

POLICY BRIEF

How did Michigan school districts plan to educate students during COVID-19?

An analysis of district Continuity of Learning plans

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July 2020

EPIC

**Education Policy
Innovation Collaborative**
RESEARCH WITH CONSEQUENCE

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DISCLAIMER

This research result used data structured and maintained by the Michigan Education Data Center (MEDC). MEDC data is modified for analysis purposes using rules governed by MEDC and are not identical to those data collected and maintained by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and/or Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). Results, information, and opinions solely represent the analysis, information, and opinions of the author(s) and are not endorsed by, or reflect the view or positions of, grantors, MEDC, EPIC, MDE and CEPI or any employee thereof.



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INTRODUCTION

On April 2, 2020, due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer issued [Executive Order No. 2020-35](#), which suspended all in-person K-12 instruction for the remainder of the school year.¹ While school buildings across the state were closed, educators continued to provide instruction, learning opportunities, and other support to their students from a distance. These unprecedented changes raised questions about how K-12 students would learn when removed from their classrooms and sparked serious concerns about inequitable access to technology, broadband access, distance learning resources, and other supports which might exacerbate existing achievement gaps among Michigan students.²

To begin to understand how Michigan school districts worked to ensure that K-12 students continued to learn in the absence of traditional face-to-face instruction in school buildings, researchers from the [Education Policy Innovation Collaborative \(EPIC\)](#)³ analyzed every Michigan school district's Continuity of Learning (COL) plan. The plans were written in April 2020 in response to Executive Order 2020-35; they outline districts' initial strategies across a range of issues related to K-12 schooling. This brief analyzes the COL plans and provides insights about how districts planned to provide instruction during the pandemic, how they monitored student learning, and what services and supports they provided to students overall and for special populations.

Of course, Michigan is not alone in this crisis. Every state in the nation ceased face-to-face instruction as a result of the pandemic, and discussions of both the adequacy and the equity of K-12 educational responses have been raised by the public, policymakers, and interested stakeholders. Among others, researchers have raised concerns about equity and academic disparities resulting from the pandemic and subsequent school-building closures.⁴ Many have focused on the prominent role of technology as a key educational resource for families learning from a distance. They have noted the substantial differences in student access to technology (e.g., electronic devices, internet) by race, socioeconomic status, geographic location, and food security.⁵ If students lack access to the internet or an appropriate device, this can restrict the type of distance learning provided (i.e., instructional packets versus synchronous learning);⁶ affect student engagement;⁷ contribute to students' feelings of disconnectedness from their peers, teachers, and school communities;⁸ and add financial strain to schools and districts that provide devices and/or internet access for students.⁹ With generally limited opportunities for student engagement,¹⁰ and teaching time well below most normally state-mandated minimum instructional hours,¹¹ principals also report that addressing academic disparities upon reopening is a priority.¹²

There are other concerns in addition to those revolving around technology, including students' access to crucial services such as meals, counseling, and supports for those with disabilities or other special needs.¹³ Although one study found that nearly all schools continued to provide meal services,¹⁴ others noted that students and teachers were still concerned about meeting basic needs during school-building closures.¹⁵ Additionally, teachers of students with disabilities, homeless students, and English Learners reported needing more or better guidance about how to support these populations.¹⁶

With these issues in mind, and acknowledging the specific needs of Michigan schools and students, we turn to a description of the COL plans provided by Michigan school districts.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS OF THE CONTINUITY OF LEARNING PLANS

To ensure that K-12 students would remain engaged in learning for the remainder of the 2019-20 academic year, Executive Order 2020-35 required each district and public school academy (i.e., charter school) in Michigan to prepare a Continuity of Learning (COL) plan. The order required the plans to describe 14 elements of operation:

1. Providing alternative modes of instruction;
2. Keeping students at the center of educational activities;
3. Delivering content in multiple ways to ensure access to learning for all students;
4. Monitoring and managing student learning;
5. Estimating additional costs and associated sources of revenue to implement the plan;
6. Collaborating across stakeholder groups to develop the plan;
7. Notifying students and parents/guardians of the plan;
8. Providing an estimated date by which the district will begin plan implementation;

9. Assisting students in postsecondary dual enrollment courses;
10. Arranging for continuation of food distribution to eligible students;
11. Paying school employees and redeploying staff;
12. Evaluating student participation in the plan;
13. Providing mental health supports for students affected by a state of emergency; and
14. Supporting ISDs to mobilize disaster relief childcare centers.

Each district was required to submit its COL plan to its intermediate school district (ISD) or authorizing body for approval. If the ISD or authorizing body determined that a plan met all of the requirements listed above and “represent[ed] a good-faith effort to provide adequate alternative modes of instruction given the limitations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying response efforts,” it was approved and submitted to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE).

This brief presents the first results from a review of COL plans from 813 school districts in Michigan. The analysis demonstrates how Michigan school districts’ COL plans aligned with the required aspects of the executive orders and how they may be used to provide important information as school districts plan for reopening in Fall 2020 amidst the continued COVID-19 pandemic.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

DATA

We constructed a dataset that detailed the contents of COL plans from 813 Michigan school districts. This dataset represents 97.2% of all Local Educational Authority (LEA) districts and Public School Academy (PSA or charter) districts in the state, and 99.4% of all LEA and PSA districts that were required to submit plans to MDE.¹⁷ LEA districts, which operate traditional K-12 public schools, comprise about two thirds of the sample. The remaining third are PSA districts, which typically operate a single PSA school.

We also drew from outside data sources to provide contextual information about the students and communities that each district serves. We included information from state administrative datasets about the location of a district (urban, suburban, town, or rural locale), percentage of students from underrepresented minority groups (all races and ethnicities other than white and Asian), and percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged. Across Michigan, approximately 19% of districts are in urban locations and nearly 40% are classified as rural. Michigan districts have students who are, on average, 34% underrepresented minorities and 62% economically disadvantaged. Using estimates from the 2014-2018 American Community Survey,¹⁸ we also considered the proportion of households in the area served by a district that have a computer with a broadband internet subscription. In Michigan, approximately three-quarters of households have broadband internet subscriptions.

We classified districts into “low”, “medium”, and “high” subgroups based on whether their percentages of economically disadvantaged students, underrepresented minority students, and households with broadband internet fell in the bottom quartile of districts (“low”), middle two quartiles (“medium”), or top quartile (“high”).

METHODOLOGY

We developed an initial rubric for coding the content of COL plans based on the requirements in the first executive order, guidance documents that the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) issued to school and district leaders, rubrics that researchers in other states developed for similar studies, and a review of a sub-sample of plans from Michigan districts. A team of 13 coders piloted this rubric by coding COL plans from a geographically and demographically representative sample of approximately 300 districts selected using stratified random sampling. About 10% of these districts were assigned to multiple coders to assess inter-rater reliability (IRR). After completing the pilot stage, we developed a revised rubric based on feedback from the coding team, preliminary results from the pilot, IRR analyses, and the requirements outlined in the new executive order (which was issued after the initial rubric was developed). The coding team tested the revised rubric and conducted a second round of double-coding to establish reliability. The average agreement rate was 90% across all raters and rubric items.

