Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee

November 5, 2020 Report to the Howard County Board of Education

**SECAC Statement of Purpose:**

The Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR 13A.05.02.13I) requires the following for a Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee (SECAC):

(1) Each local school system shall establish a special education citizens advisory committee to advise the local school system on the needs of students with disabilities within the jurisdiction.

(2) The Department shall annually allocate federal funds to each local school system to support the activities of the local special education citizen advisory committee.

(3) Each local school system shall submit a budget for the use of federal funds, consistent with §C(1)(a) of this regulation.

Each SECAC is given a grant of $2,500 each year to support such activities. SECAC has used funding primarily to support parent advocacy and training, and educational sessions for parents to learn more about the process and laws of Special education, reading interventions, etc.

**SECAC Purpose:** The Howard County Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee (SECAC) advises the school system on the needs of students with disabilities. We collaborate with other community disability advocacy groups to improve special education and the lives of our students in Howard County, MD.

**Membership:** Due to COVID-19, we have transitioned our general meetings to an online platform beginning in May 2020 which allows for more parents to attend and engage with our Department of Special Education staff. We had over 100 participants in our May general membership meeting which informed us that parents appreciated the online access. We will continue our advocacy through online means for as long as it is needed.

**Background Information:** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law that makes available “a **free appropriate public education** to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

A **Free Appropriate Public Education** means special education and related services that are: (a) provided at public expense; (b) meet the standards of the State Education Agency; (c) include an appropriate education; and (d) are provided in conformity with an IEP that meets the student’s needs that result from the disability to enable the student to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum. (34 CFR §300.17).

The Maryland State Department of Education has issued a number of Technical Assistance Bulletins or TABs related to serving special education students during the pandemic. TAB

#20-01 issued on March 30, 2020 titled “SERVING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES UNDER IDEA DURING SCHOOL CLOSURES DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC” states

The United States Department of Education (DOE) has issued multiple guidance documents:

[Non-Regulatory Guidance on Flexibility and Waivers for Grantees and Program Participants Impacted by Federally Declared Disasters](https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/disasters/disaster-guidance.pdf)

[Questions and Answers on Providing Services to Children with Disabilities During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Outbreak (March 2020)](https://sites.ed.gov/idea/idea-files/q-and-a-providing-services-to-children-with-disabilities-during-the-coronavirus-disease-2019-outbreak/)

[Supplemental Fact Sheet Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Schools While Serving Children with Disabilities](https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/rr/policyguidance/Supple%20Fact%20Sheet%203.21.20%20FINAL.pdf)

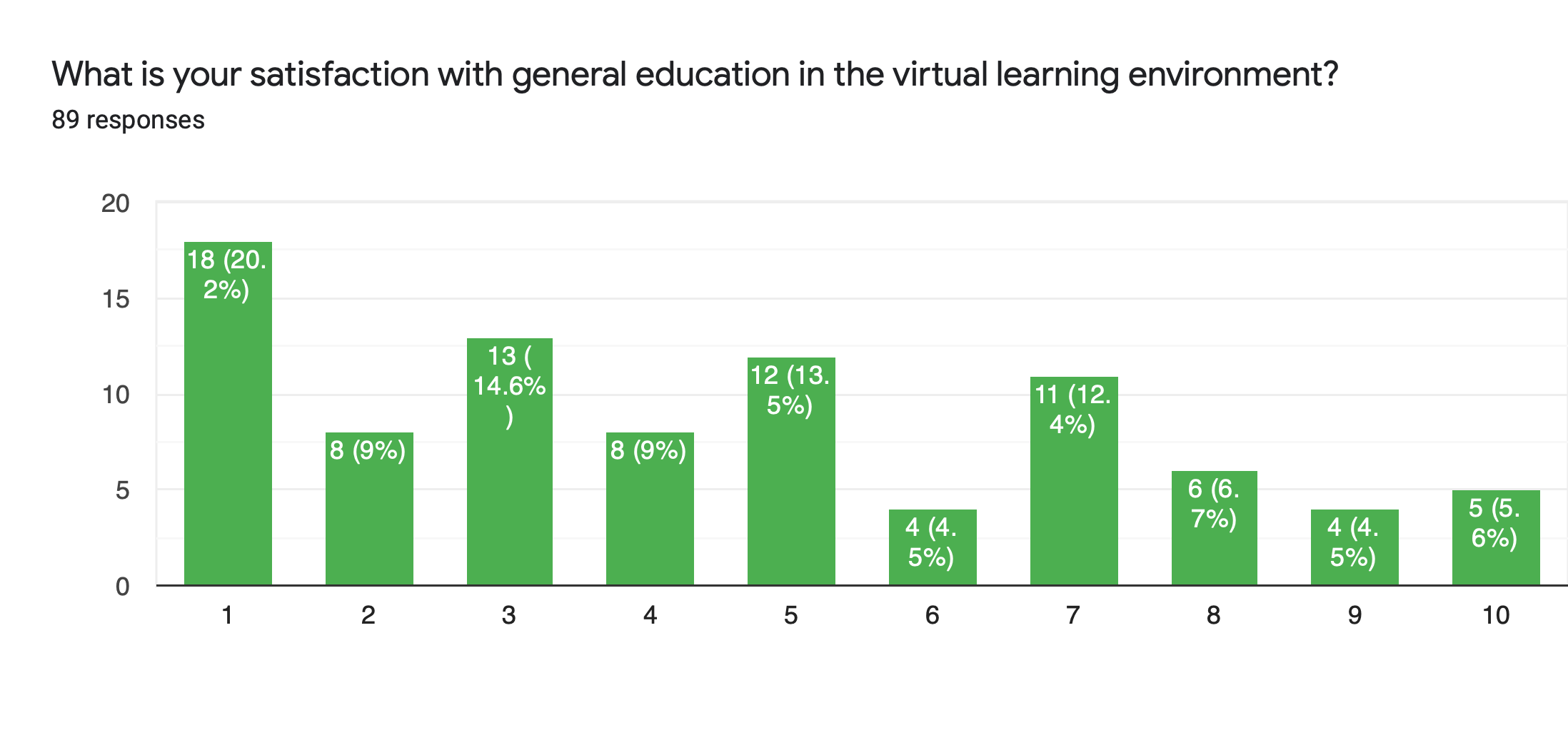
These federal guidance documents are clear **that the national health crisis does not abridge the rights of students with disabilities to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and equal opportunity to educational services as their non-disabled peers, as required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504), and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).**

