Perceptions of Florida Virtual School and Knox County Virtual Learning

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May 2021

Overview

The onset of the global coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) required district leaders in the Knox County Schools (KCS) to deploy relatively new instructional models at an unprecedented scale. Specifically, online learning expanded from a small number of high school students to nearly 20,000 students across all grade levels. This rapid expansion led to resourcing and staffing difficulties during the 2020-2021 school year (SY2021). The resourcing issues were especially acute at the high school level due to the diversity of the high school course catalog. KCS took a variety of approaches to staff online courses while maximizing the number of courses available to high school students. Within the district, virtual high school students could be taught by a teacher from their zoned school or a virtual teacher based in a different KCS high school. Some courses could not be staffed by KCS employees due to logistical and/or resource constraints. For these courses, KCS contracted with the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) to provide instruction.

Goals and Limitations

This project was originally designed to directly compare the perceptions of stakeholders using FLVS services and those using KCS-only services. These perceptions were collected using an adapted form of Panorama's open-sourced Family and School Relationships survey. The original goal of the study was to determine if future contracting with FLVS was within the best interest of the district. As SY2021 progressed, it became clear that contracting with FLVS was not ideal due to political, logistical, and operational hurdles. Accordingly, the goal of this project was adjusted. This report documents different experiences of families during the early implementation of high school virtual learning. Narrative data is presented to provide a vignette of virtual learning in KCS, rather than making comparisons between FLVS and KCS. Readers should note that the themes, thoughts, and reflections captured in this study are not intended to inform a specific policy decision. Instead, we hope to memorialize the thoughts of some KCS stakeholders at a specific point in time.

Readers should note that stakeholder opinions were collected using a static data collection tool (comment boxes embedded in an anonymous online survey). The information may be biased by the method of collection (i.e. participants may not believe that their responses were truly anonymous, participants without access to technology compatible with the survey platform could not participate, etc.). Responses may also be censored if participants question KCS's motives for collecting this information. Additionally, placing the respondents' quotes into a narrative framework required a certain level of interpretation by the author.

Findings

The general trends and themes in the data were more similar than different between FLVS and KCS virtual respondents. Our quantitative analysis detected a significant difference among the FLVS and KCS students and parents in a single Likert construct; student engagement (Appendix 1 contains the details of that analysis). The data collected among FLVS and KCS respondents seem to illustrate general attitudes about virtual learning rather than the differences between FLVS and KCS options. Response data is thematically organized below.

Theme: Instructional Delivery Mode

"We are quite satisfied with online schooling and do not wish to change any aspects." – KCS Parent
"Honestly, at this point I would be better off with a textbook and the same assignments that my teacher would have given out." – FLVS Student

High school virtual courses were largely delivered asynchronously during SY2021. When students were asked to "list 1-2 things that could improve the climate" of their classes, many FLVS and KCS virtual students suggested that more synchronous activities would be beneficial. A KCS parent suggested that virtual learning could be improved with *"Synchronous classes where students accomplish learning tasks together while online."* That sentiment was not shared by all respondents to the parent survey. Compared to the student respondents, parent respondents were more likely to respond favorably about the flexibility offered by an asynchronous model One parent offered that a helpful characteristic of online instruction was a *"Student can set the pace with a defined goal of completing x number of assignments by a specific date. This allows the student to be able to adjust workflow if other areas of study require more time than usual. The student can have class time evenings* (sic) *and weekends if needed. This is working very well for us and we do not feel the level of instruction is any less than being in a physical classroom."* Another parent was pragmatic about the virtual learning environment during the pandemic, stating *"The only 'helpfulness' is that my child is home, not being at risk for Covid. The program itself is not necessarily a bad one, all things considered."*

Theme: Student Work

"Our DBA's (discussion based assessments), which take place over the phone, are always engaging and encouraging" – FLVS Student

Multiple KCS students shared that academic expectations for virtual students seemed different than in-person expectations. They suggested that virtual students be *"Not given such heavy assignments, same work as in person kids."* and that virtual teachers *"grade work like in a classroom"*. An FLVS student shared a similar sentiment asking to *"Make the workload*

similar to how it would be if we were in person at our KCS school". Some parents and students suggested that virtual students were more likely to be assigned "busy-work" as a substitute for face-to-face instruction. One KCS parent asked for *"More instruction. Most of my child's online classes are just lists of assignments with not much actual teaching."* Respondents seemed to generally value one-on-one interaction, with the FLVS discussion-based assessments (DBAs) specifically mentioned by FLVS students and parents as positive experiences. Virtually all of the FLVS respondents note that the DBAs were the most engaging aspect of their FLVS experience. KCS respondents identified interactive assignments as the most engaging components of their virtual learning as well. Group projects, reading aloud as a class, and interactions on discussion boards were identified as the most engaging activities among KCS respondents.

