

EDUCATING DURING COVID-19: CHALLENGES & SUCCESSES

Brandon School Division

October 2020



Acknowledgements

This report is an acknowledgement of the challenges and successes of the first eight weeks back to school during the pandemic restrictions of the fall of 2020. The author wishes to thank Dr. Marc Casavant, Superintendent/CEO of BSD, for contracting BU CARES to carry out this survey. Thank you also to the principals and leaders who filled out the survey. A nearly 100% response rate is rare and shows your willingness to engage and share your thoughts and experiences. Thank you.

Educating During Covid-19: Challenges & Successes

Survey Report

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Executive Summary

Schools in the Brandon School Division (BSD) have been back in session for eight weeks. Back to school this year has been unlike any other because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Understanding how principals and school leaders are managing during this pandemic, along with their stories of challenges and successes, will help Brandon School Division build on the successes and address the challenges that have arisen.

The focus of this survey was to learn more about how school administrators and leaders in BSD are doing in these first two months back to school. The objectives of this survey were to (1) identify the current challenges faced by administrators and school leaders due to the pandemic; (2) gauge how administrators, staff, parents, and students are doing during this time; (3) share stories of successes; and (4) identify ways that BSD can support administrators and school leaders during this time. The following overarching questions addressed these objectives:

1. How are principals/leaders, staff, students, and parents feeling about the first eight weeks of the school year during Covid-19?
2. What has been successful during the first eight weeks of the school year?
3. What are the challenges facing principals/leaders during this time?

To answer these questions, a survey of 10 questions was sent to nearly 30 principals and leaders of clinician teams in the Brandon School Division; 27 responses were collected.

Major findings from this survey include:

- Most respondents say they are fairly positive about the first eight weeks back to school (7.8 average, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent).

- The most challenging aspects of the first eight weeks back to school have been providing strategic direction and revising policies and procedures.
- Overseeing facilities has been successful, with nearly half of all respondents saying it was the most successful aspect of the past eight weeks.

There are several recommendations included in this report based on the feedback provided by principals and leaders. These include increasing supports for teachers for remote days, increasing consistency between schools, addressing food insecurity, and addressing increased stress and anxiety by minimizing new initiatives and focusing on wellness and community.

This report is organized into a short introduction, followed by the main findings and recommendations. Appendix A includes the complete findings from the survey.

Introduction

Background

On October 19, 2020, BSD contracted Michelle Lam, Director of Brandon University's Centre for Aboriginal and Rural Education Studies (CARES), to conduct a survey of school principals and leaders about the first eight weeks back to school during the Covid-19 pandemic. The objective of the *Challenges & Successes Survey* project was to assess the current realities, successes, and challenges facing school administrators in the division. This information will be used to provide increased clarity and strengthen supports offered by the BSD.

The focus of this project was to gauge how parents, students, staff, and principals are doing during the first eight weeks back to school. The objectives were to:

1. Identify the current challenges faced by administrators and school leaders due to the pandemic
2. Gauge how administrators, staff, parents, and students are doing during this time
3. Share stories of successes
4. Identify ways that BSD can support administrators and school leaders during this time

Methodology

Process

On October 19, 2020, the survey was distributed via email by the BSD. The email included the following information from Dr. Casavant:

Please be advised that I have contracted Dr. Michelle Lam, Director, Centre for Aboriginal and Rural Education Studies (CARES) Brandon University, to conduct a short survey on the first 8 weeks of the school start-up and how things are going. The survey will be coming to you today and will be closing on Wednesday.

Participants

The participants for this survey were principals and leaders of clinician teams in BSD.

As this data collection was done solely for the BSD, ethics approval was not required.

To complete this research, SurveyMonkey forms were designed that could be filled out by clicking on a web-based link distributed by email. Between October 19, 2020, and October 21, 2020, 27 responses were collected. This is a nearly 100% response rate.

Data Collection and Analysis

The SurveyMonkey link was distributed via email to principals and leaders of clinician teams in BSD. Their responses were entered directly into the SurveyMonkey form.

