Research Report

HEATHER L. SCHWARTZ, DAVID GRANT, MELISSA DILIBERTI, GERALD P. HUNTER, CLAUDE MESSAN SETODJI

Remote Learning Is Here to Stay

Results from the First American School District Panel Survey

U.S. school districts have taken widely varied approaches to reopening public schools for the 2020–2021 school year. The divergence stems from the highly localized approach to both schooling and addressing the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and differences in COVID-19 transmission rates among communities.

To develop a national picture of school districts' needs and approaches to school reopening, the RAND Corporation fielded its first survey to the new American School District Panel (ASDP) from

KEY FINDINGS

- About two in ten districts have already adopted, plan to adopt, or are considering adopting virtual schools as part of their district portfolio after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. District leaders cited reasons related to student and parent demand for continuing various forms of online instruction in future years.
- Three widely shared concerns rose to the top for district leaders for the 2020–2021 school year: disparities in students' opportunities to learn during the COVID-19 pandemic, students' social and emotional learning (SEL) needs, and insufficient funding to cover staff. Leaders ranked these three concerns topmost among a wide variety of school instructional and staffing matters.
- School district leaders reported that the U.S. Department of Education had the second-least amount of influence on their COVID-19 plans; state and local health departments had the most.
- School district leaders diverged in terms of the degree to which they emphasized certain needs for the 2020–2021 school year. More leaders from focus districts than from nonfocus districts rated fundamentals (such as internet and technology access) as a greatest need. In contrast, more nonfocus district leaders rated student mental health and high-quality instructional resources as greatest needs.

September through November 2020. By offering traditional school district superintendents' and charter management organization (CMO) directors' views, we complement findings from four prior surveys of teachers and principals about their experiences navigating the COVID-19 pandemic.[1]

For simplicity, we refer to both of these types of local education agencies as *districts* and to both types of respondents as *district leaders* in this report. We use the term *focus districts* to refer to districts where at least 50 percent of students are Black or Hispanic/Latino or at least 50 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Remaining districts are *nonfocus districts*.

We hope that these findings will be useful to districts, state departments of education, education support providers, instructional content developers, policymakers, and researchers. We note that our findings are limited by a relatively small sample size, which constrains our ability to tease apart differences among types of districts. As a consequence, we only present overall responses and responses among focus and nonfocus districts. We will continue to grow the ASDP sample and field ASDP surveys in winter 2021 and in spring 2021.

In the rest of this report, we describe the American Educator Panels (AEPs), the profile of districts that participated in the survey, and the survey results, and provide a brief conclusion. The technical appendix includes our methods for survey analysis.

About the American Educator Panels

The AEP consists of three standing panels of educators: the American Teacher Panel, the American School Leader Panel, and the ASDP. The AEP began in 2014 and expanded significantly during the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years (Robbins and Grant, 2020). The ASDP is the newest member of the AEP, and it includes more than 375 districts. The American Teacher Panel, meanwhile, includes more than 25,000 teachers, and the American School Leader Panel includes more than 5,000 school principals.

We recruit AEP members using probabilistic sampling methods from the most-comprehensive lists of teachers, principals, and school districts that are available. Information about how we recruited ASDP panel members is available on the ASDP website (RAND Corporation, undated-a). The panels are designed to generate samples of sufficient size to facilitate national analyses and analyses of prevalent subgroups at the national level.

The ASDP Survey Sample and Administration

The ASDP sample consists of K–12 public school districts and CMOs in the United States. Over 375 districts have agreed to participate in the panel. Survey eligibility was limited to district superintendents, CMO leaders, or their designees. The survey we fielded in fall 2020 covers the topics listed in in the following text box.

We developed this survey in consultation with our sponsor, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and our four project partners: the Center on Reinventing Public Education, Chiefs for Change, the Council of the Great City Schools, and Kitamba. The funder provided feedback on the survey research design; however, we maintained final editorial control on the survey items. The survey had an approximate administration time of five minutes and we fielded it from September 15, 2020, through November 11, 2020.

Topics Covered in the ASDP Fall COVID-19 Survey

- Areas where districts need additional resources or guidance
- Anticipated challenges for the 2020–2021 school year
- Staff-related challenges
- Professional development
- Institutions, agencies, and personnel providing input and influence on plans for the 2020–2021 school year
- Approaches taken for the 2020–2021 school year

[1] Find key findings from teacher and school principal COVID-19 surveys from spring and fall 2020 at RAND Corporation, "American Educator Panels," webpage, undated-a.

Abbreviations

AEP	American Educator Panels
ASDP	American School District Panel
CMO	charter management organization
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
IEP	individualized education plan
PD	professional development
SEL	social and emotional learning

We administered the fall 2020 COVID-19 survey at the same time that we recruited districts and CMOs to participate in the ASDP; after a district superintendent or their designee consented and completed the ASDP enrollment process, we immediately requested that they complete the fall COVID-19 survey as a next step.[2]

Of the 1,685 districts or CMOs that we invited to join the ASDP panel, 379 agreed to become members, which is a recruitment rate of 22 percent. The 379 panelists consist of 317 traditional public school districts and 62 CMOs, which collectively span across 45 states. Of the 379 districts or CMOs that agreed to be in the panel, 319 took our first survey, for a survey completion rate of 84 percent.[3] Table 1 provides weighted descriptive statistics for survey respondents. The weights, which are described following this report's conclusion, are intended to ensure that the sample reflects the national population of school districts.

[2] Further details about the creation of the ASDP are available at RAND Corporation, "American School District Panel," webpage, undated-b.

[3] The completion rate is calculated by dividing the number of completed surveys by the number of panelists invited to complete this survey; the denominator does not include screened-out panelists (who were deemed ineligible to participate). Completion rates do not include the recruitment rate when panelists were invited to join the ASDP.

> Public education will never be the same post–COVID-19. The pandemic has forced public education to adopt new practices on the fly, and many will become lasting changes to the way we do business. Flexible scheduling and virtual instruction are just two practices that will become a part of how we educate children.
>
> *Superintendent of a large, suburban school district*

Findings and Survey Responses

In this section, we present district leaders' responses to each survey question. For each question, we present the full response in table form, and we illustrate some of the survey results in figures as well. Prior to each survey result table, we summarize some key findings about that survey question. As a reminder, *focus districts* have a student population that is at least 50 percent Black or Hispanic/Latino or where at least 50 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. *Nonfocus districts* fall below these thresholds.