Theme: Student Social Growth
"I don't see any aspects that are beneficial for social growth - there are no means for social interaction (even online)." – KCS Parent

The most consistent set of comments were associated with the lack of social growth promoted through the virtual programs. An illustrative comment comes from the FLVS parent survey. *"My child is suffering. There is no 'social growth'."* Despite the perceived absence of social growth within the virtual classroom, parents of virtual students noted that some opportunities for socializing came from *"Clubs and extracurriculars that meet online involving virtual students alongside in person students".* A KCS parent observed, *"social growth has come from after school sports."* It is important to note that these opinions are not unanimous. When asked "what aspect of the Florida Virtual program is the most beneficial for your student's social growth", one FLVS (parent) respondent noted, *"Everything".* A KCS parent added, *"My daughter does not enjoy the social aspect of school so online learning has been very beneficial for her".* Other respondents indicated that virtual learning has had beneficial side effects. A KCS parent observed their student's growth in *"Advocating for herself by contacting teacher* (sic) *directly to ask questions".* Additionally, some respondents noted that participation in the virtual program sheltered some students from potential bullying and allowed introverted students to feel more comfortable in the classroom.

Theme: Feeling Apart from In-Person Students
"being online is very isolating" – FLVS Student

Some respondents to the student survey reported a sense of isolation or apartness from their in-person peers. When asked what could improve the climate of the virtual classroom, one KCS student wrote, *"include the virtual students in the things that in-person students get to do".* Another KCS student seemed to feel less visible than in-person peers when sharing that *"in classes that are spit* (split) *in person and virtual it would be nice to see more*

acknowledgment of virtual students." Students shared some recommendations as to how to create more connectedness within the school community. A KCS student suggested an improvement could be made if the teacher could *"Maybe make a little more of an effort to take time aside maybe once a week for virtual kids and remind them that you understand the situation is hard and you are proud of how they have dealt with it."* Other students reported that synchronous activities (especially with active webcams) greatly improved their virtual learning experience. Technology issues also seemed to contribute to feelings of isolation among virtual learners and their families. One FLVS parent reported that their student was excited about attending a virtual course but had to be dropped from a class because of continual issues connecting to the FLVS platform.

Theme: Communication
"Parents need to be included in student communication and/or notified immediately if assignments are not being completed. Communication was too little too late" – KCS Parent

Among all respondents, there was a broad request for more regular communication between school staff and families. Generally, FLVS and KCS parents desired regular communication about student progress and up-to-date access to grades. One KCS parent suggested that *"Weekly Remind texts, monthly emails, and bi weekly team meetings should be offered by the teachers. This would help familiarize us with the programs they are using and why they are using them. It would give us a chance to ask questions we may have. And it would provide us with how to continue to support our virtual learners better."* Another KCS parent requested specific diagnostic information about their student's performance, stating "*Atleast* (sic) *occasional updates on class progress would be nice. We have no reference point other than their grades and those have dropped but not drastically".*

Beyond communication about student progress, an FLVS parent felt that a lack of coordination between FLVS and school-based administrators led to difficulties for their student. They felt that FLVS and KCS were not working together to provide coherent communication. Parent respondents were also adamant that they prefer personalized communication. Many respondents specifically stated that they do not consider automatically generated email messages (from learning management systems) valuable communication.

