

Promising Practices for Addressing Common Challenges:

# Students With Disabilities and English Learners

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) launched a national survey in late January 2021 to gather insights on public school district experiences in the 2020–21 school year, including how districts continued to adapt to the persistent and evolving challenges of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May and June 2021, AIR interviewed a sample of leaders in districts that responded to the survey to learn more about the challenges and promising practices they described in their survey responses, with a focus on innovative practices from which other districts can learn or that they can replicate in their own context. This brief summarizes findings related to students with disabilities and English learners from these interviews with district leaders. For more findings, check out the project web page at <https://www.air.org/project/national-survey-public-educations-response-covid-19>.

In 2020–21, many school districts faced challenges in delivering instruction to students with disabilities and English learners. This brief includes profiles of the challenges and promising practices related to **students with disabilities and English learners** for four districts across the United States:

- Regional School Unit #38, Maine
- Special School District of St. Louis County, Missouri



Maine



Rural



Medium Size



Low Poverty



Primarily In Person

## Regional School Unit #38

### Prioritized Comprehensive, High-Quality Instruction

#### The Challenge

At the beginning of the 2020–21 school year, Regional School Unit (RSU) #38 focused on ensuring that schools could effectively provide remote instruction and services to English learners and students with disabilities. Staff held remote meetings (including individualized education plan meetings) to determine whether these services could be delivered remotely and, if so, how. According to Superintendent Jay Charette, “Rather than looking at a minimum, we tried to maximize what resources we had” by delivering as many supports and services to students as possible, whether they were learning in person or remotely. Staff realized that feelings of isolation could be detrimental academically. For example, some English learners previously had relied heavily on learning English from their peers and learning from physical cues; when switching to remote instruction, these English learners experienced a notable decline in supports simply by nature of the delivery method. In addition, staff realized that many elementary students had an increased need for behavioral interventions and supports, including many students who previously had not needed behavioral supports.

#### Promising Practices

Throughout the 2020–21 school year, RSU #38 frequently used academic screening and assessment data to monitor student learning and to modify student work time accordingly. For students with disabilities, the special education director worked closely with special education teachers to ensure they had access to the data and resources they needed to consistently provide services during remote instruction. The district reported that this frequent data use helped staff ensure they were still effectively supporting students with disabilities and English learners remotely. *(continued on page 2)*



Maine



Rural



Medium Size



Low Poverty



Primarily In Person

## Regional School Unit #38 *(continued from page 1)*

The district also began to share lessons digitally so that students could review content and families could better understand and support their children’s learning at home. The district plans to continue this practice to help foster students’ sense of self-efficacy and extend supports for students with disabilities and English learners. According to Superintendent Charette, “We don’t want to supplant instruction. We want to supplement instruction.”

Staff at RSU #38 also worked to deliver academic instruction with high fidelity to lesson schedules, ensuring that students—especially those with disabilities and English learners—did not lose instructional time in core subjects following Universal Design for Learning principles. Superintendent Charette shared that one of the key messages distributed to all instructional staff was, “Don’t shorten your students’ time in math just because you need to make up something else. That’s sacred time—don’t take that time away.” By focusing on providing Tier 1 instruction in core subjects with fidelity (i.e., universal instruction within a multi-tiered system of supports), staff were able to more accurately identify students in need of additional intervention.

To support students behaviorally, RSU #38 invested in a social-emotional learning program to use with elementary students in the first 30 minutes of the school day and to give students space to share their lives with their peers. Staff found that these additional behavioral supports helped students academically as well; they were able to better focus on their work during the rest of the school day. For a few students with special needs, staff made exceptions to allow them to attend school in person in the fall while their peers continued to receive remote instruction, so that these students with special needs could receive face-to-face support. According to Superintendent Charette, these strategies reflect the district’s overall approach to supporting the whole child, emphasizing the importance of having staff with “the professional knowledge and [moral] compass to be able to make the hard decisions that are geared towards students versus geared towards satisfying adult needs.”



