

Learning Lessons

U.S. Public High Schools and the
COVID-19 Pandemic in Spring 2020

John Rogers
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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The transition to distance learning over the time of less than one week, without government intervention, fiscal bailouts, or prior training will go down as one of public education's most incredible feats in its entire history. The fact that teachers, principals, students, families, and staff were able to make this transition without major disruption speaks to the incredible intelligence, resourcefulness, and resilience of public schools and public school educators.

Pablo Diaz, Principal of a small school serving a high poverty community in California¹

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in early March 2020 prompted the closure of public schools across the United States. Principals and teachers had almost no warning and hence little opportunity for advanced planning. They received minimal guidance from federal and state officials or professional organizations about how to manage such a transition. Nonetheless, educators moved quickly from in-person to remote learning. Working outside their school campuses, they offered students daily instruction and provided a host of other critical services—meals, counseling, extracurricular activities, and more. Public school educators not only leaned into this monumental task, but they did so amidst health threats and economic dislocation affecting many staff, community members, and students.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to shape education and every aspect of social life in the United States as the 2020-2021 school year begins. Some communities are opening schools in-person, some in a hybrid model, and many others remotely. But everywhere, concerns remain about how to educate young people safely in the context of the pandemic. It thus is important to take stock of the first few months of remote learning, so that we can understand what happened in America's public schools and draw lessons to inform our efforts moving forward.

This report explores three questions about how U.S. public high schools addressed the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020:

1. How did U.S. public high schools respond to the public health and economic crises created by the pandemic? Were there differences across school communities?
2. How quickly and effectively did U.S. public high schools transition to remote instruction? Were there differences across school communities?
3. What effect did the transition to remote instruction have on educational equity? Were schools able to serve all students? Were there differences across school communities?

The Learning Lessons Survey

To examine these questions, UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access conducted an online survey of America's public high school principals in May and June 2020. The survey was developed in late April 2020, following informal conversations with fifteen principals in greater Los Angeles about leading schools during the transition to remote instruction. Those initial discussions highlighted key issues about provision of social services, distribution of technology, building staff capacity, and more.

We created a twenty minute survey protocol that invited principals to report on when and how their schools transitioned to remote instruction and how they continued to serve their school community once that change had been effected. The survey included questions about technology, social services, instructional practices, support services for sub-groups of students, and professional development. The survey closed with an open-ended question inviting principals to share thoughts about their school, leadership, and what makes them hopeful at this challenging moment.

We sent our first round of survey invitations to principals on May 19th and closed the survey at the end of June. This period of data collection included the final weeks of the 2019-2020 school year and the first weeks after the school year ended. Throughout much of this period, the number of new daily COVID-19 cases across the nation remained steady at around 20,000.² The case rate at that time thus was lower than it had been at the initial peak in April and much lower than it would become during the steep rise in July. Yet, even during this period, there were stark differences across regions. While some areas of the nation faced high levels of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths, other communities were not as substantially impacted.

Our list of public high school principals was drawn from publicly available state, district, and school websites in spring 2018 for a different study.³ Because of the high level of turnover in the principalship—with more than 1 in 3 principals in the United States having been in their position for less than 2 years—a large number of principals from our original list were no longer serving as principals at the same school when we sent our invitations in spring 2020. We supplemented this national principal list with a comprehensive list of 1422 California public high school principals that had been updated for the 2019-2020 school year.

We used Constant Contact, an email distribution service, to send out invitations to principals. The email subject header noted that this was a UCLA survey on school leadership during COVID-19. Principals who opened the email were invited “to participate in a UCLA study that examines the role of U.S. public high school principals in promoting learning and student well-being amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.” The email informed principals that participation in the study was voluntary, their responses would be confidential, and, if they participated, we would make a contribution to Feeding America, an organization which runs a national network of food banks.

We sent out email invitations between May 19 and June 29. Reminders were sent periodically to principals who had not yet completed the survey. In all, we invited 8028 high school principals to participate in the survey. 1732 emails bounced back as undeliverable. 2648 principals opened the email. 575 principals clicked on the link in the email that brought them to the online survey's opening page. 376 started the survey. 366 responded affirmatively to the opening question asking if the principal would like to participate in the survey. 344 principals completed the survey.

It is not surprising that many principals chose not to open our email or respond to the survey. In May and June of 2020, high school principals were navigating a very challenging environment, often working long hours to meet new and emerging demands. Our survey did not ask principals about the amount of time they spent answering emails during remote instruction, but anecdotal accounts indicate it has increased. In late May, we asked a handful of high school principals in Los Angeles whether their daily email communication had increased during the pandemic. Each of the five principals responded that they had experienced a dramatic rise in email traffic since the transition to remote learning, with more messages than ever before from students, parents, teachers, and district administrators. Hence it is likely that most principals across the country did not have the time to read, let alone respond to, all of the messages they received.

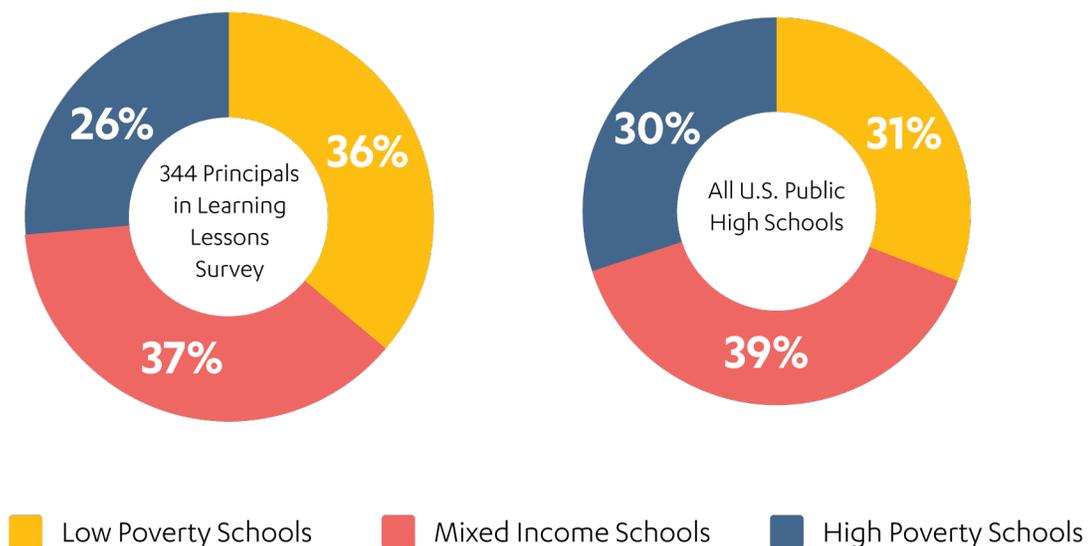
We weighted our sample to account for the fact that 47% of the principals who completed our survey lead high schools in California, even though only 13% of high school students in the United States attend schools in California. The large number of respondents from California reflects the fact that we sent out additional invitations to California principals as well as the quality of the email list we had for California principals. It also is likely that a survey from UCLA—one of California’s major public universities—drew more attention in California than in other states.

After weighting, our sample bears a strong resemblance to the universe of public high schools in the United States.

Low-Income Status of Families in High Schools

We use student eligibility for the federal Free and Reduced Price Lunch program to distinguish between Low Poverty Schools (0-29.9% of students are eligible); Mixed Income Schools (30-59.9% of students are eligible); and High Poverty Schools (60-100% of students are eligible).

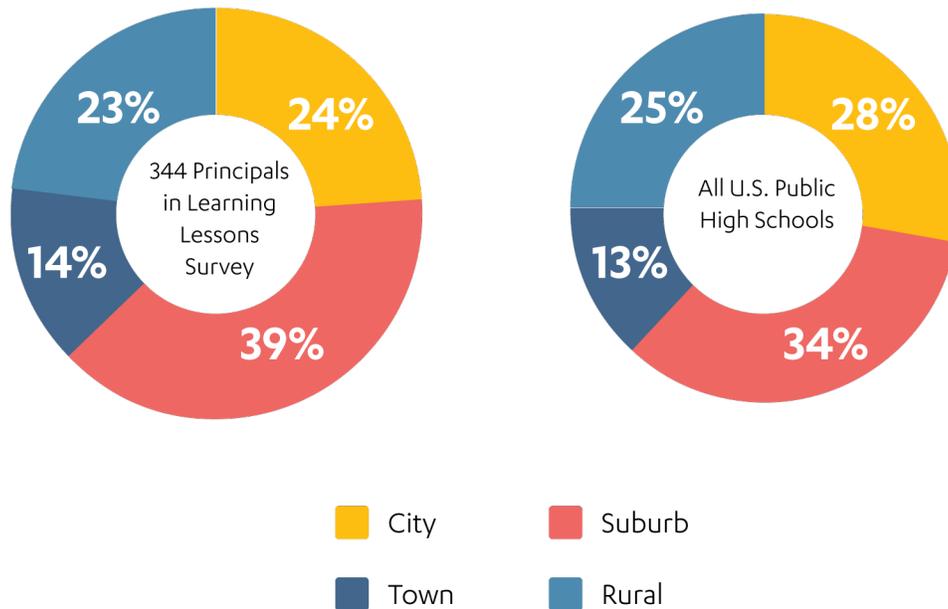
Figure 1: Low-Income Status of Families in High Schools



Community Location of High Schools

We use a classification from the National Center For Educational Statistics to distinguish four basic types of locations: City, Suburban, Town, and Rural.