Greatest Need for Additional Resources or Guidance in 2020–2021

Our first question on the survey was "As you consider how to support students this school year (2020–21), in which of the following areas does your district/CMO have the greatest need for additional resources or guidance?" Responses are reported in Table 2.

Key Findings About This Question

- Addressing students' SEL and mental health needs was the support that the highest proportion of district leaders—six in ten—identified as a greatest need. Both focus and nonfocus district leaders rated this as their greatest need.
- Beyond SEL and student mental health, focus and nonfocus district leaders diverged in the degree to which they considered other supports as top needs. For example, a higher proportion of focus leaders than nonfocus district leaders identified the provision of fundamentals, such as internet and technology access,

TABLE 1

Weighted Descriptive Statistics for Survey Respondents

Survey Respondents	Percentage		
	Sample, Unweighted	Sample, Weighted	Population
District enrollment size			
Small (Less than 3,000 students)	50	72	73
Medium (3,000 to 9,999 students)	25	20	19
Large (10,000 or more students)	25	8	7
Urbanicity			
Urban	32	9	9
Suburban	29	25	25
Town	16	20	20
Rural	22	46	46
Region			
Northeast	12	21	21
Midwest	34	36	36
South	30	25	25
West	24	18	18
Students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch			
0–24%	15	21	24
25–49%	31	36	36
50–74%	30	30	28
75–100%	24	14	12

NOTE: The ASDP sample consists of the 319 survey respondents, while the population sample consists of U.S. public school districts (approximately 13,000 districts) in the original sampling frame for ASDP recruitment. We obtained district and CMO characteristics from the Common Core of Data files; these data are from the 2018–2019 school year (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). Weighted proportions were calculated using survey weights, which are calibrated to match national averages.

as a greatest need. Conversely, more nonfocus district leaders said that they have a great need for high-quality instructional resources that will meet the needs of all students.

- Very few leaders—one in 20—identified privacy concerns for teachers and students using online tools as a greatest need.

> Interestingly enough, we've responded to non-academic needs better than academic needs: i.e., meals, childcare, etc.
>
> *Superintendent of a large, urban district*

Anticipated Challenges for 2020–2021

Our second question was "To what extent do you anticipate each of the following being a challenge for your district/CMO during this school year (2020–21)?" In Table 3, we present district leaders' responses to this question. Figure 1 depicts, in ranked order, the percentage of district leaders who identified each of eight topics as a moderate or significant concern.

Key Findings About This Survey Question

- Disparities in students' opportunities to learn during COVID-19 was the most significant challenge among the eight topics we asked about for 2020–2021. Half of district leaders rated this a "significant challenge"—a much

TABLE 2

Greatest Need for Additional Resources or Guidance

As you consider how to support students this school year (2020–21), in which of the following areas does your district/CMO have the greatest need for additional resources or guidance? (*n* = 319)

	Weighted Percentage		
Response	Districts/CMOs Overall	Focus Districts/ CMOs	Nonfocus Districts/CMOs
Providing specialized programming and support for English language learners	12	15	9
Providing services and instructional support (e.g., therapies, push in, pull out, resource rooms) as specified in students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)	46	50	43
Ensuring all students and teachers have access to the technology they will need to engage in remote learning	35	44	28
Ensuring all students and teachers have internet access	31	40	23
Providing high-quality instructional resources that will meet the needs of all students	58	49	65
Addressing students' social and emotional learning and mental health needs	61	53	67
Developing fair and instructionally sound policies for assessment and grading	22	20	24
Protecting privacy and safety of students and teachers who are using online tools	5	5	5
Managing enrollment changes	19	20	18
Other	10	4	15

NOTE: Respondents were instructed to rank their top three needs. This table displays the percentage of respondents who ranked each need as one of their top three. Percentages will not sum to 100 percent.

higher proportion of leaders than for any other of the seven items.

- Only a quarter of district leaders deemed providing subsidized meals to students a moderate or significant challenge for this school year.
- Likewise, fewer than one out of every three district leaders deemed seat-time requirements a moderate or significant challenge. Those who did so tended to rate it a moderate challenge rather than a significant one.
- Consistent with focus district leader responses about their districts' greatest needs, a much-higher proportion of focus district leaders compared with nonfocus district leaders identified internet access as a significant challenge.

Anticipated Staff-Related Hindrances to High-Quality Instruction and Other Supports to Students

Our third question was "Many districts/CMOs are experiencing challenges related to staffing as a result of COVID-19. For each of the following conditions, please indicate whether this is likely to occur in your district/CMO, and if so, whether it will hinder your district/CMO's ability to provide high-quality instruction and other supports to students." In Table 4, we present district leaders' responses to this question.

> We need a clear understanding and definition of when it is appropriate to shut down a campus or school district, due to COVID-19 cases and/or spread.
>
> *Superintendent of a small, rural school district*

