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NATIONAL SURVEY OF PUBLIC EDUCATION'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

FIRST LOOK BRIEF

National Survey on Public Education's Coronavirus Pandemic Response

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District Response to COVID-19

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) launched a nationally representative survey to better understand how school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs) are responding 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.[1]

The pandemic led schools across the country to close their buildings, requiring millions of students to continue learning from home and leading to sudden shifts in how educators provide instruction, leadership, and support.

In this brief, we preview some of the survey responses from districts that responded by July 10. Our hope is that these early results inform future practices of educators, policymakers, and researchers. *Because the results are based on early responses, they may differ to some degree from their final values and should be interpreted with caution. But these early results provide a useful indication of the distribution of strategies across districts.* The survey will remain open for responses through mid-August 2020. AIR will provide interim results throughout the summer and continue to share findings during the 2020–21 school year.

About This First Look Brief

- This brief previews survey results about districts' approaches to distance learning during the pandemic.
- These initial results are based on early responses from 474 school districts; thus, results should be considered preliminary.[2]
- We report results for all early-responding districts. We also show results separately for districts in high- and low-poverty areas, given the potential association between poverty and educational resources, and for districts in rural and urban locations, given concerns about internet access in rural communities. [3]
- Initial results suggest that districts varied in their approaches to distance learning, with some potentially important differences in how high-poverty and rural districts approached distance learning.

Serving Students During the Pandemic

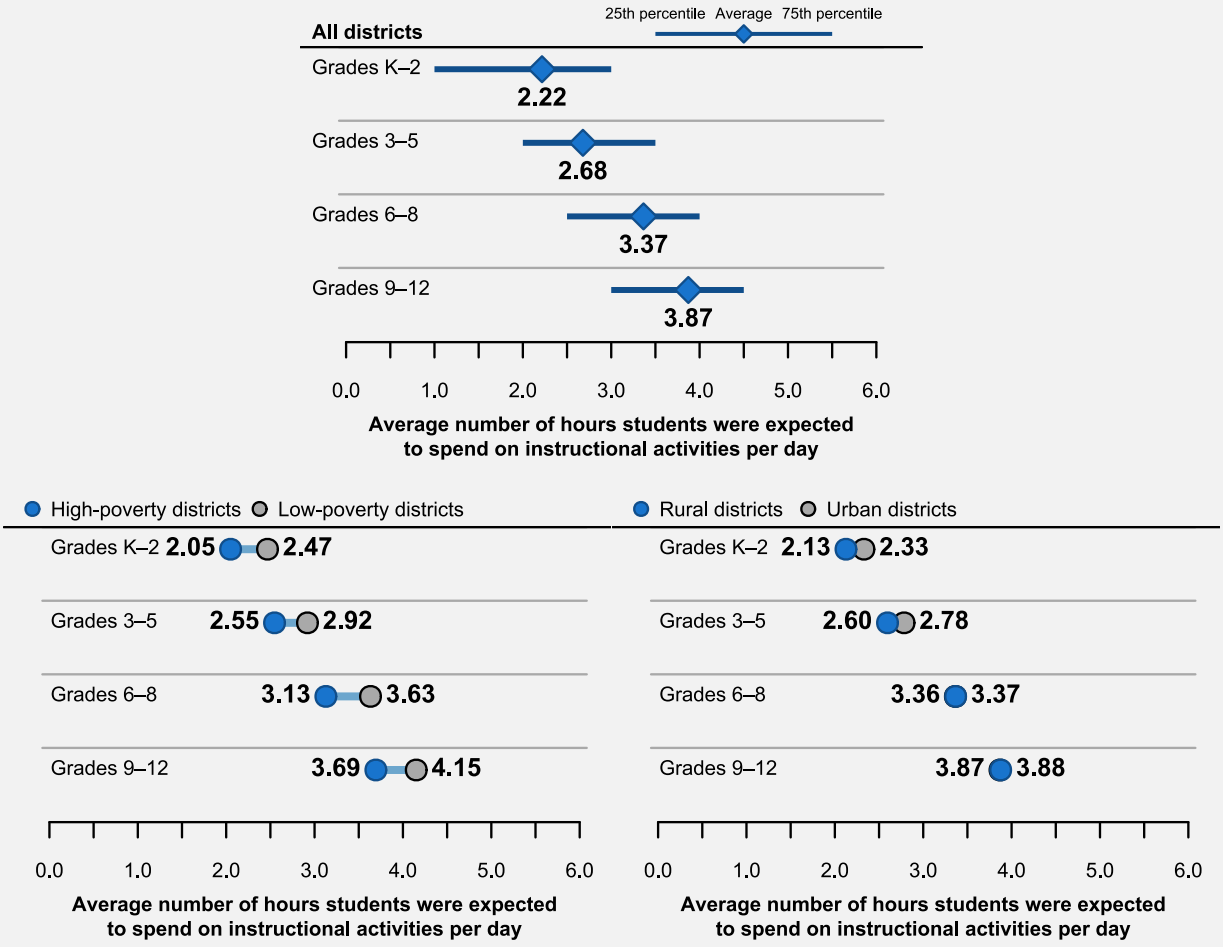
As awareness of the pandemic increased across U.S. communities, districts closed their school buildings and sought alternative ways to meet their students' needs, including providing meals, ensuring students' safety and well-being, and continuing instruction. In this brief, we touch on one aspect of districts' work during the pandemic: the transition to distance, or remote, instruction. Subsequent briefs will draw on survey data to provide a more comprehensive picture of how districts served students in spring 2020.[4]