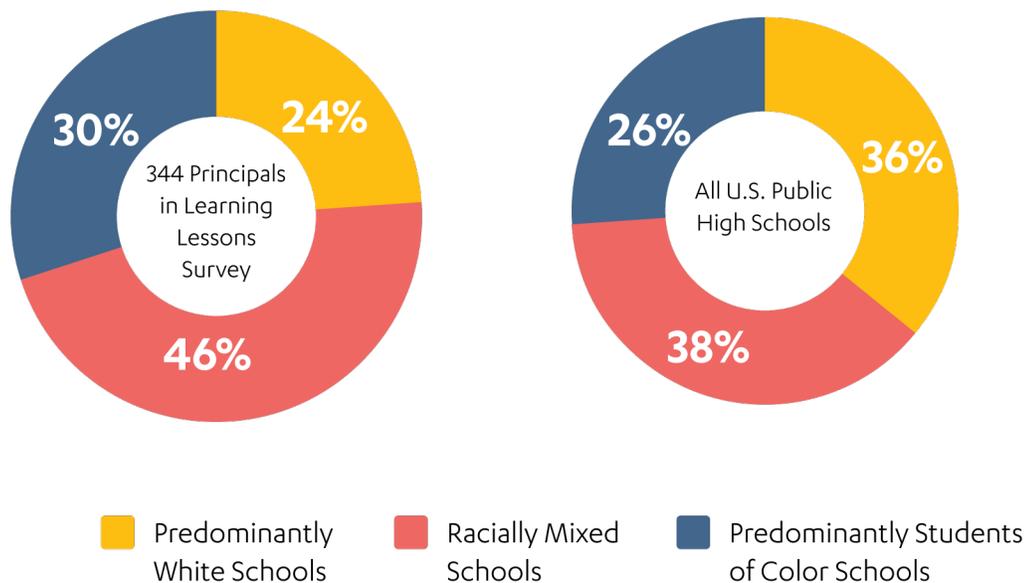
Figure 2: Community Location of High Schools



Racial Demographics of High Schools

We differentiate between three groups of high schools: 1) Predominantly White Schools (80-100% white enrollment); 2) Racially Mixed Schools (35-79.9% white enrollment); and 3) Predominantly Students of Color Schools (0-34.9% white enrollment)

Figure 3: Racial Demographics of High Schools

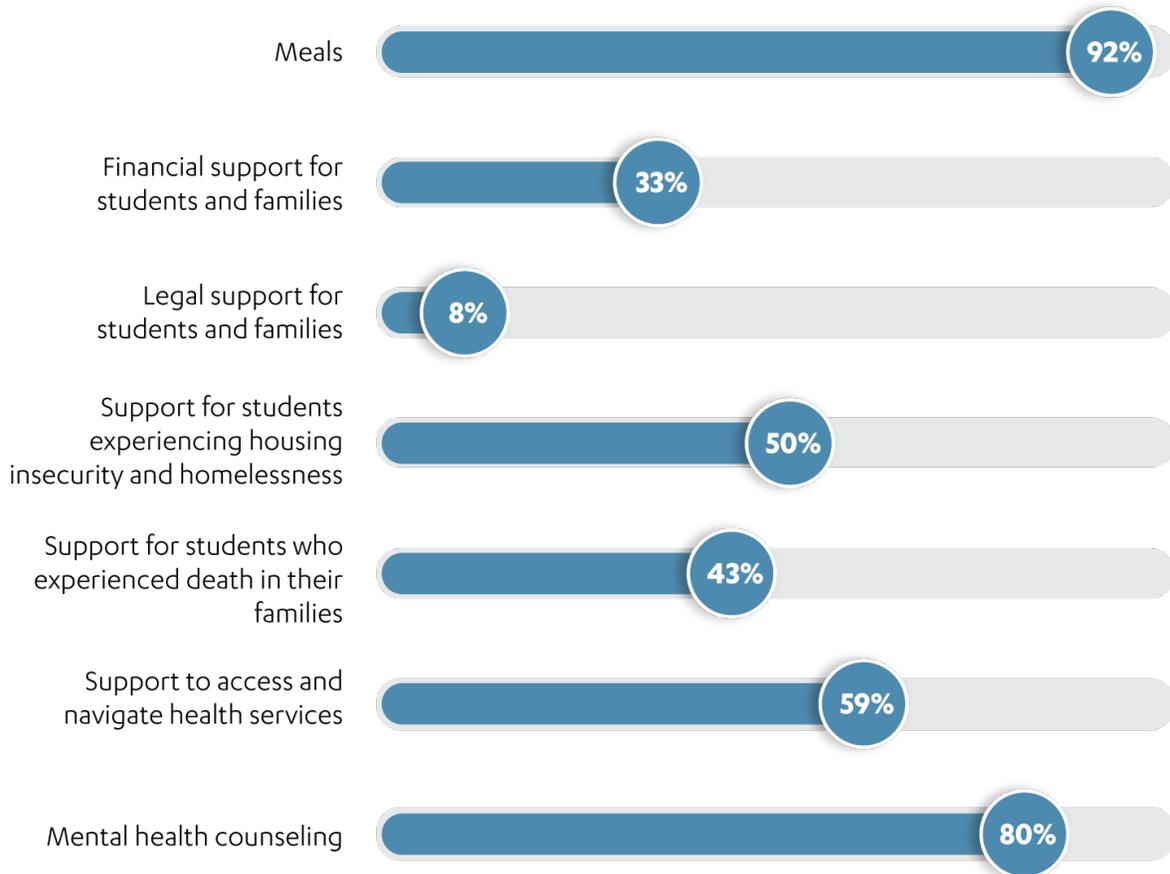


Responding to the Public Health and Economic Crises

Throughout spring 2020, states such as New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Louisiana felt the full brunt of the pandemic. One Massachusetts principal described the “intensity of the problems we’ve faced... Death. Loss of jobs. Anxiety. Depression.” Nancy Anderson, a principal in suburban New Jersey, noted that her students had “suffered losses ... neighbors dying ... people afflicted.” While rates of infection in spring were dramatically lower in some other states, the effects of the economic dislocation created by the national lockdown were experienced widely. James Wilson, the principal of a socio-economically diverse school in urban Washington, remembered “seeing families thrust into poverty so quickly and waiting in food lines.” Sofia De Leon, the principal of a high poverty school in California recounted: “As the weeks go on, I know that my students’ lives and well-being have become more and more precarious. There are some social safety nets, but not nearly enough and the disparity is palpable.”

Educators across the country stepped up to meet the needs created by the pandemic. Perhaps most poignantly, 43% of principals reported providing support for students who experienced death in their families. 80% provided mental health counseling, 59% helped students and families access and navigate health services, and 50% provided support to students experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness. Almost a third of principals provided financial support to students and their families.

Figure 4: Services Schools Provided During COVID-19



Nearly all schools provided meals during remote instruction. More than two thirds of principals reported that their school or district provided meals to family members of students who were not enrolled in the school. While principals of almost all schools provided meals to students, principals of high poverty schools provided meals to more students. 46% of high poverty schools provided meals to at least half of their students.

Figure 5: % of Students Provided Meals During COVID-19

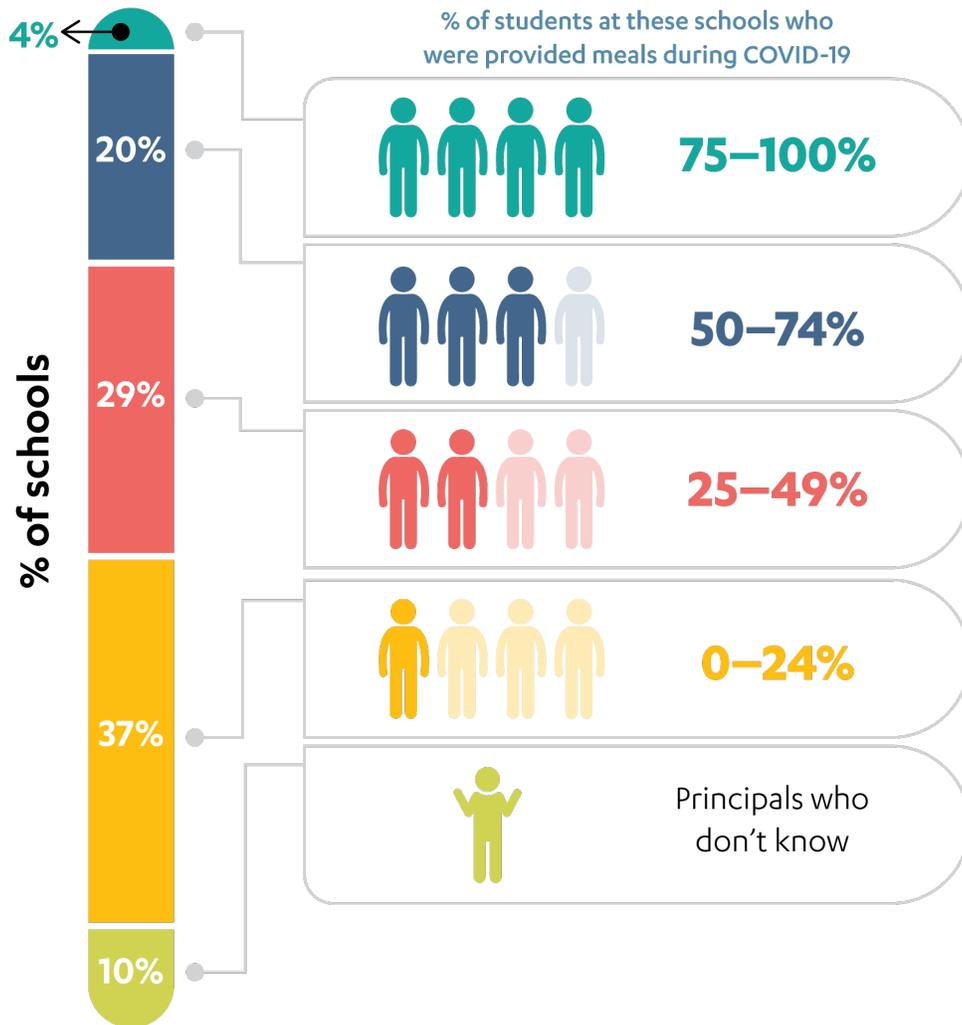
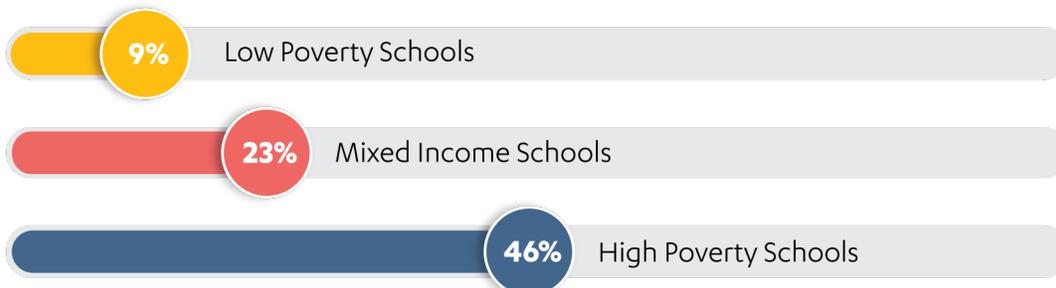