[**http://marylandpublicschools.org/programs/Documents/Special-Ed/TAB/20-01-ServingchildrenunderCOVID-19Pandemic.pdf**](http://marylandpublicschools.org/programs/Documents/Special-Ed/TAB/20-01-ServingchildrenunderCOVID-19Pandemic.pdf)

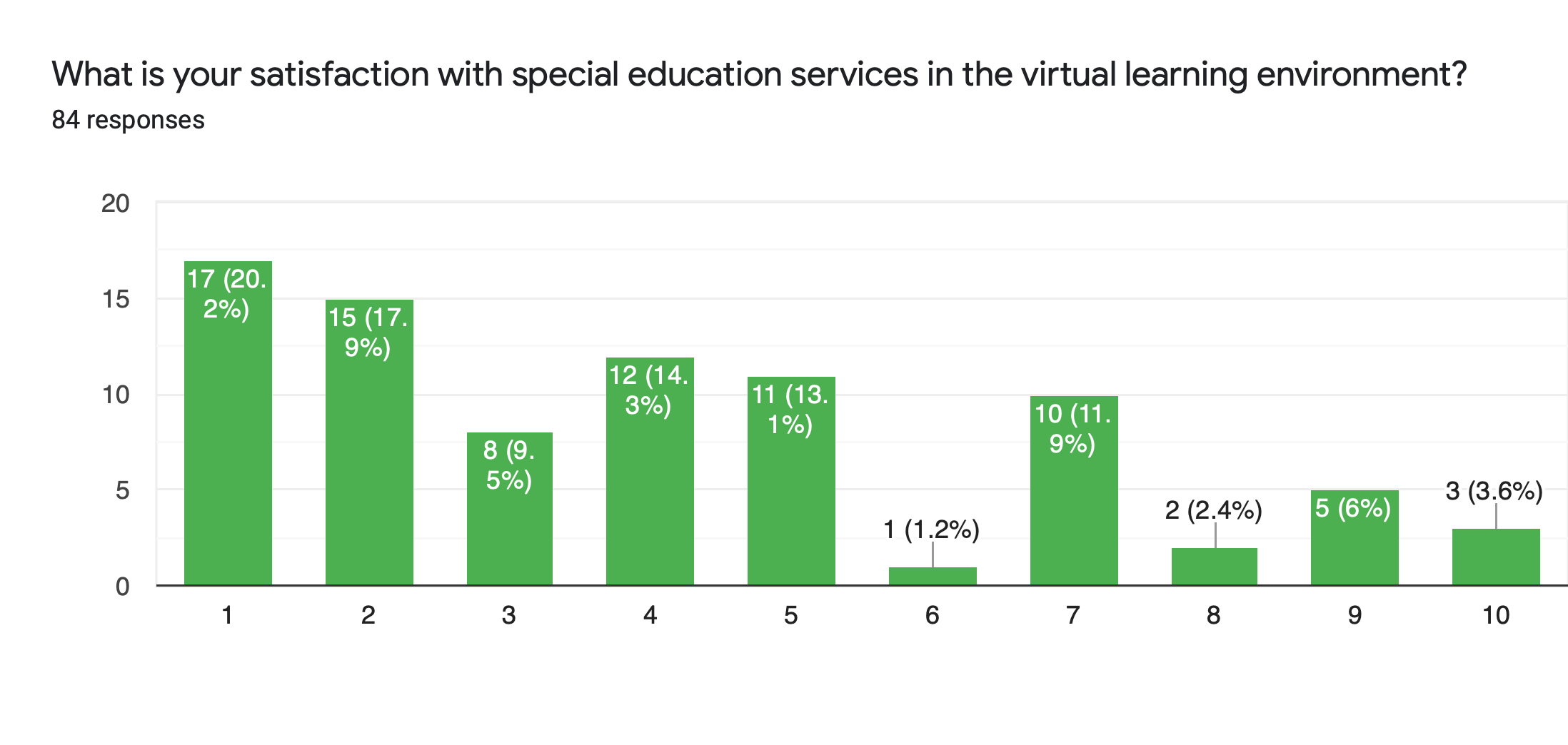
**Parent Perspective:** We are in the midst of a national health pandemic with wide-reaching repercussions and long-term economic, social, and educational impacts. SECAC surveyed families from our SECAC membership, social media followers and families of students with IEPS through the Family Support and Resource mailing list about their experience with virtual learning. Ninety-one families responded as of this writing. The majority of respondents had students at the elementary school level.

Questions centered around family (work status, use of childcare, use of supplemental services); navigating technology; overall satisfaction with general education, special education, and related services; satisfaction with the school system (evaluations, ASDM, IEP team, in-person learning); and concerns about social-emotional development. Families were provided a section to further comment about their experience. Overall, most families were unhappy with what is being provided to their child with disabilities from both general and special education.