All survey responses are included in this report (see Appendix A), as well as an analysis that is broken down by K-8 and high schools.

Limitations of this research

The results of this research may be influenced by the fact that the survey was limited to one response per IP address. If one respondent answered from different locations such as work and home, it would be possible for them to respond multiple times.

Major Findings

In Appendix A, all survey responses can be explored. The author of this report has summarized these findings in the following sections, including recommendations for further actions.

Overall findings

1. In response to a question about how they are feeling during the first eight weeks back to school, most respondents felt positive (7.8 average, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent). They felt students were also positive (7.8), parents were positive (7.6), and staff were slightly less positive (6.9). Of the four groups, **staff members were the least positive.**
2. The most challenging aspects of the first eight weeks back to school were providing strategic direction (66.67%) and revising policies and procedures (66.67%). Other challenges were connecting with students, supporting staff, keeping up to date with constant changes, and managing time demands.
3. The most successful aspect of the first eight weeks back to school was overseeing facilities (46.15%). Many respondents also mentioned the joys of reconnecting as a community, realizing that the anticipated behavioural and learning gaps were not as severe as projected, an appreciation that BSD has taken great measures to protect safety, students and staff who are resilient and adaptable, and the feeling of working together as a team. **The most common comment was the importance of re-establishing connections with the school community and relationships between staff, students, and families.**
4. Respondents reported they feel that routines and protocols are now established, and there is an **increasing sense of calm** and safety.
5. Respondents reported that some of the **new procedures will continue when the pandemic is over.** For example, they reported that the cohort system seems to be reducing recess behaviour issues.
6. Respondents still have concerns over **attendance** and worry about meeting the needs of students on remote days.

7. **Staff have been very adaptable and flexible, but they are still struggling** somewhat, particularly with increased supervision, lack of peer interactions, reduced instructional time because of new protocols, and the restrictions on their ability to facilitate known effective teaching strategies.
8. Several respondents mentioned that **families are struggling** to balance work when a child needs to learn from home because of health guidelines. For some families, this involves **stress over meeting basic needs**.
9. Respondents mentioned several areas of concern. These include the need to be able to support teachers for remote days, increasing consistency between schools, addressing food insecurity, some class sizes that are still large, and addressing increased stress and anxiety by minimizing new initiatives and focusing on wellness and community.

K – Grade 8 Findings

The first question in the survey asked respondents to select whether their school was K-6, K-8, or a High School. Only one respondent selected K-6, so those have been included in the K-8 findings. A total of 20 respondents fell into these categories.

1. In response to a question about how they are feeling during the first eight weeks back to school, most respondents felt positive (7.9 average, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent). They felt students (7.9) and parents (7.8) were positive, and staff were slightly less positive (6.8).
2. The most challenging aspects of the first eight weeks back to school for K-6 and K-8 were revising policies and procedures (75%) and providing strategic direction (70%). Other challenges included managing the new workload for staff, staying current with constant changes, and connecting with students. One respondent wrote, “There’s very little traffic in hallways, and I don’t feel right walking into classes when space is at a premium.”
3. The most successful aspect of the first eight weeks back to school was overseeing facilities (40.00%) and revising policies and procedures (35.00%) Other responses included praise for the resilience of students and staff, and the importance of relationships. One respondent wrote, “The students have been so resilient and adaptable. Our staff have been flexible and adaptable. Overall we have had a good start-up to our school year.”
4. In response to a question about what has been going well, K-6 and K-8 leaders said that routines have been going well and are causing fewer behaviour issues. One respondent wrote, “Some staff have welcomed some of the changes and feel they should stay as part of our normal routine and policies.” Another wrote, “People are making the best of a challenging situation.” Many wrote specific policies that they feel are successful, such as staggered entries and exits, distancing, smaller class sizes, in-person learning, playground zones, etc. One respondent wrote, “There has been a high level of positivity in returning to the school setting from remote learning. Staff and students have been very respectful about hygiene and the importance of following health orders. Students were extremely happy to see friends and staff. Parents were equally happy to have their children back at school.”