The final rubric, which was used to code all 813 district COL plans, is structured into seven content areas:

- planning process
- virtual instruction
- hard copy media
- schedule and expectations
- grades and credits
- special populations
- health and well-being

For each content area, there were a series of questions about whether particular provisions were included in a district's plan and if so, the details of those provisions. For most questions, coders were asked to select from a list of response options. There were a few exceptions where coders were asked to enter a number, date, or text description.

Using these data, we provide key findings about the mode(s) of instruction provided, family and student engagement and well-being, instructional time and grading, and staff expectations and support. In addition, we review districts' responses to distance learning for several special populations such as students who have IEPs or 504 plans, English Learners, and high school seniors. We compare results across subgroups of districts based on locale, the percentages of economically disadvantaged and underrepresented minority students, and the percent of households with broadband internet. In this brief, we provide an overview of some of the most pertinent findings from our analyses. We also provide an appendix table with all of the frequencies from our analyses on our website at <https://epicedpolicy.org/how-did-michigan-school-districts-plan-to-educate-students-during-covid-19/>

CAVEAT

Before we present the findings, it is important to note that we coded district's plans, and not their actual implementation of instruction after school buildings closed and distance learning began.

It is very likely that many, if not all, districts amended their plans after their initial creation, and that individual teachers and schools implemented multiple strategies and provided additional resources that were not discussed in the COL plans. We view our results as evidence of what school districts planned on doing from the outset, and how this varied across districts in Michigan.

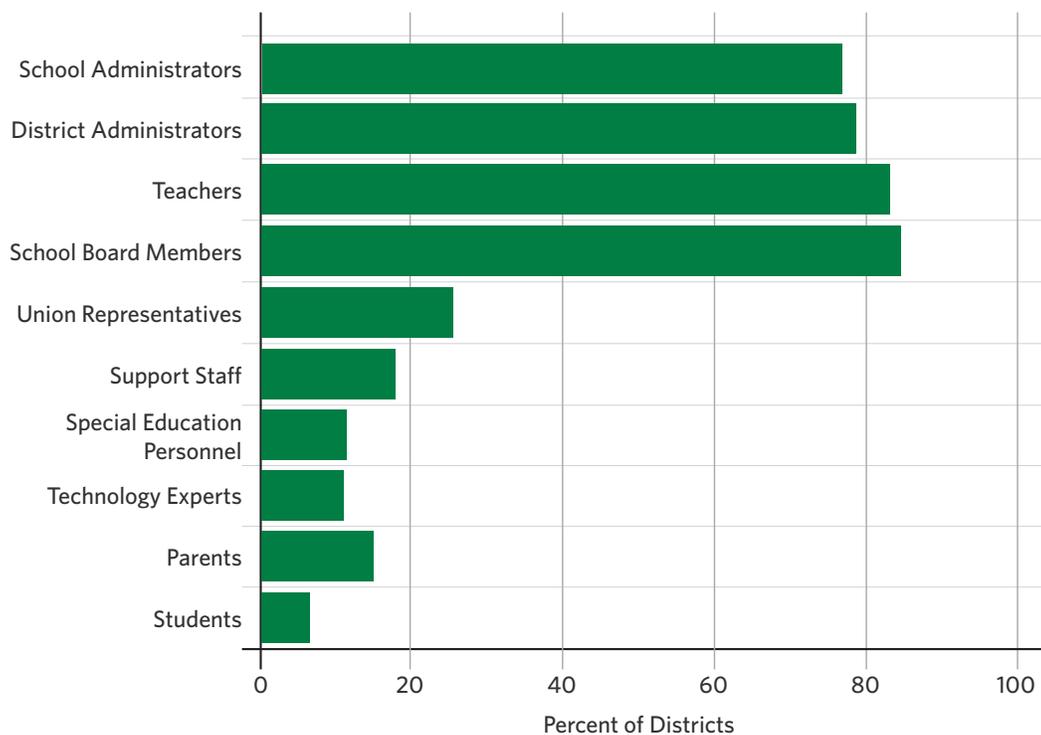
FINDINGS

FINDING 1: School boards, district and school administrators, and teachers were active in drafting Continuity of Learning plans.

Various support staff, parents, and students had less involvement.

The Executive Order required that plans be in place and distance learning commence no later than April 28th, 2020. According to the COL plans, districts began full implementation of distance learning between March 16th, 2020 and April 28th, 2020. The modal district began on April 20th, 2020, which was 18 days after the original Executive Order. While the far majority of districts indicated that school and district administrators, teachers, and school board members participated in the development of the COL plan, fewer planning efforts incorporated union representatives, support staff, special education personnel, or technology experts. Parent and student involvement was even less common; parents and students contributed to this process in 16% and seven percent of districts, respectively. Only 10% of district plans specified the roles, responsibilities, or expectations of parents.

Figure 1. Stakeholders involved in COL plan development

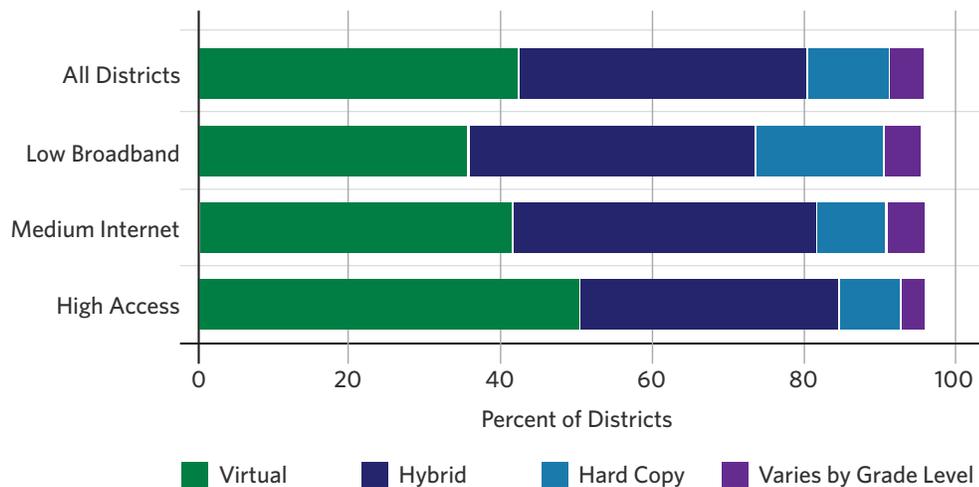


FINDING 2: Community broadband access matters in districts’ plans to provide virtual instruction and additional access to technology and connectivity.

Most districts planned on using virtual instruction either entirely or in part to educate students, although this varies by community broadband access.

As per the requirements of the Executive Order, nearly all (96%) districts outlined the respective roles of virtual instruction and hard copy media in their COL plans. Approximately 42% of district plans said they would use virtual or digital instruction as the primary format to deliver distance learning content. In most of these districts, hard copy media was offered as an alternative mode of instruction for students without access. Approximately 11% of districts planned to use hard copy media as their primary mode of instruction. Thirty-eight percent of districts used a true “hybrid” model, where instruction was delivered in both virtual and hard-copy formats. The planned use of different modes of instruction does not vary by the race/ethnicity or economic disadvantage of student populations, or by urbanicity. However, we do find that districts with higher proportions of families with broadband internet access were more likely to offer virtual instruction, and to offer it as the primary mode of instruction.

