



## FIRST LOOK BRIEF

# Voices of School District Leaders

## National Survey of Public Education's Response to COVID-19

Dia Jackson | Mike Garet

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The COVID-19 pandemic caused schools across the country to close their buildings, which resulted in millions of students continuing their learning from home and led to sudden shifts in how educators provided instruction, leadership, and support. The American Institutes for Research (AIR) launched a nationally representative survey to better understand how school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs) responded to the pandemic. The National Survey of Public Education's Response to COVID-19 was sent to leaders in 2,500 school districts and 260 CMOs in late May 2020.<sup>1</sup>

In this brief, we preview responses to open-ended questions from districts that responded by June 17. Our hope is that these early results inform future practices of educators, policymakers, and researchers. Because the results are based on early responses, they should be interpreted with caution. However, these early responses provide insight into the wide range of strategies used across districts.

The survey will remain open through mid-August 2020. AIR will provide interim results throughout the summer and continue to roll out findings during the 2020–21 school year.

The survey includes questions about the following topics:

- Timing of school closures due to COVID-19;
- Distance learning approaches and challenges;
- Support for students with disabilities and English learners;
- District policies and requirements, such as grading and graduation;
- Staffing and human resources; and
- Health, well-being, and safety.

The following themes emerged:

- Prioritizing equity,
- Supporting social–emotional needs,
- Building on prior efforts, and
- Cultivating collaboration.

<sup>1</sup> AIR is funding and leading the survey, which is being administered by NORC at the University of Chicago. The survey was sent to school districts in every U.S. state and Washington, DC, as well as CMOs across the country. The sample contains 2,536 districts, stratified by state (for districts in 12 focal states) or region (for districts in the remaining states) and locale (urban, suburban, town, and rural). Within strata, districts were drawn with probability proportional to the square root of enrollment. Large districts were drawn with certainty. The results reported in this brief use design weights adjusted for non-response in the 64 states/regions by locale strata.

The survey asked district and CMO leaders to provide responses to three open-ended questions:

1. As a district/organization, what are the most pressing challenges/concerns you are facing in meeting the needs of the students you serve?
2. What promising approaches/practices are emerging to meet the needs of your students and families?
3. On which topics related to serving students during the COVID-19 pandemic would you most like to exchange ideas with other school districts and CMOs across the country?



This brief focuses on responses to the last two questions. We provide responses that illustrate common sentiments among respondents and innovative approaches.

## Prioritizing equity in access

Many district leaders said their greatest concern during remote instruction was equity in access to instruction, and this has been a concern for many years. School closures brought many of the existing challenges to the surface, and, in some cases, gaps in access were exacerbated during school closures. When asked, “Which topics related to serving students during the COVID-19 pandemic would you most like to exchange ideas with other school districts across the country?”, one leader stated their concern bluntly:

**“Equity within our inequitable educational system. Affirming the diversity of our students. Increasing achievement to remove barriers for our students.”**

Districts thought outside the box to provide instruction to all students, but challenges abound. Specifically, the most vulnerable students and families have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and subsequent school changes. One district described persistent difficulties in meeting the needs of underserved students during the pandemic:

**“Big challenges remain in the implementation of appropriate services for underserved student groups – students with disabilities, EL students, and economically disadvantaged students in our district.”**

However, many districts used innovative approaches to address the issues of technology and internet access. Districts purchased hotspots, distributed laptops and iPads, and even brought Wi-Fi-enabled buses to communities in need. One district wrote:

**“We are extending the Wi-Fi available at schools to include the parking lots and limited surrounding areas.” Another district shared how they attended to families in rural areas:**

**“We are attempting some ‘hotspot’ technology to assist with our rural areas with limited success. For some [families] it is a great expense for limited/unreliable results.”**

Although leaders acknowledge that these are temporary solutions to long-standing disparities, they banded together and employed a number of creative approaches to get students the access they needed.

