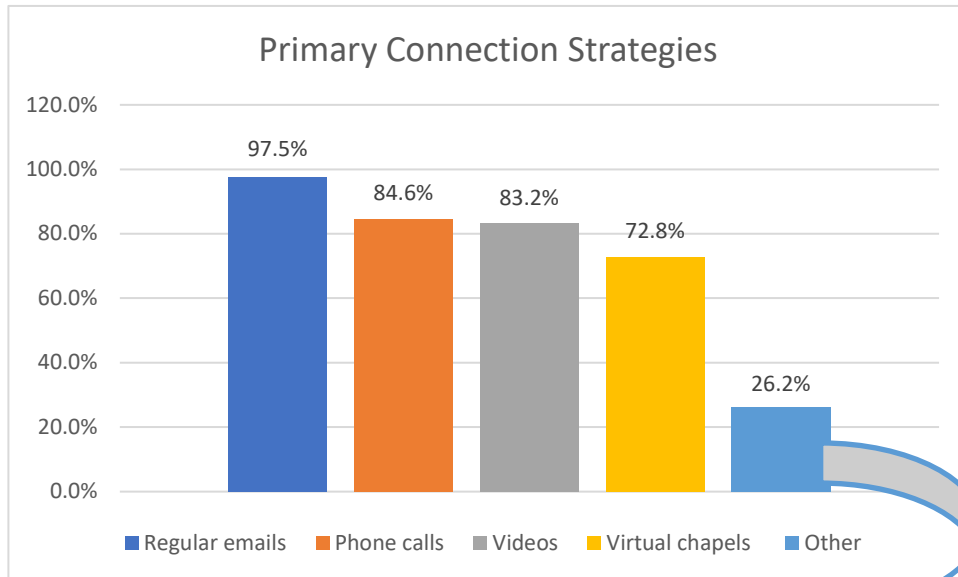


Feedback Mechanisms

Most schools have developed feedback mechanisms (predominantly surveys) to obtain data from stakeholders on the success of distance learning. Most frequently, schools had feedback mechanisms in place for instructional staff (81.1% yes/18.9% no), then school families (77.5% yes/22.5% no), and finally students (66.4% yes/33.6% no).

Community Connections

Survey findings demonstrate that despite the closure of physical campuses, Christian schools actively engaged in strategies to maintain meaningful connections with school families. The chart below indicates the main connection strategies utilized by schools, followed by examples of “other” strategies shared by respondents as means of nurturing community.



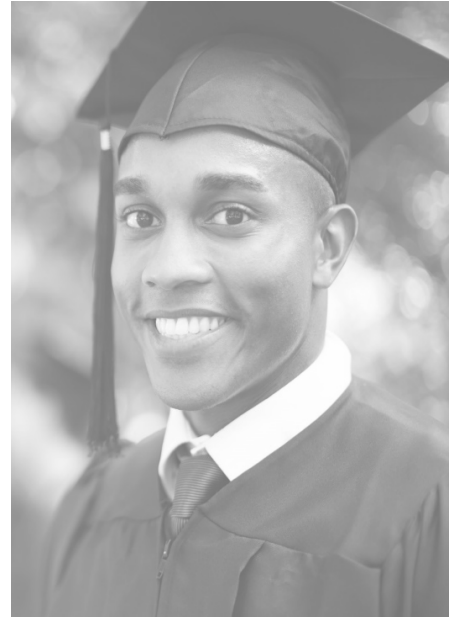
- “Spirit Week”
- Weekly postcards
- Home deliveries
- Care packages
- Closed Facebook groups
- Consistent social media presence
- Daily devotionals by staff
- Door dashes
- Facebook/Instagram Live
- Virtual town halls
- Providing family devotionals
- Virtual family nights
- Food bank offer
- Google classroom for parents
- Zoom parent meetings
- Group chats
- Handwritten notes
- Home visits
- Newsletters
- One-call system
- Online daily show
- Online reading times
- School parades
- School rallies
- Service-learning projects
- Signs in seniors’ front yards with goodie bags
- Virtual prayer times
- Text messages (groups, alerts)
- Virtual office hours
- Well-child check-in calls to school families from director of student life

“Many parents are so very thankful for our ability to support their entire family... we have been able to bring spiritual, academic, emotional, and relational wellness.”
 —Sussex County, DE

Graduation Plans

At the time of survey administration in late April, the majority of schools were uncertain about graduation plans (51.7%). The remaining respondents reported that their schools were rescheduling graduation for a later date (33.8%), proceeding with graduation virtually (5.6%), or cancelling graduation entirely (1.2%).

An additional 7.2% indicated their school had made “other” plans for graduation, such as “drive through” ceremonies or scheduling with significant modifications in order to maintain social distancing (i.e. selecting an alternate location, such as outdoors, or rotating students and families through a series of ceremonies to reduce the number of individuals at a given ceremony).