TABLE 3

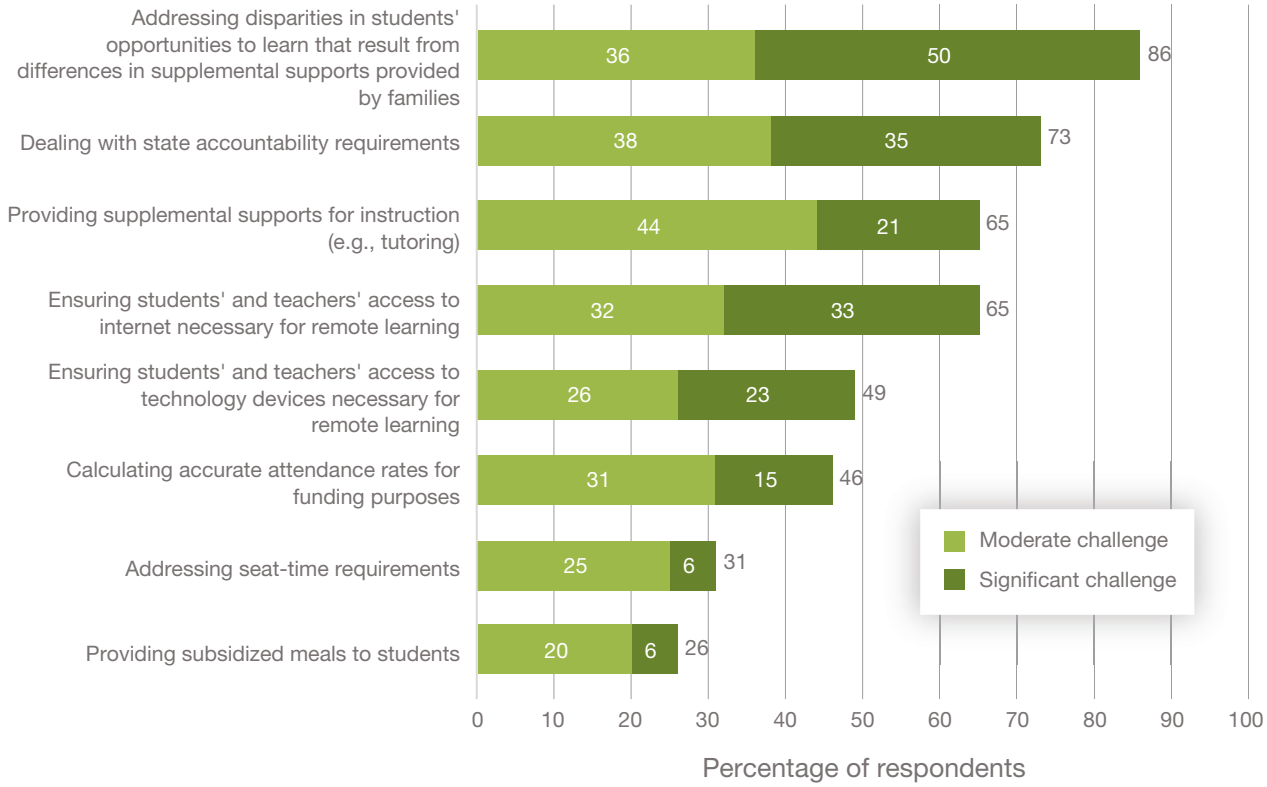
Anticipated Challenges for 2020–2021

To what extent do you anticipate each of the following being a challenge for your district/CMO during this school year (2020–21)? (*n* = 317)

	Weighted Percentage			
Response	Not At All	Minor Challenge	Moderate Challenge	Significant Challenge
Providing subsidized meals to students				
Districts/CMOs overall	35	39	20	6
Focus districts/CMOs	36	39	20	4
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	35	39	20	7
Ensuring students' and teachers' access to technology devices necessary for remote learning				
Districts/CMOs overall	17	34	26	23
Focus districts/CMOs	17	40	19	25
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	18	30	32	21
Ensuring students' and teachers' access to internet necessary for remote learning				
Districts/CMOs overall	5	31	32	33
Focus districts/CMOs	1	27	32	40
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	8	34	32	26
Addressing seat-time requirements				
Districts/CMOs overall	30	39	25	6
Focus districts/CMOs	28	34	34	4
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	31	43	17	9
Calculating accurate attendance rates for funding purposes				
Districts/CMOs overall	16	38	31	15
Focus districts/CMOs	6	36	42	16
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	24	39	22	15
Dealing with state accountability requirements				
Districts/CMOs overall	4	22	38	35
Focus districts/CMOs	2	15	38	45
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	6	29	39	27
Providing supplemental supports for instruction (e.g., tutoring)				
Districts/CMOs overall	4	31	44	21
Focus districts/CMOs	5	26	46	23
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	3	35	41	20
Addressing disparities in students' opportunities to learn that result from differences in supplemental supports provided by families				
Districts/CMOs overall	0	14	36	50
Focus districts/CMOs	0	10	28	62
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	0	17	44	39
Other				
Districts/CMOs overall	37	0	3	59
Focus districts/CMOs	57	0	4	39
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	30	0	3	67

FIGURE 1

Anticipated Moderate and Significant Challenges for School Year 2020–2021



Key Findings About This Survey Question

- District leaders indicated that inadequate funding to cover staffing needs was the most significant hindrance to high-quality instruction in their district this school year, among the 11 staff-related challenges that we asked about. About four in ten district leaders reported inadequate funding to be a major hindrance.
- However, need for funding to support staffing needs differed across focus districts and nonfocus districts. A higher percentage of leaders in nonfocus districts (45 percent) rated inadequate funding to cover staff needs a "major hindrance" than did leaders from focus districts (31 percent).
- Need for a sufficient number of qualified instructional staff ranked second among district leaders' reports of staffing-related hindrances this school year. Similar percentages of focus and nonfocus districts rated this concern a major hindrance this school year.
- Few district leaders—about one in 20—anticipated that attrition among principals or central office staff will be a major hindrance this school year.

Additional Professional Development Needs for Teachers

Our fourth question on the survey was "To what extent do teachers in your district/CMO need additional professional development, beyond what they've already received, in each of the following areas?" In

> A storm is coming when [the] state government realizes how empty its coffers are. We won't be able to pay our staff or keep the same staffing levels without significant support.
>
> *Chief executive officer of a CMO*

TABLE 4

Staffing Challenges

Many districts/CMOs are experiencing challenges related to staffing as a result of COVID-19. For each of the following conditions, please indicate whether this is likely to occur in your district/CMO, and if so, whether it will hinder your district/CMO's ability to provide high-quality instruction and other supports to students. (*n* = 315)

	Weighted Percentage			
Response	I Do Not Anticipate This	I Anticipate This, but Do Not Expect It to Be a Hindrance	I Anticipate This Will Be a Slight or Moderate Hindrance	I Anticipate This Will Be a Major Hindrance
High levels of attrition among teachers				
Districts/CMOs overall	28	38	20	13
Focus districts/CMOs	27	44	17	12
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	29	34	23	15
High levels of attrition among nonteaching staff				
Districts/CMOs overall	30	36	22	12
Focus districts/CMOs	36	36	17	10
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	24	36	27	14
High levels of attrition among principals or central office staff				
Districts/CMOs overall	66	20	8	6
Focus districts/CMOs	69	22	4	5
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	63	19	11	6
Inadequate funding to cover staffing needs				
Districts/CMOs overall	8	24	30	39
Focus districts/CMOs	12	29	28	31
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	4	20	31	45
Substantial numbers of teachers with a vulnerable health status				
Districts/CMOs overall	7	45	40	9
Focus districts/CMOs	8	42	41	9
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	6	48	38	8
Substantial numbers of teachers who lack child care for their own children				
Districts/CMOs overall	9	40	40	11
Focus districts/CMOs	12	37	39	12
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	7	43	40	11
Insufficient number of qualified instructional staff to cover all classes				
Districts/CMOs overall	16	28	30	26
Focus districts/CMOs	14	31	31	23
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	18	24	30	28
Lack of clear guidance from the state about staffing				
Districts/CMOs overall	21	40	24	15
Focus districts/CMOs	26	37	26	12
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	17	43	22	18
Revising work roles and job duties for teachers or other staff				
Districts/CMOs overall	9	41	34	16
Focus districts/CMOs	11	42	32	14
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	8	39	35	18

