Charter Schools' Response to the Pandemic in California, New York and Washington State

The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO)

Stanford University

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1. Introduction

During early spring of 2020, as our nation slowly grew to realize we were entering a pandemic, CREDO thought it imperative to capture the experience of school administrators. Events created an unprecedented occasion to learn insights to help comprehend the impact on 50 million public school children.

Working with New York authorizers, we distributed the Charter School Response to the Pandemic Survey to all 316 New York charter schools shortly after states ordered schools to shut down in March. Two hundred ninety-five schools responded, for a 93 percent response rate.

CREDO produced a report in 2020 to present those findings. *New York Charter Schools: Remote Instruction During COVID Crisis (Spring 2020) – Results for All Authorizers* described the actions taken in those first months: deploying technology, transitioning to remote learning, maintaining connections, assuring essential services and adapting policies and practices to meet students' and families' needs.[1] Schools rapidly built structure in a time of chaos, taking just three school days, on average, to provide a remote learning program.

As the pandemic continued, we expanded our inquiry. How did charter schools in other states cope with the challenges? What new insights were possible after a longer period of time? How does a community come together to protect the health of its members and, at the same time, quickly shift to a new, high-quality instructional approach to lessen lost opportunities in students' lives? Of equal importance, we wished to compare the picture of charter schools with results about other public schools reported by other education researchers. This report presents the findings from our second wave of research.

This research is important because:

- COVID-19 has been shown to have harder impacts on Black, Hispanic and low-income students – groups that are more prevalent in charters. Little is known about how charter schools responded to mandatory closures and remote/hybrid instruction and how that response evolved over time.

- COVID imposed long periods of social distancing which reoriented the role of parents in their children's education. They became close-hand observers of teachers and their interactions with their students. Many actively supported their children during remote learning. There is a unique chance to get a substantial picture of how schools engaged with parents to support learning.

- COVID required dramatic shifts in teacher practice, from curriculum and instructional designs to allies for family supports. Schools reacted in different ways to support teachers during the pandemic.

[1] https://credo.stanford.edu/publications/new-york-charter-schools-remote-instruction-during-covid-crisis-spring-2020-results-all

- COVID altered our ideas about student outcomes in substantial ways. Absent state assessment data, how did schools track and measure student performance?

News headlines trumpet the unequal impacts of the pandemic on students. Much less attention has been given to the diverse ways that schools responded to the disruption of school closures and altered operations. Some of the differences were health-driven, as caseloads rose and fell at different times across the country. Other factors included unequal access to computers and internet technology to support teaching and learning in remote settings.

Another key difference has remained unexplored: even in the same communities, some schools took a more proactive approach to adjusting to the limitations. Specifically, some schools – charter schools – are allowed to operate with considerable discretion. Even in "normal" times, they have greater control over program design and resource allocation than peer district schools. In return, they are expected to direct their resources in ways that result in strong student results or potentially face consequences. Under these parameters, their response to COVID is a natural experiment in how leaders and educators embrace the flexibility granted to them so that schooling continues and students are learning.

This research illuminates the experiences of charter school leaders in California, New York and Washington State from the start of the pandemic in March 2020 through the end of school year 2020–21. This report tells the story of how they approached the challenge of a lifetime. It also reveals a larger story of how education policy writ large can contribute in positive ways to strengthening outcomes for public school students.

2. Top Takeaways

Schools in our study:

- reported 40 percent of students experienced learning loss, with 20 percent experiencing considerable learning loss.
- saw 35 percent of students experiencing COVID themselves or in their immediate families. Fifteen percent of students lost a family member to COVID.
- took, on average, 3.5 days to transition to remote learning in late March 2020, compared to traditional districts which caught up in May.
- secured devices and internet connection for nearly 100 percent of students and teachers by end of spring 2020 semester.
- relied heavily on remote learning in spring 2020 semester, but about 50 percent of schools were using remote learning in the 2020–21 school year.
- provided professional development in remote learning to nearly 100 percent of teachers, compared to under 50 percent of district reopening plans committing to providing this form of professional development.
- reorganized curriculum and prioritized essential learning standards in a systematic way.
- saw teachers place increased emphasis on communications with all stakeholders and use of online platforms.

- recognized the impact of remote learning on student well-being and made extensive efforts to directly support students and families.

3. Methods

Survey

The survey covered two time periods: March–June 2020 and the 2020–21 school year. Schools in New York received the survey for the March–June 2020 time period in summer 2020 and the survey about the 2020–21 school year in spring 2021. Schools in California and Washington received both sets of questions in spring 2021. Items from the summer 2020 New York survey were included in the California and Washington survey. There were a few instances where the questions were changed between the two surveys. In those cases, the New York values for March–June 2020 were omitted from the results.

The questions and responses were structured to allow tabulations and comparison of responses overall and by individual state. Many questions had schools choose from a fixed response with the inclusion of "other" for additional responses. Some questions used Likert scales to capture differences in intensity, such as "Not at all a problem" to "Very serious problem."

The analysis was conducted at the macro and micro levels. The micro-level analysis is primarily descriptive, showing numbers or proportions of schools that chose to respond to the pandemic in various ways. We calculated average responses for the entire sample and for each state's responding schools. This allowed some items to be tested for statistical differences between the overall pooled results and those for each state's schools. It bears noting that while Washington State had a 100 percent response rate, the low number of charter schools in the state means their responses are often overpowered by the larger samples of New York and California.

The macro-level analysis relies on publicly available reports of how traditional district schools coped with the pandemic. While not exactly matched, these reports offer a general comparison of charter schools versus district schools throughout the study period.

Table 1: Survey Completion Rates

	# of Charter Schools in State	# of Charter Schools Completing Survey	Response Rate	# Students Enrolled in Schools Completing Survey
California	1,351	285	21%	123,861
New York	354	226	64%	99,785
Washington State	13	13	100%	3,553

Table 2: Student Demographics

	Black & Hispanic			Free & Reduced Lunch		
	State	Charter Schools in State	Charter Schools in Survey	State	Charter Schools in State	Charter Schools in Survey
California	60%	60%	61%	60%	59%	62%
New York	44%	90%	86%	57%	79%	74%
Washington State	49%	59%	59%	45%	54%	54%
	% Students with Disabilities			% English Language Learners		
	State	Charter Schools in State	Charter Schools in Survey	State	Charter Schools in State	Charter Schools in Survey
California	13%	11%	11%	18%	14%	17%
New York	18%	19%	18%	10%	8%	7%
Washington State	14%	14%	14%	12%	13%	13%

Five hundred twenty-four surveys were completed, representing schools educating approximately 230,000 students. Our state response rates ranged from 100 percent (Washington State) to 64 percent (New York) to 21 percent (California). It was a challenge to get response rates up in California. Ten schools newly opened during the pandemic.

The responses to this survey should be generalized to the larger populations of all schools In California and New York with caution. Washington's results can be applied to the entire charter sector in Washington as all 13 charter schools in the state responded. However, the response rates in California and New York make it challenging to extrapolate the findings here to the entire charter sector in those states. Instead, the findings should be interpreted as being representative of the schools responding to the survey and the experience of the 200,000+ students enrolled therein.

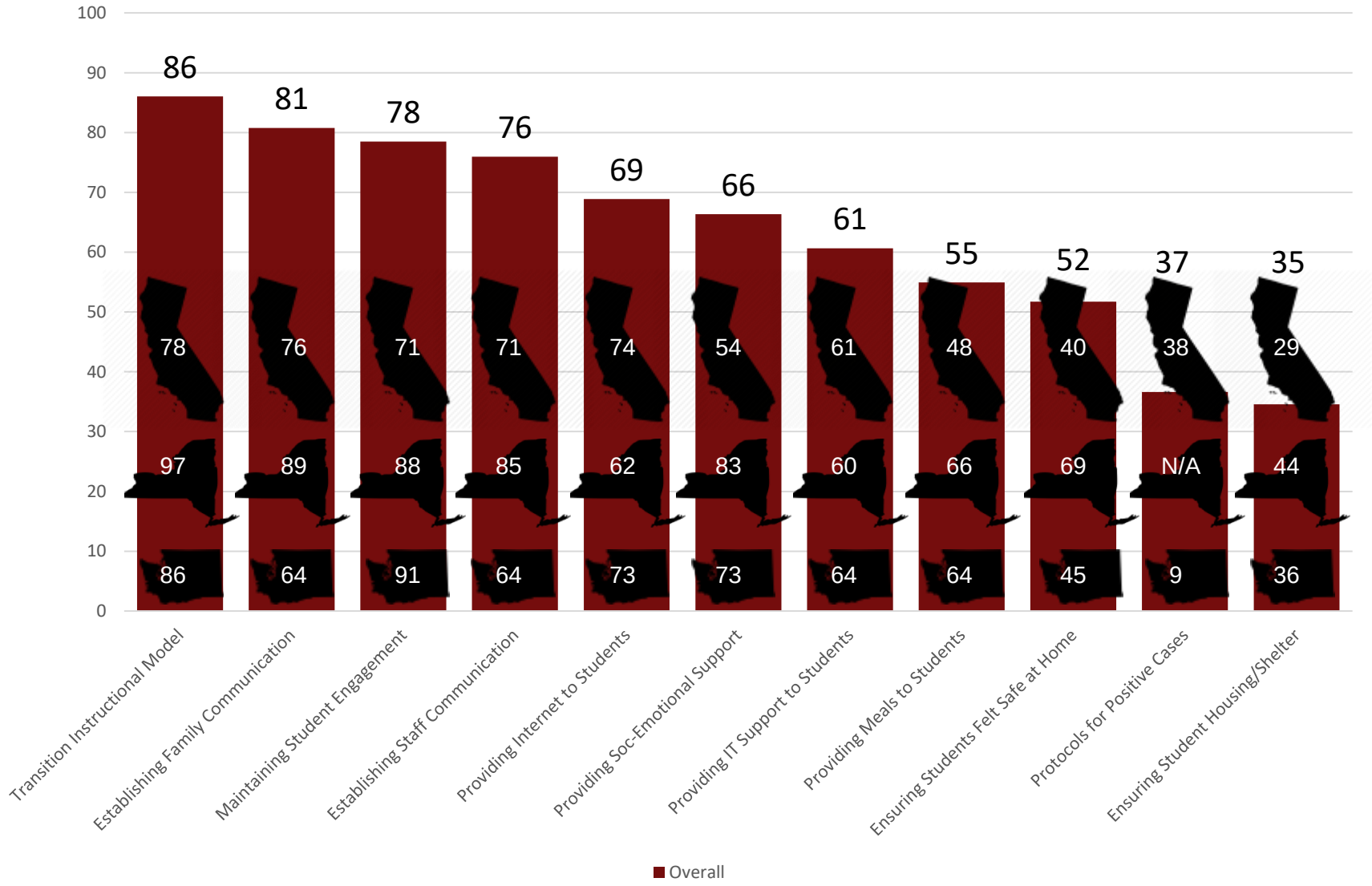
4. Findings

Much of the survey findings will be presented with four sets of results. The first set will be the overall results which include statistics for all schools responding to the survey. These numbers represent respondents only and should not be generalized to the larger populations within the survey states as these numbers are not weighted to be population-representative. Rather, the overall results are instructional for understanding the actions and drivers of the schools responding to the survey.

Individual state level results are also provided for each of the three states. As stated above, the response rates were higher for Washington State than for California and New York State, thus the results for Washington have better representativeness for the charter sectors in that state. The results for California and New York should be interpreted as being applicable to those schools responding to the survey.

What Were the Most Important Priorities Reported by Schools?

Figure 1: Percentage of Schools Reporting Priority as "Very Urgent" at the Beginning of the Pandemic



Overall, respondent schools stated their highest priorities were transitioning the instructional model, establishing communications, and providing services. Transitioning the instructional model was identified as a very urgent priority by 86 percent of respondents overall. The next highest topics identified as very urgent priorities involved communications and connections. Establishing family communication (81 percent), maintaining student engagement (78 percent) and establishing staff communication (76 percent) were all considered highly important among respondents.