Much of what we currently know about education during the pandemic comes from reporting on select districts and information posted on district websites (e.g., Gross & Opalka, 2020; Malkus, Christensen, & Schurz, 2020). These sources indicate that when school buildings closed, districts initially focused on meeting critical needs like meal distribution. It took time for districts to develop and implement distance learning approaches. Surveys of teachers and principals raise concerns about limited instructional preparation and unequal access to learning opportunities (Hamilton, Kaufman, & Diliberti, 2020). And surveys of parents raise concerns about the amount of schoolwork students did while at home (Bailey & Shaw, 2020).

The National Survey of Public Education's Response to COVID-19 adds to this picture by providing information on the expectations for instruction and strategies that districts used in spring 2020 to address student needs during the pandemic, from the perspective of district leaders.[5] For example, the initial results in Figure 1 show that, on average, districts expected students in early elementary grades (K–2) to spend 2.2 hours each day on instructional activities. In contrast, districts expected high school students (Grades 9–12) to spend 3.9 hours per day on instructional activities. These time expectations are generally lower than the daily instructional hours required by states under normal circumstances. For instance, in many states, high school students are required to complete about six hours of instruction per day (Brixey, 2020).

The preliminary results presented in this brief reinforce the conclusion that approaches differed across districts,[6] reflecting the varied challenges that districts face across the country (Blagg, Blom, Gallagher, & Rainer, 2020). To highlight differences in approaches across contexts, we present results for high- and low-poverty districts because access to educational resources (for example, technology) and potential instructional challenges may differ by poverty level. In addition, we present results for districts in rural and urban locations because access to high-speed internet may be more limited in rural communities. In future reports, we will examine differences across other contextual factors, such as district size.