TABLE 4—CONTINUED

Many districts/CMOs are experiencing challenges related to staffing as a result of COVID-19. For each of the following conditions, please indicate whether this is likely to occur in your district/CMO, and if so, whether it will hinder your district/CMO's ability to provide high-quality instruction and other supports to students. (n = 315)

	Weighted Percentage			
Response	I Do Not Anticipate This	I Anticipate This, but Do Not Expect It to Be a Hindrance	I Anticipate This Will Be a Slight or Moderate Hindrance	I Anticipate This Will Be a Major Hindrance
Retaining enough social workers and other staff to address students' mental health needs				
Districts/CMOs overall	22	35	27	15
Focus districts/CMOs	25	34	27	14
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	20	36	28	16
Need for mental health supports for teachers				
Districts/CMOs overall	2	41	38	20
Focus districts/CMOs	2	43	38	17
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	2	38	38	22
Other staffing-related challenge not listed above				
Districts/CMOs overall	39	0	11	49
Focus districts/CMOs	43	0	7	50
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	35	0	17	48

Table 5, we present district leaders' responses to this question.

Key Findings About This Survey Question

- Leaders reported high levels of professional development needs across the board, with a clear majority (68 percent or more) reporting moderate or great needs in all of the categories thst we asked about.
- The top-ranked professional development need among the six topics about which we asked was addressing students' social and emotional well-being. Nonfocus district leaders ranked this professional development need especially high, with 37 percent of nonfocus leaders deeming this professional development topic a great need.
- Following closely behind social and emotional well-being was professional development to help teachers address the needs of students with unfinished learning from COVID-19. For this type of professional development, it was leaders of focus districts that ranked this topic especially high; 38 percent of focus district leaders deemed this topic a great need.

Sources of Influence on School Districts' COVID-19 Plans

Our fifth question was "To what extent did each of the following possible sources of input influence your district/CMO's plan for the 2020–21 school year?" In Table 6, we present district leaders' responses to this question.

Key Findings About This Survey Question

- Three-quarters of district leaders said they looked to state and local health department guidance to a great extent to guide their operating plans for the 2020–2021 school year. District leaders reported that state and local health department guidance had more influence on their operating plans this year than any other source about which we asked.
- Conversely, the news media and guidance from the U.S. Department of Education had the least influence on districts' plans among

TABLE 5

Professional Development Needs for Teachers

To what extent do teachers in your district/CMO need additional professional development (PD), beyond what they've already received, in each of the following areas? (*n* = 315)

	Weighted Percentage				
Response	No Need; Not Relevant to Our District	No Need; Teachers Have Adequate Access to PD in This Area	Minor Need	Moderate Need	Great Need
Using technology tools to provide high-quality instruction					
Districts/CMOs overall	0	7	24	40	29
Focus districts/CMOs	0	9	27	35	29
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	0	6	21	44	29
Developing remote lessons that are aligned with state standards					
Districts/CMOs overall	0	8	24	40	28
Focus districts/CMOs	0	7	29	40	23
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	0	8	19	40	33
Using assessment data effectively and appropriately					
Districts/CMOs overall	2	8	22	48	20
Focus districts/CMOs	0	12	21	45	23
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	3	4	23	51	18
Addressing students' social and emotional well-being					
Districts/CMOs overall	0	3	14	51	32
Focus districts/CMOs	0	3	17	54	26
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	0	3	12	48	37
Addressing the needs of students with unfinished learning					
Districts/CMOs overall	0	3	18	47	32
Focus districts/CMOs	0	4	19	39	38
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	1	3	16	54	26
Addressing the needs of students with IEPs and English language learners					
Districts/CMOs overall	1	7	24	43	26
Focus districts/CMOs	0	5	23	47	25
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	1	8	24	40	27
Other					
Districts/CMOs overall	83	2	6	2	7
Focus districts/CMOs	93	3	0	2	2
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	69	0	14	3	14

the 14 information sources that we listed. District leaders report that both sources had far less influence than other sources that we inquired about, including parents, teachers, principals, local community members, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and professional school associations.

- The one information source that leaders of nonfocus districts looked to for guidance to a greater extent than leaders of focus districts were other districts' COVID-19 plans. In contrast, leaders of focus districts looked more to guidance from their state education agencies.

New Approaches to Schooling for 2020–2021

Our sixth question on the survey was "Have you considered adopting any of the following approaches for the 2020–21 school year?" In Table 7, we present district leaders' responses to this question, and in Figure 2 we present the top five new approaches that district leaders said they were using this school year.

Key Findings About This Survey Question

- As might be expected because of the predominance of remote instruction this school year, district leaders have adjusted staff meetings to make them virtual. Almost half of district leaders have said that they have created virtual learning communities for staff during this school year.
- The second-most-common change that district leaders reported was changing approaches to instruction. About four in ten districts indicated that they are adjusting instructional time this school year and adopting flexible staffing models that adjust students' assignments to teachers.
- About three in ten districts were establishing partnerships to offer virtual instruction and adjusting teacher compensation and work rules.
- Some districts indicated that they would like to adopt new approaches this school year, but thus far lack the resources or flexibility to do so. For example, one in five districts would like to provide tutoring to students by engaging with outside organizations or nonteaching staff (for example, college students) but lack the resources to do so. Among the eight changes we proposed, tutoring was the one that the most districts wished to do but lacked sufficient funds to enact.

> The government at the state and federal level do not truly understand what schooling is like, and how the pandemic is affecting every aspect of operations.
>
> *Superintendent of a medium-sized, suburban district*

Innovative Practices That Districts Anticipate Continuing After the COVID-19 Pandemic Has Passed (Open Response Field)

Our seventh question on the survey was "Did your district/CMO adopt any innovative practices in response to COVID-19 that you anticipate continuing in future years, even after the pandemic has passed?" Unlike the prior six questions, this was an open-ended question, and 233 respondents wrote in a reply. We coded these responses according using the methods we describe in the technical appendix. In Table 8, we present our district leaders' coded responses to this question.

Key Findings About This Survey Question

- District leaders indicated that remote learning, in at least some form, will outlast the COVID-19 pandemic. One in five districts were considering, planning to adopt, or had already adopted a virtual school or fully online option, while about one in ten have adopted or are planning to adopt a blended or hybrid form of instruction.
- When district leaders mentioned reasons for remote instruction outlasting the COVID-19 pandemic, they highlighted wanting to offer students more flexibility, meeting parent or student demand, meeting the diversity of students' needs, and maintaining student enrollment.
- Establishment of a virtual school was the innovative practice that the greatest number of district leaders anticipated would continue in future years.

