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New National Survey of High School Principals by UCLA Finds Strong Response to COVID 19, But Pandemic Has Exacerbated Inequities

In a first look at the impact of COVID 19 on American High schools, a new national survey by UCLA of high school principals finds schools stepping up strongly to respond to the needs of students confronted by illness, economic insecurity and homelessness, stress and anxiety and even death, but challenged by the pervasive inequities that have for too long undermined schools and communities.

“The results of this survey make two things very clear, says John Rogers, education professor and director of the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access at UCLA who led the survey. “Public schools have responded heroically, playing a critical role in supporting students and sustaining communities threatened by the deadly virus and economic shutdown. But the inequities that plague our schools have been exacerbated by the pandemic, impeding learning for those students in communities already greatly challenged by economic and social inequalities.”

The survey, [*Learning Lessons: U.S. Public High Schools and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Spring 2020*](#), reports the responses of a nationally representative sample of 344 high school principals questioned in May and June 2020 after schools closed campuses and transitioned to distance learning amid the pandemic.

States in the Northeast and part of the South last spring bore the full brunt of the pandemic. In those regions, one principal describes the “intensity of the problems we’ve faced ... death, loss of jobs, anxiety, depression.” Another noted that her students had “suffered losses ... neighbors dying ... people afflicted.” Even in other states where rates of infection were dramatically lower, the effects of the economic dislocation created by the national lockdown were experienced widely. One principal of a socio-economically diverse school in urban Washington, remembered “seeing families thrust into poverty so quickly and waiting in food lines.”

In the survey, 59 percent of principals who responded said they had helped students and families access and navigate health services. Seventy-seven percent provided access to mental health counseling. Nearly half, 50 percent, provided support to students experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness. Almost a third of principals provided financial support to students and their families. Sadly, 43 percent of principals reported providing support for students who experienced death in their families.

“These findings underscore the critical role schools play in their communities, Rogers said. “More than two-thirds of principals reported their school or district provided meals to family members of students who were not enrolled in the school. And while principals of almost all schools provided

meals to students, nearly half of principals of high poverty schools provided meals to more students.

As the pandemic accelerated last Spring, the transition to remote learning for schools was abrupt and immediate. But the transition to remote instruction was not the same for all schools and students. Inequality in learning opportunities was exacerbated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The digital divide was a prime cause.

While many educators and key staff struggled to move online in the early days of the transition, 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.

There were also differences in the readiness for remote instruction of teachers and schools. *In those schools that entered the pandemic with a strong technological infrastructure, educators and students were able to draw upon previous experience to support remote instruction. Schools with low levels of poverty were most likely to “swiftly” take up remote instruction, high poverty schools and rural schools often struggled during the transition.*

Principals also reported great variability in student access to the technology hardware and connectivity needed to participate from home. High poverty schools were more than 8 times (34% to 4%) as likely to experience a severe shortage of technology at the time of transition—at least half of their students lacked the necessary technology. Schools with high levels of poverty provided technology to the most students, and principals in these schools spent more time distributing and troubleshooting technology than principals in other schools.

The survey makes clear that the impact of remote instruction has significant implications for educational equity. Many high schools had difficulty providing necessary supplementary services for English Learners and Special Education students. More than 40% of all principals reported that their school did *not* supply English Learners with instructional materials—either online or in print packets—in their home language. 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.

Two thirds of principals also 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.

And 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.

"These findings reveal exceptional efforts by school principals across the country, but also make clear that the inequities confronting schools amid the pandemic map directly onto the pre-existing social inequalities that unfairly affect our most vulnerable students," Rogers said. "As we have moved to remote instruction, economically disadvantaged communities have been disproportionately impacted."

"To their great credit, Schools have played a strong role in the nation's response to the pandemic," Rogers said. "But many principals said they do not want to return to schools as they were. They see the COVID 19 crisis as an opportunity to reset and reflect on values and beliefs, to shift the way students are taught or even dismantle broken systems in a broader reinvention of teaching and learning."

"Creating those public schools will require a well-functioning civil society. 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."

[Learning Lessons: U.S. Public High Schools and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Spring 2020](https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/learning-lessons-us-public-high-schools-and-the-covid-19-pandemic/), is a project of the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. The full report of the survey findings is available online at <https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/learning-lessons-us-public-high-schools-and-the-covid-19-pandemic/>