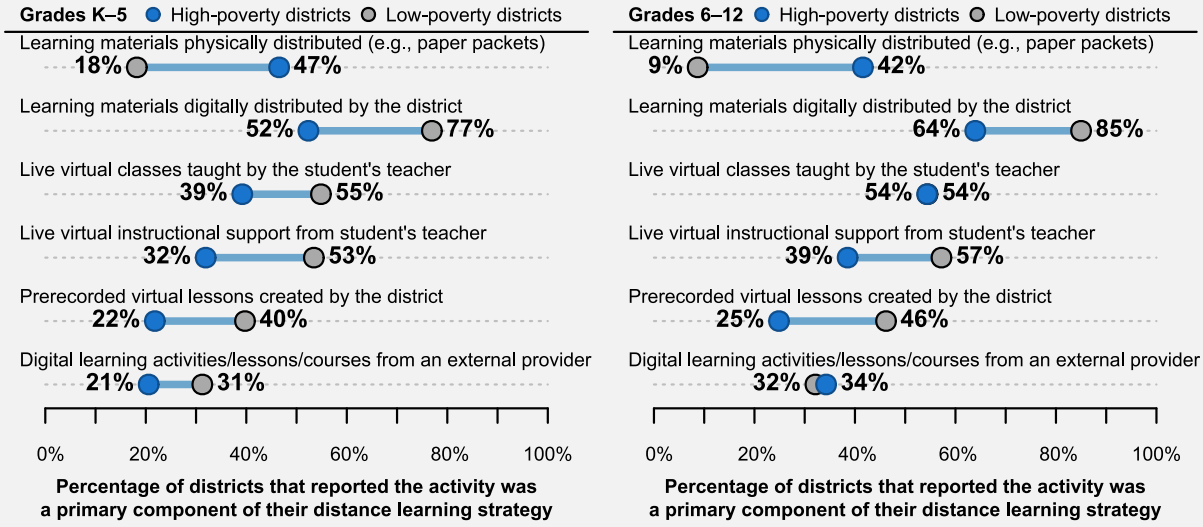
Figure 1. Expectations for the Amount of Time That Students Should Spend on Instructional Activities During Distance Learning Varied Across Districts and Grade Levels



Note. The top panel displays the distribution of hours reported across all early district responses, where the width of the horizontal line represents the range between the 25th and 75th percentiles and the diamond depicts the mean number of reported hours. The bottom left panel displays the mean number of reported hours for high-poverty districts and low-poverty districts.[3] The bottom right panel displays the mean number of reported hours for rural districts and urban districts (cities, suburbs, and towns).

Sample sizes: 454 districts for Grades K–2 (158 high-poverty and 110 low-poverty, 170 rural and 284 urban); 454 districts for Grades 3–5 (158 high-poverty and 110 low-poverty, 170 rural and 284 urban); 458 districts for Grades 6–8 (158 high-poverty and 114 low-poverty, 173 rural and 285 urban); 432 districts for Grades 9–12 (151 high-poverty and 110 low-poverty, 158 rural and 274 urban).

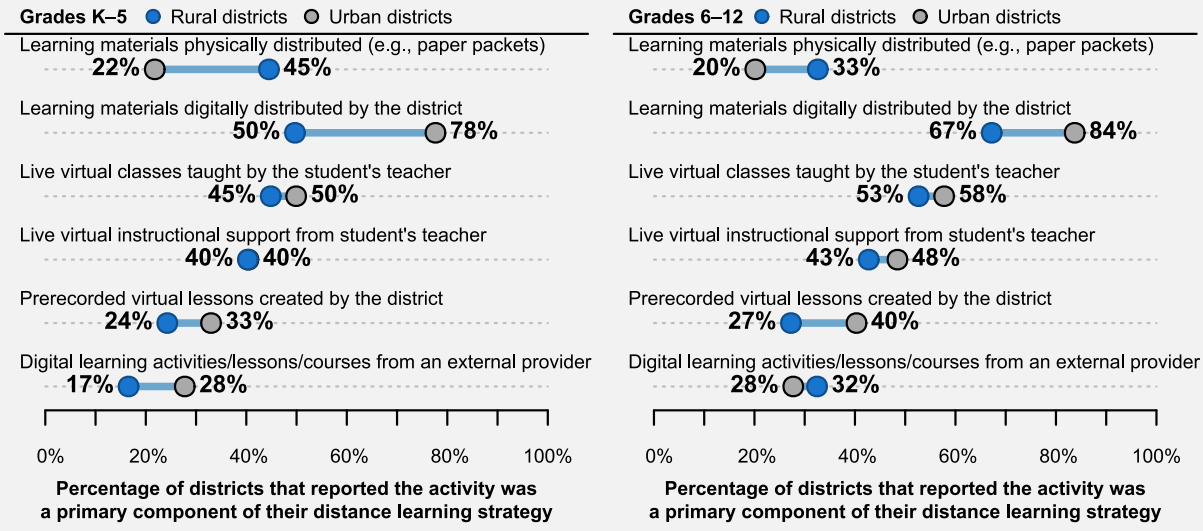
Figure 2A. The Instructional Activities Emphasized in a District's Strategy for Delivering Distance Learning Differed, on Average, Across High- and Low-Poverty Districts