Figure 6: Schools Serving Meals to More than Half of their Students, by School Poverty



Transitioning to Remote Instruction

In many schools in the United States, the transition to remote instruction was abrupt and immediate. As late as Wednesday March 11, the Center for Disease Control issued guidance to schools that emphasized cleaning and regular contact with public health officials rather than closure (though the guidance did call for a 2-5 day temporary closure if there was evidence of infections on school campuses.)⁴ But, by the end of that week, more than 8 in 10 schools had closed for in-person instruction, and most other schools followed the next week. 1 in 5 schools across the nation started remote instruction the very next school day after they had closed for in-person instruction.

This section explores whether U.S. public high schools were ready to provide remote instruction—and what this meant—when the doors closed. We consider: Did educators and students have access to necessary technology? If not, what actions did schools take after the transition? What modes of instruction did schools use for remote instruction? How did schools support teachers to adopt these new instructional approaches?

Educators' Access to Technology

Many educators and other key staff struggled to move online in the early days of the transition. A lack of experience with online communication was one challenge. A quarter of principals had never participated in a video conference (such as Zoom) in their role as a school leader prior to the pandemic, and only a little more than a third had met with faculty or staff online. Almost no principals reported that they had used video conferencing to meet with students or parents. In addition, at most schools, key staff members lacked the necessary hardware or connectivity to support remote instruction as their school transitioned from in-person learning. Only 32% of principals reported that all their teachers had the necessary technology when their school transitioned. Only 17% of principals indicated that all of their staff were ready—teachers, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and clerical support. These gaps in readiness were most commonly found in high poverty schools and rural schools. Indeed, low poverty schools were more than three times as likely (25% to 8%) as high poverty schools to have all staff supplied with necessary technology when they transitioned to remote instruction.

Figure 7: When did Key School Staff have Necessary Technology to Support Remote Instruction?

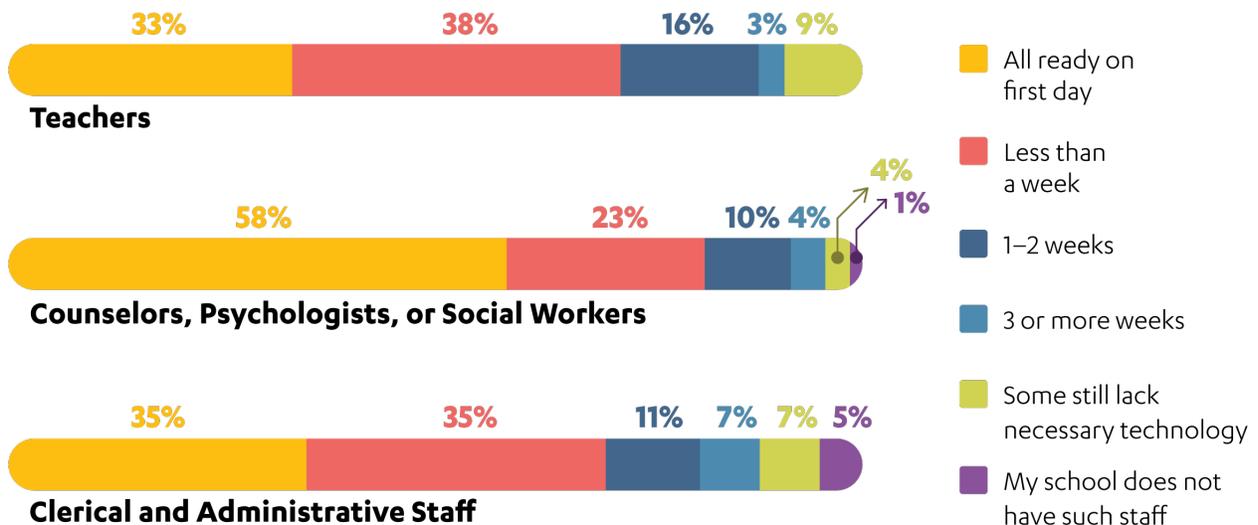
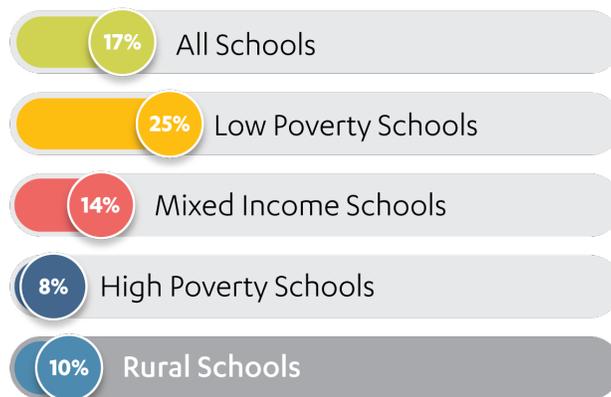


Figure 8: % Schools in which ALL Staff had Necessary Technology at Transition, by School Poverty and Community Location



Readiness for Remote Instruction

In schools that entered the pandemic with a strong technological infrastructure, educators and students were able to draw upon previous experience to support remote instruction. For principals like George Taylor in Texas and Martina Hernandez in Arizona, this meant members of their school community were familiar with platforms like “Google Classroom” and “Schoology.” Ian Brown, a principal in suburban Indiana, reported that his school was “ahead of the curve with preparation for a situation like COVID,” because it had dedicated almost all of its professional development time for six years to train teachers in digital learning and even had experience using eLearning on snow days. Similarly, David Reese from a low poverty school in New Jersey spoke of the good “fortune of operating in a 1 to 1 district” in which every student had a device for learning and in which there had been “an abundance of professional development” over several years. As a result of this strong technology infrastructure, when Mr. Reese’s school transitioned to remote instruction, his staff was able “to swiftly ramp up to approximate” in-person learning.

Not all schools were so fortunate. Carol Stevens leads a school in rural Louisiana where many families lack internet or cell phone coverage. Entering the pandemic, her school owned less than one device for every three students. As the school transitioned to remote instruction, Ms. Stevens discovered that her staff was “totally unprepared” to provide “distance learning for all students.” As a consequence, Ms. Stevens and her teachers “had to learn ‘on the fly.’”

Students’ Access to Technology

As schools transitioned to remote instruction, there was great variability in student access to the necessary hardware and connectivity for them to participate from home. Only 30% of principals reported that almost all (95% or more) of their students were ready to participate when remote instruction began. Almost 36% of principals reported that at least a quarter of their students lacked the technology to participate. In 14% of schools, at least half the student body lacked the necessary technology.

Student access to devices and connectivity differed dramatically across schools. Principals serving low poverty schools were three times (48% to 16%) as likely as those in high poverty

schools to report that almost all of their students had the technology necessary for remote instruction when they transitioned. Conversely, high poverty schools were more than 8 times (34% to 4%) as likely as low poverty schools to experience a severe shortage of technology at the time of transition—at least half of their students lacked the necessary technology.