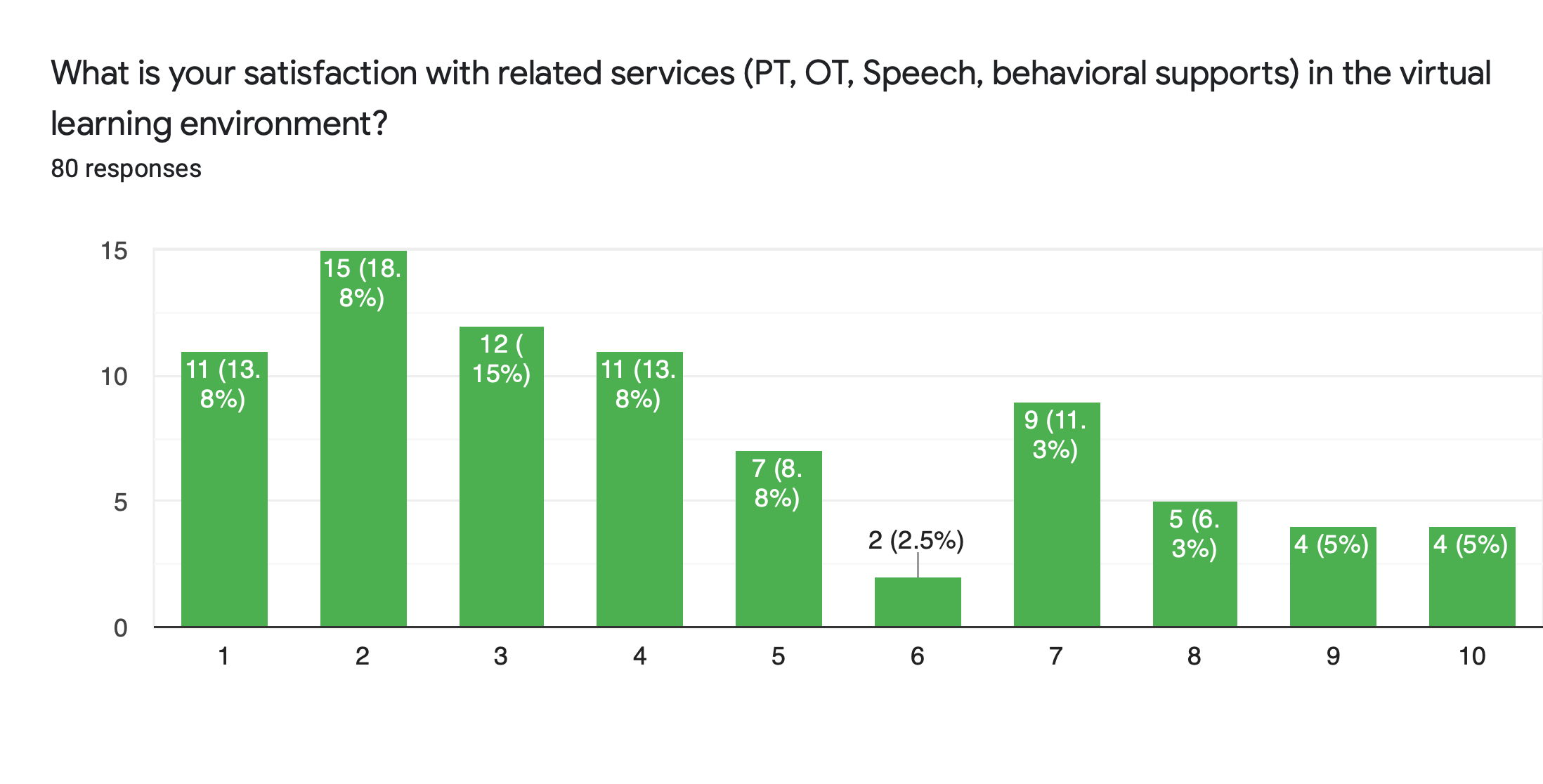
Satisfaction with general education, special education and related services are rated on a 1-10 scale with 1 being the least satisfied and 10 being the most satisfied. The weighted average for these were 4.5 (general education), 4 (special education) and 4.3 (related services) respectfully.