5. In response to a question about challenges, K-6 and K-8 leaders reported feeling a need for communal time, stress from trying to support the extra load carried by their staff and themselves, and dealing with absences. One respondent wrote, “Nothing is automatic. Every decision requires time and is multi-faceted.”

6. In response to what might be an achievable change that could make things better, respondents noted the need to focus on wellness for staff, students, and families/communities. One wrote, “During a global pandemic we must take care of one another, and this has been a focus of the Brandon School Division. Although this is not a ‘change,’ I think this needs to continue to ensure success at all levels.” Other respondents desired clarity on issues like parent/teacher interviews, recess, and supervision, or for consistency around things like sports, and events, which may change between schools and the city or province. Respondents also mentioned the need for more time and flexibility with resource allocation, full-time subs for each school, minimizing new initiatives, and smaller class sizes in the middle years. Planning ahead was also mentioned, particularly with experimenting ways to provide learning for students who are absent.

High School Findings

The first question in the survey asked respondents to select whether their school was K-6, K-8, or a High School. A total of six respondents represented high schools.

1. In response to a question about how they are feeling during the first eight weeks back to school, most respondents felt positive (7.7 average, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent). They felt students were positive (7.5), whereas parents (6.8) and staff (7.0) were slightly less positive.
2. The most challenging aspect of the first eight weeks back to school was providing strategic direction (66.67%). Other challenges included revising policies and procedures (50%), overseeing facilities (50%), staying on top of changing information, and engaging students to attend.
3. The most successful aspects of the first eight weeks back to school were overseeing facilities (80.00%) and providing strategic direction (80%). The fact that these responses were listed as both successful and challenging aspects speaks to the complexities involved. Other responses included modeling calmness and reassuring community members. One respondent wrote, “BSD has done so much to address the concerns related to Covid. I appreciate that from a personal point of view but also enables me to reassure parents that every measure has been taken to ensure the safety of their child.”
4. In response to a question about what has been going well, high school leaders said that there is an increasing sense of normalcy and that students and staff are adjusting well to the new procedures. One respondent noted that student engagement during remote learning days is much higher than the remote learning in the spring.
5. In response to a question about challenges, high school leaders reported concerns with attendance and managing student engagement on remote days. One respondent reported that, “Some students prefer an all-or-nothing approach; multiple students have said they wish it was all remote or all in-class.” Respondents also mentioned stress levels, as well as difficulty in letting go of things that supported a sense of community in the past, such as meals together and other ways of connecting.

6. In response to what might be an achievable change that could make things better, respondents noted the need to focus on practices to improve students' ability to engage during remote learning. Others mentioned addressing food insecurity and addressing the additional stress levels of staff and community members. One participant wrote, "These are not the same days as we lived a year ago, and they may not return to that for another year or two. In the meantime, we all carry the extra stress. Please let us focus on the things that are essential. I would hate to see staff burning out or going out on stress leave."

K-8 and High School Comparisons

- When compared to the high school responses, principals, students, and parents in K-8 are feeling better than those in high schools, but **staff are feeling worse in K-8**. Principals and school leaders of K-8 reported feeling slightly better (7.74 average, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent) than high school principals and leaders (7.67). The same trend was seen about how students are feeling in K-8 (7.84) and high school (7.50), and for parents (7.74 in K-8; 6.83 in high school). The trend was reversed for staff (7.0 for high school; 6.74 for K-8). One reason for this may be the struggle to facilitate known effective teaching strategies in the early years or the additional stresses of washroom breaks, hand sanitizing, reminders, etc.
- As expected, **high school principals and leaders were more concerned about attendance** and ensuring engagement with remote learning.
- Both groups had concerns about **supporting staff members** and **staying abreast of current changes**.
- Relationships and the importance of community-building was mentioned more at the K-8 levels in response to the question about current challenges; however, both groups did mention the **importance of community** throughout the comments.
- The **positive aspects** of new policies and procedures (reduced behavioural issues because of the cohort system, for example) were more a focus in K-8 levels.

