"Public education will never be the same"

How COVID-19 forced school district leaders to innovate on the fly

Robin Lake

February 2021

"Public education will never be the same": How COVID-19 forced school district leaders to innovate on the fly

Robin Lake

When the pandemic forced schools to move online, no one was prepared. It was a true crisis, but out of crisis often comes innovation and discovery. That is exactly what a fall 2020 nationally representative survey from the American School District Panel, a collaboration between RAND, CRPE, Chiefs for Change, and Kitamba, found.

A recent RAND report presented the main survey findings, with a compelling headline: "Remote Learning is Here to Stay." It found that nearly one in five districts planned to create, expand, or maintain online learning after the pandemic is over. Districts also reported a commitment to retaining an emphasis on social-emotional health and well-being.

A deeper dive into the open-ended responses from district and charter network leaders reveals more detail about what district leaders have discovered in this crisis that they want to keep. Here we summarize themes from the 218 total open-response items to the question, "Did your district adopt any innovative practices in response to COVID-19 that you anticipate continuing in future years, even after the pandemic has passed?" While we have no way of knowing how representative these individual responses are, they complement RAND's quantitative data and make meaningful contributions to our understanding of what America's school systems leaders want people to know they are hopeful and concerned about.

Durable commitment to social-emotional and mental health and racial identity

> "We realize that [social-emotional learning] is in service of educational excellence. . . . We will have a full spectrum of programming for all children. The program will have a heavy emphasis on prevention, putting SEL into practice, self-care, and breaking the stigma of receiving mental health support."

The COVID-19 pandemic has coincided with a national reckoning on racial inequity. Several districts say they have placed new focus on social-emotional health, mental health, or racial identity that they intend to keep long term. Their responses suggest the pandemic and remote learning may have forced districts to be more intentional and systematic about supporting social-emotional health and mental health, creating processes to identify students struggling with nonacademic issues and an intent to build toward more humane communities and cultures.

One district leader says their focus is "to become more inclusive, nurturing self-worth (Black and Brown excellence), having a space and support for difficult conversations about race, identity, and our own educational practices."

Many reported a deeper appreciation for the importance of addressing students' welfare as a precondition and critical complement to academic success. New programs and instructional strategies discovered in the crisis are things leaders say they will retain. In particular, leaders reported using weekly surveys to identify student needs and develop preventive strategies like daily wellness activities.

Some mentioned a simple realization that strong adult-student relationships must come first and that little habits like using Zoom to meet students before the school year started gave teachers the chance to get to know students before the first day.

One district used the first four weeks of school to engage students/parents in developing individualized student success plans (ISSP), offering social-emotional learning activities, conducting diagnostic assessments of students' skills, and training them on instructional technologies. They plan to continue ISSPs in future years.

Many districts have experimented with new community partnerships to address student needs during the pandemic and say those will continue. One district created a community task force that meets quarterly to coordinate services. The superintendent referred to the group as "a galvanizing force that puts children at the center beyond the school walls."

Many of the leaders surveyed see new partnerships with community organizations and local businesses as an important long-term resource going forward, especially on social-emotional supports.

New staffing arrangements and professional development

Leaders pointed to many interesting examples of new approaches to staffing and educator support. Several noted promising trends in "anywhere, anytime" professional development (recorded, watched by all) and virtual staff meetings. Indeed, this was the most frequently selected of the closed-ended list of innovations we included in the survey that district leaders said they plan to keep after the pandemic. They also reported experimenting with interesting approaches to teacher specialization.

One district has tried rotating content-area teachers in grades K–5 instead of asking one teacher to stay with one class all day. The superintendent felt this approach would help keep students engaged, reduce lesson planning and prep for teachers, and give consistency in content areas to the entire grade level.

Another has moved to a team approach, leveraging elective teachers and other content experts to support the lead teacher: "We want to refine and to move this model out in our K–8 schools beyond the pandemic."

Several districts started to use noncertified staff in new ways they hope to continue, such as supporting teachers and outreach to students and families.

One district described the value of leveraging the expertise of their most tech-savvy teachers to share their expertise by creating "cyber committees" to serve as models for innovative, technology-based instructional practices.

Several respondents noted the urgent and immediate need to address substitute teacher shortages during the pandemic, which is preventing many from reopening schools but is an ongoing problem for many school districts, and asked for flexibility from state rules to allow them to expand the pool of applicants.

Overall, there was significant interest in using technology to support teachers in new ways, recognizing the professional benefits and cost savings. One leader was especially enthusiastic about the possibilities, saying they will pursue "remote socio-emotional supports for staff, remote staff bonding events, remote PD, remote staff and student recruitment practices."

Parent and community connections: An easy win

> "Through Zoom, Facebook Live, and YouTube we have transitioned all events—from parent coffees to town hall meetings to our Annual Community Fest—to be virtual. When we return to in-person, these virtual opportunities will continue for families and the community."