Overall respondents also placed moderate importance on providing services to students. Providing internet to students (69 percent), providing socio-emotional support (66 percent) and providing IT support to students (61 percent) were listed as being "very urgent" by at least 60 percent of respondents. Providing meals to students was identified as "very urgent" by 55 percent of schools while ensuring students felt safe at home was identified by 52 percent.

Nearly 90% of schools, overall, responded that transitioning the instructional model was a very urgent priority.

80% of schools, overall, marked communications and connections as very urgent priorities.

70% of schools, overall, marked providing internet and IT support to students and providing socio-emotional support as very urgent priorities.

Interestingly, the last two topics – protocols for positive cases and ensuring student housing/shelter – were identified as "very urgent" for the schools much less frequently. It is logical during the early stages of the pandemic when schools would have some time before having to deal with students who were COVID-positive that establishing such protocols would have been less of a concern.

The results for California mirror those of respondents overall in most of the categories with the slight variation of providing internet to students being identified as "very urgent" at a relatively higher rate to some of the communication-focused priorities.

New York tended to rank priorities as "very urgent" at higher percentages than California and Washington State. This may be because New York schools were asked this question in spring 2020, when the uncertainties were very fresh, rather than for the other states, which were asked to reflect back to the previous year. New York also placed a lower relative urgency on providing internet to students compared to the other priorities.

Relative rankings between the priorities seemed to differ from the overall results the most for Washington. This may be due to the differences in environment and student needs in Washington compared to those in New York and California. However, respondents in Washington ranked maintaining student engagement as their most common "very urgent" topic (91 percent) with transition instruction model (86 percent) as second most common. The remaining priorities were distinctly lower, with values ranging from 73 percent down to 9 percent.

Schools that didn't mark transitioning the learning model as very or somewhat urgent were found to be schools that were primarily or exclusively virtual or had an independent or homeschool learning model prior to the pandemic. Six schools reported providing fully in-person instruction during spring 2020.

Transitioning Instructional Model

Reopening Schools

Figure 2: Days between Physical Closure and On-line Reopening

Schools were able to transform to remote education delivery in less than a week. Washington State schools made the quickest pivot (two days); California schools took the longest (four days).

How does this compare? EdWeek reported that by March 25, 2020, less than 40 percent of teachers had daily contact with their students[2] and there was a stark disparity across poverty levels. In schools with poverty levels less than 25 percent, 90 percent of teachers were engaging in instruction with their students, while in schools with poverty levels more than 50 percent, just two-thirds were.[3] The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) found that nearly 70 percent of districts nationally were not providing instruction in spring 2020: "*Some districts took months to provide comprehensive learning programs. Some never came through*."[4]

3.5 days was the average number of days between closing school and starting remote instruction, overall.

REACH (National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice) found traditional public schools were slower to shift to remote learning, but they eventually caught up overall and even surpassed other schools on breadth of services and equity of access.[5]

[2] https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-coronavirus-spring-the-historic-closing-of-u-s-schools-a-timeline/2020/07

[3] https://www.edweek.org/technology/the-disparities-in-remote-learning-under-coronavirus-in-charts/2020/04

[4] https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/e/2PACX-1vSd4QYHtn373iN1gzSQyzHXUZJWuqPSi6EV6vGPqBAQ3sIw7MgcBUwFYTC8sETW-m0l41w7m1TTQG2R/pub?start=false&loop=false&delayms=3000&slide=id.p3

[5] https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/20200713-Technical-Report-Harris-et-al-How-Americas-Schools-Responded-to-the-COVID-Crisis.pdf

Instructional Modes

Figure 3: Changes in Instructional Modes: 2020-2021

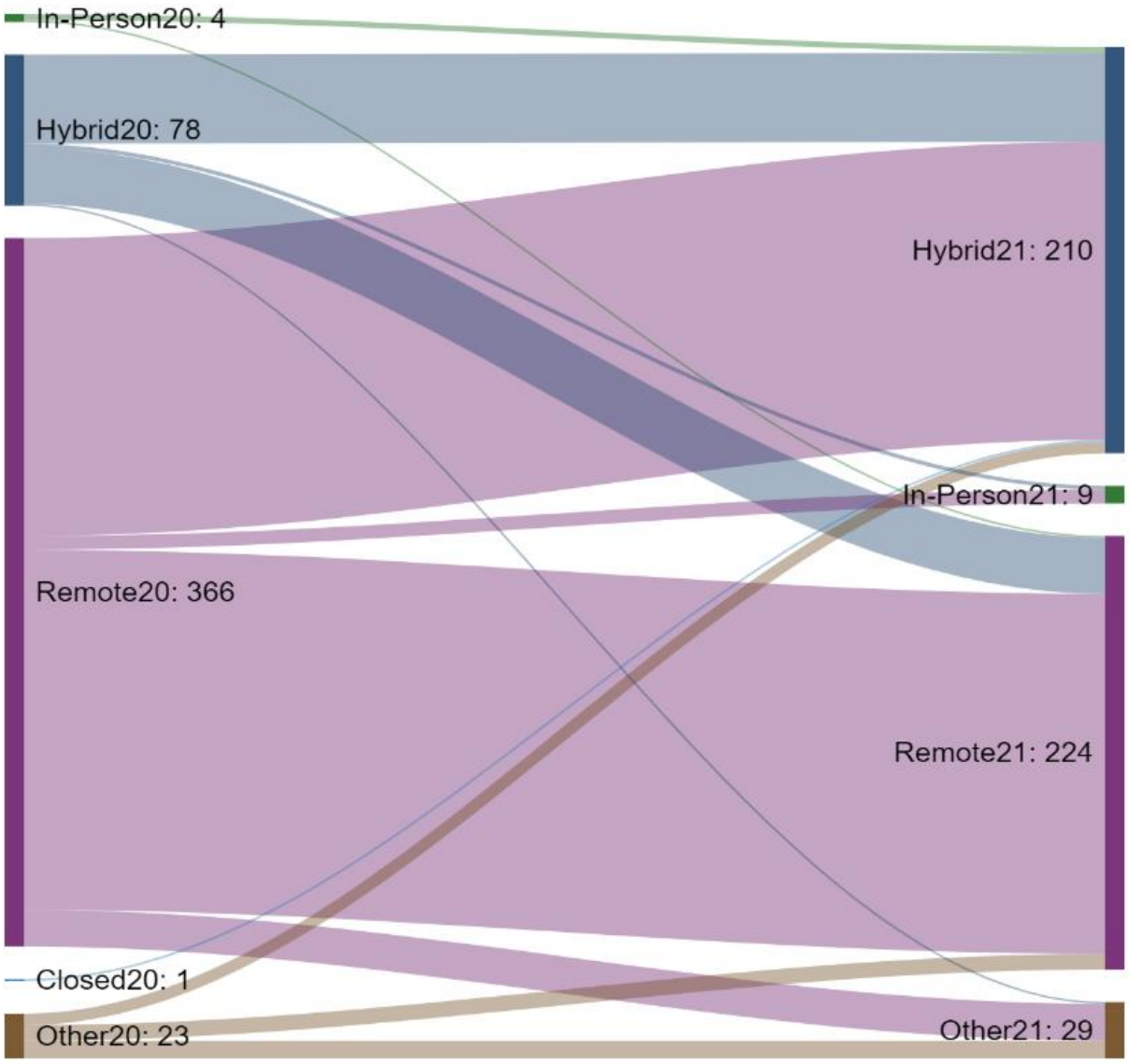


Figure 3 shows the learning modes reported by schools in spring 2020 and in the 2020–21 school year.

The vast majority of schools, nearly 80 percent, had a fully remote learning model in April 2020, with New York having the lowest at 70 percent and California having the highest at 85 percent. Nearly a year later, half of responding schools were operating remotely with the other half using a hybrid model.

Of the 78 schools that were a mix of some in-person and some remote instruction (hybrid) in April 2020, about 60 percent continued to use a hybrid model in 2021. Most of the rest converted to fully remote instruction. New York had the highest percentage of hybrid schools compared to California and Washington each year.

Only four schools (1 percent of respondents), one in California and three in New York, reported they were fully in-person in spring 2020. By spring 2021, these schools were operating hybrid or fully remote programs, and nine schools (2 percent of respondents, eight in California and one in New York) reported they were operating fully in-person.

The "Other" category included schools that weren't open yet, non-classroom based/independent study/homeschools, schools offering both full-time virtual and full-time in-person options (parent choice), dual (some part of the school population – typically those with special needs – attended in-person while the other part of the student population was educated virtually) and in-person learning at an outdoor meeting place.

80% of schools used a remote delivery model in April 2020, dropping to 50% by February 2021.

15% of schools had a hybrid model in April 2020, rising to 45% by February 2021.

In-person schools increased from 1% in April 2020 to 2% by February 2021.

How does this compare?

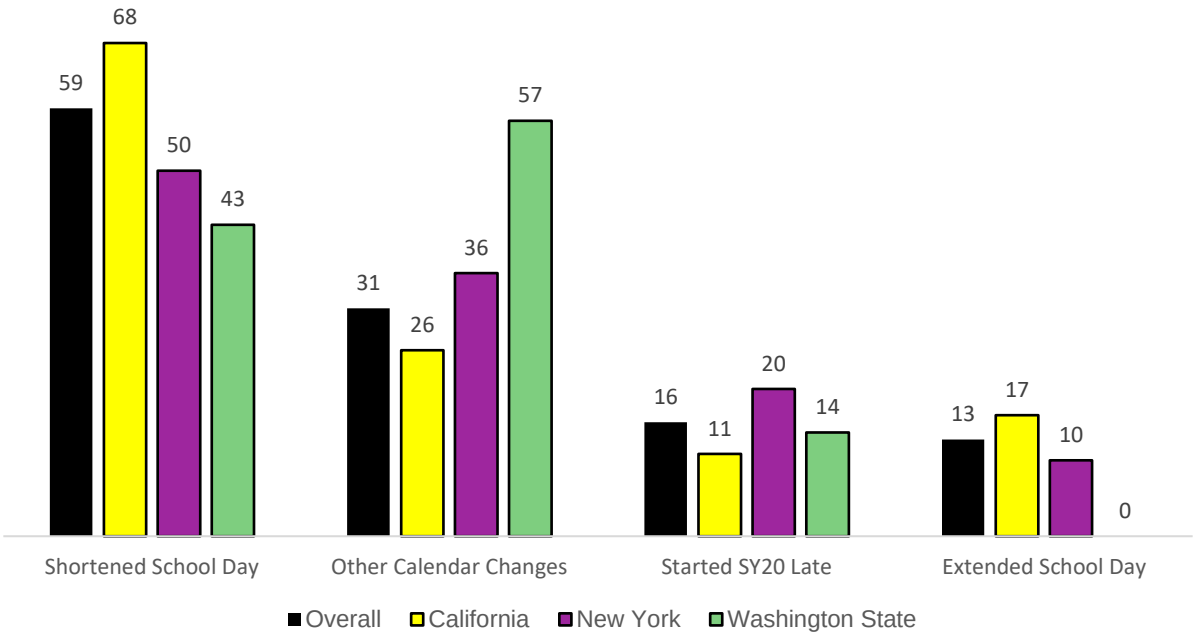
The Center for American Progress reported 74 percent of the 100 largest school districts in the country started the 2020–21 school year with remote-only instruction models. By November 2020, nearly 20 percent of districts remained fully remote, while 45 percent used hybrid models and 36 percent were fully in person.[6] Education Week Research Center's November 2020 survey found close to two-thirds of district leaders said their school systems were using hybrid learning in November 2020.[7]
The return to in-person learning was slower for schools serving high-needs students.