- Both groups mentioned a sense of **positive forward motion** – increased calm, willingness to adjust to new routines, and lower anxiety as the weeks progress.
- Addressing well-being, including **stress loads on staff**, was mentioned by both groups.

Recommendations

The information gathered through this survey provides clarity and an increased understanding of the realities faced by parents/caregivers due to the current Covid-19 pandemic. It may be useful in identifying and prioritizing goals and in planning effective supports for families at home. To assist BSD in this process, the following recommendations are offered.

Recommendations for BSD

- **Celebrate Successes.** These days have been stressful and full of change, anxiety, and complex concerns. However, respondents shared that in general, their school communities are adapting and working together to do the best they can amidst a pandemic. One participant wrote, “Routines are well established and everyone is following them. All partners have been cooperative and patient during this time. Everyone seems to be working together and helping one another out where needed.” The theme of praise for staff, students, and parents doing their best and adjusting well was seen throughout the survey responses.
- **Strengthen Relationships.** A common thread through the survey responses was that of the importance of community and strong relationships. This was mentioned as both a success and a challenge. Finding ways to strengthen relationships in an online environment for students on remote days was identified as an important task ahead.
- **Address Concerns.** Attendance for high school during remote learning was a big concern, as was consistency between schools. Addressing mental health concerns such as increased stress and anxiety were also commonly raised issues.

Recommendations for Future Research

What are the policies and procedures that are worthwhile to keep after Covid-19 is over, and why?

Several respondents mentioned reduced behavioural issues or teachers reporting a desire to keep some of the new policies and procedures.

Documenting these changes and why they are effective may lead to better future instructional strategies and supports.

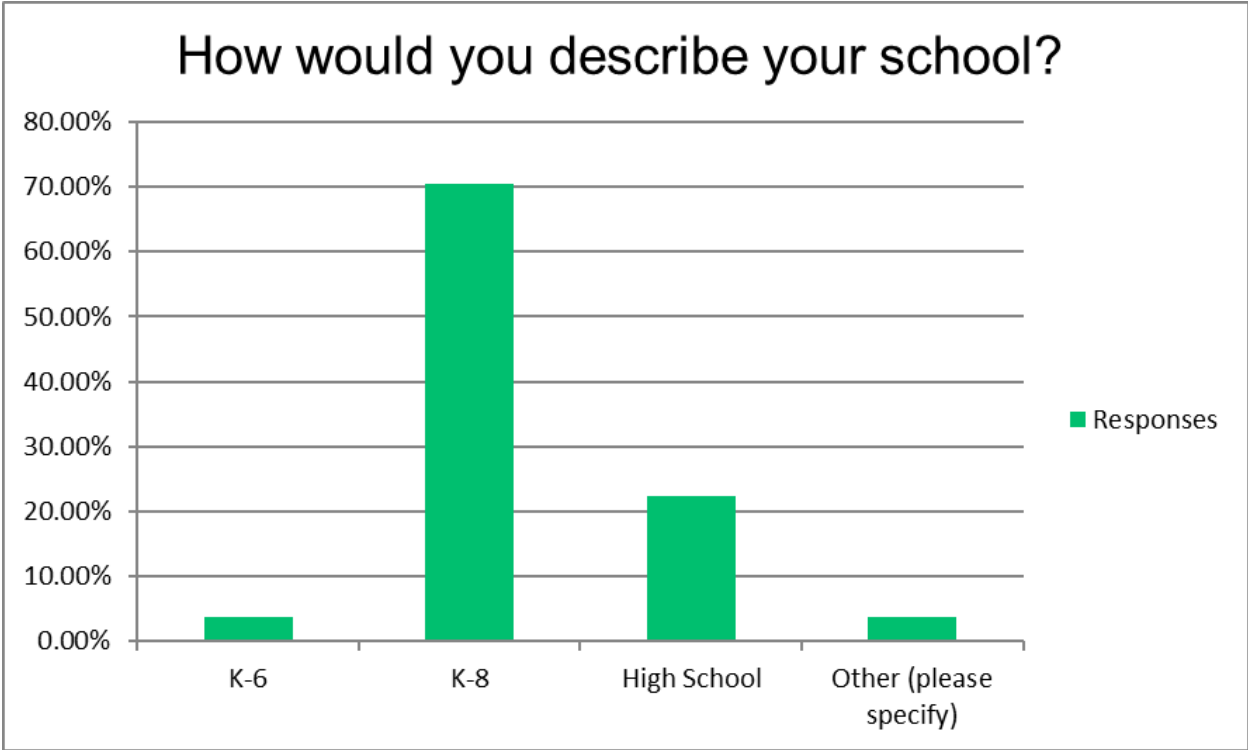
What are the best practices for remote online learning for high school students?