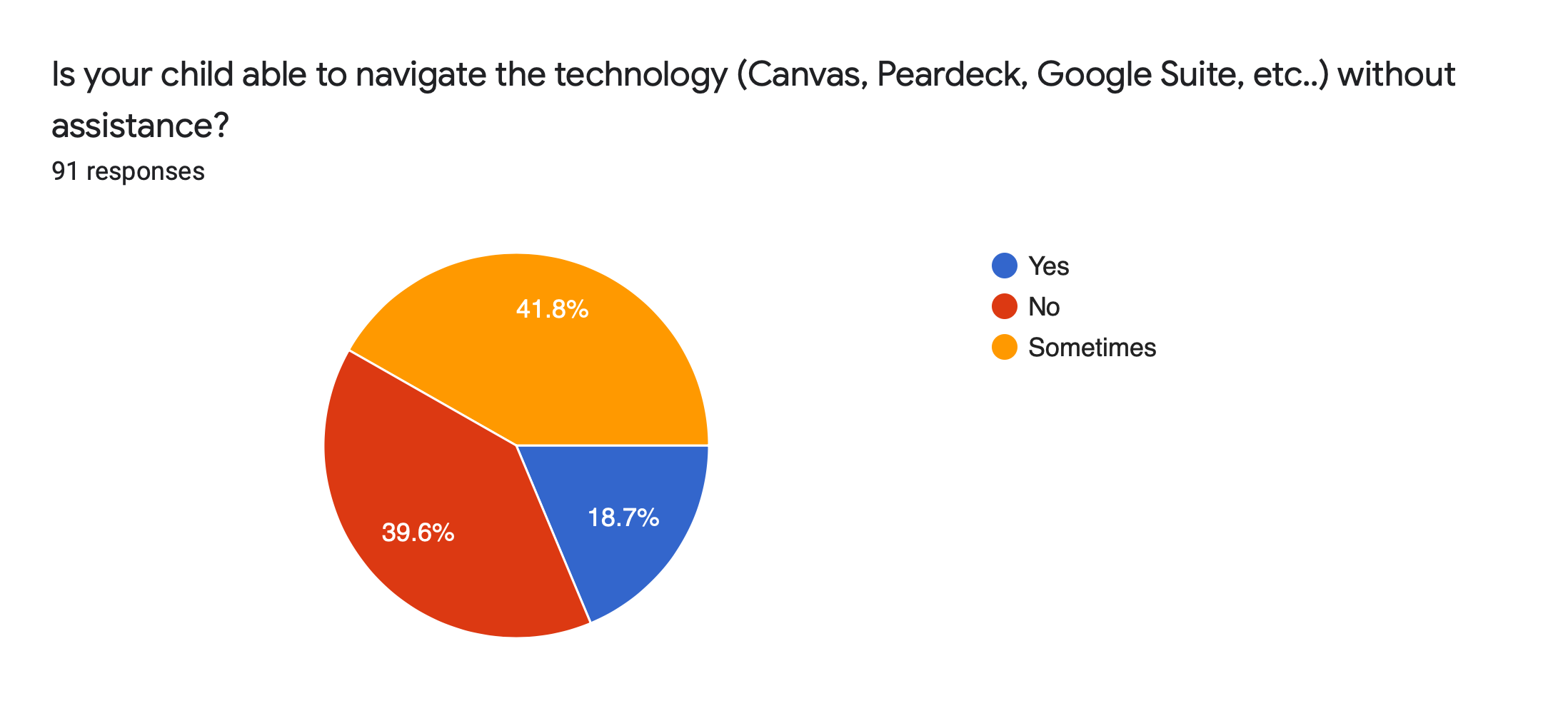
Results for satisfaction with general education reveal that 20.2% of parents were not satisfied at all (rated 1), 32.5% were not satisfied to some degree (rated 2-4), 16% were satisfied to some extent (rated 7-9), and 5.6% were satisfied (rated 10) with the general education being given to their child. 

Results for satisfaction with special education revealed 20.2% of parents were not satisfied at all (rated 1), 17% were not satisfied to some degree (rated 2-4) , 20.3% were satisfied to some extent (rated 7-9) and 3.6% were satisfied (rated 10) with special education services. The graph below indicates more than half of the parents were not satisfied with special education.