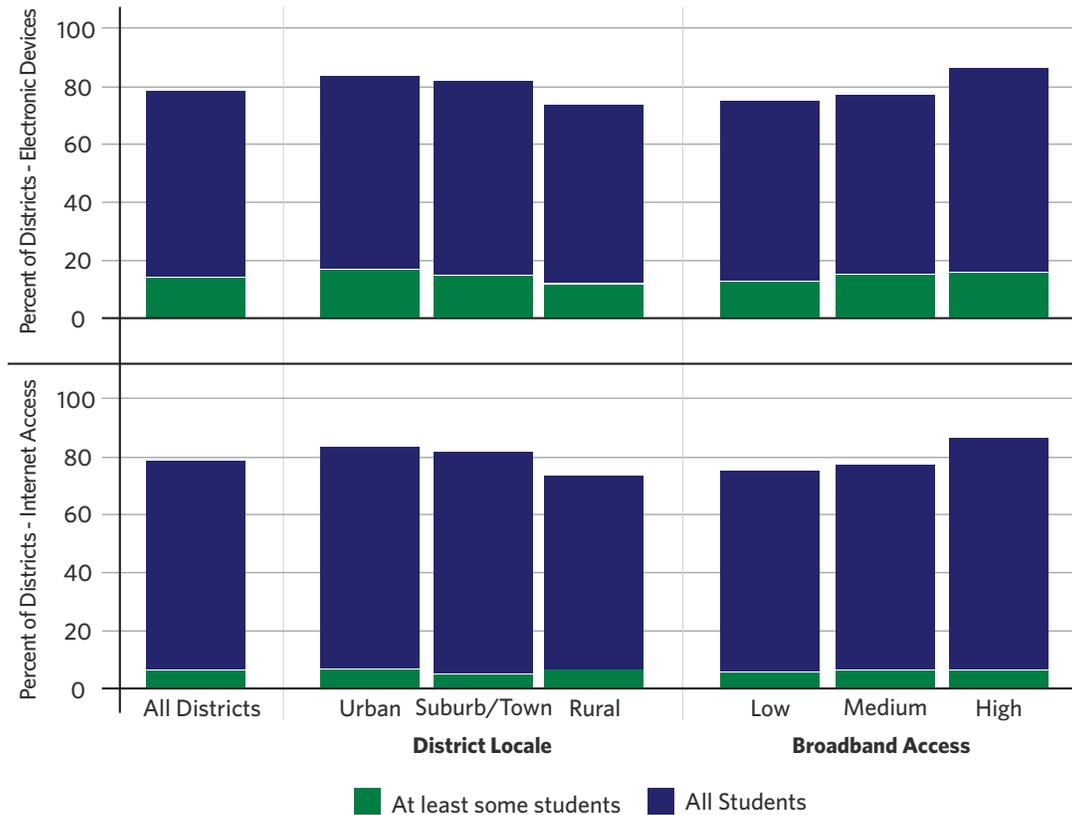
Figure 2. Percent of districts by primary mode of instruction and broadband access.



Most districts planned to provide electronic devices and internet access to at least some students (79% and 52% respectively). Some districts planned to provide these supplies to all students (15% for electronic devices and 7% for internet access).

Notably, districts that were most likely to provide electronic devices, assistance with internet access, and/or technical support were non-rural districts and districts where most students already have broadband internet in their homes. This may be due to greater confidence that students who are provided devices will be able to use them to access the internet, more emphasis on virtual instruction (compared to hard-copy media) in places where most students have internet access, or simply because the cost of providing devices is more affordable for districts where most students already have their own.

Figure 3. Percent of districts that provide electronic devices and internet access to students.



FINDING 3: Districts intended for teachers to have frequent contact with and provide feedback to students even when school buildings were closed.

Most Continuity of Learning plans required teachers to check in frequently with individual students.

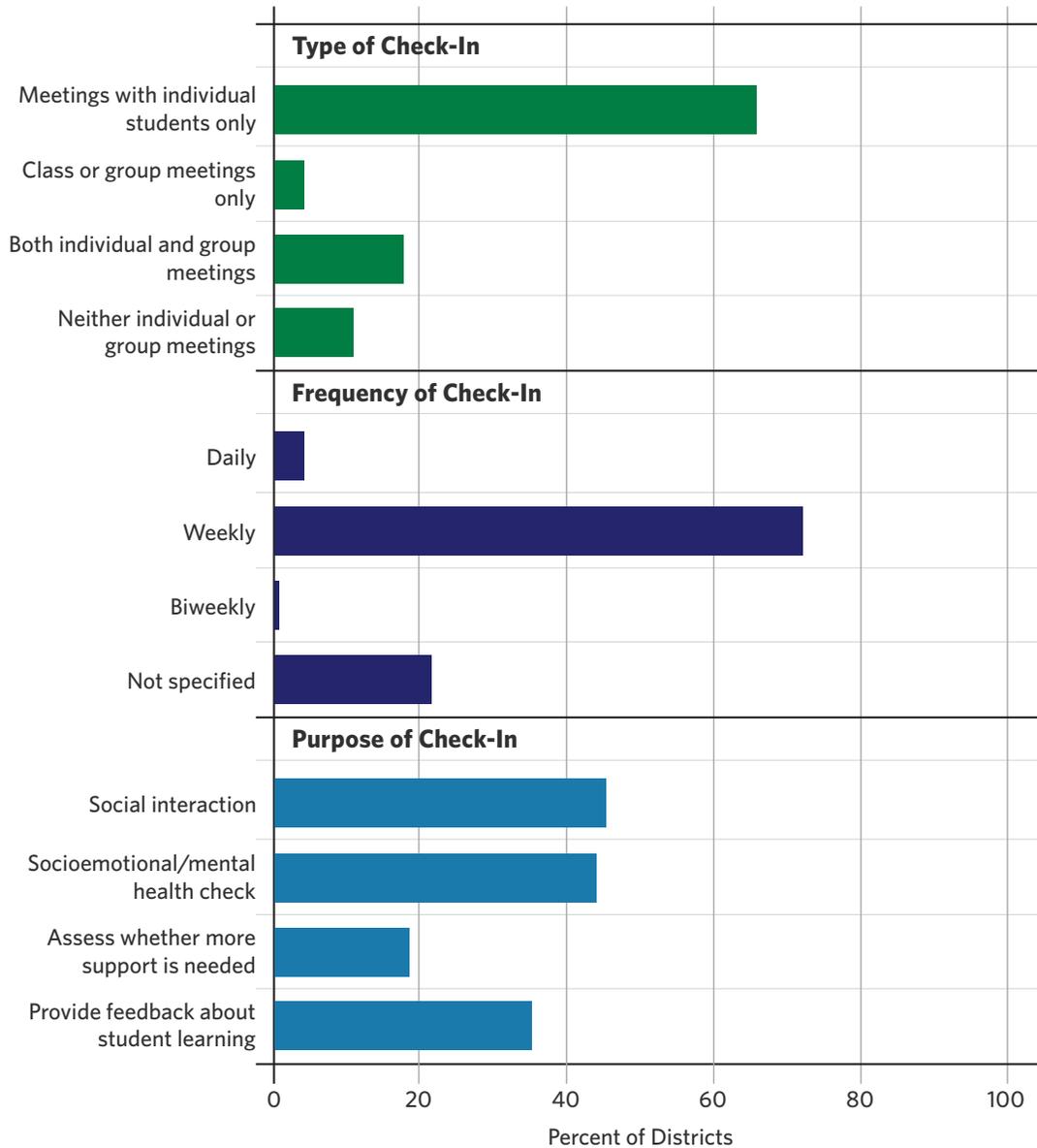
Research suggests that distance instruction is most beneficial when students remain connected to trusted teachers and staff.¹⁹ To that end, Figure 4 shows that nearly all school districts (92%) specified that teachers must regularly connect with students, and the far majority of districts (84%) stipulated that teachers check in with students via one-on-one meetings. Some districts also mentioned that teachers meet with students in class or group meetings to check in and connect with their students on a regular basis. Most districts specified how often check-ins must take place, and nearly all of those suggested a weekly frequency.