High school leaders report challenges with engagement and attendance on remote learning days. Exploring what is working well for remote online learning would help decision making in the future.

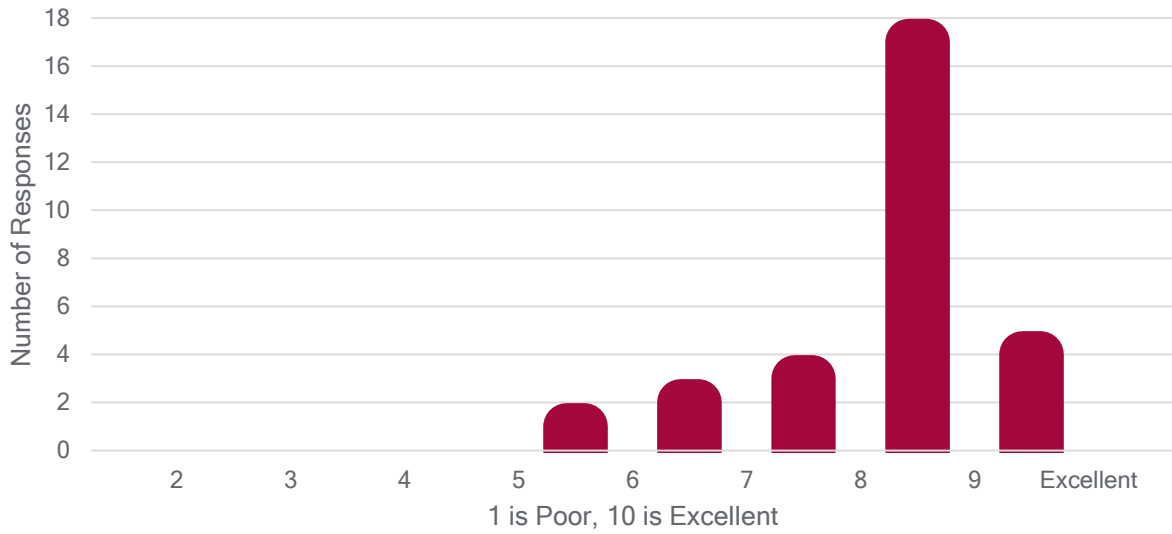
How can leaders foster the school community in the midst of pandemic restrictions?

Many respondents reported on the importance of relationships and community. While they were happy to be back in-person, and to re-establish relationships, they also reported challenges with online learning and the restrictions of safety precautions. With many of the old community-building activities no longer possible, a compilation of creative Covid-safe activities designed to build stronger relationships might be useful.