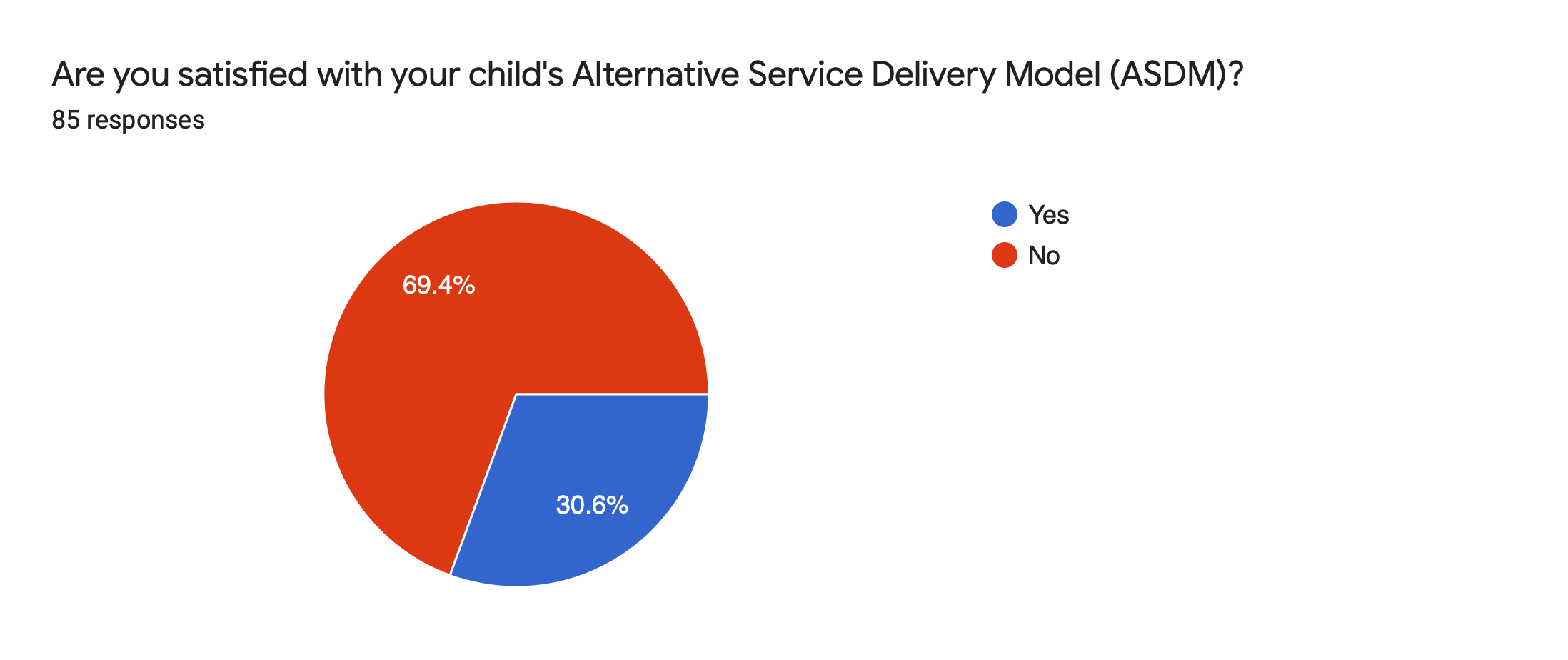


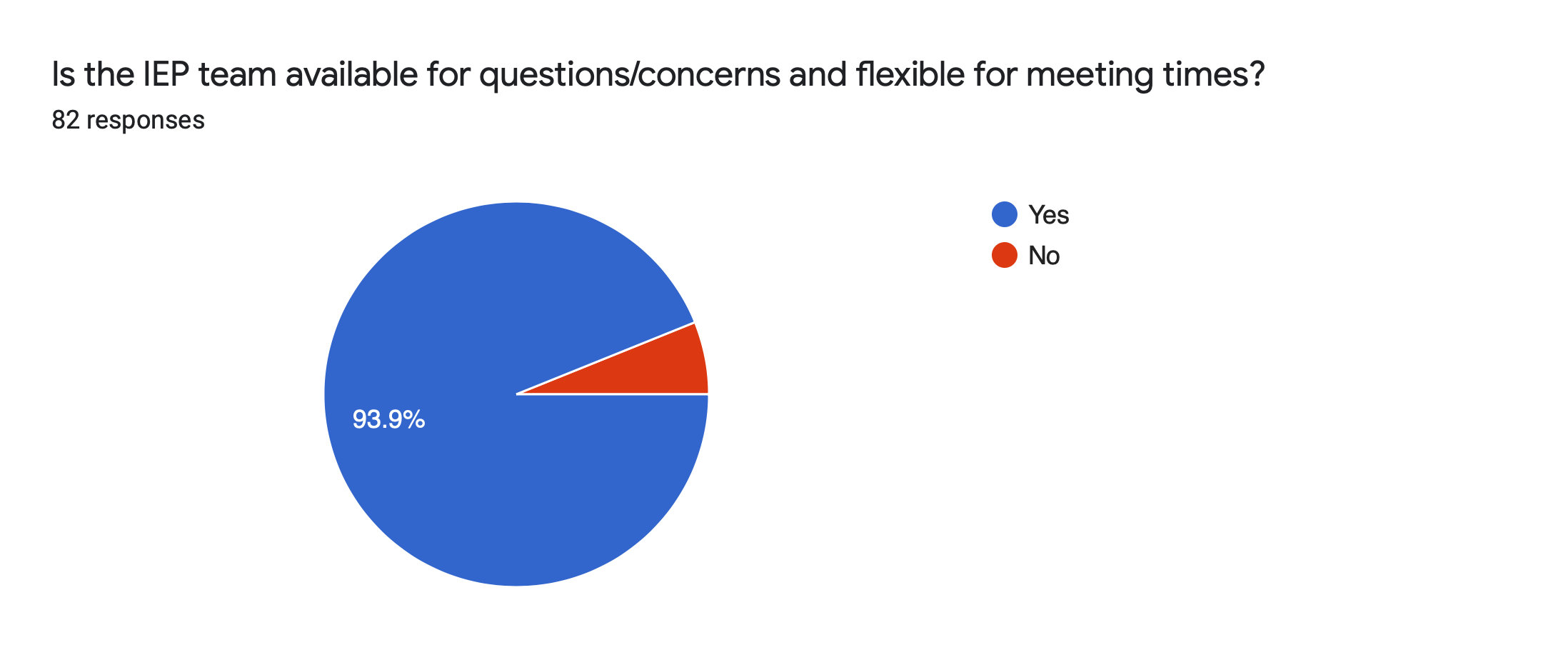
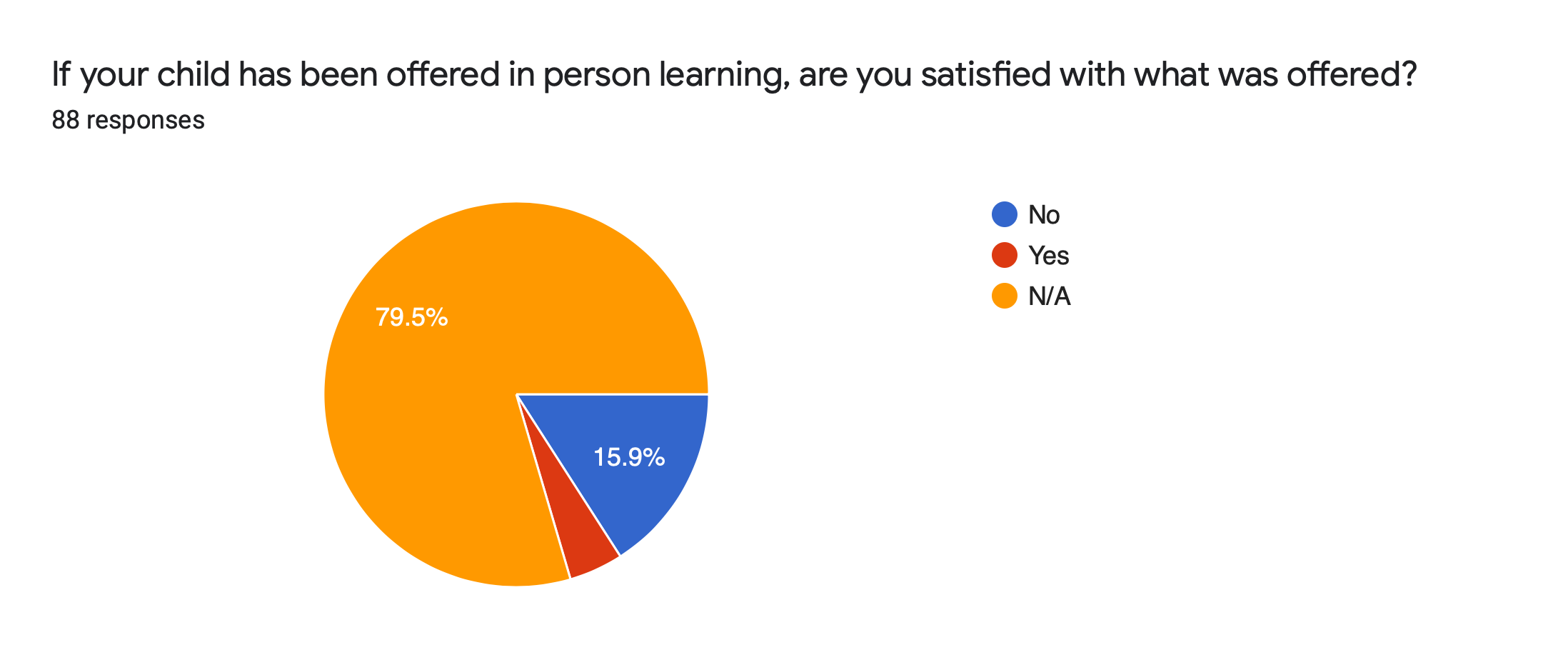
Results for satisfaction with related services reveal 13.8% of parents are not satisfied (rated 1), 31% are dissatisfied to some degree (rated 2-4), 10% were satisfied to some degree (rated 7-9), and 5% were satisfied (rated 10) with related services. Again, majority of parents indicated they were unsatisfied with related services as indicated on their IEPs.