Districts planned for check-ins to have multiple uses.

In 46% of districts, the plans indicated teachers were to use check-in meetings as a way of maintaining social connections with their students. Opportunities for students to socialize with each other were incorporated into 31% of districts' plans, as well. Nearly half of Michigan districts

also expected teachers to use regular meetings with students to check on their socioemotional and mental health. Among this subset of districts, nearly all outlined a process for referring students for additional support when concerns came up during a check-in. In addition, 36% percent of COL plans specified that teachers provide feedback about student learning during check-ins.

Figure 4. Type, frequency, and purpose(s) of non-instructional meetings with students.

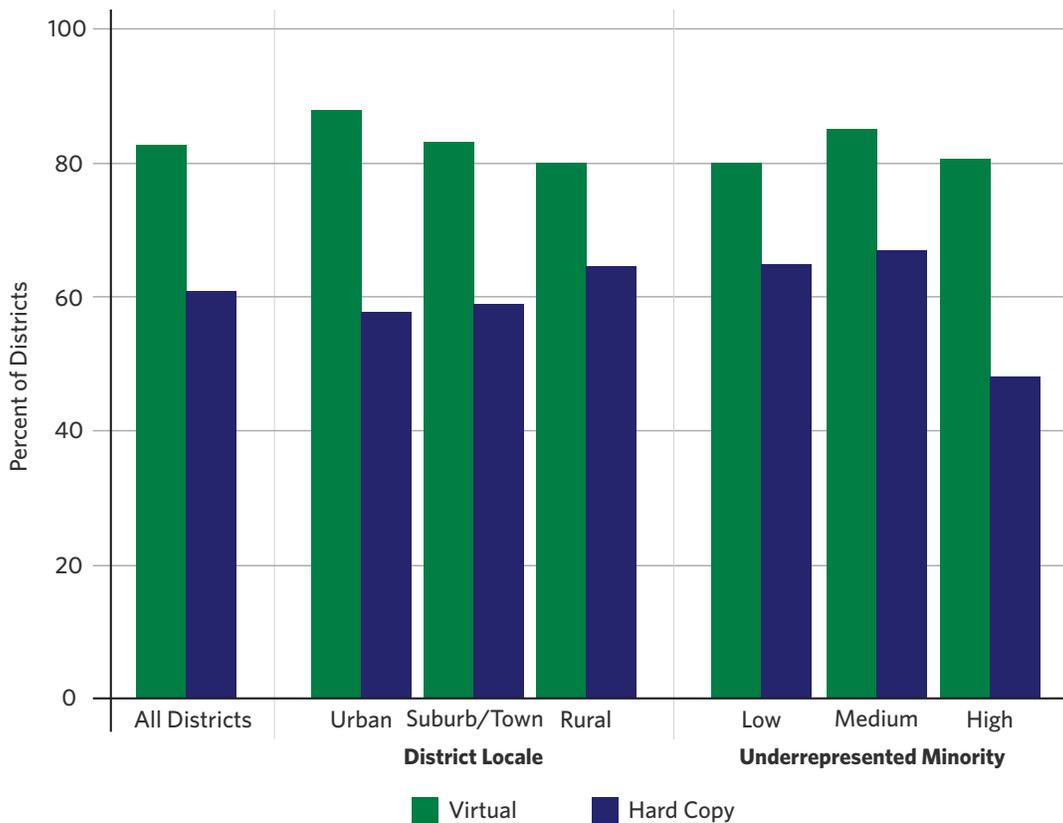


COL plans suggest differing levels of teacher feedback on student work depending on instructional modality.

Districts set different expectations for how teachers reviewed and responded to virtual learning activities relative to hard copy materials. Among districts that used virtual instruction as the

primary mode of delivering distance learning content or as part of a hybrid instructional model, more than 80% indicated that students receive feedback on virtual learning activities. However, approximately 60% of districts that used hard copy media as the primary mode of instruction or as part of a hybrid model indicated that teachers provide feedback on these learning activities. Rural districts were somewhat more likely to provide feedback on hard copy materials and less likely to do so on virtual learning activities. Districts with higher proportions of underrepresented minority students were the least likely to specify that teachers provide feedback on hard copy materials.

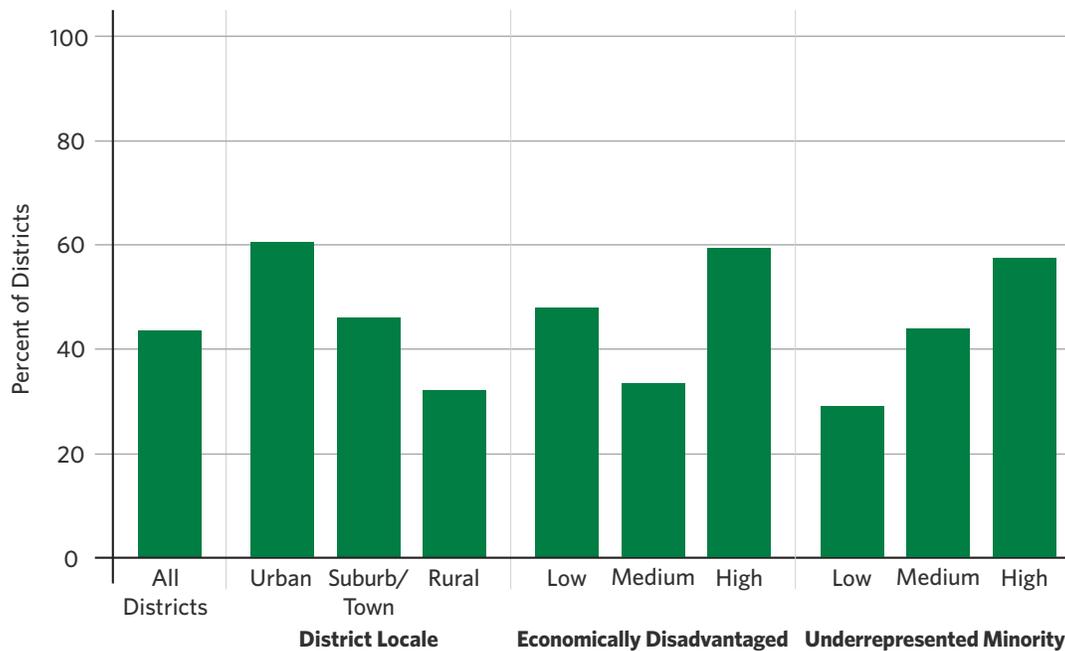
Figure 5. Percent of districts that provide feedback on virtual and hard copy learning activities.