Figure 9: % Students who had Devices and Connectivity at Transition

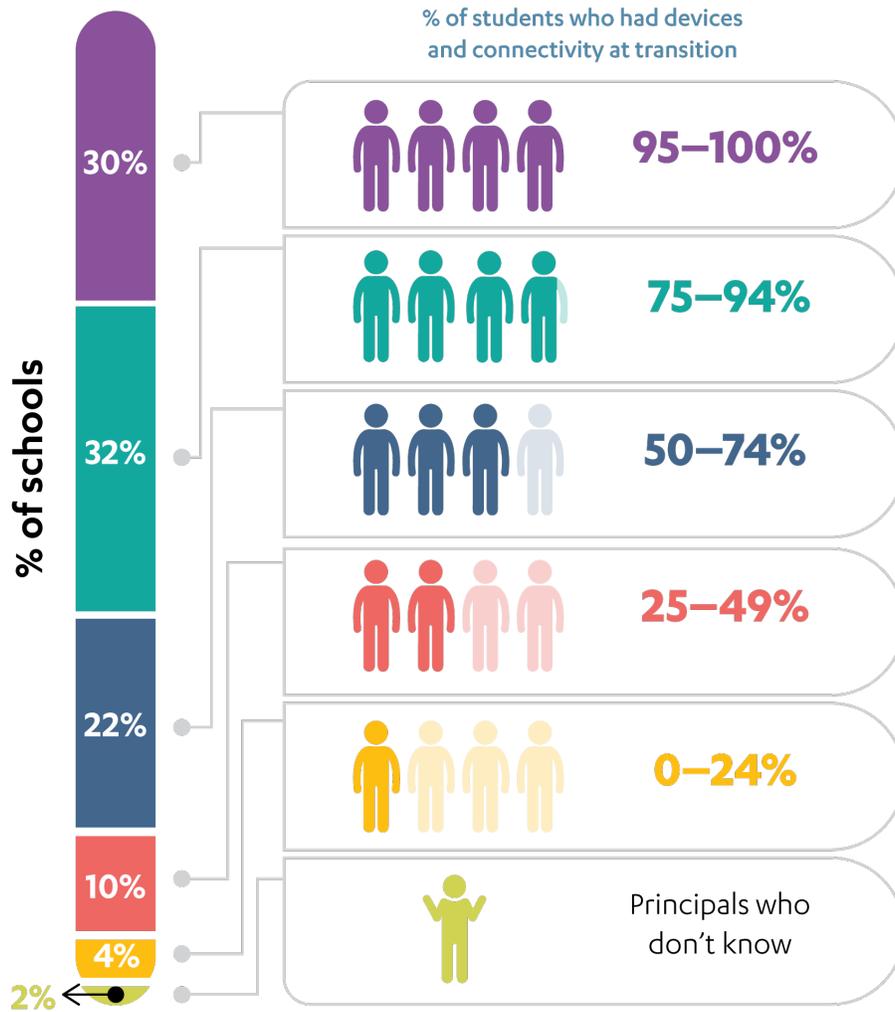


Figure 10: Schools in which almost all (95-100%) Students had Necessary Technology at Transition, by School Poverty and Community Location

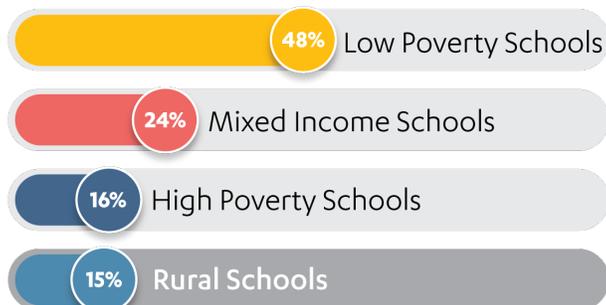
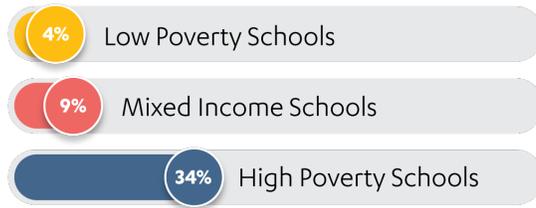


Figure 11: Schools in which Less than Half of Students had Necessary Technology at Transition, by School Poverty



Expanding Student Access to Technology

Almost all schools (93%) distributed technology to students. High poverty schools provided technology to the most students and principals in these schools spent more time distributing and troubleshooting technology than principals in other schools. For example, Daniel Ruiz, a principal in a small town in Texas, worked with district officials to set up hotspots in the community and Lucas Miller, a principal in suburban Florida, helped the district create computer repair stations.

Figure 12: Providing Tablets, Laptops, Hotspots, by % Students Served

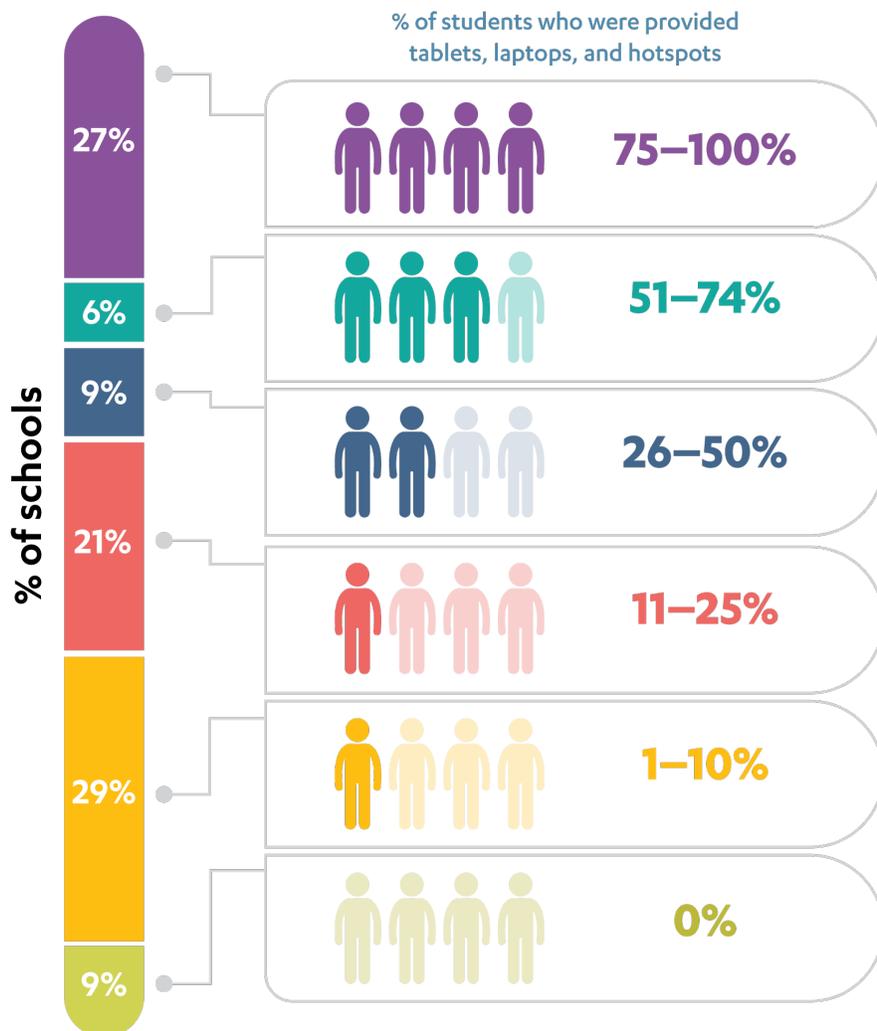


Figure 13: Providing Tablets, Laptops, Hotspots to at least 50% of Students, by School Poverty

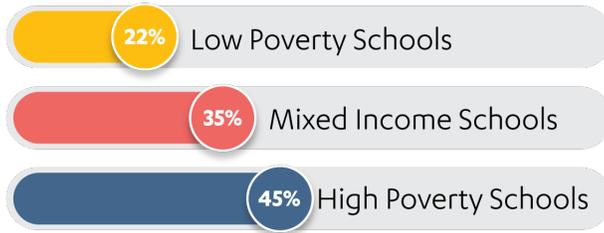


Figure 14: Weekly Hours Spent by Principals Supporting Distribution of Technology

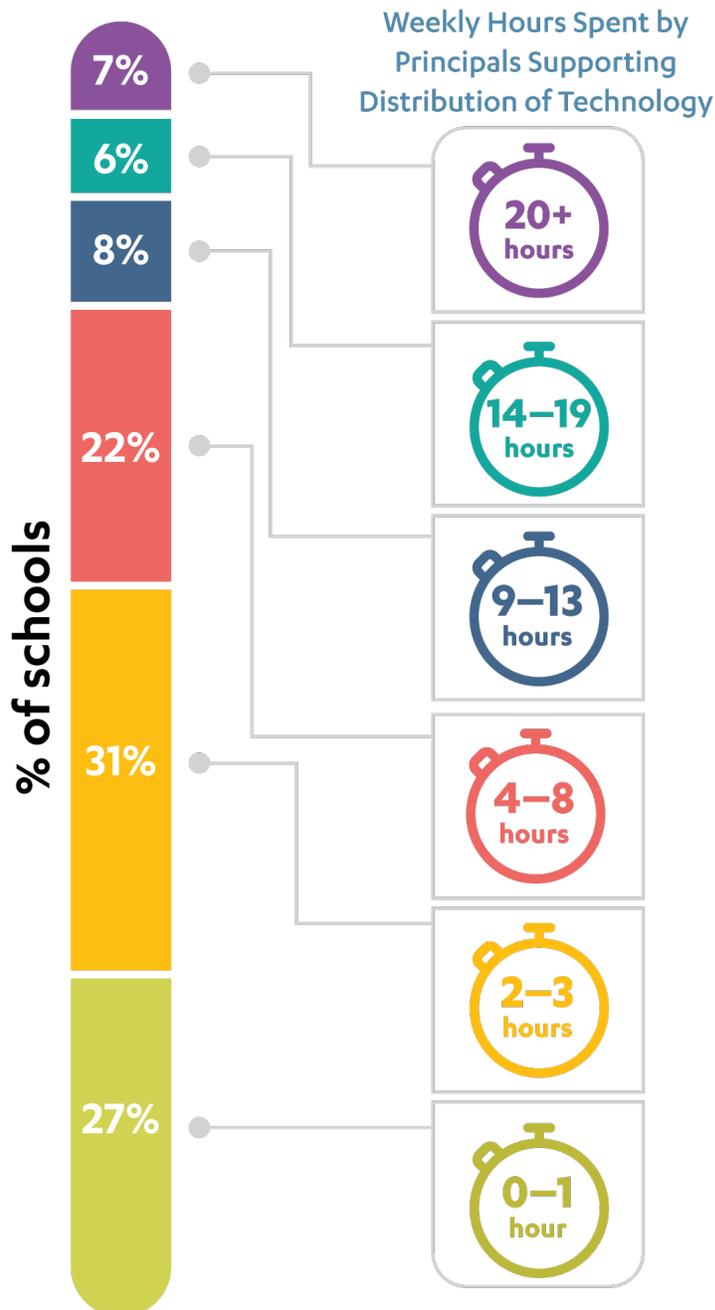
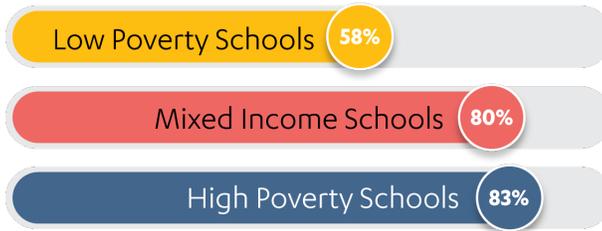