TABLE 6

Input Influencing 2020–2021 School Year Plans

To what extent did each of the following possible sources of input influence your district/CMO's plan for the 2020–21 school year? (*n* = 313)

	Weighted Percentage			
Response	Not at All	To a Small Extent	To a Moderate Extent	To a Great Extent
Guidance from the U.S. Department of Education				
Districts/CMOs overall	35	46	11	7
Focus districts/CMOs	34	43	12	11
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	36	49	11	4
Guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention				
Districts/CMOs overall	3	11	37	48
Focus districts/CMOs	0	11	34	54
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	5	11	40	43
Guidance from our state education agency				
Districts/CMOs overall	0	11	25	64
Focus districts/CMOs	0	7	21	72
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	0	14	28	57
Guidance from state or local health departments				
Districts/CMOs overall	0	5	19	76
Focus districts/CMOs	1	6	14	79
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	0	4	24	72
Professional organizations (e.g., Council of the Great City Schools, School Superintendents Association)				
Districts/CMOs overall	23	40	25	13
Focus districts/CMOs	21	38	27	13
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	24	41	23	12
Our school board				
Districts/CMOs overall	4	21	30	44
Focus districts/CMOs	4	17	29	50
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	4	25	31	40
National, state, or local political leaders				
Districts/CMOs overall	27	36	24	12
Focus districts/CMOs	20	42	30	7
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	34	31	19	16
Leaders of other districts (e.g., by sharing model plans)				
Districts/CMOs overall	3	18	45	33
Focus districts/CMOs	4	19	51	26
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	3	17	39	40
Principals in my district				
Districts/CMOs overall	2	9	40	49
Focus districts/CMOs	1	11	36	53
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	3	7	44	46

TABLE 6—CONTINUED

To what extent did each of the following possible sources of input influence your district/CMO's plan for the 2020–21 school year? (*n* = 313)

Response	Weighted Percentage			
	Not at All	To a Small Extent	To a Moderate Extent	To a Great Extent
Teachers in my district				
Districts/CMOs overall	2	13	45	40
Focus districts/CMOs	2	10	44	44
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	2	15	46	36
Parents/guardians in my district				
Districts/CMOs overall	1	24	45	30
Focus districts/CMOs	0	18	46	36
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	2	28	45	24
Students in my district				
Districts/CMOs overall	8	39	35	19
Focus districts/CMOs	7	33	38	22
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	8	44	31	17
Other members of the local community				
Districts/CMOs overall	10	56	26	8
Focus districts/CMOs	5	57	29	8
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	15	54	24	7
The news media				
Districts/CMOs overall	69	23	6	1
Focus districts/CMOs	64	24	12	0
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	74	23	1	2
Other				
Districts/CMOs overall	65	0	13	22
Focus districts/CMOs	65	1	14	19
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	64	0	11	26

Though the profoundly devastating impact of COVID marches on, I am heartened by the lessons we have learned as educators in this moment. What's most energizing to me is how we will continue to use the power of virtual instruction to disrupt barriers like staffing, space, and time to optimize student learning and experiences (and educator experiences, too).