FINDING 4: Districts’ plans for providing student instruction and weekly instructional time suggest less direct engagement than occurs in a typical school day.

Approximately 44% of districts specified that students will receive direct instruction (defined as instructional activities where students are learning directly from the teacher including both synchronous and asynchronous activities), although the prevalence is notably higher among urban districts (61%) than rural districts (32%). Direct instruction was also more prevalent among districts with the most economically disadvantaged students (59%), and districts with the most underrepresented minority students (57%), which tend to align with urban locations.

Figure 6. Percent of districts providing direct instruction, overall and by subgroup.

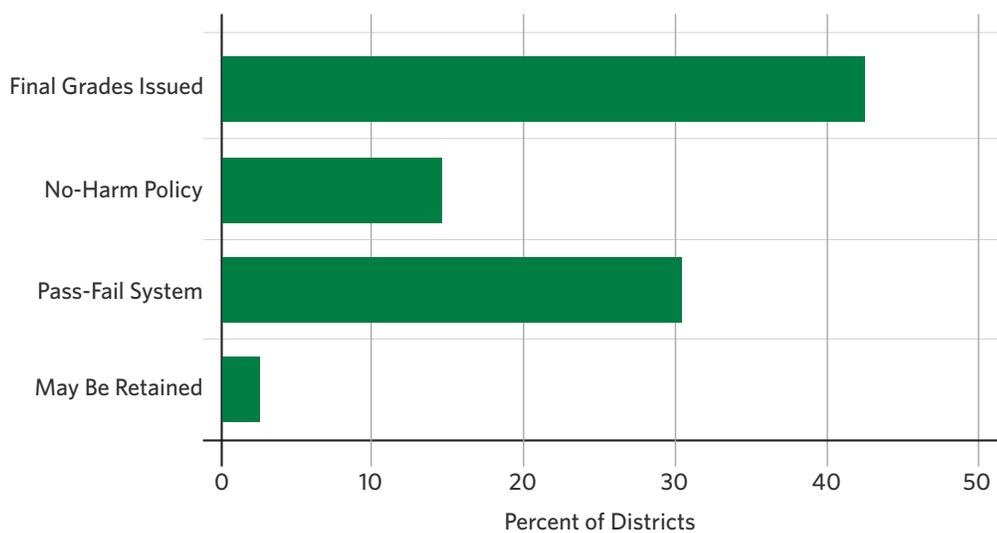


Only nine percent of districts specified how many hours of direct instruction students would receive. Among this small subset of districts, the average amount of weekly instructional time specified was 11.3 hours. Approximately nine percent of districts indicated how many lessons students would receive per week; an average of five to six. Sixteen percent of districts indicated how much time students were expected to spend on independent learning and schoolwork. Among these districts, the average amount of time specified was 12.2 hours per week. Some districts specified different guidelines for instructional time, lessons, and independent schoolwork depending on students’ grade level; these districts tended to allocate less time for learning activities for younger students. When rural districts did detail direct instruction, they tended to require fewer hours of instruction and fewer lessons per week than other districts.

FINDING 5: Districts were flexible with their final grading policies for students.

Although it is likely that nearly all Michigan districts provided their students with some kind of final grade for the spring, just over 40% of district plans explicitly indicated that at least some students would receive final grades for the year. About three-quarters of these districts chose to adopt a binary or categorical grading system such as pass/fail or complete/incomplete. In some cases, this grading system was used for all students, and in other cases as an option that students could choose in lieu of a final letter grade. About one-third of these districts opted for a “no-harm” grading policy, meaning that students’ final grades could not be lower than the grade they would have earned based on their status before school buildings closed. Only about five percent of districts issuing final grades indicated that students could be retained in the same grade level for the following year if they did not earn a passing grade.

Figure 7. District policies regarding final grades.



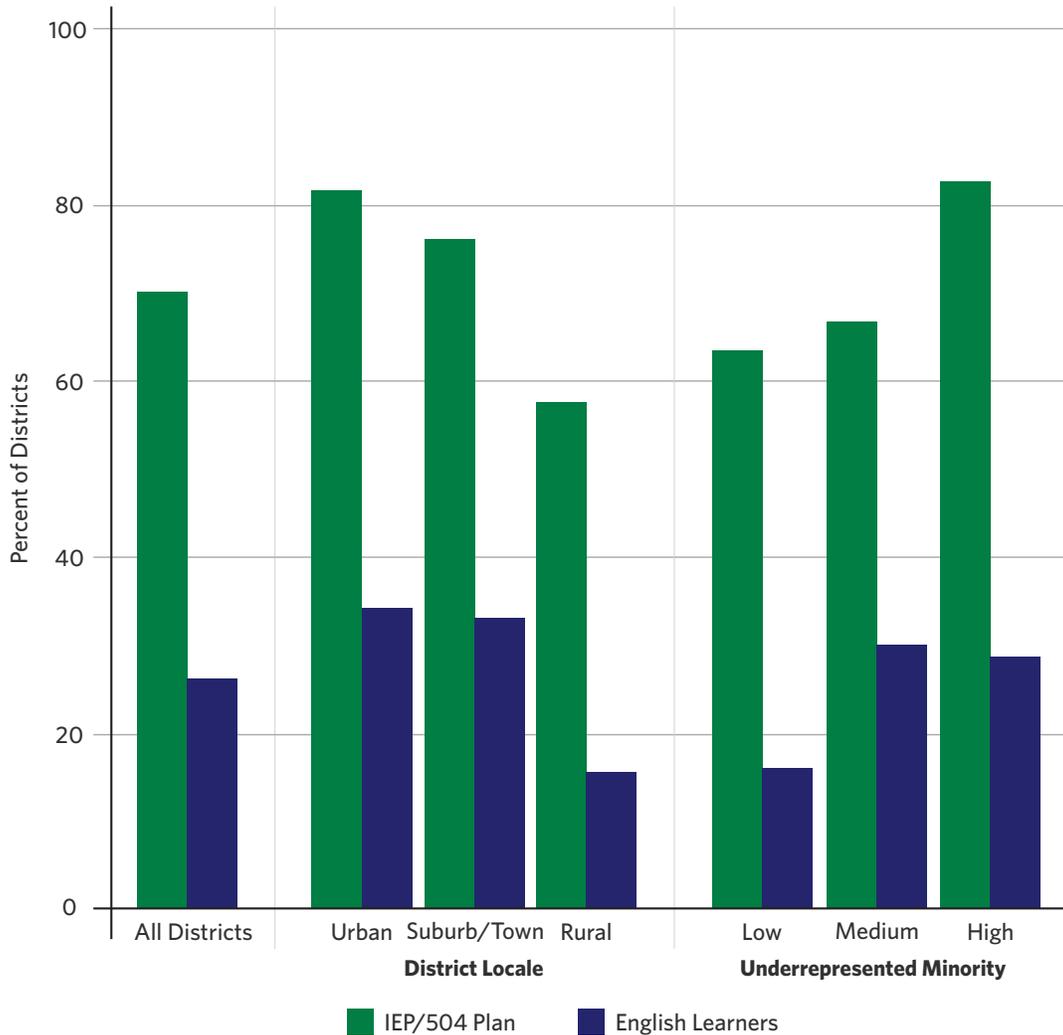
FINDING 6: District plans specified accommodations for special populations of students, but the kinds of modifications varied by district type.