Note. Each panel displays the percentage of high-poverty districts and low-poverty districts that reported that an activity was a primary component of their distance learning strategy.[3] Respondents could select more than one activity.

Sample sizes: 159 high-poverty districts and 110 low-poverty districts for Grades K–5; 164 high-poverty districts and 118 low-poverty districts for Grades 6–12.

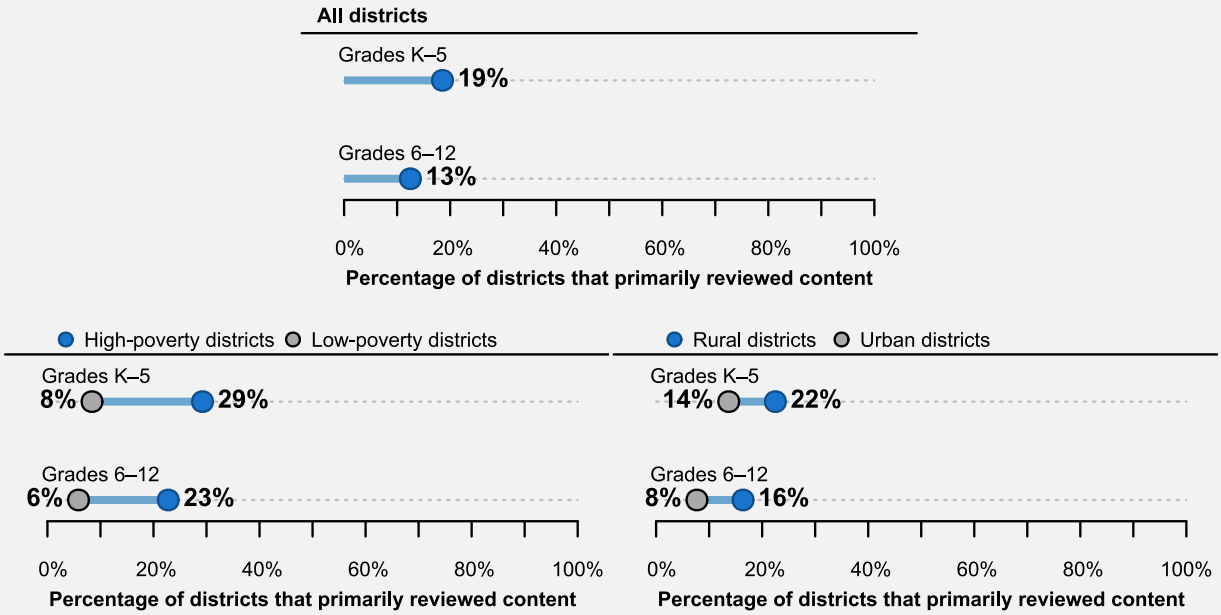
Figure 2B. The Instructional Activities Emphasized in a District's Strategy for Delivering Distance Learning Differed, on Average, Across Rural and Urban Districts



Note. Each panel displays the percentage of rural districts and urban districts (cities, suburbs, and towns) that reported that the activity was a primary component of their distance learning strategy. Respondents could select more than one activity.

Sample sizes: 170 rural districts and 285 urban districts for Grades K–5; 175 rural districts and 294 urban districts for Grades 6–12.