Missouri



Suburban



Medium Size



Hybrid

## Special School District of St. Louis County<sup>1</sup>

### Maintained a Learning Community at Home

#### The Challenge

Special School District of St. Louis County is a unique district that was established before the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and designed specifically to support special education students. The district provides special education services across St. Louis County, including staff such as occupational therapists, physical therapists, social workers, and special education teachers. In early 2020, the district developed services to deliver food and devices to families at home. Staff found that some students had highly engaged families who actively helped develop and implement instructional resources to use at home; likewise, many students were successful in a remote learning environment. However, other students had notable barriers to learning at home. For some, changes in their routine were disruptive and difficult; for others, their families were not prepared to manage day-to-day behavioral challenges. Several students had families with limited literacy skills who struggled to support learning at home. *(continued on page 3)*

<sup>1</sup> Information on district poverty was not available.



Missouri



Suburban



Medium Size



Hybrid

## Special School District of St. Louis County *(continued from page 2)*

### Promising Practices

For the past several years, Special School District of St. Louis County has prioritized family engagement and building relationships, and they continued to do so throughout the 2020–21 school year by gathering family survey data and asking for family input. For example, Adrienne Eaglin, the Family and Community Outreach Manager, shared that the district asked families questions such as, “Do we have the things in place that would make you feel welcome? Do we say [you cannot enter the school building] in a respectful manner? Do we say what you need to do? Have we given you the [access] procedures on the outside of the building so that we’re not creating frustration?” Staff actively considered this feedback when creating action plans and communications with families throughout the year.

In 2020–21, in response to remote learning challenges, staff also learned how to prioritize flexibility in delivering instruction rather than focusing solely on the rigor and fidelity of interventions and supports at school. The move to remote instruction, according to Ms. Eaglin, helped their staff “see the value of learning in [students’] communities and in their homes. I think that has opened the eyes of a lot of our educators... This moment in time has validated all of the work that our staff were doing to build these meaningful relationships with families, and how they were able to leverage it during this time to impact student work.”

Special School District of St. Louis County also set up a new, remote “office hours” time during which students and families could ask questions or seek guidance on instruction. Families often joined these “office hours” with their children (and sometimes without) and would often stay online with each other afterward to share experiences, ideas, and strategies. For families who had difficulty accessing remote office hours online, staff offered phone calls; text messaging; and printed packets with a self-addressed, stamped envelope so that families could share completed student work for feedback and continued support.

Although student assessment data have shown that most students in Special School District of St. Louis County have continued to grow academically throughout the 2020–21 school year, staff recognize that isolation and changes in routine have had a negative effect on the social-emotional health of many students. The district plans to offer an online social-emotional learning program and social worker support for both staff and students in 2021–22. According to Dr. Mollie Bolton, Executive Director of Teaching, Learning and Accountability, as administrators determine plans for future supplemental supports, they are reflecting on questions such as the following: How do we deal with our new reality? How do we fill these gaps? How do we address those social, emotional, and mental health needs?

For more information on the Public Education’s Response to COVID-19 project findings and publications, please visit the project web page at <https://www.air.org/project/national-survey-public-educations-response-covid-19>.

#### Demographic Icon Definitions

*Geographic Region.* Based on regional divisions determined by the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.).

*Locale.* Based on four locale categories (city, suburb, town, and rural) determined by the U.S. Department of Education (2019).

*Size.* Based on district enrollment data provided by the U.S. Department of Education (2019). Small = < 1,000 students; Medium = 1,000 to < 10,000 students; Large = 10,000 or more students.

*Poverty.* Based on child poverty data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau (2019). Low = < 10% of children; Medium = 10% to < 20% of children; High = 20% or more of children.



1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor  
Arlington, VA 22202-3289  
+1.202.403.5000 | [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org)

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