The majority of districts addressed the specific needs of students with IEPs and 504 plans, but fewer acknowledged challenges faced by English Learners.

As schools shifted to distance learning, advocates and educators raised alarms about the likelihood of adverse effects on special populations of students such as those with individualized education plans (IEPs) or section 504 plans, English Learners (ELs), and high school seniors preparing to graduate. Support for students with disabilities was of particular concern. Seventy percent of COL plans noted that districts would make accommodations or modifications to distance learning plans for such students, however it was clearly difficult for districts to address specific strategies in the planning documents. Whereas in 16% of districts, plans specified a set mode of instruction for all special education students (i.e., the same mode of instruction as general education students), 40% of districts indicated that the mode of instruction would be determined on a case-by-case basis depending on students' needs. For these students, the mode was most often at the discretion of the district, the student's teacher, and/or the student's IEP team. Fewer districts (26%) addressed accommodations for ELs in their plans, and for the most part those that did included little detail about the specific modifications offered or how they would be provided.²⁰

Urban districts and districts with high proportions of minority students were far more likely than their counterparts to make distinctions for students with IEPs or 504 plans and ELs. Interestingly, although not shown here, these same districts were substantially more likely to include language in their plans around how to support students with labeled "reading deficiencies" (the term used in the state's Read by Grade Three Law). Together, this suggests that urban and high-minority districts' plans paid more attention to the needs of specific groups of students who might particularly struggle with distance education.

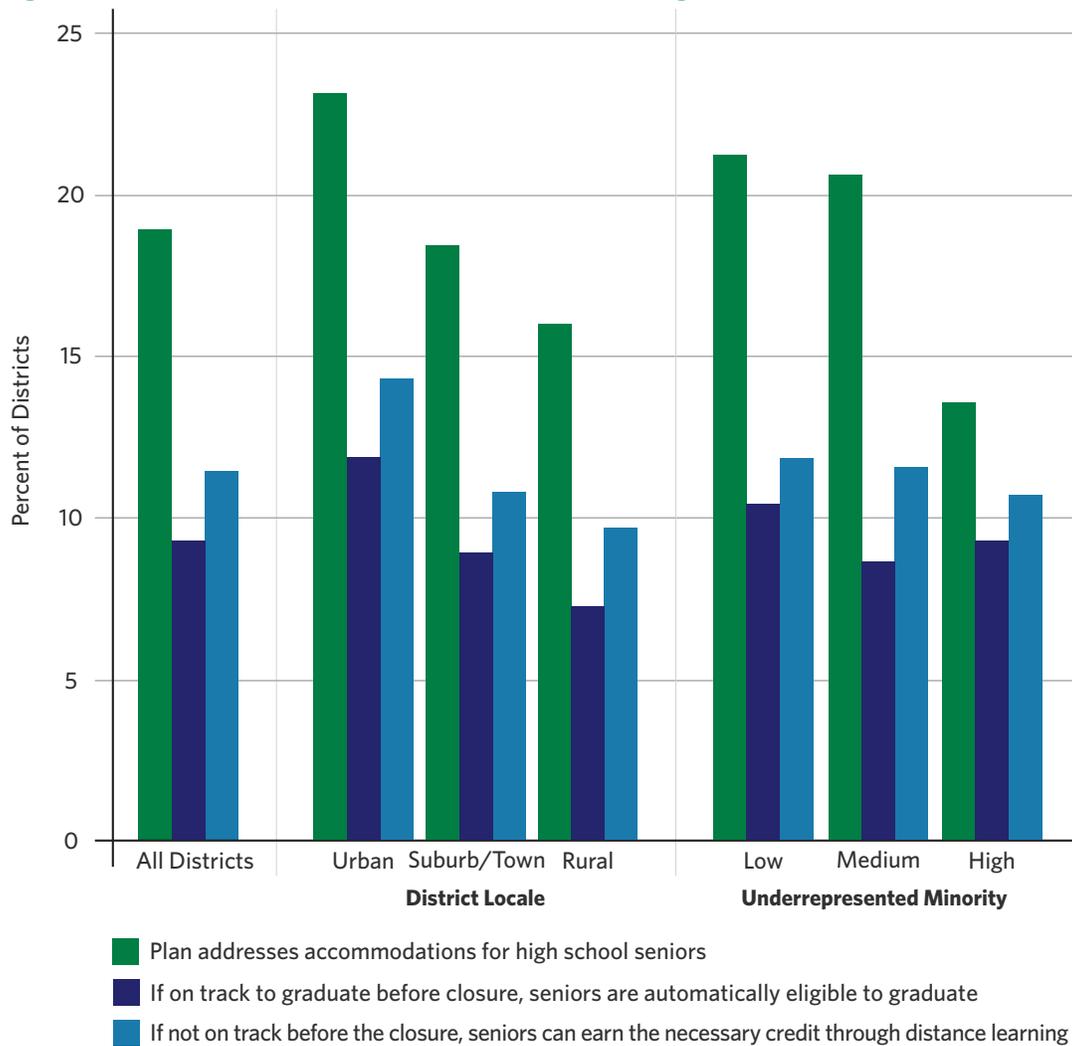
Figure 8. Provision of accommodations for students with IEPs or 504 plans and English Learners.



Districts with lower proportions of minority and economically disadvantaged students are more likely to include accommodations for high school seniors.

Fewer COL plans – just 19% – outlined specific means of addressing concerns around the needs of high school seniors as school buildings closed during their final year of high school. However, nearly a quarter of districts with low proportions of economically disadvantaged students and 21% of districts with low proportions of minority students expressly addressed seniors’ needs, relative to 16% and 14% of COL plans in districts with high proportions of economically disadvantaged and minority students, respectively. Similarly, while 11% of plans indicated that seniors who were not on track to graduate at the time closures began could earn the credit needed to graduate through distance learning and nine percent stated that seniors who were on track before the closure were guaranteed eligibility to graduate (regardless of their participation or performance in distance learning), such accommodations were more prevalent in districts with fewer low-income students.