Chief executive officer of a CMO

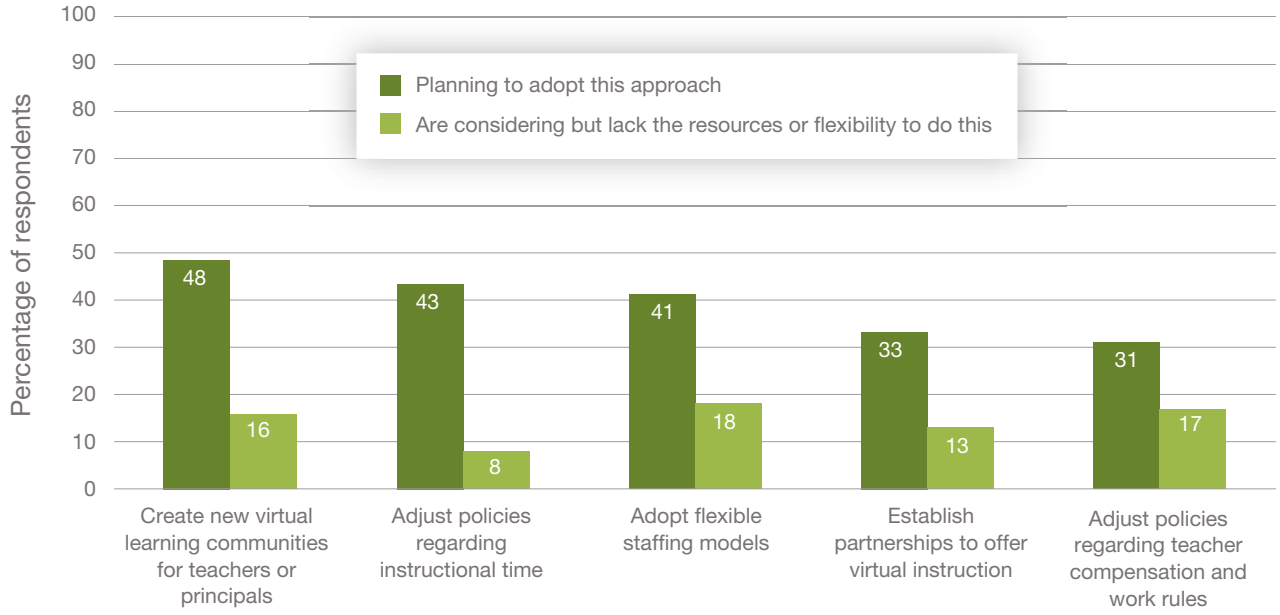
TABLE 7

Approaches Being Considered for 2020–2021

Have you considered adopting any of the following approaches for the 2020–21 school year? (n = 313)				
	Weighted Percentage			
Response	No	Yes, but We Lack the Resources or Flexibility to Do This	Yes, but We Opted Not to Because Other Options Are More Feasible	Yes, We Are Planning to Adopt This Approach
Establish partnerships with online education providers or other community organizations to offer virtual instruction				
Districts/CMOs overall	37	13	16	33
Focus districts/CMOs	32	11	19	39
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	43	16	13	28
Provide tutoring to students by engaging with community organizations or hiring new nonteaching staff (e.g., college students, unemployed community members)				
Districts/CMOs overall	47	24	8	20
Focus districts/CMOs	45	19	7	29
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	49	29	9	12
Work with community organizations to provide extra instructional space or other facilities-related resources				
Districts/CMOs overall	60	10	11	19
Focus districts/CMOs	55	10	8	26
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	64	10	13	14
Adopt flexible staffing models, in which teachers provide instruction to students other than those who would be assigned to them if instruction were in person (e.g., supporting small-group instruction for another teacher's classes; teaching a larger group of students than would be feasible in person)				
Districts/CMOs overall	27	18	13	41
Focus districts/CMOs	21	19	15	45
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	33	17	12	38
Create new virtual learning communities for teachers or principals				
Districts/CMOs overall	28	16	9	48
Focus districts/CMOs	25	15	4	55
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	30	16	13	41
Adjust policies regarding minimum or maximum class size				
Districts/CMOs overall	53	16	8	22
Focus districts/CMOs	54	17	8	21
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	53	16	9	23
Adjust policies regarding instructional time				
Districts/CMOs overall	41	8	7	43
Focus districts/CMOs	42	7	8	42
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	40	10	7	43
Adjust policies regarding teacher compensation and work rules				
Districts/CMOs overall	43	17	9	31
Focus districts/CMOs	49	15	11	25
Nonfocus districts/CMOs	38	19	8	35

FIGURE 2

Top Five New Approaches Districts Say They Are Adopting in 2020–2021



Anything Else the District Would Like to Relay About COVID-19 Response or Needs (Open Response Field)

Our final question was a general open-ended question that allowed district leaders the opportunity to reflect on the school year thus far, and share with us anything that they wanted researchers to know about their experiences. Specifically, we asked "If there is anything else you'd like us to know about how your district/CMO responded to COVID-19 or what you need to serve your students effectively, please feel free to share additional responses here." In Table 9, we present district leaders' responses to this question. However, the nature of this question led to a wide variety of responses, so these findings should be interpreted with some caution.

Key Findings About This Survey Question

- District leaders volunteered both positive and challenging themes they wished us to know about in regard to their districts' responses to COVID-19. On the positive side, about two in ten leaders who responded to this question praised how their district is now offering more choices and flexibility for students as a result of COVID-19. Similarly, a little more than one in ten leaders described selecting instructional models that match to parent and student preferences.
- In terms of challenges, district leaders underscored their concern about insufficient funding, a top-rated challenge in a prior survey question. District leaders also indicated that a lack of clear and consistent guidance from local, state, and federal officials about when and how to reopen schools made their planning more difficult.
- District leaders also highlighted the shortage of substitute teachers, which is a concern also raised by principals in our fall 2020 COVID-19 survey (Diliberti and Kaufman, 2020).

TABLE 8

Continued Use of Innovative Practices After COVID-19

Did your district/CMO adopt any innovative practices in response to COVID-19 that you anticipate continuing in future years, even after the pandemic has passed? If so, please briefly describe here. (*n* = 288)

	Weighted Percentage		
Practices	Total	Adopted or Planning to Adopt	Considering
Remote learning			
Remote instruction for individual students in specific cases (e.g., student illness)	4	3	1
Remote instruction for all students in isolated events (e.g., inclement weather days)	8	3	5
One or more stand-alone online courses (including summer school)	1	1	1
Blended or hybrid model	10	9	1
Virtual school or fully online option	20	15	6
Remote learning in some form	7	6	2
Instruction			
Modified curriculum and/or instructional practices	4	3	0
Personalized learning and/or independent study programs	3	3	0
Technology			
Learning Management System and/or digital learning tools/platforms	9	9	0
Distribution of technology devices and/or internet access	7	7	0
Scheduling			
Scheduling changes	7	6	1
Virtual meetings			
Virtual district administrative meetings and/or telework	7	7	0
Virtual teacher trainings or professional development	4	4	0
Virtual meetings with school community (e.g., parent-teacher associations, parent-teacher conferences)	4	4	0
Nonacademic support services (e.g., SEL programs, meals, transportation)			
Nonacademic support services (e.g., SEL programs, meals, transportation)	2	2	0
Health and cleaning practices			
Health and cleaning practices	3	3	0

NOTE: Respondents' answers could have been matched to multiple themes. Of the 218 respondents whose written responses were analyzed, 81 provided responses that were matched to more than one theme or sub-theme. Some respondents felt confident that remote learning would persist into the future but were unsure about precisely what types of remote learning opportunities would be provided. Other respondents' answers did not provide enough information for researchers to clarify their responses into more specific categories.

Conclusion

The following three topics rose to the top of traditional public school district and CMO leaders' concerns about their schools in the 2020–2021 school year:

1. District leaders were united in their concerns about addressing disparities in students' opportunities to learn during COVID-19. This was their top-rated challenge for the 2020–2021 school year among the eight challenges we listed on our survey. Eight out of ten nonfocus district leaders and nine out of ten focus district leaders rated this as a moderate or significant challenge.
2. Public school district leaders saw a sharp need to address students' SEL and mental health needs. Among the nine needs we asked about on the survey that—spanning topics from internet access and special education instruction to managing enrollment changes—student SEL was the topic that the

TABLE 9

Anything Else the District Leader Wanted to Relay

If there is anything else you'd like us to know about how your district/CMO responded to COVID-19 or what you need to serve your students effectively, please feel free to share additional responses here. (*n* = 96)

Category	Weighted percentage
Reported as a challenge	
Lack of clear and consistent guidance from officials	7
Equity	1
Staff mental health	2
Substitute teacher shortages	9
Helping students catch up	2
Access to technology and/or the internet	8
Funding	11
Health and safety equipment and COVID-19 data collection	4
Access to technology and/or the internet	5
Reported as a strength	
Funding	3
Health and safety equipment and COVID-19 data collection	2
Selecting instructional models that meet parent and student preferences	13
Meeting students' social and emotional needs	1
Delivering services, including meals, to the school community	11
Pride in how district staff are meeting challenges	8
Providing more choices and/or increased flexibility	19

NOTE: Respondents' answers could have been matched to multiple themes. Of the 96 respondents whose written responses were analyzed, 16 provided responses that were matched to more than one theme or sub-theme.

greatest number of district leaders deemed a great need. It was ranked highest by both focus and nonfocus districts. Likewise, addressing students' SEL needs was leaders' most-needed professional development topic for teachers in 2020–2021.