Figure 15: Principals Spending more than 1 Hour a Week Distributing Technology, By School Poverty



All of this work bore fruit. By several weeks into the transition to remote instruction, a strong majority of principals reported that almost all (95% or more) of their students had access to the necessary technology. Nevertheless, even after these efforts, only 26% of principals could say that all of their students had the necessary technology for remote learning—and this figure was much lower in high poverty schools. Several principals noted that their communities experienced weak cell phone coverage and inadequate access to the internet. Santiago Morales explained that, due to “difficulties with infrastructure, including internet connectivity,” his high poverty school in rural California was “ill prepared to implement a distance learning program that would reach all students.”

Figure 16: % Students with Devices and Connectivity after Technology Distribution

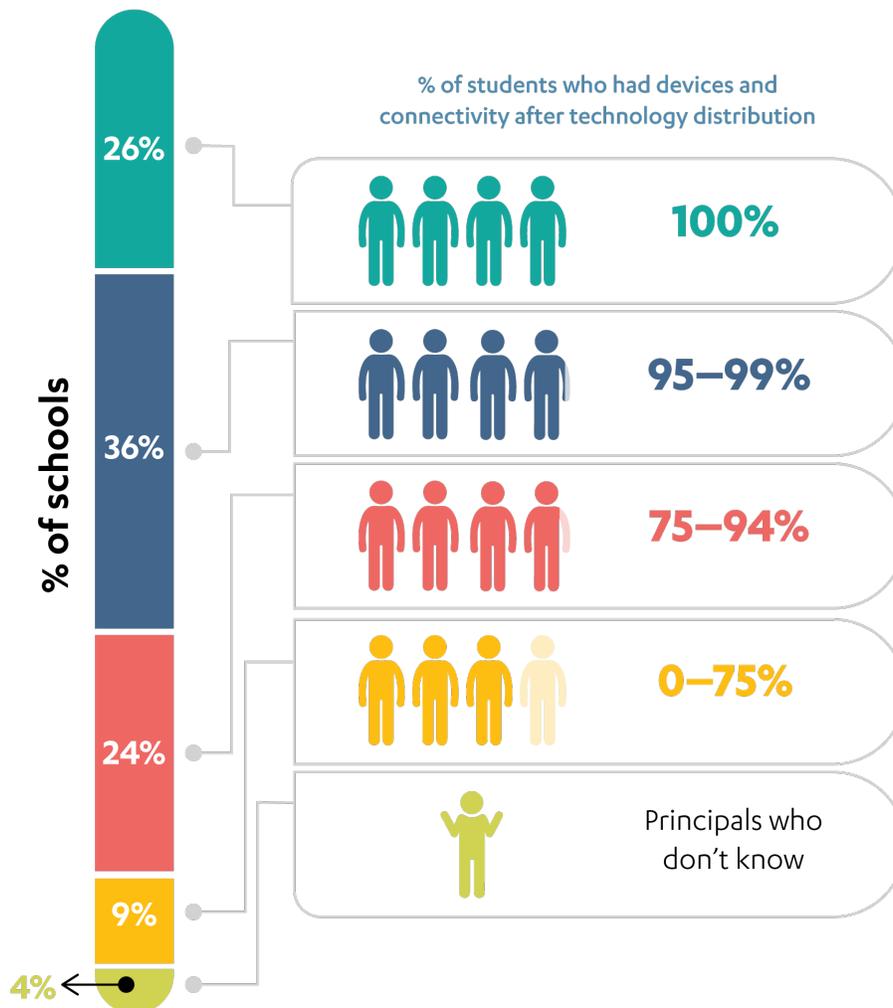
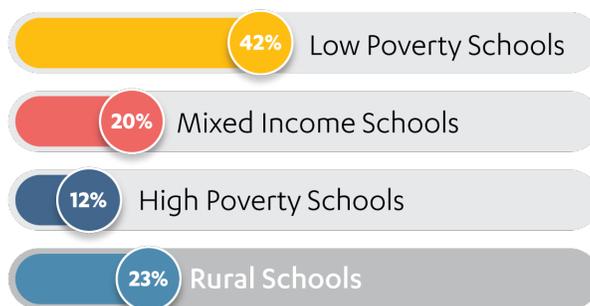


Figure 17: Schools in which ALL students had Devices and Connectivity after Technology Distribution, by School Poverty and Community Location



Using Old and New Technologies for Remote Instruction

Most schools used a mix of different approaches to provide instruction after they closed their doors. These approaches included distributing work in paper packets, posting assignments online, sharing pre-recorded lessons through the web or tv, and teaching “synchronously” through live online interaction between teacher and students. Many principals articulated the advantages of synchronous lessons. As Brian Thomas in California noted, “without the live audio/video interaction, the work as seen by students looked like a Google calendar full of tasks and assignments.” Yet, only 37% of principals reported that all or most instruction took place this way. More commonly, teachers presented students with assignments (either in paper packets or online) which students then completed and turned in.

Figure 18: Proportion of Time Spent on Different Methods for Delivering Remote Instruction

	Paper packets	Online assignments	Recorded video lesson	TV or web	Synchronous
All	2.4%	38.07%	8.23%	3.04%	8.18%
Most	3.4%	53.17%	23.17%	14.59%	29.09%
Some	53.7%	8.46%	62.8%	64.74%	57.27%
None	40.5%	0.3%	5.79%	17.63%	5.45%

Building Capacity for Quality Remote Instruction

Many principals around the country scrambled to create professional development that would help teachers develop engaging and interactive lessons. And they did this almost entirely online, even though few schools had any experience with conducting professional development online or addressing issues of remote instruction. 81% of principals reported that their schools provided teachers with professional development on remote instructional strategies. Yet, in most schools the vast majority of this training took place after the schools had transitioned. Only 12% provided at least a day of professional development before they began teaching remotely.

A number of principals praised their staff for moving quickly and purposefully to adjust to a dramatically different mode of teaching and learning. Ed Dwindle, a principal in rural Indiana, reported that his teachers “jumped into a situation that no one could have possibly been prepared for and did an outstanding job of continuing our students’ education.” Such responses played out across many diverse communities. Yet, in schools which entered the pandemic with weak technological infrastructure, even an energetic and committed staff could not ensure a rapid and seamless transition. Due to the digital divide, these differences in readiness map on to school demographics. While low poverty schools were most likely to “swiftly” take up remote instruction, high poverty schools and rural schools often struggled during the transition.

The Impact of Remote Instruction on Educational Equity

While we know that online learning can supplement our in-person model of public education, what we are learning is that it cannot fully replace it. Our inequities are magnified ten-fold.

Tyrone Rice, Principal of a Suburban High School in California

In our last two sections, we have documented the ways that schools serving low- and high-poverty communities faced distinctive challenges in meeting the needs of students and families and in transitioning to remote instruction. This section examines whether inequalities have increased within schools as well as between them. Did a growing number of students fall behind during remote learning, and, if so, was this more likely to occur in particular school communities?

During remote instruction, many high schools had difficulty providing necessary supplementary services for English Learners and Special Education students. More than 40% of principals reported that their school did not supply English Learners with instructional materials in their home language. And even in those schools that provided students with materials in their home language, English Learners often did not benefit from the informal peer-to-peer conversations that characterize the best classrooms. Suzanne Davis noted that her California school found “irrefutable patterns that distance learning doesn’t work for our language learners.” While almost all principals reported that teachers at their schools are working with Special Education students toward their IEP goals, some acknowledged that their teachers were not tracking students’ progress toward these goals or making accommodations for online teaching. And a majority of principals reported that their school did not provide the same quality of services for students with disabilities (such as occupational therapy or counseling) as prior to the pandemic.