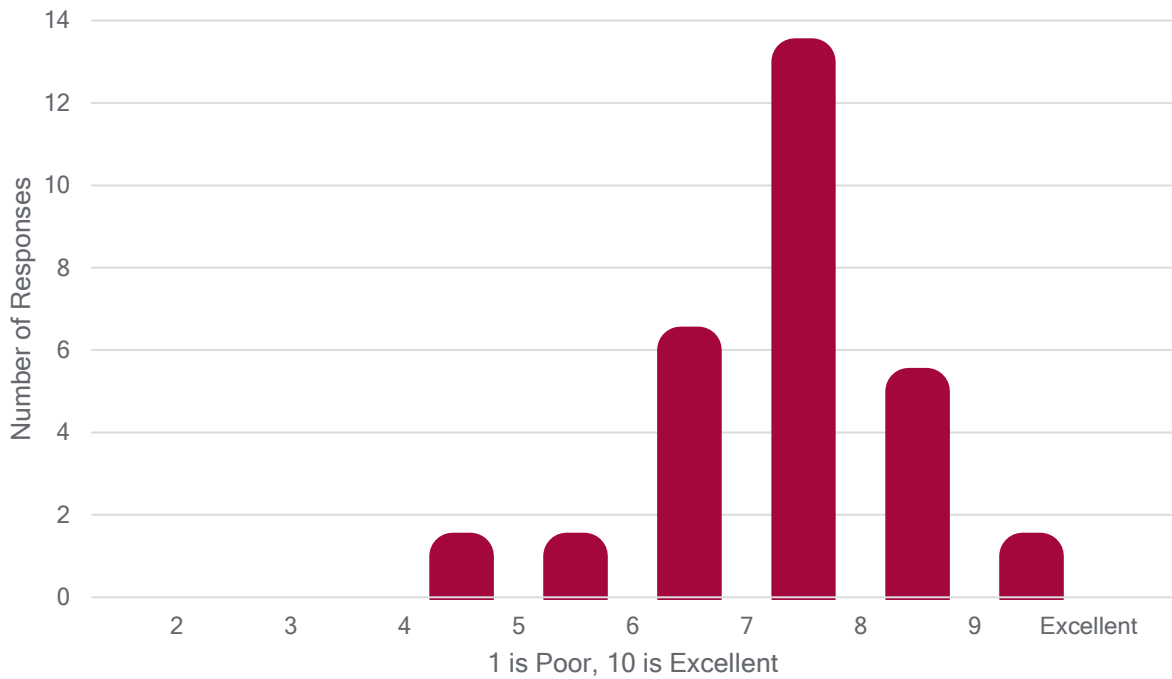
Appendix A: Survey Results



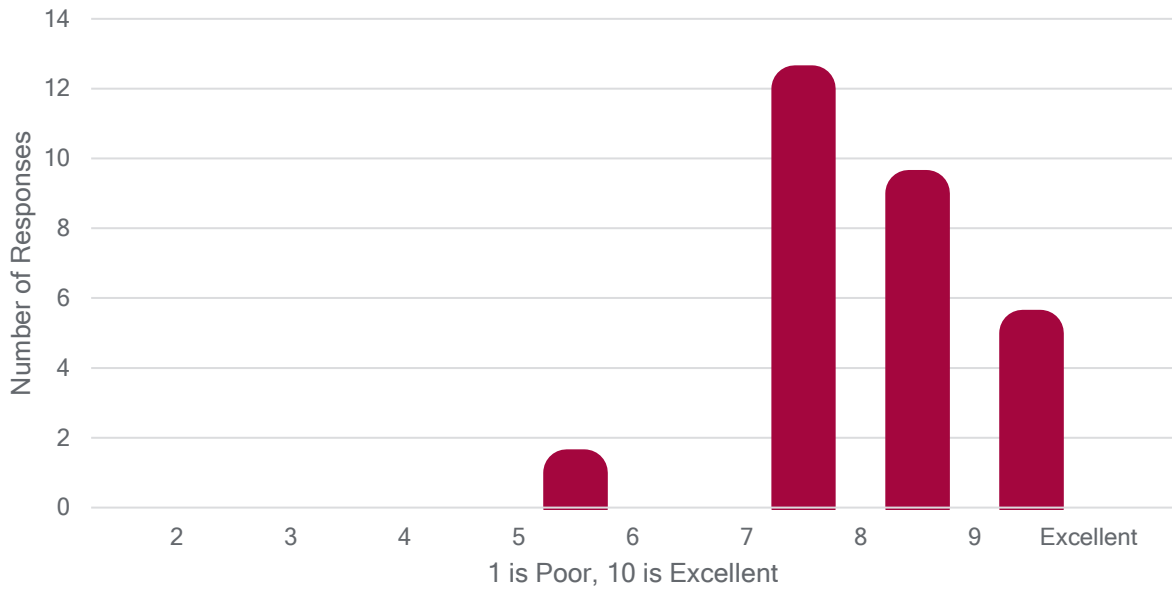
On a scale of 1-10, how do you think your students are feeling about the first 8 weeks back to school during Covid-19?