3. A large share of district leaders reported being concerned about insufficient funding to cover staff needs. Almost half of nonfocus district leaders and almost one-third of focus district leaders identified insufficient funding as a major hindrance for providing high-quality instruction to students.

Beyond those three topics, districts diverged in the degree to which they prioritized certain needs and concerns. Leaders of focus districts expressed greater levels of concern about a lack of student and staff access to online instruction, unfinished student learning, opportunity gaps, and state accountability requirements. In contrast, leaders of nonfocus districts expressed greater levels of concern about students' mental health, standards-aligned and high-quality instruction during COVID-19, future funding shortfalls, and staff attrition.

Consistent with the fragmented federal approach that the United States has taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, school district leaders looked to state and local health departments, followed by state education agencies, for guidance. Tellingly, the news media—followed by the U.S. Department of Education—had the least amounts of influence on district leaders' COVID-19 plans, less influence than members of the local district community, parents, teachers, principals, and school professional

> Regardless of political or personal stance, all staff have worked to remain compliant with our risk-reduction practices. Teamwork has helped.
>
> *Superintendent of a small, rural district*

As leaders look down the road, about one in five anticipated that a fully remote learning option will be a permanent public school offering in the years ahead.

associations had. District leaders cited frustration with a perceived lack of leadership from the U.S. Department of Education and expressed a need for clear and consistent guidance about their operating plans.

As leaders look down the road, about one in five anticipated that a fully remote learning option will be a permanent public school offering in the years ahead. One in ten are considering or have adopted blended or hybrid instruction. District leaders highlighted these offerings as ways to meet the diversity of parental and student preferences and also as ways to retain student enrollment in their district.

Based on these findings and prior research, we offer the following two recommendations.

Recommendation: Districts Need More Federal and State Funding to Redress Differences in Students' Opportunities to Learn During COVID-19 and to Prevent Cuts Below Pre–COVID-19 Funding Levels

Inadequate funding to cover staffing needs was district leaders' top-rated hindrance to instructional quality. However, a shortage of qualified instructional staff, which districts leaders also indicated was a hindrance, could impede districts' abilities to fully expend substantial infusions of new funding if it were provided. (Simply maintaining pre–COVID-19 levels could prevent large furloughs or layoffs.) If the federal or state governments were to increase school funding, partnerships with outside organizations offer a way to supplement school services, even if teaching staff remained limited. For example, about one-quarter of district leaders would like to offer tutoring to students via outside partnerships or using nonteaching staff (for example, college students) but lack the funding to do so. Furthermore, for the substantial number of districts where internet access and technology are still of concern, additional funding for nonlabor expenses could support essentials, such as needed investments to expand and maintain their technology infrastructure.

Recommendation: With Federal Funding, States and Education Content Developers Should Develop Easily Accessed Coherent Instructional Systems for Online Instruction

Because remote learning is likely to persist for a substantial portion of students beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, public school districts need coherent, high-quality instructional systems for online instruction in academics and social and emotional learning. Prior research from pre–COVID-19 virtual schools provides warning signs; students enrolled in online schools have had poorer outcomes in math, reading, science, writing, and history achievement when compared with students in traditional schools (Ahn and McEachin, 2017; Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2015; Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; Gill et al., 2015). The main cited reasons for this are: the use of instructional content that is unaligned to standards, spending the majority of instructional time on independent learning, a lack of online content with embedded modifications for students with disabilities, and a lack of accessibility of online content for English language learners (e.g., Gill et al., 2015).

Although the explosion of online content development during COVID-19 will likely improve the quality of online instructional materials, quality is still a top concern for school leaders this school year

and should remain at the top of the policy agenda as virtual and hybrid schooling become a permanent feature of U.S. school districts' portfolios. As highlighted in other RAND research (Kaufman, Thompson, and Opfer, 2016; Polikoff et al., 2020), teachers will be best able to deliver high-quality online instruction if they are supported by a coherent instructional system within their district or school. Components of a coherent instructional system include curriculum materials that are closely aligned with state standards and assessments (including tools within the curriculum to support special education and English language learners) and sustained professional learning opportunities that help teachers use their materials productively to meet student needs.

The federal government could allocate funding to states to support development of open online curriculum materials and platforms that are accessible to schools and districts. This would allow states to work with publishers that already have online curricula that are high-quality and standards-aligned and make that curricula accessible to schools and districts. Meanwhile, publishers need to quickly ramp up their online supports for quality instructional materials. Many materials that the independent organization EdReports has deemed high-quality are not as accessible as other materials, which impedes teachers' access and promotes the already common practice of teachers using self-created materials and other online materials that may be less aligned with standards.

Although the explosion of online content development during COVID-19 will likely improve the quality of online instructional materials, quality is still a top concern for school leaders this school year and should remain at the top of the policy agenda as virtual and hybrid schooling become a permanent feature of U.S. school districts' portfolios.

Technical Appendix

Survey Methods

Method for Creating Sample and Survey Weights

We created weights to produce estimates that reflect the national population of public school districts in the United States. The weighting process accounts for the probability of selection of districts sampled for the survey, and for the probability that a district or CMO responded to the survey after receiving the invitation.

To create the weights, we multiplied the selection and participation probabilities and then calibrated them to reproduce the population distribution of public school districts and CMOs in the United States. The nonresponse adjustment is important to eliminate known sources of bias and ensure that the weighted sample matches the national characteristics of districts and CMOs nationally. This weighting approach is widely used for probability sample surveys (Deville and Särndal, 1992) and to adjust for nonresponse (Kott, 1996), including for such U.S. Department of Education surveys as the Teacher Follow-Up Survey (Goldring, Taie, and Riddles, 2014). The main analysis weights are the product of the following two interim weights:

1. **the sample selection weight:** This is the inverse probability of selection into the fall 2020 COVID-19 survey sample using a comprehensive list of K–12 public school districts. Large urban districts were oversampled because we included member districts of the Council of the Great City Schools and CMOs that were from a list provided by the Charter School Growth Fund.
2. **the survey response weight:** This is the inverse of the modeled probability of a district or CMO completing the COVID-19 survey.