American Enterprise Institute's Return to Learn Tracker found that among "high-minority districts" (having more non-White students than the national district average), 28 percent were fully remote, 42 percent were hybrid, and 29 percent were fully in-person, compared with 7 percent, 48 percent, and 45 percent, respectively, for "low-minority districts" (fewer non-White students than the national district average).[8] Only 17 percent of urban districts, compared with 42 percent of rural districts, were offering fully in-person instruction to students as of February 2021. Suburban districts fell in between at 27 percent.[9]

[6] https://americanprogress.org/article/remote-learning-school-reopenings-worked-didnt/
[7] https://www.edweek.org/leadership/how-hybrid-learning-is-and-is-not-working-during-covid-19-6-case-studies/2020/11
[8] https://www.returntolearntracker.net/
[9] https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-2.html

Changes to School Calendars

Figure 4: Changes to School Calendars for 2020-21 School Year



The most reported calendar modification was *shortening the school day*. Overall, 60 percent of respondents reported they shortened their school day relative to the previous school year. Conversely, about 15 percent of schools overall reported they *extended the school day*.

Thirty-one percent of schools reported using some *other calendar changes*. These other changes included actions such as extending class end dates, adding/extending breaks, shortening breaks and moving to a year-round schedule.

60% of schools shortened the school day.

How does this compare? RAND's American School District Panel study (January – March 2021) found more than a third of districts shortened the school day, and a quarter had reduced instructional minutes in response to the pandemic.[10] Schools shortened the school day (nearly 30 percent), decreased the number of days in the school year (nearly 20 percent), decreased instructional minutes for at least some courses (17 percent) or cut some non-core courses to focus on core courses (nearly 15 percent). Half of districts made one or more of these cuts; about 20 percent made one or more additions.

[10] https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-2.html

Changes to Academic Classes

Table 3: Changes to Academic Program: Overall

	2019-20	2020-21
Drop Courses	12%	22%
Adjust Course Goals	75%	0%
Pausing Delivery	19%	N/A
Modify Pre-requisites for Future Courses	5%	0%
Modify Graduation Requirements	13%	18%
Modify Promotion Requirements	44%	40%
Reduced Course Content	N/A	55%

The most common change to the academic program overall in spring 2020 was adjusting course goals. Additionally, 44 percent of respondents stated they modified their promotion requirements for students at the end of the 2019–20 school year, and 13 percent of responding schools modified their graduation requirements. However, in 2020–21, no schools reported they had adjusted course goals. An additional 5 percent were modifying graduation requirements. The percentage of schools reporting they had dropped some courses rose from 12 percent in spring 2020 to 22 percent for the 2020–21 school year. Reduced course content was added to the survey in 2020–21, and 55 percent of responding schools reported they used that modification.

Table 4: Changes to Academic Program: California

	2019-20	2020-21
Drop Courses	11%	20%
Adjust Course Goals	80%	0%
Pausing Delivery	21%	N/A
Modify Pre-requisites for Future Courses	4%	0%
Modify Graduation Requirements	14%	12%
Modify Promotion Requirements	29%	22%
Reduced Course Content	N/A	61%

Schools in California made similar modifications to their academic programs, except that California respondents were less likely to modify their promotion requirements. Only 29 percent in spring 2020 and 22 percent in 2020–21 used modified promotion requirements, and California schools were less likely to modify their graduation requirements. But California schools were more likely to report they reduced content (61 percent).

Table 5: Changes to Academic Program: New York

	2019-20	2020-21
Drop Courses	13%	23%
Adjust Course Goals	68%	0%
Pausing Delivery	15%	N/A
Modify Pre-requisites for Future Courses	6%	0%
Modify Graduation Requirements	12%	26%
Modify Promotion Requirements	65%	59%
Reduced Course Content	N/A	49%

New York respondents, on the other hand, were more likely to have modified graduation and promotion requirements but less likely to have reported reduced course content than the responding schools in California.

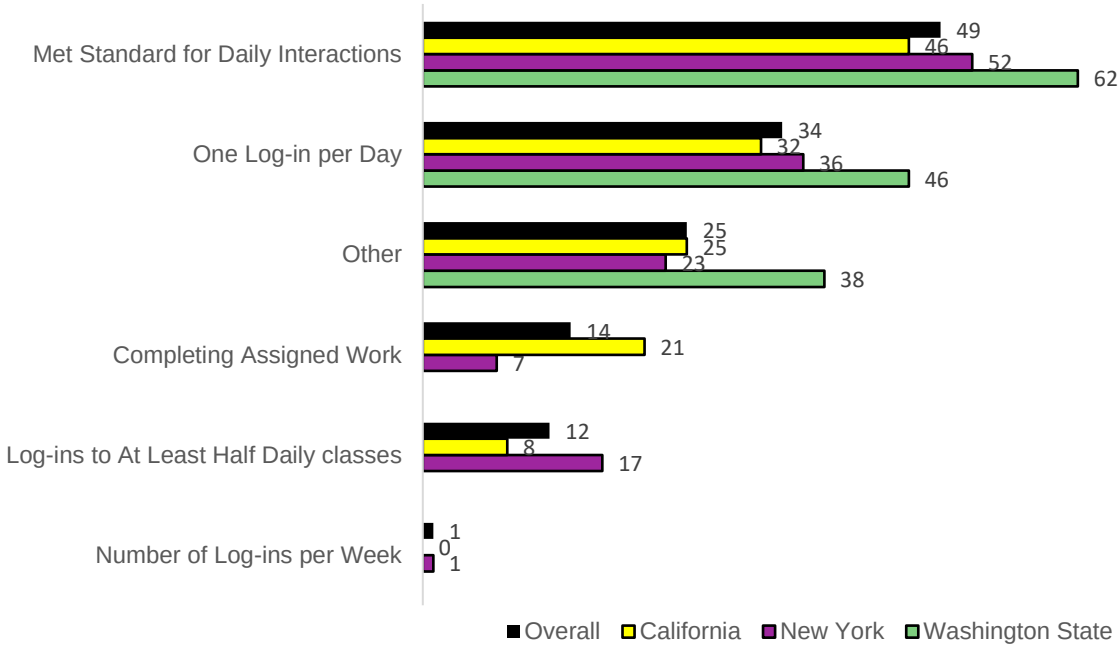
Table 6: Changes to Academic Program: Washington

	2019-20	2020-21
Drop Courses	0%	42%
Adjust Course Goals	89%	0%
Pausing Delivery	44%	N/A
Modify Pre-requisites for Future Courses	22%	0%
Modify Graduation Requirements	11%	8%
Modify Promotion Requirements	44%	33%
Reduced Course Content	N/A	50%

While no Washington schools reported dropping courses in spring 2020, 42 percent of respondents said they dropped courses for the 2020–21 school year. Washington schools fell in the middle on modifying graduation and promotion requirements. While more Washington schools reported reduced courses than the other two states, they reduced course content at a similar rate.

Attendance

Figure 5: Measuring Attendance: 2020-21



Most responding schools reported attendance was based on a threshold of online interactions per day. These interactions could include logging in to every class (49 percent), logging in to at least half of assigned classes (12 percent), logging in once a day (34 percent) or logging in weekly (1 percent) to be considered present. The "Other" category included combinations of completed work, log-ins, and online interactions/engagement or following California's Independent Study Attendance policy. Some schools had different policies for different grade spans. For example, kindergarten through 4th grade might be based on work completion while grades 5-8 would be based on login, work completion and Zoom participation.

How does this compare?

95% of schools required at least one touch point a day for a student to be counted present.

Ninety-five percent of respondents in our study reported using daily touch points (interactions per day, a daily log-in, or logging in to half their classes) counting as present, compared to 70 percent in RAND's study.[11]

In the early months of the pandemic, CRPE's research found vast differences across states and schools regarding attendance. Many states did not require attendance tracking. Ohio directed schools to mark every student present. By May 2020, just 30 percent of districts reviewed reported using a system to track attendance.[12]

[11] https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-2.html
[12] https://www.crpe.org/thelens/remote-classes-are-session-more-school-districts-attendance-plans-are-still-absent

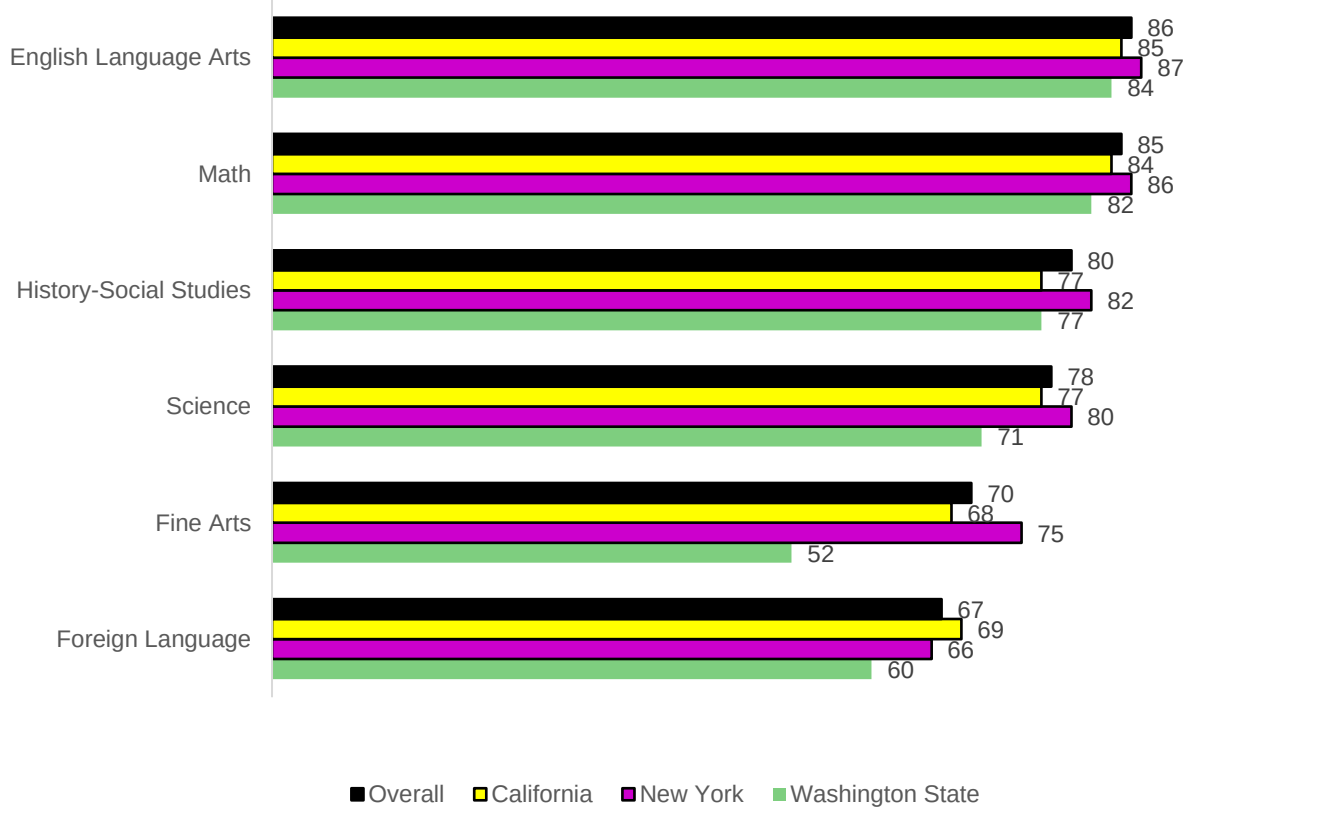
Research by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools and Public Impact found that 74 percent of charter schools expected teachers to provide instruction during COVID-19 school closures, compared with just 47 percent of school districts. Further, 37 percent of charter schools expected real-time learning, compared with 22 percent of districts. Charter schools are also more likely to expect teachers to check in regularly with students (54 percent versus 37 percent for districts) and track attendance (39 percent versus 27 percent for districts).[13]

CRPE's study found that only one out of three districts required teachers to provide remote instruction, track student engagement, or monitor academic progress for all students.[14] REACH found charter schools out-performed traditional public schools on personalization, engagement, and progress monitoring.[15]

Percent of Curriculum Covered

With the sudden physical closure of schools and shift to distance learning, both teachers and students had to adapt to new practices and methods. Such disruptive changes would be expected to impact learning time even in a planned transition. The changes due to COVID were extremely rapid and had a major impact on schools' ability to complete the typical curriculum for the year.