Figure 19: Support for English Learners

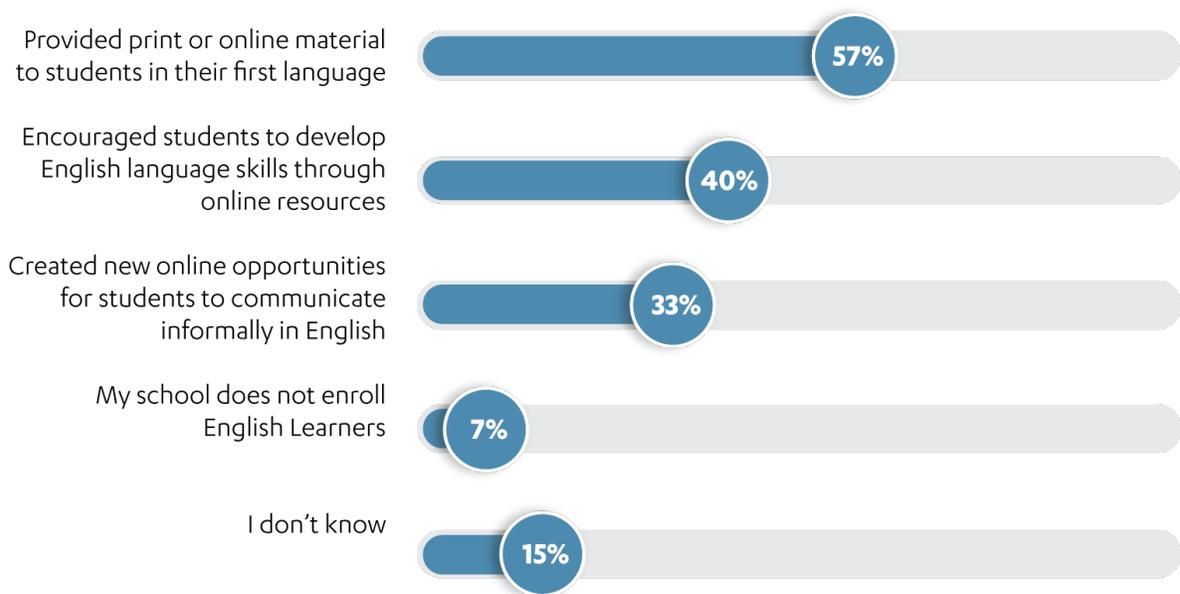


Figure 20: Support for Special Education Students

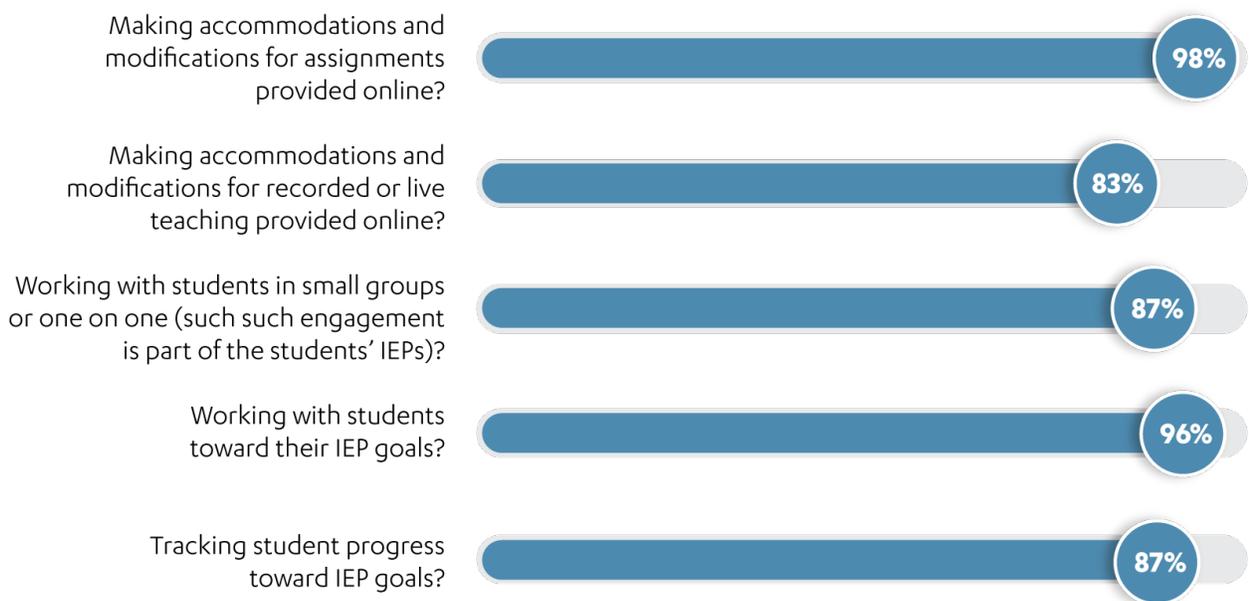
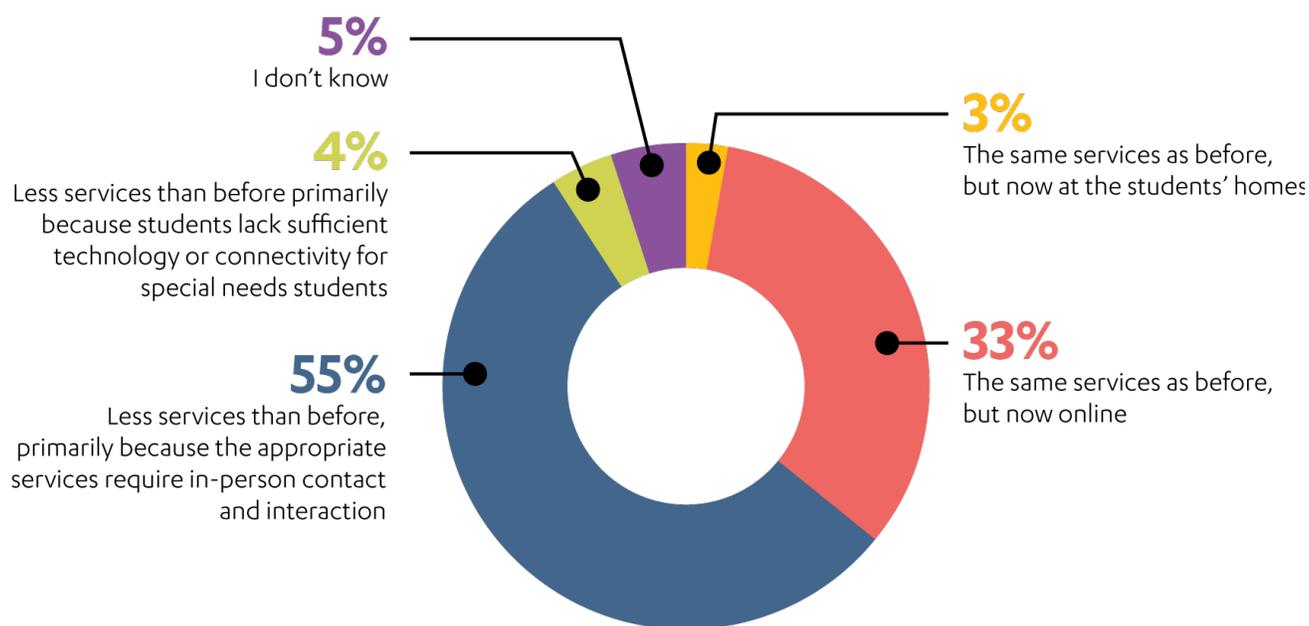


Figure 21: How do Related Services (such as Occupational Therapy and Counseling) Compare to Before Remote Instruction?



Principals highlighted two other related dynamics that made it difficult for some of their students to participate fully in remote instruction. In many communities, not all homes had access to the internet. Tony Duncan in Texas noted that the lack of universal broadband “increase[d] the divide between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots.’” This problem was particularly acute in low-income rural communities. California principal Helen Janssen leads a school in an area where few families have reliable internet access. She explained: “Asking impoverished families to use their gas to sit in a parking lot to learn online is unreasonable and puts more economic strain on the family.” This same economic stress also created growing pressures for youth to participate in the labor market. Emily Potts in North Carolina pointed out that many of her students had become “essential workers in retail and the fast food industry.” Across the country in California, Sandra Curry’s students were asked to work in the fields, or otherwise increase their working hours because they had become a “bread winner in the family structure.” Ms. Curry and other principals also pointed out that some families had turned to high school-age youth to take care of younger siblings who, due to the pandemic, were now out of school without supervision.

As it became harder for some students to participate in remote learning, many fell behind. Two thirds of principals reported that fewer students than prior to the pandemic were able to keep up with their assigned work. In 43% of schools, more than a quarter of students were not able to keep up with assignments during remote instruction. This problem was far more likely to occur in high poverty schools than in low poverty schools.

While some students fell behind, others ceased participating at all during remote instruction.

Nearly half of principals reported that they have had difficulty maintaining contact with at least 10% of their students. In some instances, principals were not able to establish any contact with a subset of their student body. Principals in high poverty schools were several times more likely than principals in low poverty schools to report difficulties contacting large numbers of students.