We subsequently recalibrated the products of these weights as necessary. Recalibration ensures that the weights recover the population estimates after selection and nonresponse adjustments are applied. The sampling and weighting approach was designed to ensure a representative sample. We used the inverse of the selection probabilities (p_{si}) as the sample selection weight, where the selection probability of the districts was set to be proportional to the square root of the enrollment size of the district. We estimated the response weights by modeling the likelihood (p_{ri}) that a selected district or CMO would respond to the survey, conditional on district- or CMO-level characteristics (including enrollment size, geographic region, urbanicity, agency type, and free and reduced-price lunch eligibility). For parsimony, we used a variable-selection method to choose the model that best fits the data. We estimated the main weight as the product of the sampling selection frame weight ($1/p_{si}$) and the response weight ($1/p_{ri}$), as follows:

$$main\ weight = \frac{1}{p_{si}} x \frac{1}{p_{ri}}$$

Because there is no guarantee that this main weight will sum to the total of the population characteristics, the weight was calibrated again based on district- or CMO-level characteristics to obtain the final weight. If some of these final weights were extreme, we used a trimming process (at the 95th percentile) to reduce the outliers and the trimmed weights were reallocated for the population totals to remain the same after trimming.

In the main body of the report, we provide detailed tables showing survey responses from district and CMO leaders. Note that table results will not always sum to 100 percent because of rounding or because the questions are designed to allow for multiple selections (or no selection).

Method for Coding Open-Ended Responses

At the end of the survey, we posed the two open-ended questions listed below. To analyze the responses, we uploaded the data for these two items into Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software. For each survey item, one analyst performed open coding of emergent themes and clustered them into coding schemes. For example, the analyst noted that many respondents indicated that they anticipated that some form of remote learning would persist into future school years. To analyze this theme, the

analyst developed sub-themes about the variants of online instruction (e.g., single online courses, virtual schools) to classify responses. The analyst worked with a second researcher to refine the coding scheme for each of the open-ended items. In the following paragraphs, we provide details about the coding scheme for each survey item.

Once the researcher had coded the open responses, we applied survey weights to present the prominence of each emergent theme. Weighted percentages are reported in Tables 8 and 9. However, these estimates should be interpreted with some caution; while our analysis captures repeated themes in respondents' answers, we do not know the prevalence of these themes among respondents who did not provide an answer to the open-ended survey items or who provided an incomplete answer. For example, a respondent might have mentioned that a new district grading policy was an innovative practice, but this does not necessarily mean that the same district is not also considering or adopting other new practices, such as remote learning on future inclement weather days. Therefore, these estimates should be interpreted with caution because they may underestimate the prevalence of some themes.

Question 7: Did your district/CMO adopt any innovative practices in response to COVID-19 that you anticipate continuing in future years, even after the pandemic has passed? If so, please briefly describe here.

In our survey, 288 respondents answered this question. Fifty-five respondents said *no*: their district was not adopting any innovate practices, while 233 respondents (or about 73 percent of the sample) said *yes* and provided a written response elaborating on the adoption of these practices. Of the 233 open-ended responses that we received, we discarded five because they were not substantive (e.g., "I don't know") or because they did not relate to the survey question posed. We classified another ten responses as a variant on the answer "too early to tell" and excluded them from further analysis.

The self-identified innovative practices mentioned in the remaining 218 responses fell into one or more of the following nine innovative practice themes: (1) remote learning; (2) instruction; (3) technology; (4) scheduling; (5) virtual staff meetings; (6) communication practices or platforms; (7) health and cleaning practices; (8) nonacademic support services; and (9) other. Several of these broad themes were broken down into sub-themes (see Table 8 for a complete list of themes and sub-themes). For example, within the remote learning parent code, we created sub-codes to identify different types of remote learning—e.g., remote learning targeted toward students in isolated cases (such as when a student is ill and cannot physically come into school buildings), stand-alone online courses, or a whole virtual school. At most, a respondent's answer matched to six innovative practice themes or sub-themes. (For the remote learning theme only, the researcher also noted any reasons the respondent gave for their district or CMO's decision to adopt or consider the practice.) For each innovative practice mentioned in respondents' answers, we also coded the practice as either *adopted or planning to adopt* or *considering*. We did this to distinguish the degree of district certainty about the adoption of the named practice. Because of how we worded the survey question, the researcher assumed that if respondents just listed practices in their survey response, it meant that the district had adopted (or was planning to adopt) those practices.

Question 8: If there is anything else you'd like us to know about how your district/CMO responded to COVID-19 or what you need to serve your students effectively, please feel free to share additional responses here.

On our survey, 120 respondents (or about 38 percent of the sample) provided a written response to this question. Of the 120 open-ended responses that we received, we discarded 23 because they were not substantive, and we discarded one off-topic answer. We analyzed the remaining 96 responses to identify themes. The nature of the question led to a wide variety of responses. We coded the responses according to one or more of the following 14 topics: (1) access to technology and/or the internet; (2) delivering services, including meals, to the school community; (3) student equity; (4) funding; (5) health and safety equipment and COVID-19 data collection; (6) helping students catch up; (7) lack of clear and consistent guidance from officials; (8) meeting students' social and emotional needs; (9) pride in district staff rising to meet the challenge of COVID-19; (10) providing

more choices and/or increased flexibility; (11) selecting instructional models that meet parent and student preferences; (12) staff mental health; (13) substitute teacher shortages; and (14) uncertainty about the future. Each response was also coded to indicate whether the respondent implied that this was a strength or a challenge for the district or CMO.

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About the Authors

Heather L. Schwartz is the director of the Pre-K to 12 Educational Systems program within the Education and Labor division of RAND. She researches education and housing policies intended to reduce the negative effects of poverty on children and families. She holds a Ph.D. in education policy.

David Grant is a senior social/behavioral scientist at RAND. Grant has extensive survey research experience, including telephone-based surveys, random digit-dial sampling, address-based sampling, noncoverage, and nonresponse bias. Grant holds a Ph.D. in sociology.

Melissa Diliberti is an assistant policy researcher at RAND and a doctoral fellow at the Pardee RAND Graduate School. Her research interests include survey design and methodology and educational equity. She holds a master of public policy degree.

Gerald P. Hunter is a research programmer at RAND. His research interests include K–12 education, the built environment, and economic development. He has extensive experience using administrative data sets and analyzing survey data. He holds an M.S. in city planning.

Claude Messan Setodji is a senior statistician at RAND and co-director of the RAND Center for Causal Inference. His research interests include applications of statistics to public policy, especially in health care cost and care, causal inferences, sampling techniques, and data reduction and visualization. He holds a Ph.D. in statistics.

About This Report

This report provides additional information about the sample, survey instrument, and resultant data for a coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) survey that was administered to superintendents and other district leaders in fall 2020 via the RAND Corporation's American Educator Panels. The results are intended to inform policy and education practice related to educators' and students' needs during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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