Figure 6: Percentage of the Curriculum Covered in the 2019-20 School Year



[13] https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2020-10/napcs_pi_report_rd8.pdf
[14] https://crpe.org/too-many-schools-leave-learning-to-chance-during-the-pandemic
[15] https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/20200713-Technical-Report-Harris-et-al-How-Americas-Schools-Responded-to-the-COVID-Crisis.pdf

Figure 6 shows the percentage of the curriculum schools reported they were able to cover by the end of the 2019–20 school year. English language arts (ELA) and math fared best out of the subjects. Overall, schools reported covering 86 percent of the ELA curriculum and 85 percent for math. The values reported for each state were remarkably similar as well. The other core subjects of science (78 percent) and social studies (80 percent) were slightly less well covered. Foreign language and fine arts classes covered only 67 percent and 70 percent respectively of their typical curriculum. Schools in New York completed significantly more of their fine arts curriculum than schools in California and Washington.

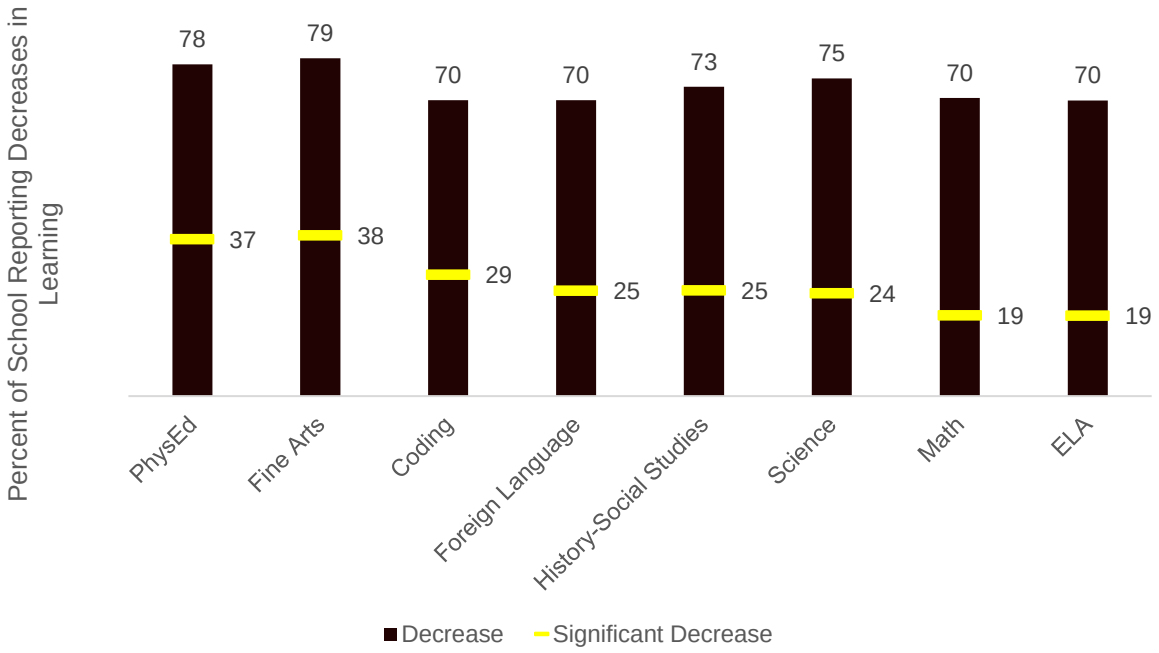
Decreases in Student Learning Time

The combination of less material being taught and new formats for presenting material had a strong impact on the amount of learning time students completed. Schools were asked to report if they felt a decrease in learning time occurred in spring 2020 and then in the 2020–21 school year.

70-80% of schools reported decreases in learning in spring 2020 across all subjects.

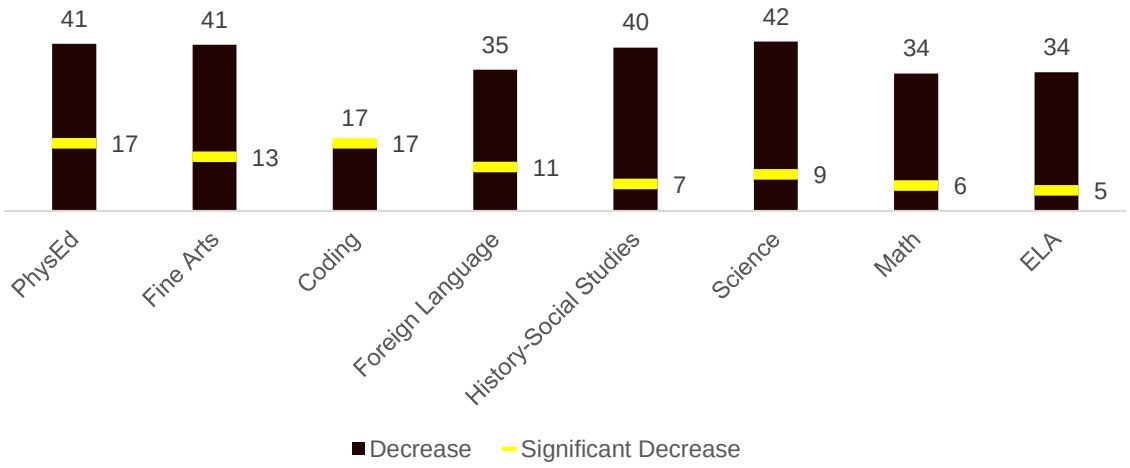
Figure 7 shows the percentage of schools reporting general decreases in learning time. The line on each bar represents the percentage of schools which said the decrease in learning time was severe. Between 70 percent and 80 percent of schools reported decreased learning time occurred in spring 2020. The decreases were greatest in fine arts and physical education classes. In the critical subjects of English language arts (ELA) and math, 70 percent of schools reported a decrease in learning time. One in five schools (19 percent) reported the decreases in learning time in ELA and math were significant decreases.

Figure 7: School Reporting Decreases in Learning Time: Spring 2020



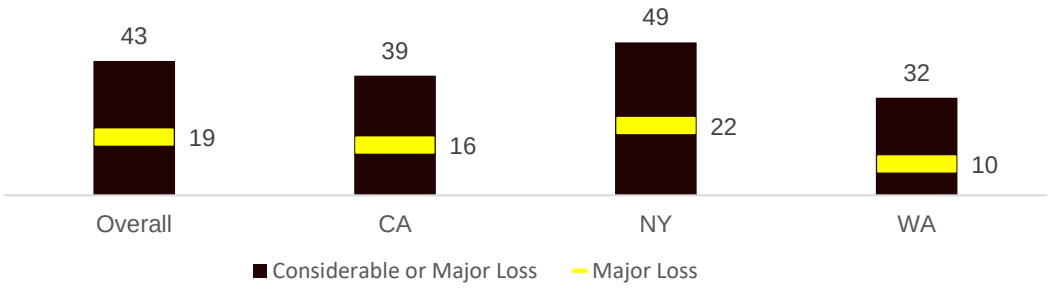
The academic time losses continued from spring 2020 into the following school year. Figure 8 shows the percentage of schools reporting decreases in learning time from the 2019–20 school year to the 2020–21 school year. Between 17 percent and 42 percent of schools reported decreases in learning time, depending on the subject. While fewer schools reported academic time losses in the 2020–21 school year compared to the level of lost time reported in the last few months of 2020, these losses occurred across the entire school year. In ELA and math, one-third of schools reported losses with ELA and math and one-third of schools reported decreases in learning time relative to the previous school year, with 5 percent and 6 percent respectively being significant decreases.

Figure 8: School Reporting Decreases in Learning Time in School Year 2020-21 Relative to School Year 2019-20



We also asked schools how the decreases in learning time impacted the individual students in their schools. Overall, the average reported percentage of students with considerable or major academic losses was 43 percent, with 19 percent being reported as having major academic losses (see Figure 9). This represents considerable academic losses for a large portion of the student population.

Figure 9: Average Percentage of Students with Considerable or Major Academic Losses since March 2020

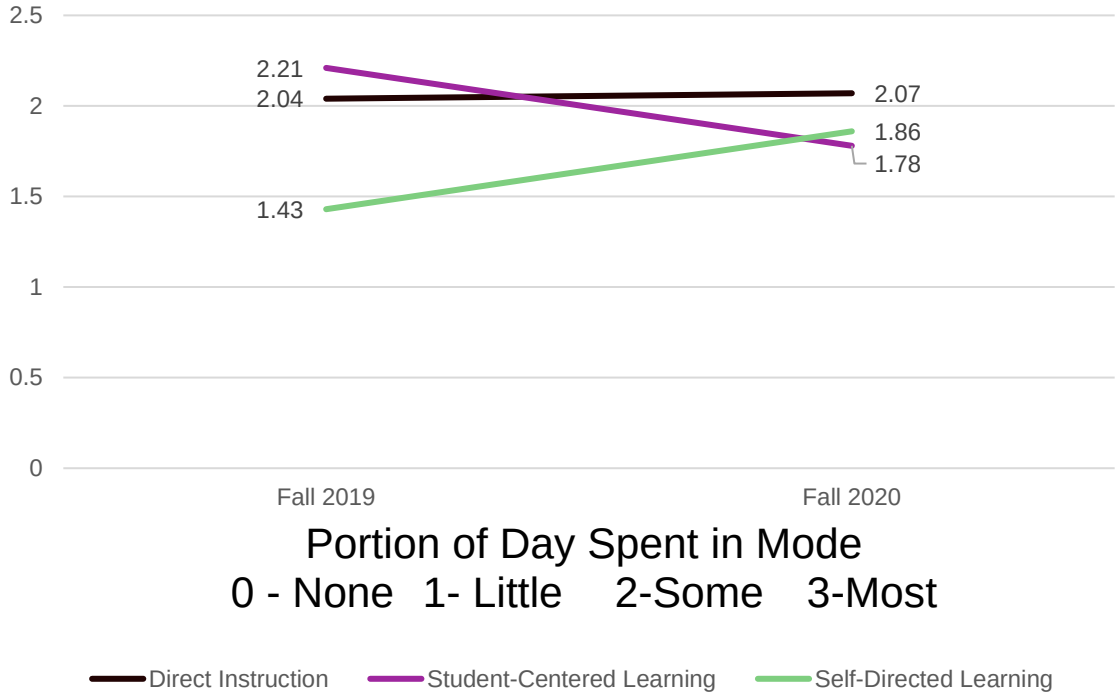


A little over 40 percent of schools, overall, reported students had considerable or major learning loss. The rate was nearly 50 percent for New York schools. Washington State schools reported the lowest, at 30 percent.

Teaching Modes

Schools reported teachers used more self-directed learning in fall of 2020 than in fall of 2019. This was offset by a decrease in the amount of learning activities considered student-centered. The rates of direct instruction remained constant across the two years. This would correspond to the shift to more asynchronous instruction.

Figure 10: Time Spent by Instructional Mode: Fall 2019 vs Fall 2020



Reporting of Final Grades

In the spring of 2020, 29 percent of schools answered they would report grades differently for the spring 2020 term than they did for the fall 2019 term. An additional 6 percent of schools were undecided at the time of the survey. This percentage was smaller for Washington, where only 18 percent of schools planned to report grades differently in spring 2020.