Figure 22: % Students Not Keeping up with Assigned Academic Work During Remote Instruction

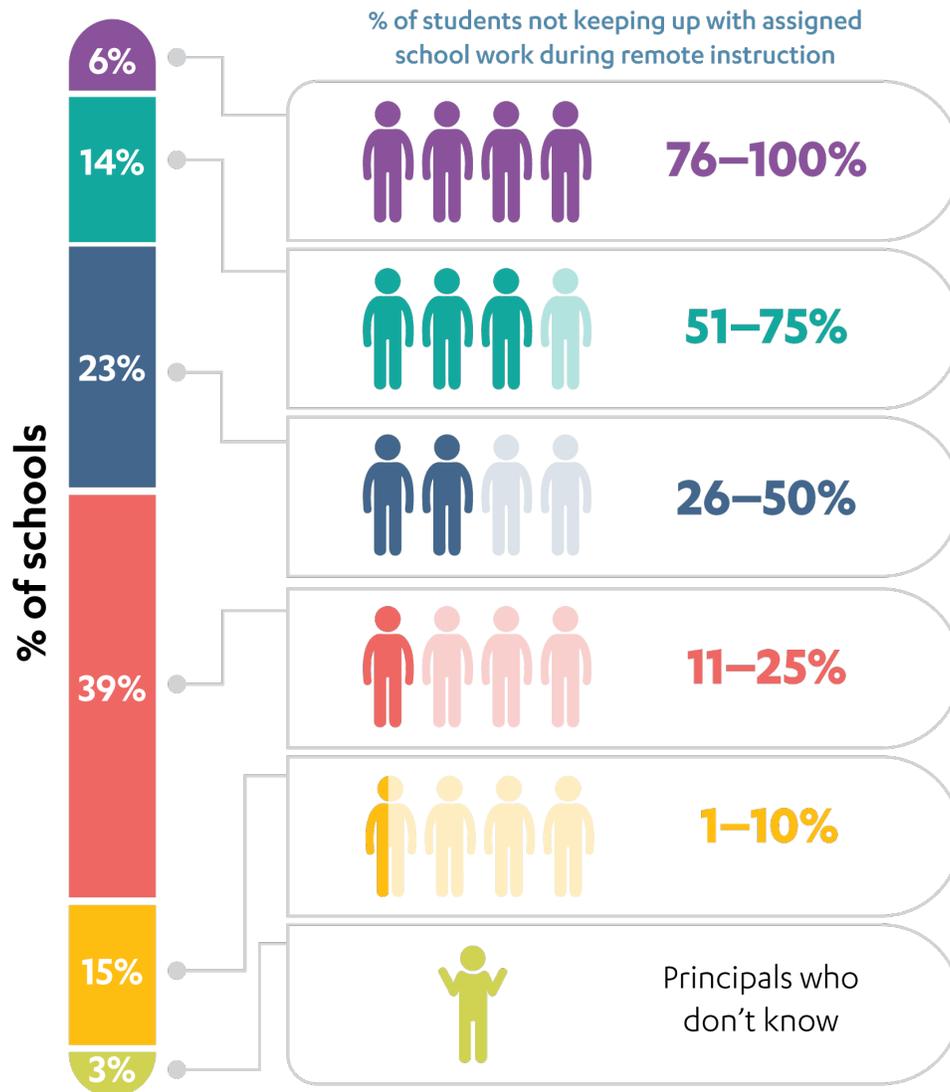


Figure 23: More than 25% of Students Not Keeping up with Academic Work, by School Poverty

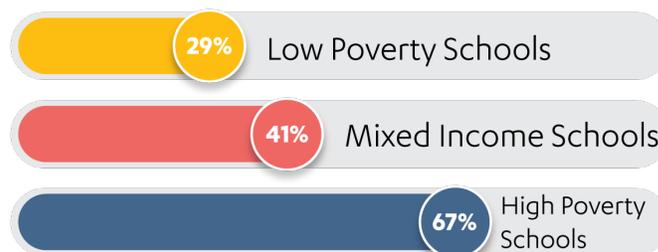


Figure 24: % of Students with whom School has Difficulty Maintaining Regular Contact

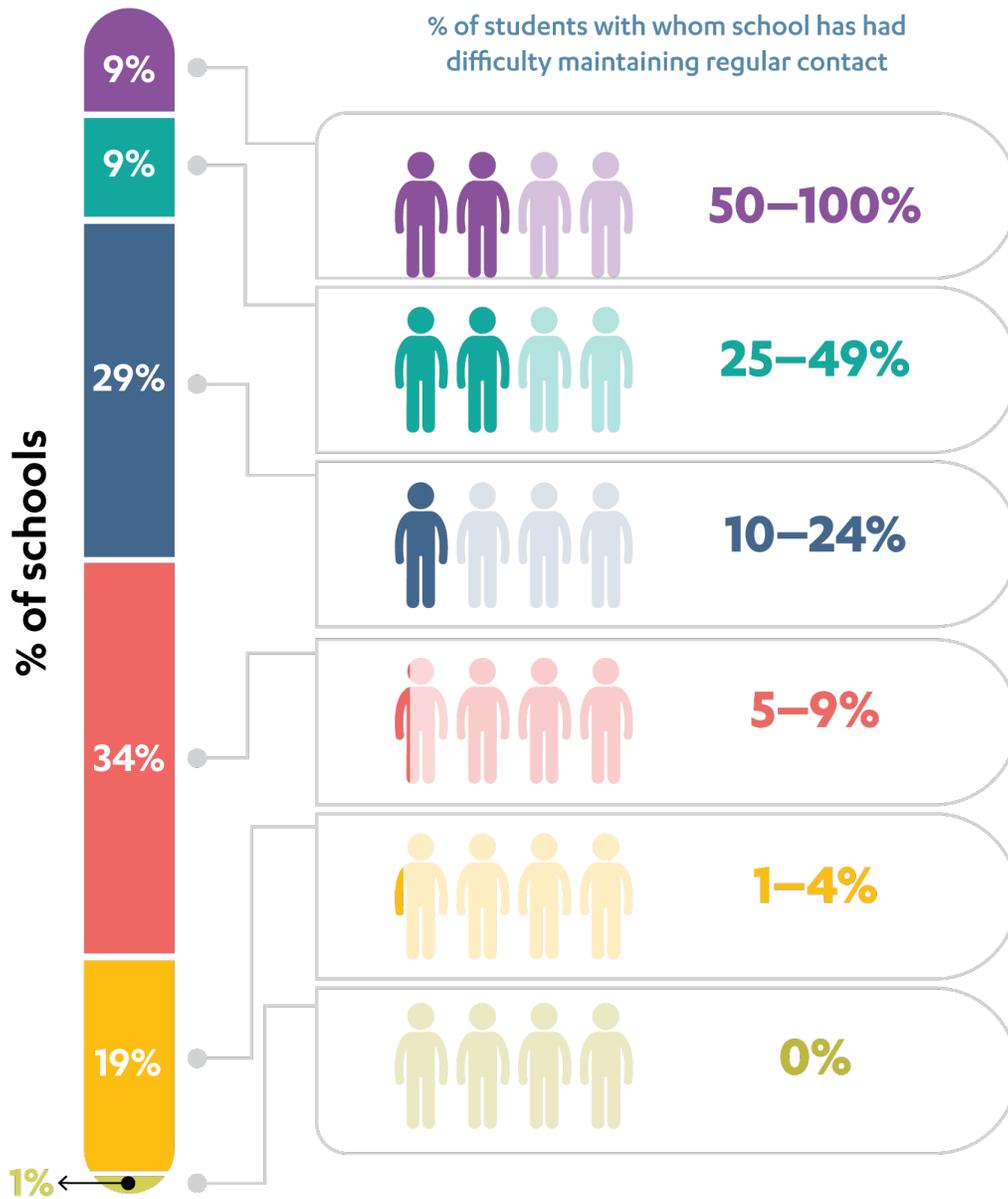


Figure 25: School has Difficulty Maintaining Regular Contact with at least 10% of Students, by School Poverty