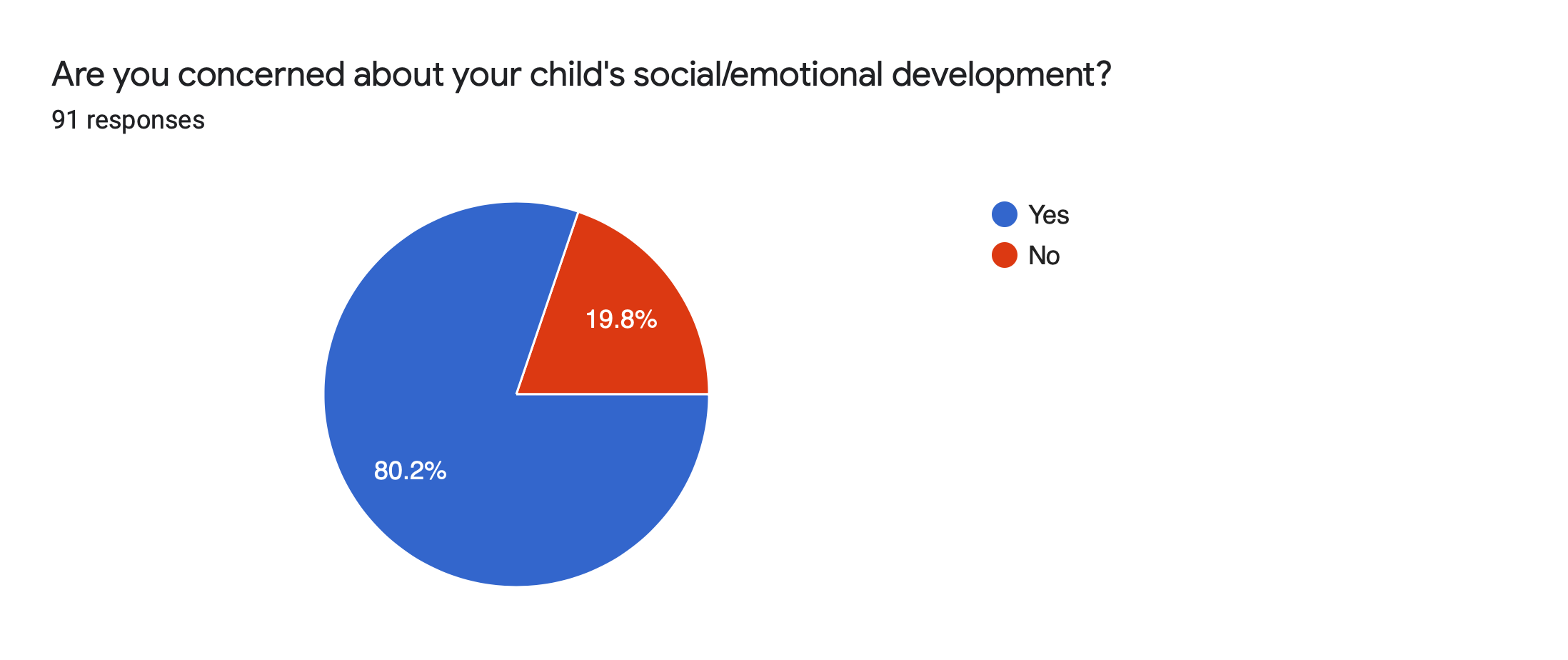
Other results reveal that only 18.7% of families said their student was able to navigate the technology independently. 

Almost 70% of families are not satisfied with their ASDM but 94% report that their IEP team is available for questions and flexible on meeting times. While families are not satisfied with the services not being provided in accordance with their child’s “Brick and Mortar” IEP, they are satisfied with the team members trying to meet their needs over concerns and meeting times.