There seemed to be widespread support among district leaders to use technology to better engage parents post-pandemic. This seemed to be a "no brainer" with widespread and immediate benefit and very low cost. The leaders we surveyed say tech has allowed them to engage with families and communities in important new ways. In the future, they will keep meetings online so more parents can attend, hold virtual Individualized Education Program meetings, and maintain online community outreach.

Some of this greater connection was achieved by simply moving public meetings online. Others found more structured strategies for engagement, including new online communication platforms and surveys. Others found that the pandemic forced them to proactively reach out to families via virtual wellness checks and home visits. Though these were motivated by emergent needs, a bonus, one leader found, was "stronger partnerships with families."

Expanded choices and options for students, especially high schoolers, and in rural areas

> "We are changing the way we teach, and students are coming to expect more options."

Most districts (around 85 percent according to a CRPE analysis) offered families some virtual learning options during the pandemic. Our survey of district leaders shows many aim to continue offering these options after the pandemic to families who want them because they see that some students and families have thrived in this environment. As one district leader said, "We have moved to 100 percent virtual and plan to continue to offer virtual after our eventual return to school. A small number of students respond well to the additional freedoms, and we believe it will be a powerful ongoing practice to offer a virtual program."

One district successfully ran an evening academy for families or students who work during the day and preferred evening classes. Another is considering offering virtual learning for courses that traditionally have low enrollment (and therefore are not economically viable) but benefit students. These kinds of options are especially appealing for rural districts that may not have enough teachers or expertise to offer harder-to-staff courses such as Advanced Placement or calculus.

One charter management organization (CMO) is now able to offer additional courses that its small charter high schools couldn't offer and is considering partnering with other CMOs to share course offerings and offer them next summer "and beyond."

Virtual instruction, of some kind, is available in most states, often operated by companies like K12 and Connections Learning. Districts see the possibility of offering their own virtual program as having an educational benefit—one that, in the words of one district leader, "coincides, cooperates, and aligns with our on-campus instruction." They also see it as a competitive strategy, allowing districts to retain enrollment (and corresponding funds) when students need virtual options.

The end of snow days, the beginning of learning abroad?

"We have a flexible model where students can learn synchronously from home or from school. We will continue to expand this process to make anywhere learning a reality."

District leaders indicated they plan to use virtual learning as an emergency stopgap in the future—during snow days, when individual students are out sick, or if schools have to close again due to a future pandemic. One mentioned that virtual learning could reduce the need for substitutes, presumably by allowing teachers to teach virtually from home. Although this "easy" use of technology holds promise for recapturing lost learning time, in the closed-ended question in the survey, superintendents were more likely to say they plan to offer full time virtual school options than to use virtual learning for snow days, etc.

Some also see the potential for allowing students to participate in class virtually if the families need to travel or if students want to take courses over the summer. Immigrant and migrant families, for example, sometimes take extended trips abroad. If they can secure stable internet access and provide students with a dedicated device like a tablet or laptop, this is a potential boon for districts with large immigrant populations or migrant worker families.

Rethinking high school and college prep

District leaders reported real interest in rethinking high school. One district piloted an online program to offer college-prep courses to high school students who would have otherwise lacked access through their individual schools. Another adopted a hybrid model throughout the district: "We see this as a plausible alternative to 9th–12th in the future. We are implementing a collegiate academy by which students are taking dual credit courses on a university campus."

Some are looking to adopt a four-day week to accommodate off-campus learning at career centers. One district leader described how every Monday will be dedicated to work-based learning. "Students will be engaged with work-based learning, ranging from community service, apprenticeships, internships, and paid employment directly tied to their career lab."

In interviews the ASDP team is conducting in the 2020–2021 school year for a set of case studies, one superintendent said he is considering moving high school seniors into community college classes and moving students who are successful in online learning to mostly virtual courses to concentrate in-person support for students with the highest needs.

Technology as a way of doing business

Basic technology use and knowhow seem to have dramatically accelerated among districts, according to the comments school leaders provided us in fall 2020. Many are still exploring what this will mean, but they are enthusiastic about the possibilities.

District leaders often noted that more tech-savvy practices were long needed. The pandemic simply pushed them to adopt faster. One leader noted that their district had previously attempted to become a "1-to-1" (one device per student) district for the past five years, but "there was always something more important. . . . Covid-19 put us all on the same page and we will continue our 1-to-1 system even after we return to in-person learning."

Another said they were 1-to-1 but hadn't allowed students to take the devices home. Now that they have, they are seeing benefits not just for children, but for the entire household. For that reason, the district will make access to devices and the internet a priority going forward.

Many are still exploring what they want to keep in the long run, but many districts said they are much more comfortable with tech in general: "Our teachers' tech competency has grown by leaps and bounds during the COVID-19 pandemic."

