Back to school looks very different this year

Back to school can often look different state by state and school district by school district, but one thing we know is this year's back to school season will not be anything like what we have seen in the past. With COVID-19 cases increasing across the United States, states and local school districts are responding in various ways. Some are requiring masks and moving desks six feet apart, some are staggering days children come in person and many are opting to go fully virtual. Search is unique in that search queries offer a unique view into the people's sentiment and what is top of mind. When it comes to back to school, with all these unknowns about the new school year, parents and teachers are turning to search to get advice, look for answers, shop for materials and find humor through the uncertainty. Here are some of the trends we are seeing:

What is 'virtual school' anyway?

Online education has been gaining popularity in the past few years, but traditional K-12 education still relied heavily on in-person instruction until COVID-19 rapidly accelerated virtual learning. Between March 1 and August 1, 2020, virtual schooling saw a 238% spike in searches, many of which were specific to geography, with state or school districts comprising most virtual school searches. Parents are trying to understand how virtual school works and how to best help their children succeed while learning virtually.

Do I homeschool?

Parents, students, and teachers have been faced with extraordinary challenges as education suddenly went from in-person to virtual overnight. As schools announce their virtual and in-person plans for the upcoming school year, more parents are researching homeschooling as an option. While parents consider their options for the fall, they are searching for homeschool schedules and curriculums to inform their decisions. Curriculum and schedule-related searches increased **2.9X** from the beginning of July to the first week of August as more schooling plans were announced across the U.S.

At the onset of COVID-19, 'best homeschool' searches spiked as parents were searching for guidance and information on how to best educate their children. They saw another spike in June and July as districts started announcing their back-to-school plans. Overall, 'best homeschool' searches have increased **90x** the volume we saw before the onset of COVID-19.

Help! We need a desk

Many families found that they were not well equipped to have their children take part in school from home. While school transitioned to the home, parents started searching for the supplies necessary to make a virtual or hybrid school experience function at home. Searches for desks, for example, increased quickly over pre-COVID-19 levels. As we get closer to the new school year with many schools continuing to remain virtual, weekly desk searches are up **10X** the volume of early January. While certain categories of school supplies are up, many of the traditional categories are seeing a drop in searches. For example, the first part of August typically sees a spike in backpack searches, and this year the volume is 50% lower than 2019.

This whole school from home thing is hard, I need some humor.

While likely balancing meltdowns, preparing balanced meals and trying to ensure continuity in their children's education, parents have had a difficult time. I've seen a lot of parents in my social media feed sharing funny stories, jokes and memes. The searches we are seeing reflect that as well – parents want to share relatable humor to find relief and connection amidst the pandemic. Searches for homeschool and virtual school memes jumped **45X** the volume at the onset of COVID-19 and now is around **20X** the volume from the beginning of the year.

Is school safe?

In states that are resuming in-person school, parents are wondering what that will look like and if it is safe for their children. They have been researching the risks and cleaning procedures that schools will be following. Searches also show the concern of school-aged children spreading COVID-19 in older family members, with people searching 'should high-risk adults let children go back to school' and 'should I see my grandkids after they go back to school'. We are seeing concern and anxiety in parents' searches as they feel pressured to make the best decision regarding their child's return to school.

What's the impact for advertisers

While the world adapts to a new normal, consumers are turning to search to ask questions and fulfill intent. For back to school season, know that virtual and online schooling is top of mind, and parents are leveraging search to know and do more. As a result, according to Advertiser Perceptions research, marketers are planning to increase their spend this year on digital advertising in the back to school season, while prioritizing eCommerce strategies and flexibility. Advertisers have an opportunity to message parents and reach

them with messaging that relates to that about which they're thinking. Consider how you might adapt your keyword, bid and audience targeting strategy to account for the tapestry of varying school experiences and how those differ by school district. If you're a retailer, consider how shopping campaigns, ad extensions and responsive search ads can help you to get your products in front of parents trying to build the proper school environment at home.

Opinions expressed in this article are those of the guest author and not necessarily Search Engine Land. Staff authors are listed here.

About The Author

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