## Supporting social–emotional needs

Leaders frequently called attention to the increased need for social–emotional supports for students and families. One district described an innovative approach that used technology to motivate and connect with students and provide access to **social–emotional supports**:

**“Our counselors use an app that allows them to use their name or be anonymous, also, [to encourage engagement and motivation] our elementary students earn raffle tickets every time they turn in a work packet. Then there was a huge drawing on Facebook Live during the last week of school.”**

Another district described its approach to addressing **student engagement** called “Every Kid, Every Week:”

**“We have an approach called ‘Every Kid, Every Week,’ which means that we make contact with every single student at least once a week. If they don’t interact with us digitally, then we call. If they don’t take a phone call, then we show up at their house. This approach has helped us learn of some specific needs that students have and also helped us keep our engagement high. They’d rather engage online than have their principal show up at their doorstep.”**



A number of districts found success in the combination of attending to social–emotional needs while also embracing more flexible strategies for academic instruction and a renewed focus on student learning and supports for parents and teachers:

**“(1) [We] prioritize relationships through regular conversations, especially video chat, (2) transition to competency-based assessments, (3) provide flexibility on deadlines with focus on mastery, (4) communicate resources available regularly and loudly.”**

Many districts integrated academic innovations with social–emotional supports while others prioritized social–emotional connection and supports when launching new tools and processes.

## Building on Prior Efforts

Despite the many challenges posed by the pandemic, leaders reflected on their areas of success. Some districts shared how their prior efforts eased the transition to remote learning. One district focused on **self- efficacy:**

**“Years ago, we began to build our whole school system with a focus on building the self-efficacy of our students as well as relationships. Not just a focus on state standards and metrics. By looking at everything through the lens of building self-efficacy, it has allowed us to have greater success at engaging students and parents, as well as staff in this coaching paradigm.”**

Another district shared that its multifaceted keys to success were the result of investments made years before and refocusing instruction on the essentials:

**The four key ingredients to our success were: (1) teacher technology training; (2) tech commitment years in the making (one-to-one, SMS, etc.); (3) social–emotional training for staff and students; and (4) quality over quantity. We focused on stripping down the learning objectives to the essential standards that needed to be completed and did those well to make sure our gaps are limited for next year...we were a state leader by the end of the year!**



## Cultivating collaboration

According to districts, one positive outcome of this complex and challenging time has been increased collaboration between schools and families, communities, and staff. One district shared the result of its collaboration with local agencies and how this collaboration was leveraged to reach families and maintain engagement with the school community:

**“The district is closing the gap with families in need via virtual meeting spaces, and local not-for-profits are working closer together with schools than ever before to meet basic needs of our students.”**

Districts also collaborated with community agencies to support families' physical and psychological health. One district discussed its use of telemedicine and community collaborations:

**“Telemedicine type of counseling sessions, connecting our community agencies with our families in a virtual way. So many different agencies have also donated toward our food program. We were able to give gallons of milk, dozens of eggs, bricks of cheese, etc., with the normal meals because community members were donating them. This also served as an amazing support to our farming community who had to dump some of their milk. WIN-WIN!”**



Collaboration and frequent communication with the community has also been a source of fun and positivity during these challenging times, with one district leader writing,

**“Some of the really fun stuff includes ‘Quarantine Art Challenge’ with students and community, home visit birthday celebrations sponsored by our police department, increased use of social media, and weekly community updates via video messages in multiples languages. Also, lots of stuff posted on Facebook Live, like virtual town halls.”**

As schools reflect on lessons learned during distance learning and plan for summer and fall instruction, many questions remain, such as “What are appropriate expectations for teachers and students in a digital environment?” Another question is how to create innovative and safe learning experiences given the impending, widespread budget cuts.

Initial survey responses from district and CMO leaders range from disheartened and frustrated to grateful for the opportunity to connect with their communities. However, many leaders remain hopeful and are seizing this opportunity to think outside the box and create a new normal that is designed to support the diverse needs of students. The ideas described in these initial district survey responses reflect a commitment to finding solutions that make learning accessible and meaningful for all students.



1000 Thomas Jefferson Street NW  
Washington, DC 20007-3835  
202.403.5000

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