Individualized help

Leaders expressed real optimism about the potential to use technology to individualize instruction and provide other supports for students.

Some see the potential to maintain small groupings of students by continuing to use "blended" instruction—where some students are together in a classroom and some are working independently or in small groups. One leader believes this will allow them to customize instruction to need: "Students with greater needs will receive greater supports in smaller groups and students who are independent will have instruction provided accordingly."

Others hope to build tutoring into the regular school day by having live instruction from 8:00 am to 1:00 pm and "virtual office hours" from 1:00 to 3:00 pm, allowing for support from outside agencies for individual tutoring. Another will have "dynamic boost" classes that dynamically group different sets of students each day based on data to provide additional 1-1 supports.

One district hopes teachers will adopt a new way for them to think about their role: "We hope the experience [of virtual learning] proves to be life-changing for teachers—to appreciate the need for engagement and supporting students."

State inflexibilities, funding get in way

"While virtual/hybrid schooling has its disadvantages, we continue to see tremendous success in learning. We know that high school students do not need to be in school all the time to learn. Learning can happen anywhere, at any time—we are living that right now. How can we continue to innovate in that area without being hamstrung by law and seat-time requirements?"

Despite their enthusiasm for change, leaders were also clear that they faced barriers, sometimes significant, for achieving potential educational benefits and cost savings from technology.

They say they want more flexibility from state laws and regulations like seat time, attendance, and staffing requirements that prevent them from using different approaches to where and when learning takes place, deploying substitute teachers in new ways, and spending public—especially federal—dollars more efficiently. Specifically, one leader is making a "legislative push" for funding purposes to receive credit for average daily student attendance when students are sick but can attend virtually. Another pointed to restrictions on snow day learning, home instruction, and the pool of substitutes. "Those are not instant innovations, but if the state DOE allows us, it provides flexibility and cost savings, and THAT is our biggest challenge."

One leader wrote that offering full-time hybrid instruction (some students online and some receiving virtual instruction) is extremely expensive and simply not sustainable.

District leaders spoke strongly about the immediate challenge they face finding enough staff to open schools, and requested help finding people willing to work in schools, as well as more flexibility from their states about who can serve as substitutes and aides.

> "We have been unable to adequately staff our transportation department and have had to cancel school bus routes. We have been unable to adequately staff our child nutrition program with the full subsidization of children's meals for all students. We have been unable to adequately staff our substitute pool to cover all teacher absences. We have positions posted but few to no applicants."

Lack of federal/state guidance and cover

Beyond state regulatory barriers, district leaders expressed a great deal of exhaustion and frustration about the current challenges they face and their inability to get to a point where they can begin to realize the changes they envision. Many said they were overwhelmed by the logistical challenges they face and the politics of school reopening decisions.

Some described the logistical complexities of managing the safety protocols, contact tracing, and staffing needs while trying to ensure instruction in classrooms is top quality. One leader was very direct about the added political challenges: "The role of the teachers union and their potential refusal to return to in-person learning is a major hurdle."

Many put forth a plea for federal and state leadership, calling primarily for improved health guidance and pointing out that districts have had to create their own action plans "due to none from the state and federal levels." Others pointed out that lack of state and federal guidance has exacerbated the political pressures they face. Here are some direct quotes to that effect:

> "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."

> "We need better guidance and direction from local, county, and state health care officials."

> "Lack of national leadership trickles down and creates problems."

> "The lack of guidance combined with political pressures have made response a challenge."

> "The uncertainty in planning for the next phase after 100 percent distant/remote learning has been a challenge. . . . We are also concerned about getting information in a timely manner in order to plan ahead."

The quantitative survey findings reinforce these leaders' sense of a leadership vacuum, especially from the U.S. Department of Education. More than four in five districts said the department's guidance influenced their planning "to a small extent" or "not at all." Federal guidance came in close to last among 11 influences listed in the survey about schools' COVID-19 operating plans.

Will we realize the opportunity ahead?

"You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before." – *Rahm Emanuel*

The system leaders who took time to respond to our open-ended questions provided candid responses that provide both a portrait of exciting potential changes ahead and a realistic take on the political, regulatory, and financial challenges they believe will undermine their ability to realize their visions for how they might use the lessons from this crisis to build a better public education system.

> "In this very unfortunate time, there have been opportunities for Gestalt to innovate and to prepare for the future educational effectiveness for all children."

> "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."

> "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)."

State and federal leaders must help school system leaders manage the crisis and reopen school buildings safely. But as these district leaders' responses show, they must also start looking beyond the crisis. They have an opportunity to marshall resources, extend flexibilities, and provide support that allows school systems to apply the lessons from the pandemic to build a new system that is more just, equitable, and effective—and better equipped to respond to the next crisis.

Acknowledgments

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K–12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S Department of Education.