“Our parents have been very appreciative of what is happening at school and our community feels stronger than ever.”

—Willamette Valley, OR

“Our families often share how connected they still feel to the school and the teachers.”

—Benton County, WA

“Our staff are putting in very, very long hours and our parents are really seeing firsthand how much our teachers love and value their children. It's incredible.”

—Florida Panhandle

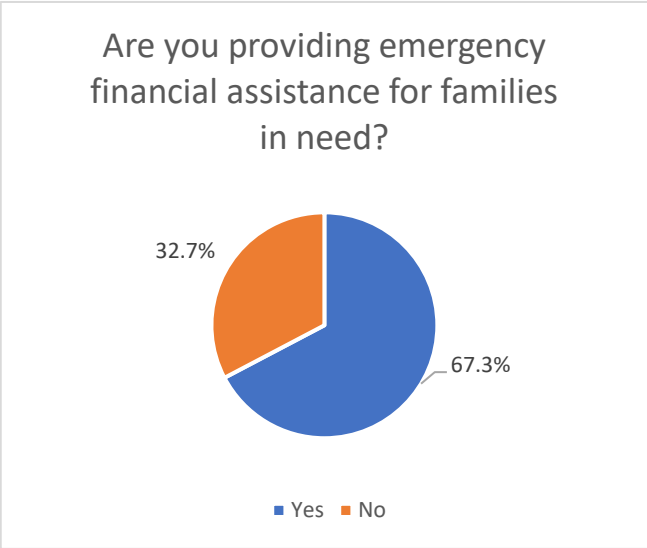
“This experience has made us more appreciative of what we have as a school family and has given us insight as to how we can be better.”

—San Diego, CA

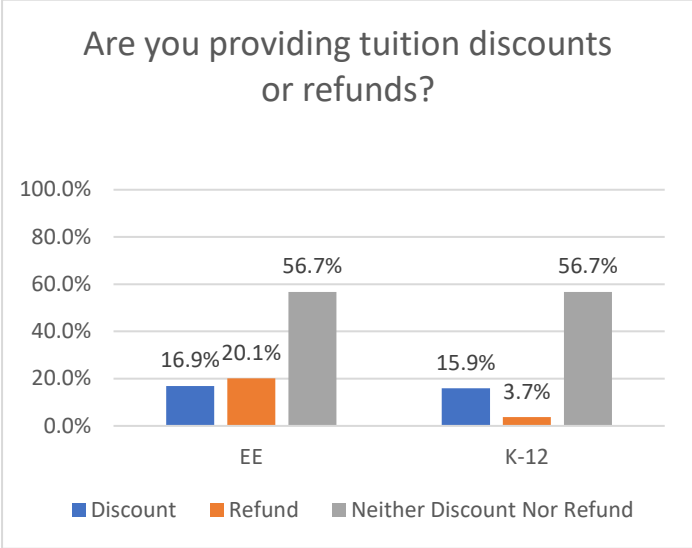
Financial Impact

The survey asked respondents about the financial impact of COVID-19. Results indicated that the majority of schools are: a) providing emergency financial assistance; b) *not* offering tuition discounts or refunds; c) minimizing staff furloughs and layoffs; and d) planning to participate in the SBA loan program provided through the CARES Act (charts below).