Figure 11: Final Grades Reported Differently than Pre-COVID Semester in Spring 2020

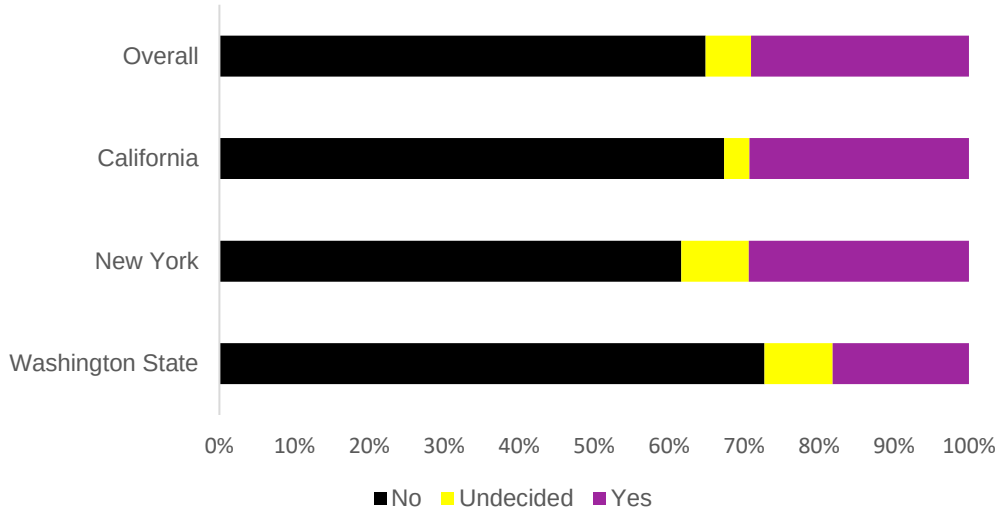
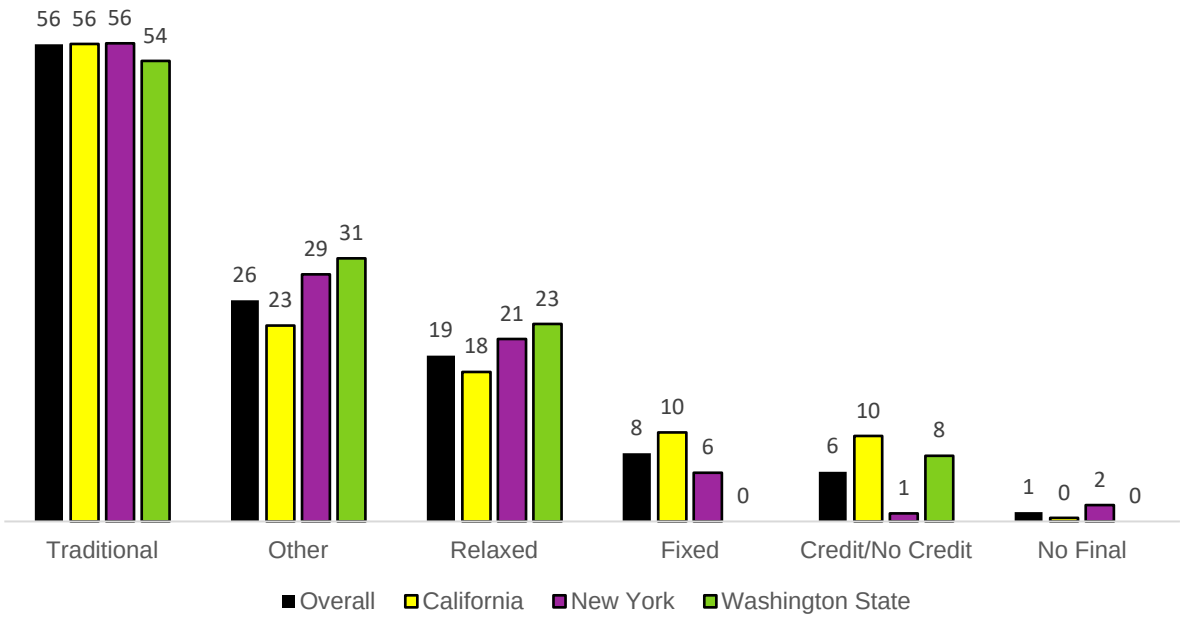


Figure 12: Grading Method Used: Spring 2020



Schools were asked to report which grading methods they intended to use. Schools could choose more than one method. Figure 12 demonstrates that the majority of schools still planned to use a tradition-based grading methodology. However, 19 percent of schools said they would include at least some relaxed grading standards. Very few schools opted for a credit/no credit grading system or dropped final grades altogether.

Twenty-six percent of schools said they would use some “other” method of determining grades. The most common responses among these replies were based on mastery-based grading (8 percent), rubric-based (4 percent), and work completion (3 percent).

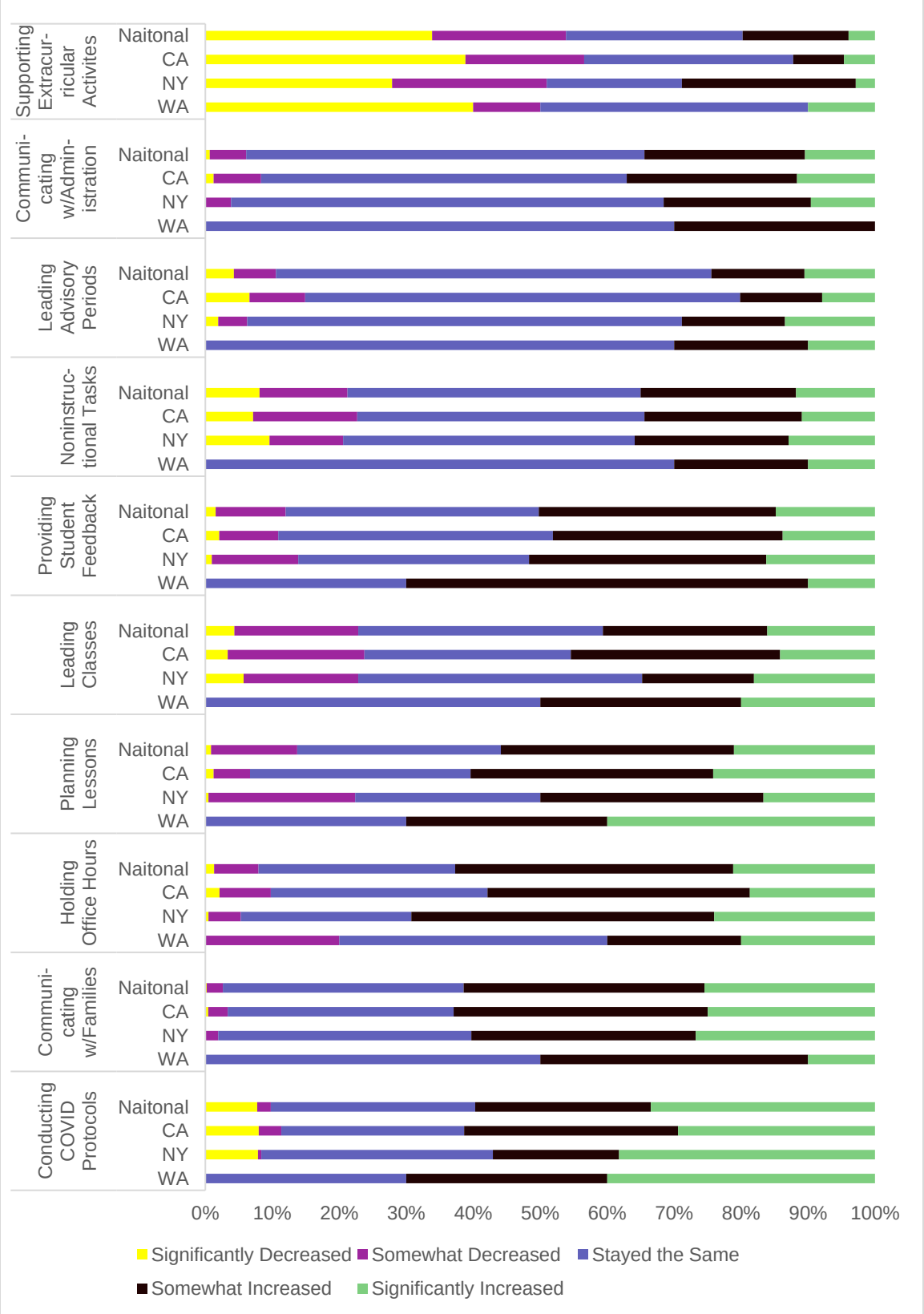
Establishing Communication with Families and Staff

Teachers’ Time on Task

With all the different challenges presented to teachers as a result of COVID, it makes sense teachers would need to adjust their practices from previous years to meet their students’ needs. Figure 13 shows how teachers’ time on task changed from the spring of 2020 to the 2020–21 school year. Schools reported teachers were spending more time around communication skills in 2020–21 as compared to the previous school year. More than half of schools reported increases in time spent communicating with families (61 percent) and holding office hours (63 percent). Teachers also reported somewhat or significantly increased time spent conducting COVID protocols (60 percent). The majority of schools also reported their teachers spent more time in the 2020–21 school year on lesson planning (56 percent) and providing feedback to students (50 percent). The amount of time reported supporting extracurricular activities significantly decreased for the majority of teachers.

60% of teachers somewhat or significantly increased time spent communicating with families and holding office hours.

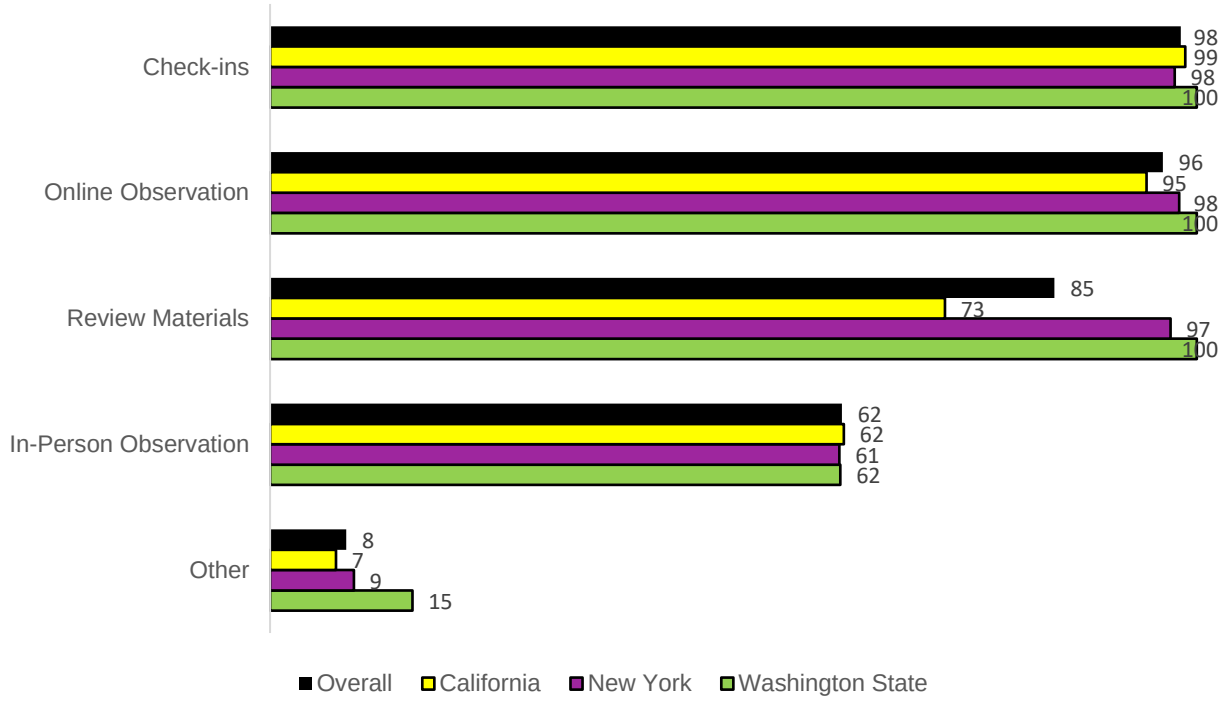
Figure 13: Changes in Teachers' Time on Task from Spring 2020 to 2020-21 School Year



Supervision of Instruction

It is also reasonable to expect administrators would have to change their practices as well to meet the needs of working in an environment that heavily relies on virtual instruction. We asked schools to report how school leaders were monitoring instruction during the 2020–21 school year.