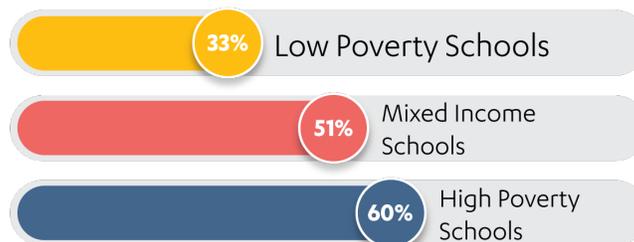


Figure 26: % of Students School has been Unable to Contact

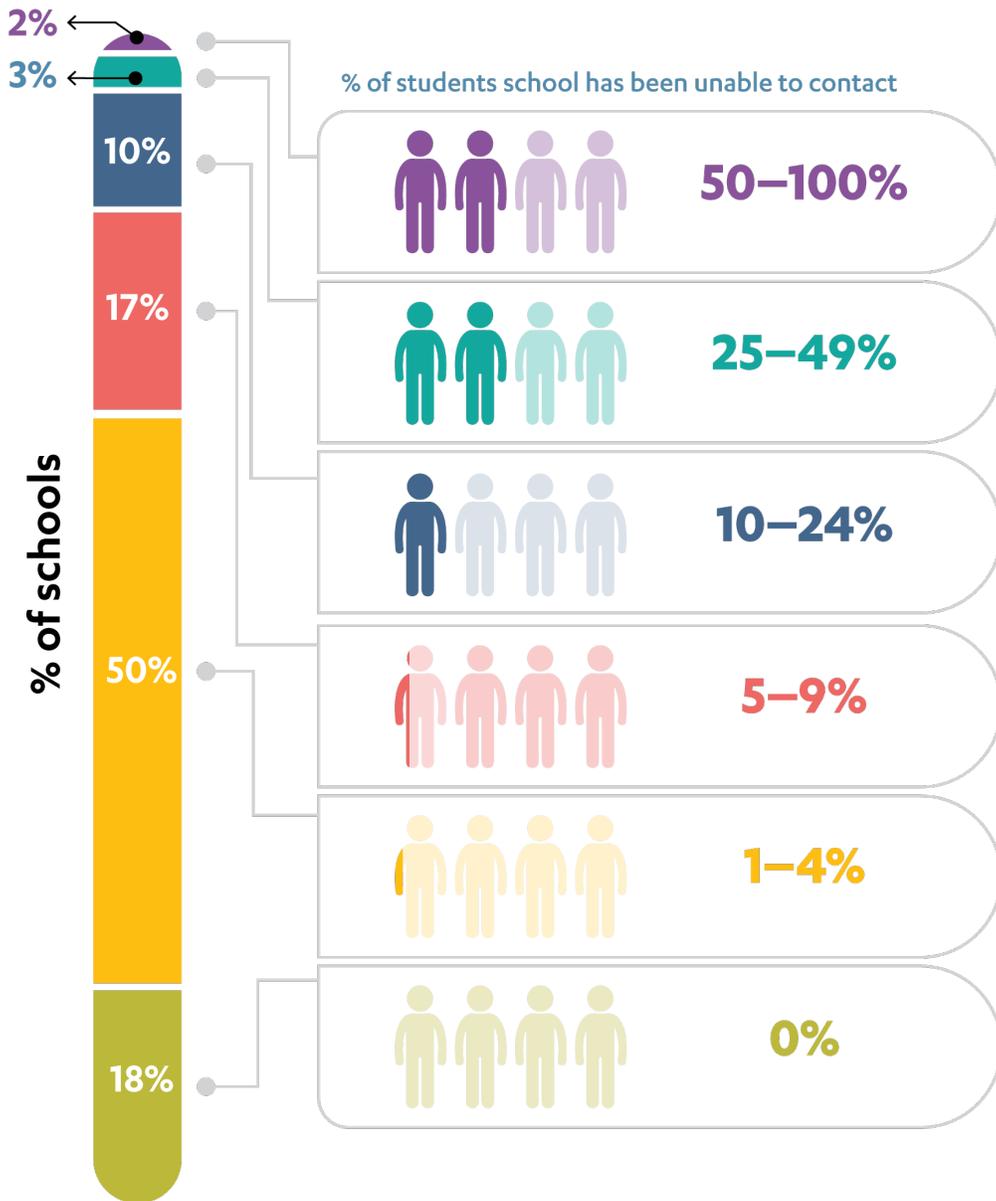
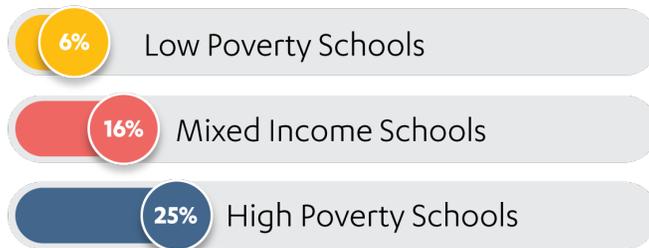


Figure 27: School has been Unable to Contact at least 10% of Students, by School Poverty



Lessons Learned

Our survey of a representative sample of U.S. public high school principals illuminates both educators' robust response to the pandemic in spring 2020 as well as the various ways that inequality was exacerbated in the context of remote instruction. In this final section, we recount five lessons that emerge from this work and point to implications these lessons hold for practice, policy, and public action.

Lesson 1:

Public schools played a critical role in sustaining communities threatened by a deadly virus and economic shutdown. Principals across the United States supported widespread efforts to meet the health and social welfare needs of students and families. Many schools provided mental health counseling, helped students to navigate the healthcare system, sought to shore up housing insecurity, and distributed meals to students and family members. These actions were common across all schools, but the need was greatest and efforts most extensive in high poverty schools.

The idea that public schools should serve as a cornerstone of community life is not new. But, there has been a tendency in recent years to focus narrowly on standardized test results, and forget the many ways that public schools contribute to our collective well-being. COVID-19 has reminded us that the best public schools are community schools that convene and connect public services, weave together different segments of the broader community, and foster social trust and understanding.

In the near term, public schools would do well to deepen relationships with community partners, conduct inventories of community needs, and encourage teachers to engage students in curriculum that examines issues and concerns in their local communities. Over the longer term, policymakers need to more purposefully invest in such community school strategies and look upon these practices as vital elements of what public schools do, rather than as “nice” or ancillary activities.

Lesson 2:

Inequality in learning opportunities was exacerbated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a prime cause was the digital divide. America's public high schools moved quickly to shift from in-person to remote instruction, often making this monumental change without students missing a school day. But while some schools “swiftly ramp[ed] up,” others took more time and struggled in the process. The transition to remote instruction played out unevenly because some school communities entered the pandemic with educators and students having more widespread access to necessary technology and more experience using various forms of technology for learning and communication. Schools in rural areas and schools serving high poverty communities were the least likely to have strong access to technology prior to the pandemic and hence were most likely to experience delays as they transitioned to remote instruction.

It is possible that efforts to expand access to technology in spring 2020 may mean that inequalities created by the digital divide will not be as profoundly felt in 2020-2021.⁵ As we note above, almost all principals report that their schools distributed technology to at least some students

last spring. Other research has pointed to creative responses such as mapping community locations that offer free internet access, creating outdoor work areas in or around school campuses for students to download materials, or linking families with companies that provide free or low cost wifi.⁶ Yet, unequal access to technology remains a critical issue whose redress requires a substantial increase in public funding.⁷ Congress is currently considering several initiatives toward this end. A more far-reaching implication from spring 2020 would be that universal access to broadband has become an essential precondition for learning and henceforth should be considered a fundamental right for all students attending U.S. public schools.

Lesson 3:

Rising inequity in learning also resulted from the uneven impact of COVID-19 amidst broader societal inequality. COVID-19 has affected the entire nation, but the most serious health and economic impacts have been concentrated in low-income communities of color.⁸ Students enrolled in high poverty schools thus were most likely to experience heightened challenges associated with the crisis that made it difficult to participate in learning. And, these effects came on top of long standing structural inequalities whereby, prior to the pandemic, high poverty schools were more likely to receive less funding and to experience greater student need associated with factors such as housing and food insecurity.

Given these dynamics, it is little wonder that, in our survey, several principals from high poverty schools called for new initiatives to address inequalities in public schools. “We have to take advantage of the disruption the pandemic has caused to our inequitable educational system,” reasoned Juan Gonzales, “to make significant changes that will assure equitable attainment of the skills and values students need to make our society equitable.”

A first step will be to target additional high quality learning opportunities toward students who have been underserved during the pandemic. One promising equity strategy is to use learning time as a lever to effect change. By expanding available learning time and ensuring that this time affords opportunities for inquiry, creative expression, and critical thinking, school systems can begin to remedy previous experiences of inequality.⁹ Once in-person learning is again possible, investments should be directed to high poverty schools for quality after school initiatives, vacation programs, and summer school.

Lesson 4:

While educators are anxious to get back to their campuses, many do not want to return to schools as they were. Numerous principals spoke to the importance of bringing their students back to school. Elizabeth Cedillo from Texas told us: “We miss them. The halls are empty, it is hard to go out into the hallways and not see any kids.” Yet, numerous principals told us that they looked upon the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to “reset,” “reflect on our values and beliefs,” “shift the way students are taught,” or even “dismantle broken systems.” Many envisioned a broader reinvention of teaching and learning. “Public education has not only changed during this pandemic but it has caused us to prepare to see a new way of teaching our students forever,” explained Joaquin Martinez. “We may talk about what education was before this pandemic and what it is now.”

The limitations of schooling under quarantine have prompted principals to reflect on the essential elements of education which they hope to foster once the health crisis has abated. Mark Jamison in Arizona has found that “remote communication lacks certain fundamental components - nonverbal cues, physical touch, a degree [of] emotion.” He is eager to re-center dialogue and communication when his students return to campus.” Nataly Kleiss in California similarly has been thinking about the “value of person to person interaction.” Unlike the isolation that she associates with zoom or google classroom, she reasons that “teenagers are highly interpersonal” and so education needs to become “a people centered operation.”

In the months ahead, it will be important to nurture the desire of educators to rethink and reimagine schooling, and to do so in ways that center trusting and caring relationships in the teaching and learning process. Many states and districts have established elaborate rules about social distancing to ensure the safety of students and staff who return to school amidst the pandemic. In addition to providing sufficient physical space, educators need to foster creative space in which teachers, students, and community members join together to develop a shared vision for what schools should become.

Lesson 5:

Public schools require a well-functioning civil society to do their work well. This is particularly true in moments of crisis. Several principals characterized Spring 2020 as the most challenging period that they had experienced in their careers. Some principals, like Leo Moore in Nevada, were sustained through “all the inconveniences, frustrations, isolation, and disruption” by supportive staff and communities. “This crisis, he told us, “has united our community in ways that I have not seen since 9/11.”

But other principals such as Alan Telluride in Utah “have felt pulled apart” by political division and a lack of social trust in the broader community. At times, the tumultuous politics of the pandemic left principals in the position of having to explain the unexplainable. In Arizona, Sara Bennington found herself caught in the contradiction that community members “could go to a bar and watch our virtual graduation that we could not hold, because ... schools [are] following CDC guidelines while bars are not.” She concluded that, “this kind of ‘confusion’ makes the work [of school leadership] much harder.”

We expect a great deal from our schools—to keep young people safe, develop their skills and capacities, and prepare them to contribute to their communities and sustain our democracy. Yet, public schools are public institutions and hence reflect the strengths and weaknesses of public life. Only by nurturing a shared public commitment to the well-being and development of all young people, will we ensure that public schools can fulfill their important role.

And that suggests that the most important educational lessons from COVID-19 have not yet been fully cast. These are the lessons that students learn every day as they observe their schooling and our political life—lessons about equity, social trust, the role of science in public deliberation, and the value we place on young people’s lives. The lessons students learn today will stay with them for the rest of their lives. What do we want these lessons to be?

Endnotes

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