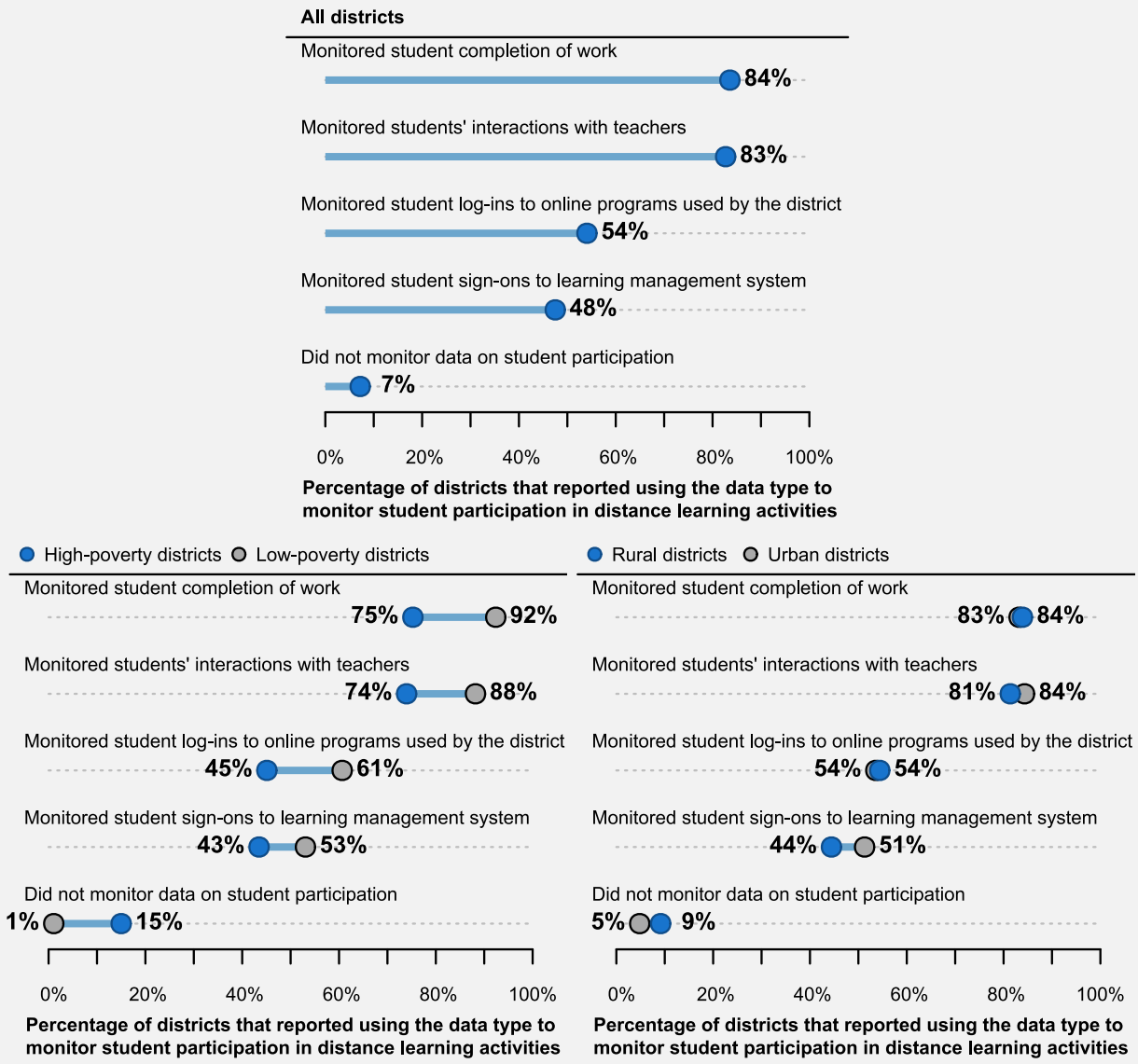
Figure 3. For Some Districts, Distance Learning Primarily Involved Reviewing Content Taught Earlier in the Year, Rather Than Learning New Content



Note. The top panel displays the percentage of all early district responses that indicated instruction since schools closed due to COVID-19 consisted primarily of reviewing content taught earlier in the year. Other response options included a combination of past content and new content or primarily learning new content. The bottom left panel displays the percentages for high-poverty districts and low-poverty districts.[3] The bottom right panel displays the percentage for rural districts and urban districts (cities, suburbs, and towns).

