

Executive Summary: Findings From Interviews With District Leaders on Schooling During COVID-19

Findings Summary

District leaders had to make many sudden decisions before and during the 2020–21 school year to respond and adapt to the persistent and evolving challenges of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without a playbook or precedent, district leaders had to quickly determine how best to support students and families within their local context. While stressful, the experience of adapting to a pandemic has created a unique opportunity for districts to re-examine their practices and priorities. For some districts, changes made to adapt to the pandemic have led to new insights that have changed district practices or priorities for the future.

This represents an exciting opportunity for district leaders to learn from one another's experiences during 2020–21 to inform schooling in the future.

In late January 2021, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) launched a national survey to gather insights on public school district experiences in 2020–21, including how districts continued to adapt to the persistent and evolving challenges of schooling during the pandemic. In May and June 2021, AIR invited a sample of 20 district leaders who responded to the survey to participate in an interview about the challenges and promising practices they described in their responses. In these interviews, district leaders expanded on the promising practices they implemented to help address common, pandemic-related challenges during the 2020–21 school year.

In interviews, district leaders discussed six major types of challenges and related, promising practices:

- 14 districts discussed **social-emotional supports for families and students**, such as community outreach, food delivery, and mental health supports; in addition, 8 districts discussed **social-emotional supports for staff**, such as employee assistance funds and mental health supports.
- 11 districts discussed supports for **students with disabilities and English learners**, such as virtual interventions or family supports.
- 10 districts discussed **remote instruction policies and practices**, such as which students would be allowed to learn remotely or how teachers would modify their roles.
- 9 districts discussed **supplemental learning supports**, such as providing additional tutoring or asynchronous learning materials.
- 6 districts discussed **personalized learning**, such as individualized instruction, competency-based grading, and flipped classroom models.

In addition to the six types of challenges and promising practices, district leaders discussed four cross-cutting themes in district decision making during 2020–21:

- 15 districts discussed **challenges or changes related to data collection and assessment**.
- 12 districts discussed **staffing or organization challenges or changes**.
- 8 districts discussed **professional development for educators**.
- 5 districts **discussed leveraging pre-existing infrastructure or priorities**.

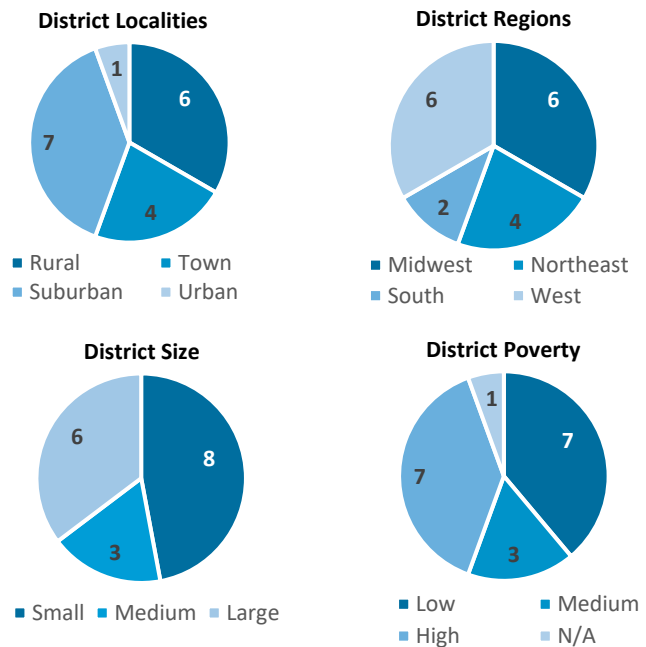
Please see the interview findings on the project web page (<https://www.air.org/project/national-survey-public-educations-response-covid-19>) for more information on the innovative strategies and promising practices from which other district leaders can learn or that they can replicate in their own context. For more information on the overall project findings, please see the data story on the project website: <https://www.air.org/perc-data-story>.

Methodology Summary

Twenty district leaders from 19 districts participated in interviews: 18 superintendents and, for one district, two central office district administrators. (See Figure 1 for details.)

Figure 1. Districts participating in interviews

State	District
Arizona	J. O. Combs Unified School District
Arkansas	Newport School District
Connecticut	Regional School District 15
Idaho	Boundary County School District
Illinois	Bloomington School District 13 Giant City CCSD 130 Peoria Public Schools
Maine	Regional School Unit #38
Missouri	Special School District of St. Louis County
Nevada	Lander County School District
New Hampshire	Regional School Unit 16
New York	Shenendehowa Central School District
North Carolina	Newton-Conover City Schools
Ohio	Aurora City School District Windham Exempted Village School District
Washington	Cascade School District
Wyoming	Big Horn County School District #1



Each interview was conducted virtually using a semistructured interview protocol and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Interviewers asked district leaders four main questions based on their survey responses:

1. What overall trends have you seen in student, family, or staff needs during the pandemic?
2. Can you tell us a little more about how the promising practices you’ve identified have helped you be successful throughout the pandemic?
3. Are you planning on using practices in the same way as you did across 2020 and 2021, or do you plan on adapting how you use them moving forward? Why or why not?
4. What have been your biggest takeaways from the 2020–21 school year?

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)

Established in 1946, with headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance to solve some of the most urgent challenges in the U.S. and around the world. We advance evidence in the areas of education, health, the workforce, human services, and international development to create a better, more equitable world. The AIR family of organizations now includes IMPAQ, Maher & Maher, and Kimetrika. For more information, visit [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org).

Copyright © 2021 American Institutes for Research®. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, website display, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the American Institutes for Research. For permission requests, please use the Contact Us form on [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org).

Notice of Trademark: “American Institutes for Research” and “AIR” are registered trademarks. All other brand, product, or company names are trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners. 16163_11/21