

# COVID Constituency

## Engaging Public Voices to Shape Tomorrow's Schools

*The Hunt Institute spoke with parents from diverse backgrounds about their children's experiences with the current education system and the changes they want to see moving forward. The following narratives highlight the stories that parents shared.*

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*“Normal was familiar, but not great. There were many shortcomings (in education) before COVID-19. COVID-19 highlighted those difficulties in education and how pervasive those problems are.”*

Keith is a father of three boys from Ohio. Like many parents, Keith found it challenging to manage his children’s educational experiences when schools were closed for in-person learning, noting difficulties navigating multiple online learning systems for homework and assignments.

But Keith found that at least one of his sons had a positive experience learning virtually at his STEM magnet school, noting that the positive experience came from the school already having experience delivering virtual learning before schools closed.

On the other hand, he noted that when moving his children to different schools, one of his sons, who has an individualized education plan (IEP), was not being served properly at a high-achieving school. To Keith, it showed that highly resourced schools do not always mean that those resources will be leveraged effectively.

Looking ahead, Keith would like for his boys’ education to teach them to become self-sufficient. Additionally, he would like to see an increase in the availability of vocational training at the secondary and postsecondary levels, noting that college should not be painted as the “end all be all” for students.

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*“If there are not proper education resources, children are less likely to get a good job, healthcare, housing down the road. So much sits on the shoulders of education.”*

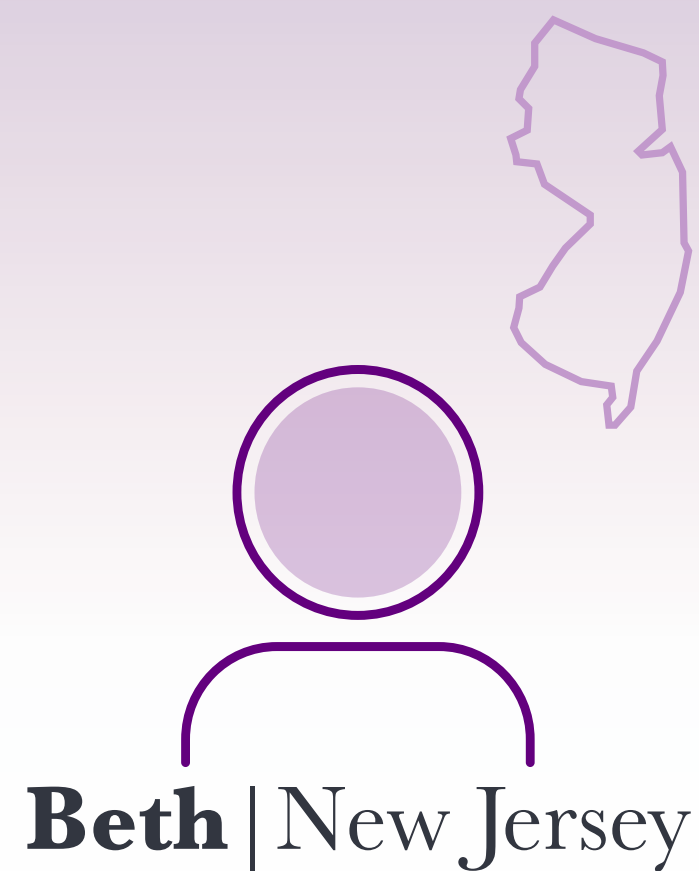
Heather is a mother of four from Florida. Even though she homeschooled her children long before the pandemic, when businesses and public spaces began to close in the spring of 2020, so too did the way her kids learn. Most notably, she had to press pause on the many field trips she and her children would take to help bring learning to life.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Heather has dealt with two significant challenges in her household. For one, she is immunocompromised and must take extra precautions keeping her and her children home more often than other parents and kids in her circle. Additionally, her children have multiple learning disabilities, and when speaking to this point, Heather mentioned that she does not have her children in the public school system because she cannot trust that the system will support her children's learning needs.

Heather believes education plays a significant role in one's ability to get a quality job, afford housing, and access health care. She believes there is significant work to be done to improve teacher training and working conditions, specifically when working with children with disabilities. Heather believes reform can start once communities rethink where money goes; she believes politicians and district leadership receive too much money and don't care what happens in the district, as their financial situations are strong. Rethinking allocation of dollars, therefore, is the first step to reform.