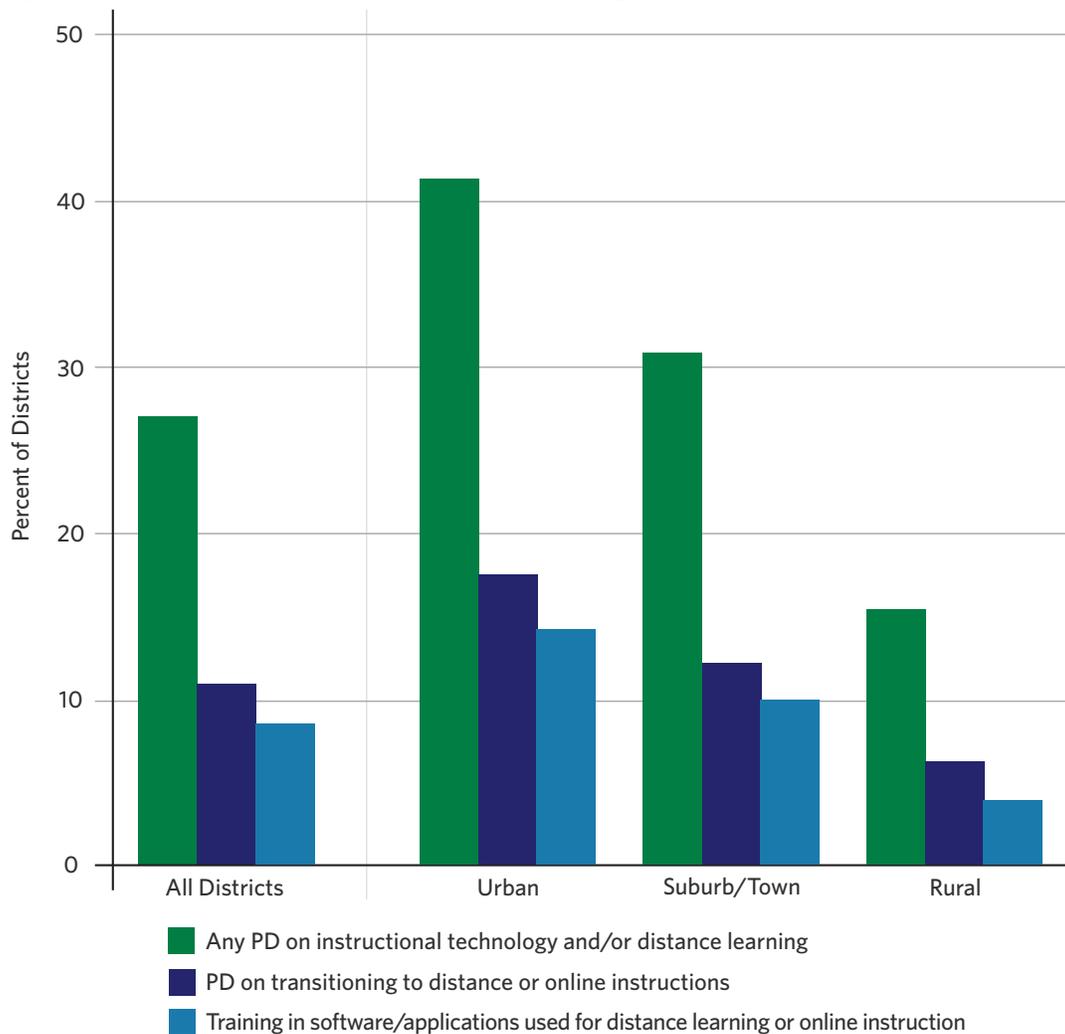
Figure 9. Accommodations and considerations for high school seniors.



FINDING 7: A quarter of districts planned to offer teachers professional development to help them prepare for distance education.

Shifting to distance learning required a new set of skills and capabilities for educators. Approximately a quarter of districts’ COL plans (27%) indicated that teachers would receive professional development to help them improve their skills with instructional technology or distance learning. Specifically, 11% offered professional development on transitioning to distance or online instruction, and nine percent provided training on using software or apps for distance learning. Urban districts were notably more likely to provide professional development in these areas, while rural districts were less likely to do so. Few districts specified that they provide internet access (five percent) or electronic devices (eight percent) to teachers for the purpose of delivering instruction and providing other supports to their students.

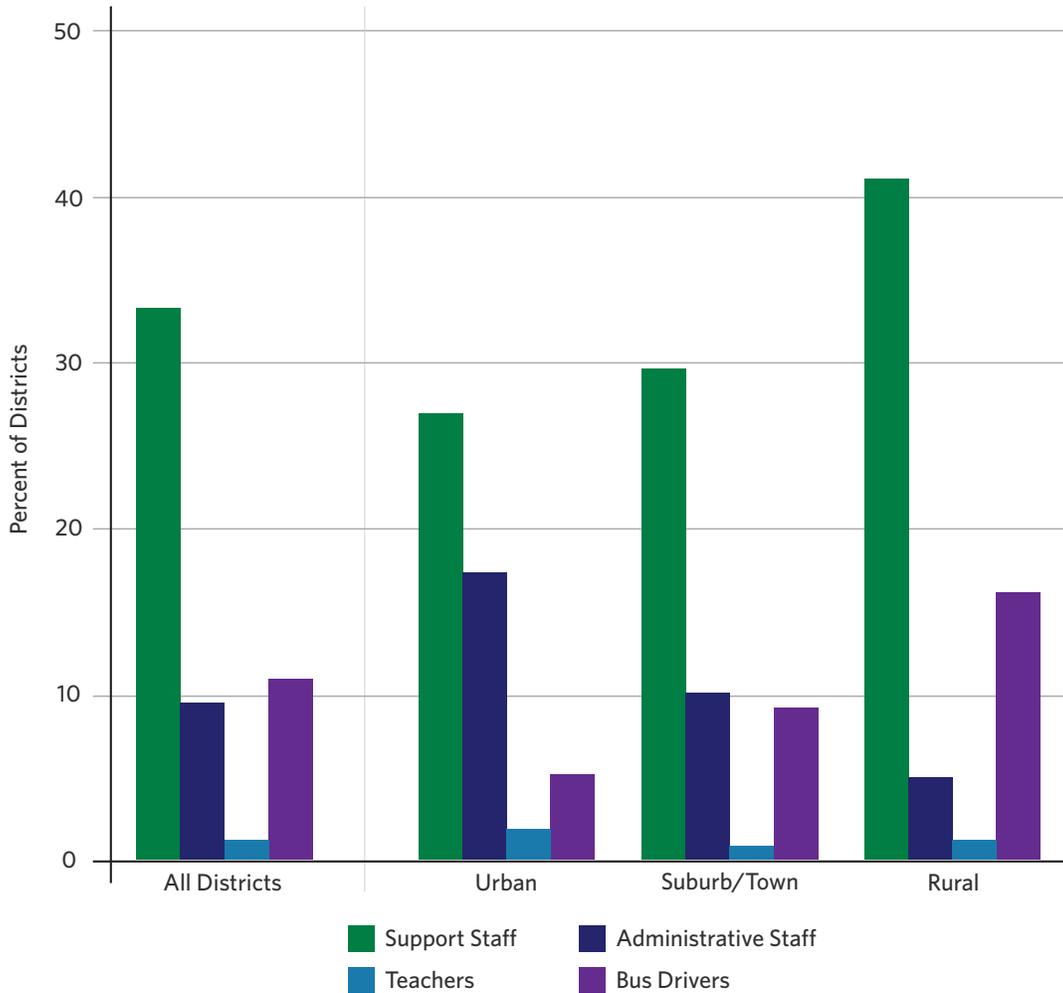
Figure 10. Professional development and training on distance learning.



FINDING 8: Districts planned to reassign staff to address students’ specific needs during the pandemic.

In addition to expectations for students, most districts also included expectations for staff in their COL plans. As required in the Executive Order, nearly all districts outlined assurances to pay staff during distance learning. Over three-quarters of districts indicated that staff may be redeployed once school buildings were closed. Overall, support staff members were the most likely group of employees (34%) to be redeployed. Approximately 10% of COL plans noted that administrative staff and bus drivers would be reassigned to other duties needed during the pandemic-induced school-building closures. The groups of employees to be reassigned varied by district locale. Whereas urban districts were the most likely to specify that some employees would be redeployed, they were the least likely to suggest reassigning support staff or bus drivers and the most likely to reassign administrative staff. Rural districts, on the other hand, were far more likely to redeploy support staff and bus drivers and less likely to shift administrators’ duties.