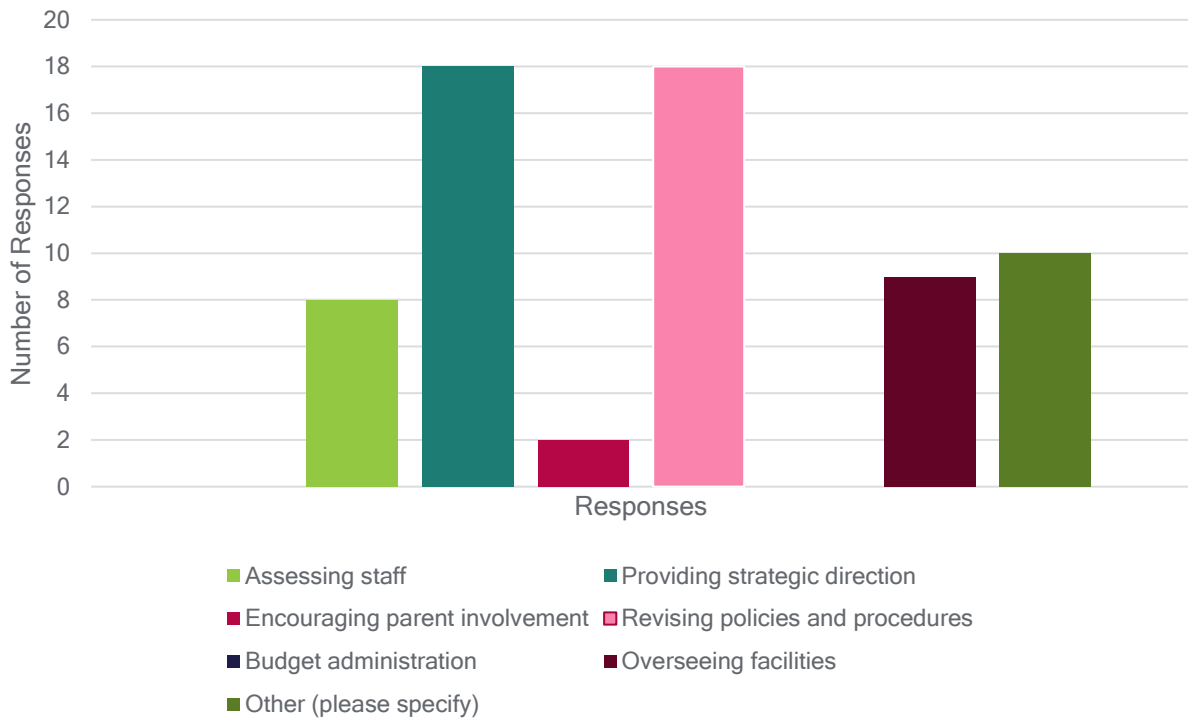
On a scale of 1-10, how do you think your staff are feeling about the first 8 weeks back to school during Covid-19?



On a scale of 1-10, how do you think parents are feeling about the first 8 weeks back to school during Covid-19?



What has been the most challenging aspect of your job during the first 8 weeks of back to school during Covid-19? (Select the top 3)



What has been the most successful aspect of your job during the first 8 weeks of back to school during Covid-19?
(Select the top 3)