Theme: Family Instructional Supports
"If I knew when tests were scheduled and when assignments are due...I could apply more pressure and encourage the student to be prepared." – KCS parent

Responses suggest that parents generally want to play an active role in the education of their students. However, many parents felt that they didn't have access to adequate resources to

support their student's virtual learning. Responses suggest that parents and students would like better access to virtual syllabi and archived instructional materials. Per one KCS parent, *"I want the option to print material out or notes out that the teachers use in the classroom so I can better understand the material so I can assist my child in understanding the material and if these are available these have not been shown to the parents that they are available"*. Another KCS parent did not know how to get access to materials, stating, *"I think that is the problem...a lot of parents, including me, don't know how to go about getting support."* Some respondents suggest that message boards and hotlines could be used to deliver instructional support to parents and students. Students suggest that teachers maintain office hours, stay in regular contact with students via email, publish study guides, and record all lessons so students can access them whenever they need to review information.

Things to Consider
"I think that my teacher has done a fabulous job, our class is completely asynchronous so I do not engage with other students, but I have found the course to be engaging and easy to jump right into! I do not think that the process could be much improved on my teacher's part!" – FLVS Student
"I'm doing awful in all my classes even though I've been a straight-a student my whole life." – KCS Student

The responses to the survey appear to tell a story of contrasting views. Many parents and students who participated in the survey communicated their dissatisfaction (and sometimes strong dissatisfaction) with virtual instruction. Generally, these respondents missed traditional classroom interactions, synchronous instruction, and the social atmosphere of a typical classroom. Conversely, some parents and students communicated virtual learning was a better fit for their students. These respondents generally enjoyed the flexible schedule allowed by asynchronous instruction and the ability to self-pace through course content. Programmatically, the district has decided to embrace a synchronous virtual instructional model in SY2122. Because this is a shift from SY2021 programming and some families specifically value the synchronous model, clear communication regarding this change seems prudent.

KCS is committed to offering virtual learning options in the near term, and although we do not suggest making policy decisions solely from this data, some artifacts from the survey may help the district support virtual learners. The district may want to explore how parent supports can be extended or transformed through technology (i.e., recordings of class lectures, message boards designed dedicated to parents/guardians, etc.). Additionally, the district may benefit from offering an array of extracurricular activities during SY2122 to promote social interactions among students enrolled in the virtual program. Building upon this theme of social support, enrollment data indicates that approximately 2,500 KCS

students have never attended an in-person class in their current (zoned) school. These students have been enrolled in virtual learning for both semesters of SY2021 and are currently enrolled in transitional grades (kindergarten, 3rd grade [for the subset of students attending intermediate schools], 6th grade, and 9th grade). Should these students opt for in-person instruction during SY2021, they may need additional support and orientation to feel more connected to their "new" school.

Appendix 1: Likert Scale Data

Surveys were conducted during the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year (SY2021). Surveys were deployed to parents and students associated with the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) and the virtual courses offered by the Knox County Schools (KCS, including courses offered at the zoned school and courses offered through the QuEST program). Surveys were sent to all parents and students associated with FLVS courses. Parents and students associated with KCS virtual learning courses were selectively invited to participate in the survey. Potential participants in the KCS pools were considered only if they were associated with comparable courses in the FLVS pools (comparable in academic level and course content). KCS participants were chosen at random to balance the number of potential participants with the FLVS survey.

Likert data was collected on the following constructs for the parent surveys: student-school compatibility, family support, school climate, and barriers to engagement. Information from the student surveys was associated with the relationship between the school and student, student engagement, and academic rigor. All survey items were adapted from a validated survey instrument constructed by Panorama Education. Stratified sampling was used to send survey invites to parents and students who were enrolled in courses in similar content areas and of similar academic levels. Response rates were low (approximately 20-30 responses per group), and should not be considered generalizable to a larger population.

The Likert data suggest there were few significant differences in how parents and students perceived the Florida virtual program compared to the online courses taught by KCS staff. The low response rates, however, mean that most quantitative analyses lack the power to detect small-to-medium differences in ratings. Due to relatively low response rates to the survey, statistical analysis of the Likert scale data involved combining items within constructs. Our analysis focused on the proportion of respondents who provided a strongly favorable response to a survey item. Chi-squared testing used a standardized number of positive responses to items clustered under a single construct. Positive responses were standardized by multiplying the number of positive responses by the minimum number of respondents in the Florida Virtual or Knox Schools surveys. The Knox Schools responses were arbitrarily used as the expected values in the chi-squared tests. Smaller chi-squared values indicate dissimilar responses between the Florida Virtual and Knox Schools respondents.