Figure 14: Methods Used to Monitor Instruction: 2020-21



Schools almost universally reported heavy reliance on check-ins and online observations of teachers during the pandemic. Additionally, 85 percent of schools reported school leaders were reviewing material teachers were using for instruction. This was 100 percent in Washington but only 73 percent of schools in California. Surprisingly, almost two-thirds of schools in all states reported in-person observations of teachers were made by school leaders during the pandemic.

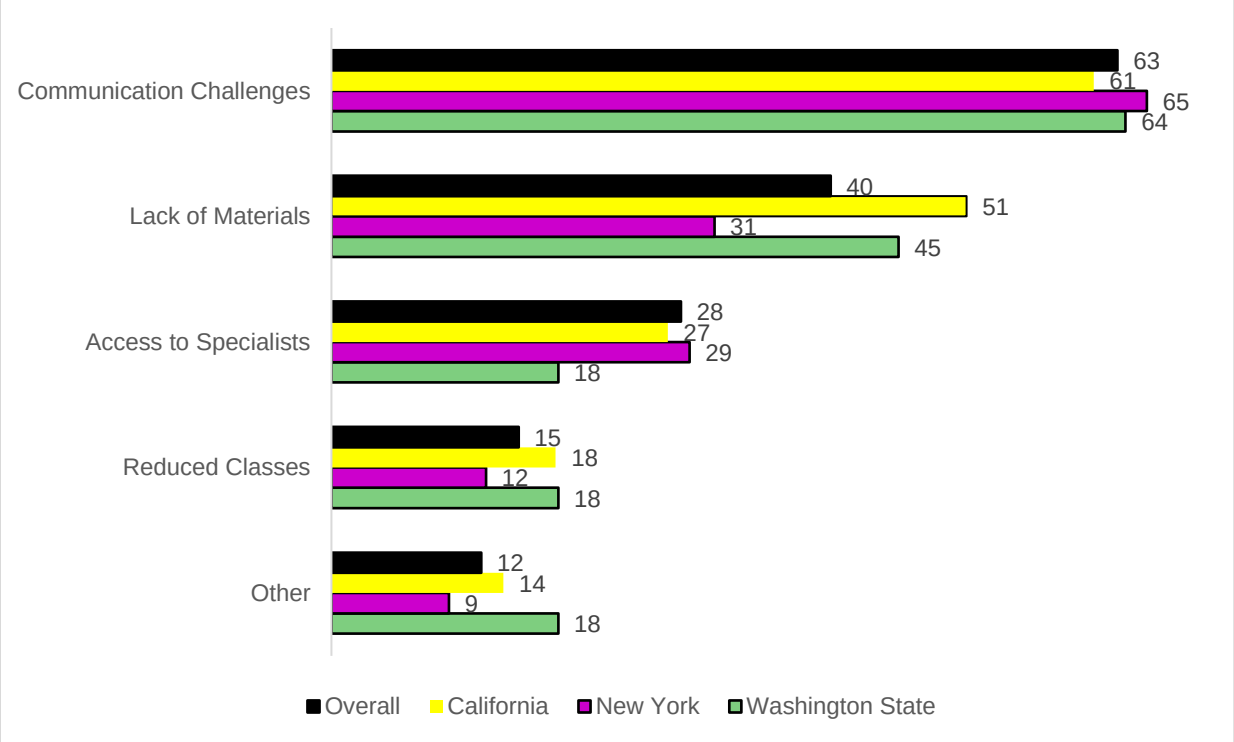
Maintaining Student Engagement

Supporting English Language Learner (ELL) Students

The challenges in the learning environment brought on by COVID were amplified for students with learning challenges. This was particularly true for students who were English language learners (ELL). Much of the instruction during COVID was conducted asynchronously and involved independently working through assignments, a task made much more difficult by language barriers.

Sixty-three percent of schools reported communication challenges were an issue for their faculty and staff when providing support to ELL students and families (Figure 15). These numbers were similar across all three states participating in the survey. Another issue for many schools was the lack of materials needed to support ELL students. This challenge was reported by 51 percent of schools in California but only about a third of schools in New York. Twenty-eight percent of schools said the lack of access to ELL specialists was an issue for their students as well.

Figure 15: Challenges Reported by School in Supporting ELL Students

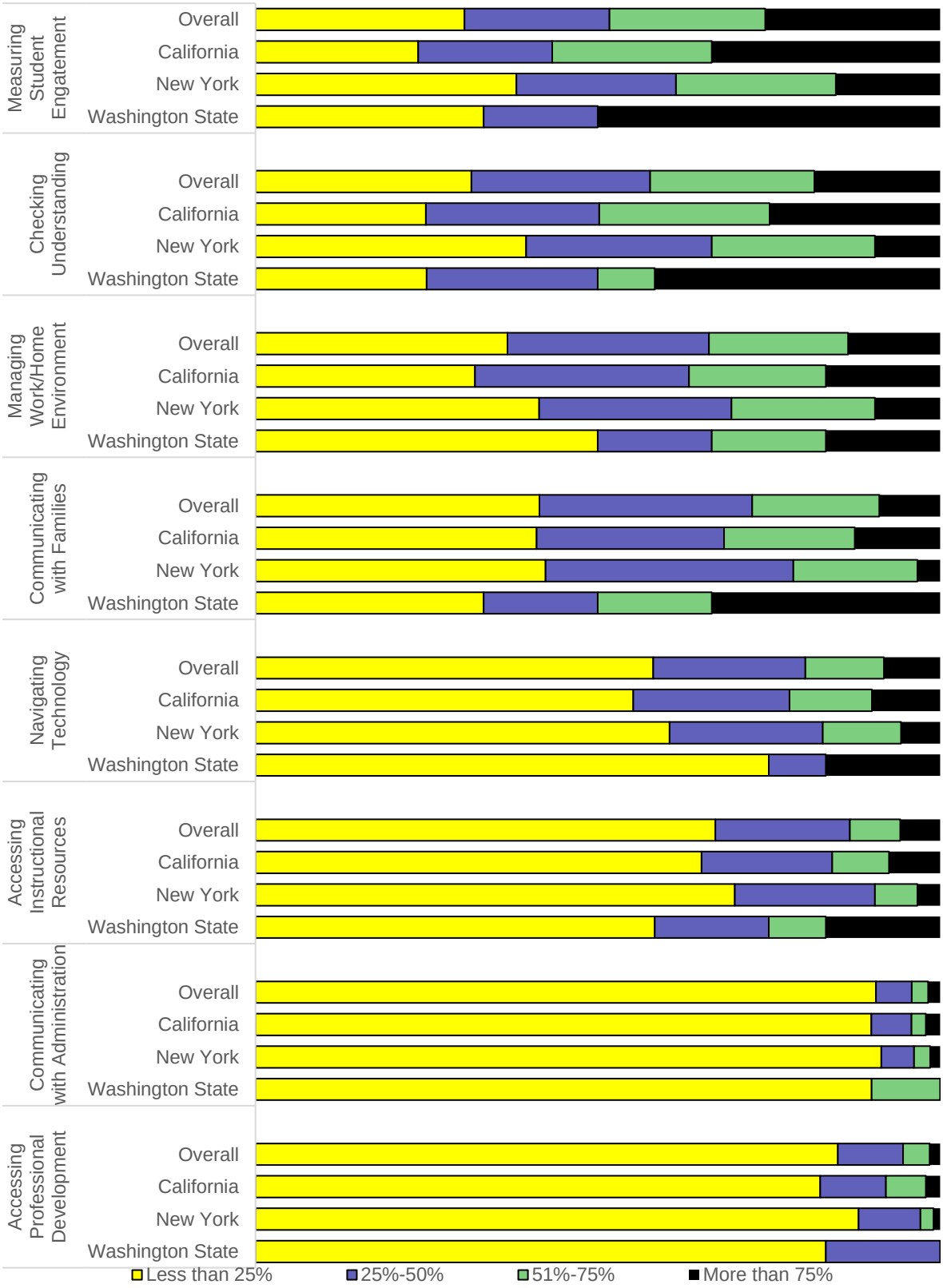


Other Challenges

Schools were also asked about a particular list of challenges and reported the percentage of their teachers who faced each of these challenges. The responses for these items are shown in Figure 16. Overall, 65 percent of schools reported that at least half their teachers had trouble maintaining student focus (screen time, burnout, and distraction in home environment) during instruction. Likewise, 48 percent of schools said that at least half their teachers had challenges measuring student engagement and 42 percent of schools listed checking for understanding as a difficulty. Half the schools in Washington reported that most of their teachers were challenged by measuring student engagement and maintaining student focus. They also reported difficulties with communicating with families at a higher rate than in California or New York.

A modest share of schools reported the majority of teachers had difficulty navigating technology (20 percent). Teachers also seemed to have little difficulty accessing instruction resources (13 percent), accessing professional development (6 percent), or communicating with their school administration (4 percent).

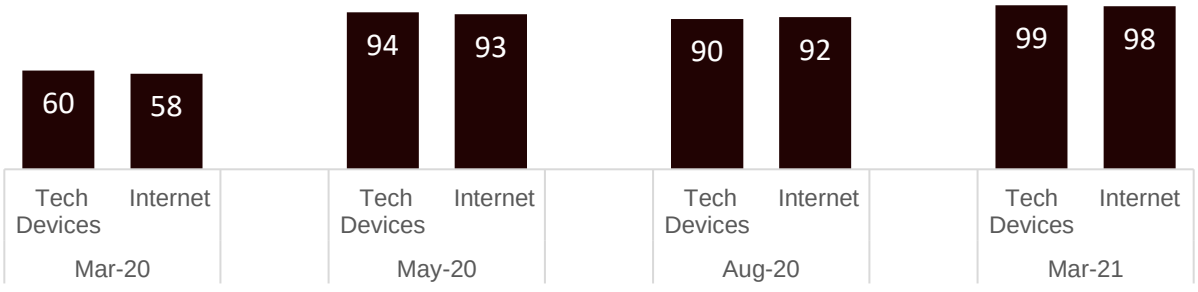
Figure 16: Percent of Teachers Reporting Challenges by Topic

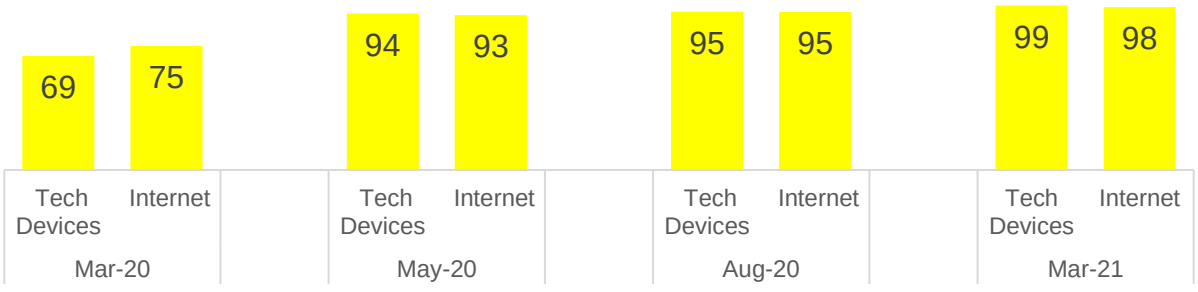


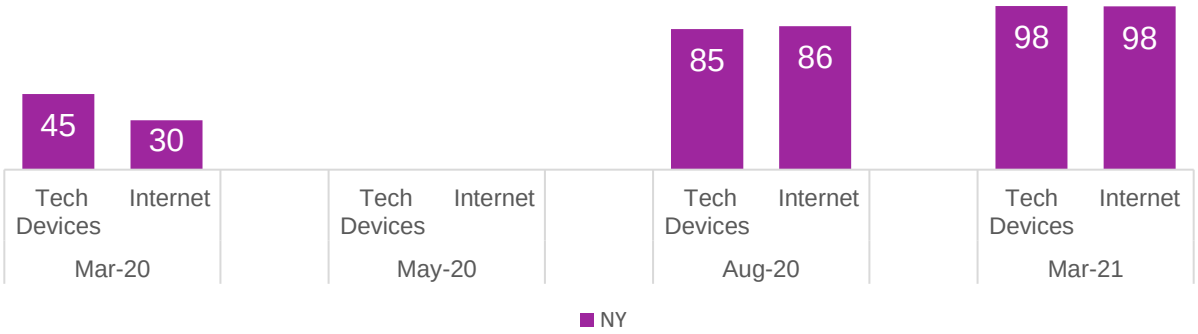
Providing Internet Access and IT Support to Students and Staff