Figure 11. Staff who could be redeployed during school building closures.

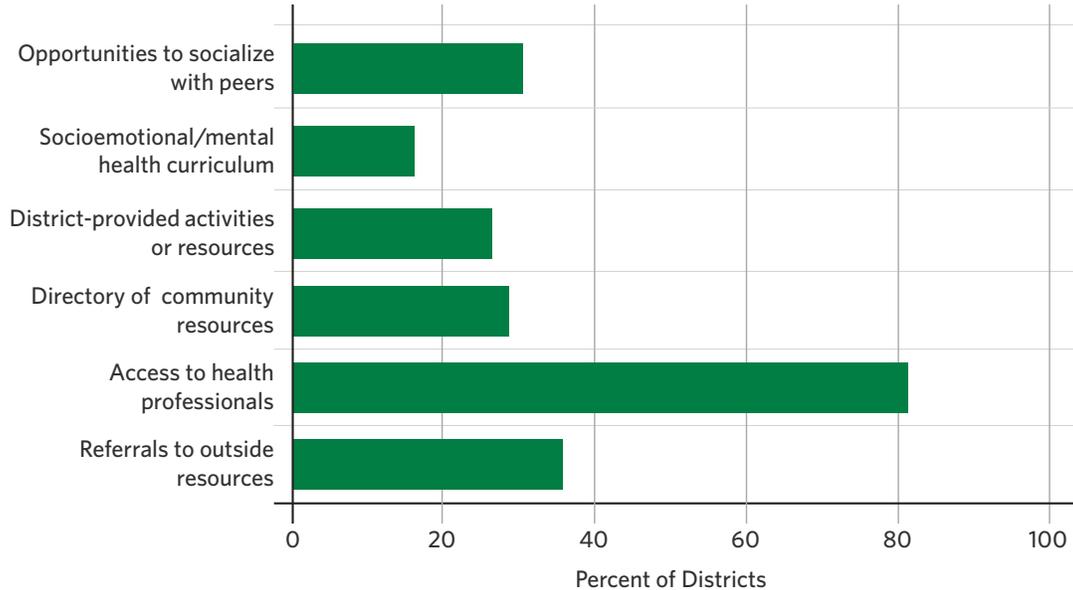


When districts indicated that staff would be redeployed, their tasks typically included copying and distributing hard copy materials, delivering meals and other supplies, and reaching out to students or families.

FINDING 9: The majority of district plans specified resources for students’ mental health and nutrition needs.

As required by the Executive Order, almost every COL plan (99.6%) specified ways to address students’ socioemotional learning and/or mental health needs. As noted above, almost half of Michigan districts intended teachers to use their meetings with students to check on their socioemotional and mental health and outlined processes for referring students for supports if necessary. The far majority (82%) of districts specified that they would provide mental health supports through access to site counselors and other mental health professionals, and just over a third noted that they would provide referrals to outside resources to meet student mental health needs. Twenty-eight percent of COL plans also provided a directory or guide to community mental health resources to enable family access.

Figure 12. Socioemotional learning and mental health content provided by districts.



In addition to providing mental health supports and checking in regularly with families, the Executive Order required COL plans to address how districts would provide meals to students in need. Ninety percent of districts met this requirement, indicating that they were continuing to provide meal supports through the academic year. However, relatively few COL plans gave thorough details about which students were eligible to receive meals, how students could access free meals, or how frequently meals would be available.

LESSONS FOR MICHIGAN IN FALL 2020 AND BEYOND

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a bright light on the difficult and central role of K-12 schools in students – and their families’ – lives. Schools do more than provide academic instruction – they help students to stay healthy both mentally and physically, provide much-needed services to families, and afford opportunities for adults and children to build strong bonds in their communities. These roles are important in normal times, and they take on increased urgency during times like these. Although we know very little about what the 2020-21 school year will look like, we do know that it will be unlike any other school year in Michigan’s history. We are asking a great deal of our educators and administrators when we ask them to plan for the provision of all students’ educational and welfare needs amidst such great uncertainty.

This brief contains evidence of districts’ initial plans for continuity of learning in the spring of the 2019-20 school year. Of course, as spring semester 2020 went on, many districts learned from their ongoing experiences and adjusted and added to their plans to meet the needs of their students, educators, and larger communities. Nonetheless, we believe that important lessons can be gleaned from districts’ early plans, with implications for the 2020-21 school year:

- 1. Engage multiple stakeholders in planning for the 2020-21 school year.** Given the short time frame and immediate need for Continuity of Learning plans in spring 2020, many school districts did not specify how or that they engaged important stakeholders in their planning efforts. With more time to plan and experience from spring 2020, it will be important for school districts to engage deeply with their teachers, associations, support staff, families, and students to ensure that these groups' needs are met and their ideas are incorporated into plans for the 2020-21 school year.
- 2. Keep equity of opportunity at the forefront when planning for high-quality instruction.** There is no one-size-fits-all approach to instruction and learning even in the most stable and normal of times. The disparate impacts of the pandemic itself and the challenges associated with school-building closures on students of color, low-income students, those with IEPs and 504 plans, English Learners, and students without technology or internet access must be kept at the center of policymakers' and administrators' efforts to plan for the coming school year. Districts can do this by considering how different modalities of instruction and types of engagement may or may not work for all groups of students, and by providing clear plans to address the needs of all students in their districts. Moreover, most educators have needed to adjust their practice to new and unfamiliar ways of teaching. Providing educators with high-quality and targeted professional development to help them engage students in remote learning will be imperative to the success of the 2020-21 school year, and in particular to the ability of students from disparate groups to continue learning and growing.
- 3. Build on current efforts to provide direct instruction and frequent contact between students and teachers.** Initial COL plans showed wide inconsistencies in districts' abilities to provide direct instruction, frequent contact, and clear feedback to student and their families. Districts should capitalize on the additional time to plan and prepare for the 2020-21 school year by building systems that enable teachers and support staff to reach students in their homes so students can build meaningful relationships with their teachers and adults in the schools, and access instruction in direct and engaging ways. Districts must give teachers supports and development opportunities to enable such instruction, and they will need to develop structures that can allow for students to authentically engage with content even when not in the classroom. Policymakers and administrators must continue to push to provide all students with access to appropriate devices and internet connectivity so that all students can access direct instruction and engage with their teachers and school staff.

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13. America's Promise Alliance (2020).; Hamilton et al. (2020).; Kemper Patrick, S. & Newsome, U. (2020).
14. Malkus, N. & Christensen, C. (2020).
15. America's Promise Alliance (2020).; Kemper Patrick, S. & Newsome, U. (2020).
16. Hamilton et al. (2020).; Kemper Patrick, S. & Newsome, U. (2020).
17. Four LEA and 14 PSA districts were not required to submit plans because they either were not actively educating students during the 2019-2020 school year or exclusively offered virtual education and did not require any changes to normal district operations in response to the executive order.
18. ACS data were obtained from IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota, www.nhgis.org
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20. It is likely that relatively few district plans provided accommodations for ELs because there are low proportions of ELs in many Michigan districts. Indeed, only five percent of districts with the lowest proportion (quartile) of ELs included accommodations for ELs relative to 14% of districts in the second quartile, 37% of districts in the third quartile, and 49% of districts with the highest proportion of EL students.



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