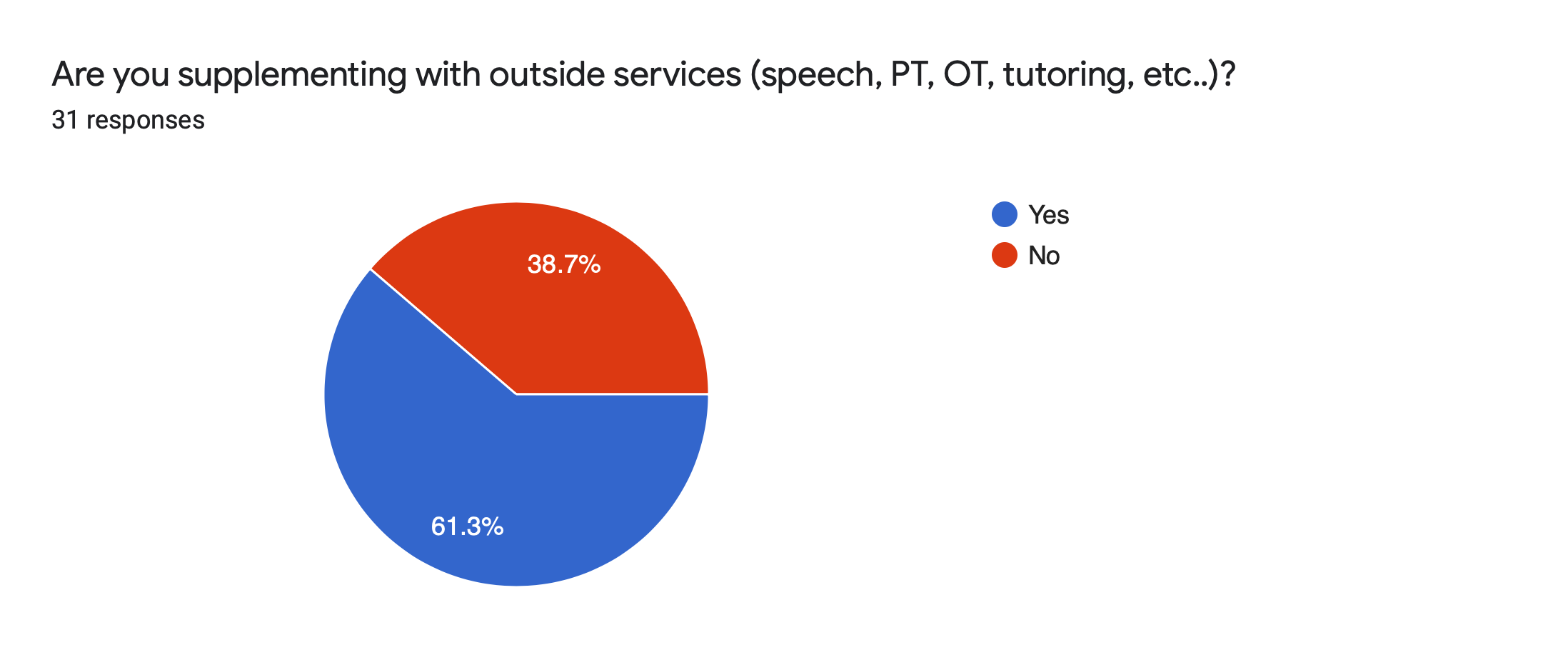


The chart below indicates that only 20.5% (18 respondents) were offered in person, face to face learning. Of those 18, 77.8% were not satisfied with what was offered. 

A little over 80% of our families are worried about their child’s social and emotional development.



Over 60% of families are supplementing online learning with outside, privately paid services such as speech, occupational and physical therapies, tutoring, etc…



Additional Information: Of the 91 families who completed the survey, 99% indicated that one or more adults in the household are working outside the home or telecommuting full time (working from home but online). Many responded that two or more are working outside the home or telecommuting. Roughly 7% said they are using a childcare center where their children are accessing virtual learning. About 20% are waiting for an evaluation completed by the school district.

SECAC received 74 additional comments about virtual learning. The majority of families are overwhelmed, concerned about the amount of schoolwork, amount of screen time, lack of supports, their child’s behavior, retention of knowledge, etc. A number were glad to have a virtual option due to health concerns and a few had positive experiences.

Qualitative data reveal parent anecdotes:

“Teachers are doing a great job. My kids are learning. Perhaps too many assignments in middle school related arts classes.” - parent of 3 children (6th, 8th and 12th)

“I am super grateful for the teachers and related service providers who are working so hard within the constraints upon them during virtual learning. Though I was surveyed about my child returning to school for “face to face” instruction, I am more than happy to keep my child home to learn virtually until it is safe to return.“

“We have experienced 2 worlds. In elementary, the special ed staff has been communicative and as helpful as they can be given the limitations….. The middle school experience was the complete opposite. After reaching out before school started, we have been met with nothing but obstacles and refusals by teaching staff….. We ended up withdrawing our 6th grader from HCPSS….. Had the school offered recordings of lessons to be viewed outside of school hours or adapted attendance policies, he likely would have been able to participate in HCPSS but the Board of Ed and Superintendent did not leave any other options for non-traditional students. A failure on their part to support our kids.”

“This experience has been a living nightmare for parents of young SpEd students…. Even the decision to not record classes is a hit to SpEd students. Especially, given that recordings are broadly used across the country. It's also the least equitable decision.”

“I have a kindergartner with Autism and a 3 year old in the RECC program, both non-verbal. Both of my kids cannot access the content. They need assistance for every class including assignments on asynchronous days. My child with Autism cannot write sentences or draw, everything is done hand over hand by myself or his grandmother….My ASD child’s behavior is awful and getting worse, just way too much screen time. I see him falling more and more behind and it’s upsetting.”

“The workload is too much. I believe it is also hard for teachers to see when students are becoming overwhelmed and can accommodate that in some way. My student has been in tears during lessons many times. In a regular classroom the teacher or para would have been able to intervene/help before they become too overwhelmed…. My student receives his special ed hours at the very end of the day, and therefore is tired and ready for the day to be over.” – 2nd grade parent

“The virtual groups highlight his disability and none of his strengths; the presence of “peers” exacerbates this.”