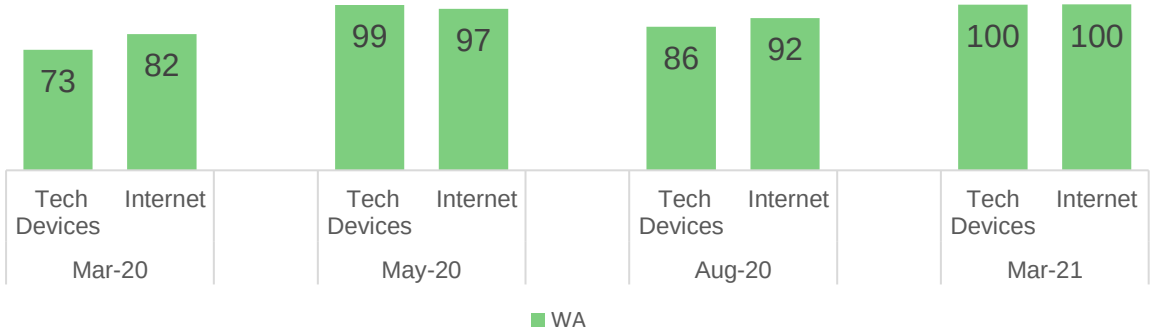
Student Access to Digital Resources

Figure 17: Student Access to Resources over Time









Student access to devices and internet varied greatly across responding schools. Respondents overall reported 60 percent of students had access to a tech device at the outset of the pandemic. However, this number ranged from 45 percent in New York to 73 percent in Washington. By May of 2020 over 90 percent of students had access to tech devices in California and Washington. This data was not available for New York schools in May 2020.

Rates dropped slightly in the fall of 2020, likely due to newly enrolled students. The percentage of students in New York with access to tech devices in August 2020 was similar to the percentages in California and Washington. By March 2021, schools across all states reported that at least 98 percent of students had access to devices.

Results for internet access followed the same pattern as for device access. In March 2020, 58 percent of all students had access to the internet for schoolwork. This percentage would rise to nearly 95 percent by May 2020. By March 2021, access to internet for schoolwork was nearly universal.

How does this compare? Common Sense Media reported that prior to the pandemic, 20 percent of White, urban, and suburban students lacked access to either a device or internet connection needed for remote learning, while 30 percent of Black, Latinx and rural students lacked access.[16] Efforts during the pandemic closed 20–40 percent of the K–12 connectivity divide and 40–60 percent of the device divide as of December 2020.[17] CRPE's article, "The Digital Divide Among Students During COVID-19: Who Has Access? Who Doesn't?" found a continued lack of access to devices and internet connectivity, particularly for families with the greatest needs, across several studies.[18]

Student access to devices and internet increased from 60% to over 90%, overall, from March 2020 to May 2020.

By March 2021, nearly all students had access to both.

Data from the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey showed that as of May 5, 2020,[19] nationally 4.6 percent of households with students attending public or private schools reported "rarely" or "never" having an electronic device available for educational purposes and only 3.7 percent reporting "rarely" or "never" having internet available for educational purposes. However, these numbers were heavily dependent on household income. Households with incomes less than $25,000 per year experienced much lower levels of electronic device and internet access availability than the average household.

16 https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pdfs/common_sense_media_report_final_7_1_3pm_web.pdf

17 https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/kids_action/final_-_what_it_will_take_to_permanently_close_the_k-12_digital_divide_vjan26_1.pdf

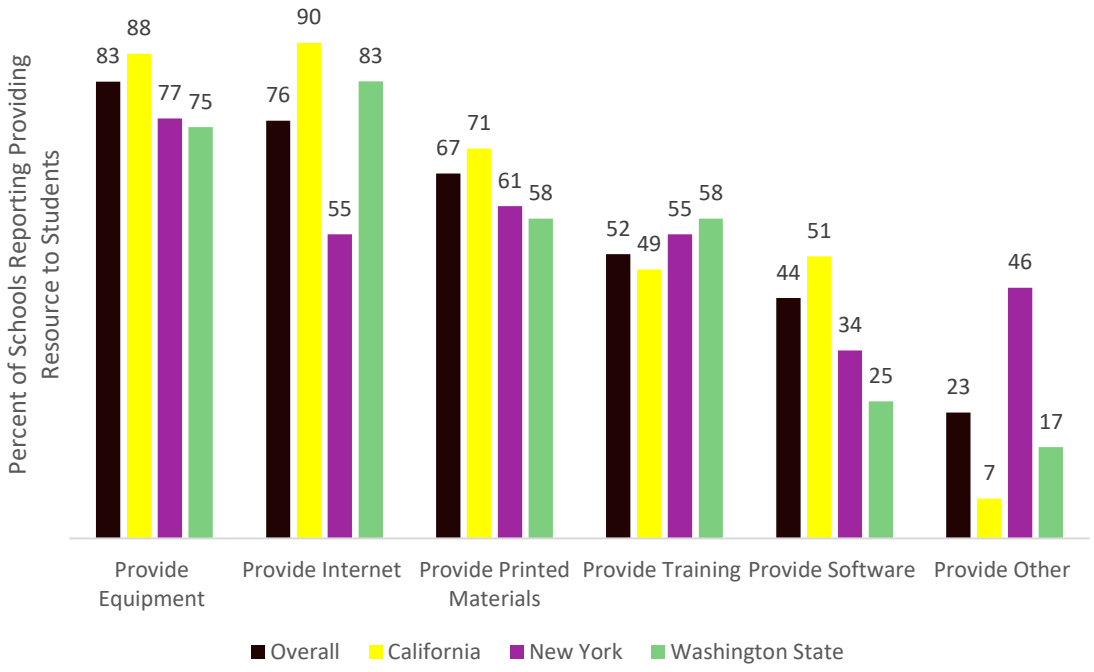
18 https://www.crpe.org/thelens/digital-divide-among-students-during-covid-19-who-has-access-who-doesnt

19 https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/hhp/2020/wk1/educ3_week1.xlsx

Table 7: Availability of Electronic Device and Internet Access for Educational Purposes: May 5, 2020

	Rarely or Never Having an Electronic Device Available for Educational Purposes	Rarely or Never Having Internet Access Available for Educational Purposes
National	4.6%	3.7%
California	2.8%	1.2%
New York	4.4%	3.1%
Washington	4.7%	2.7%
Households with income <$25,000		
National	12.6%	10.3%
California	8.3%	1.7%
New York	12.0%	3.8%
Washington	4.2%	4.2%

Figure 18: Resources Provided to Students by Schools: Spring 2020



Approximately 80 percent of schools, overall, *provided equipment* and/or *provided internet* to students during spring 2020 (California rates were at or near 90 percent). Two-thirds of schools *provided printed materials* which in theory could be used in lieu of internet and device access. A little over 50 percent of overall respondents said they *provided training* to students.

Other actions included providing parent training and monetary assistance for at-home broadband costs.

How does this compare? To fully understand the impact of providing devices and internet access to students, one must take into consideration both the provision of these services and the existing access to these services. For example, while New York respondents were less likely to say their schools provided internet access to students, the data from the Census Bureau (Table 7) does not show students in average New York households with children as having meaningfully less access to the internet than their peers in California and Washington. But those numbers are very different when looking at lower income households where the needs were much greater.

80% of schools, overall, purchased equipment and provided internet services to ensure all students could engage in remote learning during spring 2020.

Although state, federal and private agencies made unprecedented investments to reimburse schools for devices and at-home connectivity costs for remote and hybrid learning, by December 2020, at least 11 of the 25 largest districts in the country were still distributing computers or providing internet access to students.[20]

[20] https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2021/02/04/covid-online-school-broadband-internet-laptops/3930744001/

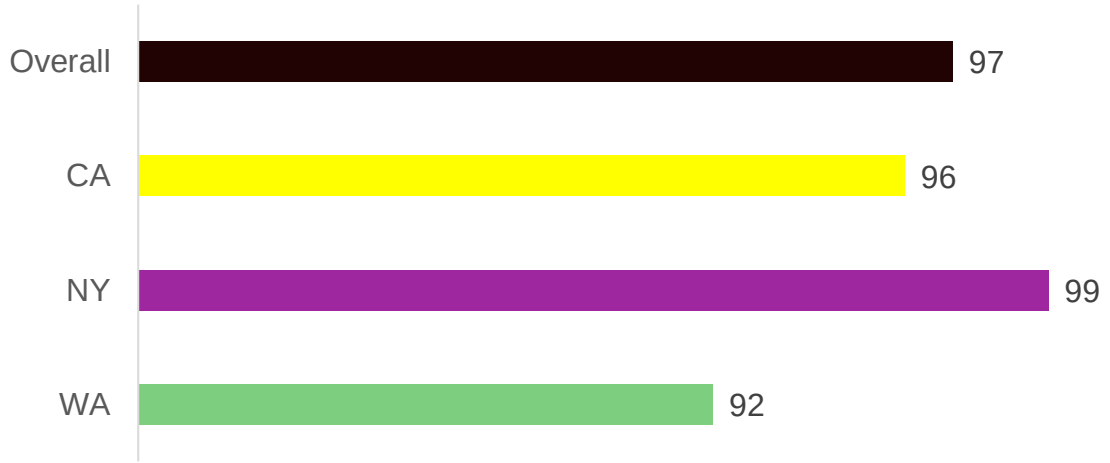
Teacher Access to Digital Resources

Figure 19: Teacher Access to Resources over Time

Similar to results for students, respondents reported a rapid increase in teacher access to devices and internet. To assure they had what they needed for remote instruction, schools increased teacher access to devices and the internet from 60 percent to over 95 percent from March 2020 to May 2020. By March 2021, nearly 100 percent of all teachers in all states had access to both devices and the internet.

How does this compare? Common Sense Media reported that 10 percent of teachers nationally lacked internet at home.[21]

Figure 20: Percentage of Schools Providing Professional Development Related to Remote Learning



Schools also reported providing teachers with professional development specifically related to remote learning. The most common topics were use of technology, curriculum resources, socio-emotional learning in an online environment, pedagogy, policies and supporting special education students. Although schools were designing reopening plans, they recognized the need to be able to provide high-quality remote learning when needed.

97% of schools, overall, provided teachers with professional development related to remote learning compared to less than half of district schools.