Sample sizes: 455 districts for Grades K–5 (159 high-poverty and 110 low-poverty, 170 rural and 285 urban); 469 districts for Grades 6–12 (164 high-poverty and 118 low-poverty, 175 rural and 294 urban).

Figure 4. Districts Expected to Use Different Sources of Information to Monitor Student Participation in Distance Learning Activities



Note. The top panel displays the percentage of all early district responses that reported a particular type of information should be used to monitor student attendance or participation in distance learning activities. Respondents could select more than one type of information source. The bottom left panel displays the percentages for high-poverty districts and low-poverty districts.[3] The bottom right panel displays the percentage for rural districts and urban districts (cities, suburbs, and towns).

Sample sizes: 470 districts (164 high-poverty and 118 low-poverty, 175 rural and 295 urban).

References

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Endnotes

[1] AIR is funding and leading the survey, which is being administered by NORC at the University of Chicago. We sent the survey to school districts in every U.S. state and Washington, DC, as well as to 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 these 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 nonresponse in the 64 states or regions by locale strata.

[2] Preliminary results could differ from final results based on the final sample if early respondents are atypical of the full sample. To assess the representativeness of the early-respondent sample, we compared the responding districts with those that have not yet responded in terms of locale (urban, suburban, small town, and rural), enrollment size, poverty, and racial–ethnic distribution. In all of these measured ways, the differences between respondents and nonrespondents were small. For example, 14% of responding districts are in cities, compared with 15% of nonresponding districts. The largest differences were in district size (30% of responding districts, have an enrollment between 2,500 and 9,999 students compared to 35% of nonresponding districts) and poverty (25% of responding districts have a poverty rate between 20% and 30% compared to 21% of nonresponding districts). Although these results suggest that the sample is representative in some ways, we cannot be sure that the early respondents do not differ in ways that we cannot measure. Therefore, readers should focus on the range and overall patterns, not on specific numerical results.

[3] We defined low-poverty districts as those with less than 10% of school-age children living in poverty, as measured by the U.S. Census. High-poverty districts are those with at least 20% of school-age children in poverty (see https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/2018/demo/saipe/2018-school-districts.html). We defined rural and urban based on locale classifications provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (Geverdt, 2015), where rural districts are located within a Census-defined rural territory and urban districts are located within a Census-defined urbanized area or cluster (encompassing cities, suburbs, and towns).

[4] To capture the effects of COVID-19 on school districts and CMOs in the U.S., the survey asks questions about how districts and CMOs have coped with issues related to the pandemic, including the timing of school closures; distance learning approaches and challenges; supporting English learners and students with disabilities; district policies and requirements, such as grading and graduation; staffing and human resources; and health, well-being, and safety.

[5] We sent the survey to district superintendents and suggested that they could ask other administrators to respond. Administrators were encouraged to ask colleagues for information if they could not respond to a question. Survey responses reflect the beliefs and expectations of district administrators, which may differ from the experiences of school personnel, teachers, parents, and students.

[6] The preliminary results presented in this brief suggest that a higher percentage of districts engaged in live virtual instruction and monitored student participation than the results reported by Gross and Opalka (2020). The differences could be caused by timing: Our survey data cover the period from May 20 to July 10, whereas the data used by Gross and Opalka cover a period 6 weeks earlier (April 6–May 1). In addition, the data used by Gross and Opalka are based on information available on district websites about expectations and requirements for teachers; they count districts as engaging in practices only if the expectations and requirements were explicitly mentioned on a district's website. District websites may not fully document district expectations and requirements, especially in fast-moving circumstances. In contrast, our survey is based on district administrators' reports on district expectations, and in this brief we focused on results about district expectations for students, not teachers.

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