The results of this analysis found significant differences in responses among a single construct: the student engagement construct measured on the student-level surveys. Items with differences in favorable response rates of 15% or more are denoted in the results.

Parent Survey: Student-School Compatibility, Chi-squared p-value = 0.78

The relatively high p-value suggests that there is little to no difference in favorable responses between the FLVS and KCS (parent respondents). Within the student-school compatibility construct, respondents associated with FLVS were more likely to agree that their students were comfortable asking adults for help.

Item	Most Favorable Responses	N Responses		% Favorable	
		FLVS	KCS	FLVS	KCS
How well do you feel [the Florida Virtual program/your student's online schooling] is preparing your student for the next academic year?	Quite well, Extremely well	18	35	28%	23%
How much of a sense of belonging does your student feel [as a member of the Florida Virtual program/at his/her online school]?	Quite a bit of belonging, Tremendous belonging	17	35	18%	11%
[Within the Florida Virtual program/At your student's online school], how well does the overall approach to discipline work for your student?	Quite well, Extremely well	17	34	35%	41%
How well do the activities offered at [the Florida Virtual program/your student's online school] match your student's interests?	Quite well, Extremely well	16	34	31%	26%
How comfortable is your student in asking for help from adults associated with [the Florida Virtual program/their online school]?	Quite comfortable, Extremely comfortable	18	35	50%	34%
How well do the teaching styles of [the Florida Virtual/your school's online] instructors match your student's learning style?	Quite well, Extremely well	17	35	24%	20%

Parent Survey: Family Support, Chi-squared p value = 0.11

The p-value suggests that there may be some differences in the number of favorable responses between the two groups. However, these differences would generally not be considered statistically significant. Within the family support construct, respondents associated with KCS were more likely to respond favorably to all of the items below.

Item	Most Favorable Responses	N Responses		% Favorable	
		FLVS	KCS	FLVS	KCS
How often do you have conversations with your student about what his/her [class is learning in the Florida Virtual program/online class is learning at school]?	Frequently, Almost all the time	18	35	61%	86%
To what extent do you know how your student is doing socially [in the Florida Virtual program/at their online school]?	Quite a bit, A tremendous amount	17	34	41%	56%
How often do you help your student understand the content he/she is learning in [the Florida Virtual program/their online school]?	Frequently, Almost all the time	18	34	11%	32%

Parent Survey: School Climate, Chi-squared p value = 0.71

The p-value suggests there are little to no differences in the number of favorable responses between the two groups. Within the school climate construct, FLVS respondents were more likely to agree that grading practices were fair and adults associated with FLVS were respectful towards the students.

Item	Most Favorable Responses	N Responses		% Favorable	
		FLVS	KCS	FLVS	KCS
To what extent do you think your student enjoys attending [the Florida Virtual program/their online school]?	Enjoy quite a bit, Enjoy a tremendous amount	18	34	28%	26%
How motivating are the classroom lessons at [the Florida Virtual program/your student's online school]?	Somewhat motivating, Extremely motivating	17	35	12%	11%
How fair or unfair is the [Florida Virtual program's/online school's] system of grading students?	Somewhat fair, Very Fair	17	35	82%	63%
How well do administrators at [the Florida Virtual program/your student's online school] create a school environment that helps students learn?	Slightly well, Quite well	16	34	31%	21%
Overall, how much respect do you think the students [participating in the Florida Virtual program/at your student's online school] have for the staff?	Quite a bit of respect, A tremendous amount of respect	17	35	59%	60%
Overall, how much respect do you think the adults associated with [the Florida Virtual program/your student's online school] have for the students?	Quite a bit of respect, A tremendous amount of respect	17	35	59%	43%

Parent Survey: Barriers to Engagement, Chi-squared p value = 0.15

The p-value suggests that there may be some differences in the number of favorable responses between the two groups. However, these differences would generally not be considered statistically significant. If there is a small difference in favorable response between the two groups, the data suggest that the Florida Virtual respondents were more likely to respond favorably to the items in this construct except for creating a sense of belonging in the school community.