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*“There must be a minimum standard for what districts do with technology as it relates to learning. Also, though inequities have been revealed during the pandemic, we always knew there were differences among districts. That is why many parents move to new places for better schools – the pandemic made those differences more obvious.”*

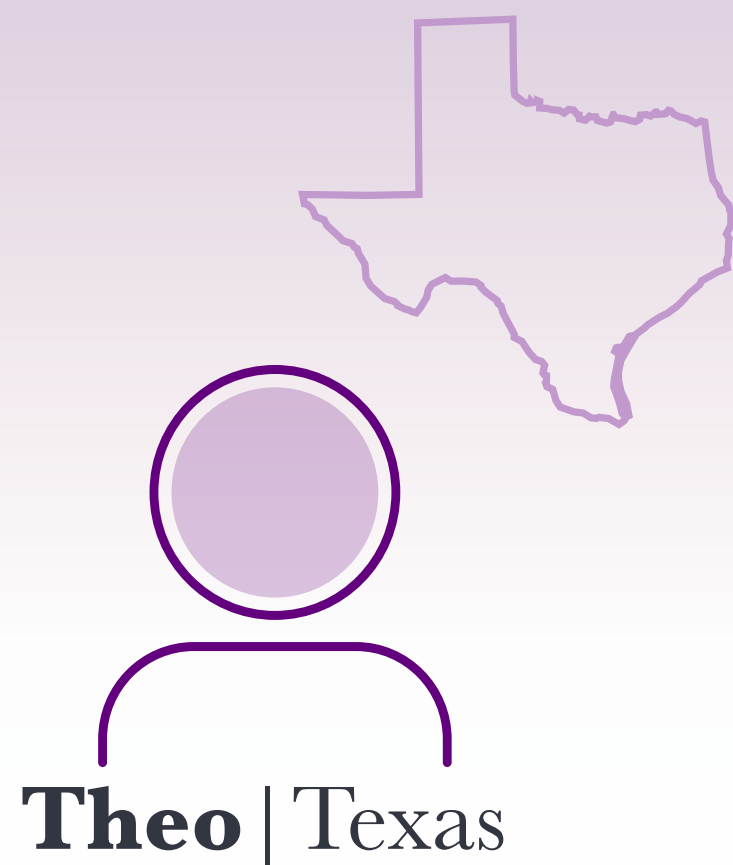
Beth is from New Jersey and has two kids. Beth’s son, who was an A-student before the pandemic, has struggled academically since returning to school following months of remote learning. Beth believes her son’s difficulties came from teachers delivering content at the same pace as before the pandemic, and given that the remote learning experience left her son ill-equipped to return to classroom learning, the pace of content delivery felt a lot faster than usual, making her son’s learning experience more difficult.

Despite the weak spots COVID-19 highlighted within the American education system, Beth believes public education can deliver for children. However, she looks at education quality as more of a regional issue, noting that while someone in New Jersey may find their education system to be adequate, someone else in Florida may not believe that system meets their needs. When it comes to school funding, Beth believes that the mismanagement of funds is the primary issue to focus on; though increased funding is important, she mentioned that should the money must be spent wisely.

Beth’s wish list for public education includes infrastructure improvements, less overcrowding, fewer school districts (and less bureaucracy), and better technology to name a few. She is skeptical of her home state’s ability to effectively leverage the billions in federal relief dollars it is receiving to make these changes. She wants to see her kids be happy, and schools can play a role through providing a quality education focusing on the whole child.

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*“(Transformational change) means that the quality of one’s life changes, and a better support system is created...(going forward) allow kids to have more of their educational experience at home, since some kids thrive when at home.”*

Theo is a father of three boys in Texas. Throughout the pandemic, he expressed concern about the transition to remote learning, especially how the initial lack of organization adversely impacted learning experiences for his boys.

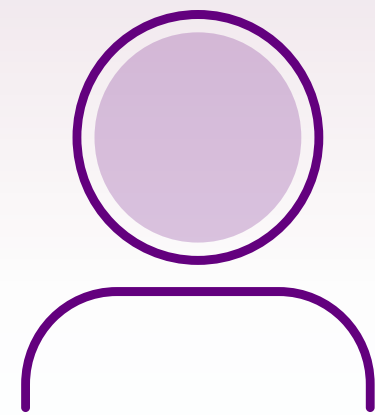
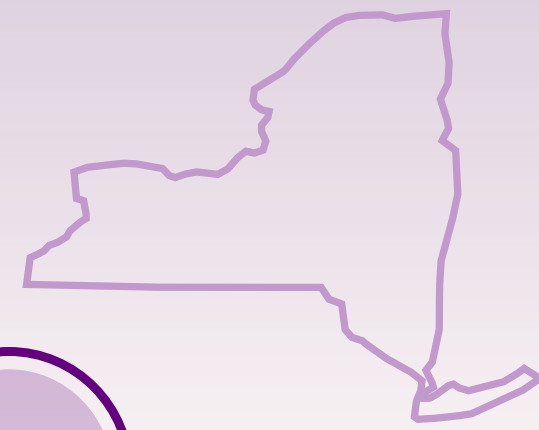
Theo looks at the transition to remote learning from several angles. He sees a silver lining, as he gets to spend more time with his family and have more activity nights with those who are closest to him. Conversely, he recognizes that the absence of an in-person learning environment is detrimental to those seeking additional support; Theo’s son, who lost a good friend during the COVID-19 pandemic, did not receive the additional support that could have been available if he had access to in person learning. He also acknowledges that there has been a collective trauma for everyone.