“It is not catering to our child’s needs or IEP. As a parent, I must be a full time in-person aide. I adore his providers but with virtual learning they are unable to meet his needs and provide his services.” – 4th grade parent

“Virtual learning does not work for special education students…..He is receiving speech therapy virtually but does not receive the occupational therapy in his IEP. We’ve been offered consult services by his OT, but honestly with 3 kids at home and a husband working outside the home since March, I do not have the time or energy to become an occupational therapist also. Virtual education is a complete failure for special education and HCPSS needs to get these kids back in school asap, long before February. We asked for our son to be included in small groups, but were told that he will not be included in the program at his school due to staff availability……We are in the process of getting our home ready to sell in order to leave this county and get our kids into a school system that is actually making progress towards reopening schools.” – 11th grade parent

“Small group instruction shouldn’t interfere with instruction. It should supplement.” – 10thgrade parent

“Main concern is with lack of peer interaction…... We are paying for an adult to help our son navigate online school since I am teaching. I did not want to take a leave of absence. I am fully aware that this is not an option for many parents with kids with special needs.. - parent of an 11th grader

“We are all failing.”

Most parents are overwhelmed with their child’s virtual learning and disappointed in what is being offered in the way of FAPE during the pandemic. They feel their children are not getting the services they need, struggling academically and emotionally, and those offered in person learning find it wanting. Parents feel the lack of an in-person option is causing harm that could take years to undo. SECAC recommends that decisions for in-person learning allow for parental input and transparency so families and stakeholders can be confident their students’ safety and education are being prioritized along with families who opt to continue with virtual learning.

**Priorities and Concerns:**

1. As stated in the July 9, 2020 SECAC report to the Board of Education, due to COVID-19, parents have had to become their child’s teacher, special educator, paraprofessional, speech therapist, occupational therapist, and other support staff. Parents not only feel the strain of this undertaking, but also noted the lack of progress and regression since the March school closing. Parents are aware that they may ask the school team for compensatory services. Compensatory services can be provided by schools if the IEP team determines there was a negative impact on the student due to the loss of their Free Appropriate Public Education. Under the IDEA, the Local School System “is responsible for providing a student with a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). 1 During this period of extended school closure and reopening, the FAPE obligation includes: (1) reviewing the appropriateness of the IEP in effect when a change in service delivery model occurs or when student progress monitoring indicates a lack of progress, AND (2) addressing the need for compensatory education/recovery services if there is a loss of FAPE.”[[2]](#footnote-2) School systems still have an obligation to provide a student with a FAPE and the student may be entitled to remedial services. We anticipate many students will require compensatory services once schools are opened. This may stretch an already tight budget in needing more support staff, teachers, tools and devices, and evaluations. This may also require the school system to provide compensatory services in the summer months and increase enrollment in ESY .
2. SECAC supports the continued professional development of teachers and educational staff working with diverse learners to ensure an equitable and appropriate education.

a) Howard County is screening kindergarteners this year by reading

specialists. Some reading specialists were unable to provide their services during

this time period due to the high number of students. One of the next steps is to

train all elementary general educators, speech language pathologists, and special

educators in the methodology of Structured Literacy. HCPSS began this process with the training of personnel in February and the initial 30 hours of Orton-Gillingham (OG) training of 132 staff members including reading specialists and special educators. SECAC and Decoding Dyslexia (DDHOCO) recommend that reading specialists and special educators the necessary level of training that includes 60 hours of OG training and a 100 hours of practicum in order to sit for the CERI (Center for Effective Reading Instruction) exam and become certified as an interventionist.

\* Almost 80% of SWD are educated in the general education setting. The

majority of those have Specific Learning Disability (SLD) or Other Health Impairment (OHI) to include ADHD. In addition to OG training, a parallel training, especially for secondary general education teachers, in the academic and behavioral issues associated with SLD (Dyslexia, Dysgraphia in particular) and ADHD, along with the executive functioning deficits will increase these students’ ability to achieve, progress, and reach their potential.

b) Appropriate behavior and safety training for all applicable staff particularly a

safety care class completed by those who work in self-contained classes and/or

with our most vulnerable students who display behaviors. Educating staff members on how to de-escalate a situation and know how to provide proper

restraints are imperative for the safety of our students as well as staff members.

c) Disabilities do not discriminate based on race, religion, socio-economic status,

nor sexual preference or identity. Beginning in 2003 and continuing through 2020, SECAC has recommended disability training for all educators including administrators and general educators, plus Central Office and bus drivers. Additionally SECAC is recommending that Policy 1080 align with the MSDE Educational Equity policy or COMAR 13A.01.06[[3]](#footnote-3), that states local school systems are to provide “access and opportunity for all students to successfully read on level by the end of grade 2”. SECAC is looking forward to continuing collaboration with the Department of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in providing a special education voice.

d) Lack of small group offerings in person instruction at select schools due to low staff availability. In the beginning of the year, the Department of Special Education surveyed parents to see how students would fare during in person teaching at select schools. While there are some students with disabilities who are participating in these in person instructional days, the majority of those parents who selected this option were not offered a spot for their student. Parents were told there was no staff availability at a school near them. Roughly 80% of parents are interested in students returning to in-person, small group instruction, yet only 21% of staff are interested in returning.

We thank you for listening to our report

1. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Retrieved from <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Recovery Efforts: Addressing the Provision of FAPE through Alternative Service Delivery Models for Students with Disabilities during the Re-Opening of Schools. MSDE Technical Assistance Bulletin. 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/Documents/12042018/TabE-13A.04.05EducationMulticultural13A.01.06EducationalEquity.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)