Item	Most Favorable Responses	N Responses		% Favorable	
		FLVS	KCS	FLVS	KCS
Please respond to the following items about possible barriers to engagement with your students' virtual program: The [Florida Virtual program/online school] provides little information about involvement opportunities.	Small problem, Not a problem at all	17	35	53%	31%
Please respond to the following items about possible barriers to engagement with your students' virtual program: The [Florida Virtual program/online school] is not welcoming to parents.	Small problem, Not a problem at all	17	35	71%	60%
Please respond to the following items about possible barriers to engagement with your students' virtual program: The [Florida Virtual program/online school] does not communicate well.	Small problem, Not a problem at all	18	35	56%	34%
Please respond to the following items about possible barriers to engagement with your students' virtual program: You do not feel a sense of belonging with the school community.	Small problem, Not a problem at all	18	35	44%	49%

Student Survey: Relationship Between School and Student, Chi-squared p value = 0.69

The p-value suggests there are little to no differences in the number of favorable responses among (student) respondents associated with FLVS and KCS. Within the construct, KCS respondents were more likely to respond favorably about the amount of respect other students show them and the fairness of rules.

Item	Most Favorable Responses	N Responses		% Favorable	
		FLVS	KCS	FLVS	KCS
How connected do you feel to the people in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Quite connected, Extremely connected	24	20	8%	5%
How much respect do students in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es) show you?	Quite a bit of respect, A tremendous amount of respect	23	20	35%	55%
Overall, how much do you feel like you belong in the [Florida Virtual/school's online] program?	Belong quite a bit, Completely belong	24	20	25%	35%
How fair or unfair are the rules for the students in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Somewhat fair, Very fair	24	20	75%	90%
How positive or negative is the energy in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Somewhat positive, Very positive	24	20	79%	70%
In your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es), how much does the behavior of other students hurt or help your learning?	Helps my learning some, Helps my learning a tremendous amount	23	20	91%	85%
How often do people treat you with respect in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Frequently, Almost always	23	20	17%	10%
How easy is it for students to get help from an adult in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Quite easy, Extremely easy	24	20	46%	55%

Student Survey: Student Engagement, Chi-squared p value = 1.4e-4

The p-value suggests that there are likely significant differences in the number of favorable responses between the two groups. FLVS respondents answered more favorably to items related to excitement about the class, eagerness to participate in class, and comfort when asking questions in class. KCS respondents were more likely to answer favorably about how much they have learned in their course.

Item	Most Favorable Responses	N Responses		% Favorable	
		FLVS	KCS	FLVS	KCS
How interesting do you find the things you learn in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Quite interesting, Extremely interesting	24	20	38%	40%
How important is it to you to do well in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Quite important, Extremely important	24	20	83%	90%
How useful do you think your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es) will be to you in the future?	Quite useful, Extremely useful	24	20	46%	35%
How excited are you about going to your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Quite excited, Extremely excited	24	20	21%	5%
In your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es), how eager are you to participate?	Quite eager, Extremely eager	24	20	21%	5%
Overall, how interested are you in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Quite interested, Extremely interested	24	20	29%	30%
How clearly is the information that you need to learn presented in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Quite clearly, Extremely clearly	24	20	38%	35%
How comfortable are you in asking questions about what you are learning in [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Quite comfortable, Extremely comfortable	24	20	50%	20%
How much have you learned in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Learned quite a bit, Learned a tremendous amount	24	20	38%	55%

Student Survey: Academic Rigor, Chi-squared p value = 0.27

The p-value suggests there are little to no differences in the number of favorable responses between the two groups. Within the construct, FLVS respondents were more likely to have to explain their answers.

Item	Most Favorable Responses	N Responses		% Favorable	
		FLVS	KCS	FLVS	KCS
How often do you have to explain your answers in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Frequently, Almost always	24	20	46%	25%
When you feel like giving up on a difficult task, how likely is it that you will get support to keep trying in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Quite likely, Extremely likely	24	20	25%	30%
How much are you encouraged to do your best in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Encouraged quite a bit, Encouraged a tremendous amount	24	20	46%	40%
Overall, how high are the expectations of you in your [Florida Virtual/school's online] class(es)?	Quite high, Extremely high	24	20	54%	50%