How does this compare? The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) found that less than half of district reopening plans for the 2020–21 school year publicly committed to increasing time for professional development.[22]

[21] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pdfs/common_sense_media_report_final_6_26_7.38am_web_updated.pdf

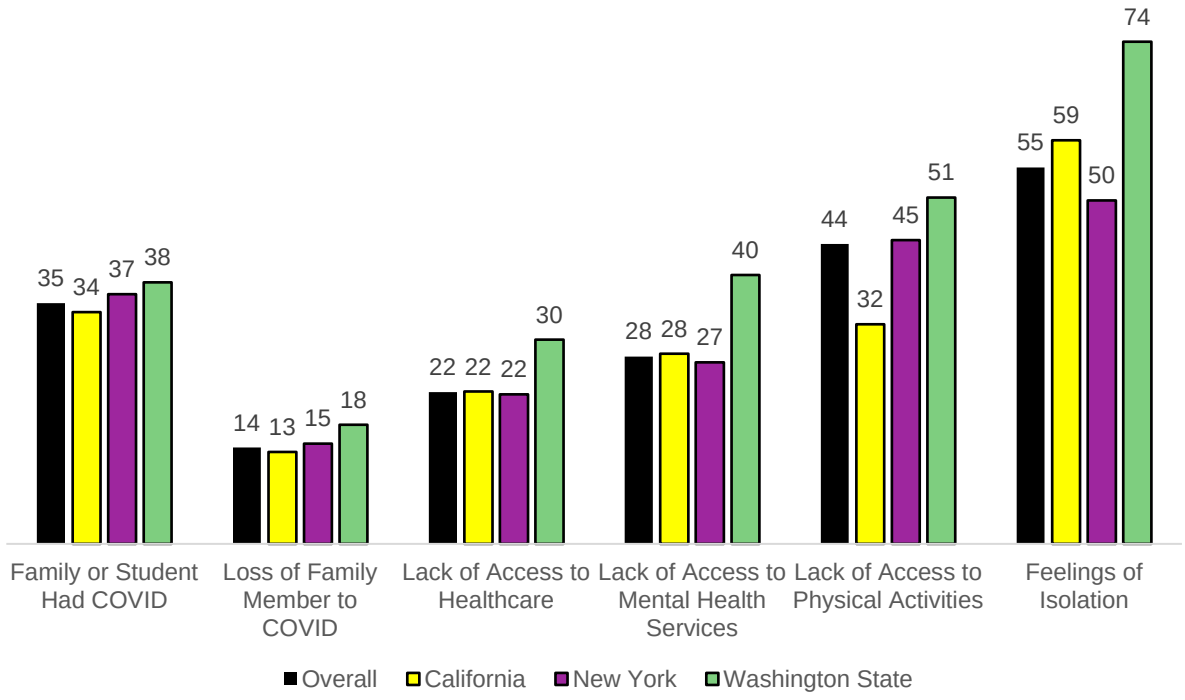
[22] https://www.crpe.org/thelens/more-districts-should-seize-opportunity-improve-professional-learning-teachers

Providing Social and Emotional Services to Students

The sudden shift of schools to online learning brought new challenges to teachers. Some of these changes were obvious, such as the need to change lesson plans and presentation methods to adapt to online learning. Other challenges were all new. Teachers were not only having to deal with the crisis of their own families' health needs but also were having to support students, many of whom were facing the loss of family members, family financial and residential insecurity, and feelings of isolation. We asked schools to report on these challenges as well.

Mental Impacts on Students

Figure 21: Average Percentage of Students with Physical or Mental Impacts Due to COVID



Overall, one-third of students either had COVID themselves or had a family member who contracted COVID. This included 14 percent of students who lost a family member to COVID.

Teachers and schools also had to provide support to students for other issues as well. For example, schools reported over half their students shared feelings of isolation as a result of COVID. This share was largest in Washington, where schools reported on average that 74 percent of students had feelings of isolation. Students also had a lack of access to physical activities.

55% of schools reported students had feelings of isolation.

Nearly 15% of students lost a family member to COVID.

How does this compare?

Pediatrics found that at least one out of every 500 U.S. children have lost a parent or caregiver to COVID (one out every four COVID-19-associated deaths).[23] A newer study estimates that more than 175,000 children in the United States had lost a parent or a grandparent caregiver to COVID as of October 2021. The majority of these children (65 percent) come from racial and ethnic minority groups. Rates were nearly 2.5 times higher for Black children and twice as likely for Hispanic children.[24] This translates to at least one of every 168 American Indian/Alaska Native children, one of every 310 Black children, one of every 412 Hispanic children, one of every 612 Asian children, and one of every 753 White children experiencing death of a caregiver.[25] The Kaiser Family Foundation found Black children, Hispanic children, and other people of color have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic's economic effects.[26]

Financial Impacts on Students

Many charter school families experienced financial impacts as a result of the pandemic. The sources of issues were widely spread across the country and have been well documented in measures such as unemployment and increases in public aid. However, the direct impacts on students and schools are less well reported.

[23] https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/148/6/e2021053760/183446/COVID-19-Associated-Orphanhood-and-Caregiver-Death
[24] https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/10/07/1043881136/covid-deaths-leave-thousands-of-u-s-kids-grieving-parents-or-primary-caregivers
[25] https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/more-140000-us-children-lost-primary-or-secondary-caregiver-due-covid-19-pandemic
[26] https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/back-to-school-amidst-the-new-normal-ongoing-effects-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic-on-childrens-health-and-well-being/

Figure 22: Average Reported Percentage of Students with Financial Impacts Due to COVID

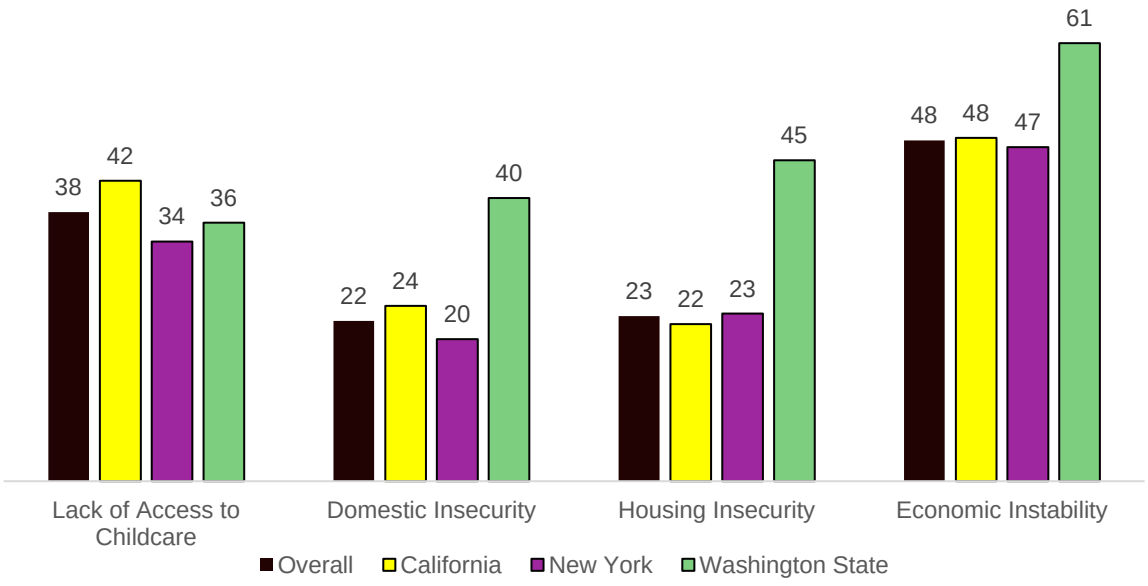


Figure 22 reports the average reported percentage of students whose families were affected by lack of access to childcare and economic, housing, and domestic instability. These are all factors with indirect but strong influences on educational outcomes. Schools reported that on average almost half of their students were economically impacted by COVID. Almost a quarter of students had housing insecurity as a result of the economic impact. These numbers were much higher in Washington where 45 percent of students were reported as having housing insecurity and 61 percent with economic instability related to COVID. A considerable percentage of families also had issues finding access to adequate childcare when schools were physically closed.

Nearly half of students suffered from economic instability related to COVID.

7. School Leader Reflections

Using an open-ended format, we asked school administrators to tell us the three most significant changes their schools made from school year 2019–20 to school year 2020–21. We clustered the responses thematically and then further sifted for positive and negative sentiments. The themes that emerged were:

- Connecting and communicating with families
- More frequent individual contacts
- Teacher support, cooperation and teamwork
- Proficiency gains in the use of technology for instruction, communications and management
- Community building – supportive services, attention to socio-emotional needs
- Building a high-quality learning environment with options, prioritizing content, refining power standards
- Anti-racism

Twenty-five percent of respondents told us leading a school through a pandemic was the most challenging experience of their 25-year, even 50-year careers. They described heartbreak over lives lost, constant stress with little direction and support from state, federal and even local agencies, students they couldn't reach and teachers and students being burnt out. There was great concern about mental, emotional and physical health of the entire school community (teachers, students and families).

Fifty percent of responses acknowledged the struggle but shared positive outcomes. They described pride at a coming together of community, resiliency, improved family/school communications and relationships, reimagined learning, focused learning and building engaging content, with little to no learning loss.

California's virtual schools reported minimal impact on their academic programs and practices. However, these schools also made efforts to assure students' and families' needs were met and sense of community preserved.

8. Summary

In multiple states and under varying conditions, the majority of charter schools we surveyed demonstrated resilience and creativity in responding to the physical and social challenges presented by COVID. They reacted strongly and acted quickly to shift to remote instruction. Communication was elevated as a priority. They assessed student and teacher needs for technology and mobilized resources and contacts to distribute technology and subsidize internet access. They identified which features of their normal curriculum and instruction were essential to students maintaining and improving their knowledge, adjusting lesson plans accordingly. Charter school leaders stepped up their efforts to support classroom teachers with additional contact, review of lesson plans and instructional material and teacher-student observation. Coaching and formal professional development helped increase educator capacity to deliver effective remote instruction.

Almost every school recognized the shift in parents' roles and reached out to connect, coordinate and support their new co-educators. Together with families, charter school teams extended themselves as students' needs shifted, recognizing that isolation, infections and loss were touching many communities. As hard as the pivot and the new demands were for all concerned, many school leaders said that the experience strengthened their ties to and the resiliency of their school communities.

The commitments and actions of the charter school teams in this study contrast with the publicly reported experience in district schools across the country. While it is certain that many districts and schools took affirmative action to shift to remote learning, there are few reports of rapid and comprehensive change to the degree reported here.

While we need to be cautious about generalizing from our set of respondents to the larger charter school landscape, it would be unfair not to acknowledge the substantial evidence of extraordinary commitment and effort on display in the findings. The through line speaks to the discretion that charter school teams enjoy and their drive to use it under these circumstances to provide as much of an educational experience as they could. The fact that the vast majority of charter schools "leaned in" successfully – at times taxing professional and personal capacities – provides a singular example of the larger story of charter schools in their communities.

9. Conclusion

Through their enabling legislation, charter schools are endowed with freedom from many traditional requirements and given autonomy to build schools they believe will be successful. In turn, they carry the obligation to focus talents and resources to create strong educational experiences for their students. This duty is not a one-time event; the best charter schools continuously evolve as they strive to improve their results. The widespread habit of "active adaptation" preceded the COVID-19 pandemic but was tested in the extreme in the period covered by this study.

The governors' orders to close school buildings was a more intense shock than most schools ever had experienced. At the same time, it thrust school teams into a familiar stance – "we need to change, how do we do it?" – that facilitated a rapid response to a quickly spiraling event. At the same time, being held to high performance expectations for student performance fostered in charter school teams a sense of urgency to adopt new approaches that could support student learning and well-being.

The survey results show the particular choices school teams made during the first 18 months of the pandemic. We do not have a full picture as to whether their efforts were successful. It will be important that schools, states and researchers continue to document the impacts of COVID into the future. With the return of standardized testing, the extent of learning loss from the pandemic will become clearer. Documenting the loss will be the first step in addressing it. Some changes coming out of the pandemic may prove beneficial to keep. Activities such as increased communication, ability to use distance learning and increased access to technology and the internet may be critical as efforts to redress the learning impacts move forward. The transparency and collaboration shown by the charter school teams during this study bode well for continued openness to objective evidence as a driver of adaptation.

These findings relate a larger truth as well. The legal and regulatory parameters that undergird charter school policy in California, New York and Washington are due some of the credit for the schools' response. When the need for action arose, charter schools already had the capacity and permission to respond. Essentially, these teams were pre-approved for change. While the events of 2020–21 have illuminated how valuable that discretion is, the three-decade history of charter schools contains thousands of smaller, similar examples. It is an essential component of charter schools' DNA. It deserves to be preserved and even extended to other schools.

Thank you to the SUNY Board of Trustees, New York Board of Regents, New York City Department of Education, The Cullen Foundation, California Charter Schools Association, APLUS+, Washington State Charter Schools Association, James L. Woodworth and all the charter school administrators who graciously shared their experiences and insights.