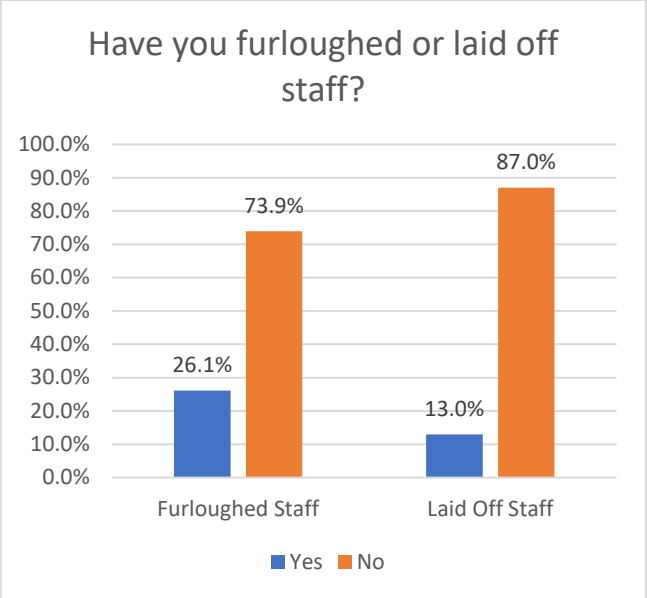
Emergency Financial Assistance



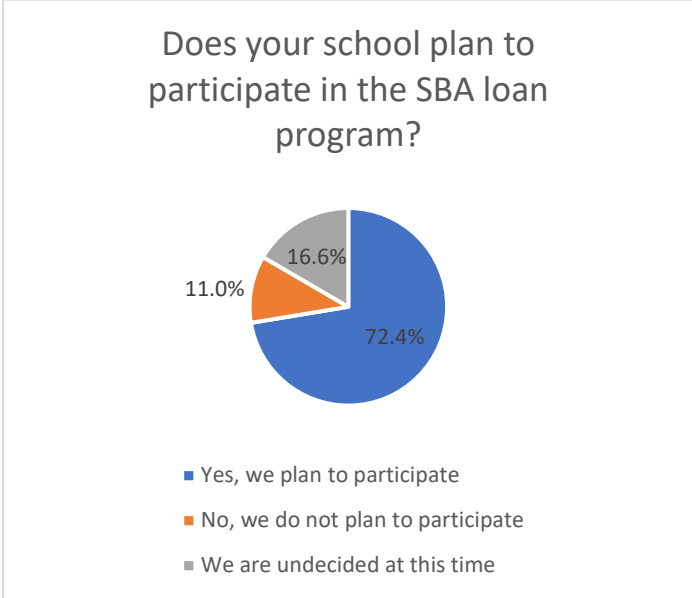
Tuition Refunds/Discounts



Furloughs/Staff Layoffs

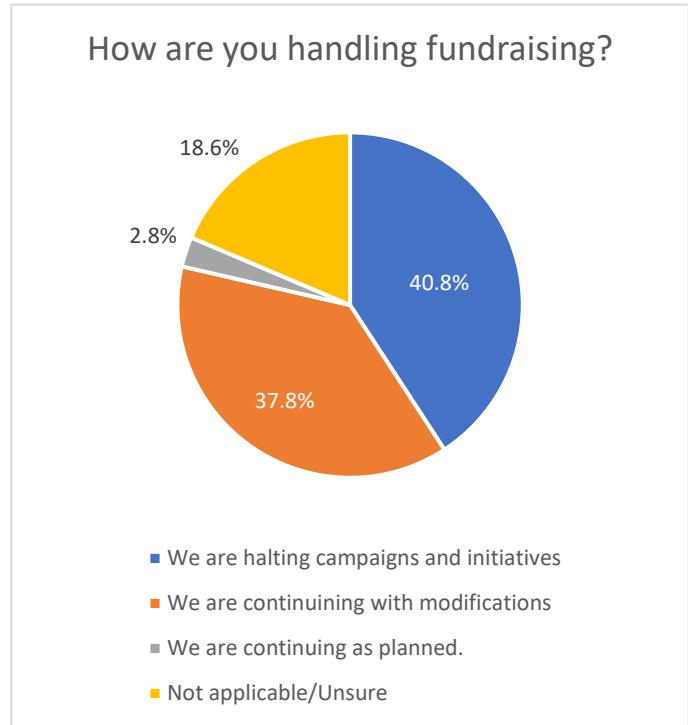


SBA Loan Participation



Quantitative data indicated that a majority of schools (40.8%) halted fundraising campaigns and initiatives due to COVID-19. An additional 37.8% of schools were continuing fundraising campaigns and initiatives, but with modifications to existing plans (chart at right).

Qualitative data from schools provided strong support for continuing or modifying fundraising efforts, as respondents reported that donors were often willing to continue or increase their giving toward financial assistance or special funds designated for families struggling with COVID-19 related financial needs.



“We have experienced generous giving to meet the needs of those families significantly impacted financially!”
—Los Angeles County, CA

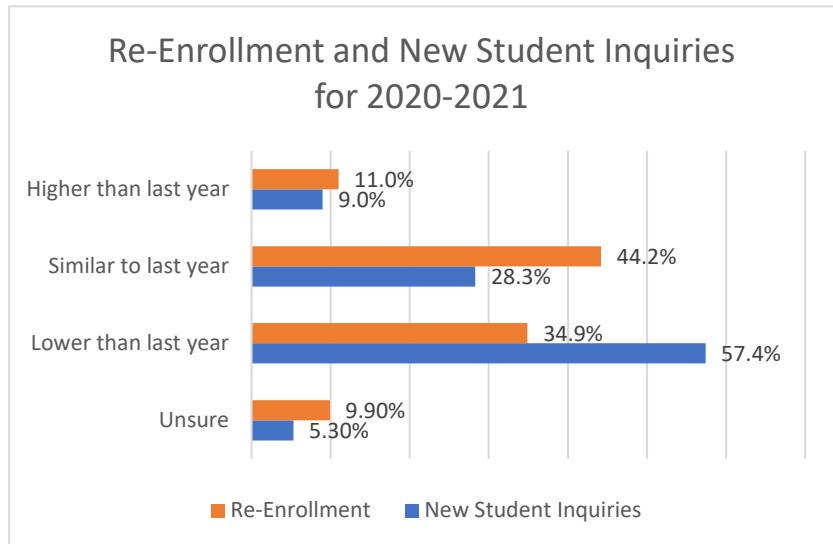
“Don't assume that your investors are incapable of giving during this time. Some may even have more passion about standing in the gap, and not everybody's wealth is tied up in the volatility of the market. We pivoted our annual fund a bit in the last month—emphasizing that it is now a "Caring Campaign instead of simply a Giving Campaign," and donating 10% of all proceeds to our school's Benevolence Fund to be used to help families within our school community who are in financial duress because of the government shutdown.”
—Bucks County, PA

2020-2021: Looking Ahead

In addition to the impact of COVID-19 on the current school year, the survey asked respondents about their planning for the 2020-2021 school year. Questions focused on schools' enrollment projections, contingency budgeting, and new opportunities to be explored.

Enrollment Projections

At the time of survey administration, a majority of schools (55.2%) reported that current re-enrollment numbers for 2020-2021 were trending *at or above* last year's number. New student inquiries, however, *were down* from last year for a majority of schools (57.4%) (chart at right).

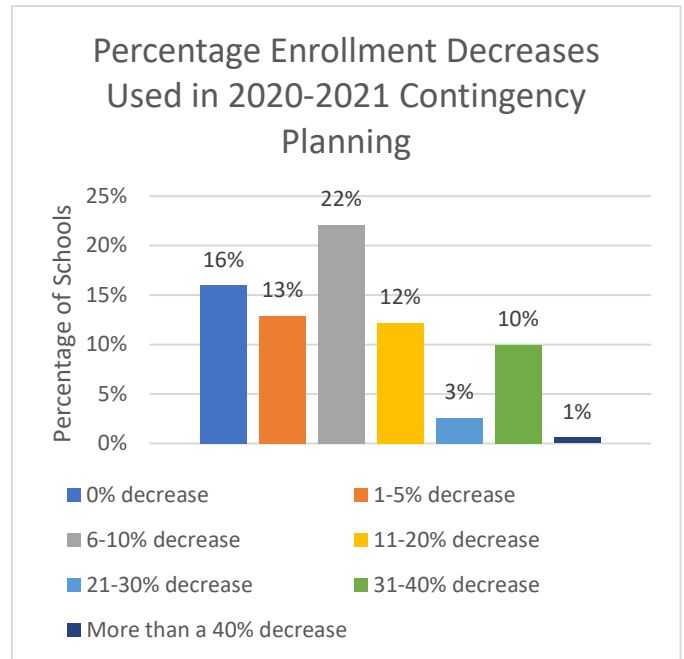
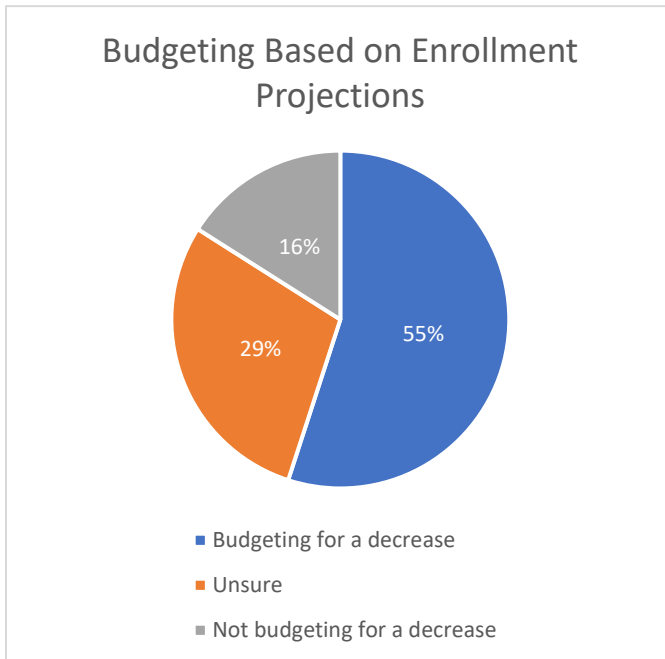


“We gained a kindergarten student because of our engaging kindergarten distance learning experience we are providing, and mom is planning to enroll her for the fall as well.”
—Phoenix, AZ

“We're even now offering ‘virtual tours’ and ‘shadow days.’ We also offer free ‘audit style’ school to all families pre-registered for next year. They are thrilled and some have joined in.”
—Phoenix, AZ

Contingency Budgeting

When asked about their budgeting for next school year, 55% of schools indicated they were budgeting for a decrease in enrollment, while 29% were unsure of their plans, and a further 16% were not expecting a decrease (chart below left). Of those that were budgeting for a decrease, 6-10% was the most frequent range of projected decreases used (chart below right).



Schools also provided qualitative data regarding the specific contingency decisions they are considering in their 2020-2021 budgeting. Responses included:

- Staff layoffs and/or re-assignments
- Freezes or cuts to salaries and/or benefits
- No new hires
- Limited professional development
- Loss of international student program
- Combination classes
- Reduction of grade levels offered
- Cutting of non-academic offerings
- Reduction in special education or student support offerings
- Online resources versus textbook replacement
- Reduction of campus footprint/buildings
- Changes to maintenance plans
- Merger with another local school with same mission
- Permanent school closure

New Opportunities

While COVID-19 has presented instructional, operational, and financial challenges to schools during the present academic year, there is a strong likelihood that COVID-19 disruptions will continue into the next school year. As one survey respondent shared, “Our goal is to be able to seamlessly alternate immediately between on campus instruction and online instruction with no loss in effectiveness by the beginning of the 2020-21 school year.”

In order to gauge the measures schools are taking to ensure continuity of learning and business operations into 2020-2021, the survey asked respondents to identify new opportunities for distance learning being considered (table below). Significantly, nearly half of schools plan to incorporate distance learning into brick and mortar delivery, and nearly a quarter of schools are planning to make additional technology investments and/or offer a new hybrid delivery program.

<u>New Opportunities Being Considered</u>	<u>% of Schools</u>
Incorporating distance learning into brick and mortar delivery	48.6%
Making additional investments in technology (e.g., LMS)	24.6%
Offering new hybrid delivery program	23%
Offering completely new online program for domestic students	8.3%
Other (see below)	8.3%
Engaging online curriculum providers	6.3%
Offering completely new online program for international students	4.1%

In identifying “other” new ideas under consideration for 2020-2021, respondents cited using distance learning for weather-related closures, developing online learning modules for future use, continuing or expanding use of Google Classroom, and adding in more problem-based learning experiences for students. Several schools indicated their plans for next year are on hold, pending feedback to be gathered from faculty, parents, and students about this year’s experiences, as well as strategic direction from their board of trustees.

“This has been a great time for us to accelerate our pace of digital learning... which we have been working on for a long time. It has provided us opportunities to push ourselves into areas that we were not able to do before.”

—Western PA

Discussion & Recommendations

The quantitative and qualitative survey data revealed three emerging themes which, taken together, illustrate the overall response of Christian schools to COVID-19. These are: 1) schools' *responding nimbly* in the transition to distance learning; 2) schools' *nurturing community* in the midst of challenge; and 3) schools' need to *strengthen contingency budgeting* as they look toward the coming school year. Each theme is described in this section of the report, accompanied by recommendations for continuing and expanding efforts in these areas.

Responding Nimbly

The data suggest that, overall, ACSI member schools responded nimbly to closures of their physical campuses due to COVID-19. Across all levels (early education through high school), approximately a third of schools missed zero instructional days, with two-thirds missing less than three days, and four out of five schools missing less than five. Many member schools reported, via qualitative data, that their turnaround time to launching distance learning was significantly shorter than other types of schools in their area.

Moreover, the vast majority of member schools continued to offer a substantial portion of their curriculum—such as core academics and Bible classes—via distance learning. Over half of elementary, middle, and high schools also offered music and arts, and at the middle and high school level, around half of schools continued to offer both physical education and electives as well.



Data from ACSI's 2018-2019 Tuition and Salary Report¹ help to illustrate the degree of nimbleness with which schools transitioned to online learning. At the time of that survey, in late spring 2019, 67% of schools *did not offer any online courses*. Only 31% of schools offered between 1-25% of their courses online, 2% offered between 26-50% of courses online, and *no schools* offered more than 50% of their courses online. This suggests that moving to 100% online instruction would have been a logistical and pedagogical challenge for most schools, and a significant feat when accomplished as quickly as data suggest.

¹ ACSI and Magneti. 2019. *2018-2019 Tuition & Salary Survey Member Report*. Colorado Springs, CO: ACSI, 12. Available at: <https://www.acsi.org/school-services/research>.

Data from the current survey on school preparation may reflect this, in that it offers a somewhat mixed picture of schools' preparedness for the transition to distance learning. As reported, 44% of respondents described their school as being either prepared or extremely prepared, 25% described their school as neither prepared nor unprepared, and 31% reported their school was either unprepared or extremely unprepared for distance learning. The survey also found that 83% of schools had utilized at least one distance learning tool/method prior to COVID-19, while 17% reported never using any distance learning tools/methods before. Further analysis is needed to explore connection between a school's level of preparedness and length of time to transition to distance learning.

Regardless of schools' experiences with transitioning to distance learning, it is still unclear whether and how in-person instruction can resume in the fall. Barring the quick development of an effective vaccine for COVID-19, schools will likely face further disruption during the 2020-2021 school year. According to Forbes.com:

The problem we face from now on is clear: what initially looked like emergency measures no longer are... Next year, institutions that are unable to offer a blended methodology that seamlessly integrates face-to-face and online teaching will increasingly find themselves left behind, until they are simply out of the race. By next year, the emergency measures implemented by educational institutions over recent weeks will have to be fully integrated: solutions capable of providing efficient, complete and fulfilling learning experiences.²

Encouragingly, member schools seem to be preparing for this reality; close to half of schools report that they are planning to incorporate distance learning into brick and mortar delivery in the coming academic year, with another quarter making additional investments in technology (e.g., an LMS) and/or offering a new hybrid delivery program.

It is possible that these investments prompted by the COVID-19 crisis will help Christian schools prepare for an increased opportunity and demand for blending learning in the future. In their book *Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools*, Michael Horn and Heather Staker report that schools are facing a "tipping point in a digital transformation that will forever change the way the world learns. If online learning has not already rocked your local schools, then it will soon."³ These words, written in 2015, certainly seem prophetic. At the time, the authors explain the tipping

²Dans, E. 13 April 2020. The Coronavirus Pandemic Has Unleashed a Revolution in EducationForbes.com. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/enriquedans/2020/04/13/the-coronavirus-pandemic-has-unleashed-a-revolution-in-education-from-now-on-blended-learning-will-be-the-benchmark/#72a44112536f>.

³ Horn, M.B. and H. Staker. 2015. *Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1-2.

point was approaching from a growing desire among families for greater personalization, access, and controlled costs in education. COVID-19 can only have served to accelerate schools' reaching that tipping point.

Thus, in order for Christian schools to continue responding nimbly to COVID-19 related changes in the coming months, it is recommended that schools plan to engage in a process of **continuous improvement** in regard to distance learning. While teachers, students, and families may have shown flexibility and patience during the spring, crisis methods of schooling are likely neither sustainable nor of sufficient quality to ensure educational excellence for the long haul. Improving distance learning will necessitate: a) **systematic feedback** from school constituents; b) strategic **investments in technology**; c) ongoing **professional development** for teachers and staff; and d) incorporation of best practices for **supporting students of varying abilities and backgrounds** in a distance learning environment. Ultimately, these improvements will help position schools to better serve families and students into the future, even beyond the current challenges of COVID-19, via blended learning.

“Our teachers and administrators did an excellent job of jumping in and taking a traditional learning institution to completely online. They are thriving in an ever-changing environment!”
—San Antonio, TX

Nurturing Community

Generally speaking, Christian schools place high importance on the value of community for their students, families, and employees. The findings of the Cardus Education Survey (2018)⁴ confirm



this, as graduates of Protestant schools reported a higher quality of relationships within their school communities (with teachers, administrators, and other students).

Thus, it is not surprising that in their pivot to distance learning, member schools utilized a variety of formats to continue to foster communication with and between school constituents. These methods

⁴ Cardus. 2018. *Perceptions of High School Experience and Preparedness for Life. 2018 Cardus Education Survey Report.* Available at <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/cardus-education-survey-2018-perceptions-of-high-school-experience-and-preparedness-for-life/>.

included regular emails, phone calls, videos, virtual chapels, and a variety of creative approaches to community-building. Additionally, more than two-thirds of member schools reported providing emergency financial assistance to families impacted by COVID-19. Overall, qualitative data from respondents suggests that school families appreciate the connection with, and support from, the school.

In addition to supporting school families, the data suggest that schools are attempting to retain their employees. Nearly three-quarters report participating in the SBA loan program established through the CARES Act, with most schools forgoing staff layoffs (87%) as well as furloughs (73.9%). While additional research will be needed to quantify the relationship between participation in the SBA loan program and staffing decisions, it is highly likely that the program has contributed to schools' ability to retain employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of course, as the 2020-2021 school year approaches, uncertainty persists around what the year will look like for families, students, and school staff alike. Given this reality, schools will need to continue to prioritize **community-centric actions**, including: a) **proactive, two-way communication** with families; b) regular **community-building** activities and initiatives; and c) continuation and possible expansion of **financial assistance** for families in need.

As importantly, it is recommended that schools devise written, actionable plans for how they will consider the **well-being of students and staff** next year, which research has shown is essential to the flourishing of both.⁵ This may include incorporating **trauma-based instruction and support** for students, as well as proactively **promoting staff well-being** (i.e. through wellness training, health-conscious scheduling, and providing regular check-ins and feedback opportunities). Taken together, these efforts will help schools to continue nurturing authentic Christian community which not only genuinely cares for its members, but also actualizes Jesus's promise: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:25 NIV).

"I have been incredibly encouraged by our faculty's response during this transition. Their positivity, engagement with students and families, and their willingness to adapt with excellence speaks to their passion for Jesus and the mission He has called them to!"

—Charlotte, NC

⁵ Swaner, L.E., C.A. Marshall, and S.A. Tesar. 2019. *Flourishing Schools: Research on Christian School Culture and Community*. Colorado Springs, CO: ACSI.

Strengthening Contingency Budgeting

While survey data points to the nimbleness of schools in responding to COVID-19, as well as their ongoing commitment in nurturing community, the data also suggests a need for schools to strengthen their financial planning in light of ongoing economic uncertainty related to COVID-19. For example, when asked about contingency budgeting for next year, 55% of respondents indicated that their schools are budgeting for decreased enrollment. While this is a majority of schools, another 29% reported being “unsure” about budgeting and an additional 16% indicated they were not budgeting for an enrollment decrease. And for those schools who were budgeting for decreases, the most common range of enrollment decrease was 6-10%.

These findings suggest that many schools are not as aggressively considering the potential financial impact of COVID-19 as they could—or, perhaps, should. As a Brookings Institution article, reflecting on changes in education in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, posits:

Private schools are likely to get pummeled financially. With the exception of the small fraction of students attending with vouchers, families have to pay tuition. While the middle-class families that attend private schools will not be as hard hit by the COVID-19 economic crisis, everyone will be meaningfully affected. Over the next year, it is likely we will see a large spike in private school closures.⁶

Given this possibility, it seems prudent that private Christian schools should take contingency budgeting as seriously as possible. Survey data on re-enrollment trends and new student inquiries reinforce this recommendation. While re-enrollment seems to be holding steady for a majority of



schools at the time of the survey (with close to 55% reporting similar or higher rates than last year), a significant number of schools (35%) reported lower re-enrollment rates. Also concerning is the drop in new student inquiries, with 57.4% of schools reporting that these inquiries are lower than this point last year—thus jeopardizing the pipeline of new students upon which many schools depend, both to replace the graduating class and students lost to attrition.

⁶ Harris, D.N. 24 April 2020. How will COVID-19 change our schools in the long run? Brookings.edu. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/04/24/how-will-covid-19-change-our-schools-in-the-long-run/>

The financial picture for many schools is further problematized by schools' actions with regard to this year's fundraising campaigns and initiatives. Nearly 41% of respondents stated their schools ceased fundraising efforts altogether, with another 18.6% indicated they were unsure of their school's plans or the question did not apply to them. This means that around 60% of schools responding to the survey were not fundraising for the remainder of the school year.

Again, data from the 2018-2019 Tuition and Salary Survey⁷ is helpful in illustrating the potentially disruptive effect of this, as the survey found that most schools do not charge enough tuition to cover the actual cost of educating a student. Specifically, at the 50th percentile, 84% of revenue came from tuition—meaning that 16% of revenue came from other sources, such as fundraising; further, out of all sources of donor income, fundraising events were the biggest revenue generator for schools in the survey. Thus, by ceasing fundraising activities for this year (or not modifying these activities by, for example, re-directing them to student aid), many schools will lose income that supplements tuition revenue and covers a meaningful portion of operating expenses.

As mentioned earlier, in light of significant financial challenges facing schools with regard to enrollment and fundraising, it is recommended that schools engage in **robust contingency planning** for multiple scenarios reflecting enrollment and fundraising decreases. Scenarios should also take into account other income loss that may result from further COVID-19 disruption (such as camp income, auxiliary income from athletics, etc.) as well as new COVID-19 related costs that schools may be required to incur (from expanded cleaning services and personal protective equipment, to investing in technology improvements to support distance or blended learning).

In both contingency budgeting and in planning fundraising campaigns, schools should also take into consideration the ongoing and likely increasing **financial needs of families**—whether through job loss, decreased investment values, closure of family businesses, and so forth. Failing to meet those needs through financial assistance will result in losing students and families.

Additionally, **articulating the value proposition** of Christian education—while always important—may never have been as critical as right now. The disruption in education due to COVID-19 will likely accelerate the already-existing proliferation of educational options for families, which have posed a challenge to Christian school enrollments for more than a decade.⁸ Articulating the unique value proposition of Christian education will require intensive internal and external marketing to current and prospective families, respectively; it will need to focus on telling the positive story of

⁷ ACSI and Magneti. 2019. *2018-2019 Tuition & Salary Survey Member Report*. Colorado Springs, CO: ACSI, 28. Available at: <https://www.acsi.org/school-services/research>.

⁸ Barna and ACSI. 2017. *Multiple Choice: How Parents Sort Education Options in a Changing Market*. Colorado Springs, CO: ACSI.

the school, its families, and its graduates, as well as highlighting measurable outcomes of a Christian school education. Schools' nimble responses to the COVID-19 disruption, as well as the enormous value of Christian community during crisis, can serve as key talking points in articulating schools' value proposition to families for the coming year.

Finally, schools' ability to survive and thrive may depend on **innovation and reaching new markets**. As Andy Crouch and colleagues have articulated in their widely read analysis⁹ of the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on non-profits:

We must ensure our people are safely deployed and cared for... while we build scenarios and take decisive action relating to cash flows, supply chains, customer disruptions, and team capacity. Yet we urge every leader to realize that their organization's survival in weeks and months, let alone years, depends far more on radical innovation than on tactical cutbacks.

Thus, in addition to contingency planning, schools should pay significant attention to cultivating new opportunities for influence and impact that may exist in the coming school year and beyond. This might involve developing programs or offerings that **increase access** to families and students for whom Christian education was previously inaccessible—whether because of their unique circumstances, geographical location, or inability to afford private school tuition. It may involve opportunities for **collaboration and cost-sharing** with other Christian schools. Or it might necessitate considering **innovative new business models and income streams**.

While school leaders may feel they cannot afford the time to explore these and other opportunities for innovation, the reality is that many schools cannot afford to ignore them. Times of crisis have the potential to provide ripe conditions for incubating paradigm-shifting ideas. This may be especially true for Christian schools, if they approach this time prayerfully and with expectation in God, “who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us,” all for His glory.¹⁰

“Now that the pressure is on, our school is standing out to our community as superior in academic delivery, love of staff to all families, and leadership willing to adjust. We have gained students since COVID from this perception swing. It has been a positive for us... in that regard. Anyone can shine in the sun. [Our school] is shining when it matters most, in the storm. Glory to God!”

—Gila County, AZ

⁹ Crouch, A., K. Keilhacker, and D. Blanchard. 20 March 2020. Leading Beyond the Blizzard: Why Every Organization is Now a Startup. *The Praxis Journal*. Available at: <https://journal.praxislabs.org/leading-beyond-the-blizzard-why-every-organization-is-now-a-startup-b7f32fb278ff>.

¹⁰ Ephesians 3:20-21 (NIV)

ACSI Resources

To support member schools and the Christian school community at large, ACSI has developed new COVID-19 related offerings as well as pivoted existing efforts toward supporting schools during this time. Resources listed below can be accessed by visiting [ACSI.org](https://www.acsi.org) and clicking on the “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Resources” bar at the top.



Legal and Legislative Resources: ACSI’s legal and government affairs team provides current, relevant information for Christian schools related to federal legislation, state laws and mandates, and legal considerations for schools. Live and recorded webinars, as well as important updates, are provided for free on the coronavirus resource page.

Virtual Town Hall Meetings: Free events occur on Wednesdays from 2:00-3:00pm Eastern and are recorded and archived on the coronavirus website. Early education Town Halls are offered as well. All Town Halls feature experts and a panel of school leaders who address pertinent topics, including:

- *What About Tuition? Quality Education During a Pandemic*
- *Keeping Your Promise: Solutions for Summative Assessments*
- *Adapt: Recruiting and Keeping Families in Uncertain Times*
- *Well-Being: Nurturing Your Community Amidst Isolation*
- *Finance Part 1: Budgeting for the Unknown*
- *Finance Part 2: Fundraising and Development During a Crisis*
- *Graduation Town Hall*
- *Innovate: The Changing Landscape of Christian Education*
- *COVID-19: Managing Anxiety and Grief During Uncertain Times*
- *Grow: Best Practices in Online Learning*
- *Kingdom Parenting Meets COVID-19: The Importance of Routines and Rituals*
- *Mission Possible: Assessing Summer and COVID-19 Academic Slide*
- *Maintaining Healthy Attachments with Children During a Crisis*
- *Back to School: What’s Going to Be Different*

Monday Webinars with ACSI’s President: Join Dr. Larry Taylor, President of ACSI, every Monday at 2pm Eastern for 30 minutes of encouragement, ACSI updates, upcoming opportunities, and an interactive Q&A session.

ACSI Community: ACSI members are invited to join peers and ACSI Leadership on ACSI’s dynamic community platform to continue the conversations and collaborate with each other, as you work to meet the unique needs of your school.

ACSI Blog: Weekly blogs feature experts and school leaders addressing COVID-19 topics related to school leadership, school growth, teaching and learning, community and culture, professional development, and encouragement for Christian school families. Read and subscribe at blog.acsi.org.