Theo wants to see several changes in the education landscape. For one, he believes teachers do not get paid enough, stressing that in many cases, teachers play the role of both teacher and counselor. Additionally, he would like to increase accessibility to good teachers through development of an online system where students can ask academic and non-academic questions to teachers at any time. In terms of curriculum, there is a desire for increased quality across districts; Theo thinks his boys are being exposed to quality curricula, the family had to move districts to access said curricula.

Ultimately, Theo is a believer in the power of technology in complementing the educational experience. He wants all schools to have the most advanced technology for learning, and he would like to see schools to devote more time to teaching students computer programming, since the jobs of the future require those skills.

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**Yasmine** | New York

*“Schools should provide supplies for the classroom. I purchase supplies every year for my kids, and I give extra supplies to the classroom, but the schools should be providing those supplies.”*

Yasmine is from New York and is a mom of two kids: a 19-year-old boy and a 4-year-old girl. Yasmine found the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic stressful for her and her children, as she took the role of both mother and teacher for over a year. Though she believes she did a good job taking on both roles, she stressed that receiving supply assistance, such as printing, from schools would have been helpful, since many families are unable to print their own materials. On the flip side, Yasmine enjoyed staying at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, as she spent more time with her kids, finding that quality time to play an important role in bringing her family closer.

Yasmine has been thinking about significant changes that should occur in the education landscape following the COVID-19 pandemic. For one, she believes that education funding should increase, noting that increased funding leads to better books and teachers, and increased teacher pay, efficacy, and satisfaction. Additionally, she thinks that schools must prepare themselves for the next pandemic; the COVID-19 pandemic revealed schools' inability to respond well to a catastrophe, and the correct resources and structures must be placed so that when the next catastrophe arrives, schools will be prepared to respond.

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*“When children live in poverty, their education is affected. Even if one’s education is good, it may not help a child in poverty since that child must worry about so many things outside education.”*

Thea, a mother of four sons and a grandmother to grandchildren, is from Florida and is heavily involved in her grandchildren’s education. Thea, like several other parents and grandparents, has looked at the COVID-19 pandemic through multiple lenses. For one, she saw the COVID-19 pandemic as a boon to her relationship with her husband, who worked 60 miles from home before stay-at-home orders were enacted; now, they get to spend more time together. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging for several of her grandchildren, including her granddaughter, who struggled to reintegrate into social settings after months of isolation.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Thea has reflected on the concept of the whole child, defining ‘focusing on the whole child’ as focusing on the well-being of the child that goes beyond the classroom. She notes that while a good education is helpful to many, it may only provide marginal benefits to those living in poverty and/or a difficult environment. Furthermore, she has pushed for the need to have more life skills training in schools. When growing up, her school devoted significant time and resources to teaching students life skills, including balancing a checkbook.

Thinking about education reform, Thea pushes for an entry into a new normal, one in which schools utilize the gains they have made from the COVID-19 pandemic, place children into classroom settings based on how they learn and ensure that teachers never have to use their own money to invest in supplies for the classroom.

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*“We have to promote the mental health piece, promote connectivity, and increase access to internet and tech.”*

Dara is a mother of two kids from Georgia. Dara’s experience parenting her kids during the COVID-19 pandemic was mixed, as she spoke about her daughter, who excels academically, but dealt with loneliness, as she was unable to socialize with her friends.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed Dara the glaring educational and economic disparities in her community, noting that while her kids, and school in general, received Chromebooks and other up-to-date technology to keep up with their schoolwork, nearby districts did not have the resources to ensure students could have a quality remote learning experience. The COVID-19 pandemic showed Dara that the quality of education depends on one’s ZIP code and that equity must be a priority, as students must have the necessary resources to succeed.

Dara has also paid close attention to best practices in education and investing in teachers. Specifically, she lamented over how public education has yet to figure out how to scale best practices, pitching the idea that the best teachers should have their lessons taped to show other classes, and as the lesson is being delivered, other teachers work directly with students as the lesson is being delivered. Additionally, Dara highlighted the need to invest in teachers, using research on best practices in teacher policy and preparation to guide those investments.

While those investments are top of mind, Dara has been thinking about the whole child, calling for the need to invest in mental health services for students, as the COVID-19 has and continues to worsen an already proliferating nationwide mental health crisis.