

Has Remote Learning Set Back Jewish Day School Students?

Supported by the **Jim Joseph Foundation**

August 2020

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Background

In July 2020, 16 Jewish day high schools fielded a survey to their students about their experience of remote learning since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was developed with support from the Government of Israel's Ministry of Diaspora Affairs as part of work for Unit.Ed—a day school initiative in Europe and Latin America. It was originally fielded in Jewish communities such as Milan, Paris, and Buenos Aires. Subsequently, it was slightly modified for students in North America. North American data were collected and analyzed with the support of the Jim Joseph Foundation and in partnership with Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools. After data analysis was complete, interviews were conducted with school leaders at the schools whose students had responded most positively in order to learn about their educational practices during this period.

In total, 1,383 students responded to the North American survey. All of these respondents were enrolled in 9th through 12th grade during the 2019–2020 academic year. Ten of the participating schools are Modern Orthodox; six are Community or Conservative high schools.

The response rate at the participating schools was between 24% and 76%. The average response rate was 41%.

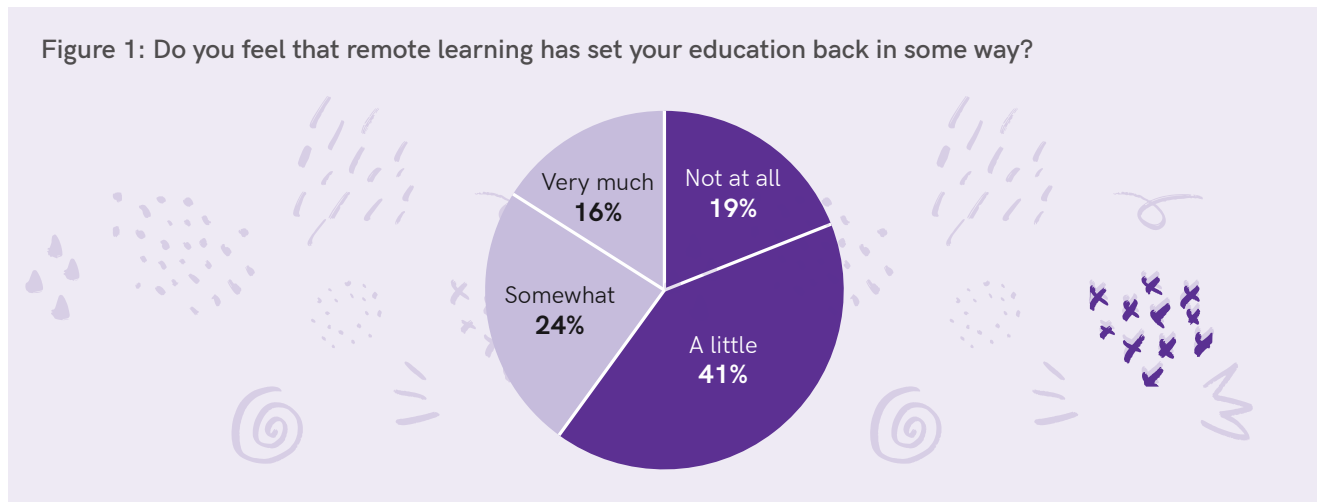
This bulletin focuses on student responses to the question: **“Do you feel that remote learning has set your education back in some way?”** Possible responses, on a four-point scale, were: “Not at all,” “A little,” “Somewhat,” and “Very much.” Students were asked to explain their responses to this question in their own words; 1,112 did so.¹

¹ Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS statistical analysis software. Qualitative (open-ended) responses were analyzed using NVivo qualitative analysis software.

Key Findings

1 Overall, a majority of students (60%) believe that their remote learning has not had a notable negative impact on their education.

Figure 1: Do you feel that remote learning has set your education back in some way?



Female students feel significantly more strongly than male students that remote learning has set their education back. A significantly greater proportion of 10th grade and 11th grade students feel that remote learning has set them back the most, compared with 9th and 12th graders. There are not significant differences between the responses of students in schools of different denominations. Overall, a plurality of students (41%) report they've been impacted "a little." The write-in comments from these respondents suggest that they don't see their education as having been badly deflected off course.

2 Students appreciate the efforts made by their schools. Even when they feel their education has been set back "somewhat" or "very much," they don't tend to attribute their problems to their schools.

Write-in responses indicate that only a small number (fewer than 5%) feel their schools let them down during this period. A majority attribute their difficulties or success to their personal learning styles or other personal factors such as circumstances at home. These patterns are well expressed in the following write-in responses:

"I have no complaints about what the school has been doing, I just can't learn as well online and I learn better in person."

"I like the extra time I have to complete assignments and less pressure when doing schoolwork. I enjoy working and learning on my own more."

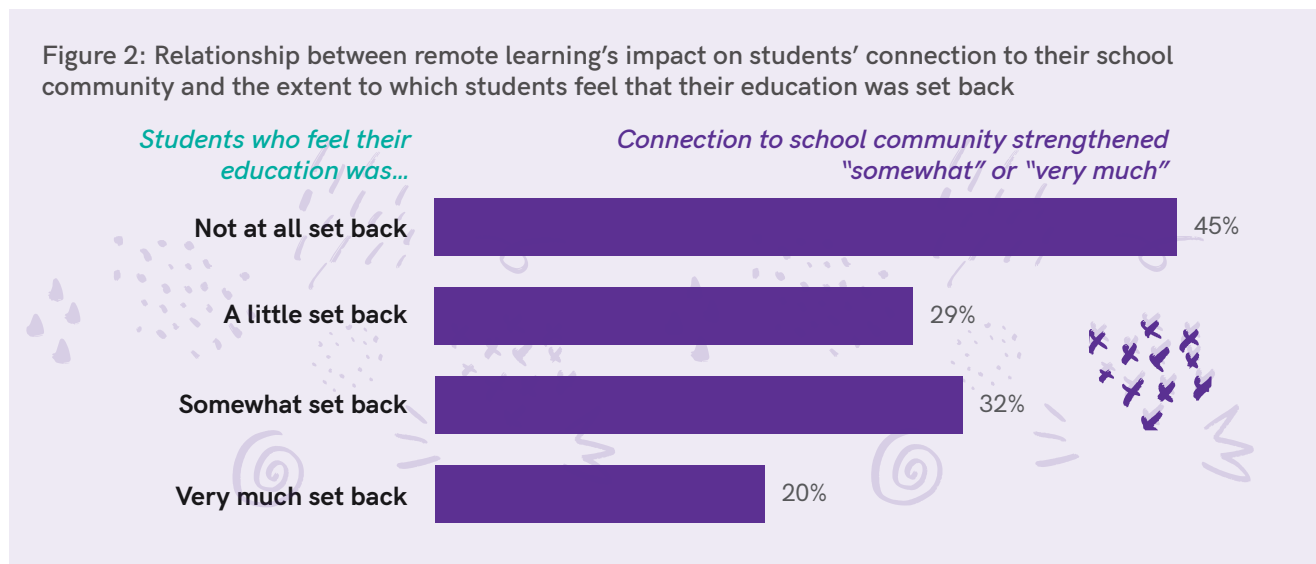
3 Personal mindset strongly impacts how students assess the impact of this experience on their learning.

Commonly, those who report that remote learning set them back least tend to view this experience as a growth opportunity. They appreciated having more free time than usual. They were glad to have a more intensive educational experience than peers in public schools.

“It was a challenging change, however I feel that things like this can only help. It’s giving us a different view of how we can improvise with our education abilities.”

Those who felt their education had been most set back viewed almost every dimension of this experience in negative terms: they experienced more friction with siblings at home, and they were disappointed with the quality of the resources employed (Zoom classes, school projects, etc.). They felt short-changed by having less contact time with teachers. They noted having covered less ground than older siblings had done in the same grade.

4 Students’ assessment of the extent to which their learning was set back is very strongly related to the extent to which they feel that remote learning strengthened their connection to their school community.



The schools with the highest proportions of students who assessed that their education was not set back at all attended relatively small schools with fewer than 20 students in a grade; they inhabited already existing tight-knit communities. These schools also invested heavily in community-building experiences: some form of daily prayer; town-hall meetings for students; and extra-curricular events such as shelter-in-place color war and a Yom Ha’atzmaut parade that came to every student’s home.

Reflections²

It has been widely reported that Jewish day schools have been especially nimble in responding to the pandemic. Student responses confirm this impression. Schools should take great pride in this accomplishment. Their students—not always the most appreciative of audiences, especially at high school level—are grateful for their efforts.

The fact that students’ perspectives of how they have fared over the last six months are so subjective, so much dependent on their mindset, constitutes a challenge for schools. Schools have responded nimbly to the COVID-19 crisis, but a significant minority of those they serve still feel short-changed. Schools must explore additional ways of reaching these students—those who thrive on interpersonal attention, on working with their peers.

² These recommendations are strongly aligned with those proposed by Youth Truth following a study conducted for the Center for Effective Philanthropy (<https://youthtruthsurvey.org/students-weigh-in/>).

Schools need to ensure that those who believe they have missed out feel they're being heard. This isn't just a call for differentiated instruction; this challenge is of a taller order. It's a call for personalized schooling. If pre-COVID only a minority of students had personal education plans, today it is perhaps a majority who need such plans—plans that would be as much about learning challenges as social-emotional needs.

Based on what our team has learned from talking with educators in the schools where students feel their education has been least undermined during this period, we suggest there are two key ways to meet this challenge:

1 Less is more.

Spend fewer hours in direct contact with students. Give them more time to breathe. Give them a chance to get on top of the work, get off the screen, be more independent of the teacher, and more dependent on one another. (At one of the schools with which we spoke, going to a four-day week has been critical in enabling students to find their equilibrium, to keep up, and to breathe.) And when students do have contact time, create space during that time for students to share their experiences with one another; consider not just using the time for teaching. Even during class time, less is more. No doubt, a minority of students will feel they're not getting full value if schools cut back in these ways. Those students will need more personalized attention.

2 Build community, and then do it some more.

In large schools, this means carving out “pods” so students have a chance to spend more time with the same peers. In parts of the country where groups of students can get together in person, work on cultivating micro-communities among the same groups of students. In smaller communities, celebrate what's special about everyone knowing everyone else. In normal times, this may be claustrophobic. In these times where we face the most elemental challenges to our needs as social beings, cultivating such communities is the most effective way in which we can enable students to thrive personally, socially, and academically.

If some of these recommendations are too challenging to implement across the high school as a whole, then focus attention on rising 11th and 12th graders. Those are the students who perceive their education to be most at risk. And fears of this kind can be self-fulfilling. Those are the first students to bring back into school.

Teaching in a Jewish day school is challenging, although rewarding, work at the best of times. At present, especially for those educators who are themselves home alone, far from family and friends, this work is doubly difficult. Teachers need community, too. Students will be best helped if schools provide their teachers